

Religion, Civil Society, and Secular Study of Religion

Ivan Strenski©
Department of Religious Studies,
University of California, Riverside

In his celebrated essay, “Liberal Politics and the Public Sphere,” Charles Taylor argued for a secular vision of the public square or public sphere against neo-conservatives like the late Richard John Neuhaus. (Taylor 1995 257-87) For Taylor, the public sphere or public square of, at least North Atlantic society, both developed historically as a secular social space, and more controversially, ought to be maintained as such. Taylor thus advances both an historical description of how civil society developed in the North Atlantic world, but also urges a prescription of how a pluralist society can flourish without transcendental legitimacy. It is Taylor’s advice about how to achieve human flourishing by the firm establishment of the public sphere as a secular space that I shall be most concerned in this paper. I shall argue the thesis that the public sphere requires not only the participation of religion, but a dedicated, secular study of religion to make it whole, and thus to enable a healthy civil society to thrive.

As the very stuff of civil society, therefore, I shall be most interested in supporting Taylor’s view of the public sphere as a social space requiring no divine legitimation for its existence or maintenance. The legitimacy of associations within the public sphere comes from their being activities in which people form for themselves what Taylor calls a “common mind.” This is to argue against neo-conservatives, and crypto-theocrats, as Taylor has done against his fellow Catholic Richard John Neuhaus, for a vision of civil society— as a whole — that itself requires no divine or transcendent source of its legitimacy. I take it, further, that Taylor then is committed to the view that no non-state and public features of Atlantic society likewise actually require transcendent legitimating ground — even though some may nonetheless claim such transcendental grounds.

Here, of course, the “religions” form a natural block of self-described exceptions to Taylor’s conception of a certain public social space, since they are arguably defined as those many of those institutions, at least the theistic ones, claiming both transcendental origins and continual divine maintenance. That is at least one way that we mark and define, in a way, those social bodies we call the “religions.” But, this claim to transcendental legitimacy by the religions, and, indeed, the assertion of their transcendental commission in the public sphere, makes for the inevitable conflict we have known as the “culture wars.” As such, these “wars” have raged even beyond the field of politics — beyond the normal space where so-called ‘church’ and ‘state’ collide. These conflicts also occur within the non-state domain known as civil society. In this paper, I want to direct my attention to one particular and significant space in which the conflict between the religions and other public social formations occurs — namely the university.

I shall argue that we cannot speak of civil society unless the tension between the religions and other public social formations is somehow amicably resolved. This is not, however, to say that the arguments will always be ‘civil,’ in the sense of well-mannered conversations among citizens. It is to say that we cannot speak of civil society unless we both make room for the participation of the religions in the public square. But, I want to say more: I think it is now well established that the religions, like all institutions embodying value systems, deserves a place, a ‘voice,’ in the ‘public square.’ Yet, it needs further to be argued more explicitly that a civil society requires that we recognize the need for a space – a second-order one if you will – that can facilitate freely coming to a “common mind” about the religions themselves. The religions already have a well-deserved voice in the ‘public square,’ but we conspicuously lack wide recognition of the essential need for an equally vibrant and authoritative voice that makes religion itself the subject of discourse in the ‘public square.’ Specifically, and at the very least, in the university, but also in other public venues, we need to recognize the crucial need to form a “common mind” about religion and the religions for facilitating the formation and maintenance of civil society. This is to assert the simple thesis that the study of religion as a dedicated academic discipline is necessary for civil society.

Without some way to form a “common mind” about religion, I do not think that civil society is complete or entirely healthy. Without a way to form a “common mind” about religion, the ‘public square’ would be ‘naked’ of reasoned discourse about one of its integral members – religion. And, as interested parties, the religions are, of course, in no position to offer the sort of public discourse about religion appropriate to Taylor’s conception of a secular “public sphere.” As interested parties, moreover, the religions assert supernatural, non-secular, transcendent authority for their views of themselves and other religions. As such, they are in no position to be the kind of secular “public sphere” in which religion can be discussed publically, and in which a “common mind” can be formed by all citizens. It is only in a disinterested – and in this case secular – domain that religion can become part of the public discourse of the ‘public square,’ that a “common mind” about religion and the religions can be formed.

The appropriate venue for our providing the materials for such a “common mind” about religion and the religions is, I believe, the university. In the spirit of openness that should characterize the civil society, the university is the venue of choice where we routinely facilitate forming a common mind about art, economics, politics, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, the past, and so on – where we make available ‘providing the materials for coming to a “common mind.”’ In civil society, we do not leave it to politicians to set the terms for the public’s forming a “common mind” about politics. Nor, do we leave it to artists to decide generally what the public should think about art? Nor, again, in civil society, do we leave it to individual men and women to set the terms of discourse about gender for the public. These are all matters we leave to open discourse in the ‘public square’ by citizens desiring to make up their minds – to form Taylor’s

“common mind” – about these integral aspects of civil society. If so, then why would we ever think that it is optimal to leave it to the religions to lay down the ground rules for public discussion about religion and the religions?

All such second-order discourses are the public business of that fundamental institution of civil society – the university. The university should be the place where we make available the materials for coming to a “common mind” about religion. I do not believe that the university should be the place where a particular mind – a personal conviction – about religion or the religions is realized. That is the business of the first-order actors in the “public sphere” – in the churches, social and political clubs, bedrooms and such of our world. We do not – or at least should not – do particular politics – party politics – in the classroom. So, also the same goes for forming a personal conviction about religion. The university is, instead, where we provide the materials for coming to a “common mind” about religion as we do about art or politics or race or gender or sexual preference. A free society – a society that respects human dignity to such an extent that it embodies civil society – is one that does not employ the massive and subtle technologies of domination available to the university to determine personal conviction about art or politics or race or gender or sexual preference. The university is likewise not where a free society pulls the levers of power available to it to compel a certain way of thinking about religion. The university in a free society, where civil society is embodied, is however, where students are provided the materials to think about religion so that they can form a “common mind” about it. In my view, therefore, the modern discipline of religious studies could thus be defined in brief as that academic unit of the university dedicated to ‘providing the materials’ by which students can form a “common mind” about religion. This is by no means to claim a monopoly for religious studies departments in studying religion. But, it is hardly imaginable that, at the very least, in this day of religious strife and assertiveness, that any academic discipline can ignore religion. Unfortunately, we cannot. But, it is to observe that we feel it necessary to dedicate areas of human life, such as art, politics, gender, sexual preference, race and so on to particular academic units. Religion surely cannot be an exception to this rule.

Now, you may well ask why the formation of such a “common mind” about religion matters – and why, moreover, it matters to the vitality of civil society and human flourishing? Isn’t it enough that our North Atlantic civil society invites the existence and participation of the religions in the public square? Isn’t it enough that religious neo-conservatives, like Richard John Neuhaus – and of course, religious progressives like Martin Luther King Jr., well before him – have made a case for the presence of religion in the public square? Isn’t it enough that religious folk do not feel they need to apologize for participation in public discourse and national politics on the basis of the religious motivations moving them? Don’t these examples of religious folk coming to their own “common mind” about public issues, in the public square no less, attest that we already accommodate religion in the public sphere, in public debate and discourse?

My answer to this list of challenges is that beyond the first-order participation of the religions in the “public sphere,” the university as an exemplary institution of civil society is not complete unless it is open to the second-order activity of making religion the object of academic study. Civil society is only possible if it is open to the academic study of religion; the academic study of religion – religious studies – is thus a fundamental of property of and society calling itself liberal, in Charles Taylor’s sense – fundamental to any society pretending to embody the virtues of civil society. Put otherwise, if a liberal society embodies the Popperian value of being an “open society,” then religion cannot and must not be excluded from the “public sphere” that we know as the university – and *a fortiori* – the public university in particular.

Let me bring some color to this discussion of the study of religion and civil society by interpreting the data of some cases on the international scene to which I have recently been party. These cases are Turkey and Russia, respectively. Now, in choosing them, I believe I can throw my argument in behalf of the importance of the study of religion for civil society into relief, and thus into a position from which I might be better able to persuade any doubters among you of the validity of my original thesis. I believe we have much to learn specifically from a comparative study of the efforts to build civil society in two remarkably similar, but intriguingly different nations. Two former empires, two imperial dominions reaching into and across a common terrain, and indeed often clashing over control the same territory – but now trying to define some national comfort zone with respect to the West, and thus of necessity, with our regard for civil society. Further, both the great nations Russia and Turkey sit on the periphery of possibly closer integration into the West – with North Atlantic civilization – at once evidencing both efforts to join the West, but at other times resisting the embrace of the West. At the same time, of course, the West – here primarily the European Union – frequently sits in judgment over Turkey and Russia, with various parties in the EU looking either for reasons to embrace these two great border nations, or reasons to be suspicious of their compatibility with the West. These suspicions take the form of wondering, for example, whether the neo-Islamist AK Party of Turkey really seeks to impose a Muslim theocracy on the nation, or really seeks to evade responsibility for an Armenian massacres, or really wants to deny its Kurdish citizens the recognition they seek, as the nay-sayers warn. Similarly, liberal European critics of today’s Russia charge that she seems to be reverting to some of the worst behavior of the Soviet era. The government’s monopolizing of mass media sends shivers up the spines of civil society activists – and this is not to mention the real shivers felt by threats to cut off gas and oil deliveries to Western Europe and the Russian “Near Abroad,” such as Belarus or Ukraine. Even the mysterious deaths of dissident journalists and civil society workers have been laid at the door of the authorities. And, one has not even broached the subject of the virtual establishment of the Russian Orthodox Church as Russia’s official religion – especially at a time when statistics indicate that more Russian citizens claim Pentecostal belief and practice than Russian Orthodoxy! While not denying that the cases of

Russia and Turkey are complex, and not easily judged from outside or without reference to mitigating historical and cultural contexts, one will recognize these often voiced suspicions of civil society activists have a familiar ring.

In the particular case of Russia, we have a new nation looking back over a period of two successive imperial pasts – the officially atheistic Soviet period, which succeeded the equally theocratic Romanov imperium. How should the new Russian nation-state position itself with respect to those pasts? Should the new Russia maintain a strict separation of church and state, perhaps on the French model, and reminiscent of the periods of the Soviet era? Or, now shorn of her official “scientific atheism,” should Russia reclaim her place as the Third Rome – successor to the classic Byzantine Christian and Eastern Roman imperial pattern of close identification of between church and state? Is the way forward in the new Russia to try to *replace* the discredited Marxist faith of the Soviet era with some new civil religious creed, or should the new Russia keep the state out of the religion business – in either the French or American way. Should such separation, such a classically secular model, prevail even to the extent of resisting the recognition of some sort Russian ‘common faith’ or civil religion? Well, we are already getting some answers to these questions, although the situation in Russia is still quite fluid.

Faced with the truly frightening moral, spiritual and religious vacuum in the country, the government, for example, has recently decided to get fully into the business of supporting a distinctly Russian civil religion, inflected, but not exclusively, in way favorable to Russian Orthodoxy. The state has decided to require religious formation in the schools, taught in large part by available clergy for different religious communities. As far as I have been able to learn, this has taken the form of each recognized ‘religion’ in Russia offering its own required courses of religious instruction in the schools for their own adherents. So, in Russia, the government has put its faith and efforts into religious or moral indoctrination. The schools will teach their captive audiences of students how to be religious, but they will learn nothing about what the religions are, and still less what religion might be. They will learning nothing of this sort, that is, unless other forces within Russian academe can make the case for the importance of the secular study of religion – for a second-order study of religion as a human and historical phenomenon – the very knowledge of which strengthens the nation because it facilitates a free and unfettered “public sphere” in which citizens can form a “common mind” free of coercion.

From the side of the Russian Orthodox Church, it has been busy seeking to establish its place at the heart of the present nation and its historical memory. One such strategy for solidifying its identification with the Russian nation has been to consecrate selected features of the pre-Soviet imperial political past. Consider the coordination between church and state in the matter of the official memorialization of the massacred Romanov imperial family in 1918. For its part, the state sponsored construction of the spectacular and costly Church of the Blood in

Ekaterinburg, site of the Bolshevik murder of the imperial family, while the Church, for its part, followed with an official canonization of the murdered Romanovs as sainted martyrs. {Rom. pix}

In Kemalist Turkey, we witness a similar attempt to deal with the religiously sanctioned Ottoman imperial past – in effect by effacing it from systematic memory of its religious character. Despite the policy of permitting different religious communities some degree of self-regulation, the Ottomans were clear that the Empire was an Islamic one. This was so much the case that a feature of common Ottoman sensibility was that when asked about one's identity, an Ottoman Turk would generally reply "Muslim" – as if the two identities "Ottoman" and "Muslim" were one and the same. The secular Kemalist Republic radically changed all this – or at least most of it – as is well known. Indeed, one might say that the Muslim past of the territory now occupied by the nation of Turkey was effaced. Witness to this is a reaction to this suppressed memory in the current rage for things Ottoman in modern Turkey. Indeed, one of the means of combating the dominance of Islam and its institutions was to foster the "historical" study of religion on the French model, in large part modeled on the positivist historicism of a religious disenchanter like Ernest Renan. One will recall Renan's historical critique of the Bible's supernaturalist accounts of the life of Jesus, and the publication of his demythologized, naturalized, indeed, explicitly "scientific" narrative of the life of Jesus. Atatürk himself not only urged the adherence to (so-called) scientific methods of history writing itself, but also insisted that "scientific" methods be brought to bear on religion – imperfectly, as I shall note shortly. To this day, as one surveys the offerings of the major state universities in Turkey, one will find courses in the history of archaic Greek, Roman or Turkish religion, Christianity, Judaism, and such, but virtually nothing on the history of Islam, in particular nothing on Islam in the Ottoman period. Yes, there are universities with Islamic studies listed as a separate field from the divinity, theology or history of religion, but these are devoted to first-order studies of Islamic literature, doctrines and such. One prominent bastion of secularism – the university of Istanbul – offers courses in Islam, but tellingly, with a heavy-handed Kemalist ideological slant as evident in this self-description of the work of the Faculty of Divinity, which in its self-statement says that their

aim is to get students to understand Islam better and to be able to make comparisons between it and other religions. The main principle of the Faculty is to train individuals who are tolerant, respectful of humans, and devoted to universal values and the principles and reforms of Atatürk. Nevertheless, we also aim to train our students to think on the Coran, to unify Islam with science, and to present Islamic culture to them in its purified form, devoid of superstitions.... {Turkey pix}

Or, at the University of Ankara, where a very impressive list of offerings in the study of religion is to be had, one also finds the same tendency to resist putting Islam squarely alongside other religions as an equal in the field of religions. Islam is present in the 'public square' of the

university, so to speak, but as exceptional. This exclusion of Islam from a discourse about religion as such, means that a discourse about religion in the “public sphere” seems to be resisted. This resistance takes the form of excluding Islam from the “public sphere” where religions can be discussed, and where we might form a “common mind” about them – all of them. But, in the case of Turkey, such a “common mind” cannot be easily formed about religion which includes Islam. I am arguing that such an exclusion of Islam from the “public sphere” alongside other religions may serve as an indicator of the fluid and contested state of Turkish civil society.

The presumption of Islamic incomparability or exceptionalism is achieved in a number of ways. First, within the Faculty of Divinity, where religion is taught as an avowedly academic subject, the study of Islam is assigned its own “Division” – that of “Basic Islamic Sciences,” separate from the “Department of Philosophy and Religious Sciences” which houses such courses as “History of Religion.” I can think of no good academic reason for such a separation unless Islamic exceptionalism is assumed. The silent assumption is that while there are the religions which merit study, for example, Judaism, Christianity and others, Islam is so special – so literally and figuratively *incomparable* that it requires its own domain, and a domain in which it is never put up for comparison against any other religion. A second way Islamic exceptionalism is reinforced is by dehistoricizing Islam. An admittedly distant perusal of the offerings in “Basic Islamic Sciences” reveals courses in the study of Koran, Koranic Recitation, Modern Approaches to the Koran, Hadith, Kalam (Philosophy), Islamic literature, and so on. Conspicuously absent is any sense that Islam is a product of history. The Quran itself is not apparently to be subject to historical investigation. In official documents such as anyone can consult on the internet, one does not find prominent statements about the Quran as a text with a past, a history of composition and development in a major Turkish university such as Ankara. This is not to say that there is no such work being done in Turkey, only to say that if so, it is not much mentioned – it is not part of public discourse about religion. Similarly, one sees scant evidence even that the Muslim history of the Turkish past is subject of serious study. For instance, the Department of Islamic History and Arts, also in the Faculty of Divinity, seems to submerge the history of Islam to the history of Islamic *arts*. In its own words: “The Department aims at enabling students to gain a historical and chronological perspective, and equipping them with skills of reading documents in the archives and enjoying the esthetic works of Islam in the area of poetry, music and literature.”

What I am arguing, then, is that there is less by way of religious studies in the spirit of civil society in either Russia or Turkey than one might wish – if one values the human future an open “public sphere” embodies. The fluid situation of a secular study of religion – religious studies – in Russia or Turkey seems to me indicative of very condition of contestation about civil society in those nations. A society that seeks to achieve the liberality of spirit characteristic of civil society must also realize the need for a secular study of religion – a study of religion which privileges none

and includes them all.

Lest we think ourselves superior, let me close by recalling an argument Stanley Fish and I had in a small seminar at Washington and Lee University about the study of religion. Fish at the time had just assumed the post of Dean of Humanities at the University of Illinois, Chicago. One of his first goals was to establish a department of religious studies, along what he reckoned were radical new lines of thought. Fish promised that he was going to guarantee that people who taught about the different religions were “genuine representatives” of those religions. No more wishy-washy, diffident liberal scholars teaching religious traditions they might not, would not or could not believe. No more phoney pretense at academic neutrality when it came to the religious world – a world defined by vigorous faith and commitment. Instead, Fish would install the genuine articles in place – real Buddhists teaching Buddhism, real Catholics teaching Catholicism, and so on. After a few moments, I raised my hand from the group assembled in the seminar. I asked Fish how he proposed to *identify* who was or was not the ‘genuine article’ – a faithful representative of a religious tradition? Wouldn’t he need, I continued, one of those academic scholars of religion he so cavalierly ‘dissed’ to lay out the many ways in which one might be said to be a faithful representative of a religion? And, even then, who would adjudicate? Wouldn’t he need the kind of dedicated academic study of religion, for which I have been arguing, to tell how difficult, nay impossible, it might be to tell who genuinely represents a religious tradition – presuming one could? Wouldn’t he need someone who, for example, knew the *whole* of Buddhism to explain how impossible it might be to produce an uncontestably ‘genuine’ representative of Buddhism? This encounter with Fish left me with the grim realization that the battle for a study of religion that nourishes civil society still remains to be won in our own country.

Featured Lecture, “Saving the Sacred in a Secular Age”
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