



COLLOQUIUM SERIES

“On Translating Religious Reasons: Rawls, Habermas and the Quest for a Neutral Public Sphere”

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In critical dialogue with the positions of Rawls and Habermas, I argue against the proviso that religious language must be “translated” into an allegedly neutral vocabulary as a condition for full inclusion within public political reasoning. There is in fact no such neutral vocabulary; as Maeve Cooke points out, reasoning about matters of justice always rests on a “riverbed” of basic but shifting moral intuitions and judgements. Failure to recognize this point leads both Habermas and Rawls to mischaracterize the nature of religious reasons in relation to reasons alleged to be “freestanding,” “secular” or “postmetaphysical.” Furthermore, close examination of religious discourse suggests that it also articulates basic moral ideas whose meaning and justification is not ultimately dependent upon theological beliefs. Because of this, religious discourse, broadly conceived, can play a valuable role in expressing *novel* insights, ones that challenge the assumptions of a “common reason” whose principles may function to legitimate the status quo and to rule out radical dissent. A democratic society nonetheless does require that as many of its citizens as possible accept the reasons given by the state for coercive policies. However, this language is not best conceived as “freestanding” or “postmetaphysical,” providing neutral reasons that “all can accept” once and for all. It is best conceived, rather, as a “thick” and historically evolving wide (not universal) agreement, and as a confluence of various *types* of agreement.

Friday, January 16th, 2015

Room: 3228 River Building

Time: 3:00 pm

All are welcome!