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The Meaning of Religious Liberty

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It is often thought that religious liberty means a strict separation of church and state, but that view is out of tune with the proper understanding of the role religion and morality play in the civic and public life of a self-governing people. A more compelling model is that of America's Founders, who advanced religious liberty in a way that would uphold religion and morality as indispensable supports of good habits, the firmest props of the duties of citizens, and the great pillars of human happiness.

Origins of Religious Liberty. The story of religious liberty in America begins with religious persecution in the Old World. At the root of these conflicts was the much deeper controversy of divided loyalty between the city of God and the city of man. These dueling claims undermined political authority and obligation and led to religious wars and the civil coercion of faith.

The basic parameters of the American Founders' arrangement in the New World are well known: They sought to prevent the religious battles that had bloodied the European continent by removing entirely the authority of the church over matters of governance. In its place, they sought to secure the basis for political obligation in the consent of the governed, premised on concepts of individual freedom and equality that were grounded in human nature.

In a letter written in 1791—all the more powerful because it was written by the first president to a Jewish synagogue—George Washington declared that “the Government of the United States...gives to

bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance” but “requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens.” Toleration, he continued, was no longer “spoken of as if it were the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights.”

The Founders' View of Religion in Public Life. But far from wanting to expunge religion from public life, the Founders encouraged religion as a necessary and vital part of their new nation. They sought the official separation of church and state in order to build civil and religious liberty on the grounds of equal natural rights, but never intended—indeed, roundly rejected—the idea of separating religion and politics.

The Founders opposed the establishment of a national church (though the federal government did not do away with state establishments); church doctrine would not determine the laws, and laws would not determine church doctrine. However, the Founders did favor government encouragement and support of religion in public laws, official speeches and ceremonies, on public property and in public buildings, and even in public schools.

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Indeed, the official separation of church and state allows and encourages (just as true religious freedom depends upon) a certain mixing of religion and politics. On the day after it approved the Bill of Rights, Congress called upon the president to “recommend to the people of the United States a day of public thanksgiving and prayer, to be observed by acknowledging, with grateful hearts, the many signal favors of Almighty God.” President Thomas Jefferson regularly attended church services held in the House of Representatives and allowed executive branch buildings to be used for the same purpose. Jefferson seemed to find nothing wrong with the federal government supporting religion in a non-discriminatory and non-coercive way.

Even after the “republican revolution” of 1800, President Thomas Jefferson praised America’s “benign religion, professed, indeed, and practiced in various forms, yet all of them inculcating honesty, truth, temperance, gratitude, and the love of man; acknowledging and adoring an overruling Providence, which by all its dispensations proves that it delights in the happiness of man here and his greater happiness hereafter.”

Religion and Morality. The Founders’ support for blending religion and politics was based on the following syllogism: Morality is necessary for republican government; religion is necessary for morality; therefore, religion is necessary for republican government. “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity,” Washington wrote in his Farewell Address, “Religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of Patriotism who should labor to subvert these great Pillars of human happiness—these firmest props of the duties of Men and citizens.”

Those two sentences are illuminating. Religion and morality are the props of duty, the indispensable supports of the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, and the great pillars of human happiness. They aid good government by teaching men their moral obligations and creating the conditions for decent politics. And while there might be particular individuals whose morality does not depend on religion, Washington argues, this is not the case for the nation as a whole: “And let us

with caution indulge the supposition, that morality can be maintained without religion.”

In the end, while it is often thought that religion and politics must be discussed as if they are radically separate spheres, the Founders’ conception of religious liberty was almost exactly the opposite. It actually requires the *moralization* of politics, which includes—and requires—the continuing influence of religion in public life.

The health of liberty depends on the principles, standards, and morals common to all religions. By acknowledging the realm in which reason and faith agree and can cooperate about morality and politics, religious liberty unites civic morality and the moral teachings of religion, thereby establishing common standards to guide private and public life. By recognizing the need for public morality and the prominent role that religion plays in nurturing morality, the Founders invite churches to cooperate at the political level in sustaining the moral consensus underlying their theological differences. It is by separating sectarian conflict from the political process and then strengthening this moral consensus that religious liberty makes self-government possible.

America does not depend on a shared theology, but it does depend on a shared morality. In his First Inaugural Address, the first president said that “there exists in the economy and course of nature, an indissoluble union between virtue and happiness” and that no nation can prosper that “disregards the external rules of order and right, which Heaven itself has ordained.” Jefferson put it more succinctly: The people, who are the source of all lawful authority, “are inherently independent of all *but the moral law.*”

What the separation of church and state does, then, is free religion—in the form of morality and the moral teachings of religion—to exercise an unprecedented influence over private and public opinion by shaping mores, cultivating virtues, and, in general, providing an independent source of moral reasoning and authority. At the same time, religious liberty reminds man to pursue his transcendent duties and frees religion to pursue its divine mission among men. Alexis de Tocqueville observed that even though religion “never intervenes directly in the government of American soci-

ety,” it determines the “habits of the heart” and is “the first of their political institutions.”

Conclusion. Today, it is increasingly evident that there is a close connection between America’s deepest social ills and the weakening of religious participation and the abandonment of traditional moral norms taught by religion. Rebuilding a post-welfare state society demands the return of religion and faith-based institutions to their central role in the nation’s civic and public life. To attain this, Americans must abandon the interpretation, maintained by the Supreme Court, that religion is in conflict with freedom and that any “endorsement” of religion creates an unconstitutional religious establishment.

That interpretation prevents government from recognizing or advancing religious faith generally.

At the same time, sectarian politics is not the way to restore and strengthen America’s religious heritage. A better course is to return to the more reasonable, historically accurate, and faith-friendly view of religious liberty that upholds religion and morality as indispensable supports of good habits, the firmest props of the duties of citizens, and the great pillars of human happiness.

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