

Excerpt from Peggy Noonan's Wall Street Journal blog dtd Dec 29, 2012

<http://blogs.wsj.com/peggynoonan/>

The Most Important Speech So Far in the 21st Century?

I've read it twice and I think it is. It's actually kind of a masterpiece. It's [George Will at Washington University](#) in St. Louis, on December 4, 2012. The language, vocabulary, diction, the assumption that the audience knows things and is capable of following a line of argument, even when that argument takes turns or doubles back – all these things are old school, and carry old school's natural authority. But Will's subject matter and message couldn't be more timely, or more relevant to the fix we're in. So it's a very modern/not modern piece of work. The Tocqueville quote at the end is like a genius's description of today.

[Note: This is a re-typed version of the 54-page original speech text shortened to 18 pages, with minor modifications to correct spelling and punctuation.]

In 1953, the year in with the words “under God” were added to the Pledge of Allegiance, and the first year of the presidency of Dwight Eisenhower, he proclaimed July Fourth a national day of prayer. On that day he fished in the morning, golfed in the afternoon and played bridge in the evening. There were, perhaps, prayers in the interstices of these recreations, perhaps when the president faced a particularly daunting putt.

This was not Ike's first peculiar foray onto the dark and bloody ground of the relationship between religion and American public life. Three days before Christmas in 1952, president-elect Ike made a speech in which he said: “Our form of government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don't care what it is.”

He received much ridicule from his cultured despisers for the last part of his statement – his professed indifference to the nature of the religious faith without which our government supposedly makes no sense. But it is the first part of his statement that deserves continuing attention.

Certainly many Americans – perhaps a majority of them – agree that democracy, or at least our democracy, which is based on a belief in natural rights, presupposes a religious faith. People who believe this cite, as Eisenhower did, the Declaration of Independence and the proposition that all people are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights.

But there are two separate and related propositions that are pertinent to any consideration of the role of religion in American politics. One is an empirical question: It is a fact that the success of democracy, meaning self-government, requires a religious demos – religious people governing themselves by religious norms.

The second question is a question of logic: Does belief in America's distinctive democracy – a limited government whose limits are defined by the natural rights of the governed – entail religious belief?

Regarding the empirical question: I believe that religion has been, and can still be, supremely important and helpful to the flourishing of our democracy. I do not, however, believe it is necessary for good citizenship.

Regarding the question of our government's logic, I do not think the idea of natural rights requires a religious foundation, or even that the Founders uniformly thought so. It is, however, indubitably the case that natural rights are especially firmly grounded when they are grounded in religious doctrine.

I will come at this large subject a bit obliquely, as follows. We in journalism are admonished not to bury the lead. That is, we are supposed to put the most important point in the first paragraph. So I will begin briskly by postulating this:

In the 20th century, the most important decision taken anywhere, about anything, was the decision, made in the first decade of the century, about where

to locate Princeton University's Graduate College. Princeton's president, a starchy Presbyterian named Woodrow Wilson, wanted the Graduate College located on the main campus, so undergraduates and graduate students would mingle. Wilson's adversary, Dean Andrew Fleming West, wanted the Graduate College located where it now is, on a hill a few blocks from the main campus. Woodrow Wilson was a man of unbending temperament when he was certain he was right, which was almost always. He took his defeat about the graduate college badly, resigned Princeton's presidency, entered politics and ruined the 20th century.

I simplify somewhat and exaggerate a bit. I do so to make a point.

Today and for the past century, since Woodrow Wilson was elected the nation's president 100 years and one month ago, American politics has been a struggle to determine which of two Princetonians best understood what American politics should be.

Should we practice the politics of Woodrow Wilson of Princeton's class of 1879? Or the politics of James Madison of the class of 1771?

What, you may well be wondering, has this to do with our topic today, the role of something ancient – religion – in something modern, the American polity. The crux of the difference between the Madisonian and the Wilsonian approaches to politics is the concept of natural rights.

As I draw for you my picture of the rivalry between these Princetonians, I recall the story of the teacher who asked her class of 8-year olds to draw a picture of whatever each of them chose, and as they drew she circulated among their desks. Pausing at the desk of little Sally she asked, "Of what are you drawing a picture?" Sally said, "I am drawing a picture of God." The teacher said, "But, Sally, no one knows what God looks like." To which Sally replied, "They will in a minute."

In 40 minutes or so, you will have my theory of the role of religion in American politics. I will begin by noting three perhaps pertinent peculiarities

about my presence for this purpose at this distinguished university and this center, both of which owe so much to the generosity of the Danforth family.

The first peculiarity is this: I write about politics primarily to support my baseball habit; and I am a Chicago Cubs fan now standing in the belly of the beast that is Cardinals Nation. I grew up northeast of here, in Champaign, Illinois, Midway between Chicago and St. Louis. At an age too tender to make life-shaping decisions, I had to choose between being a Cub fan and a Cardinal fan. All my friends became Cardinal fans and grew up cheerful and liberal. I became a gloomy conservative – but not too gloomy about the long-term prospects for the American polity or the role of religion in it.

The second peculiarity is this: America has just had a presidential election, its 57th, in which the ticket of one of the major parties did not contain a Protestant. This was an event without precedent, and is especially interesting because the ticket – a Mormon and a Catholic – was put forward by the party that is the current choice of a majority of America’s evangelical Protestants. Clearly, regarding religion, the times they are changing. But, then, when are they not in this relentlessly forward-looking, forward-leaning nation?

A third peculiarity is that I am a part of this interesting change. I am a member of a cohort that the Pew survey calls the “nones.” Today, when Americans are asked their religious affiliation, 20 percent – a large and growing portion – say “none.” My subject today is the braided role of religion and politics in America, yet I am not a person of faith. Concerning this, permit me a brief autobiographical digression.

I am the son of a professor of philosophy. He was the son of a Lutheran minister. Indeed, my father, Frederick Will, may have become a philosopher because his father was a minister. As a boy, the future professor Will occasionally sat outside pastor Will’s study, listening to the pastor and members of his congregation wrestle with the problem of reconciling the doctrine of grace with the concept of free will. By the time my father became an adult, after a childhood of two or more church services every Sunday, he had seen quite enough of the inside of churches. But he also had acquired a philosopher’s disposition.

Hence, I was raised in a secular home, but one in which the table talk often took a reflective turn. Because my father had recently sojourned at Oxford, I was able to spend two years there in the early 1960s, when it was the vibrant center of the study of philosophy in the Anglophone world. Because of that, I next went to Princeton to study political philosophy, intending to follow my father's footsteps into academia. Which I briefly did, before I turned to – or, as my father thought, before I sank to – journalism.

I began in journalism as Washington editor of William F. Buckley's National Review magazine. Bill was a devout Catholic who believed that a real conservative need not be religious but could not be hostile to religion. I agree.

As did our nation's Founders. Which brings me to our subject, and to my thesis, which is this: Religion is central to the American polity because religion is not central to American politics. That is, religion plays a large role in nurturing the virtue that republican government presupposes because of the modernity of America. Our nation assigns to politics – to public policy – the secondary, the subsidiary role of encouraging, or at least not stunting, the flourishing of the infrastructure of institutions that have the primary responsibility of nurturing the sociology of virtue.

Some of the founders, such as Benjamin Franklin, subscribed to 18th century Deism, a watery, undemanding doctrine that postulated a Creator who wound up the Universe like a clock and thereafter did not intervene in the human story. It has been said that the Deist God is like a rich aunt in Australia – benevolent, distant and infrequently heard from. Deism explains the existence and nature of the universe. But so does the Big Bang theory, which is not a religion. If a religion is supposed to console and enjoin as well as explain, Deism hardly counts as a religion.

George Washington famously would not kneel to pray. When his pastor rebuked him for setting a bad example by leaving services before communion, Washington mended his ways in his characteristically austere manner: He stayed away from church on communion Sundays. He acknowledged Christianity's "benign influence" on society, but no ministers were present and no prayers were

said when he died a stoic's death. This, even though in his famous Farewell Address, which to this day is read aloud in Congress every year on his birthday, Washington had proclaimed that "religion and morality are indispensable supports" for "political prosperity." He said "let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion." He warned that "reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle."

The longer John Adams lived, the shorter grew his creed, which in the end was Unitarianism. Jefferson wrote those ringing words about the Creator who endowed us with rights. But Jefferson was a placid utilitarian when he urged a nephew to inquire into the veracity of Christianity, saying laconically: "If it ends in a belief that there is no God, you will find incitements to virtue in the comforts and pleasantness you feel in its exercise, and the love of others which it will procure you."

James Madison, always commonsensical, explained – actually, explained away – religion as an innate appetite: "The mind prefers at once the idea of a self-existing cause to that of an infinite series of cause and effect." When the first Congress hired a chaplain, Madison said "it was not with my approbation."

Yet even the Founders who were unbelievers considered it a civic duty – a public service – to be observant unbelievers. For example, two days after Jefferson wrote his famous letter endorsing a "wall of separation" between church and state, he attended, as he and other government officials frequently did, church services in the House of Representatives. Services were also held in the Treasury Department.

Jefferson and other Founders made statesmanlike accommodation of the public's strong preference, which then as now was for religion to enjoy ample space in the public square. They understood that Christianity, particularly in its post-Reformation ferments, fostered attitudes and aptitudes associated with, and useful to, popular government.

Protestantism's emphasis on the individual's direct, unmediated relationship with God, and the primacy of individual conscience and choice, subverted conventions of hierarchical societies in which deference was expected from the many toward the few.

Beyond that, however, the American Founding owed much more to John Locke than to Jesus. The Founders created a distinctly modern regime, one respectful of pre-existing rights; rights that exist before government; rights that are natural in that they are not creations of the regime that exists to secure them.

In 1786, the year before the Constitutional Convention, in the preamble to the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, Jefferson proclaimed: "Our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions, any more than our opinions in physics or geometry."

Since the Founding, America's religious enthusiasms have waxed and waned. The durability of America's denominations has confounded Jefferson's prediction, made in 1822, four years before his death. He then said that "there is not a young man now living in the United States who will not die a Unitarian." In 1908, William Jennings Bryan, the Democrats' presidential nominee, said that his opponent, William Howard Taft, was unfit to be president because, being a Unitarian, he did not believe in the Virgin Birth. The public yawned and elected Taft.

There is a fascinating paradox at work in our nation's history. America, the first and most relentlessly modern nation, is – to the consternation of social scientists – also the most religious modern nation. One important reason for this is that we have disentangled religion from public institutions.

There has long been a commonplace assumption that my dear friend Pat Moynihan, himself a liberal in good standing, called "the liberal expectancy." It was – and still is – the assumption of most intellectuals that as science, rationalism and the rationality of market societies advance – as the disenchantment of the world proceeds apace – pre-modern forces will lose their

history-shaping saliency. The two most important of these forces are religion and ethnicity.

Of course, every day in every region, events refute the liberal expectancy. Religion, and especially religion entangled with and reinforcing ethnicity, still drives history.

Religion is also central to the emergence of America's public philosophy. So, at the risk of offending the specialists by distortion through compression, let me offer a brief – a very brief – placement of America's Founders in the stream of world political philosophy.

Machiavelli's thought is a convenient demarcation between the ancients and the moderns. The ancients took their political bearings from their understanding of the best of which people are capable. They sought to enlarge the likelihood of the emergence of fine and noble leaders, and fine and noble attributes among the led.

Machiavelli, however, took his bearings from people as they are. He defined the political project as making the best of this flawed material. He knew (in words Kant would write almost three centuries later) that nothing straight would be made from the crooked timber of humanity.

Machiavelli was no democrat, but he is among democracy's precursors. This is so because he reoriented politics toward accommodation of strong and predictable forces arising from a great constant – the human nature common to all people in all social stations.

For 44 years, Machiavelli and Martin Luther were contemporaries. Machiavelli's "The Prince" was distributed in 1513; Luther's 95 Theses were nailed to the church door in Wittenberg in 1517. Luther was no democrat, in theory or temperament. But Luther, too, was one of democracy's most potent precursors. When, summoned before the Diet of Worms, he proclaimed, "Here I stand – I can not do otherwise," he asserted the primacy of the individual's conscience.

This expressed the logic of his theological radicalism, his determination to found Christian faith on the unmediated relation of the faithful person to God. Without fully intending to do so, he celebrated individualism at the expense of tradition and hierarchy. Because Luther was in humanity's past, democracy was in humanity's future.

The advent of modernity in political philosophy coincided with parallel developments in a closely related field of philosophy – epistemology, the philosophy of knowledge, of how we know things. Here Descartes played a role comparable to Machiavelli's role in reorienting political thought.

Descartes sought a ground of certainty, a ground beyond revelation *[and pure, abstract reason]. He famously found such ground in cognition itself: Cogito ergo sum – I think, therefore I am. *[The senses – what 20th century empiricists called "sense data" – would supply the foundations for whatever certainties humanity can achieve.]*

It was in Hobbes's political philosophy that epistemology became decisive. Hobbes's bedrock of certainty came from his experience of religious strife in England. This strife taught Hobbes that all human beings fear violent death. On this powerful and simple desire for security he erected a philosophy of despotism: in exchange for security, people would willingly surrender the precious sovereignty they possessed in the state of nature, where life was "solitary, poor, nasty, brutal and short."

But Hobbes's philosophy contained the seeds of democracy, in four ways. First, Hobbes said that all human beings are equally under the sway of this strong imperative. Second, all human beings can, without the assistance of a priestly clerisy, comprehend the basic passions that move the world. Third, to the extent that the world of politics is driven by strong and steady passions and interests, to that extent there can be a science of politics. A science of politics based on what all human beings have in common – knowledge supplied by the senses – is a political science deriving its data from the demos, the people. Fourth, because people do not agree about religious truth, and because they fight over their

disagreements, social tranquility is served by regarding religion as a voluntary matter for private judgment, not state-supported and state-enforced orthodoxy.

In the interest of social peace, the higher aspirations of the ancients were pushed to the margins of modern politics. Those aspirations were considered at best unrealistic and at worst downright dangerous. Henceforth, politics would not be a sphere in which human nature is perfected; the political project would not include pointing people to their highest potentials. Instead, modern politics would be based on the assumption that people will express – will act upon – the strong impulses of their flawed natures. People will be self-interested.

To recapitulate: The ancients had asked what is the highest of which mankind is capable and how can we pursue this? Hobbes and subsequent modernists asked: What is the worst that can happen and how can we avoid it?

America's Founders – and particularly the wisest and most subtle of them, James Madison – had a kind of political catechism, which went like this:

- What is the worst political outcome? The answer is: tyranny.
- What form of tyranny can happen in a republic governed by majority rule? The answer is: Tyranny of the majority.
- How can this be prevented, or at least made unlikely? The answer is: By not having majorities that can become tyrannical by being durable. By, that is, reducing the likelihood that a stable tyrannical majority can emerge and long endure.
- How is this to be achieved? By implementing Madison's revolution in democratic theory.

Of the diminutive Madison – he probably was five feet four inches tall – it was said: Never had there been such a high ratio of mind to mass. He was Princeton's first graduate student. And he turned democratic theory upside down.

Hitherto, the few political theorists who thought democracy was feasible believed it could be so only in small, face-to-face societies, such as Pericles' Athens or Rousseau's Geneva. This was supposedly so because factions were

considered the enemy of popular government, and small, homogenous societies were thought to be least susceptible to the proliferation of factions.

Madison's revolutionary theory, the core of which is distilled in Federalist Paper Number 10, was that a republic should be not small but extensive. Expand the scope of the polity in order to expand the number of factions. The more the merrier: A saving multiplicity of factions will make it more probable that majorities will be unstable, shifting, short-lived combinations of minority factions.

Madison related his clear-eyed and unsentimental view of human interestedness to the Constitution's structure of the separation of powers. In Federalist 51 he said: "Ambition must be made to counteract ambition." That is, the self-interests of rival institutions will check one another. Madison continued:

"It may be a reflection on human nature, that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government. But what is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary."

So, said Madison, we must have a policy of "supplying by opposite and rival interests the defect of better motives."

But neither Madison nor the other Founders were saying that we should presuppose that America could prosper without there being good motives. Such motives are manifestations of good character. Our sober Founders were not so foolish as to suppose that freedom can thrive, or even survive, without appropriate education and nourishments of character.

They understood that this must mean education broadly understood to include not just schools but all the institutions of civil society that explain freedom, and equip citizens with the virtues freedom requires. These virtues include industriousness, self-control, moderation and responsibility.

These are virtues that reinforce the rationality essential to human happiness.

Notice that when Madison, like the Founders generally, spoke of human nature he was not speaking, as modern progressives do, as something malleable, something inconstant and evolving, something constantly formed and re-formed by changing social and other historical forces.

When people today speak of nature they generally speak of flora and fauna – of trees and animals and other things not human. But the Founders spoke of nature as a guide to, and measure of, human action. They thought of nature not as something merely to be manipulated for human convenience but rather as a source of norms to be discovered.

They understood that natural rights could not be asserted, celebrated and defended unless nature, including human nature, was regarded as normative rather than a merely contingent fact. This view was buttressed by the teaching of Biblical religion that nature is not chaos but rather is the replacement of chaos by an order reflecting the mind and will of the Creator.

This is the Creator who endows us with natural rights that are inevitable, inalienable and universal – and hence the foundation of democratic equality. And these rights are the foundation of limited government – government defined by the limited goal of securing those rights so that individuals may flourish in their free and responsible exercise of those rights.

A government thus limited is not in the business of imposing its opinions about what happiness or excellence the citizens should chose to pursue. Having such opinions is the business of other institutions – private and voluntary ones, especially religious ones – that supply the conditions for liberty.

Thus the Founders did not consider natural rights reasonable because religion affirmed them; rather, the Founders considered religion reasonable because it secured those rights. There may, however, be a cultural contradiction of modernity. The contradiction is that while religion can sustain liberty, liberty does not necessarily sustain religion. This is of paramount importance because of the seminal importance of the Declaration of Independence.

America's public philosophy is distilled in the Declaration's second paragraph: "We hold these truths to be self-evident." Notice, our nation was born with an epistemological assertion: The important political truths are not merely knowable, they are self-evident – meaning, they can be known by any mind not clouded by ignorance or superstition.

It is, the Declaration says, self-evidently true that "all men are created equal." Equal not only in their access to the important political truths, but also in being endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, including life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Next comes perhaps the most important word in the Declaration, the word "secure": "To secure these rights, governments are instituted among men." Government's primary purpose is to secure pre-existing rights. Government does not create rights, it does not dispense them.

Here, concerning the opening paragraphs of the Declaration, is where Woodrow Wilson and progressivism enter the American story.

Wilson urged people not to read what he called the preface to the Declaration, and what everyone calls its essence. He did so for the same reason that he became the first president to criticize the American Founding. And he did not criticize it about minor matters; he criticized it root and branch, beginning with the doctrine of natural rights.

His criticism began there precisely because that doctrine dictates limited government, which he considered a cramped, unscientific understanding of the new possibilities of politics. Wilson disparaged the doctrine of natural rights as "Fourth of July sentiments." He did so because this doctrine limited progressives' plans to make government more scientific in the service of a politics that is more ambitious.

Wilson's intellectually formative years in the late 19th century were years in which Darwin's theory of evolution seeped from biology into the social sciences, including political science. Wilson, the first president of the American Political Science Association, wanted the political project to encompass making

government evolve as human nature evolves. Only by doing so could government help human nature progress. This is why, for progressives, progress meant progressing up from the Founders and their false – because static – understanding of human nature.

Only government unleashed from the confining doctrine of natural rights could be muscular enough for this grand project. Such a government needed not the Founders' static Constitution but a "living" Constitution, a much more permissive Constitution. That is, the new progressive government needed the old Constitution to be construed as granting to the government powers sufficient to whatever projects were required for progress.

But what, then, about the Framers' purpose of writing a Constitution to protect people from popular passions? Wilson argued that the evolution of society had advanced far enough that such worries were anachronistic. The passions had been domesticated; they no longer threatened to be tyrannical, or to otherwise threaten the social order.

Hence Wilson thought the state, emancipated from the constraints of the Founder's static Constitution, should be "an instrumentality for quickening in every suitable way...both collective and individual development." Who is to determine what ways might not be "suitable"? The answer must be the state itself.

Wilson was, as progressives tended to be, a historicist – that is, someone with a strong sense of teleology. History, he thought, had its own unfolding logic, its autonomous trajectory, its proper destination. It was the duty of leaders to discern the destination toward which history was progressing, and to make government the unfettered abettor of that progress.

Progressives tend to exalt the role of far-sighted leaders, and hence to exalt the role of the president. This, too, puts them at odds with the Founders.

The words "leader" or "leaders" appears just 13 times in the Federalist Papers. Once is a reference to those who led the Revolution. The other dozen times are all in contexts of disparagement. The Founders were wary of the

people's potential for irrational and unruly passions, and therefore were wary of leaders who would seek to ascend to power by arousing waves of such passions.

Wilson, however, was unworried. He said: "Great passions, when they run through a whole population, inevitably find a great spokesman." In 1912, they found Wilson. And he began building what we have today, the modern administrative, regulatory state, from the supervision of which no corner of life is immune.

Now, I will leave it to other, more theologically grounded persons to decide whether, or how, the progressive doctrine of a changing human nature can be squared with the teachings of various religions. I will, however, postulate this:

A nation such as ours, steeped in and shaped by Biblical religion, cannot comfortably accommodate a politics that takes its bearings from the proposition that human nature is a malleable product of social forces, and that improving human nature, perhaps unto perfection, is a proper purpose of politics.

I will go further. Biblical religion is concerned with asserting and defending the dignity of the individual. Biblical religion teaches that individual dignity is linked to individual responsibility and moral agency. Therefore, Biblical religion should be wary of the consequences of government untethered from the limiting purpose of securing natural rights.

Do not take my word for it. Take the word of Alexis De Tocqueville.

De Tocqueville wrote "Democracy in America" two generations after the American Founding – two generations after Madison identified tyranny of the majority as the distinctively worst political outcome that democracy could produce. De Tocqueville had a different answer to the question of "what kind of despotism democratic nations have to fear."

His warning is justly famous and more pertinent now than ever. This despotism, he said, would be "milder" than traditional despotisms, but

"It would degrade men without tormenting them....It is absolute, detailed, regular, far-seeing, and mild. It would resemble paternal power if, like that, it had

for its object to prepare men for manhood; but on the contrary, it seeks only to keep them fixed irrevocably in childhood....It willingly works for their happiness; but it wants to be the unique agent and sole arbiter of that; it provides for their security, foresees and secures their needs, facilitates their pleasures, conducts their principal affairs, directs their industry, regulates their estates, divides their inheritances; can it not take away from them entirely the trouble of thinking and the pain of living?....So it is that every day it renders the employment of free will less useful and more rare; it confines the action of the will in a smaller space and little by little steals the very use of free will from each citizen....(It) reduces each nation to being nothing more than a herd of timid and industrious animals of which the government is shepherd.”

Each of us can – must, really – decide to what extent De Tocqueville’s foreboding has been fulfilled. People of faith might well ask this: Does the tendency of modern politics to take on more and more tasks in order to ameliorate the human condition – does this tend to mute religion’s message about reconciling us to that condition? And people of faith might well worry whether religious institutions can flourish in the dark shade beneath a government that presumes to supply every human need and satisfy every appetite.

To the extent that the politics of modernity attenuates the role of religion in society, to that extent it threatens society’s vitality, prosperity and happiness. The late Irving Kristol understood this. Although not an observant Jew, my friend Irving described himself as “theotropic,” by which he meant oriented to the divine. He explained why in these words:

“(A) society needs more than sensible men and women if it is to prosper: It needs the energies of the creative imagination as expressed in religion and the arts. It is crucial to the lives of all of our citizens, as it is to all human beings at all times, that they encounter a world that possesses a transcendent meaning, a world in which the human experience makes sense. Nothing is more dehumanizing, more certain to generate a crisis, than to experience one’s life as a meaningless event in a meaningless world.”

We may be approaching what is, for our nation, unexplored and perilous social territory. Europe is now experiencing the widespread waning of the religious impulse, and the results are not attractive. It seems that when a majority of people internalize the Big Bang theory and ask, with Peggy Lee, “Is that all there is?”;

when many people decide that the universe is merely the result of a cosmic sneeze, with no transcendent meaning;

when they conclude that therefore life should be filled to overflowing with distractions – comforts and entertainments – to assuage the boredom;

then they may become susceptible to the excitements of politics promising ersatz meaning and spurious salvations from a human condition bereft of transcendence.

We know, from the bitter experience of the blood-soaked 20th century, the political consequences of this felt meaningless. Political nature abhors a vacuum, and a vacuum of meaning is filled by secular fighting faiths, such as fascism and communism. Fascism gave its adherents a meaningful life of racial destiny. Communism taught its adherents to derive meaning from their participation in the eschatological drama of History’s unfolding destiny.

The excruciating political paradox of modernity is this: Secularism advanced in part as moral revulsion against the bloody history of religious strife. But there is no precedent for bloodshed on the scale produced in the 20th century by secular – by political – faiths.

Therefore, even those of us who are members of the growing cohort that the Pew survey calls “nones,” even we – perhaps especially we – wish continued vigor for the rich array of religious institutions that have leavened American life. We do so for reasons articulated by the most articulate American statesman.

In 1859, beneath lowering clouds of war and disunion, a successful railroad lawyer from across the river, from less than 100 miles north of here – a lawyer turned presidential aspirant – addressed a Wisconsin agricultural society. He

concluded his speech with the story of an oriental despot who assigned to his wise men the task of devising a proposition to be carved in stone and be forever in view and forever true. After some while they returned to the despot and the proposition they offered to him was: “This too shall pass away.”

Said Abraham Lincoln: How consoling that proposition is in times of grief, how chastening in times of pride. And yet, said Lincoln, it is not necessarily true. If, he said, we Americans cultivate the moral and intellectual world within us as assiduously and prodigiously as we cultivate the physical world around us, perhaps we shall long endure.

We have long endured. We shall continue to. This is so in large part because of America’s wholesome division of labor between political institutions and intermediary institutions of civil society, including and especially religious institutions, that mediate between the citizen and the state.

The mediating institutions crucial to the flourishing of St. Louis include this university, this center and crucial to both – the Danforth family.

I thank you for your hospitality and your attention, and now I welcome your questions.