

New course in universal theology

Having successfully run the first course, in the Institute's course program, on "An introduction to the world view of the Noahide laws", with both local and on-line international participants, the Institute is now planning to launch its second course on the "Universal theological principles", which underlie both Judaism and the Noahide laws. The course is to look at, amongst others, the concepts of G-d and creation, revelation and reason, providence and redemption, with a special view to the interface between these concepts and the terms of western philosophy. Such a presentation was recently trialed by the Director of the Institute at a Sydney conference of the Australasian Philosophers of Religion Association.

It will make use of text material from works in the series Monographs in Judaism and Civilization, which can be viewed at <http://www.ijc.com.au/monographs.html> The course will run for approximately 7 weeks, commencing October 16 in Melbourne and simultaneously and interactively on line. See <http://www.ijc.com.au/courses.html> Course cost is \$120 (plus GST for Australian participants) and includes course text and materials.

The origins of the Interface Program

The Interface Program began as a joint venture of the Institute for Judaism and Civilization and the Communal centre "Ohel Devora". The latter provided the venue, whilst the Institute organized the program. The program was originally launched on 9 November 2006 in the home of Mr Morry Fraid, whose company "Spotlight" together with the Docklands Press, led by Mr Moody Aboughatis, were the initial major sponsors of the program. It was opened by the then Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Hon Alexander Downer.



Photo credit: R. Chemny

Core values in Australian society

Mr Downer, whose father had been Minister for Immigration in an earlier Australian Government, spoke of the exceptional cultural diversity of Australian society, marked also by a high cultural tolerance. At the same time, he said that the ideal of Australian society was not a mere "polyculturalism", but of integration. "We brought into this country millions of migrants. We believed in the idea of nation-building...When I speak of integration, I do not mean that people need to abandon their cultural customs or their ethnic traditions. We like diversity. Integration means working in with core values – based on tolerance. It is complete nonsense that Jews, Christians and Moslems cannot live together."

The legitimacy of a shared spiritual legacy

In response the Director of the program, Rabbi Dr Shimon Cowen said, "Mr Downer has spoken of the core values through which diverse cultures can integrate into a common society. Notwithstanding an often stridently secular media and academia, religion is the most enduring, the most powerful feature of grass-roots culture and supplier of those common core values. Even in those societies, where for generations it was repressed, it sprouts anew.

Here then is the possibility of a new extension of meaning and power to the idea of "interface". The interface program will, please Goodness, in its explorations of society, culture and science be looking at the universal teachings of the Noahide laws (the common denominator values of the historical religious world cultures) in regard to all the questions of society, culture and science, which it addresses.

"By going back to the common spiritual root and values of humanity, we have a great opportunity for a constructive communication not just on topics but also between people of different cultures - locally, nationally and internationally. To the two senses of "interface" – meeting and interaction - we hope to implement a third sense: that this meeting and interaction will be a harmonious and peace-building one, based on the common ground and the common *legitimacy* of a shared universal spiritual legacy."

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ESSAY



The right to a religious education Rabbi Shimon Cowen

Values and the public square

I was pleased to accept Associate Professor Nicholas Tonti-Filippini's invitation to speak to this Colloquium (of Catholic Bioethicists) and took on trust that the topic he had chosen for me ("Reason and the public square"), would be a vehicle for further development of the discussion we had had. This section of the Colloquium clearly has to do with the relationship of Religion and the State, but interestingly, it varies the common formulation. For those for whom the presumed opposition of institutionalized Religion and State parallels the presumed opposition of faith or religion and reason, it would make sense to speak of "*Religion* and the public square", not "Reason and the public square". For the "public square" connotes for us today, the secularized realms of public educational institutions, government bureaucracy, the media and politics, amongst which one finds mixes of wariness, antagonism and squeamishness about religious experience and religious values. The mass of people – the grassroots culture – are neither wary, hostile or

squeamish about religion, but the vocal elites in education, media and politics and bureaucracy are. The public square in other words is largely – or audibly – secular.

Reason, in all of these thinking, discursive and policy making realms, would thus appear to be secular. Aren't reason and the public square one and the same – both secular manifestations?

Of course, this idea will dissolve at once, when one appreciates that reason is not merely a logical operation, but that it is inevitably based on first principles and essentially rigorously elaborates those first principles.

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Natural reason, for example, is reason which consciously proceeds from first principles, which have a congruence with religious principles. Secular – non-religious – thought is equally based on first principles, outside reason and given to reason to elaborate. The latter often proceeds from the negation of the Divine, and the positing of an exclusively materialist universe, or at least one which excludes G-d and the human soul. Karl Marx's predilection for the materialism of

Epicurus establishes a metaphysical basis for his later dialectical materialism and similarly the modern philosophy of utilitarianism, of which Peter Singer's philosophy is a latter day example – seeing the world as a gigantic calculus of pleasure and pain – is based on very clear metaphysical assumptions of what there is and what there is not.

According, therefore, to the *secularist* understanding of the separation of religion and state and of religion from reason, this has to do with the suppression of *religious* first principles for reason, and their replacement with *another* set of first principles, based on materialistic or utilitarian cosmologies. Richard Rorty, until almost the end of his life, an unrepentant secularist, interpreted the American separation of religion and state, which it would appear, the Australian constitution copies, as the "Jeffersonian compromise", namely, "On our view, religion is unobjectionable as long as it is privatized". Or, alternatively, "This compromise consists in privatizing religion - keeping it out of... 'the public square', making it seem bad taste to bring religion into discussions of public policy."

It is, of course, perfectly possible and in my view much more just, to interpret the American first Constitutional Amendment and Australian constitutional separation of religion and state in a way which does not marginalize and privatize religion. The words of these constitutions disallow the State to "establish" a religion. In other words, it is not the business of the State to prescribe a

religion or to proscribe a religion. But religious values and religious freedom can certainly be espoused in the public square and compete with any other values for political realization.

“A religious view acknowledges a third dimension – and this is also the highest dimension of the human being – the soul, the dimension in respect of which the Bible states that the human being was made in the image of G-d.”

Standing before such vast human issues as the (since legislated) decriminalization of abortion, particularly in its interpretation as abortion on demand, to disqualify or marginalize a religious opinion (in accordance with the purported intent of the separation of religion and state) would have to sound perverse to a very great number of people.

In terms of the entitlement of religious views to express themselves as much as any others, the sense of the “*public square*” has the following sense. The public square is the place of instrumentalities – legal, educational, economic, media, governmental agencies – which impact on a public - a *many* - of individuals with distinct sensibilities, feelings and attitudes and circumstances. Whichever values become policy and are largely expressed through those agencies, the agencies must

display regard for the sensitivities of the individuals and the stresses of particular situations. Individual human beings deserve regard. But in the competition to become policy, values based on materialistic or utilitarian first principles deserve no privilege over values based on religious experience and tradition.

A different view of the human and a different view of reality

An absolutely fundamental transposition of the terms of reason occurs when the religious view is allowed to speak about what the reasoner – the human being – and that which is reasoned about – reality – are. First, the human being. The religious perspective requires one to go beyond the one-dimensionality (if we are speaking about a thoroughgoing materialism) or the two-dimensionality of a secularist philosophy which knows of no more in the human being than body and mind. A religious view acknowledges a third dimension – and this is also the highest dimension of the human being – the soul, the dimension in respect of which the Bible states that the human being was made in the image of G-d.

There are a number of important consequences of this. The first is that the soul informs intellect. It is capable of receiving and ratifying – because it resonates with – Divinely revealed truth. This could be knowledge about reality: that there is a G-d, Who operates providentially in the Creation; it can also be ethical knowledge – knowledge of Divine values and qualities and the actions which

specifically embody them: justice, mercy and so on (not as fuzzy but as concrete teachings). The ability to receive from the tradition and to ratify these values is the function of the “imitation of G-d”.

Another important consequence of this understanding of the person is understood in terms of a person’s ethical scope and responsibility. To use the expression of Viktor Frankl, it is the highest aspect of the person, the soul or the conscience, which *has* body and mind.

It is the soul which is the ethical and responsible identity of the human being. In the current ethical crisis over homosexuality, with the latest attempts by various means to institute homosexual marriage or to achieve it by other means, the political discourse has it that this is fair or worthy because there are people with homosexual “orientations.” These people are it is suggested “ontologically” homosexual. Why then should they not have the entitlements of any other person, of any race or gender to marry?

The mistake here is that the person is essentially his or her spiritual identity, soul. It might be that that an individual has a homosexual impulse coming from his or her bodily being, but inasmuch as the soul is made in the image of G-d, and G-d has forbidden homosexual practice and made it something non-moral, the word “homosexual” cannot describe the essential spiritual person. Inasmuch as the most essential human characteristic is spiritual sovereignty and moral responsibility, the person is a soul with challenges from his or her

mental and physical being. The response to this needs to be struggle by the individual at least not to succumb to the impulse, with the hope of transforming it. The response of others should be help and compassion. But this person is not essentially homosexual any more than a person with kleptomania is essentially a thief. Both possess illnesses which require a cure and/or an act of will.

So also the religious view of reality is essentially one of the actions of G-d, and the sense also in which G-d is a transcendent Creator. Not a subsistent, independent Creation, mere matter and form, but a dynamic Divine animation and ensoulment of the world, is the macrocosmic parallel of the ensouled human being the microcosm. This is the everyday experience of the person of faith, but why should it be marginalized and privatized by “reason” and society?

The relationship of the microcosm and the macrocosm, of the human and the Divine then also becomes a fit subject for thought. Long secularized as the relationship of body and mind, nature and humanity, the essential relationship between the human being and G-d, which the Bible sets out so simply, needs to be translated into modern philosophical discourse. What is the interface between the pristine religious sense of the fundamental interrelationship of the human and G-d and the apparatus of modern thought? What are the affinities between the human soul and G-d, and the service of the human being which drives this dialectical relationship?

Where is the religious construction and translation of the entire enterprise of thought in western modernity? This is the task at hand: to bring religion into reason in the public square.

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The right to a religious education

I would like to propose that the religious sense, the religious first principles, be carried over specifically into the very area of reason in the public square. There is a matriculation VCE (Victorian Certificate of Education) subject called Philosophy. You may be aware that nowadays the VCE goes over two years. The first year – normally taken in year 11 – has two semester units and the second year – normally studied in year 12 – has two semester units. The first two units permit individual variation of content within broad subject areas. The first of these units defines the major areas of philosophy, metaphysics, ethics and epistemology. The second unit looks at issues of practical ethics. The last two units are externally examined but could also allow a religious interpretation.

I would like to propose that, as an alternative, a religious reading and interpretation be offered for this subject, based on broad monotheistic principles, which I think would be acceptable to the major faiths. We would see metaphysics as the Divine structure of being, as having to do with the ongoing act of Creation; we would see ethics related to a concept of Revelation; and epistemology would involve the critique of the individual arts and sciences also in the light of Religion. The second unit would bring forth all the practical issues – the life issues, the social issues and the spiritual issues – which vex our society, but from which the first principles have been occluded and privatized to the margins of consciousness.

So also units 3 and 4 of “Philosophy” dealing respectively with “the good life” and “mind, science and knowledge” could also be studied from a religious standpoint with all the philosophical rigour expected of this subject.

Who will help with the actualization of this step towards the entitlement to a religious education?

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