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Theologies Speak of Justice

A Study of Islamic and Christian Social Ethics



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Abstract

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The purpose of this study is to investigate how religious ethics, while retaining its identity, can contribute to political debate and to the understanding of justice. The inquiry addresses these issues by focusing on theological perspectives which challenge the solutions offered to these questions by the liberal paradigm. Three kinds of challenges are studied, each of which is represented by one thinker from the Islamic tradition and one from the Christian tradition, in order to enable a comparative perspective on the contributions of religious traditions. The thinkers studied are: 1) modified liberalism, represented by Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im and Duncan B. Forrester; 2) liberationism, represented by Ali Shariati and Gustavo Gutierrez; and 3) radical traditionalism, as developed by Tariq Ramadan and John Milbank.

The study is organized around three main questions. First, how can innovative interpretations of religious tradition be plausibly justified? Second, what role should religious arguments and reasons play in the political sphere? Third, what can religious ethics and theological thought contribute to the understanding of social justice? The questions are engaged by means of a critical and reconstructive engagement with the six thinkers. The suggested solutions are assessed in terms of the criteria of authenticity, communicability, and potential for transformation. It is argued that a religious ethic can rely on a tradition without accepting conservative understandings of that tradition. Furthermore, it is argued that the coherence of religious ethics can be made available for public discourse but that the hospitality of the public forum to such contributions needs to be realized through a deepened democratic culture and a critique of power structures which condition perceptions of rationality. While religious ethics do not articulate complete alternative understandings of justice, they articulate contributions by relating justice to human sociality and to transcendence.

Keywords: Islamic social ethics, Christian social ethics, comparative religious ethics, interpretative method, identity, authenticity, political theology, secularity, religious arguments, public discourse, justice, sociality, Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, Duncan B. Forrester, Ali Shariati, Gustavo Gutierrez, Tariq Ramadan, John Milbank

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Contents

Acknowledgements.....	9
1. Introduction.....	11
Introduction and aims.....	11
Research questions and criteria	15
Theoretical concepts and method of analysis.....	18
Concepts of interpretative method.....	23
Concepts of political theology.....	29
Concepts of justice.....	40
Outline of the study.....	45
2. Method and materials.....	49
The challenges of comparative method.....	49
Selection, delimitations and material	58
Abullahi Ahmed An-Na'im	63
Duncan B. Forrester.....	65
Ali Shariati.....	66
Gustavo Gutierrez.....	71
Tariq Ramadan	73
John Milbank	77
Transliteration	79
3. Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im – Theology justifies human rights ...	81
A method of reversal.....	81
Islamic motivation in the practice of politics	87
Secular state and personal piety.....	98
A human rights conception of justice.....	102
Critique and comparative remarks	112

4. Duncan B. Forrester – Fairness is not enough.....	125
Interpretation and familiarity with tradition.....	125
Theological fragments in public discourse.....	128
Prophet and minister to the powerful.....	142
Egalitarianism and right relations.....	143
Forrester in comparison.....	151
Critical analysis.....	155
5. Ali Shariati – A revolutionary religion of justice.....	163
A revolutionary interpretative method.....	164
Political awareness and critique.....	175
Freedom and religious leadership.....	185
Justice as liberation from oppression.....	186
Shariati in comparison.....	196
Critical analysis.....	199
6. Gustavo Gutierrez – Liberation from oppression and sin.....	205
Interpretation through praxis.....	206
The Church in the practice of liberation.....	211
The powerlessness of the Gospel.....	218
Justice as liberation.....	219
Gutierrez in comparison.....	229
Critical analysis.....	233
7. Tariq Ramadan – Radical tradition and confident hope.....	241
Interpretation of text and context.....	241
Proactive Islamic ethics.....	252
Secularity and secularism.....	263
A sufficiency understanding of justice.....	265
Ramadan in comparison.....	274
Critical analysis.....	276
8. John Milbank – The virtue of traditionalism.....	283
Interpretation and orthodoxy.....	283
Politics of alternative and persuasive power.....	287
Church subsuming society.....	297
Justice as virtue and flourishing.....	300
Milbank in comparison.....	311
Critical analysis.....	317

9. Resistance by tradition, a hospitable public, and hope	
of solidarity	331
The comparative perspective.....	331
Method and identity	335
Authenticity and polyphony	340
Tradition matters and resists.....	345
Religious freedom	349
Hospitability, being decentred, and solidarity.....	355
Hope, critique and visions.....	361
Power and the limits of neutrality	363
Dignity, sociality and transcendence.....	364
Index	371
Bibliography	375

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1. Introduction

Introduction and aims

In the contemporary world there exist remarkably different understandings of what role religion should play in the political sphere. Calls for religious precepts to structure political and social life in its entirety coexist with equally emphatic claims that religion becomes malign whenever it is allowed outside a strictly delimited private sphere. While some claim that respect for believers entails that they be allowed to voice religious arguments in public debates, for others democratic virtue demands that fellow citizens be addressed with reasons that can be accepted regardless of such beliefs. These positions intersect with the larger debate on the meaning of social justice. A plausible delineation of the role of religion is one aspect of a just society, and social justice is simultaneously an issue about which religious believers contend that their traditions have contributions to make to a fuller understanding of the concept. Political and philosophical accounts of social justice are articulated along widely divergent lines, involving ideas such as distribution, recognition, and opportunity. Believers, religious thinkers, and organizations intervene claim theological understandings of justice – as God’s liberation of humanity from structures of oppression, as the mercy of God that should temper all human justice, or as establishing God’s objectives to be realized in human life. Justice as articulated in religious traditions can be understood as beyond human cognition, as a source of inspiration, or as readily available for implementation.

Meanwhile, these claims are being made in a global order characterized by injustices that structure vast and arbitrary differences not only in the material resources and opportunities available to people, but also in their access to discursive space and their means of coherently articulating a critique of such injustices. The relative strength of diverse positions and arguments regarding the role of religion in political life and the meaning of justice is often obscured by the asymmetry

in resources and opportunities for their articulation. The aim of this dissertation is to focus on some articulations of potentially constructive proposals relating to these issues from voices within religious traditions, and to analyze the challenges they present to what they define as injustices in both the global order and the discursive place accorded to religious thought. The thinkers analyzed here situate their identity firmly within religious traditions and argue from theological premises, but their aim is to contribute to a discourse in which a plurality of worldviews exist. They deserve our attention not only because of their importance to religious believers, but also because of the strength of their insights and their potential contributions to further understanding of these issues through their plausible articulation of the implications of other perspectives.

In political philosophy and political ethics as practiced in the West in recent decades, the articulation and discussion of issues of justice and the role of religion have been dominated by liberal political theory. This perspective has also been central for many theological ethicists in Europe and the United States, exerting an influence on the terms of discourse within the context of such scholarly debates. Egalitarian liberalism has been articulated in several different ways, and the debate regarding these various explications has been vigorous, clarifying, and productive. Much has been written on the issue of how liberalism, through modification and further articulation, can be defended against the criticism levelled against it.¹ The status of the liberal paradigm in these theoretical and academic debates is such that other theories necessarily refer to it, even while not adhering to it. However, the dominance of the liberal paradigm also highlights the importance of investigating the challenges to liberal thought and of attending to that which these voices perceive as problems insufficiently or inadequately addressed by liberal thought. In areas of inquiry where liberal thought has elicited criticism and resistance, one can hope to find coherently articulated challenges with potentially productive insights regarding the problems with which liberal theory also wrestles. The issues of concern for this dissertation – namely, the role of religion in public

¹ See, for example, *Egalitarian Liberalism Revisited* by ethicist Per Sundman, in which he investigates the meaning and justification of social justice as equality of opportunity, and discusses contributions to that conception based on ideas such as self-ownership, desert, and recognition. Sundman, Per: *Egalitarian Liberalism Revisited. On the Meaning and Justification of Social Justice*. Acta Universitatis Upsalensis, Uppsala, 2016.

and political life, and the conceptualization of justice – represent two such areas of political ethics where the investigation of challenges to liberal thought can produce valuable insights.

The role of religion in political discourse and action, and the conceptualization of that issue in liberal thought, have been matters of intense controversy. Liberal thought starts out with an understanding of religion as being mainly a problem for rational public debate, because it conceives of religion as irrational, divisive, and prone to violence. The standard liberal solution, to consider religion as benign only when privatized, has come under criticism for being both implausible and liable to be oppressive. While many liberal thinkers have revised their position on the role of religion, these basic assumptions often remain, and debate about the issue has often continued to be conducted among liberal theorists who share this understanding of religion. However, theological thinkers have articulated potentially productive critiques of these assumptions about religion, presenting challenges to the confinement of religion to the private sphere as well as pointing to the contributions made by religious thought.

The meaning of justice is an instance where the liberal account is likewise highly influential. Liberal articulations of the concept of justice permeate discussions not only in academic fora but also in many international bodies such as the UN and various NGOs. Liberal thought in these settings asserts the priority of civil and political equality and an understanding of market capitalist economy as a default economic system to be tempered rather than replaced. However, the meaning of justice is an issue into which representatives of religious traditions claim to have particular insights not easily captured by liberal articulations. Furthermore, the assertion of such possible contributions often undergirds the claim that religious thought can play a constructive role in public debate. The concept of justice and how it should be understood therefore constitute a problem, which has both an indirect and a direct bearing on my areas of inquiry.

The aim of this dissertation is to analyze and enter into dialogue with critical approaches that point to what they perceive as the ongoing difficulty of articulating a plausible solution to these issues within liberal thought, i.e. the role of religion in political discourse and the meaning of justice. As articulated by religious thinkers, these claims deserve consideration and assessment because the dominance of a paradigm always entails a risk that other resources for development of

thought will be ignored. This dissertation can therefore be read as a contribution to the critique and analysis of the liberal paradigm. While articulations of liberalism differ in many respects, these have received ample treatment in other studies. I will refrain from a detailed description of the liberal, but rather take as my starting point the understanding that in political philosophical and theological ethics there exists a kind of liberal mainstream which can be characterized by its emphasis on equality, autonomy, rationality, and individualism. These emphases are present in the liberal understanding of the issues of religion and of justice that form the areas of concern for my investigation. Because of my focus on challenges to the paradigm, I believe myself warranted in focusing attention directly on the voices that present challenges to liberal thought and offering a critical appraisal of their attempts to provide contributions and alternatives.

The challenges that form my principal objects of inquiry and critique are made within an explicitly religious frame of two of the world's largest religions, Islam and Christianity. The articulations of theological contributions are grounded in claims to identity and authority within particular religious traditions. Despite their often innovative and radical content, these positions are voiced as plausible interpretations of the religious tradition in question. Because claims to authenticity, identity, and authority form the basis and force of the argument, claims such as these will also be subjected to analysis in this study. The issues of interpretative method that are highlighted by claims to authority are of further relevance to my inquiry: if the public debate is conceptualized in a way that allows it, the articulations of these claims can be made subject to public debate and critique.

To summarize these introductory remarks, the purpose of this dissertation is two-fold. Its first purpose is to make an analysis and comparison of six different formulations of Christian and Muslim ethics with respect to three areas of inquiry: their different methods for interpreting their tradition; their understandings of the role of religious (Islamic or Christian) ethics in public discourse and in political action; and their respective understandings of the concept of justice. The combination and intersection of these three areas is of interest here.

The second purpose is to critically assess these six different formulations of Christian and Muslim ethics in an attempt to make my own contribution to the discussion of three questions. First, what methods can be used to reinterpret tradition while retaining an identity within

tradition which makes plausible claims to authenticity and authority? Second, what role is, and should be, played in political discourse and action by religious ethics and theological arguments that have been formulated by religious organizations, believers, and theologians? Third, what would constitute a constructive theological contribution to the understanding of the meaning of justice?

The positions developed in these three areas of inquiry all contribute to the treatment of the overarching problem regarding how to assess the liberal paradigm through the analysis of challenges directed against it. In order to achieve this, the thinkers studied are considered as having assumed three different positions with respect to the liberal paradigm, each of the three being represented by one Muslim and one Christian thinker. The first is an accommodating position that seeks to contribute to and perhaps modify liberalism slightly, but without challenging its basic assumptions. The second and third represent two different types of critique and challenge to the liberal paradigm. The second was developed in the sixties and seventies and drew inspiration from socialist and Marxist critique of liberal capitalism. The third, which began to be formulated in the nineties, challenges liberal capitalism by recourse to radical traditionalism. My analysis and comparison of one Christian and one Muslim thinker from each of these three positions on liberalism allows me to compare how different kinds of religious ethics relate to a specific kind of political thought as well as how the two traditions' resources influence the ethic and political theology that are articulated with respect to which positions are taken, how arguments are formulated, and how these are justified. The writers studied are Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im and Duncan B. Forrester for modified liberalism, Ali Shariati and Gustavo Gutierrez for liberationism inspired by Marxism, and Tariq Ramadan and John Milbank as radical traditionalists.

Research questions and criteria

My research questions concern three interrelated areas: interpretative methods, the relation of religion to political discourse and political action, and the meaning of the concept of justice.

For each thinker, I will examine three areas of concern. Firstly, what is his interpretative method, that is, his methodology for inter-

preting tradition? It is helpful here to distinguish between the interpretation of tradition for the purpose of developing an ethic, and interpretation for other purposes. It is the former that concerns us here, although in some cases the distinction is not clearly drawn in the material. Of special interest is how his interpretative method departs from conventional practice. This also entails investigating how the thinker in question legitimizes his interpretative method as being a part of tradition, and whether he makes claims to represent the one true understanding of his tradition or proposes a polyphonic understanding of it. Of course, to put forward an interpretation is to argue for it, but one can still acknowledge the existence of other legitimate interpretations. I will link these concerns to the understanding of revelation and reason as sources of ethics which undergird his model of interpretation.

How does the thinker in question conceive of the relationship between religion and politics? More specifically, the question asks what role religious morality, theological argument, and theological understandings of society can play in the practice of politics understood as discourse and/or praxis. I will here inquire as to reasons invoked or implied by the thinker for giving such arguments a hearing among a wider public, and whether, as he sees it, Islamic or Christian ethics make a distinct contribution, and what that contribution consists of. Of relevance to this question is the understanding of epistemology undergirding his position, that is, how he conceptualizes the formulation, communication, and understanding of ethical arguments and reasons. These answers also depend on whether he claims that religious ethics have a specific content that is distinct from non-religious ethics. I will analyze what his position entails for the relationship between proponents of religious ethics and those in power, or more specifically, his position regarding the secularity of the state.

How does the thinker in question understand the concept of justice, i.e. what conception or conceptions of justice are operative in his thinking? This entails understanding how we as humans can come to know justice, and how justice can be attained or at least striven for. I will consider which theological ideas or arguments are present in his conception of justice and what role they play in the understanding of and attainment of justice.

When these questions have been addressed with respect to one thinker, my focus will move onto more direct comparison and critique by means of the following operative questions.

What is brought out by a comparison to the ethics previously dealt with in the study? Here, I will analyze which specific resources or constraints of the respective traditions make a lasting difference to the positions taken by the writers. I will assess whether the answers given by the ethicist in question to the research questions are plausible and defensible. Such critique is always made from a particular position, and I will briefly articulate some criteria according to which I make my assessment.

There are several criteria that can be formulated with respect to a normative ethic, as argued by theological ethicist Carl-Henric Grenholm. His position is that such an ethic must at least meet the criteria of internal consistency, congruence with human experience and integration with scientific knowledge.² These criteria can be said to inform my critical enterprise indirectly, as general requirements that can be made of any ethic, but I will discuss more thoroughly a couple of criteria that are more specific to the questions that I study. The first criterion for my critical assessment is that the ethical positions taken by the authors analyzed should be plausible as articulations of their tradition. All the ethicist studied here make explicit claims to an identity within tradition despite having a very specific understanding of it, and it is reasonable to assess the extent to which their respective ethic succeeds in remaining part of the tradition in question. As theological ethicist Elena Namli has argued, in putting forward such a criterion the question of what counts as indispensable and as the centre of tradition is of course in itself a question of interpretation. A definitive answer to the question is not possible, but one way to put it is to question whether significant parts of tradition are left out by the proposal.³ I propose to assess this criterion by considering whether the interpretative method of the ethicist plausibly situates him within tradition. The second criterion is that the ethical positions should be communicable to people who do not espouse them. The aim of all the writers in this study is for their ethic to make a difference to political action or discourse. For this to happen, the position taken must be possible to understand and

² Grenholm, Carl-Henric: *Bortom Humanismen. En studie i kristen etik*. Verbum, Stockholm 2003, pp. 34-37. See also Grenholm, Carl-Henric: *Att förstå religion. Metoder för teologisk forskning*. Studentlitteratur, Lund 2006, p. 127 and Grenholm, Carl-Henric: *Teologisk etik. En introduktion*. Verbum, Stockholm 1997, pp. 86f.

³ Namli, Elena: *Kamp med förnuftet*, Artos, Stockholm 2009, pp. 25-27. The following two criteria are also close to the ones developed by Namli in that work but I have adapted them to follow the aims of my inquiry.

to relate to in some way or other. Failure to make one's ethic understood would not only mean that the writer has not succeeded, by the measure of his own aims, but that such an ethic could hardly be called political at all. The third criterion is that an ethic should hold transformative potential. There are two reasons for this: firstly, the aim of morality in general to seek what is good and right instead of what simply is. Any ethic should therefore be capable of criticism and transformation of the society and the conditions it is formulated in, especially since the writers in this study all pursue the aim of contributing to some kind of reform or revolution. The second is that the state of the world in general is such that, in my view, an ethic which simply upholds the status quo is not acceptable for normative reasons. This criterion is not to be understood as a call for political activism on the part of the ethicists I study but, rather, as a scientific approach akin to the one formulated by critical theory.⁴ Each of these three criteria in a sense thus corresponds to one of the research questions: plausibility in interpretative method, communicability as regards political theology, and transformative power with respect to justice.

In the last chapter of this inquiry, the research questions previously put to the respective ethicists are revisited, but now with the aim of discussing how they can be answered when all the different ethics investigated have been taken into account. I develop my own position with respect to a plausible interpretative method for relating to tradition, the role of religious ethics for political discourse and action, and the contribution of theological ethics to the discussion of justice.

Theoretical concepts and method of analysis

This is a dissertation in the field of *theological ethics*, which take as its object of study several different articulations of religious ethics, i.e.

⁴ Feminist political philosopher Nancy Fraser defines critical theory as a theory which reveals the bases and character of relations of dominance and subordination, and demystifies as ideological approaches that obfuscate or rationalize such relations. It thus has a clarifying but not uncritical relation towards the oppositional social movements of its day. Fraser, Nancy: "What's Critical about Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender" in *New German Critique*, No. 35, Special Issue on Jürgen Habermas (Spring - Summer, 1985), Duke University Press, pp. 97-131. Among critical theorists, there is an ongoing discussion about what the core of critical approach consists of, which I will not go into. Fraser's definition will suffice for my purposes here.

models that articulate an Islamic or Christian ethic. Ethics, as I understand the term, is the systematic and critical reflection on morality, including, among other things, its content, structure, sources, and motivation, and an ethic is religious (Islamic or Christian) to the extent that it is an attempt to cognitively articulate the moral implications of a religious tradition.

The comparative analysis of thinkers from two different religious traditions raises some special methodological difficulties. I will address these in more detail in the next chapter, which treats the methodology of this inquiry with respect to textual interpretation of the material, and where issues about selection of material will also be discussed. However, these concerns also carry some distinct implications for the concepts and categories of my analytical method with respect to the ideational material. To clarify my position briefly without forestalling the more detailed methodological discussion of the next chapter, the theoretical concepts of this dissertation is a result of a close and generous reading of the material. The aim is to use concepts and definitions that both derive from an understanding of all the thinkers studied and do justice to each tradition. At the same time, the concepts and categories are used to disambiguate and analyze the structure, arguments, and positions of the text in order to clarify the ethic propounded and the answers to the research questions which are given or implied.⁵ As analytical tools, they express my understanding of the ethics studied, rather than the self-proclaimed affiliations of the authors, and form the basis for comparison and critique. They will exhibit a bias toward philosophical concepts used in Western academia, partly because of my own schooling in that tradition, but also because such bias is justified by the context of the larger debate on justice and secularity, which is a discourse conducted by means of certain concepts and relating to certain philosophers and their writings. While four of the ethicists I study, An-Na'im, Forrester, Ramadan and Milbank, make explicit use of that material, all of them, including Shariati and Gutierrez, in some way relate to the West and its ideas about religion, politics, and secularity.

As stated, my objects of study are articulations of *Islamic and Christian ethics*. The authors who have formulated the ideas that are my object of study in this dissertation do not all identify themselves as theologians or ethicists or see their writings as theology or ethics.

⁵ Grenholm, Carl-Henric: *Att förstå religion*, pp. 213-215.

There are several reasons for this. The term theological ethics, as a designation for a theoretical inquiry of these issues, is associated with a particular Western tradition, practised in academic institutions such as my own, Uppsala University. Other designations are more frequently used in other settings, for example moral theology in Catholic contexts. In Christian tradition generally, the term theology is often used to designate the entire field of religious thought, with ethics (dealing with morality) and systematic theology (dealing with doctrine) being seen as subsections of that field. The line between these is often blurred, such that a particular author may engage both ethics and systematic theology and, as is often the case, chooses not to distinguish in a work between positions taken in one field or the other. In Islamic tradition, the disciplines that are used to study and develop religious tradition and religious thought are categorized along other lines, such as jurisprudence (*fiqh*), speculative theology (*kalām*), and so forth. The disciplines of the Quran or the sacred disciplines are often distinguished from the disciplines associated with philosophy, with what is termed ethics (*akhlāq*) considered as belonging to the latter.⁶ Issues regarding morality and questions about how to live are in the Muslim setting often discussed in close relation to discourse on jurisprudence and law.⁷ Because the terms theology and ethics carry different meanings in Christian and Islamic tradition, they are in some sense not particularly helpful for a comparative study. Some of these differences between the traditions studied will be further discussed in the analysis, because how the particular thinkers conceptualize and understand ethics influences their positions on the research questions. Both An-Na'im and Ramadan develop their models in explicit relation to jurisprudence, but An-Na'im does so in close relation to the discourse on international law, while Ramadan explicitly uses the term ethics. Shariati sees himself as a sociologist of religion, but articulates his perspective with the help of religious ideas and theological concepts. Gutierrez, Forrester and Milbank are perhaps all best understood as systematic theologians, even as they discuss and develop standpoints on ethical questions.

⁶ Järpe, Jan: *Sharia. Gudomlig lag i en värld i förändring*. 2:a uppl. Studentlitteratur, Lund 2014, p. 120.

⁷ Ali, Kecia: *Sexual Ethics & Islam. Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith and Jurisprudence*. One world, Oxford, 2006, p. xxi.

I would claim that in all of these six authors' works there are ideas that could be termed *theology*, in the sense that they develop ideas which coherently and critically articulate the meanings and implications of the beliefs of a particular religious tradition, particularly *political theology*, i.e. theological ideas with implications for politics and for religion's role in political life. Moreover, their works also contain ideas that can be interpreted and reconstructed as instances of a *normative religious ethic*, that is, theologically informed ideas about the moral, the right, and the good. Furthermore, their articulations of theology and ethics can be analyzed with respect to their implications for questions of *ethical theory*, e.g. questions of epistemology.⁸ For the purposes of preserving terminological coherence, I will use the terms *theology* and *ethic* for the ideational material that my analysis argues is present in the works of the authors whom I examine. The ethics and theologies that I interpret and analyze are in places clearly expounded and elsewhere needing to be reconstructed from positions taken more implicitly. My designation of their work as examples of theologies and ethics stems from the fact that they all take positions with regard to the research questions; these can be adequately designated questions of ethics and political theology according to the definitions I have laid out here. As for the writers themselves, I call them writers, thinkers, authors, ethicists, and theologians, all terms I use interchangeably. The designation ethicist or theologian is thus used to refer to a person articulating theological and ethical reflection in a coherent and rigorous way, regardless of the religious tradition which forms the context of that position.⁹

The ethicists considered here have been grouped into three pairs. While the two instances of ethics making up a pair are not similar in every or perhaps even most respects, as will become evident in the following chapters, the aim of this pairing has been to organize the material according to three distinct ways of relating to the liberal paradigm. The first pair I have opted to call *modified liberalism*, and consists of Sudanese-American Sunni thinker Abdullahi Ahmed An-

⁸ Ethical theory, or metaethics as it is also called, concerns the underlying presuppositions of normative ethics regarding the sources and meaning of ethical knowledge and judgements.

⁹ One could of course ask if they should not all be called *ulama*, that being the general term used in Islamic tradition for people with religious learning. Perhaps that would be equally reasonable. In the end, the choice is based on my greater familiarity with certain concepts, which makes me more confident with their extension.

Na'im and Scottish Reformed theologian Duncan Forrester. The political stance which these men have taken involves, as I understand it, trying to ameliorate liberalism without opposing it. That is to say, they are not content with liberalism in every respect – both want to modify or amend some aspects of the workings of liberal capitalism – but they do not challenge it in its entirety and they accept it as the status quo. An-Na'im explicitly calls himself a liberal, and situates his project as a contribution to American political philosopher John Rawls's idea of an overlapping consensus on liberal justice, even if my understanding is that he expands the role of theology in relation to that idea.¹⁰ Forrester does not call himself a liberal, instead positioning himself as a critic of the workings of liberal capitalism, more so in some of his works than others. However, his theory about theological fragments, which lies at the heart of my analysis, represents a modest contribution to a public debate in a liberal society taken as given. It should be noted, however, that the term Liberal Christian theology usually denotes a different kind of political theology, one that need not concern us here.

The second pair, Ali Shariati and Gustavo Gutierrez, I have opted to call *liberationism*. They represent a first wave of critique against liberal capitalism which drew on Marxist theory and early postcolonial theory in Third World thought as exemplified by writers such as Frantz Fanon and Ernesto Guevara. In the case of Gutierrez, liberation is clearly the central concept, one he himself uses as the title for one of his books. A caveat is in order here. Because Liberation Theology is a well-established concept in Christian theology, it might be thought problematic to tack it onto a thinker from another tradition. I believe, however, that the designation is justified because Shariati's emphasis on liberation from all forms of oppression is the central feature of his thought. Islamic philosopher Shabbir Akhtar argues that Christian Liberation theology shares important characteristics with mainstream Muslim theology, and such considerations imply that there is no reason to trademark the name for Christian thought.¹¹

The third pair, what I have called *radical traditionalism*, consist of Tariq Ramadan and John Milbank. By that designation I want to cap-

¹⁰ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Islam and the Secular State. Negotiating the Future of Shari'a*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2008, pp. 97ff.

¹¹ Akhtar, Shabbir: *The Final Imperative. An Islamic Theology of Liberation*, Bellew Publishing, London 1991, pp. 10f.

ture the fact that they both oppose liberal capitalism with a variety of politics which they consider radical, but while claiming both to adhere to traditional methods of interpretation and to stand firmly in the centre of their respective traditions.¹² Both Milbank and Ramadan use the word *radical* of their respective projects: radical orthodoxy and radical reform, respectively. Milbank explicitly opts for what he calls Christian socialism, and while Ramadan is more cautious in using such terms for his political position, it is obvious from his writings that leftist movements and thinkers are his main allies. The tension inherent in the designation radical traditionalism is deliberate, leaving open for analysis the question of whether radicalness or traditionalism is the most defining characteristic.

Concepts of interpretative method

The first set of research questions concern interpretative method and relate to the concepts of identity, authority, and authenticity. The choice of interpretative method is closely connected to claiming an identity, it concerns the question of how to reform a tradition while remaining within it so that perception of tradition is altered, rather than of the interpreter's identity. I use the term *identity* to indicate the sense that a thinker understands himself and is understood by others to belong to a certain tradition. Identity is thus an intersubjective concept: one can claim an identity for oneself while simultaneously being dependent upon others for recognition of that identity. For the thinkers I examine, identity is important because they articulate their positions as situated within tradition and their arguments as coming in some sense from that tradition. Their claim to a certain identity is thus a way for them to situate themselves and their arguments; it is about where they belong. The concept of identity that concerns us here is identity as positively claimed and then recognized, not identities which are ascribed by others of which the subject can have an ambivalent or even negative understanding.

¹² Political philosopher Jeffrey Stout designates John Milbank, along with Alasdair MacIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas, as a new traditionalist. See Stout, Jeffrey: *Democracy and Tradition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2004, pp. 24-25. I believe that there are significant differences between these thinkers which would have to be highlighted if they were all objects of my study, but the designation is still an apt one because, for Milbank, tradition is indeed the solution.

Identity is necessary to establish *authority* as interpreter, especially if the interpretation in question is inventive or radical. A claim to be developing a tradition is, in a sense, always a claim to be occupying a position within that tradition. Identity is not sufficient to establish such authority, however. To be sure, there are religious traditions (e.g. the Lutheran) that, doctrinally speaking, understand belief to be the sole prerequisite of interpretive authority. The authority in question here, however, is not only engaged in establishing an interpretation which is valid in one's own life, but refers, rather, to authority which is recognized by others also and which gives those interpretations a certain weight for the lives of others. For such authority to emerge, there needs to be both identity and a certain perceived adequate knowledge or expertise. In this respect, it is important to note a historical difference in how authority as interpreter has been and is established in Christian and Islamic traditions. In Christian tradition, for the most part, theology is developed in a close relationship between academic theology and the churches of various denominations. Theologians and religious ethicists are often priests or pastors or have an education equivalent to that of such religious figures. That education, more often than not, is at least partly conducted in departments of theology in the academic institutions which form part of a more general organization of education in the society in question, or organized in similar ways. In Islamic tradition, the situation is more complicated.

Due to the colonial legacy, education in most Muslim countries is characterized by a split between, on the one hand, traditional religious education and, on the other, academia as instituted by colonial powers and conducted along the same lines as Western academia. This split between subjects and institutions has resulted in the emergence of a Western-schooled intelligentsia and another traditionally and religiously schooled group, the *ulama* ('*ulamā*', sing. '*alim*'). Early on, representatives of the former group ventured into debates on theological matters, particularly regarding reform of Islam. The question of who counts as a legitimate interpreter of religious tradition with the authority to speak publicly on issues of theology, is therefore contested and complicated in Muslim tradition.¹³ The three Islamic thinkers

¹³ In this short description of the struggle for authority of interpretation taking place in the Muslim world, I am following renowned scholar of Islam Ibrahim Abu-Rabi, who also explains that the reason the traditional *ulama* were challenged with diverging interpretations by Islamists and other modernists was that the former colluded with what were basically secularist and nationalist regimes after independence in Muslim

whose works are analyzed in this dissertation are all bearers of a mix of Western and traditional Islamic learning. As such, they form part of a movement to redefine religious authority, something that will be evident also in their arguments about reinterpretation.

All of the thinkers examined here espouse some kind of reform of tradition, including how it is understood or communicated in the public sphere. One reason for their being singled out for study here is that they make an interesting contribution to how tradition is understood and how its agency in public is understood. Thus, how each thinker interprets his tradition is of particular significance. I will characterize the interpretative methods as *radical* or *traditional*. An interpretative method is radical, according to my understanding, if it is innovative in the sense that it departs and diverges from what has historically been considered conventional or common methods of interpretation. An interpretative method is traditional to the extent that it closely follows methods of interpretation which are commonly and historically understood as authoritative in the tradition in question.

Questions of interpretative method have become increasingly important to reformers of various religious traditions, perhaps most visibly Islam, as the struggle for legitimacy among believers and against other interpretations has become more direct, not least in consequence of the globalization of communication.¹⁴ In this struggle, questions of *authenticity* are central. I understand the claim to represent authentic tradition, or to argue for the authenticity of one's interpretation, to be a claim to articulate the core of the tradition in question. While claims to authenticity are often made in a form which assumes that there is one single essence at the core of tradition and that authenticity is about correctly articulating it, I understand claims to authenticity to be com-

states, becoming representatives of an official Islam which strengthened an often oppressive status quo. Abu-Rabi, Ibrahim M.: *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History*. Pluto Press London, 2004, p. 118. As noted by Professor Zaid Eyadat, modernist Islamic interpretations often emerged as a response to the simultaneous rise in conservative reinterpretations, what he terms revivalist or neo-traditionalist, which challenged the latter's claim to represent traditional Islamic law. Eyadat, Zaid M.: "Fiqh Al-Aqalliyât and the Arab Spring: Modern Islamic theorizing" in *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 39(8), 2013, p. 746.

¹⁴ One aspect of this is the dissemination via the internet of fatwas (expert opinions regarding what Muslim observance requires according to Sharia, given as answer to a particular question), which, among other things, gives them a global reach and increase the possibility for lay people to make consultations and comparisons. For a discussion of these developments, see Hjärpe, Jan: *Sharia*, p. 14.

patible with a position that allows for a plurality of authentic articulations of tradition. These can be seen as plausible but different articulations of the same central tenet of tradition, or articulations of different but similarly central ideas of tradition. A claim to authenticity is thus not necessarily a claim to represent the only possible understanding of the original or true tradition, but it is a claim to plausibly and faithfully give voice to tradition. The recognition of a polyphony of plausible interpretations, each with their own claims to authenticity, need not imply that an interpreter does not argue for his own interpretation's greater plausibility or its ability to articulate something authentic of tradition.

There is a general tendency, one that is growing in importance and emphasis among radicals such as feminists, queer theologians, and socialists, to reclaim tradition for their projects, rather than situating themselves outside tradition as its critics. Such positions maintain that their politically radical claims represent a higher order of faithfulness to authentic tradition. Of course, one could argue that reform movements have always made claims to represent the original and undiluted tradition against later innovations. Martin Luther's reformation as well as the Islamic renaissance are early cases in point. Still, I believe that there is something distinctive about the way that progressive movements in the late modern/postmodern era have turned from criticizing religious tradition on the basis of tools or criteria outside tradition, such as secular feminist analysis, to an emphasis instead upon not only the progressive content of tradition but the possibility of progressive politics derived from traditional methods and sources. These developments are part of a turn in philosophy and theology that acknowledges the importance of situating rationality and the impossibility of articulating a view or critique from nowhere.¹⁵ These questions are also important because critics of reform endeavours often attack their lack of orthodoxy or methodological stringency, attempting to define

¹⁵ The use of the anthropology of the Council of Trent by James Alison to articulate queer theology, or the use of the tools of hadith criticism by Kecia Ali to formulate feminist ethics, are good examples of this tendency. See Alison, James: *Faith Beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay*. Crossroad Publishing, New York 2001. Ali, Kecia: *Sexual Ethics & Islam*. While the theoretical developments of feminist and queer approaches have informed my understanding of the research questions, especially those regarding interpretative method and questions of identity in relation to tradition, I have in the end still opted to study six male theologians. I will return to this question in the section on material.

such reform projects as heresy or otherwise situating them and their proponents outside tradition with the aim of discrediting such reforms and rendering them marginal in the eyes of believers. These questions of interpretative method are of central importance because of their effect on identity, authority, and authenticity, all of which are directly related to the possibility of political impact. For the purposes of the present investigation, it is vital that traditionalism not be equated with conservatism. *Traditionalism*, following the definition of traditional interpretative method outlined above, designates a position developed through an interpretation relying on what has historically and commonly been understood as central concepts and sources of tradition and conventional methodologies of tradition. While traditional methods can legitimize understandings of tradition which, politically speaking, are conservative or reactionary, such methods can also be utilized to develop interpretations - feminist or queer, for example - that are politically emancipatory or radical. This distinction between traditionalism and conservatism is often not made, and traditionalism, especially in analyses of positions in Islamic tradition, is often equated with politically conservative positions, for example with regard to questions about gender. I believe that such a terminology should be avoided precisely because it confers legitimacy upon the unsubstantiated assumption that conservatives possess a greater authority in representing authentic tradition. The tendency to defend vigorously the traditionalism of one's radical proposal is most marked in the case of Milbank and Ramadan, the last two ethicists to be studied here. However, the question of how to defend one's interpretation in a way that safeguards one's identity as belonging within tradition is relevant for all of the writers examined.

An important distinction when it comes to interpretation of religious traditions concerns different possible ways of conceiving of the relation between reason and revelation and the importance of these latter as resources for the development of ethics. At one end of the spectrum there is the position that human reason and experience are sufficient for knowing what is good and right. This does not mean that theology is necessarily pointless or vacuous, simply that it is not necessary for ethical insight. Theologians who espouse this position generally subscribe to some kind of natural law theory.¹⁶ Relying on the

¹⁶ Natural law thought has a long and interesting past in both Christianity, where it has been dominant in Catholic tradition for much of history, and in Islam, where it was

clarifying distinctions developed by theological ethicist Carl-Henric Grenholm¹⁷, I will call this *an ethic based on reason*.¹⁸ At the other end of the spectrum there is the position that revelation alone supplies insight into the good and the right, such that human beings aided by reason and experiences alone can never hope to achieve ethical insight. This I will call *an ethic based on revelation*. A third position maintains that human reason, unaided by revelation, can indeed reach some insight into the good and the right, but that full ethical insight requires reason to be supplemented in some way by revelation. This I will call *an ethic based on both reason and revelation*. Such a position can then be developed along different lines. One possibility is the view that reason gets moral issues basically right but can be more finely attuned by the nuances of revelation: revelation clarifies and deepens an ethical insight which is available solely through human faculties. Another possibility is that revelations add insights or perspectives to those of reason, so that the good is revealed to entail, not something different, but something more than reason alone could ever discover.

Qualification of these categories is in order because revelation can be understood in different ways. In Islamic tradition, the Quran is the principal revelation, while in Christian tradition it is the person of Jesus Christ who is revealed. Because both traditions claim that God created humanity, it is possible to claim, from within tradition, that ethical insight is available to all created people, i.e. to all people,

entertained by the Mutazilites in the early history of Islam, and it has experienced a resurgence in modern theology in interaction with the human rights paradigm. I will not attempt to trace its history here, but simply note that these positions on the fundamentals of ethics, described here as much in abstract as possible, can find their contextualization in quite different settings.

¹⁷ Grenholm, Carl-Henric and Bexell, Göran: *Teologisk etik*, pp. 167-174, and Grenholm, Carl-Henric: *Bortom Humanismen*, pp. 21f, Grenholm, Carl-Henric: "Christian Ethics Beyond Humanism" in *Salzburger Theologische Zeitschrift*, 10. Jahrgang, Heft 2, 2006, pp. 191-207. As will be evident in the recurring references below, I am using several theoretical concepts and categories with respect to normative ethics and positions of ethical theory developed by Grenholm. I am indebted to him not only for the articulation and clarification of these concepts in his books, but also for his generous and helpful discussions of their translation and application in my work.

¹⁸ This designation is a simplification, which should not be taken to imply that humans reach ethical insight through reasoning alone, unaided by experiences of the world around them or other human faculties. It should not be understood as a position in the philosophical discussion between empiricists and rationalists, in which I take no part. It simply entails that human faculties such as empirical experiences and reasoning suffice for ethical insight, without any aid such as revelation.

through the use of human faculties such as reason and experience. However, with reference to doctrines such as original sin in Christianity or the immense difference between creator and created in Islam, it is also possible to claim that such human faculties are damaged or insufficient for ethical insight. Revelation, according to the categories introduced here, is understood as that which in a certain religious tradition is understood to intervene and impart ethical insight to people of faith, so that they can understand what is moral despite their limitations. In Islamic tradition, this is achieved by the message of the Quran but such insight is also regarded as being transmitted by other parts of tradition such as the *sunna* (*sunna*) and *fiqh*.¹⁹ In Christian tradition, the specific revelation is related to the life and teachings of Christ and the text and doctrines which explicate these. Revelation should in this instance therefore not be narrowly conceived; rather, it entails a broader notion of the revealed insights which are transmitted in religious tradition.

Concepts of political theology

The second set of research questions concerns *political theology*, i.e. how the writers conceive of the role of theological ideas and religious arguments in relation to political discourse and action. To clarify, I use the term *religious ethic* as a common term for different articulations of a *Christian ethic* or an *Islamic ethic*, that is, different articulations of a normative ethic based on a religious tradition. Arguments which base themselves on a religious ethic or religious worldview more generally will here be called *religious arguments* or *theological arguments*. The difference lies on the level of abstraction, where theology is a coherently articulated religious position. However, for the purposes of this investigation the difference is not important and so I will use the terms interchangeably. In the research material, positions in political theology and in Islamic and Christian ethics intervene in political discourse and the action and formation of opinions in different ways and by different agents. The agents in question might be

¹⁹ The *sunna* is the authoritative example of the Prophet, which is known and transmitted in the form of collected *hadith* (*hadith*). *Hadith* are traditions about the sayings and doings of the Prophet Muhammad. *Fiqh* is the body of jurisprudence developed by the Islamic law-schools to guide believers and Muslim societies in Sharia, the path of God.

believers, theologians, or ethicists, such as Islamic jurists or Catholic priests, or religious organizations, such as churches or educational organizations based on religious precepts. These differences will become obvious as the analysis proceeds. The important thing to note is that they are being analyzed as proponents of arguments or insights from religious ethics, theological ideas, and religious worldviews which are directed at political discourse and action.

The most limited way of conceiving of this relationship, which is taken up by many of the writers studied, is that considerations of religious ethics enter into the *formation of personal worldview and opinion* of individual citizens and thus affect political outcomes. People of faith take the ethical content of their religious tradition into account when forming their political opinions and deciding on political action. Theology's contribution may be understood as largely one of motivation, justifying action for certain political ends which are held in common with others. Alternatively, it can be understood as supplying insights into the good which is being striven for, a good not recognized by the larger society. Regardless, the input can happen at a personal level and need not affect how the public debate is conducted. Even proponents of quite rigorous secularism generally acknowledge that such influence, from religious ideas to politics, cannot be eliminated while respecting privacy and freedom of conscience. I will call this kind of influence one of *personal formation* of motivation or insight. Perhaps the most influential conceptualization of this position, as the only benign role for religion in liberal society, is that articulated by John Rawls.²⁰ Rawls claimed that arguments from comprehensive doctrines such as religions should only be allowed in public discourse to the extent that they support a political conception of justice which forms part of the basis of an overlapping consensus, and that arguments stemming from comprehensive doctrines should be voiced only with the proviso that they later be replaced by arguments not dependent on such a worldview. Although he defined public discourse quite narrowly as the discourse of judges, government officials, and politicians running for elected office, he believed that the rules governing such discourse should also apply to citizens when matters of basic

²⁰ This is an immensely influential and vigorously debated position and I will not go into the details of all its faults and merits here, since that would require a book of its own. My interest here is not in Rawls's position in itself, and thus I will keep my description of it short – and doubtless fail to do it justice.

justice or constitutional essentials are at stake. Rawls meant this to work not as some kind of censure but rather as a matter of virtue on the part of politicians and citizens. He claimed that the exercise of coercive political power is only proper when we sincerely believe that the reasons we offer for our political action may reasonably be accepted by other citizens as justification.²¹ The role for various religious ethics, according to this theory, is to supply motivation and perhaps also reasons for the individual citizen, but ideally not to enter public discourse. Rawls's position offers a good example of how liberal secularist hegemony conceives of religion in public, grounded *inter alia* in the assumptions that religion is inherently divisive and thus problematic, and that public discourse can be conducted in a neutral language independent of worldview or tradition. All the ethicists analyzed in this study challenge such a position, explicitly or implicitly, but they differ not only in the extent to which they disagree with this kind of liberal secularism, but also as to which aspects of such an account are being challenged or deconstructed.

A more extensive role for a religious ethic would involve its moving beyond the personal realm and venturing into public debate. In this inquiry, *the public* is understood broadly as the sphere of political discourse and action, taking place not only in expressly political forums like parliaments and public institutions but also in the media, civil society, and culture in general, whenever discussion is public in the concrete sense of being accessible to people as citizens and not merely as members of a congregation, for instance, and when the content of that debate is related to legislation, public policy, or a broader understanding of how to organize society and what constitutes a good or just society. Such an understanding of the concept is fruitful for the present inquiry and also generally because the limits which uphold the strict distinctions of Rawls's public reason are untenable in both theory and practice. For example, if all matters of basic justice fall under public reason, one can argue that the distinction delimiting public reason breaks down because all matters of public policy are matters of justice in the sense of being outcomes of distributive choices. Political philosopher Seyla Benhabib has argued persuasively for a broad definition of the public, not least because the delineation of public and private is itself a highly contentious and political issue, one that must

²¹ Rawls, John: *Political liberalism. Expanded edition*. Columbia University Press, New York 2005, pp. 10, 137 and 444ff. The proviso is dealt with on p. xlix and 453.

be open to public debate so as to not become a vehicle for oppression.²² This is important, not least from a feminist perspective, since the division into matters private and public has been a gendered affair and the distinction has been used to legitimize and maintain the oppression of women.

Forrester, An-Na'im, Ramadan, and Milbank all operate with an understanding of a liberal democratic society in which there exist on the one hand religious traditions and on the other a general public sphere, although they differ in their designations, analyzes, and prescriptions for this sphere. They understand this public sphere to be characterized by diversity and pluralism, and also to be governed by assumptions of secularity, which they in turn criticize and challenge. Gutierrez and Shariati on the other hand, do not operate with an assumption about a secular public sphere, but rather discuss the relation of religious traditions to the political. In this way, a reading of the two latter thinkers deconstructs the liberal assumption of a neutral or secular public. They also have ideas about theology's role in public, which they conceive of as a realm along the lines I have sketched out above, but they do not conceive of theology in that domain as a special problem, for reasons that have to do with both their historical and political context and their epistemology.

If the public is conceived of in the broad way outlined above, it is clear that by definition, religious ethics and theological arguments are being voiced in public discussion. Firstly, the discussions going on in religious organizations, institutions and other such fora constitute a religious influence on the formation of personal reasons and motivation in political matters for believers. Secondly, such debate is often practically accessible to other people who may be influenced by it, and often addresses not only what position should be taken by religious believers on some issue, but also what position should be taken by anyone. Thus, a kind of indirect influence on political debate and culture stemming from *intra-organizational formulation* can be said to be exerted, regardless of the intentions of the religious institutions or fora in question. To simplify, I write here as though it is easy to distinguish religious people from other people. In reality, of course, being religious may not be a question of either-or but is better described by a continuum, even though there clearly are people who can easily

²² Benhabib, Seyla: *The Claims of Culture. Equality and Diversity in the Global Era*. Princeton University Press, Princeton 2002, pp. 12-21.

be defined at one or the other end of the spectrum. Moreover, the propensity to be moved by religious arguments might not always be correlated with belief, but rather with other factors, such as membership of religious organization, frequency of religious practice, exposure to theological language and stories, familiarity with religious tradition, and so forth. The relative importance of these different determinants probably varies across religious traditions. Indeed, one of the problems with theories about religious argument in supposedly secular societies, for example the one developed by philosopher Jürgen Habermas, is the assumption that both people and reasons can be divided neatly into religious and secular.²³ For the purposes of the present inquiry, I will assume that people are moved to form political positions and reasons by material causes as well as ideational resources. The precise processes and the relative weight of different factors will not be our concern here. Rather, it will be assumed that religious ethics and theological arguments can have the power to influence the formation of such positions, and that for analytical purposes at least, explicitly religious and theological material can be identified as such.

The two modes of influence discussed in the previous section – influence of religious ethics on the formation of personal standpoints of believers, and the discussion of political matters internal to religious organizations – are both widely accepted as unavoidable conduits of influence from religious ethics to politics. The more contentious issue is the one I call *public address*. This question concerns whether religious organizations, thinkers, and believers should intentionally speak in public outside religious fora so as to address society at large, its people and politicians, with a message grounded in political theology or religious ethics and with the intention to influence political debate, choices, and policy-making. If so, what is the language appropriate to do this, what is in fact the contribution that religious ethics can make, how can it make itself understood, and why should it be allowed?

Many liberal thinkers who were previously sceptical about the political role of theological arguments and reasons have come to accept public address as a matter of *religious freedom* or *democratic culture*. Habermas claims that a central part of living a religious life requires that one understand one's political commitment as springing from religious convictions rather than as secularly motivated, and thus that it is part of one's religious freedom to voice such convictions and the

²³ Habermas, Jürgen: *Religion in the Public Sphere*. Polity Press, Cambridge 2006.

religious reasons for them publicly. Further, the neutrality of the state as regards the worldviews of its citizens entails that it cannot assign to religious citizens the entire burden of translation which follows upon the requirement that reasons should be accessible to all citizens. Rather, Habermas claims, the reformulation of religious arguments into secular ones is the responsibility of all citizens, secular as well as religious, and all must evolve epistemic attitudes which allow them to engage constructively in democratic discourse.²⁴ Seen from the perspective of religious citizens, the argument about religious freedom can be understood as about, not just fairness (i.e. all citizens must be equally free to pursue and argue for their basic convictions), but the true identity of their religious tradition. From the perspective of the believer, if his or her tradition is understood to be *essentially concerned* with social organization and political ideals, this implies a powerful rationale for engaging in political discourse and action from theological reasons. Political philosopher Jeffrey Stout has argued that not only is this a question of democratic liberty but also that it is in the interests of *democratic culture* that people are open about their real reasons and rationales. If citizens are forced to argue from secular premises rather than their actual reasons, this will impoverish debate and most likely lead to less understanding. Stout's point is that meaningful and honest democratic conversation does not follow from the exercise in subterfuge which is invited by the requirement to hold only opinions that are undergirded with secular arguments.²⁵ These arguments are similar but not identical. I understand the argument from religious freedom to be mainly in the negative: in order for a society to treat its religious citizens fairly, there are certain limitations to their religious life that are unreasonable given a plausible account of what a religious tradition entails in terms of ethics and political commitment. The argument from democratic culture is about what attitudes and perceptions enrich a democratic culture, such as readiness to explain one's commitments, to listen to others do the same, and to be held accountable for them. The idea is that these kind of attitudes are worthy of cultivation, regardless of whether the opinions voiced are in fact valuable in each and every case. A special instance of this argument is the view that an open democratic culture can *counter bigotry* and fun-

²⁴ Habermas, Jürgen: *Mellan naturalism och religion. Filosofiska uppsatser*. Daidalos, Göteborg 2007, pp. 63-75 and 146.

²⁵ Stout, Jeffrey: *Democracy and Tradition*, pp. 63-91.

damentalism precisely by letting it be voiced, discussed, and refuted in public.

In addition to being a question of democratic culture and religious freedom, it is possible that the reason why religious ethics should be heard is that such an ethic has something to contribute to the general debate. This *contribution* can be conceptualized in different ways. One is *motivation*: a religious ethic might on this account not have a distinct content, but supplies motivation to act for the common good. This kind of contribution is perhaps most associated with the first mode of influence, in the personal formation of religious individuals, but one could also conceive of the power of certain theological ideas and stories as able to convince even non-religious people of the importance of actively pursuing some previously recognized value. Another is *enrichment*: the content of a religious ethic is perhaps not wholly distinct from a secular one, but it can supply nuances and variations that enrich our understanding of the goods to be pursued. If such an ethic is understood as contrasting, either wholly or partly, with the secular, it can *challenge and criticize* the practices and ideals of society on the basis of its own ideas of the good. If it is conceived as consonant with secular ideals, it can *challenge and criticize* the failure to live up to these commonly held ideals. A religious ethic can be understood as a kind of *tool of analysis*, supplying perspectives and criteria by which to revolutionize the understanding of political issues. It can also be understood as *posing an alternative*, supplying values and models for an alternative political order or for an ecclesial order which might exist alongside the political or even subsume it. Depending on which alternative is posited, such utopian visions can form the *basis of alliance* with secular movements for reform, or, in the latter case, criticize the political order but with the aim of supplanting rather than changing it.

To summarize, the question of religious ethics in the public sphere needs to be answered with respect to mode of influence (personal formation, intra-organizational formulation, public address), justification for the latter (religious freedom, democratic culture, essence of tradition, access to contributions), conceptualization of contribution (motivation, nuance and enrichment, tool of analysis and critique, positing an alternative, forming basis for alliance).

The positions which these authors take regarding religion and politics can be analyzed with respect to the implied positions on ethical

theory. In the section on interpretative method, the question of the sources of ethics in human reason and revelation has been given particular attention. With regard to the possible contributions from religious ethics to the political, two other questions are of particular relevance. Firstly, what is the implied position regarding epistemology? And secondly, what is the implied position regarding the content of a religious ethic?

The question of epistemology arises because ideas about the contribution of religious ethics to political debate all hinge on the presupposition that such contributions are understood by a larger public. It is relevant to inquire how these writers understand the formulation of reasons and arguments of their ethics, whether they are dependent on context and tradition or can be accepted by anyone, regardless of such considerations. Following Grenholm's distinctions, I will characterize the ideas about epistemology into three categories: *epistemological universalism*, *epistemological contextualism*, and *epistemology of possibility*.²⁶ An ethicist adhering to *epistemological universalism* claims or implies that it is possible to supply reasons and arguments to justify a certain ethic that can be understood and entertained by anybody, regardless of tradition or context. In this study, I define as proponents of *epistemological universalism* those who claim that argu-

²⁶ See Grenholm, Carl-Henric: *Bortom humanismen*, pp. 18f. The categories of epistemological universalism and contextualism are developed by him in an analysis in which he distinguishes between universalist, contextualist, and relativist positions with respect to descriptive, normative, epistemological, and ontological questions regarding ethics. The category that I call epistemology of possibility is my own addition. In Grenholm's schema, it could be understood as similar to modified epistemological contextualism, as distinguished from a pure epistemological contextualism. Grenholm understands modified epistemological contextualism to entail that some of the reasons we give to justify ethical positions are dependent on context, but that other such reasons and criteria of ethical rationality can be agreed upon, regardless of context. This position entails the possibility to communicate across traditions, conduct dialogue, and learn from others. I have used another term, epistemology of possibility, to stress two things: one is that, rather than understanding rationality as made up by both contextbound and context-independent criteria, I would like to stress that reasons and arguments are context-bound but still communicable, such that it is possible to make these arguments available for trans-contextual discourse by making explicit the context where they are coherent. The second reason is that by the term possibility I would like to stress that such reasoning is a matter of strenuous effort and not something which happens automatically. It is a possibility but can remain so. For an explanation of Grenholm's concept of modified epistemological contextualism, see op. cit., pp. 246-250 and Grenholm, Carl-Henric: "Christian Ethics Beyond Humanism", pp. 204f.

ments from a religious worldview or ethic can readily be translated into reasons that work, regardless of worldview, without anything being lost in the process. The assumption is, then, that there is a neutral language available which can faultlessly transmit the insights that religious people might unnecessarily couch in religious terms. The opposite position is one of *epistemological contextualism*, whereby the reasons we give for our ethical positions are dependent on context, tradition, or other such factors, which means that we cannot expect to appeal successfully to the same reasons, arguments, and criteria irrespective of who we share discourse with. This means that arguments or reasons from a religious ethic cannot be translated into some neutral language, both because there is no such language and because they work as reasons only in the context of their tradition. The third position, an *epistemology of possibility*, entails the idea that while arguments and reasons are indeed formed by contexts and traditions, people also have the ability to reason trans-contextually under certain material and ideational circumstances.²⁷ According to this position, we cannot expect people of other contexts and traditions to immediately understand our arguments and reasons, because justification is a contextual affair involving reasons that are rational given a particular context and a particular set of beliefs.²⁸ Exchange of reasons and arguments cannot be achieved by recourse to some universal abstract reason or some neutral language which is accessed by demanding that people abandon their tradition like an old coat. Conversation and understanding across contexts are possible, however, but they require hard work on the part of everyone involved. This can entail listening to each other's stories, trying to hold different subjectivities in one's mind, learning each other's language, and so forth. Through such discursive effort, the context that makes the arguments coherent and understandable is made available for the interlocutor in a way that makes communication and reasoning possible. This position can take many forms, and the degree of optimism about the difficulty involved and

²⁷ Namli develops what I understand as a similar position, which she calls a weak epistemological universalism, which "[...]recognizes reason as embedded in concrete social structures and simultaneously states that people can reason trans-contextually", depending on material and ideational conditions. Namli, Elena: "Cosmopolitanism, Sovereignty, and Human Rights – In Defense of Critical Universalism", forthcoming 2017, p. 11.

²⁸ Jeffrey Stout calls justification 'a contextual affair'. See Stout, Jeffrey: *Democracy and Tradition*, pp. 234ff.

the completeness of understanding which is attainable can vary, but I will term them all *epistemology of possibility*.

The conceptualizations of contributions from religious ethics to political debate also depend on what the thinkers assume about the content of religious ethics. If such contributions are not only about providing motivation but also about particular insights, the implication is that a religious ethic has such distinct insights to impart. Following Grenholm, I will distinguish between three positions regarding how to understand the content of ethics.²⁹ The first position entails that the content of an ethic given in revelation is identical to the content of ethics that are developed by reason or based on other traditions. This I will call a *theory of consonance*.³⁰ The opposite position is that the content of an ethic given in revelation is completely different from that of ethics derived from other sources, such as human reason and experience or other traditions. This is what I will call a *theory of contrast*. Between them lies the position that an ethic given in revelation contains both insights identical to those in ethics based on reason or on other traditions, and other insights that are specific or distinct. This I will call a *theory of combination*. Theologians who propose a theory of contrast or combination describe some elements of their ethic as unique. To prove such uniqueness, or to disprove it, is difficult if not impossible and certainly beyond the scope of this work. What I propose is not to judge uniqueness, but rather to understand such claims as normative claims about something distinct or specific but not necessarily exclusive. For example, the critique of poverty levelled by Gutierrez by means of the doctrine of incarnation is not the only conceivable way of condemning such a condition, and what it manages to say about why poverty is wrong may partly overlap with other critiques, but it remains distinct in the sense that it represents a specific understanding of the issue, one that can neither be completely equated

²⁹ Grenholm, Carl-Henric and Bexell, Göran: *Teologisk etik*, pp. 175-178, and Grenholm, Carl-Henric: *Bortom Humanismen*, pp. 23f.

³⁰ I have modified Grenholm's terminology slightly. What I call a theory of consonance, he calls a theory of identity. While his term probably conveys more accurately that according to such a theory, the content of an ethic developed in religious tradition is identical to ethics developed by human reason alone, I have avoided the term identity because I use it in a different sense in my analysis of interpretative method and authenticity.

with other articulations of that insight nor wholly explained in terms of something else.³¹

In this section, reference has repeatedly been made to *the secular*. How the concept of the secular should be understood and, indeed, whether the secular itself exists is a highly contentious issue, not least among the writers studied here. Some definitions must be offered in order to clarify how the term is used in the present inquiry. The term *secular* will be used to denote the non-religious, and in this sense will be used to designate arguments, language, and discursive space. I want to distance myself from an understanding of the secular as the neutral, that which is common to all humanity, or that which is left when religion is stripped away. I have doubts that there are arguments or language that are neutral in respect to worldview, or that there is a discursive space that does not presuppose a certain culture. Rather, I use the term secular to describe arguments or language that may well presuppose some worldview or cultural background but that proclaims itself to be, and is generally understood as, non-religious. It may be that in many cases such space is better described as post-religious, insofar as it still presupposes some familiarity with the stories, values, and concepts associated with a certain religious tradition, and that these elements are rendered invisible by that general familiarity. The question of how precisely the secular is to be understood and related to by religious ethics will remain with us for the entire inquiry.³²

The term secular is also used more specifically to designate the state. For the present inquiry, it means a state which aspires to neutrality with respect to religions and worldviews, and which does not favour one but aims to treat them all alike. The opposite of the *secular*

³¹ For a clarifying discussion of the unique but not exclusive, see Namli, Elena: *Kamp med förnuftet*, pp. 29 and 310ff.

³² There are different accounts of what the so called process of secularization consists in, and I will not enter into that debate here. My definition of the secular can be understood to cohere with Jeffrey Stout's understanding of the secularization for political debate. He argues that political debate has become secularized when and where people argue as if they don't share religious convictions and therefore cannot argue from religious dogma directly. Not because people no longer have such convictions or no longer consider them important to political choices, but rather because such convictions are no longer shared and thus in and of themselves do not work toward convincing others and reaching agreement. He understands this process to be parallel with the process of increasing diversity and pluralism, whereby different traditions, giving authority and credibility to different dogmas or values, come to coexist. The arguments used when attempting to convince in such a situation are largely non-religious arguments, that is, secular. Stout, Jeffrey: *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 94.

state is a *theocracy* in which sacral and political power are completely merged. In practice, the secularity of the state may not be as common as one might think, since the relation between religious traditions and state power is complicated and coloured by different historical circumstances. Some element of religious sacralization of power and/or political endorsement of some religious beliefs or values is present, I believe, in most political arrangements. The endorsement of secularity of the state, while often sought in public debates, is not a particularly helpful object of analysis. Rather, I will be taking as my object of analysis how the authors conceive of the *relationship between proponents of religious ethics and power*, particularly state power. While none of the authors I study claims to favour a theocratic model, they differ in how far they believe it is necessary to distance theology and religious tradition from such power. They also have different justifications for such a distance – as a means to safeguard the integrity of the theology, or of the political process, or both.

The term *secularism* will be used to designate the position that theology and religion ought ideally to have as little as possible to do with the political, and nothing at all to do in public. This is a normative position that not only takes secularization to mean a historical process, which can be understood in different ways and the extent of which can be debated, but seeks to further a process of marginalizing and privatizing religious belief and practice, in society in general but especially in relation to political visions and discourse.

Concepts of justice

The third set of research questions concerns the understanding of justice operative in the religious ethic studied. Firstly, what will concern us here is social justice, not legal justice. Social justice, which in the following is referred to simply as justice, I take to deal with the institutions for production and distribution of political and economic goods such as liberties, material resources and opportunities. It is hard to define justice broadly enough to encompass the many different accounts of justice possible, but I will outline here in the abstract some conceptions of justice to which the writers I study adhere or refer to, or which articulate explicitly a conception of justice I take to be implicit in the reasoning exhibited in the various ethics that constitute the material for this inquiry.

An *egalitarian conception of justice* is the understanding that justice entails an equal distribution of some good. Such a notion of justice is comparative, not only concerning itself with the absolute levels of some good that people should be entitled to, but arguing that equality is important in itself. Equality's normative weight is articulated as the equal value of every person or the respect owed to every human being. Egalitarianism is argued for by reference to the unfairness of an individual's disadvantage or privilege being determined by morally arbitrary factors, such as natural or social circumstances beyond that person's control. Egalitarian conceptions differ about what should be distributed in equal shares, for example resources, opportunities, liberties, or welfare. Ethicist Per Sundman has plausibly argued that equality of opportunity is the concept which best explicates what is to be distributed according to egalitarian liberalism, and in the following I will be invoking egalitarian justice in accordance with that notion.³³ The most renowned liberal egalitarian is John Rawls, whose conception of justice entails that social primary goods such as liberties, opportunities, income and wealth should be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution benefits the least advantaged.³⁴ Rawls's contention is that such goods are necessary for advancing one's ends, regardless of what those ends are. Individual autonomy and choice are thus privileged in a liberal egalitarian account, and the good human life is understood as a self-directed life. In explications of egalitarian justice, equal distribution generally concerns not only civil liberties and political rights but also economic goods and/or opportunities. This is often argued for by reference to the impossibility of ensuring political equality and equality of opportunity, without addressing equality in material resources. However, as political philosopher Will Kymlicka notes, a theoretical commitment to egalitarianism has often translated into a political commitment to the liberal democratic welfare state, rather than the more radical redistribution which the theory can also be taken to require.³⁵

A *sufficiency account of justice* rests on the idea that there are certain basic human needs which must be satisfied for justice to be done. According to such a conception, the most central aspect of justice is

³³ Sundman, *Egalitarian Liberalism Revisited*, p. 58.

³⁴ Rawls, John: *A Theory of Justice*. Revised ed. Belknap Press, Cambridge 1999, p. 13.

³⁵ Kymlicka, Will: *Contemporary Political Philosophy. An Introduction*. 2nd edition. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2002, pp. 88f.

that every human being must have enough, that is, an adequate or sufficient supply, of the goods considered important. Political philosopher Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach is a good example of this kind of account of justice, since it understands justice as entailing a threshold level of human functioning that society should guarantee its members.³⁶ A sufficiency account of justice is non-comparative in the sense that it identifies injustice or justice by reference, not to comparisons between people, but to an absolute standard. It is argued on the grounds that what is morally objectionable is that some people have too little, as compared to some threshold or standard which is articulated in terms of human dignity, or in terms of an anthropology identifying essential human needs or functions. An important feature of the sufficiency account is that, beyond such a threshold, inequality is not considered a problem.³⁷ A sufficiency account of justice can be articulated in terms of human rights, and, according to the terminology I employ here, then acquires some specific emphases. According to a *human rights conception of justice*, justice requires that the human rights of every person be protected according to their stipulation in the UN conventions and as practiced and advocated in the discourse around these conventions. This definition is ambiguous because, like the convention, it does not tell us how to weigh and prioritize between conflicting rights. A human rights conception could thus entail quite different visions of justice in the abstract. In practice, however, advocates of a human rights-centred approach generally assume the priority of civil liberties and other so-called political rights, while economic and cultural rights receive less attention.³⁸ In the following, I will assume that justice as human rights entails such a prioritization. Like other sufficiency accounts, a human rights account is non-comparative

³⁶ Nussbaum, Martha: *Women and Human Development. The Capabilities Approach*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001.

³⁷ Op. cit., p. 12. Nussbaum argues that questions about distribution above such a threshold may be deferred, since bringing everybody to the threshold level is already a taxing standard that is not yet to realized anywhere.

³⁸ There are many challenges to such an understanding of the priorities of human rights, which claim that the Western liberal understanding of human rights has monopolized the concept to the detriment of the concrete work of furthering human rights and the articulation of their universality. For a clarifying analysis of such critique, see Namli, Elena: *Human Rights as Ethics, Politics and Law*. Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, Uppsala 2014. My definition here is not intended to discredit other understandings of human rights as plausible articulations, but for the purposes of my analysis a narrow definition is practicable.

and sets an absolute standard to which every human being has a right. A comparative perspective can seem out of place regarding political rights, which are often a question of either-or for the individual (either you get to vote or you do not) or such that more of it implies more for everybody automatically (e.g. a better functioning democracy). When it comes to economic goods, however, the non-comparative aspect of human rights becomes apparent. Respecting human rights is normally not understood to require any redistribution beyond a point where people are guaranteed some basic level of livelihood deemed essential. Inequality is then not considered an injustice so long as it does not lead to deprivation of basic human rights, nor does it need to be rectified beyond what is needed for such provision. Although a human rights account is thus a kind of sufficiency account, the central characteristic distinguishing a human rights account of justice from other sufficiency accounts is the priority accorded to political and civil rights.

A liberationist account of justice understands justice to mean liberation from oppression. Such an account is usually based on the idea of the priority of injustice, meaning that we can more easily identify injustice and that justice is known through listening to the victims of injustice and achieved through liberation from the various forms of injustice and oppression thereby identified. According to such an understanding, justice and injustice are often understood as structural in that the institutions and structures of society constrain and condition the possibilities people have and the interactions among them, such that privilege and disadvantage are created. It is the fundamental structure of society that must be addressed in order for justice to be attained. Liberationist accounts, inspired by the theories of Karl Marx, emphasize the importance of material structures of ownership and production as preconditions for justice. Political philosopher Iris Marion Young has argued that justice cannot be limited to distribution of goods but must be a concept concerned with evaluating the institutions and structures, which can either create oppression and domination or make possible self-development and self-determination. As Young sees it, oppression need not be enacted by a concrete and active oppressor but rather, in many cases, is implemented in the tacit behaviour and micro decisions of the large number of privileged people whose position of privilege prevents them from recognizing the consequences of their actions. Young identifies five faces of oppression:

exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence, all of which must be dealt with in order to create justice.³⁹ A liberationist account of justice focuses attention on freedom *from* different kinds of oppression, but it can also be understood as articulating liberation as freedom *to* something. In Marx's account, liberation from capitalist society frees humanity to develop its innate capacities for creative work and sociality, something that makes possible the human being's realization as self-conscious, productive, and political.⁴⁰ Liberation from oppression does not only entail the liberation of a pre-existing subject of oppression. The consequence of liberation is also understood as the becoming of a new human because the altered material conditions makes possible this development. In the thinking of forerunners of postcolonial theory such as Frantz Fanon, the interrelation of the creation of a liberated society and a liberated human being is emphasized and liberation is understood to concern all areas of personality because oppression is understood to have affected every function of the human being. The humanity of the oppressed is asserted and made possible already in the consciousness of and responsibility towards the process of struggle against oppression.⁴¹

A *virtue account of justice* sees justice as an ordering of society where goods and roles are distributed according to what will further the virtues and flourishing of the community and its members. In such an account, what a just order entails must be grasped through an understanding of what is virtuous, what kinds of persons it is truly valuable for humans to be. Since people are not equally virtuous, giving each person their due does not entail giving equal shares. Even if one conceives of virtuous distribution, not as entailing distribution according to one's deserts, but rather as furthering the development of vir-

³⁹ Young, Iris Marion: *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton University Press, Princeton 1990, pp. 37-65.

⁴⁰ Marx's view of humans, as a social, political, and productive beings who realize themselves through the creation of society and productive work that is free and self-conscious, is evident in his early writings, such as the theory of alienation in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844) and *On the Jewish Question* (1843). See Marx, Karl: *Människans frigörelse. Karl Marx ungdomsskrifter i urval och översättning av Sven-Eric Liedman*. Daidalos, Göteborg 1995, pp. 40-46 and 66-70. For an explication of these aspects of Marx' anthropology, see Carl-Henric Grenholm's analysis in Grenholm, Carl-Henric: *Arbetets mening. En analys av sex teorier om arbetets syfte och värde*. Acta Universitatis Uppsaliensis, Uppsala 1988, pp. 201-210.

⁴¹ Fanon, Frantz: *The Wretched of the Earth*. Penguin Books, London 1967, pp. 250-255.

tues, a virtue account of justice does not entail any commitment to equality. The virtues are often thought to be differentiated, with different virtues potentially needing different levels of resources in order for them and the entire community to flourish. Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has argued for a return to a virtue ethic that emphasizes communities which participate in traditions and embody narratives about the telos of human life and that transmits an understanding of such virtues as the properties of the good person and the valuable human life.⁴² The anthropology of virtue accounts emphasizes that human beings acquire moral training through their social context and thus that education in the virtues is an important priority. The community in which such education occurs is thus an important means for education of the person into the virtues, and, because that person is defined as social, a structure of intrinsic importance to human flourishing. There is, in virtue accounts, an emphasis on good human relations as the appropriate end or telos of justice. If justice is that which makes human community possible and allows it to flourish, it is often claimed that justice cannot be restricted to fairness, but must entail generosity and mercy also.

Outline of the study

The book is organized in the following manner. This chapter has provided an account of the aims, research questions, and criteria of the study. The theoretical concepts and the analytical method have also been introduced. The following chapters concern the method and material, the analysis of the writers, and the conclusions. In Chapter Two, I explain how my method addresses the methodological challenges inherent in the study of two different traditions while relying on a single set of concepts, drawing attention to the power relations of colonial history that make such study precarious. The insights of the critique of Orientalist scholarship articulated by Edward Said and other postcolonial theorist are invoked in order to identify and deal with these challenges, as is Jeffrey Stout's critique of early efforts in comparative religious ethics. In the second part of this chapter, a brief outline of the context of the six authors provides background for the

⁴² MacIntyre, Alasdair: *After Virtue* 3rd edition. University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 2007, p. 223.

interpretation of their material, with particular attention being paid to the pressures surrounding their production as these concern a plausible reconstruction of their positions. The principle of selection of writers as well as the delimitations regarding their respective works are also addressed.

In Chapter Three to Chapter Eight, the six authors are analyzed one by one, according to an outline which closely follows my presentation of the research questions. The sequence in which the authors are examined corresponds to the overarching problem of assessing the liberal paradigm. In Chapter Three and Chapter Four, the attempt to address the liberal paradigm through modified liberalism is analyzed, Chapter Five and Chapter Six turn to the liberationist critique of liberalism, and in Chapter Seven and Chapter Eight the critique of liberalism through radical traditionalism is analyzed.

Chapter Three examines Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im's claim that an interpretative method which comprises a reversal of the abrogation of Quranic verses can plausibly retrieve an understanding of Islam which is compatible with human rights. His understanding of religious contributions to public debate subject is analyzed with a particular focus on the requirements of what he calls civic reason. An-Na'im's understanding of justice is characterized as a sufficiency account in the human rights tradition. The critical discussion of his position focuses on the implications of his methodological approach for the critical potential of a religious ethic, particularly the resulting legitimizing function for religious contributions to public debate. The critique of his account of justice focuses on the problems related to non-comparative accounts and the prioritization of political rights.

Chapter Four provides an analysis of Duncan B. Forrester's proposal that theology can be retrieved in a fragmented form that conveys insights to be offered as contributions to public debate. His conception of justice is characterized as primarily egalitarian but containing elements of a virtue understanding of the end of justice as right relations. I develop a critique of the issues that a fragmentary method raises for transparency and communicability. The coherence of Forrester's conception of justice in relation to his anthropology is discussed. I discuss the attempt to critique the liberal paradigm while retaining some of its assumptions, focussing on the priority of the secular and the structural aspects of justice.

Chapter Five turns to Ali Shariati's understanding of *ijtihad* (*ijtihād*) and praxis as methods for recovering original Islam as an instrument of resistance and liberation. An analysis is provided of his notion of religion as a tool of analysis, education, and critique of society, and his vision of justice as liberation from oppression, exploitation, and cultural imperialism. Shariati's claim to authority and singular authenticity is examined critically. I discuss the potential for other contexts of an approach dependent on the dominance of one tradition, with a particular focus on the aim of capturing some structural aspects of justice.

In Chapter Six Gustavo Gutierrez is analyzed with respect to his interpretive method, which is based on praxis and the epistemological privilege of the poor, his proposal that the Church through conscientization can contribute to a critical analysis of society and the struggle for an alternative order, and his understanding of justice as liberation from poverty and oppression. I discuss the potential of his method with respect to its recognition of solidarity as a precondition for understanding, and the problems with reliance on epistemological privilege. The analysis points to the deconstruction of neutrality by liberationist claims regarding political theology. The liberationist account of justice is critically appraised with regard to its plausibility in both concrete form and critical potential.

Chapter Seven is directed towards the radical traditionalism of Tariq Ramadan and analyzes his traditionalist interpretative method and its radical redefinition of interpretive authority. Ramadan's critique of secularism is highlighted through his notion of religious ethics as a counterforce against politics as management. Ramadan's concept of justice is examined with respect to its sufficiency and structural elements. I discuss the traditionalist method's advantages as regards authority, authenticity, and recognition of the diversity of interpretations. A critique is developed of Ramadan's partial articulation of justice and its potential for communication and solidarity.

In Chapter Eight, John Milbank's claim to articulate the only authentic Christian tradition is analyzed. An analysis is provided of both his understanding of political theology as the persuasive power of Christian narrative and his notion that the Church as alternative society should subsume the political sphere. His virtue account of justice is discussed, particularly the claim that a Christian understanding uniquely avoids perpetuating violence. I critically discuss the norma-

tive implications of Milbank's claim to hold a monopoly on authenticity and his pessimism regarding communication and solidarity with non-Christians. Special attention is paid to the potential of Milbank's position to affirm difference as singularity or analogy.

In the final chapter, the insights and critique which have emerged from engagement with the material are drawn together, and conclusions and reflections are articulated. The overarching question of the liberal paradigm is revisited and I discuss the insights and contributions of religious voices to the debates over religion's role in public and the meaning of justice. Further reflections are offered on the potential of interpretative method to establish authority and authenticity for radical interpretations, while contributing distinctive insights and maintaining critical distance toward surrounding society and public discourse. Theological contributions are identified that give productive perspectives on issues of democratic culture, the neutrality of the secular, the dignity of human beings and the transcendence of justice.

2. Method and materials

In this chapter, I discuss the problems inherent in the effort to compare and analyze two traditions, and more specifically how to understand and address the methodological challenge of the asymmetry of power between the traditions examined. The insights of post-colonial critique are invoked as a resource in order to avoid some of the problems but also to show that material circumstances form the conditions of studies such as this and thus cannot be completely bypassed. However, the relation between researcher and object of study can also be understood as a precondition for understanding. The analytical concepts and language-related issues are also discussed. The methodological section is followed by a presentation of the choice of material and contexts for the writers in focus. The chapter ends with a short note on transliteration from Arabic.

The challenges of comparative method

The field of comparative religious ethics, as it is commonly called, presents some specific methodological problems. These challenges have been uncovered by critiques of early works in the field as well as by developments in postcolonial thinking in general. For the purposes of this investigation, they can be summarized as two principal problems. The first is that while a tradition is generally best understood by reference to its own concepts, questions, categories, and starting points, it is necessary for the purposes of comparison to establish a single set of concepts and categories. The second is that this is not only a question of difference but also one of power. In the history of Western science, other traditions have repeatedly served as objects of study for Western scholars, who have projected themselves as neutral observers despite the fact that their scholarly projects have been inte-

gral to the colonial project of classification and domination. This has resulted not only in an objectification of people belonging to other traditions and a collusion with oppression by researchers, but also in research failure and misrepresentation in the sense that what has been observed has been heavily tainted by the preconceptions of superiority involved in the Western civilizing project. Western hegemony has contributed to the reification of certain characteristics and the creation of non-Western traditions as Other, conditioning not only outside perception of non-Western traditions but also their self-perception and thus any further development of traditions. This makes all study of non-Western traditions thorny. More specifically, however, it means that I have to be mindful of my own position as a European Christian and thus an agent in this study of thinkers in the Islamic tradition. However, I do not believe that scholars in Western academia can address the problem by avoiding the study of traditions other than Western Christianity and philosophy. Isolation and the perpetuation of ignorance can hardly be considered improvements. Rather, we need to study other traditions with the generosity and rigour we afford our own, as rich and valuable systems of thought with much to teach but also much that can be criticized.¹ This is one of the reasons that this dissertation is undertaken in the field of theological ethics rather than history of religion, missiology, or anthropology, in which most study of non-Christian traditions has hitherto been undertaken.² In no way do I wish to insinuate that my own field is somehow less tainted by the colonial production of knowledge than the work done in these areas. However, I believe that the structural division of departments of

¹ I am aware that I write here as though Islam is not a Western tradition, when historically speaking, Islam has been a European religion for roughly a millennia, and is currently one of the principal religions of Europe. Moreover, the intellectual interaction between Islam and Western philosophy and theology has been continuous and formative for the traditions involved to a degree that makes complete separation of the resources impossible. My point is precisely that, even so, Islam is not treated as a Western tradition but rather as the Other. That this analytical point is difficult to make without slipping into essentializing categories of the West and the non-West testifies to the pervasiveness of this dualistic mode of thinking. For a critical discussion of the conceptualization of Europe as by definition excluding Muslims and Islamic traditions, see the work of postcolonial thinker and anthropologist Talal Asad. Asad, Talal: *Formations of the Secular, Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford University Press, Stanford 2003, pp. 159-171.

² At Uppsala University, ethics, systematic theology, and the philosophy of religion all pertain to the area of 'Studies in Faith and Ideologies' a somewhat imprecise translation of the Swedish Tros- och livsåskådningsvetenskap.

theology, whereby Western Christianity is studied in some departments and other traditions in others, is part of a legacy by which the one perceived as non-Western is seen as an object of study and the Westerner is seen as subject – an interlocutor and author of theory. Other traditions must be studied with the tools and presuppositions that we afford our own, not only as part of history or ways of life, but as systems of thought to be taken seriously in their own right. This does not mean that they can be approached in exactly the same way. Rather, this kind of study calls for special care.

A complete levelling of the field is not feasible and the task must be approached with humbleness. As postcolonial theory repeatedly has taught us, the worst dangers lie perhaps in the belief that the colonial history is easily shaken off.³ It is more fruitful to conceptualize understanding, not as something unconstrained by the researcher's historical and cultural situatedness, but as made possible precisely because of the relation between researcher and object inherent in that situatedness. Only by re-examining preconceptions in the light of new experience, and revising our knowledge accordingly, can understanding can be achieved. However, preconceptions are not personal idiosyncrasies, but mostly result from structures of power and the ideologies produced to sustain them. It is by acknowledging these relations, their history, and their implications that we can best position ourselves to cope with the biases and pitfalls involved, rather than by claiming a neutrality and distance that is unachievable. What *is* possible is sensitivity to alterity and acknowledgement of the power dynamics involved. Awareness of the preconceptions which one carries can inspire the humbleness required to make these preconceptions into avenues of understanding, allowing experiences of the unexpected to lead one to revise one's opinions and gradually turn them into knowledge.⁴ But as postcolonial criticism has shown, the power dynamics of the

³ In the seminal essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues that the reality of the history of colonial oppression entails that despite her struggle, the subaltern does not get heard. In postcolonial thought, the essay is part of an ongoing discussion about whether there is in fact any possibility of hearing the voice of the subaltern despite the history and actuality of oppression. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty: "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) in Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty: *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason. Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1999.

⁴ This is how I understand Gadamer's vision of understanding. Gadamer, Hans-Georg: *Truth and Method* 2nd revised edition. Continuum, London 2004, pp. 269-272 and 350-357.

production of knowledge about Islam has been remarkably impervious to rebuttal. In order to develop such sensitivity to alterity, to be able to see both one's preconceptions and the unexpected, it will therefore be helpful to review the criticisms developed by postcolonial studies in general, in particular those levelled at comparative religious studies.

Of particular importance here is Edward Said's ground-breaking work *Orientalism*, a foundational work of postcolonial thought that criticizes the way in which the production of knowledge about the so-called Orient was intimately intertwined with the colonial enterprise and that shows how it must be understood as the product of a legitimizing ideology. Said claims that Orientalist production of knowledge is insulated from reality. The real people, religions and geographic regions involved did not and could not affect how the Orient was perceived, because Orientals, according to Orientalist thinking, could not represent themselves; their culture was monolithic, stagnated and degenerated and the key to their true culture lay in ancient texts which could only be properly interpreted by the Western scholar.⁵ It is therefore significant that the object of this study is the interpretations of tradition made by present-day thinkers who are contributors to living Islam.

To complicate matters further, however, not only is Orientalist scholarship impervious to reality, the ideology of Orientalism also has changed the Orient, its presuppositions having conditioned development and constructed reality. This point is more clearly taken up by postcolonial theorist Bobby Sayyid, who takes Edward Said's thinking as his starting-point in order to define Orientalism even more strongly, as not merely a misrepresentation but a construction.⁶ I concede the point that social and cultural reality is affected by how it is represented, and that colonized countries have suffered not only from material exploitation and political repression but also from an ideological dehumanization and psychological devaluation that has been internalized, at least in part.⁷ The problem with taking this insight too far is that it seems to obscure the fact that misrepresentation is a moral and scientific failure. Being represented as inferior is problematic not only

⁵ Said, Edward W.: *Orientalism*. Ordfront, Stockholm 2000.

⁶ Sayyid, Bobby S.: *A Fundamental Fear. Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism* 2nd edition. Zed Books Ltd, London 2003, pp. 34f.

⁷ Postcolonial thinker and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon is one of the earliest thinkers to point to the importance of understanding these processes. Fanon, Frantz: *Black Skin, White Masks*. Grove Press, New York 2008, pp. xiv ff.

because it is devaluing but because it involves not being recognized for what one is. It is essential that this study not uncritically reproduce Orientalist stereotypes. The stronger interpretation of Orientalism also gives warning of the dangers of such stereotypes when they creep into the self-representations which are my subject here. For example, the figure of Islam as stagnated and in need of reform, which is deployed by several of the thinkers in this study, could be understood as an example of an Orientalist construction come to life. It should therefore be understood, not as a statement grounded in thorough historical research, but as a rhetorical figure used to legitimize the writers' reforming endeavours.

The power dynamic that complicates the study of Islamic thinkers in Western academia also affects any attempt to compare Islamic and Christian ethics more specifically. It is hopefully an advantage of the present study that this comparison is made explicitly. As Said has shown, Orientalist scholarship has been implicitly comparative, with the West invisibly present as norm and point of reference. Since the Orient is constructed as inferior to the West, it must be described as utterly different from how the West perceives itself. The Orient is described as incomprehensible, irrational, undeveloped, unchanging, deviant, and authoritarian in diametric opposition to the rational, modern, developing, normal, and democratic West.⁸ On the other hand, many postmodern thinkers have pointed out that one aspect of the power of modernity is its inability to make room for what is truly different and instead to subsume everything into itself.⁹ An example of this is when ethicists read into other traditions the values of their own tradition and then use this biased reading to claim their own values as universal. Another example is when perceived similarities are instantly interpreted as full analogies, as when the Prophet Muhammad is assumed to be the equivalent of Christ in any and every respect.¹⁰ Being a work of explicit comparison, this study must naturally look for both similarities and differences while also being attentive to the way that similarity as well as difference can be constructed or imaginary and to the power dynamics inherent in that process. The intention is that all six formulations of social ethics examined here should illumi-

⁸ Said, Edward W.: *Orientalism*, pp. 251f.

⁹ See, for example, Elisabeth Hjorth's discussion about Levinas, among others, in Hjorth, Elisabeth: *Förtvylade läsningar. Litteratur som motstånd och läsning som etik*. Glänta, Stockholm 2015, pp. 68f.

¹⁰ Said, Edward W.: *Orientalism*, p. 138.

nate each other and that the otherness of each in relation to the others will help to create critical distance.

A related problem has to do with the origin of similarity. As Sayyid has argued, there is a tendency in Western scholarship of claiming that every development in Islamic thinking is a product of Western influence, even if these developments can just as easily be explained as springing from sources internal to the tradition or from general developments of modernity that cannot be characterized as specifically Western.¹¹ This tendency is aggravated by Western researchers' lack of knowledge about other traditions that might be the source of such influence. Simply because something is recognized by the researcher does not mean that it originates in the context where the researcher saw it last. Correlation is not causation. It is difficult, then, to strike a balance between acknowledging the consequences of colonialism and neo-imperialism on the one hand, and avoiding trademarking every development in colonized contexts as a Western influence. In a way this problem will be bypassed in this inquiry because my objective is not to ascertain the origin and history of ideas. Similarity between ideas in my material and other sources will sometimes be noted but not with the purpose of ascertaining influence. Rather, any such similarity will be used to further explicate and understand the concept in question, as for example, that between Shariati's and Trotsky's respective concepts of permanent revolution. Such explication naturally assumes that there is some degree of familiarity between the ideas, one that makes connecting them a fruitful way to advance the reader's understanding. Sometimes that connection is obvious, or quite straightforwardly accounted for by references made by the thinker examined. In other instances, the connection is merely probable because some ideas are known to have been heavily debated in the thinker's context, raising the possibility that the connection rests upon some misunderstanding. The aim of making such connections in the present study, being a work of ethics and not of the history of ideas, is to explicate the meaning of such concepts, not to trace their provenance.

I will now return to the first methodological problem of comparative religious ethics, namely that two traditions are to be compared using a single set of concepts and categories. This problem can be exemplified by the approach taken in *Comparative Religious Ethics*,

¹¹ Sayyid, Bobby S.: *A Fundamental Fear*, p. 136.

by scholars of religious ethics Sumner B. Twiss and David Little, in which the basis of analysis is to force other traditions into concepts of analysis developed in Western philosophy.¹² This is not a fruitful way to understand another tradition. The result is, in fact, less a comparison between several traditions than a series of comparisons of each tradition to Sumner's and Twiss's conceptual schema. Political philosopher Jeffrey Stout, in his insightful criticism of the approach, contends that rather than categorizing a tradition's morality or ethics according to concepts of Western philosophy, understanding should be achieved by attending to which concepts and questions are relevant to the tradition itself and its context. This, argues Stout, is all the more important since a strategy of defining in advance the concept of analysis risks insulating the researcher from any data that would contradict this preformed understanding, because such data would be perceived as not pertaining to the subject.¹³ Moreover, the approach of Sumner and Twiss exhibits the aforementioned tendency criticized by Said: that traditions of non-Western origins cannot represent themselves and that an adequate understanding of such a tradition is better reached from the point of view of a Western researcher, regardless of how the adherents of the tradition themselves describe it.¹⁴

However, an ethical analysis of text is impossible to perform without concepts and categories, and a comparison rests on the analysis being made with the same concepts for all instances to be compared.¹⁵ My method, as briefly stated in the previous chapter, has been to work out the relevant concepts and their precise meaning in a thorough and close engagement with the material so that the categories emerge from within the material, or at least from my understanding of it.¹⁶ The aim is to uncover how the concepts are used and understood by the different thinkers studied and only then supply terminology that hopefully does these understandings justice. Thus, when I categorize an ethic as modified liberalism, for example, it is not because I started out with an

¹² Little, David and Twiss, Sumner B: *Comparative Religious Ethics. A New Method*, Harper & Row, San Francisco 1978.

¹³ Stout, Jeffrey: *The Flight from Authority. Religion, Morality and the Quest for Autonomy*. University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 1981, pp. 204ff.

¹⁴ Said, Edward W.: *Orientalism*, p. 422.

¹⁵ This problem is discussed in Grenholm, Carl-Henric: *Att förstå religion*, pp. 122-124.

¹⁶ An example of this way of working is how Jeffrey Stout himself proceeds when developing his concepts such as Emersonian perfectionism in Stout, Jeffrey: *Democracy and Tradition*, pp. 19-41.

already formed understanding of such a position and what it entails, but rather because that category has emerged, after my engagement with the material, as the description that seems to do the material most justice. The classification of the ethicists studied into pairs relating to liberal capitalism could be problematized in similar fashion, as continuing the tradition of forcing alien categories upon a heterogeneous body of material. However, the method used to group them here is an attempt to do so according to their own professed belonging and/or according to the writers and schools of thought to which they refer and adhere and which they attempt to modify. This does not mean that I always take these thinkers' self-descriptions at face value or use their vocabulary, but rather that the categories and concept used in this book are more the result than the starting-point of my study, and that they have been developed in an attempt to do both traditions justice. This book, as the end result of inquiry, naturally presents these concepts and clarifies their meaning from the beginning.

The categories and concepts developed during my study, and, indeed, the entire book, represent an attempt to strike a balance between interpretation and critical distance. While the aim of the work is comparison and critical analysis, much of the text remains devoted to clarification and explication of the positions and arguments of the respective thinkers as well as to contextualization of these latter. There are several reasons for this. As already stated, a close engagement with and thorough interpretation of the texts studied is necessary when dealing with two different traditions at once if one is to develop the concepts of analysis that do them justice. Moreover, since not all the thinkers studied answer my research questions directly, clarificatory analysis has sometimes been needed in order to reconstruct their positions, which means that there is need to show this interpretive work in the text. Importantly, however, there is also an asymmetry regarding familiarity with the two traditions in my context of writing. For myself as a researcher, and for much of my audience, the Western Christian tradition of theology and philosophy is well known. Thus the thinkers from that part of the study are understood in their proper context and the nuances and specifics of their arguments are readily apprehended. This is not the case with their Muslim counterparts. The general level of knowledge of Islamic thought among Western ethicists is deplorable, and I believe it necessary to supply some historical context as formed by their traditions and its central concerns, so as to level the

field of the comparison at least somewhat. That said, critical distance is what makes analysis interesting and fruitful. While I will attempt to be generous and reconstructive in my descriptions and clarifications, my aim is also to analyze the ethics of the writers critically.

The presentation of each author will follow the same pattern. First, I present their answers to my research questions. This sometimes is a quite straightforward matter and sometimes, when the material does not explicitly deal with the question, involves some reconstruction on my part. It may also involve a certain deconstruction of the question, such that the treatment of the matter of a particular ethicist reveals presuppositions inherent in the other writers' answers or in the question itself and how it is posed and understood. The aim here is to do a close hermeneutic reading of the writers in a spirit of generosity, bringing out the best of their arguments and searching for a coherent and reasonable account of their positions on the various issues in light of the relevant source material. Tensions and contradictions in the material will be noted and plausible solutions and interpretations of these will be suggested, the aim being fidelity to the writers' stated overall intentions with their work and coherence with their positions in general.¹⁷ There follows a comparative section, in which the ethics formulated in the previous section are compared to those discussed in earlier chapters. The aim here is for the comparison to throw into relief the specifics of the ethics studied and highlight their contribution to the discussion of the issues. This section will become progressively more complicated as the book proceeds. Finally, there follows a section in which I advance my own critique of the ethics under discussion in the chapter, their strength and weaknesses and their potential for my overall treatment of the questions.

As stated in the previous chapter, there will be a persistent bias towards the language of Western philosophical inquiry in all this endeavour, something I believe is inescapable not only because it is the tradition in which I have been schooled, but also because the political landscape of the West is the subject of much of what these thinkers write about and is the immediate context for An-Na'im, Ramadan, Forrester and Milbank, who work mainly in Britain and the US. As for the remaining two, Shariati and Gutierrez, their engagement with the issues of modernity, colonialism, and imperialism also bring relevance

¹⁷ On reasonable and generous interpretation and reconstruction, see Grenholm, Carl-Henric: *Att förstå religion*, pp. 237-243.

to concepts of Western thought. On a more general level, it is important not to allow attention to difference in position and power dynamics to obscure the fact that traditions are never completely separate and monolithic. The history of Christianity, Islam, and Western philosophy is filled with encounters, interactions, and parallels. Historically and in the present, Islam is a Western tradition in many respects, not only in terms of where and by whom it is practised but in terms of its interaction with, and reaction to, traditions of thought associated with the history of the West. Of course, the reverse is true for Christianity, which is neither exclusively nor originally Western. In all theological research there is a risk of essentializing religions and treating them as monolithic. One should therefore be mindful of the interaction between traditions, and also of the diversity within traditions. Hopefully, the fact that this study concerns itself with several different scholars from different strands of the two religions will contribute to a more accurate picture of the multitude of voices from both traditions.

Selection, delimitations and material

The selection of writers to be studied in this dissertation follows from the aim of scrutinizing the liberal paradigm by focusing attention on the challenges levelled at liberal discourse by voices from two religious traditions, Christianity and Islam. In the debate surrounding liberal thought's solutions to the problems of religion's role in political discourse and action and the meaning of justice, I have identified three distinct theological approaches: modifying liberal thought, challenging it from a perspective based in socialist critique, and challenging it from a perspective based in a radical traditionalist ethics. I have selected the writers on the principle that they represent interesting and potentially productive articulations of these three positions, and that they do so with regard to the questions of interpretative method, political theology, and the concept of justice. The contributions they make to the continuing reflection in these areas of inquiry is thus the central justification for my selection of material. While there are many writers who deal with these issues, my options have also been limited by the fact that many do not treat all three questions in a sufficiently articulated way. My intention has also been to study strong voices in the sense that they have valuable contributions to make to the issues of the

inquiry, but also in the sense that they are relatively well known and accepted as interpreters of their respective traditions, which also makes them relevant to study in terms of their potential impact.

The development of approaches informed by feminism and queer theory has shaped my understanding of the research questions, methodology, and theoretical concepts in all three areas of inquiry. Furthermore, the critical approach that informs the transformative criterion of this inquiry can also be read as a concern with the emancipatory potential of theoretical endeavours, one that is related to both feminist and queer theory. In my selection of material, however, I have in the end still opted to study six male writers. To contribute to the continuing dominance of male reflection on justice is not an innocent position but mainly a consequence of the selection being motivated by the contribution made by the authors to all three research questions. While feminist and queer reflection in religious traditions abound with creative and productive developments, such reflection has hitherto dealt to a large extent with questions of justice in the specific areas of gender relations and sexual normativity, rather than addressing social justice in its entirety from its critical perspective. For my purposes, a further restriction that has made the inclusion of such perspectives more difficult is my aim to find writers who can reasonably be understood as comparable in terms of influence within their respective traditions. While critical feminist and queer perspectives are being developed in both traditions, the strength of such articulations, in terms of resources and influence, differs widely between contexts, both in and between traditions.

The assessment of centrality or marginality of particular thinkers with respect to their traditions represents a problem in itself, because in my context, it is far easier to assess the position of thinkers in the Christian tradition. Forrester, Milbank, and Gutierrez are all influential thinkers from different strands of Christianity, whose reach extends beyond their confession into a general discussion of political theology and ethics. As has been shown by Said, there is a problematic tendency in Orientalist scholarship to highlight something atypical in the Islamic tradition.¹⁸ This means that the selection of Muslim thinkers for the present study must be appraised critically and the representativeness of the writers questioned. Shariati, Ramadan, and An-Na'im have all made important contributions to discussion of the is-

¹⁸ Said, Edward W.: *Orientalism*, pp. 407f.

sues which I examine. None of the three are traditional Muslim *ulama*, although all have at least some traditional Islamic schooling. This is not necessarily a problem, because they are, as I have argued in my theoretical discussion on authority, part of an ongoing reflection of the issue of authority of interpretation in relation to traditional schooling. Historically, the influence of the thought of Shariati on the development and growth of political reflection in Islamic tradition has been considerable. While probably not as widely read as he once was, his ideas can be shown to have retained their relevance if they can be retrieved and reformulated for a different historical context. In that sense, his case is similar to that of Gutierrez, whose main book for the purposes of this investigation was published in the early seventies. An-Na'im and Ramadan are considered prominent intellectuals in the Western setting, where their contributions to the interpretation of Islamic tradition are widely acknowledged. It is harder to judge their importance in settings dominated by other languages. They are concerned to a large extent with the relation between Western society and Islam and are thus perhaps of more relevance to that context than to the mainstream of Muslim scholarship.¹⁹ Ramadan is largely regarded as an authority for many Western Muslims, and both he and An-Na'im are often identified as potentially productive as resources of articulation of tradition for the growing share of the world's Muslims residing in the West. I believe, then, that the selection can be defended if centrality to tradition is taken into account given the focus indicated by the research questions.

However, one restriction on my choice of writers to study has been the availability of their works in English. This means that the authors are chosen from a select few who are published in English, either because they write in English or because they have been translated. This is particularly problematic because it restricts the selection, principally with regard to the Islamic tradition. While this is partly a question of my personal competence in languages, it is also a result of structures of dominant language traditions, a factor that highlights how the consequences of power dynamics are ever-present in scholarship. This

¹⁹ This is not to say that they lack influence in other contexts. For example, political science professor Zaid Eyadat, who writes and teaches on Islam and human rights at the University of Jordan, deems both An-Na'im and Ramadan as prominent Islamic intellectuals and uses them to discuss sharia's potential for minority rights. Eyadat, Zaid M.: "Fiqh Al-Aqalliyyât and the Arab Spring: Modern Islamic theorizing", p. 735.

should not be allowed to obscure the fact that much Islamic scholarship is published in English also, especially on questions of secularity and Islam's relation to Western liberalism and democracy. While An-Na'im, Ramadan, Forrester, and Milbank all publish in English, Gutierrez and Shariati are available only in translation. In the case of Gutierrez, the translations of his works from Spanish have been widely available for he and others to criticize; it seems safe to assume that there are no significant faults in the translations. In the case of Shariati, however, there is to my knowledge no record of his having assessed any translation of his works from Farsi to English during his lifetime. Several of his works circulate in different translations and most, if not all, may have been translated and in some cases even compiled posthumously. There are additional reasons for exercising caution regarding that material, to which I now turn.

As already noted, this inquiry concerns itself with the ethical positions of six thinkers. The method is textual analysis intended to clarify the position and arguments of the respective thinkers as the latter can be understood with recourse to their texts. This limits the material of inquiry in two ways. First, the analysis is for the most part restricted to the books that the respective author has published. Some of the authors studied are also quite active in public debates in various other media, such as television and the internet. Since the focus here is on analysis of the coherent articulation of theoretical positions, the reflection and systematic development of thought that occur in monographs or collected articles present a more suitable body of material. While reference is made to other kinds of sources at some specific points in the analysis, this only occurs when some vital resource for a more coherent understanding or for the argument is unavailable in other texts. The vast corpus of websites and other media related to the authors studied is too large to serve as the object of this analysis in a more comprehensive manner.²⁰ Needless to say, the inquiry is also restricted to books by these authors which touch on the relevant subjects. However, a special case in this instance is the works of Ali Shariati, which consist to a high degree of lectures which have been recorded, transcribed, circulated, compiled, and published in various versions in a manner that differs significantly from the ordered and coherent publishing of considered texts. While this represents a spe-

²⁰ For example, both An-Na'im and Ramadan have their own websites with ongoing discussions.

cial difficulty, it can partly be remedied through attention to secondary sources. The implications of this will be discussed in the section below, which deals with Shariati's life and context.

A second delimitation is also related to the method of textual analysis. I do not concern myself with hypothetical positions or authorial opinions that are not developed in the texts. While this may seem obvious, it warrants emphasis because some of the authors studied here are subject to an islamophobic discourse which accuses Muslims of secretly cultivating fundamentalism while publicly adhering to less radical positions. The claim implicit in such accusations is that these writers are best understood by attending, not to what they write and articulate, but to their putatively hidden agenda. I have no interest in lending credibility to such discourse by treating it as a secondary source for my material. The logic of islamophobia and the associated production of islamophobic so-called knowledge about Islam and Islamic thinkers has been extensively dealt with in previous scholarship and need not be repeated here.²¹ The inner thoughts and motives of the ethicists studied generally fall outside the purview of this inquiry, but there is no reason to assume that Islamic thinkers, to a greater degree than anybody else, write something other than what they actually believe. While the object of this analysis is positions developed in texts, an absolute separation between text and the intention of the writer is not possible to uphold because the analysis will involve the generous reconstructions of positions implied in the text and the clarification and disambiguation of the coherent theory that emerges from such analysis. This necessarily involves judgement about what I take to be the intentions of the writer as these can be inferred from the text in its entirety.

In the interest of offering a plausible and generous interpretation of the authors, some attention to the context of the writers is necessary. This inquiry is undertaken in the field of ethics, not the history of ideas or sociology, and my interest in the historical or social contexts of the writers is therefore limited to what is required to understand and reconstruct their theories. The reconstruction of theoretical positions is helped by attention to its context of production, for example, because the repression to which some of the authors studied are subject makes it necessary to read between the lines of their statements, or because their different positions can sometimes be understood as strategic

²¹ See for example Gardell, Mattias: *Islamofobi*. Leopard förlag, Stockholm 2010.

choices in a certain climate of debate or a position of relative powerlessness. In order to do justice to the material, it is necessary to sometimes take into account the circumstances of its production and dissemination. This concern should not be overplayed in the sense of allowing outside factors to be understood as the sole determinants of content, but, rather, that an analysis of the pressures surrounding the production of theory can assist in its interpretation. This is especially important because of the goal of comparison. When circumstances differ widely, this must sometimes be allowed for in order for the comparison to be fair.

To advance the interpretation of the ethics studied, I will make a brief presentation of each writer, his context, and the works which I will be analysing as my primary material. The focus here is on the factors which exert the greatest influence on the material in terms of how the author presents and argues for his ethical ideas. I will provide an outline of these in this chapter so as to be able to return to them in the analysis when such context is necessary for the clarification of some of the issues.

Abullahi Ahmed An-Na'im

Abullahi Ahmed An-Na'im (b.1946) is an American-Sudanese Sunni Muslim professor of law and human rights activist. He is a follower of the political thinker and reformer Mahmud Muhamad Taha, whose political and religious reform movement was quashed by the military dictatorship of Sudan as it claimed to institute sharia as positive law. Shortly after Taha's execution on the grounds of heresy and political dissent, An-Na'im left Sudan and has since been resident mainly in the USA. A scholar of international, Islamic, and comparative law, he has written extensively on human rights, constitutionalism, secularity, and the relation of Islam and politics. He has also served as the director of Human Rights Watch Africa. Like Taha, An-Na'im opposes a state that calls itself Islamic and claims to enforce sharia. His position is that the state should be secular: while the relation between religion and politics needs to be negotiated, Sharia must be observed because of personal conviction and piety. He has devoted particular energy to identifying the features of sharia which have been perceived to be at odds with human rights, such as slavery, jihad, apostasy, and the sta-

tus of women and non-Muslims.²² According to An-Naim's self-description, "[...] he is striving to promote two interrelated objectives, namely, a liberal modernist understanding of Islam, and the cultural legitimacy and practical efficacy of international human rights standards".²³ An-Na'im thus proclaims himself as a liberal, although he insists that liberal principles must find proper contextualization in Muslim countries and be justified by Islamic principles.²⁴ He proposes to do this by means of an interpretation developed through the reform methodology of Taha, one that claims to offer a new understanding of the eternal message of Islam that is also compatible with human rights. The context of An-Na'im's thought is thus the tension between Islamism and modernism in the Muslim world on the one hand, and, on the other, the growing suspicion and hostility to Islam in the West since 2001.

An-Na'im is not an *alim* in the traditional Muslim sense, but has written on and is part of an international scholarly debate on the issues of Sharia law, theological interpretation, politics, and religious ethics and justice. That such reflection has taken place under the heading of law in Western institutions is a reflection of the fact that Islamic law can be understood as positive law, as religious law, and as ethics. Indeed, that debate is at the heart of An-Na'im's research as Professor of Law and as Fellow of Ethics. Of course, natural law has been central to ethical thinking in Christian tradition as well. The point here, however, is that An-Na'im is part of a tradition of Islamic thought in which the issues defined as ethics in the present inquiry have been developed through the work of jurists.

My analysis of Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im is principally based on two of his books: *Toward an Islamic Reformation: Civil Liberties, Human Rights and International Law* (1990) and *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shari'a* (2008). Two later books will be referred to where they illuminate his position on issues relevant to this study. One is *Muslims and Global Justice* (2011), a collection of articles which was originally published between 1988 and 2007 and thus not in the same sense a systematic exposition of An-Na'im's ideas. The other, *What is an American Muslim* (2014), because it largely deals with An-Na'im's reform proposals as applied to the legal

²² An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Islam and the Secular State*, p. 283.

²³ An-Na'im's website at Emory University, <http://els449.law.emory.edu/aannaim/>

²⁴ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Islam and the Secular State*, p. 269.

and social context of the United States, does not contain much theoretical development.

Duncan B. Forrester

Duncan B. Forrester (b.1933) is a Scottish Reformed theologian who has written extensively on the issues of theology and politics and social justice. He was ordained as Presbyterian of the Church of South India in 1962 and worked as a missionary for the Church of Scotland and teacher in Madras for several years. The author of several influential works on issues of caste, Indian society, and Christianity, he has also written extensively on pastoral theology. In the late seventies, he returned to Scotland to take up a chair in Christian Ethics and Practical Theology at the University of Edinburgh. There he founded and was first Director for the Centre for Theology and Public Issues at the New College, with the purpose of furthering theology's public engagement and promoting a theological perspective able to equip advocates and policy makers; he retired in 2001.²⁵ Forrester explicitly relates his thought to several different strands and public figures in Christian theology which assert the public relevance of Christian tradition and thought. Prominent among these are Reformed German theologian Karl Barth, author of a fierce critique of Nazism on the basis of neo-orthodoxy and a rejection of natural theology and the Christ of culture. Forrester is also influenced by Reinhold Niebuhr, an American Protestant theologian who articulated Christian realism as a prophetic voice that, even while calling for social justice as the political realization of Christian love, recalls the importance of recognizing the limits of the human search for justice in consequence of human beings' sinfulness and self-interest. Niebuhr, who has acted as advisor to prominent American politicians, claimed that human sinfulness created a necessity for both lawful coercion and democratic checks and balances in political life. In his early works, Forrester was also influenced by Liberation Theology, whose emphasis on the perspective of the poor and the powerless, while less prominent in later books, has remained constant.

²⁵ Routledge information on authors, <https://www.routledge.com/Forrester-on-Christian-Ethics-and-Practical-Theology-Collected-Writings/Forrester/p/book/9780754664383>

My main source is Forrester's *Christian Justice and Public Policy* (1997), in which he develops a systematic theory of the contribution of theology in public debate in a society of secularization and value pluralism. In a later work, *Apocalypse Now?* (2004), he continues much in the same vein but revises some of his positions to take into account the resurgence of religion, taking a global viewpoint as the explicit point of departure for his analysis. To probe more deeply Forrester's thinking on justice, I will refer to his *On Human Worth: A Christian Vindication of Equality* (2001). In order to understand some of Forrester's underlying assumptions about theology and the nature of the political, I have also studied his *Theology and Politics* (1988) and *Belief, Values and Policies* (1989). It is my impression that although Forrester's emphasis has shifted somewhat in response to changes in the world, philosophy, and ideology, these earlier works can be seen as continuous with his later writings and, indeed, as potentially illuminating his later standpoints by providing an at times more explicit account of his ethics.

Ali Shariati

Ali Shariati (1933-1977) was an Iranian and Shiite Muslim intellectual and public figure who wrote and lectured on politics, religion, and mysticism.²⁶ The context of Shariati's life and work was the severely repressive political milieu of the Pahlavi state in Iran, an authoritarian regime aimed at westernizing Iranian society and maintained with the support of the US and Israel as part of their Cold War strategy. Resistance to the regime was articulated in terms of Marxism and Islam, and often some kind of blend of the two, although many conservative *ulama* resisted the politicization of Islam. During the course of his life, Shariati was part of several oppositional organizations of Islamic, Marxist, and nationalist (in the sense of anti-imperialist) stripes. He was influenced by the critique of religion, capitalism, and class society, and the ideals of social justice, developed in Marxist tradition, while remaining critical of the dogmatic materialism and historical

²⁶ The following biographic information is based on the description of Shariati's life and context in Rahnema, Ali: *An Islamic Utopian. A Political Biography of Ali Shariati*. I.B. Tauris, London 1998. While many accounts of the life of Ali Shariati tend towards hagiography, this biography is held in high regard by academics studying Shariati, for example Kingshuk Chatterjee. See Chatterjee, Kingshuk: *Ali Shariati and the Shaping of Political Islam in Iran*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2011, p. 18.

determinism of some Marxists. Shariati was an eclectic with various sources of inspiration in his own Islamic tradition and outside it. He should also be understood as one of the revolutionary Third World anti-colonial thinkers of his epoch, such as Frantz Fanon, Ernesto Guevara, Julius Nyerere, and Leopold Sedar Senghor. As a writer and lecturer, he was widely known and considered a radicalizing influence on the students who were taking up political activism and guerrilla warfare. He was therefore subject to surveillance, scrutiny, and mounting hostility from the Iranian government's security forces (SAVAK). His most active periods as a thinker and lecturer were those at the University of Mashhad, where he was made to leave, and, subsequently, at Husayniah Irshad, a private Islamic institute which was shut down due to its subversive political impact. During that period, he was often called to interrogations by SAVAK about his lectures. He was to spend years in prison and under house arrest or hiding before dying in exile, widely believed to have been murdered by SAVAK agents.

Shariati was not an *alim* in the traditional sense of the word, but saw himself as a legitimate interpreter of Islam.²⁷ Conservative religious authorities were hostile to Shariati and accused him of having Sunni leanings bordering on apostasy, partly because he freely took inspiration from modernist interpretations of Islam, both Shiite and Sunni, such as the ones developed by Muhammad Abduh, Seyyed Jamal al-Din Afghani, and Muhammad Iqbal. His lectures and books were forbidden not only by the government but also by religious fatwas. He vigorously asserted the need for scientists versed in Islamic tradition and modern science, and thus redefined the qualifications for understanding and developing Islam.²⁸ Shariati sometimes called himself a sociologist of religion, indicating a commitment to study society with a structural analysis influenced by Marxism as well as theology. His ambition was to develop a mode of thought that was at the same time rigorously scientific, politically radical and activist, and truly Islamic. Such normative sociology clearly has ethical implications for the present inquiry.

²⁷ Bakhtiari, Bahman, *Religion and Politics: the Middle East and Latin America*. Ph D. University of Virginia 1984, p. 95.

²⁸ Shariati, Ali: *On the Sociology of Islam. Lectures by Ali Shariati*. Mizan Press, Berkeley 1979, pp. 60f.

The Iranian revolution took place two years after Shariati's death. In the revolution, Shariati was invoked iconically as a martyr and his words were used as slogans, resulting in his sometimes being understood as the "ideologue of the Iranian revolution".²⁹ Given his untimely death, assertions about how he would have viewed present-day Iran are necessarily speculative, but since the reception of theories sometimes can reveal their inner impetus, I will comment briefly on this issue. While there are some similarities between the thinking of Ayatollah Khomeini and Shariati, most notably that Islam is seen as having all the elements of an ideology for a perfect social order, there are also central differences. The current system of government in Iran, the guardianship of the jurist (*velāyat-e faqīh*) is based on a view of Islam as a comprehensive system of Sharia, to be interpreted and implemented by the *fuqaha* (*fuqahā'*, sing. *faqīh*), the jurists.³⁰ Shariati on the other hand, saw Islamic ethics, ideology, and worldview – based on the study of God, the Quran, the Prophet, and the personalities of Islam – as the primary frame of reference for arriving at solutions to social problems, rather than as a basis for jurisprudence.³¹ Consequently, the jurist in fact occupies no important position in Shariati's thinking; rather, Shariati's emphasis is on the importance of everyone studying Islamic principles and developing critical thinking. Shariati is known for his anticlericalism and his insistence that Islam needs no one to mediate between believer and God. While he conceded the need for specialists in religious knowledge, he believed that religious authority must be conferred by popular support and should not entail any special privileges.

²⁹ See the foreword by Andrew Burgess in Shariati, Ali: *Religion vs. Religion*. Kazi Publications, Chicago 2003, p. 6.

³⁰ For an analysis of the important differences between the political thinking of Khomeini and Shariati, see the dissertation by Bahman Bakhtiari. Bakhtiari, Bahman, *Religion and Politics*, pp. 98f. A thorough explanation of *velayat-e faqīh* as both tradition and innovative development is made by renowned islamologist Abdulaziz Abdulhussein Sachedina. He shows that the system of Khomeini represents a centralization of a religiosity in which people choose to follow the judgment of different scholars of law because of their respective popular authority. This is developed to the point that the entire people follow one jurist's opinion as a model of imitation (*marja'-i taqlīd*). See Sachedina, Abdulaziz Abdulhussein: *The Just Ruler (al-sultān al-'ādil) in Shi'ite Islam. The comprehensive authority of the jurist in imamate jurisprudence*. Oxford University Press, Oxford 1998, p. 235.

³¹ Navabi, Abbas, *Reform and Revolution in Shi'i Islam: The Thought of Ali Shariati*. PhD Indiana University, 1988, pp. 162ff.

These historical circumstances form the context of Shariati's thinking. But they also have two more specific consequences for an assessment of his works as sources of his ethics. The first challenge is that Shariati, at least partly as a consequence of political repression, develops a style of using historical simile and symbolic metaphor, seeking to address the issues of his day creatively by means of seemingly innocent and conventional subjects, such as the martyrdom of Imam Hussein or a description of the Companions of the Prophet. Therefore, one can find in his writings apparently contradictory statements about the same phenomenon. They become intelligible and coherent only when one realizes that Shariati's subject is his contemporary situation albeit interpreted through other events. It is therefore imperative to be sensitive to the point Shariati is trying to make in the circumstance of an utterance. The second challenge is that there is considerable controversy about a number of Shariati's works which were published after his release from prison in 1975.³² While some claim that these are the products of duress or at least an effort to appease the government, others believe them to be authentic.³³ These works represent substantial deviations from his earlier works, and to some extent also from his later publications. They entail a revision of Shariati's position on Marxism to the latter's detriment, refocus his critique of religion away from Islam and exclusively towards other religions, and substitute social cohesion for class struggle. There seems to be little or no basis for treating these works as representative of any authentic development of Shariati's thought.³⁴ I will limit my

³² One of these, criticizing Marxism, has been published under several names: "Mankind, Islam and Western doctrines", "Man, Marxism and Islam" and "Marxism and other Western fallacies". The other two, "Return to oneself" and "Return to which oneself", are more nationalistic in content.

³³ The issue has been confused further by the fact that the claim that these texts do not represent Shariati's authentic position have been seen as attempts to discredit Shariati himself and in the process political Islam and the Iranian revolution. See, for example, the foreword by Hamid Algar in Shariati, Ali: *Marxism and other Western fallacies*. Mizan Press, New Jersey 1980, pp. 13f.

³⁴ For an opinion on these manuscripts similar to the one I develop here, see Rahnama, Ali: *An Islamic Utopian*, pp. 339, 347 and 360. Despite its being well known among Swedish Islamologists, I will not use as a secondary source Christer Hedin's book on Ali Shariati which identifies him an Islamic liberation theologian. Hedin uses only two works of Shariati as his sources, and one of them is the contested source called "Marxism and other Western Fallacies", which he treats as unproblematic. Furthermore, I find Hedin's methodological stance, which explicitly searches for the Western influences in Shariati's thought, to be problematic for reasons that should be obvious given my methodology. I believe it probable that at least some of the aspects

analysis to the ideas of Shariati as they appear in his central writings, a corpus which I regard as the works produced in the years 1966-1972.³⁵ The most productive years of Shariati's life, they saw the composition of works which he had time to elaborate and revise and thus contain what may be taken to be his mature thinking.

Specifically, I have used *Religion vs. Religion* (lectures given in 1970), *On the Sociology of Islam* (containing parts of *Islamology* as given in lectures 1966-1967 and published 1969, as well as lectures from 1968), *Man and Islam* (based at least partly on lectures given in 1968) and *What Is To Be Done* (lectures given in 1971 and 1972). As a point of reference for the discussion on sources above, I have used an edition of *Marxism and other Western Fallacies*. An additional challenge in the study of Shariati is that his thinking is mainly preserved in the form of lectures, some published manuscripts and others merely transcriptions circulated informally by students and published and translated only posthumously. Thus, the material comprises, not systematic treatments of questions, but overlapping discussions of diverse subjects. Accordingly, one should not expect from them a high degree of comprehensiveness or systematization; Shariati's ethics may stand in need of greater reconstructive work on my part. Attention to the internal coherence of the specific lecture and its principal argument as well as to Shariati's general concerns and aims is necessary if we are not to be misled by details. As already noted, my selection is also restricted to works that have been translated. I have used secondary sources by researchers with access to the entire production of Shariati in order to gain a more comprehensive picture of his oeuvre and to check my interpretations against theirs.³⁶ It is my contention that there are overarching themes and recurring thoughts in Shariati's

of Shariati's thought which Hedin attributes to the influence of Sartre's existentialism could at least as well be explained by the classic tension in Shiite theology between the free will of man and the might of God, as it is understood by Abbas Navabi. See Hedin, Christer: *Ali Shariatis befielseologi. Västerländska inslag i shiitisk revolutionär islam*. Swedish Science Press, Uppsala 2006; Navabi, Abbas: *Reform and Revolution in Shi'i Islam*.

³⁵ It is not always obvious in which year specific lectures were originally delivered, but they can often be identified according to whether they were given at the University of Mashhad or Husayniyah Irshad, since after 1972 Irshad was closed and by then Shariati did not have authorization to teach at Mashhad.

³⁶ Navabi, Abbas: *Reform and Revolution in Shi'i Islam*; Bakhtiari, Bahman: *Religion and Politics*; Chatterjee, Kingshuk: *Ali Shariati and the Shaping of Political Islam in Iran*.

thought, and the works I analyze are sufficiently important and representative to warrant study here.³⁷

Gustavo Gutierrez

Gustavo Gutierrez (b.1928) is a Peruvian Catholic theologian who was among the first to formulate the ideas of Liberation Theology, a burgeoning movement in Latin America in the late sixties. After studying in Peru, Belgium, and France, he was ordained as a priest in 1959. His experiences among the poor in Lima and of base communities of the Church in Brazil have had a decisive impact on his theology. The context of his theology is the growing radicalization in Latin America of the time as a response to poverty, inequality, military dictatorship, foreign domination, oppression of the Indian population, and repression of political dissent. In the wake of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), impulses toward radicalization in the Catholic Church were given momentum by the Latin America Bishop's Conference of Medellín in 1968, at which Gutierrez took an active part in the drafting of key statements. Gutierrez's *A Theology of Liberation* (1971) was an important expression of these developments. It claims to be theology as a reflection on praxis – the practice of the Church siding with the poor, struggling against poverty and exploitation, and raising consciousness at a grassroots level. It also reflects on the repression which had been elicited by this stance. Despite the fact that the opposition organized by the Church against the political and economic order was somewhat more protected than the activities of political parties or unions, representatives of Liberation Theology were the targets of murder, disappearances, threats, arrests, torture, and exile. At the same time, their theological soundness was questioned by the Church and several attempts were made to discredit them and to prevent them from further influencing decisive statements of the Church in Latin America.³⁸ In 1983, the Congregation of the Doctrine of the

³⁷ According to Kingshuk Chatterjee, the selection of Shariati's writings which has been translated to English is representative, if narrow. Chatterjee, Kingshuk: *Ali Shariati and the shaping of political Islam in Iran*, p. 19.

³⁸ For the historical and political developments surrounding Liberation Theology, see for example in Berryman, Phillip: *Liberation Theology. The Essential Facts about the Revolutionary Movement in Latin America and Beyond*. I.B. Tauris, London 1987; Tombs, David: *Latin American Liberation Theology*. Brill Academic Publishers, Boston 2002.

Faith of the Catholic Church demanded a critical appraisal of the theology of Gustavo Gutierrez, questioning both his loyalty to the Church and his doctrinal orthodoxy. The central point of the Congregation's criticism was the influence of Marxism, which it understands as the determining principle of liberation theology.³⁹ Other Liberation Theologians have been similarly criticized and some even excommunicated. While Gutierrez openly acknowledged the influence of Marxism on Liberation Theology, he welcomed the critique by the Congregation as offering an opportunity to deepen and clarify the commitments entailed by such a theology, and he has since clarified his position to the Congregation in several ways.⁴⁰ Gutierrez has published several works of pastoral and systematic theology and been professor at the Pontifical University of Peru and visiting professor at many universities. Since 2001, he has been Professor of Theology of the University of Notre Dame, Indiana.

I will take as my main object of study the standpoints developed in *A Theology of Liberation*. A work of political theology, it is concerned with the questions that provide the main focus of this inquiry. In later works such as *We Drink from Our Own Wells* (1983), *On Job* (1985) and *The God of Life* (1989), Gutierrez reasserts his commitment to the poor and to liberating practice. However, as works more of pastoral theology and dogmatics, they steer clear of political theory, with the result that the once frequent references to Marx, Frantz Fanon, Ernesto Guevara, and Louis Althusser have all but disappeared in these later texts. They are in a way a logical next step for Gutierrez, who in his first book emphasized the importance of developing a spirituality in

³⁹ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: "Ten observations on the Theology of Gustavo Gutierrez" (1983); Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (Ratzinger, Joseph and Bovone, Alberto): "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation'" (1984) published in Hennelly, Alfred T., S.J (ed): *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, Ed., Orbis Books, Maryknoll 1990, pp. 348-350 and 393-414. The critique of the Congregation relies heavily on the notion that Marxism constitutes a complex from which parts cannot be separated. Theologians can thus not borrow from Marxist analysis insights about the origins of poverty in exploitation and oppression without carrying with them all the implications of what the Congregation takes to be an authoritarian, collectivist, violent, and atheist ideology incompatible with human rights, dignity, and freedom and with the Christian understandings of the person, sin, salvation, and truth. Op. cit. pp. 401-403.

⁴⁰ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *A Theology of Liberation. History, Politics and Salvation*. Orbis, Maryknoll 1973, p. 9, see also p 97, note 40 and Gutierrez, Gustavo: "Criticism will Deepen, Clarify Liberation Theology" (1984) published in Hennelly, Alfred T., S.J (ed.): *Liberation Theology*, pp. 419-424.

the sense of a concrete being of the Church, of prayer, liturgy, and action in a manner consistent with its message of good news to the poor. However, the shift can also be understood as a concession to the criticism levelled at liberation theology for being too Marxist. Since political and ecclesial repression form the context of Gutierrez's work, there is an obvious risk that this has affected how the argument is made in later books.⁴¹ Since *A Theology of Liberation* was written before the critique by the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith of Liberation Theology, it can perhaps be considered less of an exercise in subterfuge and thus more suitable as a principal source for Gutierrez's ideas. I will refer to the later works in my analysis when they deal more explicitly with, or develop in more detail, some aspect that is already present in *A Theology*. Therefore, they will be valuable as resources for clarifying Gutierrez point in several instances.

Tariq Ramadan

Tariq Ramadan (b.1962) is a Swiss-Egyptian Sunni Muslim intellectual engaged in political, theological, ethical, and legal reflections using Islamic sources, who describes himself as belonging to the re-

⁴¹ Some of the points of critique are plainly not adequate in relation to Gutierrez, such as the claim that Liberation Theology equates God with history, reduces salvation to political liberation and sin to social sin, gives the Bible an exclusively political meaning, and ignores the sacramentality of the church. Other aspects of criticism are clearly to the point but need not affect the plausibility of Liberation Theology, such as the notion that Liberation Theology advocates critique of church structures and a partisan church in opposition to dominant theology and much of the hierarchy. There are also points in the critique that are valid and indicate a need for further elaboration, regarding the issue of violent means and the insufficient recognition of the biblical understanding of personal freedom in Christ as a direct possibility. Gutierrez has highlighted the theme of grace in his later works, firmly anchoring the struggle for justice in the context of the gratuitous love of God offered in Christ. In my analysis, this can be seen as a response to the critique by the Congregation that Liberation Theology fails to recognize freedom as the gift of grace. I will return to some of the points of the critique when they touch directly on issues of this study, such as the relationship of truth to praxis and on the relationship of temporal and eternal liberation. In its critique, the Congregation also affirms that the Gospel is a message of freedom and liberation from sin which has consequences for liberation in economic, social, cultural, and political spheres where human dignity is realized, that the cry for justice must be answered by the Church with an effective witness in the service of the poor, and that pastoral praxis makes one more aware of some truths. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation'", pp. 393-414

formist trend.⁴² Born in Geneva in an exiled Egyptian family, he began his career as a schoolteacher involved with several NGOs. He achieved fame as a Muslim public intellectual mainly through his book *To Be A European Muslim* (1999), which lays down a strategy for faithful Muslim life in the West. He wrote his dissertation on the Islamic Renaissance and has since authored several books on Islam and modernity in both Muslim-majority societies and the West, and has held different research positions, including at Oxford University.

He has been the subject of intense controversy because of accusations of “doublepeak”, hidden radicalism and support for terrorism. As a consequence, he was banned from entering France for six months in 1995–1996, and denied entry in the United States after having been appointed to a chair at Notre Dame University in 2004.⁴³ Although the objective of this inquiry is among other things to assess and criticize the different ethics studied, among them the positions developed by Ramadan, these controversies will be largely omitted because they are not relevant to the immediate focus. The problem with most critical books on Ramadan, as Canadian Catholic theologian Gregory Baum notes in his study of Ramadan’s theology, is that they do not analyze his theological thought.⁴⁴ Rather, they consist of accusations of fundamentalism, extremism, literalism, and radicalization to the point of preparation for terrorism or conquest. These accusations cannot be substantiated by anything I have found in Ramadan’s works nor in the citations made from cassettes and other sources by his critics. Rather, it seems that the criticisms against Ramadan on these issues rest on

⁴² Ramadan, Tariq: *What I Believe*. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2010, p. 2.

⁴³ For a detailed account of these circumstances surrounding Ramadan, see Yu, Chi-Chung: *Thinking between Islam and the West. The Thoughts of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Bassam Tibi and Tariq Ramadan*. Peter Lang, New York 2014, pp. 140-144. However, Yu’s understanding of the contents of Ramadan’s thought differs substantially from the interpretation developed here. Yu claims that Ramadan wants to reduce both reliance on traditional interpretative methods and religion’s influence in social life. I take these differences in assessment to be the consequence of several shortcomings of Yu’s analysis of Ramadan. Firstly, he does not recognize the traditional authority of, and among reformers common reliance on, certain methods and concepts used by Ramadan. Furthermore, Yu relies heavily on *To be a European Muslim* which he claims as the most theoretical work, and seems oblivious to the methodological shift introduced in *Radical Reform* and Ramadan’s related claim that *ijtihad* has become insufficient. In spite of his stated aims, the analysis is in my view insufficiently informed by theoretical tools of ethics, theology and political theory. Op. cit. pp. 142, 162, 164, 170, 178ff, 204 and 207.

⁴⁴ Baum, Gregory: *The Theology of Tariq Ramadan. A Catholic Perspective*. University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 2009, pp. 15f.

several deeply problematic assumptions, all of them coming from an islamophobic worldview.⁴⁵ I will not delve further into this discourse on Ramadan. As already noted, the analysis of such discourse has been made elsewhere and there is no reason to lend it credibility by referencing it as secondary sources. It is nonetheless important, as a context to Ramadan's work, to note that Islamic ethicists who aspire to a certain radicalism beyond liberal sensibilities are being made the object of suspicion, with material consequences for their ability to work and develop theory. While one should not equate the self-censure or silencing that results from pressures of a public opinion and foregone career options with censure and political repression of the dictatorial kind, it is noteworthy for the comparison which follows that the contexts for development of Islamic radical ethics and Christian radical ethics are far from the same.

My analysis of Ramadan's ethics will take as its main material his book *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation* (2009). While many of Ramadan's previous works have dealt with how to conceive of a Muslim ethics that is firmly grounded in tradition while also addressing moral questions of the modern world, *Radical Reform* marks a critical development in this methodology. His previous books, mainly *Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity* (2001) and *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (2004), will be used because in places they provide valuable clarifications of the resources and con-

⁴⁵ For example, writer Caroline Fourest relies on the notions that Muslims feel authorized by the dogma of *taqiyya* (*taqiyya*, allowing Muslims to conceal their faith under persecution) to dissemble in the West to further their purposes, that *dawa* (*da'wa*, calling to Islam) can be translated as aggressive proselytism or even forced islamization and conquest, and that the naiveté of the left and the anti-globalization movement are leaving the field open for the infiltration of Western society by insidiously disloyal and double-speaking Islamists. See Fourest, Caroline: *Brother Tariq. The Double-speak of Tariq Ramadan*. Encounter Books, New York, 2008. Islamologist Jan Hjärpe notes that the suspicions leveled against Ramadan lack credibility because they rest on a faulty understanding of his interpretation of tradition's concepts. See Hjärpe, Jan: *Islamismen. Politisk-religiösa rörelser i den muslimska världen*. Gleerups, Malmö 2010, p. 74. Furthermore, Fourest and others of Ramadan's critics buttress their claims about his fundamentalism by citing his positions on, for example, the complementarity of men and women or on the impossibility of homosexual life in Islam. While these positions can be criticized as moralist and conservative, they do not add up to proof of sedition, and indeed are quite common opinions among Catholic theologians who travel in and out of the US and France all the time. Furthermore, the fact that Ramadan does not publicly campaign about these issues is perhaps to be understood, not as dishonesty, but as a question of where his attention is focused both academically and strategically.

cepts which he reworks in *Radical Reform*, so long as one bears in mind that, while they represent the first steps in the elaboration of Ramadan's proposal for reform, they have been superseded, methodologically speaking. His aforementioned *To Be A European Muslim* is little used in my study because it is mainly concerned with non-theoretical issues and the arguments it sets forward lie very close to those of *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*. Ramadan has also published several other works that will be largely excluded from analysis here mostly because they lack relevance for my research questions. They include a biography of the Prophet Muhammad called *In the Footsteps of the Prophet* (2008), a popularization of Ramadan's thought in a book called *What I Believe* (2010), and a book containing a kind of philosophy of pluralism, *The Quest for Meaning* (2012).⁴⁶ Of greater interest is Ramadan's analysis of the Arab spring in *Islam and the Arab Awakening* (2012), because it clarifies his political position and therefore illuminates his concept of justice. It can be seen as a return to the more politically radical statements of *Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity*. Interestingly, it is in his two works that are concerned with countries of the South that Ramadan's radicalism is most pronounced. On questions of interpretative method, *Radical Reform* will be my main object of analysis. Together with *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, it provides insight into Ramadan's thought on secularity and the role of religion. Both *Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity* as well as *Islam and the Arab awakening* are key texts for my discussion of the question of justice.

I will refer to some secondary works about Ramadan, mainly Gregory Baum's *The Theology of Tariq Ramadan: A Catholic Perspective* (2009). This work has two aims: first, it introduces Ramadan's thought mainly with regard to his theological reformist ideas and their consequences for Muslim life in the West; and second, it compares Ramadan's positions to Catholic thought as two instances of theology wrestling with modernity, both arriving at "[...] a critical conversation with the society with which they are in solidarity".⁴⁷ I will use Baum

⁴⁶ It may be that this book marks an interesting new development in the thinking of Ramadan, representing a departure from tradition. It can also be seen as a kind of meta-reflection in which Ramadan situates his own work on the Islamic tradition within a larger picture of a plurality of religions and philosophies. However, the genre of the book has led me to exclude it from my treatment of Ramadan's ethics. Ramadan, Tariq: *The Quest for Meaning*. Penguin books, London 2012.

⁴⁷ Baum, Gregory: *The Theology of Tariq Ramadan*, p. 117.

mainly to discuss his interpretations of Ramadan where his conclusions differ from my own. While Baum's analysis is an interesting contribution, I believe that he sometimes tends to overestimate the similarities between Ramadan's theology and the positions adopted by the Second Vatican Council.⁴⁸

John Milbank

John Milbank (b.1952) is an Anglican theologian known as one of the founders of Radical Orthodoxy, a theological stance presented in a 1999 book of the same name, which was edited by Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward. In it, they define orthodoxy as a commitment to creedal Christianity, confirming what they see as the richer and more coherent Christianity which was gradually lost after the Middle Ages. The radicalism of the movement is described in the book as a bold return to patristic and medieval roots in order to criticize modern society, culture, and philosophy. The radical return, they claim, leads them to rethink tradition, thereby articulating a more incarnate, participatory, and socialized Christianity.⁴⁹ By 1990, Milbank had already become widely known for his book *Theology and Social Theory* in which he reads social theory through the lens of theology, claiming that a Catholic Christian account of reality is finally the most persuasive one theoretically, and that such a theological vision alone can present a cogent political challenge to the neo-liberal hegemony and serve as a basis for socialist hope.⁵⁰ Milbank has worked as a researcher and lecturer at several prestigious universities and has had a substantial influence on the development of Christian theology in the West, most notably in systematic theology, political theology, and ethics, both in academia and in the churches.

Interestingly, he still is relatively little known outside the field of theology and the churches. There may be several reasons for this: the complicated and inward-looking character of his theology, the fact that he insists on theological self-sufficiency, and the lack of political

⁴⁸ For example, I believe that he tends to read into Ramadan's thought Karl Rahner's position on anonymous Christians. See Baum, Gregory: *The Theology of Tariq Ramadan*, pp. 69 and 136.

⁴⁹ John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (eds.): *Radical Orthodoxy. A New Theology*. Routledge, London 1999, pp. 2f.

⁵⁰ Milbank, John: *Theology and Social Theory. Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd ed. Blackwell Publishing, Oxford 2006, pp. xiii-xiv.

activism on his own part despite his political theorizing to the contrary. Another reason is, I believe, the public's tendency to treat Christian theology with benign neglect. This points to an important context for Milbank's and also for Forrester's work, which is Christianity's particular status in the Western world.⁵¹ Because Christianity has to a certain extent merged with secular culture, it continues to influence the majority's views on a number of central issues, such as private and public. We will return to these considerations because they have implications for which propositions from theology seem plausible to a general public. For now, however, it should be noted that such a privileged position affects the context of the ethicist, which constitutes a bias in the comparison that is the aim of this inquiry. It is not farfetched to assume that if a Muslim theologian had expressed views similar to Milbank's about the relationship between church and political power, even in a religious forum, it would have garnered far more attention – and criticism.

As material for my study of Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* retains its importance for understanding his overall aims and interpretative method. However, the book contains very little by way of explicit political ethics. His thesis and its implications for political theology have been further developed in *The Future of Love* and *Beyond Secular Order*. These three books will form the main material for this chapter. In his 2009 preface to *The Future of Love*, Milbank claims that the book develops a radical conservatism/conservative radicalism in direct opposition to liberalism. He positions himself in the tradition of an Anglican and Catholic Christian socialism that is conservative theologically and radical politically, believing that only the Church has the theoretical and practical power to challenge the global hegemony of capital and to create a viable politico-economic alternative.⁵² *Beyond Secular Order* is helpful among other things because in it, Milbank develops the implications of his political thought for the wider polity and not only for the Church. I also make some use of Milbank's book on Henri de Lubac, *The Suspended Middle*, because the relation of the natural to the supernatural is a foundation of Milbank's

⁵¹ An insightful discussion of this and its implications for the responsibility of Christian political theology can be found in Svenungsson, Jayne: "Public faith and the common good. A radical Messianic proposal." *Political Theology*, vol. 14, no. 6, 2013, pp. 744-757.

⁵² Milbank, John: *The Future of Love. Essays in Political Theology*. Cascade Books, Eugene 2009, p. xi.

thought, even if the particular details of his exposition of Lubac need not detain us here. Some parts of his second book, *The Word Made Strange*, which are concerned with political theology, will also be referenced.

As for secondary sources, the vast debate sparked by Radical Orthodoxy will not be referred to here in its entirety. Much of that material is written before Milbank's latter books and its criticisms are sometimes answered or bypassed by later works. I will mainly refer to some later critics of Milbank insofar their concerns are related to the research questions and aims of this inquiry. Milbank is also a public figure and involved in many debates in academic fora. I have chosen to restrict the study's interest in these mainly to questions of Milbank's views on Islam, not only because have these sparkled intense debate but because they provide some clarification of the often cursory notes in his books. Milbank's debate with Joshua Ralston, a Presbyterian theologian with a research specialism in Christian and Islamic theology, will be of special interest.

Transliteration

When the text refers to concepts in Arabic, I will employ the system of transliteration of Encyclopedia Britannica, subject to some simplifications. There are some terms of Islamic thought that can now be regarded as part of the English language, such as Islam, Shiite and Sunni tradition, the Sharia, the Quran, fatwa, caliph and jihad. These will be rendered in the same manner as any other English words. Other terms in Arabic will, the first time they occur, be followed by the full transcription employed by Encyclopedia Britannica, rendered in parentheses and italics. This is to avoid any confusion that might result from the similar transcription of different Arabic words, so that the reader knowledgeable in Arabic can ascertain what concept is referred to by the original author. Following that first occurrence, the term in question will be rendered in italics and with a simplified transliteration which employs only Latin letters. The intention is to avoid unnecessary encumbrance of the text while preserving clarity. The names of persons will not follow these rules of transliteration but instead use the lettering which they employ themselves or their conventional denotation in the media and scholarly literature.

3. Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im – Theology justifies human rights

This chapter concerns the position of Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, understood as an Islamic modified liberalism. I examine his radical interpretative method which aims to develop an Islam compatible with human rights, and discuss how it is legitimized and understood as an ethic based on reason. His position on religion and politics is analyzed in light of the legitimizing role of religious reasons in personal formation and public address. An-Na'im's notion of civic reason is disambiguated in terms of the requirements of an inclusive democratic culture. The implied positions of ethical theory are analyzed as epistemological universalism and a theory of consonance. I then turn to the question of religion and power, which involves An-Na'im's discussion of the secular state and the implications of secularity for the possibility of piety and development of tradition. An-Na'im's understanding of justice is characterized as a sufficiency account in the human rights tradition. The last section of the chapter contains a critical discussion of An-Na'im's position, in which I discuss the weaknesses of his methodological approach for the critical potential of religious ethics and the resulting legitimizing function for religion. The discussion also points to some problems with non-comparative accounts of justice and with the prioritization of political rights.

A method of reversal

For An-Na'im, the question of interpretative method is an important one. His starting point is that Islam inevitably exercises a political influence in societies where Muslims live, because religious beliefs affect the legitimacy and efficacy of institutions.¹ He is convinced that

¹ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Islam and the Secular State*, p. 84.

Sharia can exercise a positive influence in public life in promoting human rights, but that this will be possible only if Sharia can be substantially reformed in several aspects, such as the status of women and non-Muslims.² Such reform must be carried out meticulously and with honesty. An-Na'im is critical of reform endeavours that, in his opinion, are not carried out with methodological stringency. For him, it is unacceptable to re-read the past and attribute various modern values, such as gender equality or democracy, to the historical conception of Sharia. His position is that it is preferable to acknowledge that this conception of Sharia upheld discrimination of women and non-Muslims as well as slavery.³ Nor is he satisfied with attempts at reform that choose arbitrarily among different sources of Sharia in order to promote a more modern conception.⁴ Finally, he also deplors the way that many interpreters seem content to save Sharia as an unchanging ideal in theory, while in practice condoning breaches of the law by reference to the doctrine of necessity (*darūra*).⁵ According to An-Na'im, upholding in theory something not observed in practice undermines the coherence and credibility of Islam as a religion.⁶ He wants to promote a conception of Sharia that it is possible to live by and that is not subject to arbitrary exceptions.⁷

While critical of such sweeping practices, An-Na'im also claims that any reform which is carried out through the existing corpus and methodology of Sharia (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) will fail to achieve its purpose,

² An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Toward an Islamic Reformation. Civil Liberties, Human Rights and International Law*. Syracuse University Press, Syracuse 1990, p. 33. Some Muslim thinkers draw a sharp line between Sharia and *fiqh* (*fiqh*), separating the eternal and God-given moral ideal from the historical concrete development of religious law. This is not a distinction made by An-Na'im, who uses the term Sharia for the latter concept, while still arguing that Sharia *should* serve as a moral ideal rather than be understood as positive law. In his latest book, An-Na'im further reinforces this stance by reserving the term law for secular, positive state law and refers to Sharia as norms. An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *What is an American Muslim? Embracing Faith and Citizenship*. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014, p. 144.

³ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Toward an Islamic Reformation*, p. 149.

⁴ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Islam and the Secular State*, pp. 129 and 135. An-Na'im refers to some Muslim reformers' use of *talfiq* (*talfiq*), to construct a general principle or rule from a variety of sources, which according to him implies taking the judgements out of context and recombining them according to personal preference. See An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Toward an Islamic Reformation*, p. 33.

⁵ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Toward an Islamic Reformation*, pp. 6f.

⁶ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Islam and the Secular State*, p. 136.

⁷ Op. cit., p. 107.

for example of completely abolishing the death penalty for apostasy.⁸ In this instance An-Na'im discusses the concept of *ijtihad*, which many Muslim thinkers claim is the answer to the need to reform Sharia. An-Na'im states that the majority of Muslims maintain that since the tenth century the possibility of *ijtihad* has been closed,⁹ and while Muslim reformers in every age have demanded the reopening of the gates of *ijtihad*, this is not enough to achieve the necessary reform. The reason for this is that, according to the historical framework of Sharia, *ijtihad* cannot be exercised in matters governed by a clear text of the Quran or *sunna* or even by matters settled by consensus, *ijma* (*ijmā'*).¹⁰

Instead, An-Na'im proposes to reform Sharia according to the methodology developed by his late teacher, Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, which centres on the principle of abrogation (*naskh*).¹¹ The starting point for this reform is the realization that Sharia was constructed by early Muslim jurists through a process of interpretation and derivation using the divine sources of Islam, the Quran, and the *sunna*.¹² The divine status of the Quran and *sunna* means that other sources of law must defer to them.¹³ However, the Quran is far from unequivocal on every subject. It was therefore decided that the earlier Quranic verses revealed in Mecca, which contradicted later revealed verses from the Medina stage, were invalidated by the subsequent revelation. This practice, called the principle of abrogation, was necessary in order to produce a coherent Sharia.¹⁴ The methodology which Taha proposed was to reverse this process and to claim that abrogation was rather a postponement. Accordingly, the message revealed in Mecca contains the universal and eternal message of Islam. Since this message was not viable in the historical context where it was revealed, it was post-

⁸ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed, op. cit., p. 123.

⁹ The notion that the practice of *ijtihad* was ended early in Islamic history is commonly referred to by the metaphor of the closing of the gates or doors of *ijtihad*, and the call for a restoration of the practice is referred to as an opening of these.

¹⁰ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Toward an Islamic Reformation*, pp. 27f and 49f. In this he is in agreement with Tariq Ramadan who also deems *ijtihad* an insufficient remedy to the current need for development of the Islamic tradition. Ramadan's solution to this problem is different, as we shall see.

¹¹ Mahmoud Mohamed Taha: *The Second Message of Islam*. Syracuse University Press, Syracuse 1987, p. 161.

¹² An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed, *Toward an Islamic Reformation*, pp. 11 and 48.

¹³ Op. cit., p. 51.

¹⁴ Op. cit., pp. 21, 49 and 57.

poned to a later age and the Medina revelation took its place for the time being.¹⁵ Now the time has come when the postponement is over, and the historically coloured revelation of Medina should be set aside in favour of the Mecca message. This is the part of the Quran that speaks of freedom of religion and the equality of all people regardless of gender or creed, and that addresses all of humankind.¹⁶ An-Na'im's claim is that on the basis of a new application of *naskh* to the Quran and the *sunna*, a methodologically sound and systematic reinterpretation of Sharia can be made. In accordance with how Sharia has been developed historically, a new consensus, *ijma* can be established as to the meaning of Sharia.¹⁷

The basic rationale for the reform An-Na'im proposes is the belief that the Meccan message is the eternal message, intended as such by God from the beginning.¹⁸ Since Muhammad was the last prophet, it was he who received this eternal message, even though it was impossible to implement at the time. Accordingly, he also received a message more appropriate for his time.¹⁹ An-Na'im's interpretative method implies a quite radical departure from the traditional methods of interpretation of Sharia. In consequence, he takes pains to justify his methodological reasoning by reference to concepts and methods that are significant for Islamic tradition.

His central arguments can be summarized as follows: Sharia is and has always been a result of human beings interpreting God's message. Even though the sources of Sharia, the Quran and the *sunna*, are divine, any interpretation of their practical meaning in a specific context is necessarily human and thus characterized by limitation and fallibility and subject to possible change and reinterpretation.²⁰ This is because the very methodology used to derive Sharia from its sources relies on human judgment in several ways. The Quran and the *sunna* are not unequivocal on every subject, and so a human must decide which verses to apply and which to abrogate.²¹ On the subjects where there is no clear text in the Quran or *sunna*, Sharia is determined by

¹⁵ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed, op. cit., pp. 12f and 59f.

¹⁶ Op. cit., pp. 52-56 and 109.

¹⁷ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Islam and the Secular State*, pp. 135f.

¹⁸ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Toward an Islamic Reformation*, p. 180.

¹⁹ Op. cit., pp. 53f. Note that An-Na'im's argument gains its force from the central Islamic belief that Muhammad was the last of the prophets.

²⁰ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Islam and the Secular State*, pp. 47 and 135.

²¹ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Toward an Islamic Reformation*, pp. 57f.

one of the recognized methods, the most important being reasoning by analogy (*qiyās*), consensus (*ijma*), or independent reasoning (*ijtihād*).²² Even if one claims, as many Muslim scholars do, that there is no need for *ijtihād*, the exercise of human judgement is still present in the other methods.²³ Also, the methods are dependent on one another since it is in fact the reasoning and consensus of the first Muslim followers and scholars which have established what counts as reliable *sunna*, which texts are to be used for *qiyas*, and that authority can in fact be conferred on any of these methodologies.²⁴ All conceptions of Sharia thus rely on interpretation and can be made subject to reinterpretation precisely because they are human constructions and, as such, never absolute.²⁵ An-Na'im claims that by making new interpretations he is in fact remaining squarely within Islamic tradition and, like that tradition, applying a sound interpretative method based on Islam's primary sources, above all, the Quran.²⁶ Furthermore, An-Na'im claims, in the message intended for the Medina period the eternal ideal is present as a direction in which practice is aimed in small steps.²⁷ The context in which the first Muslims lived must be taken into account when understanding how Sharia was traditionally applied, and since the context has changed, Sharia must be examined anew to understand what further development in the direction of the ideal entails.²⁸ For example, women's financial dependence on men was a feature of the world of Quranic revelation, which might have justified

²² An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed, op. cit., pp. 23ff. An-Na'im defines *ijtihād* as independent juristic reasoning to provide answers when the Quran and *sunna* are silent.

²³ Op. cit. p. 78.

²⁴ Op. cit., pp. 19 and 23; and An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Islam and the Secular State*, p. 293. An-Na'im states that *ijma* and *qiyas* are not mentioned expressly by the Quran and the *sunna* as sources of Sharia.

²⁵ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Islam and the Secular State*, p. 47. While this is not spelled out by An-Na'im, his arguments resonate with a central tenet in Islamic theology, that of the absolute difference between human and God.

²⁶ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Toward an Islamic Reformation*, p. 20.

²⁷ An-Na'im here follows a line of reasoning employed by many Muslim reformers, articulated with clarity by the Islamic thinker Fazlur Rahman. He claims that there were practices and institutions at the time of the Prophet which were impossible to immediately eradicate but which God intended to abolish. In the Quran, rather than finding literal prohibitions of practices such as slavery and polygamy, one can follow indications of a trajectory toward abolition of, even when the literal words do not prohibit them. Sanctions and limitations on such practices indicate a moral ideal in which society was expected to move. Rahman, Fazlur: *Major Themes of the Quran*. Biblioteca Islamica, Minneapolis 1980, p. 48.

²⁸ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Toward an Islamic Reformation*, p. 65.

some regulations we today perceive as discriminatory.²⁹ Still, revelation contained attempts to reduce violence against women and improve their status as compared to the social practices of the day.³⁰ When the context changes, further steps in the direction implied by previous changes are called for, claims An-Na'im. Another example is the practice of consulting (*shūrā*) in the history of Muslim societies. While An-Na'im denounces as dishonest any claims to equate it with full democracy, he concedes that it can function as an inspiration and a resource for developing an Islamic commitment to further democracy.³¹ The arguments that An-Na'im puts forward in support of his interpretative method are concerns that he shares with many Muslim reformers, old and new, most notably the emphasis on understanding the role of interpretation, of context, of directionality of the message, and of the eternal message of justice and equality as a guiding principle. What is specific to his project is how he uses these insights to further the idea of a reversal of abrogation.

As already noted, An-Na'im emphasizes the fact that there is no universal consensus on how Sharia is to be interpreted in any given instance. Even if one counts only the most traditional, there exist at least four authoritative schools of jurisprudence among the Sunni, and a great diversity among Shiite Muslims. Any conception of Sharia is thus a human artefact, and all human interpretation is fallible and contestable.³² This descriptive point is important to An-Na'im since it undergirds his argument about the possibility of reinterpretation. But An-Na'im also envisages a debate about interpretations which aims at establishing an overlapping consensus on the provision of human rights. It is not important to him that the precise interpretative method he favours be regarded as the only correct understanding of interpretation. He is convinced that Islam has a central message of equality and freedom that can be established as a consensus through rational debate.

An-Na'im does not explicitly take a stand on the relationship between revelation and reason. However, as I understand it, his position is that ethics is *based on reason*. Not only does he accord reason a paramount role in understanding revelation's implication for ethics,

²⁹ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed, op. cit., pp. 88, 99f and 143.

³⁰ Op. cit., pp. 170 and 174.

³¹ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Islam and the Secular State*, p. 108.

³² Op. cit., p. 122.

his vision about a rational public debate to establish an overlapping consensus on human rights is also rooted in the idea that human reason is sufficient for moral insight. This means that although he is quick to point to the polyphonic nature of Islamic tradition as a pure description of the state of affairs, he is also convinced that what is right normatively can be understood as the same thing, not only by Muslims, but by everyone.

Islamic motivation in the practice of politics

An-Na'im emphatically rejects a state that calls itself Islamic and claims to uphold Sharia as positive law. However, he envisions an important role for religious motivation in the public sphere, and indeed wants to "affirm, nurture, and regulate the role of Islam in the public life of the community".³³ I have previously identified the influence of religious ethics in the public sphere as working through personal formation, intra-organizational formulation, and public address. In An-Na'im's view, these can all be seen as benign, although the latter is subject to several qualifications which will require some analysis because An-Na'im's statements on this subject are quite ambiguous.

First, the effect of Islam on personal formation of political positions is inevitable, according to An-Na'im. Islam is an important source of commitment for Muslims and is likely to maintain and even strengthen that influence for the foreseeable future. By his account, this role must be acknowledged and regulated.³⁴ Indeed, An-Na'im's own project of strengthening the human rights agenda through its justification by Islamic tradition is only viable because theological reasons are understood to be important to believers in their personal formation. However, An-Na'im claims that the influence of Islam on the politics of a country must be channelled through the appropriate and regular democratic institutions.³⁵ Muslims seeking to influence public policy from the perspective of their religious convictions should be able to support their proposals with civic reason. In agreement with the position taken by Rawls, An-Na'im argues that civic reason should be

³³ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed, op. cit., p. 1.

³⁴ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Toward an Islamic Reformation*, p. 68.

³⁵ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Islam and the Secular State*, pp. 5-6.

characterized by reasoning that is open and accessible to all citizens such that the reasons given can be accepted or rejected, regardless of one's religious belief.³⁶ This mode of reasoning is necessary, in An-Na'im's view, because not all subjects of the state share the Muslim faith and because those who do hold different views on what constitutes Sharia.³⁷ To prevent the tyranny of the majority, constitutional safeguards must be in place. This is An-Na'im's openly stated position, which would lead one to think that he does not accept any political role for religion beyond an influence on personal formation that can be relegated from the public. However, when all his arguments are taken into account his position in fact reveals itself to be more ambiguous.

An-Na'im believes that human rights and secularism need to be legitimized through internal discourse in religious communities, where the communities can draw upon indigenous traditions and historical experiences as resources for such developments.³⁸ Such discourse would affect the forming of personal opinion among believers, but could also be available to influence the reasoning of other citizens. An-Na'im does not envision strict boundaries around this kind of discourse. Rather, he proposes that the state can play a role in fostering internal dialogue and debate within communities as well as dialogue across communities on such issues. Argument and debate within communities should also happen in the broader social and political context of those communities, claims An-Na'im.³⁹ Here it is clear that the process of internal legitimization takes place as part of what I am here calling *the public*: not only does the discourse pertain to issues of legislation and the context is broadly conceived, but the state itself is envisaged as an actor in the discourse. So while An-Na'im elsewhere writes that "[...] the state should not intervene in the process of civic reasoning [...] except to uphold constitutional and other safeguards of free and fair debate", my interpretation is that his position can be understood as favourable towards public debate regarding various possible interpretations of tradition in and among religious communities. He even wants the state to enable such debate in ways that ideally do not favour any particular interpretation. The precise limits to appropri-

³⁶ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed, op. cit., p. 7.

³⁷ Op. cit., p. 29.

³⁸ Op. cit., pp. 178f.

³⁹ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *What is an American Muslim?*, p. 160.

ate state involvement might be a question that must be resolved in context.⁴⁰

An-Na'im's position on what I have termed public address, that is, arguments and reasons stemming from religious convictions being voiced in public, is complicated and requires some disentangling. As already explained, An-Na'im defines civic reason as a process of reasoning which is open and accessible to all citizens insofar as the reasons given can be accepted and rejected, regardless of one's religious beliefs. Citizens are entitled to be influenced by their religious commitments, but they should support their views by arguments that are independent of worldview.⁴¹ While this is what he repeatedly asserts, this straightforward definition is blurred by several features of his argument. In explaining the ethos of secularism, An-Na'im expands on his subject:

[...] secularism should be asserted to prevent the direct enforcement of religious doctrine [if it is being enforced] on the sole basis that such doctrine constitutes the religious beliefs of some people. But denying those believers the right to express their views on such matters in religious terms would undermine the principle of secularism. The secular state must protect the right to express religious views on such issues while ensuring that public policy and legislation [...] are based on civic reason [...] This paradoxical balance is difficult to establish and maintain, but there is no alternative to striving to achieve it.⁴²

The ambiguity informing this quotation is obvious. On the one hand, there is the right for religious believers to frame their arguments in favour of some policy in terms of their religious beliefs. On the other, there is the requirement that arguments thus framed not form the basis of public policy. This seems not to make sense without some additional premises, and also it seems not to do justice to An-Na'im's own idea about the progressive potential of religious justification. As al-

⁴⁰ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Islam and the Secular State*, p. 281.

⁴¹ In his latest book, An-Na'im tries to specify and perhaps also soften this requirement by formulations such as "without having to challenge the religious beliefs of others" (p. 23) or "without being open to charges of disbelief, apostasy or blasphemy" (p. 122) but this does not clarify the issue since the first formulation is clearly untenable in view of his promotion of the public contestation of interpretations, and the second clearly covers far less than he otherwise states about civic reason as a debate "without reference to belief or lack of it" (p. 173). See An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *What is an American Muslim?*

⁴² An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Islam and the Secular State*, p. 37.

ready stated, An-Na'im's own project is in fact an attempt to justify a certain conception of the state and of policymaking from the perspective of Islam.⁴³ Also, he believes his own argument about Islamic justification of secularity to be comprehensible to non-Muslims.⁴⁴ With regard to his own sources, he states that he includes Western political and legal theories, because it is "[...] neither possible nor desirable, in my view, to identify and deploy purely "Islamic" arguments, to the exclusion of non-Islamic arguments, as if the two forms of discourse can evolve in isolation or be separated from each other".⁴⁵ Furthermore, in describing his aims, he states that it is imperative to produce internally valid arguments for every culture to support secularism, human rights, and citizenship.⁴⁶ He is calling on non-Muslims to participate in the debate concerning the relationship of state, religion and politics with regard to Islamic societies, and Muslims to participate in the debate among other religious communities. The interesting point is that his discourse, which is itself public, is based on arguments that are not acceptable to anyone, regardless of belief. The point of An-Na'im's own work is to justify certain policies in Islamic terms, and the force of his argument is dependent on the fact that his reader is interested in what can be defended in Islamic terms. According to An-Na'im's definition of civic reason, his own discourse must be considered to be outside the domain of civic reason, where arguments based on religious premises have no bearing. This ambiguity is present throughout An-Na'im's work, where he repeatedly envisages a debate on different kinds of Islamic reform but states that any such debate should be subject to the safeguards of civic reason.⁴⁷ The obvious difficulty is that a debate about how a religious tradition should be reformed can hardly be couched in terms that are independent of worldview.

One way to understand this ambiguity would be if An-Na'im's conceptualization of civic reason were so narrow as to exclude public discourses such as An-Na'im's project of internal justification. But An-Na'im states that the "[...] concept of civic reason entitles all citizens to publicly debate any matter that pertains to or reflects on public

⁴³ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed, op. cit., p. 117; and An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Toward an Islamic Reformation*, p. 10.

⁴⁴ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Islam and the Secular State*, pp. 269f.

⁴⁵ Op. cit., p. 270.

⁴⁶ Op. cit., p. 42.

⁴⁷ Op. cit., p. 277.

policy and governmental or state action, including the views of other citizens about such matters”.⁴⁸ This definition, I would say, clearly situates his own project and other attempts to religiously legitimize policy or legislation as a part of that domain. Also, unlike Rawls, he claims to include independent and non-governmental spaces and arenas, such as voluntary associations and other parts of civil society, in the domain of civic reason.⁴⁹ This brings his concept of civic reason close to the definition of the public which I have presented.

A more likely interpretation is that An-Na'im's conceptualization of what constitutes a religious argument is extremely narrow, with the result that a religious argument is defined as always constituting “it's forbidden because God forbids it”. This seems to be implied by An-Na'im at several points. He describes religious rationales as “beyond debate by others” and as “dogma that does not permit negotiation and compromise”.⁵⁰ He writes that “the rationale of Sharia principles is that they are simply what some believe to be the will and command of God”.⁵¹ Discussing the issue in more detail, An-Na'im states that if, as a Muslim, he cannot give any other justification for the prohibition on interest than the fact that it is forbidden (*ḥarām*), then there is nothing to discuss with other citizens. But if, as a Muslim, he tries to explain the rationale or the good achieved by the Sharia prohibition, then it seems as though An-Na'im deems it acceptable and no longer classifies it as a religiously framed argument. If religious arguments are defined in this way, his point could be understood as both pragmatic and normative: such narrowly religious arguments are unlikely to win the support of non-believers, and to frame one's opinion in this way could also be construed as unreasonable in the sense of being not conducive to debate. On the other hand, it is quite possible to define religious arguments in a much broader way. In Islamic tradition, there is a strong tendency to believe that the dictates of Islam are rational and universally accessible, and that God wants what is best for humankind and will not impose on humans something that is not also good from a human point of view.⁵² This is the underlying logic which is present, I believe, when An-Na'im writes that it is “better for my faith as a Muslim to reflect on the social rationale for the dictates of Sharia and try

⁴⁸ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed, op. cit., p. 93.

⁴⁹ Op. cit., p. 100.

⁵⁰ Op. cit., p. 96.

⁵¹ Op. cit., p. 279.

⁵² Esposito, John L.: *Islam. Den raka vägen*. Studentlitteratur, Lund 2001, pp. 107 ff.

to persuade others of the general good of those commandments”.⁵³ Such arguments are, as I see it, still religious arguments in the broad sense that they are about how a particular religion should be understood and what is acceptable from the point of view of religious believers *qua* religious believers. With so broad a definition of a religious argument, it would seem that An-Na’im has no problem with the public address of religious ethics so long as the arguments are construed in a manner that is comprehensible to other citizens.

From this emerges what I take to be the actual, if not always expressly stated, concern which underlies An-Na’im’s ambiguous conception of civic reason. It is in fact an issue of inclusion and participation by all segments of the population, something which implies demands that are made of all citizens regardless of belief.⁵⁴ On the one hand, An-Na’im wants to restrict the use of religious reasons, at least as understood in the narrow sense, fearing that religious believers will otherwise cease trying to make arguments which other people can understand, and thereby exclude from the conversation people who do not share their religious beliefs. He writes that “[...]the objective of civic reason is to diminish the impact of claims of religious exclusivity on the ability to debate issues of public policy”.⁵⁵ On the other hand, he wants believers to be able to bring their faith into the political arena because this too is an issue of participation and inclusion. He writes: “[...] there is room in a secular society for many different kinds of voices, including those informed by religious beliefs”.⁵⁶ It would seem that the problem is not that some believers make arguments based on religious convictions; the problem arises when a certain belief (religious or otherwise) is made a prerequisite for participation in public debate. An-Na’im sometimes appears to want to solve this dilemma by supposing that there is a mode of reason, of making political arguments, which is neither religious nor atheist but truly independent of worldview. Even claims made within an explicit reli-

⁵³ An-Na’im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Islam and the Secular State*, p. 95. A similar turn is made by An-Na’im in his discussion of criminal law. See An-Na’im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Toward an Islamic Reformation*, pp. 113ff.

⁵⁴ An-Na’im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Islam and the Secular State*, p. 92.

⁵⁵ Op. cit., p. 93

⁵⁶ Op. cit., p. 221. This is exemplified by his discussion of Turkey in which he writes that “[...] the possibility of Islamic politics is necessary in Turkey in order to give significant numbers of citizens, collectively and individually, access to a fair process of civic reason.”

gious framework are supposed to be possible to reformulate in this publicly accessible way.⁵⁷ At other times, he seems not to assume that this is necessary, so long as everyone takes pains to be understandable and to understand those with other worldviews, and makes internally coherent arguments to people who attempt to understand the speaker's tradition. This is evident in another of An-Na'im's formulations of civic reason: "By 'civic reason', I mean reasons that can be publicly debated and contested by any citizen, individually or in community with others, in accordance with norms of civility and mutual respect."⁵⁸ Similarly, he refers to civic reasoning as an ongoing process of cultivating civic responsibility and empathy with opposing points of view.⁵⁹ These formulations include the possibility of allowing religiously framed arguments, provided that the framework is accessible and thus contestable to others.

To sum up, despite the fact that his expressly stated definition of civic reason in some instances indicates something else, I would say that An-Na'im claims the following. The domain of civic reason is a broad one, comprising not only all public debate in society of relevance to issues of public policy and legislation but also the justifications for various views on these issues. The media, academic institutions, and other parts of civil society count as parts of this domain when the issues discussed in these forums pertain to public policy. Religious arguments in the narrow sense described above are not to be forbidden in this domain, but they are unsuitable, because they are not conducive to debate, because they are unlikely to win support from people with other beliefs, and because they are not good Muslim practice. Religious arguments in the sense of arguments dependent on the framework of a certain worldview, or dependent on the fact that the interlocutors care about what is Islamic (or Christian, or something other), are an indispensable part of civic reason in places where people hold such worldviews because this is also the domain where internal religious justifications in favour of public policy are made to the people interested in such justifications. Ideally, people who are not religious believers of a certain faith want nevertheless to join the discussion of what it means to be, for example, a good Muslim citizen. The domain of civic reason should be characterized by as high a degree of

⁵⁷ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed, op. cit., p. 41.

⁵⁸ Op. cit., p. 85.

⁵⁹ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *What is an American Muslim?*, p. 122.

inclusiveness as is possible, and it is therefore imperative that all parties take pains to make themselves understood to people who do not share their beliefs. The outcome, ideally, is that people can agree on something – a secular state, for example – even if they have different rationales for doing so, in the manner of Rawls’s notion of overlapping consensus. They can “[...] agree upon the outcome despite their disagreement as to why they agree on that outcome”.⁶⁰

The principal actors in An-Na’im’s account are the religious believers as individual citizens. It is they who must be allowed to voice their religious beliefs and to develop their individual understandings of their tradition. Although religious thinkers and organizations may assist in the articulation of religious reflection available for the development of such standpoints, it is the believers who are the focus of An-Na’im’s concern for the inclusiveness of public debate. His account is thus individualist in its focus.

In the introduction, I stated three reasons for why religious arguments should be considered appropriate for the public debate, having to do with religious freedom, democratic culture, and the contributions which such traditions can be expected to make. All these are taken up by An-Na’im, although his emphasis can be said to rest on the two first. According to An-Na’im, Sharia plays a fundamental role in the shaping of ethical norms and values, and, as such, is an important source of political commitments.⁶¹ Safeguarding religious freedom means that believers have the right to be influenced by their religious convictions in their political life. Sharia should be neither privileged nor rejected as a source of policy simply because it is believed by some to be God’s will.⁶² The point An-Na’im makes here is that whatever views the citizenry holds, it has the right to let it influence its political choices, as long as it is channelled through the appropriate framework. Democracy demands that people be able to bring their entire self into politics, because people do not divide themselves into political and religious parts in any clear-cut way.⁶³ This argument relies on the premise that religious traditions indeed have a content rele-

⁶⁰ An-Na’im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Islam and the Secular State*, pp. 96 and 100. Rawls himself perceives An-Na’im’s project to be a good example of overlapping consensus by his own definition. See Rawls, John: “The idea of public reason revisited” in *Political Liberalism*, p. 461.

⁶¹ An-Na’im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Toward an Islamic Reformation*, p. 44.

⁶² An-Na’im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Islam and the Secular State*, p. 29.

⁶³ Op. cit., p. 275.

vant for political convictions, and therefore that it might be thought impossible to be an honest follower of this tradition while being denied the possibility of expressing such convictions publicly. An-Na'im's position is that believers are bereft of something central to their religion if they are not entitled to live by that message in its totality.⁶⁴ Because religions have content relevant to political issues, religious believers can only accept the confinement of religious thought to the private sphere by betraying their beliefs.

For An-Na'im, the most forceful argument concerns democratic culture. An-Na'im wants to foster a public discussion about religion and its implication for politics in which different interpretations are tested by giving reasons and arguments. This discourse is necessary, in An-Na'im's view, to confront conservative interpretations and for religion to evolve in a manner that is supportive of human rights. Attempts to deny entry to arguments from religious convictions to the public discussion will only force these political expressions underground and make religious commitments susceptible to abuse.⁶⁵ A public discussion between different interpretations can instead lead to a cross-cultural dialogue through which progressive forces can draw strength from each other.

The third reason for defending the right to voice religious convictions in public is that this can give the public access to contributions that might otherwise not be heard. As we have seen, An-Na'im's position is that the contribution is about motivation and justification – if people are to be convinced to strive for democracy and human rights, they must perceive these things as allowed or, better yet, mandated by their religion. Thus, if such a theology can be elaborated, it can have an important progressive impact.⁶⁶ An-Na'im assumes that religion is uniquely important to believers and, accordingly, that the contribution which theology can make in the justification of policies cannot be achieved in any other way.

For An-Na'im, the contribution that a religious ethic can make is mostly about motivation. In his view, secularism by itself cannot address the reservations which religious believers may have about secular governance.⁶⁷ But Islam can act as a legitimizing force through the

⁶⁴ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed, *ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Op. cit.*, pp. 85 and 181.

⁶⁶ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Muslims and Global Justice*. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 2011, p. 2.

⁶⁷ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Islam and the Secular State*, pp. 30 and 42.

appropriate democratic channels for the development of a secular state characterized by human rights and constitutionalism. The clear majority of human beings are religious adherents, and An-Na'im thinks that a secular state is unlikely to succeed if believers do not view it as consistent with, or even stipulated by, their religious doctrine.⁶⁸ He believes this to be the case, though he is careful to note that Islam does not exclusively determine the political opinions of Muslims.⁶⁹ This development of an Islamic defence and justification of human rights, among other things, is precisely what he himself tries to do, and it is vital for him that this goal is achieved through internally valid arguments, "[...] a coherent internal discourse in the culture".⁷⁰ It is my understanding of An-Na'im that he adheres to a theory of consonance, such that he believes the content of Islamic ethics to be the same as secular ethics. An-Na'im thus believes, not that secular ethics is defective in any substantive way, but that it has been insufficiently effective in convincing people, partly because it has been seen as inauthentic in the context of the South and as a collusion with the West. It is therefore imperative to produce internally valid arguments for human rights which develop them as a part of Islamic tradition.⁷¹ Religion is thus uniquely positioned to make a difference because of its paramount importance to believers in forming their convictions, yet it offers no more insights into the good and the right than do secular conceptions of human rights.

Because An-Na'im bases his ethic on reason, and because of his commitment to contribute an Islamic perspective to Rawls's overlapping consensus, he precludes any claims by religious ethics to make contributions to the public, contributions of a more substantive kind that might alter the content of ethics and not only its perceived legitimacy among believers. However, when one takes into account not only An-Na'im's openly stated position on Rawls but also my reading of his position on the role of religious arguments in general, I believe it becomes clear that he is not in complete agreement with Rawls. He refers to Rawls's position that comprehensive doctrines can be useful in less well-ordered societies, provided that they support the overlapping consensus. He agrees with the notion that comprehensive doc-

⁶⁸ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

⁶⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 105.

⁷⁰ *Op. cit.*, pp. 24-25

⁷¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 25.

trines, for example, Islam, should support the overlapping consensus in this way.⁷² However, he also wants to leave room for interpretation and development such that comprehensive doctrines might contribute something after all. To specify, An-Na'im wants to leave room for further development of the human rights, implying that comprehensive doctrines may have some influence on the understanding of those rights. He develops a notion of a broadened and deepened cross-cultural consensus, one which should not be restricted to the least common denominator of what is already accepted by the major cultural traditions of the world, but aim, rather, at widening the scope through internal reinterpretation and cross-cultural dialogue.⁷³ There is a small scope in An-Na'im's position, then, for the idea that a religious ethic might contribute some nuance or enrichment to the public debate on human rights and justice. However, my interpretation is that it is mainly a question of allowing some contextualization of human rights, not about developing alternatives or radical critique.

An-Na'im is a firm believer in the possibility of justifying ethical positions with reasons that can be accepted regardless of worldview. He is best understood as a proponent of what I have called an *epistemological universalism*. An-Na'im's narrow conceptualization of religious arguments might be taken to imply that he believes that justifications are contextual. Closer analysis, however, reveals that he does not count such narrow religious arguments as rational justifications at all. Rather, he believes that justifications and reasons can be given that are acceptable to people regardless of worldview. His position is complicated, as is evident when he writes:

[...] the separation between religion and state is compromised when the dictates of a particular religion, as interpreted by religious authorities or the ruling elite, are made into a prerequisite condition for participation in civic reason. But this can also happen from a nationalist or so-called secular perspective. [...] Secularism can be invoked as a hegemonic idea of national culture to the exclusion of other identities thereby violating the requirements of civic reason.⁷⁴

He does not regard atheism or secular ideologies as neutral, then, but wants to “[...] challenge the superiority of an abstract notion of a

⁷² An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed, op. cit., pp. 97-101.

⁷³ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Muslims and Global Justice*, p. 99.

⁷⁴ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Islam and the Secular State*, pp. 40f and 211.

purely secular rationale to a religious rationale, where the latter is presumed to be a less valid form of argument".⁷⁵ Moreover, An-Na'im sometimes appears to argue that it is impossible to draw a clear line between religiously framed and otherwise framed arguments. In the end, An-Na'im in his arguments often makes reference to or relies on the concept of a discourse that is completely independent of worldview or comprehensive doctrine, but he nowhere explains how this should work or be understood. As I have already shown, the discourse which he envisions has everything to do with how religious traditions are understood and can hardly be conceptualized without references to worldviews. Rather, I believe that he is best understood as working under the premise that all positions, including religious ones, can be explained in a way that is acceptable to people of other worldviews, which is to say, there exist universal reasons and justifications which anyone could accept. Also, his position seems to entail a theory of consonance according to which the content of ethics based on revelation is the same as the content of ethics based on reason.

Secular state and personal piety

Perhaps the most central tenet of An-Na'im's position is that the state should be secular. It should be neutral with respect to religious beliefs, not imposing any religion or religious commandments on its citizens. The laws which the state enforces might well accord with some religious beliefs about what is enjoined or forbidden, but these laws should be the outcome of a democratic process and cannot be justified by the state's simply making references to religion.⁷⁶ An-Na'im opposes all claims to the effect that the state should be Islamic in the sense of enforcing Sharia as positive law. The reasons for his opposition are concerned with rational coherence and religious freedom, but also and importantly with what he understands to be the requirements and traditions of Islam.

Because, according to An-Na'im, the very nature of belief is such that it presupposes the possibility of unbelief, coerced compliance with Sharia is a contradiction in terms. A conception of Sharia that is codified into national law will by definition cease to be the religious law of Islam and instead express the political will of the state. As

⁷⁵ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed, *op. cit.*, p. 275.

⁷⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 29.

such, it is a product of political power, not religious authority. When the state declares it to be Sharia, it merely seeks to legitimize its policies by calling them Sharia.⁷⁷ No human interpretation should be protected from debate and contestation by being enforced by the state and perceived as divinely sanctioned. This opens up too much possibility for abuse.⁷⁸

Furthermore, Sharia is best understood as a religious law, a question of personal piety. So if it is not possible to refuse to abide by Sharia, the religious value in fulfilling its commands is undermined. In a society where everyone is forced to live by Sharia, the option of doing so from personal conviction is rendered hollow.⁷⁹ Although this is not expressly explained by An-Na'im, I surmise that this argument is related to the fact that Sharia is a question of orthopraxis, of doing, not of believing.⁸⁰ An-Na'im writes: "Ensuring that the state is neutral regarding religious doctrine is necessary for true conviction to be the driving force of religious and social *practice*".⁸¹ This is especially damning because in An-Na'im's view it amounts to fostering hypocrisy, something repeatedly condemned by the Quran.⁸² People must be free not to live by Sharia, and even if they choose to do so, they must be free to choose their interpretation. According to An-Na'im's understanding of Islamic tradition, it is incumbent on every believer to know and uphold Sharia, which means that believers must decide for themselves on the correct interpretation. But any codification of Sharia into national law necessarily implies a choice among possible interpretations, since modern states must operate with fixed laws.⁸³ If the state uses its coercive powers to force upon people a particular conception of Sharia, they are not free to pursue life according to their convictions about their religious obligations.⁸⁴ Again, this is not acceptable from an Islamic point of view. It is also detrimental to the development of the Islamic tradition, since the evolution of Sharia takes place by debate and dissent that enables ideas to emerge and

⁷⁷ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed, op. cit., p. 7.

⁷⁸ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Toward an Islamic Reformation*, p. 80.

⁷⁹ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Islam and the Secular State*, p. 3.

⁸⁰ The importance of orthopraxis as compared to orthodoxy is often said to be greater in the Islamic tradition as compared to the Christian. See, for example, Esposito, John L.: *Islam*, p. 103.

⁸¹ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Islam and the Secular State*, p. 8. (my emphasis)

⁸² Op. cit., pp. 4, 268 and 291.

⁸³ Op. cit., p. 18.

⁸⁴ Op. cit., p. 3.

consensus to develop.⁸⁵ For this to be possible, freedom of religion, opinion, expression, and association are essential.⁸⁶

Contrary to popular belief, the Islamic tradition and its history are more consistent with a secular state than an Islamic one, according to An-Na'im. There is nothing in the Quran that prescribes a particular form of government.⁸⁷ Islamic societies, like their Western counterparts, have a history of different relationships between religion, politics, and the state, but none of these have been an example of an Islamic state as advocated by some Islamists today.⁸⁸ The conflation of religious and political authority has never been viable, either in theory or practice.⁸⁹ This reflects not a failure of application of the ideal, but the incoherence of the idea.⁹⁰ The one exception is the Medina community ruled by the Prophet, but this is an instance which cannot be replicated precisely because the Prophet, in An-Na'im's view, combined religious and political authority in a unique manner.⁹¹ Since then, the history of leadership in societies with a Muslim majority has been marked by negotiations. Religious leaders have always wanted to influence the state and gain support from it, while simultaneously also seeking to maintain a certain autonomy in order to sustain their moral authority over state and society. Political leaders have always sought the support of religious leaders to legitimize their rule and thus cast themselves as the upholders and protectors of Islamic principles and faith. Nevertheless, according to An-Na'im, there existed from the beginning of Islamic history two distinct types of authority, one based on personal piety and religious authority, and one based on political skill and power.⁹² To make the historical experience of the Medina state at the time of the Prophet into the model for political organiza-

⁸⁵ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed, op. cit., p. 137.

⁸⁶ Op. cit., pp. 14 and 30. In his comparative discussion of An-Na'im, Abdulaziz Sachedina, Rowan Williams, and Joseph Ratzinger, American Professor of Law Zachary R. Calo understands this focus on the secular as enabler of theological development to be the distinct emphasis on An-Na'im as compared to other theological contributions in the field from both traditions. Calo, Zachary R.: "Christianity, Islam, and Secular Law" in *Ohio Northern University Law Review*, vol. 39, 2012-2013, p. 886.

⁸⁷ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Islam and the Secular State*, p. 267.

⁸⁸ Op. cit., p. 45.

⁸⁹ Op. cit., p. 77.

⁹⁰ Op. cit., p. 280.

⁹¹ Op. cit., pp. 53 and 106. See also An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Toward an Islamic Reformation*, p. 77.

⁹² An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Islam and the Secular State*, pp. 49, 81 and 280.

tion today is to base a political program on a myth which obscures the history of Muslim societies.⁹³ The ideal of the Medina model should be translated so as to affirm essential justice as its underlying value and the rationale for its institutions, not duplicated under radically different circumstances.⁹⁴

The secularity of the state, according to An-Na'im, does not preclude any relation between religion and state. The exact relation between religion and power has to be mediated through practice over time in different cultural settings, and cannot be resolved once and for all theoretically.⁹⁵ In his view, an understanding of secularity which implies strict and systematic separation in all aspects between religion and state is unrealistic. Different countries have different relations between religion and state, according to their particular history, and the countries of Europe commonly assumed to be secular exhibit their own variants upon this relation. Secularity is understood and practiced in a variety of ways in different cultural settings, and the negotiation between religion and state is deeply contextual.⁹⁶ The contextuality is a feature of both the rationale for and the functioning of the secular government in every separate location.⁹⁷ In the same way, An-Na'im claims, Muslim countries should be allowed to develop a particular secularity appropriate to their context. There are resources for such a contextual negotiation of the relationship between religion and politics in the Islamic sources as well as in the various historical experiences of countries with large Muslim populations. The end result, the particular practice of secularity in those countries, will probably not conform to the European experience, nor need it do so in order to be valid. The process of developing a contextual secularity must be subject to the safeguards of constitutionalism and citizenship which guarantee, for example, the rights of minorities and women. These safeguards can in turn be supported by internally valid arguments.⁹⁸ An-Na'im calls his model process-based, which I take to mean that it is a

⁹³ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed, *op. cit.*, p. 62. To be clear, An-Na'im is not claiming that the Medina society is anything but a historical reality. What he claims is a myth is that this model has governed the relationship between state and religion in subsequent Islamic history.

⁹⁴ *Op. cit.*, pp. 107 and 110.

⁹⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 28.

⁹⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 37. An-Na'im exemplifies this with the special bilateral agreements between church and state that exists in several European countries.

⁹⁷ *Op. cit.*, pp. 42-43.

⁹⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 40.

process of contextualized contestation, negotiation, and justification that validates the resulting version of state-politics-religion relations.⁹⁹ The substantive outcome may, and in fact should, vary, but within the limits that the safeguards imply.¹⁰⁰

A human rights conception of justice

An-Na'im claims that global justice can be understood as universal human rights – the provision of economic, social, political and civil rights to every human being. An-Na'im specifically points out that this entails not only political rights but also economic and social rights.¹⁰¹ If we are to understand justice as the provision to everyone around the globe of the liberties, opportunities, and goods designated by human rights, justice clearly entails a massive redistribution of some kind. This is especially so since An-Na'im challenges the justifiability of differences between citizens and non-citizens and wants to ground universal human rights in a kind of moral global citizenship.¹⁰² As was argued in the introduction, human rights can be understood as a version of a sufficiency account of justice that entails a threshold level below which it is not acceptable for humans to be. Conversely, they also imply that the rights constitute a sufficient level above which justice does not require further redistribution. An-Na'im does not discuss equality as goal in itself and does not indicate anything about how we are to understand justice over and above the account given by human rights. One way to understand this is that the goal of securing all these goods to every human being is so awe-inspiring, and requires in itself such massive redistribution, that we need not for the moment concern ourselves with the potential inequalities which may remain after we have reached that goal.¹⁰³ This is not an argument that An-Na'im makes, but it could plausibly be fitted into his reasoning and thus account for his lack of discussion of justice over and above the ideal of realizing human rights for everybody. Alternatively, a case

⁹⁹ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed, op. cit., p. 268.

¹⁰⁰ Op. cit., p. 278.

¹⁰¹ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Muslims and Global Justice*, p. 6.

¹⁰² Op. cit., p. 308.

¹⁰³ This, as we have seen, is an argument once made by Martha Nussbaum when discussing equality in the context of the capabilities approach. Nussbaum, Martha: *Women and Human Development*, p. 12.

could be made that an egalitarian distribution is a prerequisite for the true realization of human rights, specifically political rights. This is not discussed by An-Na'im, and I deem it less probable that this is his implied position.¹⁰⁴ Rather, he retains the common emphasis of the human rights paradigm on political and civil liberties, even though he wants to put more emphasis on economic and cultural rights than is often the case. This conclusion is, I believe, warranted by the overall concerns of his works, which do not treat the issue of economic institutions and structures.

An important aspect of justice as imagined by An-Na'im is the specific right to self-determination. For him, this is simultaneously one universal human right among many and a vital aspect of every local project to realize human rights in a specific context. Human rights cannot be realized without self-determination because, from An-Na'im's perspective, this would make them an imperial imposition. This is why the development of internal legitimacy of human rights is of such importance to him: it enables the realization of human rights as a project of self-determination, a just project. Self-determination is a prerequisite for justice, claims An-Na'im, both in relations between nations and between groups in nations.¹⁰⁵ This focus on self-determination is an important factor in explaining why An-Na'im is reluctant to specify the outcome of the process of understanding and implementing human rights, and thus justice. Respect for self-determination implies that this must be an open-ended process.¹⁰⁶

Human rights can and should be interpreted and implemented somewhat differently in different contexts, and the present formulation of these rights by the UN must be open to challenges and amendment. This is especially important to An-Na'im since the process whereby human rights as understood by the UN were formulated was severely lacking in perspectives other than Western.¹⁰⁷ No culture, religion, philosophy, or ideology should be either privileged or overlooked in determining what qualifies as a human right, claims An-

¹⁰⁴ The priority of liberty in An-Na'im's account is evident, I believe, in his discussion of justice as a means to the fundamental end of liberty. An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Islam and the Secular State*, pp. 102f.

¹⁰⁵ He exemplifies with Muslims living in Europe: to require Muslims to abandon their identity as Muslims to be accepted as citizens or residents in European countries constitutes a violation of their cultural and religious right to self-determination.

¹⁰⁶ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Muslims and Global Justice*, pp. 66 and 274.

¹⁰⁷ Op. cit., p. 78.

Na'im, and no context should be preferred or rejected in deciding how it should be implemented in practice. The processes of internal cultural dynamics will, in An-Na'im's account, reconcile and resolve tensions between human rights as understood in the UN documents and the institutions and values of local cultural traditions.¹⁰⁸ Every society must work out its own particular balance between individual freedom and social justice, that is, economic redistribution.¹⁰⁹ Cultural and ideological traditions vary in their ranking of these two goals, and variations also exist within traditions. This does not mean that they dispute the equal importance of these goals, merely that they differ in how they see the interrelation of these goals.¹¹⁰ An-Na'im claims that we cannot say what justice is in isolation from the process by which a people develops its conception of justice in context, because sovereignty "[...] can only be justly and expediently based on the consent of the whole of the population purported to be so governed. It is both morally repugnant and practically difficult to coerce people". By this, he explains, he means consent in the form of opportunity to influence determination of policy and law.¹¹¹ The precise content of justice must be decided in the context of each society as an object of negotiation and consensus-building.¹¹²

However, in An-Na'im's view, this process of attaining justice must be subject to certain safeguards and a framework of constitutionalism, rule of law, equal citizenship, and human rights. This makes evident that An-Na'im's conception of justice is tied up with liberalism.¹¹³ An-Na'im claims that there is both a procedural and a substantive aspect to his conception of global justice. He identifies the procedural side as the procedure of inclusive dialogue among religious and cultural traditions, which allows the emergence of a global overlapping consensus that results from participation rather than the imperial imposition of one tradition upon the others. The substantive side he identifies with the promotion of an internal discourse within Islamic

¹⁰⁸ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed, op. cit., p. 86.

¹⁰⁹ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Islam and the Secular State*, pp. 102f. It is my interpretation that when An-Na'im discusses global justice, he is referring to his conception of justice as human rights and a process of negotiation about their content. When he mentions social justice, he means something far narrower, concerning distribution of economic goods.

¹¹⁰ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Toward an Islamic Reformation*, p. 98.

¹¹¹ Op. cit., p. 82.

¹¹² An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Islam and the Secular State*, p. 290.

¹¹³ Op. cit., p. 102.

societies to find a conception of justice that can form part of this globally shared consensus.¹¹⁴ But the second aspect formulated in this way is also a procedural one, even if the procedure aims to find some substantial account of justice that Muslims would accept as consistent with or mandated by their religious beliefs. In An-Na'im's works, such a substantive account of the Islamic understanding of justice is not articulated. This does not mean that An-Na'im has no substantial ideas about justice. Indeed, a human rights understanding of justice is a substantial account simply by virtue of specifying the rights in question as the content of justice. This is so even if it can be argued that, in An-Na'im's version, the account is substantial only at a very high level of abstraction, and that the process of contextualization and negotiation is necessary to give the rights substance and to prioritize them. Furthermore, there are also substantial values inherent in the procedure specified by An-Na'im, which are implied by his insistence on framework and safeguards. The framework for the process of negotiation and contextualization is to be the human rights paradigm, which means that a fundamental notion of equality and also individualism is built into the procedure. Human rights can be understood and implemented a little differently in different contexts, but there is no escaping the fact that they are about certain things owed equally to human beings as individuals. The safeguards that should limit the process of contextual negotiation about the content of human rights are frequently referred to by An-Na'im as safeguards of constitutionalism or of human rights. The point of the safeguards is thus to ensure that the contextual development of human rights entails protection from discrimination and other human rights infringements against weak groups such as minorities and women. Once again, there is a fundamental value of equality that is not under negotiation. Built into the account is also a certain priority given to individual autonomy and a concomitant perception of communities as simultaneously simply a means to the individual's well-being and a threat to the values of individualism and autonomy.¹¹⁵

I have already indicated that my understanding of An-Na'im is that he is convinced that humans can come to know justice by using their

¹¹⁴ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Muslims and Global Justice*, pp. 3f.

¹¹⁵ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *What is an American Muslim?*, pp. 104f, 159 and 167. There is also a certain circularity where human rights are both subject to negotiation and providing safeguards for that negotiation. I will return to this problem.

reason, without recourse to revelation. He believes that it is possible to find universally justifiable standards on issues relating to justice.¹¹⁶ This does not mean that he thinks that people everywhere currently agree on what justice is, but that the standards of justice and reasonableness are shared by all people of good will and that we can eventually come to agree on the subject of justice.¹¹⁷ I differ in this assessment from political science scholar Badredine Arfi, who claims that An-Na'im's position is not universalist but unfortunately without specifying what he means by that term. However, his interpretation of An-Na'im can be understood through his idea that An-Na'im opens up for a never ending diversification of what Islam stands for, resulting in an undecidability which poses an ever-present threat to the pluralism that An-Na'im wants to further.¹¹⁸ While I agree that there is a tension in An-Na'im's account, between the polyphonic understanding of tradition and the rationalism, it is better resolved by understanding An-Na'im's position as descriptive pluralism and epistemological universalism, such that An-Na'im believes that, over time and under progressively more ideal circumstances of public reasoning, not only Muslims but humans generally will come to agree on an overlapping consensus. The plurality of contextualizations of human rights that An-Na'im envisions is quite modest and does not threaten the universality of values upon which human rights rest. An-Na'im's position is close to the one developed by John Rawls as the primacy of the right over the good, which states that although we cannot agree on what constitutes a good life, we can agree on norms for cooperation among people with different conceptions of the good life, and that is what justice is about.¹¹⁹ Similarly, An-Na'im claims that although there are many possible interpretations of Islam (and other traditions), it is possible for an overlapping consensus on civic reason and its accompanying values of mutual respect and so forth to develop.¹²⁰

Labelling An-Na'im's ethic as an ethic based on reason alone might seem contradictory, given the focus in An-Na'im's work on justification through religious tradition, but the importance of theolog-

¹¹⁶ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Toward an Islamic Reformation*, p. 162.

¹¹⁷ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Islam and the Secular State*, p. 91.

¹¹⁸ Arfi, Badredine: "Pluralism to-come and the debates on Islam and secularism" in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 2015, Vol. 41 (7), pp. 658, 667 and 672.

¹¹⁹ Rawls, John: *Political Liberalism*, p. 201.

¹²⁰ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *What is an American Muslim?*, pp. 13, 42, 62 and 124.

ical reasons in An-Na'im's account is not that they give insights which would otherwise be inaccessible. He does not make exclusive claims to ethical insight for the Islamic tradition, but rather gives religion a legitimizing and motivating role in the search for justice.¹²¹ While justice understood as human rights must be developed and interpreted in context, in light of the local culture, the point is to build an overlapping consensus on justice as human rights. A certain amount of cultural relativism can, according to An-Na'im, act as a bulwark against the dangers of ethnocentrism because it acknowledges the equal validity of diverse forms of human life, and thus contributes to securing the right to self-determination. A central problem with human rights as currently formulated in UN documents is that the process of their formulation lacked adequate representation of non-Western perspectives. While this is a serious shortcoming for An-Na'im, it should not lead us to discard the present formulation. It means, however, that the present formulation must remain open to challenges, additions, and modifications that can develop human rights to be more truly inclusive of the perspectives of the other parts of the world, which have hitherto lacked resources and possibilities to make these contributions.¹²² However, relativism should not be allowed to undermine all criticism and cross-cultural evaluation, but merely restrict the forms it can take. Criticism and evaluation are still possible, according to An-Na'im, because they can be based on universal human values. As An-Na'im states: "it is extremely unlikely that any culture will condone an inhumane practice. This belief may be an article of faith, but it is one worth having". Of course, An-Na'im is aware that there exist practices sanctioned by culture which could nonetheless be called inhumane, but I take his point to be is that in every culture there are also internal resources to challenge such practices.¹²³ The statement should rather be read as asserting that no culture *in its entirety* will condone an inhumane practice. Thus it is An-Na'im's position that although humans presently disagree on what is just, we can come to an agreement by a process of reasoning, and, what is more, that in every culture there are resources which can help us come to an understanding of the true nature of justice. His position

¹²¹ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Islam and the Secular State*, p. 106.

¹²² An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Muslims and Global Justice*, pp. 82ff.

¹²³ Op. cit., pp. 72-77, citation on p. 74.

is thus that it is through reason that we know the good and the right, and it is universalist, both normatively and epistemologically.

When it comes to the achievement of justice, An-Na'im places a lot of confidence in liberal democratic institutions. While this in Western political theory is mainstream, among Muslim political thinkers such embracement is vigorously debated and contested. An-Na'im exhibits a certain ambiguity on the subject, on the one hand clearly promoting the ideal of liberal institutions while also noting their historical shortcomings and addressing the issues of the legacy of colonialism and continuing structures of power between the West and the rest. An-Na'im contends that his project of developing an interpretation of Sharia that is conducive to a defence of human rights is necessary precisely because of the massive failure of powerful Western states to uphold these rights through international advocacy.¹²⁴ In addition, the colonial past is very much a part of the problem he is addressing because it was, in his opinion, the colonial codification of law which resulted in the fossilizing of the dynamism inherent in Sharia and led to a conflation of Sharia and custom. This has turned an evolving system of law with creative and liberating potential into a reified symbol of communal identity open to authoritarian manipulation.¹²⁵ Similarly, he claims that the idea of an Islamic state rests on a colonial distortion. He writes: "[T]he Islamic state is in fact a postcolonial innovation based on a European model of the state and a totalitarian view of law and public policy as instruments of social engineering by the ruling elites".¹²⁶ Thus, in An-Na'im's opinion, Islamists who want to enforce Sharia as positive law may claim that they represent an offensive against Western modernity from an Islamic framework, but in fact they are producing a mirror image of the very West they criticize, determined by its counterpart rather than by Islamic heritage.¹²⁷

According to An-Na'im, it is more consistent with the historic traditions of Muslim societies to adapt to the realities of the present organization of most Muslim states.¹²⁸ He claims that since the Muslim states post-independence chose to retain the Western form of state formation, social organization, and economic, legal, and administrative arrangements, they have willingly accepted the model: the model

¹²⁴ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Islam and the Secular State*, pp. 116f.

¹²⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 289.

¹²⁶ *Op. cit.*, pp. 7 and 95.

¹²⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 274.

¹²⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 9.

should therefore be perfected, not abandoned.¹²⁹ Every reform must proceed from the fact that the former colonies in fact have accepted the European model of state; changes to the present system must be realized through the institutions of that system.¹³⁰ An-Na'im emphasizes that these institutions and practices, though Western in origin, have continued to evolve throughout the decolonization process and now also reflect the experiences of other societies, and that this development must continue to take into account the cultural tradition and sociopolitical context of each society.¹³¹ This has been the case in Western countries, which have developed their respective compromises between religion, politics, and state. We have already seen that there are limits to the contextualization which An-Na'im is prepared to accept, as constituted by his commitments to human rights and the implied values of equality and liberty. Now we encounter another limit. An-Na'im does not allow for any role for revolutionary change of society, instead insisting that justice be achieved through the institutions of liberal society.

Given that I have already characterized An-Na'im as proposing an ethic based on reason and as adhering to epistemological universalism and a theory of consonance, he cannot be expected to make any grand claims about the theological resources for understanding justice. Still, in building a justification for justice understood as human rights, the resources of tradition are important to his project. Unfortunately, An-Na'im says very little about any particular resources of Islamic tradition which might be useful for his project. Those he does identify are scarcely developed, more mentioned in passing than discussed.

As we have seen, An-Na'im envisions a process of interpretation and negotiation by which we can arrive at an acceptable notion of justice as human rights, but he also subjects this process to certain limits in terms of framework and safeguards that imply a specific content of justice. For An-Na'im, both content and process can be legitimized with reference to Islamic tradition, and can thus be said to have Islamic roots, but he insists that they can equally be legitimized by reference to other traditions. There does not seem to be a distinct contribution to the meaning of justice by Islamic tradition. On the other

¹²⁹ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed, *ibid*; and An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Toward an Islamic Reformation*, pp. 7f and 74.

¹³⁰ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Islam and the Secular State*, pp. 32, 115 and 125.

¹³¹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 126, 138 and 165.

hand, An-Na'im also states that in Islamic contexts, the understanding and implementation of justice as human rights can and should be coloured by this context, which implies that there are nuances which might be contributed by Islamic tradition. For human rights to be developed in a particular way in a particular location, it implies that there is something in the local context which contributes insights that somehow affect how these rights are understood and practiced, not merely how they are legitimized. This claim is made explicit by An-Na'im when he states that Muslim religious experience is not only a resource for enlisting the support for human rights among believers, but also a "[...] rich and valuable source of the content of those rights".¹³² My interpretation is that while An-Na'im believes that human rights should be contextualized to further their legitimacy, and while this might mean that contexts can contain insights and circumstances that contribute to a better understanding of human rights, these insights are better described as insights into the implementation and concretization of those rights. Furthermore, although Islam is a factor in various contexts, what that means for the contextualization might depend on which interpretation of Islam is prevalent in a particular context.

What An-Na'im does claim is that a special emphasis on the importance of justice is inherent in Islamic tradition. He claims that the injunction to rule according to justice and fairness is a dominant theme of the Quran.¹³³ He also maintains that Sharia has a liberating power and can serve as a critique of political oppression, economic exploitation, and social injustice.¹³⁴ An-Na'im's position is that his commitment to justice as human rights stems from the core of his identity as a Muslim. This is not an exclusive claim, in the sense that justice might be equally important in other traditions, but a claim to a fundamental consistency between Islam, as understood through the reform methodology of Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, and justice understood as human rights and international law.¹³⁵

Besides the importance of justice, I have identified three instances where it seems that An-Na'im uses theological resources to further his understanding of justice, although he never claims exclusivity for the

¹³² An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Muslims and Global Justice*, p. 143.

¹³³ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Toward an Islamic Reformation*, p. 217, note 52. Of course, one would be hard pressed to find any Muslim thinker who did not claim this.

¹³⁴ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Islam and the Secular State*, p. 290.

¹³⁵ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Muslims and Global Justice*, pp. 2-6.

insights but rather underlines that such positions are to be found in many traditions: his insistence on economic and social rights to accompany liberties, his use of the rule of reciprocity and the ideal of the *ummah* (*ummah*). An-Na'im emphasizes that justice as human rights implies interdependence between civil/political and social/economic/cultural human rights, and that this means that absolute poverty is unacceptable in all its forms: economically, in education, in health, etc. He believes that condemnation of poverty is inherent in religious traditions as sources of moral guidance. Religious communities as part of the global civil society could work to instill moral restraints on the economics of globalization, which he charges with "[...] indifference to the social consequences of this unrelenting drive for rapid growth and profits, at the cost of making the poor poorer or at least denying them their fair share of the global economic pie" and "[...] poor economic opportunities, poverty, systematic social deprivation and neglect of public facilities".¹³⁶ Again, the condemnation of poverty as incompatible with justice is seen by An-Na'im, not as a distinct insight to Islamic tradition, but, rather, as inherent in all the major religious traditions, and the human rights paradigm is identified by An-Na'im as a rallying point for these efforts.

Perhaps the clearest instance where An-Na'im tries to work out in more detail a justification of justice from Islamic thought occurs in his discussion of what he calls the principle of reciprocity (*mu'āwada*) which he also calls the Golden Rule. The principle that one should treat other people as one wishes to be treated by them is, according to An-Na'im, a shared moral sensibility across religious, cultural, and philosophical traditions, making it a possible base for an overlapping consensus on human rights and other related issues. He is confident that its moral and logical force can be appreciated by all human beings, regardless of their worldview. It has not only moral but also pragmatic foundations. The problem with the principle, according to An-Na'im, is the tendency of traditions to extend it only to certain people (e.g. men, people of their own faith), and this requires an effort of reinterpretation within each tradition to construe the rule as covering all human beings.¹³⁷ An-Na'im makes much of the rule of reciprocity. He claims it as a foundation to the principle of equal citizen-

¹³⁶ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed, op. cit., pp. 247-263, citations on p. 258 and 260.

¹³⁷ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Toward an Islamic Reformation*, pp. 162ff.

ship,¹³⁸ constitutionalism,¹³⁹ freedom of religion,¹⁴⁰ and right to self-determination and national sovereignty.¹⁴¹ In each instance, he asserts that every person and every community want to claim these rights and their benefits for themselves, and that they therefore should affirm and concede them for everybody else. An-Na'im would no doubt make the same point about other human rights, too.

In his discussion of the possibilities for global citizenship, An-Na'im mentions the Muslim *ummah* as a possible resource. The *ummah* is generally understood to imply the Muslim community worldwide, transcending all other boundaries. He also cites several other traditions, such as Western philosophy, as sources for the notion of a global citizenship.¹⁴² Again, there is little treatment of the precise content of the theological ideas that An-Na'im wants to enlist as resources.

Critique and comparative remarks

Because An-Na'im is the first ethicist to be presented here, we will come back to the question of which aspects of An-Na'im's ethics are thrown into relief by comparison with the other ethicists in this inquiry. However, one such comparison which I think can be anticipated at this stage involves whether there are specific resources or constraints of the respective traditions which make a lasting difference to the positions taken by the writers. I believe that An-Na'im's understanding of the concept of law points to a lasting difference made by the fact that Islamic tradition is his home, despite the fact that An-Na'im himself does not reflect on it. While the mercy of God is central to Islamic thought, indeed, perhaps the most central theme of the Quran, God's grace is shown by the way that God enters into a relation with humans by giving them the Law and thus making it possible to walk in the path of God (Sharia), the road that leads to salvation.¹⁴³

¹³⁸ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Islam and the Secular State*, pp. 127 and 136.

¹³⁹ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Toward an Islamic Reformation*, pp. 74 and 104.

¹⁴⁰ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Islam and the Secular State*, p. 95.

¹⁴¹ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Toward an Islamic Reformation*, p. 159.

¹⁴² An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Muslims and Global Justice*, pp. 273f, 293 and 312.

¹⁴³ This focus on law is perhaps even more pronounced in Sunni Islam as compared to Shi'a. In Shi'ite Islam the sacrifice at Kerbala can be said to have some grace-like redemptive capacity that is not immediately related to the law. For the martyrdom of

It is central to a Muslim understanding that the law is not impossible to keep. On the contrary, God aims at the wellbeing of mankind and will not demand something impossible from his creations; God will not make the keeping of his law difficult. While the idea that God gives humanity precepts regarding how to live could be seen as an aspect common to almost all religious tradition, this kind of thoroughly optimistic view of the law is characteristic of Sunni Islam. This is particularly so in comparison to Christianity, where the doctrine of original sin generally (although a wide spectrum of variation of course exists) implies a more bleak view of humanity's capacity to keep God's commandments.

This section will concern itself with critique of An-Na'im's thought and project. In addition to more general criteria of coherence and plausibility in relation to human experience and general knowledge, I will discuss An-Na'im's work with reference to its claim to articulate Islamic tradition, to its communicability, and to its transformative potential. Beginning with the issue of An-Na'im's interpretative method, it is my position that it is commendable that he proposes a method which is both stringent and transparent. His criticisms of reform endeavours grounded on ad hoc solutions and a division between theory and practice are well founded. A religious ethic should ideally rely on a clear method of interpretation that it is possible for others to assess. Not only is this a demand for academic rigour, it is also a demand that is adequate for ethics which aspire to political impact, because such aims heighten the need for communicability in terms not only of stating one's position but also of explaining the grounds for that position, making them possible to assess and discuss. However, I also have some reservations about An-Na'im's interpretative method, which relate to the criteria for articulating tradition and for generating transformative potential.

An-Na'im's method, the reversal of abrogation (*naskh*), is quite radical in comparison with how traditional schools of law in Islam work. While he makes a case for his method by pointing to its consistency and transparency, it remains to be seen if it will be considered authentic enough to take up the battle against more conservative interpretations for the hearts of believers. While an interpretative method

Husayn at Kerbala and the redemptive and atoning capacity it assumes in popular Shiite religion, see Momen, Moojan: *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam. The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism*. Yale University Press, New Haven 1985, p. 236.

can of course be sound without winning many adherents, An-Na'im's ambition to influence global politics clearly makes this an important goal for him. Islamologist Omar Edaibat argues against An-Na'im's project, claiming that reliance on the concept of abrogation will fail to convince traditionally minded Muslims and, moreover, represents a backwards step for Sharia reform. Edaibat has two principal points. First, there is disagreement on abrogation among both classic and modern scholars of Islam, such that there exists no stable position to reverse. Second, Edaibat contests An-Na'im's identification of an epistemological break in the revelation, dividing it into Meccan and Medinan period. The Quran is better understood as a living, evolving revelation, multidimensional rather than binary. Problematic verses are better dealt with through attention to context, both textual context and historical context of revelation, something Edaibat claims that An-Na'im fails to do.¹⁴⁴ Edaibat's reading of An-Na'im is somewhat lacking in generosity: in my view it is An-Na'im's attention to context that leads him to contend that some verses of the Quran have more general application than others. Also, An-Na'im and Edaibat share a negative assessment of the consequences that the traditional application of *naskh* has had for Islamic thought hitherto. However, the charge that An-Na'im relies on a simplified binary logic, in which the Quran is divided into benign and problematic parts, has substance, and is serious because it is difficult to square with the reverence for the revealed text that is central for Islamic tradition. Moreover, there is merit to the charge that since the concept of abrogation is contested in its traditional form, a reversal of it may not be the transparent and stringent method that An-Na'im suggests it to be. The renowned scholar of Islamic law Mohammad Hashim Kamali, for example, states that while the majority of classical jurists allow that abrogation exists within the Quran, there is no complete agreement and the estimates of instances vary between none and 500. Kamali argues that while some instances of rulings were undoubtedly amended due to changing context, this does not justify extending *naskh* to an entire juridical doctrine and theory.¹⁴⁵ While such objections to the stringency of An-Na'im's interpretative method are important, one must bear in mind

¹⁴⁴ Edaibat, Omar: "Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im on the Islamic Theory of Abrogation (*Naskh*): Prospects for the Reformation of the Shariah's Public Law Content" in *Next*, Vol. 4, May 2011, pp. 44-53.

¹⁴⁵ Kamali, Mohammad Hashim: *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence*. 3rd edition. The Islamic Texts Society, Cambridge 2003, pp. 206 and 218-225.

that it is a characteristic of Islamic jurisprudence that almost all positions and concepts are contested and that any traditional concept appropriated for reform, such as *ijtihad* or abrogation, will be both circumscribed and contested in its application as understood in classical jurisprudence.

Another question that remains to be answered concerns whether the consequences of such a reversal of abrogation on theology, ethics, and practice of Islam have been sufficiently thought through. Other reform endeavours, for example, those which seek to discard parts of *sunna* with reference to the inauthenticity or unreliability of certain traditions about the Prophet (*hadith*), have been criticized on the grounds that if all such elements are discarded, the remaining part will hardly be recognizable as Islam, having abandoned *inter alia* the textual authorization for daily prayer.¹⁴⁶ While it is beyond the scope of my study to carry out such an analysis of the consequences of a reversal of abrogation, it is not evident that such an analysis of the effects on Islamic tradition and practice have been carried out by An-Na'im himself. This fact considerably weakens his argument.

A radical interpretative method such as An-Na'im's is also best argued for when the more traditional avenues can be shown to have been truly exhausted. This is something that An-Na'im argues explicitly, claiming, for example, that there is no way around a religious endorsement of capital punishment without more radical measures. One might still question whether the avenues for reform present in the traditional sources and methods of Sharia are really explored to the full. Lately, there has been a great deal of interesting work that returns to the *fiqh* material of the traditional law schools, although An-Na'im is by no means alone in claiming that there are some limits beyond which it is difficult to push such interpretations. However, in the context of An-Na'im's thought, a certain pessimism regarding the potential of tradition may be a lingering effect of his liberal politics and

¹⁴⁶ Kecia Ali argues that rejecting some *hadith* is a dangerous tactic, because it "[...] grants the premise that the most respected and widely accepted textual sources for Islam, outside of the Quran, are unreliable". Ali, Kecia: *Sexual Ethics & Islam*, p. 143. From the opposite perspective, arguing against modernist interpretations, Muhammad Abdel Salam Al-Farag has claimed that if basing Islam entirely on Meccan revelation, one lacks scriptural source for fasting, praying and prohibiting usury. Al-Farag, Muhammad Abdel Salam: "The Forgotten Duty" in Donahue, John J. and Esposito, John L.: *Islam in Transition. Muslim Perspectives*. 2nd edition. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, p. 421.

perhaps unwarranted. While An-Na'im generally speaks highly of the potential of interpretation, he sometimes also seems to assume that the process of civic reasoning which he proposes would lead to diminishing reliance on personal religious belief.¹⁴⁷

An interpretative method needs, I believe, to rest on criteria internal to the tradition so as to be plausible as an avenue for developing a distinctively religious contribution. Otherwise the rationale for listening to theology, that it might have something distinctive to say, is undermined. This renders An-Na'im's project problematic, because he seems to make something outside tradition the final arbiter of what constitutes an acceptable interpretation. It could be argued that he is guided in his interpretation by the eternal message of Islam as it is uncovered by the methodology of Taha, and thus finds the norms of human rights in the Islamic tradition itself. An-Na'im seems, however, to reason the other way around: the need for an interpretation compatible with human rights leads us to the one Taha makes. His express purpose is to open a debate about reform. He himself opts for Taha's methodology, which he sees as revealing the true and eternal message of Islam, yet claims to be open to suggestions for other methodologically sound and theologically faithful approaches which might achieve the same goal, of developing a Sharia compatible with human rights.¹⁴⁸ But if the outcome of an interpretative method is determined in this way, then he seems to make human rights the yardstick by which any interpretation of religion must be judged.¹⁴⁹ However stringent the interpretative method, it seems, an interpretation can still be deemed unacceptable if it is not compatible with human rights. This makes him vulnerable to the criticism that he makes theology the mere serv-

¹⁴⁷ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *What is an American Muslim?*, p. 23. He claims that the successful examples of inclusion in his account of the USA "[...] required that the groups alter their traditions and practices to become more like those of American Protestantism." Op. cit. p. 66.

¹⁴⁸ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Islam and the Secular State*, p. 284. He persists in this position in his latest book. An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *What is an American Muslim?* p. 152.

¹⁴⁹ One reason for this is surely the general situation of progressive Muslim theologians in the West, who are increasingly under pressure to demonstrate the compatibility of Islam with any and all "Western values" such as democracy and liberalism. Mounting hostility towards Islam in general and political Islam in particular has a direct influence that sets the agenda for intellectuals. In this situation it is not surprising to find that a thinker such as An-Na'im developing an interpretation of Islam which can be measured against goods recognized in the West, such as human rights.

ant of a specific kind of politics.¹⁵⁰ In an article which brings An-Na'im into dialogue with philosopher Jacques Derrida, political science scholar Badredine Arfi seems to point to the same thing, claiming that it seems tautological to propose that an Islamic interpretation intended to justify the norms of civic reason should be constructed through a process guided by the very norms inherent in civic reason. The interpretation is guided, then, by meta-norms which act as implicit suppositions.¹⁵¹ While Arfi sees this as an instance of self-legitimation, an inaugural interpretation which must be allowed to posit itself as an article of belief, I would like to point out that it seems tradition thereby becomes a mere tool to convince believers of what they should already know is right, and is ultimately redundant from an epistemological point of view. As my analysis has shown, this is related to the fact that An-Na'im understands his ethic to be based on reason alone and that his theory of consonance precludes ethical insights specific to a religious ethic.

I find this account of the resources of religious tradition unconvincing. While I agree with An-Na'im that human judgement and thus fallibility is always present in interpretive engagement with a tradition, there are also aspects and resources of a tradition which resist the human tendency to understand God's will in a way that is amendable to one's own ends. If something outside tradition is the final arbiter of what constitutes a plausible interpretation, then the critical potential of tradition is undermined. But just as religious tradition, as An-Na'im is quick to point out, has sustained and justified oppressive practices that need to be criticized, so, too, has liberal culture in the past and present supported oppression under the guise of the purportedly civilizing missions of the West. The point of adhering to a stringent interpretative method in the way An-Na'im wants to do, instead of simply reading liberal values back into Islamic concepts, must be not only intel-

¹⁵⁰ Scholar of Islamic and Christian tradition David L. Johnston, while sympathetic to An-Na'im's project, describes the approach as culturally legitimate packaging: "The instruments necessary to limit the reach of the state are the basic principles of a democratic polity: constitutionalism, human rights, and citizenship. However, since people around the world are predominantly religious, and particularly in Muslim societies, advocating for this will necessarily entail packaging one's discourse in culturally legitimate ways." Johnston, David L.: "Islam and Human Rights: A Growing Rapprochement?" in *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, Vol. 74, No. 1, 2015, p. 141.

¹⁵¹ Arfi, Badredine: "Pluralism to-come and the debates on Islam and secularism", pp. 663 and 671.

lectual honesty and strategic advantage in convincing traditionally-minded believers. Such a method ought also to offer access to something that resists our preconceived notions of the just and therefore be a resource for critique. The point of thinking within a tradition is precisely that if tradition is engaged through its specific limitations and avenues for reasoning, a space for thought is opened up, one that can lead to discovery of resources for critique and for transformation which can then be brought into dialogue with others.

I have already pointed to the several contradictions, ambiguities, and inconsistencies in An-Na'im's account of religion's relation to political discourse. It is possible, as I have shown, to make a generous interpretation and reconstruction of his position. This would amount to an argument for a public democratic culture with the highest participation and inclusion possible, a culture where everyone takes pains to understand and be understood, where arguments are made comprehensible to those with other worldviews, and where positions are articulated in a way as to make their framework explicit and possible to debate and contest. Such a democratic culture is convincingly and coherently described by Jeffrey Stout.¹⁵² It is possible to understand the seeming contradictions in An-Na'im's work as symptomatic of the difficulties inherent in trying to articulate a liberal position without adherence to the liberal suspicion of and hostility toward religion. That would be a reasonable interpretation of An-Na'im's extremely narrow conceptualization of what constitutes a religious argument, and also his repeated references to the necessity of a discourse that is independent of worldview and arguments which are acceptable regardless of belief.

While Stout's vision of an inclusive democratic practice is constructive, I find An-Na'im's notion of a completely neutral discourse highly implausible and also unnecessary or even harmful for the development of democratic culture. As noted, An-Na'im's position can also be understood as less exigent, not requiring that arguments in public be stripped of all religious reference but still demanding that they be made in a comprehensible way. However, I would claim that there might be reasons which are not really translatable in the sense that An-Na'im seems to require. The epistemological universalism which my analysis has shown to be inherent in An-Na'im's position is implausible because it does not take into account the extent to which

¹⁵² Stout, Jeffrey: *Democracy and Tradition*, pp. 63-91.

contexts shape how arguments are formulated and which positions seem justified. An-Na'im's understanding of religious arguments I have deemed as extremely narrow. But from a theological perspective, he has a point when arguing that the meaning of religious prohibitions is that they are valid on no other grounds than that God forbids something. If religious adherents are required to explain them from other rationales or social goods, does this not require them to surrender to another discourse?¹⁵³ Perhaps such arguments could still be understood as analogous to other positions. We will continue to explore this possibility.

There also seems to be a piece missing from An-Na'im's account of epistemology and political discourse in that he does not incorporate problematics arising from questions of power into his proposed solutions. While he often references structural impediments to justice, such as racism, discrimination and exclusion, his solutions invariably centre on the ability of the disadvantaged group to address the situation by engaging in active citizenship through constitutional means and by shifting their attitude so as not to act and be perceived as a minority. In his book on Muslims in the United States, An-Na'im develops a kind of metanarrative of progressive inclusion in which he situates American Muslims among the Catholics, Jews, and Mormons in American society who have integrated and adapted from a position of exclusion.¹⁵⁴ It is telling that his examples in this instance do not involve African or Native Americans, for example, since this would have resulted in a different assessment of the persistence of institutionalized injustice and racism. Questions of power and structural impediments to the realization of justice are not completely missing from his account, but these considerations do not seem to affect the resulting proposals and solutions. Being heard and understood may not always be a function of taking pains to be understandable, but more a question of having the privilege to formulate the limits of discursive space and the norms of communication. While An-Na'im's assumption, that religion is relevant because it is uniquely important to believers, might be plausible in view of religious resurgence, this does not necessarily imply the existence of a public hospitable to reli-

¹⁵³ This is the position of John Milbank in his refutation of the surrender of theology to other discourses. See Milbank, John: *Theology and Social Theory*, pp. 3 and 382.

¹⁵⁴ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *What is an American Muslim?*, pp. 66, 90, 114 and 169.

gious ethics. Understanding might then also be a more complicated affair because it is so highly determined by questions of power.

It is central to An-Na'im's approach that he insists that changes to the system must be realized through the system, that is, he does not envisage any need for a more revolutionary change of society, either political or economic. Connected to this is his somewhat overly optimistic approach to the legacy of colonialism. It was hardly a situation of free and uninfluenced choice that brought into being the state formations of newly independent former colonies, nor should their constitution and relations with other countries be described as unaffected by the colonial past.¹⁵⁵ Of course, this is an aspect of An-Na'im's liberal approach where fairness is realized according to the rules of the game, and it can also be understood as pragmatism in the sense of choosing to accept that which is not likely to change any time soon. As we have seen, An-Na'im's assessment of the colonial past is elsewhere more critical.

There is a lingering problem in that An-Na'im does not take into account the fact that the state cannot be neutral in some respects and that certain visions of the good life are built into the framework itself. Instead, he attempts to show that while neutrality is impossible with regard to economic and social organization, neutrality toward religion is still possible.¹⁵⁶ These distinctions may not be so straightforward, however. This is an objection to An-Na'im, which has also been made by Badredine Arfi.¹⁵⁷ For example, in discussing the prohibition of interest banking, An-Na'im deems it feasible that people who, from religious conviction, do not want to charge or receive interest establish their own bank institutions. Yet this ignores the fact that every bank system is heavily dependent on the supporting policies of the state and that the state cannot be neutral with respect to the banking system.¹⁵⁸ This is persistent challenge to liberalism, because it aims to secure the freedom for people to pursue their vision of the good life without tak-

¹⁵⁵ Talal Asad has argued convincingly in his analysis of the human rights paradigm that modernity is created by practices being displaced, outlawed, and penalized, while people are being coerced, seduced, and persuaded to change. Asad, Talal: *Formations of the Secular*, p. 154.

¹⁵⁶ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *What is an American Muslim?*, pp. 21 and 33.

¹⁵⁷ Arfi, Badredine: "Pluralism to-come and the debates on Islam and secularism" pp. 673f.

¹⁵⁸ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Islam and the Secular State*, p. 35.

ing into account structural impediments and biases which invariably stack the deck in favour of some solutions.

An-Na'im's understanding of justice is a human rights-version of a sufficiency account. One problem with this is that given the wide range of human rights, the lack of clear prioritizing between them, and the open ended possibilities for contextualization of them, this is not a very specific account. Still, as I have made clear, certain emphases are evident in An-Na'im's understanding which make possible criticism of this conception. As an account of justice, I deem the conception inadequate. First, it is unclear whether political rights and liberties can be adequately sustained without equality. To take just one example, wide disparities in wealth and education have a tendency to hamper democratic decision-making even if some base level is satisfied for the entire population. Second, it seems that structures of oppression can remain intact even when formal institutions are in accordance with liberal ideals of equal opportunities. Some kind of liberation may be needed to address the many ways in which power is held and denied, even if abject poverty and formal discrimination are ended. Third, An-Na'im's account would seem to be partial insofar as he does not address inequality as a problem in and of itself. Surely the glaring inequalities of our present world are morally indefensible, both in their consequences and in their arbitrariness. An-Na'im's position, that the institutions of liberal society will suffice to address all concerns of injustice, also seems unwarranted, even when only his more modest aims of justice are taken into account, but more so if justice is expanded in the direction I have indicated. This is especially so since these institutions continue the legacy of colonial imposition. An-Na'im tries to address the issue of the colonial past through his emphasis on self-determination, but it would seem that something more radical is required.

Another problem with the sufficiency account of justice as formulated by An-Na'im is that it rests on a conceptualization of human beings that is thoroughly individualist. Like the lingering liberal pessimism about tradition which I identified earlier, An-Na'im's work exhibits a liberal pessimism about human community and sociality which are problematic in my opinion because such pessimism implies an inadequate account of the human being and therefore also of what justice should entail and how it is possible. As feminist critique has shown, the individual is not prior to the group in the sense that is often

assumed by liberal ethics and that is implied when An-Na'im writes that "[...] individuals normally need to surrender some of their autonomy in exchange for the benefits of membership in communities".¹⁵⁹ I mean to contest neither the value nor the importance, not least from a feminist perspective, of suspecting human communities of perpetuating injustice towards members perceived as weaker while also claiming to speak for them. But to relegate human sociality to a means for individualist fulfilment is something else entirely, and it fails to capture how justice is related to community because community is not only a means but also an aspect of the good human life.

For all his protestations about the importance of religious justification, there is very little theology in An-Na'im's concrete proposal. The little there is remains at a high level of abstraction. For example, An-Na'im's use of the rule of reciprocity is susceptible to the arguments that it is too abstract to be practical and that it could be used in support of anything and everything. It is doubtful if a closer reading of the principle of reciprocity could be invested with all the positive content An-Na'im gives it without some further suppositions. For example, An-Na'im attempts to show that proponents of an Islamic state who want to enforce Sharia as public law in fact claim religious freedom for themselves and demand the protection of their religious beliefs from imposition of the state. The rule of reciprocity demands that they extend this protection to others as well.¹⁶⁰ But if this is a valid argument, then all opposition to liberal society is by definition self-defeating, because political work relies on freedom of expression and organization. There is clearly a tautology at work here, one that implies that only people who do not organize politically are entitled to be opponents of liberalism. But one could of course oppose liberalism on the grounds that the freedom it grants is too circumscribed, even if the limits are mostly invisible.

An-Na'im's general reluctance to specify which particular elements of Islamic tradition could be used to better understand or contextualize justice as human rights aggravates the problem with his ethic noted earlier, namely that its potential for criticism of society is weak. If there is no distinct content besides theology's motivating and legitimizing potential, then there would seem to be no resources for taking a stand against prevailing culture. One reason for this reticence on An-

¹⁵⁹ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *What is an American Muslim?*, p. 105.

¹⁶⁰ An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed: *Islam and the Secular State*, p. 95.

Na'im's part may be his commitment to procedural theory, which makes him specify a method aiming at a conversation rather than the resulting insights. But a more important reason is that he adheres to a theory of consonance. Because he does not in fact believe that religious traditions have any distinct insights into the meaning of justice, there is no real reason to probe the traditions resources. I believe that An-Na'im's epistemological universalism is too optimistic. I concede that humans may have some shared intuitions about what justice is, and some of the reasons and justifications we give for our positions may be such that we can come to share them, but the work of understanding and translating reasons and justifications is hard. It is hindered, moreover, among many other difficulties, by the enormous differences in power, something I believe An-Na'im gravely underestimates.

4. Duncan B. Forrester – Fairness is not enough

In this chapter, the ethic of Reformed theologian Duncan B. Forrester is understood as a Christian articulation of modified liberalism. Forrester's implicit interpretative method is related to his articulated identity in tradition and emphasizes a situation of moral fragmentation. Forrester's ethic is understood as based on both reason and revelation. His understanding of political theology is analyzed with respect to his critique of secularism and the claim that Christian tradition can influence the public through personal formation, intra-organizational formulation, and public address. Forrester's justification for such a role is examined in terms of the contributions which theology alone can make, and I relate that claim to his theory of combination and epistemology of possibility. I discuss his notion of theological fragments that contain challenges, qualifications, and insights, and his understanding of theology's relation to the powerful. Forrester's account of justice is interpreted as an egalitarian account containing elements which emphasize right relations as the end of justice. In the comparative section, the enduring importance of different emphases regarding sin, grace, and law in the two traditions is highlighted. The critical discussion considers the consequences of Forrester's interpretative method for transparency and communicability. I problematize the notion of the fragment and point to certain preconditions for its success that are unevenly distributed. I also note certain inconsistencies in Forrester's account of justice, call into question its ability to distance itself from the liberal notions that it seeks to criticize.

Interpretation and familiarity with tradition

Of all the ethicists analyzed in this study, Duncan B. Forrester is least forthcoming on the subject of interpretative method, probably because

his interpretative method is quite traditional and thus does not stand in need of particular justification from the perspective of the Christian Reformed tradition to which he belongs. This means that Forrester has no difficulty asserting his identity as belonging within the boundaries of that tradition. For my purposes here, it is unfortunate that Forrester is not particularly eloquent on the subject of how to interpret Christian sources and tradition but instead assumes a familiarity with traditional Christian theological concepts and methods.¹

However, particular emphases to his interpretative effort can nonetheless be identified from his discussion of other topics. While he does not offer an explicit account of a specific interpretative method, my reconstruction of his methodology points to five aspects that are of importance when understanding Forrester. These are the role of the Bible and tradition, the poor, sin, the church, and the fragmentary nature of ethics. For Forrester, the ethic and the public voice of Christian tradition must be grounded in the Gospel and guided by Christian insights about God's purposes of love and justice and by Christian understandings of humanity and society.² These resources can be understood in many different ways, but Forrester points to the importance of being both informed by social analysis and guided by the voices of the poor and oppressed. In this, he has clearly been influenced by Liberation Theology. Most evident in his earliest work, this concern for the voices of the poor and silenced runs through his writings. However, Forrester stops well short of embracing the "preferential option for the poor" where the latter is understood as an epistemological principle privileging the poor's perception of what Christian tradition entails for ethics. Rather, Forrester continually emphasizes the ambiguities and complexities of life and the fragmentary nature of human knowledge entailed by humankind's sinfulness, although he claims that there are also dangers in failing to see the simple but hard issue. Human sin and fallibility are thus central to Forrester's under-

¹ Forrester often refers to the importance of "reading the signs of the times". It could be seen as related to the tradition of Karl Barth, whose stance has been described by Georg Hunsinger as a "[...] kind of informed intuitionism. One responds to the contingencies of the moment on the basis of discernment formed by a conscientious immersion in the ethos of the Christian community. One listens, in light of the Gospel, for what God is commanding here and now through the language of the facts." Hunsinger, George: "Karl Barth" in Witte Jr., John and Alexander, Frank S. (eds.): *The Teachings of Modern Protestantism. On Law, Politics and Human Nature*. Columbia University Press, New York 2007, p. 175.

² This is of course a very commonplace position for a Reformed Christian.

standing of the interpretative effort. Also, Forrester believes that interpretation of tradition with respect to ethical issues is a confessional matter, and that it must happen in church (understood as a Christian community of some kind) but always with a view to what is happening outside in the world.³ This is how Forrester describes what he calls *prophetic theology* in one of his early works. In later works he continues to affirm and develop the notion of a prophetic voice of religious ethics. The interpretive effort must be informed by the notion that as humans, we do not possess the entire truth in this life. Such effort starts from the systematic whole of the Christian tradition and its home in the community of faith, from which it extracts insights which can be offered to the public debate as fragments.⁴

Forrester, who admits that Christians do not agree on an elaborate account of justice, to some extent has a polyphonic understanding of Christian tradition. At the same time, his lack of account of interpretative method or criteria for interpretation seems to point to an understanding in which Christianity is in some way still assumed to be a coherent whole. All Christians, Forrester claims, should know that there is such a thing as justice, and where to seek it. For him, the Christian God is the God of justice; being oriented towards this God leads to insights, questions, and challenges that can contribute something to the discussion about justice in society.⁵ This could plausibly be understood as a position that, while all Christians do not agree on all the specifics of justice, there are certain insights and nuances to the concept which are so central to Christian tradition that all adherents to the tradition should embrace them, even if they understand them in different ways.

Forrester's account can fruitfully be understood as *an ethics based on both reason and revelation*, which means that he regards the human capacity for reason and experience as well as specific Christian revelation as sources of moral insight. Christians have insights which emerge from the interplay between tradition and Christian practice and which it is their responsibility to share in the public forum, Forrester claims.⁶ However, there also exist moral insights accessible to

³ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Theology and Politics*. Blackwell, Oxford 1988, pp. 43, 171, 157 and 168ff.

⁴ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Christian Justice and Public Policy*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997, pp. 201f.

⁵ Op. cit., pp. 54f.

⁶ Op. cit., pp. 195f.

all rational beings, by virtue of Creation and despite the effects of sin. In this, Forrester distances himself both from the stance of natural theology's embrace of humanity's natural capacity for moral insight, and from the rejection of it by Barth, who claimed that there is no basis at all for ethical discernment outside revelation.⁷ Forrester maintains that human beings unaided by revelation can have certain insights about justice and can to a certain extent reach a plausible understanding, but that ultimately justice is completely knowable to God alone and that human reflection thus stands in need of the enrichment and nuances which only revelation can provide.

Theological fragments in public discourse

First, Forrester rejects secularism, understood as the notion that religion should be excluded from the public sphere for both descriptive and normative reasons. It has been shown to be neither a practicable strategy nor desirable from the point of view of believers and non-believers alike, he contends. In previous chapters, I have identified three modes of influence of religious ethics in the public sphere: personal formation, intra-organizational formulation, and public address. Regarding the first, Forrester's position is that religious reasons are powerful determinants of behaviour, and that this is increasingly so. He refers to the resurgence of religion worldwide and claims that people increasingly reject Western secularism and look to their religious traditions to understand what is happening in the world and to find guidelines for behaviour.⁸

As we have already seen, intra-organizational formulation is important to Forrester because he believes that the elaboration of a Christian ethic should be grounded in the Christian community. The churches have at least three important tasks which all are ways to speak, to communicate publicly as Forrester sees it.⁹ First, the churches are called to witness to another kind of life by the way they organ-

⁷ Hunsinger, Georg, "Karl Barth", pp. 177f.

⁸ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Apocalypse Now? Reflections on Faith in a Time of Terror*. Ashgate Publishing, Hants 2004, pp. 35-38.

⁹ I will use mainly the designation churches to indicate Christian communities of different kinds. Sometimes the term "church" will be used indicating one or any such community. The Church will sometimes be used to indicate the worldwide Christianity in general.

ize themselves. While such ordering has its own ends, it is clearly also a message, intended for the world around the churches, about what the Christian message implies. Second, the churches must develop theology which is heard by other people.¹⁰ There is no opposition between formulating theology for church and for the world, according to Forrester. He is convinced that theology pursued for its own sake – to confess its faith and address the faithful – can have considerable public impact. In his view, “[...] all serious theology must be public theology, and the most committed and probing theology is also the most publicly relevant, the most capable of injecting ‘theological fragments’ into public debate”.¹¹ Third, besides addressing the public generally, the churches also have a specific task of promoting theological debate and religious dialogue among themselves and between churches and other religious traditions. Such ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue is of tremendous importance precisely because of the impact of religious ethics on the formation of personal political positions.¹²

Forrester also vigorously defends the claims that theology should make a direct public address by speaking in the public realm to address issues of politics. He seems to differentiate somewhat between two types of audiences for such speech: one that is understood as the more general and pluralistic public (although he envisages a context in the West where a certain familiarity with the religious tradition he represents can be assumed), and one that is described as the powerful or even The Powers. While my understanding is that he generally believes that the powerful should be addressed in public and thus that the two audiences are not completely separate, some interesting differences remain in how he describes such address.

To start with the general public, Forrester claims that a Christian ethic can offer contributions to the debate in the public sphere. These contributions he frequently calls fragments. The term refers to philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre’s description of the modern condition as fragmented, a condition characterized by competing and irreconcilable

¹⁰ Forrester, Duncan B., op. cit., p. 38.

¹¹ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Christian Justice and Public Policy*, p. 200. This position on the task of the church is evident in his treatment of equality, in which the church should be exemplary as well as making statements, considering not only its own life but complex issues of public policy. See Forrester, Duncan B.: *On Human Worth. A Christian Vindication of Equality*. SCM Press, London 2001, pp. 7 and 212.

¹² Forrester, Duncan B.: *Apocalypse Now?*, pp. 35ff.

claims and fragments of morality.¹³ This rather bleak picture is turned in Forrester's account into a positive assertion, that people do recognize some fragments of religious ethics as true, even when they realize that these fragments are derived from a tradition and a community of faith to which they themselves may not belong. In this situation, it is possible for theologians to offer insights into the public debate, not as a grand coherent theory, but precisely as fragments which are illuminating and can in some sense claim to be public truth, or at least as contributions to common reflection in the public sphere.¹⁴ In the situation of pluralism which characterizes societies today, the churches have, in Forrester's view, the opportunity to rediscover a position of creative minority.¹⁵ These fragments can take the form of questions, challenges, and the raising of issues without providing answers, a strategy he associates with Danish philosopher of religion Søren Kierkegaard. They can also be more substantial and give particular insights and perspectives. Forrester is appreciative towards a strategy which he associates with German theologian Karl Barth and American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr.¹⁶ He attributes to them the strategy of boldly proclaiming the reality of Christian faith as the best guide to the understanding of present problems.¹⁷ While his own approach is more tentative in its ambitions, I surmise that he believes that such a position, while perhaps not acceptable to the public in its entirety, can also produce insights which, although only appreciated in a fragmented form, retain something of their origin.

Forrester also assumes that proponents of a Christian ethic have a responsibility to address the powerful directly. This designation includes the holders of political and economic power, both political institutions and private interests. The powerful, Forrester claims, need help to resist the specific temptations that go with their responsibility. Power "[...] aggravates the sinful human tendency to deal unjustly and proudly with others", Forrester writes, but despite this the powers

¹³ It is also inspired by the title of S. Kierkegaard's work *Philosophical Fragments*, cited in Forrester, Duncan B.: *On Human Worth*, p. 147.

¹⁴ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Christian Justice and Public Policy*, pp. 201f.

¹⁵ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Theology and Politics*, p. 143.

¹⁶ While both Niebuhr and Barth are prominent reformed theologians, they are not usually understood as representing the same theological stance. We will return to their respective positions because they can be used to disambiguate some of Forrester's statements.

¹⁷ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Belief, values and policies*. Clarendon Press, Oxford 1989, p. 87.

have a role in God's purpose. Their true mandate is to be servants of God's love and justice; they are called to fulfil this duty and are to be measured against this standard. There is therefore a Christian responsibility to resist power which has become evil and to recall the powerful to their true vocation, to be God's servants.¹⁸ One can assume that the attempt to influence the powerful is justified simply by the fact that it is an influence which can have a large impact, but Forrester does not make this explicit. Rather, having established that Christian ethics has something to offer in the public sphere, he seems to take for granted that the task of Christian ethics is to address the powerful.

There is an aspect of Forrester's thought that is wary about the risks of collusion with power. As noted above, he has been partly influenced by Liberation Theology, which means that he emphasizes the need for theology to listen to the powerless and oppressed and to address power from their perspective. Such a conception of theology as a prophetic voice maintains a distance to power. Forrester, although adamant that the loyalty of a Christian must be with the weak, still believes that the church should in some sense also work alongside the powerful and minister to them.¹⁹ In his view, theology must engage with the issues of the day in order to assist the powerful in discerning the proper responses, balancing competing claims, and operating prudently and modestly among the ambiguities of a political life in which sinful compromises are sometimes necessary.²⁰ Such a vision, while not necessarily representing a different morality, is clearly more in-

¹⁸ Forrester, Duncan B., op. cit., pp. 67-72. Citation in Forrester, Duncan B.: *Apocalypse Now?*, p. 7. Forrester cites Karl Barth as his inspiration for this position. For Barth, it was a central tenet that state authority is not ordained by God and legitimate no matter how tyrannical, but rather is instituted by God to fulfil obligations of justice and peace, and can forfeit its legitimacy and its claim to Christian obedience. The Church should remind the state of its origins, limits, and goals. Hunsinger, George: "Karl Barth", pp. 159-164.

¹⁹ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Theology and Politics*, p. 58.

²⁰ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Apocalypse Now?* pp. 73f. In this description of the relationship to the powerful Forrester is influenced by the tradition of Reinhold Niebuhr, which he also references. Niebuhr, as stated in the introduction, had a considerable political influence in post-war USA, for example acting as advisor to prominent American state officials. Niebuhr's position was that, due to the sinfulness of human nature, coercion and sin are inescapable in the practice of politics and must be accepted albeit subject to checks and balances. Niebuhr based this view on his Christian realism, which entails that the Christian ethic of love is not directly applicable in human society, but should be translated into social justice of political structures. See Forrester, Duncan B.: *Theology and Politics*, p. 88.

volved with power and involves a shift in perspective, from the powerless to the powerful.

In Forrester's account, the public voice of religion seems to be represented by individual theologians and, to a certain extent, theological reflection as articulated by churches or organizations. This is not to say that he does not believe that religious reasons voiced by individual believers in public are valuable, but that his argument is developed with an eye to the contributions of coherent theology and his role models are prominent theological figures who were active both in churches and in academia.

Forrester advances several arguments for allowing religious arguments a role in public. Some of these can be understood in terms of the categories that I have advanced: religious freedom, democratic culture and access to contribution. However, he also makes the argument forcefully in the negative, by discussing and refuting the arguments often put forward for the relegation of religion to the private sphere, namely that religion is irrational, violent and irrelevant. I will examine these refutations before moving on to the more positive arguments.

Forrester starts out with the assertion that religious ethics and reasons grounded in religious worldviews should not be excluded from public debate because it would not be fair, in the sense that the justifications usually given for such exclusions no more apply to religion than to other worldviews. That religion and religious arguments are by their nature irrational and thus unfitted for rational argument in the public forum is, according to Forrester, an assumption, rather than something demonstrated. He criticizes secular intellectuals such as political philosophers John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, claiming that they operate on the assumption that religious reasons and arguments are irrational, subjective, and arbitrary and should be excluded from the public sphere unless they can be translated into secular language, because in that sphere disagreement should be settled by the force of rational argument. The charge that religion is by definition irrational and therefore likely to augment or cause disagreement, dispute, and violence is unfounded, Forrester claims. The standards of rationality implied are, he writes, "[...] shot through with the dogmas and assumptions of modernity, and involves a singular arrogance in the un-

derstanding of non-western and pre-modern societies and cultures".²¹ If rationality is properly understood as cogency and coherence in argument, the reasons underlying religious ethics are no less rational than other reasons. And while religion can indeed be a factor in conflicts, secular and atheistic ideologies such as Nazism and Communism have had devastating effects and, historically, have been responsible for as much evil.²² The charge against religion, that it is divisive and likely to augment conflict, could equally well be levelled against other ideologies, claims Forrester.

Another reason that Forrester identifies as a driving force behind attempts to confine religious reasons to the private realm is the assumption that religious believers are a declining part of the population, and thus that the relevance of religious factors is assumed to be likewise declining.

Forrester notes in his 2004 book that this predicted decline in religious observance and a diminishing role for religion in politics of the world have not occurred. Rather, religion is both resurgent and publicly assertive.²³ As early as 1988, Forrester claimed that theories of secularization are unhelpful for understanding the world outside Western Europe, and that Western modernity is a particular, not a universal, phenomenon based on forces which have affected non-Western societies in significantly different ways.²⁴ By 2004, it had become even clearer to him that outside the West, modern Western secularism is widely regarded with suspicion and effectively seen as another religious system or the quasi-religious outcome of Christianity. Forrester views Western Europe as the notable exception to the trend of resurgent religion, and he believes that this makes Western scholars prone to underestimate the role of religion.²⁵ To claim that

²¹ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Apocalypse Now?*, p. 45; Forrester, Duncan B.: *Christian Justice and Public Policy*, pp. 169, 189 and citation on p. 177. This is the accusation which Forrester makes against Habermas's appropriation of Lawrence Kohlberg's schema of moral development, in which religion is seen as an obstacle to maturity for social communities, but I think it is a valid description of his critique of Habermas's treatment of religion in *Justification and Application* in general. Habermas's position on the admissibility of religious reasons in public discourse has changed during the course of his long career, as is evident from the references to Habermas in the introduction. I will not go deeper into an analysis of Forrester's position on Habermas, but rather move on to the content of the positions that Forrester defends and criticizes.

²² Forrester, Duncan B.: *Apocalypse Now?*, pp. 26 and 37.

²³ *Op. cit.*, p. 9.

²⁴ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Theology and Politics*, pp. 59f.

²⁵ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Apocalypse Now?*, pp. 36f.

religious reasons are irrelevant is thus an increasingly untenable position, according to Forrester.

Forrester does not discuss freedom of religion at any length. In his context, such freedom is taken for granted, legally speaking, although he asserts that the estrangement between politics and theology is partly due to secular forces pushing religion to the margins. However, he claims that theology has an inherent political relevance. Such an assertion is, as I have noted already, a necessary premise for claiming that religious expression on matters political should be protected as an exercise of religious freedom. For Forrester, it is also an exhortation to theologians not to voluntarily withdraw to the private sphere due to lack of confidence. Such withdrawal from the public arena amounts to a major distortion in the understanding and practice of Christian theology, Forrester claims. Christian convictions cannot be set aside while entering the public arena. Rather, he claims, they “[...] must be operative there, or they are valid nowhere” because the issues of the public sphere are inseparable from theology.²⁶ The Christian church itself, Forrester claims, has believed from the beginning that it had a message with implications for the public world, on politics and economics, and it must remain true to this belief and to the responsibility it implies.²⁷ Whenever Christianity has accepted its confinement to private life, the consequence has generally been that it has lost its critical edge and simply justified the values of the surrounding society. Forrester asserts that this is something that is not authentically Christian.²⁸

Forrester also asserts the importance, as a principle of democratic culture, of public fora which are hospitable to many different traditions. For democratic society to work despite the prevailing pluralism, it is imperative that we understand each other across traditions and allow religious arguments to contribute to the dialogue, he claims.²⁹ He questions the notion that it is possible for religious people “[...] to check their convictions at the entrance to the public forum without losing integrity”.³⁰ Forrester claims that all the resurgent religions

²⁶ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Belief, values and policies*, pp. 1, 4 and 89ff. Forrester exemplifies such issues with Nazism, apartheid, nuclear weapons and the workings of the world economy.

²⁷ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Apocalypse Now?*, p. 19.

²⁸ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Belief, values and policies*, p. 7.

²⁹ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Apocalypse Now?*, p. 46.

³⁰ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Christian Justice and Public Policy*, p. 31.

have a public voice which they hope to make heard, that they share a conviction that religion both matters and should have a central place in public debate.³¹ Forrester does not claim that religion is always a force for good, but problematic interpretations of theology are best confronted in public. For religious views to be challenged, and positive religious insights enabled to contribute to public debate, a far more hospitable public forum than the one envisioned by secular philosophers such as Rawls is needed, Forrester claims.³²

Democratic culture is also best served if there is room in the public sphere for a language of transcendence, Forrester contends. If not, politics will be invested with more than it can sustain or deliver, and consequently transformed into something perverted. Alternatively, politics will turn into something purely technical, supposedly independent of ethics.³³ The public forum, Forrester claims, is too often inhospitable to moral discourse and dominated by instrumental rationality. This lack of hope and vision, he writes, something often referred to as the end of ideology, leaves democratic culture in need of religion and its capacity for ethical guidance.³⁴

It is my understanding that, for Forrester, the most important argument for allowing religious ethics a place in public debate is the contribution that such ethics can make. Were reasons and arguments derived from such worldviews to be excluded from public deliberations, it would deprive the public of something important. Again, he is arguing against the thinking of Rawls and Habermas and their treatment of consensus and its role in public life. Rawls's position, as we have seen, is that arguments from comprehensive doctrines may be introduced in the public, provided that, among other things, they support an overlapping consensus on justice. Habermas also places importance on the ability or inability of religion to create consensus in society. However, Forrester objects, it is precisely the elements of comprehensive doctrines that lie outside the overlapping consensus that have greatest potential for bringing something distinctive and new to the conversation in the form of challenges, insights, and so on.³⁵ The pub-

³¹ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Apocalypse Now?*, pp. 38f.

³² *Op. cit.*, p. 47.

³³ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Belief, values and policies*, pp. 81f. The risk that politics is invested with too much of salvation is a concern of Forrester's he associates with the grand projects of Soviet communism, and is less of a concern in his later works.

³⁴ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Christian Justice and Public Policy*, p. 198.

³⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 127. See also Forrester, Duncan B.: *Apocalypse Now?*, pp. 46f.

lic needs not only consensus but debate and distinctive insights that can nourish its conversation.³⁶ Theological voices which simply repeat the conventional wisdom of the day have nothing to offer the public debate and risk being platitudinous.³⁷ Forrester claims that the relatively marginalized position of theology in public means that “[...] it has to earn the right to be heard by the relevance and cogency of what it has to say.”³⁸

The contributions which Forrester claims Christian theology can make to public debate largely can be categorized as what I have termed nuance and enrichments. As we have seen, Forrester calls these contributions fragments because they are fragments of a Christian theology and ethic which are offered up for debate and possibly understanding and appreciation by those who do not belong to or even sympathize with Christian tradition as a whole. Although sharp in his critique of secularism, Forrester is quite tentative and modest in his description of the contributions which theology can make. He writes of a “[...] modest but constructive and questioning contribution” asserting that it might “[...] be possible for theology to ask questions and give clues, insights, comments and suggestions which, even if fragmentary, might be helpful and illuminating”, “[...] offering, but not imposing, insights, values and convictions – ‘theological fragments’ – and hoping that some of them may be tested and accepted as public truth.”³⁹

These fragments can take many different forms. Although I have considered them as belonging to three different kinds, some fragments

³⁶ In *Theology and Politics* from 1988, Forrester claims that it could be an important contribution of Christianity to the public to sustain consensus as a basis for social life, but that other contributions, such as being the prophetic voice of the powerless, are equally important. It seems that Forrester’s view of consensus is more wary later on, with an increasing emphasis on the contributions which challenge consensus. Forrester, Duncan B.: *Theology and Politics*, p. 43.

³⁷ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Belief, values and policies*. p. 32. This is also the reason that Forrester is sceptical about Catholic moral theologian Hans Küng’s project of global ethics. He agrees with Christian ethicist Oliver O’Donovan, who writes that by focusing on the highest common factor, this kind of ethic does not transcend the limitations that various participating traditions brings to it, but compounds them, by excluding the things that only one or a few traditions have come to know. Thus it cannot contribute to a critique of assumptions common to most traditions, and becomes an agreement on the most truisitic and the least reflective level. Forrester, Duncan B.: *Apocalypse Now?*, p. 42.

³⁸ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Christian Justice and Public Policy*, p. 9.

³⁹ Op. cit., citations on p. 36, 75 and 84, in that order.

may well fit into more than one such category. They are challenges, qualifications, and insights. It seems clear that what is offered are sometimes challenges – for example, criticisms and questionings. As we have seen, Forrester asserts that a Christian ethic cannot confine itself to the support of consensus, because if all we have is consensus of what most people accept, then it is unclear how we can achieve critical distance from conventional wisdom.⁴⁰ Secular liberalism has, according to Forrester, not shown itself effective enough in naming and resisting evil and may need the critical resources of other worldviews.⁴¹ Other fragments are qualifications: they contribute by enriching, supplementing, or nuancing some insight or position which is the object of public debate. Tempering justice with generosity is an example of this, to which we will return to in our analysis of justice. Forrester writes that they can be “[...] necessary complements or modifications or enlargements of conventional and commonly accepted theories of justice”.⁴² Other fragments are distinctive insights; they offer convictions, clues, and suggestions. Public debate is seriously impoverished if not all such contributions are heard. One example is that religious traditions, in Forrester’s view, are a great source of hope and vision. Forrester claims that religion may be the most important player in sustaining social hope in a world where ideological systems for social criticism and change no longer seem convincing or coherent.⁴³ Another example of how such fragments might work is given when Forrester compares them to the boy in Hans Christian Andersen’s story who shouts out that the Emperor is wearing no clothes. I understand this to entail that they offer a perspective which enables people to see things as they are and to respond properly. They can increase awareness of the heights and depths of which humans are capable, or enable people see the problems and conflicts in the light of eternity, or at least encourage them to look at things in new ways and with other time-horizons. They can also serve as reminders, drawing attention to forgotten issues and aspects.⁴⁴ Forrester believes that secular ethics are less able than theology to deal with the ambiguities of the real world as well as with the fact that things that are necessary are

⁴⁰ Forrester, Duncan B., op. cit., pp. 126 and 169.

⁴¹ Op. cit., p. 31.

⁴² Op. cit., p. 3.

⁴³ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Apocalypse Now?*, p. 33.

⁴⁴ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Theology and Politics*, p. 167; Forrester, Duncan B.: *Belief, values and policies*, pp. 62f.

sometimes nonetheless sinful, and thus to respond to guilt and speak of forgiveness. For example, he asserts that the discussions of just war and just peace-making would benefit from theological perspectives which emphasize the sinfulness of violence, no matter the justness of the cause, and which bring a distinct understanding of peace-making as reconciliation and healing.⁴⁵

As already noted, Forrester assumes that one way in which the churches communicate with the surrounding world is by demonstrating, through its organization and workings, a better way of life that is grounded in an alternative set of coherent beliefs and values, what he refers to as witnessing.⁴⁶ He wants to take seriously the notion of church as a community of faith which sustains an account of justice. Yet he also wants to emphasize that, as such, it cannot be regarded as a bolt-hole from the public debate.⁴⁷ Rather, the churches are called to anticipate the justice of God's future by the way in which they are ordered, and thus to stand as an exemplary and anticipatory egalitarian community.⁴⁸ This, as I understand it, has a bearing on politics in two ways: first, like any vision of an alternative order, the inner life of the church in itself makes an indirect critique. Secondly, the inner life of the church affects the credibility of the church's public voice to the extent that it reflects the convictions which the church seeks to advocate.⁴⁹

Forrester does not develop his position on epistemology in any systematic way. However, his position on the subject can be plausibly reconstructed to entail what I have called an epistemology of possibility. Forrester stresses the limitations inherent in relying on criteria and arguments that everyone can accept, but simultaneously underlines that arguments can be understood across divides of tradition and worldview, provided that those debating are willing to do the hard work of both explaining and understanding. Given the situation of pluralism, such effort is, in Forrester's view, a normative imperative.

As we have seen, Forrester is clearly critical, for example, of John Rawls when he assumes that there are criteria of rationality that can be accepted by everyone. It is far from clear that such exist, Forrester claims, and he thus rejects what I have termed *an epistemological*

⁴⁵ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Apocalypse Now?* pp. 92ff.

⁴⁶ Op. cit., p. 19.

⁴⁷ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Christian Justice and Public Policy*, pp. 36 and 42.

⁴⁸ Op. cit., p. 245. See also Forrester, Duncan B.: *On Human Worth*, p. 170.

⁴⁹ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Belief, values and policies*, pp. 62f.

universalism. Therefore it is also unacceptable that religious ethics should gain entrance to the public arena by accepting a purportedly public standard of rationality, presenting arguments that anyone can examine, independently of their faith. Not only can theology not contribute its distinctive insights when forced into such neutral language, but such arguments may not exist at all.⁵⁰ Forrester allows that there is a need for a shared language of morals in a community, but this language is necessarily limited and circumscribed, and needs to be supplemented by the richer and more controversial languages of traditions in order to challenge and enrich the common morality.⁵¹ I believe that Forrester's point here can be understood as close to that developed in more detail by American Jewish political philosopher Michael Walzer in his argument about thick and thin moralities. Walzer argues that morality is in fact always thick, embedded in community, tradition, stories, and practices. When it is needed for the purposes of criticism or solidarity, a minimalist, thin morality can be temporarily abstracted out of the thick account. Although still expressive of its thick, maximalist home, it can fulfil the purposes of moral commonality in terms of mutual recognition of each other's thick moralities, and some normative injunctions. As soon as we need to communicate about something more developed and nuanced, we need to return to the language of our thick morality.⁵² Likewise, Forrester assumes that a Christian ethic, to contribute to the public, must employ its own thick language and insights which can only be conveyed in that language.

Forrester is at the same time optimistic about the possibilities for understanding. His position is that understanding is largely a question of determination and painstakingly hard work. He claims that religious traditions are intellectually quite coherent doctrines and he even suspects secular intellectuals who find it hard to understand them of "intellectual laziness".⁵³ Dialogue is a prerequisite for any positive development, and serious efforts must be made by everyone in order to understand one another across the lines of ideology and religion. If there is to be real dialogue on the state of the world and what is to be done, writes Forrester, "[...] the conversation has to be attentive, serious, engaging with the subtext as well as the text, attempting strenu-

⁵⁰ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Christian Justice and Public Policy*, pp. 32f.

⁵¹ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Apocalypse Now?*, pp. 43f.

⁵² Walzer, Michael: *Thick and Thin. Moral Argument at Home and Abroad*. University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 1994, pp. 9ff and 16ff.

⁵³ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Apocalypse Now?*, p. 46.

ously to understand the other".⁵⁴ Still, he underlines that problems of communication must be taken seriously. Although sympathetic to Habermas's emphasis on communication without control, Forrester criticizes the theory of the ideal speech situation for not taking the gravity of sin sufficiently into account.⁵⁵ Forrester believes that Habermas is overconfident that the distortions of ideology and interest which characterizes modern communication can somehow easily be overcome.⁵⁶ Here I believe that an interesting point is being made by Forrester: it is not intellectual difficulties but questions of power and interest which pose an obstacle to human communication. Describing someone or their tradition as irrational is an effective way to silence them. Listening attentively and explaining carefully is a way to counteract the effect of such power dynamics.

Forrester claims that it is possible for theology to be spoken in public and understood, within pluralistic societies as well as between traditions of faith or culture. There are two important aspects to Forrester's account which I regard as forming conditions of possibility for understanding: the idea of fragments, and the closeness of traditions. Forrester, as we have seen, argues that theology can and should contribute to public debate in a fragmentary way. It can no longer be assumed that the entire worldview and religious beliefs which form the context of religious arguments will be embraced, understood or, even known by the general public. Therefore, despite his claim about the need for thick language, it is not possible to propose theology as a grand theory. Still, it is possible for theologians to offer insights into the public debate, claims Forrester, because people do recognize some theological fragments as true even if they realize that those fragments are derived from a tradition and a community of faith to which they may not belong to themselves. Forrester seems to indicate that this is something which happens almost intuitively but which can still be used rationally in debate.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Forrester, Duncan B., op. cit., p. 38.

⁵⁵ Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative rationality entails the claim that valid norms of justice are those which can be freely accepted by everybody affected in the ideal speech situation: a deliberative discourse that is conducted under conditions such that everybody is free to participate and only the strength of arguments is considered. See Habermas, Jürgen: *Justification and Application. Remarks on Discourse Ethics*. Polity Press, Cambridge 1993, p. 56.

⁵⁶ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Christian Justice and Public Policy*, p. 173. Forrester, Duncan B.: *Apocalypse Now?*, pp. 105-7.

⁵⁷ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Christian Justice and Public Policy*, pp. 84 and 201f.

Such understanding is helped by, though perhaps without being wholly dependent on, the closeness of theological and secular discourse. The boundaries between theology and secular theory are porous and not always clear, claims Forrester. There is always in theology involvement with non-theological ideas and recourse to conceptual apparatuses of the time and culture of the particular theologian.⁵⁸ This works the other way around as well, at least in the West where Christian tradition has penetrated deeply into the shared Western cultural background.⁵⁹ However, despite the closeness there is still need for the critical edge and distinct contribution of a Christian ethic to challenge culture. I understand these claims of Forrester's to imply that the critical venture is helped by there being shared ground.⁶⁰

If shared history is a prerequisite for understanding, however, there is a problem for pluralistic societies because other traditions will not have this advantage when communicating their insights. In response to this problem, Forrester claims that the shared ground of theism can serve as a bridge in the increasingly pluralistic and multi-religious situation. Religious people should be a resource in the need for understanding across traditions since they are "peculiarly qualified to enter sympathetically and with understanding into religious positions, attitudes and practices that they do not themselves share". Believers and theologians of various religious traditions should be able to learn from one another's encounter with modernity and post-modernity in a "dialogue which is only possible between believers, or at least those who are critically appreciative of religion".⁶¹ This should, in my view, imply that Western Christians have a special responsibility by virtue of their tradition's position of privilege in the West.

I regard Forrester as adhering to what I have called a theory of combination. That is, he believes that the content of Christian ethics is a combination of insights which Christians hold in common with others, and insights which are distinct to the Christian tradition. That is why the contribution of religious ethics to public discussion is so important. Furthermore, this is a position which gains in strength during the course of Forrester's writings. The ideal of equality is a clear ex-

⁵⁸ Forrester, Duncan B.: *On Human Worth*, p. 48. Forrester, Duncan B.: *Theology and Politics*, pp. 77f.

⁵⁹ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Christian Justice and Public Policy*, p. 207.

⁶⁰ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Apocalypse Now?*, p. 44; Forrester, Duncan B.: *Belief, values and policies*, p. 48.

⁶¹ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Apocalypse Now?*, p. 38.

ample of this relationship: Forrester believes that, although the ideal is espoused both in Christian and secular ethics, Christian tradition is indispensable, both to sustain the idea and to make it coherent.

Prophet and minister to the powerful

Forrester does not treat the secularity of the state, because he takes it for granted. However, he does discuss the relation between Christian tradition and secular power. In *Theology and Politics*, Forrester categorizes Christian tradition's relation to power into three different stances which have been influential as alternative positions since the early days of the history of Christianity.⁶²

The first stance, which Forrester calls church political theology, views the church as a counter-culture, called to separate itself from society and live according to an absolutist ethic. It challenges society indirectly by its witness and its alternative way of ordering life, but takes no responsibility for power and does not involve itself in politics. The problem with this kind of theology, according to Forrester, is that it can lead to a naïve view of the church as above criticism.⁶³ The second stance implies that theology sacralizes power and legitimizes the existing order. This can happen through the explicit support of power by theology, as well as through the implicit support which results when religion confines itself to the private sphere and does not present a challenge to power. Forrester is harshly critical of this position, which he faults for its obedient conformity and its collusion with evil.⁶⁴ Forrester claims that Christian tradition divides people's loyalties in a way that resists such easy sacralizing of temporal power, making it an inherently bad civil religion.⁶⁵ Forrester is aware that Christianity has historically lent itself to many things, not least of which is the sacralization of various temporal powers. I understand his description of Christian tradition in this instance as a normative statement about what should be the case if Christianity is correctly understood and practiced. It is my contention that Forrester also believes that there is something about Christian tradition itself which resists such appropriation, some inherent resource that threatens to spark

⁶² Forrester, Duncan B.: *Theology and Politics*, p. 20.

⁶³ Op. cit., pp. 21 and 164f.

⁶⁴ Op. cit., pp. 21, 32, 37 and 50.

⁶⁵ Op. cit., pp. 28 and 54f.

resistance against its misuse by the powerful. This possibility is hinted at when Forrester writes that the cross and the eschatology of the City to come all make it impossible to equate earthly kings, power and kingdoms with the divine.⁶⁶

The third stance which Forrester himself espouses he calls prophetic theology. It claims that earthly states can and should manifest justice in their orderings, and that they are to be measured against the standard of divine justice and love. Forrester claims that earthly orders can only be partial and provisional and as such are a good for social life, though not the highest good. Secular power is thus to be taken seriously but never to be considered sacred since it is always made relative by the higher claims of God. The task for theology lies in affirming to the powerful their responsibility to God, relaying the voice of the victims to the oppressor, confronting evil, and proclaiming forgiveness for that which may be necessary although it is not good. The problem, which is noted by Forrester himself, is that this supportive role easily passes over into legitimization and collusion with power, oppression, and injustice.⁶⁷

There is a certain unresolved tension in Forrester's work between a critical ministering to power and a more confrontational approach where the theologian is envisioned as remaining closer to the powerless. Although devoting considerable energy to describing the relationship to the powerful, Forrester also writes that theology must first and foremost serve the poor, and only thereafter, as a consequence, address policymakers, citizenry, and church.⁶⁸

Egalitarianism and right relations

Forrester affirms an egalitarian conception of justice but his account of justice also contains elements of a virtue account because of his emphasis on community and right relations as the end of justice. To distinguish it from conceptions which understand equality to be mainly about fairness, he emphasizes that justice must entail political, social and economic equality. Furthermore, justice implies a special concern for the poor and weak. For Forrester, the true end of justice is

⁶⁶ Forrester, Duncan B., op. cit., p. 58.

⁶⁷ Op. cit., pp. 24f and 160ff.

⁶⁸ Forrester, Duncan B.: *On Human Worth*, p. 72.

relationship, which means that justice must contain generosity, love, and mercy. According to the distinctions I have developed, Forrester's account of justice has components which understand justice as egalitarian and as virtue. It is my contention that the egalitarian strand is the more important.

Forrester claims that for justice to be achieved society must change in a radically egalitarian direction. Fairness is important for justice, but justice must, as he sees it, be something more than fair treatment within basically unjust structures. It is the structures themselves which must be altered so as to restore God's just ordering. This also means that it cannot be assumed that justice will benefit everyone. On the contrary, justice is usually costly and not in the interest of the rich.⁶⁹ Forrester writes that "[...] divine justice goes beyond fairness in a radically egalitarian direction" and that "[...] doing justice seems to involve a predisposition to equal regard for people's interests and a tendency toward equal distribution".⁷⁰ In Forrester's account, justice thus entails both equal social and political regard and a tendency toward equal distribution of material resources.

Forrester devotes some special attention to the issue of poverty, which he claims is arguably the most important issue of justice for Christian ethics because the poor have a special place in the heart of God. Poverty is not an individual but a systemic problem, claims Forrester, and as such it cannot be solved in isolation: both poor and rich need to be emancipated at the same time. Doing justice to the poor is about giving them what is properly theirs according to God's will, argues Forrester, and thus involves restitution rather than charity.⁷¹

The goal of both equality and justice is fellowship and true community, Forrester claims.⁷² In a polemic against contractarian theories of justice such as that developed by Rawls, he contends that justice can never be understood as resulting from cooperation for mutual benefit among the strong. Rather, justice has to do with the obligation, responsibility, and care that bind people in society.⁷³ Poverty must also be of special concern in the pursuit of justice precisely because of the strain it puts on relationships. Likewise, inequality erodes solidarity,

⁶⁹ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Christian Justice and Public Policy*, pp. 133-139 and 221f.

⁷⁰ Forrester, Duncan B.: *On Human Worth*, pp. 31f.

⁷¹ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Christian Justice and Public Policy*, pp. 104ff.

⁷² Forrester, Duncan B.: *On Human Worth*, pp. 35 and 143.

⁷³ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Christian Justice and Public Policy*, p. 208.

the sense of responsibility for one another and of mutual belonging that is a feature of a decent society.⁷⁴

Forrester is clearly concerned with developing an account of justice which directly involves the dependent and vulnerable in society. However, he conceptualizes this in several different ways, each of which has different implications for his conception of justice and its distinction from love or generosity. At times, Forrester claims that justice must entail recognition of the special contribution of the weak to society, or that justice entails obligations towards those who cannot contribute directly.⁷⁵ Justice, to be truly just in the way God is just, must *in itself* entail grace and generosity. Justice on this view is the institutional and social realization of love.⁷⁶ While earthly justice cannot achieve this in its totality, it should be an anticipation, a partial manifestation of the same thing.⁷⁷ At other times, however, Forrester seems to argue that the claims of those who cannot contribute to the common good are not an issue of justice, but rather that justice must be tempered by generosity to allow for these claims.⁷⁸ It would seem, then, that generosity, mercy, and their end in community are not part of the account of justice but, rather, part of some higher good of which justice is also but a part. My interpretation, however, is that Forrester is best understood as adhering to the first account, where what is due to people who are dependent and vulnerable is indeed a question of justice. Justice is understood as entailing mercy or grace as well as equality, and is not the result of cooperation for mutual benefit. However, it is interesting that Forrester has difficulty avoiding sliding into the second account, despite the fact that he goes into open polemic against Rawls, whose account of justice is problematic in precisely this way. We will return to this question in the section on critical discussion.

Forrester is, as I see it, best understood as proposing an ethics based on both reason and revelation. Understanding justice is partly the result of human reasoning and partly something that is known through revelation. Justice in its fullness is known only by God. Although we as human beings can only know God's justice incompletely, it stands in tension with the injustice of the present order, in contrast

⁷⁴ Forrester, Duncan B.: *On Human Worth*, p. 224.

⁷⁵ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Christian Justice and Public Policy*, p. 209.

⁷⁶ Forrester, Duncan B.: *On Human Worth*, p. 155.

⁷⁷ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Christian Justice and Public Policy*, p. 83.

⁷⁸ *Op. cit.*, pp. 232ff.

to and in judgment on present inequality and oppression.⁷⁹ Forrester never explicitly claims that revelation is necessary for knowledge of justice, but he does claim that insights specific to Christian tradition can contribute nuances, thus correcting the understanding of justice. Knowing justice, he argues, must also involve listening to the victims of injustice. This, too, he claims, is a specifically Christian insight which is expressed in the preferential option for the poor and the importance of experiences of injustice. This means that an account of justice in which the victims of injustice are not heard is deficient, by his account. But Forrester is also aware of the problem of false consciousness – that a sense of contentment or resentment is not always reliable as a measure of injustice.⁸⁰ I understand this to mean that although Forrester is sympathetic to Liberation Theology's emphasis on the churches siding with the oppressed, he does not embrace the epistemological principle expressed in the preferential option for the poor. It is important, even necessary, to listen to the victims of injustice but they do not have epistemological privilege. A Christian conception of justice must be informed by their perspective but it must also be understood through reasoning and through the specific resources provided by the Christian tradition.

Forrester also repeatedly underlines the difficulty in knowing justice, and relates this both to the Christian doctrine of human sinfulness and to the modern condition of pluralism.⁸¹ In our human condition we can only ever know justice partially. We tend to distort our ideas of justice so that they favour our own interests. However, justice has an objective existence and resists our tendency to define justice according to our own aims. Forrester's claim, that human sin is the reason we have trouble reaching a correct understanding of justice, implies that this has always been so. But he also claims that there is something new about the modern condition and the uncertainty about justice. In our era, Forrester writes, the plurality of incompatible accounts of justice is leading to mounting uncertainty about what justice is and a growing feeling that the choice as to what kind of justice to recognize is largely arbitrary. This paves the way to an understanding of justice as a function of our own interest, making concepts of justice into

⁷⁹ Forrester, Duncan B., *op. cit.*, pp. 227 and 247-254.

⁸⁰ *Op. cit.*, pp. 47-59.

⁸¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 1.

weapons in social conflict rather than instruments of self-critique.⁸² My understanding of this argument is that Forrester believes that although human sinfulness has always been what it is, in the fragmented cultural condition of modernity the possibilities for countering such sinfulness are being undermined and the situation aggravated.

Justice is not only hard to know, it is also hard to do, claims Forrester. In its fullness it can only be given by God. God's justice is closely connected to mercy and love, generosity and forgiveness. Earthly justice cannot achieve such justice in its totality, but it should be an anticipation.⁸³ According to Forrester, humanity's sinful condition can be understood as a situation in which justice is not always possible. History cannot be undone and it can be impossible for full restitution to be made or for injuries to be fully healed.⁸⁴ In this circumstance, forgiveness must be a component of justice.

Forrester delivers a passionate appeal for theology to contribute to thinking on justice. He claims that the distance between theology and secular thinking on justice is impoverishing both. A conception of justice which eschews all religious thought ends by becoming narrow and superficial and in need of the enrichment that theology can provide.⁸⁵ Forrester suggests an array of resources in Christian tradition which might contribute to reasoning regarding justice. I will discuss a selection of these, which I will argue are the most important for Forrester's project because they recur throughout his writing. These are the ideas about justice as equality, as relational, as costly, and as hope.

According to Forrester, equality is a thoroughly Christian concept, one that has deeply influenced secular notions of equality and indeed is the major source of the modern emphasis on equality. Christian conceptions of equality have not been totally assimilated into their secular counterparts, and in Forrester's view they remain richer and deeper thus potential sources for contributions.⁸⁶ Indeed, he questions whether a morality of equality can be sustained without drawing on these metaphysical foundations.⁸⁷ Forrester notes that people want

⁸² Forrester, Duncan B., op. cit., pp. 41 and 44.

⁸³ Op. cit., p. 83.

⁸⁴ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Apocalypse Now?*, p. 113.

⁸⁵ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Christian Justice and Public Policy*, p. 9.

⁸⁶ Forrester, Duncan B.: *On Human Worth*, pp. 30, 73, 79f and 108f. Forrester also acknowledges Stoic influences. Op. cit., p. 131.

⁸⁷ Op. cit., pp. 236 and 250.

their fundamental values, like equality, to be “in some sense *true*”.⁸⁸ Meanwhile, secular thinking on equality tends to treat it either as axiomatic and given or as a function of some empirical trait of human beings. In fact, claims Forrester, there is no consensus about equality being a self-evident value and empirical qualities are a rather shaky foundation.⁸⁹ Because secular thinking on equality is shaped by its Christian roots, theological ideas on equality can be particularly helpful in public debate, he claims, and those interested in equality should take its theistic roots seriously.⁹⁰

According to Forrester, the Christian ideal of equality is grounded in many different notions of tradition. He enumerates many of these. Perhaps the most central is the idea of equal worth bestowed on every human being through God’s love, as demonstrated in God’s act of creating and sustaining every human being.⁹¹ All humans share in the *imago Dei* and the account of Creation affirms human equality as the original condition and describes inequality as a punishment.⁹² Equality is also a feature of the promised Kingdom of God. The new community of Jesus and the early church are characterized by their treatment of inequality as something lacking eternal validity. This is shown in radical sharing, table fellowship, and in the breaking of social barriers such as purity, gender, and rank. Forrester additionally understands the biblical theme of concern for the poor and the weak to be an issue of equality, and the incarnation as an event when God makes himself equal to humankind.⁹³ While there is no shortage of instances of biblical or other Christian tradition which, Forrester claims, offer insights into equality, and although he claims that these resources provide richer understandings of equality, he does not often explain at length what more specifically they imply in contrast to a secular understanding and over and above simply providing illustrations of the ideal. For my purposes here, it is important to note that equality remains a central emphasis in Forrester’s account of justice and one that he claims is

⁸⁸ Forrester, Duncan B., op. cit., p. 47.

⁸⁹ Op. cit., pp. 43ff and 68f.

⁹⁰ Op. cit., pp. 134f and 139.

⁹¹ Op. cit., pp. 31-35 and 140.

⁹² Punishment should here be understood in the context of the Christian narrative of the fall into sin. If equality is the original created condition of humankind in the Garden of Eden, inequality is the consequence of humankind’s banishment from Eden due to humanity’s disobedience to God. Inequality is thus a circumstance of the life of humanity as encountered after the fall from grace.

⁹³ Op. cit., pp. 83-100.

particularly justified by reference to Christian ethics. Another emphasis is notable, however. Forrester's interpretation is at least partly dependent on a reading in which the humbling of the powerful and the uplifting of the weak and poor are seen as expressing and establishing equality. While God's preference for the weak is seen on this view as a partiality which is necessary for the establishment of equality, another possible interpretation would be that what these biblical passages refer to is a reversal, not an equalizing.

As already noted, justice in Forrester's account is relational, something he claims as a particularly Christian insight. According to Forrester, a biblical understanding of justice is primarily social. It is a justice which is not opposed to generosity, mercy, or forgiveness, but rather must contain all these things because the end of justice is the establishment, enablement, healing, and restoration of human community that will make social life healthy and possible.⁹⁴ On the Christian understanding, claims Forrester, God's justice is more than fair. When God acts according to mercy instead of judgment, when God gives to those who have not earned it, this is most properly understood not as a failure of fairness but as a justice that is more than fair; it is just.⁹⁵ My understanding of this claim is that justice, for Forrester, must go beyond "to each according to desert" or some comparable principle. Forrester wants to articulate the particular emphasis of justice which is brought about by the experience of justification, of being justified by God through no effort of our own, and thus being free to respond to the needs of our neighbours for their own sake rather than as means of earning salvation. This justification is constitutive of the new community, and thus points once again to justice both as going beyond notions of desert and as relational – as a basis for right human relations.⁹⁶ As noted earlier, Forrester's account seems at times to regard the grace or generosity which is constitutive of community as something outside of and additional to justice. Yet my analysis of his theological argument shows more clearly that the claims of those who cannot contribute is seen as a claim to justice. Justice is here defined as what enables good community, and the kind of community that Forrester proposes must be one that recognizes the vulnerable and powerless as

⁹⁴ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Christian Justice and Public Policy*, pp. 208, 231 and 235f.

⁹⁵ Op. cit., p. 83.

⁹⁶ Op. cit., pp. 209f.

full members. Forrester states that from a theological perspective, people

[...] who are prevented from making the usual sort of contribution to the economic and general welfare of society by disablement and other factors [...] have a privileged status and a decent society sees them as having a special contribution to make to the community flourishing together.⁹⁷

In Forrester's account, justice is something costly, not to be achieved without sacrifices. It is a theological insight, he claims, that human beings are sinful and selfish and tend to twist justice. Justice can thus make severe demands which are not in fact in the interest of the rich. Not only does a Christian ethic contain this insight, it also provides the motivation to overcome such selfishness. As Forrester has it, an important task for any account of justice is to constrain the constant tendency to selfishness by groups and individuals and the correlated disregard for the claims of another. This is, moreover, a role which Forrester is convinced that secular accounts of justice have a problem fulfilling.⁹⁸ Because the Christian faith demands a willingness to sacrifice oneself for others, it provides the motivation to work for justice although this sometimes may be contrary to one's own interests.⁹⁹

Christian hope is central to Forrester's concept of justice insofar as the future holds both judgment of present injustices and the coming of an order of just relationships. As we have seen, Forrester understands justice as something which can be given in its fullness by God alone, and thus as something to which we look forward. Hope in justice is a kind of protest against existing injustice, he claims, a refusal to acknowledge the existing order as absolute. Although religious hope can be construed as private escapism, that is, as effectively legitimizing the present order, it has also inspired countless forms of resistance, protest and reform, he notes. This is not to say that theological hope should baptize some secular cause, but that it should sustain belief in an open future, confidence of grace in the future, and the refusal to regard the present as final.¹⁰⁰ Social hope is in crisis and sorely needed in the present world order, Forrester observes, and he suggest that

⁹⁷ Forrester, Duncan B.: *On Human Worth*, p. 229.

⁹⁸ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Christian Justice and Public Policy*, p. 3.

⁹⁹ Op. cit., pp. 127f and 131.

¹⁰⁰ Op. cit., pp. 227 and 247-257.

religions may well be the only keepers of such hope. Faith, he claims, “[...] may still have the capacity to sustain and shape a social hope with clear political relevance”,¹⁰¹ able to “[...] rehabilitate a realistic utopianism” that can call on people to seek equality with eagerness and commitment.¹⁰²

Forrester in comparison

In the Introduction, I categorized Forrester and An-Na'im as modified liberalism. In this section, I will briefly compare their standpoints on the research questions so as to further clarify where they are in agreement and where they differ. Like An-Na'im, Forrester attempts to show that a system of liberal, secular democracy is compatible with religious ethics which has political claims and a public voice, and that some kinds of theological arguments are viable in such a context. I have chosen to call their approach modified liberalism because they both want religious ethics to contribute to the strength and quality of liberal democratic society. The main thrust of their arguments is to show that there is not an either-or choice between secular discourse and theological arguments. Both, too, have some reservations about secularism when understood as a standpoint hostile to religion in public. They are both weary of a too close association between theology and power, even though the formal separation of these is taken for granted by Forrester to a greater extent. On other issues, such as the inseparability of religion and politics, they both develop arguments expressly and in a similar manner. Both use similarly tentative and process-oriented terms to describe the work of theology in public, Forrester in terms of tension and ambiguity, An-Na'im using words such as negotiation and mediation.

Forrester does not explain his interpretative method at any length, and this is a notable difference from An-Na'im. This can be understood as a consequence of Forrester's traditional methods, which do not call for justification, and his casual assumption that his work will be recognized as belonging to the Christian tradition and as contributing to a long tradition of public and political engagement of Christian theologians, one anchored in both church and academic theology.

¹⁰¹ Forrester, Duncan B., op. cit., p. 157.

¹⁰² Forrester, Duncan B.: *On Human Worth*, p. 251.

A central difference between Forrester and An-Na'im hinges upon their respective understandings of the role of reason and revelation for the development of ethics. While An-Na'im proposes an *ethics based on reason*, Forrester argues for an *ethics based on both reason and revelation*. This further leads them to different standpoints on the issue of the content of ethics. An-Na'im's assumption is that the content of Islamic ethics is identical to ethics which are based on human reason and experience; he adheres to a *theory of consonance*. This means that the contribution of religious ethics which he articulates is one of justification and motivation. Islamic tradition can justify human rights and motivate people to work for them and, perhaps, contribute to some extent to their contextualization. Forrester, on the other hand, believes that Christian ethics has content in common with other kinds of ethics but also content which is specific or distinct; he adheres to a *theory of combination*. This means that there are substantive contributions which religious ethics can make to the public debate, fragments of challenge, nuance, and insight.

An-Na'im and Forrester both believe that religious ethics should influence public debate via the avenues of personal formation, intra-organizational formulation, and public address. Both regard religion's influence on personal formation as inevitable. They stress intra-organizational formulation as an important avenue for the development of tradition, one of inherent importance for the public. They both underline that public address must be formulated in a way that is conducive to understanding, coherently argued, and comprehensibly explained. Their arguments are similar in that they both advocate a concept of rationality which is not secular by default. They thus underline the importance of a hospitable and inclusive public forum in which neither religion nor secularism is a prerequisite for participation. Compared to An-Na'im, Forrester exhibits less confidence in arguments which are independent of worldview or in reasons that anyone can accept. He believes in the existence of a thin moral language, but argues that for a Christian ethic to make its best contributions, it must employ the thick language of theology. Instead, he believes that these contributions can be offered and accepted in public as fragments, parts of a greater whole which can be accepted publicly as true, even if the public does not accept the entire Christian tradition. When closely analyzed, An-Na'im seems to allow a greater role for expressly religious arguments in his ethic than first appears, which means that their

positions on the ideal mode of discourse of the public may be closer than is often assumed. However, An-Na'im's account is based on an epistemological universalism, while Forrester adheres to an epistemology of possibility which offers a less optimistic account of the immediacy of human understanding and which underlines the hard work involved in communicating one's reasons and arguments.

Many of the reasons they give for granting religious reasons a public hearing are similar: they both understand such expression as a part of religious freedom, relying on an account of their respective traditions as inherently concerned with public issues, and they both refer to the importance of an open democratic culture. The importance of the latter to An-Na'im rests mainly upon the possibility of debating and challenging interpretations which are conservative and fundamentalist. Forrester, by contrast, underscores the risks of technical rationality which undermine ideological debate in democracies lacking theological resources. While both believe that religious ethics give the public access to important contributions, they differ in how they understand these. While An-Na'im mainly seeks religious reasons for strengthening and justifying an overlapping consensus on human rights, Forrester believes that it is precisely the insights of theology which lie outside consensus that may make the most important contribution. There is a difference in their perception of secular culture: while An-Na'im believes that it has not been effective enough in convincing Muslims of the goods of secularity and human rights, Forrester believes it to be defective in a more substantive way, and he questions secular culture's ability to sustain both an intellectually coherent and a sufficiently accurate account of justice as well as hope in such justice. An-Na'im understands the contribution of a religious ethic to be mainly one of motivation, while Forrester claims that it contains enrichments and nuances. This again is connected to their respective positions on the content of religious ethics, where Forrester, unlike An-Na'im, states that such ethics has a distinct content.

Forrester's egalitarian account of justice differs from An-Na'im's sufficiency account in several respects. Firstly, Forrester wants to pursue equality as an overall goal, not only up to a certain threshold, while An-Na'im makes no such commitment. In An-Na'im's account the value of equality understood as equal rights is paramount, but it does not amount to radical egalitarianism and is affirmed more implicitly and indirectly. Forrester also believes that justice in its fullness is

known and realized by God alone, while An-Na'im remains optimistic about the human possibilities for justice. Here it is evident that while both authors place a certain amount of emphasis on human fallibility, for An-Na'im this is most notable in relation to interpretation of tradition whereas for Forrester the emphasis has a more lasting consequence for his assessment of human capacity for justice. While Forrester believes there to be many theological resources that further the understanding of justice, An-Na'im rather wants to show the force of Islamic tradition in providing justification for his conception of justice.

Theological traditions are broad avenues for thought and have many influences. Any given standpoint by a religious thinker can be explained in terms of an array of factors, including context and political positions. However, one interesting possibility is that certain emphases or elements of tradition make a lasting impression, which can take the form of constraint or nuance. Both Forrester and An-Na'im make reference to human fallibility, but with Forrester the notion goes a lot deeper, being about not only fallibility in interpretation but human sinfulness. That humans are sinners means that justice in its completeness is ultimately beyond their reach; it is something that can be known and done in fullness only by God. Although Forrester never explicitly refers to the Christian doctrine of original sin, I believe that it makes a lasting impression on his work. Original sin is the notion that all humans are in a fallen condition and thus implicated in sin, a state from which they can be liberated by God alone. The Reformed tradition of which Forrester is a part is particularly insistent that humanity is corrupt and that humans are unable to rise from their sinful condition by their own accord or even to collaborate with God in their betterment. The doctrine of original sin can be seen as the nuance which compels Forrester to argue that justice in its fullness is attainable only by God. It can furthermore be argued that the doctrine's bleak view of humanity leads him to assert the continuing importance of revelation for ethical insight, and consequently the distinctness of Christian contributions to public debate. Because of original sin, human beings cannot achieve complete ethical insight on their own accord, but need revelation through Christian tradition in order to correct and nuance their understanding.

In the previous chapter, I remarked that the Sunni Islamic understanding of the Law as the mercy of God may be an important key to

the role of law in An-Na'im. Christian tradition also has a long history of natural law thinking, of course. However, it is a specifically Christian idea that our relation with God is established by grace that surmounts the law. In particular, the Reformed Christian understanding of man's relation to God is that the Old Covenant, based on law, was somehow not enough to cope with human wickedness and therefore had to be perfected through the New Covenant by grace in Christ. The concept of law in Christian theology brings out connotations of limitation, of human weakness, and incapacity. The law is by definition impossible to keep, and it is connected to images of human bondage. As I see it, this view clearly informs Forrester's treatment of justice, the emphasis of which rests on a justice informed by grace, forgiveness, and generosity.

Critical analysis

As already noted, Forrester does not specify an interpretative method. This does not raise any serious issues as to his identity within tradition since he seems to employ a quite traditional understanding of the sources of Christian tradition, relying on Bible and basic doctrine. His understanding of these is informed by the emphases of Reformed tradition and would probably not prompt anyone to question his adherence to it.¹⁰³ However, there is a problem with Forrester's interpretative method in relation to the criterion which I have been articulating as *communicability*. Forrester does not specify an interpretative method whereby which we can know which parts of a tradition are valuable insights able to function as contributions to public debate. This means that his interpretative method lacks transparency and is difficult for others, especially non-Christians, to assess. Since there are many different kinds of religious ethics, all claiming to derive from Christian tradition, it would have been helpful if Forrester had supplied reasons as to why the theological fragments which he proposes should be understood as representing Christianity. To this Forrester might object

¹⁰³ Oliver O'Donovan remarks that although influenced by liberationist perspectives, Forrester retains a distance to them, and shows a deep commitment to mainstream Protestant orthodoxy and his Reformed tradition. O'Donovan, Oliver: Review of "Forrester on Christian Ethics and Practical Theology: Collected Writings on Christianity, India, and the Social Order" in *Studies in Christian Ethics* 27(1), 2014, pp. 95-98.

that it is not important that members of the public assesses the provenance of the fragments, so long as they somehow intuitively accept them as true. This might be the case if one were interested only in the resulting policies being just, but if one is concerned with the quality of democratic culture generally, it seems that such understanding would be better served by transparency of methodology.

A case could also be made that the different substantive contributions which Forrester envisages have their home in quite different conceptions of Christianity, and that it is difficult to imagine them as fragments of the same coherent whole. For example, the preferential option for the poor is an idea originally articulated in Liberation Theology, whose perspective lies very far from that of Christian realism. There are clearly tensions in Forrester's ethic, which I understand as stemming from the incorporation of strands from different parts of the multifaceted Christian tradition, each bringing its own distinct emphasis and not necessarily compatible with the others. Forrester manages to use both Liberation Theology and Christian realism as sources of inspiration; other interpreters of these might perhaps point to aspects of the respective theologies which are hard to square with each other. This objection could be countered by arguing that the advantage of Forrester's account of fragments is precisely that it allows several different theologies to contribute their different insights to the public debate on different subjects.¹⁰⁴ But Forrester's articulation of the argument seems to assume that Christianity is in some sense a whole and that the fragments he proposes as contributions are parts of the same thing.¹⁰⁵ Since he is not oblivious to the fact that of the some substantial contributions which claim Christian heritage are in opposition to his own positions, it remains a problem that he does not articu-

¹⁰⁴ This seems to be how theologian William Myatt understands Forrester, partly through Walter Benjamin's understanding of the fragment. Myatt argues that the fragmentary form is a methodological approach that safeguards against oppressive totalizing theory that silences its victims. While I agree with the reading of Forrester as concerned with the voice of the poor and powerless, I do not understand his methodological position as that deconstructive, but rather interprets the notion of fragments as something derived from a whole narrative that it does not stand in opposition to. Myatt, William: "Public Theology and 'The Fragment': Duncan Forrester, David Tracy, and Walter Benjamin" in *International Journal of Public Theology*, vol 8, 2014, pp. 88 and 105.

¹⁰⁵ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Christian Justice and Public Policy*, p. 203.

late a norm for interpretation.¹⁰⁶ This is all the more so since Forrester wants theology to be able to make a stand on hard and contentious issues – to deliver something more than just platitudes.¹⁰⁷ The lack of a specific method for identifying which parts of tradition are relevant for a particular situation will not make this easy, as is evident from Forrester's examples. These deal with issues such as apartheid and Nazism, which, while perhaps theologically contentious once upon a time, are hardly so today. Few would defend the notion that Nazism or apartheid is a complicated issue with two sides to its story. By not taking a stand on an issue where there is still contention as to what is right, Forrester is vulnerable to his own charge, that theology can become platitudinous when it offers nothing more than consensus.

The tension mentioned earlier, between different strands of Christian tradition in Forrester's ethic, becomes apparent in his account of the theologian's relation to the poor on the one hand and to the powerful on the other. Forrester is, of course, aware that he is attempting a synthesis and tries to make the case that the tasks of standing alongside the poor and of advising the powerful are, in fact, connected. I question whether the churches or individual theologians will be able to perform both tasks simultaneously with integrity and legitimacy. There is an obvious risk that such proximity will result, in the worst case, in corruption. At the very least, it is difficult to imagine that it would not affect the perspective of theology thus articulated, because one could also ask whether a theologian can in fact associate closely with power without being influenced by it – rather than influencing it.¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, it is not clear that the powerful will be inclined to listen to a Christian ethic at all. Given the multitude of theological perspectives, it also seems likely that the powerful will choose to listen to the representative of a theology which aligns more conveniently with their interests, rather than one in solidarity with the poor. It is essential to differentiate between two roles with regard to the pow-

¹⁰⁶ As is pointed out by professor of practical theology and feminist Heather Walton, fragments of religious ethics can also act as deeply lodged shards of misogyny and homophobia. Walton, Heather: "You have to say you cannot speak: Feminist Reflections upon Public Theology" in *International Journal of Public Theology*, 4, 2010, p. 33.

¹⁰⁷ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Apocalypse Now?*, p. 47.

¹⁰⁸ As argued by postcolonial theorist Sarah Ahmed, attention to issues of shame, and focus on the feelings of the perpetrators of oppression, in conjunction with the aims of justice understood as reconciliation and right relation, can lead to covering up injustices. Ahmed, Sara: *Vithetens hegemoni*. Tankekraft, Hågersten 2011, p. 115.

erful. One is the task of the church or theologian to act as a prophetic voice which subjects the powerful to criticism, gives voice to the silenced, and conveys the voice of the powerless to the public and to the powerful. Such a role for theology may well be the only political action possible when there is no alternative power to support or no possibility for changing the locus of power. However, Forrester also articulates a role for the theologian as a kind of chaplain, confessor, or minister to the powerful, helping to navigate the ambiguities of discernment and forgiving what is sinful but necessary for political life, a position I find problematic because it risks compromising the solidarity with those subject to the coercion.¹⁰⁹

I have already pointed to the fact that Forrester's account is ambiguous regarding the relationship of justice and generosity, in places implying that justice in itself contains generosity, and elsewhere assuming that justice is a more narrow principle and must be tempered with generosity.¹¹⁰ But if justice must be tempered with generosity in order to allow for the claims of those who cannot contribute, then the underlying assumption is that their claims are not claims to justice. If so, then justice is most likely defined as that which we agree to for mutual benefit. It seems then, that despite his attempts to distance himself from liberal contractarian theories of justice, Forrester retains some of their basic assumptions. This logic tends to creep back into his account precisely when he tries to refute it.¹¹¹ As already noted, I believe that the most plausible interpretation of Forrester's position is that his account of justice, being radically egalitarian and having right relations as its end, is quite different from the contractarian account of cooperation for mutual benefit. Such an account of justice can be just toward those who do not contribute to society in any contractarian sense *without* any need for additional generosity or mercy. However, the fact that he has not dissociated himself from some of the latter accounts' assumptions leads to an incoherence in his reasoning. For

¹⁰⁹ This view of the theologian as particularly qualified to deal with the complexities of necessary yet sinful coercion in political life is an instance in which Forrester is close to the Christian Realism of Reinhold Niebuhr. See Douglas, Davison M.: "Reinhold Niebuhr" in *The Teachings of Modern Protestantism*, p. 283.

¹¹⁰ Forrester, Duncan B.: *Christian Justice and Public Policy*, pp. 232ff.

¹¹¹ Walton notes a similar tendency in that Forrester, in her opinion, tends to slip into a Habermasian gendered distinction between public and private, despite his awareness of the feminist criticisms of the model. Walton, Heather: "You have to say you cannot speak: Feminist Reflections upon Public Theology", p. 31.

example, Forrester repeatedly refers to theology's potential to further justice through its capacity for curbing human self-interest and providing motivation for altruistic behaviour.¹¹² Forrester could defend his position by referring to his description of human beings as sinful and thus liable to deal unjustly with others. Such a notion of humanity as essentially self-interested lies at the heart of the Christian realist claim, that, due to the corruption of sin, the Christian ethic of love is not applicable in political life but instead can only be approximated, as a concern for justice which prevents mutual destruction.¹¹³ But the account of human beings as essentially self-interested and liable to conflict has other roots, in quite secular theories of justice for which justice is seen as a solution to the problem of cooperation. The Christian emphasis on human beings as capable of both heights and depths, as sinners and little lower than angels, was historically succeeded by the concept of self-interested rational individuals, notes Forrester.¹¹⁴ It seems that this substitution has also partly taken place in his own thought or in the theological tradition that is his inspiration. A more consistent critique of contractarian theories of justice would speak less about the ability of theology to curb self-interest and more about the fact that theology gives an alternative account of human beings, one which takes into account both the reality of sin and the possibility of discipleship and salvation. This would fit better with his account of human community and relation as something which goes beyond cooperation for mutual benefit. This would not only make the argument more coherent but would render his ethics more plausible as an articulation of Christian tradition, one in which the powerless are the centre of concerns about justice, not added on as an afterthought.¹¹⁵

Forrester's account of how a Christian ethic can make itself understood relies on two components: one is the notion of fragments, and

¹¹² Forrester, Duncan B.: *Theology and Politics*, p. 167; Forrester, Duncan B.: *Belief, values and policies*, pp. 62f; Forrester, Duncan B.: *On Human Worth*, p. 31 and note 22.

¹¹³ Niebuhr, Reinhold, "Christianity and Power Politics" excerpt in *The Teachings of Modern Protestantism*, p. 315.

¹¹⁴ Forrester, Duncan B.: *On Human Worth*, p. 52.

¹¹⁵ Although not arguing from a Christian perspective, Martha Nussbaum plausibly makes the case that a central problem with contractarian theories of justice is that they start from the assumption of mutual advantage and consequently have trouble handling the claims of people of unequal physical and mental powers. Nussbaum, Martha C.: *Frontiers of Justice. Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*. The Belknap Press, Cambridge 2006, p. 53.

the other is an insistence that understanding is possible but requires hard work. The notion of fragments is interesting. It seems that in public discourse, some issue of justice which has hitherto remained unnoticed and uncared for is often suddenly reformulated in a way that commands the immediate assent of a large segment of the public, in a fashion reminiscent of the intuitive understanding of fragments which Forrester assumes is possible. However, I question whether the fragments are able, if separated from the framework of narrative or doctrine that makes them coherent, to communicate all of the content which Forrester would like to impute to them. Michael Walzer has argued, as already noted, that abstracted minimalist morality is intense and can work for purposes of solidarity and critique. However, he also argues persuasively that if the aim is to articulate complexity and qualification, moral concepts need their maximalist resonance.¹¹⁶ This points to the risk that a fragmentary approach fails to communicate because too much meaning is lost when the fragment is abstracted from its context.

I would like to point out at least two more aspects which further complicate Forrester's picture of instantaneously understandable fragments. First, as Forrester himself notes, understanding and assent may be predicated on a common ground to begin with. This could mean that the historical intermingling of Western Christianity and secular Western culture is what makes the fragments of that particular religious ethic not only understandable but seemingly plausible. Second, the intuitive understanding of public discourse to which I pointed, although seeming to happen instantaneously and as a result of a particularly striking formulation of some issue of justice, one that makes people perceive it differently, is probably better understood as the result of a slow and painstakingly hard work on the part of some social movement which has shifted sensibilities and intuitions gradually. This points to a problem in Forrester's position: if only ethical fragments of traditions with this long history with the public have any chance of making themselves understood, then Western Christianity is in a position of remarkable privilege. Other traditions, whose contributions to the thinking on justice is no less relevant – and perhaps more important, given the probability that they have experiences of injustice which are of particular importance – will not be able to make themselves heard in this way. This may indeed be the case, leaving

¹¹⁶ Walzer, Michel: *Thick and Thin*, pp. 4-6.

Forrester and other public Christian ethicists with the responsibility to account for how such an imbalance can be countered. Otherwise, the transformative potential of his theory, and especially his stated concern for the experience of injustice, is severely hampered.

At least two other aspects of Forrester's ethics are relevant to a discussion of its transformative potential. First, as is brought out in comparison to An-Na'im, by insisting on the possibility of challenge and criticism from religious ethics and theological thought, Forrester retains an important resource for transformation of society. Particularly important in this respect is his notion that the aspects of religious ethics which are not encompassed by a public consensus can contribute to a better understanding of justice. This is a consequence of the pervasive importance of revelation in Forrester's account, which leads him to see revelation as a source of ethics in addition to reason. In this, a critical edge is made possible. However, this possibility must be developed in a way that is more articulated than Forrester's. Otherwise, there is a risk that, despite the resource, religious ethics in fact says nothing beyond the already established consensus.¹¹⁷

Secondly, the relationship to the powerful which Forrester sketches can prove to be damning for the transformative potential of ethics. I am convinced that for theology to involve itself so directly with the powerful runs an enormous risk of collusion with whatever agenda the latter are pursuing. Given Forrester's attention to human sinfulness, it is surprising that he does pay greater attention to this risk. In a way, by claiming that theology should concern itself with politics he treats as given the attempt to influence power. But this surely is not the case. One could equally well assume that policy must be influenced through regular people because the powerful are beyond reach or inherently unreliable. Indeed, one might question the democratic legitimacy of the undue influence of religious ethics upon the powerful. But most of all, there is an unresolved tension in Forrester's account between closeness to power and closeness to the powerless, and his attempt at a synthesis is unconvincing. In my view, there is a limit beyond which

¹¹⁷ American theological ethicist Harlan Beckley criticizes Forrester for complaining that secular theories of justice do not suffice for criticizing the status quo, while himself failing to resolve the issue with theological input beyond mere hints. While in agreement with Beckley that Forrester's critical edge would gain from greater articulation, I believe that in fairness Forrester must be understood as trying to be true to his method of proposing fragments. Beckley, Harlan: "Christian Justice and Public Policy Review" in *Modern Theology* 15(3), 1999, pp. 382-384.

involvement with power makes retaining the perspective of the poor and solidarity with the powerless not merely improbable but impossible. On this point, I believe that Forrester underestimates the power of the context to influence both perspective and position.

5. Ali Shariati

– A revolutionary religion of justice

This chapter focuses on the ethic of Ali Shariati interpreted as liberationism. Shariati's revolutionary interpretative method is understood to reinterpret the central concepts of Islamic tradition as resources for radical critique and struggle. Special attention is devoted to Shariati's notion of two opposing kinds of religion and his claim to represent authentic Islam. Shariati's understanding of the role of religion in politics is analyzed as entailing a claim to Islam's constituting a unique resource by virtue of its content and its potential to overcome the division between tradition and modernity and to act as a tool of analysis and critique. Shariati's position is understood as an epistemological contextualism and a theory of combination. His critique of a religious legitimization of oppression is highlighted to show its implications for religion's relationship to power. Justice in Shariati's account is articulated in terms of liberation from oppression and has distinct theological elements due to the close relationship between material preconditions and religious life in Shariati's thought. In the comparative section, the differences between the interpretative method, political theology, and concept of justice in Shariati's account and in the ethics of modified liberalism are highlighted. I develop a critique of Shariati's claim to represent the only authentic Islam and his no less monolithically conceived public. The discussion problematizes his ideas about religious leadership and considers the strengths of his structural and materialist approach to justice.

A revolutionary interpretative method

Ali Shariati¹ proposes a methodological revolution, bypassing traditional jurisprudence and authorities altogether and instead understanding Islam as a revolutionary ideology intended to instil awareness and provide a stimulus for a revolutionary change of society, a change that would liberate humanity from political, economic, imperialist and religious oppression, and enable the people to turn from poverty and dependence to independence, development, and confidence. While Shariati refers to this as the construction of an ideology, I believe it can plausibly be considered an Islamic ethic because he understands it to be an instrument of analysis and critique of society, a source of mobilization and of alternative visions.²

What will be discovered in such an interpretation, claims Shariati, is the original and true Islam, which was intended as a liberating ideology from the very beginning. The reform will thus involve abolishing false practices and superstitions, something that will differentiate the rightful Islam from later deviations. Although Islam throughout its history has suffered many distortions, Shariati is confident that the true religion has never been lost beyond retrieval. Most importantly, the Quran remains untouched by such deterioration. The Quran, Shariati claims, contains insights which will lead to the liberation of all people. What has been distorted is the interpretation of the Quran. To uncover the original and true Islam, Shariati claims that *ijtihad* must be practiced by qualified *mujtahid* (*mujtahid*) on the Muslim sources. This, from the perspective of Islamic tradition, may sound

¹ Ali Shariati's thought will be referred to in the present tense, to underline the fact that I am analyzing his thought as it appears in his writings, which circulate in the present even though Shariati himself died in 1977.

² In critical theory, the concept of ideology is generally used to indicate ideational constructs which obfuscate and mystify relations of oppression, for example by pacifying the poor by means of a morality that values obedience, which is how I use it in the introduction with reference to Edward Said. Shariati (or his translators) use the concept of ideology in the inverse sense, as a theory that demystifies, creates awareness of oppressive realities, and makes resistance possible. There is an affinity between Shariati's use and Gramsci's notion of organic ideology as a common worldview that cements the political, intellectual, and moral leadership of a class which aspires to hegemony and seizure of power. See the understanding of Gramsci developed by political philosopher Chantal Mouffe. Mouffe, Chantal: "Hegemony and ideology in Gramsci" in Mouffe, Chantal (ed.): *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1979, pp. 190-193. The further investigation of these connections are beyond the aims of this inquiry.

quite traditional, but Shariati relies on a very specific redefinition of what *ijtihad* means, who is a *mujtahid*, and what his qualifications are, and which are the relevant sources.³ Shariati reinterprets and redefines the central concepts of Shiite tradition, in the process claiming to put forward their authentic meaning. This method, which allows him to stay close to the concepts of tradition and work through and with the popular or traditional understanding of their meaning, but always with the aim of revolutionizing the understanding of them, is Shariati's trademark.

Like other Muslim reformers, Shariati claims that the gates of *ijtihad*, independent reasoning, must be opened. He claims that formally, *ijtihad* has continued to be allowed in Shiite tradition, but that in practice it has fallen into disuse.⁴ *Ijtihad* traditionally understood as a concept of jurisprudence, *fiqh*, is a tightly circumscribed concept of reasoning available only in certain circumstances when the Quran and the *sunna* are silent on a subject. *Ijtihad* thus understood can only be practiced by a *mujtahid* who has attained expertise in Islamic law. These methods and the implied authority are, however, of marginal if any interest to Shariati.⁵ Rather, Shariati's understanding of *ijtihad* lies close to that of many other Muslim reformers. Shariati's reinterpretation of the concept of *ijtihad* and of the *mujtahid*, the person capable of doing *ijtihad*, is the redefinition which makes possible all his other

³ Shariati, Ali: *What Is To Be Done? The Enlightened Thinkers and an Islamic Renaissance*. The Institute for Research and Islamic Studies, Houston 1986, pp. 73f. In this assertion, Shariati is using a rhetoric commonplace among Muslim reformers and modernists, from at least as far back as the Islamic renaissance, who all have insisted on the need to rid Islam of superstitions and deviations from the original message. It is also commonplace among them to insist, in line with Islamic tradition, on the flawlessness of the Quran, and to call for *ijtihad* to correct the understanding of the message. Shariati, however, uses these assertions to justify conclusions that are quite radical both methodologically and politically speaking.

⁴ Op. cit., pp. 110ff. While in Sunni tradition, the gates of *ijtihad* are considered by many to have been closed in Islam's third century, this was not formally the case in Shiite tradition. In practice, the difference might be small. On the issue of *ijtihad* in Shiite tradition, see Momen, Moojan: *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*, p. 186.

⁵ Although bypassing the authority of the experts on jurisprudence must be seen as radical in relation to Shiite history, it is not without historical roots according to Sachedina. In Shiite history, the assumption of comprehensive interpretive authority of the jurists in place of the Imam was by no means uncontested and coexisted with the opinions that either some functions of interpretation and leadership could not be executed during the Imam's occultation, or that every Shiite Muslim or the entire Shiite community should be considered a competent authority. Sachedina, Abdulaziz Abdulhussein: *The Just Ruler in Shi'ite Islam*, pp. 196ff and 209.

redefinitions. This “intellectual” *ijtihad* encompasses much more and is understood as relating to both doctrinal beliefs and ethical principles.⁶ The process of *ijtihad* is defined by Shariati as independent reasoning, not only in the sense that it involves an issue upon which Quran and *sunna* are silent, but in the sense of an interpretation made independently of previous tradition in a spirit of freedom of inquiry and of expression. *Ijtihad* is the intellectual work which allows the eternal truth of Islam to be understood in light of present challenges, Shariati claims, and its spirit of criticism implies a kind of permanent revolution which leads to ever new insights. He asserts that *ijtihad* is

[...] a free and independent endeavor aiming at obtaining a thorough and progressive understanding of Islam in all its dimensions. It is a tool by which the *mujtahid* presents a new and changing interpretation of Islam according to his progressive and exalted outlook.⁷

It is significant that Shariati specifies that both interpretation and interpreter must be progressive, and that the reinterpretation encompasses all the dimensions of Islam, not merely a minor aspect of jurisprudence. *Ijtihad* is thus redefined to authorize Shariati’s own practice of revolutionary reinterpretation.

Independent reasoning, Shariati claims, is in this sense the right and duty of every Muslim who is committed to and knowledgeable about Islam. He also develops an idea of a special figure of authority, the enlightened thinker, who can research and educate people about Islam thus understood. Shariati calls for research into Islamic tradition using all the methodology of social sciences and humanities as well as traditional Islamic methodologies.⁸ He believes that the retrieval of original Islam necessitates a new kind of scientist, versed in both modern and traditional science, who can expose both the conservatism of the *ulama* and the racism of European Orientalists.⁹ Such expertise is necessary because, according to Shariati, the division between Western and traditional education in Muslim countries have created a gulf between the elite and the poor, which can be bridged only by Islam. Shariati thus redefines the limits of who is qualified to interpret Islam and

⁶ Navabi, Abbas: *Reform and Revolution in Shi’i Islam*, pp. 34ff.

⁷ Shariati, Ali: *What Is To Be Done?*, p. 110.

⁸ Shariati, Ali: *On the Sociology of Islam*, pp. 60f.

⁹ Shariati, Ali: *What Is To Be Done?*, p. 114.

thereby redefines the concept of *mujtahid*, the person qualified to practice *ijtihad*.

The enlightened thinkers are not only to be schooled in both traditions but will be deeply involved in the struggle for justice, not only intellectually through *ijtihad* but also through jihad, which Shariati understands as concrete struggle to combat oppression and injustice in society. Not only are these two tasks inseparable, in Shariati's opinion, there is an inherent relationship between them because it is in revolutionary action that the awareness needed to sustain revolution is generated. Shariati sometimes calls himself a sociologist of religion, by which I regard him to be indicating a commitment to view the world using both a sociological structural analysis influenced by Marxist theoretical ideas, and theology. Such a social science can never in Shariati's eyes be neutral because it must be able to guide the masses, show them how to practice resistance, and translate their ideals into realities. "If a sociologist will not tell us how to change society and how to make it, what else is he good for?" asks Shariati.¹⁰ Shariati's interpretative method can be fruitfully understood through the concept of praxis, where knowledge is reached through action and a theory is apprehended by striving to realize its ideals. Shariati understood truth and political awareness to be reached through engagement in revolutionary struggle. He writes

[...]In life [we] cannot be in the course of understanding and comprehending the truth through intellectual genius, or inner illumination, or scientific thinking [...] [Because] it is in becoming that we can be. [...] [Someone] can understand a concept precisely when he stands in the current course of the application of that concept. It is in action that truth manifests itself.¹¹

For postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon, who was an important source of inspiration for Shariati, the praxis that generates the new awareness of the colonial subject is born in the struggle for independence.¹² Shariati likewise believes that his Islamic ideology will enable people to turn from dependency and underdevelopment to independence and

¹⁰ Shariati, Ali: *Man and Islam*. Islamic Publications International, North Haledon 1981, p. 95.

¹¹ Shariati, Ali: *Shi'ah*, quoted in Dabashi, Hamid: *Theology of Discontent. The ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran*. New York University Press, New York 1993, pp. 113f.

¹² Fanon, Frantz: *The Wretched of the Earth*, Penguin Classics, London 2001, p. 250.

development by providing self-awareness, the possibility for criticism, ideals, and optimism.

Shariati's ambition is to develop a thinking that is at the same time rigorously scientific, politically radical, and truly Islamic. Through research and enlightenment, true and original Islam is to be extracted and refined so that it can emerge as an ideology for reconstructing society. This thinking is to be disseminated by the enlightened thinkers to the poor masses via an ambitious program of education and instruction. During his lifetime he envisioned a program of research and education based in Irshad, the institution where he taught, but involving the rural poor through measures such as translations, public lectures, and mobile libraries in the countryside.¹³ Shariati also relies on a specific understanding of the sources of Islam which this interpretation is to be brought to bear upon. He identifies them as knowledge of Islam, the God of Islam, the Quran, the Prophet, and the outstanding figures in Muslim history.¹⁴ He bypasses traditional jurisprudence and goes directly to the sources of Quran and *sunna* while also incorporating into his thought elements of popular piety and legend, such as stories about the Caliphs and other Companions of the Prophet.

While Shariati often claims to be engaged in researching and proclaiming the true, original Islam, he is at the same time aware that he is working out a reconstruction, one that is at odds not only with the traditional authorities of his time but also with the history of Shiite tradition.¹⁵ One way to understand this is to see it as a kind of pragmatism. Shariati's play with fictional figures and his tendency to ascribe his own opinions to historical figures of Islam point to the possibility that he has simply invented the Islam that he needs, choosing doctrines for the revolutionary cause on the basis of expediency.¹⁶ But

¹³ See "What Is To Be Done: A Practical Plan for Husayniyah Irshad" where Shariati sets forth his program of education "[...] preventing economic poverty from causing intellectual and scientific poverty". Shariati, Ali: *What Is To Be Done?*, pp. 103-159, quotation on p. 157.

¹⁴ Shariati, Ali: *On the Sociology of Islam*, p. 42.

¹⁵ Shariati terms his kind of Islam as among other things true, original, primordial, life-giving etc. See for example Shariati, Ali: *What Is To Be Done?*, pp. 48f.

¹⁶ For example, Shariati translated and reworked a book on Abu Dhar, a companion of the Prophet generally described as ascetic, and turned this figure into the paradigmatic Islamic revolutionary. The book was turned into a play, shown first at Mashhad and later in Teheran, which popularized Shariati's thought. The play's mix of historical,

Shariati can also plausibly be understood as claiming that his unorthodox interpretative method was mandated by tradition itself. According to scholar Abbas Navabi, Shariati held that “[...] since Islam is a religion with practical aim for man’s life on earth, a pragmatic orientation should be also the outlook of the believers in assessing various religious precepts and the interpretation given to them”.¹⁷ On this view, Shariati can be understood as operating according to a higher order of faithfulness, whereby he judges specific interpretations of God-given doctrines from the supreme standpoint of a specific understanding of God’s intentions for humankind. To explain why the understanding of doctrines changes, Shariati offers a defence in line with much Islamic modernist thinking: the Quran and Islam are immutable realities, but at the same time Islam affirms the human condition as one of permanent change. This change also involves changes in perspective and in humanity’s conception of religious ideas and principles.¹⁸

Shariati also constructs a narrative about the role of religion in society which situates his interpretation of Islam in a way that vindicates his position precisely because of its unorthodoxy. According to Shariati, Islamic thought is a potentially powerful force in the development of society, but he also articulates a critique of religion and its quietist tendencies. He draws a sharp line between what he judges to be two completely separate kinds of religion: one which legitimizes oppression and preserves the status quo, and one which is revolutionary.¹⁹ Shariati, depending on the context and the point he is making, calls these two by different names: black and red shiism, safavid and alid shiism, the religion of Cain and the religion of Abel, *shirk* (*shirk*) and *tawhid* (*tawhīd*). In his account of these two kinds of religion, Shariati makes use of several different themes, Marx’s critique of religion as a pacifying ideology, mythical themes such as the story of Cain and Abel,²⁰ and well-known accounts of Islamic history. The latter include

political, and fictional elements is an interesting case in point of Shariati’s method of symbolic creation. Rahnema, Ali: *An Islamic Utopian*, pp. 186ff.

¹⁷ Navabi, Abbas: *Reform and Revolution in Shi’i Islam*, p. 97.

¹⁸ Op. cit., p. 78.

¹⁹ Shariati, Ali: *Religion vs. Religion*, pp. 30f.

²⁰ The Islamic version of the story of the two brothers and the first murder is partly different from the one found in the Hebrew Bible. For the purposes of this study, these differences are insignificant. Shariati bases his analysis both on parts of the story found in the Quran (5:27-31 or 5:30-34 depending on the translation used) and on how it is developed in other parts of Islamic tradition. Shariati’s point is that with the murder of Abel by Cain the original nomadic classless society was replaced by an

the Prophet Muhammad's fight against the polytheism of his day, the split between Sunni and Shiite Muslims, and the development of Shiism into official religion during the Safavid dynasty. In each instance, the point made is that religion has a powerful potential as a force of liberation but can all too easily be used as a tool of the powerful. Shariati sometimes claims that this has been so for all of human history and that such division between two opposite functions are a feature of all religions, but my own view is that his point is best understood as concerning the Islam of his day and context.²¹

When using the terms *shirk* and *tawhid*, Shariati makes a strong theological assertion regarding his position. *Tawhid* is the first and central dogma of Islam, the belief in the oneness and unity of God, i.e. monotheism. *Shirk* in classic Islamic thought is the opposite of *tawhid* and the gravest of sins. It is commonly used to refer to idolatry or polytheism and literally means establishing partner(s) or rival(s) to God, that is, worshiping or ascribing divinity to something or somebody other than God. When calling the kind of religion he opposes *shirk*, Shariati denounces it in the harshest possible terms, positioning such religion, or at least the ethic it implies, normatively beyond the pale of Islam. The reason this kind of religion merits the name *shirk*, argues Shariati, is that it ranks the ruling elite or the ruler alongside God, as God's equal. The roots of such religion lie in class society and

agrarian society of classes, private ownership, oppression and exploitation. The two kinds of religion are at home in these two societies.

²¹ Shariati's opinion on other religions differs between his works. Sometimes he claims that all religions have the same roots of resistance to oppression and all have degenerated into tools of the powerful. In others, he reserves the progressive role for the Abrahamic religions, for the eastern religions, or for Islam. It is hard to synthesize Shariati's opinion on other religions, and my interpretation is that he never does in fact discuss them with the purpose of making a statement about them. Rather, they serve as devices for highlighting different aspects of his real topic, Islam in his own day, and it is these points that are interesting. In his controversial work *Marxism and other Western fallacies*, it seems as though Shariati wants to equate oppressive religion with western religion and liberating religion with Islam. The main part of Shariati's work, however, is devoted to showing how the division between *shirk* and *tawhid* runs through Islam, Shiite Islam, and Sufism. If Shariati sometimes seems to reserve a special place for Islam it is not any Islam but the true and original one. His agenda is not so much to show Islam's superiority to other religions as to show its resources as a progressive ideology for Muslim people who already adhere to it. If any position on other religions could be extrapolated from his writings, I believe that it is that all religions can be made subject to a suspicion about whose interests it serves and what kind of society it promotes. See for example Shariati, Ali: *Man and Islam*, pp. 86ff. See also Shariati, Ali: *On the Sociology of Islam*, pp. 94f.

it is developed and maintained by the ruling class as a way to legitimize its power, and sustained by religious authorities who ally themselves with the ruling classes. Such reactionary religion works by turning the energy of believers to rewards in the afterlife, to the past or to subjective questions, all the time keeping people in bondage while assuring them that this is God's will. It works, Shariati argues, as a pacifier and an opiate of the people.²² This is the kind of religion which Shariati was convinced had the upper hand in his own lifetime, and which had been dominant historically.

However, the other kind of religion, what Shariati calls *tawhid* or original Islam, has its origin in God, and cannot be accounted for by reference to class relations or modes of production.²³ According to Shariati, it is the true religion of the people and it offers a critique of the oppressive order. *Tawhid* is always on the side of the poor people, instils a revolutionary spirit in its adherents, and wages jihad against the oppressive kind of religion. It contains ideals of equality, social justice, and righteous leadership. Shariati sees himself as a representative of this *tawhid* Islam and calls for its rediscovery and application.

The struggle between the two kinds of religion has been a persistent feature of the history of Islam, according to Shariati. All the prophets of Islam have been representatives of *tawhid* Islam, acting in opposition to their society and criticizing its injustice.²⁴ But the oppressive forces have won out, time and again; when the revolutionary transformation of human society begun by the Prophet Muhammad in the establishment of the community of Medina was not continued by his Companions; when the succession of the Prophet Muhammad was usurped from the line of Imam Ali; when Shiism became the official religion of the Safavids; and so on.²⁵ Consequently, Islam as a system

²² Shariati, Ali: *Religion vs. Religion*, pp. 32ff.

²³ According to Navabi, Shariati elevates *tawhid* to an even higher position than classical Islam, understanding it as a doctrine from which all others must be derived. Navabi contrasts this to the position of traditional Shiite theology which recognizes other independent doctrines such as resurrection, prophethood, etc. See Navabi, Abbas: *Reform and Revolution in Shi'i Islam*, pp. 82ff. I am not convinced that Shariati accords *tawhid* this position systematically. Although *tawhid* occupies the most central place in his thinking and is the source of many of his ethical principles, I believe that there are other doctrines which matter to him also, such as the Imamate. For the purposes of this study, however, *tawhid* assumes an almost all-encompassing importance.

²⁴ Shariati, Ali: *On the Sociology of Islam*, pp. 66f.

²⁵ Shariati, Ali: *Religion vs. Religion*, p. 49.

of metaphysical beliefs survived, but the social mission failed. Shariati believes that the true essence of *tawhid* Islam has never been completely lost. It has been preserved in the memories of Kerbala and in concepts such as jihad and *tawhid*, although their being distorted into ceremony and superstition means that their true meaning has been hidden.²⁶ It is these resources which Shariati claims must be tapped if Islam is to regain its true meaning and its original force for revolutionary change.

In describing Islamic history in this way, Shariati uses popular Shi'ite motifs, such as the glorification of the time of the Prophet; the perversion of the order of succession; and the loss of true leadership which occurred, first, when Imam Ali was not appointed the first successor of the Prophet Muhammad and, again, when Ali was not succeeded by his sons. It is my understanding that Shariati nowhere claims that Shi'ite Islam is *tawhid* and Sunni Islam is *shirk*. Rather, he is reworking and interpreting Islamic and Shi'ite tradition in a way that situates his own revolutionary Islam as the original and essential Islam, and he does this in a way that keeps close to the Shi'ite classic drama of martyred and then hidden true religion, and the fight between its believers and religion in the service of the powers that be. His interpretation of the identity of the main players in his own time is obviously different than the orthodox Shi'ite interpretation, but the point is that he keeps close to a story that is readily understandable because it speaks to popular sensibilities.²⁷

Conceptualizing religion as two opposing forces allows Shariati to appropriate much of the Marxist and humanist critique of religion, while claiming that this in fact should be directed against one kind of religion only, the kind that the Quran also condemns. Shariati openly acknowledges the accuracy of such a critique of religion.²⁸ A dual

²⁶ Shariati, Ali: *What Is To Be Done?*, p. 22.

²⁷ The glorification of the time of the Prophet is commonplace in Islam. This is a theme taken up by early Muslim reformers who tended to bypass later developments in jurisprudence and look directly to the primary sources of Quran and *sunna* and the golden age of the Prophet. The period of the four first successors of Muhammad, commonly called the rightly guided Caliphs, is part of this age mainly for Sunni Muslims, and Shariati was vehemently criticized by the *ulama* of his context for writing favourably on the reign of the two first Caliphs, Abu-Bakr and Omar, who in Shi'ite tradition are viewed as usurpers of the rights of Ali. It is evident that Shariati is not interested in elevating Shi'ite and debunking Sunni tradition, but rather uses that conflict, which was not politically sensitive, to make quite another point.

²⁸ Shariati, Ali: *Religion vs. Religion*, pp. 22f and 35.

understanding of the role of religion – both as an expression of protest against a horrible society and, at the same time, a way for the powerful to divert such protest and render them ineffectual – is present in the writings of Marx himself and expressed in his famous dictum about religion being the opiate of the people. Marx writes:

Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is the demand for their *real* happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to *give up a condition that requires illusions*. The criticism of religion is, therefore, *in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears* of which religion is the *halo*.²⁹

Later developments in Marxism, however, tend to judge religion rather more harshly, as the ideology of the ruling class and an enemy of human liberation. One way to understand Shariati is that he appropriates and expands on the early Marx's dual understanding of religion, thereby developing a defense of *tawhid* against later Marxist critique of religion.

However, Shariati is also deeply critical of what he calls modern materialism, by which I understand him to mean crass self-interest, greed, and the loss of ideals. While seeing the modern rejection of superstition, asceticism, and despotism as laudable, Shariati claims that humankind has in the process become alienated from fundamental dimensions of human nature such as ideals, values, and existential experiences. In this alienated position, humans fall prey to consumerism and the idol of money. Where the ruling class previously resorted to *shirk* religion to legitimize its rule, it now resorts to such materialism. The system keeps people in a meaningless cycle of production for consumption and consumption for production.³⁰ In Shariati's opinion, modern intellectuals are gravely mistaken in believing that merely because religion previously played a legitimizing role for the status quo, it can simply be discarded. This assumption has turned intellectuals against religion, which in turn has alienated the poor people, who

²⁹ Marx, Karl: *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1844), printed in *Marx and Engels On Religion*, Schocken Books, New York 1964, p. 42.

³⁰ Shariati, Ali: *Man and Islam*, pp. 25ff.

are religious. Shariati's position is that one must ask what social role is fulfilled by religion, rather than studying it as an absolute phenomenon. The enlightened thinkers must steer the course between the horns of reactionary religion and westernized critique of religion. This, he, claims, is possible only by adherence to *tawhid*.

Shariati's position on the sources of ethics is not easily identified. His massive reinterpretation of Islamic tradition and his insistence on independent reasoning, *ijtihad*, as the primary tool for a plausible understanding of what tradition demands in terms of ethics, points to the importance of reason. He states, for example, that revelation tells man only to enjoin good and to forbid evil; to take social responsibility. Humanity can and must judge right from wrong, which is done through the process of *ijtihad*. However, humans must be trained in their intellectual and moral capacities, which is why education is central to him. Although Shariati can appear to claim that human reason is enough for insight into the good, he does so by reference to a theological moral imperative which should be understood in terms of a theological principle and education in a specific tradition.³¹ Shariati repeatedly insists that an ethic appropriate for the context of Iran is available only in and through Islamic tradition. At the same time, his lectures are full of references to thinkers from a multitude of other contexts, Western as well as Islamic. He not only shows a considerable spirit of eclecticism but also seems intent on demonstrating that enlightened ideals are everywhere the same.

According to the categories which I have introduced as analytical tools, Shariati could be plausibly said to propound an ethic based on both reason and revelation: Islamic revelation and tradition are the indispensable means for articulating an ethic which is genuine and adequate for the Islamic context, but the values of that ethic are also available in other contexts. There are tensions and ambiguity on this issue in the material, but I believe that the dilemma is not only, or even mainly, due to the lack of systematic treatment. Rather, I understand this ambiguity to be inherent in early postcolonial thought, which has its roots in liberal and Marxist humanism as well as more contextual thought. The articulation of resistance to the ideologies of colonialism and imperialism involves both the claim of the oppressed to equality, on the grounds of universally recognized ideals known through the common humanity of colonized and colonizer, and simul-

³¹ Shariati, Ali: *On the Sociology of Islam*, pp. 74ff.

taneously a refutation of the imposition of Western ideals, organization, and strategies for development on the basis of local culture, contextual and particular insights. The assertion of the universal and the particular are interwoven in that the particular is asserted both over and against the purportedly universal, and as no less universal than other cultures.

Political awareness and critique

Shariati's position, as we have seen, is that a truly Islamic ethic has a paramount role to play in political struggle. It is through the analysis and criticism of society, through the ideals, and the visions which such an ethic provides that awareness and motivation for societal change can be raised and that the struggle for political change can begin. Islam thus understood does not merely contribute to the formation of people's political opinions and the public debate around these issues; rather, theology forms the very context of the conversation. While Shariati can be analyzed regarding his position on arguments from religious ethics in public debate, the question is also deconstructed through the inclusion of his perspective. The problem of whether religious arguments can be understood and contribute to an otherwise secular public debate is shown to be specific to the project of the pluralistic liberal democratic state. Shariati, on the other hand takes for granted a society which is largely religious and dominated by one religious tradition. Furthermore, since his arguments are developed under conditions of severe political repression, there is no assumption of the existence of a democratic culture awaiting perfecting; rather, the context is of an immediate need for change.

Shariati claims that a proper understanding of Islam as *tawhid* means that religion is necessarily concerned with politics. The doctrine of the unity of God, according to Shariati, implies that nothing is outside the sphere of Islam. This can be seen in the Quran, which contains provisions for social and political life as well as for piety. Likewise, the Prophet was as much a man of prayer as he was engaged in building a new society and struggling for justice. Unlike other religions, Shariati concludes, Islam does not accept the division of human life into secular and religious realms, and transcends the dichotomy between matter and spirit, between this world and the next. Islam val-

ues both of these dimensions of human life and religion needs to influence them both and to create a balance between them.³² There is no devaluation of the material world or worldly accomplishments in Islam, because the world belongs to God's reality.³³ Progress and well-being are God's aims for mankind, claims Shariati. For him, spirituality and the struggle for justice are closely related. It is not only that good works, traditionally understood as performance of religious duties, pave the way to God. Rather, for Shariati, the aim of the reconstruction of society is to enable a religious life for everybody, a collective striving toward God.

In a way, it is misleading to speak about the importance of religion in the formation of personal political positions in connection with Shariati, because he emphasizes the collective nature of political awareness. This is a consequence of the fact that praxis, the revolutionary struggle, is a common undertaking of the people, and it is in this struggle that awareness and insight are attained. Every Muslim is responsible for understanding and acting on the implications of his or her faith, and thus to engage in such praxis. The principal agent in Shariati's thought is the entire people, whom propelled by their Islamic faith, should rise up and assume responsibility for their history. However, as we have seen, Shariati also writes about the importance of the role of the enlightened thinker, who acts as a kind of vanguard or catalyst, researching the tradition for resources which can educate and awaken the poor masses to the necessity of struggle and the Islamic imperatives for it. Shariati writes:

He does not perceive his perfection as lying in the creation of a private relationship with God, to the exclusion of men; it is, rather, in struggle for the perfection of the human race, in enduring hardship, hunger, deprivation and torment for the sake of the liberty, livelihood and well-being of men, in the furnace of intellectual and social struggle, that he attains piety, perfection and closeness to God.³⁴

³² Shariati, Ali: *On the Sociology of Islam*, pp. 80f.

³³ As Navabi points out, it is commonplace among Muslim thinkers to claim that Islam concerns both spiritual and material life, although there are of course exceptions. The specific point that Shariati makes relating to this is not that Islam is a religion which concerns life's different dimensions but that it is a religion where material life is the foundation of the spiritual. Navabi, Abbas: *Reform and Revolution in Shi'i Islam*, p. 87.

³⁴ Shariati, Ali: *On the Sociology of Islam*, p. 123.

In Shariati's ethic, the enlightened thinkers are thus charged with both jihad and *ijtihad*.³⁵

Shariati proposes that the structures and institutions of traditional religion, such as religious schools and mosques, should be used to further his vision of a religious revolutionary ethic and struggle. The purpose is both to make use of the existing infrastructure and to avoid repression, but it is also justified by Shariati's claim to represent the proper understanding and use of such institutions and the Islam they are supposed to further. For example, he proposes that religious schools (*madrassa*) might be repurposed as schools of Islamic activism, and the traditional places for mourning for the martyr's death of Imam Husayn might be used to disseminate and develop revolutionary Islamic thinking. For Shariati, what I have termed intra-organizational formulation serves the crucial purpose of education. Education involves a process of discovery whereby those who take part in it become aware of their own situation, their tradition, and their role. It is an empowering process aiming at making the poor aware of the ethical implications of their tradition and prepare them for struggle.

Because Shariati does not operate with the assumption of relating to a secular public, the issue of public address is not a separate one for him. The task of addressing the people to raise their awareness is a public task for the enlightened intellectual. Shariati sees their function as akin to the prophets of Islam, guiding the people toward change. His understanding of this task can be understood as a version of the Leninist vanguard.³⁶ Shariati envisions an Islamic ethic as supplying criticism of society and its injustices, and visions about an alternative order as well as mobilizing people to change the former into the latter.

³⁵ Shiite Islam is not traditionally organized in a centralized way. Rather, there is a tradition of a plurality of religious experts providing advice and specialized opinions which are adhered to as a matter of personal conviction and of course social pressure. For a thorough discussion of Shiite religious authority and its development, see Sachedina, Abdulaziz Abdulhussein: *The Just Ruler (al-sultan al-adil) in Shi'ite Islam*.

³⁶ Shariati entitles one of his lectures on this role of enlightened thinkers *What is to be done?*, in what I understand to be a conscious echo of the pamphlet of Vladimir Lenin entitled *What is to be done* (1902), in which he argues for the role of the party as a vanguard with the task of instilling revolutionary consciousness in the working-class. In the party, the distinctions between workers and intellectuals will be obliterated. For Lenin's text, see Lenin, Vladimir Ilyich: *Essential Works of Lenin: "What Is to Be Done?" and Other Writings*. Bantam Books, New York 1966.

Operating under political repression, Shariati does not make an argument from religious freedom for Islam's political role. He often refers to human freedom as an important value, and certainly assumes the importance of freedom of theological interpretation. The strategy to promote the inclusion of religious reasons in political discourse with reference to religious freedom might not seem expedient, given that he does not assume that religious freedom is the self-evident value to which his interlocutors subscribe. Rather, he argues from the premise that religion is inherently concerned with things political, and that Islam cannot be separated from political claims without being distorted. Spiritualization represents a betrayal of *tawhid*. For Shariati, the original objective of Islam is to save humanity from oppression, and it must be true to this task. The argument Shariati makes for the inclusion of Islamic ethics in political discourse is valid only for believers, who can be assumed to have a stake in what Islamic tradition implies. But it could, of course, be extended to have force for people who care about the religious freedom of Muslims and therefore would like to further a conceptualization of the public that does not require Muslims to act in ways which they perceive as distorting their tradition.

The most important argument for Shariati's position on religion in political discourse is that it makes contributions which are both distinct and unique. The situation his ethic is intended to address in the Iranian society of his day is one of underdevelopment, poverty, stagnation, widening economic and cultural disparities as well as economic, cultural, political, and military dependency on the West. Shariati claims that this situation has solicited two equally problematic responses. On the one hand, the poor masses are stuck in underdevelopment, superstition, and the reactionary thinking of the conservative *ulama*. Religious conservatism and the reaction against modernity have turned Islam into pure ritual and form, devoid of political implications. They have, Shariati claims, made Islam incapable either of moving with the times or of providing solutions for contemporary problems. On the other hand, the Westernized elite has lost touch with the values of its own culture. Uncritical adoption of everything Western and modern has led to dependency and underdevelopment. The recipes for development and progress being imported from the West by the elite are part of the problem, in Shariati's view, because they

are unsuited to local conditions and ideals.³⁷ Shariati does not condemn all knowledge produced in the West as such. On the contrary, he wants to incorporate the best of the scientific advancements in methodology and perspective from the West as a way to understand local conditions. He objects to what he perceives as an unreserved imitation of everything Western, one guided by an inferiority complex.

The solutions to all of these disparate yet connected problems and to the divisions these responses have created in Iranian society, according to Shariati, are to be found in Islam. In my view, Shariati's justification for the unique position of Islamic ethics in the struggle for liberation can be summarized into two theses. The first concerns the content of Islam, and the second its position. According to Shariati, the content of Islam offers formidable resources for the resistance of oppression, for building self-awareness among the masses, and for the struggle for justice. Islam is identified by Shariati as the origin of all of the progressive ideals of Marxism, existentialism, and Third World anti-imperialism.³⁸ In *tawhid* Islam, these values are most perfectly integrated, understood, and expressed. Justice and revolutionary leadership receive their most lucid treatment and their most persuasive call to action in Islam, claims Shariati.³⁹ It is the most powerful ideology against oppression and colonialism⁴⁰ in the world.

The second thesis concerns the position of Islam in Iran, which is, according to Shariati, a deeply religious society. Any development which aspires to be authentic and Iranian must be Islamic. There are at least three aspects of the position of Islam in Iranian society which are of importance for Shariati's thesis: the importance of Islam to the poor people: its unique potential as a bridge between poor and educated;

³⁷ Shariati, Ali: *What Is To Be Done?*, pp. 33 and 51.

³⁸ Shariati, embracing neither Marxism nor existentialism completely, wants to retain the emphasis on equality and historical optimism of the former and the emphasis on freedom and anthropological optimism of the latter.

³⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 54.

⁴⁰ I use colonialism and imperialism interchangeably as broad descriptions of the processes by which Europe and later the United States subjected large parts of the rest of the world to political, economic, military, and cultural violence and oppression, one not limited to the actual political administration of colonized land. There are, of course, important differences between these processes and their concrete realization in specific localities, but for the purposes of understanding Shariati's critique it is my contention that a broad definition is more adequate because Shariati's anti-colonial thinking was influenced by such widely different situations as the repressive US-backed regime in Iran and Algeria's war of independence against French colonial rule.

and its authenticity, here understood as the opposite of colonial cultural imposition. Shariati writes:

Islam is what we must return to, not only because it is the religion of our society, the shaper of our history, the spirit of our culture, the powerful conscience and the strong binder of our people, and the foundation of our morality and spirituality, but also because it is the human “self” of our people. [...] when trying to stand on our own feet and build our own human awareness and revive our own historical culture and intellectual authenticity, we must return to Islam.⁴¹

Islam must be the tool of renaissance and revolution. First, because of its unique importance to the people; in Shariati’s view, it is the people who are the true agents of change. Second, because Islam is also deeply engrained in the minds and hearts of academics, and is uniquely positioned to bridge the gap between the poor and the estranged intellectuals of Iran. By answering Shariati’s call, and returning to their heritage and roots, young academics can inaugurate a religious renaissance which will bridge the gap between elite and masses and overcome the internal conflicts between modernization and traditionalism. Shariati believes that the intellectuals can turn into enlightened thinkers who will educate the masses and unite with them in a revolutionary project.⁴²

Third, Islam is uniquely positioned because in Shariati’s understanding, its authenticity stands as the opposite of the self-devaluation instilled in colonial subjects. Shariati views cultural colonialism as a phenomenon which is intertwined with the economic, political, and military aspects of colonialism. It promotes consumerism and marketization for the benefit of the colonial powers’ products, reducing human beings to consumers and slaves under the commodity industry. To achieve these ends, cultural colonialism must crush independence and resistance and strip people of their spiritual, historical, and religious identities, what Shariati calls their authenticity.⁴³ Colonial power has encouraged and benefited from the turn away from Islam among the elite and from the reactionary tendency of the religion of the

⁴¹ Shariati, Ali: *What Is To Be Done?*, p. 53.

⁴² Shariati’s assertions should also be seen in the context of the Pahlavi dynasty’s promotion of the pre-Islamic cultural heritage of Iran in an effort to strengthen nationalism and distance itself from Islam and Arab culture.

⁴³ Shariati, Ali: *Man and Islam*, pp. 35-41; Shariati, Ali: *What Is To Be Done?*, pp. 29ff.

poor.⁴⁴ Successful resistance to cultural colonialism must overcome this dualism, argues Shariati. It must employ the concepts and theories of the intellectual history of the colonized and develop these into analytical and visionary resources. Progressive religion is the worst enemy of colonialism because of its potential to instil a sense of identity, self-reliance, and independence in its adherents. Shariati further argues that that the colonized have strengthened their ties with Western powers to the detriment of the Islamic community and the shared Islamic culture. The revival of Islamic culture can contribute to the struggle by forging new bonds of solidarity among the countries of the Islamic world.

Shariati is not only convinced that religion can make important contributions to the practice of politics, he subscribes to the stronger position that the possibility of progressive politics is dependent on religious ethics because it is a kind of entry point for social change. Shariati generally seems to accept the Marxist position that material circumstances condition the possibilities for thought, and that conventional morality and structures of thought act to reinforce existing material conditions.⁴⁵ But he conceives of religious ethics as able to intervene in this cycle because it holds the insights that can make people aware of their predicament and its solutions at the same time as it commands the allegiance of the people. It lies close to the heart, which makes it particularly effective in the service of empowerment. What is needed is a catalyst to awaken the people to these insights. This is where the formulation of Islam and its ethical implications by enlightened intellectuals assumes importance.⁴⁶ In my analysis, three principal insights lie at the centre of the new awareness which is needed for

⁴⁴ Shariati's analysis is at times more focused on the internal social dynamics of Iranian society which have led to the deterioration of Islamic tradition, while at other times he analyzes the state of Islam as a consequence of colonialism. My interpretation is that he perceives the influence of colonial powers to be such that it greatly exacerbates the reactionary stance of religion that was already present. In his analysis, the colonial powers benefit both from the elite's orientation towards the West and from the reaction against this on the part of the traditional religious establishment. Shariati, Ali: *What Is To Be Done?*, pp. 31ff.

⁴⁵ Marx's materialist conception of history, which holds that it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness, is explicated in the Introduction to *The German Ideology* (1932). Marx, Karl: *Människans frigörelse*, pp. 140f.

⁴⁶ In line with Marxist thought, Shariati thus highlights the importance of the working class developing awareness of the laws of history and class consciousness for revolutionary change to be possible.

the struggle for justice: that the poverty people live in is an abomination in the sight of God; that the cause of this poverty is oppression; and that the poor are capable of becoming the agents of history and of changing their situation. These are all truths which Shariati believes to be embodied in Islamic tradition and thus possible to understand through an engagement with the Quran and through Islam properly understood. It can be noted that the two latter insights are not, as such, theological in content, even though Shariati claims that they are held to be true by tradition. In principle, however, one must assume that they could be readily grasped by engagement with critical theory alone, if theology did not have the additional advantage of being familiar to the poor. Indeed, they can be described as translating existing class conflict into class awareness in the minds of the masses, thus bringing about mobilization. For Shariati, however, the urgency of these insights derives its force from the fact that they are insights into God's aims for humanity. It is because poverty and injustice are paramount concerns for God, and thus for theology, that truths about their origins and cessation must be grasped. The most important role for religion, according to Shariati, can thus be understood as being a tool for criticism and analysis of society and religion. The tasks of analysis and public criticism are interwoven in his account of education and dissemination, where the insights of the Islamic ethic are both taught to the poor and formulated as criticisms of the status quo which is directed at the powerful in the spheres of politics, economy, and religion.

Shariati also claims that an Islamic ethic can make important contributions as a source of motivation, alternative visions, and a basis for alliance. Faith is already a powerful motivating force in the life of believers, especially since he understands faith as praxis, so that to have faith is to be motivated to act in certain ways. Religion cannot but have political implications, revolutionary or reactionary. For Shariati, Islam also embodies a vision of society which serves to highlight the shortcomings of the current order and to show that another world is not only possible but intended by God. Shariati claims that such visions and models can be found in the historical experiences of the Islamic community, as implied by ritual practices such as the paying of the ritual tax, *zakat* (*zakāt*), and in instructions and exhortations of the Quran regarding social life. While Shariati does not explicitly discuss the possibility of alliance with movements for social change

which are not Islamic, it is important for him to show that the principal enemy of faith is not unbelief or atheism but rather a religion which justifies oppression. I interpret this as a stance that is open to cooperation with secular movements.

I have already noted the tension in Shariati's position regarding the role of reason and revelation in ethics, and analyzed it as a consequence of the ambiguity of postcolonial theory. A similar tension is evident in Shariati's treatment of epistemology. As we have seen, for Shariati, theological concepts, language, and arguments are the solution to the issue of communication, not the problem. Central to his argument is an analysis of Iranian society as split between an elite which has received a Western education on the one hand, and the rural masses on the other. The estrangement between the two is a serious problem which contributes both to the lack of education and progress for the poor and to a lack of independence and local analysis on the part of the elite. Theological concepts and arguments have the potential to act as bridges and to be shared between intellectuals and poor people. Shariati thus assumes a context in which the concepts and language of the Shiite tradition are well known to the general public.⁴⁷ The problem he faces is not about communicating with people of no faith, but about convincing people that they have a faulty understanding of the faith to which they already adhere, at least nominally. Shariati assumes that shared familiarity with the central concepts of tradition is crucial for the development of a common understanding between these segments of society, and his project is premised on the possibility of improving the interpretation and understanding of tradition. This potential of theological arguments is, as Shariati sees it, a unique resource. He can be seen as claiming that the reasons which can be given for an ethical position are dependent on context and tradition.

It must be noted, however, that when Shariati himself argues for his positions in his works, he does so in a spirit of eclecticism in which thinkers from various traditions and faiths are assumed to be partners in the dialogue. He seems, then, to be working out on the assumption that progressive values can be argued for across traditions. This tension can be resolved in several ways. For example, one could argue that, although arguments and reasons are in fact universally accessible

⁴⁷ This assumption is in fact quite similar to the one made by liberal thinkers about the immediate clarity and neutrality of secular language.

to the educated, poor religious people are more easily swayed by arguments which use concepts and language from their own tradition. Such an interpretation is cynical in its view of religious argument as a mere tool for convincing simple people and is hard to square with the other claims which Shariati makes for Islam. I would argue that a more plausible understanding of the ambiguity is that Shariati is once again countering the devaluation of Islamic tradition by showing that it can be as progressive as other traditions. He thus claims that those who strive for justice can recognize each other's arguments and positions in a spirit of solidarity. Even so, I would argue that Shariati's position is best understood as epistemological contextualism in light of the centrality which he assigns to Islamic tradition as the context of reasoning.

However, when it comes to the content of ethics I believe that Shariati's position can be reconstructed so as to entail a theory of combination: the ethic available through Islamic tradition is partly the same as ethics available through human reason and experience or through other traditions, but it also contains unique or distinctive elements. The distinctive aspects are best understood as being of two different kinds. First, as argued above, a complete account of justice, freedom, and other central values is available only in Islamic ethics. Secular or other ethics can adhere to the same values and understand them in somewhat the same way, but a full understanding requires engagement with the richer content of these values as explained by Islam. This is both a claim about Islam having unique insights regarding a particular context in which Islam is the relevant tradition, and a claim that any social ethic which does not take its theological insights into account is defective because all human beings have needs which a just society must meet and for which religion alone can provide.

Shariati argues here from the notion of *fitra* (*fiṭra*), commonly understood in Islamic theology as human nature or essence. Islamic tradition contains several different explanations as to what exactly *fitra* entails, but it is generally associated with the position that all people are originally monotheists, that they have a tendency toward *tawhid*. Shariati understands *fitra* to imply that all people share a religious desire for worship of one God as part of their nature. *Fitra* is a longing in humankind for what ought to be rather than what is, an inherent tendency to strive for what cannot be seen, for what nature cannot fulfil. According to Shariati, this tendency toward *tawhid* manifests itself in human history in the belief in unity of humankind across all

barriers of race, class, or clan. In Shariati's understanding, egalitarian movements outside Islam are a consequence of humankind's inherent longing for *tawhid*, even if they do not recognize the religious roots of their beliefs.⁴⁸

The notion of *fitra*, as understood by Shariati, could be used to argue for a theory of consonance between religious and secular ethics. In my understanding, this is not the point Shariati makes. Rather, he uses the notion of *fitra* to argue that a theological understanding of human beings is necessary when formulating visions for the transformation of society. A truly humane society can be constructed only if ethical and political thought is complemented by theological insights; otherwise it will degenerate into the alienation and emptiness of materialistic societies, be they capitalist or socialist.⁴⁹

Freedom and religious leadership

Shariati does not discuss the concept of secularity, nor does he develop any position as to what the relationship between religious authorities and the state should be. There are certainly themes in his thinking, such as the importance of freedom of expression, belief, and inquiry, which could be developed so as to imply a defence of the secularity of the state. However, the project of secularism as it was enforced by the Pahlavi regime in Iran and as experienced in Shariati's day was one of severe limitations on political and religious freedoms. The concept of a secular state had a quite different meaning in his context. However, despite the lack of explicit treatment of the issue in Shariati's writings, his criticism of the alliance between the economic, political, and religious powers of his day is relevant and could perhaps be developed into a defence of secular government. There is in Shariati's thought a severe condemnation of any religious ethic which is used by those in power to legitimize oppression. However, he also sees positive potential in the combination of political and religious leadership, if it is used righteously in the tradition of Muhammad and the Imams. His position is ambiguous, but I believe that statements about religious leadership should not be understood as claims about how state power should be wielded, but rather as a justification of the political and theological role of enlightened intellectuals. While they are, in Shari-

⁴⁸ Shariati, Ali: *Religion vs. Religion*, p. 27.

⁴⁹ Op. cit., p. 21.

ati's thought, intended to exercise leadership in the struggle, their role is more about guiding the poor than about assuming political power.

Justice as liberation from oppression

Justice is one of the most central concepts in Shariati's writings, and he uses it in many different meanings and contexts. Sometimes he differentiates legal justice from social justice or equity, but his central concern is with social justice.⁵⁰ Shariati writes that "[...] in order to have equity, the social system must be changed – not superficially, but in its fundamental structure."⁵¹ Although Shariati's treatment of the concept of justice is far from systematic, his position can plausibly be understood to entail a liberationist conception of justice. He claims that justice entails liberation from structures of oppression. Oppression in many of Shariati's writings has three aspects: an economic, a political, and a religious manifestation.⁵² Oppressive power is, Shariati argues, maintained through a system of capitalistic exploitation, authoritarian despotism, and religious stupefaction. To these three aspects he sometimes also adds a fourth, colonialism or imperialism.⁵³ Justice therefore implies a fundamental altering of the systems and structures of society, effecting a liberation from all these kinds of oppression.⁵⁴

Economic oppression or exploitation and its consequence, poverty, is the aspect of oppression which receives the greatest attention in Shariati's writings. He condemns poverty in the harshest of terms, equating it with blasphemy. Shariati claims that poverty is contrary to the will of God, who wants "affluence, progress and the fulfilment of

⁵⁰ It is my understanding that Shariati uses the terms social justice, justice, and equity interchangeably most of the time, and I will refer to the concept as justice.

⁵¹ Shariati, Ali: *On the Sociology of Islam*, p. 109.

⁵² For example, op. cit., p. 115 and Shariati, Ali: *What Is To Be Done?*, p. 48.

⁵³ Shariati, Ali: *What Is To Be Done?*, p. 1, see also p 26 note 1.

⁵⁴ While Dabashi understands the anti-Western language and anticolonial stance of Shariati to be strategic, and implausible in view of his inspiration from Western thinkers such as Marx, in my analysis the critique of and struggle against colonialism is a central part of Shariati's thought. Furthermore, a reductive understanding of anticolonialism as mere strategy fails to distinguish values propagated by Shariati, such as progress or modernity, from their Western instantiations. Dabashi, Hamid: *Theology of Discontent*, pp. 115 and 137f. For a critical discussion of the failure to distinguish modernization from Westernization, see Sayyid, Bobby S.: *A fundamental fear*.

all human needs”.⁵⁵ It is important for his argument that he conceives of the Islamic tradition as distinct in its positive valuation of the goods of material life. For Shariati, poverty is therefore in and of itself an injustice and a scandal, because it is a situation which degrades people in a manner directly contrary to God’s will. But it is also an injustice because it is the result of oppression and exploitation, of a structure that is unjust. Furthermore, Shariati claims that it is impossible for a poor person to live a truly spiritual life. This is so because human goodness is undermined by circumstances of poverty and hunger. The understanding of a spiritual life as orthopraxis thus serves to strengthen the condemnation of poverty.

Shariati also condemns political oppression, which he calls despotism or authoritarianism, and clerical oppression. We have already encountered his critique of a religious power which legitimizes oppression in the section on the two kinds of religion. Shariati identifies the consequences of that aspect of oppression as ignorance, quietism, and superstition. Political oppression does not receive as much attention from Shariati, perhaps because direct criticism of the political system of his day was highly dangerous. My understanding is that he sees it as the necessary partner of capitalism and imperialism, keeping the systems of exploitation in place and punishing dissent. Shariati deals more with dependence, which he understands to be the consequence of colonial and imperialistic oppression in the Third World. In a sense dependence is an aspect of the other kinds of oppression, because it too has economic, political, and cultural elements. Such oppression has not ended with overt colonialism. Rather, Shariati claims, the seemingly benign recipes for development contrived by imperial powers are in fact a form of neo-colonialism which leads to further dependence. Shariati is similarly sceptical toward importing Western socialist solutions since these this will simply result in other versions of dependence. Liberation from dependence must involve breaking the bonds of military, economic, and political imperialism. Again, Islam assumes central importance for Shariati because of its anti-colonial potential.

In Shariati’s thinking, exploitation and oppression are closely linked to the advent of private property. Shariati accordingly claims that justice can only be realized within a classless society with collec-

⁵⁵ Shariati, Ali: *What Is To Be Done?*, p. 43.

tive ownership of the means of production.⁵⁶ This is evident from his recurring description of the beginning and end of history in the form of an explanation of the story about Cain and Abel.⁵⁷ Abel represents a pasture-based economy, which Shariati envisions as a primitive socialism. In this system, all resources were owned in common and the tools of production were such that anybody could make and own them. This was an age of brotherhood, peace, freedom, and true faith – of *tawhid*. Cain, on the other hand, represents the system of agriculture which enabled the advent of private ownership and led to greed, individualism, oppression, slavery, and injustice. The story of the brothers shows how the human family came to be divided into

[...] a minority that possessed land in excess of need and in excess of its ability to work it, and that therefore needed the labor of others. On the other side was a majority that, on the contrary, possessed only hunger and the ability to work, but had neither land nor tools.⁵⁸

The creation of private ownership thus implied “[...] the formation of the first class society, the system of discrimination and exploitation, the worship of wealth and lack of true faith.”⁵⁹ Eventually, Shariati claims, the system of Abel will triumph through an inevitable revolution. The future society of Shariati’s vision, which he calls the Muslim *ummah*, should be a classless society in which justice, brotherhood, and love are cultivated.⁶⁰ Shariati claims that “[...] in a society where

⁵⁶ According to Navabi, the idea of social justice constitutes the central core of Shariati’s thought. Developing it, he goes beyond the traditional Islamic ideas of charity and mutual aid to advocate class equality and the right of every person to all of life’s material and cultural privileges. Navabi, Abbas: *Reform and Revolution in Shi’i Islam*, p. 66.

⁵⁷ The story occurs for example in *Religion vs. religion* and *On the Sociology of Islam*. Arguments about social organization from an account of human origins are common in classical political philosophy. It occurs for example in classic liberal contractarian theory and in Marxism’s account of primitive communism. Navabi claims that Shariati’s description has more in common with Rousseau’s state of nature in *A Discourse on the Origin of Human Inequality* than with Marx’s account. See Navabi, Abbas: *Reform and Revolution in Shi’i Islam*, p. 107. Shariati himself underlines that his account is distinct from Marx’s, since instead of slavery, feudalism etc. he recognizes only two possible structures of society, oppressive or just, and claims that they are more fundamental than divisions based on modes of production. Shariati, Ali: *On the Sociology of Islam*, p. 111.

⁵⁸ Shariati, Ali: *On the Sociology of Islam*, p. 101.

⁵⁹ Op. cit., p. 104.

⁶⁰ Op. cit., p. 119.

all enjoy equally and possess in common all the bounties of life, all the material and spiritual resources of society, all will necessarily be equal and brothers".⁶¹ The ideal of *tawhid* is thus interpreted by Shariati as involving, first and foremost, equality in the sense of the abolishment of classes. Humanity is one, in the sense that there can be no justification of hierarchical distinctions among people. Unity as brotherhood is possible not by transcending differences of class but by eradicating them.⁶²

In Shariati's account, the liberation from oppression which justice entails will be achieved in the creation of a new society. In that process, a new humanity will also be created. This happens in two ways. First, already in the efforts to create a new society humankind is changed, as the poor and downtrodden assume responsibility for their destiny. The development of such capacities is in itself a part of the realization of human dignity. For Shariati, the Islamic concept of humankind as the representative or vice-regent of God on earth implies that human potential and dignity will be realized through the exercise of free will and responsibility. Vice-regency means that humanity is appointed to be God's co-operators and to establish society according to God's aims. Second, once a more just society is established and humankind is no longer constrained and conditioned by the different aspects of oppression, the result will be that human beings develop into better persons, capable of brotherhood and love. The point of the struggle is, ultimately, to create the preconditions for such people to emerge. The precise characteristics of this new human are not spelled out but it resonates with the thought of socialist thinker Ernesto Guevara and Franz Fanon.⁶³ Indeed, part of Shariati's point is that we can-

⁶¹ Shariati, Ali, op. cit., p. 107.

⁶² Shariati's references to unity has sometimes been interpreted as a call for national unity not to be destroyed by diverging class interests. Such an interpretation I deem to be a perversion of Shariati's thought, due to its inconsistency with his other claims. In Shariati's context of repression, the possibility of this misinterpretation might have been a strategic advantage. Nevertheless, unity for Shariati is an aim and not a present reality. The struggle for the end of oppression is in a sense a struggle for this kind of unity because it is only the end of all oppression which can enable a unity that is not mockery or deceit.

⁶³ Guevara claimed that the building of a new society entails the simultaneous creation of new material foundations for society and of new men and women. This development of consciousness necessitates that society is turned into a gigantic school in which people are made conscious of their role as builders of a society which aims at making them even more free and responsible. They are led by the revolutionaries who Guevara insists are guided by "great feelings of love". Guevara, Ernesto: "Socialism

not fully describe what will be possible after the unjust order is overturned, but at the same time it is in this newness that justice somehow resides. Liberation is thus not only from oppression, but also to something, to a more humane society of justice and freedom in which human beings can be free and just.

Shariati notes that his description of the goal of history and the ideal of struggle is similar to socialist thinking. Even so, he claims that there is a central difference: in the Islamic vision the just society is not the end itself but the means to an end, which is to enable people to strive towards God. There are many elements and arguments from theology in Shariati's account of justice. Such theological elements supply nuances to his account of the content of justice and underline the importance of justice, and I will return to them shortly. But religious considerations also enter Shariati's account more directly in that he understands material conditions of poverty or wellbeing to form the conditions of possibility for spirituality. In his ethic, the concept of justice is closely linked to the concept of true religiosity. Material distribution affects the conditions of religious life, stifling it in oppressive circumstances, and enabling it in the ideal society.

Capitalist society is riddled with oppression and poverty, claims Shariati, and therefore it undermines human goodness and solidarity. This is not only a problem in and of itself, it also makes true religion impossible because religion cannot survive in a state of poverty and hunger.⁶⁴ Shariati states: "A society which has economic problems also lacks spiritual wealth. Whatever is called ethics in a poor country is nothing but deviant customs and habits, not spirituality."⁶⁵ He often quotes a saying that "[...] when poverty enters a home from one door, faith exits from the other door".⁶⁶ In Shariati's understanding, spirituality is closely connected to morality, to the ability of the person to do something for his fellow beings. Shariati claims that Islam considers "[...] economics to be an infrastructure of morality and materialism to be a ladder toward spirituality".⁶⁷ I understand the importance of prac-

and man in Cuba", in *Global Justice. Liberation and Socialism*, Ocean Books, New York 2002, pp. 33-46.

⁶⁴ Navabi, Abbas: *Reform and Revolution in Shi'i Islam*, p. 68.

⁶⁵ Shariati, Ali: *What Is To Be Done?*, p. 23.

⁶⁶ Shariati attributes this saying to Abu Dhar, the ascetic companion of the Prophet that he uses as a role model for the enlightened thinker and true follower of Islam. Op. cit., pp. 23 and 43.

⁶⁷ Op. cit., p. 43.

tice to religious life to be one of the premises of Shariati's position, which he articulates as the practice of moral relationships with other people.

According to Shariati, because a society of poverty makes regular spirituality impossible, the only kind of spirituality in such a context is the struggle for a better society. The revolutionary struggle is an expression of religiosity, as is seen most clearly when this struggle entails sacrifice and, ultimately, martyrdom for the cause. Such acts of struggle and sacrifice are expressions of morality and of love, claims Shariati. He writes: "Love is consisted of a power which invites me to go against my profits and well-being and sacrifice myself for others and the ideals that I hold dear." Love consists, not of the kindness which we expect to be reciprocated, but of "[...] giving up everything for the sake of a goal and asking nothing in return."⁶⁸ In his discussion of love, Shariati alludes both to the important traditions of martyrdom in Shiite Islam and to the Sufi concept of self-annihilation as an expression of love. Traditional Sufi mysticism's concept of self-annihilation and living in God is thus replaced by self-annihilation and living for the people.

The aim of establishing a just society free from oppression, Shariati claims, is not only to enable humankind to truly flourish in accordance with the dignity given to humanity by God. The aim is also to enable people's moral growth and thus their striving toward God. To grow in moral perfection and closeness to God is the proper end of humanity. Shariati's position should not, as I see it, be taken to imply that there is nothing more to religion than morality and fellowship among humans. These concerns are indispensable to his account of spirituality or religious practice, but similarly indispensable is closeness to God as understood by Sufi mysticism.⁶⁹ Mysticism is a genuine need of humanity, related to their *fitra*, their nature as believers in *tawhid*. As we have seen, Shariati is critical of religious spiritualization in the sense of conceiving of religious life as concerned only with inward religiosity. He objects to spirituality when divorced from a concern for the material wellbeing of other people and for justice. However, mysticism and spiritual life in a deeper meaning are central to his vision of

⁶⁸ Shariati, Ali: *Man and Islam*, pp. 60ff.

⁶⁹ Shariati, I believe, is properly understood as not only a social thinker but also a mystic. Due to the nature of my research questions, I have not delved into his mystical writings, but awareness of the mystical side of his theological thought is important to do justice to his positions.

revolutionary practice and the ideal society, being vital aspects of faith as well as answering genuine needs of human beings.

As I have already argued, Shariati can be understood as proposing an ethic based on both reason and revelation. What justice entails can be partly understood through the use of reason, but it needs to be complemented by insights about humanity's true end, insights which Islamic tradition contains. Shariati is optimistic about the human possibilities for doing justice. He believes that a just society lies within the grasp of humans if they only struggle to realize it. Indeed, this is a very traditional Muslim understanding, that building the just society is a task which humanity has received from God and is able to fulfil.⁷⁰ Although the obstacles in the political world may be formidable, there is, according to Shariati, nothing that ultimately prevents human beings from turning to justice. While he seldom or never explicitly explains by what means revolution is to be practically achieved, he denounces reformist change as insufficient and as likely to lead to merely cosmetic changes. The thorough transformation of society which is necessary for justice to be realized must be achieved by a radical break with the oppressive order nationally, and dependence internationally. Shariati often refers to the need for a permanent revolution. By this I understand him to imply that revolutionary struggle must involve constant self-criticism and efforts to go beyond the gains already won.⁷¹ As we have seen, however, Shariati's account of the just

⁷⁰ The optimism about human achievement of the just society may be a point where Shariati is influenced by Muslim modernists rather than by his own Shiite tradition. In the traditional Shiite understanding of Shariati's day, awaiting the return of the Hidden Imam replaced political change in the present although there were exceptions. Shariati thus seems to draw nearer to Sunni understanding of political theology, even if he does so by reinterpreting, rather than discarding, the central concepts of Shiite tradition such as the Imam and the Waiting. However, one must be cautious not to overplay such influence for at least two reasons: Firstly, the charge that Shariati's thought was too close to Sunni tradition has been used to discredit him and charge him with apostasy from the very beginning. (See Momen, Moojan: *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*, p. 259). Secondly, and more important, Shariati was writing in a period when Shiite tradition was going through extensive developments, one of which was precisely a redefinition of the political role of religion.

⁷¹ The permanent revolution is a concept in both Marx's and Leon Trotsky's thought. I take Shariati's understanding of the term to be close to the Trotskyist understanding, which links the need for permanent revolution to the specific situation of revolution in non-industrialized countries. Trotsky claims that one effect of the interconnectedness of international capitalism was that non-industrialized countries got involved in capitalist production in ways that did not result in bourgeois revolution and democracy. The agents of socialist revolution (according to Trotsky the proletariat, in less devel-

society also has a mystical side. He claims that the ideal society is realizable in this world by human agency, but the striving to God which is the end of that society remains an eternal quest, a becoming without end because it is an evolution toward God, who is infinite.

Shariati's style and manner of expounding his ethic mean that he constantly refers to theological concepts, elements of traditions, and personages from Islamic history to explain or justify his positions. Justice is often asserted to be the most important Islamic value. According to Shariati, justice governs all aspects of Islam; it is the very objective for which all the prophets were sent.⁷² Many different aspects of the tradition, such as the Quran, the life of the prophets, and of important Muslim personalities, and the structure of the early Muslim *ummah* are invoked by Shariati to show the centrality of justice in the Islamic tradition. Because of his critique of imperialism, it is important to Shariati that values such as justice be, not imported Western concepts, but part of the Islamic tradition from the beginning – although he claims that they have often been distorted by those in power. To retrieve the true meaning of these values, he undertakes what he calls an “[...] extraction and refinement of cultural resources”.⁷³ For clarity, I have identified and chosen three doctrines as being central to Shariati's understanding of justice on the basis that they recur in his lectures both explicitly and as underlying motives. These are the doctrines of Creation, *tawhid*, and God's being the God of the oppressed.

Shariati's view of humanity is based on the doctrine of Creation. God has created man as the representative or vice-regent of God. Shariati thus emphasizes the human capacity for knowledge, creativity, and, most of all, freedom. God's absolute freedom is mirrored in humanity's more circumscribed freedom. In Shariati's understanding, free will is the trust which humanity, according to the Quran, accepted from God. This makes man the friend and co-operator of God.⁷⁴ This has several implications. First, it leads to an emphasis on human dig-

oped countries aided by the peasants, but in Shariati's thought the poor lead by the enlightened thinkers) must therefore carry out a permanent revolution, assuming the tasks of the bourgeois democratic revolution but simultaneously work to bypass it and further the development of socialism. The also means that revolution is not conceived as a once and for all event, but rather the continuous development of social organization to further both material prosperity and justice. Trotsky, Leo: *Den permanenta revolutionen*. Röda rummet, Stockholm, 1983, pp. 15, 38, 70, 78, 91 and 156.

⁷² Shariati, Ali: *What Is To Be Done?*, p. 24.

⁷³ Shariati, Ali: *Man and Islam*, pp. 29ff.

⁷⁴ Shariati, Ali: *On the Sociology of Islam*, pp. 70ff.

nity, what Shariati describes as “[...] man by nature upright”⁷⁵, and consequently that the indignity of injustice and poverty is unacceptable. Second, the doctrine of Creation implies that all men and women are equal and should live in a spirit of brother- and sisterhood since they share the same origin.⁷⁶ Third, it leads to the insight that humanity is responsible for creating a society in accordance with God’s will. Because human beings have free will and the capacity for both good and evil, they are responsible for themselves and for enacting God’s will in the world, both in their personal life and in society. They must work towards their liberation and for the establishment of a society in which equality is realized.⁷⁷ Shariati’s defence of free will is a critique of all ideologies which breed passivity, be they religious defeatism or historical determinism, and a defence of the possibility of human agency in changing the world.

Tawhid is the doctrine that has the greatest importance for Shariati. *Tawhid* is closely connected to the doctrine of Creation because the unity of God implies that God is the origin of everything. Shariati draws several consequences from *tawhid* relating to justice. First, he claims that the unity of God requires the unity of humanity.⁷⁸ According to the worldview of *tawhid*, Shariati argues, there can be:

[...] no contradiction between man and nature, spirit and body, this world and the hereafter, matter and meaning. Nor can [tawhid] accept legal, class, social, political, racial, national, territorial, genetic or even economic contradictions, for it implies a mode of looking upon all being as a unity.

But legitimized by oppressive religion, there has always been “[...] *shirk* in society, with its discrimination among classes and races”, claims Shariati.⁷⁹ This focus of Shariati on the unity of humanity has sometimes been misinterpreted as an argument for social cohesion, negating not differences in status but conflict between classes.⁸⁰ Seen in context, however, what Shariati opposes is seen to be hierarchical differences, even if he sometimes does so only implicitly. The divi-

⁷⁵ Shariati, Ali: *What Is To Be Done?*, p. 96.

⁷⁶ Shariati, Ali: *On the Sociology of Islam*, p. 77.

⁷⁷ Op. cit., pp. 74ff.

⁷⁸ Shariati, Ali: *Religion vs. Religion*, p. 26.

⁷⁹ Shariati, Ali: *On the Sociology of Islam*, p. 86.

⁸⁰ This is how Shariati is interpreted when read against Marxism and appropriated for nationalist politics.

sions which he finds unacceptable are those of “ruler and ruled, those who have and those who are abased”.⁸¹ Far from proposing social cohesion, Shariati is critical of the way in which humanist universalism and religion have been used to create false loyalties between colonizers and colonized, exploiters and exploited.⁸² My interpretation is that the unity in which Shariati believes should be understood neither as cohesion or uniformity but, rather, as equality

Second, *tawhid* points to a society of equals because a human being is subordinate only to the one God. Shariati claims that “[*Tawhid*] bestows upon man independence and dignity. Submission to Him alone – the supreme norm of all being – impels man to revolt against all lying powers, all the humiliating fetters of fear and greed.”⁸³ In contrast, *shirk* is a religion which legitimizes despotism or authoritarianism, because it implies raising the leader to God’s level. Shariati does not claim that all authority is illegitimate, but since the only ultimately legitimate authority is God’s and God has bestowed freedom and responsibility on humanity, every instance of oppression which negates this dignity is, in fact, usurping God’s power. Shariati writes: “[Islam] invites people to submit themselves to God, and urges revolt against oppression, injustice, ignorance and inequality”.⁸⁴

Third, Shariati claims that *tawhid* involves the insight that there is only one world, God’s world, and, consequently, that God is concerned with humanity’s material well-being. God wants what is good for humanity: progress, prosperity, and the fulfilment of its needs. This means that material justice is crucial: poverty is blasphemous and can never be justified on religious grounds. Material and spiritual wellbeing are integral parts of God’s concern for humanity, claims Shariati, and should never be understood as opposites.⁸⁵

According to Shariati, the God of the Quran is the God of the oppressed. God always stands on the side of the oppressed, he argues, such that what belongs to God can be understood as belonging to the people. Shariati understands the word *al-nas* (*al-nās*) to mean the oppressed or the ruled; he links it so closely to God as to claim that the terms as used in the Quran are virtually synonymous. This allows him to claim that, in the Quran, property and rule rightly belong to the

⁸¹ Shariati, Ali: *Religion vs. Religion*, p. 48.

⁸² Shariati, Ali: *What Is To Be Done?*, p. 16.

⁸³ Shariati, Ali: *On the Sociology of Islam*, p. 87.

⁸⁴ Shariati, Ali: *What Is To Be Done?*, p. 44.

⁷⁹ Op. cit., p. 43.

oppressed people.⁸⁶ He emphasizes that the Quran speaks of the negation of oppression and the salvation of the oppressed. Although the reality of oppression can seem hopeless, it is God's promise that "[...] every group which struggles for its rights will be victorious". The empires which rule the world will all perish, and Muslims should be assured and hopeful of a future victory.⁸⁷ For Shariati, the message that God is on their side should lead the poor to confidently take up the struggle.

Shariati in comparison

The differences between Shariati's account of justice, political theology, and interpretative method, and those offered by An-Na'im and Forrester in the previous chapters are too many for their separate enumeration in every detail to be meaningful. They provide different answers to the research questions and, indeed, often different understandings of what these questions are in fact about. In this section I will concentrate on certain crucial issues which are highlighted by the comparison.

Regarding interpretative method, the thinkers of modified liberalism differ in that An-Na'im gave detailed account of his interpretative method while Forrester largely relied on familiarity with Christian tradition for the justification of his interpretation. However, there was a certain similarity in the tentativeness of their approaches, their somewhat modest claims for the conclusiveness of the theological contributions at which their respective methods arrived, that is, as offering motivation or fragments. In my analysis of Shariati, the opposite is the case. He confidently declares his insights to be those of the true and original Islam and as having the force to overcome problems of social division.

As we have seen, Shariati envisions religion as divided into two opposing tendencies, one that legitimizes oppression and the other that struggles against it. One must always ask, says Shariati, which interests are served by a particular religious ethic. This hermeneutic of

⁸⁶ Shariati, Ali: *On the Sociology of Islam*, p. 116. The God of *al-nas* can more traditionally be understood as the God of all humanity, see Shariati, Ali: *What Is To Be Done?*, editors addition to note 1 p. 26.

⁸⁷ Shariati, Ali: *What Is To Be Done?*, pp. 92f.

suspicion is an aspect of the understanding of religious ethics in public that is missing or underdeveloped in the accounts which I have been calling modified liberalism, a factor which it is important to account for when discussing interpretative method. Are there resources in such methodologies capable of resisting the abuse of religion as a tool by oppressive forces? Shariati's account carries its own problems, however, since he vigorously asserts that there is only one true and original Islam. This claim, a consequence of his critique of religion, might be difficult to dispense with completely without losing some of the critical force which comes from an argument from authenticity. Indeed, many interpreters of religion resort to precisely this argument when trying to counter what they perceive as oppressive or violent interpretations. Yet such an argument itself carries violent implications because its claim to represent truth obscures other, justifiable interpretations. The question remains, then, of how critical force can be maintained while acknowledging a polyphony of voices of tradition.

One element of Shariati's position which is clearly brought out by comparison is his conception of theological language as being, not the problem itself, but the solution to the underlying problem of communication. This highlights the fact that which modes of expression are considered the problem depends very much on one's context and aims. For the thinkers of modified liberalism of the previous chapters, religious ethics are problematic because their contribution might not be understood and thus might need translation or at least reformulation. For Shariati, the language of theology is in fact the only language that can heal social division and make itself understood across boundaries. To describe a society as dominated by one tradition in the way Shariati does always entails a risk of underestimating the degree of pluralism. What is more, this can lead to the exclusion and silencing of interlocutors who do not adhere to the dominant tradition. While it is a problem whether the tradition is secular liberalism or Islam, this unitary vision must be addressed if Shariati's ideas are to be relevant to pluralistic societies. While Shariati makes a passionate argument for his understanding of Islamic tradition, his entire contribution is dependent on a context in which (all) people are Muslims and feel compelled to care about what Islam teaches. In a way this is perhaps unsurprising in a religious ethic, but Forrester and An-Na'im at least try to show why the contributions of religious thought which they

envision could be viable in a pluralistic context. Shariati's argument for the supreme content and relevance of Islamic ethics is vulnerable to the charge that it is simply irrelevant in another kind of context. In my view, this is also a position which must be modified if Shariati's thought is to be recuperated in a way that is normatively acceptable. Since existing pluralism is likely to be obscured by structures of power such as marginalization, it is problematic to assume that there is no need to address it merely because it is not immediately evident.

My contention is that the claim that theological insights can contribute to public discourse and mobilization for struggle need not rely on a conceptualization of society as monolithically formed by one tradition alone. Rather, the articulation of such contributions can be less direct and require a more developed vision of democratic culture and a more thorough treatment of the issues of solidarity and cooperation with other social movements. Because Shariati closely relates the material and the spiritual, the search for justice and true religiosity, there are possibilities for developing his position in a way that positively acknowledges the search for justice in other traditions, something that might undergird a productive account of solidarity.

There is also a difference in the conceptualization of critique of power when Shariati is compared to the writers of modified liberalism. The latter assume that criticism can result in change directly as a result of the powerful being made to listen and to change because of criticism. In the case of Shariati, on the other hand, while he certainly directs his criticism to the powerful, the intended audience is the powerless, for whom the aim is to gain awareness and assume power. Only then does he expect change to happen. This cannot, I believe, be reduced to a question of context. Certainly, one could assume that the democratic conversation, which An-Na'im and Forrester assumed as a context, lends itself to assertions about the power of public criticism and the possibility of influencing, rather than replacing, the powerful. That said, there are theories developed for democratic societies which occupy less optimistic positions than the modified liberals of this inquiry. Likewise, Shariati's position is not only the consequence of a non-democratic setting but also a result of his profound suspicion that the powerful will act in accordance with their interests rather than with what is right.

Shariati's understanding of justice differs from the accounts of modified liberalism in being more thoroughly structural, materialist,

social, and also revolutionary. While both An-Na'im and Forrester sometimes describe injustice as structural and as perpetuated by structures of domination – for example, racism – this does not seem to inform their visions of the realization of justice, which is still understood as contained within the institutions of liberal society. Shariati, on the other hand, claims that justice can only be achieved by a radical break and a fundamental altering of the structures and institutions of society. Such a vision is also more materialist because it emphasizes how material preconditions form the possibilities of thought and action, both political and religious. While Shariati, like An-Na'im, considers religion to be a formidable motivating force, he also recognizes that religious practice is dependent on the material conditions which form it. Likewise, in Shariati's vision, justice must inhabit material structures which make possible the abolition of exploitation and colonial domination. Also, while the visions of modified liberalism are individualist in their conceptions of justice as rights or as egalitarian, Shariati emphasizes the collective nature of awareness, struggle, and the just society. Shariati's liberationism involves a justice which is revolutionary in that it creates something crucially new, both a new humanity and a new society, whose properties, because formed by circumstances significantly different from those of the present (i.e. they are just), cannot be fully known before their realization in praxis. Such a vision of justice both suffers from impreciseness in comparison with alternatives but also persuasively articulates how it is a consequence of recognizing the difference that structures make.

Critical analysis

Shariati's interpretative method is quite radical, to the point where he sometimes seems to completely reverse a doctrine's meaning. While such a method is always liable to the charge of being insensitive to the meaning attached to traditional concepts in their original context, treating them as simple vessels to be filled with whatever meaning is convenient for the interpreter, I contend that the preceding analysis of Shariati shows that he attempts to remain faithful to Islamic tradition, as he understands it through his narrative about its origins and history. Furthermore, I understand the concepts he uses to serve to constrain or model his thought, such that it makes sense to say that he thinks

through these concepts within the framework supplied by tradition but without being faithful to traditional interpretative method. This is evident not only when he stays relatively close to the traditional understanding, as, for example, when discussing the status of the Quran, but perhaps even more so when he completely turns a notion on its head, as he does by claiming that the awaiting of the Imam must happen through active engagement in politics. Although radical in his reinterpretation, he relates to the traditional understanding and history of these concepts, and situates his own understanding of them in a way that make them recognizable, if altered. Shariati's claim to situate his interpretation within tradition is plausible but also dependent upon a dynamic understanding of tradition and its concepts. It is noteworthy that in his own day Shariati's understanding of Islam gained quite a following. While this of course does not in and of itself make his method justified, it points to his success in convincing ordinary Muslims of the plausibility of his position as an interpretation from within the pale of Islam.

Another criticism which can be directed to Shariati's interpretative method is that his notion of the retrieval of progressive resources, hidden in a tradition which has lost touch with their meaning, is too optimistic. Post-colonial theory has long discussed the possibilities or impossibilities of gaining access to undiluted experiences or traditions beyond the impact of colonialism.⁸⁸ It has been underlined that Orientalist scholarship and Western colonialism have destroyed and reconstructed the Orient to the point at which there is no original to retrieve. However, there is another way of looking at this. Shariati's project can be seen as an instance of reinterpretation which springs from the fact that the devaluation of Islam by colonial powers and the conceptualization of Islam as the enemy of Western civilization have inscribed the signifier Islam with a new meaning – as the principal enemy of Western hegemony – and thereby made Islam available for reinterpretation and reactivation as a resource for resistance to imperialism.⁸⁹ In such a view, it does not matter if original Islam (if there were ever such a thing) is lost forever, but rather that the construction of anti-imperialism on the basis of Islamic tradition is both possible and plausible due to the position of Islam in the world. This point is similar,

⁸⁸ As already noted, the issue is discussed and given a negative answer in the essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

⁸⁹ Sayyid, Bobby S.: *A Fundamental Fear*, pp. 63-77

although perhaps more intricate, to the one Shariati makes about the unique position of Islam in his society. While the argument has considerable force, I do not think that the resources for social critique and thinking on justice of Islamic tradition, or any other tradition, can be reduced to such contextual considerations. Rather, there are more substantial insights to be gained, even if Shariati is rather too optimistic in both his assessment of their immediate availability and the scope of their application.

Although unresolved to a certain extent, I find it productive to attend to the tension in Shariati's work surrounding the role of reason and revelation as sources of ethics and the related question of contrast or consonance between ethics developed inside and outside tradition. The specific contribution of Shariati's thought is that it clearly relates these issues to questions of power and cultural imperialism, and highlights how breaking out of devaluation and its accompanying inferiority complex requires the resources of both a claim to universalism and the insistence of the contextuality of moral reasoning. At the same time Shariati's account shows that enlisting both these resources threatens the project's coherence if they are not combined in a meaningful way. One way to fruitfully combine such insights would be to claim that there are universal moral values but that these are apprehended by human beings through their traditions and contexts. The contextual elaboration of a religious ethic can then be seen as merely one among many articulations of the aspiration to human liberation.⁹⁰ As such, it may contain insights about liberation which are fruitful as contributions to trans-contextual conversations about universal values.

Shariati's conceptualization of religious ethics as a tool of political analysis and criticism wields a considerable transformative force. However, there are several aspects which are problematic. I have already discussed Shariati's conception of tradition as univocal, which I believe is a normative problem. His belief that there is in fact only one true original and correct understanding of Islamic ethics is problematic because it is potentially violent and also unable to recognize

⁹⁰ The position of philosopher Michael Walzer that he calls iterative universalism is close to such an understanding. Walzer claims that every people must iterate liberation differently, according to their understanding and tradition, but that such liberation to be valid must recognize other arising aspirations of liberation. "Nation and Universe. The Tanner Lectures on Human Values" (1989) in Walzer, Michael: *Thinking Politically: Essays in Political Theory*. Yale University Press, London 2007.

the plurality of voices which a tradition can contain without these latter necessarily being signs of corruption. I believe that Shariati's position can be salvaged if one considers the possibility that many interpretations may be legitimate, but that they all can and should be analyzed from the suspicious point of view as to whose interest they potentially or actually serve. Then Shariati's concept of *tawhid* could perhaps be understood to act as a *meta*-criterion by which such interpretations could be deemed acceptable, as articulations of the ideal of submission to God alone and the dignity inherent therein. However, this would be a considerable development of Shariati's thought, if perhaps not a departure from its spirit, which is characterized by both its creativity and its critical edge.

Another aspect of the transformative potential of Shariati's ethic is the optimism about the possibilities for establishing justice and human liberation. Although such optimism is clearly enlisted by Shariati as a resource in the fight against defeatism and quietism, it is also a consequence of the optimistic anthropology which Shariati claims for Islamic tradition. Such optimism can be problematic because it can lack resources to retain a critical edge after a new and presumably more just order is installed, thereby running the risk of turning into a legitimizing device for a new oppressive order. Shariati's references to the theme of permanent revolution are intended as a safeguard in that respect but one wonders whether it is indeed sufficient.

In this respect, it is problematic that Shariati insufficiently discusses the issue of religion's relationship to power. As already stated, while there are resources in Shariati's vigorous criticism of religion which legitimizes an oppressive order, his works also exhibit considerable optimism about the possibilities for religious leadership. Such notions can be interpreted and developed to point in different directions. If Shariati's critique is taken to be directed only at his contemporary society and the alliance between the powerful and quietist religion therein, seeking to replace this relationship with a notion of revolutionary religious leadership that leads in turn to another religiously legitimized order, such a critique is, in my view, insufficient. There are inherent problems with an alliance between religion and state power, problems which stem both from the possibilities of abuse and tyranny and from the fact that loss of independence corrupts the capacity for religious ethics to be critical. As articulated in the transformative criteria, in my view this is normatively unacceptable. The

profound hermeneutic of suspicion which Shariati practices toward religion points to the possibility, however, that his thought should be developed to entail the continuous safeguarding of theology's independence from power as a determinant of interpretation.

6. Gustavo Gutierrez – Liberation from oppression and sin

In this chapter, the Christian liberationism of Gustavo Gutierrez is examined. His interpretative method is understood as based on an epistemological privilege of the poor, on praxis and social theory. His understanding of the role of religion in politics is articulated in terms of conscientization, annunciation, and denunciation, but crucially also political action, as justified by the political nature of the Gospel and the claim to distinct contributions of such ethics. They provide crucial tools for analysis and critique, alternative visions, and a basis for alliance with other movements. I claim that Gutierrez should be understood as adhering to an epistemological contextualism and a theory of combination. Gutierrez's position on the importance of the powerlessness of theology is highlighted. His position on justice is interpreted as a liberationist account which emphasizes both the inherent injustice of poverty and its causes in exploitation, oppression, and dependence. Justice is here considered as involving liberation from oppression, a new human in a new society, and ultimately freedom from sin. The tension between justice as a human achievement and as God's gift is discussed, and related to central theological themes in Gutierrez's account of justice such as Creation, incarnation, grace and eschatology. The comparison points to important differences in relation to Shariati as regards their optimism about human achievement, the relation of religion and imperialism, and eschatology. In the final section, I discuss the problems with epistemological privilege when dealing with multifaceted oppression and the risks in Gutierrez's inclusive approach to solidarity, but also the potential of a material and structural critique of injustice.

Interpretation through praxis

Gutierrez proposes an interpretative method of Christian tradition which, in my analysis, has three principal components: it grows out of the preferential option for the poor and thus is the result of adopting a particular perspective, it is closely connected to praxis; and it is informed by social theory.

The preferential option for the poor is understood by Gutierrez as a biblical principle, which means that God has a special concern for the poor which should be mirrored in theology, in the life of the Church,¹ and in Christian ethics. It is both a political and an epistemological principle, one which implies that the Church should always be on the side of the poor and that it is from a perspective of solidarity with the poor that the true meaning of the Christian tradition and its ethic can be known.

The Christian ethic developed by Gutierrez is a reflection on the praxis that solidarity with the poor entails, a praxis comprising both liberating work and a spirituality of the poor. The circumstances of oppression and injustice have prompted growing awareness and efforts at resistance and a struggle for a better society, claims Gutierrez. These developments in the world present a challenge to the Church and to the faith, to which some respond by acting in solidarity with the struggle. According to Gutierrez, the theology of liberation comes into being as a reflection on these experiences of struggle and solidarity in the light of faith.² It articulates the commitments of this praxis and makes them easier to communicate. It is in itself a critical theory, de-

¹ Gutierrez always refers to the Church in the singular. The designation is used both for the Roman Catholic Church as an organizational entity which contains both rich and poor, oppressed, and powerful, and to refer to the church that is the agent of Gutierrez's own ethics, that is the Christian base communities of Latin America and the priests and theologians that work in solidarity with them. I will retain the use of the Church for the latter, and clarify with the term institutional Church when I take Gutierrez to mean the organization. There is a tension inherent in Gutierrez's use of the term, because his aim is for the entire institutional Church to take the side of the poor. In ideal, and sometimes in actuality, the two terms coincide, such as when the bishops' conference of Medellín in 1968 spoke for both the Church and the institutional Church, embracing liberation theology, or when the bishops of Paraguay excommunicated several high Paraguay officials. Gutierrez, Gustavo: *A Theology of Liberation. History, Politics and Salvation*, pp. 105ff see also note 23, p. 124.

² Gutierrez, Gustavo: op. cit., pp. ix and 6; see also Gutierrez, Gustavo: *On Job. God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*. Orbis, Maryknoll 1987, p. xiii; and Gutierrez, Gustavo: *We Drink from Our Own Wells. The Spiritual Journey of a People*. Orbis, Maryknoll 2003, pp. xviii and 35.

veloped with the practical purpose of directing criticism to society and Church. Such articulation also enables reflection on and criticism of the liberating praxis itself.³ Being a critical reflection on the moral and political implications of tradition, it is, as I understand it, an instance of Christian ethic. The theologian in Gutierrez's understanding is a kind of organic intellectual engaged in struggle against oppression and, through this engagement, able to reflect and develop theory.⁴

The third component of Gutierrez's methodology is social theory⁵, which contributes to the development of his religious ethic by providing tools of analysis of society as marked by class struggle. There is a reciprocal relationship between theology and social theory in Gutierrez's thought, such that theology can enrich social theory in a theologically distinct way and is allowed to challenge it at specific points. At the same time, insights from social theory can effectuate shifts in perspective on traditional concepts such that they become subject to reinterpretation and new understandings. Gutierrez mainly describes the insights of social theory as a consequence of the movement of history, writing about a world come of age and the growing realization that humans are the authors of their destinies. But such an understanding implies a certain perspective on world history and the current situation of humanity, articulated in close connection to certain kinds of critical theory.

³ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, p. 52; Gutierrez, Gustavo: *A Theology of Liberation*, pp. 10-13.

⁴ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *A Theology of Liberation*, p. 13. Gutierrez here refers to Gramsci's concept of the organic intellectual, which he understands in his context to mean a theologian who is personally and vitally engaged in the struggle against oppression, and through that engagement able to interpret historical events and clarify their meaning, with the purpose of making Christian commitment more radical and clear. Gramsci's notion of the organic intellectuals entails that they "organically" belong to a class according to their role in production, but have a function of directing the ideas and aspirations of their class. In relation to political struggle, the organic intellectuals of the working class assume the responsibility to absorb ideas from the intellectual strata and direct struggle through the Party. See Gramsci, Antonio: "The Intellectuals" in *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, Lawrence and Wishart, London 1971, pp. 3-23. I take Gutierrez to be claiming that the priests and theologians of Liberation Theology should organically belong to the poor by assuming their material conditions and engaging in their struggle, and that their contribution is to bring their knowledge of theology, Bible, and social theory to bear on that struggle.

⁵ I understand Gutierrez to use the terms social theory and critical theory interchangeably, with both being taken to refer to an analysis of society from a critical perspective informed by the Marxist understanding of society as characterized by material relations of exploitation and class struggle.

Gutierrez's interpretative method relies on criteria both outside and inside tradition: on the one hand, it is by adopting the perspective of solidarity with the struggle of the poor against oppression that the moral implications of Christian tradition can be understood; these are then developed further with the aid of social theory. But the preferential option for the poor which justifies this move, Gutierrez argues, is a biblical principle, from the heart of Christian tradition. The notion of praxis employed by Gutierrez is a practice guided by faith and informed by the Bible from the very beginning. It is a traditional Catholic understanding that the Christian life must be reflected not only in faith but also in deeds. Thus, the employment of resources outside tradition is justified by recourse to tradition itself.⁶

According to Gutierrez's description, the institutional Church is linked to those with economic and political power in the world, both in rich and poor countries. These groups have used the Church to defend their interest and maintain privileges, so that the Church has reflected the ideology of dominant groups. Through its silence and friendly relationships with the powerful, the Church legitimizes and even sacralizes a state of violence and oppression, claims Gutierrez. This association with the powerful and the protection it entails must be abandoned by the Church.⁷ For Gutierrez, the Gospel is the good news for the poor. His claim is not that some believers should be entitled to view their faith in this way but, rather, that all believers should understand this as their obligation to God. There is no other way to

⁶ In its criticism of Liberation Theology, the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith claims that such theology has not sufficiently examined its methods critically, claiming that "[...] the ultimate and decisive criterion for truth can only be a criterion which is itself theological. It is only in the light of faith and what faith teaches us about the truth of humankind and the ultimate meaning of human destiny, that one can judge the validity or degree of validity of what other disciplines propose". While I agree that a religious ethics needs interpretive criteria that are theological, I see Gutierrez as doing precisely what the Congregation demands. The reason for the difference in assessment is clarified when the Congregation writes: "[...] in setting aside the authoritative interpretation of the church [...] one is robbed of an essential theological criterion of interpretation" and further that those who want to work for justice should "recognize in the magisterium the gift of Christ". While one way to remain within tradition is to heed its central authority, this is according to my understanding not the only way, and other understandings of Catholicity are possible. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation'", quotes on pp. 402f, 408 and 409.

⁷ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *A Theology of Liberation*, pp. 65, 101, 134 and 265f.

God than to work for justice, according to Gutierrez, and therefore the entire Church should be converted to the poor.

Gutierrez criticizes the theologies which he regards as justifications for an association with the powerful. One of those is the theology of temporal retribution, which regards wealth as a reward and poverty as a punishment for sin and laziness and thus preaches resignation to one's fate.⁸ But the most prominent in Gutierrez's analysis is the spiritualization⁹ of Christianity which allows support for the powerful to be hidden behind a rhetoric of non-intervention. Gutierrez claims that in reality this policy is applied with a double standard: never invoked to criticize the support for the status quo, only to condemn activities subversive of the established order. In the particular context of Latin America of his day, Gutierrez claims that it is impossible not to take sides. Quietism translates into support for the powerful, especially since that has been the default stance of the institutional Church for quite some time.

Gutierrez's position is an insistent call for Christian ethics to take the side of the poor, but he realizes that this end must be pursued in opposition to much of the institutional Church, which is divided in persecutors and persecuted, oppressors and oppressed. While Gutierrez is not naïve about the daunting task of turning the organization of the Roman Catholic Church around, he nonetheless aims for the conversion of the entire institutional Church to the poor, a conversion which is, in fact, a conversion to the same Gospel that is the mission of the Church to proclaim. In much the same way as Shariati, Gutierrez thus appropriates the Marxist critique of religion but simultaneously insists that, if the message of the Gospel is properly understood, it not only escapes these criticisms but formulates them more cogently than any secular instance could do because such analysis shows how a religion which legitimizes oppression fails to live up to its own message.

Gutierrez can in my analysis be understood as articulating an ethic based on both reason and revelation, although a specific kind of experience is here implied in the term reason. He writes:

⁸ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *On Job*, p. 22.

⁹ It is important to note that when Gutierrez in his later works concerns himself with spirituality, it is not to be understood as an individualistic and interior notion of faith, as opposed to faith in action and works. Rather, his notion of spirituality is a way of life, encompassing prayer, celebration, and political action. See Gutierrez, Gustavo: *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, pp. 14f.

[...] in this participation [in the struggle for liberation] will be heard nuances of the Word of God which are imperceptible in other existential situations and without which there can be no authentic and fruitful faithfulness to the Lord.¹⁰

Gutierrez does not claim that there is no truth whatsoever to be had outside the context of the struggle for liberation.¹¹ But the parts of, or nuances of truth that are available only in that struggle are central to the truth about the Gospel and its ethical and political implications. If they are missing, the remaining account will be deficient to the point of being, perhaps not false, but skewed. Also, the point is that the epistemologically privileged position can be chosen actively in solidarity. It is the perspective of the poor and oppressed which is privileged, but everyone is in fact capable of making that perspective their own by making the experience of solidarity with the poor and the struggle against poverty into their own.¹² This means that there are ethical insights to be had from human faculties and not only from revelation. As I have argued, the praxis of liberating struggle is guided by insights both from revelation and from critical theory, and simultaneously forms the context which guides the understanding of revelation. Praxis should not be understood as the opposite of abstraction or theoretical knowledge, but rather as a close interweaving of theoretical and practical insights which form each other's conditions of possibility, but for which the concrete acts that situate a person in solidarity with the struggle are indispensable.¹³

¹⁰ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *A Theology of Liberation*, p. 49, see also p. 269.

¹¹ I differ here from the assessment of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith which sees Liberation Theology as implying that there is no truth at all except through praxis. I understand that assessment to follow from the Congregation's view that borrowing from Marxism entails implicitly denying the transcendent character of the distinction between good and evil. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation'", p. 404.

¹² Gutierrez, Gustavo: *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, pp. 30f. I believe that Gutierrez should be understood to claim that solidarity must be material, that it is in sharing the poor's conditions as well as their struggle that insight is gained.

¹³ Despite the differences in concepts and theological material, there is an obvious similarity here to Shariati's treatment of *ijtihad* and *jihad*, with each constituting an equally indispensable basis for understanding the meaning of Islam.

The Church in the practice of liberation

Like Shariati, Gutierrez does not assume a secular public to which the existence of religious reasons and arguments must be justified. Rather, he describes his context as one where the political influence of the Church is substantial and where the political consequences of different conceptualizations of Christian ethics have considerable implications. This historical situation in turn implies responsibility, according to Gutierrez, since it means that there is no neutral position for the Church to occupy. It also implies an opportunity, because of the influence the Church can have.

Gutierrez certainly reserves an important role for Christian ethics in the formation of personal convictions regarding politics, but he envisions this as a collective process which he calls conscientization and which he situates as a part of what I have called intra-organizational formulation. Like Shariati, he believes that engagement with the theological tradition can result in the oppressed becoming aware of the injustice inherent in their situation and of the possibility of changing it. The representatives of the institutional Church should address the oppressed and call on them to assume control of their destiny, support them, and help them to voice their demands. Through a process of education, the revolutionary thrust of the Gospels must be recovered and recognized by the poor. The Church's work must be carried out in poverty, in close cooperation with the poor, and in solidarity with their aims, enabling them to educate themselves. These dynamic processes, by which the poor and the representatives of institutional Church learn from each other, is described by Gutierrez as conscientizing evangelization.¹⁴

In his later works, Gutierrez also emphasizes the importance of the Church speaking in both a mystical and a prophetic language. The latter keeps contemplation from losing grip on the history in which God is active; the former keeps the critical political function of the Church from narrowing into distortion. Authentic Christian life must contain both commitment to the poor and contemplation of God's gratuitous love, appreciating God's capacity to go beyond what humans can foresee.¹⁵ I understand the mystical language of which

¹⁴ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *A Theology of Liberation*, pp. 91 and 114ff. Gutierrez refers here to the work of Paulo Freire.

¹⁵ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *On Job*, p. 96, see also Gutierrez, Gustavo: *The God of Life*. Orbis, Maryknoll 1991, p. 184.

Gutierrez speaks to be a part of the inner life of the Church, of its intra-organizational formulation, and necessary for grounding public political action.

According to Gutierrez, the Church must also be public about its commitments, both in action and in statements, and practice what I have termed public address. It must articulate a clear position on social justice and on the revolutionary struggle so as to build a more just and humane order.¹⁶ In Gutierrez's understanding, religious ethics have a prophetic function. The Church should interpret historical events with a view to discerning and publicly proclaiming their meaning. That way, Christian commitments within these events can be more radical and clear.¹⁷

Gutierrez categorizes the public address of the Church by means of two concepts, denunciation and annunciation. Denunciation is about directing criticism against oppression, injustice, and dehumanizing circumstances. It also involves criticizing the legitimization of oppression by the institutional Church. In fulfilling this task, the Church gives a voice to the poor and oppressed who have hitherto been silenced.¹⁸ Gutierrez emphasizes that it is not sufficient to point out the consequences of the situation, such as the scandal of poverty. The Church must articulate an analysis that points out the causes of poverty in oppression and exploitation. Social theory must inform such criticism, providing analysis into the causes of the situation which the Gospel deems scandalous, and thus making theology able to prescribe remedies.¹⁹

According to Gutierrez, denunciation acquires its meaning in relation to the reality which the Church announces: the love of God present in the history of humankind and the future coming of the Kingdom. Through theological proclamation of an alternative to the present situation, a critical resource is made available. This message, Gutierrez claims, has a politicizing function because it is incompatible with the situation of injustice and exploitation within which it is preached.²⁰ The annunciation indicates that building justice in the world is a step toward total communion between humankind and God.

¹⁶ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *A Theology of Liberation*, p. 265. In Gutierrez's context, such a revolutionary struggle is ongoing, and the question is how the Church is to relate to it.

¹⁷ Op. cit., p. 13.

¹⁸ Op. cit., pp. 105ff and 124, note 23.

¹⁹ Op. cit., p. 267.

²⁰ Op. cit., pp. 268f.

At the same time, it shows the provisional and incomplete character of every human achievement.²¹ In relation to the struggle for liberation outside the Church, Gutierrez claims, the Church should be critical as well as committed, pointing out the tendencies that are truly humanizing as well as the dehumanizing aspects of the process.²²

However, Gutierrez also claims that the Church's critical function cannot remain at the purely verbal level; it must be backed up with action and commitment. Priests and laypeople should take an active part in political struggle in revolutionary groups and other organizations struggling for a more just world. But the Church as an organization can also take concrete action, such as participation in demonstrations, direct intervention in strikes, and so on.²³ The action of the Church must be undertaken from a desire to be realistic and effective. Using the notion of the Church as a sacrament, Gutierrez emphasizes that the Church must be not only a sign of the Kingdom of God but an efficacious sign, effecting grace and thus transformation in the world.²⁴

Like Shariati, Gutierrez does not assume a democratic polity in which the case for the political implications of religious convictions can be made using an argument for religious freedom. Nor does he address a public outside the Church using arguments about why Christian ethics should get a hearing in public debate. But he does make arguments which, although intended to convince members of the Church of the importance of political involvement, carry a certain weight beyond that. As already noted, Gutierrez's position is that Christian ethics cannot but have a political impact; the question is simply what direction such influence will take. This follows from his understanding of quietism as de facto support of the political status

²¹ Gutierrez, Gustavo, op. cit., p. 272.

²² Op. cit., p. 116.

²³ Op. cit., p. 268.

²⁴ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, pp. 107f. The notion of Church as a sacrament, a visible and efficacious sign of God's saving grace, was developed by Belgian theologian Edward Schillebeeckx and influential at the Second Vatican Council. See *Gaudium et Spes* 9 and *Ad Gentes* 1 and 5. Abbott, Walter M. (ed.): *The Documents of Vatican II*. Guild Press, New York 1966, pp. 26, 584 and 589. Gutierrez develops many of his positions in alignment and dialogue with the theological documents and discussions of Vatican II, drawing inspiration from them as well as justifying the orthodoxy (or rather the catholicity) of his positions with recourse to them. I will, for reasons of relevance as well as space, not be able to go into the details of these connections.

quo and thus a legitimization of a situation of oppression and poverty.²⁵ But like Shariati, he also makes the argument that faith is essentially concerned with political matters. From this view about the contents of religious conviction it is possible to extrapolate an argument about religious freedom. Gutierrez perceives the involvement of theology in politics as central to the mission of the Church itself. To evade the struggle for justice is infidelity to the Gospel, he claims. Because it is a message of love that encompasses people in their totality and in the fabric of their social relationships, the Gospel has inescapable political dimensions. This does not mean that it can be reduced to politics. While Gutierrez acknowledges the danger of oversimplifying the Gospel as a revolutionary ideology, he believes this danger to result from a historical lack of attention to the Gospel's political implications. The solution is thus not to perpetuate this bias but to address it from the heart of the Christian message.²⁶

Furthermore, Gutierrez clearly argues that there are important contributions to be had from a Christian ethic to political discourse and practice. There are two reasons why Christian ethics can make such contributions: one is about the special position of the Church in Gutierrez's context, and the other is about the distinct insights of his Christian liberationist ethic. As already noted, the Church should shoulder the responsibility for the injustice it has previously supported.²⁷ Moreover, because of this history, the dissidence of the priests and religious can potentially have a tremendous impact.²⁸ The premise of both of these reasons is that people in Gutierrez's context care deeply about the Church's teachings and the political implications of the Gospel, which puts the Church in a good position to act as the vehicle of conscientization. Finally, the Church finds itself in a unique position strategically because in many instances, due to the context of political repression which the Church can partly circumvent, it is the only organization in a position to protest publicly.²⁹

Gutierrez also claims that the Church has something distinct to contribute, not only by how it is situated but also because of the content of its ethic. The whole truth about human liberation, from not only

²⁵ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *A Theology of Liberation*, pp. 139 and 267.

²⁶ Op. cit., pp. 270-272.

²⁷ Op. cit., p. 108.

²⁸ Op. cit., pp. 105f.

²⁹ Op. cit., pp. 139 and 267.

injustice but also sin, is something which can be understood only in the context of the teachings of the Gospel.

The contributions of religious ethics in Gutierrez's thought encompass motivation, analysis, and critique as well as articulating alternatives and forming basis for alliances. As for motivation, it is one of Gutierrez's premises that the people addressed by his ethic care deeply about Christian tradition. The full motivational force of faith is channelled into mobilization for the struggle for justice. The Christian ethic acts as a tool of analysis and critique in conscientization, by which the poor gain a new awareness, as well as in annunciation and denunciation, by which the church supplies public criticism of society's oppressive features. Like Shariati, Gutierrez believes that his religious ethic contains the insights that poverty is an abomination in the sight of God, that the cause of this poverty is oppression, and that the poor are capable of becoming the agents of history and of changing their situation. The first two insights are readily available in the Bible, according to Gutierrez, and the third is discernible in God's continuous interaction with humanity as it unfolds in history. It can be understood with the help of social theory but also in ecclesial documents guided by the Spirit, such as the writings of the Second Vatican Council. Furthermore, Gutierrez also claims that Christian ethics contain the important insight that all human achievements are limited and ambiguous. Liberation is, in the last instance, liberation from sin: it is the work of Christ. Gutierrez states that all human revolutionary practice needs to be made subject to self-criticism. The tension inherent in the theological concept of eschatology, both as realized and as yet to come, is a resource for validating and criticizing the limitation and ambiguities of temporally liberating events.

Another contribution of the religious ethic envisioned by Gutierrez concerns bearing witness to an alternative order. This is to be achieved not only through the task of annunciation but also through a way of life and a concrete structure. In the way that it is organized and functions, Gutierrez claims, the Church can point to an alternative order and thereby contribute to envisioning a model which can be used as a critique of society. The Church should renew itself and its structures so that these latter bear true witness to its message. If it is to be a clear and understandable sign of liberation of humanity, the Church ought to be a place of liberation.³⁰ Both the lifestyle and the decision-making

³⁰ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *The God of Life*, pp. 23 and 107.

processes of the Church should be characterized by poverty and solidarity, argues Gutierrez.³¹

Gutierrez believes that the liberating action of the Church should be undertaken in solidarity with other movements for justice and liberation, which may not be guided by faith. A common commitment to the struggle is more important in these instances than doctrinal differences.³² Christian ethics is also articulated to form the basis of such alliances with secular movements for liberation. It is Gutierrez's understanding that God is active in history, not just Church life but secular history, and that non-religious movements for justice can be agents of God's will. Relying on the Second Vatican Council's affirmation of the presence of God's saving grace outside the Church, Gutierrez claims that people can be engaged in the liberating and salvific work of Christ without being aware of it. He thus envisages the possibility of common struggle with others even though they may not necessarily understand their commitments as religious. This does not prevent Gutierrez from claiming that the project of building human community in which they are engaged is, in the last instance, related to the Kingdom of God.

Gutierrez's position can be understood as an epistemological contextualism in which the relevant context is the praxis of liberation. This means that he believes that the arguments which can be given for the ethical position he espouses are dependent on the perspective that is gained by adopting a position of solidarity with the poor. Gutierrez describes the adoption of such a perspective as a conversion to the neighbour. It is a conversion in the sense of a radical shift making possible a new understanding, and since it is to the neighbour it is a conversion which most Christians also need to undergo.

It is more difficult to ascertain whether he also believes that arguments are dependent on familiarity with the context and language of a theological tradition because such familiarity is assumed by Gutierrez throughout his work. Clearly, since he believes that Christian and secular movements for liberation can cooperate in practice, he believes that they can recognize and reason about their commonalities. But this does not necessarily mean that the arguments given in that discourse are independent of theological tradition, if one assumes that the secular movements for liberation of Gutierrez's discussion are

³¹ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *A Theology of Liberation*, pp. 261f and 117f.

³² *Op. cit.*, pp. 103f and 278.

most probably post-Catholic in the sense that they share with the Church a familiarity with theological concepts and stories, even if, in Gutierrez's opinion, probably do not have an adequate understanding of the Gospel as liberation.

Gutierrez's position can be adequately understood as a theory of combination. Some of the contents of an ethics based on the liberating message of the Gospel are the same as the insights contained in secular accounts of liberation. His identification of the work for justice as being one and the same is very strong, to the point where he appropriates the secular work for justice as being the work of God's will in disguise. It is central to his understanding that people without any instruction from theology nonetheless have a capacity for justice and that God can make use of people, regardless of their professed faith.

This is accounted for by Gutierrez through reference to the universal salvific will of God, which occupies a central position in his thought. If everyone is called to salvation, the implication is that grace must already be present in everyone, even if people are not always aware of it.³³ The orientation towards God is thus a constitutive element of the human spirit, according to Gutierrez. This means that the boundaries of the institutional Church are not the limits of God's action in history. Rather, the borders between faith and works, Church and world, are fluid, and a religious value can be assigned to the action of man in history, whether Christian or not, because the process of liberation is seen as a part of the salvific work.³⁴ According to Gutierrez, there can be no radical distinction between salvation and liberation. When people renounce selfishness and seek to create authentic brotherhood by building a just society, this is a sign of the presence of grace and openness to communion with God, regardless of whether it is accompanied by an explicit confession of faith or not. Conversely, to turn away from the neighbour and the building of justice is to turn away from God, even if it happens within the Church and while confessing faith.³⁵ God is active in history, Gutierrez claims,

³³ Gutierrez refers to German Catholic theologian Karl Rahner's concept of anonymous Christians, which was influential in the formulations of the Second Vatican Council, see *Gaudium et Spes* 22 and *Lumen Gentium* 16. Abbot, Walter M. (ed.): *The Documents of Vatican II*, pp. 35 and 221f.

³⁴ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *A Theology of Liberation*, pp. 70ff and 256.

³⁵ Op. cit., p. 151.

both through the Church and through other agents, who by their free will and by grace take it upon themselves to build a better world.³⁶

Nevertheless, his account the ethic of liberation also has distinct insights which enrich the praxis of liberation in unique ways not available to secular understandings. For Gutierrez, collaboration and dialogue with other movements working for justice leads to reflection on the particular contribution of faith.³⁷ The close identification of the struggle for liberation and the process of salvation should not be allowed to obscure the fact that Gutierrez makes claims about the contributions of theology to the understanding of the struggle and its aims. These insights, which cannot be appropriated without their theological framework, can be understood as pointing to a lacuna in non-theological accounts of liberation, despite the common ground recognized by Gutierrez.

The powerlessness of the Gospel

As we have seen, Gutierrez rejects the use of Christianity to legitimize the established order. He calls for the Church to sever all ties with power and the powerful. This implies among other things that the Church and state should be separated. According to Gutierrez, this is not only imperative in the here and now, where oppression and injustice are omnipresent, it concerns all potential orders. The reason is that the separation from power will free the Church to speak out without compromise and to rely on the strength of God. In order to be true to its message, Gutierrez claims, the Gospel should always be preached in powerlessness and poverty. The only temporal ties the Church should have are with the oppressed and their struggle for justice.³⁸

Gutierrez acknowledges the risk that precisely because of its ties to that struggle and certain movements for social justice, the Gospel could in the future come to sanctify another, albeit better, social order.³⁹ This would be wholly unacceptable to Gutierrez, because for him power is in itself inimical to the message of the Gospel. The abso-

³⁶ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *The God of Life*, p. 86.

³⁷ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *A Theology of Liberation*, pp. 136f.

³⁸ Op. cit., p. 115. Gutierrez is in this passage quoting extensively from a Peruvian ecclesial document, but it is clear from the context that he approves of this analysis of Church-State relations.

³⁹ Gutierrez is prompted to develop this point at some length by the criticism of partiality that was leveled against liberation theology.

lutizing of human achievement, even if revolutionary achievement, is idolatrous. Rather, Gutierrez claims, the Christian hope of the future promised by God must be summoned to avoid such sacralization of human achievement because any liberation achieved by human beings must be, at best, incomplete.⁴⁰

However, Gutierrez also emphasizes that the appreciation of such future dangers must not be allowed to obscure the more pressing necessity of showing solidarity with the poor and with movements for social justice. The ideal of powerlessness must not be used to legitimize some kind of neutrality, which will in fact amount to quietism.⁴¹ The Church has a complex public dimension which cannot be tackled by hiding behind privatization.⁴² In Gutierrez's analysis, the best way for the Church to divest itself of power is to firmly commit itself to the oppressed and exploited. This will then lead to the withdrawal of support for the Church from the holders of economic and political power.⁴³

Justice as liberation

Gutierrez understands justice as liberation. While Gutierrez uses many different concepts to describe the conditions of injustice which liberation addresses, such as marginalization, oppression, and plunder, in my analysis there are some central ideas in his treatment of injustice. The most important concept is poverty, which in Gutierrez's account is caused mainly by exploitation but also by political oppression and dependence.

Poverty is denounced by Gutierrez as a subhuman and scandalous situation that is inimical to human dignity and contrary to the will of God. For Gutierrez, poverty has a wide range of meanings, encompassing "to die of hunger, to be illiterate, to be exploited by others, not to know that you are being exploited, not to know that you are a person". It is made up of countless aspects, such as abuse and contempt, separation of family members, sickness, undernourishment, being subject to unjust prices, delinquency springing from despair, loss of

⁴⁰ Gutierrez, Gustavo, *op. cit.*, p. 238.

⁴¹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 138f.

⁴² *Op. cit.*, pp. 224f.

⁴³ *Op. cit.*, p. 266.

cultural values, and so on.⁴⁴ It is clear that, for Gutierrez, poverty is both material and cultural. It is important to note that, for Gutierrez, the suffering of the poor is not simply an unfortunate state, rather, it constitutes an injustice *in and of itself* because it is not in keeping with the dignity of the human being.⁴⁵ Gutierrez claims that God's intentions for humanity involve material prosperity, something he evokes by the formula that God wants humanity to have life in abundance.⁴⁶ Because Christian tradition makes an ideal of poverty, Gutierrez feels the need to justify this stance. He does so by characterizing the poverty which is valued by the Church, evangelical poverty, as a poverty chosen in solidarity with the poor: it should not be allowed to obscure or justify the latter's suffering.⁴⁷ Such suffering is contrary to God's will because theirs is an inhuman situation, regardless of how they come to find themselves in it.⁴⁸ Justice is understood by Gutierrez as liberation from a situation which violates the inherent dignity of the person as created and loved by God.

Gutierrez also claims that poverty is always the result of injustice, of marginalization, oppression, exploitation, and plunder.⁴⁹ Its very existence indicates that injustice is perpetrated through acts of creating poverty and of keeping poor people poor.⁵⁰ In Gutierrez's analysis, there is always a reason for poverty. Human suffering may not be limited to suffering caused by social injustice, but this latter kind exists on a vast scale and is the root of much other suffering.⁵¹ Human dignity is being trampled because it serves the interests of the rich.⁵² To understand justice as liberation implies that justice is achieved at the expense of certain interests and the people they protect. Gutierrez writes:

⁴⁴ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, pp. 114f.

⁴⁵ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *On Job*, pp. xviii and 12.

⁴⁶ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, p. 2.

⁴⁷ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *A Theology of Liberation*, pp. 287-302.

⁴⁸ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *On Job*, p. 94.

⁴⁹ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *A Theology of Liberation*, p. 301, see also Gutierrez, Gustavo: *The God of Life*, p. 188 and Gutierrez, Gustavo: *On Job*, pp. 32f.

⁵⁰ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *A Theology of Liberation*, pp. 289ff.

⁵¹ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *On Job*, p. 131 note 25. Because this is a study of social ethics, I will not go into questions of theodicy and theological explanations of suffering which is not caused by human action or social organization. I simply note that the issue of human suffering in relation to theology is not exhausted by its treatment in social ethics, and that a theology that aspires to be comprehensive needs to address such problems.

⁵² Gutierrez, Gustavo: *A Theology of Liberation*, pp. 15 and 109.

Liberation expresses the aspiration of oppressed peoples and social classes, emphasizing the conflictual aspect of the economic, social and political process which puts them at odds with wealthy nations and oppressive classes.⁵³

The situation of injustice, Gutierrez claims, can be understood as a form of institutionalized violence that is responsible for the death of thousands of innocents.⁵⁴ Conflict and confrontation is described by Gutierrez as a fact of class society, not something instigated by the struggle for justice.⁵⁵ The creation of a just society must entail a radical break with the present order. Because they are rooted in the structures of capitalist society, oppression and exploitation are neither incidental nor temporary. Rather, they are the very bases of a system which must be changed through social revolution.⁵⁶ According to Gutierrez, the aim of such a revolution is to establish social ownership of the means of production in order to overcome the antagonistic division of society into classes and to eliminate all forms of exploitation. Thus are created conditions of social solidarity for the benefit of all, especially the most neglected; the socio-economic foundation of equality is established.⁵⁷ The goal of the struggle is, Gutierrez writes, “[...] a just and fraternal society, where people can live with dignity and be the agents of their own destiny”.⁵⁸

Liberation must also be from conditions of dependence, claims Gutierrez. Dependence is social, political, and cultural as well as economic and a condition of neo-colonialism.⁵⁹ Economic dependency is the result of ties of exploitation and domination in the international capitalist system, which result in the affluence of some and the misery of others. The integration of the world economy leads to underdevel-

⁵³ Gutierrez, Gustavo, op. cit., p. 36.

⁵⁴ Op. cit., p. 108.

⁵⁵ Op. cit., pp. 274f.

⁵⁶ As indicated by David Tombs, revolution in Gutierrez writings is to be understood as a complete turnaround of political priorities and an opposition to ineffectual reform, indicating the dramatic extent to which society must change and that such change needs to be structural, not simply one of personal transformation. Tombs maintains that while often expressing understanding and sympathy for the aims of armed insurrectionists, Gutierrez and other liberation theologians firmly rejected armed struggle as an option for themselves, and followed orthodox Catholic teaching on the use of violence generally. Tombs, David: *Liberation Theology*, pp. 131f.

⁵⁷ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *A Theology of Liberation*, p. 113.

⁵⁸ Op. cit., p. x.

⁵⁹ Op. cit., p. 109.

opment in poor countries as a by-product of development in the affluent countries. Liberation cannot take the form of poor countries modelling on rich ones because the prosperity of the latter is the fruit of injustice. Rather, liberation must be achieved through a radical break with the rich countries and the multinational corporations which control the world economy, and their allies in ruling domestic groups.⁶⁰ This will involve a social revolution that transforms the private property system and allows the development of a socialist society. Although he views Marxist theories of dependence as a resource, Gutierrez calls for dependence to be understood from the point of view of the dominated countries, so as to deepen and illuminate those theories.⁶¹ Liberation must result in a more humane society, he claims, something which involves not only a better standard of living but for the oppressed to assume control of their destinies.⁶² There is thus need for a particular Latin American socialism, Gutierrez claims, not to perpetuate dependence by importing solutions to imperialism but to develop a theory which takes the local context into account, even as it situates the struggle between oppressed and oppressors in Latin America in the context of worldwide class struggle.⁶³

Liberation is a process aiming at the creation of a just society which cannot be reduced to its economic and political structures, claims Gutierrez. It is a society that enables the human being to be all that is aimed for in Creation: creative freedom and human flourishing according to human dignity as the image of God. Such a society implies the possibility of personal fulfilment for all.⁶⁴ Gutierrez writes:

⁶⁰ Gutierrez, Gustavo, *op. cit.*, pp. 26f and 84f.

⁶¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 86. Dependency theory was developed by thinkers who were critical both of theories of economic development that underestimated, or saw as benign, the consequences for poor countries of integration in the world capitalist system, and of orthodox Marxism's focus on capitalism as a necessary stage that would eventually result in socialism. The relationship between liberation theology and dependency theory is analyzed by Christian ethicist Ismael Garcia. Garcia, Ismael: *Justice in Latin American Theology of Liberation*. John Knox Press, Atlanta 1987, pp. 19 and 44-65; Berryman, Phillip: *Liberation Theology*, pp. 88-93. For a discussion of the relation between Marxism and dependency theory, see Larrain, Jorge: *Theories of Development. Capitalism, Colonialism and Dependence*. Polity Press, Cambridge 1989, pp. 188-193.

⁶² Gutierrez, Gustavo: *A Theology of Liberation*, pp. 22 and 110.

⁶³ *Op. cit.*, p. 87 and 91.

⁶⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 21.

The goal is not only better living conditions, a radical change of structures, a social revolution; it is much more: the continuous creation, never ending, of a new way to be a man, a *permanent cultural revolution*.⁶⁵

According to Gutierrez, the creation of a new society is at the same time the creation of a new man. The struggle has ramifications on the personal and psychological planes.⁶⁶ In the struggle for a more just society, man takes responsibility for forging himself and society, and by becoming aware of this possibility and taking control of history, man is already changed: the new man is already in the process of becoming.⁶⁷ The development of this capacity for co-creation and responsibility is in itself central to the realization of human dignity. For Gutierrez, the doctrine of Creation defines humanity as the crown of Creation, called to partake in the creative work. Any situation that denies humans this creative freedom is problematic, and it is in developing this capacity for responsibility and agency that humankind truly becomes what it is meant by God to be. In turn, the new society will generate new values of solidarity and brotherhood. Because it entails a social appropriation of the means of production, of the political process, and of freedom, it leads to the creation of a new social consciousness, that is to say, the new society creates in turn a new human.⁶⁸

According to Gutierrez, however, there is an ultimate liberation which can only be achieved as the work of Christ because it is liberation from sin. Sin, understood as the refusal to love one's neighbour and therefore refusal to love God, is the ultimate cause of injustice,

⁶⁵ Gutierrez, Gustavo, op. cit., p. 32. In this discussion, as elsewhere in his writings, Gutierrez uses the generic category of "man". The intention of course is to refer to humanity as a whole, but the gender bias that is evident in such a use also reveals the lack of feminist analysis in Gutierrez early works that is only partly remedied in later reflection. I have opted to use the term humanity whenever possible, so as to better convey his meaning.

⁶⁶ Op. cit., pp. 31, 91 and 146. Gutierrez develops his ideas about the creation of new man in relation both to the socialist and postcolonial ideas of Frantz Fanon and Ernesto Guevara already discussed in the previous chapter, and to the theology of the Second Vatican Council of man already reborn in discipleship of Christ but ultimately remade in resurrection. See Gaudium et Spes 22, Abbott, Walter M. (ed.): *The Documents of Vatican II*, pp. 220ff.

⁶⁷ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *A Theology of Liberation*, pp. 35 and 214.

⁶⁸ Op. cit., pp. 113, 236f.

oppression, exploitation, and poverty, Gutierrez claims.⁶⁹ This means that sin is both a personal and a social phenomenon. It is structural and objectively conditions the progress of human history. Gutierrez rejects as incomplete what he calls the spiritualization of sin, the exclusive focus on individual and private sin which has hitherto characterized theology. However, he retains the notion of a personal dimension of sin, which means that, for him, there is both responsibility for complicity in unjust social mechanisms and a possibility of conversion.

Human efforts to establish justice acquire meaning because they are steps on the way to liberation. He writes: "The kingdom is realized in a society of brotherhood and justice; and, in turn, this realization opens up the promise and hope of complete communion of all men with God. The political is grafted on the eternal."⁷⁰ Like the work of Christ, human efforts of liberation combat sin in its structural and personal guises, but humankind on its own can never achieve full liberation, according to Gutierrez. Liberation from sin is the gift of God and, ultimately, it is Christ who makes human beings truly free.⁷¹ Gutierrez articulates the tension between human and divine liberation in terms of the doctrine of the Kingdom. Understood as the culmination of God's action in history, the coming of the Kingdom is already inaugurated, by both the salvific action of God and of humans, but its fullness is still to come. Gutierrez writes: "[...] the historical, political liberating event *is* the growth of the Kingdom and *is* a salvific event; but it is not *the* coming of the Kingdom, not *all* of salvation."⁷² This perspective gives meaning to efforts to establish justice by human means and at the same time relativizes any human order, declaring them all to be provisional. While radical liberation from sin cannot be completed by political liberation alone, nor is it possible without political liberation.⁷³ For Gutierrez, justice is properly the work of humans and God, with both actors being indispensable for its realization.⁷⁴

Liberation, according to Gutierrez, is a single process with different levels: first, the economic, social, political, and cultural liberation that corresponds to freedom from oppressions of these various kinds; second, the creation of a new man in a new society; and finally, liberation

⁶⁹ Gutierrez, Gustavo, op. cit., p. 152.

⁷⁰ Op. cit., p. 232.

⁷¹ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *The God of Life*, p. 80.

⁷² Gutierrez, Gustavo: *A Theology of Liberation*, p. 177.

⁷³ Op. cit., pp. 35 and 175.

⁷⁴ Op. cit., pp. 159 and 168.

from sin and the communion with God and with all humanity which this implies.⁷⁵ Liberation is concerned not only with freedom *from* sin, injustice and need, but also with freedom *for* love and communion. Freedom has an ultimate end, one that can be attained only in communion with God.⁷⁶

As already explained, Gutierrez's position is that it is through praxis as struggle against injustice that the meaning of justice is grasped. The theological contribution to this understanding of justice intervenes at two levels in this account. First, the praxis is from the outset informed by the biblical witness against poverty and injustice. Second, theological resources actualized by struggle can be brought to bear on the praxis of liberation. In Gutierrez's thinking, there are not so much separate theological ideas informing his conception of justice, as a theology supplying a context of reasoning in which many elements of Christian tradition are summoned to analyze, criticize, and develop different notions connected to justice. I will not attempt an exhaustive analysis of all the theological themes which inform his thinking on justice. Instead, I have identified five principal and recurring theological themes which give substantial insights into the content of justice, often in several different ways. These are the preferential option for the poor, incarnation, Creation, eschatology, and grace.

The preferential option for the poor is, as argued above, an epistemological principle, but it also has further ethical implications. According to Gutierrez, the poor are not loved by God because of any merit, moral, or spiritual value. Rather they are loved because of their weakness and the scorn that they are subject to.⁷⁷ This shows how the justice of God goes beyond human conceptions of justice to articulate a justice which privileges those who need it most and which stems from divine generosity and freedom.⁷⁸ Belief in God leads to solidarity with those who suffer contempt and oppression, regardless of their merits.⁷⁹ This concern for the poor is partial, prompting the Church to take sides, and leads Gutierrez to address the Christian injunction to love one's enemies. For him, there is no contradiction between engagement in class struggle and the injunction to love one's enemies; rather, the struggle against oppression should be seen as aiming at the

⁷⁵ Gutierrez, Gustavo, op. cit., p. 235.

⁷⁶ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, p. 92.

⁷⁷ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *On Job*, p. 88.

⁷⁸ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *The God of Life*, pp. 114f.

⁷⁹ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *On Job*, p. 94.

liberation of both oppressed and oppressor. The injunction, according to Gutierrez, is not to have no enemies but to love them. Oppressors need liberation from themselves, from power, selfishness, and ambition – in a word, from sin. The liberation of oppressors from this inhuman condition cannot be achieved without the dismantling of oppression. This requires in turn taking a resolute stand for the oppressed and against the oppressor.⁸⁰ Doing justice, as Gutierrez sees it, is necessarily partial while simultaneously aiming at liberation for all.

According to Gutierrez, Christian tradition strongly identifies God and the neighbour, the latter here understood as the poor and oppressed. Although the theme is recurrent in biblical tradition, Gutierrez argues, the identification is completed and universalized with the incarnation of the Son of God, by which God is manifested in Jesus Christ. In the Gospels this connection is explained as an encounter: the Lord is found in encounters with the marginalized, exploited, and poor. Gutierrez reinforces the connection by pointing to the understanding of the incarnation as *kenosis*, an act of impoverishment, of Christ taking on man's condition in solidarity with humanity so as to liberate it from sin.⁸¹ Gutierrez views the identification of God with the poor as a providing strong motivation to work for justice because it implies that we meet God in our encounter with other human beings.⁸² Any act towards the poor is an act towards God, and Christians should imitate Christ's solidarity in incarnation through their solidarity with the poor.

Gutierrez further claims that, through the doctrine of incarnation and the universal will to salvation which it implies, God is revealed as someone who enters history in order to bring it into the sphere of the divine, someone who transforms the present world.⁸³ Therefore, our relations to God are defined by our commitment to historical processes and "[...] there is no human act which cannot in the last instance be defined in relation to Christ".⁸⁴ Because God has become human, the profane no longer exists.⁸⁵ The consequence of this is a concern for material poverty and struggle, for the bodies of the poor, as a part of

⁸⁰ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *A Theology of Liberation*, pp. 275f.

⁸¹ Op. cit., pp. 300f

⁸² Op. cit., pp. 192-203.

⁸³ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *The God of Life*, p. 181.

⁸⁴ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *A Theology of Liberation*, pp. 268 and 176ff; Gutierrez, Gustavo: *The God of Life*, pp. 86ff; Gutierrez, Gustavo: *On Job*, p. 40.

⁸⁵ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *A Theology of Liberation*, p. 194.

spirituality.⁸⁶ The Christian faith, Gutierrez claims, cannot without distortion be divorced from the view of the person as whole and redeemed in his or her entirety. In Gutierrez's thought, the doctrine of the incarnation thus justifies both the centrality accorded the poor in the account of justice and the view of liberation as material and concerned with worldly oppression.

The doctrine of Creation is of central importance to Gutierrez's critique of poverty and oppression. The dignity of every human being is established by Creation, which designates human beings as children of God and as destined for communion with God.⁸⁷ This implies that human circumstances of hunger, misery, and oppression are incompatible with the dignity inherent in humanity as created in the image and likeness of God. The image of God is defiled by the situation of the poor.⁸⁸ For Gutierrez, the doctrine of Creation acts as a critical tool, highlighting the unacceptability of injustice. Furthermore, Gutierrez claims that the doctrine of Creation conceptualizes humanity as the crown of Creation, called upon to continue creation through its labour. This means that humanity is called to the transformation of society, the building of justice, and the social realization of human dignity. According to Gutierrez, God has set limits to his power by respecting human freedom, to ask for humanity's free collaboration in building the world and governing it justly.⁸⁹ This creative freedom is an inherent trait of humanity, Gutierrez claims, and any situation which denies humanity this collective freedom, the creativity to build society, is problematic.⁹⁰ Gutierrez's understanding of the doctrine of Creation highlights human dignity and the imperative to work for justice, but also supplies insights into human nature as creative and social; it therefore implies the particular properties of the just society to be realized by struggle.

⁸⁶ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, pp. 61-71 and 102f. In the story of Exodus, God is similarly revealed as acting in human history to effect liberation in material terms and commission the building of a just community. Exodus is often taken to be the paradigmatic story of liberation theology but my interpretation of Gutierrez is that although it is important, it receives its force from the universalization of salvation in Christ's incarnation.

⁸⁷ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *A Theology of Liberation*, p. 154; see also Gutierrez, Gustavo: *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, p. xx.

⁸⁸ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *A Theology of Liberation*, p. 295; see also Gutierrez, Gustavo: *On Job*, p. xiii.

⁸⁹ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *On Job*, pp. 77ff.

⁹⁰ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *A Theology of Liberation*, pp. 158f.

The doctrine of eschatology is very precisely used by Gutierrez both to validate to and remain critical of human efforts towards liberation.⁹¹ There is a tension inherent in the doctrine of eschatology – namely, understanding the Kingdom of God to be already realized in the work of Christ and in the Church, yet simultaneously to come in fullness at the end of time. As we have seen, Gutierrez claims that the eschatological promises are being fulfilled in history. However, he maintains that they can never be completely identified with any given social reality, because the liberation implied in the Kingdom, by designating ultimate liberation from sin, goes beyond what is humanly possible. In Gutierrez’s understanding, the coming of the Kingdom is present in and enables the temporal process of liberation. At the same time, the future promise of the Kingdom denounces the limitations and ambiguities of temporal liberating events, proclaims their coming fulfilment, and propels them forward. The theme of partly realized eschatology is an important contribution of theology to revolutionary praxis of justice, as here envisaged by Gutierrez. Because of its eschatological dimension, theology can simultaneously validate and remain critical of the struggle for justice while propelling it ever forward.

A theological theme which is developed more thoroughly in Gutierrez later works, although already present in *A Theology of Liberation*, is grace or the gratuitousness of God’s love. Christians, Gutierrez claims, are called to a love which finds expression in works without limitation, generous in the same way as the love of God is generous.⁹² Consequently, to be a believer requires a certain ethical behaviour: to give freely of that which is freely received. Grace is an unmerited but demanding gift. According to Gutierrez, the practice of solidarity and justice must not obscure grace; rather, it must be anchored in it because the building of a just society requires the stimulus and atmosphere which gratuitousness alone can supply.⁹³ Gutierrez connects grace to the freedom of God, which implies that God’s justice is not entirely foreseeable by human beings. Thus, he claims, the works of justice and solidarity which have their foundation in grace must be practiced in humility and without triumphalism. This is related to the importance of not absolutizing human achievements. I un-

⁹¹ Gutierrez, Gustavo, op. cit., p. 215. In contrast, Gutierrez criticizes the kind of eschatology that leads to passive waiting and disengagement with history and earthly realities.

⁹² Gutierrez, Gustavo: *The God of Life*, p. 136.

⁹³ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *On Job*, p. 96.

derstand the theme of grace in Gutierrez thinking to be articulated partly as a response to the criticisms levelled at Liberation Theology for being insufficiently wary of the limited nature of human liberation.⁹⁴ But more importantly, perhaps, it is also a response to Gutierrez's own waning optimism.⁹⁵ He believes that the revolutionary struggle needs to be sustained by the freely given gift of God's love because not only does the situation of poverty and exploitation seem to be without end, the interests which the struggle is challenging are very powerful, with the cost for those engaged in liberation being correspondingly high.⁹⁶ For Gutierrez, the grace of God both inspires humility and conveys strength.

Gutierrez in comparison

Together with Ali Shariati, Gutierrez represents what I have called liberationism, and in this section I will highlight some of the similarities between the different instances of the religious ethic developed by these two thinkers. I will also point to some issues highlighted by the comparison between them and the ethics which I have called modified liberalism.

There is much in the thinking of Gustavo Gutierrez and Ali Shariati that points in the same direction. They are both part of an era in which anti-imperialism and movements for decolonization influenced by Marxist thought prompted thinkers to deal with issues of dependence and justice in various regions of the Third World: in economics, political philosophy, and also theology. Shariati and Gutierrez are inspired by the same thinkers, among them Ernesto Guevara and Frantz Fanon. In contrast to the secularist nationalist movements which also emerged at this time, both Gutierrez and Shariati want to show the relevance of

⁹⁴ Robert McAfee Brown discusses the Congregation's critique in his book on Gutierrez, and claims gratuitousness as the central insistence of all Gutierrez books. Brown, Robert McAfee: *Gustavo Gutierrez. An Introduction to Liberation Theology*. Orbis Books, Maryknoll 1990, p. 139.

⁹⁵ When asked about the state of Liberation Theology some twenty years after his first book, Gutierrez replied: "The poor are even poorer and the world cares even less". Cited in Grey, Mary, "'My yearning is for justice.' Moving beyond praxis in feminist theology" in Ruether, Rosemary Radford and Grau, Marion (eds.): *Interpreting the Postmodern. Responses to "Radical Orthodoxy"*. T&T Clark, New York 2006, p. 178.

⁹⁶ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, pp. 126 and 130.

their respective religions to the project of liberation and justice. Indeed, they both see religion as an indispensable means for the transformation of society, but also as an important element of the society which they hope to attain by struggle. In a similar manner, they use the perspective of liberating praxis to reinterpret the theological concepts of their respective traditions. In so doing, they both stay close to the language and conceptual world of their traditions while adhering to a quite radical interpretative method.

Gutierrez and Shariati are also quite similar in their treatment of the issue of religion and the practice of politics. Both make reinterpretations which show the relevance of their tradition to questions of material justice. They use doctrines which are central to their respective traditions, *tawhid* and the incarnation, in order to justify their standpoint. Further, they both understand their religious ethic as enabling a certain kind of education or conscientization by virtue of its being a tool for analysis and critique. Furthermore, they both find ways to appropriate the Marxist critique of religion as a legitimizer of the status quo, without accepting such a role as the only one possible for religious ethics.

Significantly, their strategies nonetheless differ in consequence of the resources at their disposal in their respective traditions. Gutierrez mainly condemns capitalism, poverty, and exploitation as idolatrous and only indirectly levels this charge at the religious defenders of this order. Shariati on the other hand makes ample use of the Shiite notion of the true Islam which is martyred and hidden while the official Islam is perverted and taken over by its enemies from within.

A notable difference between modified liberalism and liberationism concerns the conscious contextual analysis which is the basis of the liberationist position. Shariati and Gutierrez both rely on conscious assessments of their respective contexts and understand the possibilities of religious ethics as deriving from the specific conditions of Latin America and Iran respectively. They thus express greater awareness of their situatedness than do Forrester and An-Na'im. The comparison highlights the fact that the latter develop a no less contextual account of the possible role for religious ethics, one that is conditioned by their assumption of a liberal, pluralistic society and the special problem it entails for theological language. It seems that such assumptions also carry a certain normative force in the sense that the thinkers of modified liberalism, although critical of applying a narrow conception of

secular rationality to contributions from religious ethics, seem to end up at least partly accepting the need for religious arguments to be adapted to secular discourse. Meanwhile, Gutierrez's and Shariati's analyses show how religious language can be understood as the solution rather than the problem.

As we have seen, Gutierrez and Shariati both understand justice as liberation from conditions of oppression, exploitation, poverty, and dependence. It is a considerably more comprehensive account of justice than the one available in the ethics of modified liberalism. While An-Na'im leaves the elaboration of justice as human rights as an open-ended process, and Forrester's egalitarian account is supplied with certain nuances and fragments, the liberationist ethicists take a clear stand for a particular analysis of injustice and a concomitant vision of justice as the realization of liberation into a creative society of collective ownership of the means of production in which community is made possible between God and men. The similarities between Gutierrez's and Shariati's accounts with respect to the question of justice may be too many to enumerate, and can be understood at least partly through their shared sources. However, I would like to point out three important differences: their varying degrees of optimism about the human undertaking of liberation; the difference in emphasis regarding cultural imperialism; and their differing treatments of the hereafter.

While both Shariati and Gutierrez claim that the ultimate meaning in establishing justice is to be found in relation to God, Gutierrez repeatedly insists that human liberation must in the last instance be the work of God because it is liberation from sin. Shariati would not dispute that injustice is sin, if the term designates something contrary to God's will and objectives for humanity, but he is considerably more optimistic as to the possibilities for mankind to establish justice on earth, a justice that enables not only human community but the reaching toward God which is the ultimate end of human beings. I understand this to be the lingering effect of the doctrine of original sin, which infuses Christianity with a more profound misgiving about temporal progress. By contrast, in Islam, God is seen as enjoining humankind to establish justice on earth. Although humanity will of course not attain the perfection of God, a just society is perceived as being within human reach. In mainstream Catholic tradition, meanwhile, the idea that humanity could move beyond sin without the in-

tervention of God would be plain heresy. The charge is often levelled against Christian liberationism that it does not sufficiently take into account the helplessness of humanity in the face of sin. From the other perspective, Islamic philosopher Shabbir Akhtar understands Liberation Theology to lie close to Islamic thought by virtue of its emphasis on worldly liberation.⁹⁷ Gutierrez's way of dealing with the risk of failing to remain within his tradition in this respect is to constantly emphasize that the humanly achievable liberation is never complete and that complete justice is ultimately available only through the coming of the Kingdom. He simultaneously stresses that the Kingdom, although only present fully at the end of time, is described in the Bible as being already in a process of realization. Thus he avoids both heresy and postponement of the work of justice.

Shariati's account pays considerable attention to Islam as a tool of resistance to cultural imperialism. The same cannot be said of Gutierrez, who despite his development of a Christian ethic as a critical tool, in his discussion of dependence insists on the need for Latin American socialism. This can, I believe, be understood in terms of the respective positions of Islam and Christianity in the world. Because Christianity is the religion not only of the downtrodden of Gutierrez context, but also of the imperial powers, it lacks the credentials of Islam, which Shariati claims is the strongest force of anti-imperialism in the world.

As we have seen, the coming of the Kingdom is an important resource for Gutierrez, serving as a critical ideal. Shariati, on the other hand, explicitly discards all questions of the afterlife or paradise and refuses to discuss them. These are concerns which turn religion into a pacifying force and are thus to be avoided, not expounded, he claims.⁹⁸ This point of divergence between Shariati and Gutierrez is interesting because they have similar resources at their disposal since both traditions contain teachings on the end of time and the afterlife. While these may need radical reinterpretation in order to make sense within the context of liberationism, such interpretations are offered by Shariati with regard to other doctrines. Nor can it be explained by what they try to accomplish in general, since both aim at making their tradition's teachings on justice relevant for this life and this world. My under-

⁹⁷ Akhtar, Shabbir: *The Final Imperative. An Islamic Theology of Liberation*, Bellew Publishing, London 1991, pp. 10f.

⁹⁸ Shariati, Ali: *Religion vs. religion*, pp. 52 and 58.

standing is that Gutierrez's access to the highly specific and intricate theme of realized eschatology represents a special resource to him, one that makes it possible simultaneously to validate worldly justice as the paramount concern and to use teachings on the Kingdom as critical tools. Islamic teachings on paradise perhaps do not as easily lend themselves to such interpretations. Indeed, for Shariati, the rich Islamic tradition of teachings on earthly justice and human responsibility for it make such connections unnecessary.

Critical analysis

A critique often levelled at liberation theology is that it is insufficiently theological – merely Marxism with a Christian varnish. As I hope to have shown in this chapter, this is an oversimplification which ignores the subtle interplay in Gutierrez's thinking between the ideas of social theory and resources from theology.⁹⁹ This is also something brought out in the comparison between Shariati and Gutierrez because it gives greater clarity to how their respective traditions form the conditions for their thought, making available resources which facilitate or make possible certain avenues of analysis and interpretation. Their reinterpretations of their respective tradition represent a rich and thorough understanding of the sources, which allows them to highlight resources in their heritage which emphasize the aspects relevant for a particular reading of the contemporary context. The reinterpretations to which they subject their respective traditions are indeed radical and employ methods which are not traditional, even if they are justified by recourse to tradition. However, the different theological concepts and resources of Gutierrez and Shariati still shape and affect what they are able to maintain as their distinct contributions. Despite the often scathing critique of Liberation Theology, I would say that Gutierrez's methodology with respect to how he interprets and reinterprets tradition situates him plausibly within Christian tradition. In this, he is greatly aided by the developments of the Second Vatican Council, which reoriented Catholic tradition in just such a direction, making it

⁹⁹ Ismael Garcia similarly argues that theology, Christian symbols and language are necessary to grasp the fullness and depth of the struggle for justice in Liberation theology, and cannot be understood as appendices added to socioeconomic analysis. Garcia, Ismael: *Justice in Latin American Theology of Liberation*, pp. 187f.

possible for Gutierrez to claim that his insights were furthering such developments.¹⁰⁰

It is interesting to note that while there are indeed Marxist ideas in Gutierrez's account which could be criticized as insufficiently anchored in Christian doctrine, there are similar problems in the liberal ideas of modified liberalism. I have shown how a liberal understanding of human beings as inherently prone to conflict seems to creep back into Forrester's account. The idea of humans as creative and social, while often encountered as Marxist, can seem less blatantly alien to the Christian idea of Creation in God's image. This is not intended to turn into a full-blown discussion about what kind of politics can plausibly be combined with what theological tradition; history has shown that the variations are endless and often surprising. My point is that the liberal often is perceived as neutral and hence as not susceptible to the same kinds of criticisms as other political or theological traditions.

However, there is another aspect of Gutierrez's interpretative method which must be discussed, namely the preferential option for the poor which he views as an epistemological privileging. The contention that ethical insight is contextual, not only in the sense of being affected by experiences and traditions, but also in the sense of adopting a specific perspective, of taking sides, is valuable. Here, the notion of conversion employed by Gutierrez adds an important perspective to how ethical insight is achieved. It is also interesting that Gutierrez believes that the perspective can be taken as a matter of solidarity. Ethical understanding is not taken lightly as simply a moral point of view to adopt, but is connected to participation in a liberating praxis and thus requires both considerable effort and the material experience of solidarity. However, there are at least two related problems with the notion of epistemological privilege: how to identify the privileged group; and how to counter the risks of distortions inherent in such a privilege. It is a crucial shortcoming of Gutierrez's interpretative

¹⁰⁰ Many have noted the centrality of the Second Vatican Council for Gutierrez' claim to orthodoxy, see for example Tombs, David: *Liberation Theology*, p. 124. As Phillip Berryman notes, Liberation Theologians can be regarded as doctrinally conservative regarding ecclesiology, accepting the traditional Catholic notion of the magisterium, that is, the teaching authority vested in the popes and bishops, but making the argument that the teaching authority of the Second Vatican Council is greater than that of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith. Berryman, Phillip: *Liberation Theology*, p. 198.

method that he does not discuss the problems surrounding the identification of the oppressed.¹⁰¹ While this can at least partly be understood as a consequence of context, given that he developed his ethic surrounded by glaring poverty and open political repression, it is obvious that the generic category of the poor which he employs in much of his writing fails to address structures of oppression within the category of the poor. Gutierrez's failure to discuss the oppression of women specifically is an example of this, and while it is partially remedied in later works, the problem highlights the inescapable risk of missing some aspect of oppression or marginalization which ought to be a decisive factor in whose voices are heeded.¹⁰² Moreover, there are also other risks of distortion inherent in the principle of the epistemological privilege of the poor. Gutierrez is insufficiently wary, I believe, of the possibility that the experience of suffering and oppression could distort as well as enhance one's sense of justice. There are implicit treatments of the question in his work, since Gutierrez is concerned with and addresses the problem that the oppressed do not necessarily recognize their oppression. His answer to this problem lies in the practice of conscientization, which aims at developing awareness of the wrongness of oppression and the dignity of the human being, thereby addressing the possible false consciousness of the poor and criticizing the kind of theology which teaches them to be satisfied with their lot.¹⁰³ However, there is another side to this problem, which is that

¹⁰¹ In his critique of Liberation Theology, American theologian Shubert Ogden remarks that "[the] bondage to the position of the oppressed is still bondage", implying that liberation theology is insufficiently critical of the authority of the poor, and becomes a rationalizing ideology for positions already taken instead of a theological search for truth. In response, postcolonial theorist Roberto Rivera notes that the praxis of Liberation theology is not blind activism but rather is praxis in light of the word of God and thus that it contains a notion of truth that is not reducible to the authority of the poor. Rivera, Roberto: *A Study of Liberation Discourse. The Semantics of Opposition in Freire and Gutierrez*. Peter Lang Publishing, New York 2004, pp. 122-125. While I agree with Rivera's argument, my point here is even though the epistemological privilege of the poor could be theologically justified, it still entails the difficulty in identifying the poor.

¹⁰² See Gutierrez, Gustavo: *The God of Life*, chapter IX in which Gutierrez addresses the specific oppression of women and recognizes the contributions of feminist theology in identifying it.

¹⁰³ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *A Theology of Liberation*, p. 91 and 114ff. Gutierrez refers here to the work of Paulo Freire. Roberto Rivera relates how, from a postmodern perspective, it has been argued that Gutierrez's emancipatory discourse implies devaluing the poor people's consciousness and thus reifying the oppressed as victims, which makes the liberating enterprise self-defeating. Rivera claims that there is a

one's own position as oppressor¹⁰⁴ can be difficult to recognize. This is especially so in a context where one can be oppressed in certain respects while at the same time also contributing to or gaining from the oppression of others. Gutierrez's account of oppression does not deal with the multidimensionality of oppression and therefore lacks the resources to address this problem, which can have serious normative implications given the power implied in epistemological privilege to define injustice and thus to direct struggle. While conscientization is regarded as a collective process in which ideally the many dimensions of oppression can be recognized in consequence of the plurality of experiences of the participants, it seems that the theoretical insights guiding such work must also be geared towards recognizing the plurality of forms of oppression. To incorporate such insights, Gutierrez's ethic would need a tool for criticizing an overly aggressive interpretation of epistemological privilege. This might perhaps be developed from Gutierrez's treatment of the freedom and transcendence of God, which, for him, serves as a reminder that human understanding is always less than complete and that triumphalist certainty is therefore never warranted.

tension in Gutierrez text between a view of the poor as having the capacity to determine their destinies on the one hand, and being victims lacking awareness of their history and position on the other. Rivera refutes the postmodern criticism, and claims that Gutierrez's method entails that the poor dis-identify with internalized guilt and fatalism, and become aware that these can be questioned and circumstances changed. Rivera understands this possibility to happen through transculturation whereby an ideology previously used to justify oppression is transformed into liberating strategies which can help the struggle for emancipation. The transformation happens both from above, when intellectuals such as Gutierrez transform and recycle dominant theories, and from below, when theories are further transformed through reinterpretation in the Bible study groups of the poor. Rivera, Roberto: *A Study of Liberation Discourse*, pp. 131f, 136, 143-146, 149 and 151-158. While Rivera, in a way, detours Derrida to restate the basics of conscientization as a method, I believe that he points to a crucial aspect when noting that it is biblical interpretation as a *collective* practice which enables the development of a new awareness of the poor. In this practice, *shared* experience of oppression is brought to bear on scripture. This is yet another instance where liberationism is profoundly non-individualist.

¹⁰⁴ The term oppressor here should be understood not as necessarily contributing actively to oppression, but being in a position of privilege that entails sustaining oppression through unreflected everyday actions. I have not used the term privilege in the main text because it would be confusing in the context of discussing epistemological privilege. Iris Marion Young's discussion of oppression is clarificatory. Young maintains that an oppressed group need not have a correlate oppressing group, and understands structural oppression to be embedded in norms, habits, assumptions and so on. See Young, Iris Marion: *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, p. 41.

As already noted, Gutierrez uses the notions of praxis of solidarity and conscientization to show how his ethic is communicable to other people. He regards praxis as primary, defines the doing of God's will as the doing of justice, and thus contends that God can make use of people regardless of their professed faith. In this case, the value of solidarity and struggle for a just society is allowed to broaden the understanding of what it means to be an instrument of God's salvation such that it encompasses people, regardless of their faith. At the same time, this political work is inscribed with a theological meaning beyond the mere improvement of worldly conditions, rendering it part of a larger process aimed at communion in both temporal and eternal aspects. The problem with this interpretation is, however, that many of those who are thereby seen as labourers for the Kingdom of God will not want to accept the designation nor the implication of the ultimate end which it carries. In any attempt to value non-religious work for liberation, there is a risk of paternalism. Such paternalism is normatively problematic and not only because it implies a condescension insofar as liberation theology claims to know better than these movements themselves what their ultimate aims are. There is also the risk that a Christian ethic confers legitimacy on causes which are ultimately incompatible with its own ends. On a theoretical level, such a view of human liberation would seem to imply that liberation from sin in Christ has been simply tacked onto human liberation, instead of liberation in Christ imbuing the entire process of temporal and eternal liberation with a certain meaning. If liberation can indeed be fully known only in Christ, secular accounts of human liberation must in some sense be incomplete, not only in their account of end time, but also in their understanding of liberation as a human work.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ As argued by Gregory Baum, the preferential option based on Christian love is different from a secular emancipatory commitment in its mode of social struggle, the ethics that guide it, the relationship among comrades, and the attitude toward the oppressor. As a transcendent principle, it remains valid after the reconstruction of society, offers a critical perspective on the new society, and nurtures solidarity with the newly marginalized. Baum, Gregory: *Essays in Critical Theology*. Sheed & Ward, Kansas 1994, p. 67. As already noted, it is central to Gutierrez's argument that the different levels of liberation: from oppression; to a new humanity; and from sin, are parts of a single process and that liberation in Christ is an aspect of all levels. In the work *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, based on Gutierrez defense against the charges of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, he understands this interrelation between the aspects of liberation as Chalcedonian, in which aspects are distinguished only in order to be united, not to be separated (which is how the Council of Chalcedon described Christ's two natures). See Brown, Robert McAfee: Gustavo Gutierrez, pp.

The risks of paternalism and of misapprehending who is one's really are perhaps inherent in the practice of solidarity itself. It is my contention, however, that a religious ethic which aspires to further solidarity in the struggle for justice needs an understanding of solidarity with other social movements and struggles that better addresses these risks, e.g. through some account of discernment. This is all the more important if the insights of Gutierrez religious ethic are to be recuperated from their historic situation and reformulated so as to contribute to debates in the context of pluralism. In such contexts, openness to working in solidarity with other movements is crucial for transformative potential to be retained. This is of particular importance for liberationism, which risks becoming irrelevant due to its dependence on a specific faith being the determining factor for large segments of the population.

The transformative thrust lies at the very centre of Gutierrez's ethic. Liberationist ethics cannot be understood in isolation from the idea that religion should contribute to a radical transformation of society. However, its transformative potential can nonetheless be questioned on the basis of its perceived outdatedness. The socialist ideals of community and creativity may not be obsolete but their concrete realization through a society with collective ownership of the means of production can seem not merely unfeasible, due to the pervasive power of international capitalism, but also implausible as a solution to the complex problems of the present world, and prone to certain systemic problems, both concretely and normatively. Socialism has historically been associated both with authoritarian politics and economic difficulties due to increasing administrative burdens. The economic analyzes of theories of dependence, while highlighting the structural nature of underdevelopment and the problems arising from the legacy of colonialism, have encountered problems when proscribing remedies for underdevelopment. Such considerations, while important when basing themselves on factual or theoretical problems, often degenerate into

149-153. Gutierrez would thus agree with Baum's statement. However, my point is that his view of cooperation and solidarity with secular struggle needs to be further articulated to account for this. In Gutierrez's own context, these issues were addressed through concrete participation in communities of struggle and the ensuing discussions in critical solidarity. The different circumstances of our age, when solidarity often is expressed virtually and across divides of space and language, calls for renewed attention to such discernment.

sweeping condemnation of all socialism, deemed somehow unviable due to the demise of the Soviet Union. It is my understanding that despite the many objections which can be raised against the concrete economic and social organization envisioned by Gutierrez, the insight is still valid that material structures must be questioned, not superficially but in terms of the very basis of societal organization, if one cares about the possibilities of realizing justice. Furthermore, while Marxism as a grand theory may have been discredited by the advent of postmodernism, the notion of an end of ideology has shown itself to have even more problematic normative implications in terms of political cynicism, power play, and politics as bureaucracy. The grand political visions supplied by Gutierrez and Shariati, while perhaps no longer applicable in their details, can still be understood as a resource for critiquing a public discourse which lacks both a sense of alternate political directions and the guidance of visionary thinking. Moreover, Gutierrez's emphasis on articulating religious ethics as the consequence of an engagement in liberating praxis has an inherently transformative potential, one which, ever since its earliest formulation, has shown itself in numerous contextual theologies associated with movements against racism, sexism, and so forth.

7. Tariq Ramadan – Radical tradition and confident hope

In this chapter the ethic of Tariq Ramadan is examined and interpreted as radical traditionalism. His interpretative method is determined to be based on traditional jurisprudence but including knowledge on and perspectives of the relevant sciences of the context, which means that he argues for a shift in interpretive authority. His ethic can be understood as based on both reason and revelation. His critique of secularism is analyzed and related to the contention that Islamic ethics can contribute visions to a political discourse which has been impoverished by politics as management. I analyze his understanding of the role of fatwa-councils and ordinary Muslims as aspects of a public address which contributes to transformational reform. Ramadan is taken to adhere to an epistemology of possibility and a theory of consonance, which leads to a discussion of his understanding of universality as both critical and substantial. Ramadan's account of justice is characterized as containing both sufficiency and structural elements and certain theological notions of both practice and concepts. In the comparative section, the difference between Ramadan and the other thinkers is analyzed with respect to interpretative method and its relation to pluralism. I discuss the potential of Ramadan's method with regard to a pluralistic public and the elaboration of a basis for progressive impact.

Interpretation of text and context

The main concern of Tariq Ramadan's writings is to enable Muslims to live in accordance with their faith in the world today. Ramadan's position is that this requires a radical reform of both religious interpretation and society. The reform of interpretative method will enable Muslims to articulate an Islamic ethics which will contribute to re-

forming the world. Ramadan claims that such reinterpretation can be achieved with tools that are already part of the Islamic tradition and are authorized from within that tradition. He consistently argues for his methodology of reform on the basis of the Quran, the *sunna*, the practices of *fiqh*, and the history of Islamic interpretation. Interpretative methods are an issue of great importance to him, and his position is that the methods of Islamic reform must be sound and firmly rooted in tradition.¹ In this, Ramadan is part of a development among Muslim reformers and intellectuals. Early reformers of the Islamic Renaissance were eager to dispense with everything but the Quran (and sometimes the *sunna*) and practice *ijtihad* as a mode of critical thinking unconstrained by the categories and rules of jurisprudence. Recently this approach has been severely criticized for its lack of methodological rigour and for being a consequence of its proponents' Western schooling and inadequate training in the traditional Islamic disciplines. Critics claim that this has meant that such reforming endeavours have insufficient authority or credentials to enter into debate with conservative interpretations in their own playing field, and that they have been unable to take up the fight for ordinary Muslims' allegiance. Instead, such sweeping reforms are mere paper constructions.²

Ramadan is deeply critical of the formalism, literalism, and obsession with models which he claims guide conservative interpretations of Islam. According to him, the meaning of faithfulness to tradition is not to reproduce a certain model, for example, the particular circumstances of the Prophet's society in Medina, but to realize the objective of such institutions, namely a just society. Models must change according to circumstances since they are only methods, which must be judged by their ability to realize the aims of Sharia.³ He is likewise skeptical of what he regards as the excessive and abusive use of the concepts of *fiqh* governing exception, need, and necessity, which tend to authorize departure from certain conservative norms in the context

¹ Ramadan, Tariq: *To be a European Muslim. A Study of Islamic Sources in the European Context*. The Islamic Foundation, Leicester 1999, p. 56.

² See the recurring discussion in the anthology *Progressive Muslims*. Safi, Omid (ed): *Progressive Muslims: on Justice, Gender and Pluralism*. One world publications, London 2003.

³ Ramadan, Tariq: *Radical Reform. Islamic Ethics and Liberation*. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009, p. 272.

of the West without questioning the norms themselves.⁴ Ramadan instead calls for a thorough elaboration of new interpretations. In this reform endeavour he bases his argument on several different traits or concepts in the Islamic tradition. These are in and of themselves largely uncontested by Muslims, but the emphasis placed on them, like the interpretation of their meaning and practical application, varies. Ramadan discusses and justifies his use and understanding of these concepts in the context of their elaboration in Quran, *sunna*, and the schools of jurisprudence and the works of renowned jurists, the *fuqaha*.

Ramadan aims to work according to the school of higher objectives (*madrasat al-maqāsid*).⁵ According to him, this means that faithfulness to the message of Islam requires that the higher objectives and purposes of Sharia be understood and realized through constant reflection upon how they should be applied and contextualized. These objectives are the protection of religion, life, reason, progeny, and property, and sometimes also honour, which Ramadan interprets and develops into a whole range of more specific objectives that have validity in different areas of life.⁶ According to Ramadan, Islamic ethics should be understood as faithfulness to the objectives which have been established for the good of humanity (*maṣlaḥa*). Knowledge of the context in which the principles and objectives of Sharia are to be applied assumes paramount importance for Ramadan's understanding of interpretation. The importance of context has been underestimated, Ramadan argues, because it was taken for granted that interpreters of revelation possessed such knowledge. He claims that at the beginning of Islamic history the Companions, and later the scholars of *fiqh*, had

⁴ Ramadan, Tariq: *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2004, p. 159.

⁵ Ramadan, Tariq: *Radical Reform*, p. 62. Ramadan traces the roots in Islamic tradition of this concept in the writings of the highly influential medieval Persian Muslim scholar Abu Hamid al-Ghazali and the 14th century Andalusian legal scholar Abu Ishaq ash-Shatibi of the Maliki school. See also Ramadan, Tariq: *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, pp. 39 and 42. The importance to the modern reformers of Shatibi's method of searching for the intention and spirit of the law is noted by many, see for example Hallaq, Wael B.: *A History of Islamic Legal Theories. An Introduction to Sunni usul al-fiqh*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997, p. 206. For a discussion of the hermeneutic and epistemological importance of the objectives (maqasid) of Sharia to Muslim modern reformers such as Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida, see Johnston, David L: "A Turn in the Epistemology and Hermeneutics of Twentieth Century Usul al-Fiqh" in *Islamic Law and Society*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 2004.

⁶ Ramadan, Tariq: *Radical Reform*, p. 71.

in-depth contextual knowledge, both natural and social, and adapted their rulings according to it, in the process distinguishing between the context-dependent and the unchangeable in the divine message. Their *ijtihad*, autonomous reasoning, helped to develop Islam in new contexts and situations. However, in Ramadan's view, that method is no longer enough to solve the problem. Knowledge in the contemporary world has become increasingly specialized and complicated, such that it is impossible for a single scholar to take into account all relevant information without interaction with other specialists. Therefore, scholars of text and context must work together to establish interpretations of what Islamic ethics involves and to give judgments on different issues.⁷ Ramadan argues for the inclusion on a permanent and equal footing of specialists of the context into fatwa-councils where the elaboration and contextualization of Islamic ethics takes place.

This inclusion entails a radical definition of the *usul al-fiqh*, the sources of Islamic jurisprudence. Ramadan claims that the Quran and the world should both be seen as revelations and, as such, independent sources of law. As revelations, they are both replete with signs⁸ of God which speak to the *fitra* of human nature. Like Shariati, Ramadan uses the concept of *fitra*, which he understands as the natural longing for the transcendent and innate in every human being.⁹

Ramadan justifies his interpretative method by claiming that it relies on a very traditional acknowledgement of the implicit importance of context in the historic elaboration of Islamic ethics. Additionally, he argues for the importance and orthodoxy of attention to context through several other aspects of Islamic tradition. Elaborating Islamic ethics while attending to context and objectives is implied by the general rule of permission, Ramadan claims. In Islamic tradition as he understands it, God wants what is good for humans and God also wants to make life easy for humans. This means that divine rules and regulations have not been established for everything since this would indeed make human life difficult. According to Ramadan, the silence of the Islamic sources on some issues should be seen as a result of the mercy of God.¹⁰ This means that it is a serious matter to declare that something forbidden without having sound cause because this in-

⁷ Ramadan, Tariq, op. cit., p. 82.

⁸ The word for the verses of the Quran, *aya* (*āya*), can be translated as sign.

⁹ Op. cit., pp. 88ff.

¹⁰ Op. cit., p. 70.

volves going against the purpose of God.¹¹ This implies that the general rule for Islamic life is permission. More specifically, Ramadan relies on the common notion in Islamic ethics that tradition distinguishes between three different spheres of life in Islam, which are translatable as faith, worship, and social affairs.¹² In matters of faith and worship, the tradition supplies detailed regulation, and anything which is not expressly commanded is considered a forbidden innovation. In social affairs, by contrast, very few rules are laid down in revelation and all that is not forbidden is permitted. Ramadan sees this rule of permission as opening up avenues for human ingenuity, contextualization in different cultures, and adaptation to different times. This means that faithfulness to Islamic ethics requires interpretation and thus that attention to context is indispensable for such elaborations.¹³

Ramadan also justifies his reform by referring to the distinction between Sharia and *fiqh* which is common to Islamic tradition. On this view, Sharia stands for the eternal divine law and jurisprudence, while *fiqh* is the human attempt at an approximation of Sharia. This perspective underlines the humility which must be exercised when pronouncing a judgement, because jurisprudence is a human endeavour in which error is possible. Jurisprudence is understood to be subject to change and reinterpretation, and different opinions may coexist and be accepted. This is evident in the existence of the different schools of jurisprudence. Ramadan underlines that this means that differences of opinion exist not only because some of them may be caused by human fallibility, but because specific rulings must be adapted to time and place. This, again, shows the importance of contextual knowledge.¹⁴

According to Ramadan, these aspects of how interpretation is traditionally undertaken and understood imply that new interpretations are possible as a result of changing contexts and new insights. Furthermore, this also implies the possibility that old views on the correctness of any given practice can be challenged and a new consensus of scholars can be built. This is important because the consensus of scholars

¹¹ Ramadan, Tariq: *To be a European Muslim*, pp. 72f.

¹² Often referred to by the Arabic terms of *'aqida* (faith), *'ibadāt* (worship) and *mu'amalāt* (social affairs).

¹³ Ramadan, Tariq: *Radical Reform*, pp. 17-22.

¹⁴ Op. cit., pp. 122f.

(*ijma*) is understood, in turn, as a separate source of law in Islamic jurisprudence.¹⁵

In my analysis, Ramadan's interpretative method can be summarized into three ideas: interpretation according to the higher objectives of Sharia, renewed attention to knowledge of contexts when interpreting, and, lastly, a decisive shift in authority implied by the inclusion on an equal and permanent basis of specialists on the context in the councils which actually elaborate Islamic ethics.¹⁶ This last aspect is, as I see it, the most radical part of Ramadan's interpretative method. While such a development is thoroughly argued for with reference to Islamic tradition, and while specialists on the context have been consulted in the process of working out fatwas in the past, the inclusion of scholars of the context on a permanent and equal basis represents a monumental shift in interpretive authority.

Ramadan argues for the plausibility of his method and his interpretations in terms of continuity with tradition and soundness of methodology, but he acknowledges the existence of multiple interpretations of Islam which can aspire to coherence and faithfulness to tradition. He thus does not make claims to represent the only Islam or the authentic Islam but rather insists on an open-ended inquiry into many issues, and he highlights the Islamic tradition's notion of agreeing to disagree on the correct judgment.¹⁷ Indeed, much of Ramadan's works is a call for a continuation of the work of interpretation rather than a fixed result. There is a certain development in his mode of expression in this respect: in earlier works he tends to make statements about the

¹⁵ Ramadan, Tariq: *To be a European Muslim*, p. 85. See also Ramadan, Tariq: *Islam and the Arab Awakening*. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2012, p. 111.

¹⁶ Gregory Baum claims that Ramadan's method can be summarized into three points: return to scripture, a turn to the universal and attention to context. In this, he sees a profound affinity with how the Catholic tradition has struggled with modernity. Baum, Gregory: *The Theology of Tariq Ramadan*, p. 32. In many respects my interpretation of Ramadan is close to the one made by Baum. However, I would like to emphasize that Ramadan, in contrast to many other Muslim reformers, turns his attention to the entire Islamic tradition and not simply to the Quran. I agree with Baum that universality is an important concept for Ramadan, but I will return to that question because I understand Ramadan's notion of universality to be complicated. For the purposes of the discussion here of interpretative method, the higher objectives can be plausibly be understood as a turn to the universal. That the context assumes paramount importance in Ramadan's thought is my contention also.

¹⁷ This is not uncommon among Islamic thinkers. Indeed, the acknowledgement of other possible judgements in any question of Sharia is inherent in the existence of several different schools of jurisprudence. The principle of agreeing to disagree on the correct interpretation is often referred to by the Arabic term *ikhtilaf* (*ikhtilāf*).

true principles of Islam and concrete ethical implications, while in later works he tends to acknowledge the presence of several interpretations all of which can lay claim to orthodoxy.

In addition to the interpretative method which is systematically elaborated by Ramadan, he also occasionally calls for the inclusion of the experience and perspective of ordinary Muslim men and women into the deliberations on Islamic ethics. This is something mentioned by Ramadan but how such an inclusion should come about is not developed in any detailed or systematic way in Ramadan's writings.¹⁸ In its present form, his argument does not call for a complete levelling, such that every Muslims' opinion on all issues is considered as equal to that of an expert in law or science.¹⁹ There are several possible interpretations for this ambiguity. One is that Ramadan in fact imagines that the perspective of ordinary believers can be plausibly included through the expertise of social scientists, making the actual representation of ordinary Muslims redundant. Such an interpretation is plausible given Ramadan's general optimism about science. However, I also understand Ramadan to imply that the inclusion of the perspective of ordinary Muslims would be a fruitful avenue for future elaboration, but not something he claims as a part of his method. He should not, in my view, be understood as calling for a complete democratization of interpretation. The elaboration of Islamic ethics is, in his interpretative method, still considered the work of experts, although from many different fields.

Gregory Baum, in his analysis of Ramadan's thought, likewise understands Ramadan to be defending the interpretive authority of the Islamic scholars, the *ulama*. Noting that this defence meets with criticism from other Muslim reformers, Baum argues that this traditionalism is motivated both by a wish to avoid arbitrariness, which would open the field to literalist interpretations, and by pastoral consideration. The latter is the most important, in Baum's opinion. He claims that since the aim of Ramadan is to address ordinary Muslims and present an interpretation in which they can recognize the Islam they have inherited, Ramadan cannot resort to radical measures available to liberals, who are content with making an academic impact. My interpretation, however, is that although strategic and pastoral reasons are probably part of Ramadan's rationale, the most important reason for

¹⁸ Ramadan, Tariq: *Radical Reform*, pp. 152f, 261 and 274.

¹⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 23.

his insistence upon traditional interpretative methods and the authority of the scholars in such a framework is his more general aim to follow Islamic tradition. Baum also identifies this reason, but I attach a greater importance to it in my interpretation of Ramadan.²⁰ Continuity is not only a pastoral concern for Ramadan, I contend, but a stance of consistently working from within a tradition, refusing to accept that this tradition must be judged and changed by external criteria, and insisting on using the resources inherent in tradition itself. As a stance on interpretative method, it is a way to claim a certain authority and identity. In a wider perspective, however, it is also a claim about the possibility of universal claims being made from within a particular tradition and, as such, related to Ramadan's rejection of the Western tendency to monopolize the representation the universal.

It should also be noted that since Ramadan envisions the elaboration of Islamic ethics as the work of a plurality of experts and councils which will necessarily reach different interpretations, the reform of the world that he envisions is dependent on a practice which results from ordinary Muslims making the choice to follow such ethical advice. Baum underestimates, I believe, the importance of this element of free choice among different ethical judgments because his understanding is that Ramadan wants to promote unity among Western Muslims by encouraging the development of consensus among scholars. I view Baum's interpretation as influenced by Ramadan's public call for a moratorium on the practice of corporal punishment, an issue on which Ramadan calls for a new consensus to be sought.²¹ As already noted, consensus has a special role in *fiqh* because it constitutes a separate source of law and, as such, could challenge earlier opinions. However, it is my understanding of Ramadan that he does not intend that all questions should be dealt with in this way. Rather, Ramadan writes that generally "[...] it is not for the community of faith to come up with a uniform political commitment".²² My understanding of Rama-

²⁰ Baum, Gregory: *The Theology of Tariq Ramadan*, pp. 92ff, 143 and 147. Baum compares this love and respect for tradition in Ramadan with similar struggles in Catholicism. He writes that, while some reformers presented with a knot will solve it with the cut of a knife, both Ramadan and Catholic theologians will figuratively break their fingernails to unravel the knot without cutting the string. Op. cit., p. 162.

²¹ Op. cit., pp. 117 and 103. The text of the call is available at <http://tariqramadan.com/blog/2005/04/05/an-international-call-for-moratorium-on-corporal-punishment-stoning-and-the-death-penalty-in-the-islamic-world/>

²² Ramadan, Tariq: *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, p. 163.

dan is that he is well aware of the plurality of answers which different scholars will provide to any given question and that he assumes ordinary Muslims will have to make choices about what ethics to follow.

As already noted, Ramadan makes radical claims which aim at expanding the role of contextual knowledge in the elaboration of Islamic ethics, something he bases on the theological claim of a correspondence between the book of the universe and the book of the Quran, which was developed with reference to human nature as containing a longing for the transcendent. His explicitly stated claim is that the specialist knowledge relevant to the context must be seen as an independent and equal source of Sharia which can be studied to understand God's objectives for humankind. It is my contention, however, that when analyzing Ramadan's reasoning and his examples of inclusion of considerations of context in ethical reasoning, the role which he envisages for such contextual knowledge actually falls short of establishing sciences of the context as *independent* sources of law. Rather, as my analysis shows, Ramadan allows context three functions in the elaboration of Sharia.

The first function concerns the context of revelation. Ramadan adheres to the position that Islamic revelation possesses an innate directionality as a tool of divine pedagogy.²³ This means that knowledge of the context of revelation is a prerequisite for discerning the direction of the changes mandated by Islamic revelation, and thus which higher objectives these changes aim to realize. History, anthropology, and other fields of knowledge which supply information about the world at the time of revelation are all indispensable for such an analysis. This can in turn allow for further development in the same direction to be worked out, Ramadan claims.²⁴ For example, if Islamic ethics can be understood to have strengthened the status of women in relation to the society where the message was first revealed, it is in Ramadan's opinion possible to argue for more far-reaching such measures today. The second function of context is that contextual knowledge where the message is to be implemented allows adequate judgment about how the objectives can be achieved today and what tools are available for their implementation. For example, Ramadan claims that medical

²³ This is common among Islamic reformers. In this study, we have already encountered it when analyzing An-Na'im. The notion goes back at least to Fazlur Rahman, see Rahman, Fazlur: *Major Themes of the Quran*, p. 48.

²⁴ Ramadan, Tariq: *Radical Reform*, pp. 210ff.

knowledge about the beginning of life must inform judgment on which rules regarding abortion are compatible with the duty to protect life as is stipulated by the Sharia. The third function of context scholars is to provide different perspectives of other sciences. The inclusion of these enables scholars to reach sound conclusions about the bigger picture which relates to any particular regulation. In this way a better understanding of what is at stake can emerge such that the relevant aims of the Sharia are taken into account. For example, according to Ramadan, the problem of HIV/AIDS should be approached not only from the standpoint of sexual morality but also from a perspective of economic justice, as is evident once one includes attention to the mortality rate of poor people which results from expensive medication.

These functions of such specialist contextual knowledge, while exerting a decisive influence on interpretation, fall short of establishing the context as an *independent* source of Islamic ethic. The functions enumerated here seem, rather, to limit expert knowledge of the context to supplementary knowledge which, though telling us nothing about God's objectives, can help us better understand the objectives set forth in the textual revelation. It is possible that my analysis, which is based on the examples given by Ramadan, misses the point precisely because these are merely examples and because Ramadan does not intend to restrict the influence of the knowledge of the context to the roles thus exemplified. However, he does not offer any more developed general explanation of the function of context beyond these examples. Nor is it evident how one would go about extrapolating God's objectives from, for example, the practice of sociology. Rather, the attempt to establish ethical principles directly from empirical disciplines can be criticized for falling into the naturalistic fallacy of establishing what ought to be on the basis of what is.²⁵ This is not Ramadan's intention and he repeatedly calls for a proactive stance in Islamic ethics. Ramadan envisions reform as "[...] going from the texts to

²⁵ The naturalistic fallacy is amply discussed in ethical theory. The argument is basically that normative insights about how things should be do not follow from empirical statements about how things are. This entails that arguments to the effect that something is good because it is natural are suspect. This kind of critique has been expanded by, for example, feminist ethics, where the establishment of what ought to be from what is has been criticized for leading to conservative conclusions due to insufficient critical analysis of human nature as constructed and thus gendered.

the context to act on the context and improve it”.²⁶ I therefore argue that the functions of contextual knowledge in Ramadan’s ethic can be restricted to those which I have identified as clarifying directionality, supplying tools for application and implementation, and giving perspectives on which aims and objectives of Sharia are at stake in any particular decision.

While Ramadan thus cannot be said to actually use contextual knowledge as an independent source of law, he nevertheless argues that the importance of knowledge of the context justifies the inclusion of the specialists on the context on a permanent and equal footing into the elaboration of Islamic ethics. Ramadan’s reform “[...] entails shifting the centre of gravity of religious and legal authority in contemporary Muslim societies and communities”.²⁷ It is ultimately a question of authority and power. The radicalism of Ramadan’s proposal lies in this inclusion of scholars from other sciences into the highest authorities of Islamic interpretation.

However, Ramadan also justifies such an inclusion with the notion that the two kinds of revelations, written book and “outspread” book, are in fundamental correspondence. According to Ramadan, the two revelations echo each other: written revelation mirrors, recalls, clarifies, and specifies what is known through Creation.²⁸ This can be understood as an argument for an ethics based on reason and revelation, in which ethical insight is understood to be available both through human experience and reason and through revelation, but where revelation is regarded as clarifying and specifying what is known through reason. In Islamic theology, such a position is often understood to follow from the idea that Islamic revelation purports to confirm previous revelations, reviving natural religion as revealed in created human nature, recalling the revelations of previous prophets, and putting right what has been forgotten or corrupted by humans. This is a quite traditional Islamic understanding – Muhammad as the last in a long line of

²⁶ Ramadan, Tariq: *Radical Reform*, p. 33. Ramadan also makes a distinction when discussing what is sometimes called Islamic economics, claiming that the methods and models of economic theory are everywhere the same, while the ethic that guides economic activity, on the other hand, can be Islamic in the goals and norms it provides. This illustrates, I take it, that he operates with a distinction between positive science and normative ethics. Op. cit., p. 128.

²⁷ Op. cit., p. 124.

²⁸ Op. cit., pp. 88ff. There is obviously here an affinity with natural law as it is understood in Christian tradition, but it is not a concept used or a relation discussed by Ramadan himself.

prophets, who were also recognized by other Abrahamic religions – but the extent to which revelation in the Quran is understood to add something new to ethical insight varies considerably between Islamic thinkers, and is dependent upon the how far the corruption and forgetfulness of humanity are assumed to have gone. Ramadan states that although Islamic revelation introduces some more specific requirements of practice and ethics, the core of its message is the same as in previous revelations.²⁹ It is notable, however, that when arguing for the view of the Universe as an independent source of revelation, Ramadan constantly refers to the written revelation. It is through the study of revelation in Quran that he comes to the conclusion that Nature is also revelation.³⁰ There is thus an interplay between revelation and reason as sources of ethics in Ramadan's thought. This tension is not completely resolved in Ramadan's works, but given his overall emphasis on revelation as being fundamentally in accordance with what can be known in Creation, my interpretation is that Ramadan's position is that ethical insight can be achieved through both reason and revelation, and while it is possible to achieve ethical insight by recourse to reason alone, he articulates his own ethic using the resources of revelation.

Proactive Islamic ethics

That religious ethics enter into the personal formation of political opinions of believers is a premise of Ramadan's entire reform. However, he is concerned that the ethic to which Muslims have access when formulating their positions is largely formulated by scholars of jurisprudence, *fuqaha*, who are entrenched in a reactive position towards modernity and progress. Due to the complexity of the modern world and the ever-accelerating rate of progress, scholars have attempted to adapt jurisprudence to new realities. In the process, how-

²⁹ Ramadan, Tariq: *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, p. 19. Such an understanding implies that the Islamic understanding of what other religion's revelations are about are more correct than their own, a claim that is not without its problems.

³⁰ Ramadan, Tariq: *Radical Reform*, p. 89. This is, incidentally, not so far from Christian natural law thinking either. For an excellent discussion of the often misunderstood role of Scripture in scholastic natural law-thought, see Porter, Jean: *Natural and Divine Law. Reclaiming the Tradition for Christian Ethics*. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1999, pp. 131ff.

ever, they have come to accept the direction of development as given and consequently have envisioned Islamic ethics and the moral life as something which must be protected from the workings of the world. Ramadan's proposal is that scholars who wish to break out of this reactionary position should elaborate ethical guidelines for Muslims in *fatwa*-councils where the interpretation and contextualization of Islamic sources is the joint task of scholars of Islamic jurisprudence and experts of other relevant disciplines. This will give Islamic ethics both a more thorough knowledge of the world in all of its aspects and greater confidence in approaching both the world and the Islamic sources. According to Ramadan, this will enable Islamic ethics to turn from reaction to a proactive stance, assuming a transformational role and influencing society more broadly.

The *fatwa*-councils are at the heart of Ramadan's effort to reform both interpretation and the world. The work of *fatwa*-councils can be understood in the category I have called intra-organizational formulation, it being the work of religious bodies to formulate an ethic for the faithful and to provide reflections which influence the formation of personal political opinions. Obviously, since they are not legislative bodies but provide ethical counsels, adherence to the ethic which they develop is dependent on the free choice of ordinary Muslims. Ramadan also envisions these councils as speaking publicly about their findings, so that their theologically informed reflection on ethics is made available for public debate. One could argue that their message, being intended to guide consciences, will largely be of interest to believers and, as such, not really public. But Ramadan's contention is that the ethical reflection thus produced should also be available for public discussion and will benefit debate in society at large. According to Ramadan, positions adopted so publicly could also form the basis of alliances with other movements and individuals.³¹

The public address which Ramadan calls for is not limited to public statements by the councils, however. Its most important aspect develops upon ordinary Muslims and is characterized by Ramadan as witness. Instead of the dualistic division of the world into the abode of Islam and the abode of war, as invoked by Islamic conservatives,

³¹ Ramadan, Tariq: *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, p. 163. As already argued, there will be different *fatwa*-councils reaching different conclusions on the same subjects. One must assume then that they also engage each other in public debate. This in an aspect of the public debate which Ramadan does not discuss, but which is potentially fruitful as an aspect of democratic culture.

Ramadan proposes a view of the entire world as the abode of testimony.³² This testimony involves “[...] acting for justice in every sphere of social, economic and political life, and [...] promoting solidarity with all groups of needy people who are forgotten or culpably neglected or marginalized” but, importantly, it also means publicly demonstrating faith and spirituality, thus allowing “[...] the identity and social responsibility of Muslims to be both expressed and linked”.³³ While the theoretical formulation of Islamic ethics is largely the work of councils of experts, Muslims have an important role in publicly living the reality of that ethic. According to Ramadan, they must engage in social, political, economic, and cultural action in conformity to Islamic ethics and enact the transformation that councils formulate. This is not only a question of letting actions speak for themselves. Rather, it is also important to Ramadan that believers express the religious reasons which motivate their actions.³⁴

Ramadan justifies the inclusion of religious arguments in public debate on the grounds of religious freedom and freedom from discrimination, and because they give access to important and much needed contributions. Ramadan criticizes what he claims is a tendency of dogmatic secularism in the West, one that aims to completely ban all reference to the religious in the public realm. He claims that faith involves both private and public needs, and the latter are not only those of religious practice but also a need to express a religiously informed ethic publicly. Whether religious or atheists, people must be able to be true to their values and beliefs in their public engagements, argues Ramadan. If the aim of keeping public space neutral leads to the suppression of the voicing of such convictions, the result is oppression. In Ramadan’s view, secularism would then impose unacceptable dogmatic restrictions on the sphere of negotiated power.³⁵ This I understand to be an argument which bases itself on the importance of religious freedom and the relevance of such freedom because religious tradition is essentially concerned with political choices.

Ramadan goes further, claiming that secularism in fact results in discrimination. According to Ramadan, secularism sometimes devel-

³² Ramadan, Tariq: *What I Believe*, p. 51.

³³ Ramadan, Tariq: *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, pp. 73ff.

³⁴ Op. cit., p. 243 note 11.

³⁵ Ramadan, Tariq: *Radical Reform*, pp. 262f. As he puts it, secularism can operate dogmatically with uncontested truths, holy places, and polarized discourse that separate the elect from the damned.

ops into a militant ideology which demands that religion become completely invisible, to the point where the exercise of citizenship is never inspired by religious convictions and where references to Islam disappear completely from the public. But in fact, Ramadan claims, no political system is completely void of religious reference. Rather, the illusion that a complete separation of religion from the public is possible will privilege the dominant tradition, which is perceived as neutral or non-religious.³⁶ The religious expressions of the dominant tradition will be treated as non-problematic even as other traditions are met with demands to become invisible, something which constitutes discrimination and thus injustice. According to Ramadan, such secularism, by claiming that segregation and its accompanying social problems are due to a failure by Muslims to integrate culturally by letting go of Islam, also tends to obscure the material issues of socioeconomic inequality, structural racism, and the distribution of power.³⁷

On the contrary, Ramadan believes that Islamic ethics can provide a perspective which strengthens democratic culture through its insistence on ethical visions to guide politics. Ramadan criticizes the tendency of contemporary politics to abandon any ethical vision and turn instead to pure management, often justified through claims about an “end of ideology”. According to Ramadan, this claim is itself highly ideological. It is intended to marginalize all opposition to the dominant order by positing liberal market economy as the only possibility. Such a claim implies that there is no ideological choice, no political commitment needed, and that descriptive objectivity and non-political instrumentalization can take the place of ideals. This tendency is aggravated, in Ramadan’s opinion, by the secularist dogmatism discussed previously. He believes that in such a situation, a religious ethic can be of vital importance for the practice of politics. The insistence in Islamic thought on moral visions as informing politics offers a much needed contribution to present-day society.³⁸ It is a central tenet of Ramadan’s Islamic ethic that all spheres of human action must be held to ethical standards. A separation of politics and religious ethics,

³⁶ Ramadan, Tariq, op. cit., p. 269. That politics inspired by Islam are treated with more suspicion than the Christian counterpart is an obvious example. Ramadan, Tariq: *Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity*. The Islamic Foundation, Leicester, 2001, p. 196.

³⁷ Ramadan, Tariq: *Radical Reform*, p. 268; Ramadan, Tariq: *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, p. 146.

³⁸ Ramadan, Tariq: *Radical Reform*, pp. 195 and 261ff.

to the extent that all reference to ethics disappear from the field of politics and negotiated authority, must therefore be rejected.³⁹ Islamic tradition can highlight the importance of keeping the exercise of power in the field of politics open to ethical questioning. This will in turn enable the scrutiny of the pressure exercised by interest groups and international actors such as multinational corporations.⁴⁰

Moreover, Ramadan claims that religions and cultures are sources of inspiration for social and political models which can enrich and breathe life into the project of democracy and civic responsibility.⁴¹ Not only does an Islamic ethics insist on the importance of ethical visions to guide politics, it is also a source of such visions. Islamic ethics supplies motivation to work for justice, contributes to public debate through challenge, criticism, and the articulation of alternatives, and can articulate the basis for alliance with other movements.

One important contribution by Islam in the contemporary world is through its potential as a source of inspiration in the work of reforming the world. Muslims as people are part of a tradition which strongly motivates them to work to realize the good, Ramadan claims. He writes that Islamic ethics entails:

[...] the imperative requirement of resisting with one's heart, conscience and skills; determined patience and active perseverance to go on; confidence in the name of meaning, regardless of results. This is how Muslim spirituality, echoing all the spiritualities of the world, teaches the meaning of dignity.⁴²

Ramadan believes that Islamic ethics has the power to instill a certain stance of confidence and resistance. He claims that it is known, through faith, that nothing human is eternal or impossible to undo, that no human power is absolute, and that anything is possible. Such insights liberate people to transform the world into a better place.⁴³ This confidence is exhibited in the work of Ramadan himself, where an emphasis on the world order as oppressive and unjust, in which power

³⁹ Ramadan, Tariq, op. cit., pp. 264ff.

⁴⁰ Ramadan, Tariq: *Islam and the Arab Awakening*, pp. 107 and 112.

⁴¹ Op. cit., pp. 108ff.

⁴² Ramadan, Tariq: *Radical Reform*, pp. 291f.

⁴³ Op. cit., pp. 316f.

is held by mainly undemocratic actors or corrupted by vested interest, coexists with the secure belief that reform is possible.⁴⁴

As we have seen, Ramadan at the same time believes that confidence in Islamic ethics must be restored by means of the reform of interpretative method which he proposes. He distinguishes between *adaptation reform* and *transformation reform*, arguing that Islamic ethics must concern itself with the latter. Adaptation reform, Ramadan argues, is the reactive position of many scholars of jurisprudence addressing modernity and the West. They adapt to new circumstances by trying to create protected areas for an Islamic ethic, defending it against new developments. But the problem with this strategy, Ramadan claims, is that developments which are incompatible with Islam are thereby implicitly accepted and confirmed. For example, Ramadan claims that the practices of Islamic banking within the international system of finance only confirm the logic and dominance of the capitalist world economy, at worst contributing to the logic of the system by turning Islam, from a signifier of resistance, to a marketing label which sells financial goods and services to Muslims attempting to live in accordance with their faith. According to Ramadan, Islamic ethics should instead concern itself with transformation reform, which means taking a proactive stance and questioning the direction of progress, not simply shielding the faithful from it. Ramadan claims that an ethic is not something which should be protected from the world; faithfulness to an ethic should be the reason for changing the world. Islamic ethics can be a force for resistance to the dominant world order by acting as a creative force, suggesting solutions to the challenges of the moment, and developing goals which are both visionary and realistic.⁴⁵ In the example about banking practice, an Islamic ethic should question and criticize the aims and consequences of the economic system itself. Ramadan's conviction is that the confidence needed to engage in transformation reform can be gained through the increased expertise of the *fatwa*-councils as implied in Ramadan's methodological suggestion.

Ramadan claims that Islamic ethics contributes critique, resistance, visions, and transformative practices to the public.⁴⁶ The proactive

⁴⁴ Baum also notes that Ramadan shares a hopeful attitude with many other Sunni thinkers, approaching the challenges of human existence with confidence. Baum, Gregory: *The Theology of Tariq Ramadan*, p. 165.

⁴⁵ Ramadan, Tariq: *Radical Reform*, pp. 32f.

⁴⁶ Op. cit., pp. 81f and 148.

position which he wants Islamic ethics to take implies challenging and questioning the goals of progress, seeking to redirect it by criticism and proposals. He writes: “If Islam and Muslims can provide a meaningful contribution today, it lies in questioning the goals of life and in the requirement of improving its quality.”⁴⁷

According to Ramadan, such Islamic ethics implies resistance to consumerism, neoliberal capitalist market economy, and culture as homogenization or entertainment. Also, Muslims should remind the West of the discrepancy between the values of democracy, equality and well-being, and the policies of their governments with respect to the global South.⁴⁸ They can act as the voice of the voiceless, of the victims of dictatorships, of economic injustice, and of clandestine immigrants.⁴⁹ Islamic ethics thus can act as a source for the ethical vision that is desperately needed in contemporary politics. Ramadan thus calls upon Muslims to bear witness to their faith in their everyday lives – in political debate, in solidarity actions, and in everyday consumption.⁵⁰ Resistance should always be non-violent, however, argues Ramadan. He believes that the transformation of the world must be achieved through a transformation of ethics. While Ramadan is sympathetic to the desperation that leads to the taking up of arms in many circumstances of oppression across the globe, and while he condemns the tendency to denounce only the violence of the weak and not the violence of the system or the oppressors, he also stipulates that political violence cannot be justified.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Ramadan, Tariq, op. cit., p. 257.

⁴⁸ He writes:

For their fellow-citizens, those Muslim citizens who are the most actively engaged also bear a message about humanity: we cannot extol democracy for ourselves and silently allow our governments to deal with the most sinister dictators. We cannot denounce violence and at the same time stand passive before the most fearful and deadly terror of an economic order that is responsible for the deaths of forty thousand people every day.

Ramadan, Tariq: *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, p. 111.

⁴⁹ Op. cit., p. 172.

⁵⁰ Op. cit., p. 123. Ramadan suggests that Muslims consider the treatment of animals, the fairness of trade and the production technologies of the goods that they consume.

⁵¹ Without going into too much detail on this subject, this statement should probably be understood as subject to some qualifications, such as the right of states to self-defense. See Ramadan, Tariq: *Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity*, pp. 103 and 176ff.

According to Ramadan, the Islamic ethics elaborated by *fatwa*-councils and the testimony of Muslims will serve to call the larger public to values that appeal to all people of good will. Because these values are shared across traditions, Ramadan believes that they can be the basis of alliances and cooperation in solidarity with other movements struggling for justice. Ramadan is confident that Muslims can share the struggle against unjust societies and an immoral world economy with Christians, Jews, and humanists.⁵² Potential partners in struggle include the alter-globalization movement and Liberation Theology, both non-Islamic leftist organizations whose aims he sees as in accordance with the objectives of Islamic reform.⁵³

As already noted, Ramadan believes that the reasons and arguments of religious ethics, in the form of contributions to debate and pronouncements by *fatwa*-councils, can be understood in public debate and form the basis of alliances with other movements. He identifies three intellectual dispositions as prerequisites for public debate to be constructive: humility, respect, and coherence. Humility implies that no civilization or religion holds a monopoly of universal values or good modernity; respect for the other means viewing him or her as a contributor both constructively and critically; and concern about coherence leads to a self-critical spirit and impartial judgments.⁵⁴ While Ramadan also identifies obstacles to constructive public debate, such as racism, islamophobia, and problematic developments in the media climate, he seems quite optimistic about the possibility for Islamic ethics to make itself understood. Also, he addresses these obstacles mainly by discussing the position which Muslims should assume in order to combat them: a confident and proactive stance of contribution, challenge, resistance, and open debate.⁵⁵ While in Ramadan's account, Islamic tradition forms the context for the elaboration of reasons and arguments, he is confident that the Islamic ethics which he is elaborating can be directed to all people of goodwill and understood by them, even if such understanding is premised on certain disposi-

⁵² Ramadan, Tariq: *Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity*, p. 188.

⁵³ This should not, however be understood as a wholesale acceptance of socialism. We will return to Ramadan's position in this regard in the section on justice.

⁵⁴ Ramadan, Tariq: *Radical Reform*, pp. 306ff.

⁵⁵ The term contribution is thus also a term that marks opposition to a certain discourse about the integration of immigrants, implying a less defensive and more proactive stance. Ramadan, Tariq: *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, p. 55.

tions. These considerations makes it plausible to characterize him as adhering to an epistemology of possibility.

Ramadan's position can be understood, in my opinion, as a theory of consonance. The content of an ethics developed in Islamic tradition has largely the same content as an ethics developed via recourse to human reason and experiences. Although he sometimes refers to special requirements that come with Islamic tradition, it is my view that these are not significant enough to alter this categorization and that these specific requirements should be understood as mainly addressing ritual.⁵⁶ Ramadan does not specify the precise content of such requirements of Islamic tradition, but in my view this aspect of his thought can be plausibly understood as contextualization of universal values.

Ramadan frequently refers to Islam as a bearer of universal values. While his own project is focused on developing the ethical implications of his own tradition and its contribution to reviving public debate, he is at the same time convinced that there is a fundamental correspondence between ethical insight as it is available in the Quran, in Creation, and in other religious and secular traditions. The notion of *fitra*, human nature, in Ramadan is used to strengthen the idea that God's objectives are revealed to humankind in many different ways, communicated over and over again, although often misunderstood by the recipients. Ramadan even states: "The last message brings nothing new to the affirmation of the principles of human dignity, justice and equality: it merely recalls and confirms them."⁵⁷

Ramadan claims that values such as dignity, liberty, justice and equality are shared across traditions and thus that the values he proposes to guide Muslim social action are universal.⁵⁸ The problem in the world, as Ramadan sees it, is not a lack of unanimity about the good and the right, but a failure to live up to these ideals. The role of an Islamic ethics, then, is to call people to act in adherence to these shared values in political, social, and economic practice.⁵⁹ If Ramadan's position on the content of religious ethics is understood in this

⁵⁶ Ramadan, Tariq: *Radical Reform*, p. 90. See also Ramadan, Tariq: *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, p. 19.

⁵⁷ Ramadan, Tariq: *The Messenger. The Meanings of the Life of Muhammad*. Penguin books, London 2008, p. 22. The last message is understood in Islamic tradition to be the message of Muhammad, who was the last of the Prophets.

⁵⁸ Ramadan, Tariq: *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, p. 156.

⁵⁹ Ramadan, Tariq: *Radical Reform*, pp. 306f; Ramadan, Tariq: *What I Believe*, p. 5.

way, it would seem to imply that Islamic ethics can make no specific contribution to public debate that goes beyond inspiration and mobilization, yet Ramadan seems to claim that more substantial contributions are also possible.

This tension is, in my view, best resolved by conceptualizing Ramadan's universal values as abstractions which need to find a plurality of forms and contextualizations in different traditions. On this account, the work of creating new models of for example justice and democracy must be effected in and through traditions, which are the sources not only of tradition-bound legitimacy and a motivational force for uniform values but of critical and creative potential for imagining and interpreting universals. Traditions are necessary for understanding universal values so as to bring them a more specific content and meaning. In his latest book, on the Arab Spring, Ramadan writes about the importance of local traditions:

The Arab peoples, like all those of the Global South, cannot and do not want to disregard the cultural and religious traditions that have defined and nurtured them. It is to be hoped that in the name of the shared values to which peoples aspire – freedom, justice, equality, autonomy, and pluralism – they will find, within their own references, the modalities that govern the production and application of these values. Not only will this produce, this endogenous production of values and symbols confer upon them internal legitimacy; one hopes it will create new approaches, new models, contributing as it does to the constructive criticism of contemporary models of democracy. [...] To accept that the peoples of the Global South possess the capacity, based on their own referential framework, to produce new models of democracy (and management of pluralism), and new form of international relations [...] would entail an end to projecting and imposing a synthesis that glorifies the West and amputates other civilizations of their creative potential.⁶⁰

The practices and ethical imperatives of Islamic tradition contain knowledge about the aims to be achieved in human life, Ramadan claims. Such contributions must be developed by Muslims, but all traditions have contributions to make to the understanding of the content of ethics. Ideally, he argues, public debate should be informed by a pluralism of religious and philosophical traditions. Ramadan calls for cooperation and alliance between movements and for justice on the

⁶⁰ Ramadan, Tariq: *Islam and the Arab Awakening*, pp. 20f.

basis of such shared values while at the same time claiming that such an alliance hinges on the acknowledgement that the other has the legitimate right to understand these values through his or her own tradition, to “[...] return to the living sources of his religion, spirituality, culture and civilization”.⁶¹ Understood in this way, Ramadan’s position is also an argument against the universalization of a particular and Western understanding of these shared values.

Such a monopolization of the shared values by Western tradition is criticized by Ramadan because the failure to appreciate the potential of other traditions devalues them and deprives people of the resources contained in other traditions for imagining universal values. The Western history of colonialism and imperialism is of importance to this argument. Ramadan argues that the traditions of peoples who have apparently been defeated in history have a special contribution to make because their perspective allows them to see things to which the dominant tradition is blind.⁶² Ramadan takes this to imply a critique of relationships of power and a call to end patterns of domination in order to face the common challenges of humanity.

Ramadan claims that his Islamic ethics is universal. This should be understood, I believe, as a claim to at least three things. First, I see Ramadan as operating with an epistemology of possibility and thus claiming that there exist reasons for his ethic which are transcontextually understandable. Also, his position entails a theory of consonance, which means that the content of the Islamic ethic he proposes is the same as in ethics elaborated in other traditions of philosophy or religion. And lastly, the claim to universality is a critique of the cultural imperialism of the West, which denies any universal values but its own.⁶³ Thus, Islamic universalism must be understood, not as a negation of so-called Western values, but as an opposition to Western hegemony.⁶⁴ This hegemony, according to Ramadan, asserts itself concretely in military, political, and economic terms but also through ideology, by invoking a Western monopoly of modernity and its values, such as liberty, autonomy, and democracy. Not only are such values held to be exclusively Western in origin, it is also asserted that the only proper understanding of them is the one prevalent in the West

⁶¹ Ramadan, Tariq: *Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity*, p. 190.

⁶² Ramadan is here referencing the ideas of Swiss sociologist Jean Ziegler.

⁶³ Ramadan, Tariq: *Radical Reform*, pp. 145 and 282.

⁶⁴ Ramadan, Tariq: *Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity*, p. 292.

and that consequently any search for the universal in and through another tradition is illegitimate.⁶⁵ It is my understanding of Ramadan that his insistence on the universality of the Islamic values should be seen as a claim to the specific contribution by Islam to the shared universals of common society.⁶⁶ Ramadan writes about the Arab Spring:

The aspirations of peoples for greater freedom, justice and democratization echo fundamental Western values, but they find expression in distinct cultural and religious references that the West can neither continue to ignore or delegitimize. People are rising up, bringing with them as they do their stories, their memories, their being, and their faith. They must be heard in the coherence of their resistance and their hopes.⁶⁷

Secularity and secularism

Secularity understood as distinction and separation of religious authority and political power is advocated by Ramadan. Such separation of orders of authority and legitimacy is, he argues, part of the Islamic tradition, where it is articulated in terms of the distinction between matters of faith and worship and matters of social affairs which was referred to in the section on interpretative method. According to Ramadan, questions of faith and worship are governed by the authority of revelation and therefore imposed from above by religious institutions. However, such authority applies only to those who believe in it and requires that the individual conscience subscribe to it. By contrast, in social and political matters, power is negotiated and its legitimacy is a function of participation, consultation, and respect for rights. The authority vested in states must therefore be freely and openly granted by the people.⁶⁸ While religious authority should not be imposed in the political domain, it is, as we have already seen, important to Ramadan that Islamic ethics, understood as a corpus of principles and objec-

⁶⁵ Ramadan, Tariq: op. cit., p. 7.

⁶⁶ Ramadan, Tariq: *What I Believe*, p. 116.

⁶⁷ Ramadan, Tariq: *Islam and the Arab Awakening*, p. 136.

⁶⁸ One can observe here a gradual shift where in 2009, Ramadan speaks more about participation or consultation, where in 2012 he often uses the concept democracy. This, I argue, should not be understood as a shift in his position on democracy as a phenomenon but rather as a shift in terminology. The earlier hesitation to refer to democracy is due to an understanding of the concept that identifies it with a specific model, while the latter use is a consequence of understanding the term democracy as an ideal, invested with the values of civil rights, popular participation, etc.

tives, be allowed to orient and inspire political action. The arguments and reasoning of religious ethics are an expression of civil society which must not be stifled. Ramadan thus claims that an optimal articulation between religious and state authority must be sought, where religion can provide moral orientation but where state authority remains granted and legitimized by the power of the citizens.⁶⁹ The specifics of how the relation is worked out must be allowed to vary according to context, argues Ramadan.⁷⁰ Thus, he claims, just as Western constitutions refer differently to Christianity, taking Islam into account in majority Muslim countries is perfectly legitimate.⁷¹

Ramadan considers the Muslim critique which denounces secularism as un-Islamic to be a reaction to the historical experiences of colonialism and imperialism, in which secularization has effectively meant forced de-islamization and Westernization carried out by non-democratic regimes. In Ramadan's understanding, what lies behind the call for an Islamic state in Islamist movements is "[...] the desire for reconciliation with their heritage and the imperative to break free from Western domination and to chart an original path leading to independence".⁷² However, Ramadan claims that the problematic associations and history of the concept of secularism should not lead Muslims to a rejection of the idea itself. This position is part of a more comprehensive stance adopted by Ramadan, who insists that Muslims must not define themselves in opposition to the West because this will at times lead them to act contrary to their own values. While resistance to colonialism and the experiences of discrimination and of western hypocrisy in the international arena can explain such opposition, it is imperative that Islamic interpretations be judged only in relation to the values and aims of tradition itself, not defined in opposition to something else.⁷³

According to Ramadan, the idea of an Islamic state in which religion would impose its authority upon the state, or control it, is both dangerous and contrary to Islam.⁷⁴ He claims that such a state would invite an unacceptable degree of religious dogmatism and a lack of

⁶⁹ Ramadan, Tariq: *Islam and the Arab Awakening*, pp. 111f.

⁷⁰ Ramadan, Tariq: *Radical Reform*, pp. 262f; Ramadan, Tariq: *Islam and the Arab Awakening*, p. 81.

⁷¹ Ramadan, Tariq: *Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity*, p. 80.

⁷² Ramadan, Tariq: *Islam and the Arab Awakening*, p. 91.

⁷³ Ramadan, Tariq: *Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity*, p. 52.

⁷⁴ Ramadan, Tariq: *Islam and the Arab Awakening*, pp. 111f.

respect for pluralism, and it would disable the theological critique of power. The notion that religious control over state authority is deeply problematic seen from the perspective of Islamic tradition is not developed in any detail by Ramadan. Baum argues that, for Ramadan, such a state is un-Islamic because virtuous living cannot be imposed from above. This is not a point made explicitly by Ramadan, but it certainly can be taken to follow from Ramadan's concept of testimony, the duty of every Muslim to bear witness, which would be void if moral living were mandatory.⁷⁵

A sufficiency understanding of justice

Justice is something referred to constantly in Ramadan's works. He claims that the mission of the Muslim community is "to bear witness to their faith in the presence of God before the whole of humankind by standing on the side of justice and human dignity in all circumstances".⁷⁶ However, he does not advance a systematic account of his concept of justice. I will reconstruct his conception of justice by analyzing both his references to justice and his critique of injustice. It is my contention that Ramadan's account of justice can be understood as a sufficiency account with certain structural dimensions. Justice in Ramadan's view means that every person should have enough for a dignified human life. This notion is non-comparative in the sense that, although it is important that every person is able to lead a life above a certain threshold, it does not imply anything about distribution above such a level. However, there are also elements of Ramadan's account which point beyond a sufficiency account to a more structural account of justice. This is because he understands the capitalist system and the massive economic disparities which it creates to have unacceptable consequences for democracy, spirituality, and the environment. While Ramadan's understanding of justice leads him to criticize capitalism harshly, he does not spell out any alternative in terms of economic and political system. Instead, he rather calls for the construction and appli-

⁷⁵ Baum likewise recognizes that in Ramadan's opinion, religion must be separate from state to be able to criticize political power. Baum, Gregory: *The Theology of Tariq Ramadan*, p. 124.

⁷⁶ Ramadan, Tariq: *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, p. 91.

cation of new models, seeing small scale initiatives such as fair trade as exemplary.

Ramadan's account of justice can be understood as primarily a sufficiency account. According to Ramadan, a just society must provide for every person the opportunity to meet fully the needs of their humanity. Without claiming to be exhaustive, he specifies seven rights that must be protected: the right to life and a livelihood, to family, to housing, to education, to work, to justice, and to solidarity. The right to justice, as he sees it, requires a society which both guarantees fair application of law and meets the requirements needed for the enjoyment of the other rights.⁷⁷ The right to solidarity should be understood, I claim, as the right of every person to have the means to show solidarity with others. In Ramadan's account, justice in the sense of sufficiency is due to every human being, regardless of citizenship status, and this calls for special attention to non-citizens and immigrants since "[...] such differences in status are used to justify differential treatment that can contradict the principle of respect for human dignity".⁷⁸ An account of citizenship must therefore, in his opinion, also attend to other civic statuses, such as non-citizen and resident, which are used to justify exploitation and domination.⁷⁹ Justice can thus be understood to imply a threshold level below which people should not be allowed to fall, but it is clearly also informed by a structural attention to the consequences of institutional regulations.⁸⁰

This more structural understanding of justice is also evident in Ramadan's critique of capitalism. This critique is related to his account of justice as sufficiency, because Ramadan believes that eradication of poverty is a moral imperative which is incompatible with capitalism. He criticizes what he calls the global economic order associated with capitalism and neo-liberal economic policy and repeatedly refers to consumerism, the search for profits, commercial exploitation, the blind accumulation of wealth, and quantitative growth as deeply

⁷⁷ Ramadan, Tariq: *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, pp. 149ff.

⁷⁸ Ramadan, Tariq: *Islam and the Arab Awakening*, p. 167.

⁷⁹ Ramadan, Tariq: *Radical Reform*, pp. 268ff.

⁸⁰ In Islamic tradition, there is a history of traditional jurisprudence establishing what counts as absolute poverty, because jurisprudence establishes at what level of wealth one is obligated to pay the religious tax, *zakat*, instead of being considered a recipient of *zakat*. See Hjärpe, Jan: *Sharia*, pp. 55f. Ramadan's belief in the plausibility of articulating a sufficiency account of justice based on traditional sources might be at least in part due to this notion. Ramadan does not argue this explicitly, but the notion of *zakat* has significance for his understanding of justice, as will be clarified below.

problematic aspects of the contemporary world.⁸¹ While he does not want to ban all profit-earning activity as such, it is not acceptable for him that Muslims support the global capitalist system through their policies and daily consumption habits.⁸² “The effects of this economy, which produces injustice, death and the destruction of the planet, are anything but halal”, Ramadan writes.⁸³ Baum claims that Ramadan’s critique of capitalism is similar to Catholic social teaching: supportive of social democracy, critical of liberal capitalism, demanding a more just distribution, and calling for solidarity with the poor and marginalized. It is my interpretation, however, that Ramadan is likely calling for something slightly more radical than social democracy, something which can address more fundamentally the structures of society.⁸⁴

Ramadan’s critique of capitalism has, as I see it, at least three components above and beyond the claim that capitalism produces poverty. They concern its effect on democracy and sovereignty, spirituality, and the environment. The structures of capitalism are criticized by Ramadan for undermining sovereignty and democracy. He deplores the increasing power of international corporations, of international finance, and of the institutions of global economy such as the IMF, the WTO, and the World Bank. It is problematic that such economic power severely circumscribes the possibilities for independent political decisions in the economic arena, most notably in the Third World, where the structures of colonialism have not disappeared.⁸⁵ Ramadan writes:

⁸¹ Ramadan, Tariq: *Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity*, p. 164; Ramadan, Tariq: *Islam and the Arab Awakening*, p. 120.

⁸² Ramadan, Tariq: *Radical Reform*, pp. 239ff and 243ff.

⁸³ Op. cit., p. 247. Halal (*halāl*) is often translated as lawful, here meaning moral.

⁸⁴ Baum, Gregory: *The Theology of Tariq Ramadan*, pp. 34 and 162. The accuracy of Baum’s statement depends of course on which Catholic teaching, and also which understanding of social democracy is used for comparison. However, I would underline that since Ramadan claims that a viable alternative to capitalism that answers all the problems it has generated has yet to be devised, social democracy as it is practiced today is not the answer. The difference between Baum’s assessment and my own can perhaps be explained with source material: he uses *To be a European Muslim* and *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, which are less radical and less eloquent on issues of economic justice than *Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity* and *Islam and the Arab Awakening*.

⁸⁵ Ramadan, Tariq: *Radical Reform*, p. 287. See also Ramadan, Tariq: *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, p. 174.

[...] it must be acknowledged that today's states and democratically elected governments find themselves, structurally, in a position of virtual subservience to the economic sphere, which possesses its own imperatives, its institutions, and its multinationals where egalitarian, democratic, and/or transparent administrative practices are not enforced. The doctrine of free markets appears to be assuming the form of a new religion in the very heart of the secularized order.⁸⁶

On the individual human level, rampant capitalism can undermine democracy because civil rights are dependent on structures such as civic education and development of arenas for critical thought, free expression, and the questioning of power. These are undermined in turn by effects of the market economy such as the unequal ownership of media and socioeconomic marginalization, which cause dwindling rates of democratic participation.⁸⁷ Ramadan underlines that civil rights and economic rights cannot exist without each other since one protects the freedom to act and the other gives room to act. Economic structures can inhibit democracy.⁸⁸

Ramadan also stresses spiritual development as a central goal of human life which is neglected by consumer society. He claims that a culture fostered by capitalism is not conducive to personal spiritual growth. The view of the individual as *homo economicus* is incompatible with the Islamic understanding of the person, according to Ramadan.⁸⁹ The cultural climate which, he argues, results from the capitalist conditions of cultural production is hostile to the development of spirituality, here understood as closeness to God and responsible ethical living. This is so in the West as well as in the South, where the global economic order tears down social structures of traditional societies. Islam should therefore resist cultural imperialism and homogenization, and instead contribute to the fostering of a non-standardized taste and a culture which shows its appreciation for contributions from different and marginalized traditions.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Ramadan, Tariq: *Islam and the Arab Awakening*, p. 107.

⁸⁷ Ramadan, Tariq: *Radical Reform*, pp. 273ff.

⁸⁸ Ramadan, Tariq: *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, p. 249 note 35.

⁸⁹ Op. cit., p. 178.

⁹⁰ This is a point on which critics often accuse Ramadan of conservative moralism, of wanting to impose rules against music, movies, dancing, and so forth. The point, as I understand, it is rather about creating conditions for a more plural cultural production, thus enabling a other cultural forms to flourish in the face of hegemony.

Ramadan understands environmental problems to be the effect of capitalism because he understands the exploitation of nature to be a consequence of the capitalist logic which values all growth, regardless of what is produced and the side-effects. He also claims that the main victims of environmental degradation are the poor, who are doubly punished by an economic system which both keeps them poor and makes them pay for the lifestyles of the rich. The stated goal of his reform is thus both to eradicate poverty and to preserve the future of the planet.⁹¹ In Ramadan's thought, nature has an intrinsic value and should be saved not merely because of its importance to human well-being.⁹²

In my understanding, Ramadan's critique of capitalism implies a structural understanding of justice beyond the sufficiency account. It implies that fundamental structures of economic and political system should be altered to realize a more just society. In this society, not only would the basic welfare of every human being be satisfied to a certain threshold, but the organization of economic production and political system would be such as to guarantee every person the pre-conditions for a political voice and spiritual development, and prevent the destruction of the natural environment. Ramadan states that the development of an alternative economic system and practice should be guided by the higher objectives of respect for the dignity of humanity, nature and all living species, the protection of their welfare, their development, their diversity as well as fraternity, justice, and solidarity.⁹³

Ramadan claims that he does not have an answer to the question of which economic system can replace capitalism and achieve the objectives which he sets forth, but then, he notes, nor does anyone else. In his opinion, fundamental criticism of the neoliberal economy is imperative even though an efficient and coherent alternative is lacking. His belief is that reflection on economic policy made in cooperation between Islamic scholars, experts in economic theory, and other thinkers who have a critical approach towards the dominant economic model will lead to alternatives being developed and tested. In Ramadan's view, it is insufficient to create isolated areas of alternative practices or make cosmetic changes. What is needed to change the entire

⁹¹ Ramadan, Tariq: *Radical Reform*, pp. 253 and 258.

⁹² Op. cit., pp. 249ff. A concrete suggestion that Ramadan makes is that all organic produce should be considered halal, recommending people to simply add the prayer formula themselves before consumption.

⁹³ Op. cit., p. 243.

system is the formation of a grassroots movement.⁹⁴ He underlines that the countries of the global South need not only a new economic system but also a massive development effort which must be guided by the values of human dignity and be nourished by cultural and religious reference points.⁹⁵ For Ramadan, the alternative practices of development cooperatives, alternative banks, and ethical businesses may point the way forward. There are several elements of Ramadan's thoughts on justice that point to its leftist leanings. He seems inspired by socialist ideas about the need for economic emancipation to accompany political liberation, he cites writers such as Naomi Klein and Noam Chomsky, and he advocates that Muslims build alliances with movements such as the alter-globalization movement, South-South associations, and fair trade organizations. However, Ramadan also states that an Islamic economy will not be socialist.⁹⁶ He claims that, while the critical analysis of Marxists is indeed shared by pioneers of Islam, the alternatives suggested by Marxism require critical scrutiny.⁹⁷ This rejection of socialism must be understood in context. Socialism in the Arab world has historically been accompanied by dogmatic secularism, hostility toward Islam, and development geared toward a Western-style modernity. This is clearly not what Ramadan proposes and he has no reason to openly endorse a concept which carries such connotations. However, this does not alter the fact that his emphasis on reducing poverty and political control of the economy is traditionally understood as socialist, and that he shares his concerns about the environment, terms of trade, and cultural diversity with the movements of the left. Importantly, however, Ramadan understands his political position as resulting from his Islamic ethics and the higher objectives of human life contained therein. That there is a certain overlap with socialism does not affect his understanding in this respect and indeed can be understood from within Islamic tradition as a consequence of the consonance between ethics of revelation and ethics of reason.

As we have seen, Ramadan asserts that justice as understood through human experience and reason is largely the same as the understanding of justice developed in Islamic tradition. For him, justice is a universal value which must find contextualization and nuance by

⁹⁴ Ramadan, Tariq, op. cit., pp. 241ff. See also Ramadan, Tariq: *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, pp. 173 and 199.

⁹⁵ Ramadan, Tariq: *Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity*, pp. 157ff.

⁹⁶ Op. cit., p. 145. See also Ramadan, Tariq: *Islam and the Arab Awakening*, p. 54.

⁹⁷ Ramadan, Tariq: *Islam and the Arab Awakening*, pp. 123 and 234, note 63.

being understood in different traditions, but which nonetheless retains a certain meaning. He thus seems to believe that the paramount issue of justice is to mobilize for a more just distribution of what is readily identifiable as good for humans, such as life, family, housing, education, and work. Such mobilization can be effected via the resources of Islamic tradition, which contains ample incentives to work for justice. Islamic tradition also supplies confidence, and Ramadan himself is quite optimistic about the human realization of justice despite formidable obstacles. In Ramadan's vision, no divine intervention is necessary for the realization of justice.

Despite my contention that Ramadan in fact does not make revelation indispensable for an understanding of what justice entails, he nonetheless articulates an understanding of justice in which Islamic concepts and tradition are allowed to contribute distinctive ideas. This can be understood, I believe, as an application of Ramadan's position, that universal ethical values such as justice find their contextualization in different traditions and that the diverse nuances of these values thus developed can contribute something to the common understandings of the concepts. I will here consider some aspects of Islamic tradition which Ramadan highlights as relevant contributions to a deeper understanding of what justice entails.

Ramadan claims that the prohibition on *riba* (*ribā*) in Islamic jurisprudence, often understood as forbidding interest, makes capitalism incompatible with Islamic principles. Ramadan understands the prohibition to concern at least three aspects of capitalist economy. First, it prohibits making money without actual production, what Ramadan refers to as idle money making money, which rules out financial speculation.⁹⁸ It also entails a critique of the tendency to favour productivity or growth, regardless of what is being produced, including something that is useless or destructive to the community. Third, growth founded on exploitation and unfair terms of exchange and trade are likewise encompassed by the prohibition, Ramadan claims.⁹⁹ Thus, a rejection of *riba* implies opposition to the world economic order where "[...] terms of exchange are unequal, exploitation is permanent, speculation is extreme, [...] and] a billion and a half human beings live in comfort *because* almost four billion do not have the means to sur-

⁹⁸ Ramadan, Tariq: *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, p. 185.

⁹⁹ Ramadan, Tariq: *Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity*, pp. 146 and 152.

vive”.¹⁰⁰ These aspects of the current global economic order are unacceptable to Ramadan because they are incompatible both with the formal requirement to avoid *riba* and with the higher objectives which these prohibitions aim to realize, such as the dignity of humankind and the welfare and development of all living species.¹⁰¹

Another resource is the Islamic practice of fasting, which Ramadan claims should be understood as a critique of unsustainable development and consumerism. For him, fasting associates spiritual discipline with attention to the poor: “The quest for proximity to the One can only be experienced and perfected through proximity to the poor: respecting, caring for, and serving them bring one closer to God”.¹⁰² Fasting is linked to mobilization: by linking the poor and God it strengthens the motivation of believers to work against injustices.

In Ramadan’s understanding, the paying of *zakat* is also a sign of the close relationship between spirituality and working for justice: “A right understanding of *zakat* takes us to the heart of the social message of Islam: to pray to God is to give to one’s brother or sister”.¹⁰³ Ramadan claims that a proper understanding of the system of *zakat* means that the poor have rights upon the property of others. He translates *zakat* as a purifying tax, which must be paid to respect the claim that God and the poor have on all property. Only then is the property legitimate, i.e. purified.¹⁰⁴ “To possess is tantamount to having to share”, he claims.¹⁰⁵ The poor should therefore not be put to the humiliation of having to ask for help, nor should they have to depend on charity and goodwill to compensate for the injustice of the economic system.¹⁰⁶ Ramadan writes:

Islam does not conceive of poverty as a normal feature of the social arena and does not envisage that the remedy for this distortion should be the free generosity of some toward others in the hope that the wealth of the rich and the destitution of the poor may somehow mi-

¹⁰⁰ Ramadan, Tariq: *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, p. 188. Italics in original.

¹⁰¹ Ramadan, Tariq: *Radical Reform*, pp. 241ff.

¹⁰² Ramadan, Tariq: *The Messenger*, p. 150.

¹⁰³ Ramadan, Tariq: *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, p. 88.

¹⁰⁴ Ramadan, Tariq: *Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity*, p. 191.

¹⁰⁵ Op. cit., p. 144.

¹⁰⁶ Ramadan, Tariq: *Radical Reform*, pp. 255f.

raculously find a point of balance. The obligation of zakat puts this question into the realm of law and morality.¹⁰⁷

This points, according to Ramadan, to an understanding of poverty as something to be combatted systematically and not only through charity. Ending poverty is established as a question of justice. According to Ramadan, this perspective also points to the importance of preserving the dignity of those receiving help.¹⁰⁸ Ramadan is aware that much is wanting in the actual practice of *zakat*, and he is calling for a reform of the institution based on study of the mechanisms of unemployment, homelessness, illiteracy, and so forth in order to devise strategies to overcome them. *Zakat* should be organized into a global strategy against poverty with the autonomy of the poor as its aim, he argues.¹⁰⁹ The ultimate aim of *zakat* is to bring every poor person up to a level where he or she is able to pay the *zakat*.¹¹⁰ This points to Ramadan's understanding of poverty, by which poor people are deprived not only of the means for their wellbeing as strictly defined, but also of the means to show solidarity with their fellow human beings and the means to fulfil their religious duties. In Islamic tradition the latter two coincide. Ramadan writes:

A social organization that does not provide its members with this minimum undermines their integrity as created beings who have to give account of themselves before the Creator. To be by nature responsible means that one should have the means by which to carry out the responsibility one bears.¹¹¹

Ramadan also defends his vision of pluralism by reference to theological insights. The Creation of mankind in diversity contains insights for the issue of toleration, argues Ramadan. He states that since God created the world as it is, with its diversity of people, colours, and religions, it is the duty of every person to acknowledge the right of others to exist. This leads Ramadan to criticize the idea of toleration of what is different. Tolerance is in his view a transgression, a viola-

¹⁰⁷ Ramadan, Tariq: *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, p. 178.

¹⁰⁸ Ramadan, Tariq: *Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity*, pp. 140ff.

¹⁰⁹ Ramadan, Tariq: *Radical Reform*, pp. 254ff.

¹¹⁰ Ramadan, Tariq: *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, pp. 189 and 192.

¹¹¹ Op. cit., p. 149. In this instance, Ramadan is discussing duties which a person has in general, toward family for example. But the point is perhaps even more valid for social duties which are also religious duties.

tion of the limits of God, because the act of tolerating others implies a condescending posture towards them and their difference. It means that their existence or presence is something to be suffered. According to Ramadan, this falls short of the recognition of others demanded by the realization that their difference is the decision of God.¹¹²

In connection with his discussion of nature and the environment, Ramadan highlights the doctrine of humankind as vice-regents of God. According to Ramadan, the concept of vice regency in Islam implies that even though humankind is put in charge of Creation, God is in fact the only one who has ownership in the absolute sense. Creation is at the disposal of mankind only to certain limits, and the mandate does not extend to exploitation and destruction.¹¹³ Ramadan writes:

[...] it is the role of humankind to manage the world on the basis of an ethic of respect for creation not only because people do not own it but, more deeply and spiritually, because it is in itself an eternal and continual praise addressed to the Most High.¹¹⁴

As we have already seen, Ramadan's understanding of Creation is that it is part of revelation, and thus that it is replete with signs of the Creator, which bear witness to God.

Ramadan in comparison

While the writers of modified liberalism represent a position in which religious ethics are envisioned as enriching the public debate of a liberal capitalist society taken as given, and the writers of liberationism see their respective religious ethic as a tool to analyze and challenge such a society through a radical reinterpretation of tradition, Tariq Ramadan represent a third option, which I have called radical traditionalism, meaning the attempt to work out a politically radical religious ethic with essentially traditional methods. This means that he has certain resources at his disposal in the form of traditional methods and the authority that comes with them, but also that he must proceed

¹¹² Ramadan, Tariq: *Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity*, pp. 24 and 27, note 24.

¹¹³ Ramadan, Tariq: *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, p. 182.

¹¹⁴ Op. cit., p. 18.

in a way that can be justified according to traditional standards. Ramadan's interpretative method is an attempt to stay firmly within tradition. To a much greater extent than the alternative approaches, he insists that traditional methods, if they are understood to the best of our abilities and not simply taken at face value, are sufficient for an elaboration of a religious ethic which is not only relevant to the present age but crucial for faithfulness to the objectives of religious tradition. While the liberationists also justified the positions they developed with recourse to traditional concepts and ideas, they departed from the methods of tradition even when keeping close to it in other respects. This is particularly evident in the case of Shariati, who completely bypassed the vast corpus of Islamic ethical thought contained in jurisprudence. I contend that Ramadan's approach, because of its insistence on respecting the methods of tradition, has the advantage of allowing tradition to be developed as a particular avenue for reflection and thus to contribute distinctive insights. The interpretative method also has its problems however, to which I will return in the critical analysis section below.

The relevant context for Ramadan's thought, unlike that of liberationism, is again pluralism and a public space in which secularity is often perceived as ideal. This leads him to more thoroughly articulate a view of pluralism which is more adequate for contemporary societies and also avoids some of the normative problems entailed by assuming a monolithic society, including the risk of perpetuating marginalization and the invisibility of minorities. In contrast to the liberal thinkers who operate in this context, Ramadan thoroughly challenges and deconstructs the ideal of secularity, highlighting its inherent risks of discrimination which derive from the putative neutrality of the dominant discourse. Such an approach is constructive insofar as it clarifies that the demands of secularity are not neutral and do not have uniform effects on diverse traditions with different histories in a particular context.

Regarding justice, I have already noted that there are certain structural aspects of Ramadan's account of justice which resemble the liberationist account. This similarity points, however, to an unresolved tension between Ramadan's insights into the structural and material conditions of injustice, and the pervasive idealism of his strategy for reform. While Ramadan's criticism of capitalism is sometimes close to that developed by liberationism, the transformation which he calls

for is conceived of in idealist terms, as a transformation driven by ethics. This strong idealism in his account runs the risk of neglecting the enormity of the obstacles to the realization of justice. Such obstacles reside both in material conditions and the intricacy of structures of power and oppression.

Critical analysis

Ramadan's methodological position, of attempting to remain in the mainstream of tradition despite making some radical proposals, has some significant advantages. Being firmly anchored in the interpretative methods of his tradition, Ramadan can make use of the authority which that tradition carries. The potential impact which his ideas have on discourse among believers is considerable, thanks to the perception that he is an authority on Islam in a more traditional sense than many other Muslim reformers. Ramadan can be described as reclaiming tradition, taking up the struggle for the allegiance of believers on the field of traditional *fiqh*, which is often perceived to be the domain of conservative interpreters. For progressively-minded believers, such a move is important because it points to the possibilities of dynamism within tradition instead of portraying tradition and progression as mutually exclusive opposites.¹¹⁵ More generally, such traditionalism is also fruitful because it highlights the richness of traditions as avenues for many different kinds of theologies and ethics, opening them up as resources to be rediscovered. Almost inadvertently, the position of Ramadan also points to the unavoidable pluralism in interpretation. Without downplaying the importance of specialized knowledge for interpretive work, it also implies the need for believers' own personal responsibility when choosing which interpretations and recommendations to follow. This way of relating to tradition sketches an under-

¹¹⁵ Islamologist Jan Hjärpe also notes that because Ramadan closely follows the methods of traditional *fiqh* and firmly anchors his interpretations in tradition, the radical positions he develops acquire importance for the public debate and cannot be ignored even by conservatives or radical islamists. Hjärpe develops a different terminology according to which he does not understand Ramadan to be a traditionalist. It is my understanding that we make similar assessments of Ramadan's interpretative method as traditional with a contextual emphasis, but that he avoids the designation traditionalism because in his usage the term entails political conservatism. See Hjärpe, Jan: *Sharia*, pp. 150f and Hjärpe, Jan: *Islamism*, pp. 73f.

standing of authenticity and faithfulness to tradition as something which cannot be predefined in conservative terms, nor can it be reserved for one interpretation only. Rather, identity within tradition must be worked out thoroughly by developing thought in and through tradition but with the possibility of surprising results. Authenticity according to such an understanding can be aimed for in opposition to cultural imperialist tendencies, but must be allowed to be polyphonic, that is, argued for yet without violently rejecting all other positions as heretical. It is my position that such an understanding of tradition's role in the elaboration of a religious ethic is fruitful in the current context of pluralistic society, locally as well as globally, and a constructive attempt to avoid on the one hand taking reform so far as to step outside tradition altogether and on the other hand constructing faithfulness to tradition as necessarily involving conservatism.

However, relying on the traditional methods of interpretation and judgement in *fiqh* has its constraints, too, and there may be instances where these constraints will prove to be problematic. For example, Islamic ethicist Kecia Ali has criticized the contention of other Muslim feminists that traditional Islamic marriage contracts can, through the use of the framework of *fiqh*, be reformulated to serve feminist purposes. She claims that such interpretations bypass the issue that the contract in and of itself has patriarchal implications.¹¹⁶ Such criticism could also be made against Ramadan's interpretative method. There is no guarantee that the possibilities for reform within tradition will not be perceived as insufficient. Ramadan's project rests on a confidence that Islamic tradition has, in its own methods, the resources for every reform which might be needed. While it is important to acknowledge that there is no reason to doubt that confidence in Islamic tradition any more than one might any other tradition or philosophy, it remains an article of faith that the resources for transformation will be enough from a normative perspective.

The admission of scholars with contextual expertise to the work of interpreting Sharia is a constructive development with considerable potential, and the legitimacy attached to it through Ramadan's understanding of tradition is weighty. However, it also rests on a fundamentally optimistic view of specialist knowledge and science which is perhaps not warranted by either a theoretical or a historical perspective. As the history of emancipation shows, specialist knowledge can

¹¹⁶ Ali, Kecia: *Sexual Ethics & Islam*, pp. 11-13.

be a tool for the justification and perpetuation of oppression. Science, although sometimes breaking out of its constraints and showing something profoundly new, often simply mirrors the preconceptions of its surrounding society. Thus, although Ramadan's idea about the inclusion of scientific experts into the elaboration of Islamic ethics seems to be an adequate tool to achieve the purpose of infusing Islamic ethics with greater confidence and the resources necessary for formulating proactive proposals, it seems that it would not necessarily imply that the ethics thus elaborated are progressive to the extent that he aims for. In my analysis, there is a potential for a more progressive development if contextual knowledge can be interpreted in a way that more clearly and directly identifies social movements and representatives of the concerned among ordinary believers as relevant authorities on context. This would lead to other problems, such as how to identify the concerned, not unlike the issues discussed in relation to epistemological privilege in the chapter on Gutierrez, but also to new perspectival resources, something which could plausibly be seen as a development of Ramadan's method. Such a reinterpretation of what it means to be a scholar or an expert, if only on the context, would perhaps stretch what Ramadan's project can incorporate in terms of radicalism. On the other hand, it conforms to his suggestions, specifically because it could be motivated from the standpoint identified earlier as the third function of the context. This entailed, as was noted there, that contextual knowledge can provide adequate perspectives on what is at stake in any given issue, thereby enlarging the understanding of the ethical questions to include considerations previously thought irrelevant. Furthermore, the creation of spaces for such ethical discourse would fit well with the cooperation which Ramadan seeks to establish with social movements.

Ramadan's method also relies on his account of the higher objectives. He states that these are the protection of religion, life, reason, progeny and property, and sometimes also honour. Together they constitute the Quranic command to "promote good and ward off evil and harm" that is frequently cited as the epitome of the Islamic social ethic.¹¹⁷ However, an objection which could be raised against these is that these principles are so abstract that they do not actually impart any information on how to elaborate ethics on any concrete issue. This is perhaps less a problem when conceived as part of his interpretative

¹¹⁷ Ramadan, Tariq: *Radical Reform*, p. 71.

method. Understood as guiding principles in the elaboration of jurisprudence, these principles are elaborated upon in a certain framework of Sharia which forms a context and an understanding that lend them specificity. In that context, the objective to be extrapolated from a particular tradition stands in contrast to a formalist understanding of the same tradition, and is therefore not something to be related to in the abstract. However, Ramadan also claims that the higher principles are a common core of ethic for all people and can be found in all religions. His interpretation of these principles can be said to aim at such universality, as, for example, when he ties religion to the concept of human nature, *fitra*.¹¹⁸ However, as contenders for a universal ethic, there are many objections that can be raised against these objectives. While too abstract to provide any real guidance without some serious interpretative work, the choice of principles also seems too specific to be recognized as universal.¹¹⁹ Surely, the inclusion of property but not justice, to take one example, can be contested. These problems grow, the more Ramadan specifies the higher objectives into principles for different fields. Seen from a different perspective, however, it is perhaps not a problem that the Islamic universalism which Ramadan sets forth is recognizable as universally valid only by people already belonging to his tradition. Rather, this can be understood as a characteristic of all attempts at articulating universal values. My understanding is that the particularity of Ramadan's universalism is in fact intentional: it is a universal claim from within a tradition and self-consciously so. The point is not that he believes that these are principles to which everybody, on a descriptive level, will agree. Rather, it is a normative claim that these principles are universally valid and a challenge to Western pretensions to be the only possible articulation of universal values. I would surmise that if the aims of Sharia are understood as an articulation of one tradition's understanding of what the universal

¹¹⁸ For example, the concept of religion, *din* (*dīn*), is interpreted by Ramadan as something that each person can feel as a result of *fitra*. Thus understood, the protection of *din* is about protection of the good for humans and Creation, what in Islamic jurisprudence is called *maslaha*, the common good and interest. Ramadan, Tariq, op. cit., pp. 237f.

¹¹⁹ A similar point about Ramadan's universal principles is made by Badredine Arfi who claims that the universal principles which are to be the foundations of Ramadan's European Islam are haunted by both traces of the past and his expectations of the future. Arfi claims that Ramadan "cannot think of Islam as universal without framing it through a concrete Islam." See Arfi, Badredine: *Rethinking International Relations Theory via Deconstruction*. Routledge, Oxon 2012, p. 134 and quote on p. 112.

values of humanity are, rather than the universals *tout court*, the ethic elaborated through these aims can then be seen as one contribution to a common discussion about what is truly valuable for human life.

Ramadan's contention that an Islamic ethic is an important resource for critique of the current world order of liberal capitalism is plausible in the sense that he also shows how such a potent critique can be formulated in and through tradition. For example, I believe that his idea that it is a central part of human dignity to be able to show solidarity with others could be fruitfully elaborated. In Ramadan's account, the idea acquires its force from the religious duty to show solidarity. Because that command is applicable to every believer, we are made aware that this should not only be an option for those who can afford it; rather, it is a call for a society in which the practice of solidarity is within the reach of all. Such a vision could perhaps also be embraced by people who do not accept the premise that this is so for religious reasons.

Ramadan addresses the need for religious ethics to break out of reactionary positions and acquire confidence for proactive involvement in politics and for ordinary Muslims to understand the world as an abode of witness. His idea of Islam as a kind of counter-culture and source of ethical vision and political determination is compelling. However, he leaves largely unexamined the question of how such contributions are to be related to by those of other faiths and worldviews. His pluralistic vision of universal values which are understood in and through traditions perhaps makes him overly confident in the possibilities for such contributions to be heard and understood.¹²⁰ His own challenges to secularism, resting as they do on insights about discrimination, segregation, and racism, should perhaps lead to less confidence about the hospitability of the public. It would seem then that the cooperation with other social movements and the building of solidarity must entail considerable efforts of understanding on both parts, which are not theorized by Ramadan. Ramadan's position seems to be that the state of the world, not least as regards environmental degradation, is such that cooperation will be driven by pure necessity.¹²¹ Necessity, however, seems not always to produce the

¹²⁰ It is in this instance ironic that Ramadan himself has had enormous trouble to be heard for what he is actually proposing through the noise of Islamophobia claiming that he is planning a hostile takeover of Western society.

¹²¹ Ramadan, Tariq: *Radical Reform*, p. 150.

intended results. This is a point upon which Ramadan, in my opinion, is lead to be overly optimistic, at least partly because of his reliance on reason and his theory of consonance. A more thorough account of how witnessing and theological visions might be formulated to open up possibilities for solidarity would be an important step towards substantiating such optimism in the face of the structural impediments which Ramadan himself identifies.

Ramadan's account of justice is problematic, as I see it, because it is only partially articulated, and even though I have attempted a reconstruction, there remain unresolved tensions between what I have termed a sufficiency account of justice, centering on the provision of some basic human goods to each and every person, and a more structural understanding of justice that can be inferred from Ramadan's discussion of injustices. A sufficiency account of justice is, in my understanding, inadequate. Justice must entail something more than simply the provision of basic necessities to every human being, even if this is to a relatively high level of welfare. Inequality, in my view, should be understood as a normative problem in and of itself because it lacks viable justification, not simply because of its consequences for democratic governance or environmental issues. The structural understandings of justice hinted at in Ramadan's account are too undeveloped to analyze in any depth: what is called for is greater articulation of these aspects.

Ramadan's account of the objectives of Sharia to be realized in human life constitutes a resource for thinking on justice, because it is an account of what is truly valuable for humans, and thus what justice must secure and distribute. While there are many problems in stipulating such an account, because it implies in some sense an essentializing of humanity and thus does violence to actual difference, I believe there is great strategic value in such an account in the sense that a critique of injustice might be difficult to sustain in its absence. While the aims which Ramadan enumerates seems both too abstract and too specific, his idea that the ethics elaborated through them should be seen as one of many claims by tradition to contribute to the universal has the potential to stimulate further conversation.

8. John Milbank – The virtue of traditionalism

The subject of this chapter is John Milbank's Christian ethic. His traditionalist position on interpretative method is analyzed with respect to its claim to represent authentic tradition and its departure from conventional interpretations of its authorities. Milbank's position is understood as an ethic based on revelation. I examine Milbank's understanding of the role of Christian ethics in public, as constituting an alternative and exerting a persuasive influence through narrative. His notion of complex society is examined with special attention to the central functions of virtue for the practice of democracy. The claim that the Church should attempt to subsume society into its ordering is discussed with regard to its implicit theocratic leaning. Milbank is characterized as proposing an epistemological contextualism and a theory of contrast. Milbank's account of justice as virtue is analyzed, highlighting its claim that Christian virtue entails the realization of harmonious difference and its other theological elements. The comparative section points to fundamental differences between Milbank and Ramadan in terms of the relation between reason and faith, despite the similarities of their methodological stances. I develop a critique of Milbank's triumphalism, which is implicit in his claims to a single authenticity and epistemological violence toward other traditions. Finally, I undertake a discussion of his understanding of Marx and socialism, pointing to some misapprehensions but also potentially productive insights.

Interpretation and orthodoxy

John Milbank asserts that Christian ethics must be developed with the resources inherent in Christian tradition and that it should not borrow its methods or analytical tools from elsewhere. There is, in Milbank's

view, no neutral, rational, and universal account of human society or history. Theology must develop its own account of the final causes at work in human history, based on its own particular and historically specific faith. This account or theory is, in his view, first and foremost an ecclesiology in that it explicates Christian practice and provides an account of other human societies to the extent that they are in continuity and discontinuity with this practice. The task of theology is thus to “[...] tell again the Christian mythos, pronounce again the Christian logos, and call again for Christian praxis in a manner that restores their freshness and originality. It must articulate Christian difference.” Christianity is, for Milbank, essentially different from all other cultural systems, as both ethic and ontology.¹ To have an impact on the world, theology must not allow itself to be positioned or explained by any other discourse which purports to explain religion and theology in terms of some other, more fundamental, natural, or original phenomenon.² Rather, theology must assert itself as a meta-discourse which qualifies, positions, and criticizes other discourses, understanding them as theologies or heresies in disguise.³ In response to the sociological suspicion of religion, theology must develop a meta-suspicion which casts doubt on the possibility of suspicion itself. Modern theology must be rescued from its false humility, and should not borrow its diagnoses of social ills or its recommendations for solutions of these from analyses of social theory.

Theology’s claim to be able to read all historical and social reality through the practice of the Church is, according to Milbank, immanent within the Church’s self-understanding as a truly universal society.⁴ The theological interpretation of history and society implies a perspective in which all other history is given its most ultimate explanation as “[...] fundamentally anticipation, or sinful refusal of, salvation.” A strong ecclesiological perspective which claims salvation as at once both religious and public,

[...] must also be committed to the thesis that salvation is tied to the ultimacy of a particular historical practice, which is ceaselessly constituted as a certain ‘gaze’ upon history and society. This gaze would

¹ Milbank, John: *Theology and Social Theory*, pp. 382f, quotation on p. 383.

² Op. cit., p. 101.

³ Op. cit., pp. 1ff and 52.

⁴ Op. cit., p. 227.

have to regard itself as primary, if it were not to fall victim to total incoherence.

According to Milbank, faith is the commitment to this gaze that constitutes a metanarrative. In Milbank's view, all social scientific theories are narratives which locate ultimate meaning by telling the story of human history with certain emphases. Theology is also such a narrative, but its claim to be able to understand human history is made not on the basis of reason but on faith, which situates one as a Christian, belonging to the Church and its narrative. This narrative is closely related to practice by Milbank: to be involved in the specific Christian practice is to entertain the narrative, and to entertain the narrative seriously is to continue to enact it.⁵ Narration is posited by Milbank as the "[...] final mode of comprehension of human society".⁶ Christian ethics is, in Milbank's understanding, elaborated through the narrative and practice of Christianity, which entails normative judgements about all social reality. The propositional level is implicit in the practice of worship and recitation of stories. The exemplary narratives of Jesus show the concrete possibility and shape of a non-violent practice. This is a practice which can be imitated and form the context of lives lived in common in the Church, understood as the body of Christ.⁷ The possibility of such a practice, of mutual forgiveness and the bearing of each other's burdens, marks a new beginning, a creation *ex nihilo* without continuity with sin.⁸

Milbank thus claims that ethical insight is available through the narratives and practices of the Christian tradition. However, he simultaneously claims that the Church has for the most part failed in its mission, instead ushering in the secular and bringing about more violence.⁹ Christianity, in Milbank's view, has suffered major deviations, even if it also has authentic fragments.¹⁰ As noted by many interpreters of Radical Orthodoxy, the claim that truth resides in the Church, coupled with the realization that the historical concrete Church appears to be as fallible as any other human institution, leads to the necessity of

⁵ Milbank, John, op. cit., pp. 250-254, quotation on p. 251. I have opted to retain Milbank's characteristic use of single quotation marks in the block quotations of this chapter.

⁶ Op. cit., p. 267.

⁷ Op. cit., p. 399.

⁸ Op. cit., p. 402.

⁹ Op. cit., p. 441.

¹⁰ Milbank, John: *The Future of Love*, pp. 110f.

pointing to a location for the authentic tradition.¹¹ Milbank can be understood as claiming that the task of reconstructing authentic Christian tradition falls to the theologian, and he develops his own thinking to that effect. In this endeavour, he points to a certain strand of Christian thinking, referencing a multitude of Christian thinkers since the patristic age. However, it must be noted that he develops a very specific understanding of the theologians whom he references as authorities. While the influence on Christian theology of Platonism, Augustine, and Aquinas is indeed undeniable, Milbank's specific understanding of these can be challenged from within Christian tradition. As is shown by Catholic theologian Peter Kucer, Milbank's understanding diverges significantly from Catholic tradition, for example, as developed by Joseph Ratzinger, on crucial questions of truth, reason, and faith.¹² So, while Milbank is often seen as a representative of orthodoxy and traditionalism, and while the theological resources he employs are indeed traditional authorities, his orthodoxy is not untested.

Nevertheless, Milbank himself claims that the understanding of Christian tradition which he is developing or reclaiming is not only legitimate as one possible understanding of the tradition, but rather that it is the only rightful understanding of tradition.

Milbank claims that there is in fact no autonomous reason with access to truth independent of faith. The idea that reason can be separated from faith is simply the result of bad theology, as he sees it. All of Creation is naturally oriented toward the supernatural. This natural orientation towards the supernatural indicates the presence of the divine in our depths, what Milbank calls our latent mystical condition.¹³ Milbank claims that this understanding implies a blurring of the lines between reason and faith and between philosophy and theology, what

¹¹ Shakespeare, Steven. *Radical Orthodoxy. A Critical Introduction*. SPCK, London 2007. Jeffrey Stout also points out that the actual church is so far from the ideal posited by traditionalists, that it is unclear from what vantage point the critique of modernity is possible. Stout, Jeffrey: *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 160.

¹² Kucer, Peter S.: *Truth and Politics. A Theological Comparison of Joseph Ratzinger and John Milbank*. Fortress Press, Minneapolis 2014, pp. 188-190. A similar point is made by Gregory Baum who understands Milbank to repudiate the Catholic understanding of the implications of Creation and grace on human nature and its implications for dialogue on common values. Baum, Gregory: *Essays in Critical Theology*, p. 73.

¹³ Milbank, John: *The Suspended Middle. Henri de Lubac and the Debate concerning the Supernatural*. Eerdmans, Cambridge 2005, p. 28.

he calls the suspended middle. In Milbank's understanding, this is the orthodox Christian position of the Church Fathers. It implies that there is nothing in nature which the light of faith should not reinterpret, such that all conclusions of philosophy are open to transformation by theology.¹⁴ The notion of a suspended middle does not imply that natural ethical insights can exist apart from revelation, in Milbank's understanding. Rather, in order to reason one must be illuminated by God through faith.¹⁵ While traditional Catholic theology, whose authorities Milbank seems to appeal to, has generally accorded to secular space a certain autonomy and to reason some insight into truth and right, apart from revelation, in accordance with natural law-thinking, such independence is denied by Milbank.¹⁶

I understand Milbank's ethic to be completely based on revelation in the sense that ethical insight is only possible in the context of Christian tradition informed by revelation, which in turn is adhered to as a result of persuasion. Christian tradition convinces, claims Milbank, in the way that a narrative convinces. Its persuasiveness depends upon its ability to successfully out-narrate the alternatives. Thus, in his account, reason is not accorded any role as a source of ethics.

Politics of alternative and persuasive power

Not only does Milbank claim that Christian theology is relevant to political discourse, he claims that the entire idea of a secular realm is a contingent historical invention which is malign and condescending, and that the only possibility for a politics and a society which is not fundamentally implicated in nihilism and violence is by developing Christian tradition as political thought and as a mode of organization.

The idea of a secular space, a space of pure nature, independent of the natural human orientation to the supernatural, is according to Milbank, originally constituted theologically, as a sphere delegated by God to human control in order to safeguard the absolute freedom of

¹⁴ Milbank, John in Milbank, John, Pickstock, Catherine and Ward, Graham (eds.): *Radical Orthodoxy. A New Theology*, p. 30.

¹⁵ Op. cit., p. 24.

¹⁶ Paul Kucer similarly takes Milbank to be negating the possibility of truth apart from the light of faith, and to be attributing this understanding to the Fathers of the Church. Kucer, Paul, *Truth and Politics*, pp. 148ff and 174.

the will of God, here understood as the arbitrary exercise of power.¹⁷ This theological development is, in Milbank's view, questionable from the perspective of authentic Christian tradition.¹⁸ Secular space is thus understood by Milbank as invented and contingent in history, neither natural nor original in the sense assumed by social science. Milbank deconstructs the concept of secular space as "latent, waiting to fill more space with the steam of the 'purely human', when the pressure of the sacred was relaxed".¹⁹ An understanding of the purely human as what is left when the additional or superfluous (i.e. religiosity) is removed, is in fact simply a universalization of particular Western history, Milbank claims. It is only possible if the current West is seen as the perennial destiny of humankind.²⁰ Such a reading of history is what Milbank terms the Liberal Protestant meta-narrative, something which he claims is dependent upon an Orientalist definition of the East as lack, stasis, or retardation and a projecting back onto Christianity as "always-coming-to-be [...] liberal Protestantism or its secular aftermath", both entailing the privatization of value.²¹ The reason for the perceived plausibility of such explanations in a Western context is that

[...] the historical narratives which appear *to us* to be realistic are those where one treats as 'most real', 'most basic', 'most probably causal', those things which we permit to be most significant in our own history, our own lived narrative.²²

For Milbank, the problem with this understanding of the secular as neutral is that it is simply not adequate from any perspective other than that of liberal secularity, but also that it is "[...] so condescending about the kinds of groups it describes".²³ I understand this to be a cri-

¹⁷ Milbank, John: *The Future of Love*, p. 82.

¹⁸ Milbank, John: *Beyond Secular Order. The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People*. Wiley Blackwell, Oxford 2013, p. 3. According to Milbank, because of the un-believability of such theology, it invites an atheist skepticism that eventually engenders nihilism. By contrast, Milbank claims that the arguments of atheist skepticism largely miss the mark when it comes to what he takes to be authentic Christian tradition.

¹⁹ Milbank, John: *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 9.

²⁰ Op. cit., p. 129.

²¹ Op. cit., p. 95.

²² Op. cit., p. 123.

²³ Op. cit., p. 121.

tique of the ethnocentrism involved in such an understanding of the secular.

However, Milbank's most important objection to secular politics is his claim that all secular thinking and politics inevitably tend toward nihilism and are therefore deeply implicated in violence. They depend upon what he calls an ontology of violence, "[...] a reading of the world which assumes the priority of force and tells how this force is best managed and confined by counter-force." This theme of original violence is taken to its logical conclusion by Nietzschean philosophy, in which difference and indeterminacy of meaning are taken to necessarily imply arbitrariness and violence.²⁴ The nihilism of postmodern philosophy is, according to Milbank, perhaps the best and least self-deluded self-description of the secular. Such nihilism will lead to fascism, in his view, and cannot be countered by liberal humanism since it is implicated in the same logic. In Milbank's view, nihilism may be impossible to counter on rational grounds. Instead, it must be read as a malign mythology that must be opposed with an alternative narrative, one equally unfounded but embodying an ontology of peace which conceives of differences as analogically related, rather than at variance.²⁵ The alternative narrative is the Christian one, which, according to Milbank, recognizes no original violence. Rather, Christian tradition construes peace as the sociality of harmonious difference into which violence is always a secondary intrusion. It is the story of a triune God whose very being is transcendental peace through differential relation. In Milbank's view, this is the only discourse which can overcome nihilism, a discourse of non-mastery that can support an alternative, peaceable historical practice because its ontology denies reality to violence.²⁶

Milbank does not substantively address the concrete formulation of political arguments and reasons. This is at least partly because he does not envision political discourse as a reasoning activity but sees political convictions, rather, as resulting from the persuasive power of narrative. However, it must also be noted that the form of his own argument, while perhaps resembling a narrative of philosophies, also proceeds by reasoned argument, even if it is an argument heavily biased by his own readings of the thinkers he relates to and, as such, perhaps

²⁴ Milbank, John, *op. cit.*, pp. 4ff.

²⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 279.

²⁶ *Op. cit.*, pp. 4ff and 309.

construable as an attempt to out-narrate others. The lack of an account in Milbank's thought of the articulation of arguments and reasons of Christian ethics can also be understood as a consequence of the high level of abstraction of his works. I will reconstruct what I take to be his position regarding the categories which I have developed for articulating the role of religious ethics in political discourse and practice.

Milbank clearly envisages the Christian narrative, its practice, and the ethics implied therein to be of paramount importance for the personal formation of believers' political opinions. Critics have noted that Milbank disregards the multiple identities which influence the formation of subjectivities of persons, opting instead to view them one-dimensionally as members of their faith.²⁷ A religious ethic formed by the Christian narrative and practice is thus understood by Milbank as the central determinant of personal formation.

Since the Church is the locus of these narratives and practices, it, too, assumes a central importance in Milbank's vision. Milbank believes that the Church alone has the capacity to inspire and coordinate a switch in ethos necessary to enable society to "[...] think and act its way out of our current heretical, immoral and neo-pagan political morass".²⁸ As we have seen, Milbank believes that the task of the Church is first and foremost to articulate ecclesiology, which can be understood in terms of what I have called intra-organizational formulation. The task is to formulate a religious ethic directed at believers, aimed at articulating the Christian difference, as Milbank understands it. Such formulations have, then, a persuasive power which also affects other people, but it is the power of a narrative, one leading to conversion rather than a reasoned acceptance of arguments formulated from another worldview.

The category of public address assumes a particular interpretation for Milbank, then. He clearly envisions a Christian ethic criticizing

²⁷ For example Baum, Gregory: *Essays in Critical Theology*, p. 58.

²⁸ Milbank, John: *The Future of Love*, pp. xvii ff. It is a central problem with Milbank's account that he does not specify what he means by the Church. Clearly he envisions an entity acting with one purpose and one voice, not the current multitude of Christian churches. While the Roman Catholic Church seems to be the nearest proxy for what he intends, as already noted his theology is far from traditionally Catholic and his vision of the Church, while taking inspiration from medieval times, does not correspond to that organization either. Rather it should be understood as an idealization, an account of what the Church could be if it were true to what Milbank perceives as its vocation. This Church, it seems, is not in current existence except through the writings of theologians like Milbank.

society, its other moralities, practices, and narratives, and claims that theology has the ability to read, analyze, and formulate critique of all other human theories and social formations. At the same time, because of his emphasis on narrative and persuasion, rather than argument and reason, it seems that this critique is not aimed at convincing in the regular sense, or of contributing to the formation of a common understanding. Rather, it must be understood as a kind of persuasive narrative, aimed at converting its listeners.

Milbank, despite his intent not to accept any outside standards dictating what role a Christian ethic can play, can nevertheless be understood as presenting at least two arguments as to why a religious ethic should be given this public role. In my reading, Milbank's first argument as to why theology should guide politics is the claim that only a Christian ethic can overcome violence and nihilism. Such an ethic thus has a unique content, according to Milbank; not only can it contribute to public discourse, must be understood as indispensable for the virtuous practice of politics.

The second argument can, I suggest, be understood as an argument about democratic culture. Milbank claims that democratic culture as practiced in liberal secular society degenerates into manipulation and eventually to tyranny, and must therefore be tempered with what Milbank terms the role of the few and the one. In this, theology has a central role. Milbank's argument can be explained thus. Liberal democracy tends towards tyranny because, as a system, it is inherently indifferent to truth as opposed to majority opinion. This means that in practice, propaganda and manipulation of opinion will win out. Because what is just and true is relegated to the realm of subjective opinion, the will of the majority is reduced to the notion of what the majority is represented as willing, such that the representatives of the people turn into manipulators of public opinion and prevailing trends.²⁹ Eventually, manipulation by fear will be discovered to be more effective than manipulation through promises, and hence tyranny will result.³⁰

To counteract these tendencies in democracy, it must be tempered with virtue and absolute normative standards. Milbank makes use of the categories of democracy, aristocracy, and monarchy – or the many, the few, and the one – when making this argument, and it is sometimes difficult to judge to what extent he uses these terms figuratively

²⁹ Milbank, John: *Beyond Secular Order*, pp. 140f.

³⁰ Milbank, John: *The Future of Love*, p. 243.

or literally.³¹ My interpretation is that what he terms the few can be understood as a call for virtue to influence democratic governance. A concern for what is in the people's objective interest must temper, and be tempered by, what they are ready to freely accept.³² Democratic representatives should act out of devotion to truth and justice, and there should be an educative hierarchy in society which is understood as representatives of virtue.³³ Ideally the pursuit of truth, virtue, and justice concerns everyone, and the hierarchy should therefore seek to cancel itself out. However, regardless of how many the virtuous are, it is legitimate, Milbank argues, that the excellent should balance the verdict of the many.³⁴ In Milbank's view, the role of the virtuous enables democracy. Democracy always involves the people being presented with options developed by elites; the question is simply whether it should be the work of educated elites who are conceived as guides upon the path to virtue, or of corrupt propagandists who manipulate the majority's will. Thus, liberal attempts to dispense with such a function only leave the field open to manipulation.³⁵ Concretely, Milbank contends that the few should be understood as including not only an educated elite but also all intermediary associations that uphold assumptions of and commitment to ethical and vocational norms and aims, what Milbank exemplifies as family, guild, fraternity, corporation, and commune.³⁶

The role of the one in Milbank's thought is even less concretely elaborated, but I understand it to imply that there must be absolute normative standards which transcend the democratic – some non-negotiable boundaries to democracy which can check and balance the system against itself. Milbank refers to it by such formulations as the “[...] architectonic imposition of intrinsic justice by a transcendent ‘One’”.³⁷ As an example, he mentions the ordering of boundaries of voting districts in the USA, which, if they are made subject to majori-

³¹ Milbank, John, op. cit., p. xv.

³² Milbank, John: *Beyond Secular Order*, p. 216.

³³ Op. cit., pp. 144ff.

³⁴ Milbank, John: *The Word Made Strange. Theology, Language, Culture*. Blackwell Publishing, Oxford 1997, p. 285.

³⁵ Milbank, John: *Beyond Secular Order*, p. 159.

³⁶ Op. cit., p. 165.

³⁷ At other times, Milbank seems also to mean by the monarchic component that there is, quite literally, always a head of state, perhaps even that a hereditary monarchy is preferable in some respects. His points about the aspects of representation in this case are similar between the few and the one and so will not be repeated.

ty control, undermine democracy itself. In my analysis of Milbank, I take it to be important to him that these limits are not only procedural but also concerned with substantive norms of justice. His point is that, as the example of Nazi Germany shows, a government can be contractually legitimate in the sense of being formally correct and nonetheless lead to tyranny.³⁸

The roles of the one and the few are not a second-best option to the elusive ideal of direct democracy. Rather, Milbank claims, they embody necessary functions of guidance and preservation of equity.³⁹ In Milbank's view, the balance between the one, the few, and the many should be a matter of adaptation to circumstance in the particular society in question, especially with regard to the prevalence and distribution of virtue.⁴⁰ The role for the Christian ethic and the Church in this vision of tempered democracy is thus to provide a narrative and a practice that sustain such virtues and normative standards. Of course, the Church could be seen as one of the intermediary associations which form Milbank's few, but I believe that a Christian ethic should also be understood as infusing the ethos of all aspects of his societal vision.

The contributions of this Christian ethic as envisioned by Milbank can be understood, using the categories which I have developed, as a tool of analysis and critique and as positing an alternative. However, as we have seen, Milbank claims not only that theology has a contribution to make to political discourse, but that it represents the only possibility for such a discourse if it is to be grounded in truth rather than implicated in nihilism and violence.⁴¹ Contribution would therefore seem to be too weak a term for the role which Milbank reserves for the Christian ethic, since he wants to subsume the entire undertaking of political discourse into a context of theological thought. However, there are also instances where Milbank leaves his ideal theory about a paramount role for the Church and recognizes the premise that under present day circumstances, disagreement seems to be a lingering feature. As will be evident in the section on justice, a consensus on substantive values in society is a central concern of Milbank's. Such consensus, he remarks, cannot be found by trying to bypass traditions.

³⁸ Milbank, John: *The Future of Love*, pp. 245 and 260.

³⁹ Milbank, John: *Beyond Secular Order*, p. 215.

⁴⁰ Op. cit., p. 261.

⁴¹ Milbank, John: *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 176.

Rather, traditions must be given a voice in public conversation and be encouraged to develop their intellectual perspectives according to their own lights. Where possible, they should be brought into dialogue.⁴² In these circumstances of pluralism, I believe that Milbank can be seen as identifying a contribution by the Church to the exercise of critique of other social formations, and the articulation and instantiation of an alternative to other understandings of ethics, politics, and community.

Political theology, claims Milbank, can take its principles for critique of both secular society and the Church directly out of the developing Biblical tradition. Not only can the Christian tradition supply the tools for such a critique, Milbank argues, the tradition is already in its very essence an account and critique of human society. Milbank writes:

[...] Christianity's universalist claim that incorporation into the Church is indispensable for salvation assumes that other religions and social groupings, however virtuous-seeming, were, in their own terms alone, finally on the path of damnation. In this fashion a gigantic claim to be able to read, criticize, say what is going on in other human societies, is absolutely integral to the nature of the Christian Church, which itself claims to exhibit the exemplary form of human community. For theology to surrender this claim [...] would therefore amount to a denial of theological truth. The *logic* of Christianity involves the claim that the 'interruption' of history by Christ and his bride, the Church, is the most fundamental of events, interpreting all other events. And this is *most especially* a social event, able to interpret other social formations, because it compares them with its own new social practice.⁴³

According to Milbank, the Church should also be an exemplary form of human community. It should constitute a social space where truly just economic exchanges occur, in the sense that equivalences of value are established by sharing common goals, such that every product or social role is given a position and relative weight in the community. The Church should also seek to extend this sphere of social harmony by organizing and coordinating the diverse activities of intermediary associations such as extended families, cooperatives, mutual banks, and housing associations.⁴⁴ Milbank believes that the Church should

⁴² Milbank, John, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

⁴³ *Op. cit.*, p. 390.

⁴⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 428.

use its influence to transform the public ethos so as to effect a transformation of economic systems of exchange and distribution.

As is now evident, Milbank's position on the role of Christian ethics in the practice of politics is constrained by his position on epistemology. As I have previously shown, in Milbank's opinion we arrive at conclusions through persuasion rather than argument. Narratives are thus of central importance because of their persuasive power. For Christian ethics, the stories about Jesus are indispensable because, Milbank writes, "[...] only the attraction exercised by a particular set of words and images causes us to acknowledge the Good and to have an idea of the ultimate telos". As he sees it, faith, in the sense of attachment to a persuasion, is necessary in order to be able to discriminate truth from falsehood.⁴⁵ To be persuaded is, in a sense, to succumb to a greater power, but if persuasion is true, Milbank holds, this is not violence but rather peaceful communication and consensual reception.⁴⁶ It would seem then that, for Milbank, truth is peaceful almost by definition, simply by virtue of being true. We will return to the implications of this thesis.

Milbank can on this view be understood as arguing for an epistemological contextualism. This designation entails that the arguments and reasons which we give for an ethics are dependent on context, or in his case, on being persuaded by a certain narrative and thus embracing a certain tradition. Milbank claims that he is not arguing for a position of radical incommensurability of meaning between traditions, because he believes that people can, up to a point, understand and entertain culturally alien meanings without embracing them, because we can hold several subjectivities in our head at once.⁴⁷ For Milbank, there is a possibility of persuasion across traditions and there can be communication, but it is haunted by a lingering disagreement about fundamentals. Milbank argues that there is a vital difference between the insider and the outsider of a tradition. The self-understanding of a tradition, the insider perspective, involves a sense of directionality, a telos of tradition which can never be wholly expressed in words. This telos is what makes possible changes which express a continuity-indifference. The uncommitted, outsider perspective, on the other hand,

⁴⁵ Milbank, John, op. cit., p. 401.

⁴⁶ Milbank, John: *The Future of Love*, p. 140.

⁴⁷ Milbank, John: *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 343. Incommensurability is a position he attributes to philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre.

can only propose innovations in a playful spirit, as arbitrary departures. The latter perspective negates the former's self-understanding, and in discussions between the two there is always a hovering disagreement even if it can be temporarily postponed. As I see it, Milbank's position about the possibility of communication is mainly about persuasion and does not amount to a position in which arguments and reasons are understood across traditions. Rather, it seems to me, in Milbank's account reason is only possible within traditions when the latter are understood as communities who share a narrative. Furthermore, Milbank accepts only one such tradition, story, and community as the repository of truth. According to Milbank, there is no universal reason that can be the final arbiter between accounts of truth, only a tradition that succeeds in out-narrating the others.

Milbank can be understood as arguing forcefully for a theory of contrast. He rejects the idea that truth can be understood through paths other than the Christian tradition. Milbank claims that the Christian gaze exposes an element common to all other cultures, namely, heroic ethics which celebrate strength and attainment.⁴⁸ In such an account, peace can only be limited and apparent, attained by the victory of some force of arbitrary and violent power over other forces, and virtue is about control, defeat and victory over passions. But if virtue and peace are attainable only through war, what is really being celebrated is the anarchy which preceded it and an arbitrary dominion. By contrast, the Christian narrative's central principle is the ontological priority of peace over conflict, because God originates all finite reality in an act of peaceful Creation. Peace is then real, a harmonious agreement based on love and the realization of justice.⁴⁹ Christian tradition is unique in refusing ultimate reality to all conflictual phenomena.⁵⁰

Milbank asserts that outside of Christian tradition, quite narrowly defined as his own interpretation, there can be no knowing the truth. Cooperation with secular movements and other faiths is largely ruled out by Milbank, even if he sometimes recognizes some common ground with Abrahamic traditions or enlightenment tradition through their common Platonic heritage.

⁴⁸ Milbank, John, *op. cit.*, p. 391.

⁴⁹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 393f.

⁵⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 262.

Church subsuming society

Milbank has stated that theology should be post-political because it is in fact an ecclesiology, meaning that it is about the establishment of a new, universal society, the Church, in which intimate relationships are paradigmatic and where we relate to others as neighbours.⁵¹ This has sometimes been taken to mean that he proposes an isolationist ecclesiology unengaged in common society. According to my analysis, Milbank believes, on the contrary, that Christian tradition inherently involves the critique of all human society and theory, and that the Church should attempt to subsume society into its order of peace. In Milbank's view, society must not resign itself to a state where different groups pursue different and incompatible goods, because it means that power is arbitrary at the highest level. However, according to Milbank, a temporary acceptance of divisions of groups which are unable to immediately reconcile their values may be necessary, and he calls for both pragmatic negotiation and free discussion.⁵² This should be understood, however, as a mere temporary compromise with a pluralism of ultimate ends. According to Milbank, the Church should attempt to extend its influence over other spheres. In a way that puts him closer to theocratic leanings than the other writers examined in this study, he claims that the natural must be subordinated to supernatural ends. However, he also sometimes calls for a distinction between ecclesial and political power.

Milbank advocates a form of social organization that he calls complex society: instead of the modern order, in which individuals are perceived as atoms directly related to the state, he proposes an order of intermediary associations such as the family, fraternities, guilds, corporations, associations of streets or villages, cooperatives of housing, banking or enterprises, etc. For him, complex society mirrors the needs and potentials of humanity as rational, social, artistic, and grace-imbued.⁵³ As I have already noted, the various associations of complex society promote excellence and uphold normative standards in society, which is central to Milbank's conception of a society with consensus on values. Milbank refers to the principle of subsidiarity of Catholic social teaching, claiming that many functions are more appropriately and democratically carried out at a more small-scale lev-

⁵¹ Milbank, John, *op. cit.*, pp. 230f.

⁵² Milbank, John: *The Future of Love*, p. 216.

⁵³ Milbank, John: *Beyond Secular Order*, p. 269.

el.⁵⁴ In this complex society, Milbank reserves an important role for the Church and its associations. In Milbank's vision, the boundaries between Church and other organizations should be "hazy".⁵⁵ As far as possible, political power at various levels should subordinate itself to the Church and its vision of the good and the just. Milbank writes: "[...] the supernatural virtues should inform the natural ones in the political domain and the endeavours of the latter must finally be measured by the assistance which they give to the supernatural society which is the Church."⁵⁶ Also, secular rulers should strive to exert a pastoral rule because the earthly should serve the heavenly.⁵⁷ The Church should thus seek to extend its positive order of creation in human self-organization.

Milbank still wants to preserve some political order which is not completely subsumed under the ecclesial. This is not because of any importance attached to the independence of a sphere of secular politics, but because the Church must not be implicated in the practice of force and violence. Coercive and punitive action as well as compromise may be necessary when dealing with sinful conditions such as human imperfection and lingering disagreement in the political world, Milbank argues. Paradisal generosity and reconciliation are not always possible because the defence of the weak and abused cannot await the repentance of the wicked. In Milbank's opinion, ecclesial authority and secular power should be partly integrated but not seamlessly fused. Rather, some hybridity must remain, to allow the supernatural to assert its influence as suasive rather than coercive, as a society of charity without exception. The influence of the ecclesial is to bend the necessarily negative reaction to evils towards the supernatural order of their positive overcoming through mercy and forgiveness.⁵⁸ Justice is ensured precisely by the orientation of the political to the supernatural and the gradual inclusion of the political into the ecclesial.⁵⁹

How exactly the precarious balance of political governance, as both subsumed under and remaining outside the Church, should be struck in practical terms is not developed by Milbank. However, his vision of an ordering according to ecclesial virtues raises questions for plural-

⁵⁴ Milbank, John, op. cit., pp. 150f.

⁵⁵ Milbank, John: *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 413.

⁵⁶ Milbank, John: *Beyond Secular Order*, p. 136.

⁵⁷ Milbank, John: *The Future of Love*, pp. xiv f.

⁵⁸ Milbank, John: *Beyond Secular Order*, pp. 229-233.

⁵⁹ Op. cit., pp. 245f.

ism. It is Milbank's understanding that secularity is hostile to human flourishing generally and to tradition more specifically. For him, secular pluralism is able to tolerate religious traditions only on the premise of secularization of law, politics, knowledge, and education, which render impossible the manifestation of religions as social projects. Thus, religions understood as full modes of life, in contrast to mere private beliefs, are not hospitably treated under such a regime.⁶⁰ It is therefore his contention that pluralism is better safeguarded by Christianity than by Enlightenment. Judaism and Islam would fare better "[...] under a state including itself as far as possible within the body of Christ" than under a liberal regime of reason, Milbank claims, because the former has more understanding and sympathy for the notions of religious integrity.⁶¹ In such an order, the common biblical and Platonic-Aristotelian metaphysical legacy of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam could provide a common area of vision and practice while also respecting social and cultural spaces for the exercise of differences.

Milbank also envisions an overarching global polity with revisable structures which promotes the common good insofar as the latter can be agreed upon. Such an order would embody the true human intimation of a just eternal order but recognize its imperfection through the maximum dispersal of human power. The substantive, particular, and local could then be recognized and supported by the global whole.⁶² The differences are, according to Milbank, not valid as such but only as partial intuitions about an elusive universal, a universal not grasped but rather envisioned as a global community in which differences are reconciled and mutually flourish. This, according to Milbank, can only be grounded in transcendence, more specifically a triune God who is eternally relation and unity in difference.⁶³ In Milbank's view, Christianity, in contrast to all other traditions, is able to think difference without conflict because it understands difference as progressions, additions, and insights toward God. If the reality of triune God is attended to, difference can be harmonious.⁶⁴ Difference can be construed as analogy without reducing it to instances of a common essence, be-

⁶⁰ Milbank, John: *The Future of Love*, p. 293.

⁶¹ Op. cit., p. 170.

⁶² Op. cit., pp. 240f.

⁶³ Op. cit., p. 247.

⁶⁴ Op. cit., pp. 340ff.

cause their likeness is maintained through differences and not in spite of them.⁶⁵ Milbank writes:

[...] any true global order must be based upon justice infused by charity, [and] would have to involve the emergence of a symbolic and representative world government [...] which was at least not opposed to Christian aims, and ideally made explicit acknowledgement of them, and more ideally still recognized the spiritual primacy of the Pope.⁶⁶

I understand Milbank's vision to imply that, while consensus on values and virtues should be sought on both the local and the global level, and the entire order must be grounded in the Christian narrative, this is somehow compatible with difference understood as analogy.

Justice as virtue and flourishing

Milbank's account of justice is a virtue account. In Milbank's understanding, justice can only be built on a consensus on substantial values about what is good for humans to do and to be, because the just distribution is that which furthers the development of those values and virtues.⁶⁷ Justice is identified as that which is conducive to human flourishing according to the virtues. Because Christian tradition alone contains the truth about humans and what is valuable for them to do and be, justice can only be understood through that tradition and its narratives.

A just society needs a common understanding of which needs and means are legitimate and desirable, and of their ordering. This is only possible, according to Milbank, in a polity based on virtue. In such a polity, the goal is the

[...] education of individuals into certain practices and states of character, regarded as objectively desirable goals for human beings as such. The possibility of such a politics depends upon the acceptance of the view that there is a 'right' and in this sense a 'natural' way for human beings to be.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Milbank, John: *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 290.

⁶⁶ Milbank, John: *Beyond Secular Order*, pp. 256f.

⁶⁷ Milbank, John: *The Future of Love*, pp. 258f.

⁶⁸ Milbank, John: *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 327.

As we have already noted, Milbank envisions a societal consensus on what is valuable to be taught by a self-cancelling hierarchy of education in the virtues. I understand Milbank to mean that such hierarchy is self-cancelling in the sense that the aim is for everyone to be educated in the virtues, thereby obviating the need for such education.

Milbank claims to strive for a society of social and economic equality, not in the sense that everyone has the same goods, but in the sense that everyone has what he or she needs to flourish and realize her potential and capacities in solidarity with other humans and in accordance with discernment of the true ends of humanity, these latter being ranked in a hierarchy of values which are the object of social consensus. On the basis of such agreement about what is desirable and valuable, distribution can be geared toward encouraging different aptitudes and desires which are recognized as valuable. According to Milbank, justice is thus realized through attention to uniqueness, and furthers the attainment of peaceful and harmonious differentiation.⁶⁹ Justice is ultimately perfected and fulfilled in charity, understood by Milbank as an unlimited concern to fulfil the real potential of all, and of all in harmony with all.⁷⁰ It implies an equal but diverse participation in a limitless good, indicating a society of different but harmoniously related social roles.

Justice thus entails that everyone has the means proper to their needs, capacities, and roles or functions when these have been ordered toward the common good. Milbank writes:

This view favours the greatest possible equal distribution of private property and a justification of larger private property always in terms of both the specific needs and capacities of different individuals (because all are not equally gifted or responsible) and the fulfilment of functions which genuinely serve the common good.⁷¹

Property, Milbank argues, needs to be as widely dispersed as possible to ensure that people have enough to meet their recognized needs, to allow a sufficient scope for the exercise of creative development of their talents, and to be able to participate in political processes without being subject to economic blackmail.⁷² He underscores that this must

⁶⁹ Milbank, John: *The Future of Love*, p. 369.

⁷⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 360.

⁷¹ Milbank, John: *Beyond Secular Order*, p. 175.

⁷² Milbank, John: *The Future of Love*, p. 278.

be real property, not a mass of temporary commodities. However, the distribution of power, property, and money should also serve the common good and thus be in some way linked to the human possession of virtues. Hierarchy and inequality are not necessarily unjust, in Milbank's understanding, only when they are arbitrary in relation to the realization of the virtues.⁷³ As I read him, Milbank holds that there is no upper limit to what inequality is tolerable, so long as it serves the common good. Rather, there is a bottom line which guarantees every person the means for human flourishing according to his or her capacity for virtue.

Milbank recognizes the antique roots of justice as virtue but claims that the Christian tradition, uniquely, understands virtues as the rectification of desire rather than the suppression of passions or overcoming of evil, that is, as ethical rather than mere achievement.⁷⁴ This understanding of virtue is based on the ontological priority of peace in the Christian account, which allows the unthinking of the necessity of violence. It shows that by positing violence as necessary to inhibit a prior violence, heroic accounts of virtue perpetuate a cycle of violence. The ontological priority of peace means that there can be harmonious and peaceful differentiation, Milbank argues. He writes:

There can only be an objective virtue if there is objective justice, or the possibility of a fair distribution of roles and goods within the *polis*. But in turn, objective justice implies that there can be a harmonious 'mixture' of human beings, a genuine peace of consensus, which is more than an uneasy peace of contract, or agreement to differ. [...] Because virtue presupposes justice, and justice involves real peace, *the ontological priority of peace to conflict* (peace is what is most real, most secure, most guarantees human life) is an issue of *yet more importance* than that of virtue. Peace is not a virtue, [...] because peace is the final end, the *principium* that is being itself.⁷⁵

One of Milbank's central claims is his insistence that a politics which opposes the injustice of present society can be viable only if built on a Christian ethic. He develops a critique of capitalism which takes inspiration from Marxist analysis, while at the same time claiming that Marxist opposition to capitalism is insufficient and arguing for a critique and alternative based on Christian socialism.

⁷³ Milbank, John, *op. cit.*, pp. 216f.

⁷⁴ Milbank, John: *Theology and Social Theory*, pp. 333 and 415.

⁷⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 367.

Milbank's main objection to capitalism is that it is a system which does not recognize any objective norms regarding what is valuable and desirable, and that it thus cannot further a just distribution. Milbank writes:

The goal of the capitalist market, formally considered, is [...] the stimulation of inventiveness and effort on the one hand, combined, on the other hand, with the *guaranteed* subordination of all this endeavour to a quantifiable measurement of its worth. This guarantee operates through a mechanism of supply and demand determined not by considerations of need, desire or justice, but the (abstract) desires of the owners of capital and of distributed income.⁷⁶

According to Milbank, capitalism involves a kind of invisible tyranny. While in theory, the rule of the market reflects people's needs and wishes, in reality it constrains and shapes desires and limits opportunities through its reproduction of arbitrary inequities of wealth.⁷⁷ The supposedly free choices which capitalism, the free market, and the modern state enable are, in fact, merely a cover for hidden and uniform influences. Its subjects are manipulated to the point of becoming incapable of being influenced by goodness or beauty and settling instead for self-righteous complacency and vacuous uniformity.⁷⁸

[Capitalism thus develops into a] subtle totalitarianism, [which] permits individual freedom, encourages the thought of the object of freedom as being the exercise of *personal* power, and so the better builds up both the energies and the assumptions which allow for a general extension of an efficient, all-powerful system.⁷⁹ [It secures] the dominance of the same, the univocal: the same basic car, house, restricted language, conformist behaviour, conjoined with the same individualistic narcissism. [...] This is] the reality of recent capitalism, of a discipline operating surreptitiously, disguising itself as 'pleasure', of a war that is constant and invisible, of all against all, and all against created nature.⁸⁰

Marx remains, according to Milbank, the supreme analyst of capitalist economy, and certain elements of the Marxist critique of capitalism

⁷⁶ Milbank, John, op. cit., p. 273.

⁷⁷ Milbank, John: *Beyond Secular Order*, p. 259.

⁷⁸ Milbank, John: *The Future of Love*, p. 224.

⁷⁹ Milbank, John: *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 275.

⁸⁰ Op. cit., p. 318.

and the state need to be retained and developed by theology because theology entertains the same suspicions.⁸¹ Nevertheless, Milbank raises several objections to Marxist analysis and claims that ultimately, the Christian narrative alone can challenge the hegemony of neo-liberal capitalism. His aim is therefore to revive Christian socialism.

Unsurprisingly, Milbank objects to Marx's understanding of religion. Milbank does not accept that religion is determined by material causes and that it occupies the same superstructural position in all societies.⁸² Rather, Milbank claims, religion can be the site of political struggle and its role requires assessment in context.⁸³ Milbank also believes that Marxist critique of capitalism rests on an idea of socialism as the consequence of universal rationality and an idea about unfounded, supposedly natural or original, humanity. By contrast, Milbank believes that capitalism can be opposed only on the basis of another contingent vision and an account of human nature developed in a tradition. Milbank claims that Marx understands the utopian phase as the unleashing of human freedom and the unlimited possibility of human transformation of nature.⁸⁴ This is a secular and essentially liberal goal, according to Milbank, who writes,

‘Alienation’ assumes that there are a set of needs and capacities proper and natural to human beings, which become distorted when these needs and capacities are defined by an illusory cultural logic, whose human invention is suppressed or forgotten. Yet, in fact, one element in Marx’s conception of the human *proprium*, namely the unlimited development of all human and natural powers, is clearly derived from the capitalist projection of wealth accumulation as the ultimate goal, in contrast to other societies which specify goals in terms of *what* is to be produced, and which *kinds* of human capacity are to be encouraged.⁸⁵

⁸¹ Milbank, John, op. cit., p. 251.

⁸² Op. cit., p. 183.

⁸³ Milbank, John: *The Future of Love*, p. 107. According to Milbank, it is possible to do a deconstruction of Marx, such that the priority of economy over religion as causal factors in human history is no longer tenable even on Marx's own terms. He believes that Marx effectively understand both religion and economy to be abuses of language, and thus there is no reason to give one of them causal priority. Op. cit., pp. 104f. I find this an implausible reading of Marx, whom I understand to claim that the material structure of production is the basis of communication in human language and of the production of ideas. See for example the introduction to *The German Ideology*. Marx, Karl: *Människans frigörelse*, pp. 139f.

⁸⁴ Milbank, John: *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 177.

⁸⁵ Op. cit., p. 187.

Marxism, Milbank claims, thus operates with a preconceived and unjustified notion of the essence of human nature as unrestricted production and an unrestricted fulfilment of supposedly inherent human needs.⁸⁶ The ethically objective and normative in Marxism is thus provided by a natural-historical humanity which fulfils all possibilities without illusion or alienation. However, Milbank claims that such a position is in itself an illusion: humanity only exists in the cultural specificity of tradition or language, which mediate what we perceive to be natural. Therefore, a purely naturalist ethic is impossible, and hence tradition must not simply be criticized but also positively reinterpreted in order to develop another, culturally specific and tradition-bound, account of what is human.⁸⁷ In Milbank's understanding, the coherence of Marxism is dependent on a doctrine of the person which it cannot itself sustain.

In Milbank's analysis, the problem with the anthropology underlying Marxism is not only that it is illusory because it is claimed to be natural, but that it will in fact tend to favour capitalism. He views Marxism as envisaging social cooperation in a utilitarian and modern fashion, as a means for securing one single value: the full realization of individual liberty. Therefore, Milbank claims, it is unable to make a critique of capitalism which advocates a more self-consistent form of modernism. If the only publicly recognized value is freedom of choice, market mechanisms will provide the optimal regulation of society. And if such freedom is the goal of socialists, they can criticize the unfairness of the distribution of freedom. However, in the absence of any other ideas about socialism's aim, a more substantial critique will not be viable.⁸⁸ Milbank writes:

If choice is our only value, then the single objective measure of choice in the public domain remains expansion of people's ability (individually and in consenting groups) to extend control over their own lives and over nature. Extension of autonomy will be likely to increase the instrumentalization of our relations to nature and to each other, because only the market and the bureaucracy can mediate competing and incommensurable individual freedoms. [...The] mere removal of inhibitions on human freedom (liberation) cannot be regarded as a sufficient principle of critique. Rather, true freedom is only obtainable in a

⁸⁶ Milbank, John: *The Future of Love*, p. 116.

⁸⁷ Op. cit., p. 109.

⁸⁸ Milbank, John: *Theology and Social Theory*, pp. 198f.

sittlich community, where individual activities are substantially compatible in terms of common social goals.⁸⁹

In Milbank's view, criticism and conceptions of the telos of political change, must come out of what is positively imagined by a particular, contingent community. The symbolic system of capitalist economy cannot be criticized by comparing it to human nature; it must be compared to another symbolic system, an interpretation of tradition which can sustain resistance. This is what the Christian tradition does by keeping alive transcendent and objective moral norms. As positively imagined values, they are contingent, but they represent equally valid possibilities.⁹⁰ The Christian vision of the human being and of perfect social reality as defined in the life of Christ is one such interpretation, argues Milbank.⁹¹

In the same vein, attacking capitalism from the perspective of contingency and tradition rather than that of universal reason, Milbank claims that Marx's contention, that capitalism is inherently contradictory and will produce a subject antagonistic to itself, is wrong. Capitalism, Milbank argues, cannot be criticized immanently in terms of its own contradictions because, as a tautology, it is inviolable. He writes:

[...] all cultures operate, in their social relationships, some principle of equivalence, of 'equalizing the un-equal' – this undergirds punishment and compensation as much as barter and gift-exchange – and none of these principles can be rationally founded. In this sense, the capitalist 'economy' [...] is no more rational or irrational than any other economy.⁹²

Opposition to capitalism will not emerge as a result of its failure to deliver the freedom it claims to deliver.⁹³ Without any irrationality, the worker who is deprived of the value he produces can come to assent to this, opting for the regularity, security, and predictability which recent capitalism displays, claims Milbank.⁹⁴ According to Milbank, Marx assumes that an educated workforce will realize the absurdity of subordinating the productive powers to the short-term interests of a few

⁸⁹ Milbank, John, op. cit., pp. 241f.

⁹⁰ Milbank, John: *The Future of Love*, pp. 125f.

⁹¹ Op. cit., pp. 110f.

⁹² Milbank, John: *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 186.

⁹³ Op. cit., p. 195.

⁹⁴ Op. cit., p. 188.

humans rather than to the long-term interests of all humanity. But this absurdity can be hidden from view by a non-apparent tyranny of totalitarian cultural control.⁹⁵ Capitalism can be both rational and feasible according to its own criteria, but it is not ethical. The critique of capitalism is only viable as a moral critique. We must, Milbank insists, overcome the idea that socialism is a matter of universally valid reason or science: “[...] socialism is not right because it is ‘rational’ but right because it is just.”⁹⁶ Capitalism can be opposed in the name of an equally contingent but different desire, encompassing vision and practice, one that is based on substantive values of justice understood as charity.⁹⁷ Milbank thus calls for a *Christian* socialism.

Milbank’s conviction that both capitalism and its alternative are contingent makes ideological and social struggle all the more important, because capitalism will not by itself tend toward socialism.⁹⁸ Resistance to capitalism has, in Milbank’s view, been failing because it has been lacking in metaphysical grounding and positive ethical content, both of which are the result of a failure to understand tradition as a vital critical resource.⁹⁹ Secular socialism, like liberalism and capitalism, fails to identify the true ends of humankind and focusses instead on means such as freedom and wealth. This effectively removes ethics from the public realm.¹⁰⁰ But, Milbank underscores, the priority in socialism is justice, not freedom. As I have already argued, Milbank claims that justice is only possible in the context of agreement about goods and values, because in social existence we are continuously exchanging the incommensurable.¹⁰¹ For Milbank, it is clear “[...] that the formal, regulative logic of capitalism can only be opposed by the constitutive logic of a metaphysical system which recommends certain social roles within a social narrative as objectively desirable.” Socialism must be grounded in the Christian account of human nature, which Milbank understands as being ordered to the supernatural life of charity.¹⁰² Such a vision of human ends can appeal to the full realization of the capacities of each human, in harmony

⁹⁵ Milbank, John: *The Future of Love*, pp. 94ff.

⁹⁶ Op. cit., pp. 112f.

⁹⁷ Milbank, John: *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 177.

⁹⁸ Milbank, John: *The Future of Love*, p. 125.

⁹⁹ Op. cit., p. 24.

¹⁰⁰ Op. cit., p. 29.

¹⁰¹ Milbank, John: *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 248.

¹⁰² Op. cit., pp. 191 and 208.

with the capacities of every other human in solidarity. Importantly, the capacities in question are the capacities for what is recognized as virtuous, with solidarity being imagined as compatible with different social roles in accordance with what are seen as different capacities for virtue. This “compossible mutual realization of individual flourishings” can be expressed as the body of Christ.¹⁰³

Milbank claims that the realization of justice must entail the socialization of human economic endeavour. However, rather than replacing market capitalism with central planning, a way must be discovered to ensure that market exchanges are democratically assented transactions, the outcomes of free and equal negotiations which seek to preserve and extend a distribution held to be just. The market must not be regulated by supply and demand, which are forces indifferent to justice. In such markets, exchange is arbitrary, motivated by profit and characterized by manipulation, pretence, and the absence of standards of quality.¹⁰⁴ Milbank instead proposes

[...] a genuinely collectivist (and so socialist) distributist/corporatist economy [built upon] a socially-judged recognition of the inherent relative value of natural and produced things and the inherent relative needs and desserts of all human beings as workers as well as consumers.

Such an economy is, according to Milbank, only possible on the basis of a general embrace of a realist metaphysics of transcendence.¹⁰⁵ Every act of economic exchange in such an economy involves a mutual judgment about what is right, true, and beautiful. It is a judgment about a common order which implies finding a measure between things that are inherently incommensurable. The discovery of, and assent to, such an order has the character of an allegiance of faith rather than rational conviction and has an inevitable religious quality, according to Milbank. When setting collective priorities for the use of resources, or when deciding on patterns of distribution of space, time, goods, and skills, one must judge justly but without rules, because such decisions involve equalizing the unequal.¹⁰⁶ Needs and demands are thus understood by Milbank as socially produced, and must be

¹⁰³ Milbank, John: *Beyond Secular Order*, pp. 262f, quotation on p. 263.

¹⁰⁴ Milbank, John: *The Word Made Strange*, p. 271.

¹⁰⁵ Milbank, John: *The Future of Love*, p. xvi.

¹⁰⁶ Milbank, John: *The Word Made Strange*, pp. 279f.

collectively measured and judged to see whether their fulfilment will promote socially desirable goals and social balance.¹⁰⁷

Milbank believes, as we have seen, that such an order of exchange, governed by mutual assent to what is valuable, must come about through a change in ethos which is driven by a religious ethic based in the Christian narrative. In my analysis, I have identified at least three suggestions for how to accomplish this very daunting task: the distribution of property, the effect of complex society on both values and markets; and the role of the Church. As already argued, Milbank claims that property should be as widely dispersed as possible, which, he believes, will lead to people having little need for greed and to a tendency to form self-regulating mechanisms of exchange of benefits. When a just distribution has been brought about, it can be sustained by just exchanges, which would, in Milbank's opinion, render state redistribution redundant.¹⁰⁸

In Milbank's opinion, a shared recognition of values other than money, supply, and demand evolves in local markets and small-scale production because these involve competition for excellence and shared recognition of quality and thus the exchange of what is understood as inherent value, rather than simply market value. The market of fair-trade and organically farmed produce exhibits such traits, claims Milbank, and can be seen as a form of gift-exchange in operation where economic transactions are understood as forging bonds. Producer and consumer cooperatives, cooperative banking, social credit unions, and other such organizations are invoked by Milbank to point the way to a different sort of economy, one in which economic exchange is subordinated to ethical value and informed by charity.¹⁰⁹ All pursuit of profit, according to Milbank, should be subordinated to the attainment of socially and naturally desirable ends, and thus subjected to political control at a decentralized level.¹¹⁰ Milbank writes:

[...] I do not see state activism as the prime means to bring about a socialist condition, but rather local-scale agreements among producers

¹⁰⁷ Milbank, John, op. cit., p. 282.

¹⁰⁸ Milbank, John: *The Future of Love*, pp. xvii ff.

¹⁰⁹ Op. cit., pp. 251ff. As we have seen, Ramadan also refers to practices of fair trade and organic farming as important pointers to a new economic order.

¹¹⁰ Milbank, John: *Beyond Secular Order*, p. 157, see also note 96 on this page. Modern statism, according to Milbank, rather involves the support of the rich by guaranteeing both their finances and their workforce through welfare-measures.

and between them and consumers. [...] I fully recognize that this is only possible within a wider institutional framework (including public banks, price and wage regulating bodies, intertrade councils, etc.) culminating in the state, which should appropriately have oversight in some areas (national transport, e.g.) and a role in others (like education and providing of an ultimate welfare safety net).¹¹¹

The massive redistribution needed to turn all people into owners and joint-owners, and the establishment of a new order of exchange, will require a thorough transformation, one that Milbank believes should be driven by a Christian ethic. Milbank envisions the sway of diverse religious organizations making up the Church as profoundly altering the public ethos, leading to a transformation of economic systems of exchange and distribution through acknowledgment of the standards of the good, virtuous, and just which are elaborated in theology. Milbank contends that it can only be brought about

[...] through the construction of a new mass cultural ethos which will empower a new sort of elite who will win self-respect for their social generosity rather than their wealth (this will then be their “self-interest”) and so will be able to ensure that governments will encourage through new legislation, tax structures, and regulation of banking the emergence of a radical distribution.

Milbank believes that only the Church has the capacity to inspire and coordinate such a switch in ethos.¹¹²

Justice seems, in Milbank’s opinion, to be not completely beyond human capacity. It is only through revelation that we can know justice, and in that sense God’s intervention is necessary for human striving toward justice. However, while there are instances in Milbank’s account which point to an account of sin that puts perfect justice, virtue, and peace beyond human reach, they are strikingly few. It seems then that, in Milbank’s vision, if human endeavours to establish justice are subordinated to the supernatural aims of the Christian narrative, it is possible to achieve a substantive earthly justice, despite sin.

My analysis highlights three theological concepts which inform Milbank’s account of justice, namely virtue, Creation, and anthropology. As we have seen, in Milbank’s account justice itself is a theological idea because there can be no concept of justice at all outside of

¹¹¹ Milbank, John: *The Future of Love*, p. 216.

¹¹² Op. cit., pp. xvii ff.

tradition. While there are other traditions which understand justice as virtue, Milbank claims that the Christian understanding of justice is unique in its ability to unite virtue, difference, and peace. As already explained, Milbank claims that Christian virtue is different from all other accounts because it is not conceived as resistance or overcoming in reaction to some initial evil, deficiency, or threat. Christian virtue does not assume not initial evil but acts from trust in a gratuitous plenitude which is God's original intention.¹¹³ The Christian account of the virtues is known through narratives – complex, learned practices that are knowable only through practical instantiation in a particular life. In Jesus, the virtue of charity is spelled out in a fully exemplary fashion.¹¹⁴

From the doctrine of Creation follows the ontological priority of peace which is central to Milbank's understanding of the virtues. In the Christian account, he claims, peace is finally most original, most real. This means that society need not be organized to cope with violence assumed to be original; rather, it should reflect the harmonious relation in difference of the Trinity.

In Milbank's account, the Christian understanding of the person is central for the development of resistance to capitalism. Milbank understands humanity, like the society he seeks to realize, as complex or what he calls *trans-organic*: simultaneously and integrally rational, social, artistic, and grace-imbued.¹¹⁵ The true end of humankind that is to be realized by society is the mutual realization of individual flourishings, which, according to Milbank, can be understood and expressed in the theological concept of the body of Christ.¹¹⁶

Milbank in comparison

In this study, I have categorized John Milbank together with Tariq Ramadan as representatives of a stance I have defined as *radical traditionalism*. They share a concern with interpretative method and both try to remain in the mainstream of their respective traditions while

¹¹³ Milbank, John: *The Word Made Strange*, pp. 220-229.

¹¹⁴ Milbank, John: *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 240.

¹¹⁵ Milbank, John: *Beyond Secular Order*, p. 269.

¹¹⁶ Milbank refers here to the idea that the Church is the body of Christ after resurrection, and thus that different people have different gifts and functions but at the same time are dependent on the others, just like different parts of a body.

simultaneously making politically radical claims on the basis of that tradition. In both cases, their articulated identity within tradition and their reliance on the resources of tradition have contributed to bolstering their claims to be authorities for believers.

While this similarity justifies, I believe, my treatment of Ramadan and Milbank as an interesting pairing for comparison, there is also an important difference relating to the context of the Western public. While they speak largely to the same time and the same wider public, their situation is defined by the relative positions of their respective traditions. Thus, while Ramadan's proposal for radical reform based on a religious ethic is met with accusations of trying to subvert the secular state, Milbank's more far-reaching claims for theology to assume the leading role in ordering society are seldom likewise condemned. This highlights how Islamic theology is constantly in need of proving its loyalty to the liberal state and unceasingly under suspicion, which makes for a certain defensiveness which should be taken into account when making comparisons such as the present one, so as to do neither tradition an injustice. Meanwhile, Western Christianity's privileged position, as the religious tradition which, due to its implication in the history of liberal ideas, is often made an exception for in secularist criticism, makes for a certain lack of humility that is characteristic of unrecognized positions of privilege.

There appears to be a similarity between Ramadan and Milbank because both seem intent on bridging the split between reason and faith. However, my analysis shows that they arrive at opposite solutions. Ramadan advocates a theory of consonance and an increased role for reason and human experience in the development of an ethic based on both reason and revelation. Milbank argues for a subordination of all reason under faith, which I have interpreted as a theory of contrast and an ethic based on revelation alone: Christian tradition is fundamentally different from all other human formations.

There are, in my view, at least two important differences between Ramadan and Milbank regarding interpretative method, despite their shared traditionalism. Ramadan closely adheres to traditional methods, and he clearly articulates when proposing departures from them, such as his proposal regarding experts on context. While he advocates a certain interpretation, he also acknowledges the existence of many different yet legitimate understandings of the ethical implications of tradition. Milbank establishes his authority by reference to influential

theologians of the tradition, but he does not articulate clearly how his readings of these differ from other interpretations which can lay equal or greater claim to consistency as regards tradition. Also, he regards his understanding of these traditional sources as the only one viable and claims that his interpretation represents the only possible orthodoxy.¹¹⁷ However, as Catholic theologian Peter Kucer has shown in his comparative study, Milbank's thought lies very far from the Catholic mainstream.¹¹⁸ Indeed, the theory of contrast to which Milbank adheres, is a minority position in Christian ethics. In both Catholic and Lutheran history, ethics has been guided mainly by natural law thinking, which is a theory of consonance.

Ramadan's methodological approach has the constructive advantage of being more transparent and more descriptively accurate. Furthermore, I see it as normatively problematic to claim that one's interpretation as the only genuine. As noted in earlier chapters, such claims carry a strong potential for criticism when carried out from a marginalized position, but when voiced from the privilege of white male academia, its disadvantage for a society of pluralism, and for combatting different structures of oppression and privilege, becomes obvious.

While all the authors analyzed in this study advocate a role for religious ethics in political discourse, Milbank goes furthest toward merging religious and political power, advocating hazy boundaries between Church and other authority and claiming that the supremacy of Christian tradition is ultimately the only organizing principle for a society in which differences can coexist without violence. In contrast to the other thinkers studied, Milbank does not acknowledge any political good which might be achieved by an independent secular sphere, recognizing instead only the value of preserving some degree of theological independence from the coercive practice of politics. Ramadan, Forrester, and An-Na'im all argue for the importance of a separate sphere of politics in terms of a neutral ground for discourse between plural traditions, and Gutierrez and Shariati both underscore the importance of theology's capacity to criticize power from the position of the pow-

¹¹⁷ One can speculate about whether the great impact of Milbank's thought on Protestant theologians stems at least partly from their perception of him as representing a lost Catholic heritage of the middle ages and patristic times. This is how Radical Orthodoxy is often presented by Milbank himself, but not necessarily how Catholics would describe it.

¹¹⁸ Kucer, Peter S.: *Truth and Politics*, pp. 188ff.

erless. Milbank, by contrast, believes that only power subordinated to a theological understanding of virtue is legitimate, and contends that pluralism is better safeguarded by a Christian regime operating according to Trinitarian principles of harmonious difference.

Ramadan and Milbank both articulate a critical stance toward secularism and, to a greater extent than the authors examined earlier, they also deconstruct the idea of secularity in order to show how it carries problematic assumptions. One such problem, which they both identify with secular politics, relates to its inability to articulate visions for human life. For Ramadan, Islamic theology and its vision about the objectives of human community can be a counterforce to the present state, where the political is curtailed by economic power, captured by vested interests, and played out by emotional manipulation and politics as management. This is close to Milbank's description of the virtuous few who act as a counterweight to the tendency in democracy of favouring majority opinion, manipulation, and propaganda instead of truth and virtue. In both their accounts, visions of human society and critique of capitalism can be formulated through a theologically informed account of the human being. The role of theology and a religious ethic, as the repository of vision and ethical direction of the community, is thus similar in both proposals. There are also important differences, however. Milbank believes that only Christian theology can sustain such a critique, while Ramadan believes that the Islamic critique can form alliances with other movements who perceive the ends of human community and justice in much the same way. These different positions are based on the respective standpoint on ethical theory assumed by each thinker. Ramadan, who adheres to an epistemology of possibility, believes that critique developed in tradition can be understood in a pluralistic public and contribute to a common discourse about the just society. Milbank, who adheres to epistemological contextualism, understands this critique as acting through persuasion and conversion. Because of his theory of consonance, Ramadan is confident about the possibility of alliances between Islamic and other social movements. Milbank's theory of contrast means that he does not regard such cooperation as viable or productive because it would be haunted by fundamental disagreement. The methodological position of traditionalism can thus lead to crucially different understandings with regard to politics.

Another aspect of secularism which Ramadan points to is the discriminatory consequences of the tendency to view dominant traditions as neutral and therefore less visible. Milbank seems to make a similar point when he claims that secularism involves a condescension toward other times and traditions which do not accept the division of secular and sacred as defined in the Protestant metanarrative. Milbank's point could be understood as an argument against ethnocentrism, similar to the one Ramadan makes. However, despite such insights, Milbank himself seems to promote precisely such ethnocentrism. When dealing not with the abstract question of what is wrong with secular social theory, but rather with the concrete political solution as to how a Trinitarian politics can relate to, for example, expressions of Islam as a social practice and full mode of life, Milbank claims that Islamic practices can be condoned only as analogies to the sacred in Christian tradition. This means that Islamic practices which, in Milbank's view, have no appropriate Christian correlate, cannot be tolerated.¹¹⁹ Despite Milbank's claims that a pluralism of traditions would fare better under a regime guided by harmonious difference as conceived in the Trinity than it does under secularism's demands for religions to be less than social practices, his vision seems unable to deal with real difference. This is a serious weakness in Milbank's approach, because it raises the question of how much real difference the Trinitarian harmony can really contain.

There is a certain convergence between Milbank and Ramadan in that their criticisms of the injustice of liberal market capitalism are at least partly concerned with the fact that the system is geared toward increasing productivity and growth as such, regardless of what is being produced. This is the essence of Ramadan's understanding of the prohibition on interest in Islamic tradition, and it is denounced by Milbank as a key feature of capitalism which, in his opinion, even Marxism fails to criticize adequately. Both Ramadan and Milbank claim that production should instead be geared toward what is beneficial for the community, and both claim that their own tradition contains knowledge about what is truly valuable for humans and which objectives humans should pursue. However, while Milbank's account

¹¹⁹ Milbank, John and Pabst, Adrian: "Christian Cosmopolis, Bastion of all Believers. Response to Joshua Ralston" in *ABC Religion and Ethics*, Aug 19, 2014. Milbank is also oblivious to the analogies that are indeed there, as when he claims that Christian tradition does not punish blasphemy.

is articulated in terms of virtue, Ramadan's account is both less developed and more ambiguous, containing elements of justice understood as sufficiency but also more structural ideas about justice. For Ramadan, the most poignant issues of injustice are global, centering on the issues of poverty, underdevelopment, migration, and citizenship. By contrast, the global almost never enters Milbank's discourse, which is centred on the West. While Ramadan's claim that Islamic tradition is universal leads him to develop an ethic which takes the world as its horizon and which understands universality as counter-hegemony, Milbank's understanding of justice as known in tradition and community seems to blind him to certain issues. However, since the Christian community which Milbank claims as his own is not only dispersed across the globe but also, to a great extent, extremely poor, such omissions are problematic.

Like the liberationist ethicists of previous chapters, Ramadan and Milbank both envision a radical transformation of society, but the radical traditionalists conceive of this transformation in idealist terms, as driven by ethics and ethos. Gutierrez and Shariati both imagine struggle as praxis. Revolution in their theories is spelled out in material terms, with ownership of the means of production forming a central question. The criticisms which Ramadan and Milbank direct against capitalist society are no less acute, but their solutions are different. When it comes to the question of which economic system should replace capitalism in the pursuit of justice, Ramadan is openly undecided and claims that such a system has yet to be worked out. However, he points to certain alternative practices, such as development cooperatives, ethical business, alternative banking, and fair trade initiatives. Interestingly, these same practices are referenced by Milbank, who claims that they point to the presence within capitalist economy of a different kind of valuation, where a shared conception of quality and other values is replacing the crude regulating mechanism of supply-and-demand, thus enabling an understanding of economic exchange as built upon common recognition of the good.

There seems to be a difference between Ramadan and Milbank which echoes the difference noted earlier between An-Na'im and Forrester. Ramadan and An-Na'im both imagine justice as contained in fulfilment of the law, while Forrester and Milbank both emphasize that perfect justice surpasses the law, extending beyond it into charity. This is an instance when an understanding of certain concepts in tradi-

tion makes a lasting impression on how very different theologies develop. The positions on and understandings of law in, respectively, Islamic and Christian traditions would seem, then, to make a lasting difference to the conceptualization of justice.

Critical analysis

As noted in the comparison above, Milbank's interpretative method is problematic because of his claim to represent the only authentic or orthodox interpretation of Christian tradition. The Christian tradition consists of a plurality of interpretations, practices, and understandings, and while the author of a religious ethic must argue that his or her understanding is plausible and adequate as an articulation of that tradition, so strong a claim, to be the only interpretation that is truly traditional, is problematic.¹²⁰ Descriptively, it is not plausible that Milbank's position is the only one that can lay claim to orthodoxy. Critics have pointed out that the origins of Christianity which Milbank references to prove his case were not as univocal as he seems to think.¹²¹ While Shariati and Gutierrez also partly make claims to have uncovered the most authentic interpretation of tradition, there are at least two crucial differences in the way this is made. Firstly, Shariati and Gutierrez do not claim to have uncovered the entire content of authentic tradition in all its details in the way Milbank does, but rather point to a perspective and certain insights about tradition which enable a certain understanding of faithfulness to that tradition. Secondly, in contrast to Milbank, they do not argue from a position of privilege, whereas the strand of Christian tradition which Milbank champions, blending Christian tradition and the Hellenic Platonic legacy, is arguably a Western theological heritage with a long history of posing as a

¹²⁰ According to Gavin Hyman, scholar of continental philosophy and religion, Milbank claims not only that his way of understanding the Christian narrative is the best but also that it is the only theological way, demanded by the narrative itself. Hyman's contention, similar to mine, is that while the former position can be argued for, the latter cannot be defended. Hyman, Gavin: *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology. Radical Orthodoxy or Nihilist Textualism?* Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville 2001, p. 89.

¹²¹ Hedges, Paul: "Radical Orthodoxy and the Closed Western Theological Mind. The Poverty of Radical Orthodoxy in Intercultural and Interreligious Perspective." In . Isherwood, Lisa and Zlomisic, Marko (eds.): *The Poverty of Radical Orthodoxy*. Pickwick, Eugene 2012, pp. 120ff.

universal theology when it is in fact universalizing and lacking in awareness of its rootedness.¹²² Critics have pointed out that the central event of Christianity, which has to be interpreted in different cultural settings, is the life and death of Jesus, not the particular inculturation of the story about that event in Hellenistic philosophy.¹²³ Milbank's position amounts to a refusal to see his own strand of Christian tradition as merely one of many possible variants. With respect to the criteria I have articulated, while Milbank's interpretative method succeeds in placing him within Christian tradition, he represents a highly specific and tendentious reading of the authorities of that tradition, and consequently articulates a position which is considerably more marginal than is apparent when his claims to orthodoxy are taken at face value. Milbank works in and through the concepts and writers of tradition in a way that, as I see it, places him firmly in a certain strand of Western Christian tradition. But this does not mean that he should be understood as representing quintessential Christianity. It has been cogently argued by theologian Paul Hedges that the very authorities whom Milbank relies on for the construction of his orthodoxy, such as Augustine and Aquinas, differ from him on certain crucial points. For example, they do not negate the possibility of truth outside tradition in the way he does.¹²⁴ Milbank's writings tend to obscure the plurality of Christian thought and practice in the patristic and medieval periods. His claim to represent the only orthodox interpretation of Christianity is, I contend, not only descriptively inaccurate but also normatively

¹²² Hedges, Paul, op. cit., pp. 123ff. Hedges is here referring to Schreier, Robert J.: *The New Catholicity. Theology between the Global and the Local*. Orbis Books, Maryknoll 1997, pp. 2ff.

¹²³ Theologian Joshua Ralston puts it succinctly: "I still maintain that Christianity is not *essentially* Greek, but only accidentally so. Which is another way of saying that I read the fundamental event of Christianity to be the proclamation that the crucified Nazarene is Lord – a claim that is indigenous both nowhere and everywhere – and not the synthesis of faith and reason through the merging of the biblical and Greek worldviews." Ralston, Joshua: "How Political Theologians Should (Not) Engage with Islam: Responding to John Milbank and Adrian Pabst" in *ABC Religion and Ethics*, Aug 27, 2014. In contrast, Paul Kucer maintains that the notion that certain Hellenic elements are inseparable from the Christian faith is a conviction Milbank shares with the understanding of Catholic faith elaborated by Joseph Ratzinger. Kucer, Paul: *Truth and Politics*, p. 180.

¹²⁴ Hedges, Paul: "Radical Orthodoxy and the Closed Western Theological Mind", p. 121. Paul Kucer also asserts that Milbank attributes his reading to Augustine and Aquinas. Kucer, Paul: *Truth and Politics*, p. 150.

problematic, and is tied up with a general position which I regard as triumphalism.

What I term triumphalism is a cluster of supremacist ideas in Milbank's thought, encompassing claims that his own interpretation of Christianity is the only authentic, and that Christian tradition thus understood is the only repository of truth, and the only possibility for building a society of non-violent, harmonious difference.¹²⁵ There are several other features of Milbank's thought which are connected to this triumphalism and which I deem highly problematic.

First, such a claim to complete superiority involves the danger, perhaps even the inevitability, of doing epistemic violence to others. The idea that truth is only available in a very particular strand of Christian tradition makes Milbank insensitive to the nuances of other lines of thought, whether belonging to what he perceives as allies or opponents. As several critics have pointed out, Milbank's tends to misunderstand and misrepresent his interlocutors, both the ones he criticizes and the ones that he refers to as authorities in what he understands to be authentic Christian tradition.¹²⁶ In my view, Milbank's Christian ethic is articulated through epistemic violence against its interlocutors. Such violence is problematic in itself, but all the more grave because of Milbank's ambition to represent the only way to non-violent difference.¹²⁷ This can be understood not only as a contingent irony, but perhaps as an indication that no tradition is free of problematic aspects and tendencies towards violence. Of course, Milbank himself acknowledges that the Christian tradition has for the

¹²⁵ American Judaic studies professor Peter Ochs also terms Milbank's position triumphalist, understanding it as a kind of Christian supersessionist universalism. Ochs, Peter: *Another Reformation. Postliberal Christianity and the Jews*. Baker Academic, Michigan 2011, p. 254.

¹²⁶ Some of these criticisms are summarized in Isherwood, Lisa and Zlomislic, Marko (eds.), *The Poverty of Radical Orthodoxy*, pp. 32f. See also the critique of Gavin Hyman, who claims that Milbank's readings are violent and that "a totalizing, absolute metanarrative, such as that espoused by Milbank, must necessarily entail a certain violence and exclusion of difference in spite of his claims to the contrary". Hyman, Gavin: *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology*, p. 66.

¹²⁷ Theologian Joshua Ralston also points out that the tendency of Milbank to define himself in opposition is telling given his claim to be the representative of ontological peace. Ralston, Joshua: "Islamophobia and the Comeback of Christendom. Riposte to Adrian Pabst" in *ABC Religion and Ethics*, Aug 4, 2014. Hedges goes further, claiming that there is a violent ontology inherent in Milbank's work, particularly in his violent epistemology toward others. Hedges, Paul: "Radical Orthodoxy and the Closed Western Theological Mind", pp. 136f.

most part failed to live up to its potential of harmonious difference. However, in my view a religious ethic which aims to articulate a vision of peace should be argued in a less violent manner.

Secondly, Milbank claims not only that Christian tradition is superior to the secular alternatives which he examines in his work, but that all secular thought is implicated in nihilism and violence, and he likewise dismisses all other religious traditions and their theologies as well, the latter without examination. Such sweeping condemnations, ungrounded in any analysis, cannot be justified and severely discredit his argument. Milbank claims that it would entail a betrayal of Christian essence to refrain from a wholesale condemnation of all other traditions, both secular and religious. This is an implausible claim, because there would be precious few Christians left in the world if that criterion was consistently applied, and also problematic because the position invites sectarian thinking.¹²⁸ Moreover, Christian theology is hardly rendered incoherent by a more humble epistemology which does not exclude the possibility of grace outside the Church.¹²⁹ Such a position can be convincingly anchored in doctrines of Creation and universal salvation of the kind that have been cogently advanced by many Christian theologians.¹³⁰ The conclusion must be that the condemnation of all other traditions is a premise and not a conclusion of Milbank's work. As Ralston contends, Milbank seems to have no interest in engaging other traditions, instead constructing his theology in perpetual competition to various others.¹³¹ As I see it, the weakest aspect of Milbank's thought that he fails to engage Islamic or any other non-Christian religious tradition in any serious and detailed way

¹²⁸ As noted by Anglican theologian Steven Shakespeare, many critics fault Radical Orthodoxy with being sectarian in the sense of being cut off from other faiths and ideologies. However, he understands Milbank to be less so due to Milbank's insistence that the Church has something to offer the whole human community. Shakespeare, Steven: *Radical Orthodoxy*, p. 81. However, as Jeffrey Stout argues, despite the fact that Milbank advocates complex society and not the enclave as social form, his epistemological condemnation of the world outside the church reinforces the enclave boundary. Stout, Jeffrey: *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 115.

¹²⁹ Jeffrey Stout makes this point by comparing Milbank to Karl Barth. If Christ is the Truth, Stout claims, then the Christian who affirms him is not, and the affirmation must enjoin humbleness. Stout, Jeffrey: *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 110.

¹³⁰ Peter Ochs claims that not only does orthodox Christianity not require such a position on other traditions, but that Milbank's own arguments for Christianity are also separable from his blanket criticisms of Judaism and Islam. Ochs, Peter: *Another Reformation*, p. 225.

¹³¹ Ralston, Joshua: "Islamophobia and the Comeback of Christendom."

which might justify his pronouncements on them. Although he treats secular traditions tendentiously, he at least engages some of them in great detail. Ironically, with respect to religious traditions, Milbank seems to assume the very view from nowhere which he himself criticizes.¹³²

In my analysis, Milbank's triumphalism is especially problematic because it is tied to an unrecognized position of power and privilege. Milbank's desire to break free of the constrictions which theology has imposed on itself as a consequence of its marginalization in the West has merits for the issues discussed in this study, and can generously be interpreted as similar to the stance taken by Ramadan on the need to develop confidence in Islamic ethics. But it is problematic that Milbank at times seems not to recognize, or at other times to celebrate, the privileged position of Christianity in the West as compared to other religious traditions in general and to Islam in particular.¹³³ That privilege means that his claims to superiority collude with oppressive forces in the treatment of other religious traditions, which have, for material and historical reasons, far fewer resources for making their concerns as well as contributions to the public heard. This silencing of the voices of the weaker is normatively problematic and threatens the viability of Milbank's critique of secularism as faulty because it treats other traditions and their narratives with condescension.

In my view, Milbank's greatest strength is his thorough suspicion of the secular as neutral and original, which makes him criticize, more radically than the other thinkers examined in this study, the presumptions about and the hostility toward religious tradition which are a lingering feature of secular discourse. The origins of the ideas of the secular in theology and in contingent historical developments have been extensively treated by philosopher Charles Taylor and have come to be widely accepted since the publication of Milbank's study in 1990.¹³⁴ I remain skeptical of Milbank's contention that these ori-

¹³² In a similar vein, Hyman criticizes Milbank for assuming omniscience with respect to other traditions. Hyman, Gavin: *The predicament of Postmodern Theology*, p. 79. Hedges remarks that in his treatment of Hindu tradition, Milbank assumes a generic concept of religion based on Western assumptions that he thoroughly rejects elsewhere. Hedges, Paul: "Radical Orthodoxy and the Closed Western Theological Mind", pp. 133ff.

¹³³ This is a point that is also made by Svenungsson in Svenungsson, Jayne: "Public Faith and the Common Good. A Radical Messianic Proposal", p. 753.

¹³⁴ Taylor, Charles: *A Secular Age*. The Belknap Press, Cambridge 2007.

gins lie with a theology that is somehow *inauthentic*, rooted as this is in Milbank's exceedingly narrow understanding of authenticity. However, Milbank makes a strong case for meta-suspicion towards the pretensions of social theory, its purported view from nowhere, and its condescension against religious traditions, and he rightly points to the necessity of recognizing the ideal preconditions for public discourse as being not necessarily an elusive neutrality but rather hospitality.

Milbank's claim, that the assumption of the priority of violence in modern secular society has deeply problematic consequences, is potentially productive. It points to the possibility of tempering and challenging such an account with insights based on an account of the priority of peace such as that found in the Christian narrative. However, as I have already argued, Milbank's claim that only Christian tradition can counter the nihilism and violence of secularism is unacceptable. I believe it to be evident from this study that the Christian narrative cannot be considered the only resource which can be called upon to construct an alternative to capitalism, neoliberalism, and violence. Rather, many traditions have such resources in different articulations. For example, Ramadan's treatment of pluralism as part of God's aims presents an interesting challenge to Milbank's notion that only Christian tradition is able to think difference without violence. As has been argued by systematic theologian Jayne Svenungsson, Milbank's totalizing Christian vision is counterproductive in that it hampers discussion in a pluralistic society while also being arrogant and illusory. As Svenungsson writes, "It is of course nonsense to claim that only Christianity should be in possession of truly emancipatory practices and visions".¹³⁵

Milbank claims, as we have seen, that the Christian ethic conceives of difference as harmonious and that a Christian order would consequently accommodate pluralism better than a secular one. Milbank is certainly right in pointing out the often unrecognized hostility of secular regimes toward religious expressions which do not limit themselves to the modes of liberal Protestantism, such as private belief, something that undermines the presumption that a secular order is inherently more tolerant than a religious one. It is a suggestion worthy

¹³⁵ As shown in that article, Milbank's discussion of Islam, for all his criticism of Enlightenment, betrays his allegiance to an amalgam of Christianity and secular modernism and its views on private and public, rational and irrational. See Svenungsson, Jayne: "Public Faith and the Common Good".

of exploration if a more hospitable public could be formulated on the basis of Christian doctrine. But there are also several problems with Milbank's position. As theologian Joshua Ralston has pointed out, Christianity's historical record of tolerance is not encouraging.¹³⁶ While Milbank does not regard the history of Christendom as normative in that sense, his own theorizing gives cause for the same misgivings, as I have already argued with regard to his tendency to do epistemic violence to and silence others.¹³⁷ When analyzed, it seems that Milbank's proposal for a global order subsumed under Christian aims fails to accept and appreciate actual difference as singularity, rather than just difference as analogy. For example, Milbank has claimed that a Christian polity can only "[...] demand general respect for the sacrality of other religious communities insofar as they approximate Christianity's own sense of sacrality (or are not incompatible with it)."¹³⁸ This means in effect, according to Milbank's own examples, that mosques can be respected as analogies of churches, while anti-blasphemy laws are unacceptable. This statement raises the question of what Milbank chooses not to know about the history of laws on blasphemy in Christendom. Proper analogies depend on knowledge about the matters being compared, and Milbank's treatment of Islamic tradition is generally deplorable and falls into several Orientalist tropes.¹³⁹ On a more theoretical level, however, the statement also

¹³⁶ Ralston, Joshua: "Islamophobia and the Comeback of Christendom."

¹³⁷ Steven Shakespeare also understands Radical Orthodoxy as appreciative of difference on the surface, while in practice it promotes an antagonistic strategy that eradicates any genuine commitment to difference. This amounts to an inability both to genuinely hear and to make room for the other. Shakespeare, Steven: *Radical Orthodoxy*, p. 170. Gavin Hyman understands Milbank's entire project to obliterate difference through its metanarrative and violent readings. Hyman, Gavin, *The predicament of postmodern theology*, pp. 73-77.

¹³⁸ Milbank, John and Pabst, Adrian: "Christian Cosmopolis, Bastion of all Believers."

¹³⁹ For example, he often uses Western islamologists rather than Islamic theologians or philosophers as sources, and he selects a few thinkers as representatives of "true" Islam, and he generalizes Islam to be decadent, more culturally specific and geopolitically confined than Christianity. Milbank, John: *Beyond Secular Order*, pp. 114 and 139. See also Milbank, John: "Christianity, the Enlightenment and Islam" in *ABC Religion and Ethics*, Aug 24, 2010. As Ralston notes, Milbank treats Salafism as the quintessence of Sunni orthodoxy and equates the large corpus of Sharia with blind voluntarism. Ralston, Joshua: "How Political Theologians Should (Not) Engage with Islam". Hedges claims that this is symptomatic of Milbank's treatment of other religions in general, claiming that "he shows a rather shallow and superficial understand-

raises issues. If acceptance of difference is dependent on recognizing analogies, the resulting pluralism might be too severely circumscribed to be normatively acceptable.

In my analysis, Milbank fails to adequately take into account the dangers of associating theology and power. He exhibits no wariness about the possibility that power corrupts and that the Church cannot subsume the practice of power under itself without its theology being affected by it. Generally, I find that Milbank's account of educative hierarchy and assigned social roles is insufficiently suspicious of power, roles and hierarchy being highly problematic in and of themselves, regardless of their ultimate goal or their relation to virtue. Although I find plausible Milbank's claim that people tend to overlook the fact that our present society is the most unequal and hierarchical there has ever been, I do not find hierarchy problematic simply because it is arbitrary. Rather, I maintain that there are certain problems and risks inherent in the justification of hierarchy by a religious ethic. Such justifications entail the risk that a religious ethic will be used to sanctify the prevailing order and its hierarchies. It leaves theology insufficiently independent of power to have the critical edge which I regard as necessary for developing the transformational capacity of ethics.

Another problem for the transformative potential of Milbank's ethics is his refusal of cooperation with other movements. Milbank's stance seems to provide a platform for critique of society through the understanding of Christian tradition as bearer of a radically different ethic, and his analysis of modern society also delivers insightful critique. However, his refusal of cooperation with other traditions or movements hampers this transformative potential by cutting it off from potential resources for self-criticism, solidarity, and joint political action.

I find plausible Milbank's contention that an account of what begets true human flourishing, and what is therefore valuable to human society, is necessary in order to temper the liberal primacy of a liberty that is reduced to free choice. He claims that the struggle for justice needs an account of what is truly valuable for humans, and that such an account is available in the Christian tradition of the virtues. I believe that there is indeed great strategic value in such an account and

ing of Hinduism based on sectarian sources". Hedges, Paul: "Radical Orthodoxy and the Closed Western Theological Mind", p. 132.

that there might be some merit to the position that a critique of injustice is difficult to sustain without some substantial ideas about the needs, rights, or capacities of humankind. However, there are many problems with stipulating such an account because it implies, in some sense, an essentializing of humanity and thus involves doing violence to actual difference. It is my contention that Milbank exhibits too much confidence in his ability to specify the true aims or ends of humanity in a way that actualizes the problem of paternalism. Milbank, as we have seen, understands persuasion to be non-violent if it is persuasion of truth. Truth is peaceful by definition, simply by virtue of being true. In consequence, he believes that the exercise of power with the aim of realizing what is truly valuable, because grounded in concern for the welfare of the other, is legitimate. But this is clearly a tautology which deprives us of any way to discriminate between truth and falsehood, between peaceful persuasion and domination. The problem is that a society guided by a substantial account of what is valuable for humans to do and be tends to make decisions for its citizens in a way that is problematic if we believe that some measure of freedom or autonomy is part of what is valuable to people. This problem is not solved by noting that if you have an account of what is valuable, you can perceive your paternalism as legitimate. To be coerced to do what is just and true remains coercion, and the exercise of paternalism can sometimes be justified but not by being defined away. The issues of paternalism must be more constructively dealt with than Milbank does, and in ways which acknowledge that there are other plausible accounts of what is valuable for humans to be and do than the Christian one.

As we have seen, Milbank criticizes the Marxist account of human beings, claiming that it rests on an unviable notion of natural and original humanity, and that it tends toward an empty notion of liberation and freedom without a specification of what for or to what. I believe that both these points have merits, but as criticisms of Marx's thought they are misguided.

To address the first, Milbank may be right that the idea of a natural-historical humanity accessible beyond culture is no longer a viable concept, either for a religious ethic or for political critique, but the suspicion of the natural as being fundamentally a social construct is

itself a central insight of Marx's.¹⁴⁰ While Marx clearly assumes that there are potentialities in human beings that could be realized by a different society, such a position can be coherent without understanding them as beyond culture. Indeed, Milbank has noted that his own account is dependent on the acceptance of the view that there is a "'right' and in this sense a 'natural' way" for human beings to be.¹⁴¹

Turning to the second point, Milbank notes plausibly that the language of an increasingly banally conceived freedom of choice is dominant in public discourse, to the point where even critics of market capitalism from the socialist and social democratic spectrum are succumbing to its logic. This can be assumed to hamper the socialist critique of capitalist society. However, human flourishing in the Marxist vision is not about increasing freedom as a release from restraint alone. Rather, Marx regards humans as beings of sociality and creativity. Marx's ideal human society allows the development of humans as political beings in social cooperation with others, who realize themselves through conscious productive life and creation of the human world.¹⁴² Such a vision is neither vacuous nor does it eventually favour capitalism.

It is telling to note, then, that when Milbank tries to spell out his alternative vision of the true human ends, he sometimes ends up not so far from secular socialism after all, understanding these ends as the mutual realization of the creative capacity of every individual in solidarity. However, while the release of the genius or personality of every person is important, it must in Milbank's view always be subject to judgment and scrutiny in terms of the criterion of its disclosure of something unique but of eternal verity.¹⁴³ The central difference from a Marxist account, as I understand it, lies in the origins and the content

¹⁴⁰ In *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx claims that the human essence is the ensemble of social relations and a social product. Marx, Karl: *Människans frigörelse*, pp. 128f.

¹⁴¹ Milbank, John: *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 327.

¹⁴² This anthropology is evident in Marx's writings on alienation in *The economic-philosophical manuscripts*. Marx, Karl: *Människans frigörelse*, pp. 66-70. A similarly substantial understanding of Marx vision of humanity is explained by Carl-Henric Grenholm. See Grenholm, Carl-Henric: *Arbetets mening*, pp. 200-207. Grenholm claims that there is a fundamental continuity between the early and the late Marx such that the anthropology of the early writings can illuminate his more mature theory. Op. cit. p. 192. A recognition of Marx's anthropology in a liberal context is made by Martha Nussbaum, who in her capabilities approach refers to *truly human functioning* and *the human being in need of a totality of human life-activities* as ideas appropriated from Marx. Nussbaum, Martha: *Frontiers of Justice*, p. 74.

¹⁴³ Milbank, John: *Beyond Secular Order*, p. 264.

of these standards for discernment of which human flourishing to promote, and in the aforementioned lack of suspicion against hierarchy as a means for their promotion.

There seems to be no firm basis for Milbank's claim that political action could not be sustained by a Marxist account of the human being as well as it could by a Christian one, only that the former as well as the latter might be understood as contingent narratives, what Milbank calls a different desire. His valid insight is perhaps the element of normativity in socialist engagement, which follows not from his critique of Marx's anthropology but from his suspicion of rationality as the justification for socialism.

While Milbank's contention that Christian ethics are a resource for the critique of the current world order of liberal capitalism is plausible, I believe that he is overly optimistic about the possible impact of such religious ethic or ethos. There is a strong idealism to his account, one that runs the risk of neglecting the enormity of the obstacles to the realization of justice. That the massive redistribution of property which Milbank proposes could be achieved simply by constructing an ethos of generosity among the wealthy seems improbable. Still more problematic is that this is a vision that is condescending, imagining justice as the result of handouts.¹⁴⁴ This is all the more evident in the cursory remarks Milbank makes about the global reach of justice. In most of his writings, Milbank appears to simply ignore the need for global redistribution. In his assessment of capitalism, it is apparent that he analyzes its Western aspects, disregarding the effects of its processes in other parts of the world. Clearly, the idea encountered earlier in this chapter, that late capitalism exhibits regularity, security, and predictability, has no relevance for Third World workforces, and increasingly little for their counterparts in the West. Nor is there anything covert about the tyranny needed to sustain capitalist production in many parts of the globe. This failure to address those most affected by injustice is problematic. When the Third World enters his discussions at all, Milbank claims that what is needed is some kind of "[...] more benignly parentalist assistance for the South from the North".

¹⁴⁴ Argentinian contextual theologian Marcella María Althaus-Reid likewise understands Milbank's socialism to be a hierarchal vision where the people in top remain in control. Althaus-Reid, Marcella María: "'A Saint and a Church for Twenty Dollars' – Sending Radical Orthodoxy to Ayacucho" in Radford Ruether, Rosemary and Grau, Marion (eds.): *Interpreting the Postmodern: Responses to "Radical Orthodoxy"*, p. 110.

The justification which he gives for this solution is that the South is so devastated and so bound up with the North that only global solutions enabled by a West that has recommitted to global equality can be viable.¹⁴⁵ While there is no denying the interconnectedness of the world, nor that the prospect of development outside the global system seems unviable, it seems naïve to imagine a benign and altruist influence from North to South. Such comments show both condescension and a nonchalance about power.

I have already hinted that there is merit to Milbank's suspicion towards the viability of rationality as the central argument for socialism. Historical contingencies have altered the credibility of the orthodox Marxist meta-narrative to the point where it is necessary to develop other arguments for the importance of another world order, arguments which might be articulated through the desires and narratives of traditions. Post-colonial critique has also amply demonstrated the deviousness of the concept of rationality and its potentially problematic consequences in the analysis of the Other, which are often deemed insufficiently rational. There is some merit to Milbank's claim that a problem with materialist analysis is that religion is often understood as automatically culpable rather than as a site of struggle. However, the fact that Milbank's purported radicalism easily slips into condescension, conservatism, and outright justification of imperialism points to the dangers of completely abandoning materialist analysis and its attention to material preconditions for thought, struggle, and power.¹⁴⁶

The basic intuitions of materialism should be separated from the pitfall to which Milbank points: the problematic tendency to ascribe to other cultures and contexts a distinction between, say, religious and real that is completely alien to their self-understanding. If materialism is understood as a sense of acute attention to the material conditions of subjectivity, thought, and human life in general, it should not have to involve a supposition that the understandings of the distinctions be-

¹⁴⁵ Milbank, John: *The Future of Love*, p. 227. This point is put even more bluntly in an article in which Milbank refers to "[...] the lamentably premature collapse of the Western colonial empires" which he apparently prefers to later economic exploitation. Milbank, John: "Christianity, the Enlightenment and Islam".

¹⁴⁶ I thus agree with Marcella Maria Althaus-Reid, who claims that radical orthodoxy's position derives from a pre-postcolonial stance which fails to exercise any hermeneutic of suspicion on the conditions of production, including intellectual production, that surround themselves. Althaus-Reid, Marcella Maria: "A Saint and a Church for Twenty Dollars", p. 110.

tween sacred and profane which characterize Western history are somehow normative or more real. That Marxist suspicion of the material conditions for the production of such ethnocentric thought has undergirded much postcolonial criticism should point to the potential inherent in such developments.

9. Resistance by tradition, a hospitable public, and hope of solidarity

In this chapter, I start by summarizing the findings of the previous chapters. I then move on to discuss the three areas of inquiry in themselves and what the preceding analysis may entail for a plausible treatment of the questions of method, religious ethics in public, and the meaning of justice.

The comparative perspective

The preceding chapters have aimed at fulfilling the first aim of this dissertation, which is to make an analysis and comparison of six different formulations of Christian and Muslim ethics with respect to their diverse methods of interpretation of tradition, their different understandings of the role of religious ethics in public discourse and political action, and their respective understandings of the concept of justice.

I have understood these six formulations as representing three ways to relate to liberal hegemony. Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im and Duncan B. Forrester represent modified liberalism, because of their attempts to find ways that their tradition can contribute to the good of a pluralistic society without ultimately challenging the liberal democratic paradigm. Their proposals for the role of religious ethics in political discourse, and their perception of the contributions of such an ethic to the understanding of justice, are somewhat modest. In terms of interpretative method, we have seen that An-Na'im's proposal rests on a methodology which is quite innovative, exhibiting a tendency to make something outside of tradition into the standard for interpretation. While An-Na'im's interpretative method of inverting the process of abrogation is both stringent and eloquently argued for, it remains quite radical. This has consequences for its potential impact and could also

mean that tradition is altered by such an interpretation to the point where indispensable aspects are left out. I have argued that An-Na'im makes an outside standard the arbiter of acceptable interpretation, and that the critical potential of a religious ethic is thereby undermined, because the function of such an ethic is then reduced to providing motivation and legitimacy for moral insights which are available through secular reasoning. An-Na'im's position can be understood as an ethic based on reason which does not reserve any distinct insights for religious ethics. Forrester's interpretative method is less radical but it is problematic that he does not articulate his interpretative method. While he relies for the most part on Scripture, basic Christian doctrines, and theologians who are considered authorities in his own strand of Reformed Christianity and are widely recognized as influential in Western Christianity, it remains a problem that he does not articulate a method for dealing with the polyphony of Christian tradition and the consequent need for norms of interpretation. This is especially so since he incorporates different strands of Christian tradition as sources for the contributions to public debate.

An-Na'im envisions the contributions of an Islamic ethic to the public debate as involving a justification of human rights and also as contributing to the contextualization of such rights. He asserts the need for a public discourse which is inclusive and in which every participant makes the utmost effort to be understandable to others. In An-Na'im's account, this entails avoiding arguments which cannot be accepted regardless of worldview or belief, even if I have shown that he cannot be understood as calling for full adherence to such a norm without his argument being rendered incoherent. Forrester is likewise cautious in his recommendations for a position for religious ethics in public life. He relies on the idea of fragments, implying that contributions from a religious ethic can be offered in public in a fragmented form, that is to say, not making the understanding of Christian tradition a prerequisite for accepting them but relying instead on the public's intuitive recognition of these fragments as true. Forrester articulates an ethic based on both reason and revelation, and affirms contributions from a Christian ethic to public debate which contain substantial and distinct ethical insights. An-Na'im relies on a theory of consonance, which means that he takes the content of his Islamic ethic to be consonant with ethics developed outside tradition, whereas Forrester understands his Christian ethic to consist of a combination of

insights available outside tradition and moral insights that are distinct. An-Na'im adheres to an epistemological universalism while Forrester can be understood as arguing for an epistemology of possibility.

Both An-Na'im and Forrester advance conceptions of justice that are close to liberal conceptualizations of justice. An-Na'im understands justice according to a sufficiency account, as the realization of human rights, and understands the contribution of theology to such a conception of justice as principally a matter of justifying such a conception to believers. Forrester understands justice as egalitarianism, but also as fundamentally relational and aimed at creating possibilities for good human community. In Forrester's account, theology can be necessary for a coherent defence of the ideal of equality, and he invokes theological fragments as a way to nuance and enrich the understanding of justice with the telos of relation.

Ali Shariati and Gustavo Gutierrez represent the liberationist ethics which are the subject of the second part of this book. They make radical interpretations of their respective traditions, articulating a social ethic which conceives of the task of religion as the realization of human liberation from oppression and other kinds of injustice. Methodologically, they both rely on creative reinterpretations of central concepts and doctrines of their respective traditions, informed by Marxist and postcolonial analysis of both society and religion. These reinterpretations depart methodologically from traditional methods of interpretation but are justified by recourse to tradition itself, which is reconceptualized as a message of liberation. Shariati develops an understanding of Islam as a liberating ideology which can be extracted from the sources of Islamic tradition: the Quran, the *sunna*, and Islamic concepts, practices, and narratives. A central feature of his thought is the overcoming of the divisions within Iranian society through this elaboration of Islam by the figure of the enlightened thinker. Gutierrez relies for his reinterpretation on the notion of the preferential option for the poor and the epistemological privilege of the poor in articulating what justice entails. For both Gutierrez and Shariati, praxis is closely connected to interpretation. It is through engagement in struggle and concrete solidarity with the victims of injustice that the true meaning of their respective traditions is understood. I have claimed that this position should be seen as implying that ethics in their respective accounts is based on both reason and revelation.

Both Gutierrez and Shariati see their respective religious ethic as a tool of analysis of society and thus indispensable for conscientizing and educating the poor and enabling them to take political action. Religious ethics contain insights about justice and God's purposes that can contribute criticism and articulate alternatives in public discourse, they claim. I see Shariati and Gutierrez as articulating theories of combination, that is, as claiming that there are moral insights which are distinctive to their respective traditions even as they recognize moral insights which are available outside tradition. Both Shariati and Gutierrez adhere to an epistemological contextualism; they understand reasons and arguments as dependent on context, and emphasize that these become plausible in the context of a tradition.

Gutierrez and Shariati both have an understanding of justice as liberation, by which justice is understood to be structural and material, to be realized through an overthrow of capitalist society and a severing of the ties of dependence and imperialism. Such a revolution would enable the development not only of a new society but of a new human being. For Shariati, the objective of such a society of material justice is that it will enable human striving toward God through both practice and mysticism. Gutierrez maintains that in the final instance, justice can only be realized through the liberation from sin which Jesus Christ alone makes possible.

Ramadan and Milbank represent radical traditionalism in that they both claim to remain within the mainstream of their traditions. Although they rely largely on traditional interpretative methods, they also make some departures from traditional methodology. Ramadan transparently argues for a specific departure from tradition, one that entails a renewed appreciation of the importance of context for the articulation of ethics. Milbank claims to represent traditional Christianity based on authoritative theologians, but he simultaneously makes tendentious readings of these, which results in the articulation of a position that in several respects is very far from traditional. Ramadan can be understood as affirming ethical insight through reason while articulating his ethic through both reason and revelation, whereas Milbank is the only ethicist of this study to argue for an ethics based on revelation alone.

Both Ramadan and Milbank make radical claims for the role of theology in politics as a source of criticism and visions, and both want to reclaim confidence in the possibility of a politics based on a reli-

gious ethic. Milbank claims that all practice of politics that is not subsumed under Christian virtue is in face violent and nihilistic, and that a Christian ethic is the only resource that can articulate a peaceful and just politics. He proposes a theory of contrast and an epistemological contextualism. Ramadan, by contrast, believes that an Islamic ethic can formulate visions for political debate by relying on common ideals while contributing distinct understandings of these universal values which can enrich public debate and call for greater consistency with such ideals. He relies on a theory of consonance and an epistemology of possibility which mean that he regards arguments as formulated in the context of tradition but is optimistic about the possibility of trans-contextual communication.

Ramadan's understanding of justice is under-articulated and contains both elements which I have argued point to a sufficiency account of justice, and elements which conceptualize justice as realized through structural change that addresses oppression. He understands the objectives of Sharia to articulate what is universally valuable to human beings, which makes them important for an articulation of justice. Milbank, on the other hand, has a virtue account of justice and claims that justice can be realized only where there is consensus on the substantial values to be realized by human society. Such values can then undergird a distribution which is conducive to the greatest virtue. In their conceptualization of justice, both Ramadan and Milbank develop accounts of what is truly valuable for humans as a basis for radical politics.

I will now elaborate further the issues of interpretative method, religious ethics in the practice of politics, and the meaning of justice. This discussion will be informed by the positions examined in earlier chapters, but the aim is to appraise the possibilities for plausible conceptualizations of these problems and their solutions, focusing on the potential contributions highlighted by the preceding comparison. In this chapter the interrelation and interaction of the research questions will be evident.

Method and identity

A recurring issue in this dissertation has been the question of identity. Because a religious ethic is articulated as part of a tradition while sim-

ultaneously being a development of tradition, the question of whether the ethic is plausible for asserting an identity in relation to that tradition assumes importance. The thinkers studied here all claim that the ethic they articulate is authentic and thus claim to speak with the authority of tradition even as they make claims which often differ radically from many other such articulations. In the preceding chapters, I have in each case assessed these claims to represent tradition. I now turn to a more thorough discussion of the issues of identity and authority.

There are, as noted in the Introduction, no objective measurements for judging which ethic can plausibly be situated within a given tradition. In a way, this is a question which can only be answered in retrospect, when further developments make clear whether some articulation or development will come to be seen as forming part of the evolvement of authoritative tradition, as heresy or mere irrelevance, or as a branching out and emergence of a new tradition or belief. Even history itself may not be the final arbiter, however, because the constructive reclaiming of past heresies or side-tracks in tradition shows that the process is never finalized. Moreover, what is perceived as mainstream and heresy regarding the ethical implications of tradition can change quickly in circumstances and contexts where the centre of tradition is under negotiation. This is illustrated by the example of Shariati, whose legacy is subject to intense controversy because of the radically different political circumstances of its production in relation to the history that followed.

However, it is necessary to recognize that, despite the difficulty involved in judging which developments are faithful to tradition, there must be development of some kind. The very concept of tradition implies evolution, otherwise it would not be tradition but a corpus of dead documents. Moreover, what is perceived as conservatism and lack of development often reveals itself, upon closer scrutiny, as relying on change every bit as much as do the progressive alternatives. This is highlighted by the reasoning exhibited by both Ramadan and An-Na'im in their critique of conservative interpretations. For example, Ramadan exposes how the efforts of conservative jurists, to replicate rulings without allowing modern society to influence interpretation of *fiqh* and thereby stay close to tradition, end up departing from the method of the Companions of the Prophet, who were experts on their context. It is thus more a question of at what level of abstraction

changes are possible or desirable, not only to what extent. Since development of ethical thought is unavoidable in a tradition, the question is how such developments are realized and justified. In my view, Milbank points to an important aspect when he describes the insider perspective of a tradition as a sense of a telos which makes possible changes that express a continuity-in-difference. Such an understanding is, I believe, close to the notion of directionality which I have identified as norms for interpretation in the ethics of Ramadan and An-Na'im. In Milbank's opinion, the sense of telos can only be perceived by the insider; the outsider can merely suggest developments of tradition in what Milbank calls a sense of play. While I concede the point that any judgment about the borders of tradition which does not take into account the insider perspective of a tradition is deficient, I would claim that an outsider can also contribute to a discussion of whether a particular articulation of the moral implications tradition is plausible as a movement toward such a telos. The notion of telos or directionality is fruitful in my opinion because it highlights that a tradition by definition is going somewhere, and that faithfulness to tradition is not possible without change, while simultaneously acknowledging that the movement is not arbitrary and can be subjected to critique.

I would thus defend the position that the question of whether a religious ethic is plausible as an articulation of tradition is not arbitrary, but note that faithfulness cannot be articulated as conservatism towards tradition because conservatism often rests as much upon innovation, if on a different conceptual level. Working out an ethic in a tradition, as I understand it, is a matter of working with the sources, concepts, methods, and limitations of tradition, measuring tradition with its own criteria, and justifying innovation through tradition's own arguments and resources. However, in describing identity within tradition in this way, I am aware that I assume that concepts, methods, criteria, and arguments can be neatly divided as belonging inside or outside tradition. This is a simplification which disregards the fact that traditions never have hermetically sealed borders. Methods and concepts can indeed be perceived as belonging to a tradition, but at the same time, there are in all traditions conceptual resources which are shared with others, both other religions and secular philosophy. It is in a way an inevitable consequence of the idea, necessary for theology's existence, that God addresses humanity in a language which humans can understand. As is shown by An-Na'im in his analysis of the meth-

ods of *fiqh*, human judgement is present in them all because this is the human condition. This insight, that concepts and methods belong both outside and inside of tradition, must result in a certain humility regarding the possibility of adequately judging what developments count as traditional. Refusing to acknowledge this ambiguity leads to an unsustainable dualism that in the end is incoherent. As the example of Milbank shows, the attempt to stay completely and utterly within a specific tradition does not lead him to rely on Christian resources alone, but rather results in him privileging one specific inculturation of Christian tradition and the concomitant concepts of platonic philosophy.

Moreover, claims to the effect that a certain interpretation or articulation of ethics should be understood as positioned outside tradition are often made in order to suppress certain developments. When such claims are articulated from a position of political power or cultural dominance, they are problematic because oppressive and prone to silence other perspectives. In the history of theological interpretation, the accusation of heresy has been effective in perpetuating the domination of certain voices and perspectives to the detriment both of other perspectives and of the fruitful and creative development of tradition as a whole, as is noted by An-Na'im. Less violent but still problematic is the tendency to treat some perspectives as outside tradition in the sense of being simply irrelevant, as has often been the response to feminist religious ethics. However, I would assert that there can be faithfulness to tradition, attempts to remain within tradition, and non-arbitrary conversation about the extent to which an interpretation succeeds in such faithfulness, all of which are not reducible to an exercise of power but, rather, take seriously the presence or absence of an effort to work and think with the concepts, methods, and ideas of tradition as tools and as limitations. When interpretations are silenced by exercise of power, either by dominant voices of tradition or by political power which has claimed interpretive privilege, this becomes problematic because then the interpretations in question are not allowed to be articulated and proposed as plausible contributions to tradition – not heard, not understood, and not taken seriously. The attempt to form a non-arbitrary judgement about identity aspires to the opposite, namely to take identity claims seriously, and should not be confused with silencing. Because such judgements are often formed as pure exercises of power, it is vital that faithfulness to tradition is assessed and debated in terms of criteria other than simple dominance.

As is remarked by Christian feminist theologian Jenny Dagers, liberation theologians sometimes understand the very notion of theological orthodoxy as antithetical to struggle because it is seen as an instrument of dominance. However, she notes, others have claimed that the critique of the exercise of power in the name of Christianity is itself a thoroughly orthodox position.¹ If tradition is to be reclaimed for progressive purposes, there must be ways to discuss what being orthodox, or, in my terminology, remaining within tradition, entails.

Plausibly asserting an identity within tradition, as I see it, should be about articulating an attempt at faithfulness toward the telos of tradition through the intellectual work of actively relating to the sources, concepts, methods, and limitations of tradition. In Christian tradition the central corpus of texts is provided by the Bible but also, depending on ecclesiology, authoritative church formulations. Concepts are provided by the doctrines established by the tradition of the Fathers of the early Church, such as the incarnation, the Trinity, Creation, sin, and salvation. Methods of interpretation relate the scriptures and such doctrines to the lived reality of the faith and also work with other authoritative texts elaborated by individual theologians or Church bodies. While these sources and methods are multiple and polyvalent, there are certain lingering emphases, such as the centrality of Christ and of the neighbour, which cannot be bypassed. The developments of new authoritative articulations of faith through instances such as the Second Vatican Council or the Barmen Declaration, or of new methods such as conscientization through Bible study, show how the limits of what counts as authoritative tradition are negotiable and non-fixed, without being completely fluid. In Islamic tradition, the Quran and the *sunna* are sources of central importance but the entire corpus of jurisprudential and other theological reasoning also provides resources. Central concepts are provided by doctrines such as Creation, vice-regency, and *tawhid*, but also vital practices of fasting and paying *zakat*, and, in Shiite tradition, the mourning for Husayn. The methods of interpretation and concepts developed in *fiqh* such as abrogation, interpretation according to the objectives of the Law and accepting disagreement, provide avenues for development of thought. Here too, there are limitations which are subject to negotiation, as when inter-

¹ Dagers, Jenny: "Girls and Boys Come Out to Play. Feminist Theology and Radical Orthodoxy in Ludic Encounter." in Isherwood, Lisa and Zlomislic, Marko (eds.): *The Poverty of Radical Orthodoxy*, p. 98.

prefers privilege the Quran over *sunna*, or forego *fiqh* or certain transmitters of *hadith*, but also certain central tenets, such as the transcendence and unity of God, which exert an inescapable influence.

Attempting to work within tradition is perhaps best understood as an approach, aptly captured by Gregory Baum's statement that it is a stance which requires the theologian to break his or her nails to unravel the knot, rather than simply cutting it.² While such an approach is a method that establishes identity and thus authority, it is also to be understood, I would claim, as an attempt to enable a specific kind of thought which carries special possibilities due to the limitations it accepts. I do not mean to claim that identity within tradition requires that all the methods and limitations must be kept intact or even respected, but that there must be an active effort to relate to these by embracing or justifying departures from and reinterpretations of such concepts and methods, and to do so by recourse to the motifs, concepts, and reasons which tradition supplies. While resources that are identified as coming from the outside, such as critical theory in Gutierrez and Shariati, are not necessarily problematic, their use must somehow be justified using criteria which are traditional, or at least plausibly related to the tradition in question. This is what Gutierrez does when asserting that biblical principles justify recourse to social theory. It is what Ramadan does when claiming that insight into the higher objectives of Sharia requires expertise from other fields of knowledge. From the standpoint of claims to identity, it is, in my view, more problematic to explicitly make an outside standard the yardstick of correct interpretation, as An-Na'im to my mind does with the human rights paradigm. Such a method may not put someone outside tradition but it significantly diminishes the independence and critical potential of tradition because if tradition is reduced to a vehicle for articulating an ethics grounded in external criteria, it seems that tradition cannot contribute any insights beyond simply strengthening already present convictions.

Authenticity and polyphony

As already argued, a religious ethic must assert an identity within tradition and claim to represent a plausible interpretation of that tradi-

² Baum, Gregory: *The Theology of Tariq Ramadan*, p. 162.

tion. This often involves what I have called a claim to authenticity, a reclaiming of authentic tradition in the sense of claiming that one's interpretation more adequately or faithfully articulates what is taken to be the centre of tradition in comparison with other interpretations, often dominant or conventional ones. All the thinkers examined in this study can be understood as reclaiming tradition for a progressive or otherwise radical project. Among thinkers who work by reclaiming tradition, there are at least two important strands: those who claim that their reinterpretation of tradition is in fact the *only* authentic or true one, and those who see themselves as proponents of *one* possible interpretation among many others, preferring to see the multivalence of tradition as a resource to be tapped by listening to a multitude of voices and interpretations.³

It is my contention that a religious ethic which aspires to contribute to public discourse is more adequate if it acknowledges the polyphony of its tradition as a plurality of attempts to faithfulness to tradition. Before I develop the reasons for this, however, I would like to point out that the strategy of claiming one's own interpretation as the only authentic one is attractive because of its force. This is especially so when the argument is made from a position of relative powerlessness, because it is then a claim that tradition is truly on the side of the hitherto epistemologically marginalized. As a challenge from the silenced directed toward hegemony, the argument from authenticity can perhaps be understood as a rhetorical weapon of the weak, rather than as an invalidation of other interpretations. This is how I understand Shariati's claim to represent the true and original Islam in a position of overwhelming political and clerical oppression. A generous reinterpretation of Shariati's position on the possibility of multiple interpretation is also made plausible, I believe, by the spirit of play and creativi-

³ Scholar of Islam and history Aziz Al-Azmeh argues that the notion of authenticity is inherently implicated in implausible and destructive essentialism which obscures historical reality as multiplicity and change. He claims that both Orientalism and Islamism perpetuate such essentialism. Al-Azmeh, Aziz: *Islams and Modernities*. 3rd edition. Verso, London 2009, pp. 99-108. While it is the understanding of this inquiry that authenticity is indeed something constructed and claimed, the notion of authenticity that is employed here takes such claims to be in principle separable from claims to a single essence of tradition. In my view, a coherent discussion that attempts to assess authenticity in terms of faithfulness to a traditions methods, concepts etc. need not be violent. Furthermore, the notion of authenticity as inherently malign seems problematic, because it invalidates claims to authenticity as a form of protest against the violence of cultural colonialism.

ty in Shariati's work which communicates his self-conscious reinterpretations and inventions. Authenticity can be understood as a corrective, which questions any tendency to essentialize tradition.⁴ While a claim to single authenticity as a strategy is in many instances understandable because of its effectiveness, it still carries oppressive implications. It leaves open the risk that such claims to authenticity can also be used, possibly later, to silence yet weaker voices. As such, it is inherently problematic and tied up with a strategy of epistemological violence. This becomes all the more evident when one considers the strategy as used from a position of privilege and power. As the example of Milbank shows, it then leads to the misrepresentation and silencing of other voices.

The argument from authenticity is a stance which is sometimes adopted almost unintentionally because it appears to be different in degree rather than kind from the stance of arguing for the greater plausibility of one's own interpretation in relation to other articulations. My analysis has shown that this tendency is in evidence in the earlier works of Ramadan, whereas later on he is much more careful in expressing his acknowledgement of the multivalence of tradition. In public discourse, where the finer points of authoritative interpretation may be expected to elude many listeners, there can seem to be communicative advantages to being able to forcefully decide that some practice is not compatible with Islam or that some idea is fundamentally inherent in Christian tradition. However, such communicative advantage may be illusory from a perspective of a more developed idea about democratic culture such as that described by Jeffrey Stout. A categorical refusal to acknowledge other interpretations as genuine expressions of a tradition does not lend itself easily to giving reasons for one's interpretation and being made accountable for it. Its argumentative force may also be diminished in relation to a public which perceives representatives of different interpretations as taking mutually exclusive stands on the same tradition and as treating those interpretations as arbitrarily held slogans rather than carefully worked out articulations of faithfulness to tradition.

It is implausible to understand a specific positive interpretation as the only authentic one, especially in relation to traditions, such as Christianity and Islam, which contain strong claims to universal ap-

⁴ This possibility is pointed to by Elisabeth Hjorth in her discussion of essentialism based on her reading of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. *Förtvirlade läsningar*, p. 59.

plicability. Their claims to universality destabilize the identification of one specific articulation as the only locus of authenticity. In fact, if only one voice is allowed on the authentic inside of tradition, what we have is not a tradition at all, but rather the sectarian tendency to dogmatism and isolation. To be a tradition, something must be handed over, told and retold. However, it might be the case that the argument from authenticity can more plausibly be made in the negative than in the positive, such that the condemnation of a certain practice or belief might be issued with reference to authentic tradition.⁵ As already noted, claims to authenticity can carry force as correctives despite their problematic implications, and as correctives they work mainly as negations. Even in the negative, there might be a need for caution, however, because the need to condemn a practice from the standpoint of a tradition most likely originates in the existing justification of that practice with recourse to tradition. Again, such justification of practices are not most effectively and honestly combatted by denying the existence of their claims to identity. As Kecia Ali argues, such strategies can convey the impression that the religious tradition in question can be progressive only if part of its content is obscured.⁶ Another kind of argument from authenticity which might be non-oppressive is a kind of *sine qua non*-argument which claims, not that one particular interpretation is the only viable or authentic one, but that a certain perspective or aspect of tradition cannot be completely absent from an interpretation if the latter is to be a plausible articulation of tradition. This is what I understand Gutierrez as claiming with respect to the preferential option for the poor: that a concern for the poor is so central an aspect of Christian tradition that no interpretation which omits this perspective completely can claim authenticity. Such an argument is close to the criterion developed by Namli and discussed in the introduction, whereby she claims to judge articulations of tradition according to the criterion of whether they leave out significant parts of tradition. A *sine qua non*-argument can be acceptable because it does not automatically lead to the silencing of other voices but instead insists on adding a perspective; it is more conducive to recognizing oth-

⁵ The condemnation by the World Council of Churches of racism as a heresy against the doctrine of Creation in the image of God would be an instance of such a negative argument from authenticity, I believe.

⁶ Ali criticizes the well-meaning but less than rigorous feminist translation that “[...] attempts to hide what the Quran says, as if that was the only way Muslim women’s rights could be affirmed”. Ali, Kecia: *Sexual Ethics & Islam*, p. 124.

er such additions in the future, rather than identifying once and for all a single locus of correct interpretation.

I claim, then, that while a religious ethic must claim identity and authority within tradition, and while this must in a way relate to the idea of authenticity, it is normatively and descriptively more plausible if that argument is made while acknowledging the plural forms which faithfulness to tradition and authenticity can take. Such an acknowledgement has the advantages of being descriptively more plausible, having a greater transparency methodologically and, most importantly, being less prone to epistemological violence and the silencing of other voices. Acknowledging other possible interpretations is descriptively more accurate and thus communicates a certain honesty. Transparency when arguing is important because it is more conducive to political pluralism and dialogue. This is so not least because the claim to represent the only authentic tradition, when one is in fact criticizing mainstream tradition, can lead to confusion and misrepresentation not only of other voices but of one's own position. This, I believe, is evident in the reception of Milbank, whose claim to orthodoxy is often taken at face value.

My claim is not that proponents of a certain interpretation are not entitled to argue for their interpretation as being more plausible or a better articulation of the core of that tradition, but that such arguments are better made from the perspective of acknowledging the possibility of other interpretations being plausible attempts to faithfulness to tradition and articulations of authenticity. However, if the multivalence of tradition is to be acknowledged while at the same time some interpretations are to be resisted, there needs to be some account of how such a critique is possible. Such a meta-level account would ideally also offer resources for self-criticism on the part of proponents of interpretations. I believe that Milbank has a point when he claims that to accept sociological explanations of religion is to surrender theology to another discourse, one that has no inherent claim to greater rationality. A meta-level account, then, would preferably be articulated theologically so as not to surrender tradition to outside criteria. As we have seen, Shariati and Gutierrez both employ a hermeneutic of suspicion of religion, which entails inquiring what interests are served by a particular understanding of tradition, in the process unmasking spiritualization as quietism and support for the status quo. They both claim that the elements of such a suspicion of religion are available in the

narratives of their respective traditions – in Shariati’s case in the Shi-ite understanding of the martyred and hidden strand of Islam, and in Gutierrez’s case the prophetic critique of the Bible. Such a suspicion might be possible to articulate theologically in every tradition. It must be situated and iterated differently in every instance, while retaining the insight that many interpretations might be legitimate but that they all can and should be analyzed from the suspicious point of view of whose interest, potentially or actually, they serve. As for the acknowledgement of many possible interpretations, the preceding chapters have shown that an emphasis on human fallibility is central to many of the writers I have analyzed, articulated by for example An-Na’im and Forrester. The principle of *ikhtilaf* in Islamic jurisprudence which accepts disagreements and diversity of interpretation can be a resource to further articulate such a stance.

Tradition matters and resists

On the basis of my analysis in the preceding chapters, I would argue that the resources and constraints of working within a tradition, relating to its concepts, using and developing its method, and justifying interpretations through its criteria all make a difference to what one is able to maintain and claim. The resources which an ethicist is able to summon from his or her tradition matter, not only to how the positions are developed, but for what he or she is able to maintain. The respective traditions form the conditions for the arguments of the thinkers I have studied, making resources available which facilitate or make possible certain avenues of analysis and interpretation. This is evident from certain lingering emphases, such as Forrester’s and Gutierrez’s misgivings about human achievements resulting from the doctrine of original sin. It is evident from the direction taken when developing ethics, such as the profound optimism about law as God’s way of relating to humanity which both An-Na’im and Ramadan exhibit. It shows itself in the unconsciously adopted perspective or understanding of certain situations, such as the pessimism exhibited by both Shariati and Ramadan about the possibilities for spirituality in poverty, which are only intelligible in a context where faith is also praxis. It is manifest in the specific shape of the solutions to certain intricate problems, such as how Gutierrez employs partly realized eschatology

both to validate and to criticize secular liberation, or how Shariati uses the theme of martyred religion to criticize the religious establishment while reserving critical potential for religious thought, or how Milbank uses the Trinity to articulate harmonious difference, or how Ramadan understands solidarity as the purification of property. The comparative perspective of this study is particularly useful here because the comparison shows not only how the doctrinal resources of traditions are used to clothe or varnish essentially political ideas, but how rigorous engagement with tradition amounts to a thinking through the categories and concepts of tradition, such that the emerging ideas are profoundly shaped by their context and thus distinct from similar ideas developed in other philosophical settings or religious traditions. Tradition, it is my contention, makes a lasting difference.

There is, as I understand it, a certain tendency of tradition to resist. Because thinking within a tradition makes available certain resources but also implies certain limitations and constrictions, there is a difference in being forced to think through the avenues of tradition. This resistance of tradition means that there are aspects and resources of a tradition which resist the human tendency to understand God's will in a way that is suitable for her own purposes. It also means that when thought is developed with faithfulness toward tradition, new and surprising things can be discovered. In a way akin to the hermeneutic understanding I sketched with respect to my own preconceptions in the introductory chapter, tradition carries constraints that can work as avenues for understanding. Therein lies a contribution of traditions to ethical thought. Ethical thought developed within religious tradition can be a corrective in public debate quite simply because it is another perspective, one not easily swallowed up by enlightenment reason. As Forrester insists, it is the parts of comprehensive doctrines which lie outside consensus that have something to contribute to public debate and dialogue. I would claim then that this is not only valid about the substantial inputs which Forrester envisages, but also as regards tradition as a method for thought.

There is an externality to tradition which can make it a touchstone. But this critical and transformative potential, this resistance, is only possible through a certain stringency of method. As we saw in the criticisms directed by An-Na'im and Ramadan against other interpretations, arbitrary departure from the methodological requirements of tradition is entirely possible but risks making tradition ultimately void

of meaning. Stringency of method is not only about honesty and rigour academically and in faith, it is a prerequisite for allowing tradition to exert its resistance so that new insights can be made. I would, contrary to An-Na'im, also claim that such contributions are dependent on not allowing something outside tradition to judge what constitutes a plausible interpretation. If the final arbiter of tradition is available outside tradition, then thinking through a tradition no longer appears as a resource. It's only function then becomes to legitimize to believers what was already known. As we have seen in the discussion of identity and authority, outside and inside are not easily delineated, but there comes a point when tradition is simply a detour, another language to say the same thing, which makes it both unproductive and unconvincing. And if unconvincing, it will also have less potential for the legitimizing function. Rather, as already argued, interpretations must be worked out with reference to criteria which are developed through an engagement with the resources of tradition itself, although the distinction between the two is never absolute.

I do not claim by this that similar insights cannot be reached through different traditions, or that one tradition or the other has a monopoly on criticism or visions as such. On the contrary, the results of the comparative parts of this study indicate, I believe, that when thinkers approach their tradition with similar political and theological concerns, this actualizes different resources in their respective traditions, leading to specific articulations of these resources which can achieve similar yet distinct purposes. For example, the attention to poverty and the need to articulate material well-being as a central concern of their respective ethic is common to Shariati and Gutierrez, and in both cases they understand the importance of this concern as stemming from its centrality to their respective traditions.⁷ However, in Shariati's case the articulation of the importance of the material world is directly available through the doctrine of *tawhid*. His understanding of this doctrine as implies that material and spiritual concerns can never be addressed in isolation from one another, and that an Islamic ethic necessarily carries implications for both. For Gutierrez, the valuation of the material world is complicated by the Christian Catholic

⁷ Note that I do not argue that anything can be said with the help of any tradition. Obviously, on a descriptive level, there seems to be no end to the possibilities. This does not mean that such articulations are plausible or well argued. It is important to my argument that the point that Gutierrez and Shariati try to make in this instance is related to what they understand to be the centre of their respective traditions.

tradition's treatment of poverty as an ideal. In order to deal faithfully with the limitation that this tradition seems to pose on the possibility of valuing material prosperity, he must work out a reinterpretation of that ideal which circumvents its implications of ascetism and instead discovers evangelical poverty as solidarity with the poor. Material poverty is thereby distinguished from the poverty valued by the Church and possible to articulate as an evil, inimical to God's aims for humanity. In the end, while in both traditions resources can be summoned for the articulation of this insight, the limitations and connotations of concepts implied by each tradition lead to different articulations, which carry distinctive insights.

While I view the thinkers studied here as approaching their tradition with concerns which can be compared and which have some similarities, this does not mean that the concerns in question are identical political concerns which have merely been couched in different religious terms. This study has no interest in detangling political from religious concerns and I do not claim one or the other as primary. As argued in the Introduction, I want to distance myself from an understanding of the secular as the original and neutral, as something which is left when the religious is stripped away, because such notions are implicated in ethnocentrism. I regard the concerns of Gutierrez, for example, when addressing poverty and of Ramadan when addressing environmental degradation, as both political and theological from the outset. From my perspective, they give these concerns religious articulations and theological answers with political implications, not because they attempt to enhance the political relevance of their religious tradition, but because it is from the standpoint of that tradition, a religious tradition with implications for political issues, that they perceive these things as problems in need of answers. Similarly, I regard the concerns which lead me to articulate criteria for my critical assessment – such as authenticity, communicability and transformative potential – as theoretical articulations of normative positions which are formed by both political and theological concerns from the outset.⁸

It is my contention, then, that a religious ethic should be articulated as based on both reason and revelation. As seen in the case of Mil-

⁸ As should by now be evident, those positions are formed by immersion in Christian tradition, theology and social engagement of Lutheran, Catholic, and ecumenical varieties, and by engagement with both theoretical and praxis-based political and theological articulations of critical, feminist, and post-colonial theory.

bank, an ethic based on revelation alone seems to lapse into incoherence and sectarianism in consequence of the difficulties in establishing fixed borders between the concepts and methods of reason and revelation. Such a position fails to do justice to the role of human faculties such as reason and experience in the interpretation of tradition and in the task of moral discernment. An ethic based on reason alone, on the other hand, seems to unreasonably reduce the role of religious traditions to a task of legitimizing the common morality. If religious traditions provide specific avenues for the development of thought, these can be understood as resources for the formulation of ethical insight and thus sources of ethics.

The conceptualization of a contribution of tradition as a matter of resistance implies, I believe, that a theory of combination best captures the content of an ethic based on religious traditions. A theory of consonance is, as I see it, inadequate because it fails to capture how the nuances and emphases of thought developed in religious traditions amount to distinct and specific understandings of certain issues which cannot be fully captured if reformulated or reconceptualised to fit another tradition or conversation. On the other hand, a theory of contrast does not do justice to the extent to which similar themes and problems recur and interact with different traditions in a manner that articulates similar moral insight in the context of the specifics of religious tradition. Moreover, by privileging one tradition only, a theory of contrast implausibly devalues all ethical articulation outside of a specific context.

Religious freedom

This study indicates that arguments and reasons for religious ethics and political theology must be accepted as a part of political discourse as a matter of religious freedom. This is maintained by An-Na'im and Forrester and also strengthened by the interpretations of Gutierrez and Shariati, which underline that political commitments are central to religious traditions. The imposition of restrictions, or of civic virtues, that are specifically aimed at arguments derived from religious ethics, is not only unjustified but also incoherent because it relies on an unviable identification of both people and arguments as inherently secular or religious. Furthermore, as is argued by Milbank, the secular cannot

be understood as either original or neutral. It is not the purely human which remains when the additions and inventions of religion is removed. Rather, the secular is a contingent invention particular to Western history, and to treat it as original implies universalizing that history and thus a condescension towards other cultures and forms of life.⁹ I see this as an argument about the ethnocentrism of the secular. If such ethnocentrism is discarded, there is no justification for privileging secular thought; claiming that religious ethics are in need of translation while secular ethics are readily understandable by everyone. As my analysis of Gutierrez and Shariati has shown, which language is perceived as readily understandable is a matter of context. It is my position that insofar as they can be separated from each other, neither secular nor religious thought can be asserted to be inherently more intelligible than the other. As pointed out by Ramadan, attempts to limit religious expression will also lead to discrimination against some traditions because the dominant tradition will be perceived as neutral or invisible, resulting in asymmetric treatment.

While special requirements directed only at religious arguments and reasons are unjustified, democratic culture is clearly deepened and enhanced by certain practices to which people arguing from a religious ethic should also adhere. Many of these are discussed by Jeffrey Stout, who lauds the democratic tradition of clearly articulating one's positions and the presuppositions which they rest on, of arguing coherently and transparently, of being accountable and responsible, and of holding others responsible to their commitments.¹⁰ Similarly, Forrester points to the importance of democratic conversation being attentive and serious and as engaging both text and subtext. As I have already argued, a religious ethic should ideally be elaborated through a interpretative method that is both stringent and transparent. One reason for this communicability: such an interpretation is possible for others to assess and discuss, making the resources and presuppositions of tradition available for public debate. As Jeffrey Stout argues, there is no civic virtue in obscuring one's reasons for adhering to certain positions, as would be the result if all arguments which could not be accepted regardless of worldview were ruled out. Rather, democratic

⁹ Given this insight of his, it is particularly grave that Milbank himself is thoroughly ethnocentric in his comments on Islam and in his supremacist views of Western Christianity as the only repository of emancipatory vision.

¹⁰ Stout, Jeffrey: *Democracy and tradition*, p. 85.

culture is enhanced by the participants attempting as much as possible to explain the reasons for their standpoints. Stout writes,

Indeed, I would encourage religiously committed citizens to make use of their basic freedoms by expressing their premises in as much depth and detail as they see fit when trading reasons with the rest of us on issues of concern to the body politic. If they are discouraged from speaking up in this way, we will remain ignorant of the real reasons that many of our fellow citizens have for reaching some of the ethical and political conclusions they do. We will also deprive them of the central democratic good of expressing themselves to the rest of us on matters about which they care deeply. If they do not have this opportunity, we will lose the chance to learn from, and to critically examine, what they say. And they will have good reason to doubt that they are being shown the respect that all of us owe to our fellow citizens as the individuals they are.¹¹

Not all theological arguments will make sense to people who do not share the beliefs on which they are grounded. Yet that is also true of all arguments because all political arguments are grounded in ideas about what is real, what is important, and what constitutes cause and effect. While An-Na'im is right that arguments of the kind that "it is forbidden because God forbids it" are not conducive to debate under circumstances of a plurality of worldviews, this does not exhaust the possibilities for religious arguments in public discourse. However, the potential of such arguments to contribute valuable insights to public debate is greater when they can communicate distinctive insights. As we have seen, Milbank claims that theological insights are not readily translatable into social goods because in the process of converting them to another discourse the content is lost.

There is in my analysis no guarantee that all insights from religious ethics will be heard and understood in public debate, even if it is an inclusive debate. But this does not mean that such contributions cannot be attempted and at times find resonance. As is noted by Stout, religious tradition provides a context of reasons, norms, narratives, concepts, and values, within which rational reasoning can be undertaken.¹² I understand this to imply that the context can be made accessible to people that do not share the faith in question, in a way that

¹¹ Stout, Jeffrey, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

¹² Stout, Jeffrey: *The Flight from Authority*, p. 147.

makes it possible for them to share in this rational endeavour in several different ways. That God has forbidden something may seem rationally inaccessible, but the argument can move on to “we are justified in believing that God has forbidden this because...” or “the reason that God, who wants what is best for mankind, has forbidden this is...” or “the meaning of God’s prohibition should be understood in this particular way in our society/in our time/in this particular situation:...” or “in light of the rest of God’s revelation we understand this prohibition to be about...”. Described this way, there is plenty to argue about rationally. In other words, although statements to the effect that God has forbidden something may not be amenable to rational debate, the questions of why, how, and what are full of such possibilities. The debate can be furthered by arguments about coherence, interpretative method, and so on. Those debating can hold proponents of various religious ethics responsible to the values, norms, and standards of rationality implied in such ethics even if they themselves do not embrace them, for example, by arguing that “you as a Christian should be concerned with poverty” or “you as a Muslim should not believe Sharia to be enforceable as positive law”.

There is no particular reason to think that the only people who can argue about these questions are those who believe in the God in question. What is needed for the conversation to be meaningful is that the people engaging in the debate somehow care about what the others involved believe about their God and about the issue discussed. They can have a genuine interest in the development of the tradition in question, or they can care because they share some of the beliefs discussed, for example the belief in Creation. They can care for strategic reasons, because they embrace or oppose the ideas or values proposed by a religious ethic, for reasons of their own, and thus join forces with believers to further their cause by making alliances. This is how I understand An-Na’im’s suggestion that people can agree on something even if they have completely different rationales for doing so. An atheist who does not believe that God exists, or a secularist who does not believe that God forbids anything that has to do with politics, can still try to convince a religious believer that a certain interpretation of his/her religion is the most plausible, simply because the atheist or secularist is convinced that people are motivated by their religious beliefs and that their own position is best strengthened by showing its compatibility with a certain religion. Their motives matter to the

quality of the conversation, of course, but not to the possibility of debate.

The possibility which I am sketching out here is, as I see it, largely in agreement with political philosopher Michael Walzer's concept of immanent criticism, that is to say, arguing from someone else's thick morality in order to hold them accountable to their own standards. Walzer argues that people have what he calls a maximal morality, a morality embedded in historical, cultural, religious and political commitments and resonances. However, when faced with crisis or confrontation, Walzer claims, people can also give a minimalist account of this morality for specific purposes such as solidarity and criticism. Such minimalist claims are expressive of the maximalist morality which is their home but these are, in Walzer's opinion, still trans-contextually recognized because they consist of principles which are iterated differently in different contexts, and thus similar. However, minimalist claims lack the maximalist morality's thickness of qualification, complexity, and compromise. Critique is, according to Walzer, more often and more effectively carried out as internal or immanent criticism, which requires starting from the ideals and standards internal to a context and then criticizing them as hypocritically held, ineffectively enforced, or inadequate on their own terms. Such criticism gives voice to the demand that a society or tradition actually deliver on the values to which it claims to be committed, and exposes internal tensions and contradictions in the morality in question. Walzer understands such critique to hold a radical potential he calls the subversiveness of immanence, claiming that it can overturn the moral maximalism.¹³

I agree with Walzer that political and moral arguments reflect the values and commitments of the tradition in which they are developed, and that dialogue and criticism between traditions often proceed through immanent criticism as he has described it. Also, the position that there are limits to what can be expressed in minimalist terms is plausible. However, Walzer's argument often seems to assume that, while there exists globally a pluralism of maximalist moralities, in a particular society there is one maximalist morality – *our* morality – and that in most debates that is the morality we assume. The starting point of my inquiry is that the pluralism of traditions is to a much greater extent a fact of everyday life, and that those debating in public

¹³ Walzer, Michael: *Thick and Thin*, pp. 2-16 and 41-47.

must, to a greater extent than Walzer envisions, come to understand the commitments implicit in one another's traditions in order for meaningful immanent criticism and political conversation to be possible.

This method of debating publicly by means of reasoning derived from religious commitments is described by Stout with great clarity and philosophical rigour. In his critical discussion of Rawls's theory of public reason, he describes two kinds of reason-giving, which, mirroring Rawls's categories of declaration and conjecture, he terms candid expression and immanent criticism. Candid expression entails honestly voicing one's reasons for adopting some political proposal, given one's own premises and commitments, including religious and theological ideas, and thereby showing respect for fellow citizens as requesters of reasons. Immanent criticism involves either the attempt to show that an opponent's view is incoherent, or the attempt to argue from an opponent's premises and commitments to the conclusion that one's own proposal is acceptable. In Stout's opinion, this mode of debating necessarily entails respect for difference, because immanent criticism is premised on the realization that one has to argue from an opponent's particular perspective and show why he or she has grounds for agreeing with one's proposal. Stout argues that such discourse must be undertaken in a way that is fair-minded, non-manipulative, and sincere.¹⁴ This last point is important because immanent criticism can also be used as an oppressive device by dominant tradition to define away aspects of other traditions, for example by using an ethnocentrically conceived concept of religion as the basis for denying that certain practices are covered by religious freedom. Therefore, it is important to distinguish when immanent criticism is used to discuss *with* believers about the implications of their faith, and when it is misused to discuss *about* believers in an effort to (mis)represent the essence of their tradition in a way that denies them certain rights or possibilities, such as discursive space for self-definition and articulation of modes of faithfulness to tradition.

The position which I have articulated here carries important implications for epistemology. My emphasis on communication rules out an epistemological contextualism which denies that reasons and arguments can be understood outside the tradition in which they are developed. Such a position is overly pessimistic about the possibilities

¹⁴ Stout, Jeffrey: *Democracy and Tradition*, pp. 69, 73 and 85.

for human communication and amounts to depriving the public of the possibility of this resistance through tradition – this conversation partner with different insights. Moreover, as with the case of Milbank, it invites dualism and isolation. However, an epistemological universalism fails to capture how the methods and limitations of tradition condition thought and open up avenues for particular insights. An epistemology of possibility is the most adequate position because it both acknowledges the importance of context for the articulation of reasons and arguments, and simultaneously recognizes people’s ability to communicate trans-contextually. However, such communication is only a possibility and relies for its realization on several premises. These can be articulated theoretically by reference to democratic theory such as the one Stout develops. However, in contrast to both Stout and Walzer, I would like to turn attention to how power structures the possibilities for understanding and being understood, both through material conditions such as ownership and access to media and through constructions of normative understandings of rationality and plausibility. The material and ideational circumstances which would allow the non-manipulative and sincere communication envisaged by Stout are far from actual, and the possibility of communication cannot be realized without such struggle.

Hospitality, being decentred, and solidarity

Perhaps there is a special contribution to be made by religious ethics to the construction of a public forum in which such conversations can be undertaken constructively and fruitfully. I certainly believe that this much is indicated by the thinkers whom I have analyzed. The idea of hospitality in public is taken up by Forrester and lies close to how I understand An-Na’im, namely as striving for terms of debate which are as inclusive as possible. Theological thinkers and believers are perhaps well placed to contribute to the construction of a more hospitable public forum, one less constricted by a narrow understanding of rationality and instead nurtured by the humbleness required to articulate the grounding of one’s positions. Milbank claims that there is something inherently humble about religious traditions. It is, he claims, easier for religions to own up to the contingency and singularity of their fundamental choices, because religions themselves

acknowledge that they are not fully explicable and dependent on requirements of faith. They are “wrapped in mystery”.¹⁵ I find it plausible that democratic conversation would be enhanced by a greater clarity about the fundamental choices which shape positions and desires. However, I am not sure that the humility inspired by the awareness of such choices is a consequence of some essential property of religious traditions in general. It is possible to understand such willingness to articulate fundamental commitments as a consequence of being decentred and marginalized in history. This is one implication to be drawn from Ramadan’s idea that there are special contributions to be found in the perspective of those who have been defeated in history.¹⁶ The realization that the fundamental commitments which guide one’s political standpoints are not shared by a majority, and thus need articulation and explanation to be made available for debate in a pluralistic public forum, might well be one such insight that proponents of a religious ethic have, an insight that is valuable for constructing a public ethos which is hospitable to pluralism and governed by a democratic practice of accountability and openness. As Ramadan notes, constructive public debate is dependent on proper intellectual dispositions, which he identifies as humility, respect, and coherence. Humility implies that no civilization or religion holds a monopoly on universal values or good modernity: respect for others means viewing them as contributors, both constructively and critically, while concern about coherence leads to a self-critical spirit and impartial judgments.

However, while there may be special contributions from the perspectives of marginalized and decentred traditions, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that being marginalized and decentred is a situation of vulnerability which results from oppression. The experience of being decentred is precisely about being silenced and disregarded; consequently, the contributions of such perspectives often do not get heard. I believe that one weakness in Stout’s vision of democracy is that it does not sufficiently account for the mechanisms of power that structure who gets a voice, who gets heard to the best of the public’s ability, whose reasons seem intelligible and plausible, who gets the opportunity to explain their tradition in the detail required to show its coherence, and so on. It is difficult to imagine a

¹⁵ Millbank, John: *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 140.

¹⁶ Ironically, it would seem, then, that the humbleness which Milbank lauds is the same that he wants to rescue theology from.

public debate in the West in which there is not some presumption that one tradition has a monopoly on “good” modernity. The normativity of the secular has effects which are clearly asymmetrical, and which interacts with racism and other kinds of oppression to create structural impediments to the realization of a constructive democratic conversation. Moreover, the historical legacy of colonialism and imperialism has effects which are destructive to the articulation and coherence of marginalized traditions. This is evident in the repeated calls made by Islamic ethicists examined in this study for Muslims to break free from a reactionary stance in which Islam is defined in opposition to the West instead of according to its own legacy. This is how An-Na’im understands proponents of Islamic state, and it is central both to Shariati’s understanding of reactionary religion and also to how Ramadan understands Islamic rejections of secularism.

While the predispositions for constructive and democratic conversation are insightfully identified by Stout, the prerequisites for their realization seem far off. Stout claims that, when seeking to realize the democratic culture he envisions, there is no alternative to engaging in the democratic practices and doing the actual work of democracy. There are two different ways to understand this point. Ramadan and An-Na’im both seem to call for a proactive stance of contribution and citizenship through the existing democratic institutions as the way for Muslims to contribute to the realization of a more hospitable public. Since the complete revolutionary overthrow of societal structures as envisioned by Gutierrez and Shariati may seem both unfeasible and unwanted, in view of the dangers inherent in their violence and unpredictability, there might seem to be little else that can be recommended by way of political action. However, I believe that there is a significant difference between An-Na’im and Ramadan here, one that is unfortunately articulated only partially but which nonetheless bears elaboration. As I have already noted, An-Na’im makes some observations on structural impediments to democratic conversation and to justice, such as racism and poverty, yet these considerations seem to make no difference to his theory. On the contrary, his ideas about Muslims engaging in active citizenship and proving their loyalty to Western states through contributions to the common good lays the entire responsibility for changing the situation on the people and groups who are subject to oppressive structures, and implies that equality and justice are possible to realize by working hard according

to the rules of the system, that is, by being the so-called “worthy poor”.

A critical analysis which takes into account Gutierrez’s and Shariati’s more profound suspicion of power and the powerful would also entail the notion that it is the oppressed who must be the agents of change, yet without necessarily implying confidence in the ability of the system to effect such change. What is needed, rather, are not only active citizenship and contributions to present society but active political engagement geared at changing the structures that condition the debate, the institutions of the system, and the invisible presuppositions about rationality and neutrality, among other things, which govern the possibilities within the system. This is where I believe that Ramadan’s account differs substantially from An-Na’im’s despite their common emphasis on proactive democratic engagement, because Ramadan has more structural elements to his account of injustice and consequently can be understood as imagining activism as also directed at actively combatting the structures of oppression. Moreover, Ramadan’s account is important because it points to the necessity of doing so in cooperation with other movements – of constructing solidarity.

During this inquiry I have repeatedly pointed to the need for a more elaborated concept of solidarity as a resource for imagining the public role of religious ethics. There are several aspects to this. In a condition of pluralism, the transformative potential of a religious ethic is dependent on its insights being recognized by others, which would make such insights possible parts of a basis for cooperative work in solidarity. One avenue for constructing solidarity between religious movements and movements guided by other social concerns can be indicated through an elaboration of Ramadan’s proposal. His suggestion involves the inclusion of specialists on the context into the councils which elaborate Islamic ethics. Ramadan’s assumption is that this will automatically lead to such ethics becoming more progressive and able to propose proactive solutions to change the world, rather than react to it. However, although the expertise accessed through such inclusion can be expected to enhance the capacity of fatwa councils to develop proposals which are adequate to the problems and find available possibilities for their solution, I do not share Ramadan’s conviction that science or specialist knowledge is progressive in and of itself. Such optimism seems unfounded given that science and scholarship have historically been known to serve many different purposes, including

ideologies such as racism and colonialism. If the aim is to provide the elaboration of a religious ethic with perspectives that enable it to be politically radical and not only knowledgeable about its time, Ramadan's hints about the inclusion of yet more perspectives should be elaborated. This could be effected by engaging social movements directly in the articulation of religious ethics, taking their insights as relevant parts of the context for such an ethic. I believe that this is plausible as an elaboration of Ramadan's proposal, given that he envisages the provision of an adequate perspective on what is at stake to be a vital function of knowledge about context. Also, Ramadan himself is already engaged in the practice of collaboration with social movements, for example, in the World Social Forum. The inclusion of social movements in the elaboration of religious ethics would be aided, of course, by the fact that because people have multiple identities, many social movements are already present among believers, visibly or less so.

Public articulation of a religious ethic does not only hope to elicit the solidarity of others. Such an ethic can also form the basis of its proponents' practice of solidarity with silenced and marginalized voices. As is noted by Ramadan, the publicly visible presence of Muslims in the West can translate into a call for greater concern about the South and the implications of policies on the rest of the world. I have argued that by decentring secular liberal discourse's claim to neutrality, a public religious ethic contributes to the construction of a more hospitable public forum. But a religious ethic might also work more directly to call forth the silenced voices of other traditions, in a practice of solidarity. Forrester claims that religious believers who are at home in Western societies have a special ability in this respect because they are particularly qualified to enter into discussion with other theisms. The epistemological premise of this idea is that the understanding of reasons and arguments is dependent on some kind of shared ground. Such ground can to a certain extent be constructed through the democratic practices identified by Stout and might be more easily constructed if the interlocutors recognize some shared elements of which theism or more specifically Abrahamic tradition can be a powerful one. The work to articulate the presuppositions and contributions of religious traditions in public debate could then be done in a practice of solidarity that entails conversations and collaborations between such traditions. However, such practice must also be

informed by an analysis of the power dynamics which structure such conversations, so as to counteract them. The privileged position of Christianity in relation to the public of Western societies is a problem, because that privilege is an obstacle to a practice of solidarity between believers aimed at sharing the struggle of making their reasons and arguments heard. Solidarity requires giving up privilege in order to make room for someone else, for example by forgoing the claim to be the religion construed as a rational conversation partner in contrast to others. If we understand religious ethics as the writers analyzed in this study do, as a powerful motivational force that can in some instances overcome self-interest and conscientize believers as to their responsibility for the work of justice, Christianity's position also entails a special responsibility to use the privilege, for example to destabilize oppressive notions of rationality in public for the benefit of marginalized traditions. As is noted by Gutierrez, epistemological possibilities open up as a result of choosing a material position of solidarity which makes understanding possible, and accepting the loss of privilege that this choice entails.

As noted in my critique of Gutierrez, solidarity needs to be discerning, because there is a risk that in the effort to find common ground and cooperate, differences in ultimate ends go unrecognized, to the detriment of both conversation and cooperation. While there might be good reason from a theological perspective for understanding some secular struggle or work of other religious traditions as part of God's salvation, there is also a need to recognize the self-understanding of other movements for justice as a valid articulation of their aims. Solidarity is possible despite differences. Indeed, one could say that difference is a conceptual prerequisite for solidarity since the meaning of the concept is related to engaging in a struggle which is at least partly for the sake of someone else: struggling to realize interests which are limited to one's own is not solidarity. This means that solidarity must be understood in a way that distinguishes it from mere expediency, from cooperation that is simply geared at instrumentally furthering one's own aims. According to such an understanding of solidarity, it is by definition a practice which entails choosing a position that is not directly in one's own material interest; as such, solidarity is subject to fundamental obstacles. If a religious ethic is to challenge the tendency of the privileged to keep their advantages, solidarity as understood in that ethic should have a theologically articulated rationale. A possible

resource for such an articulation in Christian tradition is indicated by Gutierrez, who understands the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ as an act of solidarity, of needlessly adopting the position of the poor in order to aid in the struggle against oppression which by this act has become his struggle also. In Islamic tradition a possible resource is in the oneness of God, *tawhid*, which in Shariati's understanding entails that God, who is the God of the oppressed, calls on the human community to realize oneness through the struggle against all hierarchical distinctions between them. In both these cases, the doctrine called upon is of great centrality to the tradition in question, and moreover, both doctrines are understood by the respective thinkers as proposing that God is concerned with the material realization of the ideals in question.

Hope, critique and visions

In this chapter I have already identified some contributions by religious ethics as joining in the construction of a more hospitable public forum and as showing solidarity with the marginalized. During the course of this study, many suggestions of contributions from religious ethics have been made, some of them substantial and highly specific, and others which can be understood as themes recurring in different articulations of religious ethics. Here, I will discuss some of the latter, with the aim of articulating the kind of contributions that seem to be identified as relevant by the method of comparison. This does not mean that the more specific and substantial suggestions for contributions of the preceding chapters are less valid or interesting, simply that their recognition does not require further analysis.

Religious ethics are important forces of motivation and justification in political matters. An-Na'im may be the only ethicist studied here who effectively reduces the influence of religious ethics to the sphere of motivation and justification, but the point is important to all the writers examined. Religious beliefs matter deeply to people, and whichever political positions and actions they perceive as justified or mandated by an ethic developed from their religious tradition are likely to have a powerful impact. An-Na'im even claims that the importance of religion in this respect is such that secular governance

must be understood as unable to sustain itself because of its inability to convince believers.

Several of the writers also underline that religious ethics contribute a certain stance toward politics, which is described as bringing hope by Forrester, as confidence by Shariati, as grace sustaining struggle by Gutierrez, and as being proactive by Ramadan. Although there are differences in nuance here, of course, I believe that these are all sufficiently similar to warrant the conclusion that there is a general agreement among these writers that a religious ethic can sustain political work through difficulties and perceived overwhelming odds. By faith, claims Ramadan, it is known that nothing human is eternal and thus that everything is possible.

At the same time, the theological insight that nothing human is absolute or eternal can be a safeguard against absolutizing human achievement and an impetus to always go beyond what has been achieved in terms of justice. This theological humbleness about human capacity is taken up by Ramadan, Gutierrez, Forrester, and Shariati, and is related to the idea that a religious ethic operates with other horizons and that this transcendence implies a potential for never-ending critique, not unlike Derrida's concept of justice which exists only as the striving toward the impossibility of perfect justice.¹⁷

Religious ethics also contribute more positively through the articulations and instantiation of alternative visions for human life and community. Milbank goes furthest in denouncing the state of liberal capitalist society for being indifferent to appeals to what is good and valuable, but the critique against increasing instrumentalization of politics and lack of political visions is also present in Forrester and Ramadan. Gutierrez points to the theological task of annunciation, of articulation of the alternative human life implied by God's purposes. For Ramadan, the entire world is seen as an abode of witness where Muslims must show the moral visions and practices inspired by their tradition. These visions for another life can be articulated through the construction of an alternative community, as Milbank claims, through declaration in public debate and through public practice of the implied ethic. While Milbank's vision of a theologically conceived hierarchy of virtue and value that subsumes every aspect of society is hard to

¹⁷ Derrida, Jacques: "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'" in Dru-cilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson (eds.): *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, Routledge, London 1992.

reconcile with a concern for difference, I still believe that a theological articulation of what is valuable for humans to be and do can be a forceful tool for political criticism, and perhaps even a tool which it will be difficult to do without if the aim is to counter the primacy of freedom of choice in liberal capitalism.

Power and the limits of neutrality

I believe that a religious ethic must be firmly separated from power and the powerful. Milbank is certainly not heedful enough of how the practice of power always entails risks, but Forrester also imagines a ministering to power which, I believe, can hardly leave unchanged the perspective of ethics. Shariati likewise lacks a satisfactory account of how religious authority should be separated from power after the revolution which he envisions.

My central concern is the one expressed by Gutierrez: that religious ethics must take the perspective of the powerless and be able to exercise a critique of power which is only possible from a certain distance. The exercise of political power should never be sacralized because of the possibilities of abuse. The powerful, when not simply beyond reach, are unreliable. Distance to power must be maintained, not only because power might turn out to be evil but because theology must be credible in giving voice to another kind of power. The argument of An-Na'im, that religious ethics must be adhered to as a matter, not of legislation, but of personal conviction and persuasion, is also important. If the articulation of theology is done in close relationship to the powerful, the expediency of the powerful is likely to influence and determine the interpretations chosen, such that the credibility of religious ethics is lost. Thus, while I defend the notion that religious ethics should be debated in public, and that reasons and arguments from such ethics could be used to justify or support policies in such a debate, I simultaneously believe that theological interpretation should never be vested in the hands of political power. However, if faithfulness to tradition is understood to entail practice, these separations are not always possible to maintain. Neutrality with respect to practice is not always possible, because some practices require collective decisions. For example, if an economic system based on interest is indeed immoral, then a national interest rate and a national pension system

aimed at freeing up resources for financial speculation are highly problematic. This cannot be solved by claiming state neutrality. Neutrality often masks how certain forms of life are privileged by the system. This means that secularity as an ideal cannot mean state neutrality toward all forms of life, but must instead mean that which forms of life are rendered possible by the state should be the subject of democratic debate, and that such debate should be made subject to a struggle that seeks to undo the structures of oppression and privilege which condition it.

Dignity, sociality and transcendence

The third area of research questions of this study centred on the conceptualization of justice. I have analyzed the concepts of justice that are operative in the ethics of the writers, and the theological ideas present in their respective understandings of justice. These accounts of justice have been categorized as pertaining to different understandings of justice, which can be articulated in terms of sufficiency, equality, liberation, or virtue. The thinkers in this study do not develop full-fledged theories of justice that are completely separate from other accounts of justice formulated in philosophical and political discourses. Rather, their treatments of the issue of justice show that their thought can be understood as aligned with such conceptions of justice. In some cases, the writer in question remains close to one account or a discourse centering on one account, and in others the writings contain elements of several different accounts of justice which may be only partly reconcilable. In my view, sufficiency conceptions of justice cannot be enough to articulate the meaning of the concept. While they are important because they point to the urgent needs of those who are deprived of the most basic justice to which human beings are entitled, they are also problematic because they do not address inequality as such. In the absence of any ethical justification, however, wide disparities in resources, capabilities, or freedoms for human beings perceived to be of equal dignity and worth must be deemed unacceptable. Furthermore, there are important gains for human society which cannot be realized without a more thorough vision of equality, such as the vision of democratic conversation articulated above. Justice must be understood in material and structural terms, I contend, as inimical to

the structures of oppression which keep power intact in many different ways, despite the institutions of formal political equality. I believe that Gutierrez is right in asserting that oppression cannot be combatted when it is conceptualized as incidental or temporary; rather it must be understood as inhabiting the material bases of societal organization.

I would claim that the authors examined in this study have made contributions to the understanding of justice but that these have taken other forms than complete accounts. They point to specific prerequisites, emphases, and components of justice which might illuminate a richer understanding of justice and act as correctives to other accounts and perhaps also, as Forrester claims, to a firmer grounding and greater coherence of such accounts. I will point to a few such components which offer potentially fruitful avenues for further elaboration of thought on justice. I believe that there is merit to Milbank's argument that a critique of injustice needs to be underpinned by an account of what is valuable for humans to be and do. This is so because any society must to a certain extent collectively choose which capacities to sustain and encourage. However, this does not necessarily entail subsuming the world under Christian virtues; rather, it must encompass the insight that there are many different contributions to such an account of humanity. While an account of what is valuable for human beings cannot be independent of worldview, original, or neutral, it can be constructed in solidarity, struggle, and conversation between several traditions and movements. Contributions to the understanding of justice of religious ethics can thus be understood as part of a conversation about a different desire with regard to human life and the social world. The authors examined in this study have articulated many distinct theological ideas and practices with implications for the understanding of justice. I will point to three interrelated insights or emphases that recur in the ethics studied here, insights which are valuable because they address the liberal tradition's pessimism about both religious tradition and human community by offering visions of human dignity and flourishing as realized through responsibility and sociality. This emphasis represents, in my view, a valuable contribution by religious ethics to the understanding of justice. While not unique, it carries a certain distinct understanding when developed through the respective traditions.

Justice, according to the religious ethics studied here, should be an order which realizes the implications of the idea that humans are cre-

ated by God and continuously related to by God. This relation is explicated in many different ways in the two traditions. In Christian tradition, the continuing relation is explicated in Christology, which is the source of both God's grace toward humans and God's continuing ethical communication with humanity. In Islamic tradition, God's continuous relation to humanity of both ethical guidance and mercy is conceived of in terms of the law, Sharia, and also articulated in vice-regency. This notion of the inherent relationship between God and humanity has at least three implications for anthropology, which I will term dignity, responsibility, and solidarity. Dignity means that because human beings are conceived as created in the image of God and redeemed by God, or as created by and vice-regents of God, their degradation and poverty are perceived as a defilement of the image of God, or as an insult to God. This calls attention to the seriousness of the situation of poverty and highlights how it is of immediate concern to a religious ethic and calls for unconditional rectification. Justice on this understanding must imply a special concern for the most poor and weak, those who need it the most. This understanding is articulated by An-Na'im, Forrester, Shariati, Gutierrez, and Ramadan. As Gutierrez states, God has a special love for the poor, not because they have done anything to deserve it but because of the suffering to which they are subjected. On this view, the partiality of God highlights how unacceptable the degradation of the human being is in the theological account. This insight is close to the one communicated by sufficiency accounts of justice, which also underline that what is most morally objectionable about injustice is that some people have less than enough.¹⁸ The sufficiency account understands justice as articulating the importance of a threshold level below which it is unjust that any human being should ever sink. The notion of Creation provides such accounts with a theological justification for this dignity. As we have seen, Forrester claims that commitment to human equality and dignity may prove incoherent if not nurtured by such theological understanding. While I believe that there are other ideas which can justify a commitment to justice as the eradication of undignified human conditions, for the people who accept such a theological justification of dignity, it provides a powerful motive to work for the realization of justice.

¹⁸ See, for example, the account of Harry Frankfurt's discussion about having enough, quoted in Sundman, Per: *Egalitarian Liberalism Revisited*, p. 118, note 11.

In the accounts examined in this study, the anthropology of human beings as created by and related to God is not exhaustively accounted for by the notion of a threshold level. While such a notion captures the important insight that a concern for justice is most especially a concern for the most weak and poor, it can also be subject to the critique that it is a fundamentally recipient-oriented and individualistic understanding of justice. Theological accounts of justice also emphasize that human beings are responsible and creative beings. Since human beings are created by God as responsible, their dignity must be realized through human agency, co-creation, and responsibility for the creation of society. This emphasis is evident in the writings of Gutierrez, Shariati, Milbank, and Ramadan, and imply that humans are political beings. The means and ends are intertwined in such an understanding of the importance of human responsibility. While the creation of a just society is a means to guarantee the dignity of every human being through the eradication of poverty and degradation, the exercise of responsibility and human creativeness which the establishment of such a society entails is simultaneously an end in itself, because the development of faculties of responsibility and creativity are part of the realization of human dignity. Human beings realize their dignity through such responsibility, which is exercised in relation to other humans who are likewise responsible, but also in relation to the commission established by God in Creation, and in the commission established by Sharia and in the recreation through grace in Christ, respectively.

This brings us to the third aspect of theological anthropology, which is related to solidarity. In the accounts of Ramadan and Shariati, the dignity and responsibility of humans must be realized through the practice of solidarity with her fellow beings. Ramadan and Shariati both understand poverty as an impediment to spirituality because it undermines the human capacity to show solidarity and thus to behave responsibly and morally. The dignity of human beings which is realized in the responsible creation of a just society is also actualized in the practice of solidarity toward others. When human beings are deprived of the means of such solidarity, their dignity is threatened because they lack the ability to give an account of themselves to God.

In my analysis, then, one contribution of religious ethics to an understanding of justice is an emphasis on human beings as profoundly social in that their dignity and responsibility both for society and for

their fellow humans must be realized through human sociality. The religious ethics of this study also points to the importance of human sociality because they understand justice as relational, as the realization of good community. For Shariati and Gutierrez, the purpose of struggle for justice is to create the possibility for both a new human and a new society, the two being prerequisites of each other. In Gutierrez's analysis, the emancipation of the poor is also the liberation of the oppressor, because the end of oppression is what makes true human community possible for them both. While partiality is thus an aspect of justice, this partiality implies a concern for the oppressor, which in the end seeks to enable human community for all. In Forrester's account, because justice is essentially about the realization of good human community, justice must be articulated in a way that accounts for the claims of the weak as a central concern of justice and not as an afterthought. For Milbank, the sociality of harmonious difference is the end of justice, a fulfilment of the real potential of all in harmony with all through social discernment of the common good. The pervasive theme of human community in the ethics studied here takes many forms, but the emphasis remains. This points to a weakness with the liberal accounts to which such religious ethics seek to be a corrective or alternative, because human sociality can be understood as that which liberal political theory and capitalist society fail to adequately articulate and enable.

To finally return to the overarching concern of this inquiry, what insights can be gained regarding the liberal paradigm by attention to the challenges posed by voices of religious ethics? Three different strategies to challenge such liberalism have been analyzed and characterized: modified liberalism, liberationism, and traditionalism. While they all contain valuable insights, the study also indicates the greater plausibility of some of the suggestions offered to address the areas of inquiry. With regard to interpretative method, the position articulated in this dissertation is that traditionalism offers the most plausible account of how to establish identity and authority within a tradition. Its methods open up traditions as avenues for thought which can develop distinct insights, and retains the critical distance of tradition which is a prerequisite for tradition to contribute to public debate. However, the authenticity which is claimed through traditionalism should be articulated in a way that allows for a polyphony of authentic elaborations of tradition so as not to lose both its plausibility and its potential for

communicating in public. With regard to the role of religion in public, the insights of modified liberalism about the role of religious traditions in constructing an inclusive and hospitable public forum are valuable, but need to be complemented by a structural analysis of the material and ideational power dynamics that also affect the possibilities for communication. Such elements are present in the liberationist deconstruction of the neutrality of the public, but these need to be modified in turn in order to take into account the pluralism of the public.

With regard to justice, it is my contention that the liberationist perspective offers crucial insights about the structural and material preconditions for the establishment of justice. While modified liberalism tends to understand human beings as inherently conflictual, egoist, and individualist, traditionalists rightly assert that religious traditions are a resource of different imaginings of the human being, human collectivity, and right relations. However, liberationist accounts take into account that whatever its inherent possibilities and potentialities, humanity as we know it is profoundly shaped by liberal capitalist society, and its material and institutional structures must be addressed for other potentialities to be realized. This captures how justice, being socially constructed, entails the possibility of things hitherto unknown, and simultaneously ultimately lies beyond the humanly achievable.

This transcendence of justice, which I have already indicated might be a critical resource of religious ethics in public, has further implications for the struggle in and with tradition. All the writers analyzed in this study indicate that the theological perspective implies insights about human fallibility and contingency. Nothing that is achieved by human beings is absolute or eternal, nothing human is ever final. This can inspire confidence and hope, but it also points to the importance of a continually renewed critique of the liberation or emancipation achieved in the name of a justice that always lies beyond what is materially instantiated. The transcendence of justice as envisioned in religious ethics can be understood as an exhortation to a permanent critique of human projects of liberation. Such an understanding of justice as a critical tool of deconstruction is articulated by Derrida, but its practical implications are more readily understandable, I believe, as elements of religious ethics. As a tool for critique, justice might be fundamentally in need of some concept of transcendence which is coherent as a part of theology.

The transcendence of justice is not only a valuable insight of religious ethics, it can also be articulated as a critical tool in relation to such ethics. If God's justice ultimately lies beyond what human beings can achieve and grasp in their various articulations, then even as traditions can contribute to understanding of justice, justice also must be understood as lying beyond tradition as a regulative ideal. The critical corrective of justice then stands in judgement of tradition, despite the former being available through the interpretive lens of tradition. This struggle between tradition and justice, where tradition, although not permitting itself to be judged by an outside standard, nonetheless articulates ideals of justice which ultimately stand as a corrective to tradition itself, could be a contribution to a wider critical reflection upon the relation between trans-contextual values and the attempts to instantiate them in particular formulations and material structures. In the struggle with tradition which has been undertaken in the various attempts at faithfulness toward tradition studied here, there are two distinct aspects: on the one hand, faith in the ability of the resources of one's tradition to articulate insights relevant to a conceptualization of justice; and on the other hand, justice understood as a corrective that is not completely grasped and contained by human endeavours, included religious ethic and its tradition. Justice is thereby not reduced to what tradition is able to articulate; rather, justice is an ideal that is both understood as profoundly intuited and articulated by tradition, and therefore able to act as a corrective to precisely that tradition – a corrective ideal which is always both inside and outside.

The examples of such struggle between tradition and justice can inspire us to think critically about the relation between other traditions and the ideals which they attempt to instantiate. An example of immediate concern in our time is the tradition of Western democracy. While often understood as the immediate application of a universal ideal, Western democracy can be seen as a tradition comprising particular practices which contain intuitions and articulations of justice that are valuable but that also need to be corrected by the regulative ideal of justice as forever lying beyond what is materially achieved. We can be justified, then, in claiming as our own the traditions which we inhabit, but not in asserting justice to be ultimately contained in that which we thereby claim.

Index

A

Asad, Talal, 50, 120
authenticity, 14-15, 23, 25, 27, 38,
47-48, 180, 197, 277, 283, 322,
341-344, 348, 368

B

Barth, Karl, 65, 126, 128, 130-131,
320
Baum, Gregory, 74, 76-77, 237, 246-
248, 257, 265, 267, 286, 290, 340

C

capitalism, 15, 22-23, 56, 66, 187,
192, 222, 230, 238, 265-269, 271,
275, 280, 302-308, 311, 314-316,
322, 326-327, 363
Christ, 28, 53, 65, 73, 155, 208, 215-
216, 223-228, 237, 285, 294, 299,
306, 308, 311, 320, 334, 339, 361,
367
colonialism, 54, 57, 108, 120, 174,
179-181, 186-187, 200, 221, 238,
262, 264, 267, 341, 357, 359
Congregation of the Doctrine of the
Faith, 72-73, 208, 210, 234, 237
Creation, 128, 148, 193-194, 205,
222-227, 234, 251, 260, 273-274,
279, 286, 296, 310-311, 320, 339,
343, 352, 366-367

D

democracy, 43, 61, 82, 86, 95, 116,
151, 192, 256, 258, 261-268, 283,
291-293, 314, 356-357, 370
dignity, 42, 48, 72-73, 189, 191, 194-
195, 202, 219-223, 227, 235, 256,
260, 265-266, 269-270, 272-273,
280, 364-367

E

Egalitarian, 12, 41, 366
epistemological contextualism, 36,
163, 184, 205, 216, 283, 295, 314,
334-335, 354
epistemological universalism, 36-37,
81, 97, 106, 109, 118, 123, 139,
153, 333, 355
epistemological violence, 283, 342,
344
epistemology of possibility, 36, 125,
138, 153, 241, 260, 262, 314, 333,
335, 355
eschatology, 143, 205, 215, 225, 228,
233, 345
ethic based on both reason and
revelation, 28, 174, 192, 209, 312,
332
ethic based on reason, 28, 81, 106,
109, 332, 349
ethic based on revelation, 28, 283,
312, 349

F

Fanon, Frantz, 22, 44, 52, 67, 72, 167,
189, 223, 229

fasting, 115, 272, 339
fatwa, 79, 241, 244, 253, 257, 259,
358
fiqh, 20, 29, 82, 115, 165, 242-245,
248, 276-277, 336, 338-339
fitra, 184-185, 191, 244, 260, 279

G

grace, 73, 112, 125, 145, 148-150,
155, 205, 213, 216-217, 225, 228,
286, 297, 311, 320, 362, 366-367
Gramsci, Antonio, 164, 207
Guevara, Ernesto, 22, 67, 72, 189,
223, 229

H

Habermas, Jürgen, 18, 33-34, 132-
135, 140
hospitable, 119, 134, 152, 323, 331,
355, 357, 359, 361, 369

I

identity, 12, 14, 17, 23-27, 34, 38,
103, 108, 110, 125-126, 155, 172,
181, 248, 254, 277, 312, 335, 337-
340, 343-344, 347, 368
ijihad, 47, 74, 83, 85, 115, 164-165,
167, 174, 177, 210, 242, 244
imperialism, 44, 47, 54, 57, 174, 179,
186-187, 193, 200-201, 205, 222,
229, 231-232, 262, 264, 268, 328,
334, 357
incarnation, 38, 148, 205, 225-227,
230, 339, 361

K

Kingdom of God, 148, 213, 216, 228,
237

L

legitimacy, 25, 27, 64, 81, 96, 103,
110, 131, 157, 161, 237, 261, 263,
277, 332

liberal paradigm, 12, 14-15, 21, 46,
48, 58, 368
liberationist, 43, 46-47, 155, 186,
205, 214, 230-231, 275, 316, 333,
369

M

Marx, Karl, 43-44, 72, 169, 173, 181,
186, 188, 192, 283, 303-304, 306,
325-327
mercy, 11, 45, 112, 144-145, 147,
149, 154, 158, 244, 298, 366
modernity, 53-54, 57, 74, 76, 108,
120, 132-133, 141, 147, 163, 178,
186, 246, 252, 257, 259, 262, 270,
286, 356, 357
motivation, 19, 30, 32, 35, 38, 87, 95,
150, 152-153, 159, 175, 182, 196,
215, 226, 256, 272, 332, 361

N

Niebuhr, Reinhold, 65, 130, 131, 158,
159
Nussbaum, Martha, 42, 102, 159, 326

P

pluralism, 32, 39, 66, 76, 106, 130,
134, 138, 146, 197, 238, 241, 261,
265, 273, 275-276, 294, 297, 299,
313-315, 322, 344, 353, 356, 358,
369
polyphony, 26, 87, 106, 127, 197,
277, 332, 340, 341, 368

R

Rahner, Karl, 77, 217
Rawls, John, 22, 30, 31, 41, 87, 91,
94, 96, 106, 132, 135, 138, 144-
145, 354
responsibility, 34, 44, 78, 93, 127,
130, 134, 141-144, 161, 174, 176,
189, 195, 207, 211, 214, 223-224,
233, 254, 256, 273, 276, 357, 360,
365-367

S

Said, Edward, 45, 52-53, 55, 59, 164
Schillebeeckx, 213
Second Vatican Council, 71, 77, 213,
215-217, 223, 233-234, 339
Secularity, 101, 263
Sharia, 20, 25, 29, 63-64, 68, 79, 82-
88, 91, 94, 98-99, 108, 110, 112,
114-116, 122, 242-243, 245-246,
249, 250-251, 266, 276-277, 279,
281, 323, 335, 340, 352, 366, 379
sin, 29, 72-73, 113, 125-126, 128,
131, 140, 146, 148, 154, 159, 205,
209, 215, 223-226, 228, 231, 237,
285, 310, 334, 339, 345
socialism, 23, 78, 188, 193, 222, 232,
239, 259, 270, 283, 302, 304-305,
307, 326-328
solidarity, 9, 47-48, 76, 139, 144,
157, 160, 162, 181, 184, 190, 198,
205-206, 208, 210-211, 216, 219-
228, 234, 237-238, 254, 258-259,
266-269, 273, 280, 301, 308, 324,
326, 331, 333, 346, 348, 353, 355,
358-361, 365-367
Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, 51, 200,
342
Stout, Jeffrey, 23, 34, 37, 39, 45, 55,
118, 286, 320, 342, 350-351, 354-
357, 359

sufficiency, 41, 46-47, 77, 81, 102,
121, 153, 241, 265-266, 269, 281,
316, 333, 335, 364, 366

T

theory of combination, 38, 125, 141,
152, 163, 184, 205, 217, 349
theory of consonance, 38, 81, 96, 98,
109, 117, 123, 152, 185, 241, 260,
262, 281, 312-314, 332, 335, 349
theory of contrast, 38, 283, 296, 312-
314, 335, 349
transcendence, 48, 135, 236, 299,
308, 340, 362, 364, 369, 370

V,W

Walzer, Michael, 139, 160, 201, 353,
355
virtue, 11, 31, 44, 46-47, 105, 128,
141, 143, 163, 230, 232, 283, 291,
293, 295-296, 300, 302, 308, 310,
314, 316, 324-325, 335, 350, 362,
364

Y

Young, Iris Marion, 43-44, 236

Z

zakat, 182, 266, 272-273, 339

Bibliography

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