Religion in the Public Arena: Recognition, Vulnerability and Tragedy

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ABSTRACT. The present contribution focuses on the place of religion in the public domain and revolves around three concepts: vulnerability, recognition and tragedy. Focusing on these three notions, I will endeavour to shed some light on the complex relationship between religion and the public arena. More specifically, I will draw attention to the fact that the *struggle for recognition* (Honneth 1992) can often lead to tragedy. There is no adequate political solution to this problem. The reason for this is that the nature of the recognition religious people desire differs from that which the political system seems to be able to offer. Nevertheless, and I hope to elaborate this in what follows, an appropriate answer to this problem needs to be found, since the danger exists that the struggle for recognition might derail (Ricoeur 2004). It is in this perspective that I turn to religion. Whereas politics manoeuvres within the domain of *solvable* problems, religion offers people a framework to deal appropriately with problems for which no solution appears to exist, or at least not an immediate one. In situations of inner conflict, religion can open up perspectives of hope for solidarity.

KEYWORDS. Religion, public domain, vulnerability, recognition, tragedy

The *struggle for recognition* (Honneth 1992) can at times take tragic turns. In dialogue with Martha Nussbaum, I hope to demonstrate that political liberalism recognizes this problem. In her recent publication *Liberty of Conscience* (2008), Nussbaum focuses on the USA's historical-cultural tradition of religious freedom. In her opinion, the American tradition is particularly sensitive to the possibility of tragic conflict between religion and the public realm and has, unlike Europe, found a way to address this issue.

Though the American tradition may indeed be food for thought, it does not follow that this tradition is the most appropriate answer to the

tense relationship between religion and the public arena. I will argue that this tradition does not succeed in offering a 'solution'. Even worse, and it is here that we encounter the real tragedy, the said tradition runs the risk of escalating the problem. I will refer to this as the tragedy of liberalism (van den Brink 1997).

The fundamental problem seems to be that the nature of the recognition religious people desire is not the same as the recognition political liberalism seems to be able to offer. But an appropriate answer to this problem remains necessary in light of the very real possibility that the struggle for recognition, as noted above, has the potential to derail (Ricoeur 2004). When we turn to religion, however, it becomes apparent that it endeavours to place the whole of human life in a larger narrative perspective and in so doing it has the power to restrain, to keep distant and to reorient that which might otherwise overwhelm people. Through rites, symbols, worship practices and narratives, religion makes it possible for people to bear with dignity that which might otherwise be unbearable. Moreover, religion, as the word itself already indicates, has the social *function* of assembling and uniting people (Ricoeur & Changeux 1998, 279). In situations of tragic conflict, religion can open up a perspective of hope — the hope that one day tragic conflicts may be overcome.

Before I continue, however I would like to point out that the present contribution is in the first instance as a conversation between both the political and the religious perspective. Hence, it endeavours to demonstrate that there are different ways of looking at the difficult relationship between religion and the public arena. It is possible that the following pages pay more attention in relative terms to the ways in which this relationship *can* be experienced by religious people and it might thus be contended that the political domain remains somewhat under-defined. While such a critique may not be completely out of place, I am convinced that the relevant literature on religion in the public domain focuses more often on the political perspective. Perhaps this article can be seen as a way to re-establish a degree of balance.

I. THE VULNERABILITY OF RELIGIOUS COMMITMENTS

Let me begin this article by examining the question of what it means to lead a religious life. After all, it is the vulnerability of *religious commitments* that obliges religious believers to struggle for recognition in the public arena – a struggle that often leads to a situation of inner conflict.

Religion is a complex phenomenon and it immediately needs to be said that no consensus exists regarding the best definition. Paul Griffiths observes the following: “Defining religion is a little like writing diet books or forecasting the performance of the stock market: there is a great deal of it about and none of it seems to do much good” (Griffiths 1999, 3). It is particularly difficult to find a definition that does justice to all religions. Of course, any view on religion can be disputed; but in my opinion the following approach responds to the complex issue of how religious plurality relates to the public arena (Green 2002, 219).

I regard religion in the first instance as analogous to speaking a specific language or belonging to a particular culture or form of life (Lindbeck 1986). Religious adherence is the result of a long process of socialization, in which a person learns to speak a particular religious language and learns to perform rituals, practices, and customs in an appropriate way and in an ever changing context. Believers learn to pray and sing, to celebrate and ask forgiveness. They learn how to deal with the limits of existence, with conflicts, and with their own finitude, by locating their own existence in the greater whole of the tradition to which they adhere. Rituals, symbols, and narratives structure the world and make it possible for human beings to find meaning in it. Of course, each believer has his or her own religious autobiography, but religious adherence always implies that one’s religious character is formed by a preceding tradition (Ricoeur 2007, 100). I use the term character on purpose here, because it enables me to bring up the profound impact of religious adherence on a person’s identity. In its original Greek meaning, character refers to an incision, a groove, a mark (Schönborn 1976, 184). One’s personal identity is marked

and branded by one's religious adherence. As a consequence, religions, "even more than the culture and languages they resemble, are like places of residence, which one cannot leave, without losing part of oneself" (Lindbeck 2004, 187). And what is more, "it seems to those who belong to it, to be comprehensive. It seems to them to take account of and be relevant to everything" (Griffiths 2001, 9). Bearing this in mind, it would be quite naive to imagine that religion allows itself to be pushed back into the private domain without any reticence or protest.

Religions function as interpretative frameworks that illuminate the world in a meaningful way (Ricoeur 2001, 221-222). Religious traditions form the *horizon from which* a religious person faces the world and makes concrete choices and decisions. Every religious tradition enlightens the life people live and the situation of the world in which they live it (Borgman 2008, 8). "Thanks to familiarity with the tradition's framework of meaning, it becomes possible for individuals to orient themselves in life, to make distinctions between what is reasonable and what not, and between reality and delusion" (De Dijn, 2006, 15).

To a large extent, religious traditions thereby determine what is considered important, valuable, and worthy of pursuit. Within a given religious interpretational framework, some aspirations are judged good and some bad, some desires are considered honourable and others shameful, some actions compel admiration and others indignation. Such evaluations give a moral hallmark to our desires, inclinations and reactions. Here we come across the interconnection between religion and ethics. Indeed, religious frameworks are fundamental for the fruition of a conscientious ethical life.

Take the Brahmin (a high caste Hindu), for example, who seriously attempts to live in such a way that his Brahminism provides a framework for all the other dimensions of his life. If he is married, he will understand the fact of his marriage, together with all the particular activities that constitute it, as prescribed to a considerable degree by the perspectives on marriage enshrined in the relevant ethico-legal injunctions found in the texts (rituals, symbols) and traditions that are authoritative for Brahmins.

The same will be true for his mode of dress, the physical posture he adopts while defecating, and what he does to make a living. There will be no form of life and no particular action or pattern of action that fails to seem to him to be a proper part of Brahminism (Griffiths 1999, 9).

This example clearly illustrates the fact that religious traditions are always particular. This does not mean that there are no similarities or points of agreement between the different religions. It does mean, however, that they are not simply interchangeable. When it comes to values, norms and convictions, religions do not simply point in the same direction. The possibility of interreligious conflict has to be taken into account in this regard. Although there are certainly similarities or points of agreement between the different religions regarding what is held highly, differences persist. At this level, the link between particularity and conflict is blindingly obvious. “The question, how ought we to live, opens up a field of conflict as soon as our choices call for justification” (Ricoeur 2007, 178).

The particularity of one religion or another is “expressed in myths or narratives.” It is here that we encounter “the images and the words used in the ceremonial, the sacred, and the ritual; what attracts us, what keeps us at a distance and what requires great caution” (De Visscher 2007, 34). Rituals, symbols, and community-building narratives are inextricably bound up with one another. The power of religion lies in their combined actions. After all, “through its rites and prescriptions, [religion] offers the possibility to deal with the unthinkable and the unacceptable: with suffering, illness, death, and evil, but [also] with the sometimes unbearable banality and meaninglessness of daily life. Religious traditions contain a kind of ‘truth’ about life as well as ‘solutions for ultimate life problems.’ At the same time, this ‘truth’ and these ‘solutions’ cannot be disconnected from the rites and prescriptions through which and upon which basis they attain reality and effectiveness. To find out the ultimate meaning of finiteness and the vulnerability of everything valuable – and how we still can or have to live with this – requires entering into and participating in ‘the mysteries of faith’” (De Dijn 2006, 22).

Religion, however, is so much more than speaking a religious language or belonging to a particular tradition. Religious life presupposes a commitment to what is ultimately important and what transcends human beings. People can only speak about this transcendence, because their speech is preceded by tradition (Borgman 2008). Nevertheless, whoever reduces religion to nothing more than its own self-preservation without a commitment to transcendence, removes religion's heart. It is thereby not only typical of religions to forefront a dimension that exceeds human beings, they also create a context in which it becomes possible for people to transcend themselves. Religions, one might argue, are never about the self, but always about what transcends the self. Religion promotes the transformation from ego-centeredness to reality-centeredness (Hick 1989, 36).

It is often said that this commitment to transcendence is the most important element in religious life. According to popular opinion, this is also what connects religions in spite of their obvious differences. Following this line of thought, the hypothesis is that the various religious traditions “constitute different ways of experiencing, conceiving, and living in relation to a transcendent divine Reality which transcends all our varied visions of it” (Hick 1989, 235-236). Religions are historically and culturally determined expressions of the universal human aspiration to transcendence. Religious life can be characterized by a movement from the inside outward: from the deepest religious experience to exterior faith practice. In line with this view of religion, concrete religious symbols, practices, rites, and narratives are seen as ornaments with no intrinsic value. They are mere pointers to the ultimate. They help religious persons in their orientation towards the ultimate, but once they have actually reached this destination, they are expected to leave such tools behind. They are not for retaining (Coward 1995, 47). In the vision I am depicting here, adult faith is presented as an attitude that ‘transcends’ these religious symbols (Hick 1995, 114-115).

This expressive theory of religion – rooted in a universal human longing for transcendence and expressed in religious traditions in various

historical-cultural ways – is not completely invalid. Indeed, it is correct to say that religions regard themselves as responses to the transcendent. The problem is, however, that this expressiveness is too simple, because it seems to ignore what the philosophy of religion calls the entanglement between the transcendent and the concrete, religious elements such as rites, symbols, objects, and narratives. Not only is there no such thing as an unmediated access to transcendence; the concrete religious elements are also constitutive of the meaning of transcendence. In this perspective, the philosophy of religion speaks of meaning-incarnation. While religious meanings cannot exist apart from their *material embodiment*, they also cannot be reduced to it. “What is holy or sacred in a religion is connected in a unique way with holy names, places, moments, objects, or events in which it is or was once present” (De Dijn 2006, 17). The sacred is deeply intertwined with particular words, standard formulas, or material symbols. This also implies that “what is perceived secondary or (historically) relative by outsiders is of vital importance to the religious person” (Merrigan 2003, 327). A failure to appreciate a concrete religious symbol can be experienced as a failure to appreciate what believers of this or that religion hold in high esteem. Hence their readiness to fight for what may seem banal to outsiders.

I already pointed out that religious life cannot be reduced to a tradition without faith. Religious people are involved in something that is of ultimate importance, something that transcends them. Because of this involvement, religious life cannot be reduced to *convention*; rather, religious life also presupposes *conviction*. When people are touched by something or someone ultimately important, they hope that this can be equally meaningful or valuable for others (Ricoeur & Changeux 1998, 271). Believers are convinced that they are concerning themselves with truth (Ricoeur & Changeux 1998, 273). That is also why their attitude towards people of other faiths is not one of indifference. “Each religion is summoned to define itself in distinction and opposition to other religions. In that sense controversy is integrated in adhesion” (Ricoeur 2007, 105).

Believers who take their religious commitment seriously want to explain their faith conviction and enter into debate with those who think and believe otherwise. Conviction and critique, both external and internal, are interwoven. “A conviction can never maintain itself unless it also becomes a fully-fledged ‘critique’ and ‘critical thinking’” (Burggraeve 2007, 242). Every believer is “summoned to render account of his commitments by way of plausible arguments, e.g. arguments worth pleading for in a discussion with believers belonging to other faith traditions” (Ricoeur 2007, 100). In and through controversy, believers give expression to their steadfast fidelity to their faith: their religious belonging is a continuous choice.

In controversy, believers stand up as witnesses to their faith: here I stand and this is what I stand for. The witness to faith adopts an exposed position because of the vulnerability of his or her faith testimony. The term vulnerability implies two things here. First, faith conviction concerns a certainty that cannot be founded in an irrefutable way and thus can always be challenged. Faith does not allow itself to be proven; the truth that believers are concerned with does not allow itself to be grasped. For this reason, we likewise need to understand the idea of religious commitment as a ‘fragile certainty’. It is a certainty that must be confirmed and affirmed time and again, even if it can never be definitively founded. Faith commitments are always liable to challenge, and the only appropriate answer to such a challenge is to witness anew. A readiness to testify time and again, symbolises the steadfastness of the reliable witness.

Reliable witnesses back up what they say by their entire personality. Here we encounter the second meaning of vulnerability, namely the fact that witnesses not only testify *to something*, but that they are involved personally in the testimony (Ricoeur 2004, 193). The witness is especially vulnerable because any testimony implies an entanglement of both that which is testified about and the personal commitment of the witness him/herself. A tremendous investment of personal commitment is at stake here. Witnesses’ personal dedication can extend so far that they are willing to give up their

life for what they believe in (Ricoeur 1980, 130). Because of this commitment, a possible rejection can also reflect on the person of the witness and can be experienced as personal rejection.

It would be wrong to conclude from this vulnerability, however, that it is appropriate to *spare* believers in their faith commitment in order to avoid possible injury. Indeed, what witnesses aim at is that what they dedicate their lives to and draw hope from may move others at the same time. Although people long for recognition, they simultaneously desire this appreciation to take place independently of their longing. “If someone who asks for recognition were to discover that the other does not really know what it is about or gives recognition [just] to please him, then he [the someone] would consider this recognition worthless or even an insult (De Dijn 2001, 25).”

II. RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AS A CHALLENGE TO THE POLITICAL REALM AND VICE VERSA

From a *political point of view*, pluralism is both an opportunity and a problem. It offers an opportunity, because diversity is interconnected with creativity and innovation. “People with different perspectives, skills, temperaments, inclinations, and values will respond to situations differently. They will see different options and try different strategies, thus leading to social learning and innovation” (Moon 1993). Interacting with other people who hold different perspectives can open us up to hitherto unknown realms of reality. However, it is also clear that the reality of plurality can give rise to conflict. Think of incompatible judgments, for example, or irreconcilable values, or contrary principles. Thus, cultural and religious differences often lead to ethical conflicts, which have to do with the fact that several particular historical-cultural sources of legitimation are in competition with one another. Religious pluralism is clearly a challenge to the political realm since it cannot be denied that religion is a very

ambiguous phenomenon. While its goal might be a good and truthful life, it has often given rise to violence. Religion has been the cause of countless wars in the past. Even to this day people continue to kill ‘in the name of God’, and even to this day, religious people are prepared to die as martyrs. In light of this dramatic reality¹, one of the challenges facing the political domain is how to “promote a culture of mutual recognition which is not limited to a deadly struggle, allowing only one victor” (Greisch 2006, 149). The relationship between religions and the public realm is of the utmost importance in this regard.

The most dominant political outlook in Western societies can be termed as liberalism, its main characteristics being a “constitutionally warranted sense of respect for the life and liberty of each individual, a concentration on equal rights, and an affirmation of the worth of democratic government and moral pluralism” (van den Brink 1997, 2). When it comes to pluralism, liberal democracies generally try to find the right balance between the private and the public realm. Indeed, one of the pillars of modern democracy is that it brackets the many particularities that characterise individuals in their daily life in order to keep only their abstract quality as human citizen (Van de Putte 2005, 81). This also applies to religion: The choice of belonging to this or that religion is an individual affair. People are autonomous subjects. In the private arena they are free to live according to their own insights and convictions.

The government is thus expected to uphold an attitude of neutrality, understood in terms of non-interference. Interference is regarded as paternalistic. Politically speaking, the precise nature of a conviction, identity or culture is not important. The only thing that matters is that each individual has an equal opportunity to choose his or her conviction, identity or culture (Van de Putte 2005, 82). The state refrains from value judgments and discussions concerning content. Citizens for their part are expected, both as individuals and as groups, to be tolerant towards the different convictions within their pluralist society (Loobuyck 2007, 137). In general, liberal democracies committed to tolerance and freedom, seek

to provide social space – i.e. liberty – for individuals and groups to pursue their own ideals, restricting the scope of political decision as much as possible to matters that must be decided through collective, authoritative processes” (Moon 1993, 7-8).

From a *religious point of view*, a (too) strict separation between the private and the public domain is not always evident. The ‘definition’ of religion we developed above demonstrates that it cannot simply be reduced to the seclusion of one’s own private religious group. Participation in public debate on what is good and valuable is, at least from a religious perspective, natural and necessary. The expectation that one should leave behind one’s religious symbols when setting foot in the public domain, however, can be experienced as rather problematic, not so much because this would amount to leaving behind part of one’s own identity (I will return to this below), but because it forces believers to be unfaithful towards the ever embodied transcendence to which they are committed. To put it bluntly, political demands and those of (religious) convictions can and do conflict (van den Brink 1997, 132). Conflicts can arise between commitment to a religious tradition and what it considers true and good on the one hand, and the obligations implied by liberal interpretations of well-being on the other.

Religious adherence carries with it certain obligations. First of all, there is the obligation to stand up as a witness. Believers feel that it is part of their faith commitment to voice their belief, especially when their most deeply held values are at stake. As mentioned above, controversies are part of religious life. Fundamental conflicts emerge from different and on occasion even incommensurable *worldviews*. Conflicts concerning fundamental moral values, such as the debate on euthanasia and abortion, are perhaps the best known in this regard. While many of these issues have, of course, been settled in legal terms, the frequent re-opening of the debate only serves to demonstrate the depth of the given moral conflict (Moon 1993; van den Brink 1997). There is no moral consensus regarding these issues, and there probably never will be.

In addition to the obligation to bear witness, however, religious adherence also involves other symbolic and ritual duties to be performed at set times and places: celebrating Shabbat, keeping the dietary laws, wearing a headscarf or a skullcap, thanking God before dinner, fasting, celebrating religious festivals... Not to observe these obligations *can* be experienced as a failure and even perhaps as a betrayal towards what believers and their religious communities regard as ultimately important. Due to the intertwinement between the transcendent and the immanent, such religious duties are not trivial. Rather, they form an intrinsic part of religious life.

From this perspective, conflict can arise when believers are forced to make their particular religious commitments invisible for the sake of the public good or when they are excluded from participation in the public domain. At stake here is not some kind of psychological attachment to religious symbols, though I do not deny that this too can play a role. Rather, we are touching a deep religious fact. Religious people *genuinely want* to be present in the public domain as students, teachers, or as town hall officials; but when this presence is only permitted when their religious adherence is forced underground, it is not unlikely that they will regard this as an unacceptable assault on what they hold dear. The often uttered discourse that religious people should be obliged to accept secularisation and to acknowledge the private character of their religious adherence ignores how religion functions. One does not simply leave behind one's religious commitment when entering the public domain. The demand to do this ultimately requires that we engage in a sort of "mental acrobatics" (Visker 1999, 364) incompatible with what makes religion tick.

III. A LIBERAL-POLITICAL RESPONSE TO TRAGIC CONFLICTS

Religious people can and often do find themselves confronted with a grave dilemma when they are asked in the name of the public interest to

bracket what to them is of ultimate importance. These dilemmas are not always tragic, but they *can* take on tragic proportions.

The terms ‘tragedy’ and ‘tragic’ usually designate events that lead up to sadness, suffering, disaster and even death. Moreover, tragedy involves an experience of necessity. Events are called tragic when their outcome seems unavoidable. In a tragedy, the protagonists do not seem to have any control over the final outcome of the play in which they are involved. Tragedy thus refers to the inevitable. Moreover, it seems that the more the protagonists try to give a new direction to their fate, the more they head straight for disaster. Perhaps the final characteristic worth mentioning, is the fact that the protagonists of a tragedy are oriented towards the good. The protagonists caught up in a tragedy are driven by what they hold in high esteem. They are committed to what they value more than anything else.

To put it simply: the event that is called tragic is comprised of intentional actions that *cannot* but generate sadness, suffering or death, even when the actors involved genuinely try to do good... So it seems that it is characteristic of the tragic – understood as a tragic experience – that human beings who try to control the world in order to be true to values that are of great importance to them, find that they ultimately fail in their attempts because of certain necessary and inescapable traits of their fate, the world, or the value frameworks from which they draw their motivation. In trying to be free and responsible individuals, they find that the consequences of their actions uncontrollably – and necessarily – result in the exact opposite of what they set out to attain (van den Brink 1997, 26).

The phenomenon of the tragic is not unfamiliar to political liberalism, and different answers have been formulated to avoid situations that might lead to tragic outcomes wherever possible.

Political liberalism is dedicated to freedom, autonomy and equality. Liberal democracies consider it crucial to provide conditions promoting the realization of these principles. The fundamental value underlying these principles is personal integrity. In this regard, one of liberalism’s aims is to prevent individuals from ending up in vulnerable situations,

situations that make it impossible for them to regard themselves as full persons worthy of equal concern and respect by their fellow men and women and by the government (van den Brink 1997, 173). Due to their great personal investment, believers are especially vulnerable in their religious commitments. Their value as a person is intertwined with the recognition of the value of their commitment. Because of this intertwining, the political demand to leave behind one's religious commitments when entering the public domain can be experienced as an undue *violation* of one's personal integrity. Such experiences have the potential to obstruct the realization of the liberal ideals of equality, autonomy and freedom.

In her recent publication *Liberty of Conscience*, Martha Nussbaum defends America's 'Tradition of Religious Equality'. She depicts American politics with respect to religion as bearing witness to a great sensitivity towards the possibility of tragic experiences due to clashing convictions, obligations and norms. Nussbaum finds the personification *par excellence* of such tragic conflicts in the ancient Greek character Antigone who is placed in an agonizing dilemma. The state, in the person of her uncle Creon, has announced that she cannot bury her brother because he was killed while attacking the city. But Antigone's religion and its *unwritten laws* tell her that she must bury her brother or forfeit all chances of being welcomed by the spirits of her family when she dies. It thus seems that Creon's rigid definition of public policy leads to the imposition of a tragic burden on a single person (Nussbaum 2008, 116).

According to Nussbaum, what this ancient Greek tragedy teaches us is that laws that cause dilemmas with regard to religious commitments are "terrible", precisely because, according to Nussbaum, such commitments have to do with the human quest for the ultimate meaning of life. Antigone's inner conflict stands as a symbol for the dilemmas with which religious people are confronted in the public domain. Numerous rules prevalent in the public arena place religious people in conflicting situations: rules about the way soldiers should dress (such as a ban on headgear other than military headgear), rules about the way people should behave in court

(removing their hats), rules about the way the military should be constituted (frequently by conscription of healthy adult males), rules about those who are obliged to testify in court (anyone who is subpoenaed, with the exception of a spouse) – all these and many other common legal requirements reflect majority thinking, which may impose very severe burdens on the religious practices of minorities. The headgear requirements of Jews and Sikhs, for example, violate military norms. Quakers believe it idolatrous to remove their hats in court. Quakers, Mennonites, and other religious groups follow the requirements of pacifism that preclude ordinary military service. Saturday worshippers cannot testify in court on that day (Nussbaum 2008, 116-117).

In expressing the gravity of such conflicts with respect to religion, Nussbaum states that some laws can lead to what she calls “soul-rape”. Nussbaum asserts that it is wrong to put civilians in such tragic situations only because of a social desire for homogeneity that is dictated by an inability to deal with otherness and strangeness. It is the ethical responsibility of liberal democracies to avoid such tragic situations as much as possible and to spare religious people in their vulnerability.² In this perspective, Martha Nussbaum criticises Europe for lacking sensitivity to this problem. She is particularly critical of France and its still prevailing ideal of *laïcité*, but she also rightly points out that several other European countries that fear religious strangeness and difference pursue a homogenising politics that reveals disrespect and intolerance (2008, 348). Nussbaum argues, therefore, that it would be better for Europe to draw some inspiration from the American tradition (2008, 25).

American politics with respect to religion is characterised as the correct balance between two liberal principles: the separation of church and state on the one hand, and religious freedom on the other (De Dijn 2008, 470). In the first instance, the American juridical tradition teaches that freedom of religion is a fundamental right, the right to follow one’s own conscience with regard to religion. Freedom of religion is closely connected to equal respect. This implies that all citizens should have equal

access to the public domain, *regardless* of their religious commitments (Nussbaum 2008, 22). In order to realise this equality, the American juridical system states that the government has to restrain itself wherever possible from creating the impression that it favours one religion over another. The appropriate attitude of the government concerning religious matters is thus one of neutrality. This implies that the state does not adopt any position regarding religious affairs. From this follows the *principle of non-establishment*: “The state may make no endorsements in religious matters that would signify an orthodoxy creating an in-group and an out-group” (Nussbaum 2008, 24). Indeed, the “establishment of religion means that government has put its stamp of approval on some particular religion or group of religions, creating an official orthodoxy” (Nussbaum 2008, 20). America’s cultural identity is incompatible with the proclamation of any religious orthodoxy. By aligning itself to one ‘orthodox’ religion, the state would inevitably give members who belong to this religion a status of superiority, which is opposite to the liberal goal of equality. In an article commenting on Nussbaum, De Dijn puts it as follows: “Civic equality is interpreted here as requiring the law to be ‘symbolically neutral’: it should not create ranks and orders of citizens on the basis of any symbols; it should not give distinguishing marks or signs, favouring some prerogatives over others. It is equality *in standing in the public realm*, itself seen as ‘a symbolic power’ in which there should be no affronts (legally speaking) to the dignity of any citizen” (De Dijn 2008, 471).

It goes without saying, however, that civic equality is often absent because many laws concerning the public domain actually privilege the ideological position of the majority and this can give way to a fundamental inequality in freedom and respect.³ Factories that require shift work, for example, are a case in point. Saturday is a working day but Sunday is not, whereas for Jews the Sabbath starts on Friday evening at sunset and it ends on Saturday at sunset. In this regard, the religious commitments of *minorities* can be a hindrance or even a handicap. It is up to politics to eliminate these handicaps in the public arena as much as possible. The neutrality of the

state is not enough in this regard. More is needed than the prevention of unacceptable interference (De Dijn 2008, 471). Sometimes exceptions to certain laws should be allowed, especially in view of religious commitments. In addition to the principle of non-establishment, for example, the American tradition upholds another principle, namely that of accommodation. This principle actually affirms “the equal dignity of differences, a valuing of diversity in the public realm” (De Dijn 2008, 472).

Generally speaking, the principle of accommodation requires the protection of religious belief and conduct. More specifically, it offers religious people dispensation from laws of general applicability such as the military draft, or rules concerning school leaving age, or the rules that govern state unemployment compensation (Nussbaum 2008, 21).

The request for accommodation often finds its expression in a juridical struggle for recognition. In other words, it is possible for American citizens to claim the right to accommodation when their religious practices collide with the laws that prevail in the public domain. Nussbaum’s book refers to a number of juridical precedents that illustrate the success of the American legal tradition. With the constitution in hand, people fight to be recognised in their vulnerable religious commitments.

IV. THE TRAGEDY OF LIBERALISM

At first glance, and looking from a political perspective, it seems that both the principle of accommodation and the principle of non-establishment formulate adequate answers to situations in which believers are confronted with a tension between their religious commitments and their engagement or presence in the public domain. The American tradition seems to offer a solution to the conflict personified by Antigone. In any case, the principle of accommodation is much more attentive to the *vulnerability* of religious attachments than the strict adoption of the neutrality principle, demanding the absence of all religious symbols in the public

domain. It tries to avoid injury to people's personal integrity due to unjust laws. Faithful to the principles of liberalism, American politics sets out to remove obstacles to autonomy, equality and liberty. Equal citizenship presupposes that religious differences are granted equal dignity.

Taking the religious perspective as the point of departure, however, the present author is left with the questions whether the juridical struggle for recognition does not itself cause problems, problems that ultimately point at what I would call the *tragedy of liberalism*. American politics aims to promote the conditions of personal integrity in terms of autonomy, equality and freedom. It does so by "protecting and fostering forms of recognition that are conducive to the liberal understanding of personal integrity." The tragedy of liberalism implies, however, that the "liberal strategy to prevent individuals from ending up in vulnerable positions will sometimes backfire" (van de Brink 1997, 173). The reason for this is that the 'appreciation/recognition' offered by the principle of accommodation belongs to a different register than that desired by religious people. And what is often even more tragic is the fact that something happens to religion in this juridical struggle for recognition that is hard to reconcile with religiosity as such.

Religious commitment is presented in the context of such a juridical struggle as an identifying mark. Religion becomes a *personal* interest to be defended, and finds itself in conflict with the public domain. What is at stake here, some would argue, has an effect on my identity as an *individual*. The moral motivation behind this conflict of interests lies in the fact that people are vulnerable when it comes to their religious attachments. The prohibition against visible and individual religious signs in the public domain thus becomes a denial of identity. In light of this vulnerability, the American tradition argues for a lenient policy that releases people from the confrontation between their religious commitments and their involvement in the public domain. I do not deny that religion determines the identity of its respective adherents, nor do I deny that a lack of accommodation can be experienced as very offensive. My question, however, is

as follows: does American juridical tradition not capitalize too directly on this individual vulnerability, thereby insufficiently recognizing that what is really at stake in religious life has less to do with identity and more to do with what goes beyond this identity. A religious commitment is not so much about personal identity, but rather about that from which believers derive meaning and significance. I noted above in this regard that religious adherence is not a matter of convention, but rather that it presupposes a conviction. From this point of view, the way in which the pluralistic American juridical tradition sets out to protect the vulnerability of the individual religious identity contributes – probably unintentionally – to an erosion of the particular nature of religious commitments. In the juridical struggle for recognition, religious adherence degenerates into an interest – or even stronger, a self-interest – to be defended, rather than an involvement in the transcendence that enables the subject to look beyond the self.

The believer becomes a plaintiff. The result of this struggle for recognition is a subject who revolves only around the self and his or her own vulnerable faith commitment. This seems to me to contain a distortion of precisely what it means to be religious.

I also wonder whether this policy of accommodation does not lead to a certain paternalism, especially “the kind of paternalism that arises through the defence of minority cultures with arguments which do insufficient justice to the motivation of these minorities” (Van Leeuwen 2003, 175-176). The discussion concerning the content of what is valuable and meaningful is avoided because of the *neutrality of the public domain*; the discussion is also avoided in order to evade conflicts about vulnerable identities. Believers, however, cannot see themselves as paternalism sees them. Indeed, a believer’s motives are not egocentric – they do not defend self-interest; rather, they are involved in something that transcends them and yet obliges them. This implies that believers do not want to be spared *because* of their sensitivities; they want that to which they have committed themselves and consider meaningful and valuable to be taken seriously

(Burms 1990). We could state that believers in a certain sense are looking for confirmation of the possibility that what is ultimately important, valuable, and meaningful to them, might also be applicable to other people and hence be recognized in the public arena and in society. Believers want to address and to convince others, and are willing to run the risk of being rejected. Is this not the original meaning of the word *martyr*? Not only is there a desire for visibility, there is also a desire to be heard; not in the first place because of the self or one's identity, but because of one's transcendent interest. After all, believers do not fight to see their own vulnerable religious identity protected; real believers are prepared to suffer for what transcends and obliges them. Faith convictions call for discussion (Braeckman 2006, 62). Does the principle of accommodation not simply avoid humiliating discussion by allowing the expression of various religious symbols and practices in a benign environment but without any appreciation of their content? At the present, the American juridical tradition avoids the content of the debate about what is valuable and meaningful precisely because this would endanger the principle of equality. Because of the neutrality of the public arena, abstraction is made of the content of religious commitments (Nussbaum 2008, 24). This is why I wonder whether this tradition can offer a sufficient answer to the quest of believers to be heard. In the name of neutrality – and also out of fear of causing injury and thereby triggering potential conflict – the in-depth discussion of numerous religious questions and their relevance to the public domain has dried up (Vanheeswijck 2007, 72). Does this not disregard the fact that there is something humiliating about allowing the expression of diverse religious symbols and practices in a spirit of benevolence, but without endeavouring to appreciate their content?

Connected to this, I also wonder whether it might not be so that this unanswered call to be *heard* then leads towards an escalation of the claim to be *seen*. Instead of becoming engaged in what exceeds self-interest and what affects public matters, religions and their faithful are *forced* into a tragicomic game of out-smarting each other. The neutral content of the

public arena is countered with a never-ending and never satisfactory struggle for visibility, which suffers under the highest bidder principle. Are religious commitments here not being abandoned to an “insatiable quest?” Paul Ricoeur draws attention to this problem. While he confirms the moral dynamics of the struggle for recognition, he also points out that the juridical struggle for recognition can become endless. When do people feel recognised? (Ricoeur 2004, 316) According to Ricoeur, the struggle for recognition may well end up in a malaise, either in the form of an irreparable *victimisation*, or in the form of a tireless plea for inaccessible ideals. The malaise of endlessness carries the danger of escalation. The unanswered demand to be heard leads to the escalation of the demand to be *seen*. In other words, the neutrality of the content of religious commitment is countered by a never-ending – because never satisfactory – struggle for visibility that suffers under the highest bidder principle.

V. IN CONCLUSION: A CHRISTIAN-RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVE

I am not a political philosopher and I do not know the best political *solution* to the above-mentioned problem. In my introduction, however, I explicitly stated that I would give relatively more weight to the religious perspective. By way of conclusion, therefore, I would like to formulate a religious answer to the *infinite struggle for recognition*.

This problem reminds me of the *brokenness* of the human condition. What distinguishes a religious perspective from a political-juridical perspective is first of all the acknowledgement that no simple inner-worldly solution exists for this brokenness. Religion cannot solve every problem. In other words, a religious attitude implies the insight that people are not always capable of finding a solution to their problems on their own. This immediately implies that religious people, in their longing for recognition, should not expect that their blessings will come from politics. From a religious point of view, however, it is not the search for solutions that should

constitute the focus, but rather the desire for salvation, knowing that this will not happen overnight. In light of the infinite struggle for recognition, it is up to the religions to remember that ultimate salvation will not take place in the *here and now* and that it will not be achieved by human hands alone. This likewise immediately implies that religious people, in their desire for recognition, should not expect *salvation* from politics only.

Such a message might be hard to accept in our present day and age, especially since people are more and more inclined to trust their own strength and their own capacity to *make the world*. Some will contend that this is fatalism to the extreme — religion as a sort of permit to do nothing! — but that would be a somewhat overhasty and narrow conclusion. There are many types of conflict and there are different ways to deal with them. Although religion does not look for solutions, it does try to cultivate a fitting religious attitude vis-à-vis problems that appear unsolvable. Religions do this by locating these conflicts in a larger narrative context, one that is ritually and symbolically *expressed* and celebrated. This helps individuals to look away from themselves and see the bigger picture. Thus religions name, localise, frame and contain otherwise unbearable experiences and at the same time they give the faithful the strength not to be dragged down into a never-ending spiral of conflicting interests.

I cannot speak for all traditions here, since, as I already noted, they are all too particular. What I *can* do is suggest what an appropriate Christian attitude might be with regard to the infinite struggle for recognition. This Christian attitude is cultivated by placing the struggle for recognition within the broader Christian tradition. Central to this tradition is hope for salvation.

Christians confirm, in the first instance, that salvation is not solely a human thing. A Christian outlook on society is soteriological in nature. This implies that Christians renounce the will to make and form the world with their own hands. Christians always live in the expectation of a world to come — a world that will always be unexpected. Bearing this in mind, Christians turn to God for help.

They do this in the context of prayer, prayer in which they confess their own weaknesses and shortcomings and they recognise that they need God's help in their attempt to surmount the difficulties they find themselves confronted with. In their prayer, Christians ask God for the power to do his will.

Christians not only ask God for help in prayer, they also do so in liturgical services in which they celebrate God's gift of salvation through Christ, and in which they express the hope that one day all people will be reconciled with each other and with God. In doing so, the Christian tradition endeavours time and time again to cultivate a specific attitude, an attitude that is hard to reconcile with a demanding posture. Indeed, as Christians have learned from God's reconciling revelation in Christ, true recognition cannot be coerced or demanded, rather it is a gift accepted in faithful gratitude. Christians believe that humankind has received this loving *recognition* from God in Christ. It is not the logic of equivalence that we find at the centre of the Christian tradition, but the logic of plenitude. Love is God's commandment and this commandment compels Christians in their present day lives not to give primacy to brokenness, but to the eschatological hope of unity (Kelly 2006, 1). When Christians look for recognition in the public arena, this should be first and foremost because they want to give testimony to what they have received from God.

This hope becomes a creative power. In what God has generously given to humankind, Christians find the strength to work in the present towards a future that will be God's eternal future. God's love in Christ provides worshippers – even today – with the strength to hope and to say: here I stand to respond with love to God's offering of faith and at the same time to cooperate in the hope that all people may one day be reconciled.

In light of what God has given them through Christ, Christians are called even today to live in a sense of abundance rather than sense of shortage, an abundance symbolised powerfully in the feast God will give in celebration of the reconciliation of all people. Because of God's

generosity, Christians are also called to cultivate an attitude of generosity. Christians owe everything to God and thankfulness is thus the fitting Christian attitude. This is why I believe Christians should cultivate both their hope in the final reconciliation of all people and the recognition that this reconciliation ought to be realised in symbolic actions of generosity.

One of the most beautiful expressions of hope is the vision of the so-called eschatological banquet on Mount Zion found in the Hebrew Bible:

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear
(Is. 25,6)

In line with this Messianic vision, I think it is fitting to invite the faithful who belong to other religious traditions to a festive table. The Messianic banquet of tomorrow can be actualised today. As I suggested above, Christians can thus give voice to their hope that all people will one day be reconciled and recognise at the same time that this reconciliation is still to be realised.

It goes without saying that this is not a political solution to the problems we have raised on the occasion of Nussbaum's study. The feasts we propose will not take away the problems over night, nor will the tensions between religion and the public domain suddenly disappear. But such feasts need not be seen as meaningless. They have the power to suspend temporarily the endless struggle for recognition by representing what *could be* in a symbolic-ritual way. Feasts have the potential to succeed in making *the possible* concrete, at least temporarily, and as such they can strengthen the belief in human *communio* without, however, minimising or ignoring problems, differences, and conflicts. In such acts of religious generosity, people can experience a grace that transcends the power of the individual. Hope defeats despair. The capacity of religion to bring people together is confirmed here. I think that this hope can also inspire the political arena.

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NOTES

1. The reality of violence between religions is all the more dramatic because it runs counter to the main goal of religions to bring people together.

2. Nussbaum obviously recognises that some of these burdens must be carried, certainly when it concerns the security of the public arena or when national interests are at stake.

3. Ordinarily, the majority determines what is considered orthodox. The minority who do not comply with the established orthodoxy are implicitly considered second-class citizens. In this way, these people are denied equal access to the public domain. This is in conflict with the principle that all civilians, regardless of their religious commitments, ought to be able to enter the public domain on an equal basis, and that they ought to be given equal opportunities when doing so.