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Plurality and religious diversity: An Arendtian argument for religious co-existence in the public sphere

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Developing a philosophical argument for the positive features of religious co-existence is among the crucial tasks in societies increasingly marked by polarization and religious diversity. The present article will argue in favor of a positive approach to religious plurality by presenting Hannah Arendt's view on plurality and considering what it entails for understanding religious co-existence. Addressing religious coexistence and not only interreligious dialogue is due to the increasing realization in the study of religion about the need to overcome a mere cognitive approach to religion and see it as more than belief. Religious traditions are clusters of practices that can be seen in light of Arendt's view about the vita activa. A practice-oriented approach also recognizes that religious traditions may share several common concerns that are not sufficiently taken into account if one only views them from the perspective of doctrinal differences. Although Arendt was not substantially concerned with the role of religion in the public sphere, the following will argue that her position also has something to say about why plurality and co-existence of religious traditions are essential to the quality of a given society.

The Task

Developing a philosophical argument for the positive features of religious co-existence is among the crucial tasks in societies increasingly marked by polarization and religious diversity. The present article will argue in favor of a positive approach to religious plurality by presenting Hannah Arendt's view on plurality and considering what it entails for understanding religious co-existence. Addressing religious coexistence and not only interreligious dialogue is due to the increasing realization in the study of religion about the need to overcome a mere cognitive approach to religion and see it as more than mere belief. Religious traditions are clusters of practices that can be seen in light of Arendt's view about the *vita activa*. A practice-oriented approach also recognizes that religious traditions may share several common concerns that are not sufficiently taken into account if one only views them from the perspective of doctrinal differences. Although Arendt was

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not substantially concerned with the role of religion in the public sphere,[1] the following will argue that her position also has something to say about why plurality and co-existence of religious traditions are essential to the quality of a given society.

Plurality: basic conditions

This section deal with selected elements in Hannah Arendt's view on plurality which serves the overall argument of this article, which is how to understand and deal with plurality as a political challenge. She sees plurality as rooted in empirical conditions, such as ethnicity and gender, political views, social class, geographical origin, religious adherence, and so on. These differences make politics both necessary and essential (*de facto*). She holds that without plurality and difference, politics is not needed. Politics presupposes plurality, and plurality is the ontological fact that must be recognized: It is why we need a politics that can coordinate and handle the different interests and concerns in society.

From the point of view of interreligious co-existence, this principled situating of the need for politics is of utmost importance: it entails a) the recognition of plurality as a given feature of society, and b) the need for a politics that does not overcome but affirms and recognizes plurality. From this follows c) that plurality must be handled by other means than those internal to the religious traditions themselves, namely by a politics aiming at justice and equal recognition. Among my points in the following is that c), although in principle to be distinguished from the resources in the religious traditions, nevertheless, can find acceptance, support, and motivation in these.

How can politics aiming at and securing religious co-existence be developed, then? According to Arendt, the political challenge is to allow the differences that manifest religious plurality to have a standing in terms of *equal rights (de jure*) that can secure equal participation in society.[2]

The insistence on plurality as a condition for human action, co-existence, and politics is found in several places in Arendt's work. It is poignantly expressed in the statement that "men, not Man inhabit the world, which she presents repeatedly."[3] Although Arendt's notion of plurality has many dimensions, it primarily has a phenomenological background.[4] When she writes that "Not Man but men inhabit this planet. Plurality is the law of the earth"[5], this is not only a description of what is the actual

[1] However, there is an exception to this claim in her "Religion and Politics" in Hannah Arendt and Jerome Kohn, *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954 : Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism.*

[2] Arendt develops this point in different writings, among which some will be referenced below. For a more recent reception of this point, see Jürgen Habermas, *Die Einbeziehung Des Anderen : Studien Zur Politischen Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996). A criticism of Habermas' transformative misreading of Arendt is offered by Margaret Canovan, "A Case of Distorted Communication: A Note on Habermas and Arendt," *Political Theory* 11, no. 1 (1983).

[3] Cf. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 8.Cf. also *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York,: Meridian Books, 1958), 476. Margareth Canovan claims that this "is perhaps the single most significant motif of her thought". See Canovan, "A Case of Distorted Communication: A Note on Habermas and Arendt."

[4] To start in the phenomenological to understand other implications of the notion is an approach made by others, as well: „Hannah Arendts vielzitierter Begriff des „Politischen" kann adäquat nur über eine Phänomenologie der Pluralität verständlich gemacht werden." Thus, Sophie Loidolt, "Hannah Arendts Phänomenologie Der Pluralität: Sozialontologische, Politische Und Ethische Aspekte," *HannahArendt.net* 1, no. 9 (2018).

[5] Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 19.

case – it is also a normative statement with moral and political implications. Plurality must be recognized as a positive contribution to difference and variation. Without it, the dynamics of social life, knowledge development, and general communication cannot occur. Plurality is what makes communication necessary. When plurality is not recognized, the monologue that points towards the totalization of one specific way of thinking and acting is the result. Its normative implication is primarily to be seen in how plurality counteracts totalitarianism.

Even though humans share a common world, the participants in this world have different locations, and "the location of one can no more coincide with the location of another than the location of two objects. Being seen and being heard by others derive their significance from the fact that everybody sees and hears from a different position. This is the meaning of public life," Arendt writes.[6]

Arendt's view on the political realm may also shed light on religion as more than belief. She sees the common sphere of politics as one in which plurality makes itself known through action and speech. About action and speech, she writes, "Their reality depends entirely upon human plurality, upon the constant presence of others who can see and hear and therefore testify to their existence."[7] In other words, the public realm is where one gets to know the other as someone who manifests themselves by what they say and what they do. The flipside of this inside is that when someone is precluded from participating in the public realm through speech and action, we do not get the chance to know them, and their contribution to a shared society is diminished. Applying this point to religious traditions implies that recognizing religious beliefs and practices cannot be done unless one also sees them as justified in having public manifestations. However, everyone must have the right to manifest oneself in this manner.

In Arendt's way of thinking, plurality has the twofold character of equality and distinction.

> If men were not equal, they could neither understand each other and those who came before them nor plan for the future and foresee the needs of those who will come after them. If men were not distinct, each human being distinguished from any other who is, was, or will ever be, they would need neither speech nor action to make themselves understood. Signs and sounds to communicate immediate, identical needs and wants would be enough.[8]

The above has one important implication: Plurality does not stand in opposition to equality. But for Arendt, the recognition of equality is linked to a political decision, not an empirical fact. This distinction between the empirical and the political is crucial for the following considerations.

Arendt holds that to make oneself distinct from others is not identical to being completely other. Although otherness is an essential aspect of plurality, and that by which we distinguish something from something else, Arendt uses plurality as a concept to capture how only humans

> can express this distinction and distinguish himself, and only he can communicate himself and not merely something – thirst or hunger, affection or hostility or fear. In man, otherness, which he shares with everything that is, and distinctness, which he

[6] *The Human Condition*, 57.
[7] Ibid., 95.
[8] Ibid., 175–76.

> shares with everything alive, become uniqueness, and human plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings.[9]

Against this backdrop, it is possible to say that, according to Arendt, equality and plurality should work together in the political realm. Thus,

> equality and diversity must mutually limit each other in the proper political arrangement: diversity, in the form of free association, limits equality to political equality; equality, in the form of equal access to the public world and the right to have rights, limits diversity through common citizenship and restrictions on the scope of political power. As political values, plurality and equality therefore have equal worth.[10]

The relevance of this point in this connection is already mentioned: speech and action reveal the unique distinctness of humans. These are the capacities through which humans *distinguish* themselves instead of merely being distinct. Speech and action make it possible for humans to appear to each other *as humans*. This appearance is more than mere bodily existence and rests "an initiative from which no human being can refrain and still be human."[11] Read against the backdrop of religious plurality, this point takes on a very obvious significance, as religion is not only about personal belief, but manifests itself specifically in speech and action, which must be seen as practices that support the understanding and articulation of religious concerns.

The relevance of religion to the public sphere does not entail that this is the only sphere in which it plays a role. The encompassing character of religious topics covers also the other spheres that Arendt identifies in addition to the political, and especially issues related to the social and private.

In other words, allowing religious differences to be expressed in the public sphere through speech and action is a way of securing the chance for humans to be recognized as humans. When someone is precluded from it, this restricts their freedom. Action and speech correspond "to the fact of distinctness and is the actualization of the human condition of plurality, that is, of living as a distinct and unique being among equals."[12] Hence, to be unique and distinct, and thereby manifest plurality, does not exclude the possibility of being among equals. On the other hand, it is this participation in a world with others that also makes the establishment of human identity possible. The disclosure of who somebody is, is implicit in both words and deeds, and without the chance of manifesting oneself against others, identity would not be possible.[13]

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[9] Ibid., 176.

[10] James Bohman, "The Moral Costs of Political Pluralism: The Dilemmas of Difference and Equality in Arendt's "Reflections on Little Rock"," in *Hannah Arendt Twenty Years Later*, ed. L. May and J. Kohn (Cambridge, Mass; London, : The MIT Press, 1996), 75.

[11] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 176.

[12] Ibid., 178.

[13] Cf. Ibid., 201., and the following: "Personal identity is an achievement accomplished only by setting forth into the web of human relationships. One is a distinct someone by engaging in actions with others and accepting courageously as one's identity the inexchangeable and irreversible course of events stimulated by one's deeds. One's identity is not mediated just by one's words and intentions, but by the form one's story takes by "rubbing against" and being rubbed by the stories of other actors. Uniqueness depends upon performance in the public realm withdrawal from this realm deprives one's identity of the depth and articulation it receives from its steady appearance in a course of events and from the acknowledgement of other actors and spectators. One can be someone only by acting." Timothy Roach, "Enspirited Words and Deeds: Christian Metaphors in Arendt's Concept of Personal

Arendt's notion of plurality is a warning against any organizing of the political realm that absolutizes one perspective and employs one generic concept of humans. Her claim that "a plurality of men, not Man, inhabit the earth and must communicate with one another"[14] aims at breaking down a generic notion of humanity that glosses over variation and difference. Because we are different, we need to communicate with others. In that sense, her notion of plurality has political implications insofar as it entails a rejection of any *Gleichschaltung* in which the dominion of one perspective rules. In passing we can note that this also represents a challenge to theologies that operate with a generic notion of the human.

The analysis of plurality shows that living beings are not mere appearances. As we have seen, life manifests in the urge to self-display in speech and action. We consistently appear in a specific form and fashion, which means that the world and others "seem to me" in a particular way, just as I do to them. This is perhaps the only possible mode in which an appearing world is acknowledged and perceived, as there can be no God's eye view:

> To appear always means to seem to others, and this seeming varies according to the standpoint and the perspective of the spectators. In other words, every appearing thing acquires, by virtue of its appearingness, a kind of disguise that may indeed – but does not have to – bide or disfigure it. Seeming corresponds to the fact that every appearance, its identity notwithstanding, is perceived by a plurality of spectators.[15]

Accordingly, plurality entails the recognition of otherness and difference, determined by the beholder's perspective. But this appearance of another might also hide something or entail something that is not apparent. Thus, to be open to the fact that there can be a surplus entailed in the appearance of the other means that one also must recognize the limitations of one's perception. In other words, recognizing plurality means more than simply ascertaining diversity.

Plurality is one of the basic existential conditions of human life on Earth. As long as we communicate with others, we are alive. And even when we are alone, plurality presents the condition for our thinking in solitude. The life of the mind, writes Arendt, presupposes plurality:

> The mind can be said to have a life of its own only to the extent that it actualizes this intercourse in which, existentially speaking, plurality is reduced to the duality already implied in the fact and the word consciousness, or *syneidenai* – to know with myself"[16]

In other words, thinking is spurred by others representing plurality, even when their contributions are reduced to what appears in my thinking as the content of consciousness.

Plurality and equality in the context of religious totalitarianism

On the contemporary scene, the emergence of what I suggest we call religious totalitarianism is increasingly more visible. We see it not only in the Middle East, but also in countries where political arguments is based on the supremacy of one specific religion

Action," in *Amor Mundi. Explorations in the Faith and Thought of Hannah Arendt*, ed. James W. Bernauer (Boston; Dodrecht; Lancaster: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987), 66.

[14] Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, (New York,: Harcourt, 1968), 133.

[15] *The Life of the Mind*, 21.

[16] Ibid., 74.

that is supposed to serve as a basis for society in general. Against this backdrop, it is interesting to look at the section of her work *The Origins of Totalitarianism* where Arendt describes the rise of nationalist movements that claimed religious legitimacy for their privileged position. Her analysis has more than historical interest; it can also shed light on various versions of (Christian) nationalism in the contemporary world. She points to how the emergence of the Pan-movements in Eastern and Southern Europe transformed the Jewish-Christian faith in the divine origin of Man (note the generic use here) by preaching about how this divine origin had to be understood as given only indirectly, through membership in a people.[17]

The chances for perceiving the individual in their difference from others, as this was enabled by linking the understanding of them as having a direct relationship with God, were exchanged for a position in which they had "divine value only as long as he belongs to the people singled out for divine origin. He forfeits this whenever he decides to change his nationality, in which case he severs all bonds through which he was endowed with divine origin and falls, as it were, into metaphysical homelessness."[18] By linking identity not to the relationship with God but with the people, nationality was made "a permanent quality which no longer could be touched by history, no matter what happened to a given people – emigration, conquest, dispersion".[19]

The establishment of belonging to a people as the sign of having a divine origin is identified by Arendt as having one more immediate consequence: It establishes the "absolute contrast between the divine origin of one's own people and all other nondivine peoples" with the effect that "all differences between the individual members of the people disappeared, whether social or economic or psychological."[20] Hence, the claim about a common divine origin of the selected people secured the option of making them into a uniform chosen mass. This uniformity excluded plurality.

In pointing out the problems of this position, Arendt recurs to a combination of secular and theological language, thereby demonstrating how uniformity is handled in different ways empirically and theologically: Arguing that the theory about a common divine origin in a people is conspicuously untrue, she nevertheless recognizes how it was politically useful – although for morally corrupt purposes. Empirically and from a secular point of view, it is impossible to say that God created men and peoples, as their origin is in procreation. Peoples (*Folk*) came into being due to human organization.[21] Moreover, "Men are unequal according to their natural origin, their different organization, and fate

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[17] Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 233–34.

[18] Ibid., 234.

[19] Ibid. Hence, nationalism and racism emerge as a consequence. Nationalism entails the concept of a national mission which "perverted the national concept of mankind as a family of nations into a hierarchical structure where differences of history and organization were misinterpreted as differences between men, residing in natural origin. Racism, which denied the common origin of man and repudiated the common purpose of establishing humanity, introduced the concept of the divine origin of one people as contrasted with all others, thereby covering the temporary and changeable product of human endeavor with a pseudo-mystical cloud of divine eternity and finality." (Ibid.)

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid. As is obvious, Arendt does not shy away from making theological statements to interpret the same topic: "Politics is based on the fact of human plurality. God created *man*, but men are a human, earthly product the product of human nature." Here quoted from Rafael Zawisza, "Between Adamite Dreams and Original Sin: Hannah Arendt's Cryptic Heterodoxy?," in *"Faith in the World" : Post-Secular Readings of Hannah Arendt*, ed. Rafael Zawisza and Ludger Hagedorn (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2021), 88.

in history."[22] Contrary to this, in an alternative mode of argumentation that employs theological language, it can be argued that for humans,

> Their equality is an equality of rights only, that is, an equality of human purpose; yet behind this equality of human purpose lies, according to Jewish- Christian tradition, another equality, expressed in the concept of one common origin beyond human history, human nature, and human purpose – the common origin in the mythical, unidentifiable Man who alone is God's creation. This divine origin is the metaphysical concept on which the political equality of purpose may be based, the purpose of establishing mankind on Earth.[23]

Accordingly, the equality of humans cannot be demonstrated empirically. Arendt also rejects "the religious cliché that everyone is equal before God because that endangers the 'worldly significance' of the other in her uniqueness."[24] Hence, if such equality should be claimed theologically, it must be rooted in a common origin in God's creative activity and in a way that affirms individuality and uniqueness. But, according to Arendt, the purpose for which humans were created is only possible to spell out in generic terms, namely, to establish humankind on Earth. This generic purpose is insufficient to promote a kind of uniformity of all humans within one conception. Hence, the understanding of human equality in origin allows for plurality while simultaneously allowing for assessing them as equal from a political point of view. The outcome of this line of reasoning is that for Arendt, equality among humans is an equality of rights, which depends neither on metaphysics nor empirical evidence.

Considering Arendt's fundamental position here in light of the rise of Christian nationalism, its contemporary relevance becomes clear. Not only has this movement been linked to prejudice towards minority groups, but Christian nationalism has been defined as a belief that "celebrate[s] and privilege[s] the sacred history, liberty, and rightful rule of white conservatives."[25] By prioritizing ethno-cultural, ethno-religious, and ethno-nationalist framing around fear of "the other" - those being immigrants, racial, and sexual minorities, - Arendt's identification of how ethnicity and othering is the constitutive factor for such nationalism is confirmed. Linked to this, and showing the neglect of equal rights for all, is how Christian nationalism can be associated with xenophobia, homophobia, misogyny, political tolerance of racists, opposition to interracial unions, and restricting the civil rights of those who fail to conform to traditional ideals of whiteness, citizenship, and certain forms of Protestantism. It also involves beliefs in patriarchy, white supremacy, and heteronormativity.

Thus, Arendt helps us see that a religiously legitimized position that entails the reduction of rights for others than the privileged group runs contrary to fundamental and universal theological convictions. It means a disregard for the actual plurality that makes politics necessary. Theological ethics needs to affirm the right of everyone to have equal rights, which can be secured only if such convictions lead to political decisions that do not privilege belonging to a specific group of people as a presupposition for such rights. Therefore, Arendt also points indirectly to the problem with human rights in general: that

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[22] Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 234.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Zawisza, "Between Adamite Dreams and Original Sin: Hannah Arendt's Cryptic Heterodoxy?," 105.
[25] Ruiqian Li and Paul Froese, "The Duality of American Christian Nationalism: Religious Traditionalism Versus Christian Statism," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 62, no. 4 (2023).

having them depends on existing in a political context. Concomitantly, "Human rights lose all their signification as soon as an individual loses her political context."[26]

Arendt thus grounds the right to have rights in a conviction based on political decisions, not empirical observations. The fact that equality cannot be demonstrated empirically resulted from nineteenth-century positivism and progressivism. These efforts "set out to demonstrate what cannot be demonstrated, namely, that men are equal by nature and different only by history and circumstances, so that they can be equalized not by rights, but by circumstances and education."[27] The futility of this effort meant that attention was given to empirical conditions instead of recognizing the fact that equality of rights relies on a political decision only. It is important to note that this secures the affirmation of plurality without seeing it as an obstacle to equality on political terms.

Equality does not rule out plurality, but equal rights secure plurality

According to the above, it becomes possible to see that plurality and equality emerge from two different spheres of human life: plurality originates in the private sphere, whereas equality is secured in the public sphere. The affirmation of the equality of rights as dependent on human decision is the basis for Arendt's view that plurality is "the disturbing miracle contained in the fact that each of us is made as he is – single, unique, unchangeable"[28] – i.e., with difference and under very variable conditions. Thus, plurality originates in the private sphere, as the sphere of the merely given. Contrary to this sphere is the public sphere, which is determined by human action. This plurality originating in private life is "a permanent threat to the public sphere because the public sphere is as consistently based on the law of equality as the private sphere is based on the law of universal difference and differentiation."[29] Consequently,

> Equality, in contrast to all that is involved in mere existence, is not given us, but is the result of human organization insofar as it is guided by the principle of justice. We are not born equal; we become equal as members of a group on the strength of our decision to guarantee ourselves mutually equal rights. Our political life rests on the assumption that we can produce equality through organization, because man can act in and change and build a common world, together with his equals and only with his equals.[30]

The fact that a shared world is a world of equals reflects Arendt's perspective on the political sphere as a manifestation of freedom. As indicated above, equality and freedom belong together.

The political challenge connected to plurality and difference – including religious diversity, is that they represent factors that cannot be brought under complete human control. Plurality and difference represent a threat to politics, because it is only possible to maintain control if there is a certain degree of sameness or equality among citizens. But this also entails that individuality and plurality contribute to constituting the view of someone– or something – as alien. The alien points towards "those realms in which man cannot change and cannot act and in which, therefore, he has a distinct tendency to

[26] Thus Leila Faghfouri Azar, "Key Concepts: Hannah Arendt: The Right to Have Rights," *Critical Legal Thinking* (2019).
[27] Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 234.
[28] Ibid., 301.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.

destroy."[31] Against this backdrop, Arendt contrasts the individual differences that necessitate plurality and the equality that must be secured by political recognition.

Accordingly, plurality and difference can be safeguarded and maintained in the political realm only if they are combined with rights. Suppose someone is recognized for their mere otherness without also recognizing their rights. In that case, he becomes a representative of a class, group, or general concept and is not seen as an individual. Arendt uses racism as an example of this, but it could just as well be pointed out that it applies to adherents to religious traditions, as well. Therefore, we can adapt her point about racism and make it relevant to a religious tradition: When someone is considered only as a representative of their religion and nothing else, they lose along with their right to equality that freedom of action which is specifically human; all their deeds are now explained as 'necessary' consequences of some 'religious' qualities, and they thereby are only considered as a specimen of what Arendt calls "an animal species, called man."[32] Their distinctive and individual character is eradicated.

Consequently, plurality is lost when we consider someone merely from a generic point of view. This relates to the religious other, as well. When we relate to others without recognizing their specific standing and their rights, they become human beings and nothing else. Hence, equality that does not acknowledge plurality becomes deeply problematic:

> Wherever public life and its law of equality are completely victorious, wherever a civilization succeeds in eliminating or reducing to a minimum the dark background of difference, it will end in complete petrifaction and be punished, so to speak, for having forgotten that man is only the master, not the creator of the world.[33]

We are created with differences, and when we foster the sameness that ignores this, we are missing the fundamental and given condition of plurality that is also the basis for ascribing rights to others than those who can be identified as identical with us.

Arendt did not develop a comprehensive theory about human rights in general, and scholars have viewed this as a regrettable omission in her *oeuvre*.[34] However, as Lene Auestad has argued, "Arendt's concept of plurality can significantly contribute to our understanding of the idea of human dignity."[35] Such dignity depends on establishing a common world that ascribes equal rights to everyone, and there cannot be any shared world unless this is done. Hence, when people are forced to live outside the common world in which equal rights are recognized, in the midst of civilization, they are thrown back on their natural givenness and mere differentiation from others.[36] Presently, this fact is very obvious in the case of Palestinians in Gaza, who are subjected to military attacks and lack

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[31] Ibid.
[32] Cf. Ibid.
[33] Ibid., 302.
[34] Cf. Francis X. Winters, "The Banality of Evil. Reflections on Hannah Arendt's Reinterpretation of Political Ethics," in *Amor Mundi. Explorations in the Faith and Thought of Hannah Arendt*, ed. James W. Bernauer (Boston; Dodrecht; Lancaster: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987), 206–09. Winters also claims that this lack is due to the *content* of other elements in Arendt's work. He holds that her doctrine on judgment "which eschews both cognitive content and practical effect, whatever its perhaps considerable intellectual merits, is manifestly incompatible with any doctrine of human rights." His criticism off Arendt here is related to the emphasis on the political utility of such rights: A right is precisely the capacity to *act in the present*, with moral immunity on the grounds of a rational claim that such action is inextricably linked to authentic human development." Ibid, 209.
[35] Lene Auestad, "Plurality and Human Dignity," *Nordic Journal of Human Rights* 23, no. 3 (2006).
[36] Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 302.

of access to water, nourishment, and medical help in a way similar to other citizens in Palestine-Israel. They are considered based solely on their membership in a group distinct from others, which affords them certain privileges and rights. Equality is absent. In light of this situation, the contemporary relevance of Arendt becomes obvious when she writes that,

> They lack that tremendous equalizing of differences which comes from being citizens of some commonwealth and yet, since they are no longer allowed to partake in the human artifice, they begin to belong to the human race in much the same way as animals belong to a specific animal species. The paradox involved in the loss of human rights is that such loss coincides with the instant when a person becomes a human being in general – without a profession, without a citizenship, without an opinion, without a deed by which to identify and specify himself – *and* different in general, representing nothing but his own absolutely unique individuality which, deprived of expression within and action upon a common world, loses all significance.[37]

Arendt writes from a perspective that differs from what is often taken for granted in the modern Western world: the idea that belonging to humanity and having human rights are intrinsically related. That is not the case when humans are deprived of what makes them unique, and where individuality or plurality no longer ensures equal protection under the law. The strength of a possible contemporary theological approach to plurality will lie in its ability to recognize equal rights, despite plurality, including the plurality of religious affiliations. The empirical differences between people cannot be an argument for depriving someone of their rights to equal recognition and treatment – a point that is necessary to underscore in light of the rising movement of Christian nationalism or any other form of nationalism.

The relevance of Arendt's analysis is thus apparent in the dangers she identifies when people are kept outside the common realm, and this is a point that currently applies not only to the Palestinian people but to every case in which the political opposition is repressed and those protesting are deprived of their rights. She holds that

> "the emergence of totalitarian governments is a phenomenon within, not outside, our civilization. The danger is that a global, universally interrelated civilization may produce barbarians from its own midst by forcing millions of people into conditions which, despite all appearances, are the conditions of savages."[38]

Her words are no less essential to observe today.

The right to have rights

Although Arendt's view about human rights is widely discussed, the origin of her famous statement about the right to have rights is obvious: it must be understood against the backdrop of how entire populations of human beings were deprived of their fundamental rights before and during World War II. This practice also seems to continue today in some places in the world, where some tribes or populations are granted privilege at the cost of others who have lost it.

Arendt goes to the core of the problem with human rights in general in her claim that the basic right is the right to have rights. This is the precise problem in the modern

[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.

understanding of human rights, which essentially regulates the relationship between the individual and the government within a nation-state and attributes rights to its members. It constitutes a fundamental problem for stateless refugees.

As observed by others, Arendt's criticism of the declarations of human rights in their various forms was based on the understanding of human beings due to their shared "nature". But in light of their concrete plurality, this shared nature not only appears as an abstraction, but it also makes it possible to ignore those who are defined as not having a share in it, as Others. She criticized this attribution of rights, however, because it ended up in "overriding the plurality found in the togetherness of people by transforming the individual subject of these rights to a member of a nation-state, whereby the 'will' of the people substituted the plural relations instituted by human action."[39]

Arendt's insistence on rights as belonging to the political sphere builds on the premise that rights only have meaning in an actual community with others. The exclusion from such communities makes it possible to lose the recognition of having such rights. As long as equal rights are based on belonging to the nation-state or are restricted by a notion of "humanity" that excludes those defined as sub-human, the community on which her understanding of the condition for rights is based is under pressure or volatile. The fundamental right to have rights irrespective of belonging is what prevents dehumanization – also for those who lack belonging to a nation-state or are no longer recognized as truly human.

The lack of recognition of the right to have rights dissolves the possibility of manifesting plurality in speech and action in the public sphere. It takes away the fundamental means of protection. In totalitarian regimes, this entails a domination that makes apparent the "nakedness of the human being" in several respects. It means "'to kill the juridical person in man,' that is, to strip people off of their political rights by which they are understood to be equal to one another;" but also eliminating humans as moral persons by making human solidarity impossible by erasing human dignity; and to obliterate plurality by making it impossible to appear meaningfully in the presence of others.[40] As Sari points out, this "process coincides with that of the human being's denial of a *place* in the world: (1) 'the loss of home' along with the 'impossibility of finding a new one,' and (2) the 'loss of government protection,' so that (3) these people became 'superfluous.'"[41]

Arendt's insights into plurality and equal rights as conditions for freedom are relevant in any society willing to face the political challenge of religious plurality. To secure every member of society the right to action and speech is not only a task for securing them freedom, however: it is also a precondition by which religious diversity and plurality are considered as providing resources for building a society that becomes more able to handle differences and challenges in a world where the temptation for conformity and sameness represents a constant pressure. Accordingly, the politically constituted right to have rights, which recognizes equality in spite of plurality, works against the drive to absolutize one religious tradition and secures that different ideas about what it is to be human and what life should be about. In this sense, and by insisting on freedom as manifest in speech and

[39] Yasemin Sari, "The Right to Have Rights," in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Arendt*, ed. Peter Gratton and Yasemin Sari (London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 359.
[40] Cf. Ibid., 361., in a summary of Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.
[41] Sari, "The Right to Have Rights."

action, Arendt also tacitly argues against an understanding of freedom as merely freedom of thought[42] or of individual and privatized belief.

Some theological inferences[43]

What does the above analysis mean for a political theology that explicitly wants to deal with religious plurality? For such a theology, which aims at a constructive approach to plurality, the above requires that one must engage in philosophical considerations such as Arendt's on plurality and rights, and consider what religions are from a more external and non-confessional point of view. It means to have a stronger focus on what religions do and how they contribute to society.[44] If we see religions as symbolically mediated clusters of practices that provide means for orientation, transformation, and reflection,[45] such practices articulate different dimensions of what is not easily exchangeable. They are not only something that people participate in: they also shape people's mode of being in the world. You do not change your religion as you change your shirt, and when you convert to another religion (or to none), it has a profound impact on how you see and relate to others and yourself. Therefore, the pragmatic aspect of religious plurality needs to be addressed as not only a theological or doctrinal issue but also as one that has implications for a person's way of living.[46] Arendt's insistence on seeing plurality as manifest in speech and action is a reminder that underscores this point.

However, Arendt's insistence on plurality also entails that a Christian understanding of God cannot be developed from a contemporary perspective unless one

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[42] "Thus, political freedom is distinct from philosophic freedom in being clearly a quality of the I-can and not of the I-will. Since it is possessed by the citizen rather than by man in general, it can manifest itself only in communities, where the many who live together have their intercourse both in word and in deed regulated by a great number of rapports-laws, customs, habits, and the like. In other words, political freedom is possible only in the sphere of human plurality, and on the premise that this sphere is not simply an extension of the dual I-and-myself to a plural We. Action, in which a We is always engaged in changing our common world, stands in the sharpest possible opposition to the solitary business of thought, which operates in a dialogue between me and myself." Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 200.

[43] Some of the points that follows are more extensively developed in Jan-Olav Henriksen, *Religious Plurality and Pragmatist Theology Openness and Resistance*, Currents of Encounter (Leiden Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2019).

[44] I admit that this approach seems to be somewhat contrary to how Arendt sees theology in both OT, 468f., and in "Religion and Politics" in Arendt and Kohn, *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954 : Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*. She has a more substantial approach to religion and theology in these texts, whereas my argument here focuses on more pragmatic and functional elements.

[45] A more extensive argument for this theoretical approach to religion as practice is presented in Jan-Olav Henriksen, *Religion as Orientation and Transformation : A Maximalist Theory*, Religion in Philosophy and Theology (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017). Cf. also the definition given by C. Smith: "Religion is a complex of culturally prescribed practices, based on premises about the existence and nature of superhuman powers, whether personal or impersonal, which seek to help practitioners gain access to and communicate or align themselves with these powers, in hopes of realizing human goods and avoiding things bad." Christian Smith, *Religion : What It Is, How It Works, and Why It Is Still Important* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017). 22.

[46] In contemporary philosophy of religion, this way of thinking about religion as a mode of being in the world, of a "life-form", has by most been developed in the wake of Wittgenstein and his reflections in *Culture and Value*. Much of what I do in the following could have been elaborated further by references to that 'tradition', but space does not permit. See Ludwig Wittgenstein et al., *Culture and Value* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 64., and more extensively with reference to religion D. Z. Phillips, *Belief, Change and Forms of Life* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986); D. Z. Phillips and Mario Von der Ruhr, *Religion and Wittgenstein's Legacy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

takes into consideration the multi-religious context. This situation requires some fundamental philosophical consideration that aims at a fundamental ethics. Such ethics is part of what constitutes a theology that acknowledges religious otherness as irrelevant for ascribing or rejecting peoples' right to have rights. In her elaborations on the problems with defining religious identity, Jeanine Hill Fletcher refers to Iris Marion Young who describes the problems with defining an identity. Identity, as

> a closed totality, always depends on excluding some elements, separating the pure from the impure. Bringing particular things under a universal essence, for example, depends on determining some attribute of particulars as accidental, lying outside the essence. Any definition or category creates an inside/outside distinction, and the logic of identity seeks to keep those borders firmly drawn.[47]

Moreover, Fletcher points out that the problem with identity is not only constituted by how Christians relate to others. She writes:

> When Christian theologians argue for a similarity among Christians that distinguishes them from non-Christians, it is at the expense of the diversity one might find within Christianity itself. This erasure of particularity within the collective is the first outcome of employing a logic of identity. A second and simultaneous outcome is the distancing of otherness. By creating a collective identity to be shared by those within the category in distinction to those outside the category, the logic of identity forges intra-religious solidarity through the very process of distancing otherness.[48]

Since a statement like "I am Christian" means different things to different people, it is more important to state precisely why *and how* you are a Christian – and not something else. What are your commitments, and how do they shape your points of orientation and contribute to visions of transformation? Only against the backdrop of answering such questions does it make sense to develop a clear identity in relation to the religious other that is not too abstract, generic, or reified, thereby allowing for an understanding of them in their actual and dynamic mode of being. Given the dynamic and contextual character of Christianity, one needs to decide what type of Christianity to develop in reference to the religious other – what commonalities and what differences can be recognized.

We can understand religious traditions in analogy with how we understand the development of human identity: as a relational process where the Other is of vital significance for what I become, and for the resources available for my being in the world.[49] This approach follows from the relational character of human existence. Understanding the development of a specific religion's identity also requires profound insight into others. That requires plurality. Moreover, when religious traditions develop, they do so because of, and concerning, specific experiences and challenges with which they need to come to terms, and among these are also the presence of other religious traditions.

All religious traditions are engaged in identity work. This work is not possible to undertake unless you have a relationship with someone else. Levinas is perhaps the

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[47] Jeannine Hill Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation? : A Feminist Approach to Religious Pluralism* (New York ; London: Continuum, 2005), 84. The quote from Young can be found in Iris Young, "The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference," *Social Theory and Practice* 12, no. 1 (1986).

[48] Hill Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation? : A Feminist Approach to Religious Pluralism*. 84–85. This point is recently taken up extensively in Tim Crane, *The Meaning of Belief : Religion from an Atheist's Point of View* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2017).

[49] I have developed this point with reference to the role of religious symbols in human development in Jan-Olav Henriksen, *Relating God and the Self : Dynamic Interplay* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).

philosopher who has most profoundly explored the difficulties, challenges, and possibilities of relating to the Other. His main concern is to maintain an understanding of the Other as different in such a way that the difference is not eliminated, as it would easily lead to the Other becoming aligned to a preexisting sameness of the self who relates to him/her, just like Arendt also underscores. Like her, he claims that seeing the Other as a representation is problematic because the "other would therein dissolve into the same."[50]

Plurality is a precondition for the need to recognize, also theologically – the need for a politics that safeguards this plurality, as well as the equal right of every religious tradition to have rights to manifest themselves in speech and action. Plurality plays an undeniable role in the constitution of religious identity and selfhood. The Christian traditions are no exception in that regard. Thus, to ignore the constitutive role of the Other in the constitution of religious traditions is not only a mistake, but it means that one restricts oneself from two important features: First, one restricts oneself from the potential enrichment and expansion of one's own world that a meeting with the religious other may mean. Second, it means you cannot come to terms with how the deeply relational character of identities has contributed to developing your own tradition and identity. The elements that shape religious identity on an individual, private, or group level contribute to plurality, but this is no reason for using such identity as an argument against equal rights.

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[50] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity : An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969). 38.

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