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The Power of the Religion in the Public Sphere

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Review

Mendieta, E., & VanAntwerpen, J. (Eds.). (2011). *The Power of the Religion in the Public Sphere*. New York: Columbia University Press. ISBN: 978-0-231-15646-2

The book *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* gathers the contributions of four highly recognized philosophers regarding a highly topical issue: the role that religion plays and ought to play in the public sphere. These contributions were presented in a public event enacted on October 22, 2009, in New York City's Cooper Union. The book also collects the discussions that took place in the frame of this event. Opening the book, its editors and organizers of the referred event, Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, recognize the need of rethinking the categories with which we have reflected about the religious and the secular and introduce the addresses of the four speakers: Jürgen Habermas, Judith Butler, Charles Taylor and Cornel West.

Probably the most recognized scholar regarding the public sphere, Habermas settles the debate moving away from his consolidated defense of a secular public sphere by acknowledging the importance of religion on it. Retaking his criticism of the systemic colonization of the normative structures of the lifeworld started in his Theory of Communicative Action (1974), Habermas asks himself whether the Enlightenment tradition can still generate motivation and social movements to revive the normative content of modernity. Criticizing the authoritarian view of "the political" defended by Carl Schmitt, Habermas approaches John Rawls, who recognizes the importance of religion in the debates of the civil society. Moving a step forward,



Habermas suggests that religious citizens can and should participate in the public sphere translating their religious utterances— which are incomprehensible for those who do not share their beliefs— into a secular and universally accessible language. In turn, Taylor reflects brilliantly on “secularism” and proposes that in democratic modern states this term does not merely refer to the separation of State and religion, but it also alludes to the response of these states to diversity; a response that, according to the author, has to be based on the three objectives of the French Revolution: liberty, equality and fraternity. He also stresses the importance for modern states of not defending the institutional arrangement in which secularism has been historically constituted, which makes of religion a special case and expels it from the public sphere. Instead, he suggests maximizing the stated objectives from a neutral state.

Rejecting a monolithic conceptualization of religion, Butler stresses that religions are very diverse and that they assume different positions in the public sphere. She focuses on a specific case: the tension that emerges between religion and the public sphere when criticism against the violence of the State of Israel is accused of anti-Semitism. Against this violence, Butler proposes an alternative presence of Judaism in the public sphere. Drawing on diasporic traditions, and in line with her latest works in the defense of human rights (Butler, 2006), Butler retrieves the idea of cohabitation, of sharing the world in harmony with non-Jews, and suggests basing a new configuration of religion in public life on it. In the same line, West defends with poetical tones the need for both religious and secular people to use their imagination and empathy to try to understand the worldview of the others. He also highlights the importance of a prophetic twist: a way of being in the world consisting in being sensitive towards and love the oppressed. West also points out the relevance of “utopian interruptions”, meaning moments when the indignation against injustice breaks through the status quo control, and asks himself whether prophetic religion can in the present time put pressure on President Obama for a better America.

Finally, Craig Calhoun, co-organizer of the debate that originated this book, argues that the role of religion in the public sphere is confusing, as religion has “many powers” and can have many diverse effects in the life of people. Calhoun also shows that religion has long played a

central role in the American public sphere. Reflecting on the implication of religion in the very development of Enlightenment, Calhoun moves on to a brilliant summary of the contributions of the authors of the book.

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