

After Civil Religion

Sander Griffioen
Free University of Amsterdam

Needless to say, I feel honored to be asked to respond to such a fine paper. To save time, I will not start by listing my many points of agreement but will concentrate on some points on which I may be able to make a distinct contribution to this conference.

The thrust of Avery Dulles's paper is clear. As civil religion is eroding, pluralism goes unchecked. This, in turn, is causing a movement downward: Government, not being able to appeal to shared convictions, practices a method of avoiding divisive issues. I agree with both the premises and the conclusion of this argument. In fact, in the final part of my comments I shall add another illustration of this methodical avoidance, that is, the substitution of culture for religion in matters of so-called multiculturalism. Where I disagree is with respect to the conclusion that Dulles then draws, namely, that we should try to strengthen civil religion. I am less positive about civil religion. In this respect I allow for more pluralism.

In the second section of this response, I will draw a distinction between directional and structural pluralism. This distinction being made, it then becomes possible to introduce the idea of a political ethos. As I see it, this notion can profitably replace Dulles's notion of a civil religion.

Civil Religion

In the last section of his paper, Dulles restricts the scope of civil religion to confessing Christian and Jewish believers. This makes it clear that he wants to

use the term *civil religion* in a restricted sense only. Yet, on reading his more general account of civil religion, his first associations are with Enlightenment notions. I am referring to the popular eighteenth-century view of religious diversity as secondary to primal communality. The favorite image was that of a tree with a dominant trunk, which only splits up into many branches at some higher point. The shared truths are those pertaining to the trunk, whereas religious pluralism only becomes relevant higher up. Jean-Jacques Rousseau was building on this foundation when he formulated the need for a new civil religion that was able to cement society together.

Of course, the use Dulles makes of this notion is different. He assumes (and I agree) that concepts of the good life cannot be cut loose from fully developed religious visions. Hence, civil religion is not introduced to shield off the political from “the dispute between conflicting truths, all of which claim the final validity of transcendence.” The divergence between the branches, then, is more significant than the unity of the lower trunk. Apparently, on his view, the trunk represents a minimal formulation of the truth, just enough for a thin political consensus. Yet, all those provisos notwithstanding, we do not get away from the image of the trunk and the branches. And, therefore, I suggest that we stay too close to the basic assumptions of the Enlightenment.

In addition, I want to point to a philosophical problem. Continental philosophy, from the early nineteenth century on, has turned away from the traditional assumption of shared rational truths. Although different philosophical systems may all appeal to certain states of affairs and use the same words to connote them, yet these statements are thought to be relative to the systems from which they stem. I am convinced that one has to be careful here to avoid being caught in a postmodern trap that makes all truth relative to conceptual frameworks. It is perfectly possible to point to the same things from within different frameworks, yet one also has to entertain the possibility that words mean different things within different philosophical frameworks. It cannot be decided in advance whether there is real communality or not. I think this fact bears on our present subject. There is no guarantee that the “natural truths” will not turn out to be empty concepts or words with different meanings in different frameworks.

I agree that it is necessary to distinguish between differences that are complementary, and hence can be reconciled, and others that are of a conflicting nature. Dulles draws on this distinction in a recent essay on the differences between Catholic and Lutheran confessions: “Varying theological formulations must often be considered complementary rather than conflicting.”¹

Although sympathetic to the spirit of the essay, my objection is that it fails to give sufficient weight to the possibility of persisting conflicts.

On the one hand, Dulles is clear about the general disagreements between the two types of confessions; on the other hand, he trusts that the differences will turn out to be complementary. “The Catholic thought-form, as expressed at Trent, is Scholastic, and heavily indebted to Greek metaphysics. The Lutheran thought-form is more existential, personalistic, or, as some prefer to say, relational.” In view of this, what hope could one have to find a deeper harmony? Dulles agrees that the disagreements are not just accidental: “In that framework [i.e., the Lutheran] all the terms take on a different hue.” Characteristically, after having stressed all that his tone changes: “We find that in spite of our different thought-forms, our different languages, we can say many things—the most important things—in common.”² There is even eschatological hope for things that now seem contradictory: “In view of this shared heritage of faith, we are confident that our doctrinal formulations, currently expressed in different idioms, can in the end be reconciled.”³

Political Ethos

It must seem that I take pluralism in such a radical sense that it becomes impossible to assume any broad political consensus. To answer this objection, I have to introduce the idea of a *structural* plurality.

It is important to see that we are looking for the possibility of a qualified consensus: not a scholarly consensus, or an ecclesiastical one, but a *political* consensus. In distinguishing the political from the ecclesiastical, we make distinctions different from the ones on which Dulles focuses when dealing with pluralism: distinctions between domains and institutions rather than between religious directions (i.e., basic convictions). From here on, the phrase *structural plurality* will be used to designate this plurality of domains and institutions.

In *Pluralisms and Horizons*, a book that I coauthored with Richard Mouw, a distinction is drawn between three irreducible types of pluralities (or pluralisms): *directional*, *structural* (associational), and *contextual*. Although there is nothing magical about these distinctions, they help to ask specific questions. I will deal with contextual plurality in my final remarks. With respect to our present subject, the relevant question relates to what political consensus is possible in a situation of strong religious diversity.

To start with, a distinction between the short run and the long run is necessary.

As to the short run, it suffices to take into account concrete policies. In the long run, however, political visions are at stake. With respect to concrete political issues, the map of religious affiliations may not provide a clue as to support for or opposition against concrete governmental initiatives. There is no way to decide beforehand what measure of support or opposition from the citizenry a government can find for its policies. With respect to certain issues, a platform may be found that is broader than that of believing Christians and Jews. For instance, Muslims may join Christians in making a case for a separate, non-neutral school system, on equal footing with the public schools.

So, for example, to defend religious liberty in a politically relevant way it is necessary, first of all, to adopt an issue-oriented approach. I do not think that there is a contradiction between, on the one hand, taking religious pluralism in a radical sense (i.e., without appealing to a civil religion), while, on the other hand, trying to forge political alliances for specific issues.

Of course, this is not meant as a plea for opportunism. Short-run considerations cannot be severed from visions of long-run developments. And it is here that basic convictions cannot but play a directing role. The difference between short and long is that, in the first case, the political and cultural framework can be considered as given, whereas in the long run the future of our political institutions is at stake.

As for the long run, I am not necessarily more optimistic than Dulles. Alliances for specific issues may in due time prove to have been based on little more than words, rather than on substantial agreement. With respect to fundamental issues, a shared political vision is called for. Such a vision, in turn, requires an ethos. Objectives, goals, and ideals do not reach far enough. What is needed is a passionate concern for the common good. That is what I mean by ethos. As I said before, visions of the good life cannot be abstracted from our religious convictions. In this respect, I am deeply sympathetic to Dulles's call "to join forces to give common testimony."

Yet, also, then (standing at the crossroads of structural and directional pluralities), I maintain that such a testimony should be made as politically relevant as possible. So, instead of appealing to shared beliefs in natural and revealed truths, I favor strengthening a political ethos.

You Name It

Before concluding, I want to introduce some thoughts on *contextual* or *cultural* pluralities (for our purpose here we may equate contextual with cultural). The avoidance by governments of divisive issues is causing a substitution of cultural for religious. My attention was only drawn to this recently when I attended a doctoral thesis examination. The thesis was on Dutch government policies with respect to cultural minorities. Cultures were primarily distinguished according to areas of origin. Hence, with respect to minority groups, no distinction was drawn between their areas of origin and their different religions. So the picture arising from this study is that it is enough to know where people are from and that no further inquiry into religious affiliations is needed. Therefore, no account was given of the fact that in Holland we have groups of Christian refugees from Syria and Iraq, which, as such, have a bond with endogenous Christian Churches in the country. From such a study it appears that all people from the Near East are Islamic—or that all religious Jewish people adhere to Judaism—overlooking the growing numbers of Messianic (Christ confessing) Jews. Or that all religious Egyptians are Muslim, whereas, in fact, there is a large minority of Christians belonging to the Coptic Churches.

What struck me most is that this insensitivity is omnipresent in the official documents used in that dissertation. It comes as a shock to realize that these documents avoid the word *religious* as much as possible, substituting terms as *cultural identity* for adherence to a religion. What will become of religious liberties if the religious factor is denied its name and when, in its stead, cultural contexts take on a quasireligious significance?

To reverse the trend, it would be good if Christians could show that taking religious pluralism seriously does not need to stand in the way at all of constructive political action. I am afraid that unconstructive attitudes of orthodox Christians have contributed unwittingly to the phenomenon of avoidance as described by Dulles. Much would be gained if through our ethos we could convince governments to face religious pluralism honestly.

In the West, the real threat to religious liberty is not pluralism—certainly not structural pluralism but also not directional pluralism. The real threat is anonymity—things not receiving names; and people being pinned down on their cultural identities, their religions being reduced to some cultural denominator—a denominator which, more often than not, turns out to be a mixture of geographical and ethnic characteristics.

Even the use of civil religion, no matter how well-intended, is already one step toward accepting anonymity, because civil religion stands and falls by not naming some real differences. Even the phrase *Judeo-Christian* may be already one bridge too far. Personally, I am reluctant to use it, if only for fear that it may unwittingly push Messianic Jews into anonymity. One task that Adam received in Paradise is still ours and even becomes increasingly important in these chaotic times: To name real differences.

Notes

1. Avery Dulles, "Two Languages of Salvation: The Lutheran-Catholic Joint Declaration," *First Things* (December 1999), 29.
2. *Ibid.*, 29.
3. *Ibid.*, 30.