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Beyond Secularization

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Ronald Beiner: *Civil Religion: A Dialogue in the History of Political Philosophy.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. xv, 432. $95.00. $34.99, paper.)

Robert Benne: *Good and Bad Ways to Think about Religion and Politics.* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010. Pp. 120. $14.00, paper.)

Ian Buruma: *Taming the Gods: Religion and Democracy on Three Continents.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010. Pp. 132. $19.95, cloth.)

"Religion" has retaken a front seat in the news. Its presence in the media is echoed in the concerns of policymakers, whence it is more strongly felt again in the thinking and writing of social scientists. Concerning religion, "resurgence" is a word that shows up in many a social science title of late. For scholars such as sociologist Rodney Stark, this language is merely further evidence of a deep-seated secularist inattention in the social sciences: religion has never been absent from human affairs, it just hasn't been of interest to prejudiced scholars. "Pluralism, not secularism, is the dominant trend in an 'age of explosive, pervasive religiosity,'" argues former secularization theorist Peter Berger in the title words of his 2006 article. The three books under consideration here do not share directly in either of these arguments. Nor do any make a claim for "resurgence," though each author acknowledges some version of the secularization myth and its dismantling in developments and events of the recent past, and each knowingly writes in that context (Benne, 2–6; Buruma, 1–3; Beiner, xiv n11, 4–5, 312).

With *Taming the Gods*, noted journalist and commentator Ian Buruma continues the inquiries that began in his well-received *Murder in Amsterdam* concerning the public role of religious belief in pluralist, liberal-democratic societies. Buruma now moves from a single but well-developed case study of the murder of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh to a wider examination of the problem of "constitut[ing] a political community on the basis of common ethics, mores, beliefs, or laws" in a contemporary liberal-democratic context in which "citizens [may] fail to share common values" (87). He takes up this question by means of a three-continent, widely dispersed historical recounting of selected episodes and incidents. If, as Buruma believes, "religious faith, the desire for metaphysical answers to questions that cannot be rationally answered, the need for and delight in mystical ritual and spiritual speculation, will [not] go away" (9), then how can such impulses be

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reconciled with pluralist democracy, which, he asserts, is the best form of rule available? In his words, can "people who hold such beliefs still agree to play by the rules of democratic government?" (85).

While broad, Buruma's concise book is not intended to be as wide-ranging as a three-continent survey (select countries in Europe, North America, and Asia) might imply. "Religion and Democracy" demarcates a specific interest: "The thread that runs through these inquiries, despite their wide diversity in space and time, is the question posed by Tocqueville: what is needed, apart from freedom of speech and the right to vote, to hold democratic societies together?" (3). That question guides the "cases" that Buruma selects to guide his inquiry. Perhaps by dint of its brevity, Buruma's political theory tends toward the superficial, but it is nevertheless refreshing to observe the commonsensical and fact-based approach of this avowed (Dutch-bred) liberal (9), even when the facts, as he sees them, militate against both liberal and conservative prejudices (86, 88).

Buruma is a member of what may be an endangered species: a thoughtful journalist, writing as a public intellectual. As such, he shares in the best strengths and regrettable weaknesses of his tribe. His journalistic style is accessible, but depends on vignettes from which the reader is encouraged to move to larger conclusions. He has a journalist's instincts for a good story, but that is not equivalent to historical analysis; his accessible, easy style is not necessarily analytically penetrating. Nevertheless, Buruma has a better-than-average grasp of some basic characteristics of cosmological societies and religiopolitical life in the cosmion (61–62), of the embedded spiritual and moral cosmological language that infuses such societies, and of contemporary desires to "return" to such theocratic political forms, even while a hope for liberal democracy, which requires "a split between religious authority and secular rule" (68) suffuses his work.

Buruma gets a good many things right. He understands the need to distinguish between a radical's theological "motivation" and a simple old-fashioned rage at being socially or politically marginalized (101–2). He has a fine sense for the ironies and tensions within the liberal-democratic ethos itself; in the final third of the book ("Enlightenment Values") he is not afraid to point out those he sees. His unwillingness to push deeper into questions of motivation, attraction, and repulsion amid social and political alienation limits the value of his efforts. He treats the political philosophers he cites (Tocqueville, Spinoza, Hume, and Montesquieu are among the most important to whom he refers) less as interlocutors than as markers. There is too little depth of analysis here for the informed reader to find any serious conversation in Buruma's abrupt intellectual histories, but the probably intended audience is unlikely to have the patience to read the sorts of deeply informed intellectual histories and philosophical analyses of which Beiner's effort is a much better examplar. Nevertheless, Buruma's deft personal touch, his willingness to take note of some central ironies and tensions inherent in the liberal ideology he wishes to defend, his ability to take account of multiple

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perspectives on difficult, perhaps even intractable political problems, and his welcome inability to be an antireligious frother may under specific circumstances make this a good introductory book to spur further inquiry, much as Thomas Friedman's *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* has played that role in many an introductory undergraduate international relations course.

Robert Benne's treatment of religion in liberal democracies takes a different departure. The book is mistitled: *Good and Bad Ways to Think about Christianity and American Politics* would have been more apt and accurate. It is divided into five chapters. The first introduces the problem of the relationship between religion and politics. "Wrongheaded" understandings of this relationship in contemporary US affairs induce Benne's "indignation" and "outrage" (1) and the motivation to write this book. Benne proposes to examine these understandings and offer a better one based on a modified Lutheran tradition. The second and third chapters examine various forms of what Benne considers to be the two core ways in which the relationship between religion and politics has been badly conceived: "separationism" and "fusion." These roughly map over the two outside poles of Beiner's political-religious spectrum: secular rule that entirely excludes religious faith at the one end, and thoroughgoing theocracy at the other. Benne's account takes aspirational cases mostly from current and recent American politics, with one or two non-American examples thrown in, to illustrate the problems associated with these two approaches to the politics–religion relationship. A more "constructive" approach, entitled "critical engagement," appears in the fourth chapter, followed by a final chapter in which some of the "nitty-gritty practical issues" (81) of such engagement are outlined.

Benne begins in a weak tradition of thinking about politics, especially democratic politics, which many Lutheran adherents seem unwilling or unable to recognize. While Benne recognizes elements of this weakness (22), Luther's minimalist leanings and his rejection of classical—especially Aristotelian—political thinking is not a mere quibble amongst friends within the magisterial tradition as Benne seems to imply. The lacunae must be filled in with more than mere Niebuhrian realism. Without drawing overt attention to the move, yet admitting that "revision" is needed (1–2), Benne selects a mixture of Enlightenment and pre-Reformation principles, along with a useful Augustinian reminder concerning the warping qualities of human sin (49) to produce a basic set of doctrines (chap. 4) on the basis of which Christians can variously engage in politics in a liberal-democratic regime (chap. 5). Separate and apart from any doubtful qualities the project as a whole may have, one or two puzzling missteps mar Benne's efforts.

"Sect" had a precise, not altogether pejorative, historical meaning as part of classical liberal political theory. Sects are large or small associations of like-minded people not in power and without access to power, and to whom, because of their political-theological aspirations, according to Hobbes and his heirs, no right-thinking person would deign to offer any political power of consequence (Beiner, 150, 154). For Benne, the term re-assumes the

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substance of Troeltsch's dubious magisterial sociological categories, in which sectarians are those who refuse certain forms of political engagement. Benne's use of this term in reference to contemporary pacifist Christians is surprising, to say the least, and regrettably dismissive. It renders his discussion not merely cursory, as the book's brevity requires, but superficial. When Charles Roberts invaded the Amish West Nickel Mines School in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, to murder young girls in the school, thirteen-year-old Marian Fisher and her eleven-year-old sister Barbie requested that he shoot them first, so that their classmates might be spared. The parents and relatives of the murdered children later called for inclusion and forgiveness. How, *pace* Benne, were these *not* direct confrontations with the evil of the world (20–21)? These sectarian "enclaves" that Benne dismisses have their character in part from theopolitical persecution: treason, based on a notion of doctrinal conformity as necessary to political union, was the most common early charge issued against them.

Luther (and Hobbes after him) was unable to offer a nonutilitarian account of friendship; perhaps some writers committed to his ecclesiology are therefore unable to make as much sense as they might of efforts to establish communities of virtue, except with disparaging categories that are holdovers from pre-liberal-democratic magisterial thinking. But it *is* regrettable, because it more severely limits the scope of Benne's engagement with a readership than he seems to recognize. Benne writes as one who would speak truth to power, and he seems disconcertingly unconcerned by the possibility that power can be its own truth. Yet constituencies within his own tradition—Lutheran World Relief, for example—are excellent examples of engaging the world in precisely the way most of the "sects" he dismisses would recognize (see 92–93). It may simply be that Benne's circumscription of what is politics or political ("the work of the state or government," 53) is too narrow (or that mine is too broad), but perhaps his US-centric focus (see 55) does not permit a notion of politics beyond a narrow realm that excludes even much of "Christian service" from its purview (54–60). Benne's "sectarians" would not be the only ones begging to differ with this conception of the political.

Any adoption of classical forms of Christian doctrine is complex, and one must follow the threads of Benne's arguments through other sources to comprehend fully his cursorily revealed intent. He offers an acceptable synopsis of "classical" (one might say "magisterial") Christianity (40–45), but the distillation of "principles from that core that are relevant to politics," even under the unobjectionable "central proposition of this book," that "religion itself influences political commitments" (69) seems too self-assured, ethnocentric, and abbreviated to produce a fully engaged discussion partner. Without naming it, Benne calls for prudence in the political application of the "core principles" he delineates (80), but this book is for those already in the camp. That is in itself not a damning observation. Nevertheless, while faith may be "the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen," Benne's doctrinal approach displays perhaps too little of the

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conversational humility implied in such a characterization, a quality that may irritate some readers looking in from the outside.

Beiner's *Civil Religion* is an impressive achievement. Given its thirty-one chapters of varying lengths, divided into four sections and bookended by an introduction and conclusion, and its treatment of at least twenty-one major and several minor thinkers in the modern Western political-philosophical canon, one might be wary of superficiality. Instead, in drawing up the promised "dialogue in the history of political philosophy," Beiner offers a penetrating treatment of the relationship between politics and religious faith in the categories provided by the classical liberal and republican traditions, but including as well several thinkers who either preceded or vociferously rejected those traditions. "This book," Beiner claims, "is premised on the view that *even if it ultimately turns out that some version of liberalism is our best means of containing the dangers of religion*, we will understand the liberal project better by locating it within a broader range of nonliberal and antiliberal theoretical projects" (5, emphasis in original). In unfolding this premise, the book succeeds.

Beiner achieves broadly what Benne hopes to achieve more narrowly: to teach us a set of ways to think about religion (mostly Christianity) and politics in the Western tradition. Beiner shows that a significant portion of early modern and modern political thought is specifically concerned with establishing a proper relationship between political rule and religious belief. Beiner's interest is in politics, and in religion only insofar as it has an impact on political rule directly. This order of priority is the case for most, but not all, modern political thinkers. Beiner's plausible argument is that in book 4, chapter 8 of the *Social Contract*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau captured a basic outline of the possible relationships between religious faith and political rule (3, 11–16). Along a continuum, Rousseau presents the three options I partially indicated above: secular rule that utterly excludes religious faith from the public realm; some form of civil religion, in which religion is subordinate to and supports political interests; and theocracy, in which politics becomes the handmaiden of religious belief. Each of the points on this continuum is an attempt to resolve the problem of the "opposing demands of civic life on the one hand and those of religious, and especially Christian, commitments on the other" (3). Rousseau did not offer a final resolution of the problem, nor does Beiner, even while he mounts a strong defense for some form of liberal-democratic rule.

Beiner's major contemporary or near-contemporary interlocutor is Leo Strauss, arguably the most influential political theorist of the twentieth century (104n84, 189). In this conversation, Beiner treats his readers to a wry joke. The title of chapter 16 is the only one to invoke Strauss's name, and it appears at the numerical center of the book. This centering, especially in light of somewhat idiosyncratic chapter divisions, brings to mind certain criticisms of Strauss's esoteric numerological reading of Machiavelli. Beiner's critique of Strauss reveals the heart of the modern religion–politics

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debate, namely the role of philosophical inquiry over against religious faith in a political regime. According to one line of Straussian interpretation, modernity, rooted in the Enlightenment, is "a betrayal of the existential supremacy of philosophy itself," even though, in Beiner's estimation, "the Enlightenment was a cultural battle between philosophy and religion, the outcome of which was an unconditional triumph for philosophy" (200). This triumph included the general Enlightenment rejection of religious faith. Beiner is puzzled that Strauss, while seeming tacitly to reject religion for philosophers, criticizes the Enlightenment for making this rejection available to the many. These, so the argument goes, require the consolations of religion to make their existence bearable in ways that true philosophers do not (201–2). The persuasiveness of this argument depends on one's estimation of the political dangers of religious enthusiasm, to say nothing of fanaticism, and on one's estimation of Nietzsche's argument, which Beiner suggests was accepted by Strauss, that most human beings require consolation and myths of purposefulness over against the abyss of meaninglessness that philosophy ultimately reveals and that perennially threatens to enervate them. The persuasiveness of Beiner's argument against this position depends on one's estimation of the ability of liberal-democratic regimes not merely to curb politically aimed forms of religious enthusiasm, but to offer sufficiently attractive responses to Nietzsche's problem. The monstrous regimes and great crimes of the twentieth century occurred mostly on the Enlightenment's watch. That may have troubled Strauss more than it does Beiner. Neither argument leaves a viable space for an egalitarian marriage of religion and reason.

While treating Nietzsche's "civil religion" project of providing renewed meaning and purpose, Beiner quotes Ernest Gellner: "modern society is inherently one in which a high culture becomes *the* culture of the entire community" (375n6). The question for liberal democracy is whether its open, public high culture can provide under its own terms a sufficient account of what is worth living for, such that religious belief plays a circumscribed role or less in the support of political regimes. Or, in a middle ground, can it make sufficiently robust distinctions between religious fanaticism and reasonableness to allow some but not all forms of religious expression in the liberal-democratic public square? If any, which ones and in what way? Those, simplistically stated, are the guiding questions that animate a remarkable proportion of classical liberal political-theoretical inquiry. Professor Beiner has performed a masterly task of delineating the articulation and incomplete resolution of those questions within and alongside that tradition.

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