'IN BROKEN IMAGES':
FAITH IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE*

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"Why, when this span of life might be fleeted away [..] oh, why have to be human, and, shunning Destiny, long for Destiny?.... Not out of curiosity, not just to practice the heart,... But because being here is much, and because all this That's here, so fleeting, seems to require us and strangely concerns us. Us the most fleeting of all. Just once, everything, only for once. Once and no more....

But into the other relation, What, alas! Do we carry across? Not the beholding we've here Slowly acquired, and no here occurrence. Not one. Sufferings, then. Above all, the hardness of life, The long experience of love; in fact, Pure untellable things....

Here is the time for the Tellable, here is its home. Speak and proclaim. More than ever Things we can live with are falling away, for that Which is oustingly taking their place is an imageless act."

Rilke: Duino Elegies, The Ninth Elegy

People of faith are faced with a similar challenge when they confront the reality of the contemporary modern world: how can the sincere believer also participate fully in the public life of his nation as a citizen? In this essay, I want to examine more closely the private and public identity of citizens in secular liberal democracies. More specifically, I am interested in a narrow

question about the relationship between these two aspects of self-identity. Are they positively related: does a secure personal (e.g. religious or cultural) identity facilitate trust of a political community? Or are they negatively related: does a strong personal identity preclude, or at the very least, make more difficult, identification with the public life of a nation? Following on from this enquiry, I want to open up a set of questions about the implications of this relationship for other citizens (from another religion or no-religion); religious communities; and for the State. At each stage, I use argument and sources which are general in their application. However, in some parts of this essay I examine the subject from the point of view of Islam. At each stage, I also hope that the discussion will raise points that are immediately familiar to those of other beliefs and to a wider audience.

"Believers in Private; Citizens in Public"

In modern secular democracies, the public-private dichotomy is almost an article of faith. Its advocates will vigorously defend an individual right to religion in the private sphere, whilst at the same time, vigilantly guard the public sphere as a neutral religion-free zone. This idea influences not only politics, but more generally, our public sphere and common culture. The public sphere and politics, it is argued, must be free of parochial religious bias. It must be governed according to public reason, which will yield an outcome that all citizens can agree is valid, despite their individual beliefs. These reason-based forms of public debate are, in Michael Oakeshott's words, "the enemy of authority, of the merely traditional, customary, or habitual."[1] Thus, "the rationalist is essentially uneducable" in relation to

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[1] Michael Oakeshott, 'Rationalism in Politics', in *Rationalism in Politics*, (London: Methuen, 1962), 1.