Political Illiberalism – a Defense

Liberalism and Illiberalism

Political illiberalism, the title of this paper, is a negative characterization. It is defined by what it is not. Political illiberalism is not liberalism. What then is liberalism? The key idea of liberalism is that politics should not concern itself with the big questions, as they are sometimes called, or that it should be neutral as between competing comprehensive visions of the good. It should rather secure the conditions for enabling everyone within society to pursue what comprehensive vision they wish provided they do not interfere with others’ pursuit of their comprehensive vision. Political liberalism takes two forms, the traditional form going back to Hobbes and the properly political form elaborated by Rawls. The first form may, following Rawls, be called metaphysical. Liberalism is itself a comprehensive vision, though a comprehensive vision about comprehensive visions. It asserts that no comprehensive vision of the good is simply correct, because there is no such good (no summum bonum as Hobbes says), or is correct for political rule, because, even if there were such a good, political authority has no business trying to enforce it. People have free choice and the right to the exercise of it, and no government may justly take it away. The second form, again following Rawls, is called political. In this form liberalism is not itself a comprehensive vision but a subordinate set of convictions about how the state should operate that adherents of different comprehensive vision can all endorse for the purpose of securing a common life free and equal for all. Liberalism in this form is based on an overlapping consensus between comprehensive visions and not itself a comprehensive vision. The difference between these forms for understanding
political rule is more apparent than real. Both define the role of the state in the same way: it should not concern itself with imposing, or ruling on the basis of, a comprehensive vision of the good. Politics is not founded on any summum bonum.

If political liberalism is as so described, then political illiberalism will be defined by the contrary, or by the thesis that politics is and should be about comprehensive visions of the good, or rather about the true such vision, and should rule, as far as possible, to secure it for all and defend it against attack. The difference between political and metaphysical liberalism is thus irrelevant. In either form liberalism gets the whole idea of politics wrong.

The proof that liberalism gets politics wrong can be taken, paradoxically enough, from precisely where liberalism gets its proof, or supposed proof, that it is right, namely by going back to the beginning. Liberalism describes this beginning as the original position or the state of nature. This state or position is imagined to be where we would all naturally find ourselves before any political organization had come into existence. Admittedly the proponents of this idea need not be taken as supposing such a state was ever a historical reality; they need only be taken as positing in imaginary form the position from which an analysis of politics and a construction of a just political community should take its start. But these proponents never take this return to some pre-political state far enough. They stop at people who are already conceived of as being adult, as being capable of speech, as having a grasp of complex notions like justice and rule and fair distribution, and as willing to form and to keep mutual agreements. In other words they stop, not at some pre-political state, but precisely at a political state, a state where those in this state are already politically sophisticated enough to understand
political justice and to devise means for its correct implementation. If it is necessary to start at the beginning, let us start at the real beginning and not somewhere else.

What is the real beginning? Well, since politics is about the organizing of people into certain kinds of communities, the beginning must be people or human beings and what it is about them that makes them naturally communal, or the sort of things that naturally want to be with others in organized communities. The obvious place to start, then, is the facts of human biology, in the way we might start with the facts of rabbit biology to understand the communal life of rabbits. Human beings, like all animals, come to be through birth from parents. For many years they are totally dependent on parents and other adults for everything from food, clothing, and shelter to education and character formation. There is no choice exercised by the child over such things either at birth or for many years afterwards. The child’s life and conditions are just given. It begins with them, it grows and matures through them, it more often than not ends living its whole life in them and producing children of its own who begin in exactly the same way and who end up doing exactly the same things.

The first beginning, then, is not the birth and upbringing of children, but the parents who gave them birth and bring them up. Where did the first parents come from? In our modern understanding this question is answered, to the extent it can be answered, by reference to evolution. The human species came to be by a slow process that passed through many earlier and more primitive species. In these species there were series of parents and offspring from one generation to the next, each passing on to the later what it received from the earlier rather in the way we see the birds and animals still do. The
bearing and raising of offspring would develop as these species evolved until something like humans emerged on the scene and from purely animal acculturation began to develop the moral and intellectual cultivation now distinctive of the human species. This cultivation would no doubt have received special impulse from individuals or groups of individuals who, by natural ability or chance, exercised a greater influence over those they lived with than anyone else and were able to give their common life distinctive forms. If these forms were of great advantage to communal life, the authors of them would be looked on as great benefactors. They would even tend to be looked on as more than human, because indeed their achievements did make them more than the other human beings around them. They would be looked on as gods and the foundations and beginnings of human goods would be given a divine origin.

Indeed, some sense of superior powers in the world would have been borne in on everyone by the mere fact that humans were not the cause of, and could not account for, the existence of the world around them or even of themselves. All these things were just there and just given. Where did they come from? Who or what gave them? The only plausible answer is that they came from some God or gods. Who were the gods? Precisely mysterious beings, which were the authors in some way of all other beings. These mysterious beings were posited as the explanation for what otherwise was just inexplicably there. Since these beings, if they exist, are nevertheless hidden, their presence had to be deduced from what was visible, and their nature had to be guessed at as somehow like ours (for we had no other experience to go on), but yet as so much greater and more magnificent. They were endowed with properties fitting their
superiority and their hiddenness: they were immortal, they were invincible, they were all
knowing, being aware of the future as well as of present and past. They were everything
men were not though they were like men in having intelligence and will and power, save
an intelligence, will, and power that vastly transcended, even if it also mirrored, what
humans themselves had.

Human community begins thus in parents and the gods. Human community is
first and foremost family and religion. But why go beyond the family? And why insist on
worshipping and honoring the gods instead of just recognizing their mysterious
existence? Indeed why gods instead of grand impersonal forces that operate without
intelligence and will? Why religion instead of evolution?

As for evolution, it is too sophisticated a theory to be conceived without
considerable cultural and scientific advance among men and could not be there at the
beginning. Besides, it does not anyway dispense with the gods or some being prior to it.
For the processes that make up evolution do not operate on nothing; they operate on
things that already exist and already have inner tendencies and potentials. Otherwise the
processes would never produce anything and so would not produce evolution either.
Something must have preceded evolution that, *ex hypothesi*, could not itself have
evolved. Religion is more rational as an ultimate answer than evolution.

As for the question about going beyond the family, the answer can only be desire;
the desire for something more and better and more fully answering to human needs and
potentials (the same sort of answer we would give, *mutatis mutandis*, as to why rabbits
dig burrows instead of sleeping in the open air). For it is obvious to a mere view that the
things we moderns now have and enjoy are impossible of realization in simple families or in small groups of extended families. They are only possible in large and developed political groupings. Even so it is no less obvious that the things we moderns now have do not fully satisfy. We have urges and longings that transcend our own best efforts to attain them. The gods return here as they do also with evolution. Our reach, as it is said, exceeds our grasp. The gods or God are our hope, if there is one, of grasping what we reach for. The drive to large and developed political groupings among men, like the drive to learn and understand all that is around us, points ineluctably to what lies beyond. The drive for the political and the scientific is the drive for some comprehensive attainment of the good that, in the last resort, could only be provided by the gods. Hence even comprehensive visions are not enough to satisfy; they never go far enough. We want what we cannot encapsulate in any theory or vision.

Still these facts give us a truer beginning for political analysis and political philosophy than any state of nature doctrine could supply. We want a political life, or even at the limit a politically transcendent life, that fully answers to our deepest longings. Perhaps, indeed, the political life will not get us where we want to be, but it seems to be a necessary step on the way. The tradition of political theory as we have inherited it from the past always understood politics in terms of the drive for complete life, for the fullest attainable happiness. Politics is thus not only inseparable from happiness; it is also inseparable from religion. For religion is our name for the beyond and the beings or being that constitute it and control it.

But if we must begin political analysis with the drive for happiness, the contours
of political philosophy have long been outlined for us by the tradition of political
philosophy from Plato onwards, if not also from before Plato in Confucius and the Bible.
We are not necessarily limited to these outlines or to the achievements of the tradition,
but they are the context within which we start and from which we proceed. For this same
reason, we should proceed from the ineluctable presence of religion in political life.
Religion or the gods cannot fail to arise in politics if politics is the expression of the
human drive for fullness of happiness and comprehension of the whole. The state of
nature doctrine and the liberalism it has spawned tried from the start to marginalize
religion and to remove it from the center of politics, leaving it a place in what was
reserved as the private sphere of individuals and individual associations. The fact that
liberalism has not planted itself in traditional religious countries such as Islamic ones, or
in comprehensive atheist countries such as communist ones, only serves to highlight the
artificiality or unnaturalness of the liberal solution. To wrench comprehensiveness from
the political context affronts the very foundation that politics has in man’s drive for
fullness. Liberalism does violence to the humanity in man and can only succeed by
continual marginalization, if not outright suppression, of his longing for more.
Communism confirms this claim as much as religion does, for communism is in its
fundamental form a rival to religion; it is a comprehensive vision of the whole that
excludes God as religions are a comprehensive vision of the whole that includes God.
Comprehensiveness of vision is the badge of both.

Liberalism of course defends itself on the ground that where comprehensiveness
is allowed to remain integral to politics the result is war and general misery. One can
avoid this fearful result and still allow man all that he wants from comprehensiveness if one removes the comprehensiveness and so limits politics to securing the conditions in which each can pursue their own vision in peace. These claims are false. Liberalism has not ended war but has introduced the worst of all wars, total war. It has also not made room for the pursuit by each of their preferred comprehensive vision. Rather, by marginalizing comprehensive visions and removing them from the political, it has taken their comprehensiveness from them. The visions by their very nature want to embrace everything, above all and especially the political, since the political is the furthest development of the communal life of man; and the comprehensive vision, if really comprehensive, is a vision that embraces all of man’s being, from individual to family to full fledged community. To deny it any of these is to deny it itself.

Indeed, if truth be told, liberalism is itself too, even in its so called limited forms, a comprehensive vision that suffuses the life and thinking and morality of everyone subject to it. Liberalism produces a liberalist society and liberalist citizens. What it marginalizes, they marginalize. What it makes central, they make central. But since it marginalizes religion and moral restraint, and since it makes central the free pursuit by individuals of what they judge or feel at any time to be their good, and since judgment and feeling without religion and morality focus almost always on the satisfaction of the passions, the resulting liberalist society tends to become a fevered embrace of degraded lusts and refined extravagance, often enough in the same places and among the same people. Attend a swanky soirée in a billionaire’s penthouse in Manhattan or London or Paris and amidst Old Masters on the wall and golden fittings in the bathroom one will as
likely find designer drugs on the drinks bar as expensive liqueurs, refined debauchery in
the lounge as refined conversation, a blasé atheism at the dinner table as a blasé liberality.
Perhaps it was ever thus among the rich and fabulous, since the like was surely found in
the past at the court of kings. But the doings of kings were as often kept hidden from the
toiling, religious masses, who would have been scandalized had they known. Now the
doings of billionaires are admired in glossy magazines and held up for the toiling masses
to imitate rather than deplore.

*Comprehensive Politics*

If human community begins from the family and for the sake of more complete
realization of full human good, and if concern for religion, or wonder about the origin of
things, especially about the origin of man himself, manifests itself as part of this
realization, then certain fundamental features of the nature of human community may be
deduced. First and foremost is precisely the longing for the comprehensive good, and not
for any such good but for the *true* such good. The longing is not for illusion but for
reality; it is for genuine good not merely apparent good. Second, and as a result, the
longing stimulates the development of possible answers and these answers become
concrete motivations. But because the question is so broad and the evidence about the
answer so hard properly to discover and penetrate, the concrete answers themselves
become various. Material goods such as greater possessions, larger and more powerful
communities, conquest and control of other and lesser communities, will figure largely in
this variety. But so will theories about the gods or the ultimate beings or being that lie at
the origin of things. The more obvious answers will take hold first, as that the gods are present in other and more mysterious and uncontrollable things, like storms and earthquakes and sun and moon and stars. Since these things are many and since many of these many seem to have their origin in birth from other things of the same kind, the idea that the gods have a similar origin will typically present itself. This idea will lead back to the thought that the first origin was some primeval father or mother from whom all other things, such as sun and moon and stars, came to be through progressive generations. Since, further, men find among themselves that parents are replaced, sometimes even violently, by their children, the same idea will be suggested about the first things (a classic ancient expression whereof is found in Hesiod’s *Theogony*).

Most of all, indeed, the fact of death will impose itself forcefully on human consciousness. What happens after death, if anything, will be a pressing and even disturbing question; the manifestation of strange and inexplicable phenomena, which seem to run counter to the normal course of things; dreams and waking visions and striking coincidences, even paranormal events (such as happen still today); all these and the like things will tend to induce men to people the world with mysterious presences that come and go. Some of these presences, because of dreams or waking visions, prompted by loss perhaps of a loved one, will be identified with the dead, who will thus be thought still to exist in a way though without bodies. Some sort of devotion to these dead spirits, to solicit or appease them, will naturally arise, and with it devotion also to things that never seem to die, as sun and moon and stars, or that seem always to keep happening, as storms and earthquakes and peace and calm. These apparently impersonal forces will take
on a personal character to provide a ready explanation for why a storm happened then and not later, and destroyed these people and things and not those.

These originary explanations, hesitant, uninformed, based on what is obvious and to hand, will not permanently satisfy the inquiring mind. Some of the more reflective will seek out other and different explanations, explanations that oppose and perhaps mock the ones already in place, saying that events like storms happen by chance or the necessary workings of material forces and not by supposed bodiless spirits. The sun and moon will be said to be big pieces of burning rock and not gods. Those who think otherwise will find these suggestions disturbing and fear that the gods will be angry at such denial of their existence and power. The inventors of these irreligious ideas will be attacked or expelled or even sacrificed to appease the supposed offended deity. But thinking will not stop and men will go on asking the same questions and trying out new and different answers. The advance of community itself into more extensive and more sophisticated forms will stimulate the process, as men discover that success in many things, like farming and sailing, requires method and principles. The practical arts will develop, and people will experiment with different materials, applying fire and water to see what happens. Thus mining and forging and tempering hard earth or metals will come into existence.

Further, methods and principles will be looked for everywhere and those who, because of advancing community, have leisure from necessities, as being served by others, will look for principles and methods in the things of leisure, as particularly in counting and numbers, and in the regular motions of the heavens. Records of the past will
be examined and ways to preserve memory fostered, as in particular by forms and patterns of words that in their rhythmic features lend themselves to easy recollection. Poetry will thus develop and those skilled at composing or remembering poems will be prized and honored. At some point ways of recollection that do not rely on living memories will be invented, as by marking shapes on long lasting material objects, walls of caves, pieces of wood, cured animal skins, baked clay, beaten metal. Pictures which are direct copies of visible objects will likely come first but the need for more abstract shapes, as to record numbers or the sounds of human speech, will be felt and find varying solutions. But throughout all will remain the mysterious riddles of the universe and whence it came and how it always remains, and where and what are the hidden things, the dreams and visions of the night, strange foretellings of the future, sudden intimations of events far away. The riddles of man himself will figure largely among these mysteries, the mysteries of love and peace, hatred and war, success and failure, advance and decay, birth and death.

The comprehensive unlimitedness of this activity and progress, and its religious dimension, will mark human community from the beginning, and will form itself into concrete versions. These versions will become the specialized preserve of experts, poets and priests and scribes, who will hand them on to future generations. But the versions will vary from place to place and none will ever be so complete or convincing as entirely to satisfy the inquiring mind. The desire to have, not a comprehensive vision simply, but a comprehensive vision that is true will drive speculation always onwards. Still it will be this drive, manifested in all the areas of life, that will fundamentally mark human
community and its development.

Authority in Human Community

The need for authority will also naturally be felt and realized in political community from the beginning, because it is naturally felt and realized in the family from the beginning. The coordinated activity of many will require the controlling activity of some. But one particular division within this authority that will emerge will be between the authority concerned with the present and living human things, and the authority concerned with the trans-human or divine things. Rulers and kings will not only have officers to lead the army, to judge disputes, to deliberate about future needs, to maintain records and deeds, but also priests to honor and solicit and placate the gods. Communal authority will have a temporal or material dimension on the one hand and a spiritual or religious dimension on the other. These two dimensions will not be sharply divided since all human activities, from war to farming, are subject to the mysterious unknown forces whose care is the preserve of the priests. Success in war and prosperity will depend as much on the gods as on man. But still, it is one thing to know how to marshal troops for battle or how to prepare the soil for planting, and another to placate the gods of war and grain so that unexpected and uncontrollable events do not intervene, or intervene only to help and not to hinder.

The pagan world presents such a picture to us, where the temporal and spiritual powers, while distinct, tended to combine in the same hands, so that the rulers were as much head of the priests as of the judges and generals and managers. But the two parts
differ if only because the latter are under the control of human art and skill, while the
former are not but in the hands of the mysterious and the divine. What is ours to make or
mar contrasts with what is not ours but is made or marred by powers we do not own,
save, perhaps, by prayer and sacrifice.

The pagan world united what the world of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam has
divided. The political or temporal authorities in this second world are not the same as the
spiritual or religious authorities. The latter instead come to be a separate class and have
their own rights and their own powers to justify or condemn, to free or confine. That the
two authorities or powers nevertheless belong together as integral parts of human
community follows from what was argued above about the drive for comprehensiveness.

Human community ultimately exists to satisfy this drive, but the drive of necessity
embraces the temporal things we can manage and control by art, and the spiritual things
that perhaps we can, to some extent, penetrate by science but that we cannot fully know
or command. Human community, therefore, includes both, and not simply as parts within
it but as authorities and powers over it. Communist countries had and have their spiritual
authority, namely the ideology of communism, whose form and content are carefully
watched and controlled as much by scholars deputed to the task as by rulers. The same
holds increasingly true of modern Israel where the guardians of Jewish religious
orthodoxy seem as integral to the management of affairs as the politicians, and indeed
where some of these guardians become politicians because they are guardians. Analogous
things were true of medieval Christendom where the two powers of temporal and
spiritual were distinct, culminating in Emperor and Pope, but yet both exercising control
over communal life, the spiritual being able, where the spheres overlapped, to command and control the temporal.

A human community that knows of temporal command but not of spiritual is, in the light of the above, deformed and stunted. Only in the so-called liberal state is such a stunting expressly aimed at, and only in such a state is the spiritual power systematically deprived of independent public authority and relegated to the private sphere without power to command the temporal in any way. The reasons for this development were explained above. But one of its consequences, too little noted or regarded by liberals, is the effect of the liberal state on man’s drive for comprehensive truth. The liberal state professes not to deny or limit this drive but rather to deny it any authority or power over the temporal and political. The profession is disingenuous, and in two main ways, first in that it marginalizes what by its nature should be at the center, and second that it denies any real possibility of an authoritative divine revelation.

The first point is that marginalization has the practical effect of making the spiritual seem irrelevant or merely a matter of taste and not a matter of truth (however hard the truth may be to find). So it has the practical effect of saying that the human drive for truth need not direct itself to spiritual questions but only to temporal ones, and it has this effect, not by having established determinately that there are no gods and no after life (for it expressly denies any competence in these things), but rather by the simple fact of marginalization. Its practice sows a likewise public practice of atheism even if a theistic interest is allowed as a personal option. It sows, that is to say, an answer to the human drive for truth that excludes the spiritual from the drive and from the truth. The spiritual
nevertheless continues to manifest itself, though not seldom in a religious rage for atheism or a dangerous fascination with the occult. At all events, the religious, benign or sinister, is supposed to be for personal choice, not for public formation and education.

The second point, about revelation, follows from the first. For if the spiritual is to be marginalized and not to be at the center of public life and authority as itself part of that life and authority (though a distinct part), if indeed it is matter for personal choice, then the idea that there has been given to man an authentic and public revelation about God is undermined. For were there such a public revelation it could not rationally be marginalized or reduced to personal choice. It would have to be as much in the public center as, or even more than, anything else. For it would provide, if genuine, a fuller and more satisfying answer to the question about the ultimate good. Since human knowledge here is limited and beset by many obstacles, the vouchsafing of a superior and divine knowledge could not fail to be both welcome and entitled to replace or rectify all preceding merely human answers.

Let us then entertain, for purposes of argument, the hypothesis that there is a public revelation from God or the ultimate source of all things. The hypothesis is eminently plausible since the three great religions in the world today, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, all claim to be such revelations, either for all men in the case of the latter two, or specifically for Jews in the case of the first. Buddhism and Hinduism do not claim to be such public revelations but they do claim to be revelations in some sense. Further the evidence for the existence of some supreme being that has power over all things is, if not uncontroversial, extensive and rationally persuasive. It covers not only, or
even especially, the classic theistic proofs (beloved of philosophers for endorsement or denial), but even more so miracles and exorcisms and other historical facts on the ground.

Since at this point, however, philosophers are likely to retort with Hume’s celebrated argument against miracles, it is necessary to point out here that this argument is doubly defective.¹ First Hume defines a miracle as a transgression of a natural law. This definition is wrong because no natural law states as part of itself that it operates in the presence of a supernatural power; it states only that in operates in the presence of natural powers. A miracle does not transgress natural law, therefore, but is rather the exercise of a higher power. It is not unlike the way we ‘transgress’ the law of gravity when we pick a stone off the ground. By itself a stone will not rise. In the presence of a human being, who has power over a stone greater than gravity has, it can rise because it rises with the human’s hand. Consequently, and second, because miracles do not transgress natural law, Hume’s claim that a witness to a miracle is more likely to be lying than that a natural law has been transgressed, so that the evidence against a miracle is always stronger than the evidence for it, at once falls away. If there is a supernatural power, the evidence of a witness to a miracle performed by such higher power is no less reliable than the evidence of a witness to a purely natural event. All depends on the standard conditions required for determining if a witness is to be judged reliable, namely whether he was really present at the event, whether he was in a good position to witness it, whether he has any strong motive to lie, whether he has proved himself a reliable witness on other occasions, whether his testimony stands up against trial, cross

¹ Hume in Section 10 of *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. 
examination, and the like. Since the witnesses for at least some miracles meet these conditions, their existence can hardly with reason be denied.

However, there is no need to insist on these claims. Take them rather by way of hypothesis – a possible hypothesis, indeed, and not one that can be ruled out a priori. For on the supposition of this hypothesis, and on the supposition of what was argued earlier about the drive of man for a comprehensive understanding of things, a drive that is integral to his drive for community and the goods that community enables, the conclusion follows that a public revelation from God, if there is one, should decisively fashion human community and in a public, open way. Those charged with the care of the revelation and its faithful preservation and promulgation would be entitled to exercise a public authority in the public sphere, and to do so, not in place of the authorities whose care is with properly temporal affairs, but alongside them and, if the temporal power in any way threatens the revelation, over and against them too. The temporal authority would also have some duty to assist and support the spiritual authority to the extent that the management of temporal affairs impinges on the management of the spiritual.

The result would not be a theocratic community, for a theocratic community is properly one where the two powers are united in the hands of the spiritual authority because it is the spiritual authority. But one could call it a theonomic community in the sense that the spiritual power would have at least equal public authority along with the temporal and, in cases of conflict, superior power. The reason is plain. The spiritual is not only superior in its nature to the temporal (for the divine is superior to the human), but it is superior in man’s drive for comprehensive truth. Only the spiritual power, if it
preserves and preaches a genuine public revelation, is able to satisfy that drive, for only it teaches the truth about the highest and ultimate things. The range of the temporal does not extend beyond truths that are temporal, and these are limited and never enough to satisfy the human drive for comprehensiveness. A temporal power that stood in the way of a public revelation, if only by denying it public authority, would not be serving community, as it naturally should, but opposing and thwarting it.

Classic examples of theonomic power are found in medieval Christendom, in the medieval Byzantine Empire, in Islamic nations past and present, in Old Testament Judaism and, increasingly, in modern Israel. There is no need here to arbitrate between these instances or to assess their respective merits. But one important conclusion does immediately follow. A political arrangement which, as a matter of principle, denies public authority to any public revelation, however well authenticated, is not a boon to human community but a bane. It thwarts the drive that has formed human community from the beginning and that still and always will continue to form it. Liberalism is such a political arrangement. It claims, of course, to be neutral and not to be thwarting any human longing or drive but to be ensuring the conditions for this drive’s full and multiply varied realization. But liberalism’s claim to neutrality is here a myth. To deny public authority to a public revelation is to deny that it is, after all, a public revelation. It is not to permit it to exist in fair conditions of peace. For, if a public revelation vouchsafed by God to all men is not allowed to exercise public authority, it is effectively prevented from being that public revelation, and so is reduced rather to being a private one. It will of course still function, but it will be prevented from functioning as it ought. For it will be prevented
from exercising spiritual authority in public life and from correcting temporal authority where temporal authority impinges on spiritual things.

This argument, however hypothetical, is enough to point up an ineradicable flaw in all forms of liberalism, or all forms of political authority that deny, as liberalism does in its very idea, public authority to a publicly revealed religion. Liberalism can only make this denial by denying the existence of such religion, for if such a religion exists the denial of public authority to it is a denial that it is what it claims to be. Liberalism is a doctrine that, willy nilly, claims to itself the authority to preach the truth about religion. In this case, indeed, it claims to itself the authority to preach that there is no religion endowed with public authority.

One might retort that, even if there is such a religion, neither liberalism nor any temporal or merely human power would ever be in a position to concede it public authority. Judgment about revealed spiritual things belongs to the revealing spiritual power, not a human one, so that, ex professo, human power could never have the authority to judge whether any religion had public authority and if so which one it was. This retort only goes so far. For while human authority could not judge the content of a revealed religion, it could judge whether some proposed religion made a rational claim to being publicly revealed. The former judgment may be beyond man’s natural powers, but the latter is not. From natural first principles one can work out the sort of conditions that a religion would have to meet if it were to make a rationally valid claim to be publicly revealed.

As a general truth one can say that human power can judge natural truths and so
can judge religion to the extent the evidences for religion, or for this religion over that, are also natural truths, or truths that fall within the competence of natural reason. If there are no such natural truths giving evidence for one religion over another or for any religion, human power will have no ability, even if it otherwise has the duty, to foster this religion rather than that, for it will have no ability to discern the truth. But truth is the goal of community and its protection or the protection of the search for it belongs to human power. So in such a case human power would be unable to act and would have to be neutral, save insofar as a given religion proved itself to be inimical to the search even for natural truths. What would have to be done, then, would be to leave the question open for whatever search could be conducted, and to impose no limits other than those that natural justice might independently impose on human communal activities in any event.

The question therefore naturally arises as to what the natural evidence for a particular religion might be. There are here two sorts of evidence: natural evidence naturally available, and natural evidence supernaturally available. The former would concern those evidences for religion that have traditionally fallen within the sphere of philosophy, as the classic proofs for the existence of a God and the like. But these proofs do not point so much to a particular religion as to religion as such, and leave particularities open to difference. For perhaps some ways of honoring the God might prevail in one place and others in another, which, if not morally offensive, would all be presumptively legitimate. If there is a way of determining between particular religions, the only evidence that could be appealed to would be supernaturally given natural evidence. The evidence would have to be natural in order to be judgeable by men, but it
would have to be supernaturally given if it was to point to one particular religion rather than another.

There are in principle two things here that natural reason can judge. First, whether a religion professing public authority makes a coherent and rationally defensible claim to that authority. Second, whether there is evidence proving that the profession is not just coherent and defensible but true. On the first point natural reason can judge that a publicly authoritative religion would have to have God as its author, either directly or indirectly through messengers sent by God. But natural reason can also judge that such a religion, to be genuine, would have to claim not only to be exercising an authority given somehow by God, but also to be doing so with infallibility. For we must assume that God is at least as rational as we are, and it would be absurd for God to bestow divine authority on a religion and not bestow on it at the same time infallibility in matters of teaching and divine cult. A religious authority capable of mistake could never be trusted, because the truth of what it said and the validity of the cult it practiced could never be relied on. A true revelation falsely taught and wrongly practiced is worse than no revelation at all.

One conclusion that immediately follows from these considerations is that no written document could constitute or found a religion possessed of public authority by divine decree. A written document needs authentication and interpretation. The Bible, for instance, is neither self-authenticating nor self-interpreting. For one thing we need to know which books actually belong to it, and to use the books currently taken to belong to it to prove they belong to it plainly begs the question. Books are also capable of misinterpretation, and the more so the more difficult they are; even the best readers can
err. So, for instance, the Bible must get its authentication and its interpretation from some other source. That source must be public if the authentication and interpretation are to be public. The source must be living and visible if the religion is to retain its authority and to go on being made intelligible to all the generations that successively come and go. It must be possessed of an authoritative teaching authoritatively and infallibly proclaimed, and it must be open to the view and examination of all if it is to proclaim, by its authority, a teaching accessible and necessary to all.

If one reviews, therefore, in the light of this description the religions that claim public divine authority in the world today, the one that stands out at once as the only one that makes a coherent and rational claim in this regard is the Catholic Church. For it quite openly and frankly claims a divinely guaranteed infallibility. Perhaps the claim is false, but only a religion that made the claim in the first place could even stand a chance of being a public divine authority. Such elementary considerations are sufficient by themselves to rule out as inauthentic all other religions, at least as to their claim to being publicly authoritative religions.

Still, appeal must eventually be made to evidence proving that a profession of public divine authority and infallibility is not just coherent but also true. Such evidence would have to be supernatural (so as to prove divinity) yet also judgeable by natural reason (else the evidence would not be evidence for us), namely displays of supernatural power manifest to human sense and reason. The obvious instances here are miracles, prophecies of the future, exorcisms of demons, and the sanctity or the luminous goodness of individual believers and practitioners. That such things, if they happen, can rightly be
judged miraculous and supernatural by natural powers was argued earlier (in the discussion of Hume’s argument). All that is further needed is sufficient evidence that such things have happened and go on happening, and the availability of this sufficient evidence in the records of actual witnesses. Where there is authentication by eyewitneses there is no rational ground for rejecting the evidence: if it is irrational to believe without sufficient evidence it is no less irrational not to believe with sufficient evidence. An interesting historical example here is the way St. Augustine of Canterbury and others converted the King of Kent and thereby, with the king’s support, the whole kingdom to Catholicism. The preaching of St. Augustine and his companions was accompanied by so many and so striking miracles that any other response by the King and his subjects would have been irrational.2

An obvious response to these contentions is that miracles and exorcisms and prophecies and saints and the like exist outside the boundaries of the Catholic Church in other religions. If these things prove the divinity of the Church they must prove the divinity of these other religions. The response is correct but insufficient. That other religions contain holiness and miracles and prophecies shows they must in some way be divine. It does not show that they have, by divine appointment, public authority. It is one thing that the divinity of something be manifest; it is another thing that that divine thing have public authority to speak and rule in the name of the divine. That only the Church could have such authority is evident because, as said, only the Church makes the claim to infallibility. If its divinity is publicly manifest, its authority to speak in the name of the

divine is publicly manifest at the same time. If the divinity of some other thing is publicly manifest, its authority to speak in the divine name will not be manifest.

Whether or not, however, any religion has the public authority it claims to have, this claim, to be rationally defensible, would have to take the form just outlined. If a religion is to have public authority as divine and to be acknowledged as such, it must meet the above conditions of infallibility and authentication by miracles and the like. Otherwise its claims can be dismissed as incoherent from the start. For instance, in the case of the King of Kent, while one might question whether the miracles happened, one cannot question that if they happened the king responded in the only rationally defensible way. The conditional proposition holds that if there are miracles then divine power is at work, and the messengers through whom the miracles are performed have divine approval, whether or not one denies the antecedent. One should, of course, have good reason for denying the antecedent in order to be rational about it, but since the antecedent asserts empirical facts the rationality of denial or acceptance will depend on the way we assess any alleged empirical fact, by examining the trustworthiness and reliability of the witnesses. Once this examination has been done, and the antecedent accordingly asserted or denied, the rest follows.

We can conclude, then, even on the basis of the hypothesis alone independently of empirical investigation, that liberalism is flawed in its very idea. For liberalism denies in principle and as a matter of doctrine that any religion can have public authority in political community. But to deny this possibility in principle and as doctrine is to deny the truth of the hypothesis, for it is to deny, in advance of all possible evidence to the
contrary, public authority to any religion whatever, even to one that could prove itself to natural reason to be divinely endowed with such authority.

Note also that one cannot defend liberalism here in the way that is typically done, by appeal to the so-called ‘burdens of judgment’. These burdens of judgment, which are the many “hazards involved in the correct (and conscientious) exercise of our powers of reason and judgment in the ordinary course of political life,” may be listed thus: (a) empirical and scientific evidence is often complex and conflicting; (b) we may reasonably disagree about the relative weight of different considerations; (c) concepts are vague and subject to hard cases; (d) the way we assess evidence and weigh values can be shaped by our total life experience; (e) different normative considerations on different sides can make overall assessment difficult; and (f) the number of values any social institution can incorporate is limited. But none of these ‘burdens’ applies in the case of clear and manifest miracles and other supernatural acts (of the sort allegedly witnessed by the King of Kent, for example). Here the evidence is plain to view and doubt by eyewitnesses is irrational. To doubt it would be like doubting that the sun was shining or rain was falling when standing outside in the open air. Likewise, doubt by those who receive the reports of eyewitnesses, provided these reports are well authenticated, would also be irrational. It would be like doubting that Napoleon lost the battle of Waterloo or that Caesar crossed the Rubicon. To defend, therefore, by appeal to the burdens of judgment, liberalism’s denial in principle of public authority to any religion, even to one authenticated by manifest miracles, is subterfuge.

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3 Rawls, Political Liberalism, pp.36-37, 55-57).
Conclusion

The only conclusion that one may fairly draw from the above is that political liberalism, in whatever form, is radically flawed and can never rationally form the basis of human communal life. Political illiberalism, or the view that politics is and must always be about the pursuit of the comprehensive good, the summum bonum, is alone rational and alone rationally defensible. Of course the extent to which the true human good may actually be taken as the guide and measure of political rule will depend on whether and to what extent knowledge of this good is available or attainable. If it is not attainable, or only attainable by a learned few who can make no publicly recognizable claim to rule on its basis, then a de facto liberal state or something like it may turn out to be the default, though equally it may not. But there can be no principled basis for liberalism as a political doctrine. Liberalism is flawed in its very idea, and is so from beginning to end.

The only rational measure of truth in politics is political illiberalism, or political theonomy to recall the earlier word. Perhaps the ideals of illiberalism will be hard or impossible fully to attain. But that we should always be trying to attain them, and to make our actual politics live up to them as far as we can, is the alpha and omega of political action and political theory. Nothing else will satisfy. Nothing else will be rational.

Nothing else will be true.