

What Do We Mean by Faith in American Public Life?

Considering an earlier—and, in my opinion, happier—formulation of this question, I shall simply assume that the point of our discussion is this: to clarify what is properly meant by the term "faith," and to take account of such different but related uses of the term as are arguably important in conducting our public life as Americans. So what I shall try to do in these opening comments is to outline very briefly how I should develop an answer to our question as thus understood.

What, then, is properly meant by the term "faith"? Generalizing a well-known theological distinction, I should say, first of all, that "faith" properly has both an *objective* and a *subjective* sense, in that it can refer equally well both to what one believes in believing and to one's act of believing it. Thus, for example, to speak of "the Christian faith" is ordinarily to use "faith" in its objective sense to mean the faith that Christians commonly confess and bear witness to, while to say that "a Christian lives by faith and not by sight" is to use "faith" in its subjective sense to mean an act of trusting unreservedly even where one cannot see.

Secondly, then, I should say that "faith" properly has both an *existential* sense and an *intellectual* sense—and that faith understood in either sense is inseparable from faith in the other. Thus, in its existential sense, faith is a matter, subjectively, of self-understanding and, objectively, of an understanding of existence, where by "existence" is meant not the self in isolation, but the self in its relations to others—to other selves as well as to other beings generally, and to the mysterious, all-encompassing Other, from which all things come and to which they all return. To exist as a self is to understand oneself somehow in relation to all these others, and what one understands in doing so is some understanding of existence. But if faith in its existential sense is thus a matter of actualizing some possibility of understanding oneself and leading one's life accordingly, it necessarily implies faith in the other intellectual sense of the term. For to understand oneself and others in a certain way would really be to *misunderstand* them unless certain intellectual beliefs about them were true beliefs. Conversely, any such intellectual beliefs, for their part, necessarily imply that some existential faith is appropriate to, or authorized by, things as they really are in a way in which other contrary self-understandings and understandings of existence are not.

A third thing I should say about the meaning of "faith" is that it is properly used to refer to a merely *implicit* faith as well as to a faith that has become *explicit*. That a small child who has not yet learned how to explicate its self-understanding in relation to its parents is nonetheless guided by it is clear enough simply from its behavior. And it is equally clear that the explicit

beliefs that an adult sometimes professes may or may not adequately express her or his actual beliefs or such other beliefs as they necessarily imply.

Inadequate as they are, these comments on the proper meaning of "faith" may indicate the lines along which a more adequate answer to the question might be developed. In any case, I must now turn to the second part of our question and ask about some of the uses of "faith" that are important for leading our lives as American citizens. I shall briefly mention three such uses.

The first is to refer to what I speak of as "*basic faith in the ultimate meaning of life.*" On my analysis, to live humanly at all is to live out of a fundamental trust that to do so is finally worth while—somewhat as it also belongs to our life to believe that the course of events generally has a certain order, warranting our expecting of the future by and large what we have experienced in the past. For the most part, this basic existential faith is merely implicit in the various things that we think, say, and do in leading our lives; and the same is true of the intellectual beliefs that it in turn implies. But even if it remains largely implied, it constitutes the fundamental presupposition of all our self-understanding and praxis, and thus of all the forms of culture that mediate them. Thanks to it we all believe (1) that there is an authentic, because realistic, way to understand ourselves and others as parts of the encompassing whole; (2) that to understand ourselves in this way and to lead our lives accordingly is, like everything else, unconditionally significant; and (3) that the structure of ultimate reality in itself is such as to explain its meaning for us, and thus to explain both why there is an authentic way to understand ourselves and why understanding ourselves in this way and living accordingly has such unconditional significance.

A second use of "faith" that I judge to be important for our public life refers to any and all of *the several faiths, philosophical as well as religious*, through which our basic faith in the ultimate meaning of life becomes explicit. Foremost here, obviously, are all the different religious faiths, properly so-called. For what is properly meant by "religion" is the primary form of culture, and thus the system of concepts and symbols, through which our basic faith in the meaning of life is not only implied but also explicated. Actually, what a particular religious faith makes explicit is some answer to the question that our basic faith in the ultimate meaning of life makes it possible for us to ask—namely, the existential question of just how we are to understand the meaning in which we cannot but believe, and so just how we are to exist authentically in accordance with that meaning. What makes this existential question necessary, and even urgent, however, is that the conditions under which we are given and called to lead our lives often seem to render our underlying faith in its ultimate meaning problematic—again, somewhat as a disappointed expectation of the future may appear to pose a problem for our basic faith in the general order of things. But in the one case,

just as in the other, we cope with our problem, not by abandoning our faith, which we couldn't do even if we tried, but by revising our expectations, or our understanding, as the case may be. And so it is that each religious faith appears on the scene, making or implying the claim to provide the requisite revision—by decisively re-presenting the possibility of self-understanding, or understanding of existence, in which all misunderstanding is at last overcome. Still other explications of our basic faith, however, are more properly said to be philosophical than religious. Being the result of critical reflection on religion as well as on our life otherwise, they form a secondary, not a primary cultural system. Even so, they, too, at their level, explicitly address the existential question and thus re-present our basic faith in life's meaning.

Finally, I shall mention a third use of "faith" that some analysts would regard as simply a special case of the second. On this use, the term refers to what I shall call, for want of a better phrase, "*our political faith as Americans*," by which I mean the faith evidently presupposed by our public institutions and normatively attested by our founding documents—above all, by the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. If we attend simply to the formulations in these documents, especially the first, it may seem that the theistic—or, more properly, deistic—faith that they express is simply another explicit religious or philosophical faith. But if this were the appropriate way to construe them, then, contrary to the plain implication of the First Amendment, something like the establishment of a religion or a philosophy would be involved in the very constitution of our nation. For this if no other reason, then, it may be worth asking whether the deistic formulations especially of the Declaration may not be intended somewhat differently—not as expressions of one kind of religious or philosophical faith to the exclusion of other kinds, but rather as expressing the basic faith in the ultimate meaning of life that all kinds of such explicit faith necessarily presuppose. The question, in other words, is whether the God-talk in our founding documents is not most appropriately taken purely formally or heuristically, as referring simply to the meaning of ultimate reality for us that is the object of our basic faith as human beings. On this construction, such talk would not preclude the possibility that other nondeistic, or nontheistic, kinds of explicit religious or philosophical faith could also validly re-present the faith it is intended to express. But whatever the answer to this question, our founding documents undoubtedly intend to assert that the way of conducting political life that they serve to constitute cannot fail to belong to any true understanding of human existence, and so to any authentic self-understanding. In this sense, they, too, bear an explicit witness of faith—to the political faith that underlies our founding as a nation and that is ever supposed to inform and find expression in our public life.