

What is the proper behavior of religious believers in a liberal society?

A fundamental problem in the church-state relations is the nature of the behavior religious believers should pursue in the liberal state. The opposing viewpoints are best represented in the discussion between Stanley Fish and Richard Neuhaus.

Stanley Fish argues that the only possible course of action the religious person should follow is to try to shut down the liberal marketplace of ideas where the self-conceited, but factually non-existent, tolerance toward all religions reigns and does not give the religious person the chance to be the one who determines the rules of the game. And since the development of liberalism has brought about such a state of affairs where the religious believer's convictions are accommodated on the terms of tolerance, and his religion is not dominant, there is no point in the existence of a public sphere where all religions are equal, because the goal of every separate religion is not to be equal with the others but to take them over. This is necessitated by the fact that every religion, as Fish discusses, starts from a different first premise and from the very inception of negotiation, no negotiation is possible, because the mindsets of these people are so completely mutually exclusive that discussion is always useless and futile.

Calling Fish's explanation of the lack of understanding between people anti-foundationalism, Neuhaus asserts that though it may create the illusion of criticizing liberalism, it is essentially a variation of liberalism, because like liberalism it does not give an answer to the question what the fundamental truth is. Neuhaus claims that even when people start from different first premises, this does not necessarily mean their systems of reasoning have absolutely nothing in common – in fact, if they are both labeled “systems of reasoning”, they should share a common ground. In my view, three of the strongest statements that support Neuhaus' position originate from this basic proposition. First, a unified conception of life does not require monism; second, only by entering the exchange of ideas one can discover the level at which conflict can be

replaced by conversation; and third, truth cannot impose itself by virtue of its own truth (this is a quotation he takes from *Dignitatis Humanae*).

To the first counter-argument Fish would probably respond that this assertion is made from a liberal point of view, which a religious person (as he defines religious) can't even conceive, because his world IS monistic. To the second proposition Fish would answer that since the mind of the religious believer can't even conceive (exactly as in the first case) the thought of conversation with people with differing first premises, for him such a thing as exchange of ideas doesn't even exist and his goal would be to destroy the liberal imitation of exchange of ideas, because it allows tolerance at a place where tolerance is impossible. Regarding the third argument Fish would point out that exactly because truth cannot impose itself and there is no way to convince people fundamentally different from you in your viewpoint, the safest thing you should seek to do is to extirpate the marketplace of ideas.

Having heard that, Neuhaus will object to the first objection, saying that “unity in diversity” is a maxim affirmed both by Catholics and Protestants and this enables them to argue about their opinions and still know what they are talking about. To the second objection he would respond that Christians really do have nothing against creating and participating in conversation, because for them tolerance is not a compromise of truth, but obedience of truth. This statement will bring about a similar response to Fish's third objection – because Christians know what the truth is and are commanded by their God to exhibit tolerance, they will not impose truth on anybody but will enter the marketplace of ideas in order to make this truth known to everybody and will leave it there to work in the people's minds and hearts until they gradually acquire the conviction that this is the only truth.

By this point it would have become dreadfully obvious that Fish and Neuhaus proceed to the justification of their arguments from two different definitions of “religious believer”. Whereas Neuhaus is talking about Christianity all the time and makes his propositions from a Christian frame of mind, giving numerous examples from Christian literature and history to support his arguments, Christianity is exactly what Fish doesn't mean by religion. His view, although not explicitly stated, is that somehow religions such as Christianity which enter the marketplace of ideas and sit down on the discussion table,

have in a certain way surrendered to liberalism and can no longer be considered religions. Neuhaus on the other hand views the same fact of participating in the public discourse on equal terms with all other religions as Christianity's great achievement. I find the flaw in his position, however, in that he misses to score a point on Fish by scolding him for not defining what he means by "religious person" in the first place. This definition should be the first premise of Fish's position and by not giving it he seriously weakens his subsequent arguments. Instead of noticing that, Neuhaus lapses too much into giving evidence of essentially Christian character (which, of course, couldn't be otherwise because he is a Christian), leaving the readers with the increasing notion that although preaching tolerance, he himself cannot step out of his Christian mindset, and thus falling into Fish's trap and his ultimate conclusion – people with differing first premises don't even know what the other is talking about.

Overall my impression of the dispute is that Neuhaus' arguments flow on the surface, while Fish's seek to penetrate deeper below and uncover reasons we haven't even thought about yet. Maybe, they are both on the side of liberalism, but where Neuhaus wants to point out the positive effects of moderate religions that allow us to "get along", Fish is eager to ring the alarm bell signaling the danger of the fundamentalist ones which bar us from "getting along". Maybe, after all, we can still get along.