

Rawls Goes to Church

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Abstract: Many mainline Protestant communities want to be welcoming while preserving their identities; they want to be shaped by the central claims of the faith while making room for those who doubt. And crucially, they want to do this in a way that leads to vibrant, growing communities, where more and more people gather to worship, encourage one another, and live out the Gospel. How should the Episcopal Church—and other mainline Protestant denominations, insofar as they're similar—try to achieve these goals? I suggest that local churches borrow some resources from John Rawls's *Political Liberalism*. On the view I outline, it's valuable for local churches to see themselves as akin to political bodies composed of reasonable citizens. The idea, in essence, is that the relevant kind of reasonableness would make congregations more unified even while tolerating more diversity, and would accomplish all this without giving up their distinctly Christian identity.

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1. Introduction

I grew up in American evangelicalism. While there were theological disagreements in the churches I attended, they were small. We argued about the timing of the Rapture relative to the Tribulation; we debated whether the *Nephilim* were the children of fallen angels. However, there was no controversy over whether the Genesis story was literally true; we took for granted that most people would suffer eternal conscious torment. And though our confident consensus seems strange to me now, it's obvious that it helped to sustain our intimate community. Years after leaving evangelicalism, I miss the way it knit people together. I haven't found anything like it.

Of course, that intimacy came at a price. Most obviously, the consensus that supported it restricted participation, and I spent most of my young life in churches of a hundred or so. Some churches—evangelical and otherwise—try to avoid this by

adopting a “We don’t major on the minors” approach. On this model, church members agree on “major” items, agree to disagree on “minor” ones, and agree not to let that disagreement become the basis for division. The difficulty is that the line between the majors and the minors is notoriously difficult to draw, and many a church has been splintered by that task. This is unsurprising: The agreement not to “major on the minors” usually isn’t based on a principled distinction, but on a culturally contingent alignment of judgments about what is and isn’t important. It doesn’t take much to upset that sort of *modus vivendi*.¹

A radical alternative is to downplay belief entirely. Unitarians, for instance, have abandoned all creeds, and so avoid any questions about orthodoxy. But while this expands the pool of potential members, it seems not to help with actual ones. Once you set doctrine aside, it’s an empirical question whether what remains can attract and unify critters like us. The evidence suggests that it isn’t. In the US, membership in Unitarian churches peaked in 1968 (~282,000 members), declined precipitously until 1982 (~172,000 members), and then recovered slightly, at least in absolute numbers, in the intervening years (~200,000 members in 2016).² Relative to population growth, though, even that recovery counts as a steep decline. The US population was just over 200 million in 1968 and was just over 323 million in 2016. If Unitarian churches only grew at the rate of the population in that period, they would boast something like 455 million members today—more than double estimates of current membership. These numbers certainly don’t tell the whole story; demographic shifts account for some of the change, just to name one important factor. Still, unless a 50-year trend takes a sudden turn, their approach doesn’t seem like the way forward.

I’m now in the Episcopal Church, and I suspect that we’re headed the way of the Unitarians. We still recite the Nicene Creed, but we’re also assured that we don’t need to believe it. On one hand, I’m glad for this: The Episcopal Church welcomes me, even as a skeptic. What matters is participation in the work of the people—the liturgy—rather than affirming certain doctrines. That seems like a significant virtue,

¹ Someone might object that there are lots of Protestant churches—including the Episcopal Church, at least in theory—that define the majors based on the oldest creeds, and it doesn’t seem fair to call that culturally contingent. But while many churches *claim* that the creeds exhaust the majors, they’re clearly misrepresenting the truth: the fractured history of Protestantism is decisive evidence that Protestants have far more expansive conceptions of what’s major—with sexual ethics being a particularly divisive recent example. (Or, if Protestants *aren’t* misrepresenting what’s major, it’s only because they’ve packed so much into their interpretations of the creeds.) And those expansive conceptions (or involved interpretations) usually represent particular moments in ecclesial—and non-ecclesial—history.

² <http://www.uua.org/data/demographics/uua-statistics>.

as there are good reasons to place less weight on belief. After all, beliefs are unstable things, usually out of our control, and we're prone to deceive ourselves about both whether and what we believe. But on the other hand, it's a mistake to place too little weight on belief. When a fellow congregant describes herself as an "Episcopagan," and others seems far more interested in the Enneagram than in Scripture, I suspect we aren't far from losing what makes us a distinctly Christian community, structured and animated by the tradition around which it's worth building a life. And insofar as the numbers are evidence in this context, the evidence isn't encouraging. The Episcopal Church's recent trajectory is worse than that of Unitarian churches: nearly 3.5 million members in the mid-1960s; a bit over 1.6 million as of 2018. In several generations, we may be gone.

I take it that many mainline Protestant communities want to be welcoming while preserving their identities; they want to be shaped by the central claims of the faith while making room for those who doubt. And crucially, they want to do this in a way that leads to vibrant, growing communities, where more and more people gather to worship, encourage one another, and live out the Gospel. How should the Episcopal Church—and other mainline Protestant denominations, insofar as they're similar—try to achieve these goals? Much of the answer may not be very philosophical, having mostly to do with congregants becoming more Christlike. Still, I hope that a philosophical perspective may be of some use. In what follows, I suggest that local churches borrow some resources from John Rawls's *Political Liberalism*. On the view I outline, it's valuable for local churches to see themselves as akin to political bodies composed of reasonable citizens. The idea, in essence, is that the relevant kind of reasonableness would make congregations more unified even while tolerating more diversity, and would accomplish all this without giving up their distinctly Christian identity.

I begin with a quick overview of Rawls's *Political Liberalism*. Then, I set out the version of the question above that Episcopalians face, which clarifies the parallels between the problems in the political and ecclesial realms, and shows how Rawls's approach can be reworked for local churches. I conclude by responding to some objections.

2. Rawls's *Political Liberalism*

Rawls is interested in the problems of political legitimacy and stability. Very roughly, a state is legitimate insofar as it's justified in using coercive power, and it's stable to the degree that people willingly follow the law. In *A Theory of Justice* (henceforth, *Theory*), Rawls described the "well-ordered society" as one that:

is not only designed to advance the good of its members but when it is also effectively regulated by a public conception of justice. That is, it is a society in which (1) everyone accepts and knows that the others accept the same principles of justice, and (2) the basic social institutions generally satisfy and are generally known to satisfy these principles. (1971, 4–5)

If everyone accepts the relevant principles of justice, and the basic social institutions generally satisfy them, then there is no problem of legitimacy: people are being governed by principles they accept. What's more, you can expect stability: if people agree about these principles, and the institutions that matter are governed by them, they have little reason to object to the social order.

However, Rawls later rejected this formulation. The problem, he said, was that he was requiring the members of a well-ordered society to endorse a public conception of justice as part of their comprehensive doctrine—their overall understanding of moral and metaphysical matters. (Justice as fairness is such a conception, and the one that *Theory* says should be part of our respective comprehensive doctrines.) In other words, he was requiring that the citizenry accept a public conception of justice as their account of justice *simpliciter*—not merely as their account for particular purposes. But, Rawls observed, the citizens of modern democracies aren't of one mind; they disagree about matters moral and metaphysical. So, it's unreasonable to expect the consensus that *Theory* presupposed. This leads us to the question that drives *Political Liberalism*:

How is it possible that there may exist over time a stable and just society of free and equal citizens profoundly divided by reasonable though incompatible religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines? Put another way: How is it possible that deeply opposed though reasonable comprehensive doctrines may live together and all affirm the political conception of a constitutional regime. (2005, xviii)

In other words, given that we live in a pluralistic society, it's implausible that we will achieve legitimacy and stability through a contingent, unprincipled consensus (what Rawls calls "a mere *modus vivendi*" (2005, 126)), and at any rate, it would be wrong to insist that free and equal citizens sign on to one. So, how can we achieve these two crucial goods?

We can summarize Rawls's response in two stages. First, we need the notion of a *reasonable person*. (Although Rawls often applies the notion of reasonableness to doctrines, it applies first and foremost to people.) Here's what he says about it:

Persons are reasonable in one basic aspect when, among equals say, they are ready to propose principles and standards as fair terms of cooperation and to abide by them willingly, given the assurance that others will likewise do so. Those norms they view as reasonable for everyone to accept and therefore as justifiable to them; and they are ready to discuss the fair terms that others propose... Reasonable persons... are not moved by the general good as such but desire for its own sake a social world in which they, as free and equal, can cooperate with others on terms all can accept. They insist that reciprocity should hold within that world so that each benefits along with others. (2005, 83)

Additionally, Rawls assumes that reasonable people are sensitive to “the burdens of judgment” —i.e., the various sources of reasonable disagreement, which are “the many hazards involved in the correct (and conscientious) exercise of our powers of reason and judgment in the ordinary course of political life” (2005, 88). These factors make it difficult to know whether we’ve reasoned correctly or whether others have erred. Their being sensitive to these factors explains, at least in part, why reasonable people tolerate deep disagreement: They aren’t inclined to take disagreement as evidence that their interlocutors are either irrational or evil. Finally, Rawls assumes that reasonable people don’t affirm unreasonable doctrines—doctrines that, among other things, encourage you *not* to be “ready to propose principles and standards as fair terms of cooperation and to abide by them willingly, given the assurance that others will likewise do so.” Given all this, it doesn’t seem implausible that reasonable people would be able to live together in a “stable and just society.” After all, they’re committed to reciprocity; they’re committed to seeing those with whom they disagree as free, equal, and rational; and they don’t have comprehensive doctrines that encourage them to bracket these commitments. As a result, it seems unlikely that they would propose terms that are oppressive.

One worry is that Rawls secures stability and justice by *homogenizing* the society. After all, there are some significant values involved in Rawls’s characterization of reasonableness; he appeals to notions like freedom, equality, fairness, and reciprocity. Must all reasonable citizens regard these as the chief goods? If so, then in what sense do they have “*deeply opposed* though reasonable comprehensive doctrines” (my emphasis)? Rawls addresses this concern by limiting the domain in which these values have pride of place:

Political liberalism tries, then, to present an account of these values as those of a special domain—the political—and hence as a freestanding view. It is left to citizens individually—as part of liberty of conscience—to settle how they think the values of the political domain are related to other values in their comprehensive doctrine. For

we always assume that citizens have two views, a comprehensive and a political view; and that their overall view can be divided into two parts, suitably related. We hope that by doing this we can in working political practice ground the constitutional essentials and basic institutions of justice solely in those political values, with these values understood as the basis of public reason and justification (2005, 163).

A crucial payoff of this qualification is that it allows illiberal comprehensive doctrines to qualify as reasonable comprehensive doctrines. Hence, a person can be a political liberal without being a comprehensive liberal. So, for example, suppose that I'm a thoroughly irreligious person who regards self-knowledge as the highest good. You, by contrast, are a Buddhist, and you regard achieving *nirvana* as the highest good. Plainly, our comprehensive doctrines are deeply opposed. Nevertheless, we may each affirm the political values of our democracy—not as our chief concerns, but as appropriate for our political life together. Moreover, we justify this judgment in completely different ways—I using my comprehensive doctrine, you using yours. Indeed, individual citizens needn't even affirm that the judgments based on the political values are *true*; they are only obliged to agree that those judgments are reasonable and binding on them as citizens. All that matters is that, for political purposes, citizens can individually reason *to*, and collectively reason *from*, a shared body of political values, regardless of the theory that each ultimately adopts about those values.

3. Rawlsian Churches

Let's return to the Episcopal Church. My suggestion, essentially, is that instead of thinking of a particular parish as a place for like-minded people (which, of course, was never a good description for many parishes), we think of it more like a pluralistic society, including any number of "comprehensive theologies"—that is, more or less complete sets of theological views, answering the various theological questions in which a person might be interested. Some of these comprehensive theologies will basically track historically significant traditions in Christianity more broadly—Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, etc.—while others will be idiosyncratic. Some will even be agnostic, offering no answers to these questions, or perhaps even fully secular, offering naturalistic replies. The important point, however, is that despite these people's differences, they are united by a desire to worship and live out the Christian life together, doing so based on terms all congregants can accept. (Obviously, most people won't have agnostic or fully secular comprehensive

theologies. But just as some illiberal comprehensive doctrines can support liberal political orders, some agnostic and fully secular comprehensive theologies can support participation in a Christian community.)

If we are willing to think of a parish this way, then the question in front of us is akin to the one that Rawls asks:

How is it possible that deeply opposed though reasonable comprehensive theologies may participate together in the life of the church while upholding its central commitment?

To develop an answer, we can borrow from the framework that Rawls develops.

The first step is to revisit the notion of a reasonable citizen. Rawlsian reasonableness has two components: a goal and a method. The *goal* is to cooperate with others, as free and equal citizens, on terms that all can accept. The *method* is “to propose principles and standards as fair terms of cooperation and to abide by them willingly, given the assurance that others will likewise do so.” It’s important to note that both the goal and the method draw on the political values common to the relevant democracy; terms like ‘freedom’, ‘equality’, and ‘fairness’ will feature in any list of the ideals of a liberal, pluralistic society.³ Part of what it is to be reasonable is to be committed to living together in accord with these values. And while this commitment isn’t essential for membership in the community—the bar is lower for membership—it’s required if you want to be taken seriously in the deliberations of the community.

Instead of reasonable citizens, a parish should have reasonable congregants. Those congregants count as reasonable insofar as they share both a particular goal and method for achieving it. For instance, reasonable congregants might share the goal of worshiping and living with others, as God’s people through Christ’s work, in a way that all can accept. The method might be to reason together from Scripture to standards and principles that aid in the living of the Christian life together, given the assurance that others will likewise do so (or, at least, try to). In the background here are the values and ideas that inform this conception of reasonableness—the values and ideas that a community might have as it tries to “be God’s people through Christ’s work.” You might, for example, think that the ideas include claims about

³ There may be some circularity here, but if so, it isn’t obviously vicious. Rawls uses the political values to define reasonableness, but he doesn’t turn around and use reasonableness to define the political values. Rather, he uses reasonableness to articulate a possible *relationship* between the political values, a person (and, by proxy, a comprehensive doctrine), and a way of living together.

the content of Jesus's teaching, or about particular creeds, or what have you. And among the values, you're likely to find things that run parallel to the ones that Rawls imagines. He says that reasonable people "desire for its own sake a social world in which they, as free and equal, can cooperate with others on terms all can accept." What's valued here isn't consensus *per se*; rather, it's a certain sort of life with others, where one requirement for securing that life is finding a way to deliberate with others about some matters. And likewise, reasonable congregants also desire an ecclesial context in which they, as free and equal, can live out a certain life together.

This doesn't necessarily mean that they agree on why that life together is valuable. Some might think that it's really hard to figure out what to believe, and they value the wisdom of various people who engage the Christian tradition from different places and with different results. Some might have "divine command" reasons to want unity: they are motivated by Jesus's sentiments in the High Priestly Prayer in John 17:

²⁰ I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me (NRSV).

Others might think that it's bad for the cause of Christ (however they understand that phrase) to have Christians divided and critical of one another. And some might be pragmatic, thinking that insofar as their faith has humanitarian or social justice dimensions, Christians are better able to make progress when they pool their resources.

Additionally, just as reasonable citizens recognize the burdens of judgment, so do the theologically reasonable. In other Protestant traditions, those burdens might be interpreted differently. Some might adopt Rawls's picture wholesale; different denominations might prefer to frame things in terms of the noetic effects of sin. I won't pause here to explore the specific version of this view that makes most sense in the Episcopal context. However, it's clear that in some of the most contentious debates in the Episcopal Church—namely, those surrounding sexuality and gender identity—groups of Bishops have affirmed something in the neighborhood. In a report on the theological issues raised by same-sex relationships, which was adopted by the House of Bishops in 2003, the authors write:

Our present conclusion is that equally sincere Christians, equally committed to an orthodox understanding of the Faith we share, equally looking to Scripture for guidance on this issue, are deeply divided regarding questions with respect to homosexuality.⁴

It's hard to see how the Bishops could agree about this without endorsing something like the burdens of judgment.

Finally, theologically reasonable people do not affirm *unreasonable* comprehensive theologies—i.e., theologies that would dispose you *not* to propose principles and standards to aid in the living of the Christian life together, given the assurance that others will likewise do so. Obviously enough, fundamentalists aren't going to be reasonable congregants, but we shouldn't single them out here. There are going to be lots of unreasonable *mainline* congregants too. These are individuals who aren't interested in tolerating views that are more conservative than their own; they won't be willing to bracket their convictions to maintain fellowship with a wider swath of the Christian community.

We need to be clear at this juncture. Rawls insists that reasonable participation in the *official* dimensions of public life is governed by the relevant political ideas and values. However, when you are participating in the *unofficial* dimensions of public life—and, of course, in the private realm—you are free to draw on your comprehensive doctrine. Likewise, theologically reasonable participation in *official* deliberations about *cooperative* activities will be guided by their shared ideas and values. If you are a priest or member of the vestry, acting in your capacity as priest or vestry member, then you'd limit yourself to claims that you can justify using shared resources. Likewise, if you are an ordinary congregant voting on a budget for the church, you'd do the same. But reasonable congregants won't think that the standards they employ in such joint ventures should also govern the lives of congregants in unofficial activities. If Abner supports LGBTQ inclusion, and Bill doesn't, they need to reach some agreement about how to proceed for official ecclesial purposes. However, their agreement doesn't need to be substantive, in the sense that neither one needs to think that the policy they adopt is the correct one. They just need to think that the policy is appropriate given the shared ideological and axiological resources on which their joint life is based. On his own, Abner can operate however he likes within the confines of his own conscience; Bill, of course, can do the same.

⁴ <https://episcopalchurch.org/files/attached-files/theologycomreport.pdf>

I've said very little about the specific ideas and values that a community might share, and we might worry that they are too thin to support a joint life together without deeper agreement. But note that the available political resources in a pluralistic society don't offer much more guidance: it takes work on the part of reasonable citizens to decide how to operate. What's more, the resources available are slightly greater than I've suggested thus far. Rawls thinks of the political conception as a freestanding "module"—which is not just a set of values, or even *ideas* and values, as I've been saying already. Rawls thinks that it's perfectly acceptable that citizens' deliberations draw on the history of the political order of which they are members: it's fine to cite the Federalist Papers, or to appeal to the tradition of having presidential candidates release their tax returns. Likewise, it's perfectly acceptable that reasonable congregants draw on their traditions. This might include citing the Book of Common Prayer and the writings of famous Episcopalian theologians. In addition, it's bound to include appealing to various shared practices. For instance, congregants might draw on their joint commitment to prayer, to fasting, to thanksgiving, to almsgiving, to the Eucharist, to baptism, to *Lectio Divina*, to regular gatherings, and so forth. And, of course, Christians often use a kind of *imitatio Christi* approach to deciding what to do, and that provides additional resources for cooperative action and reflection.

Recall too that you don't need to be theologically reasonable to be a congregant; there are indeed unreasonable Christians, just as there are unreasonable theologies. However, to be taken seriously in the deliberations of the community, you *do* need to be a reasonable congregant. Hence, when the parish family is working together, it will be proper to ignore the theological criticisms of those who are unreasonable; not all co-congregants deserve an equal voice in the deliberations of the church, since not all share the same sort of commitment to participating in the life of the church.

It should now be clear how this Rawlsian approach hopes to promote unity given diversity, without sacrificing identity. For official ecclesial purposes, reasonable congregants accept the ideas, values, and traditions that form the basis of their joint Christian life together. We can call this their "political" theology, not in the sense that it concerns the way they ought to relate to the state, but in the sense that it needn't be the theology they actually believe (though, of course, they may indeed believe it). Instead, it's the theology that they adopt for the sake of their church. Their reasonableness gives them unity, due to a shared goal and method for achieving it. (And as in Rawls's framework, since people are committed to reasoning together from their political theology, they shouldn't have reason to object to the decisions that the body makes; that is, they should regard them as legitimate. If so, then you'd

also expect the church to be stable.) Theological reasonableness also protects diversity, in that congregants can have many different relationships—belief, partial belief, mere acceptance, etc.—to the political theology, maintaining their own comprehensive theologies. Finally, it preserves a clear identity, in that the deliberations based on the political theology guide the church’s collective activities. Effectively, the congregants commit not to abandon a particular identity *as a way* of protecting both unity and diversity.

4. Virtues of the Proposal

Here, I think, are some attractive features of this approach.

First, a Rawlsian approach is fundamentally Protestant without being divisive. Individuals have the right and the responsibility to make decisions about matters of faith and practice, but since they recognize the burdens of judgment, they don’t allow that individualism to become destructive. Instead, they create an ecclesial order that grants individuals freedom of conscience with respect to theological matters while preserving a basis for unity.

Second, this approach fits with the way many Protestants already relate to their churches. It’s common to find Methodists who’ve made their home in Baptist churches, or evangelicals who are now at home within Presbyterianism, or Disciples of Christ who have wandered into an Episcopalian congregation. These changes in church home often don’t reflect changes in theological conviction; they have more to do with the fact that there is a lively children’s program at the community church, or the Lutheran Church has a great ministry to seniors, or there is a wonderful divorce recovery group at the Calvary Chapel. When mature Christians make these kinds of moves, they don’t expect the new church to operate the way their old one did, and if they become members, they willingly play by the rules of their new church home, at least in official contexts. That sounds a lot like their being reasonable congregants.

Third, a Rawlsian approach accommodates a range of approaches to Christian commitment. Episcopalians recite the Nicene Creed—which, in theory, articulates the set of claims that parishioners believe. But many Episcopalians have a more complicated relationship to their faith. They hope that certain Christian teachings are true; they have faith that some of them are true; they are committed to living their lives as though those claims are true, not knowing whether they are. However, they are much less sure about what they believe. And should such people be confirmed? Can they be full-fledged members of the Episcopal Church? On this Rawlsian approach, absolutely. What matters is whether, from each person’s

comprehensive theology, she can reason to and from the political theology that guides the parish. If she can, then it doesn't matter whether she believes it or not.

Fourth, a Rawlsian church provides a scalable model for ecumenical activities. If congregants already have a political view of their theology, then it isn't so hard to imagine having a political view of an ecumenical theology—one that allows them to partner with other Christians as well as with non-Christians. Reasonable congregants won't get hung up on the question of whether they share enough of the same beliefs with potential partners to collaborate. Instead, they will ask whether they can reason to a set of ideas, values, and practices—and then from those ideas, values, and practices—with the people in question.

Fifth, and perhaps most important, a Rawlsian approach is based on the thought that the Episcopal Church will maintain robust theological commitments, the kind that galvanize church members, motivating serious engagement with one another and the world. You don't need to pare down doctrine; you don't need to abandon the ideas that have been central to Christianity for two millennia now. Instead, you can simply acknowledge that Episcopalians can have a wide range of relationships to those ideas, and that as long as they share both the Rawlsian goal and method—that is, as long as they share the goal of worshiping and living with others, as God's people through Christ, in a way that all can accept; and want to reason together from Scripture to standards and principles that aid in the living of the Christian life together—communion with one another is possible.

5. Objections

Let's conclude with a few brief objections.

First, someone might worry that the analogy is just a bad one. In the political context, people have strong prudential reasons to find a way to compromise with others. But in ecclesial contexts, people lack such reasons. It's perfectly fine for Christians to go their separate ways when they disagree about matters of faith; they don't need to go along to get along, especially when the theological stakes are high.

The objection is fair enough: The incentives to find a political theology are different and perhaps not as immediately salient. However, the task here is not to show that Episcopalians, or the members of any other Protestant group, would be irrational not to take a Rawlsian approach. Rather, the task is to show that if we have particular goals—namely, preserving unity and diversity without giving up identity—then a Rawlsian approach is worth considering. And if we actually adopt a Rawlsian approach, then it will be hugely important both to educate parishioners about these goals and help them see why they might accept this strategy for

achieving them. As I've already indicated, there are lots of possible arguments for valuing unity, from the theological to the practical, and likewise arguments for valuing diversity and the preservation of identity. This isn't the place to explore all those arguments, so I won't say anything more about them here. And as for the argument that the Rawlsian approach is a good strategy for achieving them, that's already been given: It seems to be uniquely well-equipped to achieve these distinct goods.

A second objection is that a Rawlsian approach encourages people to have the wrong sort of relationship to theological claims. The idea that we ought to have two theologies—one "political," another "comprehensive"—ignores the privileged status that theological claims are supposed to have in our lives, taking precedence over other sorts of reasons. Many Christians would find it objectionable to maintain, for instance, that prudential considerations should lead us to set conscience aside, treating some theological claim as true when, in fact, we privately believe it to be false.

The problem with this objection is that it just doesn't describe the position of most reasonable congregants. By and large, most reasonable congregants will go along with theological compromises *for theological reasons*. As mentioned earlier, we might think that Jesus left us with a mandate to be unified, and responding to that command certainly doesn't seem like a case of allowing the prudential (or what have you) to trump the theological. This also seemed like a plausible description of the hypothetical person I mentioned earlier, who thinks that Christians' responsibilities to the poor are best discharged when Christians work together. So the Rawlsian approach doesn't necessarily encourage people to do anything that they don't already do, seemingly for good theological reasons. Instead, it just makes more explicit that this common practice can be taught and made more systematic, and thereby serve some important objectives.

Moreover, it's important to recall that part of what it means to be a reasonable congregant is to avoid affirming *unreasonable* comprehensive theologies—i.e., theologies that would dispose you *not* to propose principles and standards to aid in the living of the Christian life together, given the assurance that others will likewise do so. Obviously, many Christians aren't reasonable congregants in this specific sense: They don't value unity over having their comprehensive theologies determine how the church operates; they don't think it's worth compromising for the sake of preserving communion across theological difference.⁵ There is a sense, then, in

⁵ This is why the Rawlsian approach that I'm outlining only has a chance in communities where there is a commitment to reasonableness. In my experience, one virtue of the Episcopal Church is that it has more reasonable congregants than unreasonable ones, and my hope is that there could be more

which it's baked into the idea of being a reasonable congregant that you don't see a tension between having a comprehensive and political theology. So, while it's possible to object that the Rawlsian approach encourages people to have the wrong sort of relationship between their comprehensive and political theologies, that criticism is going to be external rather than internal; it will presuppose a view about the absolute priority of comprehensive theologies that that reasonable congregants reject.

The third objection is, essentially, that I'm overstating the promise of the Rawlsian approach. There will, of course, be different understandings of (the limits of) reasonableness, the goal of the church, the methods for achieving the goal of the church, as well as and the distinction between "official" and "unofficial" ecclesial activities. Don't these threaten to undermine the unity of the parish? Don't they threaten to create the kind of instability that has long led to fractured Protestant communities?

I share this worry, and I have no decisive reply to offer. Ultimately, it's an empirical question whether a Rawlsian approach will best achieve the goals I've identified. It seems to me that the Episcopal Church has opted for a strategy that downplays belief and emphasizes practice—which, in many ways, I appreciate. I probably wouldn't be in the Episcopal Church otherwise. My hunch, however, is that while this strategy may be successful enough at preserving diversity, it's doing less well at preserving unity and identity. I'm not sure that a Rawlsian approach would do better. But perhaps it's worth a shot.

Conclusion

As I said at the outset, I take it that the Episcopal Church wants to be welcoming while preserving its identity. It wants to do this in a way that leads to vibrant, growing parishes, where an increasing number of people gather to worship. How should the Episcopal Church try to achieve these goals? On the view I've sketched here, part of the answer involves local parishes seeing themselves as being like political bodies composed of reasonable citizens, defined as Rawls defines them. For official ecclesial purposes, reasonable congregants accept the ideas, values, and traditions that form the basis of their joint Christian life together. Their "political" theology may be the theology they actually believe, but more importantly, it's the

reasonable congregants still, at least in a serious commitment to lay education about this issue. Education is important because, as I mentioned earlier, there is no guarantee that mainline Christians are reasonable, as conservatives certainly aren't the only ones who can be unwilling to compromise for the sake of unity.

theology they adopt for the sake of their church. Their reasonableness gives them unity, due to a shared goal, a method for achieving it, and a commitment to let the political theology guide the parish's collective activities. This is the means by which my Rawlsian approach protects the identity of the Episcopal Church. But theological reasonableness also protects diversity, thereby making the congregation welcoming. The approach I'm recommending allows congregants to have many different relationships—including belief, partial belief, mere acceptance, etc.—to the political theology, with freedom to reach that theology however they like via their own comprehensive views.

This solution is idealistic in the same way that Rawls's *Political Liberalism* is idealistic. It takes work to ensure that diversity remains, that the political theology doesn't simply become the comprehensive theology that everyone's expected to have. Without explicit discussion about—and perhaps even celebration of—the diversity within a parish, we should expect eventual homogeneity, the loss of a generous welcome. In politics, this idealism might not be warranted. In the church, however, we're free to be people of hope.⁶

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