

DEBATING
the
DIVINE

RELIGION IN
21st CENTURY
AMERICAN
DEMOCRACY

Edited by Sally Steenland

Center for American Progress



THE FAITH AND PROGRESSIVE POLICY INITIATIVE

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Center for American Progress
1333 H Street NW, 10th Floor
Washington, D.C. 20005
Tel: 202.682.1611 • Fax: 202.682.1867
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SALLY STEENLAND, Senior Policy Advisor to the Faith and Progressive Policy Initiative,
Center for American Progress

Debating the Divine

An Introduction

THE ICONIC PUBLIC SQUARE where Americans of the past used to gather to debate the politics of the day is long gone from most cities and towns, but the spirited conversations that once defined these places—both in myth and fact—are alive and well today. The topics of our current political and cultural conversations range from the mundane to the profound, but a recurring theme has to do with religion and politics—in particular, whether religion should be a force shaping our public policies and our common civic life.

Of course, this is not a new conversation. Contrasting views about the role of religion in public life predate our nation's birth—from the Massachusetts Bay Colony, where officials collected taxes to support the Puritan church and compelled attendance at its services,¹ to the Founders who disestablished religion from the state and drafted the Constitution without mention of God.

In recent years, these conversations have been heating up. Invectives fly back and forth as opponents stake out mutually exclusive claims on behalf of truth, fairness, and the American way. Listening to each side, one is hard-pressed to tell whether we are a God-saturated, intolerant, anti-intellectual theocracy—or a severely secular nation that punishes the practice of religion and banishes God altogether from our laws, policies, and public life.

Debating the Divine: Religion in 21st Century American Democracy aims to turn down the heat and turn up the light. Because the issue of religion in public life is complex, encompassing theory, history, and practice, we purposely did *not* set up a narrowly-focused debate in which each side shot at the other, and the side with the fiercest arguments and most adherents won. Instead, we have chosen to examine the many facets of the issue in a thoughtful way, in hopes of finding new insights and, perhaps, common ground.

Debating the Divine opens with two essays that set out different views concerning the role of religion in the public square.

David Hollinger, the Preston Hotchkis Professor of American History at the University of California, Berkeley, argues in his essay for a strong civic sphere in which democratic national solidarity and civic patriotism trump all religious loyalties. He asserts that religious ideas are too often given a pass and argues that they be critically scrutinized.

Eboo Patel, a scholar and activist who founded the Interfaith Youth Core, calls in his essay for the vigorous participation of religion in public life, founded on principles of religious pluralism. He argues that religious voices, in all their particularity, have a legitimate and important role to

play in public debate. And he spells out ways in which interfaith collaboration is strengthening civic and political institutions.

Eleven essayists respond to these viewpoints. They challenge and expand the arguments of Hollinger and Patel, and add their own expertise and views. Vincent Miller examines ways in which globalization challenges notions of religious pluralism and cultural consensus. Nicholas Wolterstorff disputes the idea of a common secular morality and urges each of us to operate from the morality to which we are committed. Martha Minow warns against using private religious signals and symbols in public policy arguments, and insists that policies involving religion, such as faith-based initiatives, do not discriminate against a diverse public.

Susan Thistlethwaite reminds us that “objective reason” has always been influenced by cultural forces. Jeremy Gunn clarifies the meaning of the “public square.” Charlene Sinclair explains how religion as a force for social justice has been and remains a powerful ingredient in democracy. And Mark Lilla calls for serious debate among liberals and conservatives—but with the exchanges defined by each side actually knowing something about the other’s beliefs and views.

Susan Jacoby believes there is too much religion in the public square. She argues for an examination of the effects of faith-based politics. Melissa Rogers examines how the tradition of religious freedom can help define the role of religion in current civic debates. Mark Noll demonstrates how religious institutions have shaped our democracy, urging recognition of religion and public life as distinct but overlapping spheres. Finally, Alan Wolfe defines what it means for the United States to be a “secular” nation, arguing that it is because we are so secular that we can be so religious.

In the book’s final section, our lead essayists, David Hollinger and Eboo Patel, reflect on the respondents’ views. John D. Podesta and Shaun Casey conclude with an essay that lays out policy implications of the ideas discussed in the book.

Despite the widely varied views of our writers, *Debating the Divine* contains a number of recurring themes. The first is that both religious and secular citizens ought to be full and equal participants in the public sphere. Another theme is that religious motivations for policies should be argued in terms accessible to a broad public and subject to compromise, or even rejection, if the argument does not persuade. A third theme emphasizes that the religious liberty and relative harmony we enjoy in this country needs to be continuously safeguarded as we become a more diverse nation in the days ahead.

It is our hope that the views in this book will enrich your thinking and spur you to add your own voice to the conversations of the 21st century, as we continue to negotiate the role of religion in our diverse and flourishing democracy.

ENDNOTES

1 Gary Wills, *Head and Heart: American Christianities* (New York: Penguin Press, 2007), 26.

Opening Essays

David A. Hollinger

PRESTON HOTCHKIS PROFESSOR OF AMERICAN HISTORY,
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY



Civic Patriotism and the Critical Discussion of Religious Ideas

POLITICAL LIBERALS TODAY ARE AWASH in appeals to establish strategic alliances with religious constituencies, including evangelical Protestants. Nicholas Kristof, in *The New York Times*, warns against the “ignorance and prejudice” displayed by members of his own tribe when they mock citizens who hold conservative theological views.¹ The increasing engagement of leading evangelicals with the environment, poverty, and foreign policy unilateralism creates new and promising opportunities for cooperation.

I believe these opportunities are best acted upon in the context of a strong reaffirmation of a civic sphere in which our common membership in democratic national solidarity trumps all religious loyalties. Civic patriotism has been unfashionable on the liberal Left since the late 1960s on account of the efforts made in its name to discourage cultural diversity and to stifle criticism of American foreign and domestic policy.

But its renewal today can promote pride in church-state separation and can celebrate a distinctive civic sphere in which persons of many religious orientations, including persons who count themselves as non-believers, can be full participants in their distinctive capacity as Americans. In keeping with such an understanding of our civic sphere, I argue in this essay that any religious ideas offered as justifications for public policy should be open to critical debate, and no longer given a “pass.”

GIVING RELIGIOUS IDEAS A “PASS”

By “giving religious ideas a ‘pass’” I refer to the convention of maintaining a discreet silence when one hears a religious idea expressed, no matter how silly it may seem. This convention, which is deeply rooted in the assumption that religion is a private matter, shields religious ideas from the same kind of scrutiny to which we commonly subject ideas about the economy, gender, race, literature, science, art, and virtually everything else.

If someone says women cannot do first-rate science, or that African Americans are just not as smart as Korean Americans, or that homosexuality is a choice rather than a condition, or that taxation is essentially a form of theft, or that the Americans won World War II with minimal help from the Soviets, it is okay to challenge the speaker with evidence and reasoning. Responding in this argumentative manner is less okay if someone says that his or her support for Israel is based

on what God has said in the Bible, or that Jesus Christ will come to Earth soon and judge every human being living and dead, or that some good thing happened because God answered someone's prayers, or that earthquakes are messages sent by God.

When Al Gore claims to resolve life's tough problems by asking, "What Would Jesus Do?," he can count on the respectful silence of those who doubt the guidance actually provided by this principle of applied ethics. Nobody with a modicum of tact asks Gore if he has examined his religious ideas with the same scrutiny he has applied to claims and counter-claims about global warming.

Skeptics are expected to refrain from asking the faithful to clarify the epistemic status of the Bible, and from inquiring about the evidentiary basis for the doctrine of the atonement. Arguments within faith communities are allowed (Methodists can challenge one another on whether Paul's letter to the Romans means that same-sex relationships are contrary to God's will, Catholics can dispute one another's opinions about Vatican II, and committed Christians generally can argue over the relevance of the Bible to today's evolutionary science), but the greater the intellectual distance between the potential critic and the person whose beliefs are at issue, the less socially acceptable it is for the critic to speak candidly.

Religious conflicts prior to, and even well after the enactment of church-state separation, have convinced many people that silence is a good way to keep the peace.

This convention has impressive historical foundations. Religious conflicts prior to, and even well after the enactment of church-state separation, through the First Amendment to the Constitution, have convinced many people that silence is a good way to keep the peace. Protestant ancestors of my own were murdered by Catholic terrorists. The privatization of religion has been integral to the creation and maintenance of a public sphere in which persons of any and all religious orientations, including non-belief, can function together.

If religious ideas were genuinely trivial from a civic standpoint, playing no appreciable role in how people dealt with anyone other than themselves and their immediate families and their voluntary associations, religion could be more comfortably ignored. But nowadays we are constantly told that the enlargement of the scope of government renders the silencing of religion in the civic sphere a potential violation of the Constitution's guarantee of the free exercise of religion.

OBAMA GETS IT RIGHT

Fortunately, at least one major politician has offered a sensible affirmation of civic patriotism in which he places a clear limit on the role that religious ideas should play in politics. Senator Barack Obama declares, in a speech worth quoting at length:

Democracy demands that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific, values. Democracy requires that their proposals be subject to argument, and amenable to reason. *I may be opposed to abortion for religious reasons, but if I seek to pass a law banning the practice, I cannot simply point to the teachings of my church or evoke God's will. I have to explain why abortion violates some principle that is accessible*

to people of all faiths, including those with no faith at all. ...Politics depends on our ability to persuade each other of common aims based on a common reality. It involves the compromise, the art of what's possible. At some fundamental level, religion does not allow for compromise. It's the art of the impossible. If God has spoken, then followers are expected to live up to God's edicts, regardless of the consequences. To base one's life on such uncompromising commitments may be sublime, but to base our policy-making on such commitments would be a dangerous thing.²

Here, Obama invokes crucial distinctions between private motivation and public warrant, and between the demands of politics and the demands of faith in a supernatural power. He also insists that non-believers are in no way second-class citizens, but are fully equal in the civic sphere. The vital importance of these points becomes clear when we listen to some other voices in the current religion-and-politics conversation.

Governor Mike Huckabee of Arkansas, while explaining his opposition to abortion and same-sex marriage during the January Republican primary in Michigan, offered God's biblically revealed will as an appropriate template for amending the Constitution of the United States:

I believe it's a lot easier to change the Constitution than it would be to change the word of the living God. And that's what we need to do is to amend the Constitution so it's in God's standards rather than try to change God's standards so it lines with some contemporary view of how we treat each other and how we treat the family.³

Leaving aside Huckabee's innocence about how to achieve an agreement on just what God's will might be concerning family composition and a host of other issues, what's striking here is this leading politician's bland confidence that the Constitution of the United States—a document famous in the history of constitution-making for not even mentioning God—is an appropriate domain for the enactment into civil law of God's instructions on highly specific questions.

CHECKING RELIGION AT THE PUBLIC DOOR?

But if Huckabee is too extreme a case to take seriously—the kind of evangelical those secular liberals might invent for polemical purposes if Huckabee had not obliged with a theocratic gun not only smoking but blazing—the outlook of Congressman Mark Souder of Indiana invites more respectful attention as a counterpoint to the principles proclaimed by Obama:

To ask me to check my Christian beliefs at the public door is to ask me to expel the Holy Spirit from my life when I serve as a congressman, and that I will not do. Either I am a Christian or I am not. Either I reflect His glory or I do not.⁴

Obama's perspective implies that if absolutists like Souder are unable to tolerate a domain in which their religious faith is less than all-consuming, they should stay out of politics. This is exactly what Souder's Mennonite forbears did: They stayed out of public affairs because, like Souder, they believed "radical discipleship" applied 24/7 in every setting. But today Souder, who believes that as a Christian he has "an obligation to change things" and welcomes his votes as a congressman as

opportunities to act on that obligation, cries foul if the faithful are discouraged from bringing their unmitigated religious witness into the Congress of the United States.

Obama draws upon a formidable theoretical tradition in the interpretation of this nation's church-state separation. The late John Rawls and his followers, including Martha Minow,⁵ have argued that participants in a shared democratic polity owe it to one another to conduct the business of that polity within premises that are particular to that polity and not to any of the more sectarian persuasions that may be present within it.

This is not an inappropriate restraint on the constitutionally protected free exercise of religion; rather, it is a mark of democratic commitment and a sign of solidarity with co-citizens in a diverse society. A variation on this tradition of thought has been elaborated helpfully by Michael Walzer in his new book, *Thinking Politically: Essays in Political Theory*.

“THE PRESSURE OF DEMOCRATIC ARGUMENT”

Walzer is willing to countenance “an appeal to religious ideas” as part of the process of mobilizing support for a given political goal. At issue is not the total divorce of politics from religion, Walzer explains, but rather the guarantee of a civic domain in which religiously motivated political action will face “the pressure of democratic argument.”

Walzer holds that religious groups “can defend the welfare state or oppose nuclear deterrence in the name of natural law,” or “argue for civil rights and affirmative action in the name of prophetic

If religious ideas are to enter the public sphere, they should be subject to the same rules that apply to the discussion of other ideas. But this rarely happens.

justice,” and they can even “join debates about family law, the school curriculum, [and] the censorship of pornography,” but in so doing they must deal with the “democratic conditions” that require the achieving of a consensus of citizens going well beyond their own community of faith.

In contrast to the more strict separationists who do not want to hear any religious justifications for public policy whatsoever, Walzer treats such justifications as facts of life

and urges that we welcome them within “the constitutional limits” designed to “lower the stakes of political competition.” These limits, by “denying God’s authority,” enable us “to make politics safe for human beings doomed to unending disagreement and conflict.”⁶

Walzer thus cautions against Souder-style, sectarian exploitation of the civic sphere; but Walzer also provides a sympathetic answer to a complaint Souder voices with some vehemence. Souder, a conservative Republican, believes that his secular critics are not playing fair in their own religious politics. Nobody objects to his using Christian values as a basis for his votes on environmental protection and on the protection of women and children from abuse, Souder asserts, but when he wants to “speak out against homosexual marriages, pornography, abortion, gambling, or evolution across species” on the basis of his religious faith, suddenly he is criticized for bringing religion into politics.⁷

Souder calls the bluff of those political liberals who refrain from criticizing a theological warrant for policies they embrace, but reject the legitimacy of a theological warrant for opposition to same-sex marriage and to the teaching of evolution in public schools. Walzer comes to Souder’s

rescue: He in effect warns secular liberals that they cannot have it both ways. Secular liberals cannot welcome theologically intensive justifications for policies they like and then turn around and condemn *as religious* comparable justifications for policies they don't like.

But just how do religious justifications for public policy encounter what Walzer calls "the pressure of democratic argument?" Surely, if religious ideas are to enter the public sphere, they should be subject to the same rules that apply to the discussion of other ideas. But this rarely happens. There is much hesitation.

THE DYNAMICS OF TIMIDITY

Secular liberals who laugh privately at what they understand of the religious ideas of Huckabee or Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney often hold their public fire because they are not sure they can criticize Huckabee and Romney without causing embarrassment to politically liberal religious believers ranging from the Unitarians and the United Church of Christ all the way to Rick Warren and the suddenly "progressive" elements of the National Association of Evangelicals called to our attention by Kristof and many other observers.

The hope seems to be that religious believers with politics more liberal than Romney's and Huckabee's will create a new social gospel if only secularists would be less precious about church-state separation and give them a chance. Why "split the movement" and get in the way of issue-specific alliances between non-believers and a variety of different kinds of believers? Day-to-day, pragmatic considerations argue for cutting some slack for religious believers, if their politics are progressive.

Another source of hesitation is the fear that criticism will come across as arrogance. Exactly this complaint is often made against what the press likes to call "the New Atheism."⁸ The books of four polemical atheists—Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens—are roundly condemned by reviewers and bloggers for failing to appreciate the intellectual sophistication of the average Episcopalian. The price of credibility, it seems, is respect for at least some kinds of religion and for a higher standard of civility than other discourses demand. The religion of one's neighbors may be the last stronghold of the old Sunday School maxim, "If you can't say something good about a person, don't say anything at all."

Yet another source of hesitation is the enduring power of the old assumption that religion is private, and not subject to impertinent inquiries. This assumption continues to flourish alongside the claim that religion is relevant to public policy. Romney's famous speech about his Mormon faith implied that anyone who held his faith against him was biased, but Romney did not declare his religion irrelevant to his performance as a potential president—as John F. Kennedy did in 1960—nor did Romney allow for critical interrogation of the religious ideas that ostensibly strengthened his qualifications for office.⁹

So it's okay to tell, but not to ask? Proclaim your faith and assert its relevance to your political leadership but then suffer no questions about its soundness?

"TELL BUT DON'T ASK"?

"Tell but don't ask" is consistent with the convention of giving religious ideas a "pass," at least if they are presented as Christian or Judaic. The convention would be easier to defend if all candidates

for public office took the view that Kennedy did. But they do not. Any liberal who voices a worry that religion might be counter-progressive, moreover, is instantly slammed with the importance of religion to Martin Luther King, Jr., and to the civil rights movement.

But of Christians, there are many kinds. Even when King's supporters among the most liberal of the white Protestants and Catholics are added to his base among the Black churches, the total amounts to a small minority of Christians in the United States at that time. Most white Protestants and Catholics were dubious about, if not actually opposed to, civil rights agitation prior to about 1964. The most intensely Christian segment of white America during the 1950s and 1960s was the segregationist south.

The "religion-is-good-for-America" narrative proudly invokes the Social Gospel, which largely failed in its effort to advance social and economic equality, but has little to say about the role of religious ideas in bringing about Prohibition, which for more than a decade succeeded. Gaines M. Foster's *Moral Reconstruction* shows the triumph of Prohibition to be the culmination of decades of religiously connected political activity remarkably

like that we see around us today.¹⁰ Religion has motivated a variety of progressive movements in history, but the record is much too mixed to vindicate today's easy affirmations of the wholesome effects of faith on politics.

Religion has no monopoly on foolishness and ignorance, but our convention of giving religious ideas a "pass" has made religion a privileged domain for wackiness in the United States.

Even Obama has called for "spiritual renewal," and in the passage of his quoted above, he is more welcoming of religion in politics than Kennedy was. Walzer's variation on the tradition of Rawls also welcomes religiously infused energies into democratic politics, but both Obama and Walzer look to the dynamics of democratic debate to filter out sectarian perspectives and to bring about political outcomes satisfactory to a secular order.

Yet neither Obama nor Walzer has explicitly advanced—so far as I know—the point I push here: When religious ideas are offered as justifications for public policy, those ideas should be subject to the full heat of critical debate. As Harry Truman said in another context, "If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen."

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A MORE ENLIGHTENED FUTURE?

What would happen if religious ideas were subjected to such a debate? I want to conclude with some speculations. A robust, critical discussion of religious ideas might encourage popular faiths more consistent with modern standards of plausibility, more conscious of the historicity of all faiths, and more resistant to the manipulation of politicians belonging to any party.

The long moratorium on sustained, public scrutiny of religious ideas has created a vacuum in which easy god-talk flourishes. Religion has no monopoly on foolishness and ignorance, but our convention of giving religious ideas a "pass" has made religion a privileged domain for wackiness in the United States.

The learned elites of the United States have been too reluctant to honestly engage the American public on the religious grounds that continue to be important in this society, which is by far the

most religious in the industrialized North Atlantic West. This complacent, patronizing aloofness has shielded the religious ideas of masses of Americans from both rigorous biblical scholarship and the aspects of modern secular thought that have led many scientists and social scientists away from religion.¹¹

A forthright, public debate about religious ideas might reveal that the most important religious divide in the United States today is not between secularists and believers, but between two rather differently constituted parties: 1) a broad dispersion of secularists and classically liberal Protestants, Catholics, Jews, and Muslims and 2) a variety of fundamentalist and evangelical believers whose understanding of scripture, divinity, and science remain oblivious to the critical spirit of the Enlightenment. Perhaps the salient solidarities are not communities of faith and of unbelief, but of people adhering to modern structures of cognitive plausibility and of people rejecting those structures.

ENDNOTES

This essay draws extensively, and with permission, on my "Religious Ideas: Should they Be Critically Engaged or Given a Pass?" *Representations* # 101 (January 2008), 144–154, which includes a more extensive assessment of the "New Atheists" mentioned here only in passing. Several sentences are taken from my "Among the Believers," *Harper's* (November 2004).

- 1 Nicholas Kristof, "Evangelicals a Liberal Can Love," *New York Times*, February 3, 2008. See also the series of letters (February 6, 2008), many accusing Kristof of a romantic and naïve view of religious conservatives.
- 2 Barack Obama, "Call to Renewal," address on May 28, 2006, available at http://obama.senate.gov/speech/060628-call_to_renewal/. Emphasis added.
- 3 MSNBC was one of many news organizations to report Huckabee's comments, available at <http://firstread.msnbc.msn.com/archive/2008/01/15/579265.aspx>. To be sure, the next day Huckabee backed off slightly, indicating that he did understand that the Constitution was a secular document.
- 4 Mark Souder, "A Conservative Christian's View on Public Life" in E.J. Dionne Jr., et al., eds., *One Electorate Under God? A Dialogue on Religion and American Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), 21.
- 5 John Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," *University of Chicago Law Review* (Summer 1997): 765–807. See also Martha Minow, "Governing Religion," in Dionne, et al., *One Electorate*, 144–149.
- 6 Michael Walzer, *Thinking Politically: Essays in Political Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 161, 163.
- 7 Souder, 21.
- 8 Anthony Gottlieb, "Atheists with Attitude," *New Yorker*, May 21, 2007, is one of the more discerning overviews of the "new atheism." Another is David Aikman, "The Atheist Onslaught," in the on-line journal, *Implications*, May 25, 2007, available at <http://www.tff.org/index/journal/detail/the-atheist-onslaught/>. The works most at issue are the following: Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006); Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2007); Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005); Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Random House, 2006); Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).
- 9 "Romney Seeks to Defuse Concerns over Mormon Faith," *New York Times*, December 7, 2007.
- 10 Gains M. Foster, *Moral Reconstruction: Christian Lobbyists and the Federal Legislation of Morality, 1865–1920* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).
- 11 Ample evidence shows that as a general rule, the greater the amount of scientifically warranted knowledge people acquire about the world, the less able they are to accept traditional religious beliefs. There are dramatic exceptions to this general rule: I have not the slightest doubt that some of the most learned and wise people in the world retain religious beliefs of one kind or another. For a helpful summary and analysis of the many studies of religious belief by various occupational and educational groups, especially scientists who have been elected to academies, see Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, "Atheists: A Psychological Profile," in Michael Martin, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 300–318. One survey of members of the National Academy of Sciences reviewed by Beit-Hallahmi (see page 312) found that in 1998, only 5.5% of responding biologists and 7.5% of responding physicists and astronomers declared belief in a personal god, while most surveys of the American public report rates of such belief at between 80% and 90%.

Eboo Patel

FOUNDER AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, INTERFAITH YOUTH CORE



Religious Pluralism in the Public Square

WHEN KEITH ELLISON, THE FIRST MUSLIM ELECTED TO CONGRESS, took his oath of office on the Qur'an in January 2007, he touched off a public controversy. Right wing radio talk-show host Dennis Prager wrote, "Insofar as a member of Congress taking an oath to serve America and uphold its values is concerned, America is interested in only one book, the Bible." In Prager's view, Ellison's desire to take the oath on the Qur'an "undermines American civilization."¹

Seeing Ellison swear upon the Qur'an also upset Rep. Virgil Goode of Virginia. The Republican congressman sent a letter to his constituents, warning that many more Muslims would be "elected to office demanding the use of the Qur'an" if the United States didn't seriously restrict its immigration policies.² (For the record, Keith Ellison, an African American, was born and raised in Detroit, Michigan.) Days after the swearing in, pundit Glenn Beck challenged Rep. Ellison on his TV show: "[W]hat I feel like saying is, 'Sir, prove to me that you are not working with our enemies.'"³

Given such heated rhetoric, it is understandable why many people, both religious and secular, believe that religion should remain in the private realm—as personal inspiration, fine—but not as public identifier. Regarding Ellison, for example, some conservative religious voices would argue that the Bible is America's only sacred book, while some secular voices would say that elected officials should not take the oath of office on *any* sacred book, whether it be the Bible, the Qur'an or the Upanishads.

All too often, it seems that when religion steps out in public, division and strife ensue. I believe, however, that the solution to the problem of divisive religious voices in public life is not fewer religious voices—or none at all. The answer is greater participation of diverse religious voices, guided by the principles of religious pluralism.

Religious pluralism allows democratic scrutiny of religious voices, while encouraging their expression, toward the goal of a common vibrant society. The principles of religious pluralism call for:

- Respecting and celebrating diverse religious traditions
- Valuing religious particularity
- Encouraging positive relationships among religious communities
- Engaging in collaborative efforts for the common good.

All too often, when religion steps out in public, division and strife ensue.

Just as there is a compelling national interest in shaping healthy interaction among different races and ethnicities, so is there a compelling national interest in shaping how different faith communities (including people of no faith) engage one another. All of this requires a public language of faith that is inclusive, respectful, and encourages participation—and that is heard at every level of society, including national politics.

WHY RELIGION BELONGS IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE

There are a variety of arguments supporting the role of religion in the public square. They range from the philosophical to the strategic to the pragmatic—and recognize both the theoretical importance and the practical realities of religion in American life.

In this vein, the political philosopher Michael Sandel has written, “Where political discourse lacks moral resonance, the yearning for a public life of larger meaning finds undesirable expression...Fundamentalists rush in where liberals fear to tread.”⁴

Sandel has it right. When liberals and moderates avoid public discussion of religion and morality, they leave a vacuum to be filled by extremists, whose dominance gives them disproportionate influence and power. Extremists can claim that their rigid absolutist views represent the moral high ground and that they are the sole guardians of religious truth.

The way to dilute such power is to add more religious voices to the public realm. Moderating voices can challenge the extreme views of fundamentalists, disprove their false claims, and add to the vigor of public debate. Just as free speech advocates argue that the solution to bad political speech is not silencing it but adding more voices, the same is true for religious speech.

Furthermore, it is fundamentally illiberal to exclude religious voices from the public square—requiring that before people can participate, they must “cleanse themselves” of religious particularity. Democracy welcomes people as they are, even as it participates in their transformation.

Moderating voices can challenge the extreme views of fundamentalists, disprove their false claims, and add to the vigor of public debate.

Democratic discourse allows a diversity of voices based on political, ethnic, and racial identities. To close the civic door to some—or all—religious voices is contrary to our nation’s ideal of fairness.

In recent years, liberals have learned how strategically mistaken they were to abandon religious talk in the public square. In forfeiting the terrain of religion to conservatives, liberals became either irrelevant or seemingly antagonistic to urgent moral, political, and cultural issues. But liberal abandonment of religion was not just a strategic error that robbed them of voters and allies. Their relinquishment diminished the public debate.

On issues from global warming, AIDS, and poverty, to abortion and same-sex marriage, religious voices have much to contribute to the public dialogue. They can offer a moral framework that goes beyond rigid partisanship, as well as a tone of civility that encourages common ground. In rallying the public on difficult issues such as humanitarian relief and foreign assistance, religious voices can appeal to our higher selves and challenge us to go beyond self interest to serve the greater good.

As history has shown, religion not only inspires citizens to service, sacrifice, and purpose, but its institutions have provided invaluable assistance to those in need. Given the depth and history

of this assistance and the expertise it engenders, it makes good sense to include religious advocates in policy discussions and debates.

And there is a practical reason to allow religious voices in the public square: They are already there. We are a vibrantly religious nation, and to assume that God talk will somehow remain inside mosques, synagogues, churches, and temples is fantasy.

Stephen Prothero makes this point, among others, in his book, *Religious Literacy*:

Assume for a moment that liberal philosophers John Rawls and Richard Rorty are right—that religious reasons ought to be banned from the public square because they are by definition irrational and therefore not susceptible to civil debate. Assume that religious people should be forced either to translate the religious reasons for their public policy stances into secular speech or to remain mum. Assume that the *polis* is not and will never be sufficiently tolerant to allow for God talk of any sort, that anything less than a “naked public square” means a return to the religious warfare of early modern Europe. Finally, assume that the counterarguments here—that banning religion from politics is undemocratic and that religious people are just as capable as secular people of reasonable debate—are all specious. Even if all these assumptions are correct (and they are not), the fact is that American political life is, as a factual matter, awash in religious reasons, religious arguments, and religious motivations.⁵

E.J. Dionne adds more reasons why religion should participate in public life. In his book, *Souled Out: Reclaiming Faith and Politics after the Religious Right*, Dionne quotes Richard Wightman Fox, who says that religion can be seen:

both as a democratic social power—a capacity to build community—and as a tragic perspective that acknowledges the perennial failing of human beings to make community endure... Religion allows people to grapple with the human mysteries that neither science nor politics can address. But it also provides a force that science and politics can call on in their effort to understand and transform the world.⁶

Religion can serve as a means of social cohesion, a trainer of civic participation, and a builder of community where discipline, generosity, reflection, and service are learned. Religion can offer insightful critiques of materialism, hyper-individualism, and other conditions of the modern world. It can also provide endurance and hope, which are essential in the struggle for justice.

Having said all of this, it is important to add that religion in the public square must be “disciplined by democracy.” As the evangelical activist Jim Wallis says, “Religious convictions must therefore be translated into moral arguments, which must win the political debate if they are to be implemented. Religious people don’t get to win just because they are religious... They, like any other citizens, have to convince their fellow citizens that what they propose is best for the common good.”⁷

THE NEED FOR RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

The United States is an increasingly diverse nation in terms of religion—and this at a time of fierce religious conflict around the globe. In the United States, slightly over half of the adult population is Protestant (51.3 percent), while nearly one-quarter (23.9 percent) is Catholic. Mormons and

members of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints comprise 1.7 percent of the adult population. Other faiths include Jews (1.7 percent), Jehovah's Witnesses (.7 percent), Buddhists (.7 percent), Muslims (.6 percent), and Hindus (.4 percent). Slightly over 16 percent of the adult population claims no religious affiliation.⁸

The current U.S. Congress reflects greater diversity than the population as a whole. Since Keith Ellison's election, he has been joined by a second Muslim representative, and there are two Buddhist representatives.⁹ There are 15 Mormons in Congress (10 representatives, five senators) and 43 Jewish elected officials (30 representatives, 13 senators). This is the first time in our history

Religious pluralism values religious particularity—being loyal to one's own beliefs, behaviors, and symbols.

that there have been more Jewish officials in Congress than Episcopalians (27 representatives, 10 senators).¹⁰

This last statistic is particularly striking. The Episcopal church was the fourth largest denomination in 1776 and one to which many of America's Founding Fathers

belonged. The most predominant religion in the current 110th Congress, however, is Catholicism, with 129 representatives and 25 senators. In contrast, only three of our Founding Fathers were Catholic.¹¹ One representative in the 110th Congress categorizes himself as an atheist. Six representatives list themselves as "unaffiliated."

Such religious diversity offers an impressive snapshot of multiculturalism—one we can be proud to show ourselves and the world. Furthermore, this diversity offers rich opportunities for enhanced understanding among different faith traditions and for collaboration based on mutual values and goals. Yet it also presents challenges because, in today's world, the question is not simply whether religion belongs in the public square. The question also is which religion(s) can claim a legitimate public role and what kind of engagement there should be.

How we work out the answers to these questions matters greatly—not only to ourselves but to citizens in other nations who look to us as a model for how people of different religions can live peaceably side by side.

THE VALUE OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

Religious pluralism draws upon the broader philosophical tradition of pluralism in America, which can be traced back to the writings of the early 20th century political theorist Horace Kallen. He suggests that America is best understood as a "nation of nationalities," a country where people from different backgrounds not only retain parts of their heritage, but offer them to America in a way that enriches the common life of the nation.¹²

More recently, Diana Eck of The Pluralism Project at Harvard University has worked on the implications and effects of religious diversity on civic life and society. Eck makes a clear distinction between diversity and pluralism. Diversity simply refers to people of different cultural, ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds living in close quarters. Pluralism, however, is the active engagement of those diverse groups, with the intention of building familiarity, understanding, cooperation—and a common society.

Religious pluralism values religious particularity—being loyal to one's own beliefs, behaviors, and symbols. It encourages people from different religious identities to work together for

the common good, whether that is demonstrated through acts of community service or policy advocacy. Rather than closing the door on those who are different (exclusion) or demanding that they leave their differences behind (assimilation), pluralism asks that “[you] come as you are, with all your difference and angularities, pledged only to the common civic demands of American citizenship.”¹³

In short, then, religious pluralism is neither mere coexistence nor forced consensus. It is not a watered-down set of common beliefs that affirms the bland and obvious, nor a sparse tolerance that leaves in place ignorance and bias of the other. Instead, religious pluralism is “energetic engagement” that affirms the unique identity of each particular religious tradition and community, while recognizing that the well-being of each depends upon the health of the whole.

Religious pluralism celebrates diversity and welcomes religious voices into the public square, even as it recognizes the challenges of competing claims. Also, it recognizes that in a pluralistic democracy, competing claims must be translated into moral language that is understood by fellow citizens—believers and nonbelievers alike—who must be convinced of the benefits of what is being proposed.

MAKING IT REAL

In our global economy, once-homogenous communities have become startlingly diverse, as people from different races, ethnicities, and religious groups work together, send their children to the same schools, and live in the same neighborhoods. Different core beliefs, cultures, and customs rub against each other. This is both unsettling and exciting, as we encounter faiths different from our own that are deeply rooted in other people’s lives.

As we face these challenges and opportunities, we need to draw upon not only concepts of religious pluralism, but our sense of national history. The fact that our Founding Fathers deliberately disestablished religion from the state so that no particular religion would be favored and people could freely worship their own God without punishment has allowed a wide range of religious traditions in the United States to flourish.

As we face these challenges and opportunities, we need to draw upon not only concepts of religious pluralism, but our sense of national history.

And Founding Fathers such as George Washington actively engaged with religions outside Christianity. From the early days of his presidency, Washington corresponded with Jewish congregations in Savannah, Philadelphia, New York City, Charleston, and Richmond. In 1790, Washington received a letter from the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island, inviting him as the new president to visit. In part, the congregation’s letter said, “Deprived as we... have been of the invaluable rights of free Citizens, we now with a deep sense of gratitude to the Almighty... behold a Government... which to bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance—but generously affording to all Liberty of conscience, and immunities of Citizenship.”¹⁴

Washington accepted the invitation and said in his reply, “If we have wisdom to make the best use of the advantages with which we are now favored, we cannot fail, under the just administration of a good Government, to become a great and happy people. ... May the children of the

Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants; while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid.”¹⁵

At the Virginia convention ratifying the state’s constitution in 1778, James Madison said, “Freedom arises from the multiplicity of sects, which pervades America and which is the best and only security for religious liberty in any society.”¹⁶ Indeed, throughout our history, religious communities have arrived on our shores fleeing persecution and seeking religious freedom. They have settled alongside communities from other faiths and countries seeking the same.

It is true that the religious tolerance enshrined in our founding political documents has not always been honored in practice. As with race, ethnicity, and gender, the United States has a mixed history when it comes to equality and freedom for religious groups. Catholics, Jews, Mormons, and

other faiths have experienced prejudice, discrimination, and worse over the centuries. Muslims and other religious groups face bias and discrimination today.

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In order to move forward, we need to apply principles of religious pluralism to the ways we think and behave. This means being thoughtfully informed about our own tradition, whether it be faith-inspired

or not. It means giving fellow citizens the same respect and accommodation for their tradition that we request for our own. It means actively engaging with other faiths, even as we remain loyal to the particularities of ours. And it means working in collaborative efforts for the common good.

This work is already happening in schools and workplaces, in communities and on the national stage. Interfaith civic engagement is reducing tensions among communities, with significant political consequences. Several years ago at the University of Illinois, for example, Jewish and Muslim student organizations were engaged in fierce and heated debates about Middle East politics. To create space for a different type of conversation and relationship—one that was authentic and honest but respectful—a group of students founded Interfaith in Action. Among other things, the organization focused on the shared social values of Islam, Judaism, Christianity, and other faiths—values which include mercy, hospitality, and service.

The group applied these values to community-action projects. They organized an annual Day of Interfaith Youth Service that brought students together to volunteer at local social service agencies. Not only did this process ease tensions between Jews and Muslims, but when the controversial film *The Passion of the Christ* came out, Interfaith in Action was the place where people went for honest and productive interfaith dialogue concerning the film.

Similar interfaith student groups are emerging at universities across the country. Schools and students are realizing that if they do not encourage healthy relationships among diverse faith groups, extremists and fundamentalists invested in division are likely to prevail.

On the national level, the Islamic Society of North America and the Union for Reform Judaism have launched a project where local mosques and synagogues engage in interfaith programs that include regular meetings among imams and rabbis, as well as exchanges among lay leaders. And the leaders of ISNA and URJ have given keynote addresses at each other’s national conventions. In 2007, Dr. Ingrid Mattson, the President of ISNA, told the URJ convention:

Muslims have instinctively turned to the example of Jews in America to understand how to deal with the challenges we face as religious minorities—whether these challenges involve securing the right to religious accommodation in public institutions, or dealing with workplace discrimination. At the same time, I believe that the Jewish community will also benefit from having Muslim partners in the struggle to uphold the constitutional separation of church and state, to promote civil liberties, to extend religious accommodation to minorities, and to counter prejudice and hatred.¹⁷

Interfaith relationships are making important policy contributions as well. From partnerships on global warming, environmental justice, poverty, global AIDS, health care, and more, an impressive range of religious and secular groups are bringing their voices of moral urgency to the most pressing problems of our day. As Jim Wallis says:

The separation of church and state does not mean the segregation of moral values from public life, or the banishing of religious language from the public debate. ...In choosing not to establish any religion in American public life, the founders of our country were not seeking to diminish the influence of faith and its moral values, but rather to increase their influence on the social fabric and political morality—precisely by setting religion free from the shackles of the state and protecting the independence needed to keep faith healthy and strong. The attempt to strip the public square of religious values undermines the moral health of the nation, just as any attempt to impose theocratic visions of morality is a threat to democratic politics.¹⁸

REPRESENTATIVE ELLISON AS EXEMPLAR

The Qur'an upon which Representative Ellison took his oath of office belonged to Thomas Jefferson—another affirmation that today's notions of religious diversity are not new. During Ellison's congressional campaign and after his election, he reached out to a broad range of communities and sponsored a number of interfaith meetings. When asked by CNN anchor Wolf Blitzer if he thought Rep. Goode was a "bigot" for his negative remarks about Muslims, Ellison replied that he wanted to meet with Goode to dispel misconceptions about Islam and to affirm their common commitment to the Constitution.¹⁹

Ellison has been an eloquent spokesman to the Muslim world of the resonance between Islam, diversity, and democracy. "The values that underlie Islam are not unique to Islam," he says. "They are shared by all faith traditions. Belief in charity, in giving to others in need and facing adversity, the belief in equality and justice—there is no religion, including Islam, that has a monopoly on these ideas ... These are universal ideas. In fact, they're not just com-

From partnerships on global warming, environmental justice, poverty, global AIDS, health care, and more, an impressive range of religious and secular groups are bringing their voices of moral urgency to the most pressing problems of our day.

patible with democracy; they drive us toward a society in which there is consultation, in which there is input and approval from the populace.”²⁰

And Ellison has been an important resource to his colleagues on Capitol Hill. When King Abdullah II of Jordan spoke to Congress in March 2007 and opened with the traditional Muslim greeting, “Assalamu Alaikum,” Ellison responded, “Wa Alaikum Assalaam.”

“What just happened?” some of his fellow representatives asked.

“He said, ‘Peace be upon you,’ and I responded,” Ellison said. “And upon you also, Peace.”²¹

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Responding Essays

Mark Lilla

PROFESSOR OF HUMANITIES, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY



The Two Cultures?

WHILE READING THE ESSAYS by David Hollinger and Eboo Patel, I was reminded of the famed squabble over “the two cultures” between C.P. Snow and F.R. Leavis, which divided English intellectuals in the late fifties and early sixties. In his 1959 Rede Lectures, Snow, a scientist and popular novelist, complained about the mutual incomprehension between the “cultures” of modern science and the humanities, for which he mainly blamed humanists who remained ignorant of the methods and recent discoveries of the sciences. This provoked a ferocious response from the eminently provokable Cambridge critic Leavis, who, quite frankly, wiped the floor with Snow, revealing his shallow conception of culture and naïve faith in technological progress.

The quarrel came to mind because it exposed a superficial dichotomy, which is always a healthy thing. What I liked about David Hollinger’s essay is that he challenges the lazy distinction between “religious” and “non-religious” arguments and encourages us to think critically about all of them, regardless of who makes them. Eboo Patel has unwittingly illustrated the problem Hollinger is talking about when he pleads for greater “inclusiveness,” “respect,” and “pluralism” in discussing religion.

That is a certain liberal position—I’ll call it “diversity” liberalism—that seems to sanction a thoughtless, faith-based approach to every important question, among believers and non-believers alike. In 1995, long before Christopher Hitchens and the “new atheists” cashed in, evangelical scholar Mark Noll complained in *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* about the dumbing-down of American Protestant thinking and writing, which he saw as a threat to spiritual seriousness. He was right, though he failed to mention how diversity liberalism encouraged this very tendency.

The current Pax Americana dictates that all sensitive issues, not just religious ones, be avoided when possible, that pluralism be celebrated, that different folks be given different strokes, and the like. But democracy is not for cry-babies: It requires serious debate by serious people with thick skins. And so does a life of faith.

The fallacy of diversity liberalism is to assume that the only alternative to inclusiveness and respect is exclusivity and contempt. What David Hollinger has in mind, I think, is a society in

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which people with real differences argue about those differences reasonably, in debates that force all parties to understand themselves and actually know something about their adversaries. In such a society irresolvable differences will get aired, but all sides have an obligation to defend their positions in matters affecting public life.

I frankly cannot tell what kind of public discussion Eboo Patel has in mind in his pluralistic society. Everyone has a voice, but there seems to be no genuine debate over evidence or reasoning, no persuasion. We all just vent, vote, and go home.

This leads him, I think, to misunderstand philosopher Michael Sandel's statement that "fundamentalists rush in where liberals fear to tread." This is not only because "liberals and moderates avoid public discussion of religion and morality," as Patel suggests; it is because diversity liberals don't believe there can be better or worse answers to fundamental questions.

Liberal democracy provides a stable structure for deliberation, a safe place where people can give reasons and be persuaded by them. I think we would all be better off if we had more open public debates over contentious issues.

One doesn't have to be a fundamentalist to believe that, or illiberal. Liberal democracy, as I understand it, is a system that, among other things, provides a stable structure for deliberation, a safe place where people can give reasons and be persuaded by them. Hollinger is completely right to insist that religious ideas not get a pass, and I think we would all be better

off if we had more open public debates over contentious issues such as evolution, abortion, and home schooling—so long as advocates on every side had to give reasons for their positions.

My guess is that this would actually work in liberals' favor, while also teaching them a thing or two about their conservative fellow citizens and the weakness of their own positions. For example, a more open debate on evolution would teach non-believers that creationists are actually right to argue that Darwinism is "just a hypothesis." This would force them to make the better case for Darwinism, which is the case for a scientific method of hypothesis and empirical falsification, rather than biblical literalism. Ask a creationist: Do you want a cardiologist whose education is based on my method, or yours?

But that is not the case diversity liberals feel comfortable making today. They don't know much about scientific method or appreciate it—C.P. Snow was right about that—nor do they think beliefs can be rationally criticized. And, most deeply, they don't believe there are correct answers to the deepest questions that exercise religious believers. They will snub the yokels or tolerate them, but not argue with them.

An illustration: This past fall I published *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West*, a book that, to my surprise, received a lot of public attention. I did countless interviews on public radio, speaking with liberal journalists before liberal audiences, and they were uniformly dull. Most interviewers had superficial polemical questions prepared. They asked: Is there any essential difference between George Bush and Osama bin Laden? Will American evangelicals turn this country into Iran? I was annoyed, not just by the contempt they showed for believers (which Patel would recognize), but also by the lazy ignorance such questions displayed about religion more generally.

The interviewers did not feel responsible for knowing something about their subject and taking their adversaries' arguments seriously. My experience on evangelical radio was quite different.

The most memorable two interviews I had were conducted with an evangelical talk-show host in Detroit, Paul Edwards of WLQV, who liked the book but wanted to convert me back to the evangelicalism of my youth. We ended up having a spirited debate about the role of fear in human life, comparing the ideas of Thomas Hobbes to those of the writer of the book of Hebrews in the New Testament, who wrote:

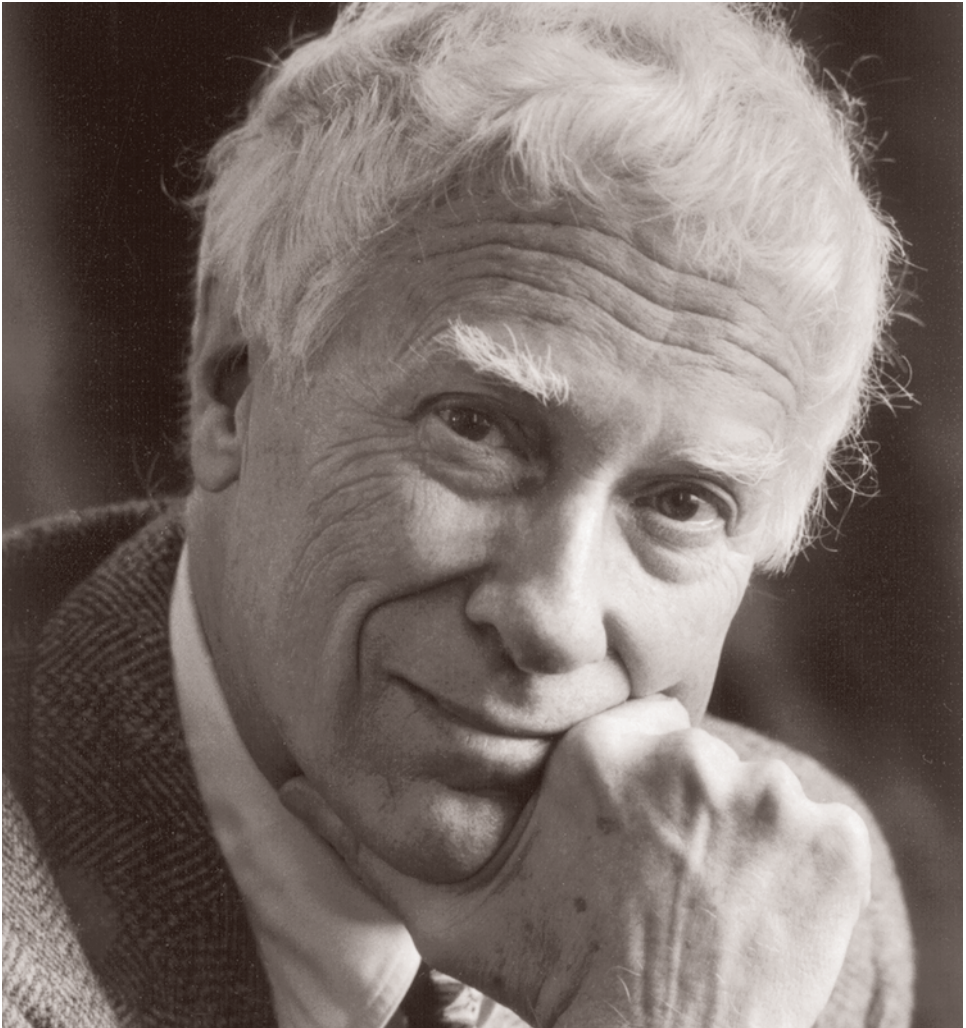
For he hath said: I will not leave thee: neither will I forsake thee. So that we may confidently say: The Lord is my helper: I will not fear what man shall do to me. (Hebrews 13:5–6)

Now that was an interesting interview.

Diversity liberals aren't interested in such debates. They wish to be "inclusive" of "people of faith," but not take seriously the claims of that faith, or argue against them if need be. They are wrong not to, and not only because a healthy democratic society requires openness to rational criticism. Such liberals underestimate the willingness of many believers to engage in such arguments because their deepest belief is that there are true answers to the questions religion addresses, and that finding those answers is "the one thing needful." Not two cultures, but one human need.

Nicholas Wolterstorff

NOAH PORTER PROFESSOR EMERITUS OF PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY, YALE UNIVERSITY



Religion in the Public Square

THE TOPIC UNDER DISCUSSION is what the role of citizen in our liberal democracy has to say about the sorts of arguments that one may employ in debating and deciding political issues. We are not talking about the role of legislators and judges, nor are we talking about what the state in our liberal democracy may or may not do with respect to religion. It is the role of citizens that is under discussion.

And when we speak of the sorts of arguments that citizens may employ, it must be understood that nobody is proposing passing laws forbidding citizens to employ certain sorts of arguments. It's not a legal "may" but a quasi-moral "may" that is under discussion. It's assumed that the role of citizen in our liberal democracy is like every other social role, in that attached to it are certain rights and responsibilities. Our question is: What responsibilities come attached to that role with respect to the sorts of arguments to be deployed in debating and deciding political issues?

In spite of their substantial disagreement, the writers of our lead-off essays agree on one very important point: People are defecting from the role of citizen if they just announce their position and refuse to engage in serious dialogue with those whose position differs, declaring "Here I stand; I can do no other." Hollinger insists that those who give religious arguments should not be "given a pass." I assume his position is that nobody should be given a pass. If so, Patel agrees, as do I.

And as I read Hollinger and Patel, they both take for granted that the topic of the discussion is to be justice for all and the common good; one is defecting from the role of citizen if one is interested only in getting power for oneself and one's fellow partisans.

The main point of contention between Hollinger and Patel is whether a religious person is faithful to the role of citizen if she employs the resources of her religion in debating and deciding political issues. Patel argues that there is nothing in the role of citizen that forbids this. Indeed, he goes farther and argues that it serves the common good if religious persons employ the resources of their religion in debating and deciding political issues. Hollinger demurs. He aligns himself with the 20th century political philosopher John Rawls, whose position, as Hollinger states it, was

People are defecting from the role of citizen if they just announce their position and refuse to engage in serious dialogue with those whose position differs.

that “participants in a shared democratic polity owe it to one another to conduct the business of that polity within premises that are particular to that polity and not to any of the more sectarian persuasions that may be present within it.”

Rawls’ view has been extensively debated over the past decade or so, along with such variants on it as that espoused by University of Notre Dame philosopher and ethicist Robert Audi, who holds that instead of appealing to Rawlsian “public reason,” citizens should appeal to what Audi calls “secular morality.” I have myself participated in this debate, defending the anti-Rawlsian, anti-Audian point of view. Here is not the place for me to rehearse my arguments; some of them are the same as some of those offered by Patel. I must content myself with making just one point.

Both Rawls and Audi assume that there is in fact a common morality; Rawls limits himself to claiming a common political morality, whereas Audi holds that there is a common general morality. Both of them then work with the picture of religious people as adding a sectarian religious morality to that common morality, or as substituting a sectarian religious morality for that common morality. One of my principal objections to the Rawls–Audi position is the assumption that there is such a common morality. This seems to me plainly false.

A fascinating book in this regard is Robert P. Jones’ recently published *Liberalism’s Troubled Search for Equality: Religion and Cultural Bias in the Oregon Physician-Assisted Suicide Debates*

(University of Notre Dame Press, 2007). Jones rehearses with admirable thoroughness the variety of arguments, religious and non-religious, mounted in Oregon for and against allowing physician-assisted suicide. (Those in favor eventually won this debate.) Two features of the debate are relevant to our topic.

If there were a common morality, then a case could be made that citizens should employ that morality when debating and deciding political issues.

First, a variety of religious arguments were employed in the debate (most, but not all, in opposition to physician-assisted suicide), yet none of them was given a pass and none of them fitted the caricature of religious arguments that one finds in the literature: “God told me that physician-assisted suicide is wrong so I’m against it.” Secondly, those who identified themselves as secular employed a variety of strikingly different arguments for their position. Some employed utilitarian arguments, some employed what Jones calls “expressivist” arguments, some sounded like Burkeans, and so forth. This should, of course, come as no surprise. Secular morality comes in many forms. Contrary to Audi’s assumption, there is no such thing as a common secular morality. And contrary to Rawls’ assumption, the idea of liberal democracy does not suffice for settling the issue of physician-assisted suicide.

If there were a common morality, then I think a case could be made that citizens should employ that morality when debating and deciding political issues—treating their own particular moralities, be they religious or secular, as dispensable add-ons. But given that there is no common morality, I think the only policy consistent with the idea of a liberal democracy is that, in their debates, citizens employ whatever morality they find themselves committed to—trying to find considerations that those who do not share their morality will find persuasive, listening to arguments against their position, and then, at the end of the day, participating in a fair vote.

Hollinger realizes that a good many religious citizens will not accept the self-censorship that he thinks belongs to the role of citizen in our liberal democracy. Hence, if I rightly understand him,

he urges on them and on the rest of us a fall-back position. If they do offer a religious argument, they must not ask for a pass and others must not give them a pass. As I mentioned earlier, on this I fully agree with him, as does Patel.

From this normative position Hollinger goes on to claim that religious people are in fact being given a pass in present-day America. I must say that when I read this part of his discussion, I had the sense of living in a different country from that which he was talking about. Arguments against religion in general are all about us. Hollinger himself mentions the books of the “four polemical atheists,” Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Samuel Harris, and Christopher Hitchens. Hollinger goes on to remark, wryly, that these have been “roundly condemned by reviewers and bloggers for failing to appreciate the intellectual sophistication of the average Episcopalian.” Well, Yes; but Hollinger’s position (and mine) is that nobody should be given a pass, even polemical atheists.

Fairness requires mentioning that not only have these four atheist essayists been roundly condemned by some; they have been lionized by others. Further, amid all the arguments against religion in general, there is no specific religion that goes free from criticism by those who hold some other religion.

I would have thought that, in the current climate, it is America-first nationalism and nativism that gets a pass, not religion. Whereas lots of people say they agree with Richard Dawkins, I haven’t heard anybody saying they agree with the judgment on America pronounced by the Reverend Jeremiah Wright.

Martha Minow

JEREMIAH SMITH, JR. PROFESSOR OF LAW, HARVARD LAW SCHOOL



Religions and Public Life

Problems of Translation

ONE OF MY FAVORITE STORIES tells of the rabbi who listens to one disputant and says, “You’re right,” then listens to his opponent, only to comment that he too is right, and then after his wife shouts out from the next room, “They can’t both be right,” the rabbi replies, “You’re right also.”

Eboo Patel says religious justifications should be part of political debate,¹ while David Hollinger argues that in the civic sphere, membership in a nation should trump religious loyalties.² On these points, they both are right,³ and any tension between the two positions can be resolved by demanding that actual rationales for public policies must be translated into secular language, accessible to and preserving of secular debate—even while the very conceptions of a common good, larger than any individual or group itself, can be sustained and replenished through the religious commitments of individuals.

In a religiously diverse society, the precise religious gestures that may solemnize events, vouch for individuals, or motivate some constituents may baffle or alienate others. The display of religious symbols or distribution of public funding may support the idea of religion or particular religions, but do so at the cost of offending those whose views are not visibly supported—or those who reject the placement of their religion on a par with others, or those who on principle reject government entanglement with their faith. Religiously-informed arguments and perspectives afford prophetic insights and energy to politics and public affairs, but exactly these same arguments and perspectives can be conversation-stoppers through the appeal to a higher authority or through the perception, by some listeners, of an alien discourse.

The promise and peril of religious references in the specifically political dimensions of public life are especially visible now as political candidates vie for the support of religious voters. An opening for religious discourse in politics occurs as the “religious right” no longer lines up uniformly for Republicans, as Democratic candidates for national office eagerly appear in televised discussions of their religious faith to overcome negative impressions that they are either too disconnected from or too influenced by religion, and as five of the nine Supreme Court justices share the Catholic faith and seem poised to rework the rules governing abortion, marriage, the death penalty, government torture, and environmental protection.

But there are deeper reasons for the mounting focus on religion in politics. Complex global forces (the excesses of market capitalism? the political uncertainties after the Cold War? the politicized uses of religion in non-democratic states?) over several decades have produced growing religiosity across all major faith traditions. The hold of secularism is growing more tenu-

ous in places as far apart as Turkey, due to internal and regional politics, and France, as natives reclaim Christianity in their response to Muslim immigrants. In this moment, it is more crucial than ever to reaffirm the distinctive American respect for the diverse religious lives of citizens and a commitment to create a common world that can be shared and governed apart from religious visions and divisions.

As a practical matter, any view that ejects religion entirely from the public sphere is doomed in a nation like the United States, where the vast majority of people identify themselves on surveys as religious and believers in a divine being. Efforts to exclude religious motivations and claims from public debate are also out of touch with the well-springs of many people's values. But difficulties arise if government actions cross over from reflecting religious sources for vision and energy to bypassing secular argument with private signals, accessible and responsive only to some participants in public debate.

That is, in effect, what happens when claims of religious belief or authority substitute for secular arguments; religious claims are comprehensible and persuasive only to some and not others. Even religiously coded speeches by presidents and representatives are problematic in this respect, for they bisect the community into those who understand the secret references and those who may not even know that a private conversation is going on.

Princeton professor of religion Jeffrey Stout puts it well: "If a large segment of the citizenry is in fact relying on religious premises when making political decisions, it behooves all of us to know what those premises are. Premises left unexpressed are often premises left unchallenged."⁴ Both public debate and public policy must refrain from preferring one kind of religion over others, or preferring the religious over the non-religious, if the fundamental commitment to civic equality is to have any chance of succeeding.

The central task, then, is one of translation. Jim Wallis, quoted by Eboo Patel, says, "Religious convictions must be translated into moral arguments, which must win the political debates if they are to be implemented. Religious people...like any other citizens, have to convince their fellow citizens that what they propose is best for the common good."⁵

And Michael Walzer, quoted by Hollinger, similarly calls for welcoming religious arguments into public debate, subject to constitutional limits—separating any catechism or religious meanings in order to permit political debate.⁶ Arguments founded not in religious faith or texts but instead in empirical evidence, history, or commonly accessible moral language hold the possibility of communicating and persuading a diverse polity.

Concretely, two sets of public policies test the role of religions (for they are plural) in the public square. The first set of policies are the faith-based initiatives, started under President Bill Clinton and expanded under President George W. Bush—policies that expanded public funding for religious providers of welfare, drug treatment, housing, and other government programs. Some state governments, too, have experimented with public funding for religious schools and public contracts for religious programs in prisons. Lord knows (!), we need to improve schools, welfare, health care, and justice. Competition and plural approaches can help—but not without the larger public framework devoted to ensuring individual freedoms and mutual respect.

New government efforts to deploy religion to meet human needs must be accountable to a diverse public. A state can work with religious providers of welfare and social services, but only if the providers do not violate state and local anti-discrimination employment law and if they ensure the freedom of religion and expression by participants. A religious (or for-profit) provider can run corrections facilities, but cannot bypass the rule of law's due-process protections.

Contract and voucher plans must have these public strings attached. Decisions to contract out or use vouchers for private programs must be subjected to ongoing review individually and taken together in light of the larger public goals of strengthening equality, mutual respect, and a sense of community across lines of difference.

The second set of policies where religions and the public square meet is public funding for private schools. Public funding must not reach any school that excludes students on the basis of race, religion, national origin, or ethnicity—and must ensure comparable opportunities for boys and girls, children with disabilities, and English-language learners. And it is vital that schools, whether public or private, secular or religious, equip students in this diverse polity to understand and use the language of secularism, while also cultivating recognition of and appreciation for the diverse religious and cultural traditions of neighbors and strangers.

Our remarkable experiment in democratic governance of a religiously diverse society depends upon believers and nonbelievers finding ways to live together, and Protestants and Catholics, Buddhist and Hindus, Muslims and Jews doing the same.

As public schools splinter into specialized charter and magnet schools, and as private schools increase their enrollments through public and philanthropic subsidies, state and federal laws need to ensure guarantees of common preparation for civic participation, as well as for further education and jobs.

Religious pluralism depends upon overarching laws that mandate tolerance and also set limits on the government's involvement and support.

This nation, reflected in its constitution and laws, embraces complex and multiple social values: freedom and community, abstract equality and religious diversity, individual and communal responsibility. These values compete but they also link. Individual freedom relies upon shared rules and institutions. That is what produces ordered liberty. Religious pluralism depends upon overarching laws that mandate tolerance and also set limits on the government's involvement and support. To make it all work, we need continuing democratic debate over how to protect the interdependence and independence of individuals.

ENDNOTES

These remarks draw upon Minow, "Vouching for Equality: Religious Schools Can Rank Among the Choices," *Washington Post*, February 24, 2002, Page B05, and Minow, "Governing Religion," in E.J. Dionne, Jr., et al., eds., *One Electorate Under God? A Dialogue on Religion and American Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), 144.

- 1 Eboo Patel, "Religious Pluralism in the Public Square," 18.
- 2 David A. Hollinger, "Civic Patriotism and the Critical Discussion of Religious Ideas," 9.
- 3 Actually, our provocateurs avoid further conflict when Patel proceeds to advocate interfaith collaborations in universities and civil society rather than religious justifications for public policies, Patel, *supra*, at 22–23, and Hollinger calls for greeting religious arguments in public debate with the same engaged critique accorded to any other kinds of argument, Hollinger, *supra*, at 14–15.
- 4 Jeffrey Stout, in E.J. Dionne, Jr., et al., eds., *One Electorate Under God*, 194.
- 5 Patel, 23 (quoting Jim Wallis).
- 6 Hollinger, 12–13.

Mark A. Noll

FRANCIS A. MCANANEY PROFESSOR OF HISTORY, UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME



Wisdom, Not Prescription

One Size Does Not Fit All

AS A HISTORIAN, IT IS DIFFICULT for me to imagine that any one formula can provide guidelines for regulating the intersection of religion and public life, especially in the United States. For the proposal from David Hollinger about the need for critical scrutiny of religious interventions in public life, for Eboo Patel's defense of religious pluralism, and for many other possibilities currently on offer, the historically informed answer should probably be, "it depends."

The prescriptions outlined by Hollinger and Patel are certainly worthy ones. In a democracy, all proposals for public policy—including those emanating from explicitly religious sources, as well as those like Hollinger's that rely on "the critical spirit of the Enlightenment"—should indeed be scrutinized carefully for their moral and utilitarian consequences. In addition, the picture of public space that Patel offers, in which a wide array of particular religious perspectives compete collaboratively, certainly sketches a praiseworthy ideal.

Yet complexity defines the American past on the connection of religion and politics. And complexity requiring a great deal of ad hoc discernment will be necessary for setting a satisfactory future course.

The history that leads me to this cautious position is filled with events and circumstances that defy reduction to simple assessments. The knot of religious-political interactions in antebellum America, and the equally knotty interactions of the last half century illustrate the dense complexities involved.

Political culture as it came to exist in the United States grew from a landscape sketched by constitutional guidelines, but given life by religious energy. The national separation of church and state, which led eventually to separation of church and state at the local level, was a wise provision of the political founders.

The agencies that created American political culture in a disestablished public space were, however, primarily religious. As described powerfully in Daniel Walker Howe's sparkling new contribution to the Oxford History of the United States, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (2007), religious motives, religious actors, and religious modes of organization were prime forces driving the creation of a functioning democratic republic.

Political culture as it came to exist in the United States grew from a landscape sketched by constitutional guidelines, but given life by religious energy.

By pioneering the deployment of voluntary societies—for Bible distribution, for temperance, for education, eventually against slavery—religiously motivated groups and individuals showed how to construct a strong civil society on the basis of voluntary organization. The political sphere followed, rather than led, this primarily religious phase of early American social development. Thus, political parties followed the lead of religious voluntary societies in organizing themselves. Political campaigning imitated what had been done in working up revivals. Political newspapers and magazines followed a path marked out by religious publications.

When Alexis de Tocqueville came to the United States in the early 1830s, he famously reported that “it was the religious aspect of the country that first struck my eye.” Many of the most telling observations in Tocqueville’s *Democracy* grew from his conclusions concerning “the great political consequences that flowed” from the nation’s religious character.¹

So was it a good thing for American democracy to be so strongly influenced by religiously inspired forms and forces? Yes and no.

Yes, because the free exercise of religion of a mostly Protestant, evangelical character gave the nation its precedents for voluntary organization, which were eventually imitated by political parties. Religious organizations developed the practices of democracy, which included women and racial minorities long before politicians gave these groups the right to vote. And religious voluntarism guided the American use of literacy, which penetrated much further down the social scale than anywhere else in the world at that time.

But also, no, because religion—again of a mostly Protestant evangelical cast—gave the northern and southern sections of the country the certainty that each was the sole agent of God’s finest work in the world, and so turned sectional conflict into the cataclysmic strife of the Civil War. Some observers at home and many from the outside recognized this conflict immediately

as a distinctly religious war.² The religious energy that had done so much to create national political culture was the same force that transformed controversy over slavery, states rights, and sectional honor into a bloodbath.

The conundrum involved in the outworking of events in a democratic polity strongly shaped by religion is illustrated by Abraham Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address of March 1865. This speech was

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the most profoundly religious public statement in American history. It was also a statement that led Lincoln out of the particularity of his own singular religious convictions to, in effect, condemn the religious forces that had fueled the war.

A similar complexity has attended the public history of the last two generations. Particular religion stormed back into American politics in the 1950s when African-American Christian ministers led African-American church members in demanding civil rights on the basis of transcendent religious norms. David Chappell’s richly documented book, *A Stone of Hope*, has argued convincingly that the ameliorative social policies of liberal white America were not effective in moving from regret about persistent racial inequality to actual reform of the United States’ racist public life. It took, rather, particular religious motives that appealed directly to God to shake loose the nation’s entrenched regime of racial discrimination.³

Yet the religious results of the civil rights movement were far from simple. The movement was actively or passively opposed by a large number, probably a majority, of white Christian believers who, though they shared the Christianity of civil rights reformers, did not share their assessment of the nation's social evils. Then, if most of white religious America eventually accepted the civil rights revolution, large segments of that same population soon came to resent the expansion of federal power that had pushed through national civil rights, especially as that power was turned to other national reforms affecting women's rights, abortion rights, and gay rights.⁴

The result of 50-plus years of mingled religious-political public advocacy is a situation where it is now difficult to find a single meaningful prescription for how the interests of public policy and religion should relate. Those like myself who view racial reform and the defense of life as the two most important domestic challenges want to both strongly affirm and seriously qualify the exercise of religion in public life.

Powerful arguments based on utilitarian principles can be advanced for each of these positions. For example: A history of racial discrimination that existed for nearly 350 years needs much more than a leveling of the legal playing field to rectify past wrongs. And a society that fails to protect those humans in its midst who are least able to protect themselves is a society poised for deadly assault on all others who are excluded from the circle of "liberty and justice for all." But, of course, for many (including myself) who would make these non-religious arguments, the reason for advancing utilitarian arguments on behalf of affirmative action and pro-life are thoroughly religious.

A better solution than seeking a universal prescription about religion and public life would seem to be the recognition that the religious sphere and the public sphere are distinct but overlapping spheres of existence. Intermingling between these spheres is inevitable, but the spheres are in fact not co-extensive or identical. Wisdom in the conduct of life within each sphere, and then wisdom about how the inevitable intersection of these spheres should be guided, is the great desideratum of this American moment, as it has been in all other times and places of human history.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. and trans. Harvey Claflin Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 282.
- 2 For expansion, see Harry S. Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War* (New York: Viking, 2006); and Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).
- 3 David Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).
- 4 I have tried to show how the earlier difficulties of the Civil War were directly connected to the unfolding of recent American history in *God and Race in American Politics: A Short History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite

PROFESSOR OF THEOLOGY, CHICAGO THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
SENIOR FELLOW, CENTER FOR AMERICAN PROGRESS



Nobody Gets a Pass

Faith in Reason and Religious Pluralism Are Equally Questionable

DAVID HOLLINGER IS, OF COURSE, COMPLETELY CORRECT when he argues that “religious ideas offered as justifications for public policy should be open to critical debate and no longer given a ‘pass.’” It is true that religious actors in the public square often seem to assume that “playing the faith card” is enough. It is not. Religion, when it engages the public square, needs to give an account of itself beyond “Thus sayeth the Lord.”

The same, however, needs to be said for the unsupported faith Hollinger demonstrates in “reason” in public discourse. For secular liberals, reason, rational discourse, and the Enlightenment are often given a pass as well. Secularists who play the “the reason card” do not evidence even a modest awareness that objective reason is subject to strong critique from many quarters, especially from postmodernists and postcolonial theorists.¹

Should we not ask secularists to at least acknowledge that the ideas of liberal democracy came from a particular race, class, and even gendered interest? Are we to believe that slaveholders writing lyrically about freedom pose no fundamental contradiction, that they are just a historical anomaly? “Remember the ladies,” wrote Abigail Adams to her husband John Adams, and the Founders did not. Without such critique, and the subsequent critical awareness of the competing and entrenched interests served by the very “ideals” of contemporary liberal democracy, liberal democracy itself can (and has) become a transcendent faith that mirrors the transcendent faith it wishes to supplant for control of the public square.

Should we not ask secularists to at least acknowledge that the ideas of liberal democracy came from a particular race, class, and even gendered interest?

In his 1981 book, *After Virtue*, Scottish political philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre argues that far from being the secular route to human salvation, the Enlightenment has failed to produce the good society. What we have achieved instead is the overreaching confidence of secular liberals in the capacity of reason (their own reason) to discover universal principles such as “freedom” or “democracy” that are unconnected to specific contexts and practices. In addition, MacIntyre credits secularism with the rise of an atomistic individualism that has not inculcated the practice of virtue required for a common good and hence a good society.²

Therefore, we cannot take at face value Hollinger’s statement that valorizes the “scrutiny to which we commonly subject ideas about the economy, gender, race, literature, science, art, and virtually everything else.” Would this be the same scrutiny to which scientific ideas about “eugenics” were subjected in the 20th century? The same scrutiny of the ideas of “informed consent” in the Tuskegee Syphilis experiments that were conducted for 40 years, ending in 1972? The centuries since the Enlightenment have been replete with the failure to sufficiently scrutinize ideas about the economy or gender, race or science. Exploitation and even genocide have sometimes been the result.

A key insight of postmodernism is that, as Christian theologian Roger Olson has written, “something like faith is involved in all human thinking.” There are those, therefore, who see “some benefits to postmodernism’s discarding of the rationalistic mind-set of the Enlightenment and modern secularism in favor of community-shaped perspective as a necessary ingredient in all knowledge.”³

If our goal, religious and secular alike, is to get greater clarity on the content of the common good, then we are better served by the kinds of knowledge, both religious and secular, that come from the bottom up. If we do not find ways to make our reflections on the common good genuinely more participatory for those on the margins, then we will have only an imaginary construct

that, because it excludes, is neither good nor common.

If we recognize the limitations of human knowledge and our individual and group capacity for self-delusion, then we might achieve a cooperative public sphere.

The advantage of the postmodernist critique to our discussion is to raise this question: Would religion and secularism both benefit from not being given a “pass” in their approach to political discourse in the public square? If we recognize

the limitations of human knowledge (religious or secular) and our individual and group capacity for self-delusion, then we might achieve a cooperative public sphere (albeit a somewhat modest one). A community of discourse that does not require each participant to adopt the mind-set of the other, a self-critical community that listens well and also challenges, is our best way forward.

PLURALISM AND CONFLICT

Eboo Patel offers us an inspiring vision of what a pluralist approach can contribute to religion in the public square. “Religion can serve as a means of social cohesion, a trainer of civic participation, and a builder of community where discipline, generosity, reflection, and service are learned,” he says. It is well to remember, however, that an encounter with genuine religious diversity can often produce the opposite result—social fragmentation, fueled by fear.

It is certainly true, as Patel argues, that just as there is a “compelling national interest in shaping healthy interaction among different races and ethnicities, so is there a compelling national interest in shaping how different faith communities (including people of no faith) engage one another.” But sometimes this very “shaping” happens through conflict, rather than “healthy interaction.”

In both the Hollinger and Patel essays, there is too little attention paid to the concept of power and conflict in political life. When religious and secular actors engage the public square, when any actor engages the public square, they are doing so in order to garner sufficient power to achieve a

given end. This fact of political life does not mean pluralism is not possible—it is simply a fact of life. While generosity of spirit and a willingness to go beyond narrow group-identity politics help to promote pluralism, it is also true that conflicts over religion, and even the drive for political power, can lead to greater pluralism as well.

The very conflict that results when non-dominant religions and their mores engage the public square can produce both rejection *and* change. And, in regard to Hollinger, people contesting their religious beliefs in public are not necessarily “irrational,” they are merely engaged in our political process.

An example of this kind of conflict recently occurred at, of all places, secular Harvard University. Harvard closed one of its gyms to men for six hours a week at the request of several female Muslim students, so that they could exercise more comfortably. “Sharia at Harvard” was Andrew Sullivan’s response on his blog. The *Harvard Crimson* called the gym closing a “misguided accommodationist policy.”⁴

Harvard is not the only site of such conflict. From Orthodox Jewish students suing Yale, arguing that being forced to live in co-ed dorms violated their religious principles, to Muslim female medical students objecting to the requirement that they roll up their sleeves to scrub in for surgery, controversy abounds when people of different beliefs, customs, and values live and work side by side.

Our sense of the “public good” can emerge from such conflicts. Some religious beliefs and practices may have to succumb to professional standards or codes (surgeons have to wash their forearms), which are considered more important for the good of the whole than an individual’s voluntary choice of a medical sub-specialty. Other beliefs and practices may gradually become accepted, and controversy will diminish.

The value of critical theory to this analysis is to recognize that religion versus secularism is not a “rational vs. irrational” issue. Nor must we insist that our increasing religious pluralism be continuous with American culture. Increased pluralism can be radically discontinuous and still be salutary, as the “insurrection of subjugated knowledge”⁵ tests, probes, and perhaps even helps us redefine who we are.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Postmodernism is a critical theory, especially of modernism. The philosophers most often associated with postmodernism are Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. While originally a critique of texts, in Derrida this is extended to include symbols or phenomena in Western thought and becomes a critique of “objective reason” per se. The most common use of the term is to point to contradictions between the intent or surface of a work and the phenomena and assumptions that inform it and that it elicits. Postcolonialism came into being in response to Edward Said’s book *Orientalism*. It seeks to problematize the influence of European colonialism and Enlightenment thought on second and third world cultures. It points to the contradictions between Enlightenment principles of democracy and equal rights and the colonialist actions of the West.
- 2 Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 6.
- 3 Roger E. Olson, “The Future of Evangelical Theology,” *Christianity Today*, February 9, 1998, 40, cited in Mark G. Toulouse, *God in Public: Four Ways American Christianity and Public Life Relate* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 172.
- 4 Ruth Marcus, “Hijabs at a Harvard Gym,” *Washington Post*, March 26, 2008, A19, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/03/25/AR2008032502295.html>.
- 5 Michel Foucault, “Two Lectures,” in Colin Gordon, ed., *Power-knowledge: selected interviews and other writings, 1972–1977* (Brighton, U.K.: Harvester Press, 1980), 78–108.

T. Jeremy Gunn

DIRECTOR OF THE FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND BELIEF PROGRAM,
AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION



Clothes Encounters in the Naked Public Square

IN HIS OPENING ESSAY, Eboo Patel asserts, correctly in my judgment, that it would be “fundamentally illiberal to exclude religious voices from the public square,” and that “to close the civic door to some—or all—religious voices is contrary to our nation’s ideal of fairness.”

While I completely agree that religious voices should not be excluded from the public square, the risk of this actually happening in the United States is so close to zero that *the real question is*: Why do Patel and so many others talk about the possibility of religion being excluded—as if it were a lurking risk? It is almost as if people in France were to become alarmed that their government might ban the French language or prohibit drinking wine. It is not going to happen. And (virtually) no one suggests that it should. Why do so many people raise the alarming specter of a religion-free “naked public square”?¹

Lest we miss the forest for the trees, we should remind ourselves just how pervasive religion is in the public square in the United States. Radio and TV airwaves (and cable channels too) are filled with preachers and their religious messages. Sermons are available 24/7. The doors of concert halls and Madison Square Garden are open for religious revivals. Public airwaves across the country broadcast Christian music. Churches, mosques, gurdwaras, and temples are easily visible and accessible to the general public from public streets. A tourist cannot walk down a public sidewalk in any city in the United States, whether on Main Street or Wall Street, without seeing churches, crosses, temples, menorahs, and other religious institutions and symbols. People are free to worship one God, no god, or many gods—and they do so. Church attendance is higher in the United States than in any other developed country in the world. Religious books are widely published, sold, and handed out, and the U.S. Postal Service delivers them in the mail without government censorship or restraint. Street preachers preach in public parks. Missionaries walk up and down public sidewalks and knock on doors to convey their message to any who will listen. Religious parades and manifestations take place on public streets and in public parks. Candidates for public office deliver speeches about their religious beliefs, whether to enlighten the public or to pander to it. School children at public schools wear religious attire (whether a hijab, a cross, a turban, or a yarmulke).

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Not only do all of these activities and symbols appear in a vibrant way in the public square, they are protected by the First Amendment of the Constitution. My own organization, the ACLU, has brought many cases to court to help establish these rights when they are ignored by government officials (federal, state, or local).² There are now many other organizations—of the ideological left, right, and center—that vigorously work to ensure that American citizens are free to practice, manifest, broadcast, and otherwise express their religious beliefs in the public square. For most practical purposes, the basic laws governing religious activities in the public square are now well-established and generally (though not always) respected. On those occasions when officials infringe on rights of religious expression described above, public interest groups across the ideological spectrum spring into action to protect religious expression in the public square.

If all of these manifestations of religion in the public square are well-protected and largely uncontroversial, we again come back to the question: Why do many people, including Patel, speak as if we actually should be concerned about the possibility of religious voices being “excluded”?

The answer lies, I believe, in some mischief-making that exploits the ambiguity of the word “public.” Although I do not think that Patel himself is trying to confuse the issue, he first adopts and then deploys the language that comes straight from the mischief-makers.

This is how the game is played: Some people who realize that Americans largely think that “religion in the public square” is a good thing but who also know that “government promotion of religion” is controversial (and arguably unconstitutional), have decided to use the misleading euphemism “*religion in the public square*” when what they are *really* talking about is *governmental promotion* of their preferred religious symbols, language, and beliefs. In this misleading framing of the issue, they try to make it appear as if the dispute is between those who, like themselves, believe that religion should be “public” and those who, like their opponents, supposedly think it should be removed from the public and kept “private” (or “behind closed doors” or “invisible”). Through this thoroughly false dichotomy, they seek to drive a wedge in the culture wars.

There are many individuals and groups who proudly describe themselves as promoting “Christianity” and “religious values” and who attack those whom they claim are trying to remove all religious expression from the public square.³ Their formulations manipulate—rather than clarify—the ambiguity of the meanings of the words “public” and “private.” Depending on the context:

“Public” can be a synonym for “government,” as in “public schools,” “public parks,” “public property,” and “public utility.”

Other times “public” means “visible” and “out in the open,” as opposed to private or hidden or secret or behind-closed-doors.

Sometimes “public” means something like “open to everyone” without the connotation of government involvement, as in “public speaker,” “public restroom,” or “public corporation.”

“Private” can mean “secret” or “behind closed doors” or “exclusive” or “limited,” as in a private club or private property.

But “private” also can refer to things that are very much in the “public” domain and are widely visible and not secret, as in “private enterprise.”⁴

The real controversy in the United States is not whether individuals, families, and religious communities may express their religion in the public square; rather, it is extent to which the *government* should be involved in promoting religious activities. It is about government officials deciding who will pray at city council meetings. It is about taxpayer dollars being used to pay for prayers. It is about spending government dollars on private religious schools or other religious institutions. It is about the government deciding which religious messages it wants to promote. It is about the government erecting religious monuments on government property. It is on *these issues* that we disagree, not whether religious voices should be excluded from the public square.

Americans typically have no difficulty whatever in recognizing the unconstitutionality of governmental promotion of religious beliefs that differ from their own. Many Americans, however, seem to apply a different standard when they want the government to promote *their particular* religious beliefs. By sounding the false alarm that religion in the “public square” is somehow in danger, they are able to distract attention from the real issue and then enlist the government to promote their preferred religious beliefs.

In the interest of having an honest and illuminating civil discourse, it would be helpful if everyone participating in the debate on the role of religion in public life would use the word “government” (or something like that) when the role of government is the issue, and not use the term “public” as a misleading euphemism. This of course assumes that participants in the discussion are genuinely interested in having a serious discussion about the public role of religion in a constitutional democracy, and that they are not seeking to fan the flames of a culture war in order to divide Americans along religious lines.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Much of the current debate has its roots in Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986).
- 2 See, for example, <http://www.aclu.org/religion/govtfunding/26526res20060824.html>.
- 3 One would hope that those who declare themselves to be promoting Christian values would be particularly scrupulous in how they describe the positions of those with whom they disagree on constitutional questions. We also would hope that these religious-minded people would candidly acknowledge that many groups with whom they might disagree on the role that government should play in promoting religion, have nevertheless worked vigorously on behalf of religious expression in the (non-governmental portion of the) public square. We also would hope that those who take religion seriously would not resort to caricature, exaggeration, and distortion by suggesting that their opponents are attempting to drive all religion out of the “public square” and force it into the “private” when it simply is not true. Well...
 - “For more than 50 years, the ACLU and other radical activist groups have attempted to eliminate public expression of our nation’s faith and heritage.” (<http://www.alliancedefensefund.org/issues/ReligiousFreedom/Default.aspx>)
 - “Many liberal advocacy groups, such as the ACLU, would exclude religious viewpoints from the public square, and religious institutions from full participation in community life.” (<http://www.aclj.org/Issues/Issue.aspx?ID=1>)
 - “[C]ourts and bureaucrats often rule that religion belongs entirely in private and so should be purged from public life.” (<http://www.becketfund.org/index.php/topic/2.html?PHPSESSID=e81144f5966a274fae0208e32a10d2f9>)
 - “Activist judges are taking away our most basic American liberties by determining what words we may use to express ourselves; by denying the expression of religion (mostly Christian) in the public square.” (<http://www.acru-courtwatch.org/issues/1stamendment.htm>)

It seems that we must continue to hope...

- 4 These distinct meanings can come into play with each other. For example, Exxon-Mobil is a *public* (visible) corporation that is *privately* owned by shareholders at the same time that it is a “*public* corporation” whose shares are listed on the New York Stock Exchange and can be purchased by the general *public*, each of whom is a *private* individual.

Susan Jacoby

AUTHOR OF *THE AGE OF AMERICAN UNREASON*



America's Tower of Religious Babble Is Already Too High

IN 1949, NEW YORK'S CARDINAL Francis Spellman and Eleanor Roosevelt squared off against each other on the issue of federal aid for parochial schools. Spellman, the most influential American Catholic leader of his day, had made a major speech demanding that Catholic schools receive their "fair share" of any federal funds for education. In her syndicated column "My Day," the former First Lady replied elliptically: "The separation of church and state is extremely important to any of us who hold to the original traditions of our nation. To change these traditions by changing our traditional attitude toward education would be harmful, I think, to our whole attitude of tolerance in the religious area."¹

Spellman went ballistic, accusing Mrs. Roosevelt in a letter to *The New York Times* of having compiled "a record of anti-Catholicism" and promoting "discrimination unworthy of an American mother."² Mrs. Roosevelt then took off her white gloves and observed that Catholic influence in Europe had not necessarily led to "happiness for the people." She concluded acerbically: "I assure you that I have no sense of being an 'unworthy American mother.' The final judgment, my dear Cardinal Spellman, of the unworthiness of all human beings is in the hands of God."³

This sharp exchange is emphatically not the sort of dialogue that Eboo Patel has in mind in an essay that seems to envisage a nation in which all we need to do is understand each other's beliefs better in order to make way for "collaborative efforts for the common good." The Spellman-Roosevelt letters may be much closer to what David A. Hollinger advocates when he argues that "any religious ideas offered as justifications for public policy should be open to critical debate, and no longer given a 'pass.'"

As a thoroughgoing secularist who believes that there is too much religion in the public square already, my position is much closer to Hollinger's than Patel's. For Patel—an Indian-American and a Muslim—secularists are always at the margins of any debate. Indeed, he literally places people of no faith in parentheses in the opening section of his essay. His is a world in which well-intentioned liberal believers of all faiths may, by becoming more understanding and tolerant of one another, make an impact on public life capable of breaking the recent fundamentalist stranglehold on discussions at the intersection of religion and politics.

Patel is concerned with the separation of church and state only insofar as it protects religion from government interference. He is not in the least concerned about the protection of government from religious interference—as long as it is the kind of "tolerant" religion he favors.

But some differences are irreconcilable. Bringing them directly into the political process requires a faith in human nature—whether under God or not—that the current state of human evolution (if I may be so bold as to use the “controversial” E-word) scarcely justifies. The novelist Philip Roth aptly captured this contradiction in a 1961 speech at Loyola University in Chicago when he referred to “the swallowing up of difference that goes on around us continuously, that deadening ‘tolerance’ that robs—and is designed to rob—those who differ, diverge, or rebel of their powers.” Roth argued that “it behooves us not to ‘love one another’ (which would seem from all evidence to be asking for the moon), but to practice no violence and treachery upon one another, which, it would seem, is difficult enough.”⁴

Patel writes about a group of University of Illinois students who, responding to angry debate between Muslim and Jewish students about Middle East politics, formed an interfaith group that concentrates on the “shared social values of Islam, Judaism, Christianity, and other faiths—values that include mercy, hospitality, and service.” Note, again, the omission of secularists from this “values” paradigm.

I would suggest that Middle East politics offer a spectacular example of a controversy that needs not more religious voices, but a stronger secularist influence. Notwithstanding Zionism’s origins as a secular movement, competing religious claims to supposedly God-given land are at the heart of the battle between Jews and Arabs. To return to Roth’s prescient speech, in which he was talking about the blockbuster movie based on Leon Uris’s novel *Exodus*, “a man who kills for his God-given rights (in this case, as the song informs us, God-given *land*) cannot so easily sit in judgment of another man when he kills for what God has given *him*, according to his accounting and his inventory.”⁵ Any definition of mercy and hospitality as specifically religious virtues hardly seems relevant here.

Hollinger’s basic position—that since religion is closely entwined with many political controversies, we should start debating the religious ideas underlying policy proposals—seems at first

A more fruitful discussion would focus on the effects of, rather than the religious rationales for, faith-based politics.

glance unassailable from a secularist vantage point. Given the current Democratic homage to the notion that we must use the language of liberal faith in order to take back the White House, it is refreshing to hear someone point out that liberals can’t have

it both ways. If it is legitimate for Democrats to use liberal faith-based rationales in support of their policies, how can we then criticize conservative faith-based crusaders for doing the same?

The one major problem with Hollinger’s analysis is the fragility of the premise that challenges to anti-rational faith might change the outcome of policy debates. Unlike many of the “new atheists” (who aren’t really new, but are reaching a new and larger audience), I see little use in arguing about the rationality of faith. The whole point of faith is that it is impervious to evidence, even though moderate religion has allowed itself to be modified by secular thought and scientific evidence, while fundamentalism has not.

A more fruitful discussion would focus on the effects of, rather than the religious rationales for, faith-based politics. The effect of expanding tax-voucher programs for parents who send their children to religious schools—a popular idea across much of the religious spectrum—would be a further undermining of public education. I would love to hear Mrs. Roosevelt’s thoughts about

vouchers, as distinct from older, indirect federal aid for religious schools participating in such tax-subsidized programs as school lunches.

But no one had the temerity in the 1940s to suggest that parents should get a tax break to underwrite religious education. One does not need to debate the principles of Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, or Protestantism to understand the potential for civic mischief in permitting any religious school to feed at the public trough.

In similar fashion, what good does it do to “challenge” the belief that using a spare embryo from a fertility clinic for research purposes is the equivalent of murder because embryonic cells in a petri dish are human beings? Better to concentrate on the potential of stem cell research to cure diseases suffered by people who are, by anyone’s religious or nonreligious standards, indisputably alive.

Above all, Americans need to distinguish between the public square—the huge space in which all of us talk and act in every way protected by the First Amendment—and the more limited political arena. Martin Luther King voiced his moral convictions—a morality equally appealing to secularists and those religious Americans who believed in racial justice—from the larger public square rather than the political arena. He wasn’t running for office.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Eleanor Roosevelt, “My Day,” June 23, 1949.
- 2 Cardinal Francis Spellman, “Letters to the Editor,” *The New York Times*, July 26, 1949.
- 3 Roosevelt to Spellman, *The New York Times*, July 28, 1949.
- 4 Philip Roth, “Some New Jewish Stereotypes,” *Reading Myself And Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975), 201.
- 5 *Ibid.*

Charlene K. Sinclair

PRINCIPAL, INSINC CONSULTING



Religion and Community Organizing

Prophetic Religion and Social Justice Offer Avenues to a New Democratic Pluralism

BOTH DAVID HOLLINGER AND EBOO PATEL agree that the critical question is not whether religious engagement within the public square is appropriate. Each affirms that whether explicit, implicit, or complicit, religion is very present in the public square. Instead, they are both concerned, for compellingly different reasons, with the impact of religious engagement on democracy and democratic participation. They both offer insightful strategies for how religious voices can be mediated within the public square, thus furthering rather than imploding democratic processes.

For Hollinger, a foundational premise for such mediation is “a civic sphere in which our common membership in democratic national solidarity trumps all religious loyalties,” and where “religious ideas offered as justification for public policy” are not given a “pass,” but are “open to critical debate.” Patel, however, proposes the utilization of a pluralistic ethos that bridges the particularity/universality divide in an effort to forge an engaged communal framework. Both Hollinger and Patel appear to be in agreement that the end goal is democratic engagement toward a nationalistic “American” common good.

Theism is often viewed as irrational and personal, while secular belief systems are seen as rational and public, but in fact both have their rational elements and leaps of faith.

In response, several questions come to mind. What constitutes “religion?” Why should democratic national solidarity trump “religious” loyalties? In a country where “democratic participation” is often reduced to distant elite conversations served up through the media and imbibed prior to entrance into a voting booth, does democratic engagement look and feel the same to all people? And finally, amid this distant and often unintelligible insider-speak that passes for democratic engagement, what gives the average person a sense of authority and right to participation beyond the process of voting? In light of my commitment to community organizing as a form of democratic engagement and because of the space constraints of this article, I will focus here on the final question.

Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci defines religion as any system that shapes “a conception of the world which has become a norm of life ... carried out in practical life.”¹ Thus theistic religions are not necessarily distinguishable from other value systems, including secular ones—so why should they be treated differently in the public square? Theism is often viewed as irrational and

personal, while secular belief systems are seen as rational and public, but in fact both have their rational elements and leaps of faith. Religion is one of a variety of value constructs and, as such, provides a normative framework by which emotional loyalties and moral sentiments can animate policies that seemingly support these loyalties or sentiments. Religion also provides a normative language for public discourse on humanity and human relations.

If we think of religion in this broad (not dogmatic or doctrinaire) sense, then any system is a “religious” system on par with any other and trumping none—be it spiritual or secular, liberal or conservative, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, or atheist. In my view, this is the starting ground for authentic democracy and an opening for a new pluralism—one that is based on commitments, whether secular or sacred. The equity inherent in this new pluralism allows us to aspire to a framework of alignment rather than engage in a struggle for primacy.

I believe that community organizing, when it engages in the struggle for socioeconomic justice among marginalized communities, illustrates such a pluralistic alignment. Community organizing is a process for social transformation that is grounded in the belief that the presence of negative socioeconomic conditions alone do not automatically lead to political, social, or legislative

changes. Rather, social transformation occurs when people affected by economic and social injustices—along with those in solidarity with them—amass enough collective power to create the public and political will to confront the negative conditions within their communities and lives.

The public square, then, becomes the stage on which the existential realities of their lives are confronted, negotiated, and ameliorated. Or viewed from a different angle, individuals waging public and collec-

If religion is a reflection of the deepest commitments of the citizenry but is confined to only private discourse, then a powerful vehicle for engagement in the democratic project is lost.

tive struggles for justice enter and are sustained and supported within the public square as a way of life; and this life is the authority that affirms their right of participation.

For many individuals directly affected by social and economic injustices, community organizing offers a challenge to the current reality over and against the vision of a different world. Faith and spiritual commitment encapsulated in the term “religion” is often the generator and sustainer of this radical vision amid an oppressive reality. Religion becomes a vehicle for collectivizing the possibilities of life and a catalyst for social engagement. If religion is a reflection of the deepest commitments of the citizenry but is confined to only private discourse, then a powerful vehicle for engagement in the democratic project is lost. Consequently, if democratic participation is defined not just as a free market of ideas but as the active engagement of all the citizenry, then excluding religion suppresses participation and thereby undermines democracy.

In *The Culture of Disbelief*, Stephen Carter says that the attempt to exclude religion from the public square is not only unnecessary, but also unrealistic. He argues that to ask those whose lives are anchored in religious tradition to engage in dialogue without reaching into the reservoir of their belief is tantamount to the needless amputation of a limb. Furthermore, the mere fact that some see eliminating religion from citizen participation as necessary, let alone possible, shows that religion is too often viewed as a trivial matter that can be shrugged on and off at will, rather than a guiding force in people’s motivations and decisions.

However, Carter agrees with Hollinger's analysis of Souder's argument when he voices concern that those who fear a weakened separation of church and state are too often spurred by whether they agree with the issue in question, instead of unswerving commitment to the principle. Citing various cases, Carter shows that "there is much depressing evidence that the religious voice is required to stay out of the public square only when it is pressed in a conservative cause."² Thus, for many the public square often becomes an exclusionary and hostile place for expressing religious and social beliefs and commitments, especially if those beliefs do not align with society's dominant views.

Dissenting voices, whether conservative or progressive, are tolerated only if they are small enough in number, quiet enough in force, or wacky enough in content to be deemed insignificant. This form of censorship allows dominant ideologies to prevail, while allowing quasi-pluralism only to the extent that it does not challenge or weaken dominant ideologies.

In a counterpoint to Hollinger's argument, Carter says that rather than keep religious voices out of the public square, we should challenge "the secular ends to which the name of God [is] linked."³ Secular ideas that receive traction because they enjoin religion must also be critically scrutinized.

The assumption that religion is (and should be) a private matter has always been an indulgent illusion of elite insiders. While I agree with Hollinger that religious ideas should not be given a pass, I also believe that critical debate regarding religion must go beyond tests for reasonability or rationality. Instead, the critique must be three-fold:

- First, it must test whether religious commitments are prophetic calls for real social analysis committed to the true humanity and worth of all and (to use a terribly religious phrase) whether they rebuke the wanton disregard for life via excessive militarism, poverty, (mis)education, and so on.
- Second, it must refute the notion that religion is an autonomous, individualistic expression that does not inform our political-moral understanding. The critique must "out" religion's political and class motivations.
- Third, it must embrace a pluralism that understands all systems of belief to be "religion," and thus subject all ideas (whether sacred or secular) to rigorous critical debate.

Democracy flourishes only through inclusive public discourse where religious motivations are encouraged and respected. In my view, the democratic project will not thrive if the demos is restricted and not allowed to engage its full self and deeply held commitments of morality and justice. Religion must be seen as more than a place of moralistic imperatives. It must be seen as a tool for appropriating and negotiating moral and empirical truth, in addition to being a well-source of our deepest commitments.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 344.
- 2 Stephen Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 64.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 229.

Melissa Rogers

VISITING PROFESSOR OF RELIGION AND PUBLIC POLICY AND DIRECTOR OF THE CENTER
FOR RELIGION AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS, WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY DIVINITY SCHOOL



The Rules of Engagement

How the American Tradition of Religious Freedom Helps Define Religion's Role in Civic Debate

HOW CAN THE AMERICAN TRADITION of religious freedom help define the terms of religion's engagement in public life? In other words, how can the spirit of that tradition guide us as we seek to forge consensus about issues such as religion's role in democratic debate?¹

While neither David Hollinger nor Eboo Patel articulates the challenges they grapple with in quite this way, each provides useful reflections on these important questions. For the most part, each scholar emphasizes different aspects of our tradition of religious freedom. Patel generally underscores the rights of the religious, the equality of all faiths in the civic square, and the positive possibilities unleashed by welcoming religious voices into democratic debate. Hollinger tends to emphasize the rights of the nonreligious, commitments to secular standards in government, and the risks and responsibilities associated with the expression of religious beliefs as part of political debate.

These are valuable counterweights. Indeed, in many ways, they reflect the duality of the American commitment to religious freedom. This essay seeks to draw on both perspectives to articulate some standards for religious involvement in public debate.

First, religious freedom requires full and equal access to public debate for people of all faiths and none. As the United States Supreme Court said in 1970: "Adherents of particular faiths and individual churches frequently take strong positions on public issues...Of course, churches as much as secular bodies and private citizens have that right."²

Further, as Patel explains, "it is fundamentally illiberal to exclude religious voices from the public square—requiring that before people can participate, they must 'cleans[e] themselves' of religious particularity." There is nothing unconstitutional, un-American, or otherwise wrong with the mere fact that some will draw on religion as a source of guidance when making decisions about public matters or include some religious references in their discussion of such matters.

There is something un-American and wrong, however, when religious people (or people of particular faiths) act as if they have better, rather than equal, rights to participate in the debate of public issues. We should not tolerate, much less perpetuate, the notion that there is or should be some kind of governmental or civic hierarchy based on what faith a person is or is not.³ And, as Hollinger suggests, the fact that there is great enthusiasm for faith in our politics today presents some special dangers. For example, we should never forget that great political leaders come from the ranks of the deeply religious *and* the profoundly secular.

In a similar vein, both Hollinger and Patel helpfully highlight the need for religious voices to promote positions in civic debate that serve the common good rather than any narrow religious

end. Of course, only the government has a constitutional obligation to ensure that its actions do not have the predominant purpose or primary effect of advancing religion.⁴ But it could be said that citizens have a civic obligation to demonstrate how their agenda would benefit Americans of all faiths and none.

Conducting our public debate in a spirit of religious freedom also means that arguments used to justify public policy positions are fair game for examination, and that arguments based at least partially on religion are certainly not immune from this proposition. For example, as Hollinger says, if someone indicates that his or her support for Israel is based on what God has said in the Bible, then it is appropriate to examine those beliefs.

In the political context, however, it is unnecessary and unwise to challenge theological propositions that do not serve as the basis for specific policy positions. For example, if someone simply says that “some good thing happened because God answered someone’s prayers,”⁵ then it is difficult to see a strong connection to policy issues or governance that would justify some kind of political fight. Likewise, when a politician says that one of the questions he asks himself when he encounters tough problems is, “What Would Jesus Do?”⁶ do we really need to argue about whether Jesus was resurrected? The better course would be to ask the politician to give an example

of how that approach cashes out in policy terms in particular situations and then take issue with that, if necessary.

Our tradition of religious freedom usually recognizes that people of faith have loyalties to two different spheres (earthly and spiritual), and that most will consider their loyalty to the spiritual sphere as the one that takes precedence.

Our tradition of religious freedom also usually recognizes that people of faith have loyalties to two different spheres (earthly and spiritual), and that most will consider their loyalty to the spiritual sphere as the one that takes precedence. Indeed, it

was James Madison who noted in 1785 that a person’s sense of duty to “the Creator” was “pre-
cedent, both in order of time and in degree of obligation, to the claims of Civil Society.”⁷ In view of this fact, our country often has made it a priority to avoid forcing people to choose between God and government.⁸

I am somewhat puzzled, therefore, by Hollinger’s call for “a strong reaffirmation of a civic sphere in which our common membership in democratic national solidarity trumps all religious loyalties.” It certainly would be appropriate to ask religious people to recognize that the civic sphere is different from the religious sphere, and that loyalties are owed to each. But it would be inappropriate to insist that Americans subordinate religious ties to secular ones. Instead, we should seek to reconcile these ties whenever possible.

Finally, conducting our public debate in a spirit of religious freedom usually means avoiding the suggestion that some would be better participants in democratic deliberations if they changed their beliefs about religion.⁹ In this regard, some of Hollinger’s statements raise certain questions. For example, in his discussion of “civic patriotism,” Hollinger expresses the hope that, if religious ideas were subject to more rigorous scrutiny in the public square, then this “might encourage popular faiths more consistent with modern standards of plausibility, more conscious of the historicity of all faiths, and more resistant to the manipulation of politicians belonging to any party.”

Would it be fair to read this statement to suggest that some must water down what they believe to be sacred teachings in order to be participants in good standing in the democratic experiment? If so, this is no more acceptable than if Christians were to suggest that atheists and agnostics must accept Jesus as their Savior in order to be better Americans. It is certainly fine to argue that people should change their positions on policy or law, even if those positions rest in part on religious foundations. And, outside the political context, it is certainly fine to argue that people should change their beliefs about religion. But suggesting that people must change their convictions about religion in order to be better citizens is different.

Our tradition of religious freedom recognizes that decisions about ultimate issues are core matters of conscience that should not define a person's standing in the political community.¹⁰ That tradition teaches us that both the most orthodox believer and the most committed atheist have equal capacities to be excellent Americans, and that both can and should work together to promote the common good.

More broadly, our tradition of religious freedom has helped us to see that our commitment to respect the rights of conscience is a source of great national strength. As we seek to define a proper place for religion in American public life, that's a tradition worth remembering.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The American tradition of religious freedom is most prominently embodied in the religion clauses of the First Amendment. They state: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof. . . ." The first clause is known as the "Establishment Clause" and the second clause is known as the "Free Exercise Clause." Of course, the religion clauses of the First Amendment only apply to actions attributable to the government, but the spirit of religious freedom expressed by those clauses also can help inform and guide civic debate.
- 2 *Walz v. Tax Commission of the City of New York*, 397 U.S. 664, 670 (1970).
- 3 It is important for people of faith to recognize that they do not have to believe that all religions are equally true in order to believe that the government should treat them all equally or to insist that all religions be given the same regard in democratic debate. Likewise, a commitment to governmental and civic neutrality in matters of faith also does not require religious individuals to embrace agnosticism or atheism. One can affirm the rights of atheists without affirming atheism, just as one can affirm the rights of Christians without affirming Christianity.
- 4 *McCreary County v. American Civil Liberties Union*, 545 U.S. 844 (2005).
- 5 David A. Hollinger, "Civic Patriotism and the Critical Discussion of Religious Ideas."
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 James Madison, *A Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments* (1785).
- 8 *See, e.g., Wisconsin v. Yoder*, 406 U.S. 205 (1972); Religious Freedom Restoration Act, 42 U.S.C. Section 2000bb *et seq.* (2008) (supporting exemptions from federal government rules that place substantial burdens on religious practices when those burdens are not justified by narrowly tailored compelling governmental interests).
- 9 Of course, if a religion calls for acts of violence or disregard for basic constitutional norms, we make no apology for calling on that religion to observe different standards. But, beyond basic parameters like these, our best tradition of religious freedom generally supports the free exercise of every faith and suggests that we should not regard certain people as better participants in democratic debate simply because of their beliefs about religion.
- 10 *See, e.g., Allegheny County v. American Civil Liberties Union*, 492 U.S. 573, 593–594 (1989) ("The Establishment Clause, at the very least, prohibits government from appearing to take a position on questions of religious belief or from 'making adherence to a religion relevant in any way to a person's standing in the political community.'") Again, while this constitutional principle applies only to actions that are attributable to the government, the spirit of this principle may helpfully guide civic debate.

Vincent J. Miller

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF THEOLOGY, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY



Globalization, the End of Easy Consensus, and Beginning the Real Work of Pluralism

EBOO PATEL AND DAVID HOLLINGER highlight important challenges facing the practice of democracy. In their essays, both rely on rather abstract accounts of the practice of pluralistic politics. Greater attention to the fortunes of pluralism in American history can help us refine our understanding of the nature and practice of democracy in a religiously diverse context. This will help us to better understand the challenges and opportunities of the present moment, particularly those posed by globalization to pluralistic democracy.

Although they have different concerns, both Patel and Hollinger share the classical liberal view of the criteria for participation in the public sphere. Religious citizens may participate in public debate, but in order to do so they must translate their religious beliefs into commonly accepted languages. Hollinger prefers that religion remain the source of motivation that must subsequently be expressed in public arguments using secular warrants. Patel makes room for a more substantive role of religious reason in contributing to public debate. Both, however, agree that such debate must be carried out in publicly accessible arguments.

Such criteria are fundamental to the liberal idea of democracy. Principles, however, do not tell us everything we need to know about how existing liberal democracies have constituted their public spheres. U.S. religious history is a case in point. While the First Amendment enshrines a separation of church and state that makes room for religious pluralism and secular democracy, the historical reality has been much closer to Diana Eck's notion of "assimilation" than to true pluralism. Assimilation welcomes others, but unlike pluralism, it does not accept their differences. "Come and be like us, come and conform to a predominantly Anglo-Protestant culture."¹

While there are noteworthy examples of true pluralism, such as Patel's citation of President Washington's support for Jewish communities, the norm has tended much more to a social and political sphere dominated by Protestant beliefs and forms of association. Religion is construed as a set of beliefs, held by individuals, who come together voluntarily into congregations. There was also throughout the 19th and much of the 20th centuries a general consensus around a Protestant

There are noteworthy examples of true pluralism, but the norm has tended much more to a social and political sphere dominated by Protestant beliefs and forms of association.

ethic of industriousness, acquisition, and personal responsibility.² Thus, the boundaries of welcoming religion into the American public sphere included embracing *Poor Richard's Almanac* and reducing religion to the Ten Commandments. Insofar as members of other religions were willing to assimilate to this construction of religion and to these values, they were welcome to participate in the public sphere.

This cultural hegemony was evident in the work of the National Council of Churches in America that served as gatekeeper in the post-war era for the free airtime that broadcasters were required to give to religious programming. The NCC limited religious programming to respectable mainline Protestant voices. As a result, more radical religious voices and fundamentalists were kept out of mainstream media. They turned instead to the power of the open market, buying time on independent stations and amassing their own networks. Although outside the venue of “respectable” civil society, they found their audience nonetheless.³ This example serves as a useful background to current arguments about religious participation in public debate. Pluralism often demands that we

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participate in conversations with undesired partners. And pragmatism shows that attempts to censor “undesired” voices generally fail.

Patel's account of the history of American pluralism highlights some of our better moments. Compared to other countries, we have a rich history of pluralism, but one that has

nonetheless taken place on fairly narrow religious common ground. We have always had difficulties with religious outliers that challenge the status quo: Jews, Catholics, fundamentalists, and others. If the United States has struggled to live up to its pluralistic ideals in the past, when pluralism needed only to span Judaism and a range of Christianities, it is sorely tested by the present moment when globalization brings radically different faiths into our national public sphere.

Globalization challenges pluralism in two ways. First, it brings about diversity (living and working with people very different from ourselves), which can be deeply disorienting. The sociologist Ulrich Beck, who has written extensively on globalization, observes that our response to diversity can include both pity and hatred, “[p]ity because the no longer heterogeneous other becomes present in one's feelings and experience... hatred because the walls of institutionalized ignorance and hostility that protected our personal and collective worlds are collapsing.” Furthermore, globalization can give rise to “a sense of boundarylessness and a longing for the reestablishment of old boundaries.”⁴ Add to this the already deep worries caused by economic dislocation and the decline of the nation-state, and global anxieties all too easily target local “others.” For instance, undocumented workers bear the brunt of economic anger, and any relatively dark skinned young male can become the focus of terrorism fears. In such a climate, a pluralist project that attempts to draw diverse members into a shared community is particularly difficult.

Hollinger's analysis helps us discern a second problem posed by globalization. In his essay, he avoids simplistic talk of “universal” reason and instead argues that members of a democracy need to base their arguments upon “premises that are particular to that polity and not to any of the

more sectarian persuasions that might be present within it.” Thus responsible public discourse involves negotiation among the various groups that comprise the political community. Globalization vastly expands the range of perspectives that pluralism must encompass. Such negotiations are never easy, but they are markedly simpler among kindred religious traditions (intramural tensions notwithstanding).

Now American pluralism must encompass, in addition to Christianity and Judaism, a quite different Abrahamic faith, Islam, as well as radically different religions such as Hinduism with its polytheistic mediations of the divine and the pointedly non-theistic Buddhist traditions. Globalization has rendered our national project of religious pluralism significantly more demanding at a time when it has also made us deeply ambivalent about cultural and religious outsiders.

Hollinger’s main concern is a profound one: that contemporary calls to allow more religious discourse into political debate may result in giving religious arguments “a pass.” This would mean that particular religious arguments are accepted into public debate but are not submitted to the full force of democratic argument. They are given public power, yet retain private privilege. This is a concern that should be shared by all citizens, religious or not, because the stakes are enormous. We stand to lose the deliberative practice of liberal democracy, replacing it with a fractious Babel of disparate discourses that would reduce democracy to mere majoritarian politics.

In that regard, Hollinger’s call for a retrieval of “civic patriotism” rooted in our “common membership in democratic national solidarity” is profoundly germane.⁵ A strong sense of the value of our common political life is crucial if we are to rise to the difficult work of building a pluralistic democracy amidst so much diversity.

Religious communities should accept the “full heat” of democratic debate both as the cost of access to public debate and as a sign of being taken seriously. Critique and challenge are signs of respect and engagement. Hollinger’s argument, however, seems to revert to a more abstract notion of the limits on discourse in the public sphere than conveyed in his paraphrase of Rawls and Minow. He pushes Walzer’s “pressure of democratic argument” toward the canons of enlightenment reason: e.g., acceptance of “modern standards of plausibility” and critical historical readings of their sacred texts.

I am not a political theorist, but it seems to me that Hollinger’s account is far too idealist. It overlooks the particular genealogy of American pluralism, assuming it has worked simply through a set of abstract principles, and not through the shifting hegemonic discourse discussed above. Actually existing public spheres have a dialogical character. Political consensus does not develop after all parties have accepted a set of abstract rules for what can and cannot be said. Rather, consensus develops out of their serious efforts to understand, engage, and convince one another. When there is a stable cultural horizon, whether through harmony or hegemony, consensus is reached. The United States currently lacks either harmony or hegemony. Democracy in such a context requires the hard political work of convincing all parties that they have much to accomplish together for the common good, and the equally hard work of negotiating a common moral and political language in which to communicate.

Moderating voices can challenge the extreme views of fundamentalists, disprove their false claims, and add to the vigor of public debate.

This work is profoundly political and rhetorical. It will not be accomplished by simply telling religious believers that they must accept Enlightenment reason or remain private. They are unlikely to listen, anyway, and nothing short of depriving them of the vote and the right to free association will keep them out of the public sphere. What is needed is a deep, generous, and knowledgeable engagement with beliefs and arguments among religious and intellectual traditions.

It is relatively simple to say with Hollinger that “easy God talk” must be challenged by “public scrutiny.” It is quite another thing to engage someone’s religious convictions in a way that actually challenges them. Here the “new Atheists” are not particularly helpful. They provide catharsis for frustrated secularists, but don’t provide much guidance for engaging their religious fellow citizens.⁶ On the other hand, the classical critics of religion—Feuerbach, Marx, Freud, Durkheim—remain useful because they illuminate the ways in which religions fall short of their own ideals. Of course to use these arguments in debate with believers requires sufficient knowledge to challenge them on the basis of their own beliefs.

The political emergence of fundamentalism and the massive growth of religious diversity pose profound challenges to pluralism. Things were undoubtedly much simpler in this country when the public sphere was dominated by a liberal Protestant hegemony that embraced the Enlightenment and delegitimated religious voices that did not fit its mold. But the ideal of liberal democracy cannot be content with such an artificial consensus. The present moment gives us the challenging opportunity to be true to our principles at a time when they cannot be easily realized. The profound difficulties we face may paradoxically make it possible for us to truly practice pluralism for the first time.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Diana Eck, "From Diversity to Pluralism," The Pluralism Project at Harvard University, available at http://www.pluralism.org/pluralism/essays/from_diversity_to_pluralism.php.
- 2 Jose Casanova, *Public Religion in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 145; Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in Religious Sociology* (New York: Anchor, 1960).
- 3 R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 229–233.
- 4 Ulrich Beck, *Cosmopolitan Vision* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 2006), 8.
- 5 His proposal that this "trump all religious loyalties" is, however, deeply problematic and deserves much more attention than it is given. It is near axiomatic that religions have more fundamental loyalties than the local or national community. Indeed this requirement seems profoundly burdensome for even purely secular convictions. Is there room here even for cosmopolitan ethical concern?
- 6 E.O. Wilson's *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006) is a notable exception.

Alan Wolfe

PROFESSOR OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AND DIRECTOR OF THE BOISI CENTER
FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE, BOSTON COLLEGE



Liberals and Religion

DAVID HOLLINGER ARGUES that liberal society should not give a “pass” to arguments made from religious conviction, but instead should subject such ideas to scrutiny in the same way we argue about the relative merits of the Yankees and the Red Sox. Eboo Patel suggests that liberal society ought to welcome as many religious voices into politics as there are religions in society. Who is right? Both are.

Skepticism toward religion originated at a time when the relationship between faith and politics was defined by two conditions. One was that most people in the society belonged to one religion under the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* (Whose rule, his religion) established by the Peace of Augsburg in 1555. The second was that political authority was undergirded by religious authority; the King ruled the country, but, as head of an established church, he also spoke for God.

When the ruler used the power of the state to enforce matters of belief, no such thing as private religion existed. Under such conditions, establishing freedom of conscience was essential. People could and should be permitted to hold whatever views they felt in their hearts without being subject to the charge of heresy for doing so.

Today’s religious believers who claim that their faith inoculates them against criticism echo, however faintly, this by-gone era. The more vehement of them are convinced that without religion, society would fall apart. Non-believers, in their view, are second-class citizens, their moral relativism a danger, their atheism repugnant. Hollinger is right that treating their ideas with special reverence privileges religion in ways incompatible with liberal equality. Against such voices calling for religion to dominate the public square, liberals should only be wary.

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At the same time, however, the conditions that once joined authoritative religion with political orthodoxy no longer exist. The United States took the historical lead in abolishing one of those conditions when it separated church and state. Some question whether we are as committed to church-state separation as we once were. More conservative Protestant denominations in the United States, such as the Southern Baptist Convention, were once strong supporters of church-state separation but now favor forms of “accommodationism,” which would permit prayer in schools or the teaching of creationism.

In contrast, the Roman Catholic Church, which once opposed separation of church and state, has supported it since the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. If, as recent U.S. elections suggest, the influence of the religious right has peaked, we can stop worrying that evangelicals with close ties to the Republican Party will find ways to curtail the tradition of religious liberty upon which the United States was founded. To be sure, some will try to proselytize in public places such as the Air Force Academy. But in 2008, James Dobson is looking for a political party; the Republicans are not out searching for him.

The other pre-modern condition that suppressed religious liberty—everyone belonging to the same faith—has also been undermined, this time by the religious pluralism emphasized by Eboo Patel. Even if there were theocrats lurking in the dark corners of American politics who wanted to establish a church, it is by no means clear which one they could establish. According to the recent survey of 35,000 Americans conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life cited by Patel, only slightly more than half of Americans are Protestants, and even that figure is likely to fall in the future.

We have become so diverse a country religiously that we no longer know what to call ourselves. We are no longer Christian, or even Judeo-Christian. We are not even “Abrahamic,” for there are large numbers of Buddhists, Hindus, and non-believers who do not share with Christians, Jews, and Muslims a heritage that can be traced back to that prophet.

We have become so diverse a country religiously that we no longer know what to call ourselves. We are no longer Christian, or even Judeo-Christian. We are not even “Abrahamic,” for there are large numbers of Buddhists, Hindus, and non-believers who do not share with Christians, Jews, and Muslims a heritage that can be traced back to that prophet.

Working together, separation of church and state and religious pluralism help us better understand what it means to describe America as a “secular” nation. The way most people use the term, secularism and religion are opposites, the one calling for the removal of religion from the public square and the other insisting that without a common faith, there can be no common morality.

The truth, however, is that the United States is at one and the same time highly secular and highly religious. Indeed, it is because the United States is so secular that it can be so religious.

Secularism, properly understood, refers to developments that lie outside the domain of religion and politics but strongly influence both. A secular world is one that insists on the importance of individual choice. It is characterized by what sociologists call “differentiation,” or the sphere of work that is separated from the sphere of family, which in turn is distinct from the sphere of education or, for that matter, religion.

In secular societies, religious authority cannot remain unquestioned, nor does it trump all other forms of authority. Secularism, as the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor argues in *A Secular Age*, means that belief in God is one option among many.

While leaders of the religious right denounce secularism, it ought to be obvious that secularism is good for religion. By creating a marketplace for faith not unlike the marketplace in economics, it

forces religion to innovate and modernize in the hopes of attracting new believers. By increasing the number of religions that compete for believers, it expands the market beyond one, two, or even three main faiths to include all faiths represented around the globe.

No wonder, then, that in both Western Europe and the United States one lesson holds true: Where religion is established and people are mostly of one faith, religion atrophies, and where religion is voluntary and pluralistic, it flourishes.

If this analysis is correct, then religious believers ought to welcome what Hollinger asks of them. Religions that treat all forms of criticism as heresy will not be able to compete in the modern secular world with those that ask for no exemptions from the inquiring minds of others. At the same time, Eboo Patel is right to call for the inclusion of religious voices in American public life because, under conditions of religious diversity, no one voice can be permitted to drive all others out of existence. As much as we might welcome religions into the public sphere, we cannot welcome any one religion to the exclusion of others.

Today in America we are engaged in a furious debate over religion's proper role in politics, with conservative preachers denouncing the naked public square and proud atheists speaking in defense of the Enlightenment. The real question, however, is not whether religion and politics will mix, for they always will, but how they can do so in ways that strengthen faith and democracy at the same time. Separation of church and state and pluralism do that. We are lucky to have them and should strive to keep them.

Closing Essays

DAVID A. HOLLINGER

Patterns of Engagement and Evasion

SO, WE AGREE. SORT OF. The general proposition that no politically salient idea should be shielded from public critical debate has met with broad acceptance in these essays. To some writers, the proposition becomes acceptable if one insists that it apply not only to religious ideas, but also to ideas flowing out of the Enlightenment. No proviso could be more easily granted because such ideas, as I invoked them, embody the very ideal of self-correcting critical debate based on evidence and reasoning.

Yet I am disappointed to see several of these same writers evade the challenges entailed by the debate they ostensibly welcome. I will argue that they invoke “history” and “pluralism” in ways that shield religious ideas from the rules of evidence and reasoning that can help us find common ground across the religious-secular divide.

I hope that my concluding reflections, taken together with the judicious arguments made by several of the writers—especially Mark Lilla, Martha Minow, and Alan Wolfe—can persuade my critics that by moving a bit farther in my direction, they have nothing to lose but their evasions.

My biggest surprise about these essays is that none explicitly takes up my suggestion that religious liberals have more in common with secularists than with religious believers who resist modern standards of cognitive plausibility. Perhaps my suggestion is simply mistaken, and religious liberals are, after all, closer to evangelical conservatives such as John Hagee and James Dobson than I thought, and less willing than I hoped to press the likes of Mitt Romney and Mike Huckabee for theological clarification.

The avowed religious essayists in this collection have basically refused the invitation to publicly criticize their obscurantist co-religionists, and some have displayed more anxiety about the use of evidence and reasoning (how elitist! how parochial! how lacking in appreciation for pluralism!) than about the pernicious effects of religion-protected ignorance on democracy. How can I bring my critics around?

Above all, I want to remind them that the bulk of the religious ideas we call “liberal” have been fashioned in direct response to Enlightenment standards of plausibility and expanded social horizons. Today’s adherents of these ideas have much to gain by continuing this historic ecumenical trajectory, thereby marking the distance between themselves and their more provincial co-religionists who cling to obscurantist versions of faith. What Melissa Rogers disparages as the “watering down” of religious ideas has, in fact, been a vital means by which inherited orthodoxies have been revised and thus their communities of faith enabled to survive within educated populations.

Yet this historic accommodation of religion with the Enlightenment is elided by essayists who turn “history” into an excuse for evasion. Mark Noll is correct about the complexity of the American past, but the passivity with which Noll concludes is not mandated by the complicated mixing of religious and secular impulses he finds in early 19th century America. Obama and Walzer show the way not to the complexity-denying universalism against which Noll warns, but to principles by which we can cope with a future even more complex than the past.

Vincent J. Miller correctly asserts that American history has been shaped by contingent dialogues rather than by an agreed-upon set of abstractions. But constitutional principles have played a structuring role in these dialogues, and Miller does not establish that we can, at any given time, do without a sense of what counts as a relevant argument.

Susan Thistlethwaite’s evasive use of history is more egregious. She seems to think that just because a principle has been ignored by many who exercise power, the principle cannot be credibly affirmed. But we do not abandon our prohibitions on murder when we learn of a high rate of homicide. We do not renounce the Bill of Rights because we can cite so many examples of its violation or because we know the ideological and economic positions of the men who wrote it. In terms of postmodernism and postcolonialism, the truth is that the best insights of Edward Said and Michel Foucault have long been critically incorporated into historically-informed discussions of how reason works in political argument.

A more common evasion is the invoking of a loaded version of “pluralism” that inhibits critical discussion by reducing modern standards of cognitive plausibility to merely one legitimate world-view among many, and then calling on everyone to play fair by respecting each other’s world-view. This is what Lilla calls “diversity liberalism,” according to which there are no degrees of warrant by which to distinguish rival answers to fundamental questions.

Prominent among the representatives of this persuasion is Charlene Sinclair, who, in the name of “a new pluralism” guided by the principle of “equity,” entreats us to just get on with the whole-some enterprise of community organizing. Rogers, too, sees little need to fuss over the relative truth of rival religious ideas. She implies that all relevant parties come to the public sphere in a state of cognitive equality. If Christians were to “suggest that atheists and agnostics must accept Jesus as their Savior in order to become better Americans,” this would be no different, declares Rogers, than asking some persons of faith to “water down” their religion in order to be full participants in American public life.

Even Miller, who accepts much of my argument, is reluctant to acknowledge the need for any rules to guide “the deep, generous, and knowledgeable engagement” with religious ideas he favors. Miller is eager that American religious pluralism be expanded to take account of Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism, but like Eboo Patel, this volume’s most complete exemplar of “diversity liberalism,” Miller begs the questions at hand, especially how rival truth claims made in the name of faith can be evaluated.

Patel tracks the classical arguments of ecumenical Protestantism of a half century and more ago, merely expanding the circle to include new faiths. One might ask if Rep. Keith Ellison, to whose career Patel rightly calls attention, has “watered down” his Islamic faith in order to operate responsibly in our political system, or if Sen. Barack Obama, as quoted in my own essay, has done the same with his Christian faith? Did Vatican II, which dramatically accelerated the incorporation of Catholics into American public life beginning in the 1960s, constitute a “watering down” of Catholicism?

I ask these questions not to answer them, but to underscore a point that some essayists have misunderstood: When I say that commitment to our democratic polity “trumps” particularistic

religious loyalties, I mean no more than what Obama and Michael Walzer assert in their writings as I quote them. Civic patriotism need not mean that one accepts no higher power than the state, but it does mean that when one participates in the public life of a democracy, one has an obligation to interact with other participants on the basis of shared civic status.

Until this point, I have made the case for a critical discussion of religious ideas on an if-then basis. *If* the basic civic-patriotic principles of Obama and Walzer are not widely accepted, *then* this public debate is hard to avoid. But there is another reason for encouraging this debate.

Religious ideas, even if not put forth as justifications for public policy, constitute a vital matrix for political culture. Scholars of virtually all human societies assume that beliefs about the nature of the world, whatever their specific content, influence the terms on which people interact with one another. Are we going to proceed otherwise for our own time and place? Are basic ideas about the universe understood to be both constitutive and performative in Victorian England, Nazi Germany, Confucian China, Inca Peru, Maratha India, Soviet Russia, Ancient Athens, Asante Africa, the Crow Nation of 19th century Montana, and Puritan New England, but *not* in the United States today?

Unless we can defend a version of American exceptionalism according to which belief systems are functional everywhere but here, we Americans all have a stake in what our fellow citizens take to be true.

EBOO PATEL

The Promise of Religious Pluralism

IN *WHAT IT MEANS TO BE AN AMERICAN*, Michael Walzer writes, “How are we, in the United States, to embrace difference and maintain a common life?”¹ The question of the role of faith in public life within a society that is both diverse and religiously devout is largely a question of how to reconcile multiple loyalties and competing worldviews. As I suggest in my opening essay, I believe this is one of the central challenges for America, and the world, in the 21st century. Reading the responses to my essay has helped me clarify the project that I call religious pluralism and feel more committed to it than ever.

David Hollinger’s opening essay is illuminating, and I concur with the many writers in this volume who agree with Hollinger that religious ideas in public life should not be given a pass, but rather should be subject to vigorous debate. Yet I also share certain criticisms to some of Hollinger’s views. I agree with Nicholas Wolterstorff, who argues there is no common civic morality upon which we can all rely to forge unifying bonds of “civic patriotism.” And I agree with Susan Thistlethwaite, who contends there is no single logic regarding civic patriotism that all people share. In addition, I object to Hollinger’s eagerness for people to subordinate their religious loyalties to national loyalties—which seems to be the crux of his definition of civic patriotism.

In her essay, Melissa Rogers echoes my objection to this placement of national loyalty above religious loyalty and summarizes an important dimension of religious pluralism. “It certainly would be appropriate to ask religious people to recognize the civic sphere is different from the religious sphere, and that loyalties are owed to each,” Rogers says. “But it would be inappropriate to insist that Americans subordinate religious ties to secular ones. Instead, we should seek to reconcile these ties whenever possible.”

In her essay, Susan Jacoby describes herself as “a thoroughgoing secularist who believes that there is too much religion in the public square already.” Jacoby criticizes me for marginalizing secularists like her by, among other things, placing them in parenthesis in my opening essay. Let me clarify: I strongly believe that non-religious people have full and equal rights and responsibilities in the American public square, and am happy to remove the offending parenthesis.

Jacoby also criticizes me for not fully believing in the separation of church and state. Perhaps she has missed certain sections of my essay. I make it clear that the disestablishment of religion from the state is essential for our national civic health and, indeed, is responsible for our nation’s religious vibrancy, a view also expressed by Alan Wolfe in his essay.

It seems to me that Jacoby has a bias against religion. This bias inspires her support of wrong-headed policies—as, for instance, her contention that “Middle East politics offer a spectacular example of a controversy that needs not more religious voices, but a stronger secularist influence.”

Many foreign policy experts would disagree.² Whether secular or religious, there is no shortage of experts who are increasingly saying that American foreign policy needs to pay more attention to religious matters. For instance, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright told the Council on Foreign Relations in 2006:

I would put myself into the secular liberal tradition as somebody who has looked at foreign policy...from a basically problem-solving approach...But it has become clearer to me...that we need to understand the role that God and religion play as a force in international affairs... For instance, if Jerusalem were only a real estate problem, we would have solved it a long time ago. But if you are working with two groups of people who believe that God gave them that piece of land, it is very important to take that dimension into consideration.³

The fact is, for all the alleged “God-talk” in American life, important institutions—from the State Department to elite universities—have failed to cultivate sufficient knowledge and understanding of religion. This has hindered the effectiveness of our policies, led to serious misunderstandings, and in some cases, further inflamed already volatile conflicts.⁴

In his essay, Mark Lilla writes vividly about his exchanges with secular liberal and religious conservative talk show hosts during his recent book tour. He found that the conversations with conservative evangelicals were far more substantive and interesting than those with liberals on public radio. The former, according to Lilla, actually believed in something, while the latter were caught up in the cult of inclusiveness and generally ignorant about issues of religious belief. Lilla places me in the latter category—in a position he calls “diversity liberalism” that “seems to sanction a thoughtless, faith-based approach to every important question, among believers and non-believers alike.”

Now I happen to agree with Lilla in my dismay over “thoughtless” conversations concerning crucial issues that give all opinions the same value, no matter how ignorant and ill-advised they might be. And I agree that—as he puts it—people with “real differences need to argue about those differences reasonably, in debates that force all parties to understand themselves and actually know something about their adversaries.” In *Acts of Faith*, I write about my strong belief in Islam and my respect for those whose religious beliefs, while very different, are as deeply felt as mine.⁵ Lilla will be happy to hear that I believe my faith has the fullness of truth and that I take seriously its claims on my life, and have enormous admiration for those who feel the same about their own traditions.

In his essay, Vincent Miller makes an excellent point about the pressures of globalization, saying that it “has rendered our national project of religious pluralism significantly more demanding at a time when it has also made us deeply ambivalent about cultural and religious outsiders.” Miller is right. The challenge for America in the 21st century is how a diverse nation like ours can build a common life together.

As I write this, there is religious conflict in Iraq, Lebanon, Israel, and the Palestinian territories. India, Pakistan, Nigeria, Indonesia, Russia, Sri Lanka, and the Balkans have also suffered from sectarian violence in the recent past. And in some parts of Europe, there is widespread concern, bordering on xenophobic alarm, about the integration of Muslim minorities.

Given these realities, it is disappointing that Lilla rather blithely dismisses the goal of building religious pluralism. Perhaps his cavalier attitude stems in some part from frustration with certain models of multiculturalism. If so, he and I would have another point on which to agree. The identity-politics model that held sway when I was an undergraduate 15 years ago was essentially only interested in the question, “How have majority groups oppressed minority groups?” That question is a poor guide for building a cohesive society.

The pluralism I speak of is not an identity-politics polemic, nor is it a thin inclusiveness where, as Lilla says, “everyone has a voice” and that voice is used only to “vent, vote and go home.” The pluralism I seek is one where people from very different backgrounds, with strong and oftentimes clashing religious and secular beliefs, learn to live in equal dignity and mutual loyalty in a world where the clash of civilizations seems to be acquiring the force of inevitability.

I am not under the illusion that people with different beliefs are going to agree on everything. I am simply proposing that building common ground on shared social values should be a high priority for a diverse and devout society in an era of religious conflict. Otherwise, we might fall into the equally false and far more dangerous illusion that we agree on nothing at all.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Michael Walzer, *What It Means To Be An American* (New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1996), 17.
- 2 Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson, eds., *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Center for Strategic and International Studies report, “Mixed Blessings: U.S. Government Engagement With Religion in Conflict Prone Settings,” available at http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/070820_religion.pdf.
- 3 Madeleine K. Albright, “The Mighty and the Almighty,” conversation with the Council on Foreign Relations, May 1, 2006, available at http://www.cfr.org/publication/10606/mighty_and_the_almighty_rush_transcript_federal_news_service_inc.html.
- 4 The Henry Luce Foundation is attempting to address this weakness by making grants to think tanks and schools of international relations institutions for programs on the nexus of religion and international affairs.
- 5 Eboo Patel, *Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007).

Policymaker Response

JOHN D. PODESTA, President and CEO, Center for American Progress

SHAUN CASEY, Professor of Christian Ethics, Wesley Theological Seminary
and Visiting Fellow, Center for American Progress

Transforming the Religious–Secular Divide to Work for the Common Good

THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN OUR DEMOCRACY is so integral to discussions of public policy, culture, and society that it should come as no surprise that a secular progressive think tank dedicated to improving the lives of all Americans would want to be engaged in “debating the divine.” Much to the surprise of many conservatives who assume that liberals and progressives are hostile to religion and want to banish it altogether from the public square, the Center for American Progress, from our early days, has embraced prophetic religious voices as critical to social change and social movement throughout American history and vital in today’s policy debates.

We see religion as a significant force in the personal lives of citizens and in the public life of our nation. Its power can be both constructive and destructive, since religion itself is a multivalent force that can liberate and subjugate, enlighten and obfuscate, inspire and offend. These divergent capacities are well-documented in our nation’s history.

At the Center, we work with people of faith, with secular citizens, and with the religiously ambivalent—all of us collaborating to forge a progressive agenda that improves the lives of Americans through ideas and action. By necessity, religious ideas inform this work. Whether stated or not, public policies are shaped by basic beliefs about the nature of the world and our place in it. Our work is also informed by the actions of diverse communities of faith involved in a wide range of policy efforts on the domestic and global fronts.

As our national religious landscape becomes ever more complex, it is crucial to be knowledgeable about religion and to seriously engage its ideas. The role of religion in 21st-century American democracy demands our attention, which is why this collection of essays offers so many ways of engaging religious ideas.

You will find no final word on the many issues raised between these covers, nor will you find artificial uniformity. What you will find is vigorous debate, honest disagreements, and a striving for common ground concerning the role that religion should play in public life. It is one of democracy’s many demands that we as citizens participate in debates such as these, because they are the surest way of sustaining the American experiment in religious freedom and diversity.

There are several areas of agreement in *Debating the Divine*. The writers all accept that the role of religion in American public life is more complicated today than in an earlier period in our history when a Protestant hegemony reigned, through the middle of the last century. None of them is nostalgic for that earlier era. In its place is a far more complicated, noisy, and diverse religious scene. Likewise, none of the writers subscribes to the neoconservative argument that the public

square in the United States is naked—that is, scrubbed of all forms of religious expression and argument. The writers also agree that in our public deliberations, all political warrants and justifications, whether secular or theological in origin, should be subject to rigorous debate in our democratic policy.

Yet there are disagreements, too. The first centers on a long-running debate among political theorists and theologians over the need to translate religious appeals into a form of public reason accessible to all citizens. Some argue that this bracing dose of Enlightenment reason will solve the epistemological problems religion poses, while other writers insist the Enlightenment's notion of an objective universal moral language is illusory.

Second, there is a range of comfort and discomfort with the desirability and utility of God talk in our policy deliberations. Some writers argue that people of faith cannot possibly discuss public policy without referring to their particular religious beliefs. Others are willing to tone down their God talk in civic discussion, and still others find any discussion of religious belief in the public square mildly to threateningly subversive to democracy.

Many of these issues raise important policy questions, both domestic and international. For instance: When is religious engagement in public policy a healthy aspect of democracy, and when does it threaten the separation of church and state? How does the United States fight—and win—the global fight against radical terrorist networks, especially when some are claiming that this fight constitutes a clash of civilizations and religions? How do we encourage collaboration among religious and secular citizens on issues both care passionately about, such as poverty, the environment, and Darfur?

In the past four years, the public face of religion has dramatically changed in the United States as the religious right lost its self-proclaimed role as the voice of religious Americans. A vibrant chorus of faith voices have risen up in its place, and they have greatly broadened the values debate, as well as expanded alliances and agendas on social justice issues. Unique partnerships are being formed. For instance, white and Hispanic evangelicals, along with Catholics and Muslims, are working on comprehensive immigration reform. Liberal, mainstream, and conservative congregations are collaborating on interfaith efforts to fight global warming. African-American faith communities, which have long been strong and courageous leaders for justice, are continuing their prophetic tradition concerning poverty, prison reform, youth violence, and more. And this growing chorus now includes voices of Islam and other religions that increasingly are part of our national conversation.

In the next four years—and beyond—this work of faith communities will go on. We at the Center will continue to be active partners, working with religious and secular organizations to ensure that our joint efforts are inclusive and accountable to a diverse citizenry. The debate about the role of religion in public life will also go on, as it should. Many of us have divergent world views and honest disagreements about the role of religion in the public square. But even as we disagree, we need to collaborate.

The work of democracy has never been easy. Unified answers that satisfy everyone are rarely, if ever, the result of citizen deliberations. But our democracy is resilient enough to engage in rigorous debate, especially when the stakes are so high. We welcome others into this debate and invite them to action, as together we strive to make real the promise of equality, opportunity, and justice for all Americans.

About the Authors

SHAUN CASEY

Shaun Casey is a Visiting Fellow at the Center for American Progress. He is also Associate Professor of Christian Ethics at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., where he directs the National Capital Semester for Seminarians, a Washington-based semester program in theology and public policy that is open to all seminary or divinity school students in North America.

His areas of research interest include religion and politics, religion and the presidency, the ethics of war and peace, ethics and international affairs, and theodicy as it relates to Red Sox Nation. His book, *The Making of a Catholic President: Kennedy vs. Nixon*, will be published by Oxford University Press in January 2009.

He is a frequent guest on Public Broadcasting System's "Religion and Ethics Newsweekly" television show, as well as National Public Radio. He serves on the Committee for the Public Understanding of Religion of the American Academy of Religion.

Casey received a Bachelor of Arts degree from Abilene Christian University, a Master of Divinity degree from Harvard Divinity School, a Master in Public Administration degree from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, and a Doctor of Theology degree in Religion and Society from Harvard Divinity School.

T. JEREMY GUNN

Dr. T. Jeremy Gunn is the Director of the American Civil Liberties Union's Program on Freedom of Religion and Belief and the Senior Fellow for Religion and Human Rights at the Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University School of Law. He is a member of the Advisory Council on Freedom of Religion and Belief of the Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). He received his Ph.D. in the Study of Religion from Harvard University, a J.D., *magna cum laude*, from Boston University, and an A.M. in Humanities from the University of Chicago. He was an attorney at the law firm Covington & Burling, after which he held several positions in the U.S. government, including the U.S. Department of State (Office of International Religious Freedom). Among his publications are *Spiritual Weapons: The Cold War and the Forging of an American National Religion* (2008, forthcoming), "Religious Liberty (Modern Period)" in the *Encyclopedia of Christianity*

(2005), and “Religious Symbols and Religious Liberty in American Public Life” in the *Oxford Handbook on Church and State in the United States* (ed. Derek Davis).

DAVID A. HOLLINGER

David A. Hollinger has written extensively about the relations between ethnicity, religion, ideology, and politics in the history of the United States. His recent books include *Cosmopolitanism and Solidarity* (2006), *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (3rd edition, expanded, 2006), and an edited volume, *The Humanities and the Dynamics of Inclusion* (2006). His earlier books include *Science, Jews, and Secular Culture* (1996). His recent essays have appeared in *Daedalus*, *London Review of Books*, *Representations*, *Modern Intellectual History*, *Journal of American Ethnic History*, and *Chronicle of Higher Education*. He is Vice President of the Organization of American Historians, a Trustee of the Institute for Advanced Study, and an elected Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He was formerly Harmsworth Professor of American History at the University of Oxford and is now Preston Hotchkis Professor of American History at the University of California, Berkeley, where he recently served as Chair of his department. He is currently studying the impact of the Protestant foreign missionary project on the history of the United States in the 20th century.

SUSAN JACOBY

Susan Jacoby's most recent book is *The Age of American Unreason*, published in February 2008. Her seven other books include *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism*, selected as a notable book of 2004 by *The Washington Post* and *The Los Angeles Times*; *Half-Jew: A Daughter's Search for her Family's Buried Past* (2000); and *Wild Justice: The Evolution of Revenge* (1984), a Pulitzer Prize finalist.

Jacoby has been a frequent contributor to national magazines and newspapers, including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Mother Jones*, *The American Prospect*, *The AARP Magazine*, and *Harper's*. She has been the recipient of numerous fellowships and awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship and a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. In 2001–2002, she was selected as a fellow of the Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers of the New York Public Library. In 2007, she received an award from the Americans for Libraries Council for her writing on behalf of public libraries.

Susan Jacoby also serves as a program consultant to the Center for Inquiry-New York City, a rationalist think tank. She lives in New York.

MARK LILLA

Mark Lilla is Professor of the Humanities at Columbia University and author, most recently, of *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West* (2007).

VINCENT J. MILLER

Vincent J. Miller is an Associate Professor of Theology at Georgetown University where he teaches in the doctoral program in Religious Pluralism. He received his doctorate in Systematic Theology from the University of Notre Dame. He has published numerous articles on culture and religious traditions, beliefs, and practices and has lectured widely in the United States, Mexico, Europe, and

Asia. His book, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (2004), considers how religious communities are being transformed from within by consumer attitudes and practices, and how they can work to counter this. His current research explores the impact of globalization and the “culture of choice” upon the fragmentation of religious communities and the polarization of religious and political discourse.

MARTHA MINOW

Martha Minow is the Jeremiah Smith, Jr. Professor of Law at Harvard Law School, where she teaches constitutional law, civil procedure, human rights, and education law and writes about human rights and advocacy for members of racial and religious minorities and for women, children, and persons with disabilities. Her books include *Breaking the Cycles of Hatred: Memory, Law and Repair* (2003); *Partners, Not Rivals: Privatization and the Public Good* (2002); *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History After Genocide and Mass Violence* (1998); *Not Only for Myself: Identity, Politics and Law* (1997); and *Making All the Difference: Inclusion, Exclusion, and American Law* (1990). She is the co-editor of *Just Schools: Pursuing Equality in Societies of Difference* (2008) and *Engaging Cultural Differences: The Multicultural Challenge in Liberal Democracies* (2002). She served on the Independent International Commission on Kosovo and helped to launch Imagine Co-existence, a program of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, to promote peaceful development in post-conflict societies. She has served on the boards of the Jewish Women’s Archive, the Covenant Foundation, and Harvard-Radcliffe Hillel. Prior to teaching, she was a law clerk to Justice Thurgood Marshall. Minow received an Honorary Doctor of Law from the University of Toronto Faculty of Law in 2006 and the Sacks-Freund Award for Excellence in Teaching from Harvard Law School in 2005.

MARK A. NOLL

Mark A. Noll, Francis A. McAnaney Professor of History at the University of Notre Dame, is the author of *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (2006) and *God and Race in American Politics: A Short History* (2008), as well as co-editor of *Religion and American Politics: From the Colonial Period to the Present* (2nd ed., 2007).

EBOO PATEL

Eboo Patel is the Founder and Executive Director of the Interfaith Youth Core, a Chicago-based international nonprofit building the interfaith youth movement. He is the author of *Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation*. He writes a featured blog called “The Faith Divide” for *The Washington Post*, and is a regular guest on National Public Radio and CNN. He is also a sought-after public speaker, delivering the keynote address at the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize Forum, speaking at the Clinton Global Initiative, and giving the Baccalaureate Service Address at both the University of Pennsylvania and Dartmouth College. Patel has a doctorate in the sociology of religion from Oxford University, where he studied on a Rhodes scholarship. He is an Ashoka Fellow and was named one of ten young Muslim visionaries shaping Islam in America by *Islamica Magazine*.

JOHN D. PODESTA

John D. Podesta is the president and CEO of the Center for American Progress and Visiting Professor of Law at the Georgetown University Law Center. Podesta served as chief of staff to President William J. Clinton from October 1998 until January 2001, where he was responsible for directing, managing, and overseeing all policy development, daily operations, Congressional relations, and staff activities of the White House. He coordinated the work of cabinet agencies with a particular emphasis on the development of federal budget and tax policy, and served in the President's Cabinet and as a principal on the National Security Council. From 1997 to 1998 he served as both an Assistant to the President and deputy chief of staff. Earlier, from January 1993 to 1995, he was Assistant to the President, Staff Secretary and a senior policy adviser on government information, privacy, telecommunications security and regulatory policy. Podesta previously held a number of positions on Capitol Hill including: counselor to Democratic Leader Senator Thomas A. Daschle; chief counsel for the Senate Agriculture Committee; chief minority counsel for the Senate Judiciary Subcommittees on Patents, Copyrights, and Trademarks; Security and Terrorism; and Regulatory Reform; and counsel on the Majority Staff of the Senate Judiciary Committee. Podesta is a graduate of Georgetown University Law Center and Knox College.

MELISSA ROGERS

Melissa Rogers serves as Visiting Professor of Religion and Public Policy at Wake Forest University Divinity School. She is the founder and director of Wake Forest's Center for Religion and Public Affairs, which promotes research, study, and dialogue regarding the intersection of religion and public affairs and provides resources for students and religious leaders on these issues.

Rogers previously served as the executive director of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life and as general counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee on Religious Liberty. While at the Baptist Joint Committee, she helped lead a diverse coalition that was instrumental in bringing about the enactment of the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act of 2000. She also served as a draftsperson for several *amicus curiae* briefs in church-state cases heard by the U.S. Supreme Court.

In 2004, Rogers was recognized by National Journal as one of the church-state experts "politicians will call on when they get serious about addressing an important public policy issue." She is co-authoring a case book on religion and law for Baylor University Press and recently testified before the Judiciary Committee to the U.S. Senate.

Rogers earned her law degree from the University of Pennsylvania Law School, where she was a member of the National Moot Court Team and a legal writing instructor. She graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Baylor University.

CHARLENE K. SINCLAIR

Charlene K. Sinclair is the Principal of InSinc Consulting, a consulting firm that provides comprehensive grassroots organizing, political strategy, and targeted organizational development assistance. Sinclair is also a fellow at the Center for Community Change's Taproots Project, where she develops projects to engage low-income leaders, grassroots organizers, and public intellectuals to discuss the intersection of spirituality and roots of struggles for social and economic justice.

Sinclair served as the Director of National Campaigns for the Center for Community Change, one of the nation's leading organizational voices for traditionally disenfranchised communities, where she led the campaign to mobilize low-income voters for the 2004 presidential election. She also served as the Director of Organizing for the National Campaign for Jobs and Income Support, where she worked to restore economic safety and dignity to low-income people. She served as the Deputy Director of Housing for the Commonwealth of Virginia, where she worked to develop and implement Commonwealth housing policies, housing development, lead abatement, and homeless programs.

Sinclair received a B.S. in Sociology from Trinity College in Hartford, CT, a Masters of Divinity from Union Theological Seminary in New York, and will begin doctoral studies in the fall of 2008. She is a longtime community organizer and brings a strong sense of spiritual and intellectual inquiry to her work.

SALLY STEENLAND

Sally Steenland is Senior Advisor to the Faith and Progressive Policy Initiative at the Center for American Progress. In 2005, she organized the Initiative's "national conversations," a series of town-hall meetings and discussions across the country on pressing issues of faith and policy. She guides the Initiative's work on a variety of policy issues, including faith and science, the role of religion in the public square, diversity and tolerance, economics, the environment, and cultural and social matters. She is also co-editor of *Pursuing the Global Common Good: Principle and Practice in U.S. Foreign Policy*.

In the 1990s, she was a frequent op-ed columnist for *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. In the 1980s, she was Deputy Director of the National Commission on Working Women, where she wrote major studies on women's employment and women in the media and directed projects involving women in nonprofessional jobs. For several years she taught English, filmmaking and critical media studies in high schools.

Steenland has written two best-selling books, *The Magnetic Poetry Book* and the award-winning *Kids' Magnetic Book of Poetry*. Her short stories have appeared in many literary journals and anthologies, and her story collection, *Skin and Bones*, was a finalist in the 2004 Bakeless Literary Prize for fiction. Steenland was raised in a Dutch Calvinist community in northern New Jersey. She received a B.A. in English from Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and a Masters in Education from Howard University.

SUSAN BROOKS THISTLETHWAITE

The Reverend Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, Ph.D., was the 11th President of Chicago Theological Seminary, serving from 1998 until 2008. She has been a Professor of Theology at CTS for 24 years, director of the Ph.D. Center for five years, has a Ph.D. from Duke University, a Masters of Divinity, *summa cum laude*, from Duke Divinity School, and a B.A. from Smith College.

An ordained minister of the United Church of Christ since 1974, she is the author or editor of 13 books and has been a translator for two different translations of the Bible. Thistlethwaite works in the area of contextual theologies of liberation, specializing in issues of violence and violation. Her works include *Casting Stones: Prostitution and Liberation in Asia and the United States* (1996),

The New Testament and Psalms: An Inclusive Translation (1995), and *Adam, Eve and the Genome: Theology in Dialogue with the Human Genome Project* (2003).

Thistlethwaite has had two appearances on *ABC News NIGHTLINE*, has written more than a dozen editorials appearing in major newspapers, and has been interviewed and quoted on various radio shows in the United States and in the Middle East. She is a weekly contributor to the *WashingtonPost/Newsweek* online “On Faith” blog and is a Senior Fellow at the Center for American Progress.

ALAN WOLFE

Alan Wolfe is Professor of Political Science and Director of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College. His recent books include *Does American Democracy Still Work?* (2006) and *Return to Greatness: How America Lost Its Sense of Purpose and What it Needs to Do to Recover It* (2005). He is the author or editor of more than 11 other books, two of which were selected as *New York Times* Notable Books of the Year.

Wolfe attended Temple University as an undergraduate and received his doctorate in political science from the University of Pennsylvania. He currently chairs a task force of the American Political Science Association on “Religion and Democracy in the United States” and is writing a book on the future of liberalism. He is a Senior Fellow with the World Policy Institute at the New School University in New York. He is a contributing editor and writer for *The New Republic*, *The Wilson Quarterly*, *Commonwealth Magazine*, and *In Character*, and also writes for *Commonweal*, *The New York Times*, *Harper’s*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *The Washington Post*.

Wolfe was an advisor to President Clinton in preparation for his 1995 State of the Union address and has lectured widely at American and European universities.

NICHOLAS WOLTERSTORFF

Nicholas Wolterstorff is the Noah Porter Professor Emeritus of Philosophical Theology at Yale University and Senior Fellow of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia.

He received his B.A. from Calvin College in 1953 and his Ph.D. in philosophy from Harvard University in 1956. He taught philosophy for two years at Yale and for 30 years at Calvin College before returning to Yale in 1989 as the Noah Porter Professor in Philosophical Theology.

After concentrating on metaphysics at the beginning of his career (*On Universals*), he spent years working on aesthetics and the philosophy of art (*Works and Worlds of Art* and *Art in Action*). In more recent years, he has concentrated on epistemology (*John Locke and the Ethics of Belief* and *Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology*), on philosophy of religion (*Divine Discourse* and *Faith and Rationality*), and political philosophy (*Until Justice and Peace Embrace* and *Religion in the Public Square*). His latest book is *Justice: Rights and Wrongs*.

In the fall of 1993, Wolterstorff gave the Wilde Lectures at Oxford University (published as *Divine Discourse*), and in the spring of 1995 he gave the Gifford Lectures at St. Andrews University. He has been president of the American Philosophical Association (Central Division) and of the Society of Christian Philosophers. He is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

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“For too long religion has been played as political football, scoring points as we cheer our side and demonize opponents. Onto this field comes *Debating the Divine* which challenges our assumptions and gives us a way for religion to enrich our politics. Justice becomes our goal as we are asked to care for the least among us and work for the common good.”

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