

**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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## The Two Cultures?

WHILE READING THE ESSAYS by David Hollinger and Eboo Patel, I was reminded of the famed squabble over “the two cultures” between C.P. Snow and F.R. Leavis, which divided English intellectuals in the late fifties and early sixties. In his 1959 Rede Lectures, Snow, a scientist and popular novelist, complained about the mutual incomprehension between the “cultures” of modern science and the humanities, for which he mainly blamed humanists who remained ignorant of the methods and recent discoveries of the sciences. This provoked a ferocious response from the eminently provokable Cambridge critic Leavis, who, quite frankly, wiped the floor with Snow, revealing his shallow conception of culture and naïve faith in technological progress.

The quarrel came to mind because it exposed a superficial dichotomy, which is always a healthy thing. What I liked about David Hollinger’s essay is that he challenges the lazy distinction between “religious” and “non-religious” arguments and encourages us to think critically about all of them, regardless of who makes them. Eboo Patel has unwittingly illustrated the problem Hollinger is talking about when he pleads for greater “inclusiveness,” “respect,” and “pluralism” in discussing religion.

That is a certain liberal position—I’ll call it “diversity” liberalism—that seems to sanction a thoughtless, faith-based approach to every important question, among believers and non-believers alike. In 1995, long before Christopher Hitchens and the “new atheists” cashed in, evangelical scholar Mark Noll complained in *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* about the dumbing-down of American Protestant thinking and writing, which he saw as a threat to spiritual seriousness. He was right, though he failed to mention how diversity liberalism encouraged this very tendency.

The current Pax Americana dictates that all sensitive issues, not just religious ones, be avoided when possible, that pluralism be celebrated, that different folks be given different strokes, and the like. But democracy is not for cry-babies: It requires serious debate by serious people with thick skins. And so does a life of faith.

The fallacy of diversity liberalism is to assume that the only alternative to inclusiveness and respect is exclusivity and contempt. What David Hollinger has in mind, I think, is a society in

The fallacy of diversity liberalism is to assume that the only alternative to inclusiveness and respect is exclusivity and contempt.

which people with real differences argue about those differences reasonably, in debates that force all parties to understand themselves and actually know something about their adversaries. In such a society irresolvable differences will get aired, but all sides have an obligation to defend their positions in matters affecting public life.

I frankly cannot tell what kind of public discussion Eboo Patel has in mind in his pluralistic society. Everyone has a voice, but there seems to be no genuine debate over evidence or reasoning, no persuasion. We all just vent, vote, and go home.

This leads him, I think, to misunderstand philosopher Michael Sandel's statement that "fundamentalists rush in where liberals fear to tread." This is not only because "liberals and moderates avoid public discussion of religion and morality," as Patel suggests; it is because diversity liberals don't believe there can be better or worse answers to fundamental questions.

Liberal democracy provides a stable structure for deliberation, a safe place where people can give reasons and be persuaded by them. I think we would all be better off if we had more open public debates over contentious issues.

One doesn't have to be a fundamentalist to believe that, or illiberal. Liberal democracy, as I understand it, is a system that, among other things, provides a stable structure for deliberation, a safe place where people can give reasons and be persuaded by them. Hollinger is completely right to insist that religious ideas not get a pass, and I think we would all be better

off if we had more open public debates over contentious issues such as evolution, abortion, and home schooling—so long as advocates on every side had to give reasons for their positions.

My guess is that this would actually work in liberals' favor, while also teaching them a thing or two about their conservative fellow citizens and the weakness of their own positions. For example, a more open debate on evolution would teach non-believers that creationists are actually right to argue that Darwinism is "just a hypothesis." This would force them to make the better case for Darwinism, which is the case for a scientific method of hypothesis and empirical falsification, rather than biblical literalism. Ask a creationist: Do you want a cardiologist whose education is based on my method, or yours?

But that is not the case diversity liberals feel comfortable making today. They don't know much about scientific method or appreciate it—C.P. Snow was right about that—nor do they think beliefs can be rationally criticized. And, most deeply, they don't believe there are correct answers to the deepest questions that exercise religious believers. They will snub the yokels or tolerate them, but not argue with them.

An illustration: This past fall I published *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West*, a book that, to my surprise, received a lot of public attention. I did countless interviews on public radio, speaking with liberal journalists before liberal audiences, and they were uniformly dull. Most interviewers had superficial polemical questions prepared. They asked: Is there any essential difference between George Bush and Osama bin Laden? Will American evangelicals turn this country into Iran? I was annoyed, not just by the contempt they showed for believers (which Patel would recognize), but also by the lazy ignorance such questions displayed about religion more generally.

The interviewers did not feel responsible for knowing something about their subject and taking their adversaries' arguments seriously. My experience on evangelical radio was quite different.



The most memorable two interviews I had were conducted with an evangelical talk-show host in Detroit, Paul Edwards of WLQV, who liked the book but wanted to convert me back to the evangelicalism of my youth. We ended up having a spirited debate about the role of fear in human life, comparing the ideas of Thomas Hobbes to those of the writer of the book of Hebrews in the New Testament, who wrote:

For he hath said: I will not leave thee: neither will I forsake thee. So that we may confidently say: The Lord is my helper: I will not fear what man shall do to me. (Hebrews 13:5–6)

Now that was an interesting interview.

Diversity liberals aren't interested in such debates. They wish to be "inclusive" of "people of faith," but not take seriously the claims of that faith, or argue against them if need be. They are wrong not to, and not only because a healthy democratic society requires openness to rational criticism. Such liberals underestimate the willingness of many believers to engage in such arguments because their deepest belief is that there are true answers to the questions religion addresses, and that finding those answers is "the one thing needful." Not two cultures, but one human need.

“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*

