

What is the Relationship of Religion and the Liberal Script?

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Though the distinction between the purview of the state and that of churches – if not a complete church-state separation – is a feature of liberal democracies, western liberal democracy is nonetheless grounded in principles of the Abrahamic faith. Though these tenets may be expressed without God-talk, liberal concepts too attenuated from their foundations become procedures that can be used for any ends as they lack precisely the framework of values that would shape them towards some Good.



I will begin with a sentence that is usually *unwelcome* in secular Berlin, that the Abrahamic faiths are the foundation for the western liberal script. I will focus on the Jewish and Christian traditions not because Islam is not a foundation but because it is not my area of research.

It is of course true that Abrahamic concepts can be reworked without “God-talk”. But I suggest that liberal concepts too attenuated from their foundations become procedures that can be used for any ends as they lack precisely the framework of values that would shape them towards some Good. We see an example of this devolution in the US, where the procedures of democracy are being used to undermine democracy. Lose the normative premises grounding the *legal* mechanisms of democracy, and democracy falters.

So, foundational values and telos count. I will discuss four foundational Abrahamic ideas.

(i) First, that persons are made in God’s image. This grounds the entire liberal script in its assertion that persons have inalienable worth, dignity, and

therefore *inalienable* rights. Hence, the freedoms of conscience, speech, assembly, and freedom *from* torture, arbitrary incarceration, etc.

The counter-claim that we can value persons humanistically, without God-talk, is vulnerable to the retort: *why?* What ground secures this mandate? Why should I worry about others at all? A second counter-claim is that the *imago* is anthropocentric and leads to environmental degradation. But this makes the answer to the first counter-claim, the self-absorbed neglect of others, bizarrely stronger. For if, to avoid anthropocentrism, we say persons are no different from whatever animals or vegetables you ate for lunch, there is no reason to afford humans the liberal script.

(ii) The relational nature of the universe. The Abrahamic faiths recognize that there could be nothing at all, but there is something, and the reason for the existability of anything is the transcendent-something-or-other, which some call God. Everything “partakes” (an anthropomorphism of course) of the reason for existability in order to exist at all, so there is a foundational relation between each particular and the transcendent. Now, the transcendent-reason-for-existability is radically different – out of time, space, and materiality – from any earthly particular. Thus, the structure of existence is distinction-amid-relation: *distinction* (each particular is radically distinct from the transcendent) *amid relation* (foundational relation to the transcendent-reason-for-existence in order to exist). The *imago* is a wonderful window onto this: as the transcendent is immaterial, there is no image – no physiognomy – for persons to partake of. Yet we must have something-of-a-kindness with the ground-of-existence to exist at all.

Because distinction-amid-relation is the structure of everything, persons are distinct from each other yet also in foundational relation. Indeed, we become who we uniquely are *through* our relationships. Consider how infants develop: through layers and networks of relations and interactions.

Distinction-amid-relation grounds the liberal idea of the distinct value of each person, who may not be violated and is protected by rights. It also grounds the liberal idea that each of us, in foundational relation to others, must be concerned about *their* value, dignity, and rights. The liberal script is not opportunities and rights for me and abuse for you. But rather, a legal and normative *system* that recognizes the distinct identity, value, and rights of each.

(iii) The covenantal nature of humanity. Covenant means a reciprocal relationship for the *flourishing* of the other. Each distinct person is simultaneously in foundational, covenantal relationship with the transcendent and with other persons, both those near and those in our paths of global connectedness, as people, goods, ideas, and germs travel. Unlike contract, which protects interests, covenant protects relationship, the community, the *polis*, and the legal and normative *system* in which the concern, rights, and responsibilities afforded to me by covenant are afforded, systematically, to all. Covenantal relationships may have stipulative terms (parents in covenantal relationship with their children may tell them to clean their rooms), but the purpose and *telos* of covenant is relationship, not stipulation (you do not have children so that they clean their rooms).

(iv) Human moral agency. In a relational universe where covenant is a *reciprocal* bond, not only God but each person is responsible for sustaining it. In ancient creation stories, the gods cavorted through their sexual or warring adventures, and humanity could hope for benign neglect or perhaps to prod the gods' good will by magic. The innovation of the Hebrew Bible is a moral universe, where ill befalls those who violate the moral law (covenant among persons), as in the Sodom and Gomorrah narrative and in prophetic writings. Moreover, *everyone* is responsible, not just the king or priests, considered gods or intermediaries with the gods.

Moreover, the Hebrew Bible provides *explanations* for its laws because it addresses readers as persons "capable of moral reasoning" (Hayes 2012: 139). Robert Bellah provides a useful summary: covenant is "a charter for a new kind of people, a people under God, not under a king [...] a people ruled by divine law, not the arbitrary rule of the state, and of a people composed of *responsible individuals*." (Bellah 2011: 323). Here we have the foundation for liberal democracy, for without the notion that all people – ordinary people – have the capacity to make moral choices for the common good, self-rule is incoherent.

In practice, we have seen these Abrahamic principles in the US abolition, labor, Civil Rights, and women's and gay rights movements, in the South African anti-apartheid effort, etc. We see them also – just for an unexpected source – among American white evangelicals who oppose Trumpism. In 2020, Jerusha Duford, Billy Graham's granddaughter, founded Pro-life Evangelicals for Biden, holding that Trump was trying "to hijack our faith for

votes” and that he “doesn’t represent our faith” (Kristof 2020). Indeed, the Not Our Faith political action committee was founded also in 2020 precisely on that idea, noting that Trump “has used Christianity for his own purposes” (Schor 2020), “failing in health care and climate change and fomenting racism” (Not Our Faith 2019). 2019 saw the formation of Christians Against Christian Nationalism (CACN), whose mission statement reads: “As Christians, we must speak in one voice condemning Christian nationalism as a distortion of the gospel of Jesus and a threat to American democracy.” (Christians Against Christian Nationalism 2019). CACN was founded by the Baptist Joint Committee. By July 2021, more than 22,000 pastors and parishioners had signed the CACN statement, which continues,

Christian nationalism demands Christianity be privileged by the State and implies that to be a good American, one must be Christian. It often overlaps with and provides cover for white supremacy and racial subjugation. We reject this damaging political ideology and invite our Christian brothers and sisters to join us in opposing this threat to our faith and to our nation (Christians Against Christian Nationalism 2019).

We observe that religion has been used also to justify stripping certain groups – minorities, women, immigrants – of dignity, value, and rights, thus violating the liberal script. So have various political and economic platforms. When we confront illiberal political or economic proposals, we do not rid ourselves of politics or economics. We strive for systems that uphold the value of person and polis. Our Abrahamic principles are the ground for doing so.

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