

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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Washington, D.C. 20005
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www.americanprogress.org

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ISBN 978-0-615-21863-2

June 2008

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Globalization, the End of Easy Consensus, and Beginning the Real Work of Pluralism

EBOO PATEL AND DAVID HOLLINGER highlight important challenges facing the practice of democracy. In their essays, both rely on rather abstract accounts of the practice of pluralistic politics. Greater attention to the fortunes of pluralism in American history can help us refine our understanding of the nature and practice of democracy in a religiously diverse context. This will help us to better understand the challenges and opportunities of the present moment, particularly those posed by globalization to pluralistic democracy.

Although they have different concerns, both Patel and Hollinger share the classical liberal view of the criteria for participation in the public sphere. Religious citizens may participate in public debate, but in order to do so they must translate their religious beliefs into commonly accepted languages. Hollinger prefers that religion remain the source of motivation that must subsequently be expressed in public arguments using secular warrants. Patel makes room for a more substantive role of religious reason in contributing to public debate. Both, however, agree that such debate must be carried out in publicly accessible arguments.

Such criteria are fundamental to the liberal idea of democracy. Principles, however, do not tell us everything we need to know about how existing liberal democracies have constituted their public spheres. U.S. religious history is a case in point. While the First Amendment enshrines a separation of church and state that makes room for religious pluralism and secular democracy, the historical reality has been much closer to Diana Eck's notion of "assimilation" than to true pluralism. Assimilation welcomes others, but unlike pluralism, it does not accept their differences. "Come and be like us, come and conform to a predominantly Anglo-Protestant culture."¹

While there are noteworthy examples of true pluralism, such as Patel's citation of President Washington's support for Jewish communities, the norm has tended much more to a social and political sphere dominated by Protestant beliefs and forms of association. Religion is construed as a set of beliefs, held by individuals, who come together voluntarily into congregations. There was also throughout the 19th and much of the 20th centuries a general consensus around a Protestant

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ethic of industriousness, acquisition, and personal responsibility.² Thus, the boundaries of welcoming religion into the American public sphere included embracing *Poor Richard's Almanac* and reducing religion to the Ten Commandments. Insofar as members of other religions were willing to assimilate to this construction of religion and to these values, they were welcome to participate in the public sphere.

This cultural hegemony was evident in the work of the National Council of Churches in America that served as gatekeeper in the post-war era for the free airtime that broadcasters were required to give to religious programming. The NCC limited religious programming to respectable mainline Protestant voices. As a result, more radical religious voices and fundamentalists were kept out of mainstream media. They turned instead to the power of the open market, buying time on independent stations and amassing their own networks. Although outside the venue of “respectable” civil society, they found their audience nonetheless.³ This example serves as a useful background to current arguments about religious participation in public debate. Pluralism often demands that we

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participate in conversations with undesired partners. And pragmatism shows that attempts to censor “undesired” voices generally fail.

Patel's account of the history of American pluralism highlights some of our better moments. Compared to other countries, we have a rich history of pluralism, but one that has

nonetheless taken place on fairly narrow religious common ground. We have always had difficulties with religious outliers that challenge the status quo: Jews, Catholics, fundamentalists, and others. If the United States has struggled to live up to its pluralistic ideals in the past, when pluralism needed only to span Judaism and a range of Christianities, it is sorely tested by the present moment when globalization brings radically different faiths into our national public sphere.

Globalization challenges pluralism in two ways. First, it brings about diversity (living and working with people very different from ourselves), which can be deeply disorienting. The sociologist Ulrich Beck, who has written extensively on globalization, observes that our response to diversity can include both pity and hatred, “[p]ity because the no longer heterogeneous other becomes present in one's feelings and experience... hatred because the walls of institutionalized ignorance and hostility that protected our personal and collective worlds are collapsing.” Furthermore, globalization can give rise to “a sense of boundarylessness and a longing for the reestablishment of old boundaries.”⁴ Add to this the already deep worries caused by economic dislocation and the decline of the nation-state, and global anxieties all too easily target local “others.” For instance, undocumented workers bear the brunt of economic anger, and any relatively dark skinned young male can become the focus of terrorism fears. In such a climate, a pluralist project that attempts to draw diverse members into a shared community is particularly difficult.

Hollinger's analysis helps us discern a second problem posed by globalization. In his essay, he avoids simplistic talk of “universal” reason and instead argues that members of a democracy need to base their arguments upon “premises that are particular to that polity and not to any of the

more sectarian persuasions that might be present within it.” Thus responsible public discourse involves negotiation among the various groups that comprise the political community. Globalization vastly expands the range of perspectives that pluralism must encompass. Such negotiations are never easy, but they are markedly simpler among kindred religious traditions (intramural tensions notwithstanding).

Now American pluralism must encompass, in addition to Christianity and Judaism, a quite different Abrahamic faith, Islam, as well as radically different religions such as Hinduism with its polytheistic mediations of the divine and the pointedly non-theistic Buddhist traditions. Globalization has rendered our national project of religious pluralism significantly more demanding at a time when it has also made us deeply ambivalent about cultural and religious outsiders.

Hollinger’s main concern is a profound one: that contemporary calls to allow more religious discourse into political debate may result in giving religious arguments “a pass.” This would mean that particular religious arguments are accepted into public debate but are not submitted to the full force of democratic argument. They are given public power, yet retain private privilege. This is a concern that should be shared by all citizens, religious or not, because the stakes are enormous. We stand to lose the deliberative practice of liberal democracy, replacing it with a fractious Babel of disparate discourses that would reduce democracy to mere majoritarian politics.

In that regard, Hollinger’s call for a retrieval of “civic patriotism” rooted in our “common membership in democratic national solidarity” is profoundly germane.⁵ A strong sense of the value of our common political life is crucial if we are to rise to the difficult work of building a pluralistic democracy amidst so much diversity.

Religious communities should accept the “full heat” of democratic debate both as the cost of access to public debate and as a sign of being taken seriously. Critique and challenge are signs of respect and engagement. Hollinger’s argument, however, seems to revert to a more abstract notion of the limits on discourse in the public sphere than conveyed in his paraphrase of Rawls and Minow. He pushes Walzer’s “pressure of democratic argument” toward the canons of enlightenment reason: e.g., acceptance of “modern standards of plausibility” and critical historical readings of their sacred texts.

I am not a political theorist, but it seems to me that Hollinger’s account is far too idealist. It overlooks the particular genealogy of American pluralism, assuming it has worked simply through a set of abstract principles, and not through the shifting hegemonic discourse discussed above. Actually existing public spheres have a dialogical character. Political consensus does not develop after all parties have accepted a set of abstract rules for what can and cannot be said. Rather, consensus develops out of their serious efforts to understand, engage, and convince one another. When there is a stable cultural horizon, whether through harmony or hegemony, consensus is reached. The United States currently lacks either harmony or hegemony. Democracy in such a context requires the hard political work of convincing all parties that they have much to accomplish together for the common good, and the equally hard work of negotiating a common moral and political language in which to communicate.

Moderating voices can challenge the extreme views of fundamentalists, disprove their false claims, and add to the vigor of public debate.

This work is profoundly political and rhetorical. It will not be accomplished by simply telling religious believers that they must accept Enlightenment reason or remain private. They are unlikely to listen, anyway, and nothing short of depriving them of the vote and the right to free association will keep them out of the public sphere. What is needed is a deep, generous, and knowledgeable engagement with beliefs and arguments among religious and intellectual traditions.

It is relatively simple to say with Hollinger that “easy God talk” must be challenged by “public scrutiny.” It is quite another thing to engage someone’s religious convictions in a way that actually challenges them. Here the “new Atheists” are not particularly helpful. They provide catharsis for frustrated secularists, but don’t provide much guidance for engaging their religious fellow citizens.⁶ On the other hand, the classical critics of religion—Feuerbach, Marx, Freud, Durkheim—remain useful because they illuminate the ways in which religions fall short of their own ideals. Of course to use these arguments in debate with believers requires sufficient knowledge to challenge them on the basis of their own beliefs.

The political emergence of fundamentalism and the massive growth of religious diversity pose profound challenges to pluralism. Things were undoubtedly much simpler in this country when the public sphere was dominated by a liberal Protestant hegemony that embraced the Enlightenment and delegitimated religious voices that did not fit its mold. But the ideal of liberal democracy cannot be content with such an artificial consensus. The present moment gives us the challenging opportunity to be true to our principles at a time when they cannot be easily realized. The profound difficulties we face may paradoxically make it possible for us to truly practice pluralism for the first time.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Diana Eck, "From Diversity to Pluralism," The Pluralism Project at Harvard University, available at http://www.pluralism.org/pluralism/essays/from_diversity_to_pluralism.php.
- 2 Jose Casanova, *Public Religion in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 145; Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in Religious Sociology* (New York: Anchor, 1960).
- 3 R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 229–233.
- 4 Ulrich Beck, *Cosmopolitan Vision* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 2006), 8.
- 5 His proposal that this "trump all religious loyalties" is, however, deeply problematic and deserves much more attention than it is given. It is near axiomatic that religions have more fundamental loyalties than the local or national community. Indeed this requirement seems profoundly burdensome for even purely secular convictions. Is there room here even for cosmopolitan ethical concern?
- 6 E.O. Wilson's *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006) is a notable exception.

“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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