



1-1-2012

# Politics and Morality are Inseparable

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### Recommended Citation

Ronald Reagan, *Politics and Morality are Inseparable*, 1 NOTRE DAME J.L. ETHICS & PUB. POL'Y 7 (1985).  
Available at: <http://scholarship.law.nd.edu/ndjlepp/vol1/iss1/2>

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## SPEECHES

### POLITICS AND MORALITY ARE INSEPARABLE†

RONALD REAGAN\*

The past few months, it seems we have all been hearing a lot of talk about religion and its role in politics, religion and its place in the political life of the nation. And I think it appropriate that my remarks to the Ecumenical prayer breakfast in Dallas on this question be included in the inaugural issue of the *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy*. The analysis of public issues in the context of our nation's historic commitment to Judeo-Christian values is a worthwhile task that this new journal is well-suited to perform.

I did not speak in Dallas as a theologian or scholar. I spoke only as one who has lived 73 years, who has been active in the political life of the nation for roughly four decades and who has served the past three and one-half years in the highest office this nation can bestow. I spoke, in short, as one who has seen much, who loves his country, and who has seen it change in many ways.

I believe that faith and religion play a critical role in the political life of our nation and always have, and that the church — and by that I mean all churches — has had a strong influence on the state, and this has worked to our benefit as a nation. Those who created our country — the founding fathers and mothers — understood that there is a divine order which transcends the human order. They saw the state, in fact, as a form of moral order, and felt that the bedrock of moral order is religion.

The Mayflower Compact began with the words "In the name of God, amen." The Declaration of Independence appeals to "Nature's God" and the "Creator" and "the Supreme Judge of the world." Congress was given a chaplain and the oaths of office are oaths before God.

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† Virtually all of this text was delivered as a speech to the ecumenical prayer breakfast in Dallas, Texas, August 23, 1984. The President's references to this *Journal* were contained in a letter from the President to Professor Douglas W. Kmiec, the Director of the Thomas J. White Center on Law & Government dated September 12, 1984 and incorporated into this article with permission.

\* President of the United States of America.

James Madison in the Federalist Papers admitted that in the creation of our Republic he perceived the hand of the Almighty.<sup>1</sup> John Jay, the first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, warned that we must never forget the God from whom our blessings flowed.

George Washington referred to religion's profound and unsurpassed place in the heart of our nation quite directly in his farewell address in 1796.<sup>2</sup> Seven years earlier, France had erected a government that was intended to be purely secular. This new government would be grounded on reason rather than the law of God. By 1796, the French Revolution had known the Reign of Terror.

And Washington voiced reservations about the idea that there could be wise policy without a firm moral and religious foundation. He said, "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man [call himself a patriot] who [would] labor to subvert these . . . firmest props of the duties of men and citizens. The mere politician . . . [and] the pious man ought to respect and to cherish [religion and morality]." <sup>3</sup> He added, ". . . let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion."<sup>4</sup>

I believe that George Washington knew the City of Man cannot survive without the City of God, that the Visible City will perish without the Invisible City.

Religion played not only a strong role in our national life, it played a positive role. The abolitionist movement was at heart a moral and religious movement. So was the modern civil rights struggle. And throughout this time, the state was tolerant of religious belief, expression and practice. Society, too, was tolerant.

But, in the 1960's, the climate began to change. We began to make great steps toward secularizing our nation and removing religion from its honored place.

In 1962, the Supreme Court in the New York prayer case banned the compulsory saying of prayers.<sup>5</sup> In 1963, the Court banned the compulsory reading of the Bible in our

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1. See The Federalist No. 2.

2. Farewell Address by President Washington (Sept. 17, 1796), reprinted in 1 J. RICHARDSON, A COMPILATION OF THE MESSAGES AND PAPERS OF THE PRESIDENTS 1789-1897, at 213 (1896).

3. *Id.* at 220.

4. *Id.*

5. *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962).

public schools.<sup>6</sup> From that point on the courts pushed the meaning of the ruling ever outward, so that now our children are not allowed voluntary prayer. We even had to pass a law — pass a special law in the Congress just a few weeks ago — to allow student prayer groups the same access to school-rooms after classes that a Young Marxist Society, for example, would already enjoy with no opposition.

The 1962 decision opened the way to a flood of similar suits. Once religion had been made vulnerable, a series of assaults were made in one court after another, on one issue after another. Cases were started to argue against tax-exempt status for churches. Suits were brought to abolish the words "Under God" from the Pledge of Allegiance, and to remove "In God We Trust" from public documents and from our currency.

Today, there are those who are fighting to make sure voluntary prayer is not returned to the classrooms. And the frustrating thing for the great majority of Americans who support and understand the special importance of religion in the national life — the frustrating thing is that those who are attacking religion claim they are doing it in the name of tolerance and freedom and open-mindedness. Question: Isn't the real truth that they are intolerant of religion? That they refuse to tolerate its importance in our lives?

If all of the children of our country studied together all of the many religions in our country, wouldn't they learn greater tolerance of each other's beliefs? And is that not to be desired? If children prayed together, would they not understand what they have in common and would this not indeed bring them closer? I submit to you that those who claim to be fighting for tolerance on this issue may not be tolerant at all.

When John Kennedy was running for president in 1960, he said that his church would not dictate his presidency any more than he would speak for his church. Just so — and proper. But John Kennedy was speaking in an America in which the role of religion — and by that I mean the role of all churches — was secure. Abortion was not a political issue; prayer was not a political issue; and it was broadly acknowledged that religious leaders had a right and a duty to speak out on issues of the day. They held a place of respect; and a politician who spoke to or of them with a lack of respect would not long survive in the political arena. It was acknowl-

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6. *Abington School Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963).

edged then that religion held a special place, occupied a special territory in the hearts of the citizenry.

The climate has changed greatly since then. And, since it has, it logically follows that religion needs defenders against those who care only for the interests of the state.

There are, these days, many questions on which religious leaders are obliged to offer their moral and theological guidance. And such guidance is a good and necessary thing. To know how a church and its members feel on a public issue expands the parameters of debate. It does not narrow the debate. It expands it.

The truth is, politics and morality are inseparable. And as morality's foundation is religion, religion and politics are necessarily related. We need religion as a guide; we need it because we are imperfect. And our government needs the church because only those humble enough to admit they are sinners can bring to democracy the tolerance it requires in order to survive.

A state is nothing more than a reflection of its citizens; the more decent the citizens, the more decent the state. If you practice a religion — whether you are Catholic, Protestant, Jewish or guided by some other faith — then your private life will be influenced by a sense of moral obligation. So, too, will your public life. One, you see, affects the other.

The churches of America do not exist by the grace of the state; the churches of America are not mere "citizens" of the state. The churches of America exist apart — they have their own vantage point, their own authority. Religion is its own realm; it makes its own claims.

We establish no religion in this country nor will we ever; we command no worship, we mandate no belief. But we poison our society when we remove its theological underpinnings; we court corruption when we leave it bereft of belief. All are free to believe or not to believe, all are free to practice a faith or not. But those who believe must be free to speak of and act on their belief to apply moral teaching to public questions.

I submit to you that the tolerant society is open to and encouraging of all religions. And this does not weaken us, it makes us strong.

Without God there is no virtue because there is no prompting of the conscience; without God we are mired in the material, that flat world that tells us only what the senses perceive; without God there is a coarsening of the society; without God democracy will not and cannot long endure.

And that, simply, is the heart of my message: If we ever forget that we are "One Nation Under God," then we will be a nation gone under.

I am certain that your inaugural issue and those to come will add immeasurably to the Notre Dame Law School's tradition of scholarly examination of legislative and judicial questions in the light of our moral and religious heritage. May God keep you, and may we, all of us, continue to keep God.

