ABSTRACT

After the events of September 11 2001 it became very clear that religion is back on the political scene as a major player. Subsequently an increasing interest emerged for research into political views based on religious convictions. In accordance with the terminology used by Leo Strauss these political views are called political theologies and can be described as political theories based on revelation. In contrast, world views that can be understood by the unaided mind are called political philosophies. The question that has been mostly neglected so far, however, is to what degree political theologies can be acceptable to people not believing in the revelations on which these world views are based. This paper therefore suggests a method to identify the degree to which they could be acceptable by identifying the amount of political philosophy contained in a given political theology. The paper will demonstrate that this can be done by translating religious language into secular language. It will also demonstrate that this approach is feasible and worthwhile for all those concerned.

BIOGRAPHY

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ON THE TRANSLATION OF POLITICAL THEOLOGY INTO SECULAR LANGUAGE

After the Enlightenment and the subsequent success of the modern secular state in Europe and Northern America it seemed that religion had lost most of its political influence. Nationalism became the most forceful movement in the latter part of the 19th and early 20th century only to be replaced by different ideologies like fascism or communism for the late 20th century. Yet, after the end of the cold war, religion returned to the political stage with a vengeance, regaining both directly and indirectly its role as an important factor in politics during the 1990s. This became very clear after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York on September 11 in 2001. After this event an increasing interest emerged for research into religion and religious justifications for the use of political violence. However, most of this research was left to theologians, historians or researchers of comparative religion who were mostly interested in the question of how true certain political theologies are to the religious texts on which they are based or how certain movements developed and what factors played a role in their success or failure. Largely neglected though, was the question of how acceptable political theologies could be to members of different faiths or non-believers. Accordingly this article will investigate the major difference between political theologies and political philosophy and will suggest a way to identify to what degree a political theology could be acceptable to members of different religious groups or non-believers.

According to Leo Strauss, a political theology is a political theory that relies on revelation as its final justification, whereas a political philosophy is a political teaching that can be understood by the unaided mind. In practice this means that every political theology will to some extent rely on the holy texts or other sources of revelation of the respective religious group. The problem with that is that it means it will not be accessible to members of different faiths or atheists. As opposed to teachings that can be understood by the unaided mind, a faith based political view becomes meaningless to people who do not attribute any truth value to the scriptures it is based on. Using the example of gun laws, this means that people might rightfully argue for or against gun control laws but only certain arguments will be accessible to certain groups in society. Pro gun control people might grant a right to self defence, but might argue that free access to guns is doing more harm than good and that therefore it is not a good way to protect society, whereas others might argue that perpetrators will be able to get guns and therefore the best way to protect oneself is to own a gun as a law abiding citizen. These two groups will be in strong disagreement but at least each side is able to understand the position the other side is holding and acknowledges that their arguments are valid even though they disagree. In contrast, if someone were to claim that it is their god given right to carry arms there is no counterargument possible and no pathway for a political discussion. One of the cornerstones of a modern liberal and pluralistic state is the principle of neutrality towards world views to enable a peaceful political dialogue and prevent the supremacy of one comprehensive doctrine or religion over all others in a commonwealth. A doctrine is called comprehensive if it includes non-political conceptions of what is of value in life, not discriminating between the public and the private sphere. What this principle of neutrality demands of the modern state is that the state should not engage in political debates based on one religion’s or comprehensive doctrine’s teachings alone. This is to make sure that even if the state in question might be founded on one religion or comprehensive doctrine, citizens who hold other beliefs are able to understand what the state demands of them and why. Yet philosopher and political theorist Jürgen Habermas reminds us that this principle of neutrality is binding only for the state and its civil servants but not for each citizen. In a speech he argued that contributions in religious language should be allowed in political debates even though they violate this principle which is one of the foundations of a modern pluralistic society. The reason he gives for that view is that while the state and its civil servants have to make statements in a political discourse that can be understood and, at least in principal, be supported by all groups in society, limiting contributions to the political debate to those made in secular language would be an unfair constraint for religious citizens. After all, religious belief is an integral part of the self-conception of religious people, who might not be able to abandon religious motivations for their political positions without abandoning a part of their identity at the same time. These religious motivations will often be mirrored by a use of religious language and it might not be possible for a religious citizen to translate this religious language into a secular, universally acceptable language. If, however, the use of secular, universally acceptable language is the prerequisite for participation in the political discourse, the liberal state asks those amongst its citizens who are religious to split their identity in two parts; one public part that is allowed to participate in the political discourse and one

3 I am using comprehensive doctrine in the same way it is used throughout John Rawls’ political writings. For a more detailed discussion of the term see John Rawls, Political Liberalism (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 13.
personal part that is not allowed to participate. This splitting of the personality is not necessary for the secular amongst the citizens and therefore the costs for the participation in a political debate are distributed asymmetrically amongst the religious and the secular citizens. Furthermore, it is not only the costs for participation that are not distributed equally but also the chances for active participation and the shaping of society, as only arguments that are, at least in principal, universally acceptable have a chance to persist in a realm where the chances of success are decided solely by the unforced force of the better argument. It should be noted that independent of motives, secular and religious people can share identical political goals. The main difference lies in the fact that only secular arguments stand a chance of success if the force of the better argument is at the heart of the decision making process. Think about capital punishment for example where the refusal of this kind of punishment unites parts of secular society with parts of religious society. In some cases agreement can even go further than just an agreement on the goals of a political movement. The interesting question in regard to this agreement on political aims is whether or not “holiness of life” and “inalienable right to live” are expressions of the same conviction and therefore the same concept in religious and secular language respectively. If that was the case, a translation would at least in principle be possible. If it is possible to translate religious and secular language into each other and if furthermore motives for political positions are inextricably linked to the comprehensive doctrine and therefore the religiosity of their holder, why should it be unacceptable to express these convictions in terms of religious language even in a political discourse where the force of the better argument rules?

I therefore suggest that the translatability of political theologies into secular language measures the amount of political philosophy contained in a political theology. This in turn constitutes a measure of acceptability of a faith based political view. To demonstrate that this is feasible, I will show that it is justified to translate religious language into secular language when it comes to faith based political views and that this constitutes a worthwhile venture for all those concerned.

Religious convictions cannot get by without a minimum of revealed certitudes. Examples would be the status of Jesus as the son of God or the revelation of the Quran as the word of God. These revealed certitudes form one of the foundations of the belief and therefore the self-conception of religious people. Therefore, a part of the motivation behind the political convictions of religious people will always be based upon revealed certitudes. The question resulting from this is whether or not it is possible to translate political convictions, which are, at least partially, based on revealed certitudes and which are formulated in a religious language, into secular language. Is it possible to find a way to restate religiously formulated contributions to a political discourse in secular language in a way that the content will be accessible to fellow citizens who believe in a different religion or no religion at all? If that is possible, it would be a rational decision to permit these kinds of contributions in political discourse. To use the terminology of philosopher Leo Strauss, the question is, whether or not every political theology has a core of political philosophy that has to be uncovered. If not all political theologies have this core then maybe at least many of them might.

At first glance it seems absurd to introduce contributions that are based on revelation, and are therefore explicitly exempt from tests of their validity based on rational thinking, into a discourse where the unforced force of the better argument decides. After all, the motive for having a political debate is to discuss different options and their relative worth, ideally including all of the groups in a society. Based on that, should not all contributions be rational in the sense that they are defensible by argument or inquiry in a way that can be understood without presumption of any particular faith? Should contributions to the political debate that rely on some facts as revealed by some God or gods not count as irrational and be deemed unfit for use in the political realm as they do not have any credulity for believers of other faiths or non-believers? If contributions based on revelation are plainly irrational, then there should be no justification to include them in the political debate. But what if they are not? If it was possible to show that there is a dimension of rationality besides that of rationally incomprehensible revelation, an exclusion of contributions in religious language would also exclude this dimension of rationality, which, according to the preconditions of the political discourse, should be included. This is something Habermas realised, when he wrote that ‘this is because the expectation that there will be continuing disagreement between faith and knowledge deserves to be called ‘rational’ only when secular knowledge, too, grants that religious convictions have an epistemological status that is not purely and simply irrational.’ One possible reason to ascribe an epistemical status beyond the plainly irrational to religious beliefs would be to uncover the dimension of the rational within a revelation based conviction by translating religious motives into secular language.

It could be argued now that the dimension of the rational within a faith based conviction is allowed in the political discourse but that it is the responsibility of the religious citizen to free it from the irrational parts to be heard in the political debate. After all, the attempt of a translation into secular language is exactly that: the liberation of the rational parts of a contribution from the irrational parts or at least the identification of the respective parts. Yet keeping in mind the asymmetry in costs and chances of being heard, it would be unfair to demand that only the religious citizens within a community adduce these efforts. If, instead, contributions in a religious language were allowed into the political dialogue as valid, non-religious citizens and citizens with a different religion would share the burden of translating that contribution. In a world where the factual continuity of existence of different religions is not in doubt, it can only be in the best interests of society as a whole to not ignore contributions solely because they had been phrased in religious language. The non-religious would forfeit their chance to keep informed about trends and movements in society that are initiated by religious groups and they would lose the ability to distinguish between those religious movements that can be argued with within the framework of pluralistic society and those movements where this is impossible. If one was to assume that every form of religious conviction was simply and purely irrational, there would be no reason to argue with any of the groups, let alone any one particular group in preference to another.

In each particular case of a political theology there are two options. Firstly, it might prove possible to find a translation of the religiously motivated view into secular language. This translation then becomes part of the political debate and has to stand the test of the unforced force of the better argument. Alternatively, it might prove impossible to find a translation that is accessible to all citizens even though all reasonable efforts have been exhausted. In this case, there is a good reason to exclude that position from the political process in a pluralistic society whose foundations and decisions should be intellectually accessible to all citizens independent of their religion or world view.

In view of the fact that a priori there is no way to know which case a religious contribution to the political process will turn out to be, it follows that all efforts should be undertaken in a cooperative way by religious and non-religious citizens alike. Furthermore, the religious citizens should have an interest in finding a translation for their initially faith based convictions. To illustrate this, two prominent examples will be given that show that the translation of their religious beliefs into secular rational language constitutes a way for religious citizens to influence the public sphere and thus influence the way society develops as a whole. In doing this they also show that their convictions claim the status of being valid for all of society rather than simply remaining the view of a particular group. The first witness to this thesis is Joseph Ratzinger, the current pope Benedict XVI, who writes that ‘natural law has remained (especially in the Catholic Church) the key issue in dialogues with the secular society and with other communities of faith in order to appeal to the reason we share in common and to seek the basis for a consensus about the ethical principles of law in a secular, pluralistic society.’ This quote shows that even the pope thinks that a translation of faith based convictions is possible and desirable because reason constitutes the only level of understanding that allows different religious groups, as well as non-religious people, to come to a mutual understanding. After all, it should be in a church’s own interest as part of a pluralistic society to find a way to communicate which policies it supports in a way that could be understood by other parts of that society. Members of a religious community are always, at the same time, citizens of the wider society and, in their role as citizens, should be interested in contributing to the political process which includes non-believers and people from other religious communities. According to the pope the best way of doing this is by appeal to ‘the reason we share in common.’ Keeping in mind that the view of the Catholic Church is of faith based origin, there is no reading of the pope’s words other than one that suggests that a translation must be possible. It is interesting to note that, by invoking the concept of natural law, Ratzinger chose a concept that is not specifically religious that he must have thought capable of being able to transport distinctly religious ideas such as the teachings of the Catholic Church, which it certainly is.

Another unexpected witness to the thesis that religious groups should try to influence political decisions by partaking in the political debate in a way that can be understood by all of society is Sayyid Qutb, one of the founding fathers of modern anti-western political Islam.” Qutb developed a new, through and through modern approach to the interpretation of the Quran. This approach has been denounced as wrong by modernist reformers of the Islamic faith as well as more traditionally minded scholars of Islam. This leads to a twofold pressure to prove its value without being able to rely on the force of - in the eye of the believer - infallible sources as his opponents rely on these exact same sources for justification. Qutb’s aim is to make the Quran the sole source of guidance in the political and private lives of every Muslim. That is why he calls ‘to return to our stored-up

6. Ibid., 69.
7. Also see Ulrich Steinworth, Docklosigkeit oder zur Metaphysik der Moderne (Paderborn: Mentis, 2006), 36-91.
resources, to become familiar with their ideas, and to test their validity and permanent worth.” What does that have to do with the problem of translating religious language into secular language? Well, if he cannot rely on the infallibility of his source, then the only way to test the validity of his position is through reason by showing that in the light of reason his explanation of the holy text is more valid than other explanations of the same text.

On the other hand, having to rely on reason implies that it must be possible to formulate his political views in a way that is accessible to unaided reason. In this way Qutb has to share this opinion which is documented by the way he chooses the criterion by which to test the validity of his view. The criterion to be used for that test, he writes, is that a theory be ‘coherent and comprehensive and not departmentalized.” By choosing the term coherent he chooses a term that is widely used in analytical philosophy and therefore makes himself criticisable by the means of philosophy. In philosophy however, only that which can be formulated in rational language can count as criticisable, which in turn means that Qutb has to share the view that his faith based world view, which is formulated in religious language, must be translatable into secular rational language. Interestingly, for this to be true, it is not necessary that Qutb himself had to consciously think of his theory as being exposed to the scrutiny of analytical philosophy. All he had to consciously choose to do was to make his political theology criticisable by means of reason and to adopt the same criterion for something being reasonable also used in analytical philosophy.

If a translation of religious language takes place it is a win-win situation for society. All citizens, religious as well as secular, will profit from such a translation. The secular part of society will be enabled to follow trends and debates within one religion or amongst different religions. The secular citizen will therefore be able to make well informed judgements on the legitimacy of those world views and their political decisions. One might think of the strict rejection of same sex marriages by the Catholic Church for example. If the church wants to claim that the validity of their political view is universal, rather than restricted to their followers, then it must be possible to formulate the opinion that same sex marriages should be rejected in a language that is non-religious and does not rely on the Bible. Only if that was the case would non-Christian parts of society be able to fully understand the views of the church and therefore be able to judge its value. The translation of religious contributions to the political dialogue therefore acts as a filtering process that separates those contributions that could in principal be agreed on by all of society from those that could not. Furthermore it allows the state, as well as every individual citizen, to identify which group’s arguments to support and which ones to contest. One should think of Jihad theory in Islam where western societies should support those intellectuals that understand Jihad as being consistent with western moral codes and laws. To support this group of modernists, it is absolutely necessary to identify the modernists first and then separate them from thinkers that believe in Jihad as a means of an Islamic world order. The translation of theological debates into secular language is one effective way of doing this.

However, one should not think that it is only secular society that profits from a translation. Religious groups gain access to the political debate within a society when their views are translated into a language that other groups can comprehend. In this way they get in touch with the rest of society and get a way of influencing public debate according to their beliefs. Sometimes, it might prove difficult for the people within a religious community to translate their views in a language that stands a chance of being heard in public debate. Yet, even then, there is still a possibility to be heard if a translation is offered by another group in society. This helps to enrich public debate and opens a gateway into political debate for religious groups. Whether or not the views of these religious groups will then be widely accepted remains to be seen.

In a time when religious fundamentalism gains more and more influence on politics it is a worthwhile project to investigate the amount of political philosophy which can be found in various political theologies. This question has been neglected for too long and the debate over religious fundamentalism handed over to the theologians. Their focus, however, is on whether a certain political view can be justified from the respective holy texts and other religious sources and mostly neglects the important question of how far a religiously grounded view could, at least in principle, be acceptable to other religions and non-believers. If the convictions held by religious fundamentalists could be expressed in secular rational language, it would be possible to compare them to non-religious views and it might be easier to find a common strategy for moderate religious people and secular groups to fight these fundamentalisms together.

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9 Ibid., 37.