

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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Center for American Progress
1333 H Street NW, 10th Floor
Washington, D.C. 20005
Tel: 202.682.1611 • Fax: 202.682.1867
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Religion and Community Organizing

Prophetic Religion and Social Justice Offer Avenues to a New Democratic Pluralism

BOTH DAVID HOLLINGER AND EBOO PATEL agree that the critical question is not whether religious engagement within the public square is appropriate. Each affirms that whether explicit, implicit, or complicit, religion is very present in the public square. Instead, they are both concerned, for compellingly different reasons, with the impact of religious engagement on democracy and democratic participation. They both offer insightful strategies for how religious voices can be mediated within the public square, thus furthering rather than imploding democratic processes.

For Hollinger, a foundational premise for such mediation is “a civic sphere in which our common membership in democratic national solidarity trumps all religious loyalties,” and where “religious ideas offered as justification for public policy” are not given a “pass,” but are “open to critical debate.” Patel, however, proposes the utilization of a pluralistic ethos that bridges the particularity/universality divide in an effort to forge an engaged communal framework. Both Hollinger and Patel appear to be in agreement that the end goal is democratic engagement toward a nationalistic “American” common good.

Theism is often viewed as irrational and personal, while secular belief systems are seen as rational and public, but in fact both have their rational elements and leaps of faith.

In response, several questions come to mind. What constitutes “religion?” Why should democratic national solidarity trump “religious” loyalties? In a country where “democratic participation” is often reduced to distant elite conversations served up through the media and imbibed prior to entrance into a voting booth, does democratic engagement look and feel the same to all people? And finally, amid this distant and often unintelligible insider-speak that passes for democratic engagement, what gives the average person a sense of authority and right to participation beyond the process of voting? In light of my commitment to community organizing as a form of democratic engagement and because of the space constraints of this article, I will focus here on the final question.

Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci defines religion as any system that shapes “a conception of the world which has become a norm of life ... carried out in practical life.”¹ Thus theistic religions are not necessarily distinguishable from other value systems, including secular ones—so why should they be treated differently in the public square? Theism is often viewed as irrational and

personal, while secular belief systems are seen as rational and public, but in fact both have their rational elements and leaps of faith. Religion is one of a variety of value constructs and, as such, provides a normative framework by which emotional loyalties and moral sentiments can animate policies that seemingly support these loyalties or sentiments. Religion also provides a normative language for public discourse on humanity and human relations.

If we think of religion in this broad (not dogmatic or doctrinaire) sense, then any system is a “religious” system on par with any other and trumping none—be it spiritual or secular, liberal or conservative, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, or atheist. In my view, this is the starting ground for authentic democracy and an opening for a new pluralism—one that is based on commitments, whether secular or sacred. The equity inherent in this new pluralism allows us to aspire to a framework of alignment rather than engage in a struggle for primacy.

I believe that community organizing, when it engages in the struggle for socioeconomic justice among marginalized communities, illustrates such a pluralistic alignment. Community organizing is a process for social transformation that is grounded in the belief that the presence of negative socioeconomic conditions alone do not automatically lead to political, social, or legislative

changes. Rather, social transformation occurs when people affected by economic and social injustices—along with those in solidarity with them—amass enough collective power to create the public and political will to confront the negative conditions within their communities and lives.

The public square, then, becomes the stage on which the existential realities of their lives are confronted, negotiated, and ameliorated. Or viewed from a different angle, individuals waging public and collec-

If religion is a reflection of the deepest commitments of the citizenry but is confined to only private discourse, then a powerful vehicle for engagement in the democratic project is lost.

tive struggles for justice enter and are sustained and supported within the public square as a way of life; and this life is the authority that affirms their right of participation.

For many individuals directly affected by social and economic injustices, community organizing offers a challenge to the current reality over and against the vision of a different world. Faith and spiritual commitment encapsulated in the term “religion” is often the generator and sustainer of this radical vision amid an oppressive reality. Religion becomes a vehicle for collectivizing the possibilities of life and a catalyst for social engagement. If religion is a reflection of the deepest commitments of the citizenry but is confined to only private discourse, then a powerful vehicle for engagement in the democratic project is lost. Consequently, if democratic participation is defined not just as a free market of ideas but as the active engagement of all the citizenry, then excluding religion suppresses participation and thereby undermines democracy.

In *The Culture of Disbelief*, Stephen Carter says that the attempt to exclude religion from the public square is not only unnecessary, but also unrealistic. He argues that to ask those whose lives are anchored in religious tradition to engage in dialogue without reaching into the reservoir of their belief is tantamount to the needless amputation of a limb. Furthermore, the mere fact that some see eliminating religion from citizen participation as necessary, let alone possible, shows that religion is too often viewed as a trivial matter that can be shrugged on and off at will, rather than a guiding force in people’s motivations and decisions.

However, Carter agrees with Hollinger's analysis of Souder's argument when he voices concern that those who fear a weakened separation of church and state are too often spurred by whether they agree with the issue in question, instead of unswerving commitment to the principle. Citing various cases, Carter shows that "there is much depressing evidence that the religious voice is required to stay out of the public square only when it is pressed in a conservative cause."² Thus, for many the public square often becomes an exclusionary and hostile place for expressing religious and social beliefs and commitments, especially if those beliefs do not align with society's dominant views.

Dissenting voices, whether conservative or progressive, are tolerated only if they are small enough in number, quiet enough in force, or wacky enough in content to be deemed insignificant. This form of censorship allows dominant ideologies to prevail, while allowing quasi-pluralism only to the extent that it does not challenge or weaken dominant ideologies.

In a counterpoint to Hollinger's argument, Carter says that rather than keep religious voices out of the public square, we should challenge "the secular ends to which the name of God [is] linked."³ Secular ideas that receive traction because they enjoin religion must also be critically scrutinized.

The assumption that religion is (and should be) a private matter has always been an indulgent illusion of elite insiders. While I agree with Hollinger that religious ideas should not be given a pass, I also believe that critical debate regarding religion must go beyond tests for reasonability or rationality. Instead, the critique must be three-fold:

- First, it must test whether religious commitments are prophetic calls for real social analysis committed to the true humanity and worth of all and (to use a terribly religious phrase) whether they rebuke the wanton disregard for life via excessive militarism, poverty, (mis)education, and so on.
- Second, it must refute the notion that religion is an autonomous, individualistic expression that does not inform our political-moral understanding. The critique must "out" religion's political and class motivations.
- Third, it must embrace a pluralism that understands all systems of belief to be "religion," and thus subject all ideas (whether sacred or secular) to rigorous critical debate.

Democracy flourishes only through inclusive public discourse where religious motivations are encouraged and respected. In my view, the democratic project will not thrive if the demos is restricted and not allowed to engage its full self and deeply held commitments of morality and justice. Religion must be seen as more than a place of moralistic imperatives. It must be seen as a tool for appropriating and negotiating moral and empirical truth, in addition to being a well-source of our deepest commitments.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 344.
- 2 Stephen Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 64.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 229.

“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*

