Toleration, Liberty, and Truth: A Parable

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In August of 1790, the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island, received George Washington's justly famous letter on religious liberty. Responding to the Jews' congratulations on his presidency, Washington offered a concise but stirring enunciation of the novelty of American liberty:

> The Citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy: a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.[1]

Washington drew a sharp distinction between toleration and liberty. Toleration implies the "indulgence of one class of people" toward another. It implies that a majority (or, alternatively, those who hold the balance of power in a polity) gives a minority (or a politically powerless group) the privilege of following their own way of life unmolested. For many centuries, toleration was the best that one could hope for, not just in Europe, but in the Muslim and pagan empires as well. Regimes of toleration, such as the millet system of the Ottomans or the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century, allowed their subjects a generous latitude of belief and traditional behavior in the interest of civil peace, commercial prosperity, and so on. But "now no more" was toleration to be spoken of. The American experiment

[1]George Washington, *Writings* (ed. John H. Rhodehamel; New York: Library of America, 1997) 766.

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introduced a radical project of religious liberty. If toleration was, at best, an expression of enlightened statecraft, religious liberty was to be an expression of moral truth. Toleration was an act of prudence. Liberty was a requirement of conscience, of fixed moral principle. Toleration was grounded in politics, liberty in ethics.

A distinctive set of putative truths informs Washington's remarks. His invocation of the term "inherent natural rights," echoing the Declaration of Independence (so much so that scholars had sometimes mistakenly attributed the Newport letter to Jefferson), indicates an anthropology of the moral person. It ascribes to persons a fixed human nature, at least with respect to their worth and their agency. Individuals have pre-political dignity and power, and are capable of that "reflection and choice" that first brings governments into being (as Hamilton wrote in *The Federalist,* no. 1). Before they are either citizens or subjects, persons are first and foremost moral agents. Governments are created in light of that fact. Their purpose is to guard the fundamental moral rights and moral dignity of persons, and to allow persons the best opportunity to live as moral agents in society. If it is the task of government to protect fundamental moral rights, it is the task of persons to rise above their natural self-centeredness and live as republican citizens. As citizens, persons are bearers of a wider range of responsibilities, chief among them the responsibility of self-rule, than they were as the subjects of the regimes of toleration (let alone of the intolerant regimes). Much is given to them and much is expected of them. Liberty thus assumes that a person's potential as a moral agent requires, for its full realization, a civic identity and self-rule under limited government. In this way, the American discourse of natural rights shelters the political beneath a moral firmament. Toleration, by contrast, remains solely political. Whatever moral virtue may be ascribed to tolerance as a personal attribute, in political terms toleration has to do with prudence rather than principle, with civil peace rather than the expression of moral truth.[2]

If this is true, then we might say that a regime of liberty makes a claim to a truth about humankind that a regime of toleration does not make. Liberty proudly asserts its correspondence with the needs of the soul, as it were. Toleration asserts its utility in service to the state or testifies to the magnanimity or graciousness of the sovereign. Since liberty claims that it knows people as responsible moral

[2]From the perspective of American constitutionalism and the natural right theories that inform it, the distinction between liberty and toleration is categorical. From the perspective of empirical social science, however, liberty may be seen as a species of the genus toleration, that is, as that form of toleration appropriate to a certain kind of society. Michael Walzer takes just this perspective in his *On Toleration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997). In Walzer's view, religious liberty is how toleration is operationalized in an "immigrant society," a society of high diversity and low public consensus about founding myths and prevailing values. By contrast, morally infused texts, such as the Second Vatican Council Declaration on Religious Liberty (*Dignitatis Humanae*) uphold the categoricity of the distinction. There is truth on both sides. While the conceptual distinction is categorical, in actual circumstances toleration and liberty often overlap. Liberty is never absolute. At its limits, it resembles toleration.

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agents and, as such, gives them their due, the regime of liberty—confident in its own "self-evident" truth—has a complex relationship with other claims to truth. It might well be the case that the regime of liberty, whose promise was to leave all persons unmolested in their beliefs and practices to the greatest extent compatible with public order, makes a demand on its citizens for intellectual consent to its norms far in excess of that made by earlier regimes of toleration. Although it may leave its citizens unmolested—inarguably a very good thing—it may press itself more deeply into their minds and hearts than a tolerant but remote and disinterested state. This is because a regime of liberty requires a culture of liberty in order to transmit its values and reproduce itself. The American Constitution, for example, does more than establish a frame of government and set limits on government's powers. This "negative constitutionalism" is balanced by a "positive constitutionalism"—a project of educating a citizenry devoted to the ideals and practices of liberty and committed to sustaining the civic virtues incident on self-government.[3]

Does the regime of liberty, which would allow individuals full freedom to practice innumerable ways of life and thought, require its own way of life and thought such that it imperils, perhaps inadvertently, antecedent ways of life and thought? To put it bluntly: Does the truth that the regime of liberty proclaims about humankind require a public skepticism toward other assertions of truth? Does the culture of a regime of liberty tend to be infused with the skepticism that the regime itself might require? Does the regime's own truth crowd out those older claims to religious truth that endured under regimes of toleration?

These issues have been central to recent academic liberal political philosophy. In general, liberal thinkers are wary of the idea that a regime of liberty requires a "religion-like" public truth of its own such that older truths, including religious truths, are disadvantaged. While communitarians and civic republicans may endorse something on the order of a civil religion—first advanced by Jean Jacques Rousseau in a very hard form indeed—liberals would see any comprehensive understanding of the good life as unfit for the polity as a whole. John Rawls, for example, argues that a regime of liberty requires, at best, a stable but thin (or "overlapping") consensus among its citizens.[4] Rawls sharply distinguishes between the political sphere, in which citizens must share a working conception of justice (as fairness) and other spheres of life where more comprehensive doctrines apply. A liberal society gives rise to complex selves. Our lives as political beings, as citizens, require that we share in a consensus about public matters such as respect for one another's rights. Our lives as citizens, however, are only a small part of our personal stories. We can and often do live rich and full lives, sometimes in the midst of communities

[3]Stephen Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000) 15. Peter Berkowitz, *Virtue and the Making of Modern Liberalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) x.

[4]John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) 133–72.

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that make metaphysical and theological truth claims. Life in this sense takes place below the level of the political. Whatever truths pertain to our lives on that level are separate from the truths we must affirm as citizens. One sphere need not press too hard upon the other. The public sphere, in fact, must prescind from asserting the sort of truths that pertain to "private" communities insofar as these are not shared by all members of the political community. The public sphere cannot lay claim to any comprehensive doctrine of the good life nor can the visions of the private sphere assert themselves too forcefully into the public realm. The public realm trades in a reason requisite to its purposes. Religion, for example, does not share in the "communicative action" of public reason. In Rawls's account, then, no conflict need arise in principle between "private" truths and public ones.

Nonetheless, Rawls envisions that citizens will bring support to the political sphere and its moral requirements from the midst of those comprehensive doctrines, whether religious or philosophical, that they, as private men and women, affirm. This is the sense of Rawls's term "overlapping." Private moral convictions will overlap with, and thus strengthen, the public consensus about rights and justice. The religious truths are expected to be reasonable, rational helpmeets to the political truths. Like helpmeets of old, however, they are expected to play a private, supportive role. Religious truths have no public share in public reason.

Rawls's disciple, Stephen Macedo, has taken his liberalism a step further. In Macedo's view, public reason, while rigorously excluding religious truths such that they remain perforce private, presses itself even more strongly into the souls of citizens. A durable regime of liberty requires "liberal virtues," habits of heart and mind that equip the citizens of a regime of liberty to think and act in certain ways. Not only will they respect one another's rights and listen to the voice of public reason, thus participating in discussions about public matters in suitably public ways, their readiness to give others a fair hearing and the benefit of the doubt will mean that they will also be tentative about their own projects. Habituated to fair and judicious openness toward others, they will be somewhat skeptical and open to revision vis-à-vis their own beliefs. The habit of seeking compromise and prizing civil peace will cause them to moderate their own commitments. The ideal citizen of a regime of liberty for Macedo has internalized liberal norms in a profound way. Not only does the public sphere refrain from asserting comprehensive doctrines of the good life, but the status of such assertions grows provisional in the private sphere as well.[5] This approach might well be characterized—negatively—by Jean Bethke Elshtain's phrase, "liberal monism."[6]

William Galston dissents from these views. Advocating a "pluralist liberalism," Galston would see the moral and epistemological traditions of, for example, reli-

[5]Stephen Macedo, *Liberal Virtues* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990) 263–85.

[6]By "liberal monism," Elshtain means "the view that all institutions internal to a democratic society must conform to a single authority principle (one person, one vote, or some such); a single standard

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gious communities living in a healthy tension with civic traditions. The American constitutional tradition and the Roman Catholic or Jewish political traditions can interpenetrate and influence one another. In rare cases of hard conflict, the basic constitutional norms must prevail. But short of that, "private" assertions of truth about, for example, the nature of the person can become proper subjects for public conversation and persuasion. Religious truths, if well translated by their adherents into a public discourse, have a legitimate place in the public sphere.[7] The "public reason" required of liberal citizens can be enriched by "private" truths when these are able to play a genuinely helpful role. Yet the requirement that religious assertions of truth be translated into discourse compatible with the constitutional tradition shows, of course, which tradition has the upper hand. Even on Galston's account, it is hard to imagine that traditions that resist reformation along liberal lines could have much of a role to play in the public discourse. The pronouncements of the Catholic bishops are able to make a political and cultural impact because the church has transformed its own tradition into one of full accommodation with the regime of liberty. Without the profound accommodation to democracy evident in *Dignitatis Humanae*, for example, the church could not be a participant in Galston's suitably expanded public reason. Thus, on the account of all three liberal philosophers, it seems that the regime of liberty sets in motion irresistible forces for internal accommodation and change. "If," as Michael Walzer puts it, "ethnic and religious groups are to sustain themselves, they must do so now as purely voluntary associations."[8] Liberty imposes a profound transformation upon the liberated.[9]

The Parable of the Three Rings

To explore the conceptual dimensions of what is at stake in the shift from a regime of tolerance to a regime of liberty, let us turn to the classic parable of religious toleration in the Western tradition: the parable of the three rings. This exploration is intended neither as a philosophical argument nor as a history of ideas. It is rather

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of what counts as reason and deliberation (here Mill and later Millians); and a single vocabulary of political discussion (John Rawls). Democracy is defined in such a way that religion must be kept marginalized. Reason is defined in such a way that faith is discounted as something else, whether irrationalism or a peculiar atavism, or a form of private solace that must be kept utterly privatized." See Jean Bethke Elshtain, "State Imposed Secularism as a Potential Pitfall of Liberal Democracy" (paper presented at the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty International Conference, Prague, 9–11 August 2000), n.p. Online: http://www.becketfund.org/other/Prague2000/ElshtainPaper.html

[7]William Galston, "Traditional Judaism and American Citizenship," in *Religion as a Public Good* (ed. Alan Mittleman; Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

[8]Walzer, *On Toleration*, 31.

[9]Note that, in the case of all three liberal thinkers, none subscribe to the natural rights doctrine implicit in the Constitution and sketched above. Despite each one's unwillingness to endorse such a "thick" metaphysics of morals as eighteenth-century natural rights teaching, they nonetheless cannot avoid making moral claims that challenge and condition religion.

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an essay in the genesis of a cultural condition. The parable provides us with a unique vantage point from which to view the cultural evolution of toleration and, subsequently, of liberty. As the parable went through a process of transmission, it was transformed, acquiring new elements and contexts that subtly changed its meaning. We shall consider the three main versions of the parable. The first two are from the late medieval and Renaissance worlds, the third from the Enlightenment. The first, in Boccaccio's *Decameron* (fourteenth century), is the classic statement of the parable in Western literature.[10] The second, in Solomon ben Verga's Hebrew work, *Shevet Yehudah* (sixteenth century), illustrates the deployment of Boccaccio's story by a persecuted minority making a claim for religious toleration. The third, from Lessing's *Nathan der Weise* (eighteenth century), a leading Enlightenment drama, is poised at the intersection between the toleration that sometimes was and the liberty that was to come. *Nathan*, despite the superficial similarities, departs sharply from the earlier versions. In this departure, we detect the peculiar force of the demands of modern liberty vis-à-vis the older traditions of tolerance.

The Decameron

The *Decameron* is a collection of one hundred stories—ten stories told on ten consecutive days—composed in Florence in the mid-fourteenth century. The ring parable is found in the third story of the first day. Boccaccio's stories exemplify certain human excellences or virtues. Virtue enables men and women to contend with fate. In Boccaccio's version, the primary intention of the parable is to illustrate how quick wit can avert peril or disaster. Its chief thrust, therefore, is not toleration. That is, at best, a side effect.

The story concerns the encounter of a Jew, here called Melchisedech, with Sultan Saladin. The sultan has bankrupted himself through lavish spending and needs to replenish his treasury. He recalls that there is a rich Jew in Alexandria who loans money "at usurious rates."[11] The sultan does not want to force the Jew, who is "avaricious," to give him money. He prefers to summon and entrap him with a verbal challenge. Should the Jew fail to answer the sultan's question correctly, he would lay himself open to the accusation that he slandered the sultan's religion.

[10]Boccaccio's version is proceeded by Italian and Latin versions, both of which were compiled earlier than the *Decameron* but published later. Of these, the *Cento Novelle Antiche* (compiled in the late thirteenth century and published in 1525) is quite similar to the *Decameron* but not as artful. The early-fourteenth-century *Gesta Romanorum* (first published in 1473) resolves the uncertainty about the true ring by exposing the rings to sick men. The true ring cures the sick. The storyteller didactically reminds the audience that faith, the true ring, is the property of the Christians alone. For the *Cento Novelle Antiche* or *Il Novellino*, as it is also known, see *Il Novellino: The Hundred Old Tales* (trans. Edward Storer; London: George Routledge & Sons, 1925). The ring parable is story no. 73, p. 168.

[11]All references to Boccaccio are taken from Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron* (trans. Mark Musa and Peter E. Bondanella; New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1977) 32–34.

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Then Saladin could take his money as a punishment. The sultan's question penetrates to the marrow: "Worthy man, I have heard from many people that you are very wise and most versed in the affairs of God; because of this, I should like to know from you which of the three Laws you believe to be the true one: the Jewish, the Saracen, or the Christian."

Melchisedech knows full well what Saladin is up to. He cannot appear to praise one Law more than another, lest he give Saladin a pretext to accuse him. He therefore offers the following parable. There was once a wealthy man who had a ring of great beauty. He wanted to honor the ring by bequeathing it to his descendants forever. To whichever son he gave the ring, that one would be his true heir. So the ring was passed down through many generations within his family. At length, however, it fell to a man who had three equally "handsome and virtuous" sons. Each implored the father to grant him the ring. The father, loving all three equally, could not decide and therefore settled on a ruse. He employed an expert jeweler to make two perfect copies of the ring in secret. The copies were so convincing that the man "hardly could tell which was the real one." As he lay dying, he drew his sons to him one at a time and gave each a ring. After his death, each presented his ring and demanded his inheritance and position. Upon learning that each brother had an identical ring and failing to distinguish the true one from the copies, "they put aside the question of who the true heir was and left it undecided to this day." Shifting back to direct discourse, Melchisedech concludes:

> And let me say the same thing to you, my lord, concerning the three Laws given to the three peoples by God our Father which are the subject of the question you posed to me: each believes itself to be the true heir, to possess the true Law, and to follow the true commandments, but whoever is right, just as in the case of the rings, is still undecided.

Saladin, impressed by the Jew's courtly discretion and clever avoidance of the trap, confessed both his plot and plight to him. Melchisedech gave Saladin all that he desired. Saladin both paid him back and honored him as a friend and a courtier.

This story might be taken to commend, if only inadvertently, a tolerant attitude toward Jews. Boccaccio treats the Jewish character with a certain sympathy although he does not free himself from the standard stereotypes of the Jew as rich and avaricious. Even the cleverness of the Jew might have a negative resonance for some of his readers. In context, however, quick wit is a virtue, as is discretion in the presence of power.

The parable entertains, most likely without endorsing, the possibility of a tentativeness or skepticism with respect to religious truth. Or perhaps it only does this under the exigent condition of a political threat: Melchisedech's response is prudential, not principled. Boccaccio admits as much in the introduction to the story. There, he gives himself permission to descend to "the acts of men" only because

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"God and the truth of our faith have already been well dealt with by us." Further support for the view that Boccaccio does not endorse skepticism toward Christian truth is found in the second story of the first day, in which a Jew converts to Christianity, although for risible reasons. (He observes the debauchery of the clergy in Rome and admits that if Christianity is able to survive its clerisy then it must be the true religion.) While Boccaccio was probably touched by Averroist skepticism he was not much ruffled by it.[12] The father, although he can "hardly" tell the true ring from the copies, nonetheless can. One ring, one religion, is certainly true despite our current inability to make that discrimination. Although the parable at this stage flirts with both toleration and skepticism, it is not primarily concerned to endorse either one. Nonetheless, it does depict a condition in which, although toleration leaves religious truth intact, the tolerant are required to acknowledge that, unlike God, their human perspective is crucially limited. Tolerance, such as it is here, arises against the possibility of human fallibility in matters of religious truth.[13]

Shevet Yehudah

The *Shevet Yehudah* ("Scepter of Judah"), a collection of stories depicting the world of pre-exilic Spanish Jewry, was composed by an exiled Spanish rabbi, Solomon ben Verga, in the mid-sixteenth century. Ben Verga had settled in Italy where he was influenced by the novella form used to such great effect by Boccaccio. He undoubtedly learned the parable either from the *Decameron* or from an early version of the *Cento Novelle Antiche*.[14]

In Ben Verga's version, the place of Saladin is taken by a Spanish king, Don Pedro the Old. The king's minister, a Haman-like character named Nicolo d'Valencia, tries to set the king against the Jews.[15] He tells the king that before he goes off to fight his external enemies, he should fight his internal enemy, the Jewish people. Nicolo alleges that the Jews' religion prohibits them from treating the Christians with honesty and respect. The king is skeptical and presses Nicolo for the source of his information. When he learns that the source was a convert to Catholicism,

[12]On fourteenth-century Averroism, see James Thrower, *A Brief History of Atheism* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2000) 63–69.

[13]The idea of human fallibility as a condition that ought to awaken mutual empathy is developed by Rawls under the rubric of the "burdens of judgment." Reasonableness, in Rawlsian terms, involves mutual recognition of our epistemic limits. That judgments of truth are always under a "burden" means that a trace of skepticism must shadow every belief. Similarly, for a belief to be reasonable, believers must be aware of their own and others' perspectival limits, their "burden." See John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 54–58.

[14]All references to the *Shevet Yehudah* are taken from Shlomo ibn Verga, *Shevet Yehudah* (ed. Azriel Shochet; Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1947) 78–80. For Ben Verga's sources, see Yitzhak Baer, "Introduction," in *Shevet Yehudah*, 14 (all translations are my own).

[15]According to Yitzhak Baer ("Introduction," 10), the figures of Don Pedro and Nikolo are fictitious while the sage, Ephraim, was a real person.

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the king dismisses the credibility of the allegation against the Jews. Nonetheless, he decides to summon a Jewish sage, Ephraim. After some tense, mutual sizing-up, the king tells Ephraim that he has been summoned to answer the question, "Which of the two religions (*datot*) is good—the religion of Jesus or your religion?"

The sage attempts to parry the dangerous question with a modern-sounding, almost relativistic, answer. "My religion," he replies, "is better for me according to my concern. For I was a slave to slaves in Egypt and God brought me forth from there with wonders and signs. And your religion is good for you and your continuing reign." The king, however, is not so easily mollified. He asks that the sage answer according to how the religions are "good" in themselves (*mi-tzad atzmam*) and not according to how they are perceived by those who receive them. The sage requests three days to consider the problem. At the end of this hiatus, he returns with an enraged and furious appearance. The king asks why he appears so disturbed. The sage answers that earlier in the day someone had cursed him although he had done nothing to deserve it. He calls upon the king to defend him. The sage explains that a month ago his neighbor went abroad. To appease his two sons, the neighbor gave each of them a precious stone. Now the sons have come to the sage, requesting of him that he tell them whose stone is more precious. The sage tells them that their father, not he, would be best suited to know this. The father is an expert in gems and a great craftsman. Let them summon him and he will tell them the truth (*ha-emet*)! At this point, the sage relates, "They beat and abused me." The king, who has already shown an inclination toward fairness, declares that the neighbor's sons did wrong and deserve punishment.

The sage now upbraids the king: "Let your ears hear what your mouth has spoken! Behold Esau and Jacob were brothers and He gave to each one a single stone. And our lord asks, 'Which is better?' Let our king send an envoy to our Father in heaven, for He is the great lapidary (*lapidario*) who can distinguish between the stones." Without replying directly to the Jew, the king turns to his malevolent courtier, Nicolo, and admonishes him: "Do you see the cleverness of the Jews? This sage is worthy of gifts and glory while you are fit for punishment for speaking lies about the community of the Jews." Although he does not speak again with the Jew, the king and his courtier remonstrate with one another. The king insists that toleration, desisting from religious coercion, will be more effective in drawing the Jews to Christianity than the outright persecution that Nicolo advocates.

Ben Verga's version of the parable departs in significant thematic (and not only in literary) ways from Boccaccio's. Here the message of tolerance is more overt. The virtues of cleverness and discretion still figure into the story but they no longer appear as its main thrust. The king is committed to a regime of toleration and wants to minimize religious strife and persecution in his kingdom. (He also anticipates the Enlightenment view, typical of Milton and Locke, that religious coercion is, as a missionary strategy, always counterproductive.) Nicolo's zealotry is at odds with

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his enlightened statecraft and personal graciousness. The Jewish sage skillfully exploits the king's propensity toward tolerance, turning a potentially catastrophic occasion to the advantage of his people. (If Nicolo resembles the biblical Haman in his malevolence, the sage Ephraim recalls the figure of Mordechai.) Nonetheless, the king, like his courtier, would rather see the Jews convert to Catholicism than remain as they are.

Despite the king's conviction of Christian truth, the theme of skepticism toward received religion is also apparent. Although the divine lapidary knows which stone is the true one, we cannot. Ben Verga hints, albeit only as an opening gambit, that truth is perspectival. My religion is best for me, while yours is best for you. He also suggests, in a way that recalls Machiavelli and anticipates Hobbes, that truth and political utility are related. The king's Christianity is true because it serves the continuation of his reign. Here the Averroist element—the true religion need not be a positive, received religion; the positive, received religions serve a primarily political purpose—becomes prominent. Ben Verga's use of the tale is more forthrightly political than Boccaccio's. As a member of a persecuted minority, himself an exile from Spain and Portugal, he wants toleration for his people. The tolerant monarch need not give up the truth of his own faith. He can continue to hope that the Jews will convert. He knows, however, that righteous example rather than religious coercion is the most effective way to influence them.

To what extent, in Ben Verga's tale, do both Jew and Christian share a threshold level of skepticism toward their received traditions? Unlike Boccaccio, where the truth of Christianity had to be proclaimed before the dangerous (*dubbioso*) story could be told (and where, at any rate, the story concerned a Jew and a Muslim, figures whose philosophic skepticism need not infect the Church), Ben Verga locates the story in Christian Europe and implicates both Jew and Christian in an attitude of partial incomprehension toward their traditions. This version suggests that even a regime of tolerance requires or develops a trace of skepticism toward exclusive claims to religious truth. Nonetheless, for both Ben Verga and Boccaccio, one of the rings (or stones) is the true one. Our ignorance of the truth complicates our lot but does not detract from the truth itself. In the parable's next incarnation, this delicate equilibrium between tolerance and religious truth becomes even more untenable.

Nathan the Wise

In *Nathan the Wise* the connection between skepticism and toleration grows much stronger, verging on (but not attaining) a full-fledged religious relativism. *Nathan the Wise* was Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's last play. Lessing had come under considerable criticism from orthodox Protestants for his involvement in an intellectual scandal concerning his publication of an anonymous Spinozist critique of Scripture. After a pitched exchange of open letters, the orthodox, led by Pastor Hermann

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Goeze of Hamburg, prevailed on Lessing's employer, the Duke of Brunswick, to censor him. Unable to write philosophy or theology, Lessing used drama to preach an incipiently liberal understanding of religion.[16] In Lessing's text, the earlier theme of cleverness as a virtue is entirely replaced by the Enlightenment aspirations to freedom of thought and conscience, humanity, and brotherhood. The virtues required for political survival are replaced by virtues requisite to moral aspiration.

Unlike the fictional Jews in the previous versions of the parable, Lessing's Nathan was inspired by a real Jew. Lessing maintained a close personal friendship with Moses Mendelssohn, the leading Jewish figure in eighteenth-century Germany. The character of Nathan, humane, noble, and wise, was Lessing's paean to his Jewish friend. Here, tolerance is neither a side effect nor a pious hope. It is the author's personal achievement, which he commends to society as a whole. Indeed, tolerance is too weak a term. Lessing's text reaches beyond tolerance to friendship as the ideal for a humane civil society. Although he is not overtly concerned with liberty in the drama, Lessing's focus on friendship anticipates liberty. For friendship is grounded on the acknowledgement of the dignity of the other, and where this recognition is paramount, a politics that respects that dignity cannot be far behind. Most crucially for our purpose, he prepares the groundwork for modern liberty by endorsing a public skepticism with respect to religious truth.

Nathan the Wise is set in Jerusalem in the twelfth century. The story concerns the strange convergence of the lives of three characters, emblematic of the three great monotheistic traditions: Nathan, a Jew; Saladin, the Muslim sultan; and a Christian Templar knight. Nathan is a wealthy trader who has just returned from the East laden with treasure. On his return, he discovers that his beautiful, adopted daughter, Recha (Rachel), was recently rescued from a burning building by a Templar knight. The knight himself, who as a defeated Crusader was deserving of execution, was spared by Sultan Saladin because he reminded him of his deceased brother. As the plot unfolds, Nathan tries to find the knight to offer him riches, hospitality, and friendship. The knight, however, eludes Nathan, not wishing to have anything to do with a Jew. Not yet knowing Nathan, he holds him in contempt, even regretting that he risked his life for a Jewish woman. When Nathan finally finds the knight, the latter is soon astonished by Nathan's genuine goodness, guilelessness, and generosity of spirit. Hearing Nathan's story of how Christians slaughtered his family years

[16]For thorough discussions of the background to this play, see F. J. Lamport, "Lessing's *Lessing: Nathan der Weise,*" in *Lessing and the Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981) 193–227; *Lessing: Nathan der Weise* (ed. Hans Ritscher; Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Moritz Diesterweg, 1968); and Allan Arkush, "Theology and 'Theater Logic' in Nathan the Wise," in *Political Philosophy and the Human Soul: Essays in Memory of Allan Bloom* (ed. Michael Palmer and Thomas L. Pangle; Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1995) 189–201. A close comparison of Lessing's treatment of the parable with Boccaccio's may be found in Heinz Politzer, "Lessings Parabel von den drei Ringen," *The German Quarterly* 31:3 (1958) 161–77.

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ago, he cannot but be amazed by Nathan's humane and forgiving nature. The two become fast friends in the classic sense; they respond to one another's virtue. Upon visiting Nathan's home and seeing Rachel, the knight falls passionately in love with her and pleads with Nathan for her hand in marriage, a prospect immediately complicated by the—at this point—insuperable difference in religion.

As this plot line unfolds, the Sultan is, simultaneously, in dire need of money to fight the Crusaders. He learns from his vizier about the wealthy Jew, who is famed for both his generosity and his wisdom. As in Boccaccio's version, the sultan resolves to bring Nathan to his palace and to test him. If he fails the test, the sultan will have the upper hand and either coerce a loan on generous terms or confiscate his wealth outright. The sultan demands of Nathan a reasoned analysis of which one of the three religions is best ("Which belief, which law has most enlightened you?"). Loyalty to the religion of one's birth is not a sufficient argument. A wise man, such as Nathan, must have reasoned his way to the truth. Let him persuade the sultan of why the way that he has chosen is the best way. "Of these three Religions," the sultan states flatly, "only one can be the true one (*die wahre sein*)."[17]

Lessing's version of the parable is similar to Boccaccio's but with a significant twist. In the ancient Near East a man had an opal ring of supreme beauty and value. Whoever wore the ring was beloved by God and man. The man passed the ring to his most beloved son, who passed it on to his, and so on through the generations. At long last it came into the possession of a prince who had three sons, each of whom he loved fully. Sometimes he loved one a bit more than the others and promised the ring to him; at other times he promised the ring to another. In truth, however, he loved them all equally. Sensing that he was about to die he secretly called a master jeweler and asked him to make two perfect copies of his ring. The jeweler succeeded so well that the prince *could not tell his own ring* (a break from the earlier versions) from the copies. He called his sons one at a time to his deathbed, and conferred on each a blessing and a ring. After his death, the sons discover to their dismay that each one has a ring. They set about squabbling, trying to determine which ring is genuine, which son should rule the others. They seek out a judge. (Here too Lessing departs from the earlier versions.) The judge, however, tells them sternly that their vicious and ungrateful behavior threatens to disqualify all of them. The ring is supposed to make them beloved. But they only seem to love themselves. Thus, he concludes, the genuine ring must be lost. Since they are not content with his verdict, however, the judge issues a challenge:

> My counsel is: Accept the matter wholly as it stands. If each one from his father has his ring, then let each one believe his ring to be the true one. Possibly the father wished to tolerate no longer in his house the tyranny of just

[17]Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Nathan the Wise, Minna von Barnhelm, and Other Plays and Writings* (ed. Peter Demetz; New York: Continuum, 1995), act 3, scene 5, p. 230; idem, *Nathan der Weise* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 1978).

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> one ring! And know that you, all three, he loved; and loved alike; since two of you he'd not humiliate to favor one. Well then! Let each aspire to emulate his father's unbeguiled, unprejudiced affection. Let each strive to match the rest in bringing to the fore the magic of the opal in his ring! Assist that power with all humility, with benefaction, hearty peacefulness and with profound submission to God's will.[18]

Nathan expounds his own parable. While the ring itself is a gift of the Creator, the transmission of the rings over time represents the passage of the Jews, Christians, and Muslims through history. In history, much is lost. Each must accept the account of events in history on faith. And who should deign to reject the faith of their fathers, the truths that their fathers vouchsafed to them? Who should cease to trust those who nourished and loved and benefited them? Although Saladin asked for an argument more rational than the mere assertion of loyalty to the faith of the fathers, Nathan shows that loyalty need not be irrational or blind. Loyalty (like friendship) can be a choice rather than a passion. Loyalty becomes a rational choice when it is compatible with truth. But this can only happen if truth becomes plural, so as to support different and distinctive loyalties.

For Nathan, truth is plural: it inheres equally in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, in each of the three rings. (Here Lessing departs sharply from the earlier versions where only one ring is the true one, although which one is genuine has not yet been definitively revealed.) Yet truth is also univocal: for what is true for Nathan—that is, for Lessing—is, in the end, virtue. A moral truth—represented dramatically by the figure of the judge—transcends and unites the disparate discourses of discrepant theologies. Friendship and Humanity—*Freundschaft* and *Brüderlichkeit*—form the ground against which the figures of the three distinct religions appear. Unlike a real medieval man, who would find this treatment of truth anemic, Saladin finds this argument entirely persuasive. He is converted from his former view that only one religion can be the true one. All can serve the moral truth toward which each, endowed with its own advantages for its own adherents, points. Both Saladin and Nathan surmount their particularity and meet, in friendship, on the ground of a moral and natural religion. This identity-in-difference is the will of Providence.

The details of the denouement of the play need not detain us—suffice it to say that the characters find that the implications of their shared humanity are deeper than they had guessed. Rachel, who turns out to have been adopted from a dying crusader, is, in fact, the knight's sister. The knight, himself, although the son of a German mother, turns out to have had a Muslim father and to be the sultan's own nephew. The artful convergence of the characters' lives expresses Lessing's still Christian belief in Providence. God supervises the course of history and arranges its events for our ultimate benefit. (In this, Lessing marks his difference from a

[18]Lessing, *Nathan the Wise*, act 3, scene 7, p. 235.

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purely naturalistic theology with which his position was easily confused.[19]) Lessing, with rather too heavy a touch for the modern reader, is also telling us that our differences are only, literally, skin deep. This comes out most directly in Nathan's initial encounter with the Templar. Inviting, demanding, that they become friends, Nathan relativizes their exclusive, particularistic identities in favor of their shared humanity:

> O come, we must, we must be friends! Disdain my folk as much as ever you will for neither one has chosen his folk. Are we our folk? What is a folk? Are Jew and Christian sooner Jew and Christian than man? How good, if I have found in you one more who is content to bear the name of man (*ein Mensch zu heissen*)![20]

In passages such as this, it is clear that Nathan is not a typical "stubborn Jew" (*Stockjude*). He is already a cosmopolitan. The air of enlightenment in which he dwells has already softened the harder outlines of his Jewish features. Must friendship, then, be purchased at the price of lessened piety, of a weakened grasp on truth?

The most acute philosophical analysis of this point is that of the political philosopher, Hannah Arendt. Arendt claims that Lessing's understanding of friendship points toward an authentic constitution of the ideal of shared humanity. This constitution of humanity draws us back toward a classical understanding of *philanthropia* and away from the, as she sees it, debased sentimentalism of modern humanitarianism.[21] The modern debasement of the ideal of humanity begins, Arendt claims, with Rousseau. Rousseau argues for *fraternité* on the basis of the shared human trait of compassion, which includes compassion even for the wicked. *Fraternité* fails to discriminate between friend and foe. In its indiscriminate and promiscuous emotion, the basis of *fraternité* is sentiment rather than reason and choice. Furthermore, *fraternité* is typical of the intense solidarity of persecuted or "pariah" groups, such as the Jews. It is a warm mutuality that the persecuted have toward one another. Persistent persecution or pariahdom, however, alienates its victims from the world. It induces in them a "radical loss of the world," a "real worldlessness," where there is no longer any question that they have responsibility for the world. They only have responsibility for themselves and their own group. The loss of a shared sense of reality, of a care for the world beyond their enclosed network of *fraternité* is a "form of barbarism."

Lessing, in contrast with Rousseau, sets friendship in place of *fraternité*. Friendship, which Arendt takes in the full classical and Aristotelian sense as an appropriate

[19]Lessing rejects natural religion, deism and the Kantian "religion of reason" (*Vernunftsreligion*). Although far from orthodox, he also distanced himself from the standard Enlightenment constructions of religion. See Ritscher, *Lessing: Nathan der Weise*, 50–52.

[20]Lessing, *Nathan the Wise*, act II, scene 5, p. 214.

[21]Hannah Arendt, "Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing," in *Nathan the Wise*, vii–xx.

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response to another's virtue, is based on discrimination between the noble and the base. It is not indiscriminate or promiscuous, let alone irrational. It requires the cool and sober apprehension of moral excellence. Friendship presupposes relatedness to the shared world, to reality. Not illogically, then, did the ancients see friendship (*philia*) as necessary for both an excellent life (*eudaemonia*) and the common good of the polis. Friendship is a political virtue. It facilitates rational and moral intercourse among equals in the public realm. *Nathan the Wise*, in Arendt's view, is, despite its modernity, "the classical drama of friendship."

If Arendt is correct, then the glib dismissal of *Nathan* as a sentimental invocation of shared humanity is rash. *Nathan* should be read more in an Aristotelian than a Rousseauean manner. Humanity, on Lessing's account, is not a bedrock truth underlying merely apparent differences and rendering them insignificant. Humanity, rather, is the possibility of coming to a mutual appreciation of one another in full cognizance of the truth and significance of difference. Appeals to an alleged, shared humanity between Jew and German in the 1930s, according to Arendt, were offensive. They bespoke worldlessness—an anomic dismissal of the terms and conditions of contemporary reality. Nonetheless, the achievement of friendship between Jew and German in those times—where both could say "a German and a Jew, and friends"—was a genuine contribution to keeping a shared and human world alive. Such is humanity when constituted on the basis of *Freundschaft* rather than *fraternité*. On Arendt's account, then, genuine friendship is compatible with deep differences, including, one assumes, deep differences in religious conviction.

But here a problem arises. Arendt, although strong on difference, is skittish about strong claims to truth. Nathan's virtue (and appeal) is found in his readiness to sacrifice for the sake of humanity qua friendship. In Arendt's view, he is ready to sacrifice "truth to friendship." Lessing had a dread of truth. Certitude meant the end of freedom. The truth compels. The great dialogue of men has to cease, if not to die.[22]

> He was glad that the genuine ring, if it had ever existed, had been lost; he was glad for the sake of the infinite number of opinions that arise when men discuss the affairs of this world. If the genuine ring did exist, that would mean an end to discourse, and thus to friendship and thus to humaneness. . . . Lessing's greatness does not merely consist in a theoretical insight that there

[22]Lessing wrote in praise of the search for truth but condemned the belief that one could, in the end, possess the truth: "Not the truth, in whose possession no man is or is meant to be, but the sincere effort that he has applied to come up behind the truth makes the worth of a man. Not through the possession but rather through the search for truth does he expand his powers. In this alone consists his always growing perfection. Possession makes him lazy, indolent and haughty. If God held in his right hand truth and in his left the ever stirring drive toward truth, although with the condition that one would always and ever err, and said to me: choose! I would with humility fall to his left and say 'Father give! The pure truth is indeed for you alone!' " Cited in Ritscher, *Lessing: Nathan der Weise*, 58 (translation my own).

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> cannot be one single truth within the human world but in his gladness that it does not exist and that, therefore, the unending discourse among men will never cease so long as there are men at all.[23]

Although Arendt relies on Lessing's famous rejection of truth in favor of the infinite search for truth, she nonetheless, in my judgment, overreaches. She is overly eager to impose her own political understanding on him. Her opposition to Heidegger, who wrote of the "inner truth" of the Nazi regime, does not require the abandonment of all truth in politics. Rather than assert that Lessing sacrifices all truth to friendship, it is more accurate to say that Lessing adapts truth such that it can serve to support a polity or culture of free and friendly association. Lessing's construal of truth entails, to be sure, much skepticism with respect to the claims of revealed religion. At the same time, however, he does hold to an attenuated but nonetheless real commitment to Christian truth, which Arendt's interpretation scants. Lessing's view of Christian truth relies on a progressive rather than a static view of revelation, the mature statement of which is found in his *Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* (*The Education of the Human Race*, 1780).

The *Education* relies on what we might call a nonorthodox view of history. The orthodox view of history, as it bears on the question of religious truth, is that the transmission of tradition from the ancients to the moderns is, in principle, reliable. Tradition itself is a sound vehicle for divine knowledge.[24] Thus, in the Jewish case, for example, some of the rabbis claim that the interpretations of later sages were vouchsafed to Moses on Sinai. The interpretations of later sages are not (radically) novel. They discover or unpack what God had embedded in the Mosaic Torah.[25] In the most important sense, the sense in which religious truth is uncovered within history, history does not entail novelty. By contrast, Lessing, and with him much of modern Christianity and Judaism, believed that whatever original revelation the

[23]Arendt, "Humanity in Dark Times," xvi. Compare Arendt's affirmation of the political humanity of discourse with the harsh assessment of her authoritarian contemporary, Carl Schmitt. The bourgeoisie is the "discussing class." "A class that shifts all political activity onto the plane of conversation in the press and parliament is no match for social conflict. . . . Dictatorship is the opposite of discussion." Cited in Stephen Macedo, *Liberal Virtues* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990) 42

[24]Saadia Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions* (trans. Samuel Rosenblatt; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967) 18.

[25]As David Weiss Halivni has shown, the ancient rabbis actually entertained three different positions with respect to the revelation of the Oral Torah. Each view (which he labels "maximalist," "intermediate," and "minimalist") affords different levels of human participation in revelation. In the maximalist view, for example, the entire Torah, written and oral, was thought to be revealed. All the legitimate arguments and solutions to every legal problem were already known to Moses. According to the intermediate view, the legitimate arguments but not their solutions were revealed. According to the minimalist view, God revealed principles but not detailed stipulations. Although these positions differ significantly on what God revealed, they all agree that whatever God revealed was reliably transmitted and can be reliably known. See *Peshat and Derash*: *Plain and Applied Meaning in Rabbinic Exegesis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 112–19.

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fathers received was mediated by many hands over many centuries and that these hands have changed the shape of revelation. Although Lessing does not divorce himself entirely from believing in the fact of ancient revelation, he subordinates revelation to the idea of unfolding moral progress under the guidance of Providence. The faith of the sons is purer and more refined, which is to say more moral, than the faith of the fathers. In the *Education*, Lessing both salvages and deprecates the Old Testament by arguing that it has value, but only for its time and place. The early Hebrews were scarcely above the level of children. Consequently, the Bible was a primer that spoke to them in an imaginative, vivid, and harsh way.

> But every primer is only for a certain age. To delay the child, that has outgrown it, longer at it than intended, is harmful. For to be able to do this in a way which is at all profitable, you must insert into it more than there is really in it, and extract from it more than it can contain. You must look for and make too much of allusions and hints; squeeze allegories too closely; interpret examples too circumstantially; press too much upon words. This gives the child a petty, crooked, hairsplitting understanding: it makes him full of mysteries, superstitious, full of contempt for all that is comprehensible and easy. The very way in which the rabbis handled their sacred books! The very character which they thereby imparted to the spirit of their people![26]

But all this came to a proper end, although the Jews did not realize it: "A better instructor must come and tear the exhausted primer from the child's hands—Christ came!"[27] Christ is the first reliable, practical teacher of the immortality of the soul. He is reliable "by reason of the prophecies which were fulfilled in him; reliable by reason of the miracles which he achieved; reliable by reason of his own revival after a death by which he had put the seal to his teaching."[28] Christ's truth is a life lived completely in tune with the promise of immortal blessedness. Although Lessing appears to be orthodox in his invocation of prophecy, miracles, and resurrection, he quickly moves to free the truth of immortality from the historical problem of the veracity of scriptural tradition.

> Whether we can still *prove* this revival, these miracles, I put aside, as I leave on one side *who* the person of Christ was. All *that* may have been at that time of great importance for the first acceptance of his teaching, but it is now no longer of the same importance for the recognition of the *truth* of his teaching.[29]

Thus Lessing ascribes to the New Testament the status that he ascribed to the Old. The New Testament is a primer for the human race that can, in principle, be outgrown. Although he is cautious about asserting this too strongly—he chides the

[26]Lessing, *Nathan the Wise*, 328, par. 51–52.
[27]Ibid., par. 53.
[28]Ibid., 328, par. 59.
[29]Ibid.

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"clever" youths who would put the New Testament down too quickly—he greatly weakens the coupling between the truth of Christianity and its historical origins and transmission.[30] Nonetheless, he does not, as Arendt would have it, dismiss talk of religious truth altogether.

Lessing's *Education*, like his *Nathan*, is a response to Goeze and the orthodox Lutherans who sought to silence him. It is also his own rejoinder to the radical, Spinozist *Apology* of Hermann Samuel Reimarus, fragments of which Lessing published under the title *Fragmente eines Ungennanten* (*Fragments of an Unnamed,* 1778). Reimarus, an older contemporary of Lessing, did not allow his *Apology* to be published in his lifetime. (Indeed, it was not published in its entirety until 1972.[31]) Reimarus argued that Scripture is, at best, "not a divine revelation, but a human testimony of a divine revelation." Over time, this human testimony "loses more and more of its credibility in being passed from hand to hand, from mouth to mouth."[32] Criteria must be established for certifying that the transmitted revelation has a divine core. The criteria that Reimarus set (e.g., no internal contradiction in the alleged revelation, that is, no contradiction of scientific or moral truths otherwise known) ruled out the Hebrew Scriptures' claim to revelatory status. Lessing modified the "Fragmentist's" theological radicalism by allowing that the Bible, in all its literary and moral contradictoriness, addressed humanity at the stage of childhood. Children can live with a level of conceptual inelegance that adults reject. Nonetheless, he endorsed Reimarus's radicalism—albeit tacitly. His distancing of Christianity's claim to truth from orthodoxy's view of historical revelation allows for a truth that is rooted in Scripture but ultimately transcends and departs from it. Although that truth remains a Christian truth for Lessing, it is not only a Christian truth. The truth of the immortality of the soul and of the need to live morally so as to anticipate and merit a future blessedness is accessible to others as well. Truth is plural, and univocal. Religious truths are ornaments to moral virtue. Moral truth is the judge of religion.

Although Lessing found himself embroiled in an overtly political problem—censorship—he was not an overtly political thinker. His concern was neither republicanism nor full-fledged religious liberty. He was, nonetheless, an Enlightenment partisan of freedom of conscience and of an expansion of toleration for the Jews. While not in itself an explicit argument for religious liberty, *Nathan* indicates some of the problems that the case for liberty poses for religious truth. Saladin, a prototype for a modern "enlightened despot," transforms his own position from one convinced, if only out of habit, of the superiority of Islam to a kind

[30]Lessing argues for a continued absorption in the New Testament text by means of exegetical techniques not dissimilar to those for which he castigated the rabbis. See ibid., 330–31, par. 72–75.

[31]H. S. Reimarus, *Apologie oder Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes* (ed. G. Alexander; Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1972).

[32]Arkush, "Theology and 'Theater Logic,' " 152.

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of egalitarianism between the religions of the book. Although Saladin was tolerant beforehand, now he is truly enlightened, which means that he has become both radically convinced of a meta-religious truth (shared humanity based on friendship) and relatively skeptical toward orthodox, religious claims to truth. Were Lessing to have made Saladin into a democrat, the constitutional structures of a regime of liberty might have come fully into view. Short of that, however, at least half of the conceptual architecture for liberty is in place. Liberty, as opposed to toleration, requires a meta-truth that subordinates the religious truths and sets them into a larger narrative of human commonality.

Conclusion

The larger narrative of human commonality has been an alluring and transforming ideal for modern men and women. It has, as in John Rawls's version of "political liberalism," allowed for selective particularity beneath a sheltering atmosphere of pragmatic universalism. One can shuttle between the two poles as public or private purposes require—a Jew, Christian, or other "in your tent" and a citizen in the public sphere. The larger narrative was a requirement of the modern constitutional state, which came to find its own legitimacy in universal, liberal principles. These principles, such as inalienable natural rights, had to be publicly justified before the court of reason without appeal to any religion in particular.

The early modern political philosophers—Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, and Spinoza, from whom Lessing drew some basic premises—all display the same ambivalence toward religious truth. Although they differ radically in their politics, they agree that a religion-like truth is necessary for a stable regime, including a regime of liberty. This truth need not displace the original religious truth, but the political truth must master and order the religious one. Ideally, the strategy of the regime of liberty is one of co-optation, as in Rawls's doctrine of the overlapping consensus. Liberty must transform the religious community into its friend and supporter. The price of liberty is not only eternal vigilance; it is moral and cultural transformation. That is not too high a price to pay but it is a price nonetheless.

Most of us in the West have paid this price and are no longer conscious of the cost that our traditions have incurred. Indeed, the inner drive toward religious liberty developed in dissenting Protestantism in the seventeenth century and was then secularized and amplified by the Enlightenment. By the time of the American Revolution, many Protestants believed that religious liberty, no less than political liberty, was the will of God. Jews willingly sacrificed the quasi-independence of their medieval compulsory communities (*kehillot*) for integration into the modern state. Although the power and authority of these bodies had been steadily eroded by monarchic absolutism, Jews met the monarchs halfway by abandoning the mythic belief in an enduring, if attenuated, Jewish sovereignty. The messianic future

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would look more like democratic citizenship than Davidic restoration. Similarly, Catholicism, in Vatican II, embraced the normative authority of the regime of liberty as the organizing principle of the modern state. The Council ratified what American Catholics had internalized in over a century of life under a democratic constitution.

These normative transformations are so taken for granted that the earlier forms of polity and political theory espoused by the Western traditions seem mostly retrograde, unhappy reminders of a less enlightened age. The enfeeblement of the truths that religious people in those ages thought they held hardly seems like a cost at all. For, from the perspective of the regime of liberty with its infinite complication of truth, with its bias in favor of the search for truth, the religious claim to truth in ages past is thought to be deeply mistaken. Those putative claims to possess the truth are seen as expressions of arrogance (rather than epistemological humility) or anxiety (rather than probity) wrongly asserting themselves as truth. "Nobody's got the truth," former President Clinton said at Georgetown University. Everybody is just "trying to get closer" to it. That, he added, is the big difference between the modern West and the Muslim extremists. "Because we don't believe you can have the whole truth, we think everybody counts and life is a journey. . . . They believe because they have the truth you either share their truths or you don't. If you're not a Muslim, you're an infidel. If you are [a Muslim] and you don't agree with them, you're a heretic and you're a legitimate target."[33] Islam (or at least the Islam of the Islamists) has no hope for a regime of liberty, Clinton implies, unless it embraces the skepticism toward truth that has come to characterize the culture of the West.

It may be that Islam, a religious culture that remains utterly serious about its own conviction of truth, has resources within it for once again institutionalizing toleration so as to approximate religious liberty. Islam, like Christianity and Judaism, prefers uncoerced belief to coerced belief. That is a possible foundation on which to build. But it is hard to see how it could take the final step toward religious liberty without giving political latitude to the uneasy skepticism that has come to define the public culture of the West. If this analysis is correct—if it is the case that, historical adaptation notwithstanding, a tension endures between truth and freedom—then we should not expect to see a contemporary Saladin (*a la* Lessing) rise in the lands of Islam. Not all goods are compatible. The goods of liberty and pluralism are ill at ease with the good of religious truth.

[33]Cited in Kevin J. Hasson, "Finding the Koran's Truth," *Washington Post*, 27 December 2001.

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