

Religious Pluralism and Political Stability: Obligations in Agreement, by David Golemboski, Routledge, 2023, 224 pp., £130.00 (hardback), ISBN: 9781032185439

David Golemboski's *Religious Pluralism and Political Stability: Obligations in Agreement* investigates conflicts between citizens' religious and political-legal obligations in contemporary pluralistic societies by analyzing the relevant literature and court cases from the perspective of political liberalism. Because such conflicts generate an unstable political system, which is unsustainable, this question is highly important. In this sense, political "stability" becomes the central focus of the book, which renders it a significant source in political theory scholarship. As Golemboski also states, although political stability has been extensively discussed in political theory, it has often been treated as less significant than other political goods such as equality, justice, and fairness.

The book consists of two parts. While the first part (Chapters 1, 2, and 3) provides a theoretical background by discussing political liberalism and stability, the second part (Chapters 4, 5, and 6) applies this theoretical background to various cases. In Chapter 1, Golemboski offers "stability" as the *primary* good and political "goal" (p. 23) that needs to be constituted in the context of pluralism. As there are numerous conceptions of stability in the political theory literature, he specifies and endorses the conception of justificatory stability. The conception he proposes in the book, i.e., justificatory stability, bases a political system's stability on its capacity to gain the consent of the public it rules over. Golemboski compares his conception with two other forms of stability from the literature. The first is brute force stability, in which stability is founded on the threat of punishment. The

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second is the *modus vivendi* version, which establishes stability in terms of pragmatic compromise among competing factors. He argues that justificatory stability ensures a more self-sustaining, resilient, and reliable political system than these two. Unlike them, it is conditioned on the approval of the governed. Therefore, since the political system will be justified in the eyes of the people, they will endorse it by themselves and avoid cheating on their political duties. After establishing justificatory stability as the normative ideal in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 identifies the necessary conditions for its realization, which are derived mainly from Hobbes. Golemboski initially lists “three main principles of political liberalism”, which are liberty, distributive equality, and justificatory neutrality, as the necessary components. The liberty principle means a presumption in favor of liberty and “establishes freedom as the normative baseline condition and places coercive acts or institutions under a burden of justification” (p. 64). Distributive equality requires the political system to distribute the benefits and burdens equally in a society. Finally, justificatory neutrality means that “the governing political principles must be justifiable on grounds that are neutral with respect to the truth value of competing comprehensive doctrines” (p. 73). After these three norms, he adds the formal principle of the rule of law as the fourth condition and sketches them under the title of “Hobbesian” political liberalism. Based on the conceptual discussions in these two chapters, Golemboski institutes the main argument of the book: justificatory stability can be satisfactorily realized “only by means of political liberalism” in the context of pluralism (p. 51). Subsequent chapters expand and consolidate this argument. For instance, Chapter 3 responds to the potential objection that these abstract, rational principles are insufficient to make citizens justify and obey the political system, particularly when they are at the expense of their moral and religious obligations. Golemboski states that if political and religious loyalties are harmonized and mutually support each other through active deliberative exchange and encouragement of various moral communities, then this objection will be in vain, as citizens will develop a commitment to the system. As in the last chapter of the first theoretical part, Chapter 3 also proposes a theory to harmonize loyalties.

Maintaining the critical *style* of the first part, where he engages with potential criticism, Golemboski designs the second part of the book as a response to “the fact that, in the messy reality of actual political life, public justification will always be to some degree incomplete” (p. 120). He responds by using case studies, mostly court decisions. Chapter 4 focuses on conflicts stemming from religious pluralism and strategies to address them. Golemboski starts from the inevitability of conflicts in the context of pluralism and scrutinizes how they emerge and impact citizens and justificatory stability. He lists several alternative solutions and concludes that they are not generalizable despite being useful for specific cases. Chapter 5 examines the limits and effectiveness of selective exemptions from the law in response to conflicting obligations. Instead of entirely rejecting or accepting “exemptions”, Golemboski proposes a balanced system to protect stability, which reflects accommodation for nonreligious moral and religious beliefs. Finally, Chapter 6 explores the implications of justificatory neutrality for religious establishment. His main argument is that since the official endorsement of religious belief violates justificatory neutrality, it results in the exclusion of particular citizens and destabilization. Therefore, except for the specific cases that he lists, Golemboski defends avoidance by the government in such matters. As this brief account of the chapters also suggests, the second part offers the observation of balance and contextuality as a solution for practice rather than a definitive or universal rule or process.

While his proposal of contextuality as a solution is one of the main strengths of the book, as it makes the claims more feasible, it also poses a vital challenge to the book’s fundamental argument. In this regard, it makes the first part redundant by evincing the non-procedural, unexpected, and conflictual nature of politics and human relations. In the first part, Golemboski describes an imagined world of justificatory stability where he maps out concepts and procedures such as types, conditions, boundaries of interest(s), justification, reason, equality, liberty, belief, and *modus vivendi*. Here, he treats *modus vivendi* as distinct from justificatory stability. This procedural and conceptual meticulousness also occasionally appears in the second part. However, as he also mentions, using the examples of racism and Black Lives Matter, stability is not *always* politically good or desired. Politics mostly considers disagreement and conflict rather than procedures and

stability, which are shaped by those disagreements and conflicts. Nevertheless, by pursuing the liberal tradition that he promotes, Golemboski reduces politics to procedures. This reductionism becomes apparent, especially in his case studies, which focus almost exclusively on “laws”. Although his practical solutions are robust and persuasive, as he considers the dynamic and antagonistic nature of politics, his theoretical discussions limit their cogency due to this reductionism. He offers those “practical” solutions as immediate responses to specific cases in which the nature of the antagonism and other dynamics of the case are obvious. Therefore, he presents a realistic approach that makes solutions robust and persuasive for their specific cases. However, since his liberal theoretical approach does not recognize the central role of conflict in politics, he cannot propose a theoretical explanation or justification for those solutions. In other words, his reduction of politics to procedures (i.e., laws) prevents him from making those solutions theoretically cogent as well as developing them into analytical tools that can be mobilized for similar cases.

The second issue considers the scope of the book. Although its title and the iterated context of “plurality” imply a discussion at a global level, the book is theoretically and practically confined to the West, especially the U.S. context. Theoretically, not only the scholarship he refers to but also his conceptualizations are Western (and sometimes even Eurocentric). For instance, when he discusses whether “the Catholic example is generalizable to other religious traditions” (p. 106) in terms of its gradual reconciliation with political liberalism, he identifies three factors: institutional differentiation between religious and political institutions, practical experience of life under liberal institutions, and developments in political theology within religious doctrine toward liberal values. He argues that these factors “suggest a potentially generalizable set of conditions that may facilitate a similar transformation in other religious doctrines toward harmony with political liberalism” (p. 108). This claim exemplifies the conventional Eurocentric and orientalist readings of the Rest regarding the expectation of linear historical progress following the European experience. In this regard, it assumes that all faiths or traditions have the same exact nature as Christianity, which has “institutions” such as the church and a “religious doctrine” that are ontologically different,

and therefore can be separated from politics. Practically, the case studies he reviews are from the U.S.

Overall, despite occasional reductionist and Eurocentric ideas stemming from its implicit claim of universality, the book offers a comprehensive and convincing analysis of political-religious conflicts in the U.S. In this sense, as a substantial contribution to the relevant scholarship, it provides an important source for those interested in the intersections of religion, politics, law, and political theory.

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