



A Public Conference presented by the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions, Princeton University and the Association for the Study of Free Institutions, University of Nebraska at Omaha

Moral Conflict and the Free Society

Free societies are established on a moral consensus among citizens to respect each other's rightful liberties. Yet, as James Madison argued in Federalist 10, such societies inevitably give rise to differing opinions, including disputes over essentially moral questions. By their very nature, free societies create intellectual and political space in which a variety of groups can advance differing conceptions of the private and public good. The consequent moral disagreements sometimes generate severe social and political conflicts that can pose persistent challenges to the politics rent by such contention.

The year 2008 marks the 150th anniversary of the Lincoln-Douglas debates, one of the great examples of free citizens in a free society grappling with deep moral divisions and their social and political consequences. Taking this anniversary, and the debates themselves, as a point of departure, the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions at Princeton University and the Association for the Study of Free Institutions at the University of Nebraska at Omaha are sponsoring a conference on how free societies generate and deal with profound and divisive moral questions: the crisis of slavery in the American republic, the subsequent quest for racial justice, continuing controversies over abortion and biomedical issues, the basis of human rights, and the question of humanitarian intervention in the affairs of other nations.

We seek to address a number of questions. How can free societies most fruitfully deal with divisive moral conflicts? Must such conflicts be addressed by recourse to the fundamental principles of the free society, or are they such that they can be resolved, one way or another, through a pragmatic accommodation of interests that need not confront basic regime principles? What is the role of prudence in mediating the conflicts that arise, and to what extent should moral evils be tolerated in order to protect the public peace that any society requires and to ensure that liberty to which free societies aspire? Most profoundly, is freedom alone a sufficient social and political good, or must the free society live up to some broader conception of justice or goodness in order to merit the citizen's full approval?