

LECTURE AT THE WOODROW WILSON CENTER

On March 4, 1865, Abraham Lincoln delivered the most moving and probably the most significant speech in American history, his Second Inaugural Address. Lincoln used his presidential platform to give an anguished rumination on the purposes of the Almighty and the consequences for Americans, in both North and South, of practicing slavery. The Second Inaugural is, as many have pointed out, essentially a sermon. Its biblical, indeed prophetic rhetoric has had a powerful effect upon all subsequent Presidential speechmaking, which struggles, never successfully, to emulate it. In spite of our constitutional separation of church and state, America's chief executives rarely deliver a major address without a direct appeal to God.

In that same epochal year of 1865, Ezra Cornell and A.D. White founded Cornell University as a new kind of American institution of higher learning. Unlike its predecessors like Harvard, Yale, Princeton and Columbia, Cornell was to be a nonsectarian university, "an asylum for Science," as President White wrote, "where truth shall be sought for truth's sake, where it shall not be the main purpose of the Faculty to stretch or cut science exactly to fit 'Revealed Religion....'" The charter of Cornell stipulates that "Persons of every religious denomination, or of no religious denomination, shall be equally eligible to all offices and appointments," and White in his Plan of Organization emphasized that "We have under our charter no right to favor any sect or to promote any creed. No one can be accepted or rejected as trustee, professor or student, because of any opinions and theories which he may or may not hold. On that point our

charter is most carefully guarded, and made to conform to the fundamental ideas of our Republic—ideas which too many institutions of learning have forgotten.” President White consciously modeled Cornell’s chartering documents on the principles of the Constitution. In short order critics attacked Cornell for its liberal spirit and began referring to it as a “godless institution” where theories such as materialism and “evolutionism” received an impartial hearing.

And yet “godless Cornell” soon had a large and impressive Christian chapel built in the center of its campus that could accommodate 500 worshippers. President White called for a lectureship in Christian ethics and weekly services offered by “the most eminent divines obtainable, of all faiths, including Catholic and Jewish.” Religion held a prominent place in the curriculum, the calendar, and the architecture of the campus. So it continues today: Cornell is a center of science, engineering, agriculture and humanities, and it is also home to thousands of students, faculty and staff members practicing their faith in campus buildings. Twenty-eight religious groups have registered as members of Cornell United Religious Work, the umbrella organization that coordinates faiths on campus. Religion is a force at Cornell today, just as it was at Cornell’s founding in 1865.

My point is this: even when Americans deny the state establishment of any religion, prohibit religious tests for public office, and never so much as mention God in their Constitution; and even when leaders with such consciously antisectionarian views as Ezra Cornell and A.D. White found a center for scientific thought and reason, what has been

called the first “truly American university,” religion is omnipresent. Today, in the midst of what history will probably call “the third Great Awakening,” we Americans are seeing a massive movement of religion back into the public square, particularly in the crucial arenas of politics and education. Abortion, stem cell research, and Intelligent Design are just three of the prominent issues revealing the power of religion in local school boards, colleges and universities, municipal governments, state legislatures, and the Congress and the White House. A month ago 55 Democrats in the House of Representatives issued a joint statement clarifying the central role Catholicism plays in their policy making. President Bush makes constant reference to the faith that governs his life and thought, both public and private.

If corpses can do such a thing, my favorite Founder James Madison is turning in his Virginia grave. Madison sincerely believed that, together with his political partner Thomas Jefferson, he had once and for all separated church and state in America in the 1780’s and early ‘90’s. In drafting the revolutionary clause on freedom of conscience in Virginia’s Declaration of Rights, in defeating Patrick Henry’s bill for a religious tax by publishing the Memorial and Remonstrance against Religious Assessments, in pushing Jefferson’s Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom through the Virginia Assembly, in helping to author the Constitution, and in drafting the First Amendment, Madison made separation of Church and State his first principle. Far from supporting Patrick Henry’s and George Washington’s belief that state support of religion would improve the morals of American society, Madison argued, adamantly and repeatedly, that yoking Church and State together had been disastrous throughout history for both religion and the body

politic. To use religion as an instrument of civil policy is, in Madison's words, "an unhallowed perversion of the means of salvation."

Furthermore, Madison argued, state support is detrimental to religion and to the body politic: Christianity flourished in a pure state in its early centuries before the Emperor Constantine made it Rome's official religion. In subsequent centuries, the state-established Church produced "pride and insolence in the Clergy, ignorance in the laity, bigotry and persecution." When Virginia passed Jefferson's Statute for Religious Freedom, Madison triumphantly wrote to Jefferson in Paris "I flatter myself we have in this country extinguished forever the ambitious hope of making laws for the human mind."

As President of the United States, and a wartime President at that, Madison strictly observed the separation of Church and State. He opposed public support for chaplains in the Congress and avoided appeals to God. Late in life he regretted that he had called for a day of public thanksgiving during the War of 1812. Madison believed that the State should deregulate religion (his formulation is "religion is wholly exempt from its cognizance"). He predicted, correctly, that such a policy would enable religion to grow and thrive in a free republic, where people of all faiths and of no faith felt equally treated. Ezra Cornell and Andrew D. White had the same vision, a secular institution where religion flourishes on its own.

And yet it has proven impossible to separate church and state completely. Why is that? “Politics is in large part a function of culture;” and “at the heart of culture is religion,” Richard John Neuhaus wrote three decades ago, as he worried that the public square had become “naked,” that is, shorn of religious belief and values. Neuhaus, as it turned out, had nothing to fear. But Madisonians do. Evangelical Protestantism has in recent years become ever more potent in American public life, while the voices of secular humanists become ever more strident in their reaction to religious rhetoric. This is a badly polarized state of affairs, as we have recently seen in national debates over the case of Terry Schiavo, abortion, stem cell research, and the opposition of Darwinism and Intelligent Design. What is the right way out of this polarized situation?

Let us begin by acknowledging that Madison was wrong: the state **MUST** take cognizance of religion: it is too important a source of ideas and values to ignore or to privatize completely. Religion shapes most Americans’ values, aspirations, beliefs, in sum, their identities. The history of this country reflects the simultaneous development of grassroots democracy and evangelical Protestantism. The two have gone hand in hand, often reinforcing one another. The problem is that the absolutist tendencies of religion frequently become incompatible with democratic pluralism and the need for give and take in politics. As Reinhold Niebuhr warned, “The religious imagination is as impatient with the compromises, relativities and imperfections of historic society as with the imperfections of individual life.” How can we insure, then, that religion will inform and improve policy debate, but not polarize? And equally, if not more importantly, how can Americans protect their faiths from becoming political religions, “unhallowed

perversions of the means of salvation,” to use Madison’s memorable phrase? These are, in my view, two of the most pressing questions we Americans confront today.

To answer these questions, we should acknowledge that religion has sometimes embarrassed itself by confronting science on its own ground. When the Catholic Church took on Galileo, it passed a short-term sentence on Galileo, a long-term sentence on itself. When Intelligent Designers go to court in the 21st century, they should be prepared for rigorous cross-examination. Judge John Jones found, in the case of *Kitzmiller vs. Dover Area School District*, that I.D. was religion masquerading as science. In the Schiavo case, right-wing legislators entered a legal battle armed with religious/political conviction, only to retire ignominiously in the face of scientific evidence and public opinion. Science keeps hypothesizing and testing results. Its theories succeed or fail with the discovery of new evidence. Religion emanates from authority and can thus appear arbitrary and ill-informed in the realm of policy making.

For this reason, religion linked directly with state power tends to be repressive and exclusionist. In his day Madison inveighed against the Inquisition because that was an example his audience well understood; today we have Muslim theocracy daily before our eyes. But it is easy to point out the dangers religious power poses to the state. It is a subtler argument to demonstrate the dangers state power poses to religion. When people of faith use their religion for political purposes, they run the risk of compromising their ideals and politicizing their religious values. Roger Williams was the first American to raise this problem in the mid-17th century in Rhode Island: an ardent Puritan, he warned

his fellow citizens against mixing church and state, because the result would make the church too worldly and give it a political agenda. For the church to remain pure and faithful to its mission, it could not, in Williams' view, consort with politicians.

Americans today find Williams' rhetoric and his practice extremist in its complete renunciation of any ties between church and state. But many American Christians find the intense political engagement of some Christian churches not only embarrassing, but an affront to their conception of the church as a spiritual home, not a partisan political actor. As Niebuhr showed, public demonstration of piety can corrupt private faith by transferring religious rhetoric to the political realm, thus lowering and cheapening it. It is bad enough when religious leaders make political pronouncements; it is worse when government leaders use the church for partisan advantage. Niebuhr wrote that "The religion which is socially most useful is one which can maintain a stubborn indifference to immediate ends and thus give the ethical life of man that touch of the absolute without which all morality is finally reduced to a decorous but essentially unqualified self-assertiveness. The paradox of religion is that it serves the world best when it maintains its high disdain for the world's values.... Its assets easily become moral liabilities when it compounds the pure idealism of Jesus with the calculated practicalities of the age and attempts to give the resultant compromise the prestige of absolute authority."

Religion is most effective publicly, then, not when it joins with the state and speaks prescriptively, but when it acts in what Niebuhr called its prophetic role. Faith can be a great moral force to reform society when government and science fail, as they often do.

Madison's beloved Constitution did not end slavery, the Abolitionists and then Lincoln did. Civil rights finally came for African Americans partly because secularists called for it, but primarily because Martin Luther King and his Southern Baptist colleagues demanded it on religious and moral grounds. It takes a wake-up call from Catholic Bishops to get Americans to confront the problem of serious poverty in our midst, even if only briefly. In the same way, we can be certain that the issue of abortion will not be solved on the basis of scientific definitions and legal procedures alone. Science and the law have little to tell us about the meaning of life. That is the domain of religious sensibility and moral sensitivity.

Abortion is the most divisive domestic issue afflicting America today. We academics have consistently misunderstood and undervalued religious arguments about abortion, much to our own and the nation's detriment. Our inability to appreciate the role of religious conviction in discussing abortion is probably the single greatest cause of our diminished role in public policy debate. Most academics are secular humanists. That is neither surprising nor especially noteworthy, but academic disdain for religion, specifically for Christianity, is noteworthy, and it has unfortunate consequences. Such disdain diminishes the capacity of many academics to understand American culture and politics, and thus lessens their influence in the public square. It is thought-provoking to note that, although it is liberals who have moved America to an ever more inclusive definition of humanity and human rights over the past century, it is now anti-abortion advocates who are calling for expanding our conception of human life. This is the religious voice speaking, like Abolitionists in the 19th century, while, on the other side,

liberal academics seem often to accord more respect to animal rights arguments than to appeals for the “rights of the fetus.” By the same token, I would sympathize more with arguments from faith about the beginning of life if those who make them showed more interest in moral arguments against ending life. Whatever side one is on in the abortion debate, or in debate over the death penalty, two things appear clear to me: religious views will play a large role in the eventual outcome; and each side needs to show greater respect to the moral basis for the other’s arguments.

When I ask myself how religion should inform politics, I keep returning to Madison and Lincoln. Madison spent a lifetime trying to ensure that this country would avoid Europe’s long history of religious conflict by separating church and state. Our Constitution and our Bill of Rights do as much as legal documents can do to assure his success. But his could only be a partial victory, because religion cannot long be kept out of the public square in this or any other country. The largest, deepest issues require religious engagement for political resolution to become possible. This country’s greatest crisis, the final confrontation over slavery, needed, in the end, religious understanding, a national benediction after a national tragedy. Presiding over civil war and incalculable suffering, Lincoln composed for his second inaugural address a national sermon. Though he found it impossible in spite of great effort to believe in personal salvation. And though he did not join a church, Lincoln read the Bible nearly every day as a source of strength and of powerful poetic language. Borrowing the language of the Old Testament prophets, and of Christian mercy, he tried to help his fellow countrymen understand the meaning of the Civil War in their history.

Unlike most subsequent presidents, Lincoln did not claim that God was on either side in this conflict. He did not even claim that he knew what God's will was. To him, the Almighty was inscrutable, a force that seemed to bring much suffering, personal, as repeatedly in his own case, and public, as in the case of the American people. But Lincoln, in his anguished pondering, did know that we Americans had committed a great sin and that we were paying for it. He also knew that people call upon religion to serve their own purposes: "Both (North and South) read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other." But it was clear to Lincoln that neither was on God's side: "The Almighty has his own purposes.... If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offences which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bondman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether."

That is the prophetic voice of religion speaking from the White House. Madison would probably have found that more than worrisome. Given the arguments I have made in this talk, I certainly do. For the President of the United States to make God the central

figure in his Inaugural Address is to join church and state bluntly and inextricably. It sets a dangerous precedent, as we have seen in the addresses of many a President of the United States. Let us note two deep mitigating factors, however, that make Lincoln's choice defensible even to separationists: first, the nation was torn by Civil War, its very existence imperiled; second, Lincoln used religious thought and language with remarkable restraint and care. He was as uncertain in his claims about God's will as he was in his own religious conviction. He refused to enlist God's aid in the struggle of the Civil War, he made no claim of personal understanding. He once said to a group of abolitionist ministers imploring him to do God's will and end slavery that he had no direct divine revelation: "I must study the plain physical facts... and learn what appears wise and right." Lincoln did, however, know Scripture and its power to assuage suffering and to create moral clarity, and he used it adeptly to grasp the meaning of what Americans experienced, in fact, to define that meaning.

Religion serves society best when it acts with restraint, and when it speaks with a genuine prophetic voice. The state serves religion best by allowing it to function freely on its own, and itself best by listening to the voice of religion and enabling it to contribute to the resolution of critical moral dilemmas. To disdain religion is to antagonize and radicalize many Americans with deeply held beliefs. To use religion for political purposes, to create political religion, is an affront to religious values and a violation of the great American tradition established by James Madison and deepened by Abraham Lincoln.