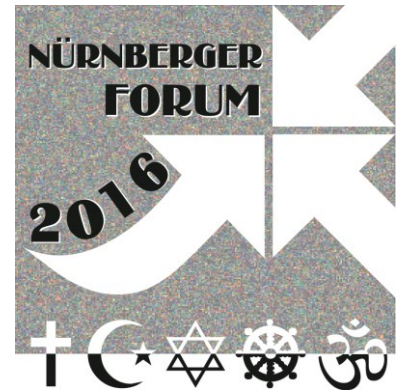


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Liberal Education and Public Theology



What is proper the role for religion in the public deliberations of open, pluralistic, liberal, democratic societies, and what is the sort of education that might prepare learners for a public life which embraces such a role? According to the American liberal political philosopher John Rawls, all comprehensive conceptions of the good including those grounded in faith must be translated into a form that is accessible to everyone. He called this public reason, which enables the burdens of judgment necessary to negotiate an overlapping consensus of beliefs and values to govern the common life of such as society.

A Frankfurt School neo-Marxist, the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas delineated a similar process by reconceiving rationality as communication oriented to achieving, sustaining and reviewing intersubjective consensus based on claims that can be criticized. Education for democratic citizenship in both of these views requires disciplining the moral life of learners to the demands of reason, including those instances when such a life has a theological basis.

In this lecture I argue that both of these views place limits on public theology that are too severe, leading perhaps unwittingly to a far less pluralistic society than either philosopher would appear to embrace. Drawing on the value pluralism of British political theorists Isaiah Berlin, I offer instead a more cacophonous conception of the democratic commons that places fewer limits on varieties of religious faith in civic debates. Preparing learners to engage theology publically in this way requires a dialogical view of education in, from and about religion and other worldviews for both common and faith schools of democratic societies. In my recent book *Reimagining Liberal Education: Affiliation and Inquiry in Democratic Schooling* I call this sort of education "pedagogy of difference."