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SYMPOSIUM ON AMERICA: THE MORAL NATION
Are We A Christian Nation?

Thank you for inviting me to be part of this wonderful event, helping to celebrate the opening of a center for religious inquiry. To actually combine religion and reason in this day, to honor inquiry, the quest for knowledge, is a courageous act and I applaud you for it. I also respect and admire Rabbi Stein; this center is fortunate to have him with his abundant talents and his extraordinary warmth as part of your leadership.

Let me begin with some personal reflections about why I care so much about church-state separation.

I grew up in the small town of Clearfield, Utah. In the Fall of 1964, the start of my senior year of high school, an article about me appeared in the *Deseret News*, Utah's Mormon-owned newspaper, because I had won an academic award. That day, I received a note summoning me to the principal's office. He was distressed to learn from the article that I was considering a career in the ministry. He spent an hour-and-a-half during school time trying to convert me to Mormonism.

Growing up in Utah in the 50's and 60's, I experienced a theocracy. The church ran the state. Every school I attended was adjacent to property owned by the Mormon church on which a seminary for released time was built. There was no separation in Utah between the dominant religion and the state.

But let me jump to the late 1970's and early 1980's. I spent four years in the southern African nation of Botswana teaching theology and serving a Setswana-language church in an urban setting. Botswana borders South Africa, and over half the Tswana people live within South Africa itself. During my years there, South African apartheid was at its worst. Apartheid was not just a political concept; it was fundamentally religious. Students of all races and religions, Jews and Muslims, had to study "Christian Nationalism" in the public schools. Christian nationalism was the theological basis of racial separation. The South African state and South Africa's Dutch Reformed Church worked side-by-side to establish and justify a system of white supremacy. The Wall of Separation between church and state guarantees that here no one religious community can ever dominate our government.

On President's Day, Botswana's 4th of July, there was an ecumenical service in our city. The mayor noticed only a couple churches were represented. The next week, police officers hand-carried letters to every minister in the city saying that any minister missing

the next such service would have his or her church shut down. The Wall of Separation between church and state also guarantees that the state cannot do what that mayor was doing, abridge my religious community's freedom.

Recently the Bush administration told the Commerce Department to deny licenses for humanitarian aid to the Cuban people through the Cuban Council of Churches. Church World Service, the outreach arm of the major American Protestant churches works in partnership with the Cuban Council of Churches. If there is a hurricane in Cuba, we can't send relief supplies. The Bush administration is interfering with my church's freedom to care for others.

Just this week, a courageous All Saints Episcopal Church in Pasadena said to an Internal Revenue Service which is bowing to the Bush Administration and the religious right, that they would not turn over an unreasonable collection of documents so the IRS could decide if All Saint's advocacy of peace and criticism of the occupation of Iraq, was inappropriate. The IRS' partisan politics, told a faith community, what it can and cannot say.

The wall of separation does two things: It protects the state from domination by any one faith community, including evangelical Christianity, and it also protects every faith community, including Islam, from abridgement of their freedom by the state.

The Wall of Separation between Church and State is integral to the freedom at the heart of American democracy – freedom symbolized by the liberty bell and the statue of liberty. But freedom is costly, dangerous, and hard work. Freedom allows for many viewpoints. Freedom respects diversity. Freedom means tolerating a Ku Klux Klan rally after a racist murder, or tolerating Lewis Faraquan's attacks on Jews, or tolerating Fred Phelps' homophobic band of religious zealots picketing funerals of those who die from AIDS. It means tolerating artistic expressions we may find repugnant and allowing the burning of an American flag. Freedom means carefully protecting the rights of followers of Osama bin Laden just as much as the rights of families who lost loved ones on 9/11. It's hard – yet it's worth it.

One of our greatest strengths is our diversity of religious perspectives. In her book, *A New Religious America*, Diana Eck, a classmate of mine thirty-plus years ago at Harvard, wrote: "The huge white dome of a mosque with its minarets rises from the cornfields just outside Toledo. You can see it as you drive by on the interstate. A Hindu temple with elephants carved in the doorway stands on a hillside in the suburbs of Nashville. A Cambodian Buddhist temple is set in the farmland near Minneapolis. In suburban Fremont, California, flags fly from the golden domes of a new Sikh gurdwara...The religious landscape of America has changed radically in the past 30 years."

In the 1950's, Sociologist Will Herberg predicted that by the year 2000, almost everyone in

the United States would be an Episcopalian, Presbyterian, or Congregationalist. How wrong he was! Today we have more Muslims than Episcopalians. Los Angeles has the most incredible array of forms of Buddhism in the world. In the United States there are six million Jews, six million Muslims, four million Buddhists and one million Hindus. That diversity is protected by that Wall of Separation.

But Pat Robertson says, "We are in a religious war." He declared that war himself. He says he is involved with politics in order to save America for God – that is the God of Protestant fundamentalism.

In his book *Character & Destiny*, charismatic TV preacher James Kennedy wrote, "This is our land. This is our world. This is our heritage, and with God's help, we shall reclaim this nation for Jesus Christ. And no power on earth can stop us."

And the current President's father, the first Bush president, said to religious broadcasters, "I want to thank you for helping America, as Christ ordained, be a light unto the world... I don't know," he said, "that atheists should be considered citizens, nor considered patriots. This is one nation under God."

These people want to tear down that Wall of Separation, making this a Christian nation. Jerry Falwell said, "We must never allow our children to forget this is a Christian nation."

These folks claim we were once a Christian nation and lost our way. Is that true? Well, yes and no.

It's true in terms of the early colonists, especially my religious tradition's forebears. The Congregational Church, now the United Church of Christ, began with Puritans settling in 17th century Massachusetts and then established other colonies throughout New England.

The Massachusetts Colony was a theocracy, like the Utah I knew growing up. Only free, white, male members of the Congregational Church were voting citizens in colonial New England. The Meeting House was the center of both religious and civic life. People couldn't challenge the establishment church. For doing so, Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams were banished to Rhode Island. Quaker Mary Dyer was hung on Boston Common.

Virginia, an Anglican colony, was established by people more interested in trade than religion. But the Church of England was its established church. In Virginia, you could be flogged if you spoke of a minister with disrespect and whipped for not going to church on Sunday. Everyone paid taxes to support the church.

But by the middle of the 1700's people in Virginia and other colonies were questioning ties between church and state. When the War for Independence ended, the wisest of our forebears trying to bring the diverse colonies into a single union of states wanted a Wall of Separation between religion and the state.

Thomas Jefferson strongly opposed using tax money to fund religion. He said it is "sinful and tyrannical to compel people to furnish contributions for the propagation of opinion which they disbelieve."

In his most famous statement, Jefferson said, "I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should 'make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,' and thus building a Wall of Separation (Roger Williams' phrase) between Church and State."

James Madison was as crucial in this regard as Jefferson. Before the War for Independence, Madison witnessed six men imprisoned for publishing religious views at odds with the state's orthodoxy. That infuriated him and he spoke out on their behalf.

Two years later, elected to the Virginia Convention, a government created outside British authority after the colony declared its independence, Madison immediately began working on a declaration of rights insuring religious liberty, claiming "all people are equally entitled to the full and free exercise of religion." When a free Virginia established its House of Delegates, Madison was one of them and worked with Jefferson to disestablish the Anglican church.

A delegate to the Continental Congress, Madison helped write the U.S. Constitution. Patrick Henry wanted a federal tax to support Christian religion, but Madison got that defeated. Eventually Madison wrote the language for the First Amendment to the Constitution.

The Constitution is a secular document. It makes no mention of God, though some wanted that. Madison and others kept religious language out. Ben Franklin wanted to start each session of the Continental Congress with Christian prayer, but delegates resisted that.

Thomas Paine said, "As to religion, I hope it to be the indispensable duty of all government to protect all conscientious professors thereof." And George Washington writing to a Jewish congregation experiencing discrimination said, "The government of the United States gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requiring only that those who live under its protection demean themselves good citizens."

And if there was any question what the framers of the constitution meant by separation of church and state, the Treaty of Tripoli answered that. A 1797 trade agreement between the United States and the Muslim region of North Africa, negotiated by George Washington, the treaty said straight out, "The government of the United States is not in any sense, founded on the Christian religion." That's the answer to the question posed for tonight's forum – No, no, no. This is not a Christian nation. Just ask George Washington!

Let me return to my own experiences. In 1992, I was minister of a church in Carlsbad in North San Diego County. My wife taught in neighboring Vista and we had two daughters at Vista High School.

At that time, Robert Simonds was active in Orange County producing resources to help religious right folks take over public school boards He wrote: "We need strong school board members who know right from wrong. Only godly Christians can truly qualify for this important position. Government, from the president on down, should be permeated with Christians."

In Vista, after a stealth campaign, 2 religious right individuals were elected to join a third member already on the school board. Now the board was controlled by the religious right.

The Vista school system began an awful downward spin as the new school board tore down barriers between church and state. The three new members prayed publicly and ostentatiously before each session. They tried to drop the state science curriculum, bringing in creation mythology to replace evolution.

The school board dumped a sex education curriculum developed by educators replacing it with a homophobic, sexist abstinence-only curriculum. When challenged about the constitutionality of their changes, the School Board dismissed the district's legal counsel and brought in the religious right's Rutherford Institute.

They attacked programs aimed at self-esteem, wanting young people to see themselves as deprived inheritors of original sin.

The school board passed a policy that any parent could have a book removed from a school library and they censored *Wizard of Oz* because of its witches.

They attacked the poor. For years, the school district had worked on a community based federal grant to bring several social service programs onto the campus of a local school in a poor area. That way parents could study English while their children were at

school, the community clinic would be at the school for immunizations. The school board refused to accept \$400,000 of federal money for that program because they felt it intruded into family life. They also cut the free breakfast program for the poor, saying that meals were the parents' responsibility, not the schools.

The school board viewed teachers as money-grabbing unionizers, removing them from key committees, replacing them with parents, many of whom sent their children to private religious schools.

In 1994, the voters of Vista refused to re-elect one of the religious right members and recalled the other two. But the damage had already been done.

The religious right wants to create an America:

- where freedom of women to make their own reproductive choices would vanish and where all of us would be severely limited in our end of life choices.
- where freedom to express differing sexual orientations would be stifled,
- where freedom to use our minds, to inquire, to question, would be buried.
- where self-esteem would be replaced with original sin,
- where books would be censored.

That's why we must protect the Wall of Separation.

Martin Luther King in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail, said, "In this generation, we will have to repent not only for the vitriolic words and deeds of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people."

Attempts to tear down the wall of separation between church and state are gaining ground because of apathy and silence. We cannot afford to be apathetic.

Our voices must ring out: keep religion out of government, keep the practice of religion out of our schools, keep church and state separate. Because that's what makes this country great. That's what allows us to flourish with our wonderful rainbow of diversity.