

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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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).

“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.”

Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, author of *Failing America's Faithful: How Today's Churches Are Mixing God with Politics and Losing Their Way*

“These essays offer a welcome, and much needed, discussion on how religion should engage the public square. The connection between policy and values is a dynamic one, and many voices—both religious and secular—need to be heard in order to make this a more perfect union. Elected officials need to hear this conversation.”

Jesse Jackson, Jr., Congressman, Second Congressional District of Illinois

“By enabling a lively, readable, and unflinching debate about religion in public policy, *Debating the Divine* reinforces the moderating power of American pluralism and offers hope for a political process in which the sacred and the secular, while sometimes in conflict, are not in opposition.”

Bill Ivey, past chairman, National Endowment for the Arts and author of *Arts, Inc.: How Greed and Neglect Have Destroyed Our Cultural Rights*

