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THE VULNERABILITY OF THE NAKED SQUARE

If any phrase coined in the last several decades deserves to permanently enter the language of everyday understanding, it is “the naked public square.” Then Pastor, now Father Neuhaus was not mounting an argument in favor of crèches in the town square at Christmastime. No, his sights are set on the much larger target of the “secular city” and its implications: a place destined to become like Narnia under the reign of the White Queen, a place where it is always winter but never Christmas.

Take religion out of public life, and you have a naked public square. But not for long. The state will quickly fill the void, which is a frightening prospect indeed. Imagine the feds in charge of moral truth; imagine us believing in them. Impossible? Ask the survivors of fascism and communism.

We need, as Father Neuhaus concludes, “the critical tutelage of traditions that refuse to leave ‘man on his own.’” Or, as Edmund Burke put it, “People will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors.”

Martin Luther King, Jr. and Jerry Falwell. Friends of both would likely be offended by the suggestion that they are in any way similar. And yet they are, I believe. Of course they are also strikingly different figures, with quite different analyses of what is wrong with America and what ought to be done about it. They were on opposite sides of the civil rights struggle in the fifties and sixties. (Without going so far as to say that King was right, the Falwells regularly acknowledge that they were wrong on race.)

There is the sharpest contrast between King’s enprincipled nonviolence and Falwell’s advocacy of bellicose toughness in dealing with the Communists. Numerous other differences, political and theological, could be itemized. But in this

they are similar: both Martin Luther King and Jerry Falwell disrupt the business of secular America by an appeal to religiously based public values.

Although in quite different ways, both are profoundly patriotic figures. Dr. King's dream was of America as an exemplar of racial and social justice, an anticipation of that "beloved community" promised by God. The patriotic fervor with which Dr. King invoked an American promise is often forgotten. But the March on Washington, for instance, can never be forgotten by those who were there, nor, one hopes, by the millions who have watched its replay on television documentaries. On that oppressively hot Wednesday afternoon of August 28, 1963, before the Lincoln Memorial, a baritone trumpet sought to recall America to its better self. "Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand, signed the Emancipation Proclamation," Dr. King began. He then described the ways in which the promise had not been kept and rhetorically etched the shape of its fulfillment. "This will be the day when all God's children will be able to sing with new meaning 'My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride, from every mountain side, let freedom ring.'" Lest we succumb to the prejudice that patriotic rhetoric is by definition ignoble, the peroration deserves to be committed to memory.

When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of that old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we are free at last!"

A biographer of King, who had learned in the school of economic determinism that moral appeals are but the instrumental disguise of class conflict, says of the March on Washington speech: "This was rhetoric almost without content, but this was, after all, a day of heroic fantasy." Such a comment suggests that the impingement of religious vision upon the public square can be permitted from time to time—if it is employed in the right causes, and if it is not taken too seriously. Thus also today's discharge of religious language in public space is assumed to hide narrow partisan interests. Although immeasurably less eloquent or persuasive than Dr. King's, contemporary religious rhetoric of populist patriotism deserves to be treated as seriously. To treat it seriously does not, of course, mean that one agrees. But when today's political preachers lift up a vision of a morally rejuvenated America serving as the base for global evangelism and as the defense against atheistic totalitarianism, there is no good reason to doubt that they are—to use that much overworked word—sincere. That is, it is not necessarily suspect language, language employed to advance some purpose other than the purpose indicated by the language itself.

To be sure, activists in whatever cause employ—and even, in the negative sense of the term, exploit—language in order to conceal loyalties and heighten emotional commitment. Activism is inescapably concerned not for disinterested

truth but for *effective* truth, truth that is effective in advancing the purpose at hand. From this reality derives the pervasive mendacity that distorts all political engagement, to a greater or lesser degree. That being said, it remains important to note which rhetoric is chosen to advance the cause. Few leaders are so false to the core as to choose a rhetoric for its manipulative effect alone. As skeptical as we may rightly be about appeals to moral ideals, it is reasonable to believe that the ideals by which leaders would call others to judgment are the ideals by which, at least in their more reflective moments, they believe they are themselves judged. This observation is not invalidated by La Rochefoucauld's famous maxim, "Hypocrisy is the homage that vice pays to virtue." The truth of the maxim does not allow even the greatest cynic to be dismissive about moral ideals in public discourse. On the contrary, the hypocrisies by which we know ourselves to fail are of decisive importance. Be they hypocrisies or be they truths nobly adhered to, they are the moral points of reference by which communities are called to accountability. My point is not to suggest that either Dr. King or current political preachers are hypocritical. It is to emphasize that they are alike in proposing a vision of public virtue and that that vision is religiously based.

The assertion that binds together otherwise different causes is the claim that only a transcendent, a religious, vision can turn this society from certain disaster and toward the fulfillment of its destiny. In this connection "destiny" is but another word for purpose. From what-ever point on the political spectrum such an assertion is made, it challenges the conventional wisdom that America is a secular society. In recent decades we have become accustomed to believe that *of course* America is a secular society. That, in the minds of many, is what is meant by the separation of church and state. But this way of thinking is of relatively recent vintage. As late as 1931 the Supreme Court could assert without fear of contradiction, "We are a Christian people, according to one another the equal right of religious freedom, and acknowledging with reverence the duty of obedience to the will of God." The 1931 case had to do with whether a conscientious objector to war could become a citizen. After the above statement about obedience to God, the court concluded, "But, also, we are a nation with the duty to survive." Citizenship was denied (*US v. Macintosh*).

In 1952, in a dispute over students getting off from public schools in released time for religious instruction, Justice Douglas, hardly a religiously observant man, wrote, "We are a religious people whose institutions presuppose a Supreme Being" (*Zorach v. Clauson*). As time went on, however, the court's references to religion had less and less to do with what is usually meant by religion. That is, religion no longer referred to those communal traditions of ultimate beliefs and practices ordinarily called religion. Religion, in the court's meaning, became radically individualized and privatized. Religion became a synonym for conscience. For instance, in cases again related to conscientious objection, exemption from the military draft was to be allowed on the "registrant's moral, ethical, or religious beliefs

about what is right and wrong [provided] those beliefs be held with the strength of traditional religious convictions” (*Welsh v. U.S.*, 1970). Thus religion is no longer a matter of content but of sincerity. It is no longer a matter of communal values but of individual conviction. In short, it is no longer a public reality and therefore cannot interfere with public business.

Such a religious evacuation of the public square cannot be sustained, either in concept or in practice. When religion in any traditional or recognizable form is excluded from the public square, it does not mean that the public square is in fact naked. This is the other side of the “naked public square” metaphor. When recognizable religion is excluded, the vacuum will be filled by *ersatz* religion, by religion bootlegged into public space under other names. Again, to paraphrase Spinoza: transcendence abhors a vacuum. The reason why the naked public square cannot, in fact, remain naked is in the very nature of law and laws. If law and laws are not seen to be coherently related to basic presuppositions about right and wrong, good and evil, they will be condemned as illegitimate. After having excluded traditional religion, then, the legal and political trick is to address questions of right and wrong in a way that is not “contaminated” by the label “religious.” This relatively new sleight-of-hand results in what many have called “civil religion.” It places a burden upon the law to act religiously without being suspected of committing religion. While social theorists might talk about “civil religion,” the courts dare not do so, for that too would be an unconstitutional “establishment” of religion.

Admittedly, it is all very confusing. The late Alexander Bickel of Yale recognized more clearly than most that law inevitably engages ultimate beliefs about right and wrong. If law is to be viewed as legitimate, it must be backed by moral judgment. But, it is argued, in a society where moral judgments differ in source and conclusion, the final grounding of moral judgment must be disguised so as not to give democratic offense. It must be grounded so *generally* so as to obscure the particularities of religious disagreement in a pluralistic society. Bickel proposes a way in which this might be done:

The function of the Justices ... is to immerse themselves in the tradition of our society and of kindred societies that have gone before, in history and in the sediment of history which is law, and in the thought and the vision of the philosophers and the poets. The Justices will then be fit to extract “fundamental presuppositions” from their deepest selves, but in fact from the evolving morality of our tradition. ... The search for the deepest controlling sources, for the precise “how” and the final “whence” of the judgment may, after all, end in the attempt to express the inexpressible. This is not to say that the duty to judge the judgment might as well be abandoned. The inexpressible can be recognized, even though one is unable to parse it.

This is an elegantly convoluted way of thinking about right and wrong in a democratic society that in fact understands its morality to be derived from the Judeo-Christian tradition. Bickel’s proposal is for a semi-sanitized public square, for a legal process that is religious in function but dare not speak the name of religion.

(“Philosophers and poets” are admitted, be it noted, but not prophets or religious ethicists and teachers.) The tortured reasoning required by the exclusion of identifiable religion is surely a puzzle to many, perhaps most, Americans. It may be that they are puzzled because they do not understand the requirements of a pluralistic society. Or they may be puzzled because they are more impressed by the claim that this is a democratic society. In a democratic society, presumably, the public business is carried on in conversation with the actual values of people who *are* the society. In a survey of North Carolinians in the 1970s, seventy-four percent agree with the statement: “Human rights come from God and not merely from laws.” Seventy-eight percent claim the U.S. flag is “sacred.” And, despite Vietnam and all that, a third assent to the proposition, “America is God’s chosen nation today.” North Carolinians may be more “traditional” than other Americans on these scores although there is no reason to assume that. One suspects, rather, that there is among Americans a deep and widespread uneasiness about the denial of the obvious. The obvious is that, in some significant sense, this is, as the Supreme Court said in 1931, a Christian people. The popular intuition is that this fact ought, somehow, to make a difference. It is not an embarrassment to be denied or disguised. It is an inescapable part of what Bickel calls the “tradition of our society and of kindred societies that have gone before.” Not only is it tradition in the sense of historic past; it is demonstrably the present source of moral vitalities by which we measure our virtues and hypocrisies.

The notion that this is a secular society is relatively new. It might be proposed that, while the society is incorrigibly religious, the state is secular. But such a disjunction between society and state is a formula for governmental delegitimation. In a democratic society, state and society must draw from the same moral well. In addition, because transcendence abhors a vacuum, the state that styles itself as secular will almost certainly succumb to *secularism*. Because government cannot help but make moral judgments of an ultimate nature, it must, if it has in principle excluded identifiable religion, make those judgments by “secular” reasoning that is given the force of religion. Because this process is already advanced in the spheres of law and public education, there is a measure of justice in the complaints about “secular humanism.” Secular humanism, in this case, is simply the term unhappily chosen for *ersatz* religion.

More than that, the notion of the secular state can become the prelude to totalitarianism. That is, once religion is reduced to nothing more than privatized conscience, the public square has only two actors in it—the state and the individual. Religion as a mediating structure—a community that generates and transmits moral values—is no longer available as a countervailing force to the ambitions of the state. Whether in Hitler’s Third Reich or in today’s sundry states professing Marxist-Leninism, the chief attack is not upon individual religious belief. Individual religious belief can be dismissed scornfully as superstition, for it finally poses little threat to the power of the state. No, the chief attack is upon the *institutions* that bear

and promulgate belief in a transcendent reality by which the state can be called to judgment. Such institutions threaten the totalitarian proposition that everything is to be within the state, nothing is to be outside the state.

It is to be expected that the move in this discussion from the naked public square to the dangers of totalitarianism will be resisted by some readers. It may seem too abrupt and even extreme. We will be coming back to the subject in order to fill in some of the intermediate steps. At the moment, suffice it to register a degree of sympathy with those who resist talk about the dangers of totalitarianism. They object, quite rightly, that many discussions of the threat of totalitarianism are only thinly veiled attacks upon Communism. A one-sided attack upon Communism, they protest, tends to overlook the many forms of authoritarian government that also violate our understandings of democratic freedom. Authoritarian, sometimes brutally authoritarian, regimes with which the United States is allied end up being tolerated or even lauded in order to maintain a common front against the Communist adversary. There is considerable merit to this critique, unfortunately. Anti-Communism is a necessary but hardly a sufficient basis for understanding the perils of our day. In this light, then, one can sympathize with those who resist much contemporary talk about the threat of totalitarianism.

A less admirable component in that resistance, however, is the naive notion that "it can't happen here." Those who subscribe to this notion are too often oblivious of the novelty and fragility of liberal democracy as a political system. They are inadequately sensitive to the distinctly minority status of such an order in our world. It is thought that liberal democracy and the freedoms associated with it are somehow "normal," part of the "establishment." The new and exciting thing, in this view, is the proposal of alternatives to liberal democracy. In the longer reaches of history, however, liberal democracy appears as a curious exception to the various tyrannies under which human beings have suffered. Of the 160 member nations of the United Nations, probably less than thirty qualify as democracies in the sense that we tend to take for granted. This historical and contemporary perspective is essential. Without such a perspective, it is impossible to understand what Americans from Jefferson to Lincoln to John F. Kennedy intended when they spoke of America as an "experiment" launched and sustained in defiance of the "normal" course of history.

Those who think all talk about a totalitarian threat to be exaggerated also evidence an insouciance, sometimes a willful ignorance, with respect to the fact that liberal democracy does have declared adversaries. There are adversaries such as the authoritarian regimes of South America, South Africa, and the Philippines. In a significant way, however, these authoritarian regimes are not adversaries. That is, they do not *claim* to be adversaries, they do not oppose liberal democracy in principle; rather, they often claim to aspire to liberal democracy, asserting that their denial of democratic freedoms is only a temporary expedient on the way to that goal. And in fact we are not without recent examples of authoritarian societies that have

been moved toward democracy; Spain, Portugal, and Nigeria are cases in point. In both the long and short term, the more ominous adversaries of liberal democracy are those forces that are totalitarian *in principle*. The only global, systematic movement of this kind today is Marxist-Leninism. In the 1930s, Mussolini's Fascism and Hitler's National Socialism represented another such movement. After World War II and despite loose talk that equates any repressive regime with "fascism," only Marxist-Leninism is left as a theoretically comprehensive and, to many, morally compelling global adversary of liberal democracy.

In such a world it is not extreme but elementary common sense to be concerned about the threat of totalitarianism. "It can't happen here" is but a form of whistling in the dark. It is strange that among the foremost whistlers are some civil libertarians who are otherwise always reminding us of how precarious are the constitutional freedoms that we are too inclined to take for granted. The threat of totalitarianism is not posed chiefly by the prospect of defeat as a result of nuclear war. Nor is the main anxiety that the Soviet Union will launch a victorious march across Alaska and down through Canada. The chief threat comes from a collapse of the idea of freedom and of the social arrangements necessary to sustaining liberal democracy. Crucial to such a democratic order is a public square in which there are many actors. The state is one actor among others. Indispensable to this arrangement are the institutional actors, such as the institutions of religion, that make claims of ultimate or transcendent meaning. The several actors in the public square—government, corporations, education, Communications, religion—are there to challenge, check, and compete with one another. They also cooperate with one another, or sometimes one will cooperate with another in competition with the others. In a democracy the role of cooperation is not to be deemed morally superior to the roles of checking and competing. Giving unqualified priority to the virtue of cooperation, as some Christians do, is the formula for the death of democracy.

There is an inherent and necessary relationship between democracy and pluralism. Pluralism, in this connection, does not mean simply that there are many different kinds of people and institutions in societal play. More radically than that, it means that there are con-tenders striving with one another to define what the play is about— what are the rules and what the goal. The democratic soul is steeled to resist the allure of a "cooperation" that would bring that contention to a premature closure. Indeed, within the bond of civility, the democratic soul exults in that contention. He exults not because contention is a good in itself, although there is a legitimate joy in contending, but because it is a necessary provisional good short of the coming of the kingdom of God. He strives to sustain the contention within the bond of civility, also, because he recognizes the totalitarianism that is the presently available alternative to such democratic contention.

John Courtney Murray, the great Jesuit analyst of American democracy, understood the nature of the contest in which we are engaged. For many years his work was viewed as suspect by church authorities but he was soundly vindicated

by Vatican Council II. Christian thinkers such as Murray and Reinhold Niebuhr are frequently discounted today as old hat. Such mindless dismissal results in part from a desire to espouse the latest thing. It is a bias of the superficially educated that books written thirty years ago, not to say three hundred years ago, are passé. In Christian circles this dismissal takes the curious twist of being conducted in the name of the most current version of “true Christianity,” based upon biblical books written two thousand and more years ago. Murray, a deeply educated man, understood that epochs are not demarcated by publishers’ seasons. The test of our epoch, he understood, is to sustain the democratic “proposition” in the face of the human yearning for monism. Monism is another word for totalitarianism, and Murray described it this way:

[The] cardinal assertion is a thorough-going monism, political, social, juridical, religious: there is only one Sovereign, one society, one law, one faith. And the cardinal denial is of the Christian dualism of powers, societies, and laws—spiritual and temporal, divine and human. Upon this denial follows the absorption of the Church in the community, the absorption of the community in the state, the absorption of the state in the party, and the assertion that the party-state is the supreme spiritual and moral, as well as political authority and reality. It has its own absolutely autonomous ideological substance and its own absolutely independent purpose: it is the ultimate bearer of human destiny. Outside of this One Sovereign there is nothing. Or rather, what presumes to stand outside is “the enemy.”

The prelude to this totalitarian monism is the notion that society can be ordered according to secular technological reason without reference to religious grounded meaning. Murray again:

And if this country is to be overthrown from within or from without, I would suggest that it will not be overthrown by Communism. It will be overthrown because it will have made an impossible experiment. It will have undertaken to establish a technological order of most marvelous intricacy, which will have been constructed and will operate without relations to true political ends: and this technological order will hang, as it were, suspended over a moral confusion; and this moral confusion will itself be suspended over a spiritual vacuum. This would be the real danger resulting from a type of fallacious, fictitious, fragile unity that could be created among us.

This “vacuum” with respect to political and spiritual truth is the naked public square. If we are “overthrown,” the root cause of the de-feat would lie in the “impossible” effort to sustain that vacuum. Murray is right: not Communism, but the effort to establish and maintain the naked public square would be the source of the collapse. Totalitarian monism would be the consequence of such a collapse. Because it is the only totalitarian ideology in play today, the consequence would likely be Marxist-Leninist; which is to say it would be, in one form or another, Communism. The probability that it would be a distinctively American form of Communism will not vindicate those who now say “It can’t happen here.” Americans may, with a little help from their adversaries, find their own distinctive way to terminate the democratic experiment to which they gave birth. The fact that democracy’s demise

bears the marking “Made in America” will console only national chauvinists. It will be little comfort to those whose devotion to America was derived from their devotion to the democratic idea.

The naked public square is, as Murray suggests, an “impossible” project. That, however, does not deter people from attempting it. In the minds of some secularists the naked public square is a desirable goal. They subscribe to the dogma of the secular Enlightenment that, as people become more enlightened (educated), religion will wither away; or, if it does not wither away, it can be safely sealed off from public consideration, reduced to a private eccentricity. Our argument is that the naked public square is not desirable, even if it were possible. It is not desirable in the view of believers because they are inescapably entangled in the belief that the moral truths of religion have a universal and public validity. The Ten Commandments, to take an obvious example, have a normative status. They are not, as it has been said. Ten Suggestions or Ten Significant Moral Insights to be more or less appreciated according to one’s subjective disposition. Even if one is not a believer, the divorce of public business from the moral vitalities of the society is not desirable if one is committed to the democratic idea. In addition to not being desirable, however, we have argued that the naked public square is not possible. It is an illusion, for the public square cannot and does not remain naked. When particularist religious values and the institutions that bear them are excluded, the inescapable need to make public moral judgments will result in an elite construction of a normative morality from sources and principles not democratically recognized by the society.

The truly naked public square is at best a transitional phenomenon. It is a vacuum begging to be filled. When the democratically affirmed institutions that generate and transmit values are excluded, the vacuum will be filled by the agent left in control of the public square, the state. In this manner, a perverse notion of the disestablishment of religion leads to the establishment of the state as church. Not without reason, religion is viewed by some as a repressive imposition upon the public square. They would cast out the devil of particularist religion and thus put the public square in proper secular order. Having cast out the one devil, they unavoidably invite the entrance of seven devils worse than the first.

The totalitarian alternative edges in from the wings, waiting impatiently for the stage to be cleared of competing actors. Most important is that the stage be cleared of those religious actors that presume to assert absolute values and thus pose such a troublesome check upon the pretensions of the state. The state is not waiting with a set of absolute values of its own or with a ready-made religion. Far from waiting with a package of absolutes, in a society where the remnants of procedural democracy survive the state may be absolutely committed only to the relativization of all values. In that instance, however, the relativity of all things becomes the absolute. Without the counter-claims of “meaning-bestowing” institutions of religion, there is not an absence of religion but, rather, the triumph of the religion of relativity. It is a religion that must in principle deny that it is religious. It is the religion

that dare not speak its name. In its triumph there is no contender that can, in Peter Berger's phrase, "relativize the relativizers."

The entrance of the seven devils that take over the cleansed public square is not an alarmist scenario. Conceptually there is no alternative to it, unless of course one believes that a society can get along without a normative ethic. Admittedly, there are those who do believe this. They are, as Alisdair MacIntyre contends, the barbarians. "This time," writes MacIntyre, "the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time." That the barbarians are composed of the most sophisticated and educated elites of our society makes them no less barbarian. The barbarians are those who in principle refuse to recognize a normative ethic or the reality of public virtue.

The barbarians are the party of emancipation from the truths civilized people consider self-evident. The founding fathers of the American experiment declared certain truths to be self-evident and moved on from that premise. It is a measure of our decline into what may be the new dark ages that today we are compelled to produce evidence for the self-evident. Not that it does much good to produce such evidence, however, for such evidences are ruled to be inadmissible since, again in principle, it is asserted that every moral judgment is simply an instance of emotivism, a statement of subjective preference that cannot be "imposed" upon others. MacIntyre's dismal reading of our times is no doubt an accurate description of the *logic* of contemporary philosophical, moral, and legal reasoning. Fortunately, the real world is not terribly logical. The vitalities of democracy protest that dour logic. Populist resentment against the logic of the naked public square is a source of hope. That resentment is premised upon an alternative vision that calls for a new articulation. When it finds its voice, it will likely sound very much like the voice of Christian America. That voice will not be heard and thus will not prevail in the public square, however, unless it is a voice that aims to reassure those who dissent from the vision.

We have said that conceptually there is no alternative to a *de facto* state religion once traditional religion is driven from the public square. Even if some were to argue that an alternative could be hypothetically conceived, we must attend to actual historical experience. We have witnessed again and again the entrance of the seven devils worse than the first. In every instance except that of Italian Fascism and the Third Reich, in this century they have entered under the banner of Communism. We who embrace the liberal tradition have suffered from a debilitating obtuseness on this score. It has too often been left to conservatives and reactionaries to point out that the emperor carries a very nasty club. Afraid to be thought anti-Communist, a species of liberalism has degenerated to fevered anti-anti-Communism.

This is the unpopular truth underscored by Susan Sontag in the dramatic 1982 confrontation at Town Hall in New York City. The meeting, the reader may recall, was for the purpose of expressing solidarity with Solidarity, the Polish labor movement that had been brutally repressed under martial law. The meeting was

sponsored in part by the *Nation*, a magazine of self-consciously liberal orthodoxy. An impressive lineup of literary and entertainment celebrities were expected to say nice things about the revolutionary proletariat in Poland and the dangers of fascist repression in the United States. Ms. Sontag went beyond expectations. She pointed out that the repression in Poland was not an aberration but inherent in the theory and practice of Marxist-Leninism. She noted that the left routinely railed against the threat of fascism.

We had identified the enemy as fascism. We heard the demonic language of fascism. We believed in, or at least applied a double standard to, the angelic language of communism... The emigres from communist countries we didn't listen to, who found it far easier to get published in the *Reader's Digest* than in *The Nation* or the *New Statesman*, were telling the truth. Now we hear them. Why didn't we hear them before?... The result was that many of us, and I include myself, did not understand the nature of the communist tyranny.... What the recent Polish events illustrate is a truth that we should have understood a very long time ago: that communism *is* fascism. ... Not only is fascism the probable destiny of all communist societies, but communism is in itself a variant of fascism. Fascism with a human face.

The conclusion to be drawn is not that the *Reader's Digest* is the oracle of truth. Anti-Communism combined with American boosterism is not a sufficient political philosophy. But, as Ms. Sontag would argue, neither is anti-anti-Communism sufficient. Alexander Solzhenitsyn comes closer to being an oracle on these questions. Commenting on the Polish developments following the emergence of Solidarity in 1981, he notes the ways in which sundry socialists of a Marxist bent attempt to dissociate themselves from what is happening in that tortured land, or even try to claim Solidarity as a representative of "true socialism" in protest against socialism's Communist distortion. "It is the Communist ideology that, with its heavy steps, is crushing Poland," writes Solzhenitsyn, "and let us admit it is not entirely alien to the socialists, though they are protesting vehemently: The ideology of any communism is based on the coercive power of the state. Let's not be mistaken: Solidarity inspired itself not by socialism but by Christianity." Beyond reasonable doubt, it is the presence of the Catholic Church in the Polish public square that prevents the regime from realizing its ambition for total control.

A literal example of the consistently denuded public square is, of course, Red Square in Moscow. Because it is in the nature of public squares not to remain naked, there is the sacred shrine of Lenin's tomb where thousands are transported each day to stand in line, waiting their turn to pay homage. Within this circumscribed space the maxim, "All within the state, nothing outside the state," is fulfilled. On several occasions in the early eighties a few bold Soviet citizens attempted to unfold banners appealing for peace and disarmament. They were promptly arrested and hustled off to psychiatric clinics. As Murray tried to help us understand, in such a society opposition to the will of the party is by definition a sign of insanity, or worse. *Tass*, the official newspaper (there being, of course, no other kind),

described the dissident “Committee to Establish Trust Between the U.S.S.R. and the U.S.A.” as an “act of provocation of Western secret services.” According to *The New York Times* report, the protesters were condemned as “anti-Sovieteers, renegades and criminals ... a handful of swindlers who do not represent anyone in the Soviet Union.”

In our society the proponents of the naked public square do not describe themselves as proponents of the naked public square. Some are technocratic liberals, some are secular pragmatists, some are libertarians of either the leftist or rightist sort. Some are socialists who insist that we need to establish “rational control” of political, economic, and cultural forces in order to forge something like a national purpose and plan. Whatever the rationale or intention, however, the presupposition is the naked public square, the exclusion of particularist religious and moral belief from public discourse. And whatever the intention, because the naked square cannot remain naked, the direction is toward the state-as-church, toward totalitarianism. And again, the available form of totalitarianism—an aggressively available form, so to speak—is Marxist-Leninism.

In one of his less felicitous statements, President Carter in a major foreign policy address cautioned against our “inordinate fear of Communism.” He did not make clear what measure of fear might be ordinate. Similarly, those who now underscore the dangers of Communism caution us against an inordinate fear of McCarthyism. Presumably, in this respect too there is a measure of fear that is ordinate. The present argument suggests that both fears are legitimate and necessary. Of the two, McCarthyism as a form of what Richard Hofstadter called “the paranoid style” in American politics is the more immediate possibility. We have been through that and the scars are still touchable. In the longer term—say, the next thirty to one hundred years—totalitarianism is the more ominous prospect. This does not mean we should risk “just a little” McCarthyism in order to ward off that prospect. It does mean that we should stop calling a sensible anxiety about that prospect “McCarthyism.” It does mean we should stop telling ourselves and others that the choice is between McCarthyism, which truncates liberal democracy, and totalitarianism, which terminates liberal democracy. An open-eyed awareness of the fragility of liberal democracy, and of the alternatives to it, is the best insurance against being reduced to such a dismal choice. As that awareness is heightened, we will as a society be more resistant both to the totalitarian temptation and to the illusion that democracy can be saved by becoming less democratic.

In 1981 the Institute on Religion and Democracy was established in Washington, D.C. Its declared purpose was to lift up the public significance of religion in the democratic process, to promote democratic ideals within the religious communities, and, as a necessary correlate of that, to oppose those dynamics in the churches that seem inclined toward the totalitarian temptation. “Christianity and Democracy” is the Institute’s manifesto-like assertion of what it means by democracy:

Democratic government is limited government. It is limited in the claims it makes and in the power it seeks to exercise. Democratic government understands itself to be accountable to values and to truth which transcend any regime or party. Thus in the United States of America we declare ours to be a nation “under God,” which means, first of all, a nation under judgment. In addition, limited government means that a clear distinction is made between the state and the society. The state is not the whole of the society, but is one important actor in the society. Other institutions—notably the family, the Church, educational, economic and cultural enterprises—are at least equally important actors in the society. They do not exist or act by sufferance of the state. Rather, these spheres have their own peculiar sovereignty which must be respected by the state.

The statement goes on to affirm the importance of participation, equality, and fairness in a democratic society. Without dwelling on the point, it notes that “as a matter of historical fact democratic governance exists only where the free market plays a large part in a society’s economy.” The statement and the Institute received widespread (some would say inordinate) attention in the general media and in the churches. They were the object of a formal debate sponsored by the National Council of Churches and of numerous critiques by theologians and social philosophers on all points of the political spectrum.

The debate produced around groups such as the Institute on Religion and Democracy gives some reason to believe that this decade could be remembered as a time of reinvigorated appreciation of the democratic idea among Christians in America. The intuition of the connection between democracy and religion was until recently part of the foundational consensus supporting what Murray called “the American proposition.” It was a constitutive element of the vital center in American thought. The vital center, it will be recalled, was the title Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., chose for his 1949 manifesto in favor of democratic freedom. *The Vital Center* is in the tradition of Walter Lippmann’s “public philosophy” and John Dewey’s “common faith.” If one did not know that *The Vital Center* was written thirty-five years ago, she would suspect it was written by one of those who today are called neo-conservative.

It is a curiosity of our time that the main-stream liberalism of a few decades ago—and nobody has more assiduously attended to his credentials as a mainstream liberal than Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.—is the neo-conservatism of today. The mainstream liberal argument then was, quite rightly, viewed as a radical proposition on the screen of world-historical change. Schlesinger wrote:

Our problem is not resources or leadership. It is primarily one of faith and time: faith in the value of our own freedoms, and time to do the necessary things to save them. To achieve the fullness of faith, we must renew the traditional sources of American radicalism and seek out ways to maintain our belief at a high pitch of vibration. To achieve a sufficiency of time, we must ward off the totalitarian threat to free society—and do so without permitting ourselves to become the slaves of Stalinism, as any man may become the slave of the things he hates.

Schlesinger and those like him then viewed with approval, indeed the highest hope, the role of the “affirmative” or “positive” state. They knew there were dangers in the self-aggrandizement of the state, but the acknowledgment of the importance of other public actors is almost an aside:

In the short run, the failure of voluntary initiative invites the spread of state power. In the long run, the disappearance of voluntary association paves the way for the pulverization of the social structure essential to totalitarianism. By the revitalization of voluntary associations, we can siphon off emotions which might otherwise be driven to the solutions of despair. We can create strong bulwarks against the totalitarianization of society.

But this nod to what we have called the mediating structures of society is almost cancelled out by the emphasis upon state power. To be sure, Schlesinger observed then, “We have strayed too far from the in-sights of Burke and de Maistre; we have forgotten that constitutions work only as they reflect an actual sense of community.” He also warned against “arrogant forms of individualism.” “It is only so far as ... individualism derives freely from community, that democracy will be immune to the virus of totalitarianism.” The reiterated “we” in Schlesinger’s writing however, is finally the “we” of the total society, the “we” of the state. This is because, in his view, the great domestic threat is the anti-democratic influence of the Corporation, of “the business plutocracy.” “The Corporation began to impersonalize the economic order,” wrote Schlesinger.

Impersonality produced an irresponsibility which was chilling the lifeblood of society. The state consequently had to expand its authority in order to preserve the ties which hold society together. The history of governmental intervention has been the history of the growing ineffectiveness of the private conscience as a means of social control. The only alternative is the growth of the public conscience, whose natural expression is the democratic government.

There, in succinct form, is the nub of the dispute. The choice, we would contend, is not between the private conscience and the public conscience expressed by the state. The private conscience, as Schlesinger also wanted to say in part, is not private in the sense of being deracinated, torn from its roots. It is not “arrogantly” individualistic. Private conscience too is communal; it is shaped by the myriad communities from which we learn to “put the world together” in an order that is responsive to our understanding of right and wrong. As for “the public conscience,” it is a categorical fallacy. It harks back to Rousseau’s mythology of a “general will” of which the state is the expression. “The Public” does not have a conscience. “The People” does not have a conscience. Only persons and persons-in-community have consciences.

Schlesinger’s enthusiasm for the triumph of “the affirmative state” is not widely shared today, neither on the right nor on the left. It is not merely that there is a groundswell of opposition to “big government” or an anti-modernist passion for decentralization in obedience to the axiom that “small is beautiful.” It is all that,

but it is not merely that. It is rather that there is a growing awareness of the limits of the political, a recognition that most of the things that matter most are attended to in communities that are not government and should not be governmentalized. This awareness is what some critics describe as a “retribalization” or “reprivatization” of American life. But “tribe” used in this way is simply a pejorative for community. And, far from this being a process of reprivatization, it is an expansion of our understanding of what is public. We are no longer content to let “public” be synonymous with “government.” Thus, for example, in education the distinction is not between public schools and private schools. It is rather between government schools and voluntary schools, or “schools of choice.” All schools that advance a public interest and meet the needs of their relevant publics are public schools.

Jefferson, Jackson, Lippmann, Dewey, Schlesinger, and a host of others strove to articulate democracy as a credal cause. The last chapter of *The Vital Center* is titled “Freedom: A Fighting Faith.” But finally it is a faith in which freedom is the end as well as the means. It is a faith devoid of transcendent purpose that can speak to the question of what freedom is *for*. This is, of necessity, a religious question. The truly “positive” state that presumes to address this question becomes the state-as-church. The Marxists are right: the political freedom of liberal democracy is essentially a “negative” freedom (freedom *from*). If we are not to succumb to totalitarianism, the positive meaning of freedom must be addressed in a manner, and through institutions, beyond the competence of what is ordinarily meant by politics or the government. The public square is the stage of many actors, not all of whom are following the same script. It is very confusing. It is democratic.

Historically, the churches in America have been leading actors in voicing the positive side of freedom’s question. The purpose of Christianity in America, it is said somewhat scornfully, was to establish “The Righteous Empire.” In the nineteenth century there was the hope to construct “a complete Christian commonwealth.” The mainline churches, as they are called, have retired such rhetoric in recent decades. Many of their members, joined by today’s moral majoritarians, want to pick it up again. Those who retired the idea tended to share the liberal assumption that the tasks of moral definition could and should be taken over by “the public conscience” expressed through the state. In the frequently uncritical affirmation of “the secular city,” it was thought a triumph that the churches could step back from what had been a transitional role in the public square. Now it is recognized, however, that man has not “come of age” in the way that many thought. We still need, we more urgently need, the critical tutelage of traditions that refuse to leave “man on his own.”

Negative freedom is dangerous to ourselves and others if it is negative freedom alone. As Murray argued, it is not only dangerous but it is “impossible.” It is most dangerous *because* it is impossible. That is, its very attempt invites the termination of the democratic freedom in the name of which the attempt is made. The question is not *whether* the questions of positive freedom will be addressed.

The question is by *whom*—by what reasonings, what traditions, what institutions, what authorities—they will be addressed. If they are to be addressed democratically in a way that gives reasonable assurance of a democratic future, we must work toward an understanding of the public square that is both more comprehensive and more complex. Along the way to such an understanding, we must listen with critical sympathy to those who are speaking the very new-old language of Christian America.

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