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Book Review: Religion In Public Life: Must Faith Be Privatized?

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of a problem if one holds the view that God is a contingent being and, although very good, powerful, and knowledgeable, falls short of being omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good. For if God has little, if any, foreknowledge of what the future will bring he simply may be unable to take the appropriate steps to prevent horrendous evils from occurring. However, to avoid confusion, we must keep in mind Langtry's initial commitment that "unless there is a local indication to the contrary" the conception of God under consideration is to be understood as follows: "God is the rational agent who brought the universe into existence and who is, either non-temporally or at all times, omnipotent, infallibly omniscient, and perfectly good" (p. 9). So, it is only when Langtry is considering his own preferred conception of God that we need refrain from viewing the God under consideration as lacking omniscience, omnipotence, and perfect goodness.

Although Langtry rejects my principle B, he does endorse a somewhat weaker principle that approaches principle B: "Other things being equal, in intentionally bringing about the better state of affairs one acts in the morally better way" (p. 322). Moreover, at one point he explicitly states: "A being who could have acted in a morally better way is not morally perfect" (p. 323). While this remark may appear to be quite close to principle B, Langtry carefully adds the statement: "This principle can easily be misunderstood. It does not entail that if there are no prime worlds then God is not perfectly good." Even if we allow Langtry's claim that God's perfect goodness is compatible with there being no prime worlds, this question remains: does the statement: "A being created a world with free human creatures, when he could have created a much better world with free human creatures" imply that the being in question could have acted "in a morally better way"? If so, then I suspect that it remains reasonable to seriously question whether God, a perfectly good being, exists.

Religion in Public Life: Must Faith Be Privatized? by Roger Trigg. Oxford University Press, 2007. Pp. 262. \$65 (cloth)

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Roger Trigg's *Religion in Public Life* is a wide-ranging discussion of the many problems posed by the presence of religious diversity within modern liberal democratic states. The basic thesis which shapes the discussion is stated in brief summary form at the end of the book: "Public debate about the proper basis for society is necessary, and religious voices should be heard in that debate. Religion has not just been one of the most formative influences on human society; religions make claims, which, if true, would be of universal importance. Religious voices must be heard in the public life of every country" (p. 235).

In previous books of his, Trigg has articulated his opposition to relativism concerning truth. That opposition comes to the surface here in two themes that run throughout the book. First, religions make claims concerning objective truth, many of those claims being of fundamental importance for social and political life; and those claims can and should be adjudicated by the employment of our common rationality. That is one of the two most important reasons for allowing religious voices to be heard in public life, the other reason being that this is a fundamental right. The other theme running throughout the book is that a liberal democratic state is incompatible with relativism concerning truth. It treats liberty and equality as fundamental virtues of the political order; in so doing, it assumes that it is *true* that these are fundamental virtues of the polity. It assumes that those who disagree are mistaken, as are those who claim that truth is relative to individual persons or to social entities of some sort.

With all these claims I am in full agreement. It is when Trigg gets down into the trenches and starts talking about the import and significance of a liberal democratic polity that I begin to have some doubts. Trigg holds that the tendency of liberal democracies in recent years, to avoid endorsing religion and instead to try to be impartial as between those citizens who embrace some religion and those who do not, is a mistake. Specifically, he endorses Canada's enactment of a "Lord's Day Act," he endorses the "under God" phrase in the U.S. Pledge of Allegiance, and he endorses England's having an established church. On the other hand, he holds that liberal democracies have been much too timid when it comes to criticizing religious thought and practice, much too eager to adopt a hands-off policy whenever they discover that religious and quasi-religious beliefs are sincerely held. "Religious claims, even when stemming from recognized religions, cannot be accepted at face value. No country can allow religious liberty, the fruit of freedom, to be a means of attacking liberty. Just as there are limits beyond which a sect like the Amish should not reasonably be allowed to go, limits have to be placed on the activities of any religion" (p. 66).

Trigg has two reasons for holding that liberal democracies should endorse religion. First, "if a country is not allowed to endorse religion, it is saying that its basic principles of justice are independent of religion" (p. 218). But this declaration is historically false. The United States, for example, "was, as a matter of historical fact, founded on a religious basis, and its earliest settlers had left their own land for religious reasons" (p. 218). It may also be false as a systematic position. "If the roots of a respect for liberty, and for the valuing of toleration, are themselves nourished by the Christian tradition, then banishing that tradition from public influence could destroy the plant" (p. 29).

It appears to me that Trigg is here gliding over the distinction between state and society. The fact that a liberal democratic state neither endorses one particular religion nor religion in general is not tantamount to its declaring that its basic principles of justice are independent of religion, nor

to its declaring that that grounding is unimportant. Silence on the topic of grounding is just that: silence. It might be the case that the vast majority of citizens of some liberal democracy believe that the state's basic principles of justice are grounded in religion while also holding that the state qua state should not endorse any religion or all religions. It would be their view that convictions about grounding are be left to the citizens and to the communities that they form, not to the state. The fact that the American state does not endorse religion "proclaims the self-sufficiency of the State" (p. 232), says Trigg. I think it does nothing of the sort.

Trigg's other argument points to something else that he sees as being declared should the liberal democratic state decline to endorse any religion or all religions. "Neutrality about religion means that a government steps back from endorsement of any particular religion, and even the idea of religion in general. . . . This may seem to support individual freedom to choose a particular religion or reject all of them. The cost is the irrelevance of religion to political issues. Any conception of the common good, as seen from a religious standpoint, can be of no concern to the political process" (p. 31). "It is being tacitly assumed that [religions] are all equally silly, and beyond the scope of reason" (p. 33).

Here too, silence is just that: silence. For a liberal democratic state to decline to endorse any religion or all religions is not to declare that religious argument and discussion have no place in the political process; it is not to assume that religions are all equally silly. One might hold, as I do, that the religions of the citizens should play an important role in public discourse while also holding that, in our diverse society, the state qua state should neither endorse religion nor any form of secularism.

I hold that, within the framework of its commitment to liberty and equality, the liberal democratic state should treat its citizens as impartially as possible with respect to their "comprehensive doctrines," to borrow a phrase from John Rawls. Obviously the policies that it adopts and enforces will please those who hold certain comprehensive doctrines and displease others. But in arriving at these policies, the state will be impartial. It will encourage everyone to discuss the policies in question in terms of whatever comprehensive doctrine they find relevant and true, and it will then see to it that a fair vote is taken.

It is possible that, over the long haul, liberal democracy will prove to have had a corrosive effect on religion. But if that happens, it will be because those who are religious among the citizens have failed to step up to their responsibilities; it will not be the consequence of a liberal democracy aiming to treat impartially all those who accept its basic principles of justice.

The fact that I do not hear, in the silence of the liberal democratic state concerning the endorsement of religion, the declarations that Trigg thinks he hears, does not detract from my judgment that *Religion in Public Life* is a helpful and lucid discussion of a large set of important and complex issues.