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CHAPTER ONE

RELIGION AND THE POST-

ENLIGHTENMENT LIBERALISM OF

JOHN RAWLS

Liberalism and Religious Transformation

In *Bad Religion*, his popular but highly controversial treatment of the fate of American religiosity, *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat argues that in the last five decades America has become a “nation of heretics” because of its increasing propensity to transform Christianity into newer and newer (and less orthodox) versions of itself.¹ Writing from the perspective of a Catholic conservative, Douthat laments the watering-down of American theology in the second half of the twentieth century and finds the evangelical accommodation with capitalism and the rise of “therapeutic spiritualism” among mainline Protestants deeply troubling from the perspective of traditional religion. In its place, he seeks to remind his readers of the heyday of American religiosity, when religion was both more orthodox and more institutionally robust, and when its cultural role in public life was more universally respected: “A chart of the American religious past would look like a vast delta, with tributaries, streams, and channels winding in and out, diverging and reconverging—but all of them fed, ultimately, by a central stream, an original current, a place where the waters start. This river is Christian orthodoxy.”² The erstwhile dominance of Christian orthodoxy, according to Douthat, fulfilled important civic purposes in our national life: “Both doubters and believers have benefited from the role that institutional Christianity has traditionally played in our national life,” Douthat writes. He cites traditional Christianity’s “communal role, as a driver of assimilation and a guarantor of social peace, and its prophetic role, as a curb against our national excesses and a constant reminder of our national ideals.”³ Like others, Douthat traces the transformation of American Christianity to the cultural revolutions that began in the 1960s, which he presents as a kind of historical aberration in an otherwise harmonious theological-political tradition that has animated American history.⁴ While he chooses to settle for a call for a Christian renewal that can re-evangelize America, Douthat’s study

leaves it an open question whether such a revival is at all foreseeable in our day and age.

The leading school of contemporary liberal theory is singularly ill-equipped to assess the civic costs of the transformation of religion that Douthat pinpoints. John Rawls's influential work, which takes its bearings from the fact of moral and religious pluralism, emphasizes the need for a liberalism that secures a limited consensus by maintaining "impartiality" between controversial comprehensive doctrines, including especially religious ones.⁵ Rawlsian neutrality has both metaphysical and political consequences: it is not only often thought to imply that liberalism can be theoretically justified independently from metaphysical foundations, but also that it requires a culture of public reasoning that eschews divisive religious appeals in support of coercive laws—a concept popularized by Rawls as the "public reason" requirement of liberalism.⁶ Thus, in large part because of the influence of Rawls's approach, debates in political theory in America have often focused more on the narrow question of the rules that should govern the interjection of religious views in public deliberation, and less on the question of whether liberalism presupposes a theological transformation. To be sure, Rawls's paradigm has had its detractors, with critics often asserting that it risks excluding the contribution of religious arguments to democracy's civic life,⁷ and in recent years an "inclusivist"⁸ alternative that allows for religious argumentation in deliberation has gained prominence.⁹ But while these "inclusivists" are friendlier to the contribution of religion than the "exclusivist" Rawlsians, they still retain the original spirit of Rawls's consensus-oriented approach: they claim that liberal neutrality helps bring about a "convergence" between competing viewpoints and traditions of reasoning (both religious and nonreligious) in support of shared political conclusions, even if they do not expect the justificatory foundations of those political conclusions to be mutually acceptable across the various traditions under consideration.¹⁰ Thus, according to this view, religious and nonreligious citizens may come to share liberal political principles without agreeing on the reasons why those principles are fundamentally sound or desirable.

What both the defenders and (to a lesser extent) the critics of public reason may fail to bring into sharper focus, however, is that the contemporary debates about the requirements that should govern public speech take place within the context of a broader transformation of religion in modern democracy. Accordingly, a different group of scholars has emphasized that democratic pluralism itself alters the essential experience of religious faith.¹¹ These commentators have shown that the cultural pressures that modern

democracy generates liberate individual rationality and nurture an attitude that questions the inerrancy (and the authority) of revelation as a source of moral and political guidance. This is a development with consequences for theology that we are still trying to comprehend, although most scholars agree that overall its results include increasing interreligious tolerance and decreasing salience of theological controversy between faith groups.¹² In *American Grace*, their celebrated study of American religiosity, Robert Putnam and David Campbell show that theological flexibility and “religious fluidity” allows Americans to combine exceptional religious devotion with religious diversity while maintaining relatively high levels of toleration.¹³ While they claim that religious identities are still distinct and meaningfully intact in spite of this fluidity, their findings simultaneously point to a theological ambiguity underlying America’s religious pluralism: Americans appear to have become indifferent to theology—so much so that they believe in an “equal opportunity heaven.”¹⁴ Although they neglect to highlight this underlying homogeneity of America’s religious landscape, their findings confirm Alan Wolfe’s famous conclusion that “Americans impose their individualism on their religious beliefs rather than the other way around.”¹⁵

This book advances the debate by bringing these disparate scholarly foci into critical dialogue with each other. I attempt to evaluate and trace the intellectual sources of this theological development and to assess its implications for the civic life of American democracy. I grapple with the following foundational questions: Can liberalism maintain a posture of neutrality toward religion, as John Rawls famously argued it should in his *Political Liberalism*, or does a liberal regime presuppose (and even bring about) a certain transformation of religious beliefs? Furthermore, has the apparent democratization of religion transpired the way early Enlightenment thinkers, such as Locke, or recent liberal thinkers, such as Rawls, expected it would, and how has this transformation affected religion’s capacity to contribute to the moral and civic life of a liberal society? Finally, is there something crucial in religion that is “lost in translation,” and should that be a concern for those who care about the health of democracy today? I explore these questions through an investigation of the political and religious thought of John Locke, Alexis de Tocqueville, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., Barack Obama, and Jürgen Habermas. In chapters that focus on their political and theological legacies, I place these figures in dialogue with each other as well as with contemporary debates, illustrating in each case how they struggle to navigate the foundational tensions between religion and liberalism.

By stressing the ambiguous effects of the liberal transformation of religion on the civic health of democracy, I offer a new framework for thinking about the role of religion in contemporary democratic life that goes beyond both the Rawlsian and Lockean paradigms of liberalism. Unlike Douthat, most scholars have at least implicitly followed Lockean liberalism in celebrating democracy's relative success at transforming religion and at rendering it in important respects more tolerant and more liberal. Putnam and Campbell are again instructive in this regard, since they are troubled by the "deeply moralistic" and "less tolerant" denominations of American Christianity, and they favor what they call "a faith without fanaticism" insofar as it contributes to America's interreligious tolerance.¹⁶ Not surprisingly, they find the decline in "religious chauvinism," or the percentage of "true believers" that identify their faith as the only path to heaven, to be beneficial for American politics, although it is less than clear that this redounds to the benefit of religion.¹⁷ America would be better off, according to their account, if religious groups emulated the ecumenism of mainline Protestantism. But studies of America's civic culture, among them Putnam's own *Bowling Alone* (published a decade before his *American Grace*), have simultaneously pointed to alarming trends that should leave us less than sanguine about the civic effects of this transformation: democratic culture is increasingly individualized and atomistic, resulting in the erosion of traditional institutions (including especially religious ones) that historically sustained what Putnam refers to as democracy's "social capital," the network of communal and social ties that are necessary for a vibrant civic life.¹⁸

Following Alexis de Tocqueville, who I show anticipated these troubling developments in democracy, this study highlights a foundational ambiguity in liberalism's posture toward religion: I point to an abiding tension between the civic benefits that religion can provide and the tendency of democracy to make religion increasingly liberal, tolerant, and accordingly theologically easygoing, suggesting that paradoxically a faith that maintains some form of rootedness in tradition and revelation may be more effective at counteracting democratic pathologies than are the liberalized faiths that we frequently encounter today. I ask whether this tension can ever truly be surmounted by liberalism and whether an essentially liberal civic faith is either theoretically coherent or practically feasible. The book suggests that this dissonance between how tolerant we want religion to be and what we expect it to accomplish in our civic life is a consequence of the liberal transformation of religion and may explain some of the deepest spiritual and civic anxieties that continue to beset American democracy.

Rawls's "Public Reason" Liberalism and the Muddle of Contemporary Neutrality

Post-Enlightenment Liberalism and John Rawls's Anti-Foundationalism

Contemporary liberal theory often operates under a blind spot with respect to these theological trade-offs and thus misses the tension between the requirements of liberal tolerance and the fate of religion in democracy. By aspiring to move beyond both rationalism and religion to a liberalism of "neutrality," present-day political theory neglects the ambiguous civic and theological effects of the liberal transformation of religion. A prominent illustration of this approach is John Rawls's *Political Liberalism*, a work that continues to define not just the methodological parameters but also the foundational questions that inform liberal theory today.¹⁹ Taking his bearings from the enduring fact of "reasonable pluralism"²⁰ of comprehensive doctrines in modern societies, Rawls proposes a teaching of liberalism that would be "political not metaphysical."²¹ For Rawls, the "political not metaphysical" formula means that liberalism can achieve political neutrality between competing worldviews by embracing a theoretical abstinence with regard to metaphysical, theological, and moral foundations: political liberalism refrains from passing judgment on the truth of any comprehensive doctrine, even including its own, and thus it need not take an official stand on foundational questions. This strategy, according to Rawls, will enable liberalism to secure an "overlapping consensus," allowing individuals to embrace liberal political principles without at the same time abandoning or altering their privately held comprehensive outlooks. Is this approach theoretically and practically coherent? Can liberalism as a way of life remain neutral with respect to religion and with respect to its own theological (or anti-theological) foundations?

It is important to note that Rawls distinguishes his version of political liberalism from its Enlightenment predecessor, on which his political teaching aims to improve in crucial respects. In Rawls's telling, the Enlightenment "project" was developed in response to the historical problem created by the Reformation, which, he writes, "introduce[d] into people's conceptions of the good a transcendent element not admitting of compromise," thereby transforming politics into an arena of "mortal conflict" and precipitating the European Wars of Religion.²² The liberal thinkers of the Enlightenment responded to their historical predicament by proposing to replace the reigning religious claims with a morality derived exclusively from secular phi-

losophy, from which derive the principles of separation of church and state and limited constitutional government rooted in individual natural rights (xvii). But Rawls emphasizes that “political liberalism has no such aims”: “emphatically, it does not aim to replace comprehensive doctrines, religious or nonreligious, but intends to be equally distinct from both and, it hopes, acceptable to both” (xxxviii). Accordingly, “the intention is not to replace those comprehensive views, nor to give them a true foundation.”²³ Indeed, doing so would be “delusional,” since Rawls believes no such true foundations can ever be expected to be found.²⁴ Political liberalism will therefore present a conception of justice that will be essentially “freestanding,” i.e., not dependent on any exclusive (and therefore controversial) conception of the good life (10). A great deal hinges on Rawls’s ambitious promise that political liberalism can achieve neutrality, since it is such neutrality that will ensure its greater tolerance and inclusiveness, even (apparently) of illiberal theological views: the strategy of neutrality means that “both religious and nonreligious, liberal and nonliberal” comprehensive views “may freely endorse, and so freely live by and come to understand [the] virtues” of political liberalism (xxxviii).

While Rawls presents political liberalism as a practical improvement on Enlightenment liberalism, he also indicates that it does not entail a mere rejection, but rather a revision or an extension, of the Enlightenment’s foundational theoretical posture. Indeed, he presents political liberalism’s break with the Enlightenment as the ultimate consequence of the Enlightenment’s own principle of toleration: “political liberalism applies the principle of toleration to philosophy itself,” thus setting aside the whole question of moral and philosophical truth as such from political consideration (10). Political liberalism thus aims to generalize and universalize the Enlightenment’s apparent religious strategy: just as Enlightenment thinkers, in Rawls’s reading, took “the truths of religion off the political agenda” when they constructed the liberal secular state, “by avoiding comprehensive doctrines” altogether Rawlsian liberalism will in turn seek “to bypass religion and philosophy’s profoundest controversies” (152). As Rawls elaborates this point further, we see more fully the far-reaching import that he imputes to his attempt to construct a freestanding liberalism:

Were justice as fairness to make an overlapping consensus possible it would complete and extend the movement of thought that began three centuries ago with the gradual acceptance of the principle of toleration and led to the nonconfessional state and equal liberty of conscience.

The extension is required for an agreement on a political conception of justice given the political and social circumstances of a democratic society. To apply the principle of toleration to philosophy itself is to leave citizens themselves to settle the questions of religion, philosophy, and morals in accordance with views they freely affirm (154).

In an essay responding to an earlier iteration of Rawls's project, Richard Rorty brings out the anti-foundationalist implications of Rawls's approach. Rorty argues that "Rawls . . . shows us how liberal democracy can get along without philosophical presuppositions," and that this is the ultimate implication of "Rawls's effort to, in his own words, 'stay on the surface, philosophically speaking.'"²⁵ Accordingly, Rorty can claim that his own pragmatist and postmodern liberalism is in agreement with the "political, not metaphysical" position that Rawls first started sketching in the 1980s and that culminated in his *Political Liberalism*: "We can think of Rawls as saying that just as the principle of religious toleration and the social thought of the Enlightenment proposed to bracket many standard theological topics when deliberating about public policy and constructing political institutions, so we need to bracket many standard topics of philosophical inquiry" (ibid., 180). Rawls's strategy, in Rorty's reading, would then involve taking "Jefferson's avoidance of theology one step further" by extending it to all comprehensive views (182).

In the same essay, Rorty goes on to argue that by bracketing foundational disputes, liberalism allows us "to put aside such questions as an ahistorical human nature, the nature of selfhood, the motive of moral behavior, and the meaning of human life" (180). These topics, once considered the focal point of philosophical and theological dispute—and frequently the spark behind political contestation—become "as irrelevant to politics as Jefferson thought questions about the Trinity and about transubstantiation" should be irrelevant to liberal democracy (180). But for Rorty, the strategy of bracketing truth claims is not merely an expression of neutrality about which comprehensive doctrines are preferable from the perspective of liberalism. Instead, it is intended to advance a specific moral outlook: Rorty makes clear that by so bracketing truth claims in the political arena, liberalism encourages people to become morally indifferent to the contest over truth. As he explains, "truth . . . is simply not relevant to democratic politics; . . . when the two conflict, democracy takes precedence over philosophy" (191–192). Society as a whole would be better off, according to Rorty, if the moral and spiritual "disenchantment of the world" that is already being brought about by sci-

ence and liberal political principles were to accelerate. Indeed, the diffusion of such disenchantment is the “moral purpose” behind Rorty’s philosophical project, as it should be the purpose of Rawls’s *Political Liberalism* when its goals are rightly understood: “the encouragement of light-mindedness about traditional philosophical topics serves the same purpose as does the encouragement of light-mindedness about traditional theological disputes,” namely, “it helps make the world’s inhabitants more pragmatic, more tolerant, more liberal, more receptive to the appeal of instrumental reason.”²⁶

As we are starting to see, Rorty is willing to draw from this evaluation of Rawls’s strategy of neutrality an extremely unsettling conclusion about the price of toleration for the spiritual and moral life of democracy: “the typical character types of liberal democracies are bland, calculating, petty, and unheroic.” For Rorty, the promotion of such a truncated human type (a veritable “Last Man” that Nietzsche had identified in harrowing detail) “may be a reasonable price to pay for political freedom,” even if this ultimately entails accepting a this-worldly materialistic culture that culminates in an easy-going “narcissism.” Moreover, from Rorty’s perspective, the more that serious moral and religious commitments (and their consequent controversies) decline, the stronger democracy will become. Although Rorty’s reading of Rawls’s early work has received some criticism, his intuition that Rawls’s anti-foundationalism culminates in theological indifference and religious apathy would clearly render the liberal promise of neutrality illogical. Now contrary to Rorty’s painfully frank prediction, Rawls had claimed that (his mature) liberalism would have a practical consequence exactly the opposite of that envisioned by Rorty. As we have already seen, Rawls repeatedly stresses that political liberalism will be distinguished from its Enlightenment predecessor by its “impartiality”: political liberalism “does not attack or criticize any reasonable view,” nor “does it criticize, much less reject, any particular theory of the truth of moral judgments” (xix–xx). Short of presupposing or promoting philosophical light-mindedness about the deepest questions, Rawls insists that political liberalism will nurture a thriving pluralism of competing comprehensive views, which will nevertheless converge around an overlapping consensus on constitutional essentials: “it would be fatal to the idea of a political conception . . . of justice if it were . . . skeptical about, or indifferent to, truth, much less . . . in conflict with it” (150); instead, Rawls expects that each citizen will endorse political liberalism “from the standpoint of their own comprehensive view, whatever it may be” (ibid.).

How then are we to resolve this ambiguity in political liberalism? How

can Rawls and Rorty begin from such similar premises (from the need to move liberalism beyond the Enlightenment's truth claims), and yet reach such different conclusions about the fate of comprehensive doctrines in liberal society? The answer can be gleaned from the fact that while both Rawls and Rorty are committed to articulating liberalism without references to metaphysical foundations, Rawls did not think that such foundations could be dispensed with altogether. As we will see below, in spite of its famous strategy of "neutrality," *Political Liberalism* demonstrates a latent dependence on historically inherited metaphysical and theological foundations that support liberal politics, even though Rawls chooses (for the sake of political expediency and practicality) neither to defend nor to articulate such foundations explicitly. In short, Rawls cannot escape foundationalism, since political liberalism requires those comprehensive views that do not already endorse liberal principles to be either transformed or marginalized; on the other hand, sufficiently "reasonable" and liberalized comprehensive views are necessary for the stability of a liberal political order. This underlying foundationalism of Rawlsian liberalism points to its underappreciated dependence on the Enlightenment's historical legacy, thus highlighting the inherent limits of the type of pluralism that liberalism's (of whichever variety) can ultimately secure.

*Rawlsian "Reasonableness" as the Enlightenment's
Historical Legacy*

We may better grasp the force of Rorty's critique by taking up Rawls's doctrine of "public reason," which is to provide the solution to the political problem presented by incompatible comprehensive doctrines. According to Rawls, public reason is the form of reason that should govern citizens of a liberal democracy in their deliberations when "constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice are at stake" (215), which he also designates as the "special subject of public reason" (214). While citizens in a democracy will continue to hold divergent metaphysical, moral, and religious commitments in their private lives, the ideal that Rawls constructs would require them to draw only upon "widely shared" public principles when engaging in political deliberation about constitutional essentials (224–225). In Rawls's words, when justifying the use of political power, we are to "appeal to those *presently accepted* general beliefs and forms of reasoning found in common sense, and the methods and conclusions of science when these are not controversial" (224, *emphasis added*). In practice, this will mean that citizens should abstain from justifying public policies and the use of political power

on the basis of their exclusively privately held (and therefore controversial and nonshareable) comprehensive doctrines, drawing instead on principles that are already part of “the public political culture.”

Rawls hopes that by adopting his prescription, citizens in a constitutional regime will be able to reach an “overlapping consensus” on political questions while preserving their commitment to a diversity of viewpoints. As I have already mentioned, scholars have focused on the formal restrictions that Rawls places on public reason, with critics rightly pointing out that Rawls’s framework risks excluding some of the most important moral and theological contributions to democracy’s civic life. Accordingly, Chapters 4 and 5 of this book will evaluate whether Rawls’s framework can accommodate the type of moral and theological argumentation that informed the public reasoning of some of America’s leading reformers, by focusing on the statesmanship of Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr. But for now, and before turning to the specific implications of public reason for contemporary liberalism, it is worth pointing out that not enough attention has been paid to the historical conundrum to which Rawls’s innovative idea points: how did public reason develop, and how did the historical consensus around liberal political principles on which public reason depends emerge in the first place? After all, as Rawls acknowledges at the outset of his work, “religious toleration is now accepted, and arguments for persecution are no longer openly professed; similarly, slavery, which caused our Civil War, is rejected as inherently unjust” (8; 151, 156). Political liberalism, therefore, would seem to take its bearings by the supposition that liberal principles are universally (or near universally) assented to in modern democratic societies, and accordingly Rawls can limit political philosophy to the modest task of “collecting our settled convictions” rather than reshaping or reconstructing them the way Enlightenment thinkers had originally tried to do (8).

This historically contingent dimension of political liberalism is revealed by Rawls’s account of the emergence of freedom of conscience in post-Reformation European history. As Rawls acknowledges, “Catholics and Protestants in the sixteenth century” did not subscribe to an “overlapping consensus on the principle of toleration” (148). Indeed, “both faiths held that it was the duty of the ruler to uphold the true religion and to repress the spread of heresy and false doctrine” (148). Toleration initially emerged after the Reformation only as a “modus vivendi,” i.e., as a grudgingly accepted temporary cease-fire between the hostile parties, because it provided the “only workable alternative to endless and destructive civil strife” (148, 156). But a mere modus vivendi, according to Rawls, falls short of the require-

ments of legitimacy that are necessary for political liberalism, since the stability of the former “depend[s] on happenstance and a balance of relative forces” that could very easily unravel (148). Accordingly, as Rawls eventually acknowledges, this cease-fire or “reluctant” *modus vivendi* had to be transformed into a genuinely cohesive moral agreement uniting the rival parties in a commitment to a tolerant and “reasonable” Christianity, in order to make the intolerant views of sixteenth-century Catholics and Protestants a decided “minority” in our society (147–148). Only after such a historically socialized reformation has succeeded, i.e., only after Catholics and Protestants have been acculturated into theological liberalism and have affirmed tolerance on “moral grounds” (147), can their “judgments converge sufficiently so that political cooperation on the basis of mutual respect can be maintained” (156; see also 458–462).²⁷

In the same discussion, Rawls refers to Locke’s *A Letter Concerning Toleration* as “a model case” that can illustrate how a “religious doctrine,” which is both “general and comprehensive,” could be made to support the political conclusions of Rawlsian liberalism. Rawls appeals to Locke’s *Letter* because he sees it as a paradigmatic example of a tolerant version of Christianity—that is to say, he sees it as a Christian religious argument for the principle of toleration: the *Letter*’s “religious doctrine and account of free faith lead to a principle of toleration and underwrite the fundamental liberties of a constitutional regime” (145, emphasis added). Later in the same chapter, Rawls acknowledges that to be considered “reasonable” in modern society, a religion must endorse the same Lockean account of free faith, i.e., it must embrace (on religious grounds) a doctrine that upholds the spiritual autonomy and thus the religious freedom of an individual (170–172). In a footnote, Rawls also refers to seven arguments in Locke’s *Letter*, which together establish the theological preconditions of a tolerant faith, by subordinating the church to the state while establishing the supremacy of individual conscience in theological matters:

This idea is illustrated by various of Locke’s statements in *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1690). He says such things as: 1) God has given no man authority over another; 2) no man can abandon the care of his own salvation to the care of another; 3) the understanding cannot be compelled by force to belief; 4) the care of men’s souls is not given to the magistrate as that would determine faith by where we were born; 5) a church is a voluntary society, and no man is bound to any particular church and he may leave it as freely as he entered; 6) excommunication

does not affect civil relationships; 7) only faith and inward sincerity gain our salvation and acceptance with God (145, internal citations omitted).

How did these principles win out in Christianity? How and on what basis were they justified to persecuting faiths, so that both Catholics and Protestants today share a consensus around Locke's teaching of toleration? In Chapter 3 of this book, we explore Locke's arguments for toleration in the *Letter* and related works in detail, as well as their contemporary reception among his Anglican critics. Contrary to Rawls's account, Locke had to argue that the principle of toleration was not simply "reasonable," but also true, both from the perspective of human reason as well as from the perspective of Christian revelation—a proposition that was extremely controversial in his time. This book argues that to advance the cause of toleration, Locke developed a form of political philosophy that was directly engaged with theological disputation and cross-examination of revelation, and that his ultimate aim was to transform Christianity into a tolerant faith. Locke is therefore a leading representative of that strand of the modern Enlightenment that advocated theological reform, and he (along with his most important intellectual allies) wished to reform religion in light of modern rationalism. This massive surface impression is confirmed not only by Locke's *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, but also by his *Reasonableness of Christianity*, as well as by Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*,²⁸ Baruch Spinoza's *The Theological-Political Treatise*, and Immanuel Kant's *Religion within the Limits of Human Reason Alone*. The defining feature of Enlightenment thought from which liberalism and toleration emerged was persistent and intransigent engagement with theological questions and their contested political and moral implications. And in contrast to Rawls's anti-foundationalism, Locke's Enlightenment strategy demanded the application of human reason as the foundational authority in all theological matters: "Reason must be *our last judge* and *guide* in everything."²⁹

The present work argues that it is only because Locke's theological project has had relative success in liberalizing American Christianity that Rawls's can aim to develop a political philosophy that disengages from foundational questions and refrains from passing judgment on theological issues. In fact, Rawls implicitly acknowledges the dependence of his political teaching on the historical triumph of the religious project that was set into motion by the Enlightenment. Thus, since he expects that religion has already been made thoroughly "reasonable" and sufficiently tolerant, Rawls can confidently discount the challenge that religious fundamentalism poses to his

political project as a merely marginal and unserious phenomenon: “except for certain kinds of fundamentalism, all the main historical religions admit of such an account [of free faith] and thus may be seen as reasonable comprehensive doctrines” (170). As he indicates, on the whole, Catholics and Protestants no longer resemble their intolerant sixteenth-century predecessors, and they have largely adopted the Lockean theological outlook: “In a democratic society,” according to Rawls, “the authority of churches over its members” is “freely accepted,” and since “apostasy and heresy are no longer legal offenses,” individuals are free to join and leave churches at their own discretion, just as they do other “associations,” without suffering any civil penalties (221). We see here that Rawls’s political system presupposes precisely the sort of individualization of the experience of faith and liberalization (and de-politicization) of church authority that are the hallmarks of the Enlightenment’s transformative strategy with respect to religion. As far as these bedrock principles that define a “reasonable faith” are concerned, Rawls’s political liberalism will be just as absolutist as the Enlightenment liberalism of Locke from which it seeks to distance itself.

This brings us closer to the nerve of Rawls’s argument about the types of religious beliefs that can be accommodated by political liberalism. The linchpin of Rawls’s position is that political liberalism is compatible not so much with any kind of normative diversity, but with a specific “reasonable” subsection of the plurality of worldviews. The pluralism that Rawls attributes to democratic societies is not “simple pluralism” (164) or “pluralism as such” (144), but rather “reasonable pluralism”—a pluralism that consists of “reasonable comprehensive doctrines,” which, he is quick to note, “do not reject the essentials of a democratic regime” (xvi). It should be stressed that Rawls attempts to distinguish “reasonableness” from rationality (and thus also from truth): reasonableness is a “moral sensibility” or a virtue of “social cooperation,” whereas rationality is the agent’s capacity to pursue chosen ends through the “most effective means” (50). Rawls comes closest to defining reasonableness when he states that “reasonable persons . . . are not moved by the general good as such but desire for its own sake a social world in which they, as free and equal, can cooperate with others on terms all can accept” (50). Because they subordinate the general good of the community to their sense of fair cooperation, reasonable persons will embrace the classical liberal separation of public and private spheres and therefore practice the liberal virtue of tolerance. Accordingly, the litmus test of reasonableness for Rawls is whether or not an individual supports limited constitutional government: “reasonable persons will think it unreasonable to use political

power, should they possess it, to repress comprehensive views that are not unreasonable, though different from their own” (60).

In light of this brief overview, one is tempted to follow Judd Owen in asking whether Rawls means by “reasonable” anything other than a “liberal.”³⁰ As we have now seen, the concept of “reasonableness” takes on massive moral significance for Rawls’s liberalism, since it enables Rawls to define the boundaries of what is politically acceptable under his “freestanding” liberal order: it allows him to implicitly exclude nonliberal views without declaring such views as untrue or even irrational. But short of resolving the fundamental theological challenge confronting political liberalism, this feature of Rawls’s teaching only confounds the problem even more. Recall that Rawls claimed that he developed political liberalism to show how a political conception of justice could be embraced by, and therefore accommodate, “religious and non-religious, liberal and non-liberal views.” Such a conception would not rely on contestable foundations. But in crucial sections of *Political Liberalism*, Rawls cannot avoid having to confront potentially illiberal objections to his teaching, and he is forced (albeit reluctantly) to appeal to his own liberal foundationalism:

in affirming a political conception of justice we may eventually *have to assert at least certain aspects of our own comprehensive religious or philosophical doctrine* (by no means necessarily fully comprehensive). This will happen whenever someone insists, for example, that certain questions are so fundamental that to insure their being rightly settled justifies civil strife. The religious salvation of those holding a particular religion, or indeed the salvation of a whole people, may be said to depend on it. *At this point we may have no alternative but to deny this, or to imply its denial and hence to maintain the kind of thing we hoped to avoid* (152, emphasis added).³¹

Political liberalism therefore cannot ignore the challenge of illiberal views, but must either expect them to liberalize or deny them legitimacy altogether. But in making this concession, Rawlsian liberalism would effectively have to surrender its aspiration to neutrality and would have to acknowledge its dependence on normative presuppositions that cannot be derived from an already established consensus.

*Lost in Translation: "Public Reason" and the Civic Life of
Democracy*

Having clarified the theological transformation on which political liberalism depends, let us return to a reconsideration of Rawls's doctrine of "public reason," the framework that he develops for accommodating pluralism in modern societies. Rawls gives at least three different accounts of the requirements of public reason vis-à-vis the private religious views of citizens, with each modification raising fundamental questions about both the viability and the desirability of shareable norms of public deliberation presupposed by *Political Liberalism*. The first account appears in the cloth-bound version of *Political Liberalism* and declares that on "fundamental political matters, reasons given explicitly in terms of comprehensive doctrines are never to be introduced in public reason" (247). By embracing this perplexing requirement, Rawls opens his theory to a set of thorny challenges: in addition to the common criticism that it imposes an asymmetric burden on religious citizens today (expecting them to find nonreligious arguments for their positions), Rawls's framework comes under tremendous strain in trying to do justice to the greatest moral conflicts and historical reforms in American history. In particular, Rawls has difficulty explaining how the religious rhetoric of Martin Luther King, Jr., the abolitionists before him, and even possibly Abraham Lincoln in his Second Inaugural Address can be made compatible with public reason. Lest *Political Liberalism* leave out these notable contributions to democracy's civic life that precipitated advances in both liberty and equality, Rawls is led to admit that for much of American history the restrictive view of public reason has been at most an "ideal" to be strived for rather than a genuine requirement of responsible public deliberation (249–251). He provisionally settles on an exception that accommodates the religiously informed contributions of these historic reformers ("the inclusive view" of public reason), but only because they existed in "a society [that was] not well ordered" and characterized by "a profound division about constitutional essentials" (249). In such a society, Rawls concedes, "nonpublic reasons" were "required to give sufficient strength" to reforms that would advance equality (251).³²

Much to his credit, Rawls would reconsider the fairness of such a restrictive position in his important restatement of the public reason framework—"The Idea of Public Reason Revisited." Here, Rawls offers a more permissive version of public reason that could guide democratic deliberation even in our day and age. Rawls refers to this modified framework as "the wide view of public reason," and its chief new feature is the "translation pro-

viso”: Rawls now argues that we are allowed “to introduce into political discussion at any time our comprehensive doctrine, religious or nonreligious, provided that, in due course, we give properly public reasons to support the principles and policies our comprehensive doctrine is said to support” (462). But there are important ambiguities in Rawls’s reformulated position, since he nowhere specifies on whom the duty of translation is incumbent and at what point of time its requirement begins to operate. While at first glance this standard appears to be more accommodating of religious speech, as Jeffrey Stout and other critics of Rawls have pointed out, it is only marginally so since it makes the legitimacy of religious appeals contingent on whether or not sufficiently nonreligious reasons are also eventually supplied. According to Stout, the translation requirement amounts to the view that “you have not fulfilled your justificatory obligations until you have” rendered your reasoning in nonreligious language.³³ But as Stout also insists, this is a perplexing requirement, especially when viewed in light of American history: the abolitionists taught the nation about the moral urgency of the antislavery cause, while “the speeches of King and Lincoln represent high accomplishments in our political culture,” and they are rightly regarded as “paradigms of discursive excellence.”³⁴ As Stout contends (and as Rawls appears to admit in *Political Liberalism*),³⁵ it would be a stretch to say that these actors abided by the translation proviso since they drew upon controversial comprehensive doctrines in their speeches.³⁶ It would therefore be “a strong count against” Rawls’s position if these speakers would “barely squeak by,” if they do so at all, on the basis of Rawls’s public reason criteria.³⁷

As I show in subsequent chapters, these historical exceptions that challenge the requirements of Rawls’s public reason framework are not mere technicalities. Instead they illuminate what is truly at stake in Rawls’s position, a fact confirmed by Rawls’s discussion in the original cloth-bound *Political Liberalism* of the “ideal” type of deliberation that should characterize democracies in our day and age. The liberal principle of legitimacy that public reason embodies, Rawls argues, imposes on citizens “a duty of civility” that has direct implications for the nature of democratic deliberation: “the ideal of citizenship imposes a moral, not a legal, duty—the duty of civility—to be able to explain to one another on those fundamental questions . . . of constitutional essentials . . . how the principles and policies they advocate and vote for can be supported by the political values of public reason.”³⁸ In this context Rawls clarifies and emphasizes that the public forum in which he expects public reason to operate extends well beyond “official forums” such as courts and legislatures: although he exempts “civil society” and the

“background culture” from the norms of public reason (220–222; cf. 443–444), Rawls nevertheless expects its requirements to obtain “when [citizens] engage in political advocacy in the public forum” (215). In particular, public reason extends to the polling booth, and so it applies to citizens when they think about how to cast their ballots; otherwise, Rawls warns, public discourse would “run the risk of being hypocritical: citizens [would] talk to one another one way and vote another” (215). It is true that Rawls eventually reverses his position in “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited” and offers a more narrow definition of the “public forum,” which exempts citizens from the requirements of public reason in their capacity as voters and activists. But even here he insists that “the commitment to constitutional democracy is publicly manifested” only when citizens accept “the [translation] proviso and only then come into debate” (463).

As becomes clear in what follows in this manuscript, the original articulation of the Rawlsian paradigm misses not only the scope of the democratic transformation of religion, but also the degree to which democratic deliberation and civic life can be fruitfully enriched by the contribution of religious viewpoints. This is a tremendous civic and moral cost that classical (Enlightenment) liberalism already exerts on modern life, and which the restrictions of public reason liberalism risk aggravating even more in the name of securing an overlapping consensus. Political liberalism shares with Enlightenment liberalism the deep distrust of religiously fueled political instability. But because it refuses to follow its Enlightenment predecessor in declaring religious objections to liberalism as irrational, political liberalism must settle for the less confrontational (but also less coherent and clear-sighted) alternative: it merely seeks to encourage religious viewpoints to converge around basic liberal principles of justice through the framework of public reason. But this emphasis on consensus leads Rawls and his followers to neglect the constructive role of moral and theological debate and intransigent but principled intellectual disagreement and conflict in democratic civic life. As this book will demonstrate, religious traditions can serve as the vehicle for both critique and renewal of liberal democracy, and sometimes they are most effective at fulfilling this task when they have not been entirely reshaped to simply mirror democracy’s cultural and political currents. Religious traditions can do so by appealing to principles of justice that go beyond both classical liberal rationalism as well as the historically inherited notions of public reason championed by Rawls, and by drawing on a rich reservoir of thinking grounded in natural theology and in Christian revelation. When religious traditions take on this role, they enrich our cultural

and civic life and compel democracy to measure itself against worthwhile normative challenges.

Plan of the Book

Before outlining the project, I would like to avert one possible source of confusion: the book does not proceed chronologically. After the overview of Rawlsian liberalism in the present chapter, Chapter 2 presents a study of Barack Obama's understanding of the role of religion in democracy, illustrating his ambiguous attempt to balance Rawlsian public reason with the tradition of American civil religion. Chapter 3 returns us to the Enlightenment roots of toleration in the philosophy of John Locke in order to highlight the religious transformative ambitions of Locke's project that are often neglected by contemporary theories of liberal neutrality. Chapters 4 and 5 fast-forward to two formative periods of American political development—the Civil War struggle over slavery and the civil rights movement—focusing on the religious statesmanship of Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr. By studying these historical case studies of the role of religion in American political development in light of our readings of Locke and Rawls, we confront them with fresh eyes, paying particular attention to how these statesmen challenge both the Lockean and Rawlsian paradigms while simultaneously advancing liberalizing trends in American Christianity. Chapter 6 returns us to the basic question of the book and evaluates the civic costs and ambiguous results of the liberal transformation of religion through an engagement with Alexis de Tocqueville and Jürgen Habermas.

I begin with an evaluation of Barack Obama's understanding of the role of religion in democracy. Obama presents an illuminating case study of the tension between the two alternative approaches to religion in American democracy that are explored throughout this work: "civil religion" and Rawls's "public reason." More than any other contemporary American politician, Obama has espoused a commitment to pragmatism and to the deliberative ideal of democracy that draws upon the consensus-based approaches to political liberalism that were inspired by John Rawls. At the same time, however, and in contrast to many liberal political theorists today, Obama is deeply appreciative of the contribution of religion to formative reform movements in American political history—most notably, to the abolitionist and civil rights movements. This leads him to call for a political liberalism that is more accommodating of religion in public life and to champion what Michael Sandel has described as a more "faith friendly form of public rea-

son.”³⁹ These competing priorities in Obama’s approach reveal an abiding but often underappreciated tension within modern liberal approaches to religion. In short, religion poses a challenge to deliberative democracy, which Obama understands as “requiring a rejection of absolute truths.” But at the same time, Obama appears to be much more keenly sensitive to American democracy’s need to tap into the moral and civic underpinnings historically provided by Christianity than are contemporary Rawlsian scholars. But because our pluralistic age is characterized by a loss of consensus about theological truth and especially by a division between religious and secular Americans, Obama attempts to transform American civil religion to make it sustainable in a “post-Christian” age. But it is unclear whether this form of liberalized “faith that admits doubt, and uncertainty, and mystery,” would share much with the religious and moral fervor of abolitionism and the civil rights movement, and thus whether it would be capable of yielding similar civic benefits. The theological dilemma that is revealed by Obama’s leadership is a reflection of a deeper ambiguity within political liberalism, whose aspiration to transcend metaphysical, moral, and theological foundations may turn out to be more a hope than a reality.

In the next chapter, I turn to the early modern Enlightenment thought of John Locke, whose political and philosophic works laid the foundations for both religious disestablishment and toleration. Locke points us to an unresolved question about the liberal project and its effect on religion: does liberalism leave religious beliefs essentially intact, or does a culture of tolerance presuppose the diffusion of philosophical and theological skepticism? There are deeply conflicting answers to this question. The predominant view in scholarship denies that toleration requires skepticism, and a popular interpretation of Locke holds that his political teaching is based on post-Reformation Protestant theology. A persistent but decided minority of scholars, however, interprets Locke as a covert Hobbesian, one whose tolerationist teaching attempted to weaken Christian orthodoxy on the basis of underlying modern rational principles. I attempt to adjudicate between these conflicting views through an investigation of Locke’s *Letter Concerning Toleration* and the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

A comparison between these two works demonstrates that Locke presents not one, but rather two accounts of the foundations of toleration, and that these accounts diverge in crucial respects: the *Essay* grounds toleration in the limits of human knowledge, while the *Letter* bases it on a religious argument about the sanctity of the human conscience. I attempt to explicate this divergence by taking account of Locke’s debate with Jonas

Proast, an Anglican divine who accused Locke of promoting “skepticism in religion among us,” and whose objections prompted Locke to write three subsequent Letters in defense of his original argument. This chapter suggests that Locke intended to leave behind a richer and more complicated legacy than is usually acknowledged by the two dominant interpretations of his work—the “Christian Locke” (the view embraced by Jeremy Waldron and many others) and the “rational” or skeptical Locke (usually favored by some Straussian interpretations). Because Locke’s teaching can succeed only at muting the tension between these two sides of his teaching, but not at resolving it altogether, scholars will continue to see in his writings the evidence of both Christian and skeptical foundations. But for his popular audience, Locke hoped that his approach would provide an alternative to the unpalatable choice between orthodoxy and irreligion and encourage in its place a synthesis that would be conducive to both toleration and religious belief.

Next, in Chapters 4 and 5, I turn to two formative periods of American political development, the Civil War struggle over slavery and the civil rights movement. These chapters evaluate whether the Enlightenment’s effort to transform and privatize religion can be understood to have been a success when that project is viewed from the perspective of American political history and civic life. In spite of its tremendous influence on Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, Locke’s project was highly controversial among his contemporaries in Europe, and it has had only mixed success in American political practice. Not only was it resisted among later political theorists like Alexis de Tocqueville, but its influence among American democracy’s greatest reformers, such as Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr., has been deeply ambiguous. These statesmen sought to recruit the theological resources of Christianity for distinctively civic and moral purposes, and they relied on religion to confront the moral challenge that slavery and racial inequality posed to American democracy in a way that Locke may not have imagined to be necessary in a secular society. They judged, moreover, that the moral life of liberal democracy is enriched when it can draw upon the deep wellspring of civic and self-sacrificial conviction that religion provides. For them, neither mere rationalism nor democratic self-interest could overcome the obstacles to American equality, and both viewed theological principles as necessary supplements (and moderating counterweights) to democratic liberty. My book therefore points to the limits of the Lockean project not just in theory, but also in practice.

Lincoln and King provide instructive contrasts to the Lockean and Rawl-

sian approaches. Even though they are working under the shadow of Enlightenment rationalism and the Lockean imperative to reform Christianity, Lincoln and King show that a democracy cannot be publicly indifferent to theological disputes, especially with respect to God's judgment about the deepest moral questions confronting human beings. At the same time, contrary to the assumptions of "neutralist" approaches to liberalism that are popular today, the success of the antislavery and antisegregation efforts championed by Lincoln and King required them to advance a new liberal theology of equality, which blended the natural rights tradition of America's founding principles with a liberal and egalitarian interpretation of the Bible. As I show in Chapters 4 and 5, the challenge that the theological rhetoric of Lincoln and King poses to his framework of public reason compelled Rawls to reevaluate the restrictive standards of deliberation that he had initially proposed in his *Political Liberalism* and encouraged him to develop a framework that was more accommodating of religious speech. In the end, I argue that because of his overriding emphasis on consensus Rawls failed to do justice to the reconstructive influence of theology in the liberal statesmanship of these two reformers. Instead, I uncover a "Tocquevillian strategy" behind the religious statesmanship of Lincoln and King: while these statesmen employ liberalizing theologies in their public rhetoric, in demonstrating the capacity of religion to act as a moral counterforce reshaping America's moral and public consciousness, they also reveal the limits of Enlightenment rationalism and "public reason" liberalism.

This study closes with a consideration of two very different assessments of the Enlightenment's transformative agenda and theological legacy: Alexis de Tocqueville, the French Catholic aristocrat who authored the two-volume *Democracy in America* after visiting the United States in the early 1800s, and Jürgen Habermas, arguably the most influential living political philosopher in Europe today and the heir to the rationalist project of the European Frankfurt School. Although writing from two very different vantage points, both Tocqueville and Habermas are led to religion by way of a moral and civic critique of liberalism, and both argue that religion provides something unique that secular reason cannot replicate. But where Tocqueville judges it necessary to preserve religion (even and especially in its traditional form) as a unique voice that can moderate democracy's "savage instincts," Habermas concludes that secular reason should seek to appropriate religion (through a "rescuing" or "salvaging translation") as a resource that can supplement liberalism. While Tocqueville will agree with Habermas's recent judgment that "religion is here to stay," from his perspective the resilience of religion

is the result not of an incomplete process of secularization (as Habermas somewhat reluctantly suggests), but of the enduring longings and spiritual needs that are inscribed in human nature and that point beyond the moral and cultural horizon of liberalism. The persistence of religion will therefore continue to nourish a dynamic dissonance within liberalism, which explains the spiritual anxieties and civic dissatisfactions that Tocqueville predicted with uncanny accuracy, and which Habermas has started to recognize in our day and age.



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