

Introduction to the Special Issue on Religious Diversity, Political Theory, and Theology: Public Reason and Christian Theology

Paul Billingham and Jonathan Chaplin

Rich and extensive literatures have been generated in recent decades by both political theorists and theologians in response to normative political questions generated by the deepening religious diversity of both western and non-western societies. These range from fundamental issues such as whether liberalism mandates a ‘secular’ public sphere to narrower ones such as the justification of legal accommodations that a liberal democracy might afford to religious minorities. Yet while these two disciplines have often produced impressive bodies of work on such themes they have generally been parallel, disconnected conversations, even when scholars are examining precisely the same issues.

Political theorists operating within the (mainly western) secular discourses of liberal democracy have developed highly sophisticated accounts of how liberal democracies can best respond to religious diversity, and how religious citizens can come to endorse—or critique—liberal democratic institutions and laws (for example, see the contributions to Cohen and Laborde 2016; Laborde and Bardon 2017). Yet they have done so largely without interacting with theology—or, indeed, with religious thought at all. This is despite the substantial and important work on these themes produced in recent decades by thinkers from various religious traditions.

This neglect is far from unidirectional, however. Many theologians working on political issues have limited grasp of debates within political theory, and are insufficiently appreciative of the work of secular theorists (see Chaplin 2018 for discussion). There are, of course, impressive exceptions on both sides. The work of John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, for example, has been seriously engaged with by some political theologians (Insole 2004; Biggar and Hogan 2009; Adams 2006; Juncker-Kelly 2011); some political theorists have engaged with Christian political theologians on these issues (Plant 2001; Macedo 2012); Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na‘im (2008) has engaged with Rawlsian pluralism from an Islamic perspective; and Andrew March (2009) has explored the relation between liberalism and Islamic political thought from a liberal perspective. But in general, the interactions between political theorists and theologians have been limited in scope and depth.

This special issue—and the broader project of which it is a part—seeks to contribute to the remedying of this deficit by bringing together political theorists and theologians engaged with the normative questions raised by the public treatment of religious diversity. That broader project includes a companion special issue in *Political Theology*, a leading journal in that field (*Political Theology*, 21(4) (2020): 279–389).

Both special issues include contributions from both political theorists and theologians. We hope that publishing special issues in both a political theology and a political theory journal will connect the often separate conversations within these disciplines, and encourage readers of each journal also to read the corresponding special issue in the other.¹

The special issue in *Political Theology* explores the theological or religious thought behind diverse religious responses to pluralism, with contributions addressing Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. This special issue in *Social Theory and Practice* focuses on one religious tradition—Christianity—and one theoretical response to pluralism—public reason. The idea of public reason has been the central focus of the discussion of disagreement, pluralism, and religion within political theory in recent years. Indeed, much has been written, both constructive and critical, on the demands of public reason and their implications for religious reasons and religious citizens. Two of the contributors to this special issue are prominent figures within that debate (Eberle 2002; Vallier 2014). Yet this voluminous literature seldom engages with actual religious thought. That is what we seek to do in this special issue, with a particular focus on Christian political theology. The papers explore the possibility of a distinctively theological justification for, and critique of, public reason liberalism, and consider the opportunities and challenges posed by religious citizens' distinctive commitments. Two papers address those issues in relation to concrete political issues—healthcare and war—that are often overlooked in discussion of religion and public reason. The papers thus both engage with the theoretical justification of public reason and examine its success in specific practical contexts, in order to make a contribution to the public reason debate within political theory. But they make this contribution in a way that is different in kind from the existing religion and public reason literature, due to their direct engagement with religious thought. In this way, the special issue also seeks to engage with broader questions about how political theorists ought to engage with theology and how the disciplines interact—questions that have been largely ignored by political theorists.

The special issue ends with two response pieces, one from the perspective of political theory (by Cécile Laborde, author of one of the most important books on liberalism and religion (Laborde 2017)) and the other from the perspective of political theology (by Jonathan Chaplin).

Before offering brief summaries of the articles in this special issue, a further word on the companion special issue in *Political Theology*. That volume considers how a range of religious traditions frame and address questions concerning the accommodation of religious diversity. What specific resources of religious thought or communal practice are available to inform both the intra-communal and the wider public accommodation

¹ Most of the papers in these special issues originate from a workshop on “Religious Diversity, Political Theory, and Theology,” held as part of a conference on Public Life and Religious Diversity at Harris Manchester College, Oxford in September 2017, organised by the Oxford University Department of Politics and International Relations.

of religious diversity? And, even more fundamentally, how is the ‘problem’ of ‘religious diversity’ experienced and understood within diverse religious traditions in the first place? The special issue includes articles from political theorist Julie Cooper on Jewish experiences of ‘religious diversity’, as reflected in twentieth century debates over Spinoza’s excommunication; political and legal theorist Mohammed Fadel on Islamic theological responses to religious pluralism among Muslims; and Christian theologian Luke Bretherton on the nature of democratic citizenship within religiously plural societies. The final article, by Christian theologian Elizabeth Phillips, takes a more practical slant, reflecting on the lessons concerning the negotiation of pluralism that can be drawn from her experience of co-convening courses inside a high security prison for a group that included both residents in the prison and Cambridge University students. These four articles are followed by four discussion pieces, in which Anne Guillard, Roxanne Euben, Daniel Weiss and Cathleen Kaveny reflect on the articles and themes of the special issue, each from their own disciplinary perspectives and drawing upon their diverse knowledge of religious thought. Overall, the *Political Theology* special issue offers a rich and diverse set of reflections on the accommodation of religious diversity, and indeed on how questions of ‘religious diversity’ are construed in the first place, in both theory and practice. We would encourage readers of this special issue to turn to that volume next.

Summary of the articles

The first article in this special issue, by Christopher Eberle, explores the application of public reason to war, taking as its jumping off point Rawls’s comments about the ‘supreme emergency exception’ to the prohibition on the deliberate targeting of non-combatants and theological objections to this doctrine from both Catholics and Protestants. Eberle uses this concrete example of theologically-freighted disagreement to assess a number of proposed restrictions on the justificatory role of religious reasons. He develops several objections to two of the central implications of public reason for religion: that religious reasons are unable decisively to justify coercive state policies in pluralistic liberal democracies and that citizens and officials should not support policies that decisively depend on religious reasons for their justification. In particular, he argues that the distinction between the religious and the secular that such claims rely upon cannot withstand scrutiny, because at least some religious reasons are not different in any relevant respect from secular reasons that have justificatory force. Further, in cases such as the supreme emergency exception, there is no policy that can be justified only using reasons acceptable to all reasonable citizens. “We are in the realm of the unavoidably controversial,” (Eberle 2021, p. XXX) and must act on whatever we believe the best reasons to be, religious or otherwise.

Joshua Hordern also critiques public reason liberalism via an analysis of a specific area of public policy—in this case, healthcare. Healthcare, Hordern argues, poses a particular challenge to (consensus versions of) public reason, because it routinely

deals with existential questions of human life. He demonstrates this both through a critical assessment of Norman Daniels' application of public reason to healthcare and an examination of several crucial areas of healthcare where public reason proves indeterminate. Healthcare is a domain in which contested, often metaphysical, views inevitably encounter one another in the most challenging of human circumstances, without consensus about existential matters but with the requirement that decisions be made. Hordern argues that insights from the practice of medical professionalism—notably 'collaborative decision-making'—suggest the need for a discourse which engages different perspectives, within which religious reasoning will have a legitimate role. This does not mean that religious reasons should be *privileged*, but it does mean that religious communities' reasoning should be seriously engaged with and permitted to influence decisions.

In his paper, Paul Billingham takes a broader look at contemporary Christian political theology, in order to identify resources that might lead Christian citizens to endorse (or reject) Rawlsian public reason liberalism—and thus to join (or not to join) the overlapping consensus, the success of which is crucial to the prospects of the theory. He considers theological ideas concerning the source of political authority, the desacralisation of politics, the role of government, and citizens' freedom and equality, ultimately concluding that there are various paths via which Christians might come to endorse political liberalism, but also some significant obstacles that need to be overcome. Further, even for those who do accept Rawlsian ideas, Christian theology always strikes a note of caution, such that this endorsement will fall short of the 'wholehearted' allegiance that Rawls seems to desire.

While Billingham's paper explores a broad sweep of theology, Kevin Vallier provides a more specific and focused theological argument in favour of a particular public reason view. He critiques both Christian agonist and Christian perfectionist approaches to politics, and defends an account of Christian public reason that is centred on the common good of political reconciliation among diverse persons. This reconciliation occurs when people live together on moral terms under social rules that are justified to each person's perspective, despite their disagreements. Vallier argues that this account of political reconciliation is a natural extension of Christian ideas of forgiveness and interpersonal reconciliation.

In her response Cécile Laborde explores the precise reasons for secular liberal suspicions of Christian conceptions of citizenship and offers a critical appreciation of the 'Christian political liberal' responses to these concerns expressed in the four articles. Yet she still finds wanting an assumption often underlying such responses—notably Eberle's—that secular and religious reasons always enjoy epistemological 'parity' in respect of public accessibility and public justification.

Jonathan Chaplin's response proposes that an 'institutionalist' perspective on the debate yields important insights that are otherwise easily overlooked when the practice of political reasoning is treated exclusively with questions of epistemology

and justification in mind. A focus on the distinctive institutional purpose of the political community suggests that such reasoning is better located within an account of democratic practice rather than one of legitimacy.

Close engagement with religious thought² would be a new challenge for much mainstream western political theory (although it would only be reviving a practice that was regarded as normal until as recently as the nineteenth century). Political *science* has been taking the measure of the empirical impact of religion in national and global politics for decades. If political *theory* were also to reckon with religious contributions to normative theorising, it would put it in a stronger position to contribute to the many political debates that, for good or ill, are today increasingly being shaped by religion. We hope that this special issue, along with that in *Political Theology*, helps to stimulate increased dialogue between political theorists and theologians engaged with questions of religious diversity. Nonetheless, the direct engagement with religious thought in these pages makes this an unusual special issue for a journal of political and social philosophy. We would like to thank *Social Theory and Practice*'s editor, Mark LeBar, for taking this on, and two managing editors, Darrell Jordan and Marc Kaufman, for all their help with bringing it to fruition.

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² Which of course is much broader than Christian political theology, the focus of this special issue.

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