THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO THE FIRST AMENDMENT AND RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

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The Cambridge Companion to

the First Amendment and Religious Liberty

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The First Amendment and Natural Religion 1

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Introduction

The United States was founded on natural religion. The grievances justifying independence rest on the claim that there are some things self-evident about God and human nature and from these come human rights and the structure of human government. Specifically, the Declaration of Independence claims it is self-evident that there is a Creator and that humans are created. Human equality and rights rest on this claim about creation. The eventual Constitution and Bill of Rights are further examples of the development of general revelation into the political and social realms as opposed to appeals to divine origination or special revelation. The exact quote is so well known it hardly needs repeating, but we can benefit from thinking about its structure: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with unalienable rights." We can discern three parts here: epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics. There is the epistemological claim, or a claim about knowledge, that some things are self-evident. There is the metaphysical claim about what is real: God the Creator and human nature. And there is the ethical claim about equality and rights.

The present chapter will look at religious liberty and natural religion. This will involve questions about reason, knowledge, meaning, and critical thinking. We will discover three overlooked areas where this critical thinking needs to take place and then use a paradigmatic religious freedom trial to illustrate the form such trials take and identify a solution that has been available to us for some time but left neglected. These three areas are natural religion, reason, and presuppositional thinking. For a paradigmatic religious freedom trial, we will examine the trial of Socrates. The argument is, first, that religion has to do with meaning, and the beliefs that provide meaning cannot be compelled. We will see this explained by Thomas Jefferson and exemplified in Socrates. Second,

the First Amendment is not aimed at promoting unending religious pluralism, but instead it provides the context for seeking to understand how lasting meaning can be attained.

The First Amendment has a practical application simply because people disagree about religion. And, indeed, disagreement about religious opinions is sometimes taken as a trademark of *religion*. But religious knowledge is like knowledge in any field. It has as its goal not merely true belief (opinion) but a true justified belief. And when we have this we can have agreement among all. Universal agreement is not a guarantee of truth, but nor is it an indication of error. J.S. Mill said it this way:

> But what! (it must be asked). Is the absence of unanimity an indispensable condition of true knowledge? Is it necessary that some part of mankind should persist in error to enable any to realize the truth? Does a belief cease to be real and vital as soon as it is generally received – and is a proposition never thoroughly understood and felt unless some doubt of it remains? As soon as mankind have unanimously accepted the truth, does the truth perish within them? The highest aim and best result of improved intelligence, it has hitherto been thought, is to unite mankind more and more in the acknowledgement of all important truths; and does the intelligence only last as long as it has not achieved its object?[1]

Disagreements about revealed religions (which constitute most if not all of the First Amendment cases) are grounded in disagreements about natural religion, especially about God and the good.

Are the First Amendment religion clauses universal, or do they apply only to some persons? The answer to this is the same as the answer to why we are starting with natural religion. The First Amendment applies to everyone. And this is not just because everyone might potentially join an institutional or traditional religion. It is because there is an important way in which all persons are religious. Religion cannot be defined primarily in terms of an organization, or rituals, or the supernatural, or scriptures, or belief in God. Not all religions have these. Nor can religion be primarily defined in terms of dualities like sacred/secular, or holy/profane, or natural/supernatural, or immanent/transcendent. To claim that such dualities are real already begs the question; many of the world's religions deny the reality of such dualities and instead make their core teaching that *all is one*.

[1] John Stuart Mill, "Liberty of Discussion," in *A Great Books Primer: Essays on Liberal Education and the Uses of Discussion and Rules for Reading*, ed. Robert Hemenway (Chicago: The Great Books Foundation, 1955), 55.

Instead, the universality of religion is in its connection to meaning. Religion is uniquely connected to how a person attempts to find meaning, and it is not strange to say that how a person finds meaning is through their religion. The beliefs we use to find meaning and interpret our experiences are the basic beliefs that are foundational to the rest of our belief system. An objection to this is that it makes religion too common. Indeed, this could mean that activities like sports or hobbies are religions. In such cases we use the adverb *religiously* (as in, he pursues baseball religiously). This makes sense precisely because of how religion relates to meaning, while also noting that such cases are instances of pursuing a hobby *like* a religion without it actually being a religion. As such, it is not a sufficient objection but instead helps illustrate the role of religion in the search for meaning.[2]

This also explains why we are looking at natural religion. Not all religions involve scripture (revealed religion), and revealed religion presupposes natural religion. All religions make claims about natural religion. Religious liberty begins in our freedom to form beliefs about authority, reality, and value that are parts of natural religion. This will also help us understand how religion and reason are related. The liberties protected by the First Amendment are for all persons. An example of an application of this is that religious beliefs cannot be separated from the public square because religion (at least in this universal form as natural religion) permeates the public square and all discussions.

What do we do when disagreements in the public square would appear to compel a person to abandon their religious convictions? Or, can the government compel us to be religious? This can be done by first narrowly defining religious activity and then regulating it and giving out freedoms limited to this narrow definition. On this basis, people are forced to participate in religious ceremonies they do not agree with. Must we accept a narrow definition of religion given by the government, or is that merely another attempt at control? The solution is to understand the universality of religion, its connection to the search for meaning, and that pragmatism and pluralism will never be final solutions for religious belief. Instead, in the area of religion, like any other, we must pursue knowledge to come to unity and agreement. We must be able to show what is clear at the basic level in the pursuit of meaning instead of falling into antinomies about

[2] Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006).

government control or individual licentiousness. Let us look at the aforementioned three elements more closely.

What Is Natural Religion?

We will start by looking at natural religion. When we speak about the First Amendment our attention almost always, perhaps always, goes to revealed religion. This is true in part because the history of our First Amendment comes out of the conflicts among those who appealed to revealed religion. It is also true in part because many of the religious sects that have been a part of the important religious liberty Supreme Court cases made an appeal to revealed religion or personal religious experience.

Nevertheless, revealed religion presupposes natural religion. Revealed religion (scripture, redemptive revelation) presupposes that there is a God and that there is sin that requires redemption. Keeping our primary focus on natural religion will serve to illustrate what it means to think presuppositionally before we look at it directly. If by revealed religion we mean the Christian scriptures, then these affirm the clarity of natural religion so that unbelief is without excuse; it is this failure to know what ought to be known from natural religion about God that leads to the need for revealed religion and its redemptive content. Revealed religion presupposes humans can understand and then offers them some new message in addition to what they can already know.

Natural religion, also known as natural theology, is the study of general revelation. General revelation is what all persons at all times can know about God and the good. Philosophical skepticism says that no knowledge is possible about God or the good. The fideist agrees with this but insists that it is impossible to live without believing something, and therefore we must choose what we will believe in the absence of knowledge. In contrast to these, we can see that knowledge is possible through reason and argument by learning to think presuppositionally. To think presuppositionally means to think of what is less basic in light of what is more basic. It is to begin with first things.[3] It

[3] I am using this term purposely to identify the structured order to thought and not as a reference to the apologetic system of Cornelius VanTil. I have written about that specific kind of presuppositional argument in Owen Anderson, *Reason and Worldviews: Warfield, Kuyper, Van Til and Plantinga on the Clarity of General Revelation and Function of Apologetics* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2008).

is to trace our disagreements to their most basic starting point. This is first done in natural religion.

Thomas Jefferson

In order to illustrate the above point about natural religion, we can refer to the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom. Commenting on this document will help us define terms like *religion* and *liberty* and will also illustrate presuppositional and critical thinking. Specifically, it will require asking what is meant by the crux terms (critical thinking) and what the conclusions presuppose (presuppositional thinking) about *religion*. In defending the *Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom*, Thomas Jefferson stated:

> Well aware that the opinions and belief of men depend not on their own will, but follow involuntarily the evidence proposed to their minds; that [Whereas] Almighty God hath created the mind free, and manifested his supreme will that free it shall remain by making it altogether insusceptible of restraint; that all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments, or burthens, or by civil incapacitations, tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness, and are a departure from the plan of the holy author of our religion, who being Lord both of body and mind, yet chose not to propagate it by coercions on either, as was in his Almighty power to do, but to extend it by its influence on reason alone.[4]

Notice the theological, or what I will here call the "metaphysical," assertions that Jefferson makes to justify his view of human nature and religion. Metaphysics is the study of what is real. Since what changes is not permanent, when we ask what is real, we are asking what is impermanent and unchanging: what is eternal – without beginning. And so we will see that when we find someone giving a theory of human nature, they will also give us, explicitly or as a presupposition, a theory of what is eternal. In the Declaration of Independence, this is the distinction between the Creator and humans who have been endowed with rights. Here, in the Virginia Statute, Jefferson affirms this distinction between God the Creator and

[4] Thomas Jefferson, "Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom," The Jefferson Foundation, accessed online, www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/virginia-statute-religious-freedom.

humans as the creation. God is eternal, without beginning, and created all else. In this act of creation, God determines human nature.

The critical aspect of human nature considered here is that it is free. Freedom is not here defined as uncaused but instead as unrestrained. Those who define freedom as "the ability to do otherwise" must emphasize that a free will is one that has no cause and is not predetermined. In the century after this Statute, both Immanuel Kant and William James rejected any theory of a free will that makes freedom compatible with causation. Yet, the emphasis here is on the will as free from restraint or coercion, not necessarily causation.

Taking the time to define freedom is important because it helps set the distinction between God and the creation. This is an important distinction because it is a basic distinction. Natural religion begins in the general revelation distinction between God and the creation. As created beings, humans are always contingent and caused. It is impossible for a creation to be uncaused. To desire an uncaused will is to desire to be the uncreated Creator: to be God. It is impossible for a human to be God, and so the human will must be caused. And yet, in contrast to bare material objects, Jefferson affirms that the will is created free. A free will is a will that is not restrained; it is free to will or to do what it wants. This is consistent with it having causes: We can name many different causes of the will, including background, personality, mood, and beliefs. Causes are unavoidable and are compatible with a free will.

Jefferson names the effects of attempting to restrain or coerce the will in matters of religion. These are the habits of hypocrisy and meanness. Here we have a hint at the role religion plays in human life. Not all coercion leads to hypocrisy. On less weighty matters one might go along or even change one's opinion. But in the case of religion, coercion creates hypocrisy because religion involves our most basic beliefs (those underlying the rest of our belief system) about what is meaningful. Attempts at coercion in religion are attempts to force a person to act against the very way they find meaning in life. Even if a person goes along with this, it will only be a kind of outward conformity that is inconsistent with the person's actual beliefs; the outward conformity will revert to authentic action as soon as the pressure is removed.

By contrast with coercion, Jefferson asserts that God Himself propagates religion through its influence on reason. Reason here is connected to beliefs and so references that by which we come to understand and believe.

A person's religion is addressed through their understanding. Or, the way a person finds meaning in life has to do with what they believe about reality and value. Religion and reason are therefore related here in the same way truth and meaning are related: For a person to believe something as true, it must first have meaning (meaningless noises cannot be true and cannot be believed).

Finally, we can note here that God is said to propagate religion. The spread of religion is through the influence of reason on the mind. The implication is that religion and reason grow together, and irrationality or failure to understand goes hand in hand with the decline of religion. We can wonder if this opens the subject of redemption. Reason can be used to understand anything, not only matters of religion. But humans in the condition of failing to use reason to know basic things are in the condition of failing to find meaning: Religion is the subject of how redemption from this condition is possible. It introduces the subjects of general revelation and redemptive revelation.

And so we have here these important definitions that can be inferred from the Statute and discernable in later documents like the Declaration of Independence: God the Creator, humans as dependent on God, the liberty of will to do what one wants, and the role of reason to shape beliefs that inform a person's religion in the pursuit of meaning. Finally, the role of general revelation and redemptive revelation will be central to the First Amendment and its history in American thought and life.

In the next passage, Jefferson introduces the role of civil rights, government, and the need for limitations and restrictions on power. This helps us think about the First Amendment and religion because it defines the limits of governmental authority. Jefferson writes:

> That our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions, any more than *on* our opinions in physics or geometry ... *that the opinions of men are not the object of civil government, nor under its jurisdiction;* that to suffer the civil magistrate to intrude his powers into the field of opinion and to restrain the profession or propagation of principles on supposition of their ill tendency is a dangerous fallacy, which at once destroys all religious liberty, because he being of course judge of that tendency will make his opinions the rule of judgment, and approve or condemn the sentiments of others only as they shall square with or differ from his own.[5]

[5] Ibid.

battle. And a spiritual battle is fought not with weapons of the world but with truth.

It is correct to wonder if there has been any progress since the time of Jefferson. Was he too optimistic about the outlook for reason? Pessimism might be in order but for the fact that free and open debate about presuppositions has not been the practice. There may indeed have been debates. However, these often occurred between persons who otherwise share presuppositions that remain unconsciously held and not critically examined. Jefferson himself may have fallen into this, and so we can hold him to the standard of this text. His deism and modification of the New Testament may not live up to the very standard of reason and general revelation to which he appeals.

Knowledge and Fideism

Much attention has been given to the obligation or duty of the civil magistrate in the history, law, and literature since Jefferson's time, but what about the obligations of religion? What if those holding to religious opinions increase division, disunity, and discord? This occurs when personal opinions are held as if they were actual knowledge when they are not. Knowledge carries with it obligation. Knowledge is not mere assertion. We will call mere assertion "fideism." Any group can assert itself in a fideist fashion. The strong impression that I am correct does not always, and perhaps very rarely, correspond to actually being correct. To call this strong impression the work of God does not change it from fideism into knowledge. What separates knowledge from true opinion is being able to give an account of why one's belief is true.[7] Those who speak highly of the value of reason have not themselves been able to show what is clear to reason about religion.

By comparing it to geometry and physics, Jefferson has given us an indication of how religious knowledge is attained. Like any discipline of knowledge, but especially exemplified by these two, knowledge begins with basic things and grows from there. These use the laws of thought (noncontradiction) to rule out what is impossible. This is not

[7] This is true for any definition of "knowledge" because it is inescapable. It is the case even if one is *giving an account* of alternative definitions of knowledge.

Enlightenment foundationalism, since both geometry and physics were doing this before the Enlightenment. But we can use the term "foundation" since this is used in the scriptures (also pre-Enlightenment). We must get the first principles or foundation in place and take care on which foundation we are building.

So when religion is in disarray and causing division that threatens the peace and good order of civilization, we can safely assume that there is division about basic things. Here I will call this "presuppositional thinking" and spend more time on it in a later section. However, the idea is that if we disagree about a less basic issue, this is because we also disagree about a more basic issue. Often, it is the less basic issues that get attention and are the source of heated argument. However, they will not be resolved as long as they are the product of more basic but unnoticed disagreement. This requires a greater level of consciousness about our own belief system and critical analysis of how disagreements work.

A religious believer's fideism shares the same presupposition as the non-believing skeptic: knowledge is not possible. The skeptic presupposes that knowledge is not possible and argues that we should not believe. The fideist also presupposes that knowledge is not possible but argues that we must believe something. The alternative to both is to critically analyze the presupposition that knowledge is not possible. As we have seen in the history of American religious life, fideism begets fideism: the multiplication of fideistic groups, each claiming to have a revelation or the correct understanding of revelation but without knowledge.

Fideism places a stumbling block in the path of others and hinders the fideist from entering as well. It strengthens the position of the skeptic, the naturalist (material monist), and the deist in their confidence that either there is no God or God does not act in human and natural history. This view is strengthened by the confusion among religions about God's activities. This stumbling block can also affect the civil realm by increasing tension and disturbing good order. The alternative is to prepare the way, remove stumbling blocks in the form of objections, by showing that basic things are clear to reason. Perhaps without knowing it, this is what Jefferson is calling for when he appeals to the role of reason in religious belief. This requires identifying the basic things and then showing what can be known about them. Basic things include concepts about God and creation, good and evil.

Jefferson has confidence in truth. He believes that when humans are free to debate and argue, they will come to know the truth. This might be called an optimistic view of humans. Truth will prevail over ignorance. Given what Jefferson said about those in power misusing their power, one might wonder why he thinks truth will prevail. To borrow a theological term, if humans are *fallen*, then why would we think they will ever seek the truth over their own selfishness? There is a tension here that needs to be resolved. On the one hand, Jefferson affirms that humans are easily corruptible, and this especially is evident when they have power. On the other hand, humans are also oriented toward the truth and truth will prevail. Perhaps, this indicates something other than the natural course of things. Under the natural course, selfishness will stay selfishness. It indicates that God's redemptive work will renew the person so that they begin to seek the truth. It seems doubtful that Jefferson would want to go there in light of his deism and his reworking of the New Testament. And it is also true that this is the only way that we can combine the corruption of human nature with the idea that truth will prevail. For our purposes here, this raises the reality of the need for redemption. Jefferson connects freedom of religion and worship with freedom of belief and opinion:

> That no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burthened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer, on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities.[8]

Liberty is set in contrast to coercion. It is in contrast to Augustine asserting, "Compel them to enter," in his misapplication of the parable (Luke 14:23).[9] This mistake reverberated throughout church history. In this passage, Jefferson specifically mentions religious worship. This includes attempts by the state to use taxes to support religious worship that might seem foreign to us now but were well known at the time. Worship is related by Jefferson to religious beliefs because it is a fundamentally cognitive, rather than a merely noncognitive, activity. While there may be noncognitive aspects, the foundational and fundamental activity is the affirmation of

[8] Ibid.

[9] Owen Anderson, "Augustine's Ethics of Belief and Avoiding Violence in Religious Disputes," *New Blackfriars* 91, no. 1031 (2010): 81–101.

basic truths: the praise of God (consider how the Psalms praise God through remembering his qualities, promises, and acts in history), the hearing of the Word of God, and discipline in applying this Word to life. None of these can be coerced so that, even if one tried, one would only produce the hypocrites Jefferson already mentioned: persons who do not believe but act as if they do believe. This is the opposite of disciplining the nations and teaching them to obey whatsoever has been commanded. What would the consequences of lack of discipline and this form of hypocrisy be on the church? What might the influence be on the life of true believers and on the health of correct doctrine?

Next, we need to pay special attention to how Jefferson expects us to maintain our religious beliefs. Humans are free to profess their religious opinions and to maintain them by argument. This is a further development of his affirmation of the relationship between religion and reason. Among its various uses, reason is used to construct arguments to support conclusions. Truth will prevail because reason leads to truth, not error. And, reason will prevail because it is the distinguishing feature of human nature. To disconnect religious belief from reason and argument is to disconnect religion from meaning.

This is the tension mentioned already between affirming that humans seek the truth and their fallenness. This kind of Enlightenment optimism is set in contrast to the claim that power corrupts and the fact that humans do not seem to seek the truth. If humans are not in the condition of seeking, then what could make them begin to do so? Or, if humans have the potential to use reason but have failed to do so (about basic things, only doing so about less basic and superficial things), what could make them begin to do so? In other words, the ability to use reason could be a defining feature of what it means to be human despite the possibility that humans do not use that ability or do not use it in a manner that leads to knowledge of what is clear at the basic level. Humans want the freedom to profess whatever belief, but not the responsibility to know what is clear about God.

This presses us to notice another purpose of reason. Although reason does aim at truth, it first and foremost aims at meaning. We cannot know if an opinion is true if we don't know what it means. Reason gives meaning by distinguishing between things (A and non-A) and then forming beliefs from these distinctions in a coherent way. Our need for meaning is our most basic need, and humans regularly give up the other needs commonly

listed (food, water, shelter, friends, life) in the pursuit of meaning. It is on the concept of meaning that reason and religion overlap; each of these is undeniably concerned with meaning.

Will the desire for meaning prevail and motivate a specific human to pursue truth? Perhaps. Perhaps not. The lack of need for meaning will always be compelling, but it could compel in one of two directions. It could compel a person to abandon what is meaningless and grow in meaning. But, it could also compel a person to move from what is meaningless into even less meaning. It moves to either greater understanding (light) or greater misunderstanding (darkness). How could we know which way it would work in a given person? This again raises the problem of redemption. Jefferson himself seems to have believed that self-improvement, including moral self-improvement, was possible through learning and good advice. Yet, the text of what someone has written takes on a life of its own, and we are not bound by the author's understanding. The problems that arise in this text make us doubt that self-improvement is sufficient in this area. If I am not seeking, then I won't listen to good advice, and I won't correctly learn or apply my learning. This problem will remain with us throughout the chapter, and we will need to return to the central role of redemption in religion.

It is hard not to see the comparison with what Jefferson here says about establishing our religious opinions through argument and what Martin Luther said at the Diet of Worms. There, when his religious beliefs were on trial, and he was accused of error and folly, he famously replied:

> Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason – I do not accept the authority of the popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other – my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot, and I will not recant anything for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen.[10]

Although he says it is not safe or right to go against conscience, he is also affirming that belief and conscience are insufficient grounds for religious freedom since both belief and conscience may be in error. Instead, a belief must be supported by scripture and plain reason. Appeals to scripture require the further step of demonstrating that scripture has been correctly understood. We understand by the use of reason. So whether we are

[10] Martin Luther, "Luther at the Imperial Diet of Worms," accessed online, www.luther.de/en/ws.html.

attempting to understand scripture or nature, we ultimately make our appeal to reason.

What Jefferson is most concerned to protect then is the liberty to hold religious opinions and support them by rational argument. This creates a social value that affirms and encourages the use of reason in the self and others and turns away in disgust from those who fail to use reason and instead rely on mere assertion and fideism. The bald assertion of religious experience or enthusiasm is not sufficient since experiences can be misunderstood and misinterpreted even by the one who has had them. Liberty is, therefore, a means to an end. It is a means for the thriving of rational discourse about religious opinions, which are the most basic and most important of opinions because they address the very questions needed for meaning. If liberty is given but not used for this end, then it is of questionable value. Nonthinking animals don't need this kind of liberty because even if they had it, they couldn't benefit from it.

Socrates: The Paradigm of a Religious Trial

We can use Socrates as a paradigmatic example of a religious trial to illustrate what was just considered in Jefferson. This trial involves both revealed and natural religion. Socrates is responding to the claim by the oracle that he is the wisest. He has a hard time believing this and sees it as a kind of religious duty to discover if it is true. After examining those persons considered wise by society and finding that they think they know, but they do not know, he concludes that the oracle spoke about Socrates as a type, "[H]e is wisest who, like Socrates, knows when he does not know." When he is asked by the court to stop his questioning, he points out that this would involve breaking his religious duties. His questioning also involves a kind of natural religion in that he is asking those who are considered wise to explain what it is to know and what is good. Their inability to do this is a matter of natural religion.

Socrates summarizes the charges against him as follows: "What do they say? Something of this sort: – That Socrates is a doer of evil, and corrupter of the youth, and he does not believe in the gods of the state and has other new divinities of his own."[11] Socrates responds to these accusations

[11] Plato, *The Apology*, MIT: The Internet Classics Archive, accessed online, http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/apology.html.

showing that he is the last who could be accused of corrupting the youth and that he cannot be called an atheist since he is in this difficulty from his commitment to the words of the oracle.

By questioning those who are considered wise by society, Socrates finds that, while people consider themselves wise, they are not actually wise and cannot give an account of their lives. This is a kind of self-deception. When Socrates questions them, and their lack of wisdom is discovered, they engage in self-justification. This self-justification carries itself to the point of a trial and eventual death penalty for Socrates. Although Socrates uses arguments to support his beliefs, he does not persuade his opponent. This once again raises a problem we have already encountered: How can it be that humans have the capacity for reason and yet do not use it? A sound argument will not persuade those who are not making use of reason, nor will it change them from not using reason to using reason.

Was Socrates engaged in a fool's errand? We need not conclude so. We noted above that reason and argument are not always persuasive, but they are compelling. They will move a person either to greater understanding or greater misunderstanding. And so it is with the trial of Socrates. His arguments moved the hearers into greater misunderstanding, and this in itself is a revelation of something worth knowing. This process reveals the fool and the simpleton. The fool is the one who thinks he knows when he does not know. The simpleton is the one who does not care to know. Neither appreciates the Socratic method of questioning.

Nevertheless, he is found guilty. His liberty will be taken away either by his agreeing to remain silent or by his death. The opposition asks for the death penalty. Socrates initially proposes that he should be rewarded for his endeavors since he tirelessly sought the betterment of others. But he admits this is unlikely and considers what other possible penalties are available:

> Someone will say: Yes, Socrates, but cannot you hold your tongue, and then you may go into a foreign city, and no one will interfere with you? Now I have great difficulty in making you understand my answer to this. For if I tell you that this would be a disobedience to a divine command, and therefore that I cannot hold my tongue, you will not believe that I am serious; and if I say again that the greatest good of man is daily to converse about virtue, and all that concerning which you hear me examining myself and others, and that the life which is unexamined is not worth living – that you are still less likely to believe. And yet what I say is true, although a thing of which it is hard for me to persuade you.[12]

The unexamined life is not worth living. The liberty to dialogue in the pursuit of wisdom is necessary for the greatest good. To ask Socrates to stop doing this is to ask him to live as less than a human. He is responding to the divine command of the oracle, but he is also doing what falls under the heading of natural religion. Without the Oracle at Delphi we could know from general revelation that the unexamined life is not worth living; we could know that wisdom is the highest good.

Socratic skepticism should not be confounded with the skepticism mentioned earlier. Socrates comes to realize that he is wise in that he knows that he does not know, whereas those he questioned believed they were wise but were not wise. His condition is superior because he knows the truth about himself. But he does not intend to stay in the condition of not knowing, nor does he conclude that knowledge is not possible. Instead, he is an example of the life of inquiry and rational dialogue to clarify definitions and give arguments.

There are inherent consequences for any human who does live the examined life. The failure to seek wisdom, the failure to know the good, results in the accuser uncovering the meaninglessness in one's life. Socrates phrases it this way:

> And I prophesy to you who are my murderers, that immediately after my death punishment far heavier than you have inflicted on me will surely await you. Me you have killed because you wanted to escape the accuser, and not to give an account of your lives. But that will not be as you suppose: far otherwise. For I say that there will be more accusers of you than there are now; accusers whom hitherto I have restrained: and as they are younger, they will be more severe with you, and you will be more offended at them. For if you think that by killing men you can avoid the accuser censuring your lives, you are mistaken.[13]

In his analysis of what sentence or consequence he should face for having been found guilty, Socrates considers two options: death as nonexistence or as a continuation of his present consciousness. If it is the former, then it is not to be feared since it is nothing. And if it is the latter, then it will be a continuation of his present search. He says:

[12] Ibid. [13] Ibid.

> Now if death is like this, I say that to die is gain; for eternity is then only a single night. But if death is the journey to another place, and there, as men say, all the dead are, what good, O my friends and judges, can be greater than this? If indeed when the pilgrim arrives in the world below, he is delivered from the professors of justice in this world, and finds the true judges who are said to give judgment there, Minos and Rhadamanthus and Aeacus and Triptolemus, and other sons of God who were righteous in their own life, that pilgrimage will be worth making. What would not a man give if he might converse with Orpheus and Musaeus and Hesiod and Homer? Nay, if this be true, let me die again and again. I, too, shall have a wonderful interest in a place where I can converse with Palamedes, and Ajax the son of Telamon, and other heroes of old, who have suffered death through an unjust judgment; and there will be no small pleasure, as I think, in comparing my own sufferings with theirs. Above all, I shall be able to continue my search into true and false knowledge; as in this world, so also in that; I shall find out who is wise, and who pretends to be wise, and is not.[14]

We are using the trial of Socrates as an exemplar of a religious trial. Socrates represents the iconic philosopher. But his trial is also a religious trial. Athens does not permit religious liberty. Although it is a polytheistic center and, as such, could exemplify the kind of pagan pluralism that some hold in regard, what in fact happens is that only some gods or worship are permitted. When Socrates is perceived to teach other gods than those the city recognizes, he runs afoul of the authority. Or, more importantly, when Socrates raises questions about whether those in authority know or if they only think they know, he is then targeted as a problem. Religious liberty is about what is real (which gods), and it is about authority (who is wise, who has knowledge).

Although there can be a kind of pluralism, in theory, even the pluralism of polytheism has its limits. Those limits aren't merely against the addition of new gods. They are about maintaining the same epistemology that supports the authority necessary for the cultural order. So, presumably, gods that affirm this order can be added indefinitely. However, when Socrates begins to question if those in authority are actually wise, this order is threatened.

Reason and Religion, or, Epistemology and Authority

Religion and government both make claims about what is real and rest these claims on authority. Ultimately, reason is the highest authority

[14] Ibid.

because it is self-attesting. Religious and political sources, at least implicitly, appeal to reason and argument to justify their claims. This is true of an Enlightenment figure like Jefferson, of a Reformation figure like Martin Luther, and of an ancient Greek philosopher like Socrates. We are bringing these many threads together to help us more clearly identify religious liberty and its goal. We need to get *reason* into greater focus to help us in this. Reason and faith are not in tension but are necessarily related.

In defining "reason," we are looking to define reason in itself. This is not exactly the same as defining reason as we use it, or defining reason in us (the sense in which we are rational). Understanding reason in its use or reason in us will follow from having defined reason in itself. When we do not define reason in itself, we tend to focus on some one aspect of rationality, reasoning, or rationalizing. This then leads us into confusion about the relationship between religion and subjects like religion or scripture.

Reason is sometimes thought to be nice but not necessary for faith and life.[15] It is thought to be for some personalities and not others. Or, it is contrasted with the simple who are authentic and do not need reason. The simple have a simple faith, and reason is said to be for the worldly-wise. Here we will see that reason and faith are inseparable and are united in their common emphasis on the need for meaning. Meaning is not just for some personalities, and the simple need meaning as much as anyone else. Reason is for all and is fundamental to our humanity.

Reason in itself is the laws of thought.[16] These laws have been defined as the law of identity (A is A), the law of excluded middle (either A or non-A), and the law of noncontradiction (not both A and non-A). These are interrelated so that affirming one of them affirms all of them and denying one denies all of them. These also operate at a meta-level over logic (classical, modern, or postmodern – if there is such a thing) in that a law of inference is what it is (law of identity). God is God. Humans are humans. A right is a right. Scripture is scripture. Whatever the subject, we study what *is* and distinguish it from what *is not*.

[15] Anderson, *Reason and Worldviews*.

[16] For further discussion of reason and general revelation, see Surrendra Gangadean, *Philosophical Foundation: A Critical Analysis of Basic Beliefs* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2008).

The laws of thought can become more concrete for us as we think about their use. Defining *reason in its use* will also help define what reason is not. These are the laws of thought in that they are the basis for understanding anything. In understanding, we distinguish between *A* and *non-A*. We distinguish pencil, desk, computer, book, under, red, fast, being, God, the good. This first use of reason is to form concepts, judgments, and arguments, which are the forms of all thought. Consider a person who objects to reason: In objecting an argument (however unsound) is being formed, and reason is being used in the objection to reason. Thought about the mundane and secular, as well as about the eternal and transcendent, is both dependent on reason for the formation of concepts, judgments, and arguments. There are other things that are sometimes confused with *thought*, such as impressions, the senses, intuitions, feelings; but reason is the laws of thought. And even with these, we distinguish senses from nonsenses, intuition from non-intuition. We use reason to understand.

In seeking to understand we use reason critically as a test for meaning. *Teaching critical thinking* has become a standard phrase in the academy. It would be hard to find any school that does not affirm this value. And yet, what this means is often lost when we see it is performed in so many conflicting ways. We are doing critical thinking by asking "what does it mean to think critically?" Asking about the meaning of a phrase is more basic than (prior to) asking about whether it is true or false. If we do not know what something means, then it cannot be assigned a truth-value. Many disagreements occur at this level because the participants are arguing about true/false but actually have different meanings in mind. Reason is a test for meaning in that if a law of thought has been violated, then there can be no meaning. *It is A and non-A at the same time and in the same respect* "means" that nothing has been distinguished, nothing has been understood, and no concept has been formed.

This presses us to consider our interpretation and is the third use of reason. We use reason to interpret our experiences. Experiences are not self-verifying. We have an experience, and then we have a meaning and explanation we assign to the experience. Sometimes, this happens so quickly that we do not notice our interpretive lens and need to take time to disconnect the experience itself (an event) from how we interpret it and explain it (it was the most important event of my life and means God exists). This builds on the formative and critical uses of reason. When we

interpret, we are "giving meaning" to an experience or text. This is a necessary part of understanding.

The fourth use of reason is constructive. We use reason to build a coherent world and life view. This is the systematic application of reason into all areas of human life. We see it illustrated in the use of "philosophy" before the various features of human society: philosophy of law, philosophy of medicine, philosophy of religion, philosophy of business, philosophy of politics, etc. We seek to understand how these relate to each other and their own internal structure as it relates to our basic understanding of what is real and the purpose of human life. In all of these, we are using reason to understand.

Different philosophers and individuals might emphasize one or another of these uses, and this gives a stamp on their approach to thought and understanding. Descartes might emphasize the critical use of reason; G.W.F. Hegel might emphasize the constructive use of reason; Foucault might emphasize the interpretive use of reason. It is appropriate for a person to emphasize a particular part of reality for greater study, but when we isolate any one of these from the rest or when we confuse their order, then we will end up with a misunderstanding of reason and perhaps even deny reason. Consider how Michel Foucault (as the exemplar of postmodern philosophy) built his career on the role of interpretation but ends with arguing that there is only interpretation and takes this one use of reason out of the context of the reason to understand what is real and permanent. We use reason to understand being. Religion is about being. And so we use reason to understand religion.

If these are the uses of reason, in what sense are we rational? What is reason in us? This is a natural question to ask because reason is natural in us. This is in contrast to saying that reason is cultural or conventional. It is natural for a human to form concepts, judgments, and arguments; it is natural to ask what something means; it is natural to interpret experience; and it is natural to form belief systems. These are formal similarities that run throughout human history and around the globe. Reason is universal – the same in all. The ancients used the law of identity to make distinctions; the moderns used the law of identity to make distinctions; and the postmoderns use this same law to make distinctions. On this basis, we can learn foreign languages in the present, and we can translate ancient texts. If anything comes natural to humans, it is thinking and the use of reason.

Second, reason in us is ontological. This is to say that reason applies to being as well as thought. Thought is an activity of being, so these are not absolutely distinct categories. Reason is not merely a mental game that

rules over what we can and cannot think about; reason is also about the nature of being. What is a contradiction cannot be thought and cannot be. It is the most basic law or starting principle that something cannot both be and not be in the same respect and at the same time. The standard example of this is the square-circle. A circle has no corners, and a square does have corners, and so a square-circle is an object that both has and does not have corners at the same time and in the same respect. This means that there aren't square-circles in our thought, and there aren't any on the dark side of the moon or within black holes. This also serves as an example of the critical use of reason. Although both *square* and *circle* have meaning by themselves, when we combine them in this manner the result is the loss of meaning.

Third, reason is transcendental. Reason is the highest authority. It cannot be questioned because it makes questioning possible. If we were to question reason, we would be using reason to form concepts, judgments, and arguments. Reason is inescapable. Insofar as we are thinking, we are using reason, and where we fail to use reason we are also failing to think. As rational beings, we cannot finally abandon reason without silencing all thought. To call reason the highest authority will inevitably raise questions about the relationship between reason and faith, or reason and scripture? Although there is a perceived tension (especially when we slip from *reason* as the laws of thought into *reason* as naturalism), the tension is not real; we use reason to understand, and we want to understand our faith and understand scripture. These are not competing authorities but categorical distinctions; reason is that by which we understand anything from the natural world to special revelation.

Fourth and finally, reason is fundamental. It is fundamental to the other aspects of the human personality, and it is fundamental in the order of understanding anything else about what is real. Great attention is often paid to either desire or the will; reason and the formation of beliefs shape how these are understood. This is true both in the sense that we use reason to understand our desires and choices and in the sense that the extent to which we use reason to understand will shape our desires and choices. This lays bare to us the order of the human personality and the order between human talents. Reason is fundamental in that its use is the source of meaning and its denial is the source of our greatest misery.

Discussion of reason and religion usually brings to mind the dichotomy of naturalism and religion, or atheism and religion, or secularism and religion. This need not be so and is due to a failure to think presuppositionally in our

definitions. Indeed, we will be working on defining presuppositional thinking and use this as one example. Naturalism, atheism, and secularism are beliefs about what is real. When adherents of these systems say that we can only appeal to *reason* and not faith or scripture, *reason* means empirical data, the senses, because this is the only source of information available if all is matter. Their presupposition about what is real has limited how they interpret their experiences. However, if there is more to reality than matter, then we need to be able to use reason to understand this as well. *Reason* has been used ambiguously by the naturalists. It refers to the laws of thought but is used by naturalism to refer to sense data about matter. This misuse of the term is a source of skepticism because empiricism by itself can never lead to knowledge, and thus by identifying it with reason this also is implicated in the skepticism.

Naturalism is one example of what reason is not, or of an ambiguous use of the term *reason*, or of a misuse of *reason* that leads to skepticism. There are other examples worth considering. Sometimes *reason* is used to mean *reasoning*. This is the human thought process. It could mean the uses of reason mentioned above. But more often it means the way a person thinks so that it can be said: "your reasoning is flawed." *Reason* as the laws of thought cannot be flawed, but a person's thought process could be unsound. For instance, a person might be using the various informal fallacies and drawing fallacious conclusions. These pseudo-arguments might pass as sound arguments to many in the audience because of their own failure at reasoning. In other words, fallacies can be persuasive, but they can never be sound. When *reason* is used to mean this kind of pseudo-argument, then it becomes a source of skepticism.

Reason is sometimes also used to mean *common sense*. What counts as common sense takes the condition of the perceiver for granted. What one person takes to be common sense, another person does not. Thomas Paine praised common sense but did not think critically about his own assumptions that led to deism and the denial of special revelation. Paine spoke highly of reason but in identifying it with common sense implicated both as skepticism. Common sense differs from society to society, and so dependence on common sense easily leads to relativism, the denial of absolutes, and the inability to come to agreement with those that have differing systems. Intuition, although different than common sense, shares this same problem. Sometimes *be reasonable* means *share my intuitions* when there is not actually common agreement about basic understanding.

This use of intuition, or common sense, in place of reason as critical thinking, leads all three into skepticism.

Reason is also sometimes contrasted with the individual. Reason as the system that has come down to us through the collected wisdom of the ages or the great teachers can be set over and above individual expression. This then creates dichotomies, including tradition and individual or reason and art or reason and creativity. Tradition is not the same as reason in itself; tradition can depart from reason or have failed to use reason critically. The individual who does critically examine the presuppositions of an age is expressing reason. Art as aesthetics or impression is not in contrast or conflict with reason but is a category that needs interpretation so that we perfectly well know what it means to speak of the philosophy of art or the art critique/commentary.

Sometimes *reason* is spoken of boldly in its systematic function and given great expression as in the works of Hegel. Here consistency as a criterion for truth is affirmed with great vigor. Castles of beliefs can be built brick by brick through systematization and the affirmation of noncontradiction. Yet these will be castles on sand if they do not get built presuppositionally (identifying what is most basic first through critical thinking) and if they first pursue truth over first using reason as a test for meaning. Modern logic puts its students through the rigors of truth tables and gives the rules for inferring true conclusions from true premises; sometimes it even attempts to build systems of inference that deny one or the other of the laws of thought (noncontradiction and excluded middle have come under special attack). These are misusing *reason*, which is not first a test for truth or a rule of inference but is first and fundamentally a test for meaning. A rule of inference is what it is (obeys the law of identity), and where it violates a law of thought it loses meaning. This misuse of reason leads to skepticism and many that are otherwise very proud of their logical prowess have fallen into as a slough of despair that reverberates throughout the rest of their life and choices.

Reason is not naturalism. It is not reasoning, it is not common sense or intuition, it is not tradition, and it is not merely systemization. Reason as the laws of thought is the source of meaning. And meaning is intimately connected to religion. And yet *faith* is often synonymous with *fideism*. Here we are distinguishing these two. *Faith* is the evidence of things not seen; faith is contrasted with sight, not with reason. Faith is understanding of what is not seen so that it can be said both that Abraham had faith and that he reasoned God would raise Isaac from the dead.

The privatization of faith is an attempt in modernity to distance religious opinion from the public and from law. It is part of the Westphalian solution to religious wars. Most of the notable religious liberty cases are about times when this private bumps into the public and a decision must be made about which will have greater weight. However, the privatization of religious does not and cannot distance them from reason. The goal of religious beliefs remains the same: to provide meaning. And reason is the test for meaning. So whether they are left in the private realm (which turns out to be impossible in the end) or they are in the public realm, when they are void of meaning this will become evident through the critical use of reason.

The privatization of religious belief tends to focus on the conflicts surrounding revealed religion. The Peace of Westphalia settled conflicts between Protestants and Roman Catholics. Since that time there have been many new religious movements introduced into the field and greater contact between the previously existing world religions. What all of these share in common is that humans think, that thinking involves the use of reason, that thinking is presuppositional, and that our basic beliefs are about natural religion.

The First Amendment does not strike us as being about natural religion because we don't see great divisions about natural religion. Indeed, perhaps all persons are united about natural religion in their general neglect of its study. The Declaration of Independence makes a bold claim about natural religion when it affirms that there are self-evident truths about God the Creator and God's role in endowing humanity with rights. Although it might be readily knowable that God the Creator exists, it is not self-evident, and in a way this might be an indication of the neglect of natural religion: Rather than do the work of giving the arguments necessary to show this is the case, it is assigned *self-evidence* and has been attacked ever since by atheists and naturalists. It is now largely replaced by a naturalist account of right or at least sufficiently challenged to undermine any claims to *self-evidence*.

Presuppositional Thinking: Applying Reason in Our Thinking about Religion

It is self-evident that we think. To deny this one must engage in thinking. We cannot deny our natures as thinking beings; we can only forfeit our integrity. Compare this to other assertions about what is self-evident,

including that all men are created equal. This might be commonly agreed upon and readily knowable, but it is not self-evident.

The simple form of a thought is to affirm or deny something of a subject. The pencil is yellow. The chapter is engaging. The dog is not loud. Here we see the work of reason in forming concepts to distinguish things (pencil and non-pencil, etc.) and forming these concepts into judgments.

Our judgments have presuppositions. A presupposition is what is assumed, or must be true, for the judgment at hand to be true: for instance, the existence and nature of the being in question. When we are told that a pencil is yellow, we operate within a framework of what it means for there to be pencils. Our framework includes that pencils exist and have properties like colors. This presupposes the concept of being.

When we think about our presupposition *being*, we naturally begin to ask *where did this come from*, or *has this always been?* This is a natural question for young children to ask just as they begin to learn to think, and if it now seems unnatural to the adult, it is only because the adult has abandoned that original curiosity in favor of skepticism. For the pencil, we conclude it has not always been. It came from something else: wood. For wood, we conclude that it has not always been; it came from something else: a tree. And a seed, and back to the first tree, and this makes us ask about the origin of life, and ultimately since we cannot press this back to infinity, it forces us to ask *what has existed from eternity?*

Our most basic belief, or our most basic presupposition, has to do with what has existed from eternity (without beginning). If we transport the judgment, *the pencil is yellow*, into one or another framework about what is eternal, we will see how the meaning is altered once we ask questions outside of the immediate practical. Is the pencil part of the creation of God, is it an illusion in the mind of Brahman, is it a merely material object composed of eternal atoms? This is called philosophical ambiguity.

We can map the possible presuppositions about what is eternal and in doing this learn to locate ourselves and others on the map about basic beliefs. At first, there appears to be three possibilities: all is eternal; only some is eternal; none is eternal. *At first*, because we can use critical analysis to find that one of these is not possible. This will be a useful illustration of what it means to think critically as well as to help narrow the spectrum of possible beliefs about what is eternal.

None is eternal is not one of the basic beliefs because it involves an impossibility. Remember that reason is ontological, meaning that it applies

to being as well as to thought. If we find a contradiction, it is not possible in thought nor being (thinking is an activity of being, and so these are not absolute distinctions). *None is eternal* is not the same as saying all is change. The latter (in Heraclitus, Buddha, and others) affirms that while no individual thing has existed from eternity, the flow of these extends into eternity; it is a form of *all is eternal.* Rather, *none is eternal* asserts that all is temporal, all had a beginning, all came into being, and finally all came into being from nonbeing. The claim of *none is eternal* is that *being came from nonbeing.* There was once nothing, and then something came into existence.

The distinction between *being* and *nonbeing* is the most basic and fundamental distinction we can make in thinking. It is the absolute distinction. No one confuses these two. We might disagree about what exists, but we don't confuse existing with non-existing. And no worldview confuses these. *From nothing nothing comes.* Nonbeing cannot give rise to being, and cannot be such that it existed, and then something came from it, nor can being come out of nonbeing. To say that the laws of thought did not yet exist if there was only nonbeing and therefore do not apply is to still affirm that at some point nonbeing existed. Each time we see this kind of assertion and inquire further (a universe from nothing; a universe that creates itself) we find that *nothing* is really something (quantum foam; gravity). If *none is eternal* cannot be true, then it follows that something must be eternal.

It is clear to reason that something must be eternal. We find the world's belief system lumped into these two presuppositions: All is eternal (material monism; spiritual monism; dualism); only some is eternal (theism; deism). We can use the same method seen above of critical analysis to find that there is indeed both eternal and temporal being, God and the creation, so that only some is eternal and the contrary assertion confuses temporal being (or denies its existence) with external being (confuses the creation with God; non-God with God). This illustrates both what it means to think presuppositionally and what it means to think critically. True critical thinking must identify our presuppositions and test them for meaning.

We can also identify what it means to think presuppositionally in subject matter. Our beliefs, or suppositions, have assumptions, or presuppositions. These follow a pattern from ethics, to metaphysics, to epistemology. Ethics is the study of what we ought to do. Our choices presuppose beliefs about what is good. These, in turn, presuppose beliefs about human nature and what is real. This is the study of metaphysics. The good for a being is based on the nature of

that being (good for a human; good for a horse; good for a car). And so to know what is good requires knowing about the nature of the being. Consequently, people make different and competing choices precisely because they have different and competing beliefs about what is good. To think presuppositionally is to analyze how these beliefs about what is good are grounded in beliefs about human nature and what is real.

Presupposed in these beliefs about what is real, about human nature and what is eternal, are beliefs about how knowledge is possible. Sometimes these are articulated and conscious, but many times a person's epistemological framework operates at an unobserved level. People are often not aware of their epistemology in forming beliefs and conclusions. We can say they are unconscious and inconsistent. The Socratic process was one of growth in consciousness and consistency through defining meaning.

Presuppositional thinking relates to religious liberty because we can identify the assumptions on which such liberty rests. The liberty of Athens could only extend so far. Its extension was to the borders of presumed knowledge. When this was called into question, those in authority had to act.

Liberty in the modern age cannot simply rest on skepticism. This is often how such liberty is presented: Since each person has an opinion, and since knowledge of religious matters is not possible, the government or society cannot take a position on religious matters and must instead take no position and allow each person to worship as seen fit. This skepticism only lasts as long as it is not consistently applied. The resulting pluralism extends until it is too much for the civil order.

The alternative formulation is that some things about God and the good are clear to reason and make up the foundation of religious belief. It is true that religious worship or belief cannot be compelled. Belief or assent cannot be compelled. And so while the government can indeed affirm what counts as religious beliefs (we hold these truths to be self-evident, etc.), it does not follow from this that it must compel individuals or groups in religious matters. So, it can be true that religious liberty and constitutional government rest on known presuppositions about the nature of reality and the good and also true that it is not possible to compel persons to believe what they do not think is true. The responsibility is on each person to pursue meaning by knowing what is clear.

Conclusion

We need not accept a narrow definition of religion. Religion is a human activity aimed at finding meaning. Nor must we accept pragmatic and pluralist solutions as final solutions. These are at best a means to an end. And that end is the same in religion as in any other human discipline: to come to have knowledge that provides unity and agreement. This knowledge begins with the kinds of questions asked in the field of natural religion. There are ways in which pluralism might be enforced that are essentially attempts at coercion of religious beliefs.

The general neglect of natural religion is not surprising. And this neglect is behind many of the false antinomies that arise, including private–public. We can continue to smooth out our approach to First Amendment cases by weighing where burdens fall to the individual and society in cases of conflict. An increasingly pluralistic society makes this increasingly difficult. Our conflicts reflect competing values that are grounded in contradictory beliefs about what is real. To continue to operate together requires common ground about what is real, about what is good, about reason, and about thinking.

As we saw in our consideration of Jefferson, it is not possible to coerce agreement. This, combined with philosophical skepticism about basic beliefs (we cannot know), leads to a kind of pluralism that is understood to be inevitable. This view says that knowledge is not possible and we will never agree. It says that nothing is clear to reason. This is not the only way to interpret pluralism. The current reality of pluralism can be agreed upon (and explained) without the specious conclusion of philosophical skepticism. Knowledge of basic things is possible through the diligent use of reason in seeking to know. The current reality of pluralism could be explained either as the result of people seeking to know while knowledge is impossible or as people not seeking to know while knowledge in reality is available (clear to reason). We have considered examples above to argue for the latter: It is clear to reason that something is eternal, that only God the Creator is eternal. As thinking beings, our highest good is to know this.

The reality that it is clear that God exists can be true, and it is also true that political and legal coercion in this matter is not useful, profitable, or even possible. It need not be enforced by law, although the law can affirm important truths that it takes to be the groundwork for all else (again,

consider the Declaration of Independence). This is what it means to say that religion is propagated by reason.

However, there is a kind of coercion that naturally occurs and is unavoidable. This is the coercion that arises from the need for meaning. The loss of meaning, and the attending boredom and guilt that accompany it, is unbearable. It pushes us either to the use of reason to find meaning or into excess to cover-up our loss of meaning and distract us from its consequences. The latter is self-destructive and a kind of death. By way of contrast, it highlights all the more the life of reason as the light of humanity (John 1:4). The reality of this death raises for us the question of redemption and highlights the need for the diligent study of natural religion.

We need not be restricted to the actual and continuing cases about religious liberty. We can raise questions about whether pluralism must presuppose philosophical skepticism and what the law must presuppose about pluralism. Westphalia was a kind of stopgap measure that allowed for the liberty and time to come to knowledge and agreement. It need not be understood as the final end. If it has been our common state to neglect what is clear about God from natural religion, then we can and should acknowledge this and turn from it.