

# The Conflicting Truths of Religion and Democracy

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**Abstract:** This paper suggests that the truths of religion and democracy are, respectively, theocracy and moral relativism. Religion tends toward theocracy, the thesis that religiously influenced political norms should trump secular norms. Democracy tends toward moral relativism, the thesis that society lacks agreed upon standards by which the varying and conflicting moral views therein may be adjudicated. The conflict between religion and democracy is thus unavoidable: theocracy insists that any conflict with democracy be decided in favor of the religious principles in question; and the moral relativism engendered by democracy cannot be tolerated by religion. The recommendation is to act in accordance with principles that will ease the conflict by strengthening tendencies counter to the two, namely the principle of chaos (which mitigates the effects of religion) and the principle of order (which serves to mitigate the effects of democracy).

## I. Introduction

Of current political philosophers addressing the relation between religion and democracy two broad and overlapping categories stand out: those who affirm or deny a profound historical and conceptual rupture and those who aim to delineate a place for religion within democracy. Prominent theorists of the first category are Marcel Gauchet, for whom a democratic separation of church and state was coeval with the birth of civil society itself, and Bernard Lewis, who employs a 'rupturist' model in his analyses of Islam.<sup>1</sup> Examples of theorists who stand against this sort of position are John Keane and Strathis Kalyvas, who see continuity in the evolution of democracy in Europe from inter-Christian religious pluralism.<sup>2</sup>

Theorists in the second category of disputes pursue the specifically liberal-democratic project most famously elaborated by John Rawls in seeking a defensible boundary between, in Rawls's terms, the realm of the 'metaphysical,' where religious and other comprehensive values and world views reside, and that of the 'political,' which should be informed by secular liberal and democratic norms. For Rawls and

his more faithful followers it is important that this boundary be impermeable such that *qua* citizens people are to abide by non-religious political values, and specifically religious discourse has no role in ascertaining proper democratic standards, policies, or institutional structures.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to the hard liners—or, better, sharp liners—are political philosophers who, while also locating themselves within a liberal-democratic framework, advance alternative ways to allow religious values and discourse into democratic politics.

To cite a few, of many, examples, Nicholas Wolterstorff argues (against Robert Audi) that religious principles are permissible as justifications for public policy provided that they do not undermine such substantive democratic mandates as equality under the law and state neutrality regarding visions of a good society.<sup>4</sup> Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson also wish to preserve space for religious arguments in public deliberation as long as other citizens can access their validity without having to adopt a sectarian point of view.<sup>5</sup> For Michael Perry explicit and committed religious engagement in liberal-democratic politics is both permissible and desirable but only if it is pursued non-dogmatically and from a standpoint respectful of pluralism.<sup>6</sup> And there are proposals for ways to integrate religion into democratic structures: Veit Bader through associative democracy, Nancy Rosenblum by means of religious political parties, and Lucas Swaine in a version of the Ottoman millet system including 'semisovereign theocratic communities.'<sup>7</sup>

These two sets of debates throw into relief several aspects of the subject before us, but I confess to a certain uneasiness with insufficient attention to the ways religion and democracy play themselves out in the lives of actual communities of people. Accordingly, I shall return to the debates after addressing religion and democracy from another direction. In particular, this paper explores the consequences of what it takes as the conflicting truths of religion and democracy. These are, respectively, *theocracy* and *moral relativism*.

The concept of 'truth' employed here is broadly Hegelian, as in his arguments that the truth of being is becoming, of perception, understanding, or of monarchy, constitutionalism. For Hegel examination of things that are apparently stable shows that within them are philosophical principles or historical tendencies that motivate change in the direction of end states specific to them. Appropriation of this Hegelian notion departs, however, from some aspects central to its teleology. For Hegel, on standard readings, things are fated to realize their truths and it is assumed desirable that the truths be fully attained. In this paper both assumptions are dropped. To say that the truth of religion is theocracy is neither to claim that religion *must* turn to theocracy nor to regard it as desirable that it do so, and similarly with respect to democracy and moral relativism. Rather, while religion and democracy tend toward their putative truths they may be inhibited from ever fully reaching them, and in these specific instances efforts ought to be made to ensure that the inhibitors carry the day.

Notwithstanding these departures, one Hegelian notion is qualifiedly retained. In this tradition, things possess dominant truths. Like anything else, religious and democratic practices, attitudes, and institutions tend in many directions, but this does not mean that they possess just as many core truths. The quest to isolate the truth of each of these things is the effort to identify that tendency by reference to which their dynamics with respect to one another can be broadly understood. Such tendencies, moreover, are ineradicable as tendencies even when they are successfully contained. That such understanding requires identifying counter tendencies as well does not vitiate claims about dominant tendencies, since these are what the counter tendencies are understood to be counter to.<sup>8</sup> Retention of this Hegelian supposition is qualified, since it allows that other truths may be centrally at play in contexts other than the intersection of religion and democracy (for instance, regarding individual spirituality or the place of voting within democracy).

## II. Religion and Theocracy

Maintaining that religion tends toward theocracy (or at least the three monotheistic religions—Christianity, Islam, and Judaism—about which the hypotheses of this paper are advanced) does not mean that adherents always aspire to a thoroughgoing merger of church (mosque, temple) and state. Rather, such an outcome is at the limit of a range of possibilities regarded as acceptable and sometimes demanded from a theocratic point of view. Toward the other limit are affirmations by political leaders that their favoured policies are in accord with religious tenets and state recognition of such as religious holidays. This weak form of theocracy arguably already exists now in North America, though whether the United States and Canada should count as weakly theocratic depends upon whether, as many suspect, the holidays have lost religious significance and professions of religious allegiance are no more than lip service designed to capture the religious vote. Be this as it may, common to all measures of theocracy is the view that political norms of behaviour and policies prescribed by the religion of the theocrat's liking should trump secular norms and policies when the two conflict.

The point can be illustrated—taking an example toward the weak side of a theocratic spectrum—by noting alternative interpretations of the pivotal (1960) interview with J. F. Kennedy during his successful bid for the U.S. presidency when he was asked whether, if the pope endorsed a policy at odds with U.S. national interests, he would follow the pope. Kennedy's response, which certainly kept his candidacy alive, was that in such a circumstance he would conclude that the pope was wrong. This reaction admitted of two interpretations: a theocratic understanding that Kennedy was confident about the congruence of U.S. and Christian interests but could imagine the pope being wrong in sometimes thinking otherwise

and an interpretation that would make Kennedy a non-theocrat who allowed that U.S. political interests should take precedence over religion. (Of course, from a specifically Catholic point of view admission of Papal fallibility borders on heresy; however, Kennedy's main critics were not anti-theocratic secularists but Protestant anti-Catholics. No analogous questions were put to the Baptist Jimmy Carter or the born-again Christian George W. Bush during their presidential campaigns. It was perhaps for this reason that the interviewer did not press Kennedy on the essential question of theocracy vs. anti-theocracy in general.)

Yet another interpretation of the example is that Kennedy was a proto-Rawlsian who, going beyond Rawls himself, thought that matters of national interest are political affairs in a different category from religious edicts such that they could never, in principle, conflict, so the question of which trumps which need never be faced. This orientation is invited by endorsement of the separation of church and state by non-theocratic religious spokespeople, the Christians among whom invariably claim scriptural support: 'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's' (Mark 12:17).

The advice to demarcate matters pertinent to religion from political matters is one that religious believers can find coherent reasons to support. In addition to the prudential consideration that demarcation is the only option when the state is firmly in secular hands, philosophical rationales are also available. In an Augustinian vein Charles Taylor locates religion in the world of the eternal, politics in that of the temporal, thus, as one interpreter reads him, providing space between religion and politics.<sup>9</sup> Khaled Abou El Fadl argues that from an Islamic point of view the will of God with respect to political matters cannot be humanly known. This means that religious leaders cannot claim divine authority for their political views, which, like those of other faiths, must be evaluated on non-religious criteria.<sup>10</sup>

No doubt philosophical efforts to compartmentalize religion can find support within the large bodies of theological literature, but this would not vitiate the claim that religion tends to theocracy. This claim is meant to apply to religion as experienced. Religion in practice serves to bind together the members of a community by endorsing their adherence to norms regulating their interactions and by sanctifying the rituals of daily, monthly, and yearly life to give them significance beyond the mundane necessities of individual and species survival. Challenges to the resulting order from secular directions or gaps in the solidarity and sense of purpose created by a religion-free political zone are bound to be at least unsettling to the religious believer despite the niceties of theological distinctions.

In this regard the religious texts, at least on plain readings, are closer to the ordinary believer than to the theologians and philosophers. Texts cited to the contrary only appear to offer support to the anti-theocrat. The context of the famous 'render unto Caesar' proclamation, recounted in each of the first three books of the *New Testament*, is that Christ is being baited by some Pharisees,

who are trying to entrap him into counseling the withholding of taxes. Christ does not rise to the bait, but he offers no reason to justify obedience to the secular authorities. However, a justification is to be found later, in Romans (13:1–7), where Paul again refers to payment of taxes and admonishes that ‘every person be subject to the governing authorities.’ The justification that follows is theocratic in nature: ‘For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed.’

El Fadl, like other Islamic critics of theocracy, cites an analogously famous passage in the Qu’ran—‘Believers, obey God and obey the Apostle and those in authority among you’ (4:59)—and again the apparently non-theocratic intent of this passage is called into question, this time in the immediately continuing text: ‘Should you disagree about anything refer it to God and the Apostle, if you truly believe in God and the Last Day. This will in the end be better and more just.’

Judaic critics of theocracy not infrequently cite Samuel (8:7): ‘Hearken to the voice of the people in all that they say to you.’ The context of this passage is that the elders of Israel are insisting that Samuel name a king to rule over them. Samuel, thinking such an order should come from God rather than the people, complains to God about them. The counter-theocratic appearance of God’s response is already muted when He adds that in acceding to the people’s wishes to designate a king (who will be Saul), Samuel should warn them against rejection of God, and a counter-theocratic reading is even harder to sustain in light of the next verse (9:15) where God tells Samuel that it is He, God, who will send Saul, whom Samuel will in turn anoint ‘to be prince over my people Israel.’

The point of this scriptural digression is not to argue that the religious texts are unequivocally theocratic, but to note that on a straight-forward reading, even the texts cited for anti-theocratic purposes point, rather, to a theocratic presumption.<sup>11</sup> This is one way to express the view that the three religions reflected in these texts have as their ‘truths’ an impulse toward theocracy. From the point of view of the religious believer, there is an elementary logic to this impulse. There is no guarantee that religious imperatives will avoid conflict with secular politics, and when they do conflict consistency demands of someone who sees religious norms as paramount that precedence be given to them. In this respect, I think that the observation of Hamid Enayat is on target. While allowing that ‘given a fair degree of exegetical talent’ Islamic religious scholars can find textual support for key democratic tenets, he nonetheless concludes that ‘if Islam comes into conflict with certain postulates of democracy, it is because of its *general* character as a religion. Every and any religion is bound to come into a similar conflict by virtue of being a religion—that is to say, a system of beliefs based on a minimum of immutable and unquestionable tenets, or held on the strength of received conventions and traditional authority.’<sup>12</sup>

A caveat (not inconsistent with Enayat's view) is that religion is not alone in harbouring anti-democratic tendencies. It might be said that in the right circumstances anyone with sincerely and strongly held tenets about social policies, whether they are religiously based or not, will be tempted undemocratically to impose them on a population, as in fact happened in the case of late Communism. If this temptation takes special pains and constant vigilance to resist in the case of religion this is likely due to the way that it deeply shapes the identities of large populations encompassing state boundaries and to the historical fact that several centuries of Middle Eastern/Western history have seen and in some places continue to see actual theocratic rule.

### III. Democracy and Moral Relativism

Democracy possesses no generally agreed upon canonical texts either supporting or detracting from claims about an impulse to moral relativism (unless references to God in such as the U.S. Pledge of Allegiance or the Canadian national anthem are taken as, well, *theocratic* endorsement of moral universalism), and theories about the nature and value of democracy are at least as diverse as theological interpretations of the monotheistic religions. Nonetheless, one aspect of democracy on any interpretation with contemporary practical application suffices to propel it in the direction of moral relativism—namely pluralism.

The key link in a chain of arguments to show that a democratic state should avoid endorsing any one vision of a good life but must facilitate people's pursuit of their various aims as far as possible in their own ways—that is, pluralism—is the tenet that whatever else democracy is taken to be at the crucial moments when collective decisions are democratically made the inputs of individual participants to the decisions are those they, themselves, chose to make. Often people making democratic choices find themselves confronted with options all of which are unpalatable to them and opt for the least objectionable alternative. This no doubt reflects a deficiency in much democratic politics, but it is one internal to democracy and, in principle, capable of being remedied. By contrast ordering people how to vote or making a decision for them without concern for whether they would make such a decision themselves contradicts the very idea of democracy, which must reflect the wishes people actually, subjectively have as opposed to those that someone else claims they ought to have or, more perniciously, claims that unbeknown to themselves, they really do somehow possess.

Insofar as the earlier-mentioned version of socialism that autodestructed in the former Soviet Union and elsewhere was premised on a political-philosophical principle, it was that in advancing what were taken as proletarian interests, including by authoritarian means, the socialist state was comporting itself *democratically*. To recognize the anti-democratic nature of this principle, or of any analogue—for

instance, one that appeals to national or civic interests—is to acknowledge that democracy must accommodate pluralism. The connection between such pluralism and a culture of moral relativism should be evident.

A society exhibits this relativism to the extent that there exists within it a variety of conflicting moral claims or visions with no agreed upon standards for adjudicating among or prioritizing them. This is the core of moral relativism, taken here as a cultural phenomenon to be distinguished from ethical relativism.<sup>13</sup> Moral relativism, as in the case of theocracy, may be more or less severe. It might simply encourage people to bracket their differences and adopt a live and let live attitude toward one another. Though such an attitude can inhibit efforts of people to seek or try to forge common values, it is usually innocuous enough. The more severe manifestations, those especially calling for concerted efforts to be impeded, take different forms depending upon how moral relativism is aligned in the minds of members of a body politic with moral agnosticism or scepticism. People who, rejecting moral scepticism, are persuaded of the objectivity of their moral beliefs but think there is no way of persuading others of their truth may adopt the innocuous stance, but they may instead try to impose their views on others. When moral relativism is combined with agnosticism or scepticism it can reinforce (if not uniquely cause) an amoral orientation where people give up on morality altogether and attend only to their self interest or give in to the yet more pessimistic attitude of nihilistic despair.

Democracy functions within a community of people who subject themselves to norms of democratic comportment, that is, who constitute a democratic 'public,' as John Dewey put it.<sup>14</sup> But the inclusion of pluralism within these norms means that democracy forsakes the common moral bonds that unite other types of communities. It is thus that pluralist democracy prompts moral relativism within single political communities. This situation is well recognized by political-philosophical theorists of liberal democracy when they address the 'paradox of liberal tolerance,' that is when they take up the challenge of identifying norms to adjudicate among conflicting values when they have potentially anti-liberal effects in a way that does not, in contraction to pluralism itself, involve the state favouring one moral vision over others. Many ingenious arguments have been produced to escape this paradox,<sup>15</sup> but, like the anti-theocratic arguments of the theologians, these arguments do little to arrest a trend toward moral relativism in actual liberal democracies.

Democracy may be thought of in an amoral sense, as a matter of prudentially following rules to preserve peace and avoid dictatorship (the interpretation following Joseph Schumpeter's famous definition of 'democracy' as nothing but competition for the popular vote among aspirants to political power) or as itself embodying moral norms (as classical theorists of democracy from Aristotle to Tocqueville maintained), but it remains subject to the morally relativistic pressures of pluralism on both interpretations. Prudence is always relative to valued goals, and, with the

exception, perhaps, of a community of pacifists dedicated to a conflict-free world at all costs, the possibility of commitment to peace or aversion to dictatorship being overridden by the goals of some or more members of a democratic public must always be admitted. The same point pertains to democracy when it is thought to embody valued norms. Freedom and equality are often and appropriately adduced candidates for being democratic values. But they are also incomplete, since one can always ask, 'freedom in what sense and how constrained?' or 'equality in what respects and how extensive?' so they are, once more, subordinate to other values, which in a pluralist democracy will diverge.

The same point applies even more obviously to the view advanced by civic republicans and more recently deliberative democrats who see commitment to pursuit of the common good as a core, uniting value of democracy. The question still remains about what counts as the good of the public. Again, as in the case of democracy generally, in a pluralist democracy on the prudential conception, the public good will always be susceptible to being overridden; while substantively conceived the content of the public good is subject to contestation. It is noteworthy that both Hobbes (arguably the father of Schumpeterian democratic theory) and Rousseau (the most forceful defender of democracy substantively understood) recognized the frailty of specifically political values as a bond for political communities and looked instead to common religious values or 'civil religion' for this purpose. Rousseau is more ambivalent on this matter than Hobbes (who cites the passage from Samuel referred to above in this connection).<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps these remarks suffice to indicate why (or at least why I think that) theocracy and moral relativism are the truths of religion and democracy. If these cases can be made out then two general observations are in order. First, it means that each of the religious critics of secular democracy and the secular-democratic critics of religion has a case: democracy does court moral anarchy, and religion does pose a theocratic threat to democracy. Moreover, these tendencies are not accidental to this or that exercise of democracy or to localized religious movements, but they are integral to democracy as it must exist in the modern world (pluralist democracy) and at least to the religions addressed here *per se*.

A second observation is that to the extent that the two truths are realized, they reinforce each other. The amoral and nihilistic potentials of moral relativism in a pluralist democracy strengthen the resolve and swell the ranks of fundamentalist religious movements inclined toward theocracy. Perception of a tendency toward theocracy in religion inhibits some secular prodemocrats from seeing counteracting democratic potentials within religions, thus denying them this potential source of common ground, and a brute standoff between champions of democracy and of religion is encouraged.

In what follows, I shall suggest principles for actions to inhibit the realization of their truths by religion and democracy: these are, respectively, *chaos* and *order*.

#### IV. Chaos and Religion

The sense of 'chaos' in which it might serve as an inhibitor to theocracy is itself drawn from a religious source, though from one that antedates Christianity, Islam, or Judaism. It is the sense explicated in Hesiod's *Theogony* regarding the pre-Homeric religion associated with Gai:

Out of Chaos, Erebos and black night came into being; and from night again came Aither and day, whom she conceived and bore after mingling in love with Erebos. And Gai first of all brought forth the starry Ouranos equal to herself to cover her completely round about, to be a firm seat for the blessed gods forever. Then she brought forth tall mountains, lovely haunts of the divine nymphs who dwell in the woody mountains. She also gave birth to the unharvested sea, seething in its swell.<sup>17</sup>

Aither and Erebos stand between the starry heavens and the dark earth, and the myths on which Hesiod drew reflected puzzlement about how, if the cosmos is divided into earth and sky, there can be dawn, dusk, and stars rather than just a stark contrast between darkness and light. The solution is that Gai is able to create these and all other things due to chaos. This term (on one interpretation) refers to the 'gap' between heaven and earth, light and darkness, which in separating them makes possible the differentiation of other things (the mountains, woods, sea, and so on). The aspect of chaos pertinent to religion and theocracy is that the interjection of chaos into the world as a whole prohibits thoroughgoing homogenization. The same is true of religion.

Just as pluralism mediates democracy and moral relativism, so religion and theocracy are mediated by an impulse of the former toward all-encompassing *totalization*. The importance of religion for providing bearings for all aspects of the life of a (sincere) believer means that it is central to his or her identity. Religion is, of course, not the only thing that provides bearings or is tied up with one's identity. Ethnicity, family ties, nationality, (ascribed) race, occupation, and other such things also perform these functions. Religion is totalizing when it expands to absorb these other sites of orientation and identity such that, for example, to be a true Jew or Muslim is to be a Jewish or Islamic religious believer, or to be a true American is to be a Christian, and there are other ways that religious identifications come to play the dominant role in giving direction and meaning to such as race, occupation, sexual identities, family and friendship ties, and the like.

A key hypothesis of this paper is that the more religion successfully absorbs other loci of meaning the more difficult it is to inhibit its theocratic tendencies. Of course, for those who classify all such orienting domains of life in a realm of civil society that they regard as entirely separate from that of politics, it would make little difference what the interrelations within aspects of civil society are to the political comportment of the state. However—to announce another hypothesis—for all but the most austere and utopian libertarian, to remove the state from engaging with

such as family relations or from projects and habits informed by national or ethnic priorities, occupational matters, and so on, is inappropriate, not to say unrealistic in complex and diverse societies. The composition and relations among different aspects of civil society will, therefore, affect the sort of state a society has, and when those relations involve totalizing religion, it will be very difficult to avoid endorsement of a theocratic state.

Chaos, in the Gaian sense, inhibits totalization by keeping open gaps among the major sites of orientation and identification in a society thereby also inhibiting theocracy. It is worth noting that chaos thus interpreted also inhibits analogously antidemocratic totalizations, such as those which subordinate all dimensions of community life to national exigencies, which can result in a myopically nationalist state of the sort all-too-familiar from the experience of fascism, or the class-reductionistic subsumptions that informed authoritarian Communism.

With respect to religion, chaos is maintained or attained by 'cultural politics' within religious communities for such things as ethnic, national, gender, and racial inclusion in religious communities and promotion of ecumenical stances, not just toward other religions but also toward institutions and activities informed by secular priorities. For those active in promoting secular priorities, chaos demands keeping their pursuits separate from religion, as opposed to hypocritically identifying oneself with religion, for example, by garnering support for national efforts by associating them with a nation's dominant religion. Such association may initially be opportunistic, but once embarked upon sets in motion cultural dynamics hard to reverse later.

## V. Order and Democracy

By 'order' is meant 'good government.' The notion includes all of 'peace, order, and good government,' as this phrase was employed in Canadian political discourse in earlier days—that is, when the main pretenders to government were classic Tories, Liberals, and Social Democrats, all of whom claimed best to advance these values. One mandate of an order-preserving government is provision (by means debated across the political spectrum) of what might be called 'elementary' public goods: security of person and possession, basic social services, such as education and health, dependable communications and transportation grids, and the like. A second mark of good government is accountability, at the very least in abiding by the results of elections and, more responsibly yet, by at least approximating to correspondence between election promises and governmental practice. Finally, an order-promoting government encourages among citizens and itself exhibits some basic civic virtues, chief among which are: respect for the rule of law, tolerance for differing points of view and styles of life, and a disposition to look beyond narrow self-interest in voting or in conducting government affairs.

Ordered government counteracts moral relativism by helping to nurture tolerance as a motivating value. A supposition behind this hypothesis is that tolerance as a preeminent and *sui generis* value is an impossibility. One might say that it is what Hegel called an 'empty universal' in need of content beyond itself to find application, which content in turn, limits its putative universality. The situation within which it is appropriate and desirable for people to place a value on toleration is when they are possessed of other and conflicting values to be mutually tolerant of. Those imbued with the potentially conflicting values would not need protection from one another by a culture of tolerance if this latter were strong enough, by itself, to counteract the conflict, since this would mean that they did not diverge in their highest value (tolerance) after all. Hence, a culture of tolerance needs help, part of which is provided by ordered government.

Elementary tolerance, where this means simply that people agree to disagree for the sake of getting on together, is difficult if not impossible to maintain in an atmosphere of fear either that basic social services are not forthcoming or that political leaders will usurp their authority by acting on exclusively particular interests and will entrench themselves in positions of government authority. In such a situation, there will be a strong temptation to circle the wagons with like-minded folk the better to compete for insecure resources and political power. Tolerance in a more robust sense, where people also place a value on mutual recognition and inclusive politics, is all the more difficult to achieve in the absence of ordered government as defined above, and in this sense it is facilitated when government is thus ordered.

Just as theocracy and moral relativism are fuels that feed each other, so do religious chaos and democratic order have potentials for mutual reinforcement. In a society free of totalizing identification, ongoing adjudication among a variety of concerns, even within the breasts of single individuals, is required, for which ordered government is an important requisite. Absence of totalized social forces in a society denudes it of one threat to ordered government, namely fanatics who either see themselves as unbound by governmental order or are determined to turn government entirely to their particular ends.

## VI. Religious and Democratic Politics

Some of those from whom reactions to drafts of this paper were sought expressed a concern that its publication would lend aid and comfort to intolerant anti-religious secularists and/or to theocratic anti-democrats. Decades-long experience as a professional theorist have me led to a modest view about the effects of my words on the political world, and in any case a prerequisite for doing philosophical scholarship is to articulate positions which one thinks defensible, inviting refutation while letting the political chips fall where they may. However, it should be registered

that the main political motivation behind the current exercise is to *strengthen* the hands of critics of theocracy and of moral relativism. This aspiration is ill-served, it seems to me, by dodging what I have argued to be ineradicable challenges within religion and pluralist democracy themselves—confronting hard cases makes for good politics as for good law.

Earlier two categories of theoretical controversy about religion and democracy were identified: one between the historical ‘rupturists’ and ‘continuists’ and one among varieties of ‘sharp liners’ and ‘blurred liners.’ The orientation sketched above is intended to supplement rather than to replace approaches departing from one of these controversies; however, it does have some implications for them.

Rupturists need not deny that modern democracy was nurtured in religious cultures—a favourite example being the rise of Christian Protestantism. Their core claim, rather, is that once evolved, democracy shed whatever religious origins it may have had and looked to popular as opposed to divine sovereignty to prescribe and legitimize political institutions, leadership, and law. What does not follow from the independent status of modern democracy is that appeal to religion has ceased to be a source of political values for many within popular culture.<sup>18</sup> The advantage offered to the democrat by transition from God-based to human-based grounds for political legitimacy is that this makes it easier to defend a separation of church and state. However, it does not guarantee this, since the theocrat is precisely challenging the moral standing of the democratic state itself.

Regarding the sharp and blurred line perspectives, an implication of the claim that religion and democracy are in unavoidable tension in virtue of their conflicting truths is that there likely is no one, timeless and generally applicable place to draw a line between them (to demarcate the metaphysical and political worlds) such that the demands of democracy and of religion can simultaneously be satisfied. The quest for such demarcation is labeled in the title of an extensive article by Stanley Fish on this topic, a ‘mission impossible.’<sup>19</sup> Reviews of the sharp/blurred line disputes suggest at least three, different sorts of intent: to facilitate mutual advantage for religion and democracy (whereby religion provides democracy with moral substance<sup>20</sup> and democracy protects individual faith from church domination);<sup>21</sup> to set boundaries to religious freedoms in order to preserve pluralist democracy;<sup>22</sup> and to give reasons to the religious to support democratic pluralism.<sup>23</sup> On the perspective of this paper, each of these endeavors is worthy of pursuit, but with one qualification and with the suggestion of an additional task.

The qualification is that whether or how religion and democracy can provide each other with advantages, how boundaries are to be set on religious freedoms, and whether or how pluralist tolerance can be interjected into religious belief will depend on existing religious and democratic circumstances and hence will vary with these circumstances. As in any contextual and pragmatic approach, fully to develop this point would require delving into the details of actual examples and

go beyond the scope of this paper. In general one might start with a crude matrix of four possibilities—crude because it does not account for matters of degree or for multiple forces and tendencies within a single society:

1. chaos infused religion and ordered government
2. disordered government and chaos infused religion
3. ordered government and totalizing religion
4. totalizing religion and disordered government.

Each scenario calls for political interventions (in a broad sense to include cultural politics in religious and secular democratic forums), and what is appropriate for one scenario may not be for another. None of the three tasks identified above is particularly urgent when confronted with the first scenario, and, indeed, democratic and religious critics seem to have occupied themselves with the tasks mainly when and where either or both of religious totalization or political disorder have become serious threats, for example, in the U.S. with the recent rise of Christian fundamentalism, in Canada earlier when the Social Gospel movement arose to advocate social services, or more dramatically when liberation theology has reacted to anti-democratic dictatorship.

Looking at the other end of the scale, I have the impression that if political philosophy has little to do in the first circumstance, it is largely impotent when confronted with the fourth. When totalizing religion coincides with disordered government—I leave it to readers to adduce current examples, depressingly confident that these will readily come to mind—political-philosophical formulas with any chance of general acceptance or implementation are especially elusive. This, however, does not mean that even in the worst case scenarios there is nothing to be done, which brings me to the additional task that the hypotheses of this paper suggest—a task, moreover, appropriate for people in addition to political theorists, theologians, and constitutional experts to take on.

This is to urge and actually to engage in the politics of the religious and democratic situations in which one finds oneself to promote or protect chaos in the one case and order in the other. Regarding religion this means working (either from within religious congregations or in interaction with them) to achieve such things as: ecumenism, non-token ethnic, national and racial diversity within religious communities, cooperation with other denominations and secular participants in joint activities, active and institutionally recognized rejection of sexist or homophobic policies and values, and other such measures. Order-promoting democratic politics means using whatever talents one possesses and taking advantage of whatever one's social, economic, or cultural positions offers to demand, individually and in concert with others, governmental accountability and concern for public goods and to encourage values of civic virtue both on the part of government officials and citizens.

If the theses of this paper are at all sound, activities like these should reduce the conflict between religion and democracy by strengthening tendencies counter to theocracy and moral relativism. While this does not hold out the promise of permanently and universally eliminating conflicts between religion and democracy, it ought at least to mute the conflicts. Or, to put the point a different way, it is within human powers to take action toward achieving worlds which, notwithstanding continuing conflict between religion and democracy, are neither torn asunder by moral anarchy nor subordinated to theocratic rule—not a bad achievement as worlds go.

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### Notes

This paper is based on the keynote address at the 21st International Social Philosophy Conference, at Creighton University in Omaha, August 1, 2004. Thanks are due for helpful reactions from participants at the conference and from Veit Bader, Ronald Beiner, Nader Hashemi, Thomas Pangle, and Charles Taylor.

1. Marcel Gauchet, *La religion dans las démocratie: parcours de la laïcité* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998); Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong?: The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002).
2. John Keane, 'Secularism?' in *Religion and Democracy*, ed. David Marquand and Ronald L. Netler (Oxford: Blackwell, The Political Quarterly Publishing Co., 2000), 5–19; Strathis Kalyvas, *The Rise of Christian Democracy in Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).
3. The main source is Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), Lectures 5 and 6.
4. Nicholas Walterstorff and Robert Audi, *Religion in the Political Sphere* (Lanham, MD.: Roman and Littlefield, 1997); Audi's argument for a 'principle of secular rationality' prohibiting religious rationales for public policies is elaborated by him in *Religious Commitment and Secular Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) chap. 4.
5. Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 56–57.
6. Michael J. Perry, *Love and Power: the Role of Religion and Morality in American Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); and see the discussion by Philip Quinn, "Political Liberalisms and Their Exclusions of the Religious," in *Religion and Contemporary Liberalism*, ed. Paul J. Weithman (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997) 138–161.
7. These three proposals comprise a special issue of *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* Vol. 6, No. 1 (March 2003) on "Religious Pluralism, Politics and the State," Veit Bader, guest editor.

8. On this conception, and contrary to Hegel himself, the notion of things possessing one, dominant truth is a presumption that might sometimes be overturned. That is, there is nothing to rule out something possessing two or more tendencies in a single context, neither or none of which is dominant (Yin and Yang, Gog and Magog). But for the purpose of politically relating religion and democracy it is alleged that at least each of *these* possesses the dominant tendency ascribed to it. From the point of view of the paper's practical recommendations not much hinges on endorsing its employment of this or some other quasi-Hegelian concepts, which readers put off by Hegel may regard as no more than convenient devices for organizing thought about the paper's complex subject matter.

9. Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1995), chap. 13. Keane rejects this as an effort to insulate the state from religion, "Secularism?" 8–9.

10. Khaled Abu El Fadl, *The Place of Tolerance in Islam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), and see his monograph, with critical responses, "Islam and the Challenge of Democracy," ed. Joshua Cohen and Deborah Chasman, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, a Boston Review Book, 2004), 3–46.

11. An example of a reading of religious texts, not from a theological nor from a hermeneutic point of view but to explicate their political content is Thomas Pangle, "The Hebrew Bible's Challenge to Political Philosophy: Some Introductory Reflections," in *Political Philosophy and the Human Soul: Essays in Memory of Alan Bloom*, ed. Thomas Pangle (Lanham, MD.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), 67–82.

12. Hamid Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 126.

13. Moral relativism refers to situations in popular culture where people adhere to a variety of sometimes conflicting views about what morality demands but lack agreed upon common standards by means of which to adjudicate among them; while ethical relativism is the position that it is impossible as a matter of philosophical principle to defend a universal, common standard for morality. Though moral relativism is sometimes appealed to as inductive evidence for ethical relativism, the two need not go together, as when philosophers who endorse a single, objective standard for morality lament the failure of the populace unanimously to recognize it.

William Galston wishes to draw a distinction between 'value pluralism,' which he endorses, and 'moral relativism,' which he thinks value pluralism does not entail, *Liberal Pluralism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 30. Since 'moral relativism' in this paper refers to attitudes embedded in popular culture, and 'value pluralism' refers to a theory of political morality, this may be sustainable: philosophical moral pluralists are not committed to endorsing moral relativism, provided they can defend the universal soundness of canons of "basic moral decency," *ibid.* But even if they can do this while remaining moral pluralists, this does not mean that moral relativism cannot hold sway in a population, for instance, one which is marked by disagreements over what counts as decency or over whether and when decent treatment may be set aside.

14. John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1927).

15. A collection of representative interventions are in *Toleration: An Elusive Virtue*, ed. David Heyd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); I review the debates and locate them within liberal-democratic theory in *Theories of Democracy: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002) 39–41.
16. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (New York: Hafner, 1947), Book 4, chap. 8. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968), pt. 3, see chap. 40. The different stances of Rousseau, Hobbes, and also Machiavelli toward civil religion are usefully compared by Ronald Beiner, "Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Rousseau on Civil Religion," *Review of Politics* 55 (Fall 1993), 617–638.
17. Modified from the translation of Hesiod's *Theogony* 116 by G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven, who also provide the interpretation adopted in this paper, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957) 25–50.
18. In defense of a contrary position, Gauchet, op. cit., maintains that modern democracy also brought with it the birth of individuality so that for the first time on a large scale people did not receive their identities from either the church or the state but saw themselves as free and responsible for making their own choices about how to live and what political values to endorse. I doubt that human nature underwent such a dramatic transformation, but even if it did, this would not signal the triumph of democracy over religion, since it cannot be ruled out that individuals chose to embrace the latter, including in reaction against what they perceive as the moral relativism of democracy.
19. Stanley Fish, "Mission Impossible: Settling the Just Bounds Between Church and State," *Columbia Law Review* 97 (December 1997), 2255–2333.
20. Ronald F. Thiemann, "Public Religion: Bane or Blessing for Democracy?" in *Obligations of Citizenship and Demands of Faith*, ed. Nancy L. Rosenblum (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 73–89; and see Thiemann's *Religion in Public Life: A Dilemma for Democracy* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1996).
21. Paul Dumouchel extracts this view from Hobbes, 'La religion comme problème politique,' in *Revue du Mauss* No. 22 (Second semestre, 2003), thematic issue, "Qu'est-ce que le religieux?" 235–246.
22. This is the effort of those theorists described at the beginning of the paper. See endnotes 3–6.
23. Thomas Nagel adopts this stance in "Moral Conflict and Political Legitimacy," *Philosophy and Political Affairs* 16 (Summer 1987), 229. A survey from this point of view of several more attempts to reconcile liberal democracy and religion is undertaken by Kent Greenawalt, *Private Consciences and Public Reasons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), and see Fish's critique of Greenawalt et al., "Mission Impossible," 2301–2313.