

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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www.americanprogress.org

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ISBN 978-0-615-21863-2

June 2008

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America's Tower of Religious Babble Is Already Too High

IN 1949, NEW YORK'S CARDINAL Francis Spellman and Eleanor Roosevelt squared off against each other on the issue of federal aid for parochial schools. Spellman, the most influential American Catholic leader of his day, had made a major speech demanding that Catholic schools receive their "fair share" of any federal funds for education. In her syndicated column "My Day," the former First Lady replied elliptically: "The separation of church and state is extremely important to any of us who hold to the original traditions of our nation. To change these traditions by changing our traditional attitude toward education would be harmful, I think, to our whole attitude of tolerance in the religious area."¹

Spellman went ballistic, accusing Mrs. Roosevelt in a letter to *The New York Times* of having compiled "a record of anti-Catholicism" and promoting "discrimination unworthy of an American mother."² Mrs. Roosevelt then took off her white gloves and observed that Catholic influence in Europe had not necessarily led to "happiness for the people." She concluded acerbically: "I assure you that I have no sense of being an 'unworthy American mother.' The final judgment, my dear Cardinal Spellman, of the unworthiness of all human beings is in the hands of God."³

This sharp exchange is emphatically not the sort of dialogue that Eboo Patel has in mind in an essay that seems to envisage a nation in which all we need to do is understand each other's beliefs better in order to make way for "collaborative efforts for the common good." The Spellman-Roosevelt letters may be much closer to what David A. Hollinger advocates when he argues that "any religious ideas offered as justifications for public policy should be open to critical debate, and no longer given a 'pass.'"

As a thoroughgoing secularist who believes that there is too much religion in the public square already, my position is much closer to Hollinger's than Patel's. For Patel—an Indian-American and a Muslim—secularists are always at the margins of any debate. Indeed, he literally places people of no faith in parentheses in the opening section of his essay. His is a world in which well-intentioned liberal believers of all faiths may, by becoming more understanding and tolerant of one another, make an impact on public life capable of breaking the recent fundamentalist stranglehold on discussions at the intersection of religion and politics.

Patel is concerned with the separation of church and state only insofar as it protects religion from government interference. He is not in the least concerned about the protection of government from religious interference—as long as it is the kind of "tolerant" religion he favors.

But some differences are irreconcilable. Bringing them directly into the political process requires a faith in human nature—whether under God or not—that the current state of human evolution (if I may be so bold as to use the “controversial” E-word) scarcely justifies. The novelist Philip Roth aptly captured this contradiction in a 1961 speech at Loyola University in Chicago when he referred to “the swallowing up of difference that goes on around us continuously, that deadening ‘tolerance’ that robs—and is designed to rob—those who differ, diverge, or rebel of their powers.” Roth argued that “it behooves us not to ‘love one another’ (which would seem from all evidence to be asking for the moon), but to practice no violence and treachery upon one another, which, it would seem, is difficult enough.”⁴

Patel writes about a group of University of Illinois students who, responding to angry debate between Muslim and Jewish students about Middle East politics, formed an interfaith group that concentrates on the “shared social values of Islam, Judaism, Christianity, and other faiths—values that include mercy, hospitality, and service.” Note, again, the omission of secularists from this “values” paradigm.

I would suggest that Middle East politics offer a spectacular example of a controversy that needs not more religious voices, but a stronger secularist influence. Notwithstanding Zionism’s origins as a secular movement, competing religious claims to supposedly God-given land are at the heart of the battle between Jews and Arabs. To return to Roth’s prescient speech, in which he was talking about the blockbuster movie based on Leon Uris’s novel *Exodus*, “a man who kills for his God-given rights (in this case, as the song informs us, God-given *land*) cannot so easily sit in judgment of another man when he kills for what God has given *him*, according to his accounting and his inventory.”⁵ Any definition of mercy and hospitality as specifically religious virtues hardly seems relevant here.

Hollinger’s basic position—that since religion is closely entwined with many political controversies, we should start debating the religious ideas underlying policy proposals—seems at first glance unassailable from a secularist vantage point. Given the current Democratic homage to the notion that we must use the language of liberal faith in order to take back the White House, it is refreshing to hear someone point out that liberals can’t have

A more fruitful discussion would focus on the effects of, rather than the religious rationales for, faith-based politics.

it both ways. If it is legitimate for Democrats to use liberal faith-based rationales in support of their policies, how can we then criticize conservative faith-based crusaders for doing the same?

The one major problem with Hollinger’s analysis is the fragility of the premise that challenges to anti-rational faith might change the outcome of policy debates. Unlike many of the “new atheists” (who aren’t really new, but are reaching a new and larger audience), I see little use in arguing about the rationality of faith. The whole point of faith is that it is impervious to evidence, even though moderate religion has allowed itself to be modified by secular thought and scientific evidence, while fundamentalism has not.

A more fruitful discussion would focus on the effects of, rather than the religious rationales for, faith-based politics. The effect of expanding tax-voucher programs for parents who send their children to religious schools—a popular idea across much of the religious spectrum—would be a further undermining of public education. I would love to hear Mrs. Roosevelt’s thoughts about

vouchers, as distinct from older, indirect federal aid for religious schools participating in such tax-subsidized programs as school lunches.

But no one had the temerity in the 1940s to suggest that parents should get a tax break to underwrite religious education. One does not need to debate the principles of Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, or Protestantism to understand the potential for civic mischief in permitting any religious school to feed at the public trough.

In similar fashion, what good does it do to “challenge” the belief that using a spare embryo from a fertility clinic for research purposes is the equivalent of murder because embryonic cells in a petri dish are human beings? Better to concentrate on the potential of stem cell research to cure diseases suffered by people who are, by anyone’s religious or nonreligious standards, indisputably alive.

Above all, Americans need to distinguish between the public square—the huge space in which all of us talk and act in every way protected by the First Amendment—and the more limited political arena. Martin Luther King voiced his moral convictions—a morality equally appealing to secularists and those religious Americans who believed in racial justice—from the larger public square rather than the political arena. He wasn’t running for office.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Eleanor Roosevelt, “My Day,” June 23, 1949.
- 2 Cardinal Francis Spellman, “Letters to the Editor,” *The New York Times*, July 26, 1949.
- 3 Roosevelt to Spellman, *The New York Times*, July 28, 1949.
- 4 Philip Roth, “Some New Jewish Stereotypes,” *Reading Myself And Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975), 201.
- 5 *Ibid.*

“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.”

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

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

