

Having read Gamwell's *Democratic Religion*, I want to update my thoughts on the whole issue of religious freedom with which he is concerned. Hence the following points.

1. I can accept Gamwell's thesis that religious freedom can be conceived coherently only if the role of the state with respect to religion is limited to what he calls "the establishment of the comprehensive question itself." In other words, religious freedom is incompatible with the state's establishing any *answer* to the existential question as the valid answer. What is to count as the valid answer to this question is to be determined, not by the state, but solely by the process of full and free discussion that the state has the duty to foster and does foster by establishing the existential question itself.

2. To the question, then, of whether the state has a religious foundation, I believe the correct answer is negative. If religion is properly understood as the primary form of culture, or "cultural system," in terms of which human beings explicitly ask and answer the existential question concerning the meaning of life, one cannot be said to be "religious" simply because one does what one has to do to establish the existential question itself. To be sure, one may very well *appear* to be religious in establishing this question, insofar as one may very well use religious concepts/terms in which to establish it. Thus the founders of the American nation typically use the concepts/terms of eighteenth-century natural religion or theology in establishing the existential question and, consequently, have been interpreted as, in effect, establishing this religion in doing so. And so, too, with Lincoln. But I agree with Gamwell that Sidney Mead is more nearly correct when he suggests another interpretation of Lincoln's apparent expression of the so-called rational religion of the founders. Lincoln's expression of belief in God "is equivalent to" no more than "the assertion that there is order and ultimate meaning in the universe which is discoverable at least in part by man." In other words, Lincoln's apparent expression of "the religion of the Republic" is really only his way of establishing the existential question itself, in the sense of a commitment to seek through democratic conversation the "order and ultimate meaning in the universe" to which the policies and purposes of the nation should conform, but any formulation of which is fallible and open to question in the context of ongoing discussion. But to take this position seriously is to resist characterizing it, in Gamwell's term, as "democratic religion," since this term has the effect of saying that the correct answer to the question of whether the state has a religious foundation is not negative but affirmative.

3. As for just what it means to establish the existential question itself, I should look to the kind of analysis of the structure of religious inquiry offered by Christian and others, qualifying it in the way in which I have argued elsewhere that it needs to be qualified. Thus I should say that establishing the existential question involves at least the following: (1) an understanding of

human rationality or understanding as occurring on two levels: the primary level of self-understanding and life-praxis and the secondary level of critical reflection and proper theory; (2) an understanding, accordingly, of the difference between the vital questions that we ask on the primary level and the theoretical questions that we ask on the secondary level; (3) an understanding according to which any answer to a vital question that becomes problematic can be critically validated, finally, only in terms of some proper theory and thus by common human experience and reason; (4) an understanding of our vital questions as including, above all, the existential question about the meaning of life, or about human authenticity; (5) an understanding of the existential question as asking, not *whether* life has a meaning, or *whether* there is such a thing as human authenticity, but *what* meaning life has, or *what* way of existing humanly is the authentic way of doing so; and (6) an understanding of the existential question, accordingly, as necessarily presupposing a basic faith in the meaning of life and involving a twofold commitment—to critically validating all candidate answers to the question by appeal to common human experience and reason and to understanding oneself and leading one's life (or conducting one's life-praxis) in accordance with whatever answer proves to be valid as a result of this process of critical validation. But while all of this is involved in establishing the existential question, none of it gives any reason for claiming that such establishing is, in reality, establishing (some) religion. Provided religion is defined as I define it, none of this is properly "religious," even if it should happen to be formulated in the concepts/terms of some religion.

4. Given this understanding of religious freedom, any answer to the existential question must be recognized by the state as legitimate, provided only that (1) it does in fact answer *this* question, as distinct from all others (including the boundary question *whether* life has a meaning, or *whether* there is such a thing as human authenticity); and (2) it recognizes that all answers to the existential question, including its own, not only deserve critical validation by experience and reason, but also require it.

5. The preceding points are all by way of explaining how I can accept Gamwell's thesis, even while resisting the claim implied by his title that "democratic religion" is a fitting way of epitomizing it. But I continue to wonder whether accepting his thesis is the best way to deal with the issue with which he is concerned. One *may* say, certainly, that the democratic state properly establishes, not religion, but the existential question to which any and all religions represent themselves as answers. But one might perhaps better avoid all such talk of the state's establishing things—whether some answer to the question or the question itself—and say instead simply that the state properly insists that the only procedure appropriate to determining its own purposes and policies at any level, including the most comprehensive, is the procedure of reason as such. Thus, if determining its purposes and policies at the most comprehensive level is impossible without giving some

answer to the existential question, any such answer that may be reasonably expected to contribute to such determination must itself be open to critical validation by a rational procedure. Otherwise put: adherents of any and all particular religions who are citizens of the state and, therefore, participants in the ongoing political discussion may by all means represent their answers to the existential question. But unless and until they are prepared to have their answers critically validated by common experience and reason, they may not reasonably expect their answers to contribute toward determining the state's purposes and policies. In short, the democratic state as such is committed to the way of reason as the only appropriate way at every level of its life; and for this reason it so constitutes itself as to establish religious freedom. This means that every religion, and every adherent of every religion, is free to contribute to the ongoing political discussion by which the state determines its purposes and policies as well as all the procedures and programs necessary to realizing them. But it also means that no religion, and no adherent of any religion, may expect to make such a contribution except in direct proportion to the validity of its witness as validated by common experience and reason.

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