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Book Review

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BOOK REVIEW: *FAITH IN DEMOCRACY: FRAMING A POLITICS OF DEEP DIVERSITY*

Bruce Wearne*

Jonathan Chaplin. *Faith in Democracy: Framing a Politics of Deep Diversity*. London: SCM Press, 2021, pp. 272, AUD 59.50, 978-0334-06-023-9.

For this review, I focus on the significant “Muslim thread” that can be discerned in Jonathan Chaplin’s complex and detailed description of contemporary public policy debate in the United Kingdom. Of course, by framing my review of *Faith in Democracy* in this way, I am also justifying why I am submitting a review of a “deeply” Christian democratic political treatise to this journal. My motivation is complex and what I write here has a political dimension, expounding what Chaplin, in his quiet, unassuming and bold style encourages; namely, the development by Muslim citizens of a Muslim democratic outlook. Chaplin says of his book:

It is aimed primarily at reflective practitioners who hold democracy in their hands – political office-holders and activists, campaigners, faith leaders, journalists and many other professionals engaged in public life – and no less at students and young people on whose commitment to a healthy form of democracy the future of all political communities depends.¹

Consideration of the book’s Muslim thread may help to continue the very positive political discussion in which I was privileged to be involved in an October 2019 seminar, “Religious Perspectives of Human Rights,” at the Catholic Theological College, East Melbourne.² Two contributions, those of Salih Yucel³ and Dzavid Haveric,⁴ develop insights that presuppose the ongoing effort of many Muslim political scientists to develop political science as a necessary dimension of Islamic studies. But more than that they do so in a way that seeks to stimulate their fellow Muslim citizens with Islamic political insights as they give expression to their responsibilities as citizens. What these two with their works are hoping to encourage

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¹ Jonathan Chaplin, *Faith in Democracy: Framing a Politics of Deep Diversity* (London: SCM Press, 2021), xi.

² Daniel Nellor and Gordon Preece, “Religious Perspectives on Human Rights,” *Ethos*, May 5, 2020, <http://www.ethos.org.au/online-resources/in-depth-articles/religious-perspectives-on-human-rights>.

³ Salih Yucel, “Human Rights and Guilt by Association: Said Nursi’s Renewal Approach,” *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 4, no. 3 (2019), http://www.ethos.org.au/site/Ethos/filesystem/documents/Yucel_Guilt_by_Association.pdf. This is the author’s edited version.

⁴ Dzavid Haveric, “Islamic Perspectives on Human Rights: A Brief Socio-historical Overview,” *Zadok Papers* S245 (2020), http://www.ethos.org.au/site/Ethos/filesystem/documents/In-depth/Haveric_Islamic_Perspectives.pdf.

among Australian Muslims and anyone else who may be taking notice is comparable to what Chaplin is seeking to do in this detailed analysis of British public policy.

The book is pitched as the author's response to a public lecture delivered on 7 February 2008, "Civil and Religious Law in England," by the Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams.⁵ Chaplin's thesis is that "the firestorm of tabloid outrage" that arose thereafter "has left permanent scorchmarks on British public discourse about faith."⁶ Williams had suggested that aspects of traditional Islamic law might be *accommodated* within the English legal system.

Reading that lecture now, 13 years later, and reviewing the "firestorm" and "permanent scorchmarks," as Chaplin guides us through the subsequent public debate about religious faith and politics, we might well wonder why the Archbishop's lecture drew such outrage. Chaplin goes to some lengths to describe the various "denominations" of what we should probably call "secularist faith" and he specifically pinpoints the "inclusivistic secularists" who were in the vanguard of outrage.

(There is another issue here that he does not refer to, at least not specifically, and that is the way in which social media, which has grown to have exponential impacts on political debates since 2006, lives off the "headlining" of issues that can completely misrepresent what has been set forth. Thus, we would say that Williams was judged by many in the courts of public opinion to be guilty by association – note here the relevance of Yucel's contribution.⁷)

My retrospective interpretation is that Williams had dared to set forth a view that people of "religious faith" need not be viewed as the political problem that has to be solved by "secular" politics. Williams' lecture countered the "secularist" belief that all citizens must do what they, the secularists, claim to be doing – engaging in politics without any reference to their faith.

Chaplin, in a highly nuanced discussion, convincingly argues that such a secularist outlook – even as itself a "faith" – actually presumes on its own "established" character and believes it has a mandate to tell people of faith how they might participate in politics by embracing the ethics of neutrality. But such a view imposes a working definition of "faith," which can be deeply incompatible with what is actually believed by the people concerned. In retrospect, we might say that the flashpoint was Williams' none too subtle suggestion that the Islamic faith of the British Muslim community should be viewed as an integral part of the *answer* for these law-abiding British citizens to the complex political problems that arise in the multi-faith and multi-cultural public square of the UK.

Thirteen long years later, Chaplin's book is his record of the consequential twists and turns of public debate after that "event," a complex and detailed description of British public policy. In our reading of this book, we become immersed in the details of deeply diverging

⁵ Rowan Williams, "Civil and Religious Law in England: A Religious Perspective," in *Shari'a in the West*, ed. Rex Ahdar and Nicholas Aroney (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁶ Chaplin, *Faith in Democracy*, ix.

⁷ Yucel, "Human Rights and Guilt by Association."

political views. This divergence retains an ongoing political impact as it converges on the public square when a person's responsibility as a citizen intersects with their parenting, public speech, voting, buying and selling, entitlements to healthcare, schooling for their children and much else, all of which contributes to everyday living.

Faith in Democracy is framed to develop a "deep diversity" that reckons with what Chaplin calls "jurisdictional secularism," in contrast to Williams' suggestion of "procedural secularism." Chaplin's response to Williams' 2008 controversial suggestion is found in Chapter 7 Faithful Association: "A complex case of associational autonomy: shari'a councils."⁸

Chaplin's consideration of Sharia councils in UK life comes after he has spelled out vital aspects of his political vision for public governance. The "public justice" that is to be ascribed to "faithful association" must presuppose "faithful speech"⁹ and "faithful conscience."¹⁰ There must be some appreciation of the distinctive integrity of the public office bearer's role, which includes how faith relates to the performance of the duties of that office. This is where his strange phrase "jurisdictional secularism" begins to make sense, i.e. in the complexity of public governance.

Earlier in the book, Chaplin covers the complex history of toleration and important role of Christian dissent in the West after the 16th and 17th century Reformation. He states:

Where temporal government confined itself to the establishment of civil order, dissenting beliefs might indeed flourish – indeed, even non-Christian ones: Roger Williams tolerated the religion of the Native Indians of Rhode Island. But, astonishingly, this would itself pose no threat to civil stability.¹¹

Citizens should be free to form (lawful) associations to give expression to their faith; the administration of public justice, in the distribution of public funds, should give room for faith-based welfare and schools. Public life reveals alternative and competing understandings of public life and how this is to be justly shared by citizens. Chaplin develops a sociological perspective in which the plurality of human accountability is respected for its respective "jurisdictions" (as marriage partners, parents in families, in schools, in the workplace and marketplace, and in voluntary associations). For this, he depends on creative insights that have long been part of the Christian tradition.

Chaplin informs us that, as well as Sharia councils being in existence since the 1980s, the Muslim Arbitration Tribunal had been set up in 2007 to provide formal arbitration for Muslim communities. The Muslim Arbitration Tribunal was usually concerned with commercial matters but could also assist in resolving domestic disputes. It served within the constraints of UK law, a Muslim-oriented private arbitration association, under the *Arbitration Act 1996*.

⁸ Chaplin, *Faith in Democracy*, 176-181.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 107-126.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 127-153.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 72.

Without harping on it, the content suggests the “firestorm” raged because of widespread ignorance within the British public about what had already, for decades, been underway. The media outrage demonstrates a *superficial political appreciation* for British social developments, quite apart from the lack of deep respect for Muslim efforts to publicly live out their faith within the constraints of British law. In this way, *Faith in Democracy* draws attention to the ongoing contribution of Britain’s Muslim community to British life, as it is being lived today.

Political discourse is always part of the *political activities* and public advocacy of *political believers* (citizens) who are worthy of genuine *political* respect to be ascribed by the government and their *political* opponents. For Chaplin, *Christian* citizenship is about loving one’s neighbour with public justice, which also involves careful and ongoing listening to a neighbour’s political views.

Faith in Democracy encourages British Christian citizens to raise a *Christian* political voice, but Chaplin does so in a way that commends the *development of parallel political faithfulness from people of all faiths*, including Muslim people. This is surely an important dimension of his effort to educate his fellow *Christian* citizens. “Deep diversity” for Chaplin is not simply something to talk about in interfaith forums; it is something that should be demonstrated actively in the warp and woof of democratic efforts to commend justice for all. The two scholars I have noted above publish works that quietly encourage a sure but steady emergence of a sense of *political* responsibility and civic engagement among fellow Muslims.

Chaplin seems to have asked himself an important question before commencing his book: are not the problems facing Muslim scholars in helping to raise a Muslim *political* voice in the public sphere, as an important dimension of Islamic identity, comparable to what he has experienced in efforts to promote a Christian political voice as integral to Christian discipleship? Just as there is much literature commending Christian citizenship, so there is a considerable body of Muslim political science and scholarship encouraging Muslim citizens to take up the challenge of being *Muslim citizens* in whatever polity they find themselves. They do not have to take the advice of Salman Rushdie to become secularists in public life, while keeping their faith for the mosque and “private realm.”¹²

So, *Faith in Democracy* has also provoked further questions: can sympathetic political discussion between Muslim and Christian citizens become an integral part of interfaith dialogue? Could such an exchange of political perspectives make a positive contribution to state-crafting, promoting justice at home and internationally?¹³

¹² The similarity became evident to me when I came across Abdel Salam Sidahmed’s book review. Abdel Salam Sidahmed, “Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na’im: Islam & the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shari’a,” *The Windsor Yearbook of Access to Justice* 29 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.22329/wyaj.v29i0.4487>. An-Na’im is referred to by Haveric (op. cit.).

¹³ James W. Skillen, “Why do Parties in Conflict Become Partners in Dialogue?” *The Diplomat* 1, no. 2 (1996). Skillen is also quoted in Chaplin’s book.

It goes without saying that many Muslim people live within the “Anglo-sphere.” They do so as a matter of choice, with sustained patriotism and loyalty to their countries of residence, and have done so for generations. Muslim communities have been living peacefully, patriotically and in growing numbers in the polities of the former British Empire since the final decades of the 19th century. This history has demonstrated strong and enduring community building. Is the faith-life of religious communities going to remain part of the political problem to be solved by secularist “neutrality” or is it possible that political life can be developed in ways that understands faithful state-crafting by people of different faiths is necessary for just and healthy public governance?

Faith in Democracy is certainly a *Christian* challenge to much conventional Christian thinking about politics. The book also challenges any notion of interfaith dialogue, which arbitrarily excludes “faithful politics” from discussion. As with the Muslim political science of scholars like An-Na’im, there emerges an understanding that “secularism” when it is established becomes a political force equally religious as Islam, Christianity or any other way of life.

What then should Muslim political scientists, and more particularly, Muslim citizens, take from this book? I would encourage them to read it in terms of its author’s Christian democratic outlook and ponder the question of how to further develop what seems to have been a long-term project, at least in the “West,” of configuring a “Muslim democratic” political contribution. In that project, discussion with “Christian democratic” political science may prove useful.

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