

## **Governor Mitt Romney Address - "Freedom requires religion" 12th Annual Canterbury Medal Dinner Becket Fund for Religious Liberty - Delivered Metropolitan Club NYC May 8, 2008**

Thank you

It is an honor for Ann and me to be with you this evening. We have a lot of friends who work with the Becket Fund. As you can imagine, that makes your recognition even more meaningful.

Your mission – and my topic this evening – involve the intertwining of religion and government. It's not a new topic. It was in the 12<sup>th</sup> century that Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Beckett famously refused to allow Henry II to control the Church of England. As you are well aware, his conviction came with a high price: he was killed by the king's soldiers in his own cathedral.

Our religious liberty in America was bought in large measure by the sacrifice of men and women like Thomas Beckett.

The battle for religious freedom is not over, nor is it likely to ever be. I appreciate the work you do to protect a fundamental human liberty and to defend those who are modern victims of religious intolerance and persecution.

As you know, I gave a speech about religious liberty during the height of my campaign. This was not a speech I was forced to give, it was a speech I wanted to give. I felt that I had a unique opportunity to address in a very public way the role of faith in America.

In the days that followed, my remarks drew a considerable amount of congratulatory comment...and some criticism as well. The criticism was a good thing, of course. It meant that my words were not like the proverbial tree falling in the forest – unheard and unheeded. It also gave me the chance to go back and re-think, and that presents an opportunity for more learning.

Several commentators, for instance, argued that I had failed to sufficiently acknowledge the contributions that had been made by atheists. At first, I brushed this off – after all this was a speech about faith in America, not non-faith in America. Besides, I had not enumerated the contributions of believers – why should non-believers get special treatment?

But upon reflection, I realized that while I could defend their absence from my address, I had missed an opportunity...an opportunity to clearly assert the following: non-believers have just as great a stake as believers in defending religious liberty.

If a society takes it upon itself to prescribe and proscribe certain streams of belief – to prohibit certain less-favored strains of conscience – it may be the non-believer who is among the first to be condemned. A coercive monopoly of belief threatens everyone, whether we are talking about those who search the philosophies of men or follow the words of God.

We are all in this together. Religious liberty and liberality of thought flow from the common conviction that it is freedom, not coercion, that exalts the individual just as it raises up the nation.

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Perhaps the phrase which elicited the most comment – and controversy – was this: “[the Founders] discovered the essential connection between the survival of a free land and the protection of religious freedom...Freedom requires religion just as religion requires freedom...Freedom and religion endure together, or perish alone.”

Looking back, do I still believe that religion requires freedom?

History abounds with examples where religion has been imposed by the state upon a people – from the Greek city-state to the dictatorship of the Taliban. But that is not the faith of which I speak. True religious faith is a matter of conviction. It can only be discovered through personal communion with God, sought in the heart and in the heavens. And that path of personal discovery is of necessity free of constraint and censor. Yes, I believe religion requires freedom.

The more controversial assertion, however, was that freedom requires religion.

One critic dismissed this idea by pointing out that there are countries in Europe which have become godless but nevertheless remain democratic. But I was not speaking about Europe’s recent experiments in state secularism, I was speaking about America and the larger family of free nations; and I was not speaking about a moment of time, but rather about a span of history. Would America and the freedom she inaugurated here and across the world survive – over centuries – if we were to abandon our faith in God?

I don’t believe so.

This is hardly a novel view.

It was not lost on the Founders that rights that were recognized as having been gifted by God, not by kings, would defend individual freedom from tyrants and power-seekers of all kinds. “Can the liberties of a nation be thought secure,” Jefferson once asked, “when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are a gift of God?”

John Adams offers an added perspective. Our constitution and freedom would only endure if the passions and destructive tendencies of man’s nature were constrained by the bounds of religion: “Human passions unbridled by morality and religion” he said “...would break the strongest cords of our Constitution as a whale goes through a net. Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people.”

Nor can we overlook the fact that people of faith have a unique appreciation for freedom. Because the practice of religion requires freedom, liberty is especially precious to people of faith. They are willing to sacrifice much to protect it.

“We and God have business with each other,” William James once observed. “In opening ourselves to his influence, our deepest destiny is fulfilled.” When a people’s “deepest destiny” can only be realized in a land of liberty, you can expect that that land and its liberty will be preserved at any cost. As indeed it has!

We have recently been visited by Pope Benedict XVI. It was interesting to me that both he and Pope John Paul II, testified of the connection between freedom and truth. Pope Benedict quoted his predecessor: “in a world without truth, freedom loses its foundation.” Calling those words “prophetic,” he said they echo in some sense the conviction of George Washington’s Farewell

Address, that “religion and morality represent ‘indispensable supports’ of political prosperity.” And then he added his own conviction: “Democracy can only flourish, as your founding fathers realized, when political leaders and those whom they represent are guided by truth and bring the wisdom born of firm moral principle to decisions affecting the life and future of the nation.”

I love how plainly that thought was put by John Adams: “Without religion, this world would be something not fit to be mentioned in polite company, I mean Hell.”

I don’t mean to suggest that truth can only be found in religion or that morality exists only among believers. But I do believe, like Adams and Washington and Hamilton, that “national morality” as Hamilton put it, “require[s] the aid of...divinely authoritative religion.” Or as Washington put it, morality cannot prevail “in exclusion of religious principle.” I believe that religion is the most effective bulwark against moral relativism—which, as I have seen through my life, can be so malleable that it can label “evil good, and good evil;” in the words of Isaiah and “put darkness for light, and light for darkness.”

I also believe that religion and the general precepts of morality defended by religion make us better men and women. And on the whole, I believe we are a stronger people and a stronger nation because of faith. Religion has taught us that there is something greater than ourselves, that we are equal in the eyes of God, that we are to care for those in need, that justice is a principle of salvation, and that marriage, children and family are a source of great joy. That last teaching alone may help us escape the demographic nightmare that is haunting Europe.

There is one more reason why I am convinced that our freedom requires religion.

One day as a boy when a sermon at church was unusually boring, I asked my Dad to give me a dollar bill so I could look at something more interesting. On the back, there is a curious picture of a single eye surrounded by rays suspended over a pyramid—the great seal of the United States. What’s that, I asked? My father explained that it was the eye of God, and that the Founders believed that He watched over the affairs of this nation. And I later learned that the words on the seal were from Virgil - *Annuit Coeptis* – “God has favored our undertakings.”

This may not be at all compelling to the non-believer, but it has been compelling to every president who has led this nation at a time of peril. It is that God has blessed America. It is that God will bless America if we continue to deserve His blessing. Washington saw the hand of Providence in the nation’s founding: “No people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the invisible hand which conducts the affairs of men more than the people of the United States.”

As our soldiers prepared to ascend the beaches of Normandy, Franklin Roosevelt led the nation in prayer: “we know that by Thy grace, and by the righteousness of our cause, our sons will triumph...with Thy blessing, we shall prevail over the unholy forces of our enemy.” And triumph they did, through His blessing and through the holy sacrifice of young lives, now revered in beautiful cathedrals not of stone and stained glass but formed by row after row of simple, white crosses and stars of David.

God blesses America. Like millions of Americans, I believe that He has, that He does, and the He will, so long as we deserve His divine blessing.

Thank you, and may God continue to bless our great nation!