

DEBATING
the
DIVINE

RELIGION IN
21st CENTURY
AMERICAN
DEMOCRACY

Edited by Sally Steenland

Center for American Progress



THE FAITH AND PROGRESSIVE POLICY INITIATIVE

A project of the Center for American Progress, the Faith and Progressive Policy Initiative works to identify and articulate the moral, ethical, and spiritual values underpinning policy issues, to shape a progressive stance in which these values are clear, and to increase public awareness and understanding of these values. The Initiative also works to safeguard the healthy separation of church and state that has allowed religion in our country to flourish. In all its efforts, the Initiative works for a society and government that strengthen the common good and respect the basic dignity of all people.

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Center for American Progress
1333 H Street NW, 10th Floor
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Tel: 202.682.1611 • Fax: 202.682.1867
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Alan Wolfe

PROFESSOR OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AND DIRECTOR OF THE BOISI CENTER
FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE, BOSTON COLLEGE



Liberals and Religion

DAVID HOLLINGER ARGUES that liberal society should not give a “pass” to arguments made from religious conviction, but instead should subject such ideas to scrutiny in the same way we argue about the relative merits of the Yankees and the Red Sox. Eboo Patel suggests that liberal society ought to welcome as many religious voices into politics as there are religions in society. Who is right? Both are.

Skepticism toward religion originated at a time when the relationship between faith and politics was defined by two conditions. One was that most people in the society belonged to one religion under the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* (Whose rule, his religion) established by the Peace of Augsburg in 1555. The second was that political authority was undergirded by religious authority; the King ruled the country, but, as head of an established church, he also spoke for God.

When the ruler used the power of the state to enforce matters of belief, no such thing as private religion existed. Under such conditions, establishing freedom of conscience was essential. People could and should be permitted to hold whatever views they felt in their hearts without being subject to the charge of heresy for doing so.

Today’s religious believers who claim that their faith inoculates them against criticism echo, however faintly, this by-gone era. The more vehement of them are convinced that without religion, society would fall apart. Non-believers, in their view, are second-class citizens, their moral relativism a danger, their atheism repugnant. Hollinger is right that treating their ideas with special reverence privileges religion in ways incompatible with liberal equality. Against such voices calling for religion to dominate the public square, liberals should only be wary.

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At the same time, however, the conditions that once joined authoritative religion with political orthodoxy no longer exist. The United States took the historical lead in abolishing one of those conditions when it separated church and state. Some question whether we are as committed to church-state separation as we once were. More conservative Protestant denominations in the United States, such as the Southern Baptist Convention, were once strong supporters of church-state separation but now favor forms of “accommodationism,” which would permit prayer in schools or the teaching of creationism.

In contrast, the Roman Catholic Church, which once opposed separation of church and state, has supported it since the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. If, as recent U.S. elections suggest, the influence of the religious right has peaked, we can stop worrying that evangelicals with close ties to the Republican Party will find ways to curtail the tradition of religious liberty upon which the United States was founded. To be sure, some will try to proselytize in public places such as the Air Force Academy. But in 2008, James Dobson is looking for a political party; the Republicans are not out searching for him.

The other pre-modern condition that suppressed religious liberty—everyone belonging to the same faith—has also been undermined, this time by the religious pluralism emphasized by Eboo Patel. Even if there were theocrats lurking in the dark corners of American politics who wanted to establish a church, it is by no means clear which one they could establish. According to the recent survey of 35,000 Americans conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life cited by Patel, only slightly more than half of Americans are Protestants, and even that figure is likely to fall in the future.

We have become so diverse a country religiously that we no longer know what to call ourselves. We are no longer Christian, or even Judeo-Christian. We are not even “Abrahamic,” for there are large numbers of Buddhists, Hindus, and non-believers who do not share with Christians, Jews, and Muslims a heritage that can be traced back to that prophet.

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Working together, separation of church and state and religious pluralism help us better understand what it means to describe America as a “secular” nation. The way most people use the term, secularism and religion are opposites, the one calling for the removal of religion from the public square and the other insisting that without a common faith, there can be no common morality.

The truth, however, is that the United States is at one and the same time highly secular and highly religious. Indeed, it is because the United States is so secular that it can be so religious.

Secularism, properly understood, refers to developments that lie outside the domain of religion and politics but strongly influence both. A secular world is one that insists on the importance of individual choice. It is characterized by what sociologists call “differentiation,” or the sphere of work that is separated from the sphere of family, which in turn is distinct from the sphere of education or, for that matter, religion.

In secular societies, religious authority cannot remain unquestioned, nor does it trump all other forms of authority. Secularism, as the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor argues in *A Secular Age*, means that belief in God is one option among many.

While leaders of the religious right denounce secularism, it ought to be obvious that secularism is good for religion. By creating a marketplace for faith not unlike the marketplace in economics, it

forces religion to innovate and modernize in the hopes of attracting new believers. By increasing the number of religions that compete for believers, it expands the market beyond one, two, or even three main faiths to include all faiths represented around the globe.

No wonder, then, that in both Western Europe and the United States one lesson holds true: Where religion is established and people are mostly of one faith, religion atrophies, and where religion is voluntary and pluralistic, it flourishes.

If this analysis is correct, then religious believers ought to welcome what Hollinger asks of them. Religions that treat all forms of criticism as heresy will not be able to compete in the modern secular world with those that ask for no exemptions from the inquiring minds of others. At the same time, Eboo Patel is right to call for the inclusion of religious voices in American public life because, under conditions of religious diversity, no one voice can be permitted to drive all others out of existence. As much as we might welcome religions into the public sphere, we cannot welcome any one religion to the exclusion of others.

Today in America we are engaged in a furious debate over religion's proper role in politics, with conservative preachers denouncing the naked public square and proud atheists speaking in defense of the Enlightenment. The real question, however, is not whether religion and politics will mix, for they always will, but how they can do so in ways that strengthen faith and democracy at the same time. Separation of church and state and pluralism do that. We are lucky to have them and should strive to keep them.

“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*

