

*God and The Heart of Democracy*

It has been little noted that on December 10, 2009 in Oslo, Norway, President Barack Obama ended his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech with an urgent call for deeper thought about God and religion. Perhaps many observers regarded this call simply as an afterthought or merely as a nod to the headlines foaming on the surface of the more fundamental political and economic conflicts of our era. But we need to take this call as far more than an afterthought. In fact, the need for new, serious reflection about the idea of God and the meaning of religion strikes to the root of the crisis of our world and our nation. Without heeding this call, we may lose the very meaning of America and the hope it still offers the peoples of the world. And we may condemn ourselves to a world of perpetual and ever more horrific war.

Drawing on President John F. Kennedy's address at The American University in Washington, D.C., June 10, 1963, President Obama wisely drew a sharp line between the fantasy of a sudden change in human behavior and the long work of bringing about a gradual evolution of human institutions. In Kennedy's words, "Let us focus . . . on a more practical, more attainable peace, based not on a sudden revolution in human nature but on a gradual evolution in human institutions." In echoing these words of President Kennedy, Mr. Obama was also echoing the fundamental, defining purpose of American democracy itself—not only a government of, by and for the people, but a government that exists to protect and support the possibility and the necessity for human beings freely to

come together for the purpose of orienting their lives according to the dictates of conscience. It is this possibility and this need that constitutes the deepest philosophical foundation of the separation of church and state. Government must not only keep its hands off of religion, but it must protect, without interference, the peaceful expression and development of the human impulse of which what we call religion is but one manifestation. The purpose of government is to allow all human beings the chance to become fully human! This is the deepest meaning of the American democratic ideals of equality, liberty and justice. It is also the deepest and perhaps the only real justification for military power and economic institutions which must of necessity operate according to laws—laws backed by force when necessary. Otherwise, what is freedom *for*? The Founding Fathers surely did not fight and die only that we could make and spend money—although, keen realists about human nature that they were, they trusted that the interest in material success could dampen and neutralize the egoistic passions that continually brought men and nations to murder each other.

Thomas Paine said it best. Writing at the very start of the American Revolution in 1776, he drew the critical distinction, which is constantly being blurred and which we must continually rediscover, between government and society. Nor only are these two fundamentally different, but they have entirely different origins: “Society,” he wrote in *Common Sense*:

. . . is produced by our wants, and government by [our] wickedness; the former promotes our happiness *positively* by uniting our affections, the latter *negatively* by restraining our vices. The one encourages intercourse, the other creates distinctions. The first is a patron, the last a punisher.

Society is the realm of ethics and the voluntary search for conscience; government is the realm of law backed, when necessary, by force. Society has no armies; government does not and cannot guide the search for inner truth. And it is the search for inner truth that lies at the heart of the spirituality explicit or implicit in the thought of many of the Founding Fathers, a spirituality of the mind and heart which they understood to be at the heart of all the uncorrupted institutions of religion.

In this way, we can appreciate the wisdom of President Obama in separating the call for thought about religion from all the governmental principles he outlines his realistic and visionary speech—principles dealing with the justification of military force and international sanctions and legislation in defense of national and worldwide human rights, safety, and material well-being. He draws toward his conclusion by saying that all of this is not enough. The strengthening of such institutional aspects of government is still not enough. “Something more” is needed: “the . . . expansion of our moral imagination” that is the heart and soul of all genuine religion everywhere—the sense of what we might call the divine dignity of all human beings that lies at the basis of the ideals of love for and faith in human possibility.

For if we lose that faith—if we dismiss it as silly or naïve . . . then we lose what’s best about humanity. We lose our sense of possibility. We lose our moral compass . . . that spark of the divine that still stirs within each of our souls.

This is not so much a call for action; this is not political, it is not governmental. It is not something that Congress or the UN needs to or ought to vote on; it is not something to campaign on. This vision of human nature and its possible inner, moral evolution, is, I

propose, something to think about, and to gather together with companions to study and think deeply about, just as the gifted human beings who created America gathered together and thought so deeply about it, and thus determined to develop a government, an America, that protected our right to think and grow, as individuals and as a community. Such growth can be understood as the beginning of the only real possible inner revolution that can beneficently tip the balance of an imperiled world.

--Jacob Needleman, author of *What Is God?* and *The American Soul*