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## Religious Ideas: Should They Be Critically Engaged or Given a Pass?

WOULD THE DEMOCRATIC PUBLIC CULTURE of the United States be well served by a robust, critical discussion of religious ideas? Or do principles of ethical propriety and political prudence encourage us instead to ignore each other's ideas about religion, however silly they may seem?

Two recent developments give point to these questions.

One is a striking increase in the number and intensity of demands for a greater role for religion in public affairs, and for more "flexible" and "realistic" approaches to the constitutional separation of church and state.<sup>1</sup> Faith-based initiatives are widely supported by leaders of both political parties. The very idea of a distinctly secular public sphere is said to entail a bias against religion. Republicans tend to favor more religion in public life than do many leading Democrats, but the latter scramble to assure their constituents that they, too, learned a lot from the nuns when they were in parochial school, or that they still attend services at a church or synagogue. The leaders of the Air Force Academy have not believed it a violation of the church-state separation to place heavy and repeated pressure on cadets and faculty to attend Protestant and Catholic religious services regularly and to decorate the ostensibly secular campus with banners proclaiming the Air Force of the United States to be "Christ's Warriors." Only a lawsuit led the academy's leaders to somewhat modify their practices, as has been pointed out in Ray Suarez's *The Holy Vote*.<sup>2</sup> If religious ideas are going to be more widely accepted as legitimate justifications for public policy, shouldn't those ideas be assessed according the same rules that apply in the public debate of other ideas?

The second development is the sudden appearance of, and extensive public attention given to, what the press likes to call "the new atheism."<sup>3</sup> The books of four polemical atheists—Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam

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Harris, and Christopher Hitchens—are roundly condemned in one forum after another for their arrogance, ignorance, and sweeping rejection of all religion. Can these writers not distinguish between Methodists and morons? Reviewers and bloggers mock the new atheists for failing to appreciate the intellectual sophistication of the average Episcopalian.<sup>4</sup> The price of credibility, it seems, is respect for at least some kinds of religion and for a higher standard of civility than other discourses demand. The religion of one's neighbors may be the last stronghold of the old Sunday school maxim, "If you can't say something good about a person, don't say anything at all." Does the buzz-saw now carving up the books written by the new atheists indicate that a vigorous, public debate about religious ideas is a mistake, after all?

Let's begin with what it means to give religious ideas a "pass." I have in mind the *convention of protecting religious ideas from the same kind of critical scrutiny to which we commonly subject ideas about almost everything else*. The new atheists are getting so much attention partly because they are flouting this convention. The convention is deeply rooted in American culture. When Al Gore—one of the most highly educated of liberal democratic politicians, and one whose favorite book is Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*—claims to resolve life's tough problems by asking "What Would Jesus Do," he can count on the respectful silence of those who doubt the guidance actually provided by this principle of applied ethics. Nobody with a modicum of tact asks Gore if he has examined his religious ideas with the same scrutiny he has applied to claims and counterclaims about global warming, or to competing theories of how science makes progress.

The discussion of other topics really is different. If someone says women cannot do first-rate science, or that African Americans are just not as smart as Korean Americans, or that homosexuality is a choice rather than a condition, or that taxation is essentially a form of theft, or that the Americans won World War II with minimal help from the Soviets, it is okay to challenge the speaker with evidence and reasoning. Responding in this argumentative manner is less okay if someone says that his or her support for Israel is based on what God has said in the Bible, or that Jesus Christ will come to earth soon, or that some good thing happened because God answered someone's prayers. Religion, wrote Richard Rorty in a widely quoted essay of 1994, is often a "conversation-stopper."<sup>5</sup> When someone starts going on about "The Rapture," the prescribed behavior is to politely change the subject, or to indulge the speaker as one might a child or an aged relative. In the case of The Rapture, the implications for one's fellow citizens may be uncertain, but to invoke a religious justification for a public policy issue is to discourage an opponent from actually debating it.

This convention of giving religious ideas a pass has impressive foundations, and not only in the virtues of decency and humility. These foundations

reside also in a constitutional tradition that does indeed treat religious ideas as a distinct category. These foundations are embedded, further, in a history of religious diversity that renders silence a good way to keep the peace. Protestant ancestors of my own were murdered by Catholic terrorists who were surely convinced that these killings were responsive to God's will. The privatization of religion has been integral to the creation and maintenance of a public sphere in which persons of any and all religious orientations, including nonbelief, can function together.

If religious ideas were genuinely trivial from a civic standpoint, playing no appreciable role in how people dealt with anyone other than themselves and their immediate families and their voluntary associations, religion could be more comfortably ignored. But we are nowadays constantly told that religious ideas are a legitimate and vibrant ground for action in the public square and should not be suppressed. This assertion is frequently bolstered by a historical narrative emphasizing the wholesome effects of religion on American politics. Anyone who worries that religion might be counterprogressive is instantly reminded of the importance of religion to Martin Luther King, Jr., and to the role of religious ideas in propelling the civil rights movement. But even when King's supporters among the most liberal of the white Protestants and Catholics are added to his base among the Black churches, the total amounts to a small minority of Christians in the United States at that time. Most white Protestants and Catholics were dubious about, if not actually opposed to civil rights agitation prior to about 1964.<sup>6</sup> The most intensely Christian segment of white America during the 1950s and 1960s was the segregationist south. The religion-is-good-for-America narrative proudly invokes the Social Gospel, which largely failed in its effort to advance social and economic equality, but has little to say about the role of religious ideas in bringing about Prohibition, which for more than a decade succeeded. Gaines M. Foster's *Moral Reconstruction* shows the triumph of Prohibition to be the culmination of decades of religiously connected political activity remarkably like that we see around us today.<sup>7</sup>

This popular but seriously imbalanced account of the history of religion-and-politics facilitates today's discourse, in which we are awash with treatises and manifestos claiming that post-World War II interpretations of the church-state separation function to suppress religious faith by preventing its free exercise in the design and execution of public policy. To keep religion out of public life, we are told, is to trivialize religion. How unfair, indeed how absurd it is that the faithful are asked to "check their religion at the door." Among the legions who invoke this phrase is Congressman Mark Souder of Ohio:

To ask me to check my Christian beliefs at the public door is to ask me to expel the Holy Spirit from my life when I serve as a congressman, and that I will not do. Either I am a Christian or I am not. Either I reflect His glory or I do not.<sup>8</sup>

Yet there is a formidable theoretical tradition that defends the checking of one's religion at the door. The late John Rawls and his followers, including Joshua Cohen and Martha Minnow, have argued 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 yet more sectarian persuasions that may be present within it.<sup>9</sup> In this view, checking one's religion at the door, in the sense of declining to use it as a justification for actions in which one asks others of different religious orientations to join, is not a bias, nor an inappropriate restraint on free exercise. Rather, it is a mark of democratic commitment and a sign of solidarity with co-citizens in a diverse society. In this view, if absolutists like Souder are unable to accept a domain in which their religious faith is less all-defining, they should stay out of politics. This is exactly what Souder's Mennonite forebears did: they stayed out of public affairs because, like Souder, they believed "radical discipleship" applied 24/7 in every setting. But today, Souder cries foul if the faithful are discouraged from bringing their unmitigated religious witness into the Congress of the United States.

But some politicians see the appeal of the distinguished tradition of democratic theory represented by Rawls. Senator Barack Obama, who professes Christian faith as fervently as Souder does, has endorsed the Rawlsian view explicitly in speeches widely hailed for the element of religious testimony they embody and defend. Obama does encourage Americans to be upfront about their religious motives. But he offers a qualification not often quoted. Like a good philosopher, the senator understands the distinction between motivation and warrant.

Democracy demands that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific, values. Democracy requires that their proposals be subject to argument, and amenable to reason. *I may be opposed to abortion for religious reasons, but if I seek to pass a law banning the practice, I cannot simply point to the teachings of my church or evoke God's will. I have to explain why abortion violates some principle that is accessible to people of all faiths, including those with no faith at all. . . .* Politics depends on our ability to persuade each other of common aims based on a common reality. It involves the compromise, the art of what's possible. At some fundamental level, religion does not allow for compromise. It's the art of the impossible. If God has spoken, then followers are expected to live up to God's edicts, regardless of the consequences. To base one's life on such uncompromising commitments may be sublime, but to base our policy making on such commitments would be a dangerous thing.<sup>10</sup>

Obama's example can give courage to those wanting to defend a strong, autonomous sphere of civil government without infringing on the constitutionally protected free exercise of religion. Civic patriotism has been unfashionable on the liberal Left since the late 1960s on account of the efforts made in its name to discourage cultural diversity and to stifle criticism of American foreign and domestic policy. But its renewal in the present context could encourage pride in the church-state separation and celebrate a distinctive civic sphere in which persons of many religious orientations, including persons who count themselves as nonbelievers in any religion, can be full participants in their distinctive capacity as Americans. It might be too crude to brand as "un-American" those who try to bring church and state closer together, but civic patriotism can at once support a secular public sphere and a private religious one.

Yet even if a renewal of civic patriotism were to persuade everyone that a secular public sphere is not in itself a threat to the constitutional right of free exercise of religion, the religious culture of citizens would obviously continue to affect what happened in the secular sphere of public affairs. Religious ideas, even if not put forth as justifications for public policy, do constitute a vital matrix for political culture. Scholars assume this when they study almost any society in the world. Beliefs about the nature of the world and of human beings, whatever the content of such ideas, are understood to be important. Historians and social scientists trying to understand the political and economic order of any society take belief systems into account. Often, these belief systems are religious. Are we going to proceed differently with the United States of our own time? Are basic ideas about the universe assumed to be both constitutive and performative in Victorian England, Nazi Germany, Confucian China, Inca Peru, Maratha India, Soviet Russia, Ancient Athens, Asante Africa, the Crow Nation of nineteenth-century Montana, and Puritan New England but *not* in the United States today? Can we defend a version of American exceptionalism according to which belief systems are functional everywhere else but not here? Do we not all have a stake in what our fellow citizens take to be true about the world?

The religious ideas of masses of Americans have been shielded from the aspects of modern thought that have led so many scientists and social scientists away from religion.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps critical debate would encourage popular faiths more consistent with modern standards of plausibility, more resistant to the manipulation of politicians belonging to any party, and more accepting of the wisdom in the sharp separation between church and state. Where, after all did we get liberal religion? We got it out of orthodox religion. Especially did the great biblical scholars of the eighteenth and nineteenth century provide the cognitive context for a variety of liberalized religious faiths, including the capacity of many Christians to absorb the Darwinian revolution in

science. Religious dialogue has been vital to the intellectual and political history of the North Atlantic West for centuries, until twentieth-century secularists complacently assumed religion was on the way out and ceased to engage it critically.

The absence of sustained, public scrutiny of religious ideas in our time has created a vacuum filled with easy God talk. Politicians are not the only ones skilled in this idiom, but President George W. Bush certainly exemplifies it when he assures the world that his policies in Iraq correspond to God's will. How different was the voice of Lincoln, who never joined a church, but whose God talk was anything but easy. Lincoln invoked the deity in a spirit of humility. In his Second Inaugural Address of 1865, Lincoln cautiously alluded to "those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to him," speculated about what such an omniscient God's will might be, and stopped well short of expressing confidence that, as president, he could be sure that God was on his side.

In Lincoln's time, religious ideas were less often given a pass. In much of nineteenth-century America religious ideas were critically debated, sometimes with a touch of ridicule, even as the church-state separation was defended. An example is the antebellum debates over slavery. The bible, proslavery theologians and politicians reasonably argued, had no problem with slavery. These proslavery Christians insisted that abolitionists just did not know their Bible and were projecting their own secular ideas on the sacred text. Leviticus, Exodus, Ephesians, and First Timothy were routinely cited as biblical warrant for the acceptance of slavery, and abolitionists were hard pressed to find scriptural warrant for their side even in the gospels and in the letters of Paul.<sup>12</sup> When proslavery Americans established their own government—the Confederate States of America—they put God right into their constitution, a step that dramatically set their political order apart from that of the United States itself.

But beyond the slavery debates, the nineteenth-century Americans who discussed issues of public policy understood full well that no matter how the church-state separation was construed, the kind of society in which they lived depended in part on the basic view of the world accepted by their fellow citizens. The great feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton issued what she called *The Woman's Bible* in the 1890s, in which she openly renounced passages of scripture she found offensive to women, and there were a lot of them. Stanton understood, just as the canon-revisers in our English departments of the 1980s understood, that the books people read had something to do with what kind of people they became and what kinds of political culture they would create; Stanton went after the Bible with a vengeance, the New Testament as well as the Old, and scolded the authors of the ancient texts like a confident schoolmistress correcting the spelling mistakes of the class dunce.

She ridiculed the male theologians and preachers of her own time who continued to reinforce the scriptures whole, rather than reading them with modern, enlightened understandings of the gender distinction.<sup>13</sup>

Not everyone appreciated this. Stanton's religious writings were felt by many other feminists to be ethically inappropriate and, more important, politically imprudent. Upon her death in 1902 Stanton's memory was largely erased by the American feminist movement and not recovered until the 1960s. Stanton's place in the movement was obscured with a new celebration of the more conventional Susan B. Anthony.

Stanton's contemporary, Robert Ingersoll, the agnostic whose performances as a lyceum speaker made him a household name and a constant foil for preachers, also went after specific religious ideas with a critical spirit. But at least his generation—Ingersoll died in 1900—was familiar with some of the same objections to Christianity that, when raised in our own time by Sam Harris, seem unconscionably rude. Ingersoll had many critics, but Ingersoll and his enemies were at least part of the same conversation, and one in which religious ideas were taken seriously by secular intellectuals as well as by the faithful.

During the twentieth century unbelieving intellectuals too often assumed, complacently, that religion was in the process of dying out and that religious ideas therefore did not need attention. The British philosopher Bertrand Russell's writings of the 1910s and 1920s were among the last to make a big production of attacking Christianity for its intellectual deficiencies, but American secular intellectuals often found Russell's fussing about religion quaintly anachronistic. He displayed the mark of a true Victorian, it was often said in the 1940s and 1950s: Russell still thought that to reject belief in God was an act of great moral courage.<sup>14</sup>

The new atheists echo many of Russell's complaints, but unlike Russell's confident contemporaries they do not take for granted religion's eventual demise. Rather, they treat it as a serious and dangerous enemy of civilization. But if anyone is complacent in the current controversy over the new atheism, it is those who dismiss the writings of Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, and Hitchens too rapidly. The value of bringing evidence and reasoning to a discussion of religious ideas is lost when we jump on the obvious failings of these writers and ignore the power of the basic Enlightenment critique of religious obscurantism that their books embody.

Refuting Sam Harris has become rather like refuting Samuel Huntington: almost any academic can do it, and when you finish you congratulate yourself for your cleverness and move on to something else. But if Huntington is wrong to characterize Mexican Americans as uniquely subversive of the traditional, immigrant-based social order of the United States, the questions he raises about immigration and assimilation and the cultural

foundations of democracy are far from silly, and deserve better answers than most of Huntington's critics provide.<sup>15</sup> So, too, with Harris.

Part of the problem is that Harris connects his critique of religion to a naturalistic metaphysics more specific than his mission requires. This portentous turn is also taken by Dennett and Dawkins, whose philosophical reach has struck many informed readers as extending well beyond the grasp of the evolutionary biology on which it is ostensibly based. The biologist H. Allen Orr, who is no apologist for religion, has been particularly convincing in showing the limits of the scientific foundation for the new atheism.<sup>16</sup> But there is more to the problem than simply espousing a metaphysics that even many agnostics and atheists do not feel compelled to accept.

Harris has no sense of history, and no understanding of the traditional role of religious argumentation in promoting liberalized versions of faith. Harris buries his rasping, potentially valuable critique of genuinely obscurantist ideas beneath undiscerning attacks on people he calls "religious moderates." Both *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation* reject the liberal Protestants, liberal Catholics, liberal Muslims, and so on, who could be Harris's strategic allies. Reviewer after reviewer has treated Harris's books as not worth systematic refutation because the author can't tell the difference between Jerry Falwell and Peter Gomes, and can't distinguish between the Muslim fanatics who attacked the World Trade Center and the liberal Muslims written about in Jytte Klausen's *The Islamic Challenge*.<sup>17</sup> Harris accuses religious moderates of serving as covers for more outrageously irrational versions of the faith. Yet these religious moderates are, like him, inheritors of the best features of the Enlightenment, and are thus his natural allies. Harris reveals no understanding of the historical circumstances that have led many highly intelligent and well-educated people to espouse religious faith, or of the range of ideas that have passed as religious. The popular novel by Marilynne Robinson *Gilead* explores a liberal religious culture with strong roots in the United States, yet Harris is altogether oblivious to the character of this culture.<sup>18</sup> Harris's logic is similar to that of the communist international's theory of social fascism as advanced in the early 1930s, when social democrats in Germany, the United States, and other nations were said to be functionally indistinguishable from fascists simply because they had not renounced bourgeois reform in order to side with the communists.

But the social democrats fought back. They did not leave the political arena to the communists and the fascists. What will happen now?

It remains to be seen what kind of political and cultural alliance can develop between (a) secularists who are more patient with religious liberals than the New Atheists are and (b) religious liberals themselves. And this is where the issue of giving religious ideas a "pass" has become especially difficult. Political liberals of secular orientation tend to give religious ideas a pass

because they hope thereby to achieve issue-specific alliances with faith-affirming Americans on the environment, health care, foreign policy, taxation, and so on.<sup>19</sup> Why mess things up by embarrassing the faithful and demanding that they repudiate more resoundingly their more conservative coreligionists? In the meantime, religious liberals are under constant attack from their conservative coreligionists for being on a slippery slope to secularism and are thus reluctant to break ranks with more conservative believers to an extent that secularists would find productive. Hence these religious liberals, too, prefer to seek issue-specific alliances with secular liberals and leave potentially divisive religious argumentation aside.

This continued avoidance of actual debate about religious issues seems to me viable only if religious liberals and secular liberals can advance a civic patriotism that would celebrate a distinctly secular public sphere along the lines advocated by Rawls and Obama. The need to engage religious ideas diminishes somewhat if those ideas are understood, in keeping with modern church-state separationist doctrine, to be inappropriate justifications for public policy. There is a lot to be said for letting each other alone. But in the absence of such an agreement—repudiating the views of Congressman Souder and comparable defenders of politics as a form of religious witness—the case for a robust, public debate of religious issues seems to me hard to refute. If the New Atheists are too sweeping in their rejections, the rest of us need not be.

## Notes

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This piece has profited from conversations with several colleagues and friends, especially Carol J. Clover, John Connelly, E. J. Dionne, Robert Post, and Alan Wolfe. Several sentences are drawn from my “Among the Believers,” *Harper’s*, November 2004.

1. A convenient point of access to this discussion is E. J. Dionne, Jr., Jean Bethke Elshtain, and Kayla M. Drogoz, eds., *One Electorate Under God? A Dialogue on Religion and American Politics* (Washington, DC, 2004).
2. Ray Suarez, *The Holy Vote: The Politics of Faith in America* (New York, 2006), 73–90.
3. Anthony Gottlieb, “Atheists with Attitude,” *New Yorker*, May 21, 2007, is one of the more discerning overviews of “the new atheism.” Another is David Aikman, “The Atheist Onslaught,” *Implications*, May 25, 2007, <http://www.ttf.org/index/journal/detail/the-atheist-onslaught/>. The works most at issue are the following: Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston, 2006); Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great* (New York, 2007); Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York, 2005); Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York, 2006); Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York, 2006).

4. A widely discussed example is Terry Eagleton's review of Dawkins: "Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching," *London Review of Books*, October 19, 2006.
5. Richard Rorty, "Religion as Conversation-Stopper," *Common Knowledge* (Spring 1994): 1–6.
6. Historians have recently begun to correct this widespread misunderstanding about the history of religion and politics in mid-twentieth-century America. For an example of the new scholarship on "the theology of segregation," see Jane Dailey, "Sex, Segregation, and the Sacred After *Brown*," *Journal of American History* (June 2004).
7. Gaines M. Foster, *Moral Reconstruction: Christian Lobbyists and the Federal Legislation of Morality, 1865–1920* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2002).
8. Mark Souder, "A Conservative Christian's View on Public Life," in Dionne, Elshtain, and Drogosz, *One Electorate*, 21.
9. John Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," *University of Chicago Law Review* (Summer 1997): 765–807. See also Martha Minnow, "Governing Religion," in Dionne, Elshtain, and Drogosz, *One Electorate*, 144–49, and Joshua Cohen's Tanner Lectures as delivered at the University of California, Berkeley, April 2007.
10. Barack Obama, "Call to Renewal," Keynote Address, June 28, 2006, accessible at Barack Obama: U.S. Senator for Illinois, [http://obama.senate.gov/speech/060628-call\\_to\\_renewal/](http://obama.senate.gov/speech/060628-call_to_renewal/). Emphasis added.
11. Ample evidence shows that, as a general rule, the greater the amount of scientifically warranted knowledge people acquire about the world, the less able they are to accept traditional religious beliefs. There are dramatic exceptions to this general rule: I have not the slightest doubt that some of the most learned and wise people in the world retain religious beliefs of one kind or another. For a helpful summary and analysis of the many studies of religious belief by various occupational and educational groups, especially scientists who have been elected to academies, see Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, "Atheists: A Psychological Profile," in Michael Martin, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (New York, 2006), 300–18.
12. An excellent intellectual history of the debates over slavery is found in Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholder's Worldview* (New York, 2005), esp. 505–27. The Genoveses demonstrate commandingly that the proslavery writers had superior scriptural warrant for their position that slavery was not a sin, but that the abolitionists were on stronger ground in attacking the specifically racial basis for slavery as it existed in the United States in their time.
13. For an account of the writing and contemporary impact of this important work, rarely discussed today, see Kathi Kern, *Mrs. Stanton's Bible* (Ithaca, 2002).
14. See especially Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian* (London, 1927).
15. Samuel Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* (New York, 2004).
16. See esp. "A Mission to Convert," *New York Review of Books*, January 11, 2007 (directed primarily at Dawkins), and "A Religion for Darwinians?" *New York Review of Books*, August 16, 2007 (contrasting the approach of the new atheists to the more scientifically and philosophically cautious book of Philip Kitcher, *Living With Darwin: Evolution, Design, and the Future of Faith* [New York, 2007]).
17. Jytte Klausen, *The Islamic Challenge: Politics and Religion in Western Europe* (Oxford, 2005).

18. Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York, 2004).
19. A comment by Congressman Souder can remind us of the dangers in accepting religious justifications on an issue-specific basis. Souder observes that nobody objects to his using Christian values as a basis for his votes on environmental protection and on the protection of women and children from abuse, but suddenly when he wants to “speak out against homosexual marriages, pornography, abortion, gambling, or evolution across species” on the basis of his religious faith, he is criticized for bringing religion into politics; Souder, “Conservative Christian,” 21. Surely, Souder is on to something: if secular liberals refrain from criticizing a theological warrant for policies they embrace, must these secular liberals not also accept the legitimacy of a theological warrant for opposition to same-sex marriage and to the teaching of evolution in public schools?