



## Max M. Kampelman Papers

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## **RELIGION AND POLITICS: A FORMULA FOR THE 21ST CENTURY**

**By MAX M. KAMPELMAN\***

I approach the subject of religion and the politics of democracy out of a life-long conviction that religion has the potential of providing the cement to bind us together as human beings and as children of God. But that conviction is accompanied by the full realization that religion has also often served to divide us from one another and that throughout history, including this very day, great injustices have been committed in the name of religion by those who were persuaded that theirs was the real truth and that it was their duty to God to conquer and defeat those with other truths.

The First Amendment to our Constitution, prohibiting Congress from making any law "respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," was the earliest and most successful attempt, within the spirit of religion, to guard against those who might improperly use government power to corrupt it. Alexis de Tocqueville quickly grasped the significance of the separation of church and state, noting:

"Upon my arrival in the United States, the religious aspect of the country was the first thing that struck my attention; and the longer I stayed there the more did I perceive the great political consequences resulting from the state of things, to which I was unaccustomed. In France I had almost always seen the spirit of religion and the spirit of

freedom pursuing courses diametrically opposed to each other; but in America I found that they were intimately united, and that they reigned in common over the same country . . . I found that they differed upon matters of detail alone; and that they mainly attributed the peaceful dominion of religion in their country to the separation of church and state."

G.K. Chesterton, with that same appreciation, called America "A country with the soul of a church."

It is appropriate here to note an alleged experience of Bishop Fulton J. Sheehan who was scheduled to speak in Philadelphia at City Hall and decided to walk there from his hotel. He lost his way and was forced to ask some boys to direct him. One of them asked, "What are you going to do there?" "I am going to give a lecture," replied the Bishop. "About what?" the boy asked. "About how to get to heaven. Would you care to come along?" "Are you kidding?" said the boy, "you don't even know how to get to City Hall."

The ancient Hebrew tribes made a profound contribution to civilization when they proclaimed that there was only one God. This was at a time when the prevailing view of their neighbors was that there were many gods. If there is only one God, goes the message, then we are all of us His children and thus brothers and sisters to one another. I believe that the ancient Hebrews might not even be remembered today, except as a learned footnote in history, and certainly their

offspring would have been lost in the vast chasm of history, had this new and astute insight not permeated our civilization.

There are deep historic, cultural, and religious ties between the Jewish ethic and American values. From the early days of our beginnings as a nation when the Puritans used the Hebrew language as the language of their prayers, the ties that have bound Judaism to America have been strong. As early as September 1653, twenty-three Jewish refugees from Brazil landed at the harbor of New Amsterdam determined to settle. It is interesting to note that they were not welcome by Peter Stuyvesant, the Dutch governor, who protested to the Dutch West Indies Company: "Giving them liberty, we cannot refuse the Lutherans and Papists". Following the decision to permit the Jews to settle, the governor then refused their request to bear arms and join the militia guarding the colony. The Jews insisted. They prevailed.

To this day, the holiest and most repeated of Jewish prayers is called the *Sh'ma Yisroel*, translated as "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one!" The Talmud asks: "Why did God create only one man?" In order that all men would have the same ancestor, and no man could claim superiority over another, was the response. A rabbinic story refers to the *Haggadah* tale of the Egyptian armies drowning in the Sea of Reeds. The angels in heaven began to sing the praises of the Lord. And the Lord rebuked them by saying, "My children are drowning and you would rejoice?"

Here, in this doctrine of human brotherhood (a doctrine not fully accepted or understood by all of the components of Judaism today), we have the essence of our religious creed, the spiritual basis of our evolving civilization. Here are the moral roots of political democracy, human rights, human dignity, the American dream. The notion that human beings are the children of God and that they thus have the potential for developing that which is God-like within them is clearly anathema to any political system which does not respect the dignity of the human being.

Gunnar Myrdal, the Swedish social scientist, wrote many years ago that he was struck by the strength and depth of American values with their roots in religious ethics. They reflected themselves, he said, in the power of the "ought" as a guiding light for our actions. The "is" of our lives as individuals or as a nation may not always be consistent with the "ought", but the "ought" is the moving force in bringing us steadily closer to the values and ideals we proclaim. Achieving the "ought," however, requires effort and dedication.

The Book of Genesis states that Man was created in the divine image. This concept of Man's divine nature easily led to the philosophic and political emphasis during the Age of Reason that we were primarily rational and noble beings. The problem, however, was that the perception of Man as rational and God-like could not explain Man's continued capacity for cruelty against Man and Nature. Obviously, an image is by definition not quite the same as the original model, but it should bear a close resemblance to it.

The philosophic notion of the coexistence of good and evil is found in many ancient civilizations, and remains even stronger as experience has seared our reality. The Jewish scholars taught that there is in each one of us an ingredient in the heart and soul that is good and God-like, but that there is also in each one of us an ingredient that is destructive and "evil." This explains the concept of the Devil in many cultures. The Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr called it "Children of Light and Children of Darkness." The Catholics refer to "original sin." Freud and others based their understanding of Man on this insight. And, this dichotomy in Man obviously means the good and the evil is also intrinsic to the societies created by Man.

How else can we explain totalitarianism except as an expression of that destructive drive? How else can we understand the Holocaust, or the cruelty of the Stalinist system? If there is one thing that history has taught us, it is that we ignore the dark side of Man only at our peril. We have the capacity to reach for the stars, but we do so with our feet deep in the dirt of the earth.

For me this means that the development of civilization becomes the effort to strengthen the light within us, our children, our families, the societies we create; at the same time as we have the obligation to resist and attempt to overcome the dark side within ourselves and our societies. This is the real meaning of the evolutionary challenge. One might say it is the evolution of the species Homo sapiens to that of the species Human Being.

Much is said of the change that has characterized our moment in history. The changes are so fast, so dramatic, so basic that we can barely see their details let alone their scope and consequences. The changes are beyond calculation, probably greater in our one lifetime than have taken place in all of mankind's previous history, with newer, greater developments on the horizon that will probably make the awesome developments of our time dwarf by comparison. What we have seen and experienced is only the beginning. As an indication of the change yet to be seen, more than 100,000 scientific journals annually publish the flood of new knowledge that comes out of the world's laboratories. There is much more ahead. We barely understand the human brain and its energy; and the endless horizons of space and the mysteries found in the great depths of our seas are still virtually unknown to us. Our science is indeed a drop, our ignorance remains an ocean.

This year I noted my 80th birthday. During my early childhood, strange as it may appear to the younger among us, there were no vitamin tablets, no antibiotics, no television, no dial telephones, no refrigerators, no FM radio, no synthetic fibers, no dishwashers, no electric blankets, no airmail, no transatlantic airlines, no instant coffee, no Xerox, no air-conditioning, no frozen foods, no contact lenses, no birth control pills, no ball-point pens, no transistors. The list can go on — all in one lifetime.



In our lifetime, medical knowledge available to physicians has increased perhaps much more than ten-fold. The average life span, certainly in the West, keeps steadily increasing. Advanced computers, new materials, new biotechnological processes are altering every phase of our lives, our deaths, even our reproduction.

It has been said that necessity is the mother of invention. I suggest the corollary is also true: Invention is the mother of necessity. Technology and communication are necessitating basic changes in our lives. Information has become more accessible in all parts of our globe, putting authoritarian governments at a serious disadvantage. The world is very much smaller. There is no escaping the fact that the sound of a whisper or a whimper in one part of the world can immediately be heard in all parts of the world — and consequences follow.

But the world body politic has not kept pace with our dramatic scientific and technological achievements. Just as the individual human body makes a natural effort to keep the growth of its components balanced, and we consider the body disfigured if one arm or leg grows significantly larger than the other, so is the world body politic disfigured if its knowledge component opens up broad new vistas for development while its political and social components remain in the Dark Ages.



It is perhaps a supreme irony of our age that we have learned to fly through space like birds and move in deep waters like fish, but we have yet to learn how to live and love on this small planet as brothers and sisters. In every age, this has been the challenge, but it is today more urgent than ever as we realize that our continued existence as a species depends on a fragile thread.

Freedom House, the authoritative reporter on the subject, tells us that in this decade, a larger part of the world's population is living in relative freedom than ever before in the history of the world. What we have been observing and experiencing in the growth of democratic influence is a necessary effort by the body politic to catch up with the world of science and technology. The wealth and power of nations is coming to depend more on intellectual and technical resources than on natural resources.

What we have also been unexpectedly observing is a fierce resistance to that change. It is as if a part of us is saying: "Not so fast. Stop the world. We want to get off. We are not ready. We are not prepared for this new world we are being dragged into. It is threatening our beliefs. We will resist the changes. We will hold on tight and with a determined frenzy to the familiar, the tribal, the traditional!"

It is not just that Saddam Hussein remains in power. It is also the savagery in too many areas of the world, with ethnic strife and xenophobia dividing people, villages, and neighborhoods. It is the human race once again demonstrating its

capacity for extreme cruelty, with hundreds of thousands of refugees slaughtered and displaced from their homes in a process of "ethnic cleansing", with the words "concentration camp" reappearing in our consciousness and consciences. All of this was accompanied by a leaderless inability to stop the violence and brutality. Our own country contributed to that inability. We were reminded of Shakespeare's MacDuff: "And heaven looked on and would not take their part."

The question may well be asked: Are we entering an age of democracy, a new world based on the religious values of human dignity, or an age of disorder which repeats the hatreds and divisions and savageries of yesterday? In helping us to understand the dimensions of this urgent dilemma, we must appreciate that in addition to the fear felt by many who see an unknown future they do not understand, there are also forces and people now enjoying power and its fruits who see change as a real threat to that power and its privileges. Equally important, and to provide some perspective, we must also appreciate that the explosions we hear are frequently the sounds of escaping steam as the lids of repression are removed from boiling kettles. Fingers and faces that are too close get scalded. We must harness the energy of that boiling water into a samovar of refreshing tea. We should appreciate that there are strong and urgent sounds of impatient hope and expectation for human dignity not to be neglected.

The promises and realities of modern technology for better living cannot be hidden and their availability cannot long be denied. Fundamentalism, nationalism, race, and ethnicity are today making themselves increasingly felt, but they face

severe competition. The communication age has opened up the world for all to see. The less fortunate are now aware that they can live in societies, including their own, which respect their dignity as human beings. From radio and television they know that such societies, which provide advantages of better health, improved sanitation, adequate food and water, economic opportunity, leisure for self-enrichment, are only hours away. They want that dignity and better living for themselves and for their children — and they don't wish to wait.

The less fortunate are increasingly becoming aware of a most amazing demographic fact, the dramatic decrease in the world's death rate. It took thousands of years to increase life expectancy at birth above the 20-year level. In the past two centuries, the length of life one could expect for a newborn in the advanced countries jumped from under 30 years to more than 70 years and it is going up. This has been accompanied by a gain in life expectancy. For example, among American males aged 65 to 74, deaths fell nearly 50 percent from 1970 to 2000; and among females of that age, the decrease in the death rate was even greater. The life span in poor countries, as a result of advances in agriculture, sanitation, and medicine, has also increased by 15 to 20 years.

People have since antiquity worried about running out of natural resources—flint, game, animals, oil. Yet, amazingly, all the historical evidence shows that raw materials have become less scarce rather than more. Food is an especially important resource. The evidence is particularly strong. Per person food consumption is up over the last 30 years. The increase of human height in the

West is another mark of improved nutrition. Ten thousand years ago, only 4 million people could keep themselves alive. In the 19th century, the Earth could sustain only 1 billion people. Now, more than 5 billion people are living longer and most are healthier than ever before. A case can be made we are witnessing humanity's victory against death.

The less fortunate, aware of the existing disparity, want to catch up with what is realistically at hand. The need is great and the challenge is formidable. Life expectancy, which exceeds 70 years in developed countries, is still as low as 30 to 40 in parts of Asia and Africa. (Interestingly, while life expectancy is clearly rising in China, it is going down in Russia, where it is 58.9 years for males and 71 years for females, compared to 74 and 80 years respectively for Americans.) Hundreds of millions of people are afflicted by water-carried diseases for which preventative remedies and cures exist. Some 800 million adults in the world are believed to be illiterate. The disparity between affluent countries and the least affluent remains great.

Keeping up with scientific and technological opportunities requires openness to information, new ideas, and the freedom that enables ingenuity to germinate and flourish. A closed, tightly controlled society cannot compete in a world experiencing an information explosion that knows no national boundaries. Armed national boundaries can keep out vaccines, but they cannot keep out germs, or ideas, or broadcasts. Peoples now trapped in the quagmire of ancient ethnic and national grievances and enmities will soon come to recognize that they are thereby

dooming themselves, their children, and their grandchildren to become orphans of history, lost in the caves of the past. There is room for ethnic, national, religious, racial and tribal pride, but if that drive for self-identification is to produce respect and self-realization for the individual and the group, that drive must be peaceful and in harmony with the aspirations of others in our evolving interrelated world community.

As national boundaries are buffeted by change, the nations of the world become ever more interdependent. We are clearly in a time when no society can isolate itself or its people from new ideas and new information anymore than one can escape the winds whose currents affect us all. Canada cannot protect itself from acid rain without the cooperation of the U.S. The Government of Bangladesh cannot prevent its tragic floods without active cooperation from Nepal and India. To cure a polluted Mediterranean requires the active cooperation of the twenty countries that border that mass of water.

This suggests, among many other implications, the need to reappraise our traditional definitions of sovereignty. The requirements of our evolving technology are increasingly turning national boundaries into patterns of lace through which flow ideas, money, people, crime, terrorism, missiles — all of which know no national boundaries. Science has no national identity. Technology has no homeland. Information requires no passport. One essential geopolitical consequence of this new reality is that there can be no true security

for any one country in isolation. We must learn to accept in each of our countries a mutual responsibility for the peoples in other countries.

The argument is made that we cannot be the policeman of the world. Nonetheless, I respectfully suggest that no community — and our nation is an integral part of an economic, technological, scientific, and political world community — can survive, let alone flourish, without a police force. We have an obligation to be part of such a force, with diplomacy our first responsibility and with the readiness to use our military as a reluctantly available and practical additional resort.

The Charter of the United Nations and the Helsinki Final Act make it clear that to achieve peace and stability there can be no profit from military aggression. We and Europe failed in timely fashion to meet the first modern challenge to that principle when the Serbs in Europe moved militarily with brutality and hate against their former Yugoslav fellow citizens. Our country belatedly attempted to correct our earlier lack of leadership and we contributed troops to a NATO force designed to restore some stability to the area. Our continued commitment remains uncertain, and our early failure has contributed to further ethnic violence in the area.

It is not just the Balkans that threaten a world free of violence. There are 24 nations with a ballistic missile capacity that can carry biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons of mass destruction. These missiles can today reach our friends



and allies. They will soon be able to reach us. Advanced conventional weapons are proliferating the world through international suppliers, including American. Chinese military expansion and modernization, particularly naval, is awesome and serious. North Korea is also developing and selling modern missiles at the same time as it maintains a powerfully threatening conventional military posture. We also know that Russia's political and economic insecurities have strengthened its nationalistic impulses and encourages its government to maintain its significant military arsenal and sell its nuclear technology at the same time as it continues to develop new and improved naval and air weapons. The potential for greater violence in the world is evident.

The argument is also heard that our effort to foster democracy in other geographic areas is a misguided and doomed effort to transfer the religious values of our culture to other cultures not hospitable to those values. Our Western values, it is said, particularly by defenders of Middle East and Asian authoritarian systems, are unique to our Judaic Christian culture alone.

It is true that the modern idea of democracy originated in the West. But Judaism, Christianity and Islam originated in the Middle East and those ideas spread to all parts of the globe. The ideas of freedom need not be confined to Western Europe and North America. Westerners do not uniquely carry a democracy gene. We know that the ideology of the Enlightenment has established a bridgehead in all of the non-Western civilizations. Young people of today's Japan, for example, are in many ways culturally closer to their American and



European contemporaries than they are to their grandparents. At a dinner conversation in our home, a young Saudi friend of ours, a Ph.D. in Political Science, expressed irritation at the arrogant thought that he, his family, friends and fellow citizens were unqualified because of their religion to live in freedom and human dignity.

We who believe that democracy works best for us must increasingly come to understand that it will work best for us only to the extent that it works well for others. We Americans, who today have the greatest power and influence, bear the greatest responsibilities. We are, therefore, obliged to carry the flag of democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. We must remember that the struggle for human dignity is a continuing one, if we are ever to achieve a world not dominated by violence. Are we wise enough to know how to assist the historic developments now underway? Do we have the insight, discipline, unity, and will to fulfill our responsibilities?

Our country is the preeminent military power in the world. But, morally, we have been in a deep slide. America now finds itself at or near the top of the industrialized world in rates of murder, rape, drug use, divorce, abortion, child abuse, and births to unwed mothers. Our elementary and secondary education system often places us at the bottom of the industrialized world. Much of our popular culture is vulgar, violent, mindless, and perverse. All of these things together have shattered our traditional confidence about ourselves, our mission, and our place in the world.

We can do better. We must do better. We all pray that we will do better — and I use the word "pray" advisedly because I believe religion must increasingly assert itself in emphasizing that all the Children of God must enjoy the dignity of that role and have a responsibility to one another to help achieve that dignity.

The United States is today the largest and oldest continuing democracy in the world. It is the political expression of our religious faith. Our task is to achieve the firm sense of purpose, readiness, steadfastness, and strength that is indispensable for our nation's effective and timely foreign-policy decision-making. Our political community must resist the temptation of partisan politics and institutional rivalry as we develop the consensus adequate to meet the challenge. Our political and religious values and our character traits have helped us build the most dynamic and open society in recorded history, a source of inspiration to most of the world. We must come to appreciate what that dream means to the world and the burden that puts on us to advance the cause of democracy and human dignity for those who do not today enjoy that blessing. We must see to it that the central aim of our government's foreign policy should be to make the 21st century the Century for Democracy.

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