

**DEBATING**  
*the*  
**DIVINE**

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RELIGION IN  
21<sup>st</sup> 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  
[www.americanprogress.org](http://www.americanprogress.org)

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## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>*

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.<sup>3</sup>*

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.<sup>4</sup>*

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,<sup>5</sup> 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.”<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup>

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."<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup> 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."

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."

## 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.<sup>11</sup>

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

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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/](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%.

“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*

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