

DRAFT
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“Building Bridges of Reconciliation”²
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Thanks, Pat Deluhery, for the thoughtful introduction, and thanks also to another old friend, the Reverend Richard Jones, for encouraging me to join fellow Episcopalians and accept the invitation of Iowa’s distinguished Bishop, the Right Reverend Alan Scarfe, to speak to this august conference.

As we listened to the opening invocation, I was struck by the inadequacy of any comments I might make following the prayerful explication of the excruciating violence unfolding 7,500 miles from our shores. To provide a relevant outsider perspective to the traumatic issues under review may seem insensitive when so many in this room have themselves and with families and friends suffered grievously. It is thus with a deep sense of humility that I address you as a former legislator and diplomat who carries the burden of having witnessed up-close American public decision-making that in recent years has frequently been more counter-productive than helpful to peoples in the Middle East and parts of Africa.

Our history as a country is truly extraordinary, but 21st Century governance decisions have not always been extraordinarily wise. Nevertheless, I thought it might be useful to make a few observations about how moral values helped frame the American republic, how they have been tested, how they remain in turmoil, and how the challenge to foster reconciliation exists at home as well as abroad.

The story of America begins with the faith-based values of the Puritans who aspired to build a “city on a hill.” Like the Puritans, many settlers came to the

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² Summarized in delivery.

New World to escape religious persecution. But religious tolerance was not always evident once they arrived on our shores. Eleven of the original thirteen colonies at one point or another designated a state church. The two exceptions were Pennsylvania and Rhode Island, the latter of which was initially settled by immigrants fleeing the strictures of the early settlers in Massachusetts where Quakers were hung and stocks and pillories used to shackle heretics and the morally wayward. In early Virginia, the unorthodox were threatened with fines, whippings, and according to a 1612 law, the possibility of a bodkin being thrust through the tongue of anyone who rejected tenets of the Church of England. In Maryland, Catholicism was the original state church; then when Protestants became more numerous in Baltimore, the city fathers issued a decree that no Catholic church could be built as high as that of the Episcopal cathedral.

The founders of the American republic who precipitated the Revolutionary War and thence established a constitutional republic were moral philosophers as well as political activists. In a shortcoming that amounted to the greatest moral umbrage in our history, they determined that for the sake of maintaining unity within the initial 13 states it was necessary to set aside the issue of slavery. It took two centuries that included a Civil War where 750,000 citizens lost their lives and many decades of civil strife to ensure that all people without racial or gender exceptions are entitled to equality under the law.

In the wake of ratification of the Constitution, the first Congress proceeded to insist that an individual rights manifesto (albeit one that did not encompass equality for over half the population – women and people of color) be added to our constitutional foundation. Relevant to today's subject is that the first of the seminal constitutional amendments developed by Congress under Madison's tutelage guarantees freedom of speech and religion and prohibits the establishment of a singular state faith system.

Accommodation for religious diversity implicit in the "non-establishment" clause was considered essential not only due to the religious tensions many settlers had been exposed to in their former homelands and to the increasingly multifaceted approaches to religion taken by the new Americans. "Who does

not see,” Madison warned, that “the same authority which can establish Christianity in exclusion of all other religions may establish with the same ease, any particular sect of Christians in exclusion of all other sects.”

To counter the feudal nature of Old Europe and ensure democratic accountability in the fledgling republic, the founders dwelled on the frailty of human nature and opted to form a republic that bifurcated and decentralized political power. Following Montesquieu, they established a checks and balances system in which power was split between Congress, the Executive branch, and the Judiciary. This separation of powers model was then repeated in similarly tripartite ways at state, county, and city levels, thereby causing a perpetual tension between and within levels as well as branches of government.

The assumption of our founders was that federalist governance coupled with individual rights protections would protect the people from tyranny, limit corruption, and avoid the prospect that religious intolerance would spark division at home or conflict abroad. Indeed, in a famous 1802 letter to the Baptist Association of Danbury, Connecticut, Jefferson opined on the role of religion in governance by affirming that a wall should separate church and state. As a student of comparative religion, Jefferson, who historians often describe as a Deist, held that what mattered most was not where religions differed but where they conjoined.

While the founders made clear that there was not to be a single established “church” or faith system, there was an expectation at the outset of our experiment with self-government that moral values springing from ethical and religious foundations would undergird the American republic. Since duty to the Creator, in Madison’s terms, precedes the claims of civil society, the state could not require a public official to conform to a particular religious creed. In turn, public officials were obligated not to impose particularistic views on private citizens. They were expected to practice their faith by example rather than with coercion; to be moral without moralizing; to be respectful of the convictions as well as rights of others.

Civic virtue in America was not intended simply to relate to the establishment of institutional constraints on political authority. In the 55th Federalist Paper, Madison noted: “As there is a degree of depravity in mankind which requires a certain degree of circumspection and distrust, so there are other qualities in human nature which justify a certain portion of esteem and confidence.” Citizens were expected to supplement governmental actions with civic engagement.

Religion holds meaning as a faith system and as a code of behavior. The Ten Commandments, for instance, which are elements of the Judaic, Christian, and Islamic faiths, are a mixture of duties of the faithful regarding a relationship with God on the one hand and with people on the other. Likewise, the Golden Rule is a moral maxim that is a fundamental component of many of the great religions of the world and has antecedents as well in ethical maxims of the ancients. It can be expressed in the affirmative (Do unto others as you would have them to do unto you, for instance, which is the general Christian articulation) or in a more passive way (Do not do unto others what one would not have done to oneself, which is closer to the Judaic and Confucian traditions).

Other behavioral injunctions are fundamental to all of the major faith systems. At the heart of Christianity, for instance, is the injunction to love thy neighbor as thyself. An analogous teaching, this one from the Koran, counsels that “...it may be that God will ordain love between you and those whom you hold as enemies.” In like spirit, the Buddha advises contemplative self-restraint and Hindus are enjoined in the Bhagavad Gita to be compassionate. And in what may be the oldest monotheistic faith system, Zoroastrianism, the principal bonds of community were love and friendship. Moderation was the central behavioral tenet. An anonymous author of a Medieval Zoroastrian text noted several exceptions: “Those things in which moderation is not necessary are knowledge, friendship and virtuousness.”³

³ See essay by Jamsheed K. Choksy published as a chapter in “The Zoroastrian Flame: Exploring Religion, History and Tradition, ed. A. Williams, S. Stewart, and A Hintze (London: I.B. Taurus, 2016)

Warnings of blemished behavior as well as descriptions of moral conduct are embedded in the parables and exhortations associated with various ethics and faith systems.

According to the Bhagavad Gita, deterrents to a spiritual life include arrogance, anger, conceit, cruelty, hypocrisy, and ignorance. Similarly, preceding the Christian era, there has developed over time a classification of vices termed the seven deadly sins and a parallel classification of virtues known as the seven virtues. The vices – pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath and sloth – are matched by the virtues – humility, charity, chastity, kindness, temperance, patience, and diligence. These contrasting vices and virtues have been set forth for centuries by moral philosophers and religious authorities for individuals to consider as life presents inevitable choices of one kind or another. However, their relevance is magnified in political leadership because the decision making of those in power can have significant ramifications for society as a whole.

At various points in history, even in this great democracy, demagoguery has come into vogue. This has particularly been the case when religious and immigration concerns co-mingled. For instance, in the middle of the 19th Century the higher angels of human nature were for many citizens not evident. In 1836 Samuel F.B. Morse -- the polymath who invented the Morse code and was the preeminent portrait painter of an era – ran unsuccessfully for mayor of New York on anti-immigration themes. Obsessed about the “Catholic Menace,” Morse sought to plug the “leak” in the ship of state by limiting immigration from Catholic countries and at the same time banning followers of the Papacy who had already arrived on our shores from holding public office.

Opposition to immigrants, Catholics in particular, escalated in the 1850s as wars in Europe and the famine in Ireland precipitated a 5-fold increase in immigration to the States compared to the prior decade. In rapid fashion new settlers in the West and abolitionists in New England abandoned allegiance to the traditionalist Whig Party. Energized by Harriet Beecher Stowe’s account of the traumatic lives of slave families being treated as the property of others in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, they came to identify with the fledgling Republican Party. But an

angst-ridden, anti-immigrant element of the public chose to back another new political movement, the American Party, which came to be derisively referred to as the “Know-Nothings.”

In 1856, The Republicans with their first Presidential candidate, John C. Fremont, carried 37% of the electoral college but lost to the pro-slavery Democrats because the candidate of the anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic third party, the Know-Nothings, garnered 21% of the popular vote. How echoes of the Know-Nothing movement can be found in this year’s election when xenophobic politicians ignore the Constitution and advocate religious tests at the border should be pondered deeply by the public as we engage in this year’s voting process. Of similar interest should be an assessment after the election of whether the Republicans who had been the principal progressive party in the 19th Century will wish to return to their roots or cede various forms of rights advocacy to rivals.

The big picture is that the broad history of America has been one of welcoming immigrants and refugees who have added value and vibrancy to our economic and cultural life. Nonetheless, of soul-searching relevance are historical instances where fear, discrimination, and elements of hate have been interconnected, beginning with the killing and forceful displacement of Native Americans; the enslavement of African-Americans; the mistreatment of Chinese immigrants enticed into the country in the 19th Century to help build our railroad infrastructure; the rampant anti-Catholicism that once characterized the attitudes of many Protestants; the anti-Semitism poignantly reflected in the soul-less refusal of the U.S. government in 1939 to allow the M.S. St. Louis, a merchant ship carrying 908 German refugees seeking to escape the Holocaust, the right to dock at an American port; and the subsequent interning of thousands of Japanese-American families in the wake of the attack on Pearl Harbor.

St. Paul once suggested that we all look through a glass darkly. Metaphorically, Paul may have made the ultimate case for humility. While faith may be absolute, Paul suggests that man simply doesn’t have the capacity to know the

will of God or apply perfectly the wisdom of His apostles on earth. An analogous lack of certitude should be applied to political judgments.

There is always a tension in a society such as ours that is based on firmly held ethical and religious values but which protects diversity of thought as a fundamental right. Transforming this tension into positive political energy is the challenge of our Constitutional system. Process is our most distinctive product.

In the jungle of modern politics there is an increasing tendency for politicians to pontificate about what ails the body politic the way medicine men at 19th Century county fairs peddled elixirs which they announced could cure pains of the human body. "Believe me," this potion will cure what afflicts you, they would proclaim without any evidentiary basis.

Modesty is not a hallmark of public life, but a wise politician reins in overconfidence. Whether a person knows a great deal or very little, caution should be taken about being certain of very much. To know a lot may be a preferable condition to knowing little, but the best and the brightest are not immune from great mistakes. Imperfect judgment characterizes the human condition. That is why humility is such a valued character trait, and why civility is such an important part of an interconnected world polity.

For many, concern for civility seems either unimportant or sanctimonious. Actually civility is an enduring virtue of civilized society. At issue is how individuals inter-relate in community and how societies make decisions that affect their place in relation to all others.

Civility is not simply or principally about manners. All it requires is a willingness to consider respectfully the views of others with an understanding that we are all connected and rely on each other. Seldom, after all, is there only one proper path determinable by one individual, one political party, or one ideological movement.

In all of politics, there is a human nature dimension to how issues are addressed and resolved. For those who have ever studied physics, you might recall that

Sir Isaac Newton postulated 3 laws of nature, the last of which is that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Two decades ago I discovered what I describe as a 4th “Newt-onian” law from observations made on the House floor. One day the then Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich, an unusually gifted Member from Georgia, gave a blistering critique of the Democratic Party’s position on an issue. As I was watching the indignant reaction of friends on the Democratic side, it suddenly dawned on me that in social physics unlike natural physics, reaction can sometimes be greater than action. Bitterness begets greater bitterness.

My first thought was that this “Newt-onian” principle was peculiar to politics; then it quickly dawned on me that it applied to everything from a dinner table conversation to international relations. How one talks and acts can affect the behavior of others, sometimes constructively, sometimes causing unwanted and unforeseen counter-measures. Statesmen and military strategists through the ages have noted the danger of pressing an opponent too deeply in a corner where irrational lashing out becomes the only alternative. Offensive words can have a similar effect. Word wars can lead to wars of other kinds.

What is at issue today in an American context is an increasing social division based on a large number of factors ranging from race, ethnicity, economic and social status to religious differentiations, regional loyalties, political and ideological perspectives. Politics has become a game where compromise – a notion rooted in willingness to listen to each other -- is increasingly considered a sign of party disloyalty or lack of conviction. Particularly on Capitol Hill in our nation’s capital there is an institutional failure to understand who the community (the team) is. An oath taken to uphold and defend the Constitution which every legislator takes is not a party unity pledge. Elected officials must come to understand that the team that matters is the public at large whose representatives can be expected to reflect widely diverse views but whose duty it is to ensure that constitutional governance respects all the people. If all men and women are created equal, it follows that all are deserving to be heard.

In his farewell address, President Eisenhower warned of a “military-industrial complex.” Today my worry is about the rise of a “political-ideological complex.” Ideologues use politicians as pawns while politicians use ideologues, especially those with deep pockets, as enablers of personal ambition. This reinforcing set of mutual interests has little to do with the common good and much to do with the break-down in civility in public life.

National security challenges shift over time. Half a century ago, Arnold Toynbee, one of the world’s preeminent historians based at the London School of Economics, gave a lecture 60 miles east of here at Grinnell College in which he chastised the Russians for thinking that Karl Marx’s theory of class struggle and economic determinism had historical validity.

To consider Marxist dogma a guiding way to look at history was in his judgment simply false. In a gentler vein, Toynbee then warned Americans not to misunderstand the civil rights struggle so actively underway in 1963. He acknowledged that civil rights problems were extremely important and must be thoughtfully addressed but he wanted all to know that from an historical perspective he did not consider it likely that racial differentiations would be a fundamental cause of war in the foreseeable future. Instead, he predicted that war would be far more likely to break out as a consequence of religious differentiations than economic or racial distinctions.

In the mid-1960s such a predictive framework seemed out of touch with Cold War concerns. But in the aftermath of 9/11, Toynbee’s predictions appear undeniably prescient.

A country is like a family writ large. Within the family every parent at some point lectures a child to learn from his/her mistakes. A really smart person, it might be added, should learn from the mistakes of others. And a sage should learn from the wise as well as unwise acts that came before. The challenge today for peoples and their leaders is to amass understanding of the lessons of social history so that they can act morally and sagely. In this age of new- and old-fashioned violence – all of which is executed against a

chilling backdrop of ever proliferating weapons of mass destruction – we cannot afford to succumb to the lower instincts of human nature.

We must aspire to the highest moral plateaus which faith based systems are designed to inspire, but recognize that just as asceticism is admirable but not a natural instinct of man, the religious injunction to love or befriend an enemy is frequently beyond the emotional reach of human nature. So in a world in which outbreaks of violence and war itself have been virtual constants in history due in part to escalating tit-for-tat responses to perceived umbrages and the confusion that often clouds who is responding to whom for what umbrage, it is important to have a fallback pattern of thinking as a credible stage before the more hallowed directives that form the loftier behavioral guidance of various faith systems can take hold.

As we deal with the “other,” the development of tolerance may be the first constructive step toward reconciliation between peoples. Love must remain the spiritual ideal, but advancing respectful tolerance for individuals and groups for whom misunderstanding, even hatred, has raged may be the greatest challenge of our times, if not all ages. There are, of course, certain things such as hate and intolerance, untruth and hypocrisy, violence and aggression that are intolerable. But if a peaceful world is to be secured, each generation has a never-ending imperative to work to understand how others think and why they act as they do.

Love, after all, springs at a personal level from coming to know someone. It seldom applies to people an individual doesn't know or understand, and almost never to those who have killed, tortured, or molested loved ones. The challenge thus at the social level is how to apply what in effect are loving policies even when love between people doesn't exist.

In Sudan and South Sudan reconciliation is a moral imperative rather than an abstract option. If not treated as an imperative, options on the table could too easily become annihilation or harsh and demeaning subjugation.

Here the South African experience is of relevance. Particularly instructive is the work of a distinguished professor of rhetoric and linguistics the University of

South Carolina, Erik Doxtader, who on a MacArthur grant has chronicled the reconciliation process still underway in that country. In an analysis that skips from sociology and history to philosophy and ethics, Doxtader notes how leaders of one of the intransigent sides gingerly started to use, perhaps insincerely, the word “reconciliation” and how the other side, also gingerly and perhaps insincerely, competitively responded by using it as well. Repetitive usage of the word caused both sides, each filled more with fears and bitter memories than any sense of affection, to consider deeply what reconciliation and contrasting alternatives might mean for their country. Forthcoming steps began tentatively to be taken by a Gandhi-esque figure, Nelson Mandela, and his apartheid regime counterpart, FW de Klerk, and the concept of reconciliation came to be defined by events as they unfolded.

Faith-based systems led by compassionate leaders like Archbishop Desmond Tutu came to reinforce the logic of mutual accommodation. An infrastructure of churches helped make possible the humanity of togetherness. Christ’s guidance to love thy neighbor may not as yet characterize South African society but the reconciliation process has made such a prospect a real world possibility.

From the perspective of this outsider who in Congress had helped lead the effort to impose sanctions on South Africa’s apartheid government, it would seem that a near miracle has begun to take hold. Instead of hate and inequality sparking the bloodiest of civil wars in South Africa, the noun “reconciliation” became an action verb with accelerating meaning. For the Sudans today the issues are similarly immediate.

In America the word reconciliation is not in vogue. But it should be, even though the challenges do not seem to be as intensely stark. Attitudinally we have begun increasingly to distrust our government, our leaders, and our neighbors. As this election year has demonstrated, it has become almost a social norm to use disrespectful, even hateful, words to describe those with whom we differ.

Public angst is understandable. Our political establishment failed to comprehend Toynbee’s warning about the dangers of religion based conflict. The

consequences of misunderstanding the role of religion in the life of people near and far is now self-evident. Likewise, in governing circles around the globe few seem to have fully absorbed the meaning of Einstein's warning that splitting the atom has changed everything except our way of thinking.

On the assumption that vulnerability is now the state of man everywhere, the human condition requires all of us to re-think together. Reconciliation is a challenge for North America as well as East Africa, the Far East as well as the Middle East.

A place to begin at home is to recognize that the American community is a mosaic of Christians, Muslims, and Jews coupled with adherents to an assortment of other faith systems and secular codes of conduct. As a pluralist society, those of other faith and ethical systems are us and we are them. In the face of globalized terrorism and an upsurge of displaced people around this globe, the only rational option is for citizens of all faiths and ethical backgrounds to unite in mutual respect and understanding.

Nativism – the bias against anyone not born in America – that the Know-Nothing party stood for was not an answer a century and a half ago. Nor is it an answer today. We err grievously if our borders are shut to all people of a given faith. We must stand together in what may be long-term geopolitical turmoil; work to insure that our communities are hate-free; and see to it that our relations with peoples within and outside our borders are respectful wherever and whenever possible.

As Lincoln, citing Scripture, warned a century and half ago: a house divided against itself cannot stand. The same applies to our common home – mother earth.
