

"Faith in the Public Square"
Speech at St. Thomas More College of Liberal Arts' Symposium on Catholic Statesmanship
December 4, 2010
Remarks of former Senator Rick Santorum (R-PA)
As Prepared for Delivery

We are here in Boston, home of the only Catholic ever elected President to talk about the role of faith in public life. No modern president has had more of an impact on this discourse than JFK. Attacks on his faith by some high profile Protestants threatened to cost him the election. Two months before the 1960 election, JFK delivered a speech to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association to dispel suspicions about the role the papacy might play in his administration. Kennedy was addressing a real issue at the time. But on that day, Kennedy chose not just to dispel fear, he chose to expel faith. Let me quote from the beginning of Kennedy's speech: "I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute."

The idea of strict or absolute separation of church and state is not and never was the American model. It's a model used in countries like France and until recently Turkey, but it found little support in America until it was introduced into the public discourse by Justice Hugo Black in the case of *Everson v. The Board of Education* in 1947. (Black, by the way, was a Catholic-hating former member of the KKK who ironically enough advocated this strict separation doctrine to keep public funds from Catholic schools.)

While the phrase "separation of church and state" doesn't appear in the Constitution, the concept of keeping the government apart from religion does. The first part of the First Amendment prohibits the federal government from establishing a state church, such as existed in England and in some of the states in 1791, and from discriminating for or against particular faiths. The founders were determined to ensure that the new national government had no jurisdiction over matters of religion, in large part to insure that each American would be free to pursue the religion of their choice without state interference. Far from reflecting hostility toward religion, our founders, rooted in their own faith convictions, knew that faith was not just an essential element, but the essence of civilization and the inspiration of culture.

The second reference to religion in the First Amendment guaranteed the free exercise of religion and in conjunction with the prohibition of established churches, these two concepts were to work together to ensure that religion and people of faith had powerful constitutional protections of their right to not only worship as their conscience dictated, but to be free to bring their religiously informed moral convictions into the public discourse.

The phrase "wall of separation" used by Black comes from a letter written by a founder who didn't even attend the constitutional convention, Thomas Jefferson. After he was elected president he mentioned the phrase in a response to a letter written to him by the Danbury Baptists. The Baptists had expressed concern to him about the right of the government to interfere with the religious pursuits of the people, not the right of the people to engage their government with religiously informed moral judgments.

Jefferson's "wall of separation" was describing how the First Amendment was designed to protect churches from the government and nothing more. But Kennedy's misuse of the phrase constructed a high barrier that ultimately would keep religious convictions out of politics in a place where our founders had intended just ...the opposite.

Kennedy continued: "I believe in an America ... where no Catholic prelate would tell the President -- should he be Catholic -- how to act... where no public official either requests or accepts instructions on public policy from the Pope, the National Council of Churches or any other ecclesiastical source; where no religious body seeks to impose its will directly or indirectly upon the general populace or the public acts of its officials."

Of course no religious body should "impose its will" on the public or public officials, but that was not the issue then or now. The issue is one that every diverse civilization like America has to deal with -- how do we best live with our differences. Our founders' vision, unlike the French, was to give every belief and every believer and non-believer a place at the table in the public square. Madison referred to this "equal and complete liberty" as the "true remedy." Admittedly our country hadn't always lived up to that ideal - in particular with respect to Jews and Catholics, but what JFK advocated sounded more like Turkey's Ataturk than Madison.

Ultimately Kennedy's attempt to reassure Protestants that the Catholic Church would not control the government and suborn its independence advanced a philosophy of strict separation that would create a purely secular public square cleansed of all religious wisdom and the voice of religious people of all faiths.

Kennedy took words written to protect religion from the government and used them to shield the government from religion.

Of all the great and necessary freedoms listed in the First Amendment, freedom to exercise religion (not just to believe, but to live out that belief) is the most important; before freedom of speech, before freedom of the press, before freedom of assembly, before freedom to petition the government for redress of grievances, before all others. This freedom of religion, freedom of conscience, is the trunk from which all other branches of freedom on our great tree of liberty get their life. Cut down the trunk and the tree of liberty will die and in its place will be only the barren earth of tyranny.

When I served in the US Senate I often looked to the moral wisdom found in the writings of religious people.

Mother Teresa's speech at the National Prayer Breakfast, moved me to take a leading role in an issue that pulled at the moral fabric of our country: partial birth abortion. And it was Pope John Paul II and other Christian leaders' call for the ... biblical concept of absolving debt at the Jubilee year of 2000 that motivated me to join Sen. Joe Biden to reduce third world debt. Should I have rejected the instructions from the clergy to relieve debt because it was inspired by the word of God? Did Kennedy reject

desegregation because black ministers like the Rev. Martin Luther King arguing from a Biblical premise advocated it?

If there were any doubts about Kennedy's intent to devalue faith's role in shaping public discourse his concluding words erased it: "Whatever issue should come before me as President, if I should be elected, on birth control, divorce, censorship, gambling or any other subject I will make my decision ... in accordance with what my conscience tells me to be in the national interest and without regard to outside religious pressure or dictates."

Notice Kennedy and subsequently followers invoke their consciences as their guide. Of course your conscience is your guide, but you are not born with a competent conscience; it is formed and continues to be formed by something and reflects that formation. If faith in objective and eternal truths is no longer going to inform your conscience what convention does? And where does it come from? And what is the basis of its authority? These questions are either never asked or never answered.

What they admit is that their consciences are not rooted in faith and as such they can be permitted to freely apply their ideas in making laws and deciding cases. On the other hand, consciences rooted in a belief in God are only free to apply their ideas to personal matters, but if your beliefs, are "deeply held beliefs" that impact your public positions -- they must be excluded.

A major political offshoot of Kennedy's philosophy, was best illustrated by Mario Cuomo's speech at Notre Dame on the 24th anniversary of JFK's Houston speech, in September 1984. There he espoused his nuanced position on abortion: that, as a result of his religious convictions he was personally opposed to abortion. But he then applies Kennedy's thesis and refrains from imposing his values upon others whose views, because the truth is indiscernible, are equally valid. Virtual stampedes of self-proclaimed Catholic politicians followed Cuomo into this seemingly safe harbor and remain there today. This political hand washing made it easier for Catholics to be in public life, but it also made it harder for Catholics to be Catholic in public life.

Cuomo's safe harbor is nothing more than a camouflage for the faint of heart -- a cynical sanctuary for concealing true convictions from the public, and for rationalizing a reluctance to defend them. Kennedy, Cuomo and their modern day disciples would resolve any conflict between religion and politics by relegating faith to the closet.

I see it as a healthy tension that Jesus dealt with directly when he said, "render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's." The early church under Pope Gelasius pronounced the two swords doctrine defining two realms, the realm of the sacred and the realm of the secular. Our founders understood that the secular realm of positive law would be at times unjust and that is why the more important sacred realm would arm people with, as one of our founder's James Wilson put it, a "principle of revolution" to strive to set things right.

As a senator, whenever I was confronted with an immoral law that was unjust or harmed society, I had an obligation to respect the law, but an equal obligation to work toward changing it to comport with

what is moral. I agree with the founders that there is a natural law which can be known through the exercise of reason against which the positive or civil law must be measured and if needed amended.

Martin Luther King laid out his approach for ordinary citizens in a Letter from a Birmingham Jail. He wrote: "There are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws.. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. ... A just law is a man made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. "

That said it's important to exercise prudence in such matters, particularly concerning matters of private personal behavior. Not all immoral conduct should be illegal. There are many good reasons not to fight such behavior with the coercive tools of criminal law. Thomas Aquinas said that law "does not forbid all the vices, from which upright men can keep away, but only those grave ones which the average man can avoid, and chiefly those which do harm to others and have to be stopped if human society is to be maintained, such as murder and theft and so forth." Aquinas was clear and practical: "The purpose of human law is to bring people to virtue, not suddenly, but step by step."

As it has been pointed out to me on numerous occasions, there are moral issues where I have differed from the US Conference of Catholic Bishops and even the pope -- welfare reform, the war in Afghanistan and Iraq, and some immigration policies. While all of these issues have profound moral underpinnings none of them involve moral absolutes. War is are not always unjust; government aid is not always just or compassionate. The bishops and I may disagree on such prudential matters, but as with all people of good will with whom I disagree, I have an obligation to them and my country to listen to their perspective and perform a healthy reexamination of my own position.

I am not arguing here that I have, or our country should, be governed on the basis of religious revelation. I wholehearted agree with C.S. Lewis who said "I love God, but I detest theocracies."

All of us have an obligation to justify our positions based upon something that is accessible to everyone irrespective of their religious beliefs. We owe the public arguments based upon reason grounded in truth. In the Encyclical, *Fides et Ratio*, Pope John Paul II wrote as his opening sentence: "Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart the desire to know the truth -- in a word, to know himself -- so that by knowing and loving God, men and women can come to the fullness of the truth about themselves."

The Church's principle of the harmony of faith and reason is the answer that JFK could have posited to the questions raised by his detractors. Catholics, along with a majority of Protestants and Jews, believe that God reveals himself through his creation and, as such, moral truths that should govern a just society are accessible to all -- believers and non-believers alike. At the same time, of course, we must hold fast to our convictions of what is right and what is wrong according to our faith, and not fall into the trap of idolizing our own intellects, or trying so hard not to offend that we succumb to a watery political correctness. It should not make us uncomfortable to call something evil if that's what it is. Having convictions doesn't mean that we don't understand the complexity of the world -- it means that we are able to prioritize the pursuit of truth and justice and call evil what it is.

The American experience has demonstrated a healthy union of faith and reason. We have learned that faith for its own sake, apart from the pursuit of truth is only a sentiment, and that reason for its own sake withers into rationalism. Neither is autonomous. If I have faith only in myself, I belong to a very small religion.

And as for the right use of reason, let's remember what G. K. Chesterton said: "A madman is not the man who has lost his reason. The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason."

The movement in our country to follow Europe and fly on "one wing," reason alone, will ultimately undermine the very foundation of our country -- freedom. America is rooted in the founders' belief that free people, whose God-given rights are protected by a government that allows the individual to pursue their dreams and reap the fruits of their labor, would build the most just and prosperous society in the history of man. They were right; freedom was the key ingredient in the American experiment. Our founders understood it was relatively easy to establish freedom in our Constitution, the harder task was to create a system that would maintain it against the corrosive force of time. The author Os Guinness describes how they accomplished this as the Golden Triangle of Freedom: "Freedom requires virtue, virtue requires faith and faith requires freedom and around again."

That freedom requires virtue was explained by the political philosopher Edmund Burke, who wrote: "Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites ... Society cannot exist, unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere; and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things, that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters."

Virtue requires faith because faith is the primary teacher of morality. That is not to say that one cannot be virtuous without faith, but for society as a whole faith is the indispensable agent of virtue.

Faith requires freedom. Why has America remained a deeply religious country averting the road to secularism traveled by our European brothers and sisters? Again Madison's "true remedy," the combination of "free exercise" and no religious state supported monopoly, has created a vibrant marketplace of religions extolling everywhere the word of God to inspire people to fulfill His special plan for each of us. Our founders' inspired brilliance created a paradigm that has given America the best chance of any civilization in the history of man to endure the test of time. Time, this time may well be our toughest test.

Let me conclude with one of the Catholic Church's foremost American advocates for religious freedom, John Courtney Murray advised us that the first two articles of the First Amendment are "not articles of faith, but articles of peace." What was Murray getting at? Our founders believed that if they fostered religion and the Judeo-Christian moral code we would achieve something that was never before seen in a country with so many competing faiths – Madison's true remedy -- a truly tolerant, democratic and harmonious public square that would be the glue that would have the best chance to bind us together -- E pluribus Unum – out of many, one.

Kennedy's speech in the short term accomplished a great good by helping to put an end to Catholic bigotry. Unfortunately, its lasting impact not only undermined the essential role that faith has successfully played in America, but it reduced religion to mere personal "belief" and helped launch a cultural revolution, proclaiming loudly that on matters of moral consequence, reason has no truths it can discern, nothing of moral significance it can claim to know, much less contribute to the public debate.

That's the "faith" that is being offered by those who want to change the time tested Golden Triangle of Freedom. You'll see it in the public square today, and it's popular because it pretends to impose nobody's values on anybody. Yet it's an illusion because it uses a cloak of "neutrality," "objectivity" and "rationality" that results in the imposition of secular values on everybody while marginalizing faith and those who believe as "moralizing theocrats".

Kennedy concluded his Houston speech by saying he did not "intend to disavow either my views or my church in order to win this election." The sad fact is he could have stood by his beliefs and won; he chose not to. Instead he charted a course that has won many elections, but has put American civilization at risk. I have always felt comfortable to be on the path our founders took, the one that is now less traveled and invites the most criticism. I do so because I believe we all have an obligation to be good stewards of this great inheritance the "true remedies" generations of Americans created with their last full measure of devotion.

That's why we should feel so blessed to be here at a time when the land that God has so richly blessed is being put to the test. Many generations are never called to do great things, make great sacrifices to maintain liberty. We are the fortunate ones.

Christopher Lasch said that "everyday we tell ourselves lies so we can live." Two lies that too many Americans tell ourselves are that "America will be free and safe and prosperous irrespective of what I do" and "that I can't make a difference."

Those are lies. We will only be as free as long as we fight for our freedom and each one of us in our own way, albeit great or small contribute to that greater good.

America is a country that has been blessed by God more than any in modern history, in large part because we have been a country that has recognized that fact and given Him the glory for our greatness. Because of what has happened over the past 50 years, that too is at risk.

This moment reminds me of a call and response from the history of another nation from ancient times that was blessed by God.

In Chapter Six of Isaiah, the prophet looked up to heaven and heard a voice that called out for someone to stand for God. Whom shall I send? The voice asked. And Isaiah responded "Here I am Lord, send me."

This is our watch and like every generation we are being called Whom shall we send?

What is your answer?

God bless you and may God continue to bless America.