

‘World-Views Clashing? The Possibilities of Dialogue’

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What possibilities exist for dialogue between radically different world-views? Can there be anything like argument between representatives of positions which have few if any premises in common? Professor Otto Muck of Innsbruck has analysed the structure of dialogue between world-views, and has elaborated the logic of arguments in the context of such dialogue (Muck 1975, 1983, 1984, 1999). I have found this approach very helpful in the field of political philosophy, in particular in the philosophical debate about justice. In this paper I explore a line of thought developed by John Rawls within political philosophy which might be of use for the dialogue between religious world-views. In particular I am interested in the dialogue of Catholic Christianity with Shi’a Islam (Riordan 2004b).

1. Otto Muck on world-view dialogue

In 1983 Professor Otto Muck of Innsbruck presented a paper to the International Wittgenstein Symposium on the contribution of the philosophy of science to clarifying the life-carrying function of religious belief (Muck 1984). Other articles on this and related themes and his book on the philosophy of God have analysed the logical structure of *Weltanschauungen* and have clarified the role of philosophy in facilitating dialogue between world-views, especially religious world-views (Muck 1983, 1999). Muck discusses these questions as a contribution to clarifying the specific rationality of religious language, with the hope of facilitating rational dialogue between world-views. He relies on G.D. Kaufman’s introduction of the concept of *Weltanschauung*: ‘Any being, as speaking and acting, has a symbolic representation of its environment, with an evaluation of it relevant for decision and action’ (Kaufman 1966). Muck’s introduction of his concept of world-view follows Kaufman’s operational emphasis. By world-view is meant the set of convictions and attitudes of a person as these affect the shaping of his or her life. More precisely, this is the lived world-view. This can be the basis for an explicit formulation of this atti-

tude. But of course an attempted explicit formulation can be a more or less adequate presentation of the lived world-view.

I do not have the space here to sketch the extent and richness of Muck's discussions. Suffice it to note that he addresses the problems associated with interpreting world-views, the relevance of phenomenological analysis of engendering experiences, the role of key concepts and general sentences in the core of a world-view, and the distinctive types of justification which are possible in forms of dialogue. For my purposes I will concentrate on his elaboration of four criteria for the assessment of world-views.

The introduction of the term 'world-view' relied on the function a world-view is understood to fulfil in any person's life. This function grounds the criteria which would enable one to determine whether or not and how adequately any particular world-view fulfils the stated function. Muck insists that the proposed functional criteria are not to be confused with the claim bound up with anyone's convictions that his point of view corresponds to reality. They serve rather to explain how someone would recognise errors in his views and how he would change his position in a manner open to rational reconstruction.

The criteria require that the core of a world-view is free of contradiction in the sense that not any possible conclusion can be drawn from it. Otherwise it could not fulfil its interpretative and ordering function. Acceptance of this criterion means one would recognise the identification of contradiction in one's world-view as an objection. A further criterion requires that the world-view is unified or coherent in the sense that it not consist of different, uncoordinated interpretative systems. This would ground an objection for instance against an extreme version of the double truth theory. In regard to the content of life's experiences, a world-view would obviously fail in its function if it were not facilitating the interpretation and evaluation of the experience. Were it to exclude arbitrarily some domain of experience, and fail to be open in principle to all possible experience it would obviously be deficient in relation to its function. These criteria provide us with a method for (1) the critical discussion of prevalent world-views and for (2) understanding their development as rationally justified.

Muck is modest in his expectations of what might be achieved in this kind of dialogue between world views. The main purpose of argumentation in this area is the enlargement of the shared horizon of understanding, the generation of a more adequate appreciation of one another's convictions and a discovery of each other's reasons. The fruit of such efforts is a greater caution and tolerance in one's personal attitude to the convictions

of others by heightening awareness of the complexity of the factors involved.

2. Dialogue between Catholic Christians and Shi'a Islam

The relationship between religion and politics is an important topic in the dialogue between Christians and Muslims. A core issue is the notion of religious liberty. The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran recognises 'Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian Iranian' as religious minorities, 'who, within the limits of the law, are free to perform their religious rites and ceremonies, and to act according to their own canon in matters of personal affairs and religious education' (Article 13). This means that the law allows religious liberty only to those non-Islamic groups who are recognised as being mentioned in the Koran – the Jews, Assyrian Christians, Armenian Christians, and Zoroastrians. Because the Koran is read as acknowledging the existence of these groups and respecting their divine origin, the Constitution carries over the same attitude and these groups enjoy a protected existence as minorities within a predominantly Shi'a population. Other groups, whether originating within Iran such as the Baha'i or with links to international churches such as the Episcopalians or Roman Catholics do not enjoy the same institutionally secured liberty to exist, even though their presence and practice may be tolerated in fact. Some Christian groups can experience quite a bit of pressure, and indeed persecution, especially to the extent that their membership includes Farsi speaking Iranians.

The permitted religious liberty is restricted to the recognised minorities, but it is restricted in another sense also. The Constitution does not recognise a liberty to choose one's religion, to convert from one to another, or to abandon religious allegiance altogether. The respected minorities are not simply religious minorities: they are also cultural and ethnic minorities. The Armenian Apostolic Church for instance is a 'national' church to which new members can be added only by being born into an Armenian family. The church itself may not receive converts. The same holds for the other groups.

The evangelical Christian groups which typically proselytise are not tolerated because the possibility of a Muslim renouncing his religion and becoming a Christian may not be admitted. The prohibition of conversion includes also the prohibition of apostasy. It is not permissible to become an atheist and remain a citizen of the Islamic Republic. This is a serious quali-

fication on the usual meaning of religious liberty. Here I am relying on my interpretation of the situation, which may not be accurate, and I am happy to be corrected if appropriate. However, on the face of it, it does not conform to the understanding of religious liberty presupposed in Article 18 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* which proclaims that ‘Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance’.

3. Is Dialogue Possible? Help from Rawls

What are the possibilities for dialogue in this situation? Is dialogue possible at all? What common ground might be found for conducting the dialogue? What structure might analysis and arguments follow so as to allow an exploration of possible development? I have found the work of John Rawls helpful for dealing with these questions. I will explore some lines of thought suggested by John Rawls in his late essay “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited” (Rawls 1999). Here I am applying Rawls’s thought to a situation which he did not envisage, at least in this essay, although he does raise relevant questions in *The Law of Peoples*. What Rawls considered to be a situation of plurality of comprehensive doctrines within a liberal polity is reflected in the international community of peoples. The political agenda today cannot be confined to the horizon of the national state, given the very many structures, problems and ideas which transcend those boundaries. The forms of dialogue which are explored on the assumption of the sovereign state can suggest forms of dialogue in international encounter.

Key ideas in Rawls’s approach are the notion of comprehensive doctrine, and the distinction between reasonable and unreasonable comprehensive doctrines (Rawls 1996). Given the fact of pluralism in our political systems, the agreement and compliance of citizens cannot be evoked by exclusive reliance on one or other comprehensive doctrine to which many citizens have no access. What can evoke their agreement and compliance is the content of public reason which Rawls describes as the content of an overlapping consensus between reasonable comprehensive doctrines. The overlapping consensus contains a political conception of justice and of reasons for public accountability, summarised by Rawls as public reason. He revisits the idea of public reason in this late article. It represents a constrained form of reasoning because of its political role:

‘Public reasoning aims for public justification. We appeal to political conceptions of justice, and to ascertainable evidence and facts open to public view, in order to reach conclusion about what we think are the most reasonable political institutions and policies. Public justification is not simply valid reasoning, but argument addressed to others: it proceeds correctly from premises we accept and think others could reasonably accept to conclusions we think they could also reasonably accept’ (Rawls 1999, 155).

The forms of argument which are appropriate within public reason are more generously presented in this late article. For instance, the use of a language and conceptual apparatus generated from a comprehensive religious doctrine is permitted with the proviso that the equivalent argument be presented later in a commonly accessible public language. The possibility of translation from the language of the comprehensive doctrine to the language of the overlapping consensus makes it permissible to allow the comprehensive doctrine into the public space. Still, even with this concession and proviso, the realm of public reason is tightly constricted. Rawls’s ideas concerning the relationship between a religious world-view and the principles which might guide a liberal polity as formulated in *Political Liberalism* and developed in later articles have proved fruitful for an examination of the admissibility of religious arguments in public discourse (Riordan 2004a). Rawls’s acknowledgment of the reality of religious conviction as sustaining a commitment to maintain a liberal polity is innovative. The later articles (Rawls 1999, 2001) elaborate on this acknowledgment and take it further in the recognition of the contribution of a Catholic tradition of language and criteria which might provide candidates for public reason. He acknowledges for instance how from within the horizon of Catholic Christianity there has been a distinctive attempt to generate a conceptual framework which might function as a candidate for the overlapping consensus. He takes the analysis in terms of natural law, common good and solidarity as providing an alternative candidate to his own proposal of justice as fairness (Rawls 1999).

Rawls sees possible benefits in allowing reasonable comprehensive doctrines, religious or nonreligious, to be introduced into public political discussion. Commitment to the democratic ideal of public reason is strengthened when citizens’ basis of commitment to the ideal as rooted in their religious world-view is acknowledged. Rawls anticipates a reinforcing dynamic when public officials respond to citizens whose commitment

to the democratic ideal of public reason is supported by the respect shown their religious and secular motivations. These reflections are located in his discussion of broad political culture (Rawls 1999, 153ff.). Admitting religious argumentation into public reason is conditional on the willingness of citizens to translate their contribution from its formulation in terms of their religious world-view into the language of the political conception of justice in the overlapping consensus. This condition Rawls labels the *proviso*.

Rawls stresses one aspect of public reasoning: it is addressed to fellow citizens and proceeds from premises which the speaker thinks they can accept and argues to conclusions which she thinks they can also accept. This concern that arguments be accessible to the other is central to the duty of civility. Introducing world-views into public political debate would seem to violate this duty of civility, since not everyone can be expected to accept premises or conclusions drawn. Hence the requirement of the proviso. Hence also the delineation of the relevant forms of non-public discourse. Rawls distinguishes three such forms: declaration, witnessing, and reasoning from conjecture (Rawls 1999, 155).

In declaration a citizen speaks from her comprehensive doctrine and show how on its basis she can endorse the content of the political conception in the overlapping consensus. This form of non-public reasoning is the one which cashes in the value of allowing reasonable comprehensive doctrines into public political debate, since the mutual understanding of citizens is fostered and the knowledge of and respect for their differing world-views is increased. Note here how this benefit is only derivable from reasonable comprehensive doctrines which in fact function to support the overlapping consensus. Rawls illustrates this style of discourse by referring to the parable of the Good Samaritan, and how a citizen might appeal to it to explain her commitment to the difference principle which includes concern for the worst-off in society (Rawls 1999, 155, & n.55). This principle is part of Rawls's suggested theory of justice as a political conception, which he labels 'Justice as Fairness'. Civic friendship between people of different convictions is strengthened by this style of reasoning, and public justification is made easier because greater familiarity allows each to anticipate the thinking of the other.

A citizen may think that her religion does not allow her to endorse some element of the political conception. In that case, a supporter of the overlapping consensus may attempt to argue by conjecture from what he knows of the relevant comprehensive doctrine. Appealing to his fellow citizen's religious or secular convictions he may try to outline an argument taking her

convictions as premises and drawing conclusions from them which she originally may not have thought possible. Rawls explains it thus: ‘we argue from what we believe, or conjecture, are other people’s basic doctrines, religious or secular, and try to show them that, despite what they might think, they can still endorse a reasonable political conception that can provide a basis for public reasons’ (Rawls 1999, 155-6). Rawls stresses the importance that the use of conjecture be ‘sincere and not manipulative’. ‘We must openly explain our intentions and state that we do not assert the premises from which we argue, but that we proceed as we do to clear up what we take to be a misunderstanding on others’ part, and perhaps equally on ours’.

Both declaration and conjecture are optimistic non-public forms of argument in that they anticipate success in linking the reasonable comprehensive doctrines to the political conception of justice. The third form, which Rawls introduces in a footnote, is applicable in situations in which ‘citizens feel they must express their principled dissent from existing institutions, policies or enacted legislation’ (Rawls 1999, 156, n.57). As examples of such ‘witnessing’ he mentions Quakers’ expression of their pacifism or Catholics’ opposition to abortion. He distinguishes between witnessing and civil disobedience. The significant point of difference is that the latter requires appeal to the principles and values of a liberal political conception of justice to maintain that the objectionable policy offends against these. In witnessing as Rawls characterizes it, those who act on the basis of their deepest beliefs want their fellow citizens to know about their opposition to some policy and their basis in faith for their stance. But they have no grounds for appeal to public reason to seek overturning of the objectionable policy. ‘While they may think the outcome of a vote on which all reasonable citizens have conscientiously followed public reason to be incorrect or not true, they nevertheless recognize it as a legitimate law and accept the obligation not to violate it’ (Rawls 1999, 156, n.57).

Declaration and witnessing can be seen as positive and negative versions of the same stance, the former expressing support for a policy and the latter giving testimony to dissent, but without denying the claims of the conclusions of public reason to compliance. With conjecture, the discrepancy between the world-view and public reason is addressed in the expectation that the reasonable comprehensive doctrine can be so interpreted as to yield support for the overlapping consensus.

4. Applying Rawls to Inter-religious Dialogue

There are various obvious reasons why Rawls's ideas are not particularly useful for inter-religious dialogue. However, I want to take up the idea of reasoning from conjecture, to explore its possibilities for inter-religious dialogue, which I am considering here as a specific case of dialogue between world-views in Muck's sense. I will suggest that the criteria elaborated by Muck find a resonance in the operation in practice of reasoning from conjecture. Rawls suggests that people will be able to subscribe both to the political conception of the overlapping consensus and to their own reasonable comprehensive doctrine. But the reasons they have from within their world-view for supporting the content of the overlapping consensus will not be the reasons they can offer to fellow citizens in instances of deliberation within public reason in the narrow sense. Reasoning from conjecture seems useful for such instances where people who hold a comprehensive doctrine which is in principle compatible with the overlapping consensus, but who have not yet acknowledged that they can accept that consensus, can be led to discover its compatibility with their deeply held beliefs, or at least to explore that possibility. This seems to be a benign and very straightforward use of reasoning from conjecture.

Another case might be a debate within public reasoning itself which resists resolution in terms of the very narrow set of resources available within public reason. This is a case where parties in the debate seek to find ways of arguing from premises in their opponents' comprehensive doctrines which lead to conclusions compatible with their own proposals. Such a use of reasoning from conjecture would be a two way street, with each party appealing to the opponent's fundamental convictions for the sake of finding a resolution within the overlapping consensus. This situation is contrasted with the previous one, therefore, in which the proponent of the overlapping consensus relied on reasoning from conjecture to guide the holder of a reasonable comprehensive doctrine towards acceptance of a political conception. In this second case, both parties represent the overlapping consensus but seek ways of persuading the other to accept proposals within public reason which they had not been able to accept on the basis of public reason alone. An example might be the debate conducted in the past decade about whether national and international political and legal systems should facilitate pharmaceutical companies in exploiting competitive advantage in selling medicine (especially re AIDS) to developing countries. The resources available from within public reason alone (property rights,

protection of patents, free market, need) were not sufficient to lead to a commonly agreed resolution.

Might a citizen be justified in thinking that whereas her reasonable comprehensive doctrine allows her to subscribe to the overlapping consensus and the political conception in general, but that it generates questions in relation to particular resolutions already arrived at in public reason (acceptance of slavery by the US Constitution in its original adoption, denial by the US Supreme Court at one point of the rights of states to legislate on working hours and conditions), then the dominant consensus might not be justified in terms of public reason. On the basis of such a suspicion, a challenge to accepted opinion might be warranted. This seems to be a case in which ‘civil disobedience’ is justified since the context conforms to what Rawls calls a ‘nearly just, but not fully just, society’ (Rawls, 1999).

But such scenarios lead also to the form of discourse which Rawls calls ‘witnessing’ (Rawls 1999, 155f.). Witnessing ‘typically occurs in an ideal, politically well-ordered, and fully just society in which all votes are the result of citizens’ voting in accordance with their most reasonable conception of political justice. Nevertheless, it may happen that some citizens feel they must express their principled dissent from existing institutions, policies or enacted legislation.’ It is worth emphasising that Rawls here admits that the ideal fully just society is made up of very reasonable citizens who for good reasons on both sides do not always agree on issues. In other words, everyone being reasonable does not guarantee agreement or consensus.

5. Debate on Religious Liberty

In the dialogue about religious liberty, an interesting example of what seems like reasoning from conjecture has emerged. Some Shi’a Muslim scholars are returning to the text of the Koran to investigate if it is being correctly interpreted in denying religious liberty to those religious believers who do not fit in to one of the excepted categories. Some Koranic sources are drawn on to suggest that the silence of the Koran on the religions of others should not be interpreted as disapproval. Instead, phrases and sentences which are respectful of the differences indicate an alternative reading of the Koran. I report here on the presentation by one participant in particular at meetings in London in October 2005 and in Tehran in January 2006. In his talks he listed a whole series of texts in the Koran in which there is mention of other religions and other peoples with different faiths, which might be read in a positive way. These texts, he suggests, allow for

an acceptance of the entitlement of the other to respect, toleration and accordingly recognition of religious liberty.

Surveying these texts, admittedly in translation, and again admittedly without the scholarly competence to provide exegesis, I can recognise the point he is making. In the dialogue, he, as a committed believing Shi'a Muslim, has internalised the question which we from outside Islam would want to raise. He has accepted the question, and is attempting to answer it to his own satisfaction. His attempted answer appeals to his own fundamental principles, rather than to some supposed neutral basis or secular rationality.

His strategy is to look at the kind of text which allows for recognition of the Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians, and then to compare more generalized texts which do not name only these groups. The former kind of text is exemplified in Koran 2,57; 5,73; 22,17. The argument appeals from these recognised texts usually relied upon for the policy of recognition of the accepted minorities to more general texts in which a divine providence is expressed allowing all peoples and all persons the possibility of salvation. A recurrent theme in the texts cited is the idea that God has sent a messenger to every nation, and that every people has had its companion and helper on the way to finding God's will. Koran 16,36; 35,24; 10,47: 'Every nation has its messenger'. Texts with a similar message speaking not of nations but persons are exemplified by Koran 2,137, and 2,143: 'God guides whomsoever he will', and 'every man has his direction to which he turns'.

I am not competent to read these texts and interpret them against the background of their usual reception among Muslims, but it is sufficient to recognise the thrust of the argument proposed by our partner in dialogue. He attempts a form of argument, beginning from accepted texts within the religious world-view, and seeking to elaborate them as warranting a level of tolerance of others and their convictions even though they may disagree with the orthodoxy of Islam. In other words, he is attempting to demonstrate the compatibility of a more broadly understood right to religious liberty with the text of the Koran, than is currently accepted in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

This is more like conjecture than declaration, since he is facing the task of convincing his fellow believers of the rightness of his reading of the scripture. At the same time it seems unlike conjecture, since the partner is himself pursuing the question posed to him from outside his comprehensive doctrine but which he accepts as valid.

This experience indicates grounds for optimism in the dialogue, which on the face of it does not seem to allow for argumentation. Muck's analysis of the rationality of world-view dialogue finds a parallel in Rawls's development from a narrow consideration of the arguments possible within public reason to the non-public forms of argument appropriate to the engagement of comprehensive doctrines which seek to sustain a way of living together. A tentative confirmation of the usefulness of their proposals is found in the experience of dialogue as partners develop their positions. In particular it is to be noted how the criteria formulated by Otto Muck are exemplified in this approach. Insofar as the partner in dialogue is generating a developed interpretation of his sources and the core of his world-view, that development can appear as rational if it moves in the direction of greater coherence and a more adequate guide to dealing with the whole of experience. To that extent it seems that there are possibilities for argumentation in a special sense in dialogue between world-views, argument forms which Rawls places outside of public reason such as conjecture, but which are very helpful in extending the realm of mutual understanding and respect, and possibly, in time, the domain of an overlapping consensus.

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