

**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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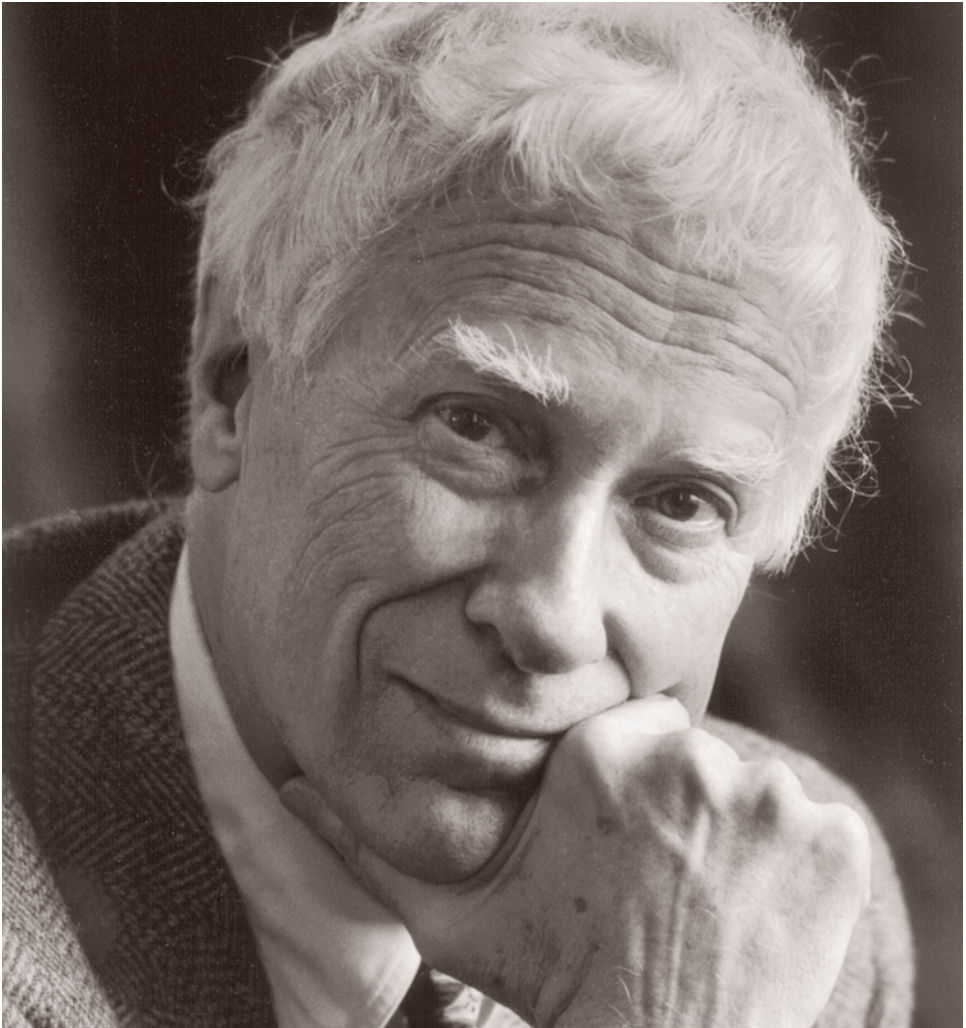
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## Nicholas Wolterstorff

NOAH PORTER PROFESSOR EMERITUS OF PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY, YALE UNIVERSITY



## Religion in the Public Square

THE TOPIC UNDER DISCUSSION is what the role of citizen in our liberal democracy has to say about the sorts of arguments that one may employ in debating and deciding political issues. We are not talking about the role of legislators and judges, nor are we talking about what the state in our liberal democracy may or may not do with respect to religion. It is the role of citizens that is under discussion.

And when we speak of the sorts of arguments that citizens may employ, it must be understood that nobody is proposing passing laws forbidding citizens to employ certain sorts of arguments. It's not a legal "may" but a quasi-moral "may" that is under discussion. It's assumed that the role of citizen in our liberal democracy is like every other social role, in that attached to it are certain rights and responsibilities. Our question is: What responsibilities come attached to that role with respect to the sorts of arguments to be deployed in debating and deciding political issues?

In spite of their substantial disagreement, the writers of our lead-off essays agree on one very important point: People are defecting from the role of citizen if they just announce their position and refuse to engage in serious dialogue with those whose position differs, declaring "Here I stand; I can do no other." Hollinger insists that those who give religious arguments should not be "given a pass." I assume his position is that nobody should be given a pass. If so, Patel agrees, as do I.

And as I read Hollinger and Patel, they both take for granted that the topic of the discussion is to be justice for all and the common good; one is defecting from the role of citizen if one is interested only in getting power for oneself and one's fellow partisans.

The main point of contention between Hollinger and Patel is whether a religious person is faithful to the role of citizen if she employs the resources of her religion in debating and deciding political issues. Patel argues that there is nothing in the role of citizen that forbids this. Indeed, he goes farther and argues that it serves the common good if religious persons employ the resources of their religion in debating and deciding political issues. Hollinger demurs. He aligns himself with the 20th century political philosopher John Rawls, whose position, as Hollinger states it, was

People are defecting from the role of citizen if they just announce their position and refuse to engage in serious dialogue with those whose position differs.

that “participants in a shared democratic polity owe it to one another to conduct the business of that polity within premises that are particular to that polity and not to any of the more sectarian persuasions that may be present within it.”

Rawls’ view has been extensively debated over the past decade or so, along with such variants on it as that espoused by University of Notre Dame philosopher and ethicist Robert Audi, who holds that instead of appealing to Rawlsian “public reason,” citizens should appeal to what Audi calls “secular morality.” I have myself participated in this debate, defending the anti-Rawlsian, anti-Audian point of view. Here is not the place for me to rehearse my arguments; some of them are the same as some of those offered by Patel. I must content myself with making just one point.

Both Rawls and Audi assume that there is in fact a common morality; Rawls limits himself to claiming a common political morality, whereas Audi holds that there is a common general morality. Both of them then work with the picture of religious people as adding a sectarian religious morality to that common morality, or as substituting a sectarian religious morality for that common morality. One of my principal objections to the Rawls–Audi position is the assumption that there is such a common morality. This seems to me plainly false.

A fascinating book in this regard is Robert P. Jones’ recently published *Liberalism’s Troubled Search for Equality: Religion and Cultural Bias in the Oregon Physician-Assisted Suicide Debates*

(University of Notre Dame Press, 2007). Jones rehearses with admirable thoroughness the variety of arguments, religious and non-religious, mounted in Oregon for and against allowing physician-assisted suicide. (Those in favor eventually won this debate.) Two features of the debate are relevant to our topic.

If there were a common morality, then a case could be made that citizens should employ that morality when debating and deciding political issues.

First, a variety of religious arguments were employed in the debate (most, but not all, in opposition to physician-assisted suicide), yet none of them was given a pass and none of them fitted the caricature of religious arguments that one finds in the literature: “God told me that physician-assisted suicide is wrong so I’m against it.” Secondly, those who identified themselves as secular employed a variety of strikingly different arguments for their position. Some employed utilitarian arguments, some employed what Jones calls “expressivist” arguments, some sounded like Burkeans, and so forth. This should, of course, come as no surprise. Secular morality comes in many forms. Contrary to Audi’s assumption, there is no such thing as a common secular morality. And contrary to Rawls’ assumption, the idea of liberal democracy does not suffice for settling the issue of physician-assisted suicide.

If there were a common morality, then I think a case could be made that citizens should employ that morality when debating and deciding political issues—treating their own particular moralities, be they religious or secular, as dispensable add-ons. But given that there is no common morality, I think the only policy consistent with the idea of a liberal democracy is that, in their debates, citizens employ whatever morality they find themselves committed to—trying to find considerations that those who do not share their morality will find persuasive, listening to arguments against their position, and then, at the end of the day, participating in a fair vote.

Hollinger realizes that a good many religious citizens will not accept the self-censorship that he thinks belongs to the role of citizen in our liberal democracy. Hence, if I rightly understand him,



he urges on them and on the rest of us a fall-back position. If they do offer a religious argument, they must not ask for a pass and others must not give them a pass. As I mentioned earlier, on this I fully agree with him, as does Patel.

From this normative position Hollinger goes on to claim that religious people are in fact being given a pass in present-day America. I must say that when I read this part of his discussion, I had the sense of living in a different country from that which he was talking about. Arguments against religion in general are all about us. Hollinger himself mentions the books of the “four polemical atheists,” Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Samuel Harris, and Christopher Hitchens. Hollinger goes on to remark, wryly, that these have been “roundly condemned by reviewers and bloggers for failing to appreciate the intellectual sophistication of the average Episcopalian.” Well, Yes; but Hollinger’s position (and mine) is that nobody should be given a pass, even polemical atheists.

Fairness requires mentioning that not only have these four atheist essayists been roundly condemned by some; they have been lionized by others. Further, amid all the arguments against religion in general, there is no specific religion that goes free from criticism by those who hold some other religion.

I would have thought that, in the current climate, it is America-first nationalism and nativism that gets a pass, not religion. Whereas lots of people say they agree with Richard Dawkins, I haven’t heard anybody saying they agree with the judgment on America pronounced by the Reverend Jeremiah Wright.

“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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