

**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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# Wisdom, Not Prescription

## *One Size Does Not Fit All*

AS A HISTORIAN, IT IS DIFFICULT for me to imagine that any one formula can provide guidelines for regulating the intersection of religion and public life, especially in the United States. For the proposal from David Hollinger about the need for critical scrutiny of religious interventions in public life, for Eboo Patel's defense of religious pluralism, and for many other possibilities currently on offer, the historically informed answer should probably be, "it depends."

The prescriptions outlined by Hollinger and Patel are certainly worthy ones. In a democracy, all proposals for public policy—including those emanating from explicitly religious sources, as well as those like Hollinger's that rely on "the critical spirit of the Enlightenment"—should indeed be scrutinized carefully for their moral and utilitarian consequences. In addition, the picture of public space that Patel offers, in which a wide array of particular religious perspectives compete collaboratively, certainly sketches a praiseworthy ideal.

Yet complexity defines the American past on the connection of religion and politics. And complexity requiring a great deal of ad hoc discernment will be necessary for setting a satisfactory future course.

The history that leads me to this cautious position is filled with events and circumstances that defy reduction to simple assessments. The knot of religious-political interactions in antebellum America, and the equally knotty interactions of the last half century illustrate the dense complexities involved.

Political culture as it came to exist in the United States grew from a landscape sketched by constitutional guidelines, but given life by religious energy. The national separation of church and state, which led eventually to separation of church and state at the local level, was a wise provision of the political founders.

The agencies that created American political culture in a disestablished public space were, however, primarily religious. As described powerfully in Daniel Walker Howe's sparkling new contribution to the Oxford History of the United States, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (2007), religious motives, religious actors, and religious modes of organization were prime forces driving the creation of a functioning democratic republic.

Political culture as it came to exist in the United States grew from a landscape sketched by constitutional guidelines, but given life by religious energy.

By pioneering the deployment of voluntary societies—for Bible distribution, for temperance, for education, eventually against slavery—religiously motivated groups and individuals showed how to construct a strong civil society on the basis of voluntary organization. The political sphere followed, rather than led, this primarily religious phase of early American social development. Thus, political parties followed the lead of religious voluntary societies in organizing themselves. Political campaigning imitated what had been done in working up revivals. Political newspapers and magazines followed a path marked out by religious publications.

When Alexis de Tocqueville came to the United States in the early 1830s, he famously reported that “it was the religious aspect of the country that first struck my eye.” Many of the most telling observations in Tocqueville’s *Democracy* grew from his conclusions concerning “the great political consequences that flowed” from the nation’s religious character.<sup>1</sup>

So was it a good thing for American democracy to be so strongly influenced by religiously inspired forms and forces? Yes and no.

Yes, because the free exercise of religion of a mostly Protestant, evangelical character gave the nation its precedents for voluntary organization, which were eventually imitated by political parties. Religious organizations developed the practices of democracy, which included women and racial minorities long before politicians gave these groups the right to vote. And religious voluntarism guided the American use of literacy, which penetrated much further down the social scale than anywhere else in the world at that time.

But also, no, because religion—again of a mostly Protestant evangelical cast—gave the northern and southern sections of the country the certainty that each was the sole agent of God’s finest work in the world, and so turned sectional conflict into the cataclysmic strife of the Civil War. Some observers at home and many from the outside recognized this conflict immediately

as a distinctly religious war.<sup>2</sup> The religious energy that had done so much to create national political culture was the same force that transformed controversy over slavery, states rights, and sectional honor into a bloodbath.

The conundrum involved in the outworking of events in a democratic polity strongly shaped by religion is illustrated by Abraham Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address of March 1865. This speech was

Religious organizations developed the practices of democracy, which included women and racial minorities long before politicians gave these groups the right to vote.

the most profoundly religious public statement in American history. It was also a statement that led Lincoln out of the particularity of his own singular religious convictions to, in effect, condemn the religious forces that had fueled the war.

A similar complexity has attended the public history of the last two generations. Particular religion stormed back into American politics in the 1950s when African-American Christian ministers led African-American church members in demanding civil rights on the basis of transcendent religious norms. David Chappell’s richly documented book, *A Stone of Hope*, has argued convincingly that the ameliorative social policies of liberal white America were not effective in moving from regret about persistent racial inequality to actual reform of the United States’ racist public life. It took, rather, particular religious motives that appealed directly to God to shake loose the nation’s entrenched regime of racial discrimination.<sup>3</sup>



Yet the religious results of the civil rights movement were far from simple. The movement was actively or passively opposed by a large number, probably a majority, of white Christian believers who, though they shared the Christianity of civil rights reformers, did not share their assessment of the nation's social evils. Then, if most of white religious America eventually accepted the civil rights revolution, large segments of that same population soon came to resent the expansion of federal power that had pushed through national civil rights, especially as that power was turned to other national reforms affecting women's rights, abortion rights, and gay rights.<sup>4</sup>

The result of 50-plus years of mingled religious-political public advocacy is a situation where it is now difficult to find a single meaningful prescription for how the interests of public policy and religion should relate. Those like myself who view racial reform and the defense of life as the two most important domestic challenges want to both strongly affirm and seriously qualify the exercise of religion in public life.

Powerful arguments based on utilitarian principles can be advanced for each of these positions. For example: A history of racial discrimination that existed for nearly 350 years needs much more than a leveling of the legal playing field to rectify past wrongs. And a society that fails to protect those humans in its midst who are least able to protect themselves is a society poised for deadly assault on all others who are excluded from the circle of "liberty and justice for all." But, of course, for many (including myself) who would make these non-religious arguments, the reason for advancing utilitarian arguments on behalf of affirmative action and pro-life are thoroughly religious.

A better solution than seeking a universal prescription about religion and public life would seem to be the recognition that the religious sphere and the public sphere are distinct but overlapping spheres of existence. Intermingling between these spheres is inevitable, but the spheres are in fact not co-extensive or identical. Wisdom in the conduct of life within each sphere, and then wisdom about how the inevitable intersection of these spheres should be guided, is the great desideratum of this American moment, as it has been in all other times and places of human history.

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#### ENDNOTES

- 1 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. and trans. Harvey Claflin Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 282.
- 2 For expansion, see Harry S. Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War* (New York: Viking, 2006); and Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).
- 3 David Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).
- 4 I have tried to show how the earlier difficulties of the Civil War were directly connected to the unfolding of recent American history in *God and Race in American Politics: A Short History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

“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*

