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Faith, Truth, and Tolerance in America

Edward M. Kennedy

October 3, 1983

Thank you very much Professor Kombay for that generous introduction.

And let me say, that I never expected to hear such kind words from Dr. Falwell.

So in return, I have an invitation of my own.

On January 20th, 1985, I hope Dr. Falwell will say a prayer at the inauguration of the next Democratic President of the United States.

Now, Dr. Falwell, I'm not exactly sure how you feel about that.

You might not appreciate the President, but the Democrats certainly would appreciate the prayer.

Actually, a number of people in Washington were surprised that I was invited to speak here -- and even more surprised when I accepted the invitation.

They seem to think that it's easier for a camel to pass through the eye of the needle than for a Kennedy to come to the campus of Liberty Baptist College.

In honor of our meeting, I have asked Dr. Falwell, as your Chancellor, to permit all the students an extra hour next Saturday night before curfew.

And in return, I have promised to watch the Old Time Gospel Hour next Sunday morning.

I realize that my visit may be a little controversial.

But as many of you have heard, Dr. Falwell recently sent me a membership in the Moral Majority -- and I didn't even apply for it.

And I wonder if that means that I'm a member in good standing.

Reverend Falwell: Somewhat Senator Kennedy: "Somewhat," he says.

This is, of course, a nonpolitical speech which is probably best under the circumstances.

Since I am not a candidate for President, it would certainly be inappropriate to ask for your support in this election and probably inaccurate to thank you for it in the last one.

I have come here to discuss my beliefs about faith and country, tolerance and truth in America.

I know we begin with certain disagreements; and I strongly suspect that at the end of the evening some of our disagreements will remain.

But I also hope that tonight and in the months and years ahead, we will always respect the right of others to differ, that we will never lose sight of our own fallibility, and that we will view ourselves with a sense of perspective and a sense of humor.

After all, in the New Testament, even the Disciples had to be taught to look first to the beam in their own eyes, and only then to the mote in their neighbor's eyes.

I am mindful of that counsel.

I am an American and a Catholic; I love my country and treasure my faith.

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But I do not assume that my conception of patriotism or policy is invariably correct, or that my convictions about religion should command any greater respect than any other faith in this pluralistic society.

I believe there surely is such a thing as truth, but who among us can claim a monopoly on it?

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There are those who do, and their own words testify to their intolerance.

For example, because the Moral Majority has worked with members of different denominations, one fundamentalist group has denounced Dr. Falwell for hastening the ecumenical church and for "yoking together with Roman Catholics, Mormons, and others."

I am relieved that Dr. Falwell does not regard that as a sin, and on this issue, he himself has become the target of narrow prejudice.

When people agree on public policy, they ought to be able to work together, even while they worship in diverse ways.

For truly we are all yoked together as Americans, and the yoke is the happy one of individual freedom and mutual respect.

But in saying that, we cannot and should not turn aside from a deeper and more pressing question -- which is whether and how religion should influence government.

A generation ago, a presidential candidate had to prove his independence of undue religious influence in public life, and he had to do so partly at the insistence of evangelical Protestants.

John Kennedy said at that time: "I believe in an America where there is no religious bloc voting of any kind."

Only twenty years later, another candidate was appealing to a[n] evangelical meeting as a religious bloc.

Ronald Reagan said to 15 thousand evangelicals at the Roundtable in Dallas: "I know that you can't endorse me.

I want you to know I endorse you and what you are doing."

To many Americans, that pledge was a sign and a symbol of a dangerous breakdown in the separation of church and state.

Yet this principle, as vital as it is, is not a simplistic and rigid command.

Separation of church and state cannot mean an absolute separation between moral principles and political power.

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The challenge today is to recall the origin of the principle, to define its purpose, and refine its application to the politics of the present.

The founders of our nation had long and bitter experience with the state, as both the agent and the adversary of particular religious views.

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In colonial Maryland, Catholics paid a double land tax, and in Pennsylvania they had to list their names on a public roll -- an ominous precursor of the first Nazi laws against the Jews.

And Jews in turn faced discrimination in all of the thirteen original Colonies.

Massachusetts exiled Roger Williams and his congregation for contending that civil government had no right to enforce the Ten Commandments.

Virginia harassed Baptist teachers, and also established a religious test for public service, writing into the law that no "popish followers" could hold any office.

But during the Revolution, Catholics, Jews, and Non-Conformists all rallied to the cause and fought valiantly for the American commonwealth -- for John Winthrop's "city upon a hill."

Afterwards, when the Constitution was ratified and then amended, the framers gave freedom for all religion, and from any established religion, the very first place in the Bill of Rights.

Indeed the framers themselves professed very different faiths: Washington was an Episcopalian, Jefferson a deist, and Adams a Calvinist.

And although he had earlier opposed toleration, John Adams later contributed to the building of Catholic churches, and so did George Washington.

Thomas Jefferson said his proudest achievement was not the presidency, or the writing the Declaration of Independence, but drafting the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom.

He stated the vision of the first Americans and the First Amendment very clearly: "The God who gave us life gave us liberty at the same time."

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The separation of church and state can sometimes be frustrating for women and men of religious faith. They may be tempted to misuse government in order to impose a value which they cannot persuade others to accept.

But once we succumb to that temptation, we step onto a slippery slope where everyone's freedom is at risk.

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Those who favor censorship should recall that one of the first books ever burned was the first English translation of the Bible.

As President Eisenhower warned in 1953, "Don't join the book burners...the right to say ideas, the right to record them, and the right to have them accessible to others is unquestioned -- or this isn't America."

And if that right is denied, at some future day the torch can be turned against any other book or any other belief.

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Let us never forget: Today's Moral Majority could become tomorrow's persecuted minority.

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The danger is as great now as when the founders of the nation first saw it.

In 1789, their fear was of factional strife among dozens of denominations.

Today there are hundreds -- and perhaps even thousands of faiths -- and millions of Americans who are outside any fold.

Pluralism obviously does not and cannot mean that all of them are right; but it does mean that there are areas where government cannot and should not decide what is wrong to believe, to think, to read, and to do.

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As Professor Larry Tribe, one of the nation's leading constitutional scholars has written, "Law in a non-theocratic state cannot measure religious truth, nor can the state impose it."

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The real transgression occurs when religion wants government to tell citizens how to live uniquely personal parts of their lives.

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The failure of Prohibition proves the futility of such an attempt when a majority or even a substantial minority happens to disagree.

Some questions may be inherently individual ones, or people may be sharply divided about whether they are.

In such cases, like Prohibition and abortion, the proper role of religion is to appeal to the conscience of the individual, not the coercive power of the state.

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But there are other questions which are inherently public in nature, which we must decide together as a nation, and where religion and religious values can and should speak to our common conscience.

The issue of nuclear war is a compelling example.

It is a moral issue; it will be decided by government, not by each individual; and to give any effect to the moral values of their creed, people of faith must speak directly about public policy.

The Catholic bishops and the Reverend Billy Graham have every right to stand for the nuclear freeze, and Dr. Falwell has every right to stand against it.

There must be standards for the exercise of such leadership, so that the obligations of belief will not be debased into an opportunity for mere political advantage.

But to take a stand at all when a question is both properly public and truly moral is to stand in a long and honored tradition.

Many of the great evangelists of the 1800s were in the forefront of the abolitionist movement.

In our own time, the Reverend William Sloane Coffin challenged the morality of the war in Vietnam.

Pope John XXIII renewed the Gospel's call to social justice.

And Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who was the greatest prophet of this century, awakened our nation and its conscience to the evil of racial segregation.

Their words have blessed our world.

And who now wishes they had been silent?

E Who would bid Pope John Paul [II] to quiet his voice against the oppression in Eastern Europe, the violence in Central America, or the crying needs of the landless, the hungry, and those who are tortured in so many of the dark political prisons of our time?

President Kennedy, who said that "no religious body should seek to impose its will," also urged religious leaders to state their views and give their commitment when the public debate involved ethical issues.

In drawing the line between imposed will and essential witness, we keep church and state separate, and at the same time we recognize that the City of God should speak to the civic duties of men and women.

There are four tests which draw that line and define the difference.

First, we must respect the integrity of religion itself.

People of conscience should be careful how they deal in the word of their Lord.

In our own history, religion has been falsely invoked to sanction prejudice -- even slavery -- to condemn labor unions and public spending for the poor.

I believe that the prophecy, "The poor you always have with you" is an indictment, not a commandment.

And I respectfully suggest that God has taken no position on the Department of Education -- and that a balanced budget constitutional amendment is a matter of economic analysis, and not heavenly appeals.

Religious values cannot be excluded from every public issue; but not every public issue involves religious values.

And how ironic it is when those very values are denied in the name of religion.

For example, we are sometimes told that it is wrong to feed the hungry, but that mission is an explicit mandate given to us in the 25th chapter of Matthew.

Second, we must respect the independent judgments of conscience.

Those who proclaim moral and religious values can offer counsel, but they should not casually treat a position on a public issue as a test of fealty to faith.

Just as I disagree with the Catholic bishops on tuition tax credits -- which I oppose -- so other Catholics can and do disagree with the hierarchy, on the basis of honest conviction, on the question of the nuclear freeze.

Thus, the controversy about the Moral Majority arises not only from its views, but from its name -- which, in the minds of many, seems to imply that only one set of public policies is moral and only one majority can possibly be right.

Similarly, people are and should be perplexed when the religious lobbying group Christian Voice publishes a morality index of congressional voting records, which judges the morality of senators by their attitude toward Zimbabwe and Taiwan.

Let me offer another illustration.

Dr. Falwell has written -- and I quote: "To stand against Israel is to stand against God."

Now there is no one in the Senate who has stood more firmly for Israel than I have.

Yet, I do not doubt the faith of those on the other side.

Their error is not one of religion, but of policy.

And I hope to be able to persuade them that -- that they are wrong in terms of both America's interest and the justice of Israel's cause.

Respect for conscience is most in jeopardy, and the harmony of our diverse society is most at risk, when we re-establish, directly or indirectly, a religious test for public office.

That relic of the colonial era, which is specifically prohibited in the Constitution, has reappeared in recent years.

After the last election, the Reverend James Robison -- Robison warned President Reagan not to surround himself, as president before him had, "with the counsel of the ungodly."

I utterly reject any such standard for any position anywhere in public service.

Two centuries ago, the victims were Catholics and Jews.

E In the 1980s the victims could be atheists; in some other day or decade, they could be the members of the Thomas Road Baptist Church.

Indeed, in 1976 I regarded it as unworthy and un-American when some people said or hinted that Jimmy Carter should not be president because he was a born again Christian.

We must never judge the fitness of individuals to govern on the basis of where they worship, whether they follow Christ or Moses, whether they are called "born again" or "ungodly."

Where it is right to apply moral values to public life, let all of us avoid the temptation to be self-righteous and absolutely certain of ourselves.

And if that temptation ever comes, let us recall Winston Churchill's humbling description of an intolerant and inflexible colleague: "There but for the grace of God goes God."

Third, in applying religious values, we must respect the integrity of public debate.

In that debate, faith is no substitute for facts.

Critics may oppose the nuclear freeze for what they regard as moral reasons.

They have every right to argue that any negotiation with the Soviets is wrong, or that any accommodation with them sanctions their crimes, or that no agreement can be good enough and therefore all agreements only increase the chance of war.

I do not believe that, but it surely does not violate the standard of fair public debate to say it.

What does violate that standard, what the opponents of the nuclear freeze have no right to do, is to assume that they are infallible, and so any argument against the freeze will do, whether it is false or true.

The nuclear freeze proposal is not unilateral, but bilateral -- with equal restraints on the United States and the Soviet Union.

The nuclear freeze does not require that we trust the Russians, but demands full and effective verification.

The nuclear freeze does not concede a Soviet lead in nuclear weapons, but recognizes that human beings in each great power already have in their fallible hands the overwhelming capacity to remake into a pile of radioactive rubble the earth which God has made.

There is no morality -- There is no morality in the mushroom cloud.

The black rain of nuclear ashes will fall alike on the just and the unjust.

And then it will be too late to wish that we had done the real work of this atomic age -- which is to seek a world that is neither red nor dead.

I am perfectly prepared to debate the nuclear freeze on policy grounds, or moral ones.

But we should not be forced to discuss phantom issues or false charges.

They only deflect us from the urgent task of deciding how best to prevent a planet divided from becoming a planet destroyed.

And it does not advance the debate to contend that the arms race is more divine punishment than human problem, or that in any event, the final days are near.

As Pope John said two decades ago, at the opening of the Second Vatican Council: "We must beware of those who burn with zeal, but are not endowed with much sense... we must disagree with the prophets of doom, who are always forecasting disasters, as though the end of the earth was at hand."

The message which echoes across the years is very clear: The earth is still here; and if we wish to keep it, a prophecy of doom is no alternative to a policy of arms control.

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Fourth, and finally, we must respect the motives of those who exercise their right to disagree.

We sorely test our ability to live together if we readily question each other's integrity.

It may be harder to restrain our feelings when moral principles are at stake, for they go to the deepest wellsprings of our being.

But the more our feelings diverge, the more deeply felt they are, the greater is our obligation to grant the sincerity and essential decency of our fellow citizens on the other side.

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Those who favor E.R.A [Equal Rights Amendment] are not "antifamily" or "blasphemers."

And their purpose is not "an attack on the Bible."

Rather, we believe this is the best way to fix in our national firmament the ideal that not only all men, but all people are created equal.

Indeed, my mother, who strongly favors E.R.A., would be surprised to hear that she is anti-family.

For my part, I think of the amendment's opponents as wrong on the issue, but not as lacking in moral character.

I could multiply the instances of name-calling, sometimes on both sides.

Dr. Falwell is not a "warmonger."

And "liberal clergymen" are not, as the Moral Majority suggested in a recent letter, equivalent to "Soviet sympathizers."

The critics of official prayer in public schools are not "Pharisees"; many of them are both civil libertarians and believers, who think that families should pray more at home with their children, and attend church and synagogue more faithfully.

And people are not sexist because they stand against abortion, and they are not murderers because they believe in free choice.

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Nor does it help anyone -- Nor does it help anyone's cause to shout such epithets, or to try and shout a speaker down -- which is what happened last April when Dr. Falwell was hissed and heckled at Harvard.

So I am doubly grateful for your courtesy here this evening.

That was not Harvard's finest hour, but I am happy to say that the loudest applause from the Harvard audience came in defense of Dr. Falwell's right to speak.

In short, I hope for an America where neither "fundamentalist" nor "humanist" will be a dirty word, but a fair description of the different ways in which people of goodwill look at life and into their own souls.

I hope for an America where no president, no public official, no individual will ever be deemed a greater or lesser American because of religious doubt -- or religious belief.

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I hope for an America where the power of faith will always burn brightly, but where no modern Inquisition of any kind will ever light the fires of fear, coercion, or angry division.

I hope for an America where we can all contend freely and vigorously, but where we will treasure and guard those standards of civility which alone make this nation safe for both democracy and diversity.

Twenty years ago this fall, in New York City, President Kennedy met for the last time with a Protestant assembly.

The atmosphere had been transformed since his earlier address during the 1960 campaign to the Houston Ministerial Association.

He had spoken there to allay suspicions about his Catholicism, and to answer those who claimed that on the day of his baptism, he was somehow disqualified from becoming President.

His speech in Houston and then his election drove that prejudice from the center of our national life.

Now, three years later, in November of 1963, he was appearing before the Protestant Council of New York City to reaffirm what he regarded as some fundamental truths.

On that occasion, John Kennedy said: "The family of man is not limited to a single race or religion, to a single city, or country...the family of man is nearly 3 billion strong.

Most of its members are not white and most of them are not Christian."

And as President Kennedy reflected on that reality, he restated an ideal for which he had lived his life -- that "the members of this family should be at peace with one another."

That ideal shines across all the generations of our history and all the ages of our faith, carrying with it the most ancient dream.

For as the Apostle Paul wrote long ago in Romans: "If it be possible, as much as it lieth in you, live peaceably with all men."

I believe it is possible; the choice lies within us; as fellow citizens, let us live peaceable with each other; as fellow human beings, let us strive to live peaceably with men and women everywhere.

Let that be our purpose and our prayer, yours and mine -- for ourselves, for our country, and for all the world.