POLITICAL CONSTRUCTIVISM AND ONTOLOGY: JOHN RAWLS' FREESTANDING POLITICAL CONCEPTION VERSUS LIBERAL AND RELIGIOUS COMPREHENSIVE DOCTRINES

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Paper Abstract

Despite the global ascendancy and widespread recognition of multicultural politics, the extraordinary resilience of normative metaphysical principles sadly infiltrating even contemporary political debates, mandates a closer critical look at persistent attempts to re-introduce ontological or "platonic" (by which I mean non-political) underpinnings to political theory. In light of the well-established danger of insidious forms of theocracy inescapably involved even in theoretical intersections of metaphysics and government, I shall present John Rawls' recently formulated model of political liberalism as a balanced and feasible project, valuable in all agendas, like my own, aiming to de-ideologize faith and de-theologize politics. Moreover, to further highlight the merits of Rawls' proposal, I shall introduce in my analysis Cornelius Castoriades, whose devastating refutation of Plato's totalitarianism is on a par with Karl Popper's, as conveyor of the liberal flipside to Chrestos Yannaras, who not only contests these negative readings of Plato but (like Roman Catholic philosopher William Desmond, among others) staunchly

resists the demarcation of ethics and political theory from ontology. Although I must eagerly acknowledge a personal intellectual debt to Yannaras in regards to theology, in this debate I will side with Castoriades and Rawls, though without neglecting to pinpoint the subtle metaphysical assumptions tainting Castoriades' otherwise perceptive insights, as well.

1. What degree of interaction, if any, may be deemed permissible between religion or metaphysics in general, and politics? Should the two be allowed to cross paths, even in temporary alliances backed by popular sentiment, or must they be constantly kept apart, for fear of spawning governmental and civil abuse? The present lines are written with the assumption that reflective citizens of democratic nations (especially those exercising an informed commitment to one religious worldview or another) will be increasingly compelled to ponder this complex question at the dawn of the new millenium. The rapid process of globalization and the concurrent, largely uneasy, transformation of traditionally homogeneous societies into multicultural communities, have acted as a powerful, and (one also hopes) a cathartic catalyst on the consciences of many practicing Christians, pressing home to us an awareness of racial and cultural otherness that's apt to jolt us out of habitual civic complacency. Already, however, hopeful signs of fruitful and amiable inter-religious engagement are in sight, and to such an unprecedented extent that faith is now increasingly seen in a more positive light: not as a merely rancorous source of division among peoples, but as a possible tableaux for mutual understanding and an opportune meeting-place for a culturally compartmentalized global community. As John Berthrong, a noted American expert on world religions has recently indicated,

> Christian theologians reconsidered their views of other religions because of the growth of practical relations with members of other religions ... Beginning with engagement with the Jewish community and then expanding to the whole range of the religions of humankind, including what are called the world religions and the various smaller primordial, regional, and tribal communities of faith, an older ecumenical bromide proved as true in interfaith dialogue as it had in ecumenical inter-Christian conversation: service in community unites, whereas theological debate divides. When people meet face-to-face in service to the highest goals of their religion, they often discover all kinds of

parallels and harmonies with other religions. It is all too often conceptual theology that divides one person from another. The new contacts and positive views caused by Vatican Two and the influx of new North Americans after 1965 also forced Christians to look seriously at ... Christian self-identity as defined by theology of religion and the mission of the Church in a religiously plural world ... Christians have [now] begun to question earnestly their old theology of religion in terms of their revised reflections about religious pluralism.[1]

Noble as these observations sound, they amount in truth to little more than self-laudatory rhetoric unless they are shown to match some real progress in the delicate causes of social and racial toleration, by furthering, to however limited a degree, the harmonious co-existence of diverse cultures within common living territory. For enlightened, ecumenical inter-religious dialogue (as Berthrong chronicles it) notwithstanding, religion is still seen as inevitably an obstacle and a serious impediment to the irreversible process of European and international integration, especially by cabinet bureaucrats concerned with societal unity and stability. On a parallel, but more abstract, movement, the contemporary, so-called postmodern intellectual scene is just as apprehensive (if not bluntly dismissive) of all "worldviews" in general, an eschewal now extending from religious, all-encompassing faiths with exclusive claims to soteriology and metaphysical truth, to the most secularized systems with pretensions to normativity, and out of the same fear of totalitarianism: the secularized eschatologies of previous "meta-narratives" such as Marxism, Positivism, and Psychoanalysis, ironically born in iconoclastic suspicion of traditional metaphysics, are now finding themselves on the receiving end of deconstruction. Postmodernism, as a decentralized hermeneutics (itself the result of a prior decentralized semantics), is primarily concerned to legitimise alterity and the voices of otherness and the marginalized, the arguably perennial victims of ideology and grand systems of thought that habitually have sacrificed uniqueness of personhood to their procrustean eschatologies.[2]

Especially targeted by these radical critics has been the scientistic deter-

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1. John Berthrong, "MRPing: The Formation of Christian Identity in an Age of Pluralism," *Boston University School of Theology Focus* (Spring 2002) 7-11, p. 8.

2. The American psychologist James Hillman has advanced, over the period of the past decades, an increasingly influential view of personhood which raises otherness, understood as

minism adjacent to modernity's enlightened persuasions, with its self-professed verificationism and universal applicability, a *naturalized* rendition of prophetic eschatology. Indeed, the currently prevailing iconoclasm mandates the removal of the disfiguring, totalitarian lenses of meta-narratives and ideology in order to restore to our vision the inexhaustible actuality of human persons and their intrinsic worth as ends in themselves. Only thus shall we be forced to acknowledge the fundamental *relativity* that governs human affairs and indeed all aspects of life, as only literature, and not science, can disclose it. For the object of science is always the general and the universal, or even worse, as Kant tried to establish, the transcendental. By contrast, the otherness of each human being posits a unique existential claim, which (so the story goes) challenges us to reconsider our social prejudices and most strongly held beliefs[3]. That is essentially the morale which Milan Kundera tries to press home to us in his *The Art of the Novel*,[4] as in his famous early novels, *The Joke* and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Small wonder, then, that the majority of such well-known and controversial deconstructionists as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Paul de Man, and (last but not least) neo-pragmatist Richard Rorty come mainly from the field of literary theory, with a strong resentment of teleological visions.[5]

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uniqueness resistant to ideological or other typologies, into a central concern. Like Foucault and Derrida, but from an altogether different background, Hillman dispenses with all theories of character classification, insisting as he does on the fluidity and uniqueness of the human person. See especially his *Egalitarian Typologies versus the Perception of the Unique* (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1980).

3. Cf. Emmanuel Levinas' superb analysis of the real magnitude of personhood and its power to break free from the totalizing reductionisms and constraints of ideology in *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne Univ. Press, 1979), esp. pp. 73-74, 80-81. Cf. also his *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne Univ. Press, 1987).

4. Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel* (New York: Grove Press, 1988).

5. In this systematic demolition of extra-historical worldviews, the "liberal ironist" critics of modernity, as neo-pragmatist Richard Rorty calls them, have relied on an extravagant, if elegantly designed, picture of language as an utterly contingent and non-transparent instrument co-extensive with reality and meaningful thought. When thus envisaged, language allegedly breaks through the pretensions of metaphysicians, exposing their systems for what they truly are, as nothing more, that is, than different vocabularies, each of which with a claim to ultimacy and the confidence of accurately representing an objective total reality from a privileged angle. The entire case of the postmoderns, in fact, has rested on attempts to show that when it comes to "reality," it's just vocabularies all the way down. As Rorty puts the matter, "For us

John Rawls seems to have emulated neo-pragmatism and the postmoderns (but only seemingly so, as I shall argue) in rejecting eschatology in his later writings, following his 1985 article "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical" (later incorporated in *Political Liberalism*), where he makes the decisive switch from a *metaphysical* to a purely *political* conception of justice. In other words, from a theory of justice featuring "truth claims" to one appealing to "reasonable" claims. And while prompted by neither episte-mological nor literary considerations, Rawls' final disavowal of "theory" from the scope of political justice as an exclusivistic query into "reality as such" reflects his realization that totalitarianism originates the moment some well-meaning and sometimes even emancipating "universal truth" becomes dominant. When such an all-encompassing viewpoint, or "comprehensive doctrine," in Rawls' terminology, wins an ascendancy (intellectual or politi-cal alike), it seeks to marginalize and de-legitimize rival creeds, obviously with dire civil repercussions when favored by state power. Thus for the sake of preserving the hard-won inclusiveness and toleration constitutive of libe-ral democracies, it is vital, Rawls stipulates, that philosophical and especially religious perspectives be kept in equal and due distance from all theories of government. This not too subtle point which Rawls urges is often missed by many good-natured adherents of organized religions, to say nothing of street-wise politicians who openly capitalize on populist religious sentiment.

Speaking of which, there is a popular misreading of Rawls' position vis-à-vis religion that ought to be dispelled from the outset. Superficial or beginning

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ironists, nothing can serve as a criterion of a final vocabulary save another such vocabulary; there is no answer to a redescription save a re-re-redescription. Since there is nothing beyond vocabularies which serves as a criterion of choice beyond them, criticism is a matter of looking on this picture and on that, not of comparing both pictures with their original. Nothing can serve as a criticism of a person save another person, or of a culture save an alternative culture – for persons and cultures are, for us, incarnated vocabularies." Rorty, "Private Irony and Liberal Hope," in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 80. In truth of course, this non-representational nominalism is hardly unique to the postmo-derns, since a more temperate, *empiricist* version of it had already been systematically worked out by the now classic figures of modern analytic philosophy, well before the dramatic onslaught of the subsequent radical cultural critics. In that regard, "non-representationalism," as the chief intellectual weapon at the service of post-empiricist philosophers and literary critics who have sought to undercut systematic theories with foundationalist aspirations, may be singled out as the true intellectual backbone of modernity and post-modernity alike, beginning with Kant's transcendental epistemology and passing through a linguistic transformation in the 20th centu-ry down to its thoroughly historicized, de-transcendentalized present form.

readers of Rawls (a category ranging from nervous Church goers to those with positivist proclivities, shaped by a devoted adherence to Enlightenment skepticism) are often inclined to see his later work as a more or less anti-religious manifesto. But such a convenient assumption, encouraged as it may be by Rawls' repeatedly expressed fear of sectarian social conflict more likely of religious origins, would be a flagrant distortion of his real intentions, given that the purpose of political liberalism, as Rawls puts it forward, is not in the least to assail any particular faith or doctrine as "nonsensical," "false," "unscientific," "incompatible with deep learning," etc. In actual fact, "political liberalism," as Rawls hastens to explain early on in the introduction to his paperback edition, "is *not* a form of Enlightenment liberalism, that is, a comprehensive liberal and often secular doctrine founded on *reason* and viewed as suitable for the modern age now that the religious authority of Christian ages is said to be no longer dominant. Political liberalism," he concludes, "has no such aims ... [for] emphatically it does not aim to *replace* comprehensive doctrines, religious or nonreligious, but intends to be *equally distinct* from both and, it hopes, accessible to both."[6]

In fact, by wishing to keep political theory altogether neutral with regard to religion, Rawls runs counter to a lofty ideal of Enlightenment secularism, namely the still widespread confidence that the free, unrestrained employment of reason is bound to yield a free and unprejudiced consensus on most matters of social impact. This essentially Socratic optimism and trust in the promises of the human mind to liberate us from the curses of prejudice, ignorance, superstition, and bigotry, first resurfaced in the European scene with Humanism, when in the Renaissance scholars rediscovered classical Greek texts. It then received a further boosting from the arguments against external authority (especially religious authority) hurled by such Enlightenment superstars as Bacon, Diderot, Hume, and last but not least, Kant. As far as religion was concerned, it is worth mentioning that all these "freethinkers" (and many more among their contemporaries) were not necessarily irreligious or hostile to religion (with the notable exception of Hume), but wanted rather to establish a new, rational religion, fashioned after the new worldview assembled by the Copernican revolution and Newtonian mechanics. In our own century, this classic faith in the emancipating power of reason finds eloquent expression, among many other places, in Sigmund Freud's *The Future of an Illusion*,

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6. Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (N. York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. xl (italics provided).

one of the most succinct manifestos of 20th century positivism: "the voice of the intellect ... does not rest till it has gained a hearing. Finally, after a countless succession of rebuffs, it succeeds. This is one of the few points on which one may be optimistic about the future of mankind."[7]

It stands as a tribute to Rawls' astuteness that, though an enlightened person himself, he has resisted the confident positivist expectation of a progressive and inevitable reasonable consensus on social and political issues visualized after the verifiability of the natural sciences. Rawls dismisses such a highly popularized expectation as an unwelcome and dangerous utopia, making his starting-point instead that the free and constitutional exercise of reason by thinking citizens is only bound to wield ever greater diversity of opinions and disagreement. Similar objections have been voiced earlier by scholars of equal renown, most notably by Karl Popper who, also mindful of the same benefit of unencumbered reason to produce variance instead of concurrence, had expressed a similar caveat earlier in his classic work *The Open Society and Its Enemies* against political agendas aiming to maximize social happiness, based as they were on broad assumptions of what constitutes "the general good":

> The politician will be aware that perfection, if at all attainable, is far distant, and that every generation of men, and therefore also the living, have a claim; perhaps not so much a claim to be made happy, for there are no institutional means of making a man happy, but a claim not to be made unhappy, where it can be avoided ... The piecemeal engineer will, accordingly, adopt the method of searching for, and fighting against, the greatest and more urgent evils of society, rather than searching for, and fighting for, its greatest ultimate good.[8]

Popper's remark must be read against the backdrop of his attack on *historicism*, the teleological and deterministic view of history that fuelled the visions of Plato, Hegel, and Marx in the assortment of its theistic, naturalistic, or economic manifestations. His point is that social scientists can only

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7. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, The Standard Edition (W.W. Norton & Company), p. 68.

8. Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Vol. 1, Ch. 9, "Utopianism," (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 158.

afford to plan ahead in a piecemeal manner, instead of relying on grand meta-physical accounts of history and society. As is well known, the minimalism wisely recommended by Popper stems from his famed *falsificationist* episte-mology, which sought to reverse the positivists' revered principle of verifica-tion by crediting with genuine cognitive value those theories alone that are in principle falsifiable, thereby delimiting the potency of scientific knowledge to a tentative and provisional status. As an epistemologist, of course, Popper is far removed from Rawls and his purposes, who not only has no theory of kno-wledge of his own but would consider any such theory, including Popper's, inadmissible to political theory precisely as falling under the rubric of "com-prehensive doctrines." Still, Popper's work is replete with passages bearing an apparent affinity with Rawls' project, such as the following from the second volume of The *Open Society*:

> The attempt to make heaven on earth invariably produces hell. It leads to intolerance. It leads to religious wars, and to the saving of souls through the inquisition. And it is, I believe, based on a complete misunderstanding of our moral duties. It is our duty to help those who need our help; but it cannot be our duty to make others happy, since ... it would only too often mean intruding on the privacy of those towards whom we have such amiable intentions.[9]

Perhaps one more comparison between Rawls and a prominent contem-porary philosopher like Richard Rorty will bring into crisper focus the dis-tinctiveness of political liberalism. The exuberant praise of pluralism is also part and parcel of Rorty's Pragmatism, whose famous "rhetorical" or "her-meneutic" turn, solidified in his 1979 work *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), comes exceedingly close to Rawls' own subsequent rhetorical shift, with the notable exception of Rorty's espousal and concomitant justification of a form of relativism, as opposed to Rawls' sober acknowledgment alone of plurality and disagreement as the *natural* (and, indeed, welcome) offspring of the free exercise of reason.

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9. Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Vol. 2, Hegel and Marx (London & New York: Routledge, 1996), Ch. 24, p. 237.

> From a pragmatist point of view, to say that what is rational
> for us now to believe may not be true, is simply to say that
> somebody may come up with a better idea. It is to say that there
> is always room for improved belief, since new evidence, or new
> hypotheses, or a whole new vocabulary, may come along.[10]

Here, of course, we would be remiss in failing to add that where Rorty
himself is concerned, "relativism" is objectionable as the sum-total of his phi-
losophy:

> However, it is not clear why 'relativist' should be thought an
> appropriate term for the [view] which the pragmatist does hold.
> For the pragmatist is not holding a positive theory which says
> that something is relative to something else ... the pragmatist
> does not have a theory of truth, much less a relativistic one.[11]

But the question of Rorty's relativism aside (obviously irrelevant to the
purposes of this paper), my reference to his work intended to show that when
measured by the yardstick of political liberalism, his "conversational" model
must join Popper's falsificationism in the Rawlsian category of "comprehen-
sive doctrines." For despite the political and humanistic ulterior motives of
this notorious neo-pragmatist, programmatically opposed to all metaphysics
and essentialism ("As a partisan of solidarity, [the pragmatist's] account of
the value of cooperative solidarity has only an ethical base, not an epistemo-
logical or a metaphysical one."), Rorty's *non-representationalist* thesis comes
with a set host of ontological and epistemological commitments, and so is not
innocent of metaphysics, assuming as it does (rather than demonstrating) that
all perceived reality is intrinsically conceptualized and resistant to impartial
descriptions. Rawls, on the other hand, stands altogether outside the entire
problematic of the nature of truth. As he says, "my aim is only to stress that
the ideal of public reason does not often lead to general agreement of views,
nor should it. Citizens learn and profit from conflict and argument, and when
their arguments follow public reason, they instruct and deepen society's

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10. Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers Volume 1*
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 23.

11. Ibid, p. 24.

public culture."[12] That is why Rawls never tires of repeating his intention to leave religious doctrines intact, i.e., not to subject them to any intellectual or philosophical criticism whatsoever: "Central to the idea of public reason is that it neither criticizes nor attacks any comprehensive doctrine, religious or nonreligious, except insofar as that doctrine is incompatible with the essentials of public reason and a democratic polity."[13] To further clarify his point, Rawls adds elsewhere that

> we must distinguish public reason from what is sometimes referred to as secular reason and secular values [since] these are not the same as public reason. For I define secular reason [itself] as reasoning in terms of comprehensive nonreligious doctrines. Such doctrines and values are much too broad to serve the purposes of public reason ... Moral doctrines are on a level with religion and first philosophy. By contrast, liberal political principles and values, although intrinsically moral values, are specified by liberal political conceptions of justice and fall under the category of the political.[14]

In fact, Rawls' first systematic work itself, *A Theory of Justice*, may well count as a "comprehensive doctrine," in that it advances an all-encompassing moral theory in the classical tradition of "grand narratives" (to borrow a pejorative term of Lyotard's), in its case drawing mainly from Kantian thought. To be sure, Rawls' Kantian debts were strictly moral, not epistemological; nonetheless, the well-known Kantian deontological ethic upon which Rawls' earlier work largely rests is not a self-evident "ought" derived from experience, but was extracted from a more general philosophical system with broader metaphysical assumptions. In *Political Liberalism*, by contrast, Rawls puts forward a political theory wherein the *political* assumes a complete autonomy. To this end, he draws a crucial distinction between *doctrine* (which includes all comprehensive doctrines, as defined above) and *conception* (by which he means *freestanding*, i.e., theory-free notions appropriate to political discourse). Accordingly, his designation of people as *citizens* rather than sim-

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12. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. lvii.

13. Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," in The *University of Chicago Law Review*, Vol. 64, No. 3 (Summer 1997), p. 766.

14. Ibid, pp. 775-6.

ply as *persons* aims to underscore the fundamental assumption of political liberalism that all citizens are born equal under the law, with certain duties and privileges that are constitutionally guaranteed, central among them being the right to life, to property, as well as to religious freedom (which for Rawls means also freedom *from* religion).[15]

In his system, then, Rawls maintained an impartial stance over religious and secular perspectives alike, mindful as he was that even secularism is capable of developing totalizing tendencies, such that might possibly interfere with citizens' religious rights. Hence, despite some intriguing overlap with the concerns of post-structuralist "politics of difference," involving in both cases a *non-ontological* approach to citizenship, Rawlsian liberalism cannot be grouped with deconstructionist projects designed to undercut the metaphysical foundations of modernity. For, his injunction to ostracize ontological considerations from political theory, would never assume the form of a critique of ontology as such, of the type encountered, for instance, in contemporary analytic philosophy or in recent postmodern literature. As an illustration of the latter sort, Michael Peters, in his paper "Radical Democracy, the Politics of Difference, and Education,"[16] identifies a cluster of specifically post-structuralist political theorists, such as Iris Marion Young, Anna Yeatman, Chantal Mouffe, and Fred Dallmayr, all of whom are indebted to the work of the French post-structuralists for their respective notions of a "politics of difference." Anna Yeatman's aversion to ontological connections in political theory, for example, as Peters quotes it, is worked out on the basis

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15. The late popularizer of science Carl Sagan was equally as fervent a supporter of religious freedom understood above all as freedom *from all religion*, putting forward (for his own specific purposes, concerned with freedom of scientific inquiry) a view that resonates considerably with Rawls'. See his chapter "A Sunday Sermon," in *Broca's Brain* (New York: Balantine Books, 1993), pp. 329- 341, esp. p. 338: "The First Amendment to the United States Constitution encourages a diversity of religions but does not prohibit criticism of religion. In fact it protects and encourages criticism of religion. Religions ought to be subject to at least the same degree of skepticism as, for example, contentions about UFO visitations or Velikovskian catastrophism ... There is no question that religion provides a solace and support, a bulwark in time of emotional need, and can serve extremely useful social roles. But it by no means follows that religion should be immune from testing, from critical scrutiny, from skepticism." Again, where Rawls parts company with Sagan etc. is in his unwillingness to involve political liberalism in any critique of religion, be it scientific or philosophical.

16. Michael Peters, Critical Multiculturalism: *Uncommon Voices in a Common Struggle*, Barry Kanpol & Peter McLaren, eds. (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1995).

of such well-known post-structuralist themes as phenomenalism and histori-
cal contingency:

> Here an openly contested politics of voice and representa-
> tion makes it very difficult to sustain ontological orientations
> for it becomes very evident that any one of them is in a highly
> contested relation to others. More specifically, it becomes evi-
> dent also that these ontological orientations are internally
> contested, and that their 'being' is more a creature of contingent
> history than it is of some pre-historical point of being. By brin-
> ging out how all constructions of homogeneous community or
> identity depend on systemic exclusions, on domination, these
> internal contestations make it all the more difficult to forget the
> forgetting of those who are bothered by assertions of self and
> group identity.[17]

Rawls, on the other hand, as I have just tried to indicate by comparing him
with Popper and Rorty, deliberately refrains from engaging in a criticism of
ontology as such.

At the same time, however, consistent as Rawls is in his programmatic
commitment to a fair treatment of secular and religious worldviews, he har-
bours no illusions as to the violence latent particularly in doctrines of the lat-
ter sort. His thesis traces the urgency of the modern demand for religious
toleration, an indispensable feature of all democratic societies, to the prolon-
ged bloodshed caused by the clash between "salvationist, creedal, and expan-
sionist religions" during the Reformation. Rawls sees these bitter religious
clashes as a modern European phenomenon, unknown to the ancient world.
This is because ancient Greek religion was neither creedal nor authoritative;
in other words it was not constituted in salvific terms, as a faith concerned
with an eternal afterlife. Christianity, on the other hand, stood on entirely
opposite ends from Greek religion and moral philosophy; and "when an
authoritative, salvationist, and expansionist religion like medieval
Christianity divides, this inevitably means the appearance within the same

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17. Cited from ibid. p. 48. See Anna Yeatman, "Minorities and the Politics of Difference,"
Political Theory Newsletter, Special Issue, Symposium on the Politics of Difference, Moira
Gatens and Anna Yeatman, eds., (1992), pp. 1-10.

society of a rival authoritative and salvationist religion, different in some ways from the original religion from which it split off, but having for a certain period of time many of the same features. Luther and Calvin," he concludes, "were as dogmatic and intolerant as the Roman Church had been."[18] But why are faiths centered on salvation not simply competitive but intrinsically aggressive? Rawls' answer sheds ample light on the unprecedented peculiarity of salvific doctrines:

> Christianity already made possible the conquest of people, not simply for their land and wealth, and to exercise power and dominion over them, but to *save their souls*. The Reformation turned this possibility inward upon itself. What is new about this clash [i.e., the Reformation] is that it introduces into people's conceptions of their good a *transcendental* element not *admitting* of compromise.[19]

Now, while the call for religious toleration voiced by the so-called Enlightenment sages (one of the most interesting among whom, perhaps, for the purposes of theology being John Locke)[20] was an important sign of progress, Rawls wants to see toleration transformed from a mere *modus vivendi* to a positive moral value in its own right. That is, he wishes to see pluralism endorsed constitutionally *for the right reasons*. "It is not sufficient," Rawls contends, "... that these [comprehensive] doctrines accept a democratic regime merely as a *modus vivendi*. Rather, they must accept it as members of a

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18. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. xxv.

19. Ibid, pp. xxvii-xxviii (italics provided).

20. That's because as passionately as Locke may have fought the uncritical endorsement of external authority, just as firmly did he hold that Christianity was at bottom a reasonable faith, even where miracles were concerned, the subject of endless derision by such rigid skeptics as Francis Bacon and especially David Hume, but which Locke contrastingly assumed to have been reliably witnessed to in Scripture. See *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1996), where in his "Third Letter Concerning Toleration," Locke chastises the use of brute force in missionary work as wrong and unnecessary, given the richness of the faith itself: "The question between us here," says Locke to his imaginary interlocutor, "is, whether the Christian religion did not prevail in the first ages of the Church by *its own beauty*, [intellectual] force and reasonableness, without the assistance of force? I say it did, and therefore external force is not necessary." (ibid, p. 90).

reasonable overlapping consensus."[21] In his 1993 lecture at the University of Chicago Law School, he presented this important point in clearer and more explicit terms:

> To clarify the question, consider [the example] of Catholics and Protestants in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when the principle of toleration was honored only as a *modus vivendi*. This meant that should either party gain its way it would impose its own religious doctrine as the *sole admissible faith* ... nor again do we have stability for the right reasons [when the allegiance of citizens] to these constitutional principles is so limited that none is willing to see his or her religious or nonreligious doctrine losing ground in influence and numbers ...[22]

All of the above points must be seen as building up to the following core question: "How is it possible that there may exist over time a stable and just society of free and equal citizens [otherwise] *profoundly divided* by reasonable though *incompatible* religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines? Put another way: How is it possible that *deeply opposed* though reasonable comprehensive doctrines may *live together* and *all affirm* the political conception of a constitutional regime?"[23] The Aristotelian character of this aim is easily recognizable, striving as it does for the attainment of a balanced and stable society. However, Rawls begs to differ somewhat from Aristotle in his preferred vision of social stability, depending the latter not so much on income and the stabilizing force of a prevailing middle-class as on the systematic cultivation of a civil mindset supportive of the constitutional legitimacy of pluralism.

So much then for Rawls' decentralised model in a nutshell. But as we are about to see, there are those who, whether openly or by implication, question the feasibility of this project and its purposes by descrying its formalism and rootlessness in history and/or ontology. Let us then move on to these competing political theories, beginning with the challenging prose of Cornelius Castoriades.

2. Cornelius Castoriades, political theorist formerly of a socialist persua-

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21. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, pp. xxxix-xl.

22. Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," p. 781.

23. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. xx.

sion, is known for his astute analyses of ancient Athenian democracy, whose self-regulating model of government he employed in a lifelong intellectual effort to oppose the inherent totalitarianism of theocratic as well as communist regimes. Despite the complexity of Castoriades' mind, whose erudition extended to fields as far-flung as mathematics, psychoanalysis and literary theory, the true backbone to his thought can be traced to his passionate political concerns, so much similar to Popper's and Rawls', since by his own persistent admonishment, true philosophy is at root always *political* in character. This is to say that in contrast, e.g., to Bertrand Russell's political standpoint, which, while also consistently liberal was in essence peripheral to a mainly empiricist ontological project, Castoriades' intellectual agenda was strictly political, with every bit of knowledge outside this field put to the service of rendering support to the theoretical construction of a free and democratic model of government.

Upon first reading, Castoriades' thesis seems naïvely Manichean, almost bordering on Samuel Huntington's more recently formulated view of history as a series of cultural warfare among different, incompatible civilizations. In the former writer's case, the apparently simplistic divide consists of the following contrasting sides: we have, on the one hand, the gradual first emergence of an enlightened, democratic regime identified as 5th century Athens which, although destined to perish following the subsequent broader decline of the Greek city-state, enjoyed a partial revival later in post-medieval Europe as well as in the founding of the United States); on the other hand are the remaining global civilizations that, however culturally significant in their own right, cannot be credited with having made a substantial contribution to the political emancipation of humankind, failing as they did to produce the invaluable concepts of civility and citizenship. For notwithstanding our appreciation for Eastern (or African, for that matter) art and spirituality, Castoriades stipulates, it is to the Greeks that in the last analysis we turn to for obtaining an originary pattern of constitutional democracy. At the heart of the Greek marvel, which, be it noted, Castoriades never naïvely idealizes, lay the accomplishment of the Athenians' *self-determination* or *autonomy* (to be contrasted with political *heteronomy*) from laws drawn from transcendent or otherworldly sources, following the gradual emergence of a collective awareness that as a people, Athenians were solely responsible for their future survival, prosperity, and the management of their daily affairs. Political autonomy therefore, as originally attained to in Athens, is at once synonymous with the abrogation of religion and metaphysics at least from the public sphere,

more likely the result of a happy, for Castoriades, convergence of philoso-
phical skepticism, materialism, and (consequent upon these) of relativism in
that time and place. "Skepticism and doubt," writes Castoriades, "comprise
the common root of democracy and philosophy alike."[24] All these factors, his
story goes, produced a *realist* mindset that, popular piety aside, was decisive
in the ostracism of messianism from the public arena of the Athenian *agora*,
the meeting-place where political debates were held and all major decisions
about the town were made:

> The very notion of a historical guarantor, like the related
> ideas of a Messiah or the possibility of an otherworldly escapism
> are completely alien to the Greeks. Their standpoint inspires the
> conviction, instead, that whatever is possible [and desirable] to
> occur will occur here. Anything that cannot be realized here sim-
> ply cannot concern us, it takes place elsewhere, either in the
> domain of the gods or at the bottom of the abyss (chaos). What
> is truly significant for us happens here, depends upon us, and will
> be carried out by us and no one else. Neither God, nor historical
> determinism shall bring it about ... It is up to us human mortals
> to accomplish it – should Fate and circumstances allow so – else
> it will never happen.[25]

Of special attention in Castoriades' account is the *procedural* and open-
ended nature of the Athenian model, for as such it actualised the possibilities
of social change and renewal that are foreign to alternative heteronomous
models surrendering the future of entire peoples to a sacred, pre-determined
eschatology impervious to contingency and specific historical needs. Thus far
Rawls would be in full agreement with Castoriades in his acknowledgment of
the fluidity and non-essentialism of Athenian politics (attributed, as we just
saw, to a revolutionary detachment from any fixed and given body of divine
revelation), and even pleads his own case of political endogamy on the sad
loss of these classical Greek hallmarks:

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24. Cornelius Castoriades, *Ancient Greek Democracy and Its Contemporary Significance*
(Athens: Ypsilon Publications, 1999), p. 25. Cf. by the same author, *Plato's Politicus: Seven
Seminars at Ehess* (Athens: Polis Publications, 2001).

25. Ibid, p. 22.

> [Greek religion] was not a religion of salvation in the
> Christian sense and there was no class of priests who dispensed
> the necessary means of grace; indeed the ideas of immortality
> and eternal salvation did not have a central place in classical cul-
> ture ... So in rejecting the Homeric ideal characteristic of a way
> of life of the warrior class of a bygone age, Greek philosophy
> had to work out for itself the ideas of the highest good for human
> life, ideas acceptable to the citizens of the different society of
> fifth century B.C. Athens. Moral philosophy was always the
> exercise of free, disciplined reason alone. It was not based on
> religion, much less on revelation, as civic religion was neither a
> guide nor a rival to it.[26]

On opposite ends now from the self-governing, politically autonomous
community that was Athens lie those other known historic societies, whose
loyalty to received tradition remained unwavering throughout the centuries,
and where every form of authority was religiously sanctioned. "In almost
every other society we are historically familiar with," Castoriades continues,

> it was considered natural to maintain the status quo and to
> prolong life as it was previously lived, thereby keeping everyo-
> ne to their traditionally appointed social position. What the
> Hebrews took as self-evident was not the quest for freedom, for
> justice, or for equality, but rather submission to Jehowa's com-
> mandments. For a Christian, likewise, salvation of one's soul
> and the winning of eternal life assumes a unique precedence
> over the fate of society. The same holds for Hindus, who to the
> present day are bent on preserving the extant social casts.[27]

Castoriades minces no words when it comes to relaying the baneful, as he
sees it, impact of Christianity's institutionalisation and promotion to state
religion on the political ideals of the Greeks, holding it directly responsible
for the historical remission of democracy in Europe. He plainly accuses
Byzantine and Roman theocracies as not only being utterly incompatible

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26. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, pp. xxiii-xxiv.
27. Castoriades, *Ancient Greek Democracy and Its Contemporary Significance*, p. 13.

with the essentials of a democratic polity, as the world first tasted them in 5th century Athens, but also for actively setting the cause of democracy backwards by many centuries, citing as one evidence among others the sheer fact that in the context of *caesaropapism*, Eastern or Western, people weren't seen as *citizens*, but only as loyal *subjects*. The long countdown for the demise of European theocracy, in turn, began when the classical Greek manuscripts were rediscovered by the Humanists in the Renaissance and were gradually made available to those theorists who were destined to play a key part in the rebirth of democracy later in western Europe and in the founding of the United States of America. Now, far from resting content, as Rawls would, with merely alerting his readership to the dangers accompanying the infiltration of metaphysical, or essentialist, categories into otherwise democratic constitutions (which he insists must always remain conventional and subject to continuous revision), Castoriades goes the extra mile to suggest, sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly, that only atheism or agnosticism are conducive, even necessary, to the furtherance of democracy. In other words, if citizens continue in earnest to hold on to their private religious beliefs, the edifice of democracy is bound to be undermined from within, even if, in the long run, states are secularised enough as to drive the necessary wedge between Church and State. It goes without saying that such a suggestion couldn't be further away from Rawls' sincere contentment to have citizens simply endorse the fundamentals of liberalism without giving up the private pursuance of their faith (or even the lack thereof):

> Citizens are reasonable when, viewing one another as free and equal in a system of social cooperation over generations, they are prepared to offer one another fair terms of cooperation according to what they consider the most reasonable conception of political justice; and when they agree to act on those terms, even at the cost of their own interests in particular situations, provided that other citizens also accept those terms. The criterion of reciprocity requires that when those terms are proposed as the most reasonable terms of fair cooperation, those proposing them must also think it at least reasonable for others to accept them, as free and equal citizens, and not as dominated or manipulated, or under the pressure of an inferior political or social position.[28]

28. Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," p. 770.

This is as far as Rawls is willing to go in terms of political autonomy. For Castoriades, however, this wouldn't amount to more than a half-measure, adamant as he was in his perception that no society shall rise to genuine autonomy until its members can attain a liberation from metaphysical and religious attachments, a liberation high enough as to allow for the complete management of their own lives. No doubt at work here is Castoriades' psychoanalytic training, whose pejorative vision of religious belief is that of an "Oedipus complex" writ large, coupled with a Feuerbachian aversion to faith as an alienating factor from humanity's authentic nature, seen as inescapably mortal and fleshly. My point in stressing that the concept of *individual* autonomy, as a *sine qua non* prerequisite for social autonomy, is central to Castoriades' thesis is to foster an appreciation for Rawls' neutral liberalism as a subtler and more democratic alternative indeed, respectful as it is of the private religious beliefs of its adherents, despite the strong demands of reasonableness that it makes on them. I should add here that, following Rawls, I take atheism to be a metaphysical standpoint, a "comprehensive" doctrine in its own right with a host of philosophical assumptions attendant to it that so often go unnoticed because they are much less pronounced than the articles of faith, which by necessity are always made explicit: certainly atheism cannot be assumed or simply taken for granted for all people, nor can it be popularised without a supporting, if "negative", background metaphysics; I submit that atheism is neither self-evident, nor flows directly from the natural sciences, but results rather from one's temperamental philosophical *interpretation* of the extant empirical knowledge. In that regard, the following excerpt from another famed work of Castoriades should shed light on his own metaphysical, *non-political* commitments:

> The making of democracy negates all transcendent sources of meaning, at least in the public sphere, but ideally, I should add, if democracy is to be complete, for the individual as well … for a democratic polity, as I have said, is unthinkable apart from the actual autonomy of its particular members, namely without each person's capacity to freely realize their own meaning in life. Needless to say, all this presupposes a philosophical position … admitting that there actually exists no *intrinsic* meaning in Being in the form of a veiled treasure awaiting to be extracted, whether from nature or History or our inner life; that it is nobody but us who are the true makers of meaning and value, creating it and

then planting it on the bottomless abyss, and in that sense that it is us again that give shape to chaos with our thoughts and deeds, apart from extrinsic guarantees to lean upon.[29]

Even the most furtive acquaintance with what has been argued for in recent cultural and philosophical literature should vouch for the immense intellectual popularity of Castoriades' praise of all-out immanence. Case in point, one among countless more, is the contrast recently drawn by Greek literary critic and poet Pantelis Boukalas between sacred texts and philosophical reflection, on the occasion of a revised new edition of Presocratic prose. In a critical review of the said publication, aptly titled "Back to the Presocratics?" this critic enthusiastically writes:

> Classical Greek prose does not constitute a "Bible," nor by any means can it be considered a cluster of taboo texts owing the thrust of their ideas to a heavenly revelation. One would be hard pressed to single out instances of terminal "truths" in them, or utterances shielded by a sacrosanct authority.[30]

But these and similar simplistic absolute contrasts between reason or "logos" on one hand, and revealed truth on the other, are now finding them-

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29. Cornelius Castoriades, *Anthropology, Politics, Philosophy* (Athens: Ypsilon Publications, 2001), pp. 76-7.

30. Παντελῆς Μπουκάλας, Ἐνδεχομένως: στάσεις στὴν ἑλληνικὴ καὶ ξένη τέχνη τοῦ λόγου, ᾿Αθήνα, ῎Αγρα, 1996, σ. 465. It must be pointed out, however, that for all his astuteness, Boukalas and like-minded humanists premising the merits of agnosticism on an exaggerated reason-versus-revelation divide would be hard-pressed to find biblical scholars advocating a positivist (or endogamic) hermeneutics, i.e., a view of Scripture as the Word of God devoid of historical specificity and human viewpoints, as they so readily assume. This highly misleading (and sadly still widespread) myth of human intellectual detachment from the processes of Scriptural composition and interpretation is forcefully exposed in Σάββας ᾿Αγουρίδης, Ἑρμηνευτικὴ ἱερῶν κειμένων: προβλήματα- μέθοδοι ἐργασίας στὴν ἑρμηνεία τῶν γραφῶν, ᾿Αθήνα, ῎Αρτος Ζωῆς, 2000, esp. pp. 44, 53, 76-78, 98-99, as had already been indicated by Fr. George Florovsky, who elaborately denounced all forms of uncritical «biblicism» in Θέματα ὀρθοδόξου θεολογίας, ᾿Αθήνα, ῎Αρτος Ζωῆς, 1989, esp. in Chs 3 & 11. Indeed, hermeneutical positivism, in the sense of a self-contained Scriptural endogamy, is already decisively debunked, and is therefore just as untenable in theology as it is in the natural sciences. Hence, it is doubtless telling that Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously took Karl Barth, the renowned biblical endogamist, to task precisely on charges of positivism in *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1968), pp. 170-71.

selves on the receiving end of criticism, mainly on grounds of *ontological destitution* and social anomie. Writers like William Desmond repeatedly and penetratingly expose the misleading one-sidedness of such intellectual patterns, whose disregard for the questions of ontology and truth, both of which are too easily identified with *essentialism*, foster a high degree of relativism that may easily lapse to nihilism. Not only that: the end-result of an absolutised autonomy is now seen by many as apt to lead not to Kant's (and Castoriades') noble ideal of the self-governed moral agent, but to the Nietzschean "overman." In Desmond's words,

> If each is self-legislating, what of the other? Do I legislate for the other? Does the other legislate for me? Does not the *pluralizing* of self-legislation create serious difficulties to holding on to the notion of *self*-legislation as the primary model of moral freedom? ... We are only projecting ourselves [as God] then. We project ourselves, we recover ourselves, by dissolving God back into ourselves, and thus we become truly self-legislating. We start as morally righteous Kantians and end as self-glorifying Nietzscheans beyond good and evil, ourselves the source of the moral law.[31]

Desmond's warning is similarly echoed by Chrestos Yannaras, whom as I said I shall incorporate in the present discussion as a contemporary theorist carrying the flipside to Castoriades' and Rawls' (distinct forms of) liberalism.

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31. William Desmond, *Ethics and the Between* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), pp. 139-142. The leading communitarian theorist Charles Taylor voices the same fear in *Hegel and Modern Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 159, 167, namely that the prospect of an unrestrained autonomy ignoring the human embeddedness in communal and cultural values is only bound to result, over the long run, in the naked exaltation of the «will to power». As a genuine communitarian, Taylor is nervous about the so-called deontological priority of the *right* over the *good* traditionally espoused by liberals and designed as a Kantian counter-attack against utilitarianism. And while Taylor finds this priority «highly justified in its anti-utilitarian thrust», he worries that «it can also be used to downgrade not just the homogeneous good of desire-fulfillment central to utilitarian theory but also any conception of the good, including the qualitative distinctions underlying our moral views». See Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 88. Thus, Taylor complains about Rawls' proposal in *A Theory of Justice* that we develop a notion of justice starting only with a «thin theory of the good», meaning thereby what Taylor calls weakly valued goods, a suggestion that he claims to find incoherent (ibid., pp. 88-9).

Like Desmond, Yannaras is a Christian philosopher bent on countering modernity's and postmodernity's relinquishment of extra-human and trans-cendent ontological categories, even where political theory is concerned. The backbone to his voluminous corpus can be summarized, at the risk of a mis-leading oversimplification, as the purgation of the real from the imaginary, in his case the real being identified with the ontological fullness of life as accom-plished in Christ's resurrection, in contrast to ideological or psychological counterparts usurping the place of the real. If Christ identified himself with truth and life ("I am the way and the truth and life," *Jn* 11:25), Christian theo-logy cannot dispense with truth-claims, says Yannaras, and these must extend beyond soteriology to all quarters of human life, including political organiza-tion. It should be specified at once that Yannaras does not recommend a return to monarchical or theocratic forms of government, although he concurrently takes modern constitutional democracies to task for having been designed not with a view towards mirroring a grander truth, i.e., so as to embody something approximating what Rawls refers to as the "General Good," but as a matter of convention, at the service of *individualism* and its private pursuits of pleasure. Modernity's "original sin," according to Yannaras, is that the concern for ontology

> remains just barely or not at all tolerated within the bounda-ries of the mentality that the civilization of the Enlightenment imposes even today. What is mainly rejected in the framework of this civilization is the "core" or precondition for every pro-position of ontological interpretation. What is rejected is the problem of the causal principle of the existent [i.e., God], and therefore also rejected is the criterion for distinguishing the real from the imaginary.[32]

How does Yannaras translate his ontological commitments into political terms? Interestingly enough, the model he refers us to is not the Byzantine empire but, as in Castoriades' narrative, 5th century Athens, though it's easy to guess that the two authors see this seminal democracy from radically diffe-rent angles, hence reaching contrasting results about it. Whereas Castoriades

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32. Chrestos Yannaras, *The Real and the Imaginary in Political Economy*, Ch. 8: "Genealo-gy of the Impasse in Economic Epistemology" (Athens: Domos Publications, 1989), p. 163.

exalted Athenian political autonomy and conventionalism, as we just saw, Yannaras claims instead that the Greek *polis* or city-state, of which Athens was the grandest exemplary, came into existence not due to any skeptical detachment from metaphysics, but as a result rather of its denizens' gradual submission to what they perceived as "the cosmic Logos," meaning by that term the well-known Greek awe before the harmonious splendor of the cosmos, which they sought to render incarnate in their communities. "In this case," says Yannaras,

> Politics ... is no longer the technique of utility-pandering expediency but an art of disclosing the *logos* of universal communing cohesion, a creative partaking in the realization of a mode of existence *according to truth*. Politics is identified with the pursuit of existential authenticity, of correspondence to the logical [logos-like] nature or to the purpose of human existence. Then the *city* also has a *sacerdotal* character, not because it serves some narrowly religious expediency, but because it realizes and discloses that sacredness par excellence which is the mode of life, the mode by which life is true as reality and as duration. And the citizen is not simply a unit in the aggregate of common living together, a unit of rights and obligations that are regulated conventionally in order to balance egocentric demand. To be a *citizen* is a title of honor. You partake in the greatest honor and in the achievement of making life *true*. This is why citizens are not elected to office but are appointed by lot; each citizen by definition partakes in the achievement of that life according to truth which is *democracy*. Whoever refuses involvement in the political realization of this communal truth-making is not simply an idler, he is a good-for-nothing [This last statement is an almost direct quote from Pericles' Funeral Oration, in Thucydides, *Histories* B. 40.2].[33]

Stripped of its technical jargon, Yannaras' point may be more simply rehearsed as follows: the first originary democracy in the western world, 5th century Athens, came about not by so prosaic and conventional a means as a

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33. Ibid, pp. 167-8. Cf. also Yannaras, *Ratio Recta and Social Practice* (Athens: Domos, 1984), pp. 195-6.

"social contract," as is so often said, but because its people reached a level of sophistication and self-awareness high enough to realize that authentic human existence is possible only in the parameters of a community emulating the surrounding cosmic harmony. Thus, so Yannaras claims, Athenians (and to a somewhat lesser degree other Greeks) set about to create a constitution not for the purpose of merely facilitating peaceful cohabitation but in order to *institute* the true mode of being, "in accordance with *logos*," a key category in Greek thought, from Herakleitus down to Aristotle. Yannaras then makes the bold (and, in my view, untenable, except in a qualified sense) thesis that an organic evolution of this political community-gathering survived in the form of early and Byzantine Christian parishes, where the faithful flock convened at regular intervals not to worship God in an abstract and emotive sense, but to communally *comprise* and make manifest as one body the true, divine mode of being which is made incarnate materially in the Eucharist, the sacrament of God's continuing enfleshment in history. His thesis owes much to the etymology of the Greek term "liturgy," meaning literally "work of the people," something enacted by an assembly comprised of the whole people of God.

Clearly, the theoretical constructs of both Castoriades and Yannaras have *realist* aspirations, in the sense that they rest on assumptions drawn from the way each believes the world or reality as *such* to be (a "reality" that, in Yannaras' case, extends to extra-human categories, encompassing as it does the transcendent). As Yannaras so emphatically puts the matter,

> If the majority faith of a social group asserts that it is impossible for man to lead up to a causal [source] of the existent [meaning by that God], i.e., that *agnosticism* is the more consistent attitude toward the problem of the origin and cause of the data of reality, and the only "truth" that we know is the appearance of things, then the purpose of human life cannot but derive from this ignorance and absence of logos. In that case there exists no special existential logos-purpose for the human presence in the world, there exist only *useful expediencies* for responding to the given and apparent needs of the natural individual. For example, the political and economic problems that this deontology poses are problems of balancing individual or group demands, problems of strategies and methods for the more efficient production of goods, and, in the more romantic case, for their just dis-

tribution to the social whole ... The final meaning of your social enlistment and of your productive activity (the content of everyday life and the motive for action) is that you struggle to push death back temporarily.[34]

In other words, where state bureaucrats might see economic and social progress in western bourgeois democracies, Yannaras sees brute *utilitarianism* and expediency, and beneath them the specter of nihilism looming large. But Castoriades, too, while standing on opposite ends from Yannaras' thick ontological project, would be just as displeased with a tightly endogamic, freestanding model like Rawls,' given its allegedly insufficient anchor in reality as Castoriades pictures it at least, roughly corresponding to the axiomatic denial of the existence of God or other akin extra-historical or transcendent *a priori* principles traditionally assumed to dictate moral action.

Philosophically, the two radically divergent forms of realism share the common objective of deriving their moral and political "oughts" from their respective "is." When seen from such an unmistakably realist perspective, Rawls' liberalism appears suspiciously "pragmatist," i.e., as relativising the concept of the Good beyond redemption by defining it in the minimal sense as that which is of practical use for us here and now. In fact, Rawls has been routinely critiqued for having sought the privatisation or compartmentalisation of the common good in a manner strongly reminiscent of Rortyan pragmatism. David Hollenbach, for example, has forcefully described Rawls' later conversion to political liberalism as an unfortunate transition from a Kantian to a pragmatist perspective,[35] lamenting its individualism and the fragmentation of meaning and social life it supposedly fosters:

> A principled commitment to avoiding sustained discourse about the common good can produce a downward spiral in which shared meaning, understanding, and community become even harder to achieve in practice. Or, more ominously, when the pluralism of diverse groups veers toward a state of group conflict with racial or religious dimensions, pure tolerance can become a strategy like that of an ostrich with its head in the

34. Yannaras, *The Real and the Imaginary in Political Economy*, p. 168.
35. David Hollenbach, "Is Tolerance Enough?" *Conversations* 13 (Spring, 1998).

sand. In my view, this is just what we don't need.[36]

Hollenbach's reservations are closely echoed by Luis Dupre, another critic worried about the *constructivism* (or artificiality) and abstraction of Rawls' liberalism:

> But once we relativize the good to being a matter of private choice, we *eo ipso* deprive both the choice and the obligation of that absolute quality that only the good itself can confer. To secure each individual's "right" to do what he or she pleases, as long as he or she does not hinder others in doing the same, may be expeditious, perhaps necessary from a practical point of view. But it can hardly pass for a common *good* ... [In its abstraction and conventionalism] Rawls' ideal can count for hardly more than a description of· the civilized manner in which members of a modern society, especially one rooted in the Anglo-Saxon legal tradition, pursue their intensely private goals without becoming a nuisance to others.[37]

Since both critical statements come from (well-meaning, to be sure) Catholic scholars worried, like Desmond and Yannaras, about what they understand as Rawls' easy abrogation of an Archimedean moral *a priori* (in their case, identified with God) for the sake of a conventional deontology devoid of all ontological content, it would now be appropriate to assess the potency of Rawlsian liberalism and the adequacy of its constructivism in the light of such *realist* criticism coming from the side of religious quarters. In what follows, I shall attempt to justify Rawls' constructivism as comprising, in my view, the most reasonably balanced and suitable conception for the setting of contemporary pluralist democracies, and in the process to square it also with religion and its rightful place in them. To do so, I must first examine his constructivism vis-à-vis the rival concept of "moral (or "rational") intuitionism," represented by writers like Yannaras, Hollenbach, Dupre, and (in a reversed sense) Castoriades as well.

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36. Ibid, p. 8.

37. Luis Dupre, "The Common Good and the Open Society," *Catholicism and Liberalism: Contributions to American Public Policy*, R. Bruce Douglas and David Hollenbach, eds. (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), p. 185.

In his program, Rawls distinguishes moral and rational intuitionism from his notion of political constructivism by a set of four criteria which essentially amount to the following two pictures. We have, on one hand, a set of moral principles and judgments that, "when correct, are true statements about an independent order of moral values," and this is an order which "does not depend on, nor is it to be explained by, the activity of any actual (human) minds, including the activity of reason."[38] In addition, and following directly from the above, rational intuitionism "conceives of truth in a traditional way by viewing moral judgments as true when they are both about and accurate to the independent order of moral value. Otherwise, they are false."[39] It is counter to this traditional, realist picture of ethics, then, that Rawls sets up his aforementioned constructivist conception. Man-made as its name suggests and historically emergent, his theory focuses on reasonableness at the exclusion of absolute truths, an inversion of priorities that helps explain why Rawls is, mistakenly as I believe, tossed so easily with the pragmatists. This doesn't mean, however, as rational intuitionists would quickly assume, that constructivism denies the concept of truth, much less that it sets out to foil and counter the (ontological, realist) claims of rational intuitionism.[40] Were it to do so, it would justify at once the (misinformed) critique against it as a disguised pragmatism, which in actual fact it is not.

If Rawlsian liberalism dissociates itself from broader, comprehensive doctrines it is not out of a metaphysical skepticism towards truth, but only because it seeks to remain *freestanding* from these for the greater benefit of society as a whole. Inasmuch as the ultimate goal of Rawls' thesis is harmonious social cohesion based not on the indiscriminate imposition of a particular faith upon everyone but on the widest possible acceptance of freedom of belief and expression as indispensable prerequisites for individual and social progress, there is an unmistakably communitarian element in it, despite charges to the contrary. For while ostensibly promoting individualism or privatising religion, as many critics think, Rawls actually sets the scene (the political prerequisites, that is) for a social ethic that prioritises tolerance and unity-in-diversity as basic cornerstones of all just states. If anything, I read Rawls as urging us to become communitarians in a subtler, deeper sense, as demanding from his readers the maturation level required to overcome the self-cen-

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38. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 91.
39. Ibid, p. 92.
40. Ibid, pp. 94-5.

tered political denigration of beliefs and viewpoints other than one's own. Accordingly, Rawls is socially responsible by encouraging his readership to see the bigger picture and thus to consider the greater social lot, as concern for the welfare of one's culturally and religiously "idiosyncratic" neighbours. Critics rallying against his decentralized concept of the Good, lamenting no longer seeing it as preceded by the term "common," should still be able to see the adjective reflected in the more inclusive word "greater," preferred by Rawls for its multilateral meaning. Knowing full well that religion (like opposition to it) are highly heated topics capable of inducing authoritarian, and even violent, behaviour, Rawls is determined to guarantee fair terms of social cooperation which would be fatally compromised from the outset were they extracted from metaphysical conceptions. "How are fair terms of cooperation determined?" asks Rawls in attempting to justify his constructivist proposal:

> Are they to be simply laid down by some outside authority distinct from the persons cooperating, say by God's law? Or are these terms to be accepted by these persons as fair in view of their knowledge of an independent moral order? Or should these terms be established by an undertaking among those persons themselves in view of what they regard as their reciprocal advantage?
>
> Justice as fairness, we said, adopts a form of the last answer ... This is because, given the fact of reasonable pluralism, citizens cannot agree on any moral authority, whether a sacred text, or institution. Nor do they agree about the order of moral values, or the dictates of what some regard as natural law. We adopt, then, a constructivist view to specify the fair term of social cooperation as given by the principles of justice agreed to by the representatives of free and equal citizens when fairly situated.[41]

And again,

> Thus, it is only by affirming a constructivist conception – one

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41. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 97.

which is political and not metaphysical – that citizens generally can expect to find principles that all can accept. This they can do without denying the deeper aspects of their reasonable comprehensive doctrines. Given their differences, citizens cannot fulfill in any other way their conception-dependent desire to have a shared political life on terms acceptable to others as free and equal.[42]

Despite appearances to the contrary, I submit that Rawls gives his constructivism a firmer and more solidly realistic justification in the passages just quoted than do his critics to their respective forms of moral intuitionism. For these, restrained as they are by ontological sectarianism and often rooted in earlier and simpler forms of community, both monolithic and uniform in their innocence of the potential emergence of increasingly diverse states, cannot hope to contribute a catholic formula of social unity except only by coercion[43]. Nowadays more likely involving coercion of consciences. For there are bonds forged by coercion and bonds based on reasonable persuasion and understanding. Rawls is privy to the reality that western democracies are now well set into a course opting for social and political bonds of the latter sort, as his contemporary moral intuitionists apparently are not. He knows well that the politics of self-determination and multicultural citizenship rely on continued debating which occasionally might seem like a battlefield, a far cry from the romanticized social serenity and cohesion of more traditional, culturally homogenized communities. Nonetheless, Rawls sees no real (meaning, no *necessary*) threat to society's stability in the on-going public conversation among informed and concerned citizens; instead he anticipates a new and liberating form of *togetherness*, this time based not on sameness, racial or cultural, but on the recognition of difference as an inescapable, welcome, and useful social fact. In a paper examining the prospects of roughly this kind of

42. Ibid, pp. 97-8.

43. The violent exclusion of disadvantaged groups form active membership in such romanticized earlier communities, conveniently overlooked by many noteworthy communitarian writers (most notably, Charles Taylor and M. Sandel), is convincingly exposed at some length by Will Kymlicka in *Liberalism, Community and Culture*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 85 ff, 90. Kymlicka is a Canadian liberal theorist, one of the most influential at work today, who adds an important corrective to Rawls' pluralist vision, i.e., the *revisability* of a citizen's ends and so the possibility, guaranteed by the state, of his or her *exiting* from any given social or religious community/group, on top of the liberty to freely join it in the first place (ibid., pp. 59-60).

democracy, aptly labelled "people in conversation," Andre Van de Putte expresses a much-needed optimism concerning its disputed viability:

> This conception of democracy and popular sovereignty ... offers an immediate answer to a question that returns in many discussions about special rights: the question of the stability of a society in which such rights are introduced. It is regularly argued that such rights pose a threat to the *unity* of political society, to feelings of solidarity, to shared civil identity, and that every group under the protection of its special rights will withdraw into itself. And, indeed, special rights place the emphasis on self-determination, exclusivity and separateness. What *holds together* a multicultural political society that recognizes multicultural citizenship? [Hanna] Arendt's reflections on power suggest an answer: what makes a society strong is an active and inclusive public space. What in the final analysis must protect political society against segmentation is a constitution that protects and guarantees the constitutedness of individuals and at the same time *involves them in the whole*. The combination of a guaranteed domain of self-determination with integration into a public space must abolish *fear* [italicized in the original] which will only lead, as Hobbes taught us, to the war against all war, making any cooperation unthinkable.[44]

The point that Rawls and Van de Putte are making, curiously missed by moral intuitionists, is that the human spirit (individually and collectively speaking) can only grow and prosper in social contexts of free and unrestrained intellectual exchange, in the setting of an "active and inclusive public space," to repeat a line from the above-cited passage, with all the civic accountability and mutual respect that this notion entails. At the root of this recognition lies the awareness that intellectual *diversity* and *disagreement*, rather than *concurrence*, is the most frequent offspring of the mind, as a result of which societies are enriched by being continuously exposed to new and as yet undreamed of perspectives and possibilities. Now, accepting that dis-

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44. A. Van de Putte (Dean and Prof. of Social & Political Philosophy, Institute of Philosophy, Catholic University of Leuven), "The Nation-State and Multicultural Society" (unpublished paper), p. 20 (italics provided).

agreement is more likely to preponderate over consent in most instances of reasonable public deliberation by no means should dishearten us as to the prospects of future social progress, in the form, say, of increased racial equality and justice. Much less, I submit, should it compel us to assert a direct link between spirit and war, as Panayiotis Kondylis would have us believe, who saw violent ideological confrontation as the foremost, indeed the inevitable, product of spirit and thus as the unavoidable fate of humankind.[45]

If democracy does signify a substantial step forward in humankind's long, tortuous path toward civilized life, a path admittedly fraught with labyrinthine difficulties and dependent on the people's constant consent, it is synonymous with the principles of reason and tolerance. Political liberalism asks religious believers to comply with these two principles, yet it does not demand that they give up or even compromise their faith. On the contrary, devout followers of comprehensive doctrines are welcome to make their particular contribution toward the establishment of a truly participatory constitutional democracy, not of course by smuggling in metaphysical tenets to the public discussion but by internalising tolerance as a central and positive force in their system of values to such an extent as might effectively curb certain unreasonable remnants of the faith that would threaten the fundamentals of social freedom and civility.

None of all this, of course, would satisfy Castoriades' unmitigated demand for a blueprint of democracy dependent on complete external *and* internal autonomy, just as it wouldn't meet the requirements of its Kantian ancestor, similarly premised on a transcendental formalism devoid of all empirical (i.e., *heteronomous*) input.[46] But perhaps a fairly adequate response to Castoriades might be that the person who consciously subscribes to the basics of Rawlsian

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45. Kondylis' grim thesis is expounded in his tightly-argued work Ἰσχὺς καὶ ἐξουσία: ἡ διαμόρφωση τῶν κοσμοεικόνων καὶ τὸ πρόβλημα τῶν ἀξιῶν, Ἀθήνα, Στιγμή, 2001, and more elaborately in chapter III, «Ἰσχὺς καὶ ἀπόφαση στὸ μέτωπο τοῦ "πνεύματος"», pp. 143-208. Nor, I would like to add in passing, does Rawlsian liberalism commit us in any way to the aggressive economic individualism and capitalist anomie of theorists like Friedrich Hayeck and Milton Friedman. For, while it would certainly be a mistake to toss Rawls with the socialists (a misunderstanding easily encouraged by his famous debate Robert Nozick in matters of social sensitivity), there is a genuine concern for economic disparity in classical liberalism worthy of our attention. Kymlicka admits as much when he says that he sees closer ties between socialism and liberalism than first meets the eye (*Liberalism, Community and Culture*, p. 91).

46. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Mary Gregor, trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002).

liberalism in spite of his or her cultural and religious inclinations is already to a considerable degree autonomous, certainly ahead of untroubled sympathisers and self-professed advocates for tolerance too comfortably (and just as dogmatically as the next fundamentalist, sometimes) set on their secular ways.

But moral intuitionists as well, especially as represented by Yannaras' intriguing conjunction of politics and ontology, need to be reminded that they conflate the two distinct kingdoms, the city of heaven and the polis, too seamlessly for the desired overlap to survive critical scrutiny, unmindful as they appear to be of the *tension* that's inevitably at work between these two terrains. For the kingdom of heaven, as always envisaged by the most influential Christian theologians, is above all an *eschatological* reality that at best can only be anticipated (and momentarily foretasted in the Eucharist) but never historically coerced on society. Being a theologian myself, I feel compelled to humbly submit in these lines, as I have done elsewhere, my heartfelt endorsement of Prof. Yannaras' neo-patristic synthesis of ontology with personhood and otherness, as meriting praise for its rich anthropological implications. All the same, I must express sincere qualms about it when it is presented as an extended social program in political terms. In all fairness it should be added that, in a qualified sense, the two forms of *ecclesiae*, the Athenian and the Christian, do seem to overlap, given that (ideally at least) the same guiding principle seems to be involved in both: the surpassing of one's raw individualism by one's entrance to a nurturing community of freely bonding persons. For after all, to the Greek mind as early as Homer's days[47] the *polis* was, even in its primitive versions with a minimal institution of social assembly, the primary matrix for the gradual attainment of one's very humanity, beyond the parameters of which lay plain barbarism. In the Eucharistic assembly, accordingly, the baptismal incorporation to the community is meant to instantiate a long process whereby each member receives, by grace and effort, a new identity mirroring the transition from *individual* to the *person*. However, as noble as I may find the ecclesial vision of personhood as a naturalization to the kingdom of heaven, I cannot forbear acknowledging that

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47. It is doubtless telling that in the *Odyssey* (ι, 106, 112), Homer links the barbaric lawlessness of the Cyclops to their innocence of an organized social life. Evidently, the Greeks saw "humanity" not in strictly physical terms, as a quality given at birth, but as a political accomplishment. Cf. Aristotle's designation of man as a political animal (*Nichomachean Ethics*, A, 5, 1.097B, 12).

it points to a metaphysically sectarian idea of citizenship not normally encountered in the Greeks, and certainly not capable of eliciting a *necessary* wider appeal, let alone endorsement. The real, if limited, convergence of the two forms of assembly therefore, important and instructive as it is, must not be hardened or absolutised to the point of blurring their radical asymmetry, the fundamental wedge between God and Caesar alluded to by no less a personage than Christ Himself (*Mark* 12:17).