

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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Nobody Gets a Pass

Faith in Reason and Religious Pluralism Are Equally Questionable

DAVID HOLLINGER IS, OF COURSE, COMPLETELY CORRECT when he argues that “religious ideas offered as justifications for public policy should be open to critical debate and no longer given a ‘pass.’” It is true that religious actors in the public square often seem to assume that “playing the faith card” is enough. It is not. Religion, when it engages the public square, needs to give an account of itself beyond “Thus sayeth the Lord.”

The same, however, needs to be said for the unsupported faith Hollinger demonstrates in “reason” in public discourse. For secular liberals, reason, rational discourse, and the Enlightenment are often given a pass as well. Secularists who play the “the reason card” do not evidence even a modest awareness that objective reason is subject to strong critique from many quarters, especially from postmodernists and postcolonial theorists.¹

Should we not ask secularists to at least acknowledge that the ideas of liberal democracy came from a particular race, class, and even gendered interest? Are we to believe that slaveholders writing lyrically about freedom pose no fundamental contradiction, that they are just a historical anomaly? “Remember the ladies,” wrote Abigail Adams to her husband John Adams, and the Founders did not. Without such critique, and the subsequent critical awareness of the competing and entrenched interests served by the very “ideals” of contemporary liberal democracy, liberal democracy itself can (and has) become a transcendent faith that mirrors the transcendent faith it wishes to supplant for control of the public square.

Should we not ask secularists to at least acknowledge that the ideas of liberal democracy came from a particular race, class, and even gendered interest?

In his 1981 book, *After Virtue*, Scottish political philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre argues that far from being the secular route to human salvation, the Enlightenment has failed to produce the good society. What we have achieved instead is the overreaching confidence of secular liberals in the capacity of reason (their own reason) to discover universal principles such as “freedom” or “democracy” that are unconnected to specific contexts and practices. In addition, MacIntyre credits secularism with the rise of an atomistic individualism that has not inculcated the practice of virtue required for a common good and hence a good society.²

Therefore, we cannot take at face value Hollinger’s statement that valorizes the “scrutiny to which we commonly subject ideas about the economy, gender, race, literature, science, art, and virtually everything else.” Would this be the same scrutiny to which scientific ideas about “eugenics” were subjected in the 20th century? The same scrutiny of the ideas of “informed consent” in the Tuskegee Syphilis experiments that were conducted for 40 years, ending in 1972? The centuries since the Enlightenment have been replete with the failure to sufficiently scrutinize ideas about the economy or gender, race or science. Exploitation and even genocide have sometimes been the result.

A key insight of postmodernism is that, as Christian theologian Roger Olson has written, “something like faith is involved in all human thinking.” There are those, therefore, who see “some benefits to postmodernism’s discarding of the rationalistic mind-set of the Enlightenment and modern secularism in favor of community-shaped perspective as a necessary ingredient in all knowledge.”³

If our goal, religious and secular alike, is to get greater clarity on the content of the common good, then we are better served by the kinds of knowledge, both religious and secular, that come from the bottom up. If we do not find ways to make our reflections on the common good genuinely more participatory for those on the margins, then we will have only an imaginary construct

that, because it excludes, is neither good nor common.

If we recognize the limitations of human knowledge and our individual and group capacity for self-delusion, then we might achieve a cooperative public sphere.

The advantage of the postmodernist critique to our discussion is to raise this question: Would religion and secularism both benefit from not being given a “pass” in their approach to political discourse in the public square? If we recognize

the limitations of human knowledge (religious or secular) and our individual and group capacity for self-delusion, then we might achieve a cooperative public sphere (albeit a somewhat modest one). A community of discourse that does not require each participant to adopt the mind-set of the other, a self-critical community that listens well and also challenges, is our best way forward.

PLURALISM AND CONFLICT

Eboo Patel offers us an inspiring vision of what a pluralist approach can contribute to religion in the public square. “Religion can serve as a means of social cohesion, a trainer of civic participation, and a builder of community where discipline, generosity, reflection, and service are learned,” he says. It is well to remember, however, that an encounter with genuine religious diversity can often produce the opposite result—social fragmentation, fueled by fear.

It is certainly true, as Patel argues, that just as there is a “compelling national interest in shaping healthy interaction among different races and ethnicities, so is there a compelling national interest in shaping how different faith communities (including people of no faith) engage one another.” But sometimes this very “shaping” happens through conflict, rather than “healthy interaction.”

In both the Hollinger and Patel essays, there is too little attention paid to the concept of power and conflict in political life. When religious and secular actors engage the public square, when any actor engages the public square, they are doing so in order to garner sufficient power to achieve a

given end. This fact of political life does not mean pluralism is not possible—it is simply a fact of life. While generosity of spirit and a willingness to go beyond narrow group-identity politics help to promote pluralism, it is also true that conflicts over religion, and even the drive for political power, can lead to greater pluralism as well.

The very conflict that results when non-dominant religions and their mores engage the public square can produce both rejection *and* change. And, in regard to Hollinger, people contesting their religious beliefs in public are not necessarily “irrational,” they are merely engaged in our political process.

An example of this kind of conflict recently occurred at, of all places, secular Harvard University. Harvard closed one of its gyms to men for six hours a week at the request of several female Muslim students, so that they could exercise more comfortably. “Sharia at Harvard” was Andrew Sullivan’s response on his blog. The *Harvard Crimson* called the gym closing a “misguided accommodationist policy.”⁴

Harvard is not the only site of such conflict. From Orthodox Jewish students suing Yale, arguing that being forced to live in co-ed dorms violated their religious principles, to Muslim female medical students objecting to the requirement that they roll up their sleeves to scrub in for surgery, controversy abounds when people of different beliefs, customs, and values live and work side by side.

Our sense of the “public good” can emerge from such conflicts. Some religious beliefs and practices may have to succumb to professional standards or codes (surgeons have to wash their forearms), which are considered more important for the good of the whole than an individual’s voluntary choice of a medical sub-specialty. Other beliefs and practices may gradually become accepted, and controversy will diminish.

The value of critical theory to this analysis is to recognize that religion versus secularism is not a “rational vs. irrational” issue. Nor must we insist that our increasing religious pluralism be continuous with American culture. Increased pluralism can be radically discontinuous and still be salutary, as the “insurrection of subjugated knowledge”⁵ tests, probes, and perhaps even helps us redefine who we are.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Postmodernism is a critical theory, especially of modernism. The philosophers most often associated with postmodernism are Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. While originally a critique of texts, in Derrida this is extended to include symbols or phenomena in Western thought and becomes a critique of “objective reason” per se. The most common use of the term is to point to contradictions between the intent or surface of a work and the phenomena and assumptions that inform it and that it elicits. Postcolonialism came into being in response to Edward Said’s book *Orientalism*. It seeks to problematize the influence of European colonialism and Enlightenment thought on second and third world cultures. It points to the contradictions between Enlightenment principles of democracy and equal rights and the colonialist actions of the West.
- 2 Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 6.
- 3 Roger E. Olson, “The Future of Evangelical Theology,” *Christianity Today*, February 9, 1998, 40, cited in Mark G. Toulouse, *God in Public: Four Ways American Christianity and Public Life Relate* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 172.
- 4 Ruth Marcus, “Hijabs at a Harvard Gym,” *Washington Post*, March 26, 2008, A19, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/03/25/AR2008032502295.html>.
- 5 Michel Foucault, “Two Lectures,” in Colin Gordon, ed., *Power-knowledge: selected interviews and other writings, 1972–1977* (Brighton, U.K.: Harvester Press, 1980), 78–108.

“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.”

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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*

