
Faith of Our Fathers and Mothers: Religion and the American Democracy

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I am not a citizen of this great state, but I've read about Al Quie, I know of his work, and, as one concerned about the future and health of American civil society, I am pleased to play some small part in paying tribute to a great contributor to that civil society, to, therefore, what Abraham Lincoln called "the last, best hope on earth."

In keeping with the themes of Al Quie's life and work, I want to share with you a few words on religion and the American democracy. "God talk" as well as "rights talk" is the way Americans speak. If you do not appreciate the interplay of America's religions with America's politics, you will understand neither our religion nor our politics. Much of our political ferment historically and currently flows from religious commitments. The majority

of Americans have long believed that our history of religious liberty—free exercise coupled with disestablishment—is what distinguishes America from so many other polities. The embrace of faith as a grounding for human meaning, purpose, and identity and as a central feature of American culture frequently bewilders foreign observers. But this very fact about us transfixed the most famous foreign observer of American democracy, the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville whose work *Democracy in America* helped to capture the temperament of the fledgling republic over a century and a half ago.

Tocqueville understood that the American republic was forged through a complex intermingling of religious and political imperatives, beginning

with the puritan's famous "city on a hill." Although church and state are separated—ours is not and never has been a theocracy, nor a nation with an official civil religion—religions and politics have always mutually influenced one another in ways direct and indirect.

This is a theme advanced by Tocqueville in his great masterwork. He proclaimed that the religiously formed and shaped optimism and egalitarianism and the associational enthusiasm he observed when he toured these United States during the Jacksonian era were something new under the political sun. The action of religion on politics and vice versa puts into play the important categories: believer and citizen. The terrain in which they meet, most of the time, is that realm called civil society.

To speak of civil society is to speak of the institutions that human beings create for themselves in order to raise their children, sustain work-life, strive to prosper, guarantee domestic peace and security, propagate their faith, enact projects of solidarity, and attain individual ends and purposes. When Tocqueville toured America, he found that the nation was looking westward even as the older puritan establishment in New England had lost its hold. He observed congregations forming and sometimes fragmenting. Although the majority of Americans were religious seekers and believers of a Protestant variety, Tocqueville insisted that Catholic immigrants were destined to play an enormous, positive role in American life. And Jewish residents of

the United States were not required as, they had been in France, to relinquish the communal markers of their faith that found expression in and through Hebrew schools, communally enforced dietary rules, regulations, and dress, as their price of civic admission.

One might say—although Tocqueville himself didn't put it this way—that in the American democracy confessional pluralism and social pluralism were linked. The first refers to what is usually called "freedom of conscience"; the latter to "the maintenance and accommodation of a plurality of associations to foster religion," in the words of scholar John Witte. Tocqueville was less interested in the legalities of the matter than in what he called "the mores," the habits of the heart, that really determine what makes a culture tick. Here social pluralism was critical as this refers to that sphere we call civil society—the realm of families, schools, learned and civic associations, the variety of plural associations that help people to nurture and to sustain morality, charity, and order in the state and the broader community.

Tocqueville, a French Catholic whose family had narrowly escaped complete devastation during the terror, understood what happened when a people's religion is wrenched violently from them. This depletes a culture, it does not liberate. So Tocqueville's discerning eye was shaped by the memories of direct experiences. He also knew the long story of Western encounters between government, or earthly rule, and the sacred and its representatives on earth. He knew this was a rich and

complex story, much, much more than simply a matter of state hostility to church. The West has never been receptive to a thoroughgoing theocratic model in which political and religious establishments are fused into a single structure. There were often close alliances between throne and altar, to be sure, but this isn't the same thing.

A differentiation between politics and religion was sown in Western religious history from very early on. Christians were obliged to ask what has God to do with Caesar? The answer varied widely and still does. Let's add to this mix the fact that churches, synagogues, and now, mosques, embody a kind of politics, having their own understandings of community, membership, authority, rule, power, and the nature of earthly kingdoms in general.

It is utterly unsurprising, then, that when Tocqueville toured America in the Jacksonian era, he noted the ways in which religion in the United States generated and made use of democratic instincts; religion helped to shape the mores, the habits of the heart. Tocqueville further observed that settled beliefs "about God and human nature are indispensable to men for the conduct of daily life." You simply couldn't function if you awakened each morning and had to determine anew what truths would guide you over the next twenty-four hours.

For any culture, the question will be: what forms the basis of the truths that guide us? The truths that set the mores for Americans were, in one way or another, theistically grounded. So

much so that Tocqueville insisted that America embodied a coming age of democracy and equality, not despite her religiosity but precisely because of it.

But Tocqueville also conjured with certain problematic tendencies in our optimistic, can-do, religiously grounded but increasingly—even then—secular society. Here, in a nutshell, are the worries—and I submit to you that it is citizens like Al Quie who have spent a lifetime struggling with the troubles Tocqueville alerted us to and to whom, therefore, we are deeply indebted. Egalitarianism in a commercial republic such as the United States unleashes a materialistic quest. At this juncture, faith communities are vital. Why? Because such traditions and communal institutions exert a chastening influence on striving ambition. They inspire contrary urges that draw people into community and away from narrow materialism. In Tocqueville's words, "religion helps to purify, control, and restrain that excessive and exclusive taste for well-being human beings acquire in an age of equality." Tocqueville had in his sights the covenantal tradition and its living remnants. The notion of covenant is one that stresses mutual accountability of persons to one another and before God. This creates and sustains a kind of "moral equality among the people."

In fact, and perhaps surprisingly, the separation on the constitutional level of church and state had in America invited an astonishingly religious atmosphere. By diminishing the official power of religion, Americans appeared

to have enhanced its social strength. Perhaps, deep down, Americans appreciated the way that religion feeds hope and is thus attached to a fundamental principle of human nature. Amidst the flux and tumult of the rambunctious American polity, religion shaped and mediated the passions. Tocqueville's fear was that were the day to arrive when those passions got unleashed upon the civic world unrestrained, then we would indeed arrive at an unhappy moment. He called this dreary prospect "democratic despotism." Here is how he described it:

Perhaps the claim would take hold that each individual is presumed to be self-sovereign in all things. Sovereign selves cannot sustain community. Over time, the principle that all persons are unique and sacred gives way to a view that all are islands unto themselves. A republican government such as America's depends on communal vitality and a source of value not reducible to the sum total of individualistic claims. Sovereign selves cannot sustain associational life.

Would American religion remain strong enough to play this role—one that chastened certain tendencies and invigorated others? Here Tocqueville wasn't that confident about our prospects, it must be said. He determined that there were at least two great dangers threatening the American democracy. He named these as "schism" and "indifference." Schism pits people against one another in suspicion and enmity. Religion might even inadvertently contribute to schism. If you

didn't like the preacher, you threw him out. If you couldn't throw him out, you left that church and started a new one. If there is a creedal difference that sticks in your craw, change it or drop it and if others don't accept it, start a new church. Small wonder that President Andrew Jackson is supposed to have quipped that political attacks didn't bother him half so much as arguments in the Presbyterian Church.

If communities are not strong enough to hold together, individuals will not only fly away, they may fall apart. Note that this tendency feeds directly into our present dilemmas about "difference." If and when our differences become destructive divisions, that is schism: we fly apart and can find no judicious principle of comity. This erodes our appreciation of both community and plurality. We need communities in order to make our differences manifest and present to one another in a nonviolent way. But with the breakup of the covenantly tradition, protestant individualism by the end of the nineteenth century held sway to an extraordinary extent. Tocqueville had put his finger on our pulse all right.

As covenant increasingly gave way to contract, the range of public debate and discussion also altered. Over time, we felt a good bit more comfortable talking about interests than we did talking about norms or principles or the moral good or goods. We confidently proclaimed our rights but it seemed excessively solemn to discuss our duties.

What about the issue of indifference? Indifference is a danger because

this attitude invites us not to care about one another at all—in the current lingo, *'whatever.'* This is different from authentic tolerance of the sort that presupposes a way to live together with strong, open, and articulated differences that go deep and are far more than cosmetic.

Surely if Tocqueville were touring America today, he would point to both worries and suggest that we are in danger of losing that generous concern for others that religion promotes. Tocqueville would find this enormously troubling, for much current evidence suggests that, even as Americans say they believe in God, they are increasingly detached from what they call “institutional religion.” Instead, individualistic “spirituality” is lifted up. But as bishop Wilton Gregory, vice president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops noted: “What do they mean by ‘spiritual’? That they watched two episodes of *Touched by an Angel?*” Spirituality is a complex discipline, not an ephemeral feeling, as so many seem to think. True illumination is provided by people who hold their lights aloft in the darkness as a community of belief. As well, operating from some common moral basis helps people to learn how to compromise, precisely because they agree on so many important things.

Here’s the Tocquevillian conundrum summarized: if a society slides into a world of schism or indifference, differences become occasions for isolation or enmity, and authentic pluralism of the sort that requires institutional bases and communities from which to

operate, is lost. It is pluralism that creates space within which to be both American and Protestant, Catholic, Jew, Muslim, on and on. Absent robust faith and vibrant civic institutions, citizens are thrown back on their own devices. They lose the strength that membership provides. They forget that they can come to know a good in common that they cannot know alone.

Should a society arrive at this impasse, we would find that individuals, striving to stand upright in the winds blowing from centers of governmental or economic power operating minus any chastening influences from other vital sources, would soon be flattened. People would grow apart. We might still have kin, but we would lose civic fellowship and a country in the strong sense of a polity of which we were essential parts.

Religion isn’t just another interest group that you can take up or drop if it no longer serves your immediate purposes. As defenders and theorists of democracy have known for centuries, absent strong formative institutions—institutions that form decent, moral citizens and persons—it is impossible to sustain freedom in the authentic sense, freedom that is self-limiting because I recognize that my freedom is not in opposition to yours but that each of us together is free insofar as we sustain respect and recognition for others. That, too, is where faith communities play a critical role. They insistently compel us to recognize the claims of others, of the person before us, whatever his or her skin color, ethnicity, economic status or, yes, religious belief.

Of course, we must acknowledge that our history is not free from intolerance—outbursts from the know-nothings, with their virulent anti-Catholicism, attacks on Mormons, Jewish quotas, and the like. But I submit to you that the way to combat this is to insist that persons with strong religious convictions must recognize, as President Bush said in his State of the Union Address, that liberty is not America's gift to the world but God's gift to humanity. We cannot deny to others what we ourselves embrace.

We live in a skeptical if not disillusioned era. We know on the basis of the best available evidence from our leading social scientists that Americans have withdrawn in large numbers from hands-on civic engagement. Especially troubling is growing evidence that those most cynical about our prospects, particularly politics and government, are the young. This is a complex phenomenon, no doubt. But I suspect that one factor in the spirit of cynicism is the fact that young people are often fed stories that represent American history as nothing but a tale of failed promises. In an attempt to be more self-critical, and not to instill in our young people a too-benign view of our past, some have gone overboard the other direction. We have failed to offer the young a strong civic story to hold onto.

If this is true of our civic story, it pertains as well to our narratives about America's religious history where we have been treated to many accounts of late about the marginalization of this group or the maltreatment of another but along the way we have lost sight of

the millions of ordinary Americans whose commitment to their faith lifts them up, sustains hope and faithfulness, and helps to form them as good stewards and responsible members of their communities.

My then five-year-old granddaughter—she's now a big girl of eight—gave me her version of the traditional story shortly before Thanksgiving 1999. It went like this:

Grandma, we learned about Thanksgiving and why we have turkeys. The Pilgrims got on a boat called the **Mayflower** because the king wouldn't let them pray free. So they got on the boat and they sailed for a long time across the ocean to come to America. Some Pilgrims got sick and died. The Pilgrim children had to sleep on the hard wood floors on the ship. They thought they'd never get there. But they did! It was cold and they were hungry. They got to be friends with the Indians and they shared some turkeys and corn and gave thanks and that's why we eat turkey and have Thanksgiving, because then the Pilgrims could pray free.

Could pray free. This isn't a bad story and it is essentially the one many of us were taught. It is the baseline from which to work. The story gets more complex over time. The encounter with indigenous people is, we know, one with many layers of suspicion, violence, failure and also stories of communication and comity. We are familiar with how this proceeds. Jump-starting the civic formation of children with a strong, decent story is appropriate. Of course, one could not—no responsible

parent or teacher would—offer a benign version of the coming of slavery to American. But even here one could tell this horrific tale in a way that emphasized the strength of African slaves and their determination to try to hold on to their God-given dignity even under conditions of slavery; their efforts to sustain families; their cultural contributions even enslaved.

I propose a civic and hopeful way to tell the American story—a story of a society struggling to see to it that its practices live up to its principles. The interweaving of faith with civic life is central to this narrative. The world is wounded in so many ways. But beginning with the dignity of each and every human person, we must lift up that dignity by recognizing and honoring the religious dimension of every person. In the Christian tradition this means insisting that we are all made in God's image. Other traditions have their own starting points from which to engage a wounded world. The critical yet hopeful approach is aware of our shortcomings even as it promotes a dialogue between faith and civic culture. Citizens are enjoined to think, to speak, and to act toward a common good, as has the man we honor here today. The story of America at her best is a story of the struggle to ask, to answer, and to achieve a good that we can know in common that we cannot know alone.

Following Professor Elstain's speech, Governor Quie offered brief remarks and then both took audience questions.

Governor Quie's Remarks

After 9/11, when I realized the evil that had been committed, I remembered I had a file folder entitled "Evil." It included a 1999 article called "The Vocabulary of Evil," which quoted Dr. Elshtain greatly. It is thrill to connect the person with what I've been reading about.

This is a subject that has been deep in my heart for a long time. Part of it comes from the fact that I grew up in a family that was quite religious and the church had an impact on me. I recognize that the doctrine of the church wasn't easy for me. I remember the feeling when the pastor laid his hands on my head at the altar rail before communion and said, "Gracious forgiveness of all your sins, in the name of the Father and the Son and Holy Ghost." It was as though God had reached down through his hands, and I was feeling the power of God upon me.

People have those feelings in various ways. The way I look at it, faith is a realization of the reality of God. The realization of what God has done and is doing and will do through his risen son, Jesus Christ. But my way, the Christian way, isn't the only way of knowing God. In New Mexico I saw someone give corn back to the earth in a show of thanks for its gifts. That doesn't fit with our Christian religion but it represents a relationship to God that we ought to honor and respect.

When the commissioner of corrections, Sheryl Ramstad, asked me if I would chair a group to work on developing a means for inmates to grow in

their faith, we pulled together people from various faiths. Rather than have neutrality, so everybody would have a universal way of expressing themselves, everyone would give a prayer. I would ask them to pray the way they do in private. I told them, "You don't have to translate Allah into God for us. Pray in Arabic, if that's easier for you. You can pray in Hebrew if that's what you normally do, in Ojibwa if that's what you do, and just pray, we will accept that." Later I would say to the Christians, "I've been watching you, and I notice you leave out the words that I hear you say when you're only with Christian groups—'in Jesus' name'—before you end with 'amen.' What you're saying to the other folks is that you don't expect them to respect you; therefore, they know you don't respect them. And that's essential."

When I was growing up on our farm, we had a hired man who happened to be Catholic. This was in the days before Pope John XXIII and Vatican II. The hired hand ate with us, so if we had had meat on Friday, he would have needed special dispensation from his priest to eat with us. So on Fridays, my mother always fixed fish. She said it was nonessential to us, but it was essential to him. She told me we ought to honor and respect him for his faith. This is what we're talking about in our pluralistic society, to honor and respect others, because then people are more likely to honor and respect us.

When I was in Congress, we passed legislation creating the National Endowment for the Humanities. I wanted to make sure the NEH grants

would allow the study of religion, because it's had such an impact on our nation. So, I prepared the amendment and I went over to the Senate and got Jake Javits to be my co-sponsor. I figured that if a Lutheran and a Jewish person worked together we probably could reduce the opposition. That was one of the first open mixings of religion and politics. But religion plays more of a role than most of us realize.

We can draw on what God has shown us. So, when we elect a person who has an obvious faith, no matter what their religion is, we should not fear that. But we should, from that, try to find out the transcendent truth.

Questions and Answers

Mitch Pearlstein: Over the last generation there has been a resurgence of religious energy in politics, and particularly on the right side of the aisle. How would you evaluate that change, that surge? Good? Not so good? Helpful? Unifying? What would you say?

Governor Quie: It may be that we notice it coming from the right more than the left because the right has used language that defines it and perhaps the left has not used that language. I would like to see the churches bring the two sides—the left and the right—together to discuss faith, in the way that Center of the American Experiment does on political issues. We need to recognize that we come from different perspectives and views on faith. Through that, I believe we can come closer to God and reach out to other people more. What I'm saying is, don't give up on

what you believe in, but communicate with other people about it.

Jean Bethke Elshtain: In the academic circles in which I make my home, when you talk about the resurgence of religion as the direct source of political inspiration, it is always construed as a threat—almost some unique peril. This always strikes me as simply a misreading of the situation. We have always had in our history, people with strong religious convictions entering the political arena on the basis of those convictions and beliefs and being quite explicit about the fact that they're out doing what they're doing in politics precisely because of their faith.

One of the things that Stephen Carter of Yale University likes to talk about is Martin Luther King, the phenomenon of King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. He says people consistently forget or don't even want to acknowledge that King was, above all things, a Baptist minister, and that you have to understand his faith and his understanding of prophetic witness in order to appreciate his politics.

I had an experience about two years ago in a discussion on these issues in which a particular scholar (I'm not going to name names; you'll never get it out of me!) said, "When I was in the free speech movement at Berkeley, we managed to get King to come to campus and give a talk. The others and I chose simply to ignore the fact that he was a minister." He said, "I think it's best simply to leave that part out." How can you leave out what's central

to the person and central to his or her understanding of the kingdom?

When you read Dr. King's speeches, you pick up the cadences and the language of the Old Testament, as well as the new. You hear something like the prophet Amos. You hear something like the "Sermon on the Mount." And that's absolutely essential to his politics.

I believe that there needs to be more robust debate about a whole range of issues. And as long as that debate takes the form of debate and dialogue, and even, at times, confrontation, just to make our differences clear, I think that's fine. Democracy can make provision for that. Obviously, if it slides over into threats and violence, that's another issue. But then you're dealing with criminal behavior, and we have ways to deal with that, too. So, I think religion as a source of political inspiration is absolutely vital.

Jerry Reedy of Macalester College: You said, if I understood you correctly, that for Christians, human beings are made in the image of God, something from the book of Genesis, which Christianity inherited from Judaism, something that we have in common. Shouldn't that fact be stressed?

Jean Bethke Elshtain: Oh, sure. I think that it's absolutely vital to stress that and to show that at many points along the way what Christians and Jews share. But Christianity has made this a centerpiece of Christian theology, rather more than much rabbinical teaching does, to the extent that I am familiar with it, and we have some very distinguished scholars of the rabbinical

tradition at the University of Chicago. But, certainly, this is something that's shared. My understanding of the Muslim tradition is that that is not their understanding about the nature of the person. I had assumed that it was and then I was corrected on that point, in fact, by a Muslim scholar. And that's why I said others having their own starting points in responding to a wounded world. So I think that we always walk a fine line. We must balance pointing to the things we share and have in common, even as, as the Governor has suggested, it's also important for our differences and distinctiveness to be revealed and displayed, as well, and for us not to be worried about those distinctions and differences.

Dan Ritchie of Bethel College: I'd like to pick up on the concern about the young and their involvement, not just in politics but in social movements in general. I'm a teacher and I'm very struck by the sense among the young that they are really incapable of effecting much change, doing much work that will have true public significance. Often they think the only publicly significant act they perform is voting. In other words, they are not willing or able to undertake the kinds of activities that Tocqueville thought were so important in forming associations, cultivating mores and the habits of the heart on political, social, and economic levels. Or, they undertake these activities but they don't really think they're that important.

I'm wondering if you can give us a couple of instances where you see alter-

natives to my description, which are truly significant in terms of turning the tide back in the direction of a robust participation in public life, broadly conceived.

Jean Bethke Elshtain: I want to hear the governor on this, too, but since you mentioned students, I have a couple of thoughts. One is, it's really a sea change that I detect in my students. (Come September, I will have been teaching for thirty years.) With students now, the emphasis often is on trying to work out their lives in such a way that they are able to sustain families. Many of them come from broken homes, come from homes with two very busy, dual-career moms and dads. They love their parents, don't get me wrong, but they think that their lives were a little imbalanced as far as working out the relationship between family commitments and work commitments. I had a very interesting encounter with a very capable young woman who had a whole series of ambitions and was beginning to worry that they might conflict with one another. She wanted to make partner in a law firm before age thirty and be married and have children and so on. So, she's talking to me about this and she said to me, "Professor Elshtain, did you ever read stories to your children?" I started to recite *Green Eggs and Ham* from memory, and *Where the Wild Things Are*, which remains one of my favorites. I saw some real pathos in her reaction. She said she had a lawyer father and a physician-mother and that she could not remember ever sitting

down and having one of her parents read a story. And, again, as I said, she loved her parents. But there was something haunting in that question, clearly, about how people spend their time. So, the commitments that many students now are struggling with are how to live a more balanced human life. Much of this comes out not in the kind of political activism, movement activism that we saw, for better or for worse (it was some of each, I think) in the 1960s and early '70s, but it comes out more in what is often called volunteer activity. It's a quieter kind of commitment. It doesn't make headlines because people aren't out marching or, in some cases, unfortunately, as you know, even turning to destructive activities. But it's more along the lines of a Habitat for Humanity connection or what's happening through their churches. Or, increasingly, for students who don't have church connections or faith backgrounds, they think about the ways in which they can make a contribution to the building of kind of an international civil society. They're keen to go to places where they're building, where they have very fragile fledgling democracies. Can I make a contribution there? Maybe I can go and teach English there. Maybe there are things that I can do on the ground that might make a contribution. And I hear quite a bit of that. There's also, of course, a lot of "just don't want to think about those things, not interested in those things," and a sort of narrow focus, narrow career orientation.

So, I would say there's a mix. And, obviously, the kinds of students you

meet and talk to at the University of Chicago are not the same students at your institution and many others. One of the glories of this country is the incredible variety—much of it, actually, religiously based—in our institutions of higher education. So you're going to see a lot of difference. But politics is usually a negative, and that's very worrying. That's very worrying, because our young people should not be so turned off by politics and political life. St. Augustine described politics as reconciling conflicting human wills. Finding a way that people within a given space, if you will, can find ways to reconcile one with the other. It's a vital task; it's a God-given task. I think that we don't sufficiently respect and honor the people who go into it.

Governor Quie: Politics is the art of governing. Power is getting other people to do what you want them to do. We all started out in politics when we learned that when we cried, our mother ran to us. We're all in politics in some way, and I have two pieces of advice for the politician in all of us. First, you need to have time to yourself alone in order to think. Much of the time you're just following somebody else who's been doing the thinking and reading.

Second, never believe that you have no voice. When I was in Congress, some students in Faribault High School wanted to sell apples and the school lunch program denied them the right to sell apples. The program had to control all food that was sold. I thought that was insane, so we changed the law. ■