

**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

A project of the Center for American Progress, the Faith and Progressive Policy Initiative works to identify and articulate the moral, ethical, and spiritual values underpinning policy issues, to shape a progressive stance in which these values are clear, and to increase public awareness and understanding of these values. The Initiative also works to safeguard the healthy separation of church and state that has allowed religion in our country to flourish. In all its efforts, the Initiative works for a society and government that strengthen the common good and respect the basic dignity of all people.

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## 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."<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> (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.'"<sup>3</sup>

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.”<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup>

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.”<sup>7</sup>

## 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.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup> 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).<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>

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.”<sup>13</sup>

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.”<sup>14</sup>

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.”<sup>15</sup>

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.”<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup>

#### 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.<sup>19</sup>

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.”<sup>20</sup>

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.”<sup>21</sup>

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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.”

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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“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

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“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*

