

11-2015

Rawls and Religion

Pietro Maffettone

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/id-journal>



Part of the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), [International and Area Studies Commons](#), [International and Intercultural Communication Commons](#), [International Relations Commons](#), and the [Political Theory Commons](#)

Please take our feedback survey at: https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE

Recommended Citation

Maffettone, Pietro (2015) "Rawls and Religion," *International Dialogue*: Vol. 5, Article 7.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.ID.5.1.1096>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/id-journal/vol5/iss1/7>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the The Goldstein Center for Human Rights at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Dialogue by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

Review

Rawls and Religion

Tom Bailey and Valentina Gentile (eds). New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. 307pp.

Pietro Maffettone^{*}

John Rawls was the most important political philosopher in the twentieth century. His work has been immensely influential within the Anglo-American philosophical tradition and beyond. As one of his staunchest critics and colleague famously said (as far back as 1973), one has to either work within the Rawlsian paradigm or explain why not. Political philosophers have, to the regret of some, clearly followed Nozick's suggestion, and scholarship on Rawls' work has basically become a sub-discipline in U.S. and UK universities. Any addition to this ample and well-developed literature will thus have to meet a relatively high threshold of quality to represent a genuinely significant addition to the already existing body of work.

This is a test that Bailey and Gentile's volume passes with flying colors. The book is an excellent collection of essays (most of which derived from a workshop held at LUISS in Rome) on the relationship between Rawls' work and religion. One of the book's achievements is that it clearly shows how working within Rawls' framework can still be fruitful and certainly not something to be regretted from a philosophical point of view. Rawls' views on religion are shown to be, from what is, admittedly, a broadly sympathetic group of contributors, both important to understand the idea of a political

^{*}**Pietro Maffettone** is lecturer in global politics and ethics and the Director of the M.Sc. in Global Politics at Durham University. He graduated from the University of Rome (La Sapienza) and then moved to the LSE, where he received his M.Sc. and Ph.D. from the department of government. His research interests centre on ethics and international affairs. He is a political theorist by trade but has increasingly become interested in the assessment, from a moral point of view, of concrete institutional practices within the global political domain such as WTO agreements, IBRD and IMF structural adjustment programs, and other international regimes controlling the use of intellectual property rights, and the sale of natural resources. He has also developed a strong interest for the idea of distributive justice in general and the work of John Rawls in particular.

liberalism and at the same time to more clearly discern the place of religious beliefs in a modern pluralistic society.

The books' introduction by the editors is admirably clear. It contains a summary of some of the most important aspects of Rawls' specific variant of political liberalism and its relationship to religion, and a summary of the contributions that follow.

The book itself is divided in three parts. The first illustrates the more traditional aspects of the Rawlsian discussion concerning the role of religious reasons in public discourse. Part 1 features contributions by Christopher Eberle, John Talisse, Paul Weithman, and Andrew March. What is remarkable about part 1 is how accessible the contributions are for what is, on average, a rather technical debate within the remits of academic philosophy. The chapters present the main issues that any political liberalism will face when devising an account of public reason which includes both religious and secular views while trying to stay genuinely inclusive. The chapters' references to the technical debate are also worth mentioning: both for teaching and research purposes they give the reader access to a wealth of information and further material.

The second part of the book looks at the place of religious citizens in the life of a liberal democracy. It includes contributions by Patrick Neal, Micah Schwartzman, and Johannes Van Der Ven. One of the most important aspects of part 2 is that it illustrates in a vivid way why the book's title is particularly well-chosen. All three essays in part 2 make an implicit or explicit effort to "see" the problem from the perspective of the religious citizen, not simply as a problem of Rawlsian exegesis.

The third part of the book tries to "transcend" traditional debates concerning Rawls' work in a different way. It offers what we can describe as the perspective of those who consider this debate from a higher vantage point by suggesting, for example, how Rawls' vision of political community fits into view of religious faith (Gledhill), how the Rawlsian understanding of public reason could fit in a different, non-Christian (Muslim) political society (An-Na'IM), or how liberal and religious accounts of reason can be compared to each other within the prism of the idea of reasonable faith (Jonkers).

There is something valuable in all three parts of the book. However, the volume is at its strongest in terms of coherence in part 1, while part 2 and 3 suffer slightly on that front. In a similar way, while the book addresses most of the relevant themes connected to the relationship between the domestic version of Rawlsian liberalism and religion, it does not pay sufficient attention to Rawls' international theory.

The division of the chapters into three different parts seems to follow the following conceptual scheme: part 1 offers the Rawls centric perspective where liberals argue about the role of religious reasons in public reason, part 2 offers the perspective of the religious citizen and asks how the latter can see her place within a liberal democratic and pluralistic society while part 3 concentrates on those who take a bird's eye view on this debate and want to draw broader implications concerning the character of political community or the applicability of Rawls' insight to other cultural traditions. If this is correct, and I see no strong alternative reconstruction of the book's tripartite structure, then, it is unclear why some of the chapters are situated where they are. Most evidently, it is unclear why Van Der Ven and Jonkers are not both in part 2 and why Neal is not in part 1.

Even more strikingly, the book omits an important part of the Rawlsian corpus, namely, Rawls' *The Law of Peoples. Political Liberalism* deals directly with the relevance of religion for the internal political life of liberal democracies. However, looking at contemporary political events tells us that the main place in which we need to address the role and relationship between religious beliefs and political life often lies beyond the borders of Western democratic debates. *The Law of Peoples*, at least to some extent, does that. It offers what is arguably an account of international toleration that at the very least speaks to the possibility of a peaceful and just international order where peoples strongly committed to different faiths and political cultures live together. This omission is particularly striking when it comes to An-Na'im's otherwise excellent chapter. At page 257 the author basically describes the features of a decent well-ordered society without even mentioning Rawls' work on international justice. Furthermore, it is important to stress that a discussion of *The Law of Peoples* would have been fruitful for the narrower purpose of discussing Rawls' understanding of liberalism. Rawls' work is often described as a form of justificatory liberalism. Several authors within the collection recall this label in their chapters. However, none seem to note that the "justificatory" and the "liberal" may come apart. Indeed, this is specifically what Rawls' idea of a decent *well-ordered* society seems to suggest. What happens when we face a political society where it is religious rather than secular reasons that are "accessible" to the vast majority of citizens? This is one question that the book does not seem to address.

I have tried to sum-up what I take to be the strongest and weakest points in the book. However, as a final and holistic appraisal I want to leave the reader with no doubt

about what my conclusions are: this is an excellent book, one that deserves to be bought and possibly read carefully.