

RAWLS AND HABERMAS ON RELIGION AND POLITICS: REFLECTIONS ON PHILIPPINE POLITICAL CULTURE

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Abstract

What is the role of the Church in politics? Is there a way to justify such role? This paper will explore the answer to this problem in the area of deliberative democracy, and will seek to strengthen the idea that political and democratic discourse may allow for religious arguments, if and only if these arguments also purport to express public values. To shed light onto this problem, I will bring into dialogue John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, most especially with emphasis on their respective ideas concerning civil society, and hope to reconcile the role of politics and religion in Philippine democracy.

Church involvement in politics has always been controversial, especially in third world democracies like the Philippines. This paper intends to examine the involvement of the Catholic Church in Philippine political affairs, and find legitimate justifications for such crucial engagement. Historically, the Catholic Church in the Philippines has always played an important role in charting the course of Philippine politics, most notably during the dark years of Ferdinand Marcos which ended in the First People Power Revolution in 1986. The Church has also been active in its protest against controversial proposals such as abortion, reproductive health (House Bill 4110), divorce and many others. The Church and its leaders has also served as a beacon of hope for a vibrant democracy in the Philippines.

But of course, this involvement is not without its opposition. There

are sectors who argue that Church involvement in political issues violates the separation of Church and State. There is also a view that sees the Church as meddling in the areas concerning women's rights to reproductive health. But what really is the role of the Church in politics? Is there a way to justify such role? This paper will explore the answer to this problem in the area of deliberative democracy, and will seek to strengthen the idea that political and democratic discourse may allow religious arguments, if and only if these arguments also purport to express public values. To shed light into this, I will bring into dialogue John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, most especially on their idea of civil society, and hope to reconcile the role of politics and religion in Philippine democracy.

Civil Society and Comprehensive Doctrines

According to Rawls, civil society, or the “background culture”, includes “the culture of churches and associations of all kinds, and institutions of learning at all levels, especially universities and professional schools, scientific and other societies” (Rawls 1999, 134). Civil society belongs to the nonpublic use of reason, which comprises many of its questions (Rawls 1993, 220). It is undeniable, however, that members of civil society may base their political opinions on certain religious insights. Church doctrines which oblige the individual to respect human life from the moment of conception can form part of the convictions of individuals, and as such, are important in the way they comprehend political matters. The person who professes belief in God is the same person who votes, decides, and performs other acts in the public realm as a social being. But there can be conflict when one introduces comprehensive doctrines in public debates in a liberal democratic society, for bringing them in can offend others who may not share the convictions of those who profess such. Such is the reason why the public realm must be independent from religious arguments.

This neutrality is in view of the very nature of public reason. In a democratic society, according to Rawls, “public reason is the reason of equal citizens who, as a collective body, exercise the final political and coercive power over one another in enacting laws and in amending their

constitution” (Ibid., 214). Simply put, public reason in this sense is always political in nature. For instance, people come into an agreement to a constitution that defines public policy. They also agree on the way upon which public institutions are to be established. Public reason, however, for Rawls, does not apply to the background culture. (See Rawls 1993, 215)

Public reason, he says, “does not apply to our personal deliberations and reflections about political questions, or to the reasoning about them by members of associations such as churches and universities” (Ibid.). Political power rests in the constitutional framework of government, and this framework is independent of the religious convictions of the background culture. Any liberal democratic state must therefore be neutral. (See Audi 1997, 39) Generally, it can be said that setting aside comprehensive norms is understandable because the basis of political stability is the consensus shared by all on matters pertaining to the general interest of the public. The constitution, for instance, is a product of this agreement. Any legislation can only be legitimate if it is constitutional. Thus, no single religious opinion from the background culture can override what has been established constitutionally.

Questioning the Idea of Neutrality

In the context of third world cultures, it is important to note that religion plays a great part in the lives of people, and therefore in the kind of government they wish to establish. Put into the context of Philippine society, which is 85% Catholic, the presence of Catholic values permeate the many areas of politics, including the Constitution and the laws passed by Congress. More importantly though, members of civil society in the Philippines are influenced by strong religious values. The Church has been a strong voice on contentious political issues like abortion, divorce, and the death penalty, to cite a few examples. As one Filipino scholar notes, involvement in social issues can take place at the level of basic ecclesiastical communities where the parish is able to generate some kind of dynamism (Gaspar 1997, 151).

The Church finds itself as an active participant in Philippine political issues. For instance, the church through its many affiliated associations have delivered their arguments against the bill on Reproductive Health

Care in legislative hearings called for by Congress. The Church has also been active in the peace process, another political issue. In the 1996 Mindanao Peace Congress, “church leaders categorically stated that peace is the wholeness of life where every person can live with dignity. Peace must be based on justice for all, whether they are Christians, Muslims, or Indigenous peoples” (Gaspar 1997, 168). Moreover, the Church also takes part in electoral advocacy. During Philippine elections, the Church and civil society groups openly endorse candidates who support their agenda. As Karl Gaspar notes, “there is no denying that in a number of areas, the Church, despite its claim to be neutral, did support certain candidates, directly or indirectly (Ibid., 156) Thus, it can be said that in the Philippines, it is impossible for the Church to be neutral.

The Church, according to Gaspar, through its program for conscientization, supported the people’s aspiration to participate actively in making decisions that affect them, thus internalizing democratic values, empowering them towards setting up a just and caring society (Gaspar 1997, 164). For instance, if the Church criticized some development programs of the government, it was not because the Church was interfering with government affairs. (Ibid.) In such an instance, the Church was simply expressing its concern for the poor and the oppressed. What justifies this involvement?

The Proviso

Rawls says that the idea of public reason specifies at the deepest level the basic moral and political values that are to determine a constitutional democratic government’s relation to its citizens and their relation to one another (Rawls 1999, 132). For Rawls, public reason accounts for the concerns that involve matters pertaining to political justice. (Ibid., 133) He says, “as reasons of free and equal citizens, it is the reason of the public; its subject is the public good concerning questions of fundamental political justice” (Ibid.). Although he limits the role of civil society, that doesn’t mean that citizens can no longer hold their government officials accountable. (Ibid., 135) Citizens, according to him, can realize the function of public reason in society, and most notably, he says, they have the duty “to repudiate

government officials and candidates for office who violate public rules”, which is, in fact, for him, “one of the political and social roots of democracy and is vital to its enduring strength and vigor” (Ibid., 135-36). The Church in the Philippines, for instance, noted Gaspar, was the first to publicly denounce martial law, and called for President Marcos to lift it, long before other groups found the courage to do so (Gaspar 1997, 149). In today’s Philippine society, the duty of civility is realized in the availability of venues to file complaints against corrupt officials through the Office of the Ombudsman, and the public nature of congressional hearings on concerns like health, the environment, and education. Participating in formal venues is an inherent requisite because discussions pertaining to the public must be governed by rules set by the institutions which deal with public matters. Since members of civil society are better educated than the majority of the people in the Philippines, they are expected to be the sounding board in the halls of Congress. As Rawls points out, citizens have a duty to involve themselves in issues of public concern, for it is an ideal “that imposes a moral, not a legal duty – to be able to explain to one another on those fundamental questions how the principles and policies they advocate and vote for can be supported by the political values of public reason” (Rawls 1993, 217).

Rawls designates the duty of civility as a moral duty. (Ibid.) Such duty is not a legal obligation, but it is a duty which proceeds from the ideal of political justice. Citizens must seek, actively participate, and hope for the realization of what is good for society. Thus, in filing complaints or seeking remedies for grievances against government officials, one is performing something not for his own private sake but for the sake of the public. It is important to note that participation in the public sphere in the Philippines is heavily indebted to the values taught by the Church. Not only that, the Church itself is active in promoting its stand on public issues. For instance, combating the government’s promotion of artificial means of birth control has pre-occupied family-life programs of the Church (Gaspar 1997, 163).

Given this influence of the Church in Philippine political culture, it is important here to introduce the notion of the proviso, where Rawls says, “reasonable comprehensive doctrines, religious or non-religious, may be introduced in public political discussion at any time, provided that in

due course political reasons and not reasons given solely by comprehensive doctrines, are presented” (Rawls 1997, 777; also in Habermas 2006, 5-6). Rawls requires that the introduction of religious arguments must be grounded on the principles of political justice and that the values that these religious arguments purport to express must also be public values. (Ibid.) In Philippine political culture, basing political decisions in the Church’s teachings regarding respect for human life is not at all arbitrary, for this value is something that Filipinos do share, a value which they have in fact chosen when they ratified the constitution.

Poor Filipinos (30 percent of the population or 24 million people) find strength in the Church. If the Church demands from the government that it protects the interests of the poor, a stance that can be based on the doctrine of love for one’s neighbor (a Catholic teaching), the Church is advocating something that is fair and rational. It is also at the same time a demand for responsible politics. It is worthy to note that the “Philippines was the first country to articulate its vision of becoming a Church of the Poor” (Gaspar 1997, 150). Concern for human life and care for the poor are matters of political justice. I also believe that these are two public values that any democratic society would strongly uphold.

In Mindanao, one of the major islands in the Philippines, many dioceses involve lay leaders in most decision-making processes through regular assemblies attended by priests, religious and lay people to promote active lay participation (Gaspar 1997, 163). Such assemblies prepare and immerse church leaders and lay people in the ideals of democratization. It is in these assemblies where the Church echoes its positions and hold public dialogues. The promotion of Christian values in the public sphere by the Church help define the moral viewpoint of the public. By opposing abortion, the Church is simply trying to protect the life of the unborn child, and is acting on the basis of human values. The contribution of the Church on matters of public concern is vital. Philippine society as a whole counts on the Church as a moral voice on public issues. This is done within the context of a constitution that promotes and protects the value of human life.

Because of the active involvement of the Church in forming public opinion, its influence on the issue of reproductive health has been felt by most Filipinos. Naida Pasion states, “nowhere is the influence of the Church

more felt than in government programs on reproductive health. Nurses deliberately absented themselves during the scheduled days for IUD insertions rather than defy the teachings of the Church” (Pasion 1997, 226). It must be noted that there is no direct intervention on the part of the Church. What it does is voice out its opinion on many vital public issues. Habermas says, “religious traditions have a special power to articulate moral intuitions, especially with regard to vulnerable forms of communal life. In the event of corresponding political debates, this potential makes religious speech a serious candidate to transporting possible truth contents” (Habermas 2006, 10).

Religion in the Public Sphere

“The liberal state”, according to Habermas, “has an interest in unleashing religious voices in the political public sphere, and in the participation of religious organizations as well” (Ibid.). If allowing the balance between religious and public values contributes to consensus in society, then there is no reason to silence the voice of the Church on public matters like abortion, divorce, and reproductive health care. Habermas says that “in a secular state only those political decisions are taken to be legitimate as can be impartially justified in the light of generally accessible reasons, in other words equally justified vis-à-vis religious and non-religious citizens, and citizens of different confessions” (Ibid., 5) Habermas writes, “a liberal state must not discourage religious persons and communities from also expressing themselves politically” (Ibid., 10). The Church cannot be excluded in the public debate on abortion and other morally sensitive issues. Religion and politics are intertwined in Philippine political culture because Filipinos consider the Church as their protector from the excesses of their government. Some religious values have become part of public morality. It does not appear as an imposition of one religion to another, because in issues like abortion and reproductive health care, the values of “respect for human life” and “respect for the dignity of the human person” concern public morality in the Philippines. Kent Greenawalt affirms such when he says that in settling the issue regarding the infusion of religious norms on matters of public policy, “much depends on history, culture, the religions,

and other comprehensive views that people hold” (Greenawalt 2003, 275). Habermas says that religious doctrines potentially deliver the truth on important public matters. (Habermas 2006, 12) They must therefore be allowed in the public given the legitimate reasons. There is no arbitrariness in bringing in religious arguments if they are supported by equally reasonable arguments other than the religious arguments themselves. (See Rawls 1997, 777) Habermas requires, however, that these arguments be translated before they are allowed in the public sphere. (See Habermas 2006, 10-11) This translation means finding the political reasons for these religious arguments, meaning, their accessibility in terms of “what citizens owe one another as good reasons for their political statements and attitudes” (Habermas 2006, 11). He adds that the truth content of religious contributions can enter into the institutionalized practice of deliberation and decision-making if the necessary translation occurs in the pre-parliamentary domain, i.e., in the public sphere itself (Ibid., 12)

For Habermas, the political public sphere acts as a sounding board for problems that must be processed by the political system because they cannot be solved elsewhere (Habermas 1996, 359). For him, civil society’s attunement to societal problems in the private sphere can make it effective in transmitting and amplifying reactions to the public sphere (Ibid., 367). The reason for this openness, is that the public is made up of citizens who seek acceptable interpretations of their social interests, and who may want to have an influence on institutionalized opinion and will-formation (Ibid.). This explains the important role that the Church plays in the Philippine public sphere.

Habermas explains that the public sphere must amplify the pressure of problems, that is, not only detect and identify problems, but also convincingly and influentially thematize them, furnish them with possible solutions (Ibid., 359). Obviously, social and political problems are issues that religious and lay people talk about in meetings and even in informal gatherings. Even with the absence of the formality of public hearings, assemblies contribute to public enlightenment on important issues. As an example, the Mindanao Assembly for Peace, convened by Archbishop Fernando Capalla in Davao City, committed itself, Christians, Muslims and Indigenous peoples alike, to become peacemakers, called on government to provide basic services essentially in depressed areas, and con-

duct peace education (Gaspar 1997, 167).

The Church always play a vital function in the public sphere. According to Habermas the political system must remain sensitive to the influence of public opinion (Habermas 1996, 367). Habermas acknowledges the influence which may come from religious leaders suggesting that this political influence supported by public opinion is converted into political power – into a potential for rendering binding decisions (Ibid., 363). He assigns a big role for civil society, pointing out that, “basic constitutional guarantees alone, of course, cannot preserve the public sphere, and civil society from deformation. The communication structures of the public sphere must rather be kept intact by an energetic civil society” (Ibid., 369).

Democracy is healthier with a more active civil society in the public sphere. Jean Cohen asserts that the survival and expansion of basic rights depend very much on political cultures that allow and even promote its mobilization (Cohen 2002, 217). The active role of the Church makes the people more involved in open discussions on political issues, thereby empowering an otherwise helpless populace. This is strongly grounded in the fact that “the Church in the Philippines believes that ministering to the needs of the poor and the oppressed is a moral option, a moral obligation” (Gaspar 1997, 163).

Critique of the Liberal Tradition

The liberal tradition’s exclusion of comprehensive doctrines, according to Wolterstorff, seems to be telling people to “step out of their religious community and enter the public debate without any appeal to their religious convictions” (Wolterstorff 1997, 172). Kent Greenawalt suggests, granting that there will be disagreements, or that some people might disagree, it can still be said that “we can revert to the possibility that one set of background beliefs might be better than any other, and that human beings have the capacity to identify sound background beliefs” (Greenawalt 2003, 262). For Wolterstorff, it seems to be too much of a generalization to throw away religious arguments simply because they are religious without even examining their value in the discussion of matters

that concern the life and well-being of citizens (See Wolterstorff 1997, 180).

The intention of engaging in political dialogue is to provide better choices for the people. For Wolterstorff, it is not necessary that religious arguments are shared by all. (See Wolterstorff, 181) For him, it is sufficient that the argument stands and that the majority supports it (Ibid.). As Greenawalt adds, “if a respected religious authority like the pope, a divinely inspired text or one’s personal sense of how God relates to human beings suggest that we should help those who are less fortunate,” (Ibid., 269) it should not be taken as something negative.

As Wolterstorff suggests, instead of forbidding to offer religious reasons in the public space, why not invite people to continue saying with civility what they do believe (Wolterstorff 1997, 180). For him, anybody who has a sound religious argument and wants to contribute to dialogue must be admitted, for the healthy exchange of ideas is good for democracy. (Ibid.) Wolterstorff seems to be saying that the constitutional restraint that Rawls’ proviso requires is unnecessary. (See Habermas 2006, 11) He seems to be suggesting that any sound religious opinion must be listened to and that it is sufficient that the majority agrees to these arguments (See Wolterstorff 1997, 181).

Majority Religion and Constitutional Essentials

Comprehensive doctrines tend to shake the balance of political culture in any society for these doctrines can present themselves as impositions from outside for the members of society who do not share such convictions. (See Habermas 2006, 12) Recalling Rawls, he says that political autonomy is “realized by citizens when they act from the principles of justice that specify the fair terms of cooperation they would give to themselves when fairly represented as free and equal persons” (Rawls 1993, 77). Freedom and equality are the essentials of a liberal and democratic society. (Ibid., 216) This means, according to Habermas, that citizens are meant to respect one another as free and equal members of their political community (Habermas 2006, 5).

Given that in the liberal state only secular reasons count, citizens

who adhere to a faith are obliged to establish a kind of balance between their religious and secular convictions (Ibid., 5-6). For Habermas, public deliberation needs some kind of restraint before any religious opinion is admitted. (Ibid., 12) He finds the proposal of Wolterstorff problematic (Ibid.). Habermas says, since no institutional filter is envisaged between the state and the public domain, Wolterstorff's version does not exclude the possibility that policies and legal programs will be implemented solely on the basis of the religious or the confessional beliefs of a ruling majority (Ibid., 11). He adds that parliaments in this sense will become a battlefield of religious beliefs and governmental authority can evidently become the agent of the religious majority that asserts its will and thus violating the democratic procedure (Ibid.). There is a great possibility in this sense of a majority religion simply imposing its will on the whole populace if constitutional safeguards are not provided for. Legislatures cannot just allow any religious opinion. Constitutional grounds must be set as basis before any religious argument is admitted.

Habermas says that it seems that for Wolterstorff, the argument between different conceptions of justice grounded in competing religions and world views can never be solved by the common presupposition of a formal background consensus (Ibid., 12). According to Habermas, Wolterstorff rejects the whole idea of a reasonable background consensus on constitutional essentials (Ibid.). Habermas is against the position of Wolterstorff because for Habermas the democratic procedure has the power to generate legitimacy precisely because it both includes all participants and has a deliberative character (Ibid.). It is possible for other religions not to compromise on what they believe is right. But agreement can still be possible, because "conflict of existential values can be contained by losing any political edge against the background of a presupposed consensus on constitutional principles" (Ibid.). In this sense, constitutional essentials are important to legitimize whatever religious argument are introduced in the public sphere. The constitution safeguards the public sphere from any possible excesses that any majority religion might do, which in the end will only disturb the spirit of social cooperation and undermine social unity which the constitution as the fundamental law of the land protects. Religious arguments, therefore, must find resonance in the constitution to be legitimate.

Civic Virtue and Theo-ethical Equilibrium

One author asserts that the question is not whether religion and politics can be mixed; they are mixed and will continue to be mixed (Audi 1997, 38). We have explained above why accommodating religious values in the public sphere is not at all inconsistent with democracy and human freedom given that they find resonance in the constitution. To be able to elaborate on the relation between religious insights and secular norms, it is important to explain the meaning of civic virtue. For Robert Audi, civic virtue is the individual's way of being socially responsible without having to disregard the values of his religion, with the former playing a major role on the latter. (Ibid., 54) He says further, "in a society that is complex, pluralistic, and so, inevitably somewhat divided, civic virtue implies trying to take reasonable positions on important issues" (Ibid., 48).

Audi says, if one's only reason is to promote religious devotion, then even if one is expressing a kind of religious virtue, one is not exhibiting civic virtue (Ibid., 57). Such seems far from the mind of the Church or of civil society. If anything, the Church and civil society are simply advocating what is just and reasonable for all Filipinos. Audi says that the concept of civic virtue realizes what he calls a theo-ethical equilibrium (Ibid., 62). He says, "I propose a principle of theo-ethical equilibrium: where religious considerations appropriately bear on matters of public morality or of political choice, religious persons have a prima facie obligation – at least insofar as they have civic virtue – to seek an equilibrium between those considerations and relevant secular standards of ethics and political responsibility" (Ibid.).

Civic virtue implies doing one's responsibility as an individual using the balance between one's moral and religious convictions. It implies responsible political participation in a liberal democracy (Ibid., 48). Such an idea proceeds from what Audi calls a secular rationale, which is "intended to benefit people within a religious tradition, for instance in different denominations or even in the same denomination, as well as to facilitate good relations between different religious traditions, and between religious and non-religious people" (Ibid., 56). Such rationality, therefore,

intends to foster dialogue among different sectors in society. This balance requires that “a seemingly sound moral conclusion that goes against scriptures or one’s established religious tradition should be scrutinized for error; a religious demand that seems to abridge moral rights should be studied” (Ibid., 52) Those who advocate abortion on the basis of reproductive rights should be able to examine their conscience if the life of the unborn child is worth compromising for the sake of their secular view. If the Church defends the rights of the unborn child by using religious values, it should not be barred from doing so simply because one thinks that the argument is based on some religious ground. The Church must be allowed and does have good reasons for its arguments. Audi thinks that this arrangement does not defy reason. (Ibid., 53) He adds that inasmuch as secular reasons may change one’s religious views, religious considerations can also lead to the revision of one’s secular moral views. (Ibid.)

For Audi, the separation of church and state does not require that churches should not publicly take moral positions, even if there is political controversy about them (Ibid., 65). Articulating reasons based on religious grounds like the teachings of the Church on the value of human life in order to argue against a proposed law that it perceives to be morally unacceptable should help enlighten rather than complicate the discussion. In view of the importance of human life as a whole, the Church has a big role to play in every democratic society. The separation of Church and state does not mean that the Church has to be helpless in the face of grave social and moral problems. The role of the Church in the public sphere is clear. In the context of a third world country like the Philippines, it can be said that “the Church needs to truly practice what it preaches in terms of lay empowerment. It should support the laity in playing their role in the political arena, not only in casting their votes, but in pressuring the government to allocate resources for the poor, to promote ecology and human rights” (Gaspar 1997, 166).

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