TO LOSE GOD IS TO LOSE MAN: WHAT “PUBLIC REASON” CAN LEARN FROM PUBLIC FAITH

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Much of liberal theory tacitly presupposes a secularized and radicalized form of the religious view called fideism, according to which reason and faith, Athens and Jerusalem, have nothing to say to each other. John Paul II defended the contrasting view that only rightly ordered faith allows reason to become fully itself. If he was right, however, then to purge civic discourse of expressions of faith would make it not more rational, but less. Carson Holloway convincingly demonstrates this point through a sustained examination of thinkers who shaped the present age.

I

Let us begin by giving some thought to why a book like Carson Holloway’s is important. To re-echo a well-known question, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?”

The point of this notorious query of Tertullian was that Christianity has nothing to learn from philosophy. To put his point more elaborately, systematic faith, based on truths revealed to the people of God through divine word and act in history, has nothing to learn from systematic reason, based on truths revealed to all human beings through the order of being itself.

As we know, the Church throughout history has rejected Tertullian’s view. His own writing illustrates that Athens has something to do with Jerusalem, for even he makes use of logical skills that the philosophers had sharpened. But we are not speaking simply of borrowing a few knives from the philosophers’ kitchen drawers. The Church professes a far closer relationship between Athens and Jerusalem than that. Before his accession to the papacy, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger wrote that in the early days of Christianity, “in an environment teeming with gods,” when believers were asked to which god their God corresponded, “the answer ran: to none of them. To none of the gods to whom you pray but solely and alone to him to whom you do not pray, to that highest being of whom your philosophers speak.” He rightly remarks, “The choice thus made meant opting for the logos as against any kind of myth.” And yet there is another side to the picture:
By deciding in favour of the God of the philosophers and logically declaring this God to be the God who speaks to man and to whom one can pray, the Christian faith gave a completely new significance to this God of the philosophers .... ... [T]his God who has been understood as pure Being or pure thought, circling round for ever closed in upon itself without reaching over to man and his little world ... now appeared to the eye of faith as the God of men, who is not only thought of all thoughts, the eternal mathematics of the universe, but also *agape*, the power of creative love.³

The relationship between faith and reason that this profound event reveals has been well put by John Paul II: Faith and reason are like the two wings of a bird, both needed to fly. Neither can come into its own without the other.⁴

Something like the same view may even have been held by the great model of all philosophers, Socrates himself: He denied possessing knowledge in the sense that he could exclude even the possibility of counter-argument, but he certainly held firm beliefs. Although he considered many divine inspirations spurious, so does the Church; his attitude was not that all such claims should be rejected, but that all such claims should be tested, which is precisely what St. Paul recommended to the Thessalonians.⁵ And let us not forget that on the morning of the day of his death, as he was preparing for his last conversation, Socrates was composing a hymn to Apollo. Like the Church, he seems to have believed in a mutual dependence of reason and faith.

The notion that faith and reason depend on each other is far from popular, for though the Church rejected Tertullian’s hostile view, something like it lives on in liberal modernity. However, in our times it has taken on two twists.

The first twist is that early in modernity, the question was reversed. As Tertullian had put it, the believer questions the philosopher and finds him wanting; but as the moderns put it, the philosopher questions the believer and finds him wanting. Instead of asking “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?”, the modern asks “What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?” The idea is not that faith is complete without reason, but that reason is complete without faith.

The other twist came later, when a third perspective was added to the picture—a very old perspective, which was resuscitated for the occasion. Besides the believer and the philosopher, who claim to speak for faith and reason respectively, we once again have that ancient fellow, the agnostic rhetorician, who claims to speak for the City. I will call him
the Sophist, because he is a Sophist in doctrine, though he puts the sophistical doctrine into practice. He asks neither “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” nor “What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?” Rather he asks “What has Rome to do with either of those two cities?” The idea this time is that what we say in the public square is not about, need not be about, and should not be about truth. All that matters is what we decide to do. If we cannot quite bring ourselves to jettison the very word “truth,” then at least let us define truth as whatever we say it is. Neither faith nor philosophy has anything to do with it; we can get along quite well without them. Truth doesn’t reside in conformity to the order of being, to what is, but in conformity to what people say.

How very democratic and egalitarian all this sounds. After all, says the Sophist, if truth does reside in conformity to the order of being, then we can’t change it by majority vote. The only thing we can change is what we say about it. Presumably, then, we must all be slaves to the experts—whether philosophical or theological—who understand it. That doesn’t sound agreeable.

But the Sophist has it backwards. There is something democratic about truth residing in conformity to the order of being. What is it? That every last one of us experiences being firsthand. Nor can the experience be kept from us; we have inside knowledge. This is why Aristotle begins every discussion with common opinion. In fact, the philosopher begins exactly where everyone else begins; he merely thinks about it more clearly. There is also something democratic in the notion of further insight into the order of being coming to us through revelation. The democratic thing about it is that this insight is offered to everyone. It isn’t an esoteric doctrine, for “Wisdom has built her house, she has set up her seven pillars .... She has sent out her maids to call, ... ‘Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!’” Much like the philosopher, the believer begins exactly where everyone else begins; he merely accepts the invitation.

If there is an elitism in either of these operations, in either reason or faith, it lies only in the fact that not everyone does think clearly, and not everyone does accept the invitation. But this is not a coercive elitism, because both the philosopher and the believer make their way by persuasion. Peter says, “Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence.” Fidelity of mind and heart are the two things in this world that cannot be forced. Violence can be used against them, but violence cannot produce them.

The real opponent of democracy turns out to be neither faith nor reason, but the attitude of liberal modernity that “truth is whatever
we say it is.” The hazy “we” in that motto never means “we citizens,” but “we who form the citizens’ opinions.” For if truth really is nothing but what we say it is (pay no attention to the man behind the curtain—never mind the circularity of “really is”), then rational argument is no longer possible at all, because there is no independent reality to argue about. What used to be called reasoning can only be a tool for manipulation, and it will not be the most powerful tool at that. How much more effective to encourage lush fantasies, to scatter meaningless words, to appeal to the vanity of the audience. “We are the ones we’ve been waiting for.” Spin is king, because its generation and control are all there is. For citizens, it might be generated in focus groups. For scholars, perhaps in conferences.

John Rawls is the emblem of such a world. Although his university post was in philosophy, not, say, marketing, his aims as a political theorist were curiously anti-philosophical. The elimination of all consideration of independent reality, and its replacement by just what we say, was exactly what he had in mind when he called liberalism “political, not metaphysical.” When he called for “public reason,” he didn’t mean freedom to reason in public, as one might think; he meant limits on the reasoning allowed there.

Such claims about his doctrine may seem intemperate. After all, Rawls didn’t call it illegitimate to offer propositional statements in public debate; he only said that no one in public debate should be suffered to appeal to “comprehensive” doctrines, meaning worldviews, whether philosophical or religious. My critic, then, might say that it wasn’t so much truths that Rawls objected to, but only big and controversial truths, or perhaps big and controversial theories about them. But the very notion that debate should be purged of controversial ideas is controversial. Otherwise we would not be having this conversation, would we? Moreover, the classification of truths into two categories—big ones to which we must not appeal, and little ones to which we may—presupposes that truths are disconnected, the little ones uncoupled from the big. Whether or not that is an odd view of the world, as I think it is, surely it is a view of the world, so we have not escaped worldviews after all; we have only been swallowed up by the Rawlsian one.

But what is so bad about worldviews anyway—why may we not mention them? What Rawls calls a comprehensive doctrine turns out to mean simply any considered view of reality that tries to supply more adequate reasons for doing things than liberals are willing to allow. Because the citizens of the liberal polity would be prohibited from offering more adequate reasons, they would be reduced to incomplete
and inadequate reasons. To be sure, they would be allowed to base their policy proposals on any views of ultimate reality that they might wish—but only so long as these views were not recognized by liberals as views of ultimate reality. In other words, citizens would be allowed to appeal only to those comprehensive doctrines that liberals—by virtue of refusing to admit that they were comprehensive doctrines—deemed acceptable. This is a little like saying “Everyone may talk as he pleases so long as he pleases to talk just like me.”

Prohibiting appeal to comprehensive doctrines is disastrous in another way too. Philosophy and religion begin in wonder, and that moment of wonder is no accident, because man is a wondering creature. He doesn’t just wonder what things are and how things happen; he demands to know what they mean. The quest to find out is not just an amusement but the staff of life; knowledge of meaning is not just a means but an end. Nor can the quest be carried on by solitary individuals. Like everything else we do, it requires social cooperation. Why should this fact surprise us? We are neither beasts nor gods, and none of the most important human goods are purely private; consider marriage. They all implicate other people; to be enjoyed at all, they require traditions, institutions, and shared understandings. Likewise the search for meaning implicates other people. It is central to who and what we are, not in the fictitious, disconnected lives that modern liberal theory concocts for us, but in the lives we actually live, in solidarity with others—in families, neighborhoods, synagogues, churches, and, yes, in the commonwealth too.

The only way to stop appealing to comprehensive doctrines would be to stop wondering what things mean. To stop wondering would be to become other than men. I do think we can lose ourselves, but that is not quite the way that it happens. As Horace said, “One can drive out nature with a pitchfork, but it returns.” The problem is that it may return angry. If we did try to fulfill the Rawlsian demand, what would really happen? Would we really be able to avoid the appeal to comprehensive doctrines? No, we would only make a comprehensive doctrine of our hatred of other people’s comprehensive doctrines, and we would appeal to that doctrine constantly. We would desperately try to see meaning in refusing to look into meanings greater than the effort itself. Some people might say this is happening.

To sum up my argument so far: Purging the public square of expressions of faith would make it not more reasonable but less. Placing limits even upon the kinds of reasoning allowed there, as Rawls intends, would complete the destruction. Faith and reason are the native languages of the mind, and meaning is the air with which it forms its
words. One might as well cut out a man’s tongue, pour molten lead down his throat, then bid him “Speak.”

Among some people who would agree with me up to this point, the next move is to propose what might be called *generic* public faith. Like Rawls, but unlike me and unlike Carson Holloway as well, they still distinguish “public reason” from reasoning in public. Public reason is narrower. It still has limits, with juridical consequences; its limits are merely somewhat broader than someone like Rawls would allow. Thus, according to them, we may speak publicly of God, but not of Jesus (or Moses, or Muhammad); we may speak publicly of the natural law, but not of the Sermon on the Mount (or Torah, or Shari’a). Whereas Rawls would have told us that for Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, and atheists to speak together, each of them must impersonate an atheist, now we are told merely that each of them must impersonate a deist. Perhaps one may be forgiven for thinking that this is hardly progress.

“What!” the critic asks. “Would you have us retreat to particularism? Don’t you agree that to have a conversation, we must focus on what we share? Isn’t *what we have in common* the very meaning of the *res publica*, the commonwealth?” Of course I agree. The critic, though, overlooks the paradox that what makes sense of shared experience is not itself a shared experience; that what makes common humanity intelligible may not itself be common to all humanity. For insight into what we do hold in common, we necessarily fall back on what we do *not* hold in common—on our particular traditions. To say “You must not speak except generically” is to say, “The most important things you must not speak.”

“But wait!” the critic says. “Even if what you say is true—even if insight into what we have in common depends on what we don’t have in common—how can you talk about it with those who don’t share it?” I answer, “Why can’t I?” Although I am not an orthodox Jew, I see and respect what an orthodox Jew is getting at. It was no accident that the period during which the thinkers of my faith achieved their greatest insights into natural law coincided with the period during which they were intensely and simultaneously engaged with the pagan thought of Aristotle, the Jewish thought of Maimonides, and the Muslim thought of Averroës. A Jewish thinker who is writing about the natural law will naturally draw from the resources of Judaism to do so; for example, he will give far more attention than I do to the rabbinical tradition of reflection upon the “reasons of the laws.” But these are things I can read with profit, and which have leavened my tradition already.

To illustrate the same point from a Christian perspective, if ever something was common to all human beings, it is the natural law. But
isn’t it also common to all human beings that we are fallen? Doesn’t the latter fact make it difficult to recognize the former? The disorders of fallen nature merely stun the mind when contemplated apart from the grace of redemption. Our actual inclinations are at war with our natural inclinations. Our hearts are riddled with desires that oppose their deepest longings. We demand to have happiness on terms that make happiness impossible. How can we expect natural law to be plausible to those whose nature experiences only its humiliation, not its restoration? Surely a truly adequate understanding of nature’s malaise, and therefore nature itself, requires some hint, some glimpse, some trace of its supernatural remedy. How can one offer that hint while concealing one’s faith?

To be sure, honest conversation among people whose faith traditions are different from our own is difficult. Making matters worse, not all traditions believe in conversation, and others regard it only as a phase of holy war. It may take a long time to find out whether conversation with the adherents of a given tradition is possible or not; we are finding this out now with regard to Islam. But the liberal, if he is one of the modern type, cannot even properly acknowledge the difficulty. Why is that? Because he thinks the foundation of a courteous discussion is having nothing serious to discuss, and slapping down anyone who says that he does. This form of jihad is called “making room for diversity.” It is a little like expecting that if only one could get rid of all the voices, there would be more different kinds of song. The liberal attitude is the reason why, in countries like ours, the greatest challenge to commonwealth is not trying to achieve conversation among people of different traditions; it is trying to achieve it between people who have traditions and people who imagine that they haven’t any—whose tradition is the spurning of tradition.

Where does Holloway fit into all this? Though he begins not quite so far back, and traces not quite the same trajectory, the two paths converge. Holloway’s target is the Hobbesian view that social order must be built not on the high ground of aspiration to virtue and truth, but on the “low but solid ground” of selfishness and private vice. Against this he sets the view of John Paul II, that although the ground on which the moderns built is certainly lower, it is not for that reason more solid. Holloway is aware that the suggestion will strike moderns as preposterous. They ask, “Haven’t we seen that highmindedness gives rise to cruel bigotry, wars of persecution, and terroristic violence?”

Put so bluntly the paradox may well give us pause. Could it really be true that we will more closely approximate true virtue if we don’t give a damn about either truth or virtue? As Holloway points out, even a modern ought to admit that the world is a dangerous place, and
that even if it were needed for nothing else, heroic virtue would be needed for defense against cruel bigotry, wars of persecution, and terroristic violence.

As Holloway also shows, it turns out that the most interesting of the moderns had difficulty themselves believing in the Gospel of the Low but Solid. If we latecomers don’t know this, we have forgotten our intellectual history. In a chapter on the “ambiguity” of the American founding, he explains how although the pioneers of the American republic certainly had one foot in the theory that urged “go low but solid,” they kept the other foot in the theory that urged “go high.” One of his examples is the remark of Thomas Jefferson, in a letter to Henry Lee, that the American understanding was informed by “the elementary books of public right, as Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney, &c.”

Holloway writes,

This remark ... looks simultaneously in different directions. The reference to Aristotle and Cicero seems to place the founding generation within the same Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition on which John Paul II relies, a philosophic approach holding that the supreme good for man is realized through the activity of virtue. At the same time, the reference to Locke would appear to place the Founders in a distinctively modern theoretical camp that had come to view virtue as merely the means to peaceable and prosperous living together in society.

He adds that we cannot pass off the tension between these two positions as a mere quirk of Jefferson’s, “for the same ambiguity can be perceived generally in the thought of the leading figures of the founding generation.”

I think this is right. One might quibble over details: In particular, I would suggest that Locke himself is not such an unmitigated Hobbesian as this passage makes him out to be; he too is an ambiguous figure with one foot in both traditions. Unfortunately, he has thrown out so much of the theoretical equipment of the older tradition that he can hardly sustain what he does retain from it. Over the course of his career, moreover, the problem becomes steadily worse. Whether or not he was an Epicurean from the beginning, as some would maintain, he is certainly one at the end. Several of the American founders seem to have suffered a similar philosophical deterioration. This is certainly true of Jefferson, who by 1819 is openly Epicurean. As he writes to William Short,
As you say of yourself, I TOO AM AN EPICUREAN. I consider the genuine (not the imputed) doctrines of Epicurus as containing everything rational in moral philosophy which Greece and Rome have left us. Epictetus, indeed, has given us what was good of the Stoics; all beyond, of their dogmas, being hypocrisy and grimace. Their great crime was in their calumnies of Epicurus and misrepresentations of his doctrines; in which we lament to see the candid character of Cicero engaging as an accomplice.

Of Jefferson, as of Locke, it might be held that he was really an Epicurean from the beginning, and that the assertion by the Declaration of Independence of a right to the pursuit of happiness proves it. However, happiness need not be viewed as mere pleasure, as Epicureans view it. When Aristotle, St. Thomas, and Cicero spoke of happiness, they had something else in mind. At the time of the Declaration, Jefferson is probably thinking less of Epicurus than of one of his favorite thinkers, Jean-Jacques Burlamaqui—who also has one foot in both traditions! To much the same effect, Holloway reminds us that the Declaration upheld the validity of both natural rights and “sacred Honor,” both of which transcend mere biological existence. As he points out, “if the Declaration’s anthropology provides an insufficient motive for a principled defense” for such things, “its theology, considered in full, supplies the deficiency” through its appeal to God as creator, judge, and providential protector of man in all his dignity.

Another, complementary way to view the ambiguity of the American founding might be suggested. Adam Smith is often thought to have held that private economic ambition would accomplish public prosperity through competition, without any need for virtue. He does sometimes give this impression. What he actually held, however, was that private ambition would have this result only if the great men of commerce had enough virtue not to subvert the free market. In the same vein, James Madison is often thought to have held that private political ambition would accomplish justice through checks and balances, again without any need for virtue. He too sometimes gives this impression. Yet what he actually held was that private ambition would have this result only if the great men of statecraft had enough virtue not to subvert the free constitution. As it happens, the famous invisible hands of commerce and statecraft were not originally conceived as working without any virtue whatsoever, but only with rather less virtue than other systems require. This was also the view of Augustine of Hippo. In the City of God, he had explained how the vice of desiring glory could lead men to
perform some good acts, but he had also made it clear that it would do so only if people had the virtue not to take short cuts to glory through crime. Unlike Smith and Madison, he thought that eventually they would. Eventually, the vice that imitates virtue undermines the real virtue that restrains people from pursuing the vice in more damaging ways. At this point the system breaks down.\textsuperscript{15}

As we see, then, there are many good reasons to be skeptical about so-called “low but solid ground.” Yet John Paul II’s critique of liberal modernity is a good deal more than an inventory of doubts. The main themes in Holloway’s treatment of this pope take us back to the questions with which I began: What have Athens and Jerusalem to do with each other? In Holloway’s view, John Paul II’s protest against the culture of death has been widely misunderstood because it has not been seen in its context, his doctrine of the culture of life. The clash between these two cultures arises from the difference between their views of man. Liberal modernity, ignorant of the true nature of man, tends to reduce him to his material element, to a body. Though it would be gravely mistaken to deny that our bodies are part of us, they are not all of us. Our bodies are united with rational souls. Up to this point even a pagan like Aristotle or Cicero can agree.

Yet even this insight is not enough to account for the personal reality of the human being. In the first place, we are images of God. Nor does even this magnificent statement express the full measure of the truth about us. As John Paul II insisted, “Christ alone, through his humanity, reveals the totality of the mystery of man…. The key to his self-understanding lies in contemplating the divine Prototype, the Word made flesh, the eternal Son of the Father.”\textsuperscript{16} When we gaze upon Christ, what we see is the incarnation of love. Love is not accidental to God’s nature, as though He may love or may not, but happens to love. The reason is that he is not just personal but tri-personal, a communion of three Persons so united in blazing love that they are not three Beings but one. Love, personal communion, makes sense for us, the images of God, because God in His Being is not like Hobbes’s God, the greatest body, nor even like Aristotle’s God, thought thinking itself. God is a communion of Persons. The fundamental event of early modernity was that God—not Aristotle’s, not Hobbes’s, but this God—was rejected. Consequently, we have lost the truth of love, the truth of life, in fact, the truth of ourselves. All these things must be recovered.

Holloway recognizes that these theses are not only John Paul II’s. They are of a piece with the Second Vatican Council, which declared that “It is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear.”\textsuperscript{17} They are continuous with the “personalism”
of Thomas Aquinas, who wrote in his discussion of the Trinity that the
term “person” signifies “what is most perfect in all nature—that is, a
subsistent individual of a rational nature.”18 They arise from St. John’s
insight that “God is love”19 and St. Peter’s confidence that even we may
“become partakers of the divine nature.”20

In Holloway’s view, what actually follows from John Paul II’s
critique of liberal modernity? What political theory might be raised in its
place? How might political practice be reformed? About this, he has
little to say; then again, he did not assign himself the task. He does
convincingly show that liberal modernity cannot explain itself on its own
terms. After all, he explains, even moderns wish for more than survival.
They want more than even comfortable survival. Ultimately, they desire
the survival of a way of life, a way of life that makes gestures toward
ideals that their view of themselves cannot sustain. They have rejected a
view of man by which whatever is admirable in their way of life might
be defended and purified; in its place they have embraced another view
of man that has nothing to say for itself and even provides an opening
for tyranny. Perhaps, for one book, this is plenty.

We are told ad nauseam that we must speak from a human point
of view. But if man is truly made in the image of God, then to lose God
is to lose man. Moreover, to lose man is to lose the commonwealth,
because if we do not share in humanity then we certainly cannot share in
anything else. Surely our humanity, this image of God, must be polished
and preserved with all of the resources of reason, all of the resources of
hope, and all of the resources of faith. What then has Athens to do with
Jerusalem? Everything. What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?
Everything. What has Rome to do with either of those two cities?
Everything.
Notes

3. Ibid., p. 99.
4. “Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth—in a word, to know himself—so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves.” John Paul II, encyclical letter *Fides et Ratio* (1998), preface, citing Exodus 33:18, Psalms 27:8-9 and 63:2-3, John 14:8, and 1 John 3:2.
5. “Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophesying, but test everything; hold fast what is good, abstain from every form of evil.” 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22 (RSV), emphasis added.
6. Proverbs 9:1,3-4a (RSV).
7. 1 Peter 3:15 (RSV).
11. Holloway, p. 117.
12. Ibid.
19. John 4:8,16 (RSV).
20. Peter 1:4 (RSV).