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Religion and Civil Society

A Critical Reappraisal of America's Civic Engagement Debate

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This article looks at some of the cutting-edge issues that have been raised in the current civic engagement debate, notably with respect to the role played by organized religion in reviving America's democracy. The framework used to analyze the relationship between religion and civil society borrows from Arendt's, Habermas's, and Rawls's writings in political philosophy. In its core analytical claim, the article draws a division between a discourse-based deliberative democracy and one that is based on participation in mostly local communities and associations. In this context, the author contrasts a social-capital approach to understanding the role of religion and civil society with one that emphasizes the primacy of political relations and hence the importance of political capital. The purpose of the article is to provide a critical framework that can be used by theoreticians and practitioners, facing issues of management and political activism in an organizational environment, in which religious values and secular guidelines increasingly overlap.

Keywords: *citizenship; civil society; deliberative democracy; religion; social/political capital*

Recently published scholarship about the influence of religious organizations on civic engagement (mostly but not exclusively of U.S. provenience) has been by and large preoccupied with the social capital hypothesis, promoting an understanding of civil society as "the networks of ties and groups through which people connect to one another and get drawn into community and political affairs" (Skocpol & Fiorini, 1999, p. 2). In this context, organized religion and civil society are often characterized as maintaining an almost symbiotic relationship. There are two aspects to this symbiosis that the literature highlights.

A recent Independent Sector report titled *Faith and Philanthropy: The Connection Between Charitable Behavior and Giving to Religion* explores "the link between Americans' generosity to religion and their support of the vast array of other charitable groups that make up America's nonprofit sector" (Independent Sector, 2002, p. 4). The findings of this report—that those who contribute their financial resources and volunteer their time to congregations are more likely to give to

secular charities as well—seem to have been corroborated by a growing body of literature. Many of the articles it contains (Becker & Dhingra, 2001; Campbell & Yonish, 2003; Hodgkinson, 1995; Nemeth & Luidens, 2003; Wilson & Janoski, 1995) attribute to religious organizations a capacity to foster civic engagement by creating communal values and beneficial habits of giving and volunteering among their members.

A second aspect deals with the phenomenon that organized religion becomes increasingly involved with society as a supplier of social services. Research conducted by Independent Sector in this context has confirmed that congregations engage in a variety of activities beyond church-based worship and religious education (Saxon-Harold, Wiener, McCormack, & Weber, 2000, p. 3). Changes made to welfare policy in 1996, known as “charitable choice,” heightened public attention to the increasingly important role organized religion is playing in welfare policy. An initial report *What’s Faith Got to Do With It?* on the Irvine Foundation’s¹ experience with its Organized Religion portfolio argues that the involvement of churches, synagogues, and mosques in providing human services has a strong impact on civil society. Unlike social service agencies based on program delivery models, religious institutions provide “unprogrammed” space in which participants and members can decide together what ought to be done.

The argument that religious giving and volunteering has been instrumental in fostering civic engagement and the assumption that faith-based welfare reforms are beneficial for society at large have been criticized by liberal intellectuals mostly on constitutional and legal grounds (Skocpol, 2003; Skocpol & Fiorini, 1999). They have been joined in their criticism by social policy analysts (Chaves, 1999, 2003; Chaves & Tsitsos, 2001) pointing out that there is no hard empirical evidence for the proposition that faith-based social programs are more efficient than governmental and secular ones at healing society and helping the needy. However, criticisms based on constitutional arguments and the evaluation of welfare policies seem to dismiss the real danger of associating organized religion too closely with civil society and crediting it with too important a role in strengthening societal cohesion. Charitable giving in a spirit of love, occasional volunteering orchestrated by church congregations and participation in religious life are no remedies to widespread civic decay and will not create sufficient democratic leverage, as long as such initiatives do not promote shared values and address broader issues of a political community (Skocpol, 2003, p. 257).

The present article will attempt to reframe the civic engagement debate by redirecting thinking about the ways in which religion may (or may not) strengthen citizens’ involvement in society. The sources to which it turns to get inspiration are neither legal scholars nor welfare policy experts, but the classics of modern political philosophy as represented by the American philosopher John Rawls, his German counterpart Jürgen Habermas, and last but not least, Hannah Arendt, who was

preeminent in translating ancient Greek political thought into a modern theoretical framework.²

In *The Human Condition* (1958, p. 22), Arendt introduced the important distinction between “social” and “political,” which is at the core of the argument presented in this article. Being “social”—Arendt explains—is something human life has in common with animal life, in that the need for social companionship of the human species is imposed on it “by the needs of biological life, which are the same for the human animal as for other forms of animal life” (Arendt, 1958, p. 24). By contrast, the human capacity for political organization is not only different from but stands in stark contrast to that natural association whose center is the home and the family. The rise of the city-state in ancient Greece as the first democratic form of political organization meant that, besides the private life, man received a sort of second, political life (*bios politicos*); now every citizen belongs to two orders of existence, one natural and social, the other organizational and political (Arendt, 1958, p. 24). Arendt argues that “of all the activities necessary and present in human communities, only two were deemed to be political, . . . namely action (*praxis*) and speech (*lexis*)” (p. 25). The fundamental characteristic of society as a political organization—and not a merely social association—has to be taken into account when reframing civic engagement and analyzing the role of religion in society.

Categorizing society as a “political” rather than a “social” phenomenon has an important consequence for the method of inquiry used in the research presented here. It is a well-established fact in philosophy of science (Boyd, 1991) that scientific methods as the source of observational predictions are theory dependent. In other words, methods for employing theories in making observational predictions depend on the conceptual structure of the theories in question. From this it follows that an argument on civic engagement, which is built on the political as the constitutive characteristic of society, will put the emphasis on the institutional context of the body politic in which citizens operate, rather than the attitudes, resources, and interactions of individuals. Thus, the inquiry about religion and civil society presented here will be based on the primacy of political rather than social and personal relations.

The political–theoretical framework and the institutional analysis that underlie the following discussion offer an interesting new way of understanding the relationship between religion and civil society. Such an approach is not necessarily conflicting with—but to a large extent complementary to—the social science–based literature and empirical inquiries addressing this topic in the United States. The theoretical and methodological framework used in this article also contains the additional potential of shedding new light on the relationship between religion and civil society in contexts others than those prevailing in this country, such as the problems posed by the massive influx of Muslim immigrants in Europe (Wagner, 2008).

The article begins by reconsidering in Section I the meaning of civic engagement, which—as already mentioned—has traditionally been framed in the context of the

so-called “social capital” approach. As a consequence, much of the civic engagement literature focuses on interpersonal relations and the behavior of individuals, instead of drawing attention to the institutional context of a democratic polity. Based on this criticism, Section II introduces the conception of the public use of reason and develops an ethics of democratic citizenship, through which citizens are engaged in a continuing process of mutual deliberation and renegotiation of their social contract. Such a discourse-based understanding of the polity as a deliberative democracy contrasts with a communitarian view of society that focuses on social capital and participation in associational life. Building on this discussion, Section III will analyze the relationship between religion and a democratic polity in the framework of the theory of political liberalism. This section explains Rawls’s (1971) and Habermas’s (1962/1976) positions of reasonable pluralism, drawing attention to the attitudes that secular and religious citizens might attribute to one another, were they to understand the task of translating religious content for use in the public sphere as a cooperative endeavor. Moreover, the section criticizes the writings by both Rawls and Habermas as politically too disengaged for adequately describing the role of organized religion in facilitating full democratic participation by the greatest possible number of citizens. Expanding on this criticism, the article will in its Concluding Remarks draw an important distinction. The secular legitimization of a deliberative democracy rests on two components: the equal political participation of all citizens in a political community and the epistemic conditions for a democratic deliberation to produce rationally acceptable outcomes. Only based on this distinction can the role of religion and its relationship to civil society be properly understood.

Section I

Civic Engagement Reconsidered

Standard research about the ways in which religion may strengthen citizens’ involvement in society has been governed by the assumption that (a) civic engagement has declined in recent years and (b) revitalization of society must come about through reform movements, especially at the grassroots level, and by focusing on the moral rejuvenation of individuals and families (Wuthnow, 2003, p. 203). Hence, much of the current civic engagement debate focuses on interpersonal relations and the behavior and/or beliefs of individuals, especially in informal and voluntary settings (Wuthnow, 2003, p. 191); it is framed in the context of the so-called “social capital” approach.

There is no denying that local congregations and other religiously affiliated organizations are an especially potent source for strengthening social ties and promoting communal values. Although the changing composition of American religion—mirrored in the relative decline of mainline Protestant denominations—may affect

its capacity for mobilizing civic engagement in the future (Wuthnow, 1999, p. 335; Wuthnow, 2002), there is ample empirical evidence suggesting that religion disproportionately generates social capital (Coleman, 2003, p. 33; see also Campbell & Yonish, 2003; Nemeth & Luidens, 2003). Churches, synagogues, mosques, and other houses of worship are the primary sites where members adopt the kind of norms and build the networks capable of generating civic solidarity in society at large (Coleman, 2003, p. 37). Beyond the social capital forged in and through churches and congregations proper, special purpose religious organizations (such as schools and hospitals) and para-church interest groups engaged in community organizing and lobbying also contribute to strengthening social trust and civic solidarity (Coleman, 2003, p. 39). By creating networks of organized reciprocity and reversing the downward trend in associational participation, faith-based organizations have the potential to renew the idea of mediating institutions for a society of the 21st century. More important, it can be argued that religiously generated social capital is different as compared to social capital arising within other kinds of social institutions, making up for the democratic deficit caused by the relative weakness of trade unions, national federations, and anonymous umbrella organizations (Coleman, 2003, p. 41; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995).

Many of the arguments about the role of religion for building social capital pay tribute to Alexis de Tocqueville's remarks about Americans' voluntary spirit in the 1830s. In his "Foreword" to the Independent Sector report *Faith and Philanthropy*, Robert W. Edgar, Secretary of the National Council of Churches, states that "like Tocqueville at his best, this study holds up a mirror to the landscape of American philanthropy and reflects back to us a picture that shows a bold and persistent link between patterns of giving to religious institutions and the broader society" (Independent Sector, 2002, p. 6). Such value judgments should, however, not prevent us from asking questions about the extent to which religious involvement actually helps to mobilize participation in society at large. As a matter of fact, the neo-Tocquevillean generalization that associations bridge social divisions and contribute to a spirit of cooperation has been dismissed in many quarters as a misrepresentation of the Frenchman's idealization of American democracy. He specifically called *political* associations—and not the civic ones—the "great free schools of associations" in American democracy (Edwards, Foley, & Diani, 2001, p. 140). As Wuthnow (1999, p. 362) remarks, "what interested Tocqueville about voluntary organizations was not just their ability to provide friendships or to teach people civic skills; more important was their ability to forge connections across large segments of the population, spanning communities and regions and drawing together people from different ethnic backgrounds and occupations."

According to historian Kathleen McCarthy (2003), this holds true particularly for the religiously oriented associations of Tocqueville's time. Although earlier studies have often stressed their conservatism and localism, organizations such as the ABS (American Bible Society), the ATS (American Tract Society), and the ASSU

(American Sunday School Union)—sometimes referred to as the Benevolent Empire—helped to create in the first half of the 19th century a network of social and political mobilization that reached into hundreds of communities across the republic (McCarthy, 2003, p. 49). At around the same time, some of the Black mutual aid groups that surfaced in the wake of the Revolution and promoted charity, self-help, and individual probity had evolved into benevolent societies—such as the FAS (Free African Society)—with a much wider agenda. Together with African American congregations, they provided a resilient political voice for the country's most disadvantaged groups and institutional mechanisms for shaping the Black agenda (McCarthy, 2003, p. 120). Almost 200 years later, and with many denominational affiliations in decline, the ability of religious organizations to generate national networks and to create innovative partnerships with the secular community "may be the greatest test of their role in mobilizing civic engagement" (Wuthnow, 1999, p. 362).

McCarthy's (2003) historical research and the argument developed by Wuthnow (1999), challenge the notion that civic solidarity is something purely social and separate from the democratic polity. At the same time, their views inject a healthy note of skepticism into a civic engagement debate that—as Skocpol and Fiorini (1999, p. 14) note—romanticizes sheer participation in small groups in general and religious movements in particular. Social capital theory—by overemphasizing interpersonal relations—risks being a step backwards, compared to much of the best social theorizing of the last half of the 20th century, which highlights structures and functions of institutions (Wuthnow, 2003, p. 192). In modern social sciences, institutions are defined as complexes of individuals, collectives, organizations, and the activities through which they are bound together by a common mission, purpose, or focus. These might include government, family, corporations, or—particularly important in our context—religion and democratic polity (Wuthnow, 2003, p. 196). Seen through the lens of institutionalism, revitalization of society depends to a large extent on the availability of funds, knowledge, and other organizational resources, rather than personal connections and social ties. Specifically, voluntary associations—be they religious or secular—matter as sources of popular power in political processes, not just as facilitators of individual participation and generators of social trust (Skocpol & Fiorini, 1999, p. 15).

Many of the problems affecting our society—poverty, power disparity, and political demobilization—cannot be solved by neighborly interactions and occasional volunteering with church congregations or nonprofit agencies (Skocpol, 2003, p. 259). Shrinking government, concentrating civic energies at the local level, and handing over public social services to religious congregations are therefore harmful remedies against the plight of American society (Skocpol, 2003, p. 254). Such measures will not create the necessary democratic consensus to tackle problems that can only be addressed with concerted national commitment (Skocpol, 2003, p. 255). Effective democracy is about more than sociability and trust, and it certainly requires much more than charitable ties. It requires fiscally sound governments at the federal,

state, and local levels as well as strong umbrella organizations that nurture national solidarity and afford collective leverage by and for the majority.

This analysis suggests that the civic engagement debate has to be reframed. The discussion of social capital should shift from one that emphasizes the social aspects of individual connections to one that includes the political dimension of a democratic polity in which individual relationships are embedded (Wuthnow, 1999, p. 196). To find such a political perspective, it would help to turn to the writings of John Rawls and other classics of modern political philosophy. In this discipline, the relation between religion and society were of concern long before social capital theorists began to address the issue.

Section II

Toward a Discourse-Based Ethics of Citizenship

Rawls's (1971) work recasts Rousseau's (1762/1947) doctrine of the social contract, in which the fair terms of social cooperation are conceived as agreed to by those engaged in it, as free and equal citizens of the society in which they lead their lives (Wagner, 2004). In his earlier work—most prominently represented by *A Theory of Justice*—Rawls (1971) assumed a well-ordered society, one which is relatively homogeneous with respect to its basic moral beliefs and in which there is broad agreement about what constitutes a functioning democracy. Later on he came to recognize that what characterizes a modern democratic polity is a plurality of incompatible (religious, philosophical, and moral) doctrines coexisting within the framework of democratic institutions. Recognizing this as a permanent condition of democracy, Rawls (1993) revises in *Political Liberalism* the idea of justice as fairness and explains how a stable and just society of free and equal citizens can live in concord when deeply divided by incompatible comprehensive doctrines (Rawls, 1999, p. 132).

Rawls's (1993) approach to understanding coexistence in a pluralistic society is based on the idea of public reason, first outlined in *Political Liberalism* and then further refined in his seminal article "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited" (Rawls, 1999, pp. 129-180). The argument put forward by Rawls has two components: one political, the other epistemological. With respect to the political component, "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, p. 132). In other words, the political part of the argument emphasizes the condition of equal participation of citizens for a democratic polity (understood by Rawls, 1999, p. 138, as a deliberative democracy) to function properly. The other part of Rawls's (1999) explanation specifies the epistemological condition for citizens participating in democratic deliberations to achieve a satisfactory outcome. Citizens have to recognize that they cannot approach

mutual understanding with respect to constitutional essentials and matters of social justice on the basis of their irreconcilable comprehensive doctrines (Rawls, 1999, p. 132). When citizens deliberate in a public setting on such matters, they exchange views and suppose that their political ideas may be revised by discussion with other citizens. Reasonable pluralism (i.e., the fact that citizens make their arguments based on a plurality of reasonable but conflicting religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines) is therefore a basic feature of deliberative democracy (Rawls, 1999, p. 31).

The problem with the idea of reasonable pluralism is that throughout his essay "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," Rawls (1999) shows a tendency to limit what he considers as "public" to the three branches of government. Every citizen must know that only secular reasons count beyond the institutional threshold that divides the nonpublic sphere from parliaments, courts, ministries, and administrations. The role religious and other comprehensive doctrines play in democratic deliberations is therefore restricted to an area outside the discourse of judges, the discourse of chief executives and legislators, and the discourse of candidates for public office in party platforms and political statements (Rawls, 1999, p. 133). The liberal conception of the use of reason in democratic deliberations is based on a rigid boundary that separates the public sphere from a residual "nonpublic" arena, in which citizens' political demands are aggregated in a relatively unspecified way. Rawls is particularly ambiguous with respect to a clear distinction between the public forum proper (i.e., the state) and the arena of political parties. According to *The Public Reason Revisited* (1999, p. 133), campaign managers, party platforms, and political statements are part of the three-part public forum. In footnote 13 of Rawls's (1999, p. 134) essay, however, the political culture of parties is treated as belonging to the nonpublic sphere, together with lobbying entities and special interest groups.

Also part of the nonpublic sphere is what Rawls (1999, p. 134) calls the "background culture" of civil society. He points out that political deliberations and arguments about the common good will not occur initially in the more narrowly defined public forum but will develop freely in the background culture with its many and diverse agencies and associations, the nonpublic political culture and the—properly so named—media of all kinds, which mediate between the public and the nonpublic sphere. The term *background culture* as a specification for what is meant by civil society is revealing for Rawls's liberal position. It restricts the role of churches, of associations of all kind, and institutions of learning at all levels (Rawls, 1999, p. 134, Fn. 13) to the "backstage" of politics. Rawls concedes that "backstage" (i.e., in the background culture), the idea of public reason does not apply. He recognizes the need for full and open discussion of public matters in civil society, based on other arguments than those drawn from public reason (Rawls, 1999, p. 134) and in that respect fully agrees to a discourse model of political liberalism. But restricting civil society to the background of democratic deliberations seems to imply that the strategic political decision will be made in a forum that is strictly separated from a privatized and depoliticized background culture. In this position, civil society in general and

religious organizations in particular will be ill-equipped to redefine as matters of justice needing discursive legitimation what had previously been considered nonpublic and nonpolitical issues (Casanova, 1994, p. 65; Hollenbach, 1994, p. 18).

The need of political liberalism to surround the arena of public deliberations by rigid boundaries led in the case of Rawls (1999) to a fairly abstract conception of the private to public divide. But the same objection cannot be made to Jürgen Habermas, Rawls's German counterpart as a political philosopher. In his "Habilitation"-Thesis *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (1962/1976) (translated 1989 into English as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*), he took—early in his academic career—a more historical and therefore less dogmatic approach to the idea of "public sphere." He discussed the institutionalization of political discourse and the creation of a public sphere in the Enlightenment and the revolutions of the 18th century (see also Cohen & Arato, 1992, p. 392). According to Habermas (1962/1976, p. 45), early examples of the public sphere include London coffee houses and French literary salons of that time, which then evolved into a more institutionalized public arena as an intermediary between the state and the needs of society.

Based on this understanding of public sphere, Habermas (2005, p. 4) discussed in a lecture recently delivered at the New School for Social Research some of the consequences that Rawls's conception of the public use of reason has on what—referring to Audi (2000)—he called "the ethics of citizenship." To grow together as one society, citizens have to become involved in a continuing process of mutual deliberation and renegotiation of their social contract. In considering constitutional essentials (often questions of death and life, such as abortion, assisted suicide, or embryonic stem-cell research) and matters of basic justice (such as universal health care and tax policies), only reasoned arguments can be used to which all citizens have equal access. In this respect, citizens act reasonably, when they offer one another fair terms of collaboration and treat one another as free and equal in a system of political cooperation. "For all their ongoing dissent on questions of world views and religious doctrines," Habermas (2005, p. 7) writes, "citizens are meant to respect one another as free and equal members of their political community; this is the core of civic solidarity." Here Habermas reiterates what Audi and Wolterstorff (1997, p. 172) had emphasized already before: that in culturally diverse societies mutual respect, more than mutual attachment, emerges as the core element of citizenship.

Such an emphasis on a discourse-based ethics of citizenship as the constitutive element of society stands in stark contrast to the sentiment of belonging to a community, voiced by many social capital theorists and communitarian philosophers. Habermas's (2005) understanding of civic engagement has to be interpreted in the historical context in which he began to develop his political theory. Born in 1927, he came to public attention in 1953 for a newspaper article attacking Martin Heidegger for allowing his "Heidelberg Lectures" to be republished with the original allusions to the inner greatness of Nazism and its emphasis on participation in the *Volksgemeinschaft* (folk community) (Judt, 2005, p. 276). The only sort of national sentiment that Habermas felt

it was appropriate and prudent to encourage in his countrymen was constitutional patriotism (*Verfassungspatriotismus*) (i.e., the recognition that the *Grundgesetz*—basic law or constitution—is what epitomizes the German democracy. In his political writings he insisted therefore again and again that only a discourse model of democracy—and not one that requires assimilation with a community—is compatible with a multicultural and ethnically diverse modern polity (Habermas, 1996; Schomberg & Baynes, 2002).

Rawls's (1999) idea of public reason and Habermas's (1999) view of what constitutes the core of civic engagement provide an alternative contractualist framework for understanding society as a deliberative democracy, different from the communitarian model of an associational (or "associationist," as Rawls, 1999, p. 64, would say) democracy that is dominant in much of the social capital literature. Deliberative democracy emphasizes the idea of rational discourse and the use of public reason in the negotiation of the social contract, rather than the idea of participation and the need for joining local communities and special-interest associations. Conversely, from an associational perspective, the focus is on social and personal ties that hold society together, whereas the contractualist framework of deliberative democracy puts the emphasis on the epistemic foundations that make society possible. In a deliberative democracy, members of society are united with each other by a constitutional regime (Rawls, 1993, p. 42) and as equal participants in a public discourse. In an associational democracy, by contrast, membership in society is mediated through the membership in particular groups, each of which is often governed by its own comprehensive doctrine (that in some instances may violate basic democratic rights of at least some fellow citizens). Finally, associational democracies are structured in a hierarchical way, viewing citizens as members of different groups (Rawls, 1999, p. 64) and offering them terms depending on the worth of their potential contribution and not linked to the equal status of citizenship, as would be the case in a deliberative democracy (Rawls, 1993, p. 42).

The contractualist framework of a deliberative democracy pays homage to Rousseau's *Social Contract* (1762/1947) and its translation into modern thought by Rawls and Habermas, rather than to Tocqueville's "new science" of forming voluntary associations (Zunz & Kahan, 2002, p. 181), from which many social capital theorists borrow their ideas.³ The idea of deliberative democracy is based on social norms that promote cooperative behavior across a wide range of the population, instead of emphasizing social capital and face-to-face interactions in small groups. In a deliberative democracy, individuals are viewed as equal citizens, whereas in an associational democracy, their status in society is mediated through membership in associations. Citizens express their involvement in society not in the first instance by volunteering for the common good, but by participating in public deliberations (i.e., by voting). Public deliberation must be recognized as a basic feature of democracy and set free from the curse of money (Rawls, 1999, p. 139). This requires the use of coercive taxation and sets limits to using ever more generous tax exemptions as

incentives for voluntary giving. Finally, the governance structure of a deliberative democracy emphasizes the key role of elected government, instead of devolving the authority for public affairs to third parties.

Section III

The Role of Religion In Democratic Decision Making

Instead of romanticizing small-group participation as the social capital advocates tend to do, the alternative model of deliberative democracy views society as a platform provided to free and equal citizens for renegotiation of their social contract. Framing civic engagement in this manner may shed new light on the role of organized religion in society, but it also raises difficult questions concerning the decision-making process in a democracy. For instance, may ordinary citizens (i.e., people who are politically active but are not government officials) rely on religious considerations when casting their votes and participating in democratic deliberations?

Not surprisingly, the author of *Public Reason Revisited* takes a somewhat purist position with respect to the political role of religion. Rawls (1999) concedes that in a pluralistic, multicultural and multiethnic democracy, mutual deliberations necessarily include the use of conflicting religious and moral codes or what he calls “comprehensive doctrines.” Therefore, political liberalism agrees to the need for full and open discussion of public matters based on arguments other than those drawn from public reason (Rawls, 1999, p. 134) but only in the background culture of civil society and the nonpublic political arena. As far as the public political forum (i.e., the state per se is concerned), citizens should abstain from engaging in democratic deliberations when based solely on religious considerations. In other words, comprehensive doctrines—religious and others—cannot be labeled as true or false, respectively as right or wrong, but only as politically reasonable when addressed by citizens to citizens outside the public sphere (Rawls, 1999, p. 132).

Restricting the role of religion in democratic decision making to the domain of civil society, special interest groups, and political parties, does, however, not appear to be a practicable solution for the real world of politics. In a democracy, voting is an activity that occurs within the public sphere. Do religious citizens act against the principle of public reason, when they participate in church-sponsored deliberations and weigh their religious convictions before casting a vote in an assisted-suicide referendum or in an election of a candidate who favors capital punishment? Contrary to Rawls (1999), Habermas (2005, p. 12) argues that contributions to political deliberations “should not be subject to constraints on the mode of expression in the political public sphere.” The liberal state, which specifically protects religious forms of living, cannot at the same time expect that citizens justify their political statements independent of their religious convictions or worldviews. The institutional

Table 1
Deliberative Versus Associational Democracy

Characteristics	Communitarian Model of Associational Democracy (based on participation)	Contractualist Model of Deliberative Democracy (based on discourse)
Underlying theoretical framework	Tocqueville, Putnam	Rousseau, Rawls, Habermas
Core concept	Social capital	Social contract
Status of individual defined by	Citizenship	Membership in association
Societal involvement through	Volunteering	Voting
Financial contribution based on	Donated money	Tax money
Governance structure based on	Third-party government	Elected government

threshold between the public sphere and civil society can at best be considered “a filter that from the Babel of voices in the informal flows of public communication” (Habermas, 2005, p. 11) allows only the most valuable contributions to pass through. But the liberal state has an interest of its own to let religious voices penetrate into the public sphere, “for secular society could otherwise cut itself off from key resources for the creation of meaning and identity” (Habermas, 2005, p. 11).

With such a tolerant stance toward religion, Habermas (2005) takes a position that clearly departs from the view of political liberalism held by Rawls (1999). According to Habermas (2005), the ethics of citizenship derived from political liberalism impose an asymmetrical burden on religious traditions and communities, a burden that secular citizens do not have to shoulder. Religious citizens are expected to adopt a secular attitude when participating in political deliberations; secular citizens, by contrast, are absolved of similar cognitive requirements when formulating their arguments. Habermas (2005, pp. 16-17) proposes therefore a more balanced norm for civic engagement, one that requires from both secular and religious citizens certain “epistemic attitudes” when becoming involved in democratic decision making. On one hand, religious citizens must make an effort to translate the vocabulary of a particular religious community into a generally accessible language. On the other hand, their secular counterparts have to open their minds to the possible truth content of religious propositions and engage in a serious discussion of contentious political issues. The translation of a religious comprehensive doctrine for use in the public sphere is therefore a cooperative task. It necessitates a complementary learning process in which the nonreligious citizens must likewise participate, if their religious fellow citizens are not to be encumbered with an asymmetrical burden (Habermas, 2005, p. 12; Habermas, 2003). “As long as the secular citizens perceive religious traditions . . . as archaic relicts of pre-modern societies,” Habermas (2005, p. 16) argues, “they will understand freedom of religion as the natural preservation of an endangered species. From their viewpoint, religion no longer has any intrinsic justifications to exist.”

Despite Habermas's (2005) effort to develop a more tolerant version of political liberalism, the conception of public reason comes still across as an abstract and disembodied idealization, resulting from a gender-neuter and class-neuter analysis of democratic citizenship. Although this criticism of political liberalism is justified to a certain extent, it doesn't get to the heart of the philosophical argument about the relation between religion and civil society. The aim of political philosophy is not in the first instance to analyze the functioning of democracy in a specific institutional environment, but to understand what role the institution of citizenship should or would play, if a society were to approximate the ideal of a deliberative democracy. The way Rawls and Habermas conceive the impact of religion on a democratic polity does not in the first instance depend on empirical observations, but on the moral claims about freedom and equality that form the core of the conception of democratic citizenship. It is nevertheless true that such claims cannot be derived by means of logical deduction exclusively but have to be based on complementary empirical research and an analysis of a particular societal context. In this respect, empirically grounded research about the role of organized religion is likely to produce more satisfactory results than Habermas's (1996, 2003, 2005) and Rawls's (1971, 1993, 1999) admittedly abstract theoretical considerations have provided.

Such a contextual analysis was recently presented by Weithman (2002). To advance his argument, this author draws the distinction between formal citizenship as a legal category and "realized citizenship" as full participation in a democratic polity (Weithman, 2002, p. 36). Realized citizenship has a subjective as well as an objective condition. From a subjective perspective, members of society have to identify in the course of a lifelong learning process with their role as a citizen, which—unlike other social roles—is not assumed by explicit consent. As the objective condition, it is equally important that citizens are given access to resources (information, skills, and networks) and offered effective opportunities to take part in society. In his study, Weithman contends that churches and congregations—understood as the primary institutional bearers of religiously motivated political action (Weithman, 2002, p. 38)—play a role in fostering realized citizenship. They are known to enrich the political debate and facilitate full political participation especially among citizens who face serious political disadvantages. Based on this argument, Weithman concludes that in a deliberative democracy, ordinary citizens should be allowed to draw on the guidelines their churches have formed, when either voting or running for public office.

The evidence that churches promote realized citizenship can be gathered from studies on factors influencing political equality in the United States such as the one presented by Verba et al. (1995; see also Hollenbach, 1997). Their research shows that civil society in general and churches in particular strengthen democracy by providing citizens access to financial and informational resources and preparing the basis for their effective participation in political life. Of special importance in this context are research findings indicating that voting is the form of political

participation with which religious affiliation is most highly correlated—directly as well as indirectly. With respect to the indirect correlation, religious organizations in the wider sense (i.e., not only churches and congregations) do better than many other nonpolitical organizations—and better than trade unions (Verba et al., 1995, p. 378)—at fostering civic skills, an important mediating factor for active citizenship (Leege, 1988, p. 712; Weithman, 2002, p. 43). It is well known that church basements and other localities associated with religion are venues where citizens learn to speak in public, write letters, and chair meetings as well as how to approach authorities (Weithman, 2002, p. 43). More important, however, Verba et al. (1995, p. 359) were able to provide evidence that there is a strong direct correlation between membership in congregations and voting behavior, insofar as attendance at church (which is used as a measure for religious and/or institutional affiliation) is significantly related to voting. Through such direct and indirect mechanisms, churches and other religious associations constitute a prime source of participatory equality in American public life. This holds particularly true for the political role of America's Black congregations. Among African Americans, religiosity is positively correlated with racial consciousness and Black churches are therefore important agents in promoting political involvement of citizens (Weithman, 2002, p. 45).

Church-based political activism not only helps individual citizens to more fully realize their citizenship, it also addresses a crucial institutional shortcoming of contemporary democracy: the divide between civil society on one hand and the institutions of the public (state) and nonpublic (political parties and lobbying groups) political realm on the other hand. There are, however, few studies that analyze the institutional dimension of the relation between religion and democracy, as opposed to the individual dimension of political behavior. An important exception is Wood's (2003) research comparing two models of grassroots political participation in urban America, one that is rooted institutionally in religious congregations, the other culturally in the racial identities of participants (Wood, 2003, p. 71): Center for Third-World Organizing (CTWO) and Pacific Institute for Community Organization (PICO). Based on these case studies, the author provides evidence that local church-based organizing federations (such as PICO) function as "bridging institutions." Not unlike political parties or lobbying groups in the nonpublic political realm, community organizations "aggregate the interest and value-commitments of individuals and collectivities in civil society and channel them into the decision-making process of governing elites" (Wood, 2003, p. 83). Through this mechanism, church-based community organizations such as PICO provide the kind of democratically controlled links between citizens and their state "that are so scarce in contemporary American society" (Wood, 2003, p. 83). Wood's findings corroborate similar research, which suggests that church-based community organizing networks show an ability to link congregations to the public sphere and to mobilize their resources for the common good (Campbell, 2002, p. 223).

Concluding Remarks

The empirical studies referred to in the section above shed new light on the role organized religion can play in promoting democracy. On an individual level, churches have a direct as well as an indirect impact on the voting behavior of citizens and in this sense contribute to their fuller participation in the American polity. From a more institutional perspective, faith-based community organizations project their power into the public realm, thereby making the political debate on legislative proposals more responsive to the needs of ordinary people. It is hard to imagine what institutions would counterbalance more effectively the many sources of participatory inequality affecting minorities, if religious ones withdrew from politics in the name of a secular understanding of deliberative democracy (Weithman, 2002, p. 45).

It becomes clear from this preliminary conclusion to our analysis that religion's contribution to society should not be framed primarily in a social capital perspective, with its focus on mutual trust, communal values, and networks of organized reciprocity. In that respect, the current civic engagement debate and the role assigned by it to religion for reviving civil society suffers from category confusion. It results from the often unconscious substitution of the social for the political as the fundamental characteristic of a democratic society, based on mutual deliberations in the public sphere, as opposed to a natural association whose center is the home, the family, and the neighborhood (Arendt, 1958, p. 23). As a matter of fact, "political capital" and not "social capital" may be the appropriate metaphor to describe the contribution of religious organizations to a more equal participation in democratic decision making.

However, reducing the role of organized religion to building political capital does not give a full picture of its influence on a democratic polity either. As was mentioned in the introduction to this article, two activities constitute the essence of what Hannah Arendt (1958, p. 25) called "political life" or the order of existence of citizens: action (*praxis*) and speech (*lexis*). The human capacity for democratic political organization rests therefore on two equally important pillars: One is the equal participation of all citizens in democratic decision making (political action); the other their obligation to care for rationally acceptable outcomes when speaking with each other and contributing to civic argument and public debate (political speech). From this it follows that the democratic potential of organized religion has to be assessed from both these perspectives: the impact on political participation and democratic decision making (elections and votes) as well as the contribution to civic argument through a broadly inclusive exchange of opinion in civil society and testimony in the public sphere proper (court proceedings, legislative sessions, and administrative hearings) (Weithman, 2002, p. 49).

Several empirical studies corroborated that in the United States, churches and congregations have made valuable contributions to democratic participation by building political capital and facilitating "realized citizenship" among the most disenfranchised members of society. Whether religious institutions should also have an impact

on the *content* of civic arguments remains, however, a more contested matter. Some are concerned that government could become the agent of a religious majority, if one were to let faith-based arguments penetrate into the public sphere. What would be problematic in such a case is not a religiously influenced majority vote per se, assuming that it has been correctly carried out, but the violation of the second core component of the democratic procedure: a fair deliberation based on reasoned arguments (Habermas, 2005, p. 13).

In response to fundamentalist tendencies of monotheistic religions and the challenges of modernity they face in a pluralistic society, Habermas (2003, p. 252) formulates three epistemic rules for the use of religious arguments in the public sphere. First, members of religious communities must self-reflectively process the cognitive dissonances that result from the existence of other religious doctrines (respectively, the existence of other denominations of their belief) within a pluralistic society hitherto dominated by their own claims to truth. Second, communities of faith have to let their members reconcile religious doctrines with scientific knowledge about the state and origin of the world in a way that is not in conflict with their faith. Third, as citizens of a democratic polity, members of religious communities have to connect the egalitarian universalism and secular morality of the constitutional state with the premises of their own comprehensive doctrines.

This arduous work of hermeneutic self-reflection (Habermas, 2005, p. 15) cannot be imposed on communities of faith by the secular state, but must be undertaken from within religious traditions themselves. In Western societies, the secular reconstruction of sacred truths has traditionally been performed by what came to be called public theology. For the United States, two role models of public theologians, who translated the language of Christian traditions for use in the public arena, immediately come to mind. One, of course, is Martin Luther King, who again and again used the imagery and stories of the Bible to express the aspirations of freedom that fueled the civil rights movement of the 1960s (Franklin, 1990, p. 56). The other is Reinhold Niebuhr, who by one of his biographers was appropriately given the title "theologian of public life" (Rasmussen, 1988).

Ever since he began his career as a preacher and teacher, Niebuhr stuck to his *leitmotiv* that theology is meant to aid "the ethical reconstruction of modern society" (quoted by Rasmussen, 1988, p. 17, from *Does Civilization Need Religion?*, 1927). This requires forging a religious imagination that sustains a strong commitment to public life and guides policy decisions that represent the leading edge of justice (Rasmussen, 1988, p. 17). Niebuhr's theological *pièce de résistance* was the contribution in two volumes to the prestigious Gifford Lectures *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. In later volumes, such as *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense, Faith and History*, and *The Self and the Drama of History*, Niebuhr further elaborated on his public theology and social-ethical criticism.⁴ The political argument he developed in these and other works can be summed up in one single powerful sentence: "Man's

capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary" (quoted by Schlesinger, 2005, p. 12).

The core theme of Niebuhr's public theology, the relationship between social justice and democracy, has also been explored by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB). By contrast to liberal Protestantism, where the contribution to civic argument was traditionally left to individual theologians, the responsibility to bring the tradition of faith to bear on public issues falls, in the Catholic Church with its more hierarchical structure, on the bishops "as the titular operators of a vast network of institutions" (Weithman, 2002, p. 50). They do it through their regular work as preachers and teachers and more visibly in the pastoral letters they issue as a corporate body. One of the best known examples of these pastoral letters by American bishops is *Economic Justice for All* (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1986). The bishops explicitly issued the letter as bearers of a tradition of moral thought and as citizens concerned with pressing public affairs and persistent economic injustice (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1986, paras. 7-11). By arguing that "the American promise of liberty and justice for all give the poor a special claim on the nation's concern" (chap. 1, para. 19), the letter puts forward an alternative and unpopular interpretation of values that democracy professes to advance. The bishops derive their argument from the premise of faith that human beings have an inviolable dignity because they are made in God's image. In this respect, the letter offers an example of how a community of faith connects the egalitarian universalism of the constitutional state with its own comprehensive doctrine.

It follows from the examples of public theology presented above that in a deliberative democracy, the role of religion should not be reduced to the one of fostering political participation in the more formal sense of the word. Rather, the kind of oppositional advocacy (Weithman, 2002, p. 52) practiced by the theologians and church leaders referenced in this article give at least some anecdotal evidence that communities of faith are having an impact on the content of political debates and are also contributing to the intellectual vitality of civic argument. As long as they take a self-reflective and critical stance, such theological interventions should not be interpreted as fundamentalist reactions to modernity and an attempt to impose a religious agenda on an otherwise secular society, but as normative critiques of problematic societal trends. As Casanova (1994, p. 65) argued, at issue here are neither the boundaries between public and private nor the disestablishment of religion per se, because they are necessary to protect fundamental constitutional freedoms. At issue is merely the need to recognize that in the context of a radically discursive model of democracy, these boundaries must be open to a continuing process of contestation. By redefining what ought to be considered issues of social justice—and not merely matters of private concern—public theology will continue to play an important part in a discourse-based deliberative democracy.

Notes

1. From 1996 to 2005, The James Irvine Foundation (www.irvine.org) supported the Organized Religion Initiative, a portfolio of grant investments that sought to capitalize on the potential of congregations as civic spaces to draw new and low-income Californians into greater civic engagement.

2. In this context, it may be interesting to note that Arendt preferred the term *political theory* to the one of *political philosophy* (see, for instance, Arendt, 1958, p. 227, Fn. 69).

3. I hesitate to use geographic labels, characterizing a deliberative democracy as a "European" model of society, as compared to the "American" model of an associational democracy. The hesitation does not only stem from the fact that the eminent theorist of deliberative democracy is an American scholar, but also from taking into account that Tocqueville was of European descent. More important, however, his view—so cherished in the United States—that associations play an important role as vehicles of integration in democratic societies has not gone unchallenged, not even in American history. In *The Federalist* (Paper No. 10), James Madison argued that factions "are the mortal disease under which popular governments have every where perished" (Hamilton, Madison, & Jay, 1787/2006, p. 52). The proliferation of factions, he goes on, demonstrates Americans' "zeal for different opinions concerning religion, concerning government, and many other points . . . and rendered them much more disposed to vex and oppress each other, than to cooperate for their common good" (1787/2006, p. 53). Madison's concern about factions echoes Rousseau's (1762/1947, p. 27), who argues in *The Social Contract* that special interest groups or "partial associations" can have a negative impact on societal integration. "When there are partial associations," Rousseau (1762/1947, p. 27) argues, "it is politic to multiply their number, that they may be all kept on an equality." It would therefore be incorrect to attribute the label "American" to the model of associational democracy, as opposed to a "European" model of a contractualist and deliberative society.

4. These works were published (in the order quoted in the text) in 1941, 1943, 1944, 1949, and 1955.

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