



CONSIDERATIONS OF MY
STAY AT THE WIKO
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Sundry Thoughts

Since this was my second time at the Wiko, I had a chance to see – or perhaps feel would be a better word – something that the staff often talks about: the inevitable, ineffable difference in Wiko classes. In both years, I met people with whom I will stay in contact, had exciting intellectual discussions with people from a range of disciplines, learned a great

deal for the colloquia, and laughed a lot. And yet the two experiences were significantly different.

Before I go on, I want to say what an ingenious institution the Wiko is and what a gift it is to be here. The chance to live and in a way work with such a high level of scholars from around the world is unique and life-changing. It is not only the intellectual exchange that is invaluable, but all the living itself and learning how people from different parts of the world see it – subtly, through meals, jokes, body language, interaction with children, etc. Perhaps this is especially important for me, in Multilingual Multicultural Studies. It is also why I spend so much of each year outside my own country (the US): to be faced with a world of different assumptions (tacit and not) where my gut-level impulses are called into question explicitly and implicitly. But I think this living-aspect is important not only for me, but for Fellows overall. It's from this that curiosity, friendships, and the spirit of the group, so to speak, develop.

One of the great pleasures for me this year was to talk with political scientists from India, Rajeev Bhargava in particular. He was kind enough to point to some of his writings, which I read, and we talked a good deal about the variants of secularism, pluralism, democratic structures, toleration, etc. worldwide. Because the Western European model is so predominant worldwide (owing to the prestige of the European Enlightenment) and because I write often for the European audience, I have had to give a good deal of thought to the differences between the European and US experiences historically, culturally, and politically. Though the US is heir to the European tradition, the development of democracy, statism/grassroots civil society, Church-State relations, and pluralism has been rather different on the two continents (even accounting for differences among European countries), owing to the immigration experience of the US, the frontier, the *de facto* pluralist mix in the US, the lack of the territorialization of religion (as Europe had after the Westphalian Treaty in 1648), the influence of British liberalism and of pietistic and evangelical religions.

Yet this year I was able to learn a bit about the Indian experience and how India's variant of democracy, pluralism, and civil society is similar to and different from the US and European ones. In many ways, the Indian emerging model is more similar to the US's than is Western Europe's. In any case, India's groping with religious and ethnic difference amid great class inequalities under democratic structures is something to consider very carefully, as these circumstances account for much more of the world's population – in India and other countries – than does Western Europe's modern history.

It was also an immense pleasure, and illuminating, for me to talk with the musicologist Annegret Fauser, her husband Tim (also a musicologist), and the composer, Gyula Fekete. Since the “other half” of my life is dance and choreography, I was delighted by their work and by their responses to the dance projects in which I’m currently involved. As they are involved with the arts, I also found them, in spirit and approach, greatly warming.

Finally, perhaps most thrilling for me was to finally dance myself at the Wiko. It was my gift to the staff at the final party to perform (along with a wonderful student dancer) a short duet that I choreographed, to Bach’s Concert for Oboe d’amore, Strings and Basso Continuo, BWV 209 III. As dance is a tremendously important source of insight and energy for me, and since it contributes much to the way I see and approach my surroundings, performing a piece that I had choreographed, I feel, brought this important rest of me to the Wiko for the first time.

To return to the differences among Wiko classes: I don’t think I can explain this better than does the staff, which has had years to consider the differences among classes. But I would say that the group, as it comes together, moves in a certain way as a group; the “cultural” assumptions of what is done, not done, what is said and not said, how quickly, with whom, in what sequence, with what meaning, even where and how people sit at lunch and at colloquia, etc. develop. Individuals within the group contribute to that “culture” and then move within it, improvising, extending what’s done, etc. These cultures, I imagine, are influenced by the individual Fellows but also by the physical plant (weather, for instance), and chance events (a good performance at the Philharmonie). In short, all the things Bourdieu described pertain to the Wiko culture as well. And so the paths and personality of the classes are distinct.

One specific aspect of the 2009–10 year was the composition of the Fellows. Unlike my first year (2006–07) – which had working groups in religion (to which I belonged), biology, and other disciplines – the dominant influence this year was the biology group. Though there was also a humanities group, it was somehow less visible or present. As a result there was not quite the same balance among the disciplines – not quite the feel that they were all at the same sea level, so to speak. Perhaps there was also a different feel for what the Wiko (or this year at the Wiko) could offer: Was the main but tacit feel one of extending what one was already doing or one of cross-pollination (to borrow from the biologists)?

This does not mean that I lacked fascinating conversation with Fellows from other disciplines, but rather that the float of people and conversation among Fellows was affected. This of course could be explained by saying that the ease of conversation with me, in particular, was less fluid for whatever reason. And this well may be the case. But listening to other Fellows, as the year came to a close, I found that they offered similar observations.

I have always understood that the selection process of Wiko Fellows is important and delicate, and now I understand this even more. I also think the priorities of the Wiko itself, its staff and vision, influence what eventually becomes Fellow conversation or cross-pollination. An emphasis by the staff on one discipline, region, topic, or other aspect may inadvertently affect what I'm calling the flow of talk and curiosity among Fellows.

About My Work

This year at the Wiko I was able to complete a book addressing at least a part of a question I've been studying for some years: what are the conditions under which devout believers may support liberal democracy, thrive under it, and contribute to democracy's flourishing? The question is pressing because there are today 600 million Buddhists, 800 million Hindus, 1.5 billion Muslims, and 2.3 billion Christians. Religion is ever in the news, often in connection with intolerance, persecution, and violence – whether it's the role of Catholicism in Poland, Pentecostalism in Africa, the fate of Christians in Malaysia, or the direction of Islam in Europe and the Mideast. It appears that religion has not faded away, as secularization theory predicted. Indeed, secularization theory has sustained neither its explanatory power in the face of religion's tenacity (consider the US or South Korea) nor its predictive power about how people behave in mobile, multicultural conditions.

Thus, if we are unable to develop ways in which the devout may support and even contribute to liberal, democratic governance, the prognosis for liberal democracy is bleak. Moreover, left unresolved, the issue leads potentially to polarization, with believers seeking to strengthen religion in the public sphere while secularists seek to limit/privatize it, fearing that, unless carefully managed, religion will rise and devour modern life in a resurrection of the repressed. Extremist groups who use religion to justify violence reinforce this view.

In looking for examples in which devout believers support and contribute to democratic structures, I did a case study of America's "new evangelicals", those who have separated themselves from the Religious Right in self-identification, political aims, and means. They are neither fundamentalist nor fanatic, not only democratic but often progressive, and on many issues, supporters of President Barack Obama. They embrace liberal constitutional law and see themselves not as imposing Scripture on the state but as part of civil society, with priorities in poverty relief and environmental protection. Like other civil society groups, they criticize the government when it transgresses liberal democratic principles, such as using torture.

In investigating "new evangelicals", I looked at books, sermons, newsletters, blogs, and political and social activism and guided open-ended interviews with scholars, pastors, political advisors, and the laity across a broad demographic range of "new evangelicals" in the US between 2004 and 2010. Interviewees included men and women ranging in age from 20 to 74, from scores of Christian denominations across the country. Professions range from firemen and construction workers to nurses, church staff, professors, and political consultants.

Perhaps most interesting for me was "new evangelical" discourse. As devout believers, they express their politics in the discourse of faith – not Montesquieu and Kant but Matthew and Paul. Perhaps this may enable other devout communities to take them seriously. Their approach to holy text may be familiar, and the trajectory from Bible to democracy may be one that other devout people might consider and adjust to their own circumstances – not as mechanical reproduction, as that is impossible because contexts vary, but so that functional equivalents may be developed.

- Religious communities may be interested in the question: How do "new evangelicals" retain their religious values while embracing liberal, constitutional law and cooperating with non-believers?
- Secularists may be interested in knowing: How do "new evangelicals" embrace pluralism and liberal, constitutional law, even as they retain religious values?

It is this work that I wrote about in my book, to be published in Germany in the fall of 2010 (Berlin University Press) and in the US (Eerdmans Publishing).

Suggestions for the Future

In thinking of how I can be of further use to the Wiko, two things come to mind: to bring more dance here, as music and the plastic arts are already somewhat established, and to develop a structure for the ongoing study of religion and politics. This might be to have a Fellows' working group on the topic each year, or most years, somewhat like the continuing presence of biology. Or it may be some other structure. I'd like to discuss with the staff how this might come about in a way that would be of most benefit.