

The Alternative

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Dear Reader,

This issue of the Newsletter is on the relation of religion and politics in the present presidential campaign. Race or gender may turn out to be the big topic this year, but Mike Huckabee's success in the South on Feb.5 suggests that religion is still part of the campaign. Although the relation between religion and politics has been a constant issue in the United States, the country has no clear way to address the inevitable tension between a person's religion and his or her political outlook.

What commentators always invoke is the first amendment of the U.S. Constitution. What is never acknowledged, however, is that the first amendment's treatment of religion is a confused mess. In attempting to create a balance, two different meanings of "religion" were used (personal activity and institutions). In 1801, Thomas Jefferson made things worse with a botched translation of the religion clauses as "a wall of separation between church and state," European language that was irrelevant and misleading. Jefferson's bad metaphor seemed to disappear until it surfaced as anti-Catholic-church rhetoric in the 1880s. It achieved legal status in the 1940s. For discussing the relation of religion and politics, the metaphor is worse than useless.

In the following essays, John Gray, a noted British author, expresses a common European bewilderment at the United States' mix of religion and politics. Sarah Vowell, who writes offbeat comedy, is suspicious of religion but has some insight into the good and bad influences of religion in political life. Gabriel Moran's essay notes the prominence of the term faith which is mostly an attempt to avoid talking about religion.

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FAITH IN REASON

By John Gray

There exists a widespread belief that as people become more modern they become less religious; that the ongoing growth of human knowledge contributes to the development of human reason, with the result that societies become ever more secular. Religion retreats as science advances, and the end point of this process will be a world in which the traditional faiths of humankind disappear.

This was the expectation of John Stuart Mill and Karl Marx, along with many other political thinkers, and in the twentieth century the same expectation had a powerful influence in the social sciences. Religion, in this view is not the expression of a primary human need but a by-product of ignorance, or else it is the result of poverty or political repression. Once these adverse conditions have been overcome, religion will vanish from human life, or at least dwindle into insignificance.

This common notion of secularization has to be distinguished from the political doctrine of secularism, which stipulates that the state must use its power to limit the role of religion in the public sphere. In fact, the demand for a secular state originated among dissenting religious believers who suffered persecution by established churches; many of the people who support a secular state today are believers who nonetheless see the desirability of separating faith and politics.

Secularization and secularism are clearly different ideas. Yet although the two are distinct they are not unconnected, for a secular regime aims to appeal only to beliefs and values that can be accepted by believers and nonbelievers alike. Like those who subscribe to the theory of secularization, secularists assumed that government can be purged of religious influences. Both assume that religion and politics can be held apart.

Nevertheless, recent developments suggest that religion and politics are not as separable as had been assumed. Terrorism, for example, is a complex phenomenon whose causes include social and geopolitical conflicts but its use by Islamist groups has brought religion into the center of the international arena in a way that few Western observers anticipated. At the same time, religious believers in many countries have mobilized to promote a “politics of values.”

Conflicts over abortion, gay marriage, and euthanasia have helped to shape the trajectory of American politics, and a similar trajectory can be observed in certain European countries. Until recently, Poland was governed by a Catholic party

supporting Christian values, and in Britain, where the majority has long since ceased to follow any traditional faith, Muslims, Sikhs, evangelical Christians, and other religious minorities have demanded censorship of artistic performances they judge to be offensive.

There is a real question, then, as to whether any process of secularization is actually under way. If societies become less religious as they become more modern, how is it that the United States – which sees itself and is seen by others as the epitome of a modern country, with the separation of church and state – remains as religious at the start of the twenty-first century as it was in the early part of the nineteenth century, when Alexis de Tocqueville noted the intense religiosity of American life?

Is the U. S. an anomaly among advanced societies, or is the theory of secularization flawed? If the power of religion can be limited by a secular state, why does religious fundamentalism play a larger role in American life than it does in the political life of any other developed country?

The experience of the past decade has made such questions highly pertinent, but they are rarely explored in public discourse. Instead, debate has been dominated by the polemical assaults of evangelical atheists who attack religion as a harmful relic of the past. Obsessed by the current excesses of Christian and Islamic fundamentalism, such writers as Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Richard Dawkins not only renew the demand for a secular state; they seek to create a secular civilization.

Secular regimes come in several forms. The American model in which a “wall” separates church and state, is not the only form of secularism, nor is it necessarily the most successful. Turkey – the secular state established by Kemal Ataturk in 1923, which despite the growing challenge of Islamist movements continues to exist to this day – controls religion through a government department of religious affairs.

The example of Turkey undermines the view that Muslim countries have failed to produce a convincing example of secularism. Indeed, one might argue that Turkey is a more successful secular regime than the United States. Turkey has a long established secular political tradition, whereas nothing comparable exists in the United States. The United States has yet to produce a secular brand of politics.

LOVE IN POLITICS

By Sarah Vowell

In 1983, Ronald Reagan signed a bill honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. with a federal holiday, though Reagan opposed it. So there was the president pretending to enjoy turning this drain on the Gross National Product into law. Perhaps he comforted himself that the American people, who can turn something as dead serious as Memorial Day into a clambake, would somehow find a football season Monday venerating a murder victim to sleep off their beer and nachos hangover of the preceding afternoon.

There's a pleasing symmetry in Regan forking over a day to Dr. King. Both men owe their reputations to the Sermon on the Mount. The president's most enduring bequest might be a city-smiting drug war, but thanks to a nice smile and a biblical sound bite that's not how he is remembered. Reagan cribbed from the Gospel of Matthew via the Puritan John Winthrop to dream up his "shining city on a hill" legacy. And Americans in general and Republican presidential candidates in particular, still believe in it, possibly because they are not watching "The Wire."

Here is what King got out of the Sermon on the Mount. On Nov. 17, 1957, in Montgomery's Dexter Avenue Baptist Church he concluded the learned discourse that came to be known as the "loving your enemies" sermon this way: "So this morning, as I look into your eyes and into the eyes of all my brothers in Alabama and all over America and over the world, I say to you: 'I love you. I would rather die than hate you'."

That is hands down the most beautiful, strange, impossible but most of all radical thing a human being can say. And it comes from reading the most beautiful, strange, impossible, but most of all radical civics lessons ever taught, when Jesus of Nazareth went to a hill in Galilee and told his disciples, "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you."

The Bible is a long book and Lord knows within its many mansions of eccentricity finding justification for literal and figurative witch hunts is as simple as pretending "enhanced investigations technique" is not a synonym for torture. I happen to be with King in proclaiming the Sermon on the Mount's call for love to be at the heart of Christian behavior, and one of us got a Ph.D in systematic theology.

I live in lower Manhattan. In my seriously secular neck of the woods, Christians are often dismissed as those homophobes on the news hell-bent on keeping half the population of Chelsea out of the wedding pages. Once, I told a member of the

fabled East Coast Media Elite that I was raised Pentecostal and he asked if that meant I grew up fondling snakes in trailers. I replied: “You know that book club you’re in. Well, my church was a lot like that, except that we actually read the book.”

I have become just another citizen whose only religion is the freedom of religion and as such I patrol the wall of separation between church and state like some jumpy East German guarding Checkpoint Charlie back before Ronald Reagan single-handedly tore it down.

Which is why I am relieved that journalists keep asking Mike Huckabee what he meant ten years ago when he told a meeting of his fellow Baptists, “I hope we answer the alarm clock and take this nation back for Christ.” That is a curiously unconstitutional opinion for someone seeking the job of defending the Constitution, not to mention historically inaccurate considering that the mostly deist founders were about as spiritual as the original cast of “Hair.”

But I am also relieved when Mr. Huckabee occasionally blurts out some Sunday School sentiment about how he doesn’t think a poor child should have to sleep in a car. Of course, this whiff of Jesus makes some of his fellow Republicans turn on him as if he’s Michael Dukakis. Because they fear that trying to find the homeless homes translates into raising taxes they must render unto Caesar.

Whoever wins the presidential election this year will be a Christian. So the rest of us might as well as suck it up and see if we can pick the Christian who is, if incapable of loving his or her enemies, the one who seems least likely to drum up a bunch of extra, new enemies to hate.

In this age of a slower, grubbier mutually assured destruction, when no one’s typed the word “nonviolence” since the typewriter, it’s worth reading King’s quarrel with the cold war’s MAD ploy. In the “loving your enemies” text, he tells a pretty little parable about how one night his brother A.D. drove him to Tennessee. Infuriated by all the other cars’ bright lights, A.D. vowed to crank his lights and blind the next driver passing by. Dr. King told him not to, that it would just get everybody killed. “Somebody got to have some sense on this highway,” he said.

FAITH AND POLITICS? RELIGION AND POLITICS?

By Gabriel Moran

During this endless season of presidential politics, there has been a constant concern with religion. Actually, the talk is more often about “faith” which seems to have less threatening connotations or perhaps is just vaguer. Whatever the connotations of the terms, it is not helpful that people use faith and religion interchangeably. Perhaps it is hopeless to expect any clear distinction, but it is worth asking what the difference is.

The religious concern this year was at first a whispering campaign. Finally, Mitt Romney, one of the reasons for the concern, brought into the open what was an obvious sticking point for many people: his Mormon religion. That step seemed to release discussion of Mike Huckabee’s Baptist religion; up to that point, he was not taken seriously enough to be of concern. Calling attention to his being a preacher turned some people away but attracted many others.

People in the news business, as well as political handlers, are unsure of how to handle religion. The rule seems to be that your candidate should have some but not too much of it. The politicians themselves try to send double messages. To their “religious base” they try to convey: “You can trust me; I am one of you.” At the same time, to critics of religion they imply: “Trust me, I don’t take my religion that seriously.” The result is about as bad a mix as one can imagine. One need not look further than the born-again Christian in the White House. George W. Bush doesn’t in fact take the Christian religion very seriously since he shows little acquaintance with it. But the narrow, distorted version of his “faith” that has powerfully determined U.S. policies is largely given a free pass.

Romney’s speech was called “Faith and Politics” though it was mostly about religion and politics. The speech got mixed reviews. He was in an impossible position and like most politicians he tried to have it both ways. There were comparisons to John Kennedy’s 1960 speech; however, there was a fundamental difference between the two speeches. Kennedy came down hard on one side, saying in effect: You can trust me because I am a rich guy from Harvard who is not going to be influenced by my indifferent connection to Roman Catholicism. The speech was sensationally successful and had a big part in his election. One good result was it freed subsequent office seekers from being given the Catholic test.

Is Mormonism in 2008 more frightening to the populace than was Roman Catholicism in 1960? That’s hard to judge but there is widespread ignorance of this home-grown minority religion. I sympathized with Romney who was trying to

be true to himself (I really am a Mormon) and yet reassure the country when there is no language in which he could do that. He issued a lot of the required political pieties but that did not stop the whispers and innuendos.

If he had wanted to be completely forthright, he would have said: “I am a Mormon and that influences everything I do. Having genuine religious convictions will enrich my presidency because it will deepen and broaden my understanding of the world that I will face as president.” Whether many people would have believed such an argument I do not know, but that is almost certainly what Romney believes. Doubts about Mormonism have undoubtedly played a big part in conservative Republicans swallowing hard and embracing John McCain.

The personal tension is in how a person’s faith and religion are related. Faith is the older word. It found expression in Plato’s writing as a way of “knowing” that is not really knowledge because it is secondhand. Faith is an act of accepting as true what one cannot see for oneself. Ancient Hebrew did not have such a philosophical concept but it did have a word for trusting one’s outlook on life because God is trustworthy.

As often happened in early Christian writing, faith became an amalgam of Greek and Hebrew attitudes. The word was Greek, the imagery was Hebrew. Faith could still be platonically used for secondhand knowledge, but it also could mean a trust in the universe and the power to know it. Plato had thought only a few wise men could lift the veil of ignorance and see the truth; the rest of the people had to follow what they were told.

The Christian movement tried to revolutionize this picture but it only partially succeeded. In the Christian use of the term, truth or revelation only happens at the end of time. Until then, everyone, including the wisest, has to live by trust and cooperation with others. The greater one’s trust in the universe and its creator, the more open one is to the (partial) knowledge one lives by. The attitude of believing or trusting in the universe issues in beliefs. Some of those beliefs are so completely agreed upon that they are called “facts.”

Christian thinkers had a genuine insight here that has remained into modernity. Modern “science” (knowledge) has been amazingly successful at establishing “facts.” It does not much like the word faith but its real opponent is “beliefs” rather than the attitude of believing/trusting. A.N. Whitehead noted that modern science could do without faith – except for believing in the intelligibility of the universe. Much of twentieth-century philosophy came around to recognize, as

Dewey put it, that faith underlies knowledge and that facts are a case of belief. Knowledge flows from our interests as much as vice versa.

It is important that a person's "faith" extend beyond his or her interests, narrowly conceived. That is where religion comes into play. A person's religious symbols, myths and beliefs can keep broadening and deepening one's faith, but religion can also be a channeling of faith into a rigid, intolerant stance. What a person believes in is only partially expressed in beliefs, that is, statements held to be true. A person's religion is better shown in how one acts, who and what one cares for.

Every religion (Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Mormon...) has beliefs that sound ridiculous to an outsider. But as elements within a logic that challenges the flatness of life and the narrowness of our interests, religion can be a way to find sympathetic connection to humans and nonhumans who are strangers. Unfortunately, religion can also be a source of violent destruction of everyone and everything that is perceived as a threat.

A president' religion as expressed in symbols, stories, convictions and actions should be submitted to public examination. That should include allowing a person to profess no religion, although what is called atheism is usually a religion of anti-theism. As Mary Midgely has said of atheism, if the house is empty why keep ringing the doorbell and running away. Atheists profess too much certainty and too much belief.

Agnosticism (not know), in contrast to atheism, has a long and respectable history despite the word being kidnapped in the nineteenth century. It is common in Buddhist religion, Jewish religion and the mystical strand of Christian religion. It is a good religious stance if it is really an openness based on a search for meaning. The recent revelations about Mother Teresa showed her to be something of an agnostic but one immersed in traditional symbols and dedicated to caring for suffering individuals. Thomas Aquinas, who is assumed to be a rationalist by those who do not read him, says "revelation does not tell us what God is, and thus joins us to him as to an unknown."

The test of one's religion is whether one continuously resists idolatry. The religious person says "that is not God, that is not God..." It would be good to have a president who religiously opposes the idols of nationalism, of obscene wealth, of the insanity of war, of the petty power games of Washington. But does the process of seeking the office exclude that kind of religion?