

Religion and Liberalism for McCain

What Liberalism Is ... and What It Is Not

Ed has asked Kevin and I to reflect on issues that arise at the intersection of religion and liberal democracy. I'll focus on one -- the proper role of religious arguments in public life. But the conversations that we've had in the seminar leading up to this conference

have convinced me that I should begin
by saying something about what I take a
liberal democracy to be.

I favor a rather minimalist conception which I'll introduce with a short statement by Michael Perry from 2003. Here is Perry:

We live in a time when demagogues, polemicists, and pundits have largely succeeded in turning the word 'liberal' into an epithet.... Let us reclaim our discourse. We Americans are all liberals now, because we affirm the true and full humanity of every person, without regard to race, sex, religion, and so on, and we also affirm, therefore, certain basic human freedoms ... to speech, press and religion. It is this twofold affirmation that makes a

democracy a 'liberal' democracy, a political
morality a 'liberal' political morality, and a
person a 'liberal.'

Perry's minimalist conception appeals to me for a number of reasons. It's true: each human being really is sacred and inviolable. It comports with important elements of the American political tradition. It's ecumenical: even in our partisan and polarized time, many diversely committed citizens affirm equal human dignity and various rights grounded thereon. Perhaps most

pertinently for today, it's compatible with very different conceptions of the proper role of religious argument in public life.

Although Perry's minimalist liberalism is ecumenical, it's not uncontroversial.

Different theorists employ various competing conceptions of what makes for a liberal democracy. This provides

ample opportunity for dialectical mischief. One or another critic decries liberalism, yet it turns out that what's rejected isn't liberal democracy but some tendentious, controversial, or corrupted conception thereof.

So, for example, if Yoram Hazony is correct, liberalism is inextricably tied to a kind of Enlightenment Rationalism, according to which basic political norms must satisfy

quite demanding epistemic standards -- they must be either self-evident or derived demonstratively from self-evident propositions.¹ He also tags liberalism with an "insatiable egalitarianism" according to which the state must be neutral as between "different ways of life," which in turn precludes it from privileging particular 'lifestyles -- say, a life of sacrificial military service over indolent selfishness.² So understood, Hazony rejects liberalism.

¹. Yoram Hazony, **Conservatism: A Rediscovery**, (Washington DC: Regnery Gateway, 2022), p. 332f.

². Yoram Hazony, **Conservatism: A Rediscovery**, p. 167.

Now if commitment to liberal democracy really did have these associations, then we should follow him in rejecting it. Indeed, we should do so for excellent liberal reasons. After all, whatever some of our founders declared, the claim that each human being is created equal is anything but self-evident, the epistemic standards that Hazony attributes to liberalism would preclude assent to that paradigmatic liberal norm, and so liberalism would turn out to be internally incoherent. Liberals have

excellent reason to reject epistemic
constraints that undermine their basic
commitments.

Moreover, the neutrality he attributes to liberalism is both implausible on its face and contradicted by the regular practice of our government. Liberals have excellent reason to promote or privilege 'lifestyles' that are essential to the defense of liberal democracy from its many enemies, as we do when we honor some, and only some of our citizens with, say, a Medal of Honor.

Incoherent and implausible, we should reject liberal democracy as Hazony construes it. But we shouldn't reject liberalism itself. Does each human being enjoy equal dignity, whatever each's distinguishing characteristics? Does each therefore possess basic rights to speak freely, to own property, to worship God as conscience dictates? Do ordinary people have a right to participate in elections to determine the composition of their governing authorities? If you respond affirmatively in

each case, then you *are* a liberal democrat. So committed, you are free to disagree with your fellow citizens about almost everything else -- abortion, the flat tax, whatever.

Let's explore one of those disagreements. Is it morally acceptable for a member of Congress to vote for a law that promotes heterosexual monogamy on the basis of a theologically grounded conception of human sexuality? May a citizen persuade her compatriots to support a generous immigration policy by appealing to our duty to care for the most vulnerable and powerless of those created in God's image? May a Marine officer be led by Jesus'

command that we love our enemies to impose on his subordinates a house-clearing tactic that endangers them but provides enemies with increased opportunity to surrender? In each of these cases, someone brings their faith into public life in a particular way: by taking a religious reason as a basis for some policy matter that, inevitably, affects the well-being of at least some who do not share that person's faith.

What should we make of those who do this sort of thing? Of course, the question here is not about which position we should take regarding marriage, immigration, or house-clearing tactics but about whether we may rely on our faith commitments to determine which position to take regarding such matters. Moreover, the question isn't one of law but of morality: what morally acceptable role may religious arguments play in the public

life of a liberal democracy -- the way legislators vote, how citizens persuade one another, the manner in which military officers discharge their public responsibilities.

I favor a rather inclusive answer to this question. Bluntly, let a thousand flowers bloom. For many Americans, religion is a critically important source of moral guidance. So, for example, it sustains the conviction that each human being, even the most vulnerable or socially insignificant, has equal dignity, it explains why this is the case, and it specifies the many political implications thereof.³ For many Americans, therefore, their assessment of competing policies will be grounded, perhaps decisively, on their faith commitments. Because it's morally excellent for us to support the very policies that we conscientiously believe to

³. See, for example, **Declaration “*Dignitas Infinita*” on Human Dignity**, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2024/04/08/240408c.html>

be correct, it's equally excellent for us to do so on religious grounds. We shouldn't privilege religion, we also shouldn't discriminate against it. Rather, equal treatment of the religious and the secular is the order of the day.

Of course, I don't think that religious believers should strive to adopt policy positions for which there is nothing to say other than that it accords with the will of God. Surely it's good to have as many persuasive reasons as we can muster. We should learn from our compatriots, and so take seriously their criticisms ... and so refuse to insulate our faith commitments from their criticisms. We should exit from our own parochial perspective and attempt to discern reasons that persuade others to adopt

the policies that we favor. In short, we should engage conscientiously with one another as we attempt to discern which policies merit our support.

But at the end of the day, our deliberative and persuasive powers run out, and we might find ourselves conscientiously compelled to support a policy position that depends decisively on our faith commitments, religious or secular, as the case may be. That's life in a liberal democracy: we think, we deliberate together, we disagree, we vote

our conscience, and then we live with the results.

The Doctrine of Religious Restraint

That's a brief indication of my inclusive view. Many liberals disagree, particularly when public officials ... members of Congress, say, or officers in the military ... fulfil their public duties by relying on their faith commitments. Why? What's the source of the antipathy?

As I noted above, a liberal democracy protects the right to religious freedom. When human beings are free to determine for themselves what to believe about religious matters, they'll inevitably disagree. If the state really does leave it up to citizens whether to believe in God, they will affirm very different conceptions of what God is like. As a consequence, then, of its core commitments, a liberal democracy will inevitably include a pervasive religious

pluralism. Unlike liberalism and Enlightenment Rationalism, liberal democracy and religious pluralism actually are inextricably entwined.

In that pluralistic context, many advocate for a more constrained role for religious arguments than the inclusive position I favor. We have to reach collective agreements on matters that affect us all, we must authorize the state to coerce compliance with our collective agreements, and so we should try to provide our compatriots with what they regard as adequate reason for our favored policy positions. This is partly a matter of reducing alienation -- those with whom we deliberate together are likely to be less alienated by state coercive than those with whom we do not so deliberate. It's partly a matter of respect: we affirm the dignity of those with whom we

disagree by providing them with reasons that at least *might* persuade them that our favored policies are correct. We don't just impose. We don't just say 'because I said so.' That's how we treat children, not free and equal compatriots.

This line of argument constrains the role that religious arguments may play in public life. A state policy that can't be justified absent a religious argument leaves many citizens without any reason at all to endorse that policy. To provide them with only a religious rationale is the functional equivalent of providing them with no reason at all. This is profoundly disrespectful. It's insulting. It treats others like children. And it's divisive and alienating to boot. Something like this argument leads many liberals to conclude that state coercion may not depend decisively on religious reasons for its justification. Moreover, citizens and state officials ought to *restrain* themselves from

endorsing coercive policies that they realize depend on a religious rationale.

There is a pronounced tendency in the literature to ease us into digesting this claim by feeding us certain stock, prejudicial cases of religious argument. Here's a commonly used recipe: take a coercive policy that bears on some hot-button 'culture-wars' matter ... say, the criminalization of sodomy, add a juicy biblical passage about abominations (Leviticus), have your ignorant, bigoted, and slightly inebriated Uncle Charlie affirm that policy for that reason, and you will easily induce in your audience heartburn at the prospect of religious argument in public life. There's an equally pronounced tendency to contrast religious reasons of this sort with certain especially excellent secular reasons -- those that are widely regarded as being obviously true, or that satisfy some demanding epistemic standard, or the like. So contrasted, we're only a short skip and a step to the conclusion that, of

course, never the religious, only the secular, can justify state coercion.

One final point by way of explication.
What kind of reason *can* provide the
required justification? How can we
reach some collective resolution as to
how we are to live together in a way that
respects the dignity of all?

We do so by appealing to common ground. We don't just repeat the reasons that persuade us to affirm our side of a disagreement, but we appeal to shared premises that provide some deeper basis for resolving the particular disagreement at hand. That is, the kind of rationale that can justify coercion in a pluralistic liberal polity are reasons that are shared by, or that are in some

respect sharable by, a diversely
committed population.

But the only shared or sharable reasons are secular: only the secular is the universal, natural and common; the religious is invariably particular, sectarian and idiosyncratic. Religion *always* divides; the secular *can* unite. And so only the secular, never the religious, may decisively justify state coercion in a pluralistic liberal polity.

Two Objections

This restrictive view is inconsistent with the more inclusive conception I favor. What's wrong with it?

Here's a first concern. Suppose that you support the invasion of Afghanistan on the 'just war' grounds that it's a proportionate response to a grave moral evil. I'm a hard-bitten realist who opposes that invasion because it's detrimental to the long-term national interests of the United States. We disagree. We might, in response, try to find some common moral ground, though I have no idea how that would go

-- there seems to be no such common ground given our fundamentally different conceptions of the morality of war. Are we therefore bereft of dialectical options?

Of course not: you can appeal to my abiding realist commitments in order to persuade me to change my mind. You inhabit my way of thinking and construct an argument -- a realist argument -- that you hope will persuade me to follow you in supporting the invasion. Suppose you succeed. We reach an agreement, not by retreating to common ground, but by following the implications of our distinct and incompatible conceptions of the morality of war. We agree on the policy,

but are 180 out on the reasons for the policy.

This is often how political argument works. We disagree profoundly. There's no way that we're going to resolve those disagreements. But we don't avoid them. I enter your parochial perspective ... it might be secular or it might be religious ... and I do my best to show that you should, after all, reach the same conclusion as I do given my very different assumptions, experiences, and priorities. I engage with you not as a generic human being but as the particular person you are -- secular utilitarian, liberal Muslim, or Conservative Catholic. I do the same for others. Eventually,

I articulate a spread of 'sectarian' reasons that provides many others with what they regard as persuasive reasons for my favored policies.

So far as I can tell, policies justified by such a diverse spread of reasons can be every bit as respectful as appeal to a shared or shareable rationale. Shared reasons might be nice but they are not morally necessary. And so religious arguments may play exactly the same justifying role as do secular arguments: they provide reasons that appeal to others in their particularity.

Here's a second concern. The requirement that state policies must be justified by shared reasons is supposed to provide a filter through which political arguments must pass. Because religious arguments are never shared in liberal democracies, they can't justify state coercion. This appeal to shared reasons is only one instance of a general strategy: to identify some filter that screens out the religious but not the secular. So for example, many have proposed some kind of epistemic filter: the reasons that may justify state policies must be -- take your pick -- demonstrable, accessible,

fallible, criticizable ... religious reasons are none of those things ... some secular reasons are ... and so only the secular, never the religious, can ground state coercion.

I can't assess each proposed filter. So let me indicate my most general case for skepticism ... and leave the details for discussion.

Any filter on political arguments must be porous enough to allow us to rely on a

spread of secular reasons that enables us to resolve the kinds of policies we cannot avoid. But it can't be so porous that it allows in any religious reason. But *whatever* the filter, some religious reasons will sneak through. To drop the metaphor: there just isn't any relevant property that all coercion-justifying secular reasons possess that all religious reasons lack.

Time constraints preclude me from providing what really needs to be an extensive exploration of this argument. I'll therefore have to substitute example for argument. I take as given that liberalism is a militant creed: we can't avoid determining when the use of military violence is permissible and when it is not. Any such determination must involve some kind of proportionality assessment. So, for example, the US invasion of Afghanistan was just only if:

(P) The goods achieved by the invasion of Afghanistan were proportionate to the evils that occurred as a consequence of that invasion.

I take (P) to be a kind of reason on which the most brutal kind of state coercion depends – 'but for' the required kind of proportionality between goods and evils, a liberal democracy ought not wage war. It plays a justifying role disallowed to any and every religious consideration. Plausibly, proportionality judgments of

this sort are secular. So, then, inquiring minds want to know: What's so impressive about (P)? What is it about secular (P) such that it can play a justifying role disallowed to any and every religious reason?

I doubt that there's a principled and otherwise defensible answer to that question. My suspicion is that (P) differs in no relevant epistemic, sociological, or moral respects from at least some religious claims. It isn't shared in respects that religious reasons are not: indeed, when people are free to make up their own minds as to secular claims like (P), they'll disagree every bit as much as they do on religious matters. As recent

events testify, proportionality is the realm of the inevitably and unavoidably contentious.

Again, it's doubtful that (P) possesses any *epistemic* excellence unavailable to any and all religious reasons. Frankly, that's because (P) isn't all that epistemically impressive. Our basis for believing it seems 'subjective' and contentious in ways that must surely remind us of the basis for many religious doctrines.

Recent events testify to just how tenuous an epistemic hold we have on such difficult judgments. This is why it's hard to believe that *no* religious reason enjoys

the epistemic credentials needed to
avoid being filtered out.

It turns out, then, that its arbitrarily exclusionary to claim that only the secular, and never the religious, can decisively justify state policies in a liberal democracy. Liberals must make certain political decisions, certain secular reasons may play a decisive role in justifying such decisions, and there is no relevant difference between those acceptable secular reasons and familiar kinds of religious reason. Again, equal treatment is the order of the day: both

secular and religious reasons may play a decisive role in justifying state policies.

Let me end at the beginning. Many liberals affirm general restrictions on the role that religious arguments may play in public life. Moreover, they regard those restrictions as a morally necessary response to the religious pluralism engendered by liberalism. In so doing, they build highly contentious normative commitments into their favored conception of liberalism.

This is bad for liberal democracy. We're already polarized enough; we shouldn't make enemies when we don't have to. Critics like Hazony reject liberalism, in part, by virtue of its exclusionary treatment of religion.⁴ He rightly rejects that treatment, but he's wrong to reject liberalism itself. The two are no more intimately related than are liberal democracy and Enlightenment Rationalism. Better to articulate a much humbler and more inclusive conception of liberalism, one that welcomes robust religious contributions to public life. This is good for liberalism, it's good for

⁴. This is nicely exemplified in a very recent essay by Ed Feser, "Western Civilization's Immunodeficiency Disease," <https://www.postliberalorder.com/p/western-civilizations-immunodeficiency>.

the United States, and it's good for religion as well.