PUBLIC REASON AND INCLUSIONISM AS PSEUDO-INCLUSIONISM

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In the last two decades or so political philosophy has been debating whether religious arguments may legitimately be used in public discourse. The problem arises because in public discourse citizens exercise collective political power, and should do so in terms all citizens can reasonably be expected to accept. In modern societies, marked by a pervasive and deep pluralism of worldviews, religious arguments cannot command widespread assent, but whether it follows that they should be excluded from public discourse is a matter of contention. The idea that public discourse is the place where political power is exercised and that this exercise of power needs to be justified in generally accessible terms, is the core of the concept of public reason. Public reason is a normative notion specifying what kinds of arguments should and should not be used in public discourse. Public reason theories fall into two groups: exclusionism and inclusionism. Exclusionism, most prominently represented by John Rawls and Robert Audi, propounds the view that religious arguments should not be used in public discourse. Inclusionists such as Christopher Eberle, Nicholas Wolterstorff or Kent Greenawalt, by contrast, hold that religious arguments may be used in public discourse. Rejecting exclusionism as too restrictive, inclusionists maintain that religious citizens should not be asked to disregard their religious commitments when discussing political issues in public. Both inclusionists and exclusionists, then, embrace the concept of public reason but disagree on whether it admits religious arguments.

In the course of the debate a shift has occurred. Whereas the 1990s were dominated by the exclusionist position (Bader 1999: 598), the present century has seen an emerging consensus in political philosophy

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1 John Rawls’s idea of public reason, which is part of his conception of political liberalism, could be considered exclusionist at least until the introduction, in 1996, of ‘the wide view of public reason’ (Rawls 1996: li–lii). Unlike the views of many other authors, Rawls’s exclusionism not only concerns religious arguments but all arguments based on what he calls ‘comprehensive doctrines’.
on the inclusionist view (Boettcher 2005: 497). This shift is due in part to the recent publication of sophisticated defences of inclusionism, most notably by Christopher Eberle (Eberle 2002). Moreover, some exclusionists have come to embrace a more inclusionist perspective. John Rawls, Richard Rorty and Michael Perry have all declared that their positions have changed from exclusionism to more inclusionist perspectives (Rawls 1996: li–lii, Perry 2003: xi–xii, Rorty 2003: 141–4).

My claim in this paper is that inclusionism is not as inclusionist as it purports to be. In fact, it is no more than pseudo-inclusionism. It pays lip service to the permissibility of religious arguments in public discourse, but suggests requirements for public discourse which seriously restrict the use of these arguments. I elaborate on two of these conditions: the exclusion of what Kent Greenawalt has called ‘imposition reasons’ and the fallibilism requirement. I argue that both requirements are ill-founded and unduly restrictive. Finally, I ascribe the failure of inclusionism to be properly inclusionist to its conception of a person, arguing that inclusionism only avoids being unduly restrictive for those citizens who conform to that conception.

1. The Exclusion of Imposition Reasons

In his theory of religious arguments and public reason, Kent Greenawalt draws a distinction between two kinds of religious reasons: imposition and non-imposition reasons. Greenawalt argues that where the prohibition of human conduct is at issue, only non-imposition reasons should be used in public discourse. As the term indicates, as imposition reasons Greenawalt defines all reasons which seek to impose one’s religious belief on others or to seriously discourage others from holding different religious beliefs (Greenawalt 1995: 59). Among such reasons are those which refer to certain human acts as sins. These are imposition reasons because they are based on notions of harm which are not comprehensible in non-religious terms, but only in religious terms such as eternal damnation, damage to one’s God-given soul, or incurring the wrath of God (Greenawalt 1995: 6).

Greenawalt gives several examples of imposition reasons. One is that of a person who supports classroom prayer in state schools because he thinks that this would induce Jewish children to abandon their faith (Greenawalt 1995: 58). A second example is that of an opponent of homosexuality who is convinced that homosexuality is a sin