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INESTIMABLE BLESSINGS OF RELIGIOUS AND CIVIL LIBERTY

(From a sermon for Independence Day)

Full disclosure: except that there is no one else to do it, I have no business in the pulpit today. I am not a citizen of these United States of America, this country in which I am so fortunate as to live and work as a (legal!) resident alien; indeed, I am a citizen of a country that originated in opposition to the American revolution. The Dominion of Canada was in large part shaped by Americans on the losing side of the first American civil war (whom Americans call Tories and Canadians call Loyalists). So what am I supposed to tell you today? A Canadian friend of mine suggested, "Come back, all is forgiven!"

Such predicaments are not new to Episcopal clergymen. Although many of the American republic's founding fathers were what we would now call Episcopalians, many of the clergy were Loyalist or Tory in sympathy, even those who stayed on the United States and made their peace with the new order, and this was not easy. When a revision of the English Prayer Book for newly-constituted Episcopal Church was proposed in 1786, it contained "A Form of Prayer and Thanksgiving to Almighty God for the inestimable blessings of Religious and Civil Liberty" to be used on the fourth of July. For clergymen of loyalist inclination this was a bit too much to swallow. It was one thing to submit to the powers that be, and to pray for all those in authority, as Scripture required; quite another to give thanks to God for the Declaration of Independence and the success of revolution! So in the interests of healing the wounds of division, the proposed service was not included in the first Prayer book of 1789. Not until the revision of 1928 were the present collect, epistle, and gospel introduced for Independence Day.

We give thanks today, as citizens and resident aliens, for "the inestimable blessings of religious and civil liberty", and it is about that phrase that I would have you think. In recent decades Jefferson's "wall of separation of church and state" has been built up to the point that one would hardly link the two aspects of liberty any more. Religion is now regarded by many as an irrational and essentially private matter to be rigorously excluded from the public realm. Religious views are often disqualified from public debate merely by reason of their being religious in origin; and an agnostic secularism is thought to be the only

legitimate category for public expression. The freedom of religion guaranteed by the first Amendment to the Constitution is often thought to mean freedom from religion. A song like "Imagine" is a manifesto for such views: "Imagine there's no countries / It isn't hard to do / Nothing to kill or die for / And no religion too." The USA may have resisted Marxist-Leninism, but it has not escaped the influence of John-Lennonism!

Against such views, let me give you four quotations, whose provenance I think you will readily recognize. First: "When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and Nature's God entitle them..." Second: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights..." Third: "We therefore, the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions..." Fourth: "And for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honour".

In the Declaration of Independence, it is very striking that the argument for civil liberty is made on the basis of religious convictions about Nature and Nature's God, the Creator who endows men with inalienable rights. The signers appealed to the Supreme Judge of the world to vindicate the rectitude of their intentions, and they proclaimed their reliance on the protection of divine Providence for the success of their enterprise. This should surprise us. In our own time, human rights and religious convictions are often thought to be inherently in conflict, and those who champion human rights often put themselves in opposition to those with strong religious convictions.

But the Declaration assumes the opposite: the only possible basis for its argument for human rights is the religious convictions of the American people (which then as now were overwhelmingly, if broadly, and sometimes eccentrically, Christian). Though the first amendment would prohibit Congress from establishing a church for the whole nation, it was only in the late twentieth century that it has been interpreted (bizarrely) as requiring a public square scrubbed clean from all trace of religious observance. If Americans take the Declaration seriously, they must acknowledge that the religious convictions of the American people have a critical and essential role in the public good.

In this respect, the American republic represented no great break from the whole develop of the western political tradition, which developed over many centuries under the influence of Christianity. In this tradition, the authorities of church and state are clearly distinguished, each with its own distinctive tasks: yet they are not 'separated' in the sense demanded by contemporary secularists. Both are "under God", under his judgment and mercy; and both are necessary for the common good of society. The State maintains the peace, security, and order, in which the Church can carry out the work of the gospel; the Church, on its side, inculcates that moral virtue and true religion without which the State cannot be just or free. T. S. Eliot has a line somewhere about the folly of devising systems so perfect that no one

has to be good. The best system of checks and balances is no protection against tyranny and corruption, if there is no virtue and no religion to inculcate those virtues. The State therefore has an proper interest in the flourishing of the Church.

If we think that to be an outmoded understanding, we should consider what an aggressive secularism has accomplished in Stalin's Russia, Hitler's Germany, Pol Pot's Cambodia, Mao's China, and Kim Jong Il's North Korea. We don't have to "imagine" a world without religion: we have seen it; and we know it to be utterly inhumane. Whatever the crimes and follies committed in the name of the Christian religion, they pale in comparison. Those with no fear of an account to be rendered to "the Supreme Judge of the world", and no "firm reliance on divine Providence", and no respect for the laws of Nature's God and Creator, will have no other constraint on their selfish and destructive passions. Only as a nation is brought under the judgment and mercy of the God and Father of Jesus Christ can it know true freedom.

The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar

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