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“Religion and Democracy”

Ralph Reed
Executive Director
The Christian Coalition

Ralph Reed began his career as a congressional campaign staffer, working for numerous candidates around the country. In 1982, he was appointed executive director of the College Republican National Committee and supervised a grassroots network of 100,000 members on 1,000 campuses. In 1984, he founded Students for America, a conservative student network on 200 campuses.



Since 1989, Dr. Reed has received national attention as executive director of the Christian Coalition, one of America's leading profamily organizations. He has built a support base of one million members and activists in nearly 900 chapters in all 50 states. He is a sought-after analyst on politics and has appeared on many television programs, including *Larry King Live*, *Nightline*, *Meet the Press*, *Crossfire*, and *Today*. His articles have been published in such sources as the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *National Review*, and *Policy Review*.

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Christian Coalition Executive Director Ralph Reed argues that the most important debate in America today is not about the federal budget or who will win the 1996 presidential race. It is about the role religion plays in our public life. Dr. Reed presented these remarks at Hillsdale College's Shavano Institute for National Leadership seminar, "Educating for Virtue," in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho in October 1995.

A New World

America is a nation unique in the history of the world. It is not the product of an accident or evolution. In spite of its tenuous connection to Great Britain, it is not a natural extension of an empire. America is literally, in the words of 17th-century European explorers, a "New World."

Its founders were free to decide its future, and they decided, with conscious purpose, to invent a nation the like of which had never been seen. Thus America is a nation with no kings, no royalty, and no privileged classes. It is a nation held together by a common bond and a common vision—a bond of common experience and a vision of uncommon greatness. America is George Washington's "common country," John Adams' "glorious morning," and Abraham Lincoln's "inestimable jewel."

America is also a nation in which one becomes American not by accident of birth or by ethnic heritage, but by *subscribing to an idea*. No one truly becomes a Frenchman merely by moving to France. No one becomes a Spaniard merely by moving to Spain. But America has lifted its lamp beside the golden door of entry to immigrants of all

ances and all nations and bids them welcome to what Irving Howe called “the good country.”

It is not blood or marriage that counts but a vision—a vision of a society based on two fundamental beliefs. The first belief is that all men, created equal in the eyes of God with certain unalienable rights, are free to pursue the longings of their heart. The second belief is that the sole purpose of government is to protect those rights.

The first Americans shared this deeply spiritual vision. Most Americans still do. That is why, in the words of a remarkable cover story on religion in America that appeared last year in *U.S. News and World Report*, the United States is—with the sole exception of Israel—the most devoutly religious nation in the entire world. It is a fact borne out in experience, not simply in magazine cover stories. According to public opinion surveys, 92 percent of all Americans believe in God; 83 percent believe that the Bible is the infallible word of God; and 57 percent pray daily. Nearly 130 million attend church every Sunday. That means, thank goodness, that there are more people worshipping God on Sunday morning than are watching *Sixty Minutes* on Sunday night.

There can be no better testimony to the faith of our nation than the reception that Pope John Paul II received when he came to the United States recently. Millions of Protestants and Catholics welcomed his message of spiritual renewal. Americans of every faith and no faith at all watched and listened as this remarkable man of God called on us to remember that there is more to life than ourselves.

The Faith of Our Founders

The Pope's message was far from new. It was the same message delivered by our founders. The American Revolution, which established a new nation, was not merely a revolution inspired by political or eco-

nomie oppression but was a revolution of faith, arising from a great spiritual awakening that was

sweeping the world in the 18th century. It should be of little surprise to us, then, to find the affirmation in the Declaration of Independence that there are certain truths that are “self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.” The founding fathers were certain that these rights are granted by God, are afforded His protection, and are not to be infringed upon by government.

The “father of our country,” George Washington, wrote, “I am sure there never was a people who had more reason to acknowledge a divine interposition in their affairs, than those of the U.S. I should be pained to believe...that they

failed to consider the omnipotence of God, who is alone able to protect them.”

Our nation's second president, John Adams, added, “Our Constitution was designed for a moral and religious people only. It is wholly inadequate for any other.” By this, President Adams did not mean that the Constitution was meant for people of any specific faith. He opposed religious tests for public office, as do I and all Americans. The point Adams made was far more profound. He meant that to create a nation where government was small, limited, and confined to enumerated functions, one must have a virtuous citizenry animated by faith in God and moral values.

Our founders possessed a view of the world and government that necessarily presupposed a people obedient to an internalized code of conduct—based upon that first, and best, code of law found in the books of Moses—that made a large central government superfluous. It was this view that the great French observer Alexis de Tocqueville wrote about in the early 19th century: “The Americans combine the notions of [religion] and liberty so intimately in their minds, that it is impossible to make them conceive of one without the other.”

“We may erect skyscrapers of silver that rise from streets paved with gold, but if our inner cities resemble Beirut, our children pass through metal detectors into schools that are war zones, and one out of every four high school graduates cannot read his diploma, then we will have failed ourselves, failed our nation, and failed our God.”

From the Quakers in Pennsylvania to the Congregationalists in New England and the Catholics in Maryland and the Baptists in Virginia, America is a nation undergirded by faith, built by faith, and enlivened by faith. And it is not a faith in word alone—it is an active, transforming faith. Look around today and what you will see are the fruits of our national faith. Throughout our history, America's faithful millions have founded orphanages, hospitals, lending libraries, and charities. America's first public schools were founded by clergymen. Her first colleges were divinity schools.

Children learned to read by using the Bible as a textbook. McGuffey's Readers, which sold 120 million copies during the 19th century, contained lessons drawn directly from Scripture. Historian David Herbert Donald points out that Abraham Lincoln, one of the most well-read presidents in our history, enjoyed only a single year of formal schooling. On the dirt floor of a log cabin, young Lincoln learned how to read by poring over the pages of his mother's Bible. The first lesson in his first spelling book read as follows: "No man can put off the law of God."

When Noah Webster published the first American dictionary in 1828, he used Bible verses as definitions. There was no false wall dividing private faith and public service in Webster's day. He was an author, teacher, and preacher who founded a college and served in Congress.

The Fourth Great Awakening

Lincoln and Webster understood what too many today have forgotten: the importance of faith to the public institutions in a democratic republic. Yet that connection today is a source of vigorous controversy. As we prepare for the 1996 presidential election, a crucial debate rages in the land over the role of religion in

our public life and the role that religious believers should play in our politics.

The religious conservative vote, so vital to the Republican landslide in 1994, is now one of the largest, if not the largest, single voting bloc in the electorate. According to exit polls taken during the 1994 election, fully one-third of all voters were self-identified evangelicals and pro-family Roman Catholics. They cast 70 percent of their ballots for

Republicans and only 24 percent for Democrats. The pendulum swing of evangelical voters has transformed the South into a virtually one-party region again, this time favoring the Republicans. The Catholic vote went Republican in 1994 for the first time since Irish Catholics landed on these shores more than a century and a half ago. The 1996 election will not be decided by the union vote, the feminist vote, the minority vote, or the third party vote. It will be decided by the religious vote.

What we are witnessing is nothing less than the largest mobilization of active religious believers in recent memory. And if history is any guide, this mobilization is the sign of another period of great transformation in

America, for political change in the United States has always been rooted in religious upheaval. Nobel Prize winning economic historian Robert Fogel argues that the current rightward shift in American politics can be traced to a new American religious revival, a "Fourth Great Awakening." The First Great Awakening, which began in 1730, helped bring on the revolutionary movement, the second in 1800 sparked the antislavery movement, and the third in 1890 gave rise to the progressive impulse. Now, Fogel suggests, the tectonic plates of a religious culture have shifted again, with vast political consequences.

Since the mid-1960s, mainline church membership has declined by one-fourth. That decline, however, is not indicative of a general decline in American faith. And it has been more than made

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up for by the skyrocketing popularity of conservative and evangelical churches in which membership has more than doubled. Pentecostal and fundamentalist revivals have converted millions of people. Nesting baby boomers are returning in droves to the churches and synagogues of their youth. With 15.2 million members, the Southern Baptist convention has become the largest Protestant denomination in the world.

Religious Bigotry

The result is a complete transformation of America's churchgoing population. Today, the typical American churchgoer is orthodox in faith, traditionalist in outlook, and conservative on cultural and political issues. Yet as active religious believers move beyond the pews and into public life, a strange and disturbing hostility greets them. Instead of being welcomed into the political arena and into a culture generally acknowledged to be in crisis, they are confronted by an intolerance that frequently curdles into religious bigotry.

This bigotry is manifested in many different settings. In a South Carolina race in 1994, a political candidate said of his opponent, "[H]is only qualifications for office are that he handles snakes and speaks fluently in tongues." In 1995, one candidate for the presidency denounced the nation's religious conservatives as "fringe" and "extremist." And in a bizarre twist, a candidate for the U.S. Senate in Massachusetts in 1995 was denounced not because of his stand on issues or ethical problems, but because he had once been an elder in a conservative church. The candidate was Mitt Romney. The accuser was Senator Edward M. Kennedy.

It was ironic that Senator Kennedy was making his accusations almost 35 years to the day after his brother, then-Senator John F. Kennedy, Jr., was fending off charges that his Roman Catholicism disqualified him from seeking the office of President of the United States. In a speech to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association in 1960, Kennedy said, "The issue in this campaign should be not what kind of church I believe in, for that should matter only to me. It should be what kind of America I believe in."

What Kind of America?

What kind of America do religious conservatives believe in? It is an America in which we would all like to live, a nation of safe streets, strong families, schools that work, marriages that stay together, with a smaller government, lower taxes, and civil rights for all. Religious conservatives do not countenance discrimination—or special rights—for anyone. Our faith is simple, and our agenda is direct.

For either political party to attack persons holding these views as "fanatics," "extremists," or worse, violates a basic American spirit of fairness. More than that, it runs counter to all we are as a nation and all we aspire to be as a people. For 200 years, America has pursued its vision, maintained its firm foundation, and achieved greatness because it honors God and welcomes people of faith into its public life. But in the 35 years since John F.

Kennedy, Jr. uttered his eloquent warning, we have lost our way. People of faith have become victims of the worst forms of stereotyping, marginalization, and demonology.

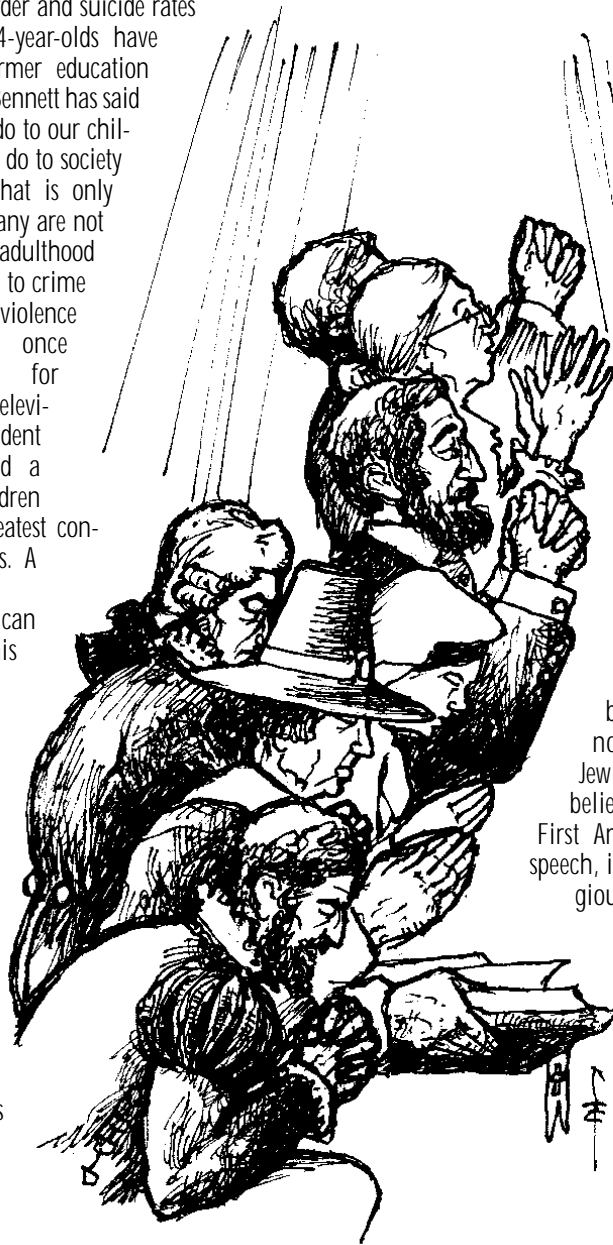
In the words of Yale law professor Stephen L. Carter, "a culture of disbelief" threatens our society. In the place of core beliefs and time-honored values many of our elites in the academy, the media, and government have promoted a different sort of value system—a system that presupposes the inability of Americans to care for themselves through a culture of compassion. This system is based not on the relevance and benevolence of God but on the ability of government to meet every need and provide every solution.

It is not a workable system. Witness the welfare state, once measured by the height of its aspirations and now measured by the depth of its failures. We read about them every morning in newspapers and see them every evening on television. Social pathologies once imagined only in our darkest nightmares are a daily reality. In 1960 only 5 percent of all children born in America were born out of wedlock. Today that figure is 33 percent

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and rising. In our largest cities as many as 67 percent of the children born today can claim no father.

The Carnegie Institute recently released a study detailing the carnage that is afflicting our young people. One in three adolescents has used illegal drugs before the age of thirteen. Since 1985, the murder and suicide rates for 10- to 14-year-olds have doubled. Former education secretary Bill Bennett has said that what we do to our children, they will do to society as adults. That is only partly true; many are not waiting until adulthood before turning to crime and forms of violence that were once unthinkable for children. A television correspondent recently asked a group of children what their greatest concern in life was. A seven-year-old African American boy raised his hand and said, "Gangs." Imagine that. A seven-year-old boy who goes to bed every night worrying about whether he will be cut down by gangs the next day.



Reaffirming the Role of Faith in Public Life

Not too long ago, the novelist John Updike wrote, "The fact that we live better than our counterparts in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union cannot ease the pain that we no longer live nobly." Our culture is testimony to the awful truth of his words. We may

erect skyscrapers of silver that rise from streets paved with gold, but if our inner cities resemble Beirut, our children pass through metal detectors into schools that are war zones, and one out of every four high school graduates cannot read

his diploma, then we will have failed ourselves, failed our nation, and failed our God. We cannot and must not fail. There is too much at stake.

What is the answer? We must begin by reaffirming the role of faith in our public life.

First Amendment Rights for Religious Believers

Let me be clear: I support the separation of church and state. I believe in a nation that is not officially Christian, Jewish, or Muslim. But I also believe in the right under the First Amendment to freedom of speech, including speech with religious content.

Yet the same Congress that begins every session with an organized prayer denies that right to students in our public schools. The same Supreme Court that issues rulings from a bench beneath an inscription of the Ten

Commandments carved in granite has ruled that those commandments cannot be placed on a bulletin board in a public building.

These rulings have real consequences. Recently, a fourth grader in St. Louis, Raymond Raines, received a week-long detention. His crime? Bowing his head and praying before lunch. On at least three different occasions, school officials

interrupted the intransigent Raymond in the middle of his prayer and hauled him off to the principal's office. Finally, the school attempted to extinguish this politically incorrect behavior by punishing Raymond with detention.

In southern California, students at a public high school were forbidden from handing out leaflets inviting other students to their Bible study group, even though California has a statute specifically allowing students to distribute petitions and literature. In another case, a fifth grade public school teacher was told by the assistant principal that he could not have a Bible on top of his desk, that he could not read the Bible during silent reading period, and that he could not have two illustrated books of Bible stories in the classroom library of over 350 volumes. And in a scene repeated hundreds of times throughout the country every May and June, nervous administrators censor high school students and forbid all references to God and the Bible in graduation speeches.

Re-Entering Politics

If we are to reaffirm the role of religion in public life, we must also encourage those with strong spiritual values to re-enter politics after too many years of self-imposed retreat. Religious believers must become full citizens, with a place at the table and a voice in the conversation we call democracy. Their involvement should be a source of celebration, not fear. Their participation is not a threat to democracy but is essential to it. And as they enter the political arena, people of faith should not be asked to leave their moral convictions at the door. On issues such as strengthening the family and protecting human life, they are a voice for the voiceless, a defender of the defenseless, and a protector of the innocent.

Let me communicate not with code words but with clarity, not with ambiguity but with honesty and candor. For Republicans, who have welcomed religious conservatives into their party in recent years, this is a time of decision—a time to decide whether to be the party of Lincoln and Reagan or the party of retreat and accommodation. A time to stand for or to blur the distinction between what is just and unjust. A time to choose between reaffirming moral commitments or succumbing to the timid voices of compromise lurking in the

wilderness. I do not speak of a debate over taxes, the budget, or trade. I speak of the most basic and defining issue of all: the sanctity of innocent human life. The Republican Party will not and cannot, in my view, remain the majority party that it became in 1994 if it tears from the fabric of its cherished history its noble heartfelt affirmation of the value of every single human being, including the aged, the infirm, and the unborn.

I freely acknowledge that not all share this view or the faith that inspires it. That is one of the great privileges of a democracy; I am confident that our views will be tested and our proposals improved by vigorous and open debate. But what must be

acknowledged is the affirming and healing role that faith plays in society. Just as we acknowledge that at times in the past religion has been twisted to evil ends—such as when the Nazis trumpeted their horrific belief in the superiority of the Aryan race and when Muslim terrorists committed unspeakable acts of terrorism against innocent civilians while invoking the name of God—we must acknowledge the good ends and the enormous blessings of religion. If we can look without prejudice at the real historical record, then together we can bridge the differences that separate us and heal our land.

Recognizing the Limits of Politics

We must also recognize the limits of politics. As important as civic involvement is to a restoration of values, it cannot legislate what can only spring from the heart and soul. Politics alone cannot restore a land of loving parents, of strong marriages, of lullabies sung to sleeping babies and bedtime stories read to wide-eyed children. That work is too important to be left to the government. It is best done by mothers and fathers, churches and synagogues, home and hearth.

It is my hope that in the days and weeks and months and years to come that this will be an agenda and a vision shared by all Americans. We are a people of many faiths and many races. That is the genius of America. Our motto translated means, "Out of many, one." May it be so in our time. ▲

"The Americans combine the notions of [religion] and liberty so intimately in their minds, that it is impossible to make them conceive of one without the other."

—Alexis de Tocqueville

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