Secularist Segregation, Religious Democratization  
By Charles Brian McAdams

Introductory Note: I was John Raines’s final doctoral student before his retirement from Temple University. My dissertation explored the influence of the Civil Rights Movement. Therefore, Dr. Raines was not just a wise mentor and learned scholar in my field; he was also an eyewitness to the events. So on the one hand, he was my professor. He read my writings, helped me refine my thoughts and pointed me toward scholars whose work could inform my academic development. I wrote the original version of this paper near the culmination of that process. (I have adapted this from a paper I presented at the 2010 meeting of the Mid-Atlantic American Academy of Religion meeting.)

On the other hand, Dr. Raines had also been a participant in the events I describe. The second section of this essay has an extended quote from segregationist Senator Richard Russell complaining about religious civil rights leaders working for passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. In that quote he bemoans that, “men of the cloth have been standing on the mall and urging a favorable vote on the bill.” John Raines was among a group of clergypeople who held a vigil on the mall in Washington during the debate about the bill. I have selected this piece for this Festschrift because it exemplifies both roles Dr. Raines had in my academic development.

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community unless the religious believers remain willing to trade privatization for a guarantee of religious liberty.”

Rorty later asserts, “if I think liberal democratic institutions are in danger from tax-exempt ecclesiastical institutions, I shall do well to warn my fellow-citizens against their insidious influence.”

Yet I suggest that the Civil Rights Movement falsifies the universality of the well accepted doctrine that religion is dangerous for democracy and social justice. During the Civil Rights Movement, those who sought an expansion of democracy and greater devotion to social justice regularly called upon religion in their cause, while those who sought limitations used secular language and demanded their opponents do so also.

A Strange Distinction

Rorty and Rawls want a strict division between the sacred and the secular. However, Martin Luther King, Jr. was not comfortable with the division that they think is so essential. Before Dr. King became famous, he was the pastor of a prominent Baptist church in Montgomery, Alabama. In a Fourth-of-July sermon at that church, he discussed the role of religion in politics and explained, “if our religion is to be real and genuine in our lives it must be experienced as a dynamic force. Religion must be effective in the political world, the economic world, and indeed in the whole social situation. Religion should flow through the stream of the whole life. The easy going dicotymy [sic] between the sacred and the secular, the god of religion and the god of life, the god of Sunday and the god of Monday has wrought havoc in the portals of religion.”

More famously in the “Letter from Birmingham City Jail” nine years later, he laments that,

in the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churches stand on the sideline and merely mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard so many ministers say, “those are social issues with which the gospel has no real concern,” and I have watched so many churches commit themselves to a completely otherworldly religion which makes a strange distinction between body and soul, the sacred and the secular.

King had reason to distrust this strange distinction between the secular and the sacred. Regularly those who defended Jim Crow advocated the importance of the distinction.

Richard Russell

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5The King Papers Project uses brackets to indicate Dr. King’s handwritten additions to his printed text.


Consider the United States Senate’s 1964 debate whether to end a filibuster and vote on the 1964 civil rights bill. Segregationist Senator Richard Russell, who promised, “I will oppose them to the limit of my endurance and to the extent of my ability,” led the Southern fight against civil rights laws.

One of Richard Russell’s tools was to dismiss the arguments of the civil rights activists because religion should not be involved in such political matters. For example on the floor of the Senate Russell explained:

I have observed with profound sorrow the role that many religious leaders have played in urging passage of the bill, because I cannot make their activities jibe with my concept of the proper place of religious leaders in our national life. During the course of the debate, we have seen cardinals, bishops, elders, stated clerks, common preachers, priests, and rabbis come to Washington to press for the passage of this bill. They have sought to make its passage a great moral issue. But I am at a loss to understand why they are 200 years late in discovering that the right of domination over private property is a great moral issue. If it is a great moral issue today, it was a great moral issue on the day of the ratification of the Constitution of the United States. Of course, this is not, and cannot be a moral question; however it may be considered, it is a political question.

Day after day, men of the cloth have been standing on the mall and urging a favorable vote on the bill. They have encouraged and prompted thousands of good citizens to sign petitions supporting the bill—but all without the knowledge of the effect of what they were demanding of the representatives in the Congress of the United States.

This is the second time in my lifetime an effort has been made by the clergy to make a moral question of a political issue. The other was prohibition. We know something of the results of that.

I want to focus on Russell’s division between the political and the moral. Russell accepts and uses a binary opposition: moral v. political. Religious leaders deal with moral issues; United States Senators deal with political issues. Russell warns that conflating these separate spheres is dangerous, “we know something of the results” of allowing religious leaders to speak to political issues. The spokesperson for segregation demanded that people remember the “proper place of religious leaders in our national life.” They should not be holding vigils on the mall or lobbying members of Congress.

Martin Luther King, Jr. rejected this and argued for more religion in civil life. In a conversation before the Rabbinical Assembly, King explained the need for religious

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involvement in passing an anti-poverty bill by reminding his listeners of the efforts to pass the earlier civil rights legislation:

We got enough people moving—we got rabbis moving, we got priests moving, we got Protestant clergymen moving, and they were going around Washington and they were staying on top of it, they were lobbying, they were saying to [Senator] Dirksen and others that this must be done.

Finally, the Congress changed altogether. One day when Senator Russell saw that the civil rights bill would be passed and that the Southern wing could not defeat it, he said, “We could have blocked this thing if these preachers hadn’t stayed around Washington so much.”

Now the time has come for preachers and everybody else to get to Washington and get this very recalcitrant Congress to see that is must do something and it must do it soon.\(^{10}\)

However, it was not just in the halls of power where those who opposed the Civil Rights Movement demanded a division between the sacred and the secular. We can find this presumption well outside the politically rarified environment of Washington, DC. It was also in the crucible of Selma, Alabama, in 1965 on the front lines of the battle for civil rights.

During the protests in Selma, Officer L. C. Crocker stopped and confronted a group of protestors led by Jimmy Webb. Webb explained that the group wanted to go to the courthouse. Crocker explained they could not because the courthouse was closed. A remarkably calm Webb, responded, “we don’t want to go into the courthouse, all we want to do is go to the lawn of the courthouse to kneel in prayer and we’ll gladly return . . .”\(^{11}\) Officer Crocker cut him off with a lesson on the proper role of religion, “you take your prayers back to your church. That’s the proper place to pray.”\(^{12}\) The lesson here is clear: Prayers should be in churches not courthouses. Civil rights legislation is about politics not morality. There are two spheres, one religious and one secular.

**Kennedy, Race and the Dixiecrats**

While Rorty admits what we cannot make laws to enforce the strange distinction between the sacred and secular spheres, he contends that,

there is nothing wrong, I think, with insisting that candidates for office do what John F. Kennedy did: namely, to make it very clear indeed that they have no intention of taking ecclesiastical authority seriously when exercising the functions of the office to which they aspire.\(^{13}\)

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\(^{12}\)Ibid.

\(^{13}\)Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square,” 147.
From this it appears that Rorty wants this kind of assurance lest the influence of religious people further oppression.

Kennedy delivered his most famous speech on his faith to Greater Houston Ministerial Association during the 1960 Presidential campaign. Certainly the major impetus for Kennedy’s famous speech was to counter anti-Catholic bias—assuring Protestants that he could draw a line between his religion and his politics. He assured his listeners that he treasured the “separation of church and state.” But perhaps there was a secondary effect of the speech. Whether Kennedy desired this or not, it would have mitigated the fears of southern segregationists that Kennedy would follow the integrationist inclinations of many in the Roman Catholic hierarchy.

Lawrence H. Fuchs, in his John F. Kennedy and American Catholicism, runs down some of the high points in Roman Catholic rejection of segregation:

In September, 1947, Archbishop Joseph E. Ritter of St. Louis ended segregation in the schools of his archdiocese. In Washington, the integration of parochial schools was begun by Archbishop Patrick O’Boyle in the fall of 1948. In 1954, Archbishop Joseph F. Rummel of New Orleans denounced three bills in the Louisiana legislature which were intended to frustrate the antisegregation decision of the United States Supreme Court. In the same year, the University of Notre Dame received an award from the Negro newspaper, the Chicago Defender, for breaking off athletic relationships with Southern schools which practiced Jim Crow on the playing field. In March, the director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People praised Bishop Vincent S. Waters of Raleigh, North Carolina, for abolishing segregation in his diocese; and in April of that year, Archbishop Robert E. Lucey of San Antonio, Texas, decreed that no child would be refused admittance to a Catholic school in his archdiocese because of color, race, or poverty.

These actions were not isolated to the Northeast or West Coast, but they include Texas, Louisiana and North Carolina in the heart of Dixie.

In a 1956 pastoral letter, Archbishop Rummel of New Orleans, Louisiana, declared repeatedly that, “racial segregation as such is morally wrong and sinful.” Two years later Martin Luther King, Jr. in his Stride Toward Freedom was presumptively quoting Rummel’s pastoral letter when King asserted, “The Roman Catholic church has declared, ‘Segregation is morally wrong and sinful.'” Segregationists in the South had plenty of reasons to believe that the Roman Catholic Church was allied with the Civil Rights Movement.

The Roman Catholic Church’s words in favor of integration adds another layer of complexity to Kennedy’s commitment to ministers in the South, that, “I do not speak for my church on public matters; and the church does not speak for me” 18. Additionally, he declared,

> I believe in an America that is officially neither Catholic, Protestant nor Jewish; where no public official either requests or accept instructions on public policy from the Pope, the National Council of Churches or any other ecclesiastical source. 19

His choice of Pope and the National Council of Churches (NCC) is fascinating. On the surface he has done nothing more than compared the Pope with the NCC. But the two are really very different. The Pope was a foreign, semi-autocratic religious authority who determined orthodoxy for the Roman Catholic Church. The NCC was loosely connected and had no power to speak authoritatively to its constituents. However, there is an important point of agreement: both supported the Civil Rights Movement. Though Kennedy could have named any number of religious organizations which resisted the Movement, instead he linked the two dissimilar pro-Civil Rights religious organizations and then distanced himself from them both.

This is not to say that Kennedy was against the Civil Rights Movement, but that in addition to using the opportunity to address his faith (something he had done over and over again using many of the same lines he used in Houston) 20 he also effectively allayed the fears of white Southern voters.

Kennedy was a Harvard educated Yankee who needed Dixiecrat electoral votes to win the 1960 presidential election. In fact he felt that fear of his faith, “was being amplified—not only in the border states of Tennessee and Kentucky, but in downstate Indiana and Illinois, in the farm belt, [and] above all in the South.” 21 Though Kennedy had picked a Texan as a running-mate, he won the state’s 24 electoral votes by merely two percent. He also got more votes in Mississippi than did Nixon, but a plurality of Mississippians voted for “unpledged” electors. 22 These eight electors supported arch-segregationists Harry F. Byrd and Strom Thurmond for President and Vice-President. Seven additional electors (six in Alabama and one in Oklahoma) also voted for the Byrd/Thurmond ticket. Even in heavily Catholic Louisiana, Kennedy got less than 51% of the vote. As was more obvious in the 1968 electoral contest, northern Democratic presidential candidates needed to secure electoral votes in the Dixiecrat South.

What are the relationships among democracy, social justice, secularity and religion? The presumed answers to these questions changed. Supporters of the Civil Rights Movement

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20See Fuchs, 164-188.
and its opponents agree that progressive politics finds fertile ground in religion while regressive politics finds its safe haven amidst secularity. Today that assumption is reversed. The role of religion in social justice and democracy is more ambiguous than Rawls and Rorty presume. Their prescriptions would have advanced the interests of segregationists. Democracy and social justice are not necessarily always furthered by a stark division between the secular and the sacred. Sometimes that division is a strange distinction that furthers oppression and resists the expansion of democracy.

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