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Troels Nørager, Taking Leave of Abraham: An Essay on Religion and Democracy

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As Troels Nørager describes it, we live in a world today where secularization and religious traditions often clash, where terrorists invoke the Abrahamic call to sacrifice in order to justify their atrocities and where cultures yet seemingly evolve ‘beyond’ their religious origins. In this sense, Nørager seeks an (often ignored or overlooked) interaction between political philosophy and the philosophy of religion, juxtaposing Kierkegaard’s reading of Genesis 22 (Abraham’s potential sacrifice of Isaac) with Rawls and Habermas on contemporary forms of democracy and political participation. This particular comparison is justified, we are told, by the focus given to the manner in which religion, like culture, can be said to evolve beyond its original context. Thus, moving quickly through a large cross-section of relevant scholarly debate and critique, Nørager develops a line of thought that elevates ‘public reason’ (Rawls) and ‘deliberative democracy’ (Habermas) over the authoritarian tendencies of religious traditions, being clear that believers today have indeed ‘evolved’ past Abrahamic conceptions of God, and with seemingly good reason. It is thus that we are asked to ‘take leave of Abraham’ and the violence that is done by all three monotheistic traditions in his name.

We are not, he tells us repeatedly, currently undergoing a ‘return to religion’ in our globalized world; Abraham’s faith is in fact not one to which we should return. We are much rather facing a ‘transformation’ of religious and cultural values that should not be confused with any such ‘return’, something the various world fundamentalisms have misconceived. Thus, parallel in many respects to other contemporary positions on a non-sovereign religious belief that also accept the basic coordinates of ‘secularization’ (put forward by, for example, G. Vattimo and J. Caputo), Nørager seeks to illuminate the most basic contours of a ‘post-secular’ age; one which must seek a ‘liberation from religion’ at the same time as it embraces its most cherished theological positions. In this fashion, Nørager asserts that a ‘contemporary Christian consciousness’ must be regarded as a ‘gradual ‘purification’ of Christian doctrine and belief’, especially as concerns those doctrines that cling tenaciously to ideas of providence, sacrifice and the sovereignty of God. Later on in the book, and even more to the point, he portrays the religious traditions of western culture as no longer being necessary in order to sustain the social and cultural values which are currently taking shape around us.

There is some sense, then, that this is not altogether removed from the ‘double bind’ that lies at the centre of the work of Jacques Derrida, who also meditates upon Kierkegaard’s Abraham amidst the roles of
democracy and justice today; his account which is strangely absent from Nørager’s survey. This omission is pointed out, however, only to illustrate how Nørager’s work finds a deep resonance in other work circulating around his own foundational premises. In the end, there is no plea lurking here for ‘less religion’ in the public sphere; indeed, he calls for more religious involvement, but with the understanding that it is a form of religion that has yet to be fully articulated, or perhaps more importantly, recognized globally. Hence, he makes a point that certainly occupies current thought, and will certainly continue to inspire more.

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