

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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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.

“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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