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SOME NOTES ON RELIGION AND DEMOCRATIC LIBERTY

My intention is to discuss briefly several elements of the connection between liberal democracy and religion. This topic is decisive in much of Richard Neuhaus' work. Conserving liberty is a central task today, and religion's place in this task important, although controversial.

The orientation of my paper is toward this political or ethical issue, not toward faith as such. One should recognize, however, that from some secular standpoints the unlikelihood, improbability, or lack of evidence for revelation shapes from the start the seriousness with which one addresses the connection between religion and politics. From these standpoints, the moral height and strength of the Jewish and Christian revelations is not as such evidence of their truth. The fact that Farabi, Maimonides, Aquinas, Hobbes, Locke, Kant, and Hegel – and in their own way Plato and Aristotle – considered the issue of the connection between thought and faith does not show its intellectual power. We and they grapple with a problem that there is no special intellectual reason to deal with earnestly – as distinguished from historical or political reasons. The evidence for revelation is not greater than that of other possibilities one would not dream of taking seriously. Similar (although opposed) assurance may also govern those convinced by faith.

It is sometimes said that judgments about the importance or superiority of reason cannot escape from an original leap of faith not different in principle from faith as we ordinarily understand it. The choice to follow along reason's path must at first be irrational, or not demonstrated. One begins by assuming a superiority of reason that one cannot prove. Yet, this argument apparently does not lead those who doubt the evidence and authority of pious faith to take its claim more seriously. One reason is that, however reason begins, its journey can always remain open to

a reasonable showing of its superiority and necessity or, indeed, the superiority or necessity of faith. That reason cannot at first satisfy its own claim is not, for reason, a reason to eschew it.

Indeed, faith must work within a world of natural intelligibility in order to clarify and issue its commands, report its source, announce its justification, and so on. Religious commands must be intelligible if they are to be obeyed: what are they asking of whom, when, and where? This intelligibility seems, indeed, to show the superiority of reason as a first step, because nothing can be commanded or grasped altogether apart from intelligible speech, and, therefore, from reasonable articulation. This is not to say that the true meaning, bearing, and grounds of intelligibility are obvious. But the need to clarify them seems to be a rational need. In this sense, beginning with and even preferring reason is not arbitrary. Perhaps, moreover, openness to such reflections differentiates faith that can accord with reason and does not contradict or wish away the limits it imposes from arbitrary faith and obedience. Indeed, one should always ask how much the actions of a pious or obligatory life allow or require unbridled reflection or questioning, and how much of observant ritual or of faith can be defended by reason, that is, defended in its worth for character, liberty, justice, or good politics. In any event, we cannot altogether isolate the political question from the epistemological or theoretical one.

Toleration and Piety

The significance of our liberal democratic political orientation for religious practice itself becomes visible once we remember that for liberal democrats the chief religious virtue is tolerance, not piety.

Tolerance at first meant grudging acquiescence in religious practices different from one's own, not today's easy-going acceptance of those with different faiths, let alone active support of them. But it always suggests a character that tries to permit others to observe as they choose. This virtue is allied with legal toleration. Toleration limits and is intended to limit the public sway of any sect in particular, and, from a political or legal point of view, it equalizes them. Using law to aid religion, or treating observance as restricted unless publicly supported, is constitutionally impermissible. Particular beliefs may help to form practical judgment and goals, and belief generally can be aided or advanced with different degrees of subtlety. But, using public force to command belief, to support particular rituals, or to punish particular believers or non-believers is unacceptable.

The dominance of toleration as a virtue and in law is bound to affect religious observance and, ultimately, belief. Religion that requires or profits from public support – from mandated prayer to mandated keeping of the Sabbath, from political and educational tests to employment discrimination – is weakened, or transformed into belief that can do without such mandates. Together with the expansion of li-

berty and material wealth, toleration, indeed, even has the effect of making distinctions among believers who belong to different sects less relevant and pressing, or of advancing private and not merely public religious equality. This occurs even in countries that are dominated by a single religion. Religion becomes primarily a private matter, and the way is opened for new sects and new preachers.

The Tension between Faith and Liberal Democracy

The danger that toleration is intended to ameliorate helps make visible faith's tension with liberal democracy, especially when piety demands public support for orthodoxy and ritual. This danger is that religion becomes authoritative, or that the authority of religion is merged with the authority of law, leaving no justified room for unfaithful judgment and certainly not for the public effecting of such judgment. The natural openness that is connected to the imperfection of every regime becomes transformed by the religious-legal link into the perfection of this particular regime. Private choice becomes restricted, especially the private use of reason. Horizons of understanding and action are narrowed and constricted. Men become constrained, or their energies dissipated. In situations where religion is authoritative but where it is split from much day to day law, the hope for salvation turns attention away from improvement here and now.

The connection between piety and law is, because of our current attention to Islam, more broadly familiar to us now than it had become. It is visible intellectually in the link between piety and justice in Plato's *Euthyphro* and in his *Republic* and, especially, in his *Laws*. These dialogues attempt among other goals to clarify the degree to which we can make piety compatible with what reason teaches us about virtue and thought.

When piety dominates political life and our understanding of the soul's virtue, we may also find danger in the substance of what piety demands and ritual commands. This danger can be evident in the good things that faith requires or restricts. Piety can absent itself from reason to greater or lesser degrees. It can eschew natural satisfactions. It can advance the arbitrary and limit freedom. It can point sway from natural satisfactions. If it is universal, it can leave little room for challenge anywhere.

These difficulties are exacerbated by the fact that the meaning of mystery and revelation, the demands of law, ritual, and observance, and the proper way to form the soul – in short, the meaning of piety – all need to be interpreted. Religion often or, indeed, usually becomes in effect the rule of priests, and the wider its field, the wider the rule. One can in principle doubt or disclaim priestly authority because, as I have suggested, what is commanded and said about how to act, behave, think, and be educated piously must enter the realm of natural reason and evidence to be comprehended or obeyed.

But the degree to which doubt or criticism can effectively limit priestly teaching and rule is unclear. These considerations indicate the difficult relation between liberal democracy and public piety. The rule of priests is not self-rule by a liberal democratic people. The natural authority of individuals is not the authority of those with special access to tradition or revelation.

The justice of pious obedience is not the justice of equality under laws made by one's representatives. The goods favored by pious obedience are not the sensual satisfactions our equal natures demand, or the property connected to them. Nor are the virtues of humble obedience the same as the liberal virtues of responsible self-reliance and vigorous enterprise. Pious action, moreover, is not the continued attempt to resolve intellectual perplexity.

Religion and the Origin of Liberal Democracy

These discrepancies help to explain the attempt by modern thinkers from Machiavelli on to limit the sway of religion, of pious observance, of priestly control, and of other-worldliness. In particular, the authority of priests, and of those such as kings who derive their authority from them, is replaced by the evidence of one's own authority for oneself and the grounding of political authority in representation of ourselves. This attempt is most evident in John Locke, in the understanding of rights, authority and government that we see in the *Essay* and the *Two Treatises* as well as in the *Letter on Toleration*.

From the viewpoint of liberal democracy and its intellectual founders, piety suffers from still another defect that limits its attraction. As we have suggested, it is not always clear how a claim of revelation differs from strange, arbitrary, or unreasonable assertions. At the least, such claims often appear to be unscientific. For piety truly to be a virtue, one therefore suggests, it needs to be correlated with demands that are not irrational. But when we fit it together with what is reasonable, it seems more to favor traditional or Aristotelian virtue and understanding than it does the standpoint of modern science and the technology that modern science supports. This technology, however, seems to be central to the economic growth that is vital to liberal democracy, given its connection to equal self-reliance and material goods. In this way piety and liberal democracy pose special challenges to each other.

Religion's Compatibility with Liberal Democracy

Despite these difficulties, religion and liberal democracy are compatible in various ways, and it is these ways that provide mutual support between the two. These areas of convergence also help to explain why toleration, not piety, is our central

religious virtue. Liberal democracy encourages individuals to at first take an individual standpoint, to think of themselves primarily as individuals. Other attachments must be legally permissible on the basis of individual rights and authority, and they are finally grounded in individual choice. This means that all attachments are in principle voluntary, and most are in practice. This includes religious observance and affiliation. This voluntary and individual stance toward religion is one reason that toleration becomes desirable and is encouraged.

When attachments are voluntary, however, we wonder what enables us to have and secure the virtues of character that we need to use our individual rights vigorously. We wonder as well about what helps to generate and protect the immediate or emotional standpoints we need to treat others as if they enjoy the equal rights that we know intellectually belong to them. And, we wonder about the origin and security of the understanding of what is good that attracts us to use our rights well. We require good character and good institutions in regimes that are based on natural rights even though these institutions enjoy much less traditional and implicit power than they do in other regimes or places. Religion is among the practices that help to transmit the virtue, justice, and direction to what is high that we need in liberal democracy. This is so despite the fact that in liberal democracy the conditions of implicit attachment to religious institutions are weakened, and despite the contrast between the independent authority at the source of liberal democracy and a life of pious observance. Liberal democracy reduces the sway of ritual and piety, especially publicly.

The Liberal Benefit of Religion: Virtue and Institutions

Let us discuss more fully the place of virtue in liberal democracy, and religion's potential help in developing and establishing it – although, of course, we do not mean help for everything that calls itself virtue, by everything that calls itself religion. Liberal regimes are based on citizens who seek to secure their rights. For them to secure and enjoy their rights they require responsibility, the steadiness and training to do their jobs successfully and to amass the skills and other dispositions that this effectiveness requires. When so much relies on oneself rather than others one needs a responsible character. Indeed, when so much relies on each of us, attention to public matters must also arise from voluntary choice. This choice to attend to public matters is connected to the wish and impulse to take on more and more responsibility, to advance one's responsibility in larger and larger fields, and, thereby, to advance the common interest together with one's own.

The effective use of rights also requires the more typical "bourgeois" virtues of industriousness, probity, and considerateness. Each of these virtues, and modified versions of classic virtues such as courage too, can be aided by religion. For, Christianity, Judaism, and other religions can lead one to wish to elevate oneself, to

make the best of oneself, to think of others even as one thinks of oneself, to see in each of us a certain equality with others.

Of course, religion's general aid to character does not simply require liberal democratic regimes, although responsibility and the other characteristically liberal virtues cannot flourish apart from liberal democracy. Religion may even work against responsible self-reliance by developing, instead, pious humility, cruel insistence on conversion, or "spiritual" disdain for property and wealth. Liberal democracy, on the other hand, requires that we appreciate property and wealth.

Indeed, property is a chief outward form of our inner freedom, and material wealth a more or less neutral means to the variety of ends that free men pursue. Nonetheless, the discipline and attention to others that religion often inculcates can work together with liberal democracy when the character religion has in mind and aids involves attentive industry and responsibility – not responsibility as wallowing in guilt but as seeking to be effective and successful. From this viewpoint, religion and the character that liberal democracy needs can be brought together, although more on liberalism's terms than on traditional religion's. The link in the United States between capitalist energy, love of individual freedom, and individual religious rebirth is telling and genuine, but hardly inevitable.

Religion aids character not only or primarily as doctrine but because it is one of the institutions that implicitly shape and guide us. Most and in a sense all attachments in liberal democracies are in the final analysis voluntary. But much of our view of what is desirable and proper, and much of the training that first impresses this on us, comes from what one takes for granted, not what one constantly judges and chooses. This is obviously true in the family, but it also is significant in other institutions, in neighborhood, and education.

Indeed, liberalism's weakening of these institutions because of its individualism and the rapid change it often promotes is an internal source of its own difficulties. Religious life that supports individual rights and its necessary virtues is a bulwark against this decline.

Religion, as we are arguing, is significant in guiding character and helping us to learn to choose what is correct. To some degree, moreover it does this because we are so often shaped by ritual and belief: religious institutions are among those that help to mold our implicit expectations and guides. Yet, if religious affiliation is voluntary, some of this implicit and continuing forming is lost. It is subject to many of the same difficulties that beset liberal institutions generally. New affiliations may take the place of or reenergize old ones, however, something we saw, say, in the development of President George W. Bush. In fact, one might also suggest that the constant presence of religion in the United States because of the variety of faiths partially makes up for the weakening of what is implicit in religious life and belief (and, therefore, the weakening of its effects on character) that voluntary religion seems to bring about. One of the significant phenomena to explore in addressing the current relation of liberal democracy and religion is the greater significance of

religious life and, especially, of belief in God in the United States than what we see in much of Europe. In any event, religion can aid the virtue and restraint that equal freedom requires, and can help to elevate our understanding of what to choose with our freedoms. The voluntary choice that is central in liberalism, however, in general, if not always, affects the implicit as well as the explicit ways in which religion does this.

The Liberal Benefit of Religion: Elevation and Consolation

There are other ways that religion can not only be compatible with liberal democracy but can help to secure it, speaking, again, from the standpoint not of faith as such but of liberal democracy. Part of the human elevation that liberal democracy can help to advance is a view of each of us as at root inviolable. This connects much of what is suggested by the holy and the divine with individual rights, and is also related to what we mean by dignity.

The natural right of each individual is his authority to consider, to choose, and to act. Natural rights belong to each of us justly; we hold them as equals; they are not properly awarded to us as privileges bestowed by others. Natural rights, indeed, do not stem from the authority of others. Rather, in liberal democracies political or other authority stems from natural individual authority, from individual choice and transfer. Any just regime must take the equal natural authority of individuals (equal because reason sees no distinction among us in our natural authority to choose, act, and move for ourselves) into account.

Our natural authority is inseparable from freedom as self direction and from freedom understood as being unobstructed. Freedom suggests the need for the responsibility and reasonable understanding that can secure it, and use it successfully and well. A basic element of our height or elevation, in short, is the natural freedom and authority of self direction and choice, and central to the inviolability of each individual is precisely the natural authority to consider, choose, and proceed. This is an authority whose external effect can be obstructed, whose presence in individuals can be obscured, and whose use can be unwise or insufficiently reflective. But, it is an authority that transcends human whim, cannot justly be ignored, and can never simply be taken away.

In this sense, natural individual rights express much of the sanctity of the individual that religion too means to express. This is vital for the link that is possible between religion and liberal democracy. This link is not grounded in a matter of bare moral dignity in Kant's sense but, rather, in individual natural rights. Ethical freedom and authority exist even without Kantian moral universalism.

The naturally free does not exhaust natural height and therefore does not exhaust either the compatibility or tension between religion and liberal democracy. What is holy or divine in us is not only our natural freedom but also the highest or

fullest use of our powers. What is divine in us is reason, as it informs our enjoyment and pursuit of the goods that we usually seek, and as it seeks its own fullest field, in theoretical understanding. When religion supports the holy and divine, it also helps to protect the best use of our human powers, when these are seen to comprise what we are most fully.

Religion can belong to and even take some of the lead in elevating us because of the emotional power, seriousness, and social force with which it consecrates the central events of birth, marriage, and death that are so basic in our grasp of human inviolability and in our understanding of our ability to transcend ourselves in order to make the best of ourselves. For this reason, religion may find itself opposed by the misinterpretation of natural rights as equal license and the consequent objection to an ethical and intellectual education that is oriented to what is better and worse. But, it is also true that religion may become an enemy of reason, or deem impious and unholy what is in truth only imprudent, or undesired by the reigning authorities.

Religion not only elevates, it can also console, or enlarge our implicit understanding of the limits inherent in what is choiceworthy and good. Both this consolation and elevation help to account for religion's strength, a strength that supplements what is available to reason alone. Of course, such elevation can be misguided if its substance is distorted, and such consolation has often been too comfortable with material and political conditions that in fact we should challenge and overcome. As we said, much as piety, thought, and liberal democracy properly support each other they are not compatible simply. Practical affairs cannot do without practical judgment.