# The Very (Bad) Idea of Public Reason

Alven Neiman
*Notre Dame University*

Liberalism, as a political notion, is relatively new. Originally formulated in the early modern era, liberal political institutions were first devised as a means by which peoples of different religious persuasions could peacefully coexist. Within a liberal framework, those things that typically got in the way of peace, especially religious beliefs, would be placed within a "private realm." In this realm one would be free to think or do as one pleased as long as no one else was harmed. On the other hand, the "public realm" would contain all those things that citizens could usefully agree upon, typically issues of justice rather than truth. Yet for at least some liberal thinkers this was meant only as a provisional arrangement. Ultimately it was hoped by many that this public region might increase as more and more citizens became "enlightened," that is, came to rely for their public and private beliefs on "pure reason." Of course for many philosophers only philosophy (what else?) could rise above matters of "faith and prejudice" in order to make this enlightenment promised land a reality. Philosophy would do this by discovering what public reason (the form?) is.

What is it? For classical liberals, the idea came to represent both a method of finding truth as well as the results of such a method. Just as Descartes might strive to build a strong foundation for his philosophical system by means of this method, at least some liberals at times imagined that properly educated citizens would turn away from their sectarian fantasies to a "religion of reason." Yet as time went by doubts concerning such utopian ideas became stronger and stronger. Such doubts have, in fact, finally won the day for "pragmatic liberals" such as John Rawls.

For philosophers such as John Rawls there is no such method or faculty of the mind that might be designated as "Reason," and therefore no foundation for "purely Rational" beliefs in the political (or any other) sphere. As truth in practice becomes understood more and more as a matter of coping rather than copying, political reason, as mere conversational problem solving, can be understood, with Rawls, as one of reaching "reflective equilibrium." Note that there is no reference here to anything like a quasi-Cartesian "method" aimed at "Truth" rather than (for example) accommodation. Perhaps Richard Rorty's description for political practice, " criterionless muddling through" is better than that of Rawls, since it is more likely to keep our philosophical hubris in check!

Thus political liberalism denotes a political strategy that remains liberal in spirit while rejecting the classical enlightenment idea of reason. For Rawls, the realm of public reason will contain primarily whatever fits within what he calls an "overlapping consensus" of belief among the citizens of a state. Within this realm of belief, justice, understood as fairness, is "constructed" and "reconstructed" in order to adjudicate between particular "warring parties" engaged in particular disputes at particular times. Thus, on this reading of Rawls, the aim is not in any way

to undertake a Socratic quest to discover what "Justice" really is, but only to reach piece-meal solutions to this or that threat to public civility.

For Rawls, as well as for many other political liberals, the danger of war between various religious sects is best avoided if all citizens are taught to respect, or at least tolerate, religious difference within the private domain. Rawls suggests that in order for citizens of a liberal society to remain respectful of religious belief it is best that the teaching of religion be banned from public schools. In her helpful essay, Suzanne Rosenblith points out how this strategy of avoidance may fail to achieve its intended result. Using what she refers to as "the recognition challenge" as a guidepost, Rosenblith persuasively argues that this approach will fail insofar as it suggests or assumes that comprehensive religious points of view are not even the sort of thing for which truth or falsity are an option. Even a public school curriculum that includes the discussion of religious beliefs (such as Warren Nord's) will fail if it too persuasively intimates that comprehensive religious frameworks may not be legitimate candidates for cognitive description. Just as schools indicate respect for science by insisting that its theories be subjected to the test of criticism, so, according to Rosenblith, must we proceed when dealing with religion and religious claims.

I agree with Rosenblith that within a liberal society it must be understood that religious frameworks, when properly formulated, are legitimate candidates for truth. Certainly for a large number of citizens, self-understanding is grounded in the idea that the religious beliefs by which they define themselves, others and the world they live in are at least as respectable as those of the sciences. Thus, according to Rosenblith, such citizens can receive full recognition as selves (in Charles Taylor's sense of the term) only if schools work at both understanding such beliefs, and subjecting them to the test of reason, that is, public reason.

I believe that the usefulness of this suggestion depends on the sense we can make of the idea of public reason. According to the account of this idea set out here, Rosenblith's strategy of teaching religion in public schools will be of little help. Such reason is surely too thin, in fact too disinterested in matters of truth in general, to provide what she envisages. None the less, attempts to develop more robust conceptions are available. I encourage Rosenblith to make use of such accounts to enrich her provocative suggestion. Still, when I try to imagine her hope as a reality, I am afraid that all I can see is another quaint and mistaken attempt (such as those encouraged upon us by various followers of Habermas, armed with the fantasy of an "ideal speech situation") to make Cartesian neutrality a real option in a post-Cartesian age.

In the context of my philosophical gloominess, perhaps I owe Rosenblith as well as this audience my own "positive" suggestions concerning the issue of religion and public schooling. Here then are two concluding points: First of all, I think it is incumbent upon anyone who would discuss the truth value of this or that religion in general to recognize just how difficult the task of real appreciation of religious belief can be. To actually gain such appreciation (and perhaps nothing is more necessary in our current world situation than such appreciation), it is necessary to understand just how inept our understandings of religion and religious belief tend to be. By "our"

I am not simply referring to our atheists, agnostics, and academics. Perhaps the beliefs of many if not most contemporary religious persons have, in an age of pop-spirituality, of chicken soup for the soul, become shallow. But the understandings of religious geniuses such as Augustine and Rahner, Maimonides and Rosensweig, Averroes and Al-Ghazali remain available to those who would wholeheartedly enter into their worlds with the intent not only of criticism but edification. Their wisdom includes not simply the understanding of this or that term (for example, "God") or belief (for example, in God) but also highly sophisticated suggestions concerning the grammar of truth in matters religious. All too often what "public reason" discusses under the guise of religious belief is not only a caricature of rationality but also of authentic piety. In this context inter-religious understanding, let alone truth testing, becomes impossible.

Thus, I am tempted to make, as a second point, the suggestion that the task of sympathetic understanding is so great that any substantive criticism be postponed until students move on to post high school education. This suggestion would seem to propose a fourth possible strategy, besides those of Rawls, Nord, and Rosenblith. The idea is that we might stress appreciation in public schools without denying that religious frameworks may in fact be the kinds of things that can be true or false, or at least warranted or not warranted. In fact, I am tempted to think that this suggestion comes close to mapping actual law and practice.

At this point Rosenblith might remind us that no severe dichotomy between sympathetic understanding and criticism is possible. Does this truth imply the rejection of my proposal? As Rorty often reminds us, actors within liberal societies, properly oblivious to the concerns of enlightenment philosophers, commonly, and in most cases appropriately, make ad hoc distinctions between things such as appreciation and criticism of religions in public schools. And they apply their results to this or that felt difficulty in practice as it arises.

In response, then, to Rosenblith I would say this: Our chances of making satisfactory judgments concerning the legitimate use of criticism in religious education improve markedly if we avoid attempts at a "critical method" or "critical theory" that are meant both to anticipate and settle questions of practice once and for all. Once we see what the real alternatives are, this process of continuing to muddle through particular problems, making such "prudential judgments" in particular contexts as they arise, looks a lot better than enlightenment philosophers have made it seem.

---

1. John Rawls, *Pragmatic Liberalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990). Thanks to my colleague Phil Quinn for at least attempting to improve my understanding of Rawls's proposals in this book.

2. Frederick P. Ellett, Jr. and David P. Ericson, "In Defense of Public Reason: On the Nature of Historical Rationality," *Educational Theory* 47, no. 2 (1997): 134-61.

3. For example, on truth see John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2001). For a masterful account of the grammar of religious discourse see David B. Burrell, *Aquinas: God in Action* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1979).