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“Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness:
Reflections on the American 2004 Elections”

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Never have I seen the American public so ideologically and emotionally polarized against itself and the rest of the world as it was during the 2004 elections. Unprecedented degrees of animosity and contempt have been expressed by members of both political parties for those who supported the opposition’s candidate, while each side confidently claims the high moral ground: “God, or at least truth and justice, is entirely on our side,” they each proclaim. The alienation between the two factions is due in large part to the fact that each finds the other’s position incomprehensible. “How can anyone who loves God and country support Kerry?” is the challenge posed in churches and synagogues throughout the Heartland of America, and “How can any reasonable, informed person who cares about the world as a whole support Bush?” is the rhetorical question posed in colleges and universities throughout the nation. Such an atmosphere of self-righteousness and contempt is bound to be saturated by a dense fog of ignorance and bewilderment.

The polarization that characterizes the American public today focuses on familiar themes:

Reason vs. faith

Facts vs. values

Head vs. heart

Cities vs. rural areas

Cosmopolitan vs. parochial

Science vs. religion

Self-reliance vs. reliance on authority

Realism vs. idealism

Materialist values vs. spiritual values

George W. Bush thoroughly embodies one side of this divide, and the values he consistently represents and champions found widespread support as soon as the nation was traumatized by the 9/11 attacks. His policies have so uniformly advocated the second of all the above polarities that he has become a powerfully appealing symbol for lean to the Right, and a powerfully repulsive symbol for those who lean to the Left. As a result of this deeply antagonistic polarization, there is little room left in the middle, and hardly any grounds for mediation between the two extremes. Many citizens who supported Bush in the 2004 election did so because of what he stands for in their eyes—especially his moral values—*despite what he has done over the past four years and plans to during his second term*. Many swing voters, on the other hand, refused to vote for Kerry because he appeared to stand for so little, despite what he promised to do if elected president.

This polarization can only be understood if we take account of the historical context of Western civilization, which is rooted in two radically different cultures: the Greco-Roman and the Judeo-Christian. Many powerful thinkers, including Augustine,

Aquinas, Galileo, Newton, and Kant, have sought to reconcile the worldviews, values, and ways of life promoted by these two cultures. But now their incompatibility has crystallized in the polarization within the American public and the alienation of much of the rest of the world from the direction a slight majority of Americans have elected to follow.

This split began as a problem in the Mediterranean Basin, it then became a European problem, then an American problem, and with the modern spread of the Euro-American worldview, values, and way of life, it has become a global problem. Militant, fundamentalist Muslims also cherish the latter of each of the above polarities, as does President Bush; but unlike the President, they loathe the Euro-American worldview, values, and way of life, regarding them as antithetical to their own worldview, values, and way of life based on the Koran. One form of religious fundamentalism violently collides with another, despite their extensive common orientation and values.

The disparity between the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian heritages has become nothing short of a kind of social bipolar disorder, and in those who try to embrace both poles, it often results in a sort of “double-think.” Many devout Christians and Jews enthusiastically support scientific research and embrace the fruits of technology, yet have not come to terms with the fact that the physical sciences portray a universe that has no role for a personal God who intervenes in nature and responds to the prayers of the faithful. And the biological sciences portray humans as physical organisms devoid of an immortal soul imbued with free will. Likewise, many advocates of scientific materialism are ethical people with a strong sense of social responsibility, but their own materialist views support the materialistic values and rampant consumerism that are

destroying our natural environment, while undermining human values. While reducing human identity to brain functions totally under the control of the impersonal laws of physics and biology, they deny any basis for personal responsibility or ethics, let alone any spiritual dimension of human existence or the world at large.

The world is now in dire need of fresh, integrative perspectives to heal this existential fragmentation. This must include a mediating ideal of a meaningful life that draws on and honors both heritages, while transcending their polarization. To seek this ideal, let's reappraise the vision of the American Founding Fathers when they sought to establish a nation that upheld the ideals of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness within the context of a meaningful life.

Life: An integral ideal is to cherish the life of all humans, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, or creed, and all sentient beings, human and non-human, including unborn embryos that are either human or in the process of becoming human, and the entire ecosphere, which is essential for the flourishing of life on our planet.

Liberty: Cherish the freedom of all peoples for self-determination and the exercise of their basic human rights. Seek freedom from the inner causes of misery and conflict, such as greed and self-centeredness, hatred and animosity, and ignorance and delusion.

The pursuit of happiness: Cherish the social harmony and physical health of everyone. With discerning intelligence, draw from the religious heritages of humanity for guiding ethical principles, and let scientists examine what forms of behavior truly result in genuine happiness and human flourishing for individuals and society as a whole. A central emphasis of such research should focus on eliminating poverty and starvation throughout the world. Likewise, let medical science continue to diagnose and treat

illnesses, and ensure that everyone is provided with basic healthcare. Let the mental health sciences explore the nature not only of mental disease but also mental health, including exceptional states of mental balance and well-being.

The pursuit of genuine happiness, or human flourishing is an ancient ideal from our Greek heritage. Aristotle, known as The Philosopher throughout the late medieval era and still heralded as the Father of Science, called such happiness *eudaimonia*, and he equated it with the human good, with the mind working in accordance with virtue, especially the best and most complete virtue. Augustine, the great fifth-century Christian philosopher and theologian, called genuine happiness a *truth-given joy*, a sense of well-being that arises from the nature of truth itself.

Certainly such happiness, as opposed to mere transient pleasures, must be based on truth, but what kinds of truth? For Jews and Christians, this is fundamentally the truth of God and mankind's creation in the image of God. Socrates, on the other hand, represented a common Greek view when he proclaimed, "I am still unable, as the Delphic inscription orders, to know myself; and it really seems to me ridiculous to look into other things before I have understood that."

The religiously minded seek the truth top-down by relying on the authority of divine revelation, while the scientifically minded seek the truth bottom-up by relying on human empirical and rational inquiry. These two approaches have collided head-on, but is there any way they might turn out to be complementary? There are powerful elements of dogma in both religion and science today. Religion has become largely a matter of belief and adherence to divinely decreed ethical standards, while science is dominated by the principles of materialism, which many of its advocates acknowledge are articles of

faith, not empirically confirmed scientific facts. The way out of this fragmentation between spiritual and scientific mindsets has been suggested by the American psychologist William James when he proposed a science of religion that pursues experiential discoveries and draws logical inferences based on a careful examination of “the immediate content of religious consciousness”:

Let empiricism once become associated with religion, as hitherto, through some strange misunderstanding, it has been associated with irreligion, and I believe that a new era of religion as well as philosophy will be ready to begin... I fully believe that such an empiricism is a more natural ally than dialectics ever were, or can be, of the religious life.

Neither religion nor science alone can claim sole authority for understanding the nature of human identity or the world around us. The human mind cannot be thoroughly comprehended solely through the scientific examination of the brain and behavior, nor can the human soul be fathomed solely on the basis of divine revelation. Science does not have the tools to explore the spiritual dimensions of existence, for those tools have been designed to measure physical processes only. Science and religion may yet prove to be complementary, but only if adherents of both return to the primacy of experience.

The same principle holds true in terms of the cultivation of virtue, which Aristotle and Augustine both acknowledged to be indispensable for the pursuit of genuine happiness. But virtue must also be based on truth. Indeed, I am inclined to view a life of virtue as a life that reflects the nature of truth. Science has forgotten this principle, as it

has become evident over time that one may become a great scientist—with great insights into certain aspects of reality—without cultivating virtue and without reaping the fruits of genuine happiness. But religion has also fallen into the error of ignoring the empirical insights of science in determining what kinds of behavior are truly conducive to human flourishing within the context of the individual, the family, community, nation, international community, and the entire ecosphere. Let a spirit of empiricism and critical inquiry prevail, and humanity may explore and embrace a revitalized sense of ethics and virtue that is inspired by the religions of the world and empirically tested by the methods of science.

As global economies are fast depleting the non-renewable, physical resources of our planet, there is now an urgent need to explore the inexhaustible, inner resources of the human spirit and to utilize them in the common pursuit of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all beings. In this way, the American people may find harmony among themselves and with the rest of the global community.