

“Of Answers Ruled Out”

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Early in Plato's *Republic*, after doubt has been cast upon the adequacy of several of the definitions of justice that have been set forth, there is a brief encounter between Socrates and Thrasymachus, in which the latter, now mortally frustrated by the hopeless naivete of those who have so far spoken, demands of Socrates that he provide a precise definition of justice. In his understated way, Socrates protests that while he is willing to give an account of justice, he must not be constrained by the kind of answers that Thrasymachus requires. If Thrasymachus has ruled out certain kinds of answers right from the beginning, how can Socrates speak adequately about justice?

This dilemma, of having to speak or write about the human condition amply, all the while having certain kinds of lines of inquiry ruled out, is by no means confined to the arcane literature of ancient philosophy. Indeed, in academic life today one must think twice before venturing the discomforting idea--written into so many of the venerable texts of this and every other civilization--that there is another dimension to human life; that human beings find their True Home in the Transcendent dimension; that unless we recognize our dependence on the Transcendent, however named, we are bound to fall into servitude of one form or another; that the freedom we experience when not bound to the Transcendent is a truant's freedom, at best; that all ethical or moral understanding is pretense, or worse, unless grounded in the Transcendent. As a historical footnote, perhaps these propositions are thinkable; to mean them today is to risk one's credibility as a rational being. These propositions--even when rendered less offensive by avoiding the "G" word--are ruled out from the outset in the academic setting.

Some structural considerations warrant attention here, to be sure. The intellectual tasks presently posed by academic life are simply not well suited to direct attention toward those sons of issues. Where at their outset modern universities were, for the most part, unthinkable without religion,



today the ivory tower cloisters a new breed of scholars who are often oblivious to or intolerant of religion. By virtue of disciplinary pressures, specialization, embarrassment, political posture, Enlightenment sensibility, ignorance, or the attempt to supersede the father--it is a striking fact within social science how many parents of academics were involved with institutionalized religion--academic life rules out certain kinds of answers along with the questions that give rise to them. Thrasymachus, who demands certainty and precision, who is impatient with all talk of higher things (and who, Socrates later intimates in the *Republic*, would strike his father), rules. In my own field of the history of political thought, one might think that the contemporary and provincial prejudice against religion would be less in evidence. This is not so. The scholarship of the last generation concerned with modern political thought, for example, scarcely mentions the religious writings of the canonical thinkers of the period, even though the works are often extensive. In a hermeneutic move that surely confirms Augustine's claim about the self-centeredness of man, it is assumed that the canonical writers were like us--that is, atheists--and the burden of proof is placed on the shoulders of those who would argue otherwise. By a tortured logic, the conclusion is reached that these thinkers could not possibly have meant what they said about religion. They were, after all, smart men.

This prejudice is not limited to narrow circles. Members of the predominant scholarly orders: those who defend liberalism (historic, not necessarily contemporary), democratic theorists, Straussians, and postmodernists, while disagreeing vehemently with each other on certain points, are in accord about the irrelevance or danger posed by religion. Recent liberals have shown a chilling inability to incorporate into their thinking a place for those who actually believe in God or anything else deeply; democratic theorists are engaged in a frightened rearguard attempt to specify with anguished precision what kind of discourse democracy can and cannot allow; Straussians worry that religion is a species of unreason, and that embracing it is no different in kind from the forms of irrationality that led to Hitler's Germany; postmodernists are too busy showing the instability of all things social to be concerned with religion, which is but one mode of oppression among many. Liberals and democratic theorists treat beliefs as "preferences," and so mock anything approximating real belief; Straussians berate both groups because they fear that neither really believes anything, but are, at times, vindictive



and condescending toward those who would supplant the sacred "teachings" of the philosophers with the ruminations and illuminations of theologians; postmodernists playfully reduce the human universe to contested discourse in which beliefs are conceived only in terms of words about belief. In all, the history of political thought has rendered religion quite unthinkable.

Turning a Blind Eye Toward Religion

I cannot, of course, pretend to speak for the treatment of religion in other fields. My impression is that the seminal thinkers of the modern period have not, for example, been as distorted by historians; nor is it the case that classicists have buckled to the often procrustean reflexes of many Straussians. Disciplinary training of this or that sort alone, however, cannot ensure fair treatment. The study of the facts and propositions of religion are no substitute for religious or spiritual sensitivity. Without the latter, such facts and propositions remain impenetrable, if not offensive. Such spiritual sensitivity, unfortunately, is largely unteachable. No inverse affirmative action program designed to compensate for a majority of academics in the social sciences who are "religiously challenged" will redress the imbalance.

Other considerations warrant attention here as well. The West's rhetoric during the Cold War offered rather stark alternatives: the command economy of the East or the free market economy of the West. The latter, of course, entails the sort of rational calculation and individual autonomy that is, at best, in creative tension with the claims of revealed religion. For better or for worse, the geopolitical fact of the Cold War twisted and torqued the academic topography, decade after decade, until the terrain, in the social sciences at least, had been largely cleared of the obstructions that signaled a challenge to "reason," to "individuality."

All was not well, however. When the Berlin Wall fell there were already signs on the landscape of academic life, not to mention in American society as a whole, that something was seriously amiss. Tocqueville had written a century earlier of "the corrosive effects of individualism," yet this thought, with a few notable exceptions, went largely unnoticed during the Cold War. "Community" took on the color of red in many academic eyes. During the 1980s, however, the signs were too obvious to ignore. Economists began to worry in earnest whether their mode of analysis had been oblivious to "social capital," to the glue that makes possible the "propensity to truck, barter, and change." Many



social theorists struggled to find a theory and language, now coalescing around the designation of communitarianism, to grapple with the alarming fragmentation of American society.

I bring the communitarian movement to your attention here because it is, in my view, an intellectual fashion--now also prominent in high political circles--that turns a blind eye toward religion. To its credit adherents recognize the deleterious effects of "individualism," but about the religious basis of community its defenders (like liberals, democratic theorists, Straussians, and postmodernists) have remained silent or awkward in its defense.

Not long ago I had lunch with a prominent member of the communitarian movement here in Washington. The subject of the oasis of community eventually came up, and to my dismay he announced that he didn't really care what it was based on as long as it could continue to be counted on. His point was clear: you shall not hear the words "community" and "religion" spoken together from us. His terse response evinced, to me, an ignorance of the religious covenants of our Puritan originaries, not to mention the binding power of the church in America to this day, perhaps especially for those "at risk." Moreover, every major social upheaval in this nation's history--from the civil rights movement in the 1960s, to the Progressive Era at the beginning of this century, to the Social Gospel movement of the end of the last, to the abolitionists of the Civil War period, to the Revolutionary War ("No King but King Jesus" was one of its slogans)--has come out of places of worship in America or has been nourished in them. The American community and the communities of America have all been formed, in no small part, by its churches and synagogues.

Rather than look to the real-life religious communities that have, in part, been an antidote to "the corrosive effects of individualism" for some evidence that religion might be important for the renewal of America, communitarians largely turn a blind eye toward it. The configuration of possible modes of inquiry--liberal, democratic theory, Straussian, postmodern, and now communitarian--rules out the answer that may be needed. In its present arrangement, I do not hold out the hope that academic life in my field will become hospitable to religion. Moreover, if change does come I do not believe that it will be due to open and candid discussion, but rather because of changes in society itself. The image of the ivory tower does not quite capture the spirit of academic life. Academics do not often dispassionately survey the terrain below them; more apt would be the image of the



submariner. When enough academics agree on a configuration of suppositions they submerge; when they run out of supplies--when the debates grow stale--they come back to terra firma only to find, lo and behold, that the world has changed since they last took a good hard look at it. If religion comes to be taken seriously within the academy, it will be because it has become a large enough presence in the world that it can no longer be ignored.

Hopeful Signs from the Classroom

Academic life, thankfully, involves teaching as well. In the three different academic institutions where I have taught during the past seven years (University of Chicago, George Washington University, and now Georgetown), I have found that the much maligned "Generation X" students have been eager to learn about the religious aspects of the history of political thought. True, they are, as a rule, a rather frightened bunch who are most comfortable traveling the well-worn path to more conventional careers. I attribute this more to our failure as teachers to pose for them the big questions, however, and to undertake the very difficult work of awakening in them a facility to talk and think about larger issues. As research has gained the upper hand in academic life, the content of courses has thinned in my field and in others, to the point where many academics now believe that their task is to convey a "body of information" to their students rather than to make with them a stuttered beginning which, we can only hope, develops into a full-blown fluency, the din of which democratic citizenship requires. There is a nuanced but critical distinction between possessing knowledge and loving knowledge, which we have lost. In this Information Age, we idolize the former, and shape university life into a mold to accommodate this Golden Calf.

I should add that teaching at Georgetown does offer a certain advantage to those like me who, in one way or another, wish to teach about religion. The undergraduates are required to take a one-year sequence of courses in religion and also in philosophy. By the time they reach their junior and senior years, many of them are remarkably good at holding a conversation. True, these core courses are under fire from some quarters because their content is oriented by the categories and prejudices of Western civilization. Should these courses be dismantled, here and elsewhere, I fear we will have failed to understand the meaning of robust pluralism. Pluralism worthy of its name is not timid; it risks believing something with the full knowledge that there are other, very different, wagers about



the meaning of human life. The desire in some quarters to rid the university of Western categories and prejudices may have its salutary aspects; on the whole, however, it is a mask behind which hides the frightened soul who cannot bear the risk and responsibility of believing in anything. At present Georgetown has not succumbed.

If I have not made the point clear enough already, I will be bold to say that it is not our students, but our colleagues, who are most eager to rule out religion in the university curriculum. Students remain one of the few hopeful signs.

I am not unaware that many of my colleagues would respond to these remarks with the question: might the study of religion more properly belong in divinity schools and seminaries? Said otherwise, what does a university have to do with religion? I will leave out of my answer the obvious historical linkages) as well as the enduring similarities between monastic and scholastic life--the need for a recommendation to enter graduate school (the monastic order) by a professor (priest) in your discipline (community); the long years of training in which rights of passage are established in order to ascertain a student's (spiritual) advancement; the dedication (self-renunciation) necessary to complete a dissertation; the solitary mode of inquiry required as a professor (priest); the willingness to forgo material gratifications of the sort normal mortals expect; the expectation that you will take a stand on one or another side of the present intellectual controversies (heresies); the understanding that you will watch over your students (flock) with care, etc. These intimations of ongoing affinity in no way disrupt the force of the question for us today. Universities are not, after all, training grounds for the clergy.

Living Among the Lotus Eaters

My answer requires a brief reference to an insight from the history of political thought about the peculiar relationship between democracy and the Transcendent. In a democracy, Plato tells us toward the end of the *Republic*, there is a tendency to dwell with the Lotus Eaters. The allusion is to Odysseus's wayward journey home in the *Odyssey*. The Lotus Eaters, of course, caused sailors to forget about their home, and by this Plato means to suggest that when democracy rules, citizens easily forget that their true home is in the Transcendent dimension wherein the Good resides. Rather than recognize their dependence upon the Transcendent Good, however, they are



boisterously proclaiming their own rights and their own authority, as well as opining that the material resources at hand are sufficient to solve the problems humanity confronts. The lesson is not too difficult to discern here. Universities in a democracy seem designed to help us dwell with the Lotus Eaters to forget our homeward journey. Yet however promising may be the scientific and technical advances that come out of the university, however powerful may be the tools of social science research, the use to which they are put depends, in the final measure, on how we understand ourselves in relationship to the Transcendent. If we forget our journey home, then all the comforts we create and the understanding we achieve will nevertheless leave us out in the cold. Again, words from Plato:

However much we may know about other things will avail us nothing if we do not know [about the Good]. Neither would any possession profit us if we had not the possession of the Good. [What profit can there be] in possessing everything except that which is good?

I am not suggesting that universities become schools *of* theology, but rather that they grant a place *for* theology. Human life is so constituted as to require attention to technical problems. The needs of our immediate household are real. Yet we deceive ourselves if we believe that the solutions at which we arrive can wholly circumvent deeper, religious questions. There must be a place for them in the life of a university; without such questions posed for and by our students, I fear we shall proceed into the future without the wisdom, forbearance, and yes, tolerance, to live well amidst the plenty with which this nation has been so amply blessed. A university that caters only to the needs of the household narrowly understood fails to produce citizens who understand broadly.

More than 150 years ago the great prophet and apostle of democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville, applauded the close affinity between democracy and revealed religion. He worried, however, that in the future the spirit of religion might for a time be abandoned and, so, leave democracy without its most important support. Transposed into Plato's idiom, he too thought that democratic citizens tend to dwell with the Lotus Eaters. His advice was unequivocal:

There is a need for all who are interested in the future of democratic societies to get together and with one accord propagate throughout society a taste for the infinite, and appreciation of greatness, and a love of spiritual pleasures.



Unless this happens, he thought, democratic citizens would become preoccupied with petty concerns and struggle restively without satisfaction. It is worth pondering whether the moody discontent that appears in American society today can be redressed by the as yet unfulfilled promises of the narrow but powerful specialties within the social sciences, or whether such discontent requires an approach to the human situation that is presently ruled out in academic life. To be sure, as Hobbes pointed out long ago, the dangers of brittle dogmatism and prideful posturing in an enterprise of this sort are not to be underestimated; more debilitating still, however, may be the long-term consequences of closing off the questions that religion poses.

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