READING THE SILENCES, QUESTIONING THE TERMS

A Response to the Focus on Eighteenth-Century Ethics

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ABSTRACT

It is striking that most of the essays in this Focus do not explore the specifically religious aspects of Enlightenment ethical thought. A principled reason for this may be found in a conception of religion that makes it hard for Enlightenment thinkers to seem religious at all. Neither does this conception fit anything that is likely to be a live option for most people today, and the now prevalent unpopularity of eighteenth-century piety and religious thought may blind us to important religious possibilities.
KEY WORDS: *Enlightenment, modernity, pluralism, rationalism, religion*

IN READING THE INTRODUCTION AND MAIN ARTICLES of this Focus on eighteenth-century ethics, I find myself disappointed—not with the quality of the work (which in general, so far as I can judge, is thoughtful, historically careful, and clearly written and argued), but over a missed opportunity. These articles, with the notable exception of Mark Larrimore's piece on Christian Wolff, do not explore the *religious* aspects of Enlightenment ethical thought. They do relate eighteenth-century ethics to religion, but in most cases the ideas about religion that are invoked belong either to the later twentieth century or to a pre-Enlightenment religious culture. In Mark Cladis's article on Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the principal religious dimension is found in structural relations between Rousseau's views and the views of love, sin, and the possibilities of human goodness found in pre-Enlightenment Christian traditions. There is little discussion of the relation between Rousseau's own religiosity (an object of considerable interest, on which Rousseau himself spilled a good deal of ink) and his ethical thought. In John Bowlin's article on Joseph Butler and David Hume, Thomas Aquinas is brought in at the end, as a sort of

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theologus ex machina, to provide a religious dimension that the author apparently could not find in the ethics that Butler presented in sermons that were preached as acts of Christian worship.

I say this not by way of criticism of most of what *is* said in these articles, much of which is instructive, but by way of reflection on what is *not* said. Perhaps one should not be surprised that it is not said, for the religious aspect of the Enlightenment is so unpopular today, among both friends and foes of the Enlightenment, as often to seem invisible. That is partly because Enlightenment religiosity was both rationalistic and individualistic in ways that many, perhaps most, students of religion today have come to believe, on both theological and anthropological grounds, that authentic religion cannot be. This is all the more reason, I think, for us to be on our guard lest we blind ourselves to the very real religious piety of most Enlightenment thinkers and, with it, to permanently important possibilities of religious life.

Certainly there was an antireligious Enlightenment, but there was also a religious Enlightenment—and I think the adherents of the latter were more numerous than those of the former. For many the Enlightenment was a religious movement of religious reform, and religion and Enlightenment have been intimately intertwined in many social reform movements since the eighteenth century. The religious dimension of the Enlightenment was still visible half a century ago, but it no longer fits the dominant categories of religious studies.

The Focus authors must say what they think, of course, and some of them seem to hold views that imply that there cannot really have been a religious dimension of the Enlightenment. In her introduction, Jennifer Herdt seems to accept a view she ascribes to Clifford Geertz, that "it is intrinsic to religion that it be authoritatively revealed," and hence that religion is "an intrinsically heteronomous way of linking worldview and ethos" (Herdt 2000, 171, 173). As I take it Herdt agrees, Enlightenment thought, with its emphasis on autonomy, can hardly be religious by this definition. Cladis's comment that "religion necessarily entails traditions" may have similar implications (Cladis 2000, 222).

Herdt acknowledges that there are "many other definitions" of religion (Herdt 2000, 173). I suspect that some of them fit the character and role of what has generally been called "religion" in the premodern as well as the modern West better than the Geertzian definition does. Specifically, I doubt that historic Christianity generally fits the Geertzian paradigm. In its "high culture," at any rate, the premodern Christianity of Western Europe was hardly characterized by naive heteronomy, although it was certainly more deferential to authority than the Enlightenment typically was. The theology of Aquinas (to take the most obvious example) proceeded everywhere by question and argument, placed authorities in confrontation with each other, was deeply engaged with the obviously

non-Christian thought of Aristotle, recognized a natural as well as a revealed knowledge of God, and examined the relation between the specifically Christian "theological virtues" and the cardinal virtues that were known to the pagans. It is also doubtful whether the first-century Christianity of the New Testament conformed to the Geertzian paradigm. It was a faith of minorities who participated in various ways in a larger, often quite pluralistic society that did not share their Christian faith. Furthermore, some of its literature advocated a highly critical—not to say polemical—stance toward inherited beliefs and practices.

I do not doubt that anthropological accounts such as Geertz's have shed much light on many cultures and on the part played in them by ideas and behavior that we naturally call "religious." The cultures thus depicted are fascinating, and sometimes attractive—perhaps religiously as well as aesthetically. Yet if that is the only thing that religion can be, if religion cannot exist except as the practically unquestioned warp or weft of a complete and all-embracing social fabric, then it can hardly be more than a museum piece for those of us who must live in a culturally and religiously diverse modern or "postmodern" society—a conclusion that is not unwelcome to many secularists. Or to put the matter the other way round, if the sort of religion described by Geertz is to persist at all in the modern Western context, it must construct for itself a cultural ghetto in which to take refuge from cultural diversity and change—a conclusion that is not unwelcome to some religious conservatives.

Is there not another possibility for authentic religion in the modern or "postmodern" circumstances in which we must live (and in which many of us would also choose to live if we had the choice)? If we aspire (as I do) to be genuinely religious while living fully in a modern cultural environment (though not necessarily without historical awareness), we need a religion that can be ours without being affirmed by our whole society, a religion that therefore departs in various ways from the Geertzian paradigm. Surely such religion exists, and is called "religion" in the ordinary discourse of our society. I suspect some, or all, of the Focus authors may sympathize with what I have just said. However, if the only kind of society we are likely to have (indeed, the only kind of society many of us really want to live in) is profoundly influenced by Enlightenment ways of looking at religion, why shouldn't those of us who seek to be religious be interested in Enlightenment ways of trying to integrate religion with modernity? We may not want to adopt them in the end, but might we not have something to learn from them?

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