Maureen Junker-Kenny


The question of the role of religion in public reason has been fiercely debated in recent political philosophy. Maureen Junker-Kenny’s book stands out in this literature: she approaches this question in a very innovative and fruitful way, aiming not at providing a new normative argument about whether religious reasons can be legitimately used in liberal democracy, but at analysing and comparing the terms of the question themselves and their implications in the positions of three authors.

The choice of these three authors is itself unusual. Although John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas are very often discussed together and read against each other, Paul Ricoeur is widely ignored by liberal political philosophers. Here is the first significant achievement of the book: it successfully combines authors of different philosophical traditions that are usually treated independently, on a topic that is usually considered to belong to the liberal tradition. The issue of religious convictions in the public sphere has indeed been one of the central questions of liberal theory since Rawls reformulated the Kantian ideal of public reason. Junker-Kenny, however, rightly reminds us that Rawls and his followers are not the only heirs of Kant and that they do not have the monopoly on discussing public reason.

The second main achievement lies in the method chosen by the author. Junker-Kenny does not simply focus on the concepts of public reason and religion; rather, she looks at the whole philosophical enterprise of each author to make sense of these terms. Instead of starting from the usual questions about the scope of public reason or its compatibility with religious convictions, she starts with a reconstruction of the philosophical framework of each of the three authors. Rawls’ liberal theory, Habermas’ discourse theory and Ricoeur’s hermeneutics are based on different anthropological and philosophical assumptions. The concepts of agency or autonomy, which Junker-Kenny discusses at length, have very distinctive meanings for each of them and have a direct influence on the way the concepts of ‘religion’ and ‘(public) reason’ are then defined.

Rawls’ conception of public reason and of the role of religion within public reason is probably the most common one in contemporary political philosophy. Public reason, for the liberal philosopher, is what is accessed independently of religion. For Rawls, religion is a specific type of comprehensive doctrine: like all other comprehensive doctrines, it is particular, it is the object...
of unavoidable and reasonable disagreements and it cannot be expected to be shared by all citizens. Public reason, by opposition, is what we all share once we remove all our particular religious or philosophical beliefs. Rawls, however, acknowledges that religion can play an important role in the stability of liberal societies, to the extent that it is a widely shared basis for the justification of liberal and democratic values. However the distinction between public reason and religion, or more generally between what is comprehensive and what is public, is clear and seems definitive in the liberal framework: religion is ignored, and has to be ignored, by public reason.

The distinction between public reason and religion also exists in Habermas’ position, but not in so clear-cut terms. Whereas Rawls focused exclusively on arguments and reasons themselves, independently of the individuals who might happen to introduce them, Habermas insists on the significant role played by individuals: public reason is associated with the process of argumentation rather than with mere arguments. Given the philosophical framework of communicative reason and discourse ethics, Habermas highlights mutual learning and cooperation between individuals, including between religious and secular individuals. The concept of translation plays a key role here. Habermas shares the Rawlsian idea that public reasons must be generally accessible, but he considers the Rawlsian model to impose an unfair burden on religious believers who are then unable to use the convictions they find the most relevant. Translation is presented as a solution to this problem: it is the process through which religious reasons are translated into a secular, generally accessible vocabulary, therefore allowing religious believers to introduce religious convictions, whilst at the same time maintaining the demands of public reason. For Habermas, translation is also necessary for the sake of public reason itself, because religions are the bearers of truth-contents that have been lost in secular traditions. Religion consequently is seen as potentially playing a decisive role in public reason. However, this role comes at a price and is only possible if religions respect certain conditions regarding their proper place within the modern state, the authority of science and religious pluralism. Religion can be a partner for public reason, but only when it follows the rules dictated by public reason.

Ricoeur goes even further than Habermas in the idea that religion has an important role to play in public reason. For him, different symbolic traditions, including religious ones, are co-founders of the public sphere. What public reason is already depends on specific cultural understandings and interpretations: both religion and reason are “equally seen as symbolically mediated” (p. 247). The total distinction between public reason and religion, suggested by