

DEBATING
the
DIVINE

RELIGION IN
21st 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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Transforming the Religious–Secular Divide to Work for the Common Good

THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN OUR DEMOCRACY is so integral to discussions of public policy, culture, and society that it should come as no surprise that a secular progressive think tank dedicated to improving the lives of all Americans would want to be engaged in “debating the divine.” Much to the surprise of many conservatives who assume that liberals and progressives are hostile to religion and want to banish it altogether from the public square, the Center for American Progress, from our early days, has embraced prophetic religious voices as critical to social change and social movement throughout American history and vital in today’s policy debates.

We see religion as a significant force in the personal lives of citizens and in the public life of our nation. Its power can be both constructive and destructive, since religion itself is a multivalent force that can liberate and subjugate, enlighten and obfuscate, inspire and offend. These divergent capacities are well-documented in our nation’s history.

At the Center, we work with people of faith, with secular citizens, and with the religiously ambivalent—all of us collaborating to forge a progressive agenda that improves the lives of Americans through ideas and action. By necessity, religious ideas inform this work. Whether stated or not, public policies are shaped by basic beliefs about the nature of the world and our place in it. Our work is also informed by the actions of diverse communities of faith involved in a wide range of policy efforts on the domestic and global fronts.

As our national religious landscape becomes ever more complex, it is crucial to be knowledgeable about religion and to seriously engage its ideas. The role of religion in 21st-century American democracy demands our attention, which is why this collection of essays offers so many ways of engaging religious ideas.

You will find no final word on the many issues raised between these covers, nor will you find artificial uniformity. What you will find is vigorous debate, honest disagreements, and a striving for common ground concerning the role that religion should play in public life. It is one of democracy’s many demands that we as citizens participate in debates such as these, because they are the surest way of sustaining the American experiment in religious freedom and diversity.

There are several areas of agreement in *Debating the Divine*. The writers all accept that the role of religion in American public life is more complicated today than in an earlier period in our history when a Protestant hegemony reigned, through the middle of the last century. None of them is nostalgic for that earlier era. In its place is a far more complicated, noisy, and diverse religious scene. Likewise, none of the writers subscribes to the neoconservative argument that the public

square in the United States is naked—that is, scrubbed of all forms of religious expression and argument. The writers also agree that in our public deliberations, all political warrants and justifications, whether secular or theological in origin, should be subject to rigorous debate in our democratic policy.

Yet there are disagreements, too. The first centers on a long-running debate among political theorists and theologians over the need to translate religious appeals into a form of public reason accessible to all citizens. Some argue that this bracing dose of Enlightenment reason will solve the epistemological problems religion poses, while other writers insist the Enlightenment's notion of an objective universal moral language is illusory.

Second, there is a range of comfort and discomfort with the desirability and utility of God talk in our policy deliberations. Some writers argue that people of faith cannot possibly discuss public policy without referring to their particular religious beliefs. Others are willing to tone down their God talk in civic discussion, and still others find any discussion of religious belief in the public square mildly to threateningly subversive to democracy.

Many of these issues raise important policy questions, both domestic and international. For instance: When is religious engagement in public policy a healthy aspect of democracy, and when does it threaten the separation of church and state? How does the United States fight—and win—the global fight against radical terrorist networks, especially when some are claiming that this fight constitutes a clash of civilizations and religions? How do we encourage collaboration among religious and secular citizens on issues both care passionately about, such as poverty, the environment, and Darfur?

In the past four years, the public face of religion has dramatically changed in the United States as the religious right lost its self-proclaimed role as the voice of religious Americans. A vibrant chorus of faith voices have risen up in its place, and they have greatly broadened the values debate, as well as expanded alliances and agendas on social justice issues. Unique partnerships are being formed. For instance, white and Hispanic evangelicals, along with Catholics and Muslims, are working on comprehensive immigration reform. Liberal, mainstream, and conservative congregations are collaborating on interfaith efforts to fight global warming. African-American faith communities, which have long been strong and courageous leaders for justice, are continuing their prophetic tradition concerning poverty, prison reform, youth violence, and more. And this growing chorus now includes voices of Islam and other religions that increasingly are part of our national conversation.

In the next four years—and beyond—this work of faith communities will go on. We at the Center will continue to be active partners, working with religious and secular organizations to ensure that our joint efforts are inclusive and accountable to a diverse citizenry. The debate about the role of religion in public life will also go on, as it should. Many of us have divergent world views and honest disagreements about the role of religion in the public square. But even as we disagree, we need to collaborate.

The work of democracy has never been easy. Unified answers that satisfy everyone are rarely, if ever, the result of citizen deliberations. But our democracy is resilient enough to engage in rigorous debate, especially when the stakes are so high. We welcome others into this debate and invite them to action, as together we strive to make real the promise of equality, opportunity, and justice for all Americans.

“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*

