In Diplomacy, Faith Can Never be a Matter of Indifference

Address by Ambassador Douglas Kmiec | Wednesday, April 15, 2015

Introduction by Dr. Rick Griffin, Director of CCS

In today’s society religious freedom remains very important to millions of Americans. While the different religions, the denominations, may always have some points of difference on doctrine and elsewhere, there continues to be a critical need for religious organizations to have interfaith understanding and cooperation.

As we spoke of the founding, one of the things we learned from the founding is that religious intolerance threatens religious freedom. If religious liberty and religious tolerance are to be maintained, there must be interfaith diplomacy, understanding, and cooperation.

Our next guest, Ambassador Douglas Kmiec, actually does not just speak of interfaith understanding and cooperation, but was involved in one of the more troubled areas of the world in bringing forth these efforts.

Professor Kmiec is the Caruso Professor of Constitutional Law at Pepperdine University, and a former member of the Office of Legal Counsel for Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush. More recently, Doug Kmiec was called by President Barack Obama to be the U.S. Ambassador to the Mediterranean island nation of Malta; which is strategically important for its proximity to the Middle East and to Europe.

In Malta, Ambassador Kmiec sought to build interfaith understanding; he continued to exercise his own freedom of religion, even as an ambassador; and Ambassador Kmiec, this evening, will be speaking on diplomacy and faith, and how, “In diplomacy, Faith Can Never Be a Matter of Indifference.”

Ambassador Kmiec.
Ambassador Douglas Kmiec’s remarks

Good evening. It is a privilege to be with you. On the first day on the job, as the car pulled out of the gate from the residence (Ambassadors get to have cars with flags on them), I looked out the side window and there was an 80-year-old Maltese fisherman saluting the flag of the United States. And I said to the driver, “Jimmy, stop the Car I’ve gotta hug that guy!”

And the driver said, ‘Ambassador, if you’re gonna hug everyone who salutes the flag of the United States of America, you will never get to the embassy.’

That was a very warm moment. I learned as ambassador that it wasn’t that they agreed with the United States in every regard, but that they had enormous respect for what was our founding basis.

Ronald Reagan used to call it – the shining city on the hill. It’s worth thinking about where that shining city remark came from. It was a remark made by John Winthrop on a ship, in the 1600’s, on his way to the United States [i.e., American colonies]. And it was a covenant that he was calling his fellow passengers to make. He said, ‘If we make a covenant with God, if when we get off this ship we retain that covenant and are true to it and form a community, then we will be like a shining city on a hill and nations around the world for generations to come will salute us. But,’ he said, ‘if we go our own way, if we think that we are larger than the Divine, if we think that we don’t need each other and each other’s individual talents, we will be but a footnote and be forgotten.’

The second scene I want to paint for you [is from] my service [it is] one that took place in the living room of my residence. I look out at the audience here tonight, and I see a lot of bright faces, a lot of hopeful faces. Well there was a hopeful face in my living room that afternoon.

He was from my home state of California. He had blonde hair and blue eyes, and he was athletic. He was a Foreign Service officer sent by the secretary of state and President Obama to do a very dangerous mission as Envoy to the country of Libya. Libya was in the midst of an uprising, an uprising that was spreading across all of North Africa.
And President Obama wanted to know from this young man—who spoke perfect Arabic (because after he finished his college education he joined the peace core and spent several years in Morocco) they wanted to know whether or not it was possible for the United States to come to the side of the rebels in Libya, whether or not it was likely that they were going to succeed, whether or not the President of the United States should ask his fellow countrymen to come to the side of these people. And this young Foreign Service officer went that day, and he went and he reported back with his natural optimism that “yes” it was very much worth the endeavor.

Sometime after that, a call came in, and it was from the Secretary of State, and she reported to me that the uprising in Libya had gotten even worse. And we had to get 100 personnel out of our embassy in a hurry.

“How?” I said. “Be creative.” was her answer.

“Don't we have a Navy?” I said.

“Don't be cute,” was her answer.

The President, exercising prudential judgment, considering the reports of this young man who went as envoy, had yet to decide whether not to support the no fly zone because it wasn’t a decision to be made lightly. Human life is not a decision to give up lightly. To ask your young men and women in uniform to serve in a dangerous place is not easily made.

When I took the position, the President said, “You will enjoy Malta, it has 365 Catholic churches.”

I said, “Oh great, one for every day.”

And Obama said, with that usual toothy smile of his own, “Make sure you go.” And that was the best diplomatic advice I received, because in going, I got to see the people of the host country in the place that mattered most to them. And faith is the organizing principle of that country, because among other things, St. Paul shipwrecked there in the year 60 and changed the face of their orientation to one that was very positive, and very optimistic, and reflecting uncommon kindness.
And it was by going to these churches that I discovered people who are always willing to help the American Embassy, and on this occasion, I happen to know that a businessman in Malta had just purchased a catamaran. And I called him up and I said, “Jim do you mind if I borrow your boat?”

“Where are you going?” he said.

“Tripoli.”

Gulp! But it was only about a fifteen minute gulp, and he came back and said “Yes, ambassador you can borrow the boat.”

And so, off we went in a catamaran—a Californian would have a catamaran, wouldn’t he—to rescue 100 people. It was a nine hour trip from Malta to Tripoli. And when we got there, my pilot reported, “They won’t let us set anchor. They don’t know who we are, they don’t know whether we’re on their side, and they don’t know whose side their on.”

After a while we were in port, and they did let us set anchor. They came on board and they took our cameras and smashed them on the floor, so that there would be no evidence of what would take place. They were intimidating us because they didn’t know us, that we were strangers to them.

And yet what was going to make the difference? One young woman, who was part of our counselor’s staff, opened up her purse and started looking at the pictures of her children. And then another of my staff started looking at the pictures of her grandchildren. And then they started sharing those pictures with the guards, and they started taking out the pictures of their children. Diplomacy. It’s a big word, a fancy word for ‘love thy neighbor.’

And while it took a while, and it took a lot of pictures of grandchildren to win them over, eventually, one of the head guards came and said, “We’re going to look the other way, and if you happen to leave and you take your hundred personnel from the embassy well, you happen to leave.” We not only took our personnel, we took 238 more from other countries, all around the globe, because the United States never goes anywhere without thinking about being of service to someone else. Then of course we got on the high seas, and Mother Nature had a gale force five storm waiting for us, and the only injuries that were suffered
were really those injuries in getting home through that storm; but 36 hours later, large numbers of people were thanking you, through me, for their lives.

One of the people who ultimately was saved that evening was Jay Christopher Stevens, a member of the Libyan embassy and ultimately appointed by the President, ambassador to Libya.

Jay Christopher Stevens would not survive the following 9/11. You know the story. His life was taken in Benghazi. Why was he there? He was there to open up a mission of goodwill.

Not many people knew that the following day he was scheduled to meet with the doctors of Libya to start an exchange program for the treatment of young children because the care of children in Libya was terrible.

He didn't survive to 9/12, and when the president had the solemn duty of calling Jan and Mary Stevens, Chris’s parents, to inform them of his death, of course the president made the obligatory statement that we will bring these people to justice. But here’s an aspect of interfaith diplomacy that comes, not from the state Department but from the father of a fallen young man. He said, “Mr. President, I know your chain of office requires you to do that, to hunt down those who would harm us, but what Chris would want is for you to complete the mission, for you to continue that exchange program that would build up the care of their children.”

And while the state department was a little slow in getting that underway, ultimately that took place; but it took place largely under the tutelage and under the guidance of the Stevens family, who had the capacity in their own diplomacy to say, ‘Here. You took our son, we offer more.’ How much more can one do than to lay one’s life down for another.

‘Interfaith diplomacy.’ said President Obama, ‘That’s what I want you to open up.’ Why Malta? Because the people of Malta are secure in their faith. They know who they are, because it is the pivot point. To the south is Africa and the great Muslim nations, to the east are the Hebraic, Judaic nations, to the north is Europe and, of course, the United States and Christianity. This is a place where people could come together, and the President was insistent that we must follow the admonition of Mika: “To act justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our
God…” And to do that, embassies needed to be populated not just by trade officers, not just by cultural officers, not just by political officers, but by officers who would understand the faith tradition of the countries in which they were serving in, so that we would have avenues to reach the heart; when we didn’t have avenues open to us to reach the head.

These are opportunities. This is the way in which democracy, if it is going to come into root, if it is going to be strengthened, will make a difference in these countries.

Some people say the way forward is not to pay attention to faith, to not learn about the faith of others, to take a wholly secularist perspective; but that isn’t the history that was just demonstrated to us of the Native Americans who danced with a dance that informed us of a higher spirit that guided them. That wasn’t the spirit of William Penn that the Director talked about that brought people who had been persecuted in their religious beliefs to the United States.

The answer is not to divide our public selves from our private selves, and if in private we pray, and if we pray in our families, then we have to pray as a nation as well. America’s greatness depends upon staying true to the promise of the Declaration of Independence, a promise that is anchored in the laws of nature and nature’s God.

If we are not true to that we will forfeit freedom itself, and we will forget, as John Kennedy told us (and I think that there may be a wonderful picture going up at some point of John Kennedy kissing the forehead of his father, Joseph, in October 1963, and we know what happened a month later)…. That’s an unusual picture; I bet you haven’t seen it before. It was a picture that was in my father’s collection, because he was a Kennedy man, and that’s how I learned about politics myself, by being dragged to meetings as a nine-year-old.

My father was always accused of winning the 1960 election with the cemetery vote for John Kennedy. As I told the audience this afternoon, my father had an answer to that, and it was, ‘if so that was only proof of the resurrection.’ He would also quip, ‘if you were a Democrat,’ but we will put that to one side.
Ladies and gentlemen, faith matters to us. It is never a matter of indifference. It is how we form our families, it is how we raise our children, it’s not a single faith in a single set of beliefs, it’s a multiple set of beliefs, and we have an obligation domestically to not go out of our way to provoke people to disregard each other in those beliefs, but to accommodate, to welcome, and to affirm, and the same is true internationally.

So, if you will, join me in remembering this obligation that President Obama has so clearly set forth, and is beginning to achieve with this prayer: ‘Keep us oh God from all pettiness. Let us be large in thought, in word, in deed. Let us be done with all faultfinding, and let us be done with all self-seeking, [and] put away all of our pretenses. Let us meet each other face-to-face, without self-pity, without prejudice. Let us never be hasty in judgment. Let us take time. Make us calm and serene. Help us put into action our better impulses to be thoughtful and to be unafraid. Grant that we may realize that it is in the little things in life that we are different; it is in the big things that we are all the same.’ And, oh God, as we contemplate religious freedom and the obligation to nourish it, let us never forget to be kind. Thank you very much.