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Why Religious Values Support American Values

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Mr. Loconte's remarks are adapted from a debate sponsored by the Oxford Union Society at Oxford, England. He argued against the proposition that "Christian Values Undermine American Values." He was joined by Richard Lowry, editor of National Review and Eric Metaxas, director of Socrates in the City. Welton Gaddy, president of the Interfaith Alliance, and Herb Silverman, president of the Secular Coalition for America, argued for the proposition. The debate was held on May 26, 2005.

The proposition before this august body, that Christian values do not support American values, would have utterly mystified the greatest generation of political leaders in the history of Western democracy.

Consider this statement from James Madison:

We have staked the whole future of American civilization, not upon the power of government.... We have staked the future upon the capacity of each and all of us to govern ourselves, to sustain ourselves, according to the Ten Commandments of God.

And this, from Thomas Jefferson:

No nation has ever yet existed or been governed without religion. Nor can be. The Christian religion is the best religion that has ever been given to man, and I as chief Magistrate of this nation am bound to give it the sanction of my example.

Benjamin Rush observed:

I have always considered Christianity as the strong ground of republicanism.

Talking Points

- It was James Madison, the mind behind the First Amendment, who enshrined the guarantee of religious liberty in our political imagination. "If this freedom be abused," Madison warned, "it is an offense against God, not against man."
- The American approach to religious freedom immediately surpassed the European experience: It rejected Christendom's fusion of church and state as well as the radical Enlightenment's brooding hostility to faith.
- Without liberty of conscience, how can there be free speech or a free press? Without religious freedom, what happens to the right to assemble, or to associate with people who share your deepest values? It is conscience—the sacred realm of belief—that motivates our civic and political activity.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
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And John Jay declared:

No human society has ever been able to maintain both order and freedom, both cohesiveness and liberty apart from the moral precepts of the Christian religion.... Should our Republic ever forget this fundamental precept of governance...this great experiment will then surely be doomed.

We have many doubters among us today who deny this “fundamental precept of governance”—at great risk to their own nation’s experiment in freedom.

Uncoerced Conscience

Let me now draw our attention to a Christian concept that lies at the intersection of biblical religion and the American democratic tradition: It is the necessity of authentic faith—the idea that genuine religious belief must be freely chosen, unharassed by human authorities, whether religious or secular. Authentic faith is a religious *and* a political necessity. It is a religious necessity because the Christian tradition views conscience as the realm of belief formed through reason and conviction, not through force or violence. Through persuasion, not coercion.

The great Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther, refused to recant his teachings about divine grace because, as he put it, “My conscience is captive to the Word of God. To go against conscience is neither right nor safe.” That rugged English Quaker, William Penn, founded a “holy experiment” in religious liberty in Pennsylvania, a model that would inspire America’s Founding generation. His Puritan counterpart in New England, Roger Williams, fought to establish a government that would respect Jews, Muslims, and Catholics alike. His argument was simple: “Forced worship stinks in God’s nostrils.”

And so it was that James Madison, architect of the American Constitution, came to regard freedom of conscience as a sacred right and a binding political obligation. It was Madison, a pupil under the evangelical minister John Witherspoon at Princeton, who enshrined the guarantee of religious liber-

ty in our political imagination. “If this freedom be abused,” he warned, “it is an offense against God, not against man.”

The American approach to religious freedom immediately surpassed the European experience: It rejected Christendom’s fusion of church and state, as well as the radical Enlightenment’s brooding hostility to faith. Even John Locke, in his *Letter Concerning Toleration*, argued tepidly for the toleration of religion—as if the exercise of faith was a gift from government, not an inalienable right.

The First Freedom

Americans took a different line. If we Americans believed in royalty, we might call it the Queen of our political virtues. It is the First Freedom: the freedom that precedes and helps make possible all the other liberties. And that is what makes it a political necessity.

For without liberty of conscience, how can there be free speech or a free press? Without religious freedom, what happens to the right to assemble, or to associate with people who share your deepest values? It is conscience—the sacred realm of belief—that motivates our civic and political activity.

This is what that great Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville observed during his visit to the United States in the 1830s:

The Americans combine the notions of Christianity and of liberty so intimately in their minds that it is impossible to make them conceive the one without the other.... If any hold that the religious spirit which I admire is the very thing most amiss in America...I can only reply that those who hold this language have never been in America and that they have never seen a religious or a free nation.

No one is claiming that this Christian precept of liberty of conscience is beyond abuse in the United States, either by pastors or politicians. William Livingston, an 18th century Presbyterian leader in New York City, complained that “there is more Iniquity committed under the Robe, than is repented of under the Gallows.”

Fair enough. But consider the fruit of this Christian virtue translated into the American experience: The United States is a nation of breathtaking ethnic and religious diversity, with thousands of different religious groups and traditions. And yet we have sustained a level of civic peace and social stability that is the envy of the world.

How is that possible? First, we have a largely Christian culture that honors the God-given worth of every individual. Second, our government does not pick winners and losers in religious matters. We Americans jealously enforce the separation of church and state—but not the separation of faith from life.

A Nation of Dissenters

Consider another consequence of this biblical value of freedom of conscience, reinforced in American society: It is our great tradition of social protest, of social reform. Who led the decades-long fight to end slavery in the United States? It was Northern evangelicals, who petitioned lawmakers, rescued runaway slaves, and gave birth to the Republican Party. Who launched massive rescue missions for thousands of poor families during the economic upheaval of the early 20th century? It was that British import known as the Salvation Army. Who led the civil rights movement in the face of violent white supremacists and a hostile legal culture? A Baptist minister, the Reverend Martin Luther King, joined by brave foot soldiers from black churches throughout the country.

In each case, the Christian concept of religious freedom, embedded in our political system, made possible these great challenges to that same political system. Here were Christian leaders, armed with biblical ideals, attacking the nation's political and economic values—attitudes and practices that contradicted the nation's founding principles. They were against America, for America, for the Gospel's sake.

Thus, the United States is, and always has been, a nation of dissenters. Whether the cause is civic, political, or religious, we insist on the right to disagree. And we consider this right grounded in our God-given dignity.

Your own Edmund Burke admired this quality in Americans during the Revolution. Addressing the

British Parliament on the subject of the American rebellion in March of 1775, he warned that the “fierce spirit of liberty” is stronger in these English Colonies than in any other people on earth. “The people are Protestants,” he explained. “And of that kind which is most adverse to all implicit submission of mind and opinion.”

In a certain sense, all Americans are Protestants. The United States is a nation of immigrants—many of whom began their journey here in protest.

My own grandfather left his home in southern Italy, mostly because the right to disagree was fading quickly under the Fascist dictatorship of Benito Mussolini. It wasn't enough that the trains ran on time. So in 1935, my grandfather took his wife and two young sons, got on a boat and sailed for America. During the Second World War, whenever Mussolini was on the radio, my grandfather could be heard shouting insults in Italian across the room of their Brooklyn apartment.

This is what we mean by the right to dissent, the right to protest. The United States—along with Great Britain, our eternal ally—fought to defend this right, not only in the Second World War. We fought for it in the war's aftermath, at the formation of the United Nations. No government pushed harder for a U.N. Charter committed to protecting the dignity of all persons. No nation argued more effectively for a Universal Declaration of Human Rights. No country understood better the importance of Article 18 in that Declaration, the guarantee of freedom of conscience. Charles Malik, the Arab intellectual and Commission delegate from Lebanon, described the influence of the United States during this time in this way:

The American spirit of freedom, tolerance, largeness of heart and profound respect for individual human beings permeated and suffused our atmosphere all around....

I cannot imagine a document on human rights and fundamental freedoms arising in our age without the sustaining support of this spiritual background. I cannot imagine the Declaration coming to birth under the aegis of any other culture emerging dominant after the Second World War.

Faith and Freedom. The right to dissent. The right to believe according to the dictates of one's conscience. This is a profoundly Christian idea, and a basic doctrine in the American Creed.

Americans are chronic dissenters, and Europeans should not be shocked when the United States refuses to bow to established political orthodoxy from time to time. It doesn't mean, of course, that we Americans are always right in our dissenting. It just means we insist on the right to be wrong. That

sometimes makes us hard to live with. But when we consider what's at stake in the fight for freedom around the world today, perhaps that makes us hard to live without.

—*Joseph Loconte is the William E. Simon Fellow in Religion and a Free Society at The Heritage Foundation and editor of The End of Illusions: Religious Leaders Confront Hitler's Gathering Storm (Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).*