Tarasque: Religion in the Secular Village

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Religion plays a vital role in civil society today that finds warrants in Plato and in the political theories of Giuseppe Mazzini. The process by which religion enters a culture is not a simple one in which the sacred and the secular are opposed but a dynamic process, suggested by the legend of Tarasque.

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The myth of Tarasque, the fearsome dragon from Provence, presents an interesting image of the role religion plays in contemporary political life. According to legend, a six-legged dragon-like creature with bear-like legs, a turtle-like body, and a scorpion’s sting terrified and menaced the people of Neluc for years.
Tarasque was said to have come from the east, from Galatia. It was the offspring of the Galatian monster Onachus and the biblical sea creature, Leviathan. The king of Neluc often sent his best knights and soldiers to fight Tarasque, but they were always defeated. Then Martha, the sister of Mary of biblical fame, who had somehow made her way from Jerusalem to the south of France, came to the village and charmed the monster with hymns and sweet-sounding prayers. One day St. Martha, as she was to be known, decided to bring Tarasque into the town to show the king and the people that she had tamed the beast. As Tarasque approached, the people of the village attacked it and killed it, the now docile beast offering no resistance. When they realized what they had done, out of contrition for their folly they renamed their village Tarascon in honor of the slain Tarasque and erected a stone statue of it in the village square.

How should the state regulate and/or facilitate religious expression? In what follows, I will offer one view of religion as a vital part of civil society and defend its importance in the face of secular critics that argue that religion does more harm to society than good. My effort will have two parts: first I begin with an historical discussion, which attempts to ground the question in classical and nineteenth-century theories about the ideal society. Second, I will offer a reflection on the relationship between the political and the theological.

1. Two Views from History

The idea that religion is important to social functioning finds strong articulation among the Greeks. Plato begins his *Republic* with the famous line: “I went down to the Piraeus.” A whole line of interpretation has grown up around the idea that the real import of this line is to signal that Plato was undergoing a *katabasis*, descending into another social world from which he could comment on the socio-political problems of democracy. But that ignores the obvious sense of the text, which reads in full: “I went down to the Piraeus to say a prayer to the goddess.”\(^2\) Plato

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went to the Piraeus to perform his religious duty. Not only does the Republic begin with a religious reference but it ends with the Myth of Er, a story about what awaits man in the afterlife. As Mark McPerran pointed out in his study of the religion of the Greek philosophers, Socrates never broke entirely with the religious traditions of ancient Athens but offered merely some revisions, which Plato elaborated. Socrates viewed his religious commitments as an important part of his philosophy of moral examination, which enabled him to offer a “rational reformation of Greek religion” (McPherran 1996, 3). Religion plays an important role in the kallipolis. The city-soul hypothesis is central to the Republic. The polis is like the soul of an individual. The governance of the soul must be like the governance of the city. The polis is the magnification of the character of the individuals that compose it. A well-ordered city is made up of persons in whom virtues, most especially the virtue of justice, rule. The justice of the soul redounds to the benefit of the city and creates a social harmony, binding together the inhabitants with every person doing his or her own job and every person filling his proper role.

Because of this, the model republic must train its members carefully, both in body and in soul. The soul’s training relies primary on religion. In part three of book two, Plato discusses in detail the type of education the guardians of the republic must have. The mind must be trained from youth. Stories, like those offered by the poets, should be used to talk about God and to model virtuous behavior. There is a problem, however, with much of Greek poetry. It speaks wrongly about the gods. It depicts them as profane, carnal, dishonest, silly, and idle – all the things that they are certainly not. Plato is a theological reformer who wishes to replace the silly superstitious views of the gods with a better theology, one that emphasizes the goodness and wisdom of the deities. Plato’s religion is not an amalgam of fairy tales about human-like gods who scheme how to use people for their pleasure. Neither are gods changing forms to trick us. “Every god is as perfect and as good as possible, and remains in his own form without variation forever.”  

The Greek poets are guilty also of diminishing the afterlife, rather than pointing us to the hope of future glory. Those stories of the gods

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carrying on boisterously will also not due, for such a demeanor would not become a guardian, who must be like a watchdog vigilant and alert. Like such a dog, he must also quickly distinguish friend from foe and be fierce to enemy and gentle toward his own. The love of learning and wisdom, which begins with religion, should characterize guardians, lest they become too brutal and fail to temper their aggression as needed. Although the republic should carefully supervise the education of the young, it is not a society that relies totally on external controls. Rather it relies on education, training of values, which they the guardians and others will embrace and reflect.

For Plato the pursuit of philosophy was necessary to create persons of virtue. Philosophy trained the soul to understand the necessity for balance and harmony both in terms of its own passions and in the life of the city. Without philosophy, the city could take on distorted forms of government that resulted from disordered passions in the soul.

This desire to see politics as growing out of fundamental qualities of the soul is still relevant. Taking that idea as a beginning point, we can talk about the way in which the individual person’s aspirations play a part in society’s construction both of theological and of political systems, questions I will address in the last part of this article.

A second quite different example linking religion to politics comes from the nineteenth century work of Italian “founding father,” Giuseppe Mazzini. In the nineteen century at a time when Europe was being transformed by democratic movements, Giuseppe Mazzini was one of the leading advocates of the new democratic movements in nineteenth century. For him, religion was to have a key role in the new forms of government. He held views on the relationship between religion and liberalism that in many ways resemble Rousseau’s. Mazzini’s work is replete with religious themes. His language is religious. We hear constantly of “sacrifice”. We hear him say his work is not a labor of authority but a sincere and earnest mission of an apostolate. He describes his work as establishing the European apostolate with a religious character. He says for instance we abandoned the religious idea precisely when it was most needed to put an end to discords that existed in society. But he rejected Rousseau on Religion, in so far as he
thought Rousseau was dominated by a radicalism that took an extreme view of current religion.

Mazzini was heavily influenced by Romantic notions of the people or the folk. A nation for him was not merely a political contrivance but an organic, evolving whole with a distinct character and purpose. Only when a nation realized itself and became self-conscious of its uniqueness and destiny could it be free. For Italy, this meant throwing off the yoke of foreign allegiances and dependencies and acting like a free, integrated country with its own interests.

All this blended with an explicit call for the rediscovery of religion as a crucial element of a free democratic nation. He called for a “humanitarian Catholicism,” which would provide the foundations of moral unity for the state. For him the religious element is universal, immortal. It both universalizes and unites. Religion is crucial for human progress. “We advance, encouraged by the sacred promise of Jesus, the new gospel which before he died he gave us, and the immortal hope, that of the Christian gospel. This is but the germ, the germ of humanity.”

Mazzini sees ideas as organic living things that change, evolve, and progress. We live in a world of appearances. The human spirit is involved in an eternally progressive faith.

Religion remains; the idea is immortal. It survives the dead forms and is reformed from its own ashes. The idea disengages itself from the worn-out symbol, from the insignificance to which analysts have consigned it, and shines forth in brightness. (1835, 26)

He complains that even in nineteenth-century philosophy, the eighteenth century dominated, especially its materialistic spirit of analysis, its process of criticism, its insistence on the sovereignty of the individual, its distrust of all authority, and its spirit of emancipation and resistance. The French Revolution continued to dominate the thought of the Mazzini’s time, which he considered a fresh, new age. Primarily he was concerned with the French Revolution’s animus toward religion that he did not see as part of the new synthesis his age required. For the

French revolution, he says “we substitute the apostolate of humanity by asserting the common law of nations which should be a sign of our faith. We lay the foundations of the humanitarian faith” (34). The individual, humanity, and liberty would all be united in an organic whole, should people realize that this is precisely what the age demanded.

Mazzini had a complicated relationship with his native Catholicism and with the earthly head of that church. On various occasions, he wrote to Pius IX, exerting him to join in the new movement he heralded. When nothing came of that outreach, he returned to his condemnations, which are summed up by Pius IX’s refusal to take seriously Mazzini’s appeal to give up the traditional prerogatives of the popes, styling himself a spokesman for a new liberal humanity. While the church in the twentieth-century has not entirely transformed itself into what Mazzini envisioned, the revolution of Vatican II and the subsequent development of the papacy as a universal advocate of human dignity did move in the direction Mazzini urged.

On the state side, the picture is more complicated. Mazzini’s Romantic musings sound much like a “political theology” in which the nation takes on a heroic role in the history of the world and assumes religious traits. The dangers of that approach to politics are well-illustrated by Ernst Kantorowicz and Leo Strauss in their post-World War II musings that feared religion as a force that could destroy contemporary society. Their reflections were shaped by the horrors of Nazism that readily took up many of these Romantic views of der volk and developed a fanatical cult of the Reich as representative of the German people.5

2. The Political and the Theological

Yet linking religion to the state is not limited to nineteenth-century Romantics or to twentieth century totalitarians. In the ancient world, it

was a fundamental characteristic of the state. It was not until the Edict of Nantes in 1598 that new models emerged. As Blandine Kriegel points out, that document represented an effort by European governments to craft a new secular basis for society in which citizenship would not be defined by religious affiliation and in which the confessional state would be a thing of the past. The goal was to create a public space in which all might participate not as religious persons separated by their faith confessions but as citizens united in the common public space of the modern nation.

Along with this political movement grew up an intellectual tradition in political science that tended to read Hobbes as a warrant for this new kind of society. Rather than see him as an apologist, willing or not, for state supremacy over the churches and of totalitarian control of civil society, instead Hobbes was praised by some as an advocate of personal freedom, because in areas in which the sovereign does not speak, there is complete personal freedom.

Yet this vision has never been completely fulfilled. The secular state ironically remains reliant upon creating a religion-like identity for the state. It is not the state’s impotence against a revanchist religious sentiment in the bourgeoisie that causes this but rather its success at relegating religion to the personal, private, and therapeutic dimensions. The post-Hobbesian political world is not one in which individual freedoms are maximized because the sovereign limits itself to certain external and structural elements as many current political theorists who consider themselves followers of Hobbes would hope. Rather the secular state searches desperately for some grounding, some point of linkage to more than the world of positivism, some kind of transcendence, which, ironically, it cannot admit.

Religion begins with a personal experience of what Rudolf Otto called simply, the numinous (Otto 1917). That primitive experience of

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awe and reverence in the presence of the totally other is not primarily an experience of dread or fear. Paradoxically, there is an attraction to the unknown, a familiarity of the other that draws the individual into a relationship in which she feels herself suddenly in communion. She is part of some larger scheme. She transcends her isolation and experiences the social in its most basic form. The experience is at once personal and public, because it is relational and multivalent.

Secondary efforts to represent that experience are part of the construction of a religious system. Ritual, symbol, and the development of a language of theology all follow. With the process comes a transformation. The experience takes on a less unique form. It moves from epiphany to elocution. The epiphany is an experience, ringed off by a mystic fire. The elocution is vulgar, in a common language. The experience is sacred; the theological expression is not. In this way, it can be said that all theology has a built-in secularity.

Theologies, because they are social, secular expressions, can be matched to political forms. Mystical experiences cannot. The secular state can easily endorse the theological enterprise but always remains wary of the mystic. The mystic may also be the prophet, if he speaks forth in a sufficiently primitive language that differentiates itself from the secular theology of the church or the state.

Massimo Cacciari asks what is the political form that matches a “political theology”8. In traditional religious societies, there is a harmony between the form and the political-theological language. For instance, in the Puritan societies of New England, an inter-worldly asceticism, to borrow a term from Max Weber, was present. They developed an economy of competition among those inter-worldly ascetics as they each tried to demonstrate their place in God’s providential plan. A capitalistic economy grew out of this system and harmoniously related to it. Greed was tempered by Christian charity; complacency and sloth by fortitude. The state and the economic system it supported existed to aid the person in the attainment of his end, which was to glorify God.

The secular state cannot make such claims. Its claims to supremacy are eschatological: it presents itself as part of a new age, a better age. It represents the end of history. The problem that arises from this is clear for Cacciari. “How can the state be founded as a new, total organization, as a definitive and comprehensive system of economic contradictions and of confessional civil wars, if the state is itself aware of not being able to represent the whole, if it wants to be deduced rationally merely as a worldly power? How can the state pretend to be valued as ultimate if its own project is radically detached from the idea of a theologically-founded sovereignty? Its form claims to be absolutely legitimized as agent of the overall process of secularization that cannot allow, however, in principle, absolute positions.” (2009, 177-78)

This predicament of the modern secular state assures that political discourse eventually will take on the language of a theology, twice removed from the primal religious experience with its multivalent qualities, twice secularized. So the problem of which form a polity should take is in no way resolved by the secular state. The claims at constructing an earthly paradise with no relation to the heavens vanish in the daylight of the procedural republic that pathetically offers utilitarian explanations to the problem of how to ground the state. The Leviathan state, which has all power to define the political, represents nothing beyond itself. Any vague claims to the common good are lost in the contradictions of opposing data streams.

Everyone looks to the state for validation, of their contracts and their currency to be sure, but also of their values and ethics. People want an all-powerful state that stands for whatever they want it to. Yet the state must make this validation representing only the thinnest conceptions of fairness and equal treatment.

René Girard explains the formation of the modern judicial system, which is an example of this dynamic of the secularization of primitive experiences. For Girard, the judicial system is the result of the process of secularization and rationalization of the dynamics of sacrifice. By vindicating the absolute monopoly of legitimate vengeance, the state completes the process begun by ritual sacrifice, rationalizing and developing greatly its effectiveness. Rather than trying to stop vengeance, the legal
system rationalizes it. It turns it into an extremely effective technique of healing and, secondly, of preventing violence (Girard 1972).

This is an effective secularization that benefits society and perpetuates the sacred instinct. Religion is not hindered by such secularization, rather it is benefited. It gives its life for the good of society. It sacrifices itself by secularizing sacrifice and saves itself while saving others. The great religions of the world all do this. The cult or new religious movement often cannot do this; it is too interested in creating a unique identity, in setting itself off from the rest of the world; but that is not what makes it live long. Unless it can one day die, it will live only briefly, like celibate Shakers who never could shed their faith in their peculiar institutions and because of that set themselves off from the rest of society so well that only three of them are left in the world today.

Violence, theology, and law are linked in a process of secularization. Should law try to break that linkage, as it does in the case of legal positivism, it becomes arbitrary and capricious. Should theology try to break it, it becomes fundamentalist, cut off from all warrants other than its own assertions.

The mystical dimension of religion will try again and again to distance itself from theology. It refers back to the more primitive moment and rejects the limits placed on it by theology. Yet it is only an aporia, lasting for a moment. It cannot live without secularization. If it tries to, it remains wholly mysterious, wholly other, inarticulate, crude, and silent.

Efforts to banish religion from society, to control its expression, to make it an organ of the state, to temper it all fail, because it is not based on a sacred, ineffable fire alone. Religion has tamed that fire, has translated itself using the same mechanisms society uses to convey meaning and pass on values. Religion can only be replaced with another religion. The gods of the Greeks and Romans can be conquered by Christ and all the saints but mere mortals are powerless against them. Purely secular attempts to replace religion succeed only to the degree that they assume religious dimensions. So movements that mimic religions like communism and socialism succeed in part, but not completely, because they rely too much on the state and on suppression. They appear as inferior gods in the long run. Scientism too has some
success, because of its discipline and its dedicated clergy. Atheism never succeeds, however, because it is only denial. It is unnatural, born of sickness, the product of disillusion, betrayal, or ignorance.

Like the mythical beast Tarasque, religion in its primitive form is a terrifying force that threatens the human community. When, however, it is tamed through the processes of secularization that mature religions contain, it becomes a friend. Yet the foolish, frightened by the threat it poses to the village, often try to kill it. Those secularists think they are saving their state from a monster. When they have killed it, however, they realize their folly and seek to memorialize it and restore it to life. What they can recreate is only a distorted form of the living beast. On its part, the beast, once tamed, is willing to give its life for the good of the society, because it knows that it will be reborn.

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