Is it true that we, as Americans, are "a religious people," in that the presuppositions of our institutions are properly "religious"? My answer is, Yes—and no, depending on what being "religious" is taken to mean?

If it is taken to mean affirming this, that, or some other explicit answer to the religious question, then I should say, No, we are *not* a religious people. Why not? Because it can be shown, I believe, that, even though the presuppositions of our institutions as Americans are indeed talked about—by our founders and in our founding documents—in properly religious language, such language is nonetheless really intended to function in such talk only formally, or heuristically, rather than materially, or substantially. In other words, it is intended to express the basic supposition and the open commitment necessarily involved in asking the religious *question*, as distinct from expressing this, that, or any other explicit *answer* to it.

If, however, what being "religious" is taken to mean is not somehow explicitly *answering* the religious question, but only somehow *asking* it, and thus presupposing only what asking it necessarily involves, then I should say, Yes, we *are* a religious people. For our founders and our founding documents undoubtedly assert the basic supposition and the open commitment necessarily implied by asking the religious question—as well as, of course, by any way of explicitly answering it.

With this answer in mind, then, I should think it preferable to say, not that we, as Americans, are "a *religious* people," but that we are "a people *of faith*," in that the presuppositions of our institutions are properly matters of faith. More exactly, they are matters of an eminently rational faith—"rational" in the double sense that to exist humanly and, therefore, rationally at all is possible only by in some way affirming and bearing witness to basic faith in the ultimate meaning of life; and that common experience and reason alone are sufficient to affirm and attest this basic faith both clearly and consistently. At the same time, to be the American people constituted by our founders and our founding documents seems to me to share in affirming, if only implicitly, this rational faith in the

ultimate meaning of life as what Abraham Lincoln called our "ancient faith." In other words, somehow affirming this basic faith is not only *sufficient* to be, or to be a member of, the American people, but it is also *necessary*, to the one as well as to the other.

But what about so-called secularists? Can they affirm this basic rational faith, and if they can't, can they really be members of the American people? Here, again, an answer to the question depends on just what is to be understood by the terms in which it is formulated—in this case, especially the term "secularists."

The common use of this term obscures an important distinction between "secularity" and "secularism." To be secular in one's outlook is one thing, to be secularist, somethng else. Whereas the first is essentially positive in asserting, implicitly, if not explicitly, the full reality and significance of this world and of our life within it, the second is just as essentially negative in explicitly denying that there is anything real or significant beyond this world wherein its own full reality and significance are grounded. Nor is this the only important distinction that the common use of "secularists" obscures. One must also distinguish between two different types of secularism itself. Whereas for one type—which I distinguish as "soft" secularism—the explicit denial of anything transcendent in reality and significance does not preclude explicitly affirming that some way of existing humanly is authentic, for the other type—"hard" secularism, if you will, or, as it is more popularly known, "nihilism"—the explicit denial of transcendence is matched by a comparably explicit denial of any such thing as an authentic human existence.

Now it may seem clear enough that no hard secularist, at any rate, could consistently and sincerely make the affirmation constitutive of the American people. But even here things may not really be as clear as they seem. It is at least questionable whether anyone can explicitly deny that there is any ultimate meaning of life and any way of existing that is authentic without at the same time implying self-contradictorily, by her or his very denial, that there *is* some way, after all, in which any human being ought to live and therefore some

ultimate meaning to her or his life. But, whatever the case may be, finally, with the hard secularist, there can scarcely be any reason to exclude a merely secular person from membership in the American people. Although she or he may not explicitly *affirm* the eminently rational faith presupposed by our institutions as a people, she or he also does not explicitly *deny* that faith, and, in any case, *does* also explicitly affirm that there is a way of existing humanly that is authentic. Moreover, it may be that even the soft secularist has some claim to belong to the American people. If she or he affirms sincerely, however inconsistently, that there is some way in which a human being ought to live, then, arguably, she or he thereby affirms at least implicitly the basic rational faith in the ultimate meaning of life, affirmation of which evidently underlies our existence as Americans.

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