

Remarks As Prepared For Delivery  
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Mr. President, Regents of the University, ladies and gentlemen: I am honored to be among you on this momentous day in the life of this institution. As an Episcopalian—one of God’s Frozen People—as a journalist, and as a Tennessean, I feel that my being here is testament to Baylor’s commitment, like Jesus’, of keeping company with sinners, so I am counting on your mercy. Mr. President, you and Mrs. Lilley have opened your arms to me with grace, and I thank you for your hospitality.

I feel I should, given the question before us about faith and reason, offer you some sense of my own vantage point on these matters. I am an Episcopalian; I keep the feast of Holy Communion; I pray each day, in words attributed to John Henry Newman, for “a safe lodging, and a holy rest, and peace at the last.” I speak to you today, then, as a believer in the Christian story.

At the same time, I am as committed to the American creed of personal liberty and divinely ordained human rights—chief among them the freedom to believe or not to believe—as I am to my personal religious faith. I see the two—a religious understanding of the origins and destiny of life, and of the civil arrangement of affairs that allows men and women to live as their conscience dictates, with or without reference to God, or to the gods—as inextricably linked, for I believe that if God Himself created us and did not compel obedience, then no man should try, either by the sword or the purse or the polling place. Without freedom there is no true faith, for faith coerced is no faith at all, only tyranny.

In the beginning, what separated us from the Old World was the idea that books, education, and the freedom to think and worship as we wished would create virtuous citizens. According to St. Augustine, “a people is an assembled multitude of rational creatures bound together by common agreement on the objects of their love.” I think that the love binding Americans together is that of personal liberty subject only to the workings of a republican system of checks and balances. And I would argue that the love of the life of the mind is what binds together institutions like yours. You are here today as a people—the people of Baylor—to affirm that love and that bond, and to rededicate yourselves to the great adventure of following the lights and lead of reason while preserving a public commitment to the Christian faith.

It is sometimes said—and it is sometimes the case—that faith and reason are at war: that, in the West, belief in the God of Abraham and God the Father of the Holy Trinity can be incompatible with scientific inquiry or hinder the free play of the mind.

In our age—an age of mortal threats from violent, religiously-motivated extremists, an age of rapidly developing technology that can alter the most fundamental elements of human life—it is time to put away the conflicts between faith and reason. God gave us reason, and He gave us the capacity to choose to be faithful to Him. We must begin to think of the life of the mind and the life of the soul not as enemies but as the two wings that enable all of us to rise, as the late John Paul II once said, to the contemplation of truth.

The 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries will be remembered as an age of both liberty and bloodshed; from Fort Sumter to the Western Front to the Battle of Britain to Pearl Harbor to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the death of the Soviet Union, the last century and a half brought freedom to more people than at any other time in history. Yet the price was high:

these decades were also almost certainly the deadliest in all history. How would we, as the architects of the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, like to be recalled when, God willing, our children's children come to pass judgment on our stewardship of the history of our time?

I have an immodest proposal. Let us conduct ourselves in such a way that it may be said of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that we brought peace to the wars between faith and reason, between science and religion, between belief and doubt. May the firmest of adherents to the literalism of Holy Scripture, for example, not dismiss the discoveries of science or deny the inherent ambiguity of the nature of God on this side of paradise. By the same token, may the most clinical of thinkers and the most secular of scientists resist the temptation, all too often indulged, of waving away the faith of our fathers as superstitions or fairy tales or fables.

Is such a peace between faith and reason possible? I am confident that it is, for both are, at some level and to some degree, about making the invisible visible, or at least tangible. When a believer scans the skies or prays to a God beyond time and space, he is seeking intimations of the divine—he is seeking, in other words, what the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews calls “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” When a nonbeliever scans the skies or finds reassurance in nature, he too is seeking something beyond him—perhaps not God, but knowledge, or insight, or data that he did not have before he went in search of it. Such a secularist might object to this comparison, saying he is looking for the quantifiable, not the mystical. Perhaps, but from earliest antiquity humankind has understood that we are not fully in control of our destinies, and whether one thinks of the world as subject to fate or chance or providence, one is still thinking in terms that allow for the unknowable and the incomprehensible. In our country, in our time, I believe that it is on the common ground of curiosity and charity and humility that peace between faith and reason is possible.

The acts of reading, of contemplation and discovery, of writing poems and finding cures and composing symphonies, are, for the religious, an acts of piety, and of thanksgiving. For the secular, such things may be about the wonders of nature, or of rationality, or of logic. So be it: the point is that we are all headed on the same odyssey, if for different reasons. In either case, the story is about moving forward. Or at least it should be. Extremes make the journey more perilous.

And ours is, sadly, an age of extremism, a time in which people who are most comfortable somewhere in the vast middle between these two poles are finding themselves frustrated by the clamor of what we now call the culture wars. Why does our public life feel this way? For the left, one factor is that it has been 40 years since the high-water mark of liberalism, the Great Society. For the right, the same 40-year period has been a time both of great strides and grave setbacks. Conservative Christians are far more influential today than in the past, but their power has come in reaction to what they view as threats to society, especially the Supreme Court decisions banning school prayer and permitting abortion. Both sides, then, feel they are fighting for the survival of what is best about America: liberals for openness and expanding rights, conservatives for a God-fearing, morally coherent culture. And when such conflicts are cast in stark, often religious terms, they become ferocious. It is up to us—to all of us—to try to make the rough places smooth.

Can religion be a force for unity, not division, in the nation and in the world? It is a reasonable question. Religion gave America its founding idea about the divine origins of human rights, and the Founders believed religion was the key to public virtue. Homer said that “all men need the gods,” and we are religious creatures; there is, therefore, no way to eradicate faith. As a force in the affairs of nations it must be managed and marshaled for

good, for it will be with us, as the scriptures say, to the end of the age. For many—in my tradition of Anglicanism, for example, and in the great Baptist tradition of religious liberty—reverence for one’s own tradition is not incompatible with respect for the traditions of anyone else. Elizabeth I is said to have remarked that she did not wish to make windows into men’s souls—sound counsel for any age. We should be careful not to turn into people like the minister in the old New England story recounted by the Columbia University scholar Jacques Barzun. Two Protestants from different denominations, one a minister, the other a layman, met and discussed the differences between their faiths. It was a heartwarming lesson in tolerance, and as they parted, the minister said: “Yes, we both worship the same God, you in your way and I in His.”

Humility and a sense of history are our best hopes of avoiding the self-satisfaction of that (probably) apocryphal minister. The beginning of the end of extremism may lie in the opening line of Thomas Jefferson’s Act for Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia: “Whereas, Almighty God hath created the mind free ...” The thought is at once rational and theological, and is quintessentially democratic. In the aftermath of the Revolution, the Founders had struggled to construct a government that would check the rise of extreme elements, be they religious or secular. James Madison once said: “If men were angels, then no government would be necessary”—and European wars in the name of God had taught the young Americans that angels were sometimes in very short supply.

We have, it is true, been here before. There is, as we have been taught, no thing new under the sun. From slavery to the Scopes Trial to isolationism to McCarthyism to Vietnam to Watergate, take-no-prisoners battles in the public square have fundamentally shaped the nation. Yet the skirmishes of our own time are just that: the skirmishes of our time, and we

are called, it seems to me, to do the best we can to fight those skirmishes with resolve as we attempt to shed light in a world that tends toward darkness.

Simply put, what I like to think of as the American Gospel (literally, the good news about America) is that religion shapes the nation without strangling it and that life is best lived when Athens and Jerusalem are not at war but in alliance. Like most allies, they need not agree on everything at all times, only on the big things. The wonderful truth at the heart of our national experience is that faith and reason, religion and ethical secularism, have long joined forces to fight the battles of this world. We would do well to recover this alliance and give it new strength.

America itself is a child of this alliance, and of the commingling of faith and reason. The past teaches us that belief in God is central to the country's experience, yet faith is a matter of choice, and the legacy of the American Founding is that the sensible center holds. It does so because the Founders believed themselves at work in the service of both God and man, not just one or the other. Driven by a sense of providence and an acute understanding of the fallibility of humankind, they made a nation in which religion should not be singled out for special help or particular harm, but was to be treated like any other force in the burgeoning nation. The balance between the promise of the Declaration of Independence, with its evocation of divine origins and destiny, and the practicalities of the Constitution, with its checks on extremism, remains one of the most brilliant of American successes.

It was a success—a landmark in statecraft—that owed much to the joint workings of faith and reason. It was faith—in the possibilities of the human spirit, in God, in liberty—that led the Founding Fathers to deploy their reason in order to construct a country that would avoid the worst experiences of other nations. They knew religion was often the stuff of war

and strife; they wanted a better way, and they found it in the conviction that all men were created in the image and likeness of God, and thus all men, regardless of their religious faith, were entitled to dignity and respect. For Jefferson, his Act for Religious Freedom in Virginia “meant to comprehend, within the mantle of its protection, the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and the Mahometan, the Hindoo and infidel of every denomination.” James Madison led the fight for Jefferson’s bill with these words: “Whilst we assert for ourselves a freedom to embrace, to profess, and to observe the religion which we believe to be of divine origin, we cannot deny an equal freedom to those whose minds have not yet yielded to the evidence which convinces us.” It would take too long—tragically too long—for us to expand those rights to people of color and to women, sins for which I believe we will have to answer at the last day. But at least we can say this: the march of freedom, however painfully slow for so many, began in those crucial days.

Dedicated Christians should be among the fiercest defenders of liberty of mind and heart; Jesus Himself set the pattern, refusing to rule by force. When the multitudes tried to make him king, he hid from them. In the garden on the night he was betrayed, when one of his followers cut off the ear of one of the arresting force, Jesus commanded him to “Put up thy sword”; later, before Pilate he said: “My kingdom is not of this world; if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight ... ”

The fights of the world, however, are bound up with religion and religious considerations, for good and for ill. “If slavery is not wrong,” Abraham Lincoln once said, “then nothing is wrong.” In coming to this conclusion, he used not only Scripture but reason, history, and experience. The Bible is rarely a safe sole source on specific political matters, for, as Shakespeare wrote, “The devil himself can quote Scripture to his purpose.”

Abolitionists cited Exodus and Deuteronomy to help make the case against slavery; slaveholders tended to point to Genesis, where Noah curses the sons of Ham, saying they shall be “slaves” to his brothers.

Religion is more than a familiarity with and purported application of scripture, though: it is also an attitude of belief formed by tradition, reason, and experience. If anything, competing scriptural citations stand a good chance of exacerbating tensions and fueling unhealthy, possibly destructive passions, for if both sides fight only with what each considers the inerrant word of God, it is difficult to see how such battles can be reasonably settled.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century battle between the Catholic hierarchy and Galileo over whether the earth revolved around the sun or vice versa, it was Galileo—a Christian—who understood better than his persecutors how to reconcile apparent contradictions between faith and science. “If Scripture cannot err,” he said, “certain of its interpreters and commentators can and do so in many ways.” In other words, if reason leads humankind to discover a truth that seems to be incompatible with the Bible, then the interpretation of scripture should give way to the rational conclusion. In this Galileo was echoing Augustine, who wrote: “If it happens that the authority of Sacred Scripture is set in opposition to clear and certain reasoning, this must mean that the person who interprets Scripture does not understand it correctly.” Augustine’s work enables Christians to take advantage of scientific and social advances without surrendering the authority of revelation. Guided by these lights, believers have (however slowly) removed the biblical support for the ideas that the earth, not the sun, is the physical center of universe, that women are property—or that slavery is divinely sanctioned.

The lesson is that, as we saw in the fight over slavery, purely religious arguments may not be sufficient to get us to the right result. The faithful should see that God meant for them



to use reason as well as revelation. The secular need to note the moral component of any cause and should not dismiss it even if the religious and the moral course happen to be the same.

The Victorian Age was not unlike our own, and thus repays some attention. In England, the poet Matthew Arnold, son of the Reverend Thomas Arnold of Rugby School and godson of the Reverend John Keble, a key figure in the Oxford Movement, lost his religion. Then there was the rise of scholarly interest in the historical nature of the Bible and of the life of Jesus and, second, the 1859 publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species*.

George Eliot's English translation of Strauss' *Life of Jesus Critically Examined* was published in 1846, a work calling the most essential tenets of biblical believers into question. As the Bible was under what the most conservative Christians thought was assault from European intellectuals, Darwinian thought, caricatured as irreligious and blasphemous, also roiled the American faithful.

Many religious believers, while challenged by Darwin's findings, managed to reconcile their faith with the idea of evolution by acknowledging the mysterious ways of God and holding that at some unknown juncture in the making of the species God invested his creatures with a soul. Experience shows that there need be no stalemate between religion and science; the faithful have met and risen to intellectual difficulties from age to age. Still, the struggle continues to occupy many cultural warriors who choose not to take Augustine's counsel to heart.

There is a great need for believers of moderate temperament to make their voices heard, and that is hard, for by definition moderates tend to dislike the cut and thrust of the arena. If we do not bear witness to a middle way, though, we will be failing to fulfill what I

honestly think is a sacred duty, for to whom much has been given, much is expected.

Believers have been given what an Anglican divine once called “the means of grace and the hope of glory,” and no man can—or at least should—ask for anything more than that. True, that remark is grounded in faith, in the expectation that the story of our help in ages past is pointing toward our eternal home. But it is not blind faith, nor fanciful.

Let me explain. The beginning of a thoughtful faith lies in the acknowledgment that, as St. Paul said, we now “see through a glass, darkly.” We live in twilight and in hope more than we do in clarity and certainty. This is why the gift of reason is so essential, for to fail to approach the creeds with intelligence and balance and a sense of history risks sending us off in one of two wrong directions: either to doubt and skepticism and unbelief, or to fundamentalism, as, hungry for certitude and answers, we seek comfort in the literal. Light can neither enter into nor emanate from a closed mind.

Christianity is difficult, both in practice (“If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me,” Jesus said) and in theory (“How deep to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!” said the Psalmist). Every believer, says the author of the Epistle of St. Peter, should “be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason for the hope that is in you.” The suggestion that Christianity is a matter of both intellect and imagination, however, is viewed dimly by the secular, who find the whole business fanciful, and by literalists, who hold that inerrant scripture teaches humankind all it really needs to know.

Yet the work of this world—of our hearts and minds and souls—is never truly done. As Machiavelli wrote, “in human affairs nothing should be perpetual or quiet.” So it was, and

is, with America, for each generation faces the danger of extremism—and each generation must defeat it anew.

A grasp of history is essential for Americans of the center. To fail to consult the past consigns us to what might be called the tyranny of the present—the mistaken idea that the crises of our own time are unprecedented. Subject to such a tyranny, we are more likely to take a narrow or simplistic view, or to let our passions get the better of our reason. If we know, however, how those who came before us found the ways and means to surmount the difficulties of their age, we stand a far better chance of acting in the moment with perspective and measured judgment.

William James once said: “We and God have business with each other; and in opening ourselves to his influence our deepest destiny is fulfilled.” The task of a republic like ours is to do our business with God without falling into self-righteousness.

The world does not lend itself to simplicity or to easy explanation; Creation is riddled with mysteries and paradoxes. Isaiah said: “For who has known the mind of God, or been his counselor?” The secular can find a similarly instructive text in a remark of Hamlet’s: “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

The key is to *think*—to think on all things, using the lights of history, the insights of literature, the findings of science, the achievements of art, the penetrations of philosophy. In the words of the great rabbi Abraham Jacob Heschel, God “did not make it easy for us to have faith in Him, to remain faithful to him. *This is our tragedy*: the insecurity of faith, the unbearable burden of our commitment. The facts that deny the divine are mighty, indeed; the arguments of agnosticism are eloquent, the events that defy Him are spectacular. . . .” Yet those arguments must be met, not dismissed; considered, not suppressed.

In my view, to live an examined faith believers have to acknowledge those complexities and engage them, however frustrating the task. In fact, the task is *supposed* to be frustrating, for the religious man is always in some sense a stranger in a strange land, a pilgrim in search of a city that is to come. Such a believer will therefore be forever vulnerable to earthly discontent; as Cardinal Newman once said, “The test of our faith lies in our being able to fail without disappointment.”

In the meantime, in this world of change and chance, we are left with an exhortation from a favorite text of Saint Augustine’s, the 105th Psalm: “Seek the Lord, and his strength: seek his face evermore.” As the search goes on for so many along so many different paths, Saint Paul offers some reassuring words for the journey: “Be at peace among yourselves ... encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks ... hold fast what is good, abstain from every form of evil”—faithful and reasonable words for all of us, whoever our gods may be.