

RELIGION IN 21st CENTURY AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

Edited by Sally Steenland

Center for American Progress

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DEBATING the DIVINE

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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, 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 ban-ishes 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 Pess, 2007), 26.

"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