

**A VOICE OF ONE'S OWN:**

**PUBLIC FAITH IN A PLURALISTIC WORLD**

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**I**

The world has always been a very religious place, and, by all appearances, it will continue to be in the foreseeable future. That's not what some of the great figures of European modernity expected, though. They thought that religion would, in one way or another, "wither away," to use a phrase that the Marxist tradition most commonly employed to describe the expected disappearance of religion from private and public spheres. Religion is irrational, the thinking went. It will take flight in the face of reason, just as the darkness takes flight before the dawn of a new day. Religion is epiphenomenal. Ultimately, it causes nothing and explains nothing; in fact, other things, such as poverty, weakness, and oppression, cause and explain religion. Once people, armed with knowledge and technological prowess, take their destinies into their own hands, religion will disappear. This is, very roughly, the basic content of the so-called secularization thesis.

The secularization thesis has proven wrong, however. Or rather, it has proven only partially right, and that, only in a very circumscribed set of societies, those of Western Europe. Even in these societies, religion has not quite withered away, though its influence there is significantly less now than it was a century ago, for instance. But contrary to all expectations, the rest of the world does not seem to be following a Western European pattern. As Charles Taylor has rightly noted, it is now obvious that we can no longer speak

of a single modernity that started in Europe and spread to the rest of the world. There are many non-Western ways to modernize, what Taylor calls “multiple modernities.”<sup>1</sup> In most of these, economic progress, technological advances, and the increase and spread of knowledge sit quite comfortably alongside a thriving religion.

Worldwide, the fastest-growing overarching perspective on life is not secular humanism. If half a century ago secular humanism seemed to be the wave of the future, it’s because in many places it was imposed from above—in the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries, in China and some Southeast Asian countries. There, secular humanism functioned like a parody of its original self: In the name of freedom—freedom from ignorance and oppression—it was imposed as an unquestioned ideology to legitimize oppression on scale larger than history has ever seen.

In fact, the fastest-growing worldviews today are religious<sup>2</sup>—Islam and Christianity. And for the most part, they are propagated not by being imposed from above but by a groundswell of enthusiasm to pass the faith on and a thirst to receive it. Behind the spread of Christianity—behind the fact that Christianity is now predominantly a non-Western religion with over two billion adherents and growing mainly through conversion—is neither the power of states, nor the power of economic centers, nor the power of media or knowledge elites. Experts on world Christianity seem unanimous that the masses of believers are themselves the chief agents of its spread.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 1.

<sup>2</sup> I’m somewhat hesitant to designate any of the world’s faiths as “religions” because the very notion of “religion” is a product of modernity; it represents the reduction of a living and encompassing faith to a sphere—a religious one—within the larger secular society.

As the mention of Christianity and Islam signals, the world is not just a religious place. It is a religiously *diverse* place. In addition to these two largest and fastest-growing religions, there are many smaller religions that continue to thrive. Moreover, within Christianity and Islam, there are many varied, sometimes even widely discordant movements. Finally, secular humanism itself in its diverse forms is also part of the world's religious diversity in that it does share with other religions one important feature: It comprises an overarching perspective on life, or at least, some of its influential forms, like Marxism, function as worldviews.

## II

An important social shift is underfoot in Western societies in regard to religion. Until recently, Western societies were relatively religiously homogenous. For centuries, they were by far predominantly Christian. Of course, there was always a small but significant presence of Jews, with whom relations ranged from overt and sometimes deadly hostility (as in Nazi Germany) to tolerance and relative friendliness (as in post-World War II United States.). And for centuries, Western Christianity itself was divided, or, in sociological speak, internally differentiated. Catholics and Protestants, Lutherans, Reformed, Anabaptists, Episcopalians, Methodists, Baptists, Pentecostals, and Seventh-day Adventists coexisted with one another, often in competition for membership and social influence. And yet with exception of Jews, a shared religious culture united them.

Slowly, but steadily, the swath of that common religious culture is diminishing. Take the United States as an example, with a robust Christian presence uncharacteristic of the rest of the Western world. Christianity is still by far the predominant religion here, but others

have significant presence, too. In addition to about six million Jews and about 35 million atheists, there are about six million Muslims, perhaps three million Buddhists, and 1.2 million Hindus, to name just the most populous faiths. In Europe too, religions other than Christianity are growing, especially Islam. In the Western world, in the foreseeable future non-Christian religions will continue to increase in both absolute and relative terms.

And these numbers aren't significant only as indicators of the vitality of religions. They're also indicators of their potential political influence. Muslims, for instance, are numerous enough to become a significant political force, both in the United States and in Europe. Moreover, they and other religious groups have the will to assert themselves as such a force. They have both the social power and will to make their voices heard and their interests taken seriously. In the West, religiously pluralistic social spaces are likely to give rise to increasingly religiously pluralistic political bases and actors.

The workplace is a good site to observe the growing significance of religious plurality. In terms of religious diversity, it is a mirror image of the wider culture. But it's not just that diverse religions are represented. Believers are also increasingly willing to bring their religious concerns into the office space or onto the factory floor. It used to be that workers hung their religion on a coat rack alongside their coats. At home, their religion mattered; at work, it was idle. This is no longer the case. For many people, religion has something to say about all aspects of life, work included. Indeed, some of them are excellent workers precisely because they are devoutly religious. If religion is allowed into an office or factory, many religions will come—possibly as many as are represented in the workforce—which leads to interesting questions, like how to configure a work space that's equally friendly to all religions. Religious diversity in the workplace is emerging as a significant issue analogous to racial or gender diversity.

The religious diversity of Western countries increasingly mirrors religious diversity in the world as a whole. At the level of individual nations, religious diversity is, of course, not a Western phenomenon. In a sense, it's a latecomer to the West. Some non-Western countries, like India, have lived for centuries with religious pluralism. Others are likely to become increasingly pluralistic, with various religions—foremost Christianity and Islam—competing for members and vying for social power and political influence. Globally and nationally, religious diversity will continue to be an important issue in the years to come. A modernist longing for a secular world is bound to be disappointed, just as the nostalgia for a “Christian Europe” or a “Christian America” is bound to remain just that: an unfulfilled nostalgia.

### III

Liberal democracy emerged in the West as an attempt to accommodate diverse religious perspectives on life within a single polity. It's democracy because governance is ultimately vested in adult citizens, all of whom have equal voice. It's liberal because its two key ideas, in addition to equal protection before the law, are (1) freedom for each person to live in accordance with his or her own interpretation of life (or lack of it) and (2) the state's neutrality with respect to all such perspectives on life.

In an essay entitled “The Role of Religion in Decision and Discussion of Political Issues,” Nicholas Wolterstorff noted one pervasive, though not defining, feature of liberal democracies. In debates and decisions concerning political issues, citizens are not to base their positions on religious convictions derived from explicit divine revelation (so called “positive revelation”). Instead,

“when it comes to such activities, they are to allow their religious convictions to idle. They are to base their political decisions and their political debate in the public space on the principles yielded by some source *independent of* any and all of the religious perspectives to be found in society.”<sup>3</sup>

Wolterstorff also notes that those who advocate such idling of religious convictions in public matters often interpret the state’s neutrality with respect to all religions as the *separation* of church and state—the famous “wall of separation”!

But for many religious people, it is part and parcel of their religious commitment to base their convictions about public matters on religious reasons—on Torah, on teachings of the Old and New Testament, or on the Koran, for instance! How can they be free to live the way they see fit when they aren’t allowed to bring religious reasons into public debates and decisions? For these people, liberalism, conceived in this way, is illiberal. It hinders them from living out their lives as the faith they embrace urges them to do.

When religion leaves the public square—or is driven from it—the public square doesn’t remain empty. Instead, it becomes filled with a diffuse phenomenon called secularism. Today in the West (unlike in the Soviet Union of the past century), secularism is not, strictly speaking, an ideology but rather a set of related values and truth-claims partly inherited selectively from the tradition and partly generated by the marketplace and a set of convictions drawn from the hard sciences. The marketplace enthrones personal preference as the paramount value, and the hard sciences offer explanations using inner-worldly

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<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, “The Role of Religion in Decision and Discussion of Political Issues,” Robert Audi and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Religion in the Public Square: The Place of Religious Convictions in Political Debate* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), 73.

causalities as the only truth. With religions absent from the public square, secularism of this sort becomes the overarching perspective. My point here is not that secularism isn't admissible and respectable as such. It's rather that, by barring religious reason from public decision-making and enforcing separation of church and state, secularism ends up as the *favored* overarching perspective—which is clearly unfair toward religious folks.

As an alternative, Wolterstorff suggests a form of liberal democracy he describes as “consocial.” It has two main features. First, “it repudiates the quest for an independent source and it places no moral restraint on the use of religious reason. And second, it interprets the neutrality requirement, that the state be neutral with respect to the religious and other comprehensive perspectives present in society, as requiring *impartiality* rather than *separation*” (115). “What unites these two themes,” Wolterstorff continues, “is that, at both points, the person embracing the consocial position wishes to grant citizens, no matter what their religion or irreligion, as much liberty as possible to live out their lives as they see fit” (115).

What also unites these two themes is advocacy of “a politics of multiple communities” (109). The liberal who bars religious reasons from public debate and advocates separation of church and state is clinging to “a politics of a community with shared perspective” (109). But Western nations are no longer such communities, if they ever truly were. They are communities made up of adherents of multiple religions and perspectives on life. In a polity that calls itself liberal, each of these should have a right to speak in the public square in a voice of its own.

Will religious communities support a polity in which they can speak in their own religious voices in the public arena and the state relates to all communities impartially?

Unless they are simply power hungry, they will. And unless they are secularized, most of them are likely to support such a polity more readily than one that is implicitly secular and therefore favors a perspective on life other than theirs. To be sure, some religions will strive to be favored by the state. But when they do, they are in principle no different than secularism is now or than secularism would continue to be under “consocial” proposal. There are legal checks against favoring one perspective on life over others, and all players will have to face the moral demands of fairness and partiality.

Liberal democracy, the kind that sought to take convictions of particular religions out of public life, emerged in the wake of the European religious wars of the 17th century. People clashed partly because they had differing perspectives on life. To remove the cause of conflict, liberal democracy said the protagonists’ religious perspectives should no longer be part of their public encounters. But if we are to live with a politics of multiple communities that bring their religious perspectives to the common table, as Wolterstorff suggests, won’t violent clashes return? Under these conditions, is there a way of avoiding the return of religious conflict, even religious wars?

#### IV

One way to avoid clashes triggered by particular religious perspectives would be to suggest that all religions are fundamentally the same. On the surface, the differences among them are obvious—from dress codes to arcane points of doctrine. But in this view, all differences are an external husk containing the same kernel. Alternatively, all of them are media, conditioned by the particularities of indigenous cultures, that communicate the same basic content. “Lamps are different, but the light is the same,” said an old Muslim sage,



giving poetic expression to this account of the relations among religions. Its contemporary proponents have christened it “pluralist.”

The pluralist account of relations among religions fits rather nicely into the role assigned to religion by liberal democracy. Just as liberal democracy relegates particular religious perspectives to the private sphere, so the pluralist account of relations among religions relegates them to being accidental features of a given culture. In both cases, particularity is rendered idle—in the case of liberal democracy, by leaving it behind in favor of a universally accessible “independent source,” and in the case of pluralism, by seeing through religious particularities to the “common light” contained in all of them. More precisely, in both cases religious particularities can be acceptable to the degree that they are an instantiation of something more encompassing— public reason, in liberal democracy, and the heart of religious faith, in the pluralist account

But the pluralist account of relations among religions is incoherent. I don’t mean here that it never ends up making good on its promise of including everyone on equal terms, although this is true, too. Some religious group always ends up excluded, mainly because the teachings and practices of concrete religions are not only different but sometimes outright contradictory and stubbornly refuse to let themselves be interpreted as instances of an underlying sameness. We can expand the circle of the included, but we cannot avoid excluding—unless we declare every religion to be acceptable in advance. From my perspective, this is as it ought to be; otherwise we would end up having to indiscriminately affirm anything and everything. Pluralists shouldn’t pretend, however, to have overcome religious exclusivism.

The main trouble with the pluralist account of the relations among religions is that it tries to reduce religious diversity -- that is, diversity that is acceptable on its own terms -- to an underlying sameness. It offers a framework more overarching than any other in which each religion and all of them together are situated and of which they are made culturally specific instantiations. But such frameworks always squeeze particular religions into a pre-assigned mold, which is all the more troubling because for most religious folks, their religion is itself the most encompassing framework for life and thought. Attempts to reduce what's important in different religions to the same common core are bound to be experienced as disrespecting each religion in its particularity.

Religions simply don't have a common core—a crucial claim that I must leave undefended here. Each is comprised of a set of loosely related rituals, practices, and metaphysical, historical, and moral claims to truth. Among different religions, these rituals, practices, and claims partly overlap (for instance, Muslims and Christians believe in one God) and partly differ (Muslims engage in ritual washings before prayers, for instance, and Christians don't), and are also partly mutually contradictory (Muslims object to the Christian claim that Jesus is the Son of God).

Moreover, there is no reason to think that the overlaps, differences, and disagreements in the future will be the same as they were in the past. Religions are dynamic, not static. They develop not only by interfacing with other domains of life, such as economic conditions or technological advances, but they also develop in mutual interaction with one another. To continue with the example of Christianity and Islam, we can trace the history of their encounters as a history of their shifting convergences and divergences. There is a give-and-take between them, sometimes triggered by hostilities and sometimes facilitated by the friendliness of their adherents.

The dynamic character of each religion and the overlaps between them give some reason to hope that the perspectives of various people of faith need not always clash and that, when they do, they need not clash permanently. But that's a hope; that's a possibility. What would it take to make it a reality? What would it take for religions not only to preserve their differences but to bring the wisdom of their own traditions to bear on public decisions and debates? What would it look like to do this and yet live in peace within a single democratic framework in which the law of the land treated members of all religions equally and the state related to all religious communities impartially?

## V

Each person should speak in the public arena in his or her own religious voice, I have suggested. But what does it mean to speak in one's own voice? The answer has two components, one that is common to all religions and one that is specific to each.

If we think that all religions are basically the same, then what truly matters in each will be the same in all. To speak authentically as a religious person would mean to express that which is common to all religious people. Disagreements that remain between people would be a function of something other than religion. But I've already noted that such an account of the relations among religions is implausible. Religions are irreducibly distinct.

An alternative view about what it means to speak in one's own religious voice takes an opposite tack and seizes on religious differences. What's important in each tradition is the way it differs from others. According to this view, to speak in a Christian voice would be to highlight what is specific to Christianity and leave out what is shared with other religions as comparatively unimportant. Whenever people of different religions enter public debate, their

views, if they were religiously informed, would clash. But I've already suggested that religions don't just differ among themselves. They also agree, and they agree on some important issues.

Both approaches are wrongheaded because *they abstract from the concrete character of the religions themselves*, the one by zeroing in on what is the same in all religions and the other by zeroing in on what is different. They miss precisely what is most important about a religion, which is *the particular configuration of its elements*, which may overlap with, differ from, or contradict some elements of other religions. If one affirmed one's religion in this kind of particularity, what would it mean to speak in one's own voice?

To speak in a Muslim voice, for instance, would be neither to give a variation on a theme common to all religions nor to make exclusively Muslim claims in distinction from all other religions; it would give voice to Muslim faith in its concreteness, whether what it said overlapped with, differed from, or contradicted what people speaking in a Jewish or Christian or any other voice were saying. Since truth matters and since a false pluralism of approving pats on the back is cheap and short-lived, adherents of various religions will rejoice in overlaps and engage each other on differences and incompatibilities.

But if differences and incompatibilities remain in spite of significant agreements, then what will prevent clashes? Won't religious people, if they bring their differing and diverging perspectives into a public arena, plunge the political community into violence? For some, even to raise this question is to suggest that religious voices should be muted in the public domain and that some form of secularism should be embraced. But secularism won't help. It is just another perspective on life that isn't above the clashes but participates in them as one player. Moreover, when it comes to violence, the track record of secularism is no

better than that of religions. Most violence perpetrated the twentieth century—the most violent century in humanity’s history—was done in the name of secular causes.

The only way to attend to the problem of violent clashes among differing perspectives on life—whether religious or secular—is to concentrate on the internal resources of each for fostering a culture of peace. For each, these resources would be different, though again they may significantly overlap.

In regard to the Christian faith—the faith I embrace and study and the faith that is a good contender for having a legacy as violent as any other—developing its resources for fostering a culture of peace would mean at least two things. The first concerns the *center* of faith. From the very start, at the center of Christian faith was some version of the claim that God loved the sinful world and that Christ died for the ungodly (John 3:18; Romans 4:5), and that Christ’s followers must love their enemies no less than they love themselves. Love doesn’t mean agreement and approval; it means benevolence and beneficence, possible disagreement and disapproval notwithstanding. A combination of moral clarity that does not shy away from calling evildoers by their proper name and of deep compassion toward them that is willing to sacrifice one’s own life on their behalf was one of the extraordinary features of early Christianity. It should also be the central characteristic of contemporary Christianity.

The second consideration about speaking in a Christian voice follows from the first, and it concerns the nature of *identity*. Every discrete identity is marked by boundaries. Some things are in, others are out; if all things were in or all things out, nothing particular would exist, which is to say that nothing finite would exist at all. No boundaries, no identity, and no finite existence.

The same holds true with religions. Though necessary, boundaries need not be impermeable. In encounter with others, boundaries are always crossed, even if only minimally. People and communities with dynamic identities will have firm but permeable boundaries. With such boundaries, encounters with others don't serve only to assert our position and claim our territory; they are also occasions to learn and to teach, to be enriched and to enrich, to come to new agreements and maybe reinforce the old ones, and to dream up new possibilities and explore new paths. This kind of permeability of the self when engaging another presupposes a basically positive attitude toward the other—an attitude in sync with the command to love the neighbor and, perhaps especially, to love the enemy.

To speak in a Christian voice is to speak out of these two fundamental convictions: that God loves all people, especially the transgressors, and that religious identity is circumscribed by permeable boundaries. Everything else that is said about every topic should be said out of these two convictions. When that happens, the voice that speaks will be properly Christian but will contain nonetheless the echoes of many other voices, and many other voices will resonate with it. Of course, sometimes the voice will find no resonances, only contestation. That's what the stuff of good arguments is made of, in personal encounters as well as in the public sphere.

## VI

In 1779, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing published a small book entitled *Nathan the Wise*. The book was an instant success. It's a play set in twelfth-century Jerusalem about the relationships between the three Abrahamic faiths, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. But its main theme is gift giving. The Muslim ruler of Jerusalem, Sultan Saladin, pardons a young

Knight Templar who then rescues Resha, a daughter of a wealthy Jew by the name of Nathan who himself had adopted Resha when she was an orphaned Christian baby. All this giving—and much more—has one purpose: to underscore that it takes *generosity* for Jews, Christians, and Muslims to live in peace with one another.

In fact, Lessing made two points about relations among Abrahamic faiths, one negative and one positive. The negative one is that we can safely put aside debates about the truth-claims of religions. Adherents of each religion believe that their religion is true. But when it comes to comparing them, we can't know which one is true and which is not. And if religions' truth cannot be told apart from their falsehood, only pride can lead adherents of a religion to believe that "only their God is the true God" and to try to force the "better God upon the whole world for its own good."<sup>4</sup>

What should they do instead of trying to persuade each other of the superiority of their religion? Here is how Lessing put his positive point. It comes in the form of a statement addressed to the representatives of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam:

“Let each of you rival the others only in uncorrupted love, free from prejudice. Let each of you strive to show the power of [his religion]. Come to the aid of this power in gentleness, with heartfelt tolerance, in charity, with sincerest submission to God” (76).

To Lessing, religions—or at least, the Abrahamic faiths—are enablers of uncorrupted love. The test of their truth is the ability to generate such love, and that's where gift giving comes in. Believers' concern should be to give what others need and delight in, and leave the

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<sup>4</sup> Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Nathan the Wise*, transl. Ronald Schechter (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004), 56.

question of truth open—to be decided by an impartial judge on the basis of each religion’s track record in fostering love.

A child of the Age of Enlightenment—one of the *fathers* of the Enlightenment!—Lessing thought he could neatly separate the practice of love from the question of truth. Truth-claims are disputed, he felt, but we all agree on what is loving to do. Moreover, he also believed that being a Jew, a Christian, or a Muslim is a dispensable addition to a more basic, generic humanness stripped of all the particularities of culture and religion. Like truth, cultural and religious particularities divide; like love, generic humanness unites. For a noble person, it wouldn’t matter that he or she is a Jew, a Christian, or a Muslim; it would be “enough ... to be called a human being” (57).

The problem is that there are no generic human beings and there is no generic love. We know neither what love is nor what it means to be a human being outside of the traditions—mainly religious—in which we were raised and in which we live. There are Jewish ways of being human and of loving; there are Christian ways of being a human being and of loving; there are Muslim ways of being a human being and of loving, and so on. These various ways of being human and of loving are not identical, though they may significantly overlap. Put differently, Jewishness and Christianness, for instance, are not garments of humanity and love that can be taken off; they are the stuff of a particular humanity and a particular love. And that brings us back to the question of truth. It is the overarching perspectives on life, with their metaphysical and moral claims to truth, that give concrete content to what we think “love” or “being human” means.

On its own, Lessing’s exchange of gifts in the practice of “uncorrupted love” is important but insufficient. It needs to be supplemented by the exchange of gifts in search of



truth and mutual understanding. At the most basic level, the truth-claims of many religions—notably those of the Abrahamic faiths—are contained in their sacred texts. People of faith should practice “hermeneutical hospitality” in regard to each other’s sacred texts and exchange gifts as they do so. Each should enter sympathetically into others’ efforts to interpret their sacred texts as well as listen to how others perceive them as readers of their own sacred texts. Such hospitality will not necessarily lead to agreement in the interpretation of respective scriptures. And it will certainly not lead to agreement among different religious communities for the simple reason that they hold distinct—even if, in some cases, partly overlapping—texts as authoritative. But such hermeneutical exchange of gifts will help people of faith to better understand their own and others’ sacred texts, see each other as companions rather than combatants in the struggle for truth, and how better to respect each other humanness and practice beneficence.

## VII

The two forms of gift exchange—Lessing’s beneficence and my hermeneutical hospitality—will not remove all disagreements and all conflict among various religious communities. In fact, removal of disagreements and conflict may not be even desirable. Public life without disagreement and conflict is a utopian dream whose realization under the non-utopian conditions of this world would do more harm than good. But this kind of gift exchange makes it possible to negotiate disagreement and conflict in mutual respect, and it even contributes to a significant measure of convergence and agreement. Religious communities will continue to disagree and argue. The point is to help them argue productively as friends rather than destructively as enemies.

Ongoing arguments are, of course, no substitute for action. There is no exit from acting. Even as we argue, we act. In a democratic polity, one important way in which we act is by voting. We argue, and then we vote, and then we argue again—or at least that’s what citizens of well-functioning democracies do. There is no reason to think that members of different religious communities could not do the same without having to leave their religion locked up in their hearts, homes, and sanctuaries.