

Forthcoming in *Social Theory and Practice*, July 2021. Pre-print version.

On the Parity between Secular and Religious Reasons

Cécile Laborde

Nuffield College, Oxford

Abstract

The contributors to this Special Issue all suggest that Christianity is compatible with political liberalism. In this paper, I first illuminate the grounds of this compatibility. I then focus on one distinctive – yet unexplored – premise of the compatibility argument. This is the thought that religious and secular reasons are essentially on a par, in terms of their contribution to public reasoning. I critically examine Christopher Eberle's claim that, as their epistemological status is equivalent, both secular and religious reasons may play a decisive role in justifying coercion-related state policies, including in contexts of war.

Key words

Public reason – Christianity – political liberalism – Christopher Eberle – just war – supreme emergency.

There is a long-standing tradition of Christian suspicion of secular liberal politics. The articles assembled in this volume aim to allay this suspicion, and suggest that a modestly political liberalism – one that does not pursue a comprehensively secularist, anti-religious worldview – need not contradict Biblical teachings. The articles, as importantly, provide reasons for secular liberals to accept Christians as *bona fide* liberal citizens. In this Essay, I shall focus on the latter kind of reasons. I begin by extracting the roots of the secular liberal suspicion of Christian (and more generally, religious) modes of citizenship. I then set out the Christian political liberal response to these doubts, drawing on the idea of parity between religious and secular reasons. In the final section, I assess the implications of parity for the coherence of the political liberal

project. I do so by assessing Christopher Eberle's claim that religious reasons have similar epistemological credentials as secular reasons.

I.

Let me first clarify which secular liberals I have in mind. I do not refer to those liberals who hold that religion is a mystifying, archaic or oppressive force destined to wither away once the claims of reason – scientific and humanist – are victorious. Such liberals might dismiss Christian citizens as essentially *irrational*. Rather, I focus on liberals who accept that religious belief is not incompatible with the exercise of reason, that free societies are inevitably ethically pluralist, and that the coercive imposition by the state of a comprehensive secularist worldview would be illiberal and illegitimate. In John Rawls's terms, they defend a political rather than a metaphysical or comprehensive secularist liberalism: one that seeks fair terms of cooperation between citizens who disagree about the existence of God, the meaning of life, and the content of the good life (Rawls 1996). Such liberals are not committed to the claim that Christian citizens are not rational. Yet they might worry that Christian citizens are not reasonable: that they are not fully committed to finding fair terms of political cooperation with non-Christians. This is because their theological commitments essentially conflict with the demands of political liberalism.

We can spell out three such familiar worries, which I call *hypocrisy*, *detachment* and *superiority*. The charge of *hypocrisy* speaks to the fear that religious believers accept liberal politics only as a second best arrangement. On this view, Christians would naturally prefer to live in a Christian state, one where there would be no alienating chasm between their religious commitments and their political existence. If they profess allegiance to liberal politics, it is often suspected, it is only as a *modus vivendi* – a pragmatic and prudential concession to the current balance of forces in their society, rather than a wholehearted commitment to the secular form of the state. Their commitment to liberal

politics, in other words, is fragile and contingent at best, duplicitous at worst.

The charge of *detachment* has a different target. It points out that, even when Christians do not favour a Christian state and broadly endorse liberal politics, their commitment to citizenship itself is bound to be half-hearted. This is because Christians believe that their ‘kingdom is not of this world’. The worry is that they will take no responsibility for the imperfect, sinful, and transient human efforts to achieve some kind of political order on earth. As Charles Péguy quipped about Kantians: ‘they have clean hands, but they have no hands’ (Péguy 1910: 331).

Finally, many secular liberals worry that Christians harbour a sense of epistemic and moral *superiority*. Even if they broadly endorse liberal politics, and even if they take an active and responsible part in them, it is unclear why they would refrain from imposing what they take to be the truth on others, whom they deem not so fortunate or clear-sighted. If Christians are certain they hold the true faith, and if that faith is relevant to common life, why should they refrain from appealing to it in politics? A connected worry here is that religious epistemology – the appeal to foundational and absolute truth – is incompatible with the much more partial, modest and limited aims of political liberalism.

These worries, it should be clear, are neither crude nor groundless. They are not crude because they do not rely on anti-religious prejudice nor on the view that religious belief is irrational. They are not groundless because history, theology and philosophy have taught us that people of faith, including Christians, have harboured deep and fundamental doubts about the godless political order born out of modernity. Fortunately, the authors of the articles in this Special Issue provide us with sophisticated arguments to allay these worries.

II.

Let us start with the charge of *hypocrisy*. It echoes Rawls’s just-so story of the rise of toleration in Europe. Rawls argued that toleration emerged

as a mere *modus vivendi* between conflicting religious sects, none of which powerful enough to impose its own version of Christianity. They only tolerated others because they could not oppress them. Over time, Rawls suggested, religious believers found reasons, within their doctrine, to endorse the political principles of freedom of religion, toleration and equality, so as to ground an overlapping consensus on the liberal order. If people of faith are moved by persuasive theological arguments against a religious state, and in favour of a liberal state, then they escape the charge of prudential duplicity: they can endorse the liberal state for principled, not merely pragmatic, reasons.

The chief argument against the religious state is a set of claims about the impermissibility of the coercive imposition of belief. Paul Billingham suggests that the deployment of the coercive apparatus of the state must be justifiable, in conscience, to those it applies to (Billingham 2021). Kevin Vallier argues that a perfectionist state – a state that enforces a comprehensive Christian ethics – would be authoritarian and paternalist (Vallier 2021). In turn, the argument in favour of the liberal state comes in two forms: negative and positive. The negative argument is the view, often traced back to Augustine, that earthly politics have a limited purpose: salvation can be only be achieved in the ‘City of God’. In the ‘City of man’, we should merely hope to achieve basic justice, not to live the full and eternal Christian life. The positive argument for the liberal state is that it best expresses the idea that all individuals are free and equal in the eyes of God, and that they hold basic rights. In sum, Christian liberalism is a sincere not a merely pragmatic commitment, as there is no alternative political form that would be congruent with Biblical teachings.

The next charge is that of *detachment*. To recall, the worry here is that religious citizens, even if they do not dispute the legitimacy of the liberal state, may not feel connected to it in the right way. Like the Amish in the USA or the Haredim in Israel, they might refuse to take on the basic duties of citizenship. They might be, at best, partial citizens, instead of citizens taking full responsibility for the collective political life. In response, and against what he detects as the ‘agonism’ of certain strands

of Augustinian theology, Vallier advocates the ‘reconciliation’ of Christians with earthly politics - a site where they can work with others to achieve political justice, despite disagreement (Vallier 2021). Christopher Eberle likewise defends Christian conscientious engagement in politics (Eberle 2021). Joshua Hordern illustrates such engagement in relation to the politics of public health, showing that medical responses to conditions such as extreme dementia, high-risk pregnancies or gender transition treatments directly engage Christian religious commitments (Hordern 2021). And Billingham points out that the deeper grounds for political engagement are no more mysterious for Christians than they are for secular liberals. After all, Rawls famously motivated civic commitment by appeal to a ‘natural’ duty of justice. Billingham draws attention to another similarity between Christian and liberal thought. Just as both are capable of motivating political engagement, neither considers such engagement to be the main component of a life lived well – by contrast to political theories such as participatory democracy, civic humanism, or ecological citizenship. Politics, for both liberals and Christians, has a limited and partial purpose (Billingham 2021).

The final charge is that of *superiority*. Religious conviction is a special mode of knowledge, both in terms of its epistemic credentials (its purported status as absolute and final truth) and its ethical implications (the salvation of souls, eternal life). Would not recipients of this special knowledge feel they have a special responsibility to spread the Gospel in politics? Why should ‘respect’ for other citizens override the natural concern one might have for their seeing the truth? Answering this question is, of course, the key challenge for the project of reconciliation of religious convictions and political liberalism. The standard response – to which the authors assembled here broadly subscribe – is to deny the specialness of religious belief, and argue that Christian and secular convictions stand, not in a relation of hierarchy or superiority, but rather of *parity* – at least in relation to their standing in the political order.

The argument can be made in different ways. One version takes an epistemic form, suggesting that people’s wholehearted commitment to their own beliefs is compatible with their accepting that others can

reasonably (though mistakenly) reach alternative convictions. Billingham suggests that plausible interpretations of Christian epistemology and of the natural limits of human reason can accommodate something like the recognition of the Rawlsian burdens of judgement. The upshot is that Christians may both believe that they hold the truth and accept that others justifiably - albeit mistakenly - hold alternative beliefs (Billingham 2021). Another familiar ethical argument, to the effect that religious belief is not special, is that secular citizens subjectively relate to their comprehensive worldviews with the same depth, integrity and commitment as religious citizens do to their faith. Kantians, feminists, and ecologists, like religious believers, are also moved to convince and convert others. The Christian liberal answer to the superiority charge, in sum, insists on the ethical and epistemological parity between religious and secular convictions. More precisely, religious and secular citizens are symmetrically positioned in relation to an ideal of public justification. According to a political liberal theory of respect, laws must be publicly justified to all those they apply to. Justificatory liberalism holds that ‘a legitimate regime is such that its political and social institutions are justifiable to all citizens – to each and every one’ (Rawls 2007: 13).

Christian liberals, however, hold different views of the implications of parity for public justification. Some argue – in line with ‘consensus’ public reason liberals such as Rawls and Jonathan Quong (2011) – that religious *and* secular comprehensive reasons are symmetrically barred from public justification, which must only be grounded in shared political reasons. Others, such as Vallier, have developed alternative ‘convergence’ approaches to public reason, according to which justified laws are those that all citizens have different (religious *or* secular) reasons to endorse (Vallier 2014). Yet others, such as Eberle and Hordern, derive from parity the more radical implication that *both* secular and religious reasons can decisively justify laws. To be sure, as on the consensus view, citizens should sincerely seek to find shared political reasons to justify coercive laws to others. Yet they might not succeed, because such reasons are too indeterminate or inconclusive

to do all the work of justification, when complex ethical-political questions are concerned. In such cases, we have a stand-off. And if we take seriously the epistemic parity between religious and secular reasons, then *neither* have the status of neutral public reasons.

Hordern richly illustrates this indeterminacy of public reason, in relation to ethical debates around death, the nature of personhood, the status of marriage and the meaning of gender identity: in such matters, there is little reason to suppose that religious perspectives have less secure epistemic grounding than non-religious ones. Consequently, collaborative deliberation in healthcare should permit communities' religious or other comprehensive reasons to be publicly recognised as justifying their endorsement of and participation in a public health policy (Hordern 2021).

More controversial is the notion that religious arguments can decisively and directly justify coercive laws. Eberle's essay is most thought provoking for its suggestion that, if a law is passed following a process of respectful and conscientious engagement, it can be justified *decisively* by appeal to a religious reason. Liberalism, it turns out, is compatible with religiously-grounded laws. It is this striking conclusion that I think deserves further scrutiny. It is one of the most profound challenges to secular liberalism from a Christian perspective, and one that has not been adequately addressed.¹

III.

Eberle focuses on the principle of just war theory that absolutely prohibits the deliberate killing of innocent civilians (Principle of Civilian Immunity or PCI). Infamous violations of this principle include the firebombing of Dresden, and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima in 1945. However, liberal theorists such as Michael Walzer and John Rawls have defended an exception to the PCI, in cases of supreme emergency (the

¹ For a response to an earlier version of Eberle's argument, see Talisse (2012). I discuss Talisse's response below.

Supreme Emergency Exemption or SEE). When a society faces an imminent threat of annihilation, they argued, it is unreasonable to grant priority to the rights of the innocent. Walzer and Rawls defended the British campaign of terror bombing of German cities early in World War II as examples of justified attacks on innocent civilians. These RAF campaigns, in turn, were denounced in the strongest terms by many Christians, including Bishop George Bell and philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe. No consequentialist consideration, they reasoned, can ever justify breaching the absolute prohibition on the deliberate killing of innocents. This prohibition, Eberle further points out, is rooted in an explicitly theological, providentialist understanding of the human condition. God requires that human beings comply with fundamental moral constraints, and trust Him that the ‘Heavens will not fall’ if they do. What, Eberle asks, is wrong with this religious argument in liberal politics?

The question posed by Eberle is a good one, for three reasons. First, it avoids familiar contentious issues such as abortion or same-sex marriage, to focus on an ethical dilemma internal to liberalism itself. A central commitment of rights-based liberalism is, as Rawls memorably put it, that ‘each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override’. The Christian who defends the PCI is defending a position that no liberal has independent reasons to think odious (by contrast to most sexual morality cases). Second, Eberle makes it clear that the dilemma is internal to liberal public justification, as it concerns how to balance two secularly grounded norms: the need to respond to imminent threats of annihilation v. respect for civilian immunity. The religious argument is only invoked *in extremis*, to resolve the conflict between the two secular norms: to add weight, we could say, to one of the secular reasons. In this sense, Eberle suggests, the religious reason does not *solely* justify the proposed solution, but it *decisively* justifies it. In the minds of Bell and Anscombe, the appeal to providentialism is what decisively tilts the balance in favour of PCI. Third, the example of *jus in bello* suggests that justificatory liberals often cannot simply retreat to a principle of non-coercion in cases

of stand-offs between irreconcilable principles, as advocated by Vallier. In such dilemmas, the absence of coercion itself is as controversial as the authorization of coercion (this would also apply to Vallier's proposed compromise in the area of same-sex marriage and abortion, as Hordern's argument also suggests). So Eberle is right to focus on policies that *bear* on coercion, rather than merely those that *authorize* coercion.

I now turn to evaluate Eberle's argument for the parity between secular and religious arguments. Let me start with a clarification. Eberle claims to show that 'there is no principled reason to believe that religious reasons cannot count as shared' (Eberle 2021: XX). Yet this is not what he, in fact, shows. His argument is, instead, that secular arguments do not have the epistemological virtues that are routinely attributed to them. In particular, they are often as 'subjective and contentious' as religious reasons. So the argument is that, in cases of dilemmas such as the SEE, *neither* secular *nor* religious arguments are shared. This is what justifies what we could call parity of pursuit: as their epistemological status is equivalent, both secular and religious reasons may play a decisive role in justifying coercion-related state policies.

Why does Eberle think that Rawls's argument for the SEE is not shared? Simply put, because it can be reasonably contested. People might accept the justificatory force of both considerations (response to imminent annihilative threat and civilian immunity), but they might disagree about how they are weighed and balanced. After all, the circumstances under which such judgements are made are extraordinarily murky. To assess whether the RAF bombing campaign (i) is a response to an *imminent* threat of *annihilation*, (ii) would be *effective* in sapping Nazi determination to carry out these threats, and (iii) would be *proportionate* to this aim, we need to make exceedingly complex factual assessments. As Eberle documents, we now know that it is most doubtful that the UK needed deliberately to target German innocents to fend off Nazi aggression. This is correct. However, as Eberle himself concedes, it is not damaging to advocates of public reason liberalism. Rawls's argument for the SEE is not shared, but it is the subject of reasonable disagreement. Such disagreement centres on the

interpretation of complex and uncertain facts, and the weighing of sometimes incommensurable considerations. There is nothing there that political liberals could not accept.

Nor is secular debate about SEE merely an effectiveness calculus made on *empirical*, consequentialist grounds (as Eberle's account suggests). Secular critics of SEE might (and did) challenge the *moral* premise of SEE: that it is permissible to violate the PCI in cases of supreme emergency. Some secular just war theorists argue that the morality of killing in war is no different from the morality of killing in non-war contexts. It is open to those theorists to say that, just as individuals are never permitted deliberately to kill the innocent as a means to save their own lives, neither are political communities permitted deliberately to kill innocent enemy civilians as a means to their collective self-defense. Eberle seems to assume that secular philosophers quickly lean towards consequentialist reasoning, whereas only Christians have the moral resources to justify absolute deontological prohibitions (even as the risk of political detachment: *Fiat justitia, pereat mundus*). For example, Eberle asserts that 'but for divine providence, there would be no compelling objection to the supreme emergency rationale for the RAF's bombing campaign' (Eberle 2021: XX). But this is manifestly false. One need not be a Christian to be a strict deontologist, as the history of moral philosophy demonstrates.²

The upshot is that Rawls's arguments for RAF terror bombing can be the subject of reasonable disagreement. They may be 'contentious' but they are not necessarily 'subjective'.³ Rawls's conclusions are not shared – many people disagree with them – but they can be discussed and debated on secular grounds. They are, in a word, publicly accessible. Eberle, however, is also a trenchant critic of the notion of accessibility in

² For a sceptical assessment, however, see Anscombe 1958. Anscombe famously argued that deontological ethics such as Kantianism and contractualism untenably lacked foundations.

³ It is true that, when caught in the 'fog of war', actors let their subjective experiences – what Eberle calls 'the murky depths of their darkened, fearful, calloused hearts' – determine their use of military violence. I agree with Eberle that reasons that are rooted in personal experience and subjectivity are inaccessible in the same way as (some) religious reasons. But we are here focusing on the reasons proffered by state officials.

public reasoning and, more generally, of the availability of any epistemic criterion of distinction between the ‘secular’ and the ‘religious’ (Eberle 2002). One clarification is in order before I present his arguments on this point. It is this: it is not incoherent to hold both that the criterion of accessibility is the correct criterion to deploy in public reason, while also denying that accessibility is the criterion that sets apart religious from secular reasons. For my part, I am quite convinced by Eberle’s suggestion that some secular arguments are inaccessible, and that some religious arguments are accessible; and I do not hold that religion is uniquely special in relation to epistemic inaccessibility (Laborde 2017). However, I have doubts about Eberle’s more specific argument that the argument *from providentialism* is publicly accessible, as I explain in the final section.

IV.

Eberle’s reasoning is as follows. Many liberal philosophers assume that theological arguments are obviously inaccessible, because they depend on faith and revelation – personal, subjective experiences that cannot be the object of reasoned public evaluation. Yet, Eberle points out, religious topics such as arguments for and against the existence of God, or the possibility of evil, have been debated by generations of atheological thinkers. As he puts it: ‘any and all theistic claims are amenable to assessment by appeal to widely shared epistemic and normative standards’ (Eberle 2021: XX). By the same token - we can surmise – a decision not to bomb German cities, when justified by an ultimately providentialist rationale, is accessible in public justification. This is because it can be contested by non-believers in exactly the same way as other reasonable citizens can contest Rawlsian argument to the contrary. To deny that religious arguments are contestable via the exercise of normal reason would be to endorse the view – incompatible with political liberalism – that religious belief is irrational.

This is a powerful argument from Eberle, because the usual political liberal responses to similar challenges do not easily defeat it. Consider, first, political liberals who deny that the exercise of public

reason is ever indeterminate in the way that Eberle suggests. Jonathan Quong, for example, has argued that even seemingly ‘religious’ controversies such as those over abortion are to be interpreted as reasonable disagreements about the relative weight of different *political* values (eg. right to life v. women’s reproductive autonomy). Yet Quong does not explain how this weighing can itself be done only by appeal to political values (Stemplowska and Fowler 2015; Laborde 2018). As Eberle illustrates, the epistemic virtues of the two conflicting secular reasons do not automatically accrue to the ‘meta-reason’ that adjudicates between them.

A second common political liberal response is to stipulate that religious reasons are ‘by definition’ not public reasons, because the latter are ‘reasons which must count as internal reasons for citizens in their role as citizens’, in Robert Talisse’s words (Talisse 2014: 320). Yet this begs the question. Surely not all actual citizens share the same set of such reasons, so what counts as ‘internal reasons’ cannot be induced from empirical generalization. Political liberals must idealize the set of citizens to whom public reasons are addressed. But then Talisse’s argument begs the question, because it is not clear why religious reasons would not be internal to the idealized constituency. Talisse might reply that the only reasons that are ‘relevant to the role of citizen’ are abstract political values such as freedom, equality and fairness. But then we are back to the dilemma faced by Quong: in what sense exactly is the meta-reason (the reason that justifies the relative weight of different political values) itself ‘internal’?

A more sustained effort to demonstrate that religious reasons are not accessible in public reason has come from Gabriele Badano and Matteo Bonotti (Badano and Bonotti 2020). They dispute an argument defended by Vallier (and drawing on Eberle’s), according to which debates in the field of natural theology are framed by shared standards of rational enquiry and conceptual analysis (Vallier 2011: 380–385). Badano and Bonotti, in response, loosely follow Kant in stipulating that metaphysical truth ‘lies beyond the very limits of what we can meaningfully argue about’. Many citizens, they note, are sceptical that

claims about ‘the supernatural’ are amenable to rational enquiry. So natural theology arguments are not accessible. To this extent, they are perfectly analogous to comprehensive philosophical and metaphysical reasons which – as Rawls insisted - should not be appealed to in public reason either. By contrast, arguments from natural theology are dis-analogous from complex scientific arguments which – despite their apparent inaccessibility to actual citizens - are part of public reason. This is because, for Badano and Bonotti, science’s evaluative standards are continuous with common sense, and are ‘more broadly shared than those of natural theology and of most philosophical inquiry’ (Badano and Bonotti 2020: 52). The overwhelming majority of religious believers are committed to the public value of scientific reasoning; whereas few non-believers are committed to the public value of religious reasoning. There is no parity, in public reason, between religious and scientific reasons.

Badano and Bonotti are right to locate the debate about the parity between religious and secular reasons within a broader discussion of the relative epistemic claims of religion, philosophy and science. Theirs is a reconstruction and defence of Rawls’s scattered remarks about the content of liberal public reason, and one that laudably avoids sustained reference to the obfuscating notion of ‘reasonableness’ that often afflicts political liberal writings. To be sure, in the process, they make some of the controversial arguments (about the nature of rationality notably) that critics have found damning for the project of political liberalism. And their arguments are open to similar objections as Talisse’s: they *describe* the existing beliefs and conceptions prevalent in existing liberal democratic societies but (like Rawls) fall short of *justifying* them.

All that said, I think that Badano and Bonotti ask the right questions, and in the right way. The problem is that their answers are not fully persuasive. Consider what they say about the parity between religious and philosophical reasoning. Badano and Bonotti begin by noting that few citizens think that shared standards of conceptual analysis should be applied to claims about ‘the supernatural’, because it is unclear that such matters can be ‘meaningfully argued about’. This is the sense in which natural theology is not, for them, properly accessible.

Later on, they respond to the possible objection that this will exclude many philosophical doctrines from public reason. This is a bullet they are prepared to bite: ‘after all, Rawls himself famously excluded philosophical doctrines (including comprehensive ethical doctrines such as those of Kant and Mill) from the realm of public reason’ (Badano and Bonotti 2020: 48). The problem with this response is that it is doubtful that Kantian and Millian ethical doctrines are excluded from Rawlsian public reason on *epistemic* grounds. It would be odd to apply a version of Badano and Bonotti’s epistemic scepticism to the wealth of meaningful debates in practical ethics that characterize the practice of philosophy. By suggesting that neither natural theology nor philosophy can ‘meaningfully be argued about’, Badano and Bonotti prove too much. For my part, I am quite convinced by Eberle (and Vallier’s) argument that arguments from natural theology are accessible in exactly the same way as philosophical, ethical arguments (indeed, the former are often studied in secular university philosophy curricula).

What I dispute is Eberle’s more specific suggestion – implicit in his argument about the SEE – that the argument *from providentialism* is accessible in public reason. What is the difference between natural theology and providentialism? Natural theology arguments, I suggest, are *detachable* from specific systems of belief: they can be assessed on their own merits, by reference to ordinary criteria of rationality. Specific theological arguments, by contrast, are not so detachable. To make sense of providentialism, you must believe that God exists, that at least some of His intentions are discernible through human reason, that He relates to the world and to human actions in a certain way, and so forth. Such matters, of course, are the subject of intense theological controversy, both within Christianity and within other religious traditions. But such controversies are only meaningful to those who are embedded in such epistemic communities. Only believers, we might say, are *epistemic peers* in relation to them.

To this extent, there is an intriguing parallel between science and religion. Only those who apply themselves to the discipline of scientific learning can make sense of, and meaningfully argue about, the intricate

findings of science. Consider climate change. Only trained climatologists can meaningfully debate the plausibility of different scenarios of future climate emergency. It is extraordinarily difficult for lay citizens to have proper access to this knowledge, as they lack the training and understanding to grasp the scientific facts. As for those, such as climate deniers, who refute the premise from which the experts begin – the fact of human-made climate change itself – they fall even more squarely outside the relevant community of epistemic peers. Their disagreement is not a peer disagreement.

The argument from providentialism, I suggest, has a similar structure. *Contra* Eberle, it is simply not accessible to those who deny the existence of God in the first place. Their position vis-a-vis theological controversies is akin to that of the climate change deniers vis-a-vis debates about climate emergency scenarios. One cannot meaningfully disagree about what God wills without sharing the premise that God exists, as well as the substantive commitments of faith that follow from such a premise. Only those who are epistemic peers – who share a set of convictions about the place of God in the universe – can properly debate the plausibility of providentialist intervention. In this specific sense, both science and religion are epistemically closed systems: they are subjected to standards of rational enquiry only on the basis of premises internal to particular bodies of knowledge. What this suggests is that Eberle's argument from providentialism is not accessible in public reason. If British authorities had decided to refrain from terror-bombing German cities by claiming to trust God that the 'Heavens would not fall' if they conscientiously refrained, they would *not* have offered citizens reasons that can be meaningfully argued about in public debate.⁴

⁴ A potentially troubling corollary of this claim, readers will have noted, is that scientific arguments are not, either, accessible in public reason in my sense. This, of course, does not entail the *reductio* that the public status of science in liberal democracies is as fragile as that of religious providentialism. But it does suggest that much more work needs to be done about the relationship between liberal justification, democratic governance and public expertise. Political liberal epistemic abstinence is not sustainable. On the developing literature on this, see McKinnon (2012), Jønch-Clausen and Kappel (2016), Bellolio (2019), Pamuk (2019).

My argument here does not rely on vague generalizations about the epistemic merits of secular versus religious thought. Rather, it identifies the feature that an argument has to exhibit – it has to be detachable from self-contained systems of knowledge – if it is to be publicly accessible. Consequently, we have reasons to be sceptical about Eberle’s key claim that ‘*any and all theistic claims* are amenable to assessment by appeal to widely shared epistemic and normative standards’. We need a more fine-grained distinction between different kinds of claims. I have argued that arguments from natural theology, just like most philosophical and ethical judgements, are amenable to assessment in this sense. Yet I have denied that arguments from providentialism, just like other specific theological commitments, are similarly accessible. Any claim about the parity between religious and secular reasons in public debate must be sensitive to the different levels of public accessibility present within different bodies of knowledge and thought.

Nuffield College, University of Oxford.

Cecile.laborde@nuffield.ox.ac.uk

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Paul Billingham and Cécile Fabre for comments on a draft of this article.

References

Anscombe, E. (1958) ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’, *Philosophy* 33: 1–19.

Badano, G. and Bonotti, M. (2020) 'Rescuing Public Reason Liberalism's Accessibility Requirement', *Law and Philosophy* 39: 35–65.

Bellolio, C. (2019) 'The Quinean Assumption. The Case for Science as Public Reason', *Social Epistemology* 33/3, 205–217.

Billingham, P. (2021) 'Can Christians join the overlapping consensus? Prospects and pitfalls for a Christian justification of political liberalism', *Social Theory and Practice*, this Issue.

Eberle, C. (2002) *Religious Convictions in Liberal Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Eberle, C (2021) 'Irreconcilable Disagreement: Supreme Emergency, Respect, and Restraint', *Social Theory and Practice*, this Issue.

Horden, J. (2021) 'The challenge of healthcare for consensus public reason', *Social Theory and Practice*, this Issue.

Jønch-Clausen, K., and Kappel, K. (2016) 'Scientific Facts and Methods in Public Reason' *Res Publica* 22 (2): 117–133.

Laborde, C. a(2017) *Liberalism's Religion*. Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Laborde, C. (2018) 'Abortion, Marriage, and Cognate Problems', *American Journal of Jurisprudence*, 63/1: 33–48.

McKinnon, C. (2012) *Climate Change and Future Justice. Precaution, Compensation and Triage*. London: Routledge.

Pamuk, Z. (2019) 'Justifying Public Funding for Science', *British Journal of Political Science*, 49/1: 1–16.

Péguy, C. (1910) *Victor-Marie, comte Hugo*. Vol. 3. Paris : La Pléiade.

Quong, J. (2011) *Liberalism without Perfection*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rawls, J. (2007) *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press.

Rawls, J. (1996, 2nd ed., first ed: 1993) *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Stemplowska, Z. and Fowler, t. (2015) 'The Asymmetry Objection Rides Again: On the Nature and Significance of Justificatory Disagreement', *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 32/2: 133–146.

Talisce, R. (2012) 'Religion, Respect, and Eberle's Agapic Pacifist', *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 38/3: 313–325.

Vallier, K. (2014) *Liberal Politics and Public Faith: Beyond Separation*. New York: Routledge.

Vallier, K. (2011) 'Against Public Reason's Accessibility Requirement', *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, 8: 366–89.

Vallier, K. (2011), 'Christian Reconciliation Through the Public Use of Reason', *Social Theory and Practice*, this Issue.