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# Cécile Laborde, "Liberalism's Religion."

Felix Lambrecht

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**Cécile Laborde.** *Liberalism's Religion*. Harvard University Press 2017. 344 pp. \$36.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780674976269).

In *Liberalism's Religion*, Cécile Laborde offers a novel approach to identifying the role of religion in liberalism and liberal states. She aims to address both tensions and debates in liberal theory itself and specific controversies in between Western liberal states and religion. Theoretically, how can liberalism's commitment to neutrality be reconciled with its Western Christian lineage? Practically, how can we assess specific controversies that seemingly conflict with liberal values, for instance, when clergy excludes women, or businesses deny services to LGBTQ+ consumers? In short, how do we reconcile liberalism's commitment to freedom of religion with its other commitments, especially when these commitments conflict?

Laborde's strategy is to 'disaggregate' religion (2). Liberalism treats religion as a singular concept when it is truly multifaceted. A general concept of 'religion' is too vague and cannot adequately explain nor resolve conflicts in liberalism. Instead of using an aggregated all-encompassing idea of 'religion,' we should recognize the discrete normatively distinct dimensions that 'religion' is meant to capture. Religions often combine important normatively distinct dimensions such as moral and ethical obligations, voluntary associations, comprehensive ways of life, or collective identities. Disaggregating religion means focusing on distinct normative dimensions of this kind. Rather than trying to capture all such elements together as one singular concept, we can use these disaggregated dimensions to resolve the tensions in liberalism's treatment of religion.

Laborde's argument has two stages. First, she makes a negative argument against an aggregated conception of religion, which, second, sets up her positive argument for disaggregation. Her negative argument considers prominent criticisms of liberalism's treatment of religion and argues that they result from an aggregated view of religion. Broadly, these criticisms say that liberalism violates its own commitment to neutrality by requiring states to evaluate which religions and practices can receive accommodations. Laborde evaluates liberal responses to these objections. She finds that these liberal responses only capture some of the normative dimension of religion. For instance, Charles Taylor and Jocelyn Maclure attempt to explain when the state can provide accommodations for religions by analogizing (reducing) religions to conscientious duties. For them, any belief system that requires conscientious duties should receive accommodations. But this kind of response fails to address religions or compressive doctrines which are not constituted by duties (68-75). Laborde's point is that liberal responses, in focusing on a general conception religion, miss important normative dimensions.

While inadequate, liberal responses are helpful in that they motivate a disaggregated conception of religion. Each liberal response alone is insufficient in that it only accounts for one facet of religion. But these responses identify one normative dimension of religion that liberalism should address. Some liberals have attempted to explain the importance of religion in terms of duties, while others have tried to explain religion as important as an analogue to other protection-worthy categories (vulnerable identities, close associations, and disabilities). One of Laborde's key insights is that critics of liberalism are correct to point out that these responses are inadequate. But, rather than dispense with liberalism altogether, we should reformulate liberalism to address these lacunae that critics identify. We should take liberal suggestions about the importance of religion—they require duties, are analogous to other protection-worthy categories—and make these the normative dimensions that constitute a *disaggregated* conception of religion.

With the need for disaggregated religion established, the author moves to her positive argument that disaggregated religion better resolves the tensions between liberalism and religion that critics have identified. Her argument is broadly as follows: Religions create tensions for liberalism because religions often entail illiberal elements. Disaggregating religion allows us to see these illiberal elements as discrete from one another. Each illiberal element in isolation resembles other nonreligious elements of society that liberalism can quite easily deal with. So, once we disaggregate religion into discrete normative dimensions, there is nothing particularly challenging about religion. Consider liberal values of justifiability, inclusivity, and autonomy. At first glance, it seems as though religion challenges these values (124-67). Religious interests are often inaccessible to non-believers, and, thus, difficult to reasonably justify. Religions often exclude both members and non-members (for instance, by excluding women from clergy). And, religions, as comprehensive moral doctrines, often impinge the autonomy of members (by morally *requiring* them to act in certain ways). Taken together, religion seems at odds with liberal values. But by disaggregating religion into different normative dimensions, Laborde argues that these tensions are not as troubling. Many other non-religious ideologies and practices can *also* be inaccessible, exclusionary or challenge autonomy. The discrete normative dimensions of religion are not uniquely challenging to liberalism. Once we view religion as disaggregated normative dimensions, we can better address liberalism's critics.

Those interested in cultural diversity, philosophy of religion, and liberal egalitarianism will find much of value in *Liberalism's Religion*. Laborde treats canonical issues—state neutrality, religious identity, and the ethical status of religion—with philosophical rigour. One of the book's important contributions is a systematic and clarifying treatment of previous debates about the role of religion in liberalism. Disambiguating the previous literature in this way is a significant contribution in its own right. Not only is it useful for motivating the positive argument in the second half of the book, but it provides the essential function of clarifying and demonstrating how the issues fit together. Future scholarship would benefit from consulting the overview and discussions presented in this book.

Laborde's positive argument also offers significant novel application. Broadly, the disaggregated religion approach can help resolve some of the largest problems in the literature. For instance, many liberal approaches to cultural or religious diversity have assumed that the state must be broadly committed to freedom of religion. This has encountered difficulty since religions uphold diverse practices, obligations, behaviours, or organizational structure. Accordingly, the like-for-like treatment of religious accommodation that liberalism demands is not always possible. But by disaggregating a religion into different normative dimensions—freedom of association, freedom of conscience, and so on—we can begin to treat religions equitably. We can accommodate different religions with an eye to their various normative dimensions to ensure that all religions have full consideration in these normative dimensions.

Laborde's positive argument also helps address another frequent objection to liberalism – that liberalism cannot be neutral because it is rooted in Western ethnocentrism. Liberalism developed in Western Europe and primarily dealt with Western Judeo-Christian religious conflict. Thus, liberalism's conception of religion is occasionally thought to be unable to resolve questions arising about religions that do not follow the Judeo-Christian mold. For instance, it might be thought that liberalism assumes a Protestant religion in which belief and practice are personal to the individual. If so, then liberalism may be ill suited to address concerns about religions that are structured around public and community practice. Laborde's disaggregated religion elegantly disarms this objection. Instead of a singular conception of religion which may have difficulty being expansive enough, analyzing

religion in discrete normative dimensions allows us to address a diverse range of religions. One normative dimension—say, freedom of conscience—may be emphasized when addressing Protestant religions, while another dimension—freedom of association—may be emphasized for other community-focused religion. Disaggregated religion, thus, helpfully resolves the ethnocentrism objection to liberalism.

For all the detail and virtues of *Liberalism's Religion*, a few questions remain unresolved. First, it is unclear how the project in this book sits with her previous work on cultural and religious diversity (cf. *Critical Republicanism*, Oxford University Press 2008). In previous work Laborde has offered a republican approach to addressing cultural and religious diversity. There, she emphasizes nondomination and prioritizes minimal autonomy for minorities over more strictly egalitarian concerns. In *Liberalism's Religion*, she departs somewhat from the republican tradition. While nondomination still plays a minor role in her positive account, it no longer is in the context of criticizing, but rather as a *complement* to liberal egalitarianism. The change in approach is not addressed and may leave readers questioning the reasons for the change and the relation between the two approaches.

A second, more substantive question may be raised. Laborde gives compelling arguments to show that disaggregated religion more effectively addresses religious diversity. One might wonder, however, whether disaggregating religion into distinct normative dimensions loses an important normative element. Perhaps, while it may be true that distinct normative dimensions nicely capture many facets of religion, there might be a *sui generis* normative element that emerges with the *conjunction* of religion's normative dimensions. That is, perhaps religions gain some important normative property in virtue of being a conjunction of normative dimensions. The idea might be that religions have an important normative quality that arises when the many disaggregated normative dimensions are combined such that religion's normative status is more than a simple sum of its parts. If a religion's normative status is more than a sum of the dimensions that make it up, then something might be lost in treating these normative dimensions separately. This kind of worry would undermine Laborde's argument as a whole. If disaggregated religion misses an important normative element present in religion, then disaggregated religion does not comprehensively address liberalism's treatment of religion.

These questions aside, *Liberalism's Religion* offers a thorough, systematic, and deep treatment of religion in liberal egalitarian thought. Those interested in the subject matter will see a lot of value in both the detailed treatment of past scholarship as well as a promising novel positive account.

**Felix Lambrecht**, University of Toronto