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RELIGION IN THE AMERICAN PUBLIC SQUARE

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## Choosing our Better History: Religion, Secularism, and American Public Life

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# Choosing Our Better History: Religion, Secularism, and American Public Life

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Linell Cady

I am delighted for this opportunity to participate in the Macalester Civic Forum and to explore with you some “big” normative questions about our civic life. All too often academics feel constrained to dwell upon smaller questions—some say *ever smaller* questions—so I welcome this chance to think about the bigger picture.

I have been invited to reflect upon the question, “What *should* be the role of religion in contemporary American public life?” That certainly counts as a big question, and one that invariably touches a nerve. The very question, *and* its inflection, signals the conflicts, uncertainties, and anxieties surrounding religion in our current moment.

Religion has re-emerged as a problem, a problem most Americans in the 20th century thought they had pretty much solved by a wall of separation between our public life and private faiths. In recent decades, religious actors and movements have increasingly “gone public,” challenging the constitutional underpinnings and historical adequacy of the wall metaphor. Consensus about the place of religion in American life has unraveled, and we are less sure about the rules of the game.

Skirmishes over the place of religion in American public life have become regular features of our cultural landscape. In recent years, we have grown accustomed to religiously inflected disputes over abortion, sexuality, stem cell research, prayer in schools, religious symbolism in public spaces...and the list goes on. These are not isolated disputes with changing coalitions, but episodes in the so-called “culture wars” that have rocked American society for decades. Although most Americans may stand on the sidelines of this struggle, its extreme camps

have spawned dueling public narratives over the place of religion in American life and identity—narratives that constitute the inescapable backdrop to our reflections on this topic.<sup>1</sup>

### I. Dueling Public Narratives

One story recounts the emergence of a creeping secularism that has taken hold of American public life in the latter half of the twentieth century. Framing secularism as another religion, this story mobilizes “people of faith” to fight back against the privatization and marginalization of their voice in American life. The second narrative, essentially a mirror image of the first, traces a dangerously expansive conservative religious movement that is threatening to take down the secular consensus and values of our democratic public life. If the rhetorical power of the first story is driven by the idea of secularism as another religion, the second draws strength from hurling charges of impending theocracy at those religious discourses and movements seeking to transform secular American law and practices.<sup>2</sup>

To take just one example, consider the highly charged rhetoric surrounding the issue of gay marriage. Its legalization in California prompted religious conservatives to campaign vigorously last fall for Proposition 8, a ballot initiative to ban it. In an obvious effort to raise passions and the stakes, Donald Wildmon, a leading conservative Christian evangelical leader, announced that the culture war itself hung in the balance. If the proposition to prohibit gay marriage went down to defeat, he pronounced, “the culture war is over and Christians have lost” and “gradually, secularism will replace Christianity as the foundation of our society.”<sup>3</sup> Clearly designed to mobilize sympathizers, this intensified rhetoric succinctly captures the oppositional construction of religion and secularism that has anchored and fueled the religious right, a movement that has successfully institutionalized itself through media outlets, think tanks, and grassroots organizations.

Significantly, if not surprisingly, a similar oppositional rhetoric is deployed to very different ends by the opposing camp, especially evident in the spate of new books attributed to the “new atheists,” a group that includes such figures as Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, and Christopher Hitchens.<sup>4</sup> Aptly dubbed “missionary secularists,” these figures are waging a highly visible campaign to position religion as a dangerous, irrational force. Consider, for example, the efforts of Sam Harris in his book-length screed *The End of Faith*. In caricaturist fashion

he equates religion with superstition, irrationality, and violence against which he sets secularism, the font of reason, progress, and peace. Especially telling, for Harris one is either an enlightened secularist or a religious fundamentalist—there is no middle ground. A religious moderate who imagines otherwise is really, he insists, a “failed fundamentalist.” Or if you want the short story, just note the subtitle of Hitchens’ book, *How Religion Poisons Everything*. You may be familiar with a far more entertaining variant of this position that has entered popular culture in the form of Bill Maher’s new movie *Religulous*, a neologism that blends religion and the ridiculous to obvious satirical ends.

I mention these antipodes of the culture wars, not to endorse either of these two approaches, but to take stock of the broader context within which we are located. Even if one does not align explicitly with either pole, their narratives now saturate our contemporary moment—thoroughly if not exclusively. In so doing, these stories inhabit us, shaping and constricting the imaginative repertoire through which we engage our world. The media has played a critical role in sustaining these story lines. To some extent this reflects their penchant for “conflict narratives” that help to generate interest and sales. But even beyond that it reflects, as Diane Winston has shown, the media’s embrace of a new framework for religion reporting. Throughout much of the 20th century, refracting the legacy of the Scopes trial, the media story line was “true believers as fools” and scientists as “heroes.” This interpretive angle has kept substantive coverage of religion outside of mainstream secular media.<sup>5</sup> Yet it also facilitated the dominance of a public Protestantism, helping it to operate largely under the radar screen. Things have changed in the past few decades. Through the influence of the media-savvy religious right, we have seen the ascendancy of another news narrative “privileging culture wars and clashing civilizations,” which has allowed conservative religious voices to own religion in the public sphere.<sup>6</sup> As a result, liberal and progressive religious voices and values have been largely eclipsed from the coverage and their presence in our imaginative repertoire correspondingly reduced—at least until recently. There are now some indications suggesting we have entered a transitional moment, which may be opening up new ways of envisioning and enacting the public role of religion.

As should be evident from this quick snapshot of the polarized landscape, it is impossible to think clearly about the role of religion in American public life without also taking into account the nature and positioning of the secular. They are a conceptual pair, and exploring

them in tandem is necessitated by the growing recognition of their deeply tangled relationship.<sup>7</sup> We are now in a period of considerable flux and conflict regarding how to think about their relationship and how to embody it within the institutional spaces of our collective lives. The United States is not the only site embroiled in such realignment. The public resurgence of religion, and its extensive politicization, has been a feature of politics in recent decades around the world, from Iran, to Turkey, to India. These religio-political movements have, nationally and globally, succeeded in disrupting the taken-for-granted dominance and legitimacy of secularism within public life.

My aim is to work toward a more adequate model for envisioning the public role of religion in American life by positioning it in relationship to the two dominant discourses that compete for public attention. I want to explore the differing forms of secularism that inform these discourses, and their implications for the public role of religion. By recognizing more clearly how these discursive traditions operate in the public marketplace of ideas, we can gain some distance from them and open up space for thinking differently. I will first sketch out these two versions of secularism, considering some historical touchstones and contemporary expressions, and then consider their theoretical and normative adequacy. Essentially, I will argue that each offers a truncated, simplified picture of the religious/secular landscape in American life, past and present. Each fails, in different ways for different reasons, to adequately address the conundrum of making room for religion in a religiously plural, secular, democratic state. I will then turn to the 2008 presidential election, which not only offers a window on the cross currents of our moment, but augurs a promising shift in the politics of religion. Barack Obama, who distances himself from both of the dominant pictures, illuminates a different trajectory for negotiating the religion-secular divide in American life. In so doing he offers resources for a different kind of story about the place of religion in American public life, one that does justice to our better history.<sup>8</sup>

## **II. Variants of Secularism**

Much of the power of secularism has come from its ability to present itself as a natural category that maps onto the world in an unproblematic fashion. By defining itself against religion, which it aligns with the parochial and the private, secularism has positioned itself as a neutral space and discourse, that which is held in common, and so appropri-

ately public, even universal. The challenges of religious movements worldwide to the avowed neutrality of secularism have prompted scrutiny of this discursive formation and generated work on the roots and varieties of secularism across time and place.<sup>9</sup> We are now beginning to see more clearly the way in which the categories of religion and the secular work in tandem to make possible the formation of modern selves and societies. This includes the secular nation-state operating in a global economic order as well as rhetorics of privacy, freedom, and natural self-interest that fashion a self suitable for inhabiting such an order. As Timothy Fitzgerald explains, “By constructing religion and religions, the imagined secular world of objects and markets as the result of the free association of natural individuals, has also been constructed.”<sup>10</sup> From a quite different angle and genealogy that builds upon the Christian contrast between the worldly and the spiritual, the conceptual distinction between religion and the secular helps to sustain the (always relative) independence and purity of religion. In short, rather than view the religion/secular classification as a universal template that maps seamlessly onto the world, the multiple streams that flow into its formation and its cultural work in configuring our world have moved to center stage.

Political Scientist Elizabeth Hurd has called attention to two distinctive traditions of Western secularism that align themselves differently with religion.<sup>11</sup> She distinguishes between what she terms a laicist secularism and a Christian/Judeo-Christian secularism, a tradition that in at least one of its American trajectories has expanded from its narrowly Protestant roots to include Catholics and Jews during the course of its 20th-century development. Her work is especially useful in illuminating the versions of secularism promoted in and through our dominant public discourses surrounding religion.

Laicist secularism (sometimes called aggressive secularism or strong secularism) represents one camp in the culture wars and clearly powers the rhetoric of “the new atheists.” Its lineage, however, is much older, rooted in the narrative of secularization that has played such a central role in the formation of the modern Western imaginary. In basic outline this is a story of progress that links modernization with the process through which religion is disentangled from the various domains of social life—from politics to economics to science—and located within its own private domain. It is a celebratory narrative that traces the emancipation of humanity from the tyranny of ecclesiastical authorities, from the darkness of superstition, and from the religious

violence that engulfed early modern Europe. In this telling, the privatization of religion makes room for the emergence of secular modernity that is envisioned as the teleological movement toward greater peace, freedom, and enlightenment.

Laicist secularism is embedded within a narrative of separation that imagines an oppositional, clean, and fixed divide between secular domains and discourses and religion. Its legitimacy is rooted in the presumption that this divide that secures the separation of religion and politics can be readily and permanently drawn apart from disputes within religion and politics. Secularism in this form, as Hurd notes, “presents itself as having risen above the messy debate over religion and politics, standing over and outside the melee in a neutral space of its own creation.”<sup>12</sup> It is this very claim, though, that rings increasingly hollow in a world where the politics of secularism have become so heated and divisive, pointing to the inescapable conclusion that far from providing the neutral framework for disentangling religion and politics, laicist secularism is itself “located on the spectrum of theological politics.”<sup>13</sup>

The second tradition of secularism, reflecting accommodationist rather than separationist proclivities toward religion, envisions Christianity (and in one of its tributaries, Judeo-Christianity) as the historical ground and civilizational context within which the distinction between religion and the secular is made. Although committed to the institutional separation of church and state, this tradition does not seek to limit the intersections of religion and politics. To the contrary, Christian values and practices are envisioned as the wellspring from which secular democratic institutions and values draw sustenance. This tradition envisions a continuum, if not fusion, between Christian and national identity and mission. It is this understanding that makes possible the interpretation of the United States on two registers simultaneously: a secular state within the international system of states *and* a nation with a divine mission to spread democracy and freedom.<sup>14</sup>

These two traditions of secularism are now colliding in American public life, with each side engaged in a seemingly winner-take-all battle to determine the public role of religion. Each side seeks to position itself as the guardian of America’s founding principles and historical trajectory, reading the other out of the historical record. Neither model for envisioning the place of religion in American public life can in isolation account for the interplay of religion and secular and national

discourses and practices, and neither provides a compass for moving forward.

The tradition of laicist secularism resonates with the separationist logic and Enlightenment voices that, in collaboration with religious dissenters, gave shape to the American model of church/state separation. However, the term “secularism” was not used by the framers, and only came into usage as a political movement and distinctive theory of life in England in the mid-19th century.<sup>15</sup> In the United States it was not until the late 19th century, and accelerating rapidly in the 20th, that this version of secularism came to dominate, particularly among the educated elite. The universities were one of the primary sites for its incubation and transmission.<sup>16</sup> Over a couple of decades the broadly Christian assumptions that shaped higher education in the United States, and sustained a unitary vision of truth, gave way to a more specialized disciplinary landscape embodying a new paradigm of knowledge that separated facts from values. This shift, as Christian Smith describes it, was part of a broader “secular revolution” in American life carried out by a cadre of elites “who were largely skeptical, freethinking, agnostic, atheist, or theologically liberal; who were well educated and socially located mainly in knowledge-production occupations; and who generally espoused materialism, naturalism, positivism and the privatization or extinction of religion.”<sup>17</sup> For the most part, this tradition of secularism in the American setting avoided outright hostility to religion and settled comfortably into a liberal embrace of a secular public sphere and private religious faith.

If higher education was at the forefront in effecting this social transformation, the courts were critical in its further solidification, particularly in the post-World War II period. It was a 1947 Supreme Court decision that invoked the metaphor of the “wall of separation” between church and state, quoting from an 1802 letter of Thomas Jefferson to the Danbury Baptist Association. This was the first in a series of judicial rulings that pushed a more separationist agenda between government and religion, with the public schools at the epicenter of the shift. Legal scholar Noah Feldman notes that this shift “could never have won at the polls,” but it “could become the consensus among educated elites who looked on their opponents as regressive and insufficiently attuned to the rights of minorities. To embrace legal secularism was, for the Court, continuous with a set of liberal values characteristic of enlightened citizens and educated jurists.”<sup>18</sup>

It was this tradition of secularism that John F. Kennedy invoked in the 1960 presidential campaign in his famous speech seeking to defuse the political liabilities of his Catholic faith. He had to counter a long history of prejudice against Catholics who were suspected of being not American enough and not democratic enough due to perceived loyalty and obedience to the Pope. Kennedy's strategy was to insist that his faith was irrelevant to politics. As he forthrightly proclaimed, "I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute."<sup>19</sup> Although anchored in the imperative to separate religious and civil authorities, this metaphor did considerably more work for Kennedy in terms of separating religion and politics more broadly. He moved readily between the constitutional and institutional separation of church and state to the much broader claim about the separation of religion and politics. Religion, Kennedy proclaimed, is an entirely "private affair" and irrelevant to what he repeatedly referred to as the "real" issues of political life, such as hunger, poverty, and education.

A map picturing a neatly divided *secular public* versus *private religion* landscape became the dominant paradigm in the social sciences in the middle decades of the 20th century. Reading the history of American democracy through this paradigm contributed to generations of scholarship that essentially screened out the religious, primarily Protestant, strands shaping American identity, law, and politics.<sup>20</sup> So too with foreign policy analysts and international relations scholars who, imagining religion as private or epiphenomenal, were surprised and theoretically unprepared to account for its resurgence and politicization in international and global affairs.<sup>21</sup> Taking the wall of separation as the defining metaphor and script for the relationship of religion, national identity, and politics more broadly has blinded us to their collusions and fusions in American life. In so doing, we essentially take one strand of a thicker rope and assume it can stand in for the whole. We lose sight of what has sometimes been called "voluntary establishments," no doubt too innocent a term to capture the coercive and exclusionary dimensions that flow from them.

Alexis de Tocqueville, a 19th-century Frenchman, zeroed in on this truth about the place of religion in American life in his frequently cited *Democracy in America*. Famously remarking that religion in America is the "first of their political institutions," that it "reigns without obstacles, by universal consent," he called attention to the deep and pervasive influence of Protestantism in American life that continued despite, even because of, its formal legal disestablishment.<sup>22</sup> When the country was

founded, more than 95% of the Euro-American population was Protestant, with over 90% from the Reformed tradition.<sup>23</sup> This religio-cultural homogeneity ensured a tacitly shared set of assumptions, sensibilities, and practices, from individualism, to legalism, to Bible-centered religion. Remarking on the partnership between religion and politics, Tocqueville observed, "Americans combine the notions of Christianity and of liberty so intimately in their minds that it is impossible to make them conceive the one without the other."<sup>24</sup> The institutional separation of church and state, as William Connelly puts it, worked "to soften sectarian divisions between Christian sects while retaining the civilizational hegemony of Christianity in a larger sense."<sup>25</sup> Tocqueville saw in early 19th-century America a continuity, even a fusion, between Protestant Christianity and American democratic political life. This was in striking contrast to his own country where the revolution pitted national, democratic, and enlightenment interests against the authoritarianism and power of the dominant Roman Catholic Church. Indeed, this hostile encounter was the incubator for laicist secularism, making France its paradigmatic exemplar. The institutional separation of church and state did not signal or produce a clean separation between religion and national identity, mission, and politics, but a framework that fostered, as Hugh Heclo articulates it, "a twisting helix of reciprocal influences" between Christianity and American democracy.<sup>26</sup>

This interpretive angle opens up a very different picture of the religion/secular divide, bringing into focus their continuities, collusions, and fusions. Recent revisionist studies have illuminated this terrain. From abolition to the civil rights movement, from prohibition to the new war on drugs, religious voices and movements have been at the epicenter of the conflicts that have transformed American laws, practices, and institutions.<sup>27</sup> As James Morone puts it, "the campaigns leave deep legacies: they lead us to rewrite laws, reinterpret the Constitution, reshape the political culture, and create new public agencies."<sup>28</sup> The secularist model that envisions a clean and settled division between the domains of religion and secular public life is a still portrait, frozen in time. What we need is a moving picture to capture the *processes* in and through which secular and religious formations are constituted and reconstituted. Failure to recognize this process blinds us to the ways in which secularism refracts the religious sensibilities and assumptions of the majority tradition. In fact, so concerned to counter this failure, some now prefer the term "protestant secularism" to make perfectly clear that secularism is not neutrality or the antithesis of religion.<sup>29</sup>

We cannot really get a handle on the religious inflections and shifts in American national identity unless we escape from an oppositional model that imagines secular national identity over against religious identity. American identity and Protestant identity have been deeply tangled from the earliest days of the country's founding. The historical record of prejudice and violence against Native Americans, or Mormons, or Catholics, has reflected a deep sense that they are un-American, not one of "us." The trajectory has certainly moved in the direction of broadening the American-Protestant linkage. By mid-20th-century, the Protestant mainstream was "widening into a triple mainstream" to include Catholics and Jews.<sup>30</sup> Tellingly, the term "Judeo-Christianity" was invented as a way to construct a shared tradition and interfaith coalition for a country whose population had grown far more diverse since its origins. Despite this widening of the mainstream, Christianity retains its dominant position, and we continue to hear voices, such as a Donald Wildmon who explicitly, though now anxiously rather than triumphantly, reference a "Christian America."

These two traditions of secularism, with their distinctive roots, champions, and implications for the public role of religion, jostle in complicated ways in contemporary American life. Consider that in the mid-1900s, when Kennedy was successfully appealing to an absolute wall of separation between religion and secular public life and politics, Congress was inserting "under God" into the Pledge of Allegiance, while the prophetically inspired civil rights movement was profoundly transforming the American landscape. Not only does this point to the tangled interactions (on occasion partnerships) of these divergent traditions of secularism, but it captures the varied ways in which religion can shape public life—sometimes serving a priestly function in sacralizing national identity and mission, and other times serving a prophetic transformative function.

Focusing on these distinctive traditions of secularism and the place they each accord religion helps to locate us within our contemporary moment. Identifying their contours and some of their expressions helps us to see better some of the constraints and possibilities of our time. By working in, through, and against these secular formations that have shaped our past (and continue to shape our present), we can begin to more adequately envision and accommodate the role of religion in our pluralistic democracy.

Neither model or tradition of secularism serves us well as we move into this next century. Exposing the mythic distortions of the standard

secularization narrative is especially important at this historical juncture. As I tried to show in this brief sketch, it does not capture the manner in which religious voices and values have in fact shaped American life, including national identity and mission, and so offers a serious misreading. Consider its potential ramifications as Americans engage in the dubious process of exporting democracy around the world. Pushing the myth that American democracy is secular democracy, as if religious dimensions were truly privatized, is to export a vision that does not begin to capture the dynamics of our own history. It is a stunning erasure of the religious dimension of democratizing movements in the United States, and so contributes to our imaginative failure to recognize democratic impulses in religious movements abroad, not to mention authoritarian, anti-democratic leanings that operate under the rubric of the secular. The misreading of the religion/secular boundary in American life also contributes to another form of erasure closer to home, blinding us to the way in which some religious sensibilities and values inform and align with secular discourses and practices more than others. These informal establishments allow an unmarked religion to dominate—without even being named—and at the same time marginalize different religious voices and formations.<sup>31</sup>

If laicist secularism can be faulted for its theoretical failure to reveal its religious inflections, it is also vulnerable to theological critique for privileging some forms of religion rather than others. Although portraying itself as a level playing field for all religious expressions, it is, as we have seen, more accommodating of some than of others. Those religious traditions that accentuate individual and private faith are especially at home within this secularist formation. In this vein many have rightly noted the easy fit with Christianity, especially Protestant traditions, compared with, say, the conundrum of locating Native American traditions within the religion/secular framework. It is also important to recognize the way in which it flattens theological alternatives, even within the Christian tradition. Suggesting that Christianity can easily align itself within the private domain is to privilege a particular theological resolution to the relationship between Christian faith and the broader world. As H. Richard Niebuhr so clearly demonstrated in his classic work *Christianity and Culture*, there are a variety of ways in the past two millennia in which Christians have worked out this problem, a problem that parallels the challenges we are dealing with here. A resolution that rests comfortably within a fixed separation between religion and the wider culture fails to embody the transforma-

tive imperative that Christian faith, and the prophetic tradition more generally, have recognized.

The alternate tradition of Christian secularism envisions Christianity as the cultural ground or bedrock that sustains the unifying values of democratic politics and national identity. Although this tradition has been more accommodating of religious expressions, the privileged role of Christianity has made it unequally so. In forging such a powerful link between religion, national identity, and mission, this tradition founders on the rocks of increasing religious pluralism in the United States. Its limitations grow even more apparent from a global perspective. The fusion of religious and political identity in this tradition of secularism, as Charles Taylor argues, goes beyond the national arena to shape civilizational identity: “the sense people have of the basic order by which they live” and which commonly provides a sense of “superiority and goodness.”<sup>32</sup> In so doing, it constitutes a modern variant of Christendom, with all of the dangers of that formation in global politics today. It sustains and fuels the highly misleading narrative of a “clash of civilizations” that rests upon notions of homogenous, bounded, and static cultures that are maintained and defended in opposition to the “other” without.

### **III. Religion and Politics in the Obama Era**

The 2008 presidential election offers an illuminating angle into the changing fortunes of these traditions of secularism in contemporary American life.<sup>33</sup> Through the prism of presidential campaigning and politics we can see these versions of secularism as more than disembodied abstractions. They are discursive strategies that politicians pursue in their appeals to the electorate. Whether the appeals are genuine, calculating, or some mixture of both, they provide a window into contemporary currents in American life, currents that politicians can never afford to stray too far from. Focusing on the 2008 election of Barack Obama is especially revealing for our topic. Obama’s vision of the role of religion in American public life does not sit easily within either tradition of secularism, although he is clearly working out his own position in light of and in relationship to them. In and through his criticisms and challenges, he gestures toward a distinctly different way of navigating the religion/secular divide. It is one, I shall argue, that offers a more promising way for envisioning and enacting the role of religion in our pluralist secular democracy. It is not that he is a trail-

blazer, without precedents in American history. But he draws upon religious and cultural currents that have been largely eclipsed by the polarization of the culture wars. That he could be elected is a signal of a changing landscape and, we may hope, impatience with the reigning alternatives. Unlike most politicians, he offers more than the occasional scattered references to religion and its intersections with politics. In two best-selling books, speeches, and a series of revealing interviews, he sets forth a fairly robust picture of the appropriate place of religion in American public life.

Obama cast his presidential bid in terms of moving past the deep cultural divisions that have marked American life in the past few decades, including the division between a “religious America” and a “secular America.” Critical of the Republican Party’s exploitation of this divide to mobilize voters, he also chastises Democrats for hiding behind a version of secularism that imagines that religious faith and values are irrelevant in political and public life. He admits to being tempted by this “strategy of avoidance.” When his opponent in his first senate race said “Jesus Christ would not vote for Barack Obama,” his initial thought was that he was running to be Senator, not Minister, of Illinois.<sup>34</sup> Reconsidering, he concluded that this secularist strategy allowed conservatives to define authentic religion, and it failed to honor the appropriate role and place of religion in American democracy. Not only are most Americans religious, but also “the majority of great reformers in American history,” he notes, “were not only motivated by faith, but repeatedly used religious language to argue for their cause.”<sup>35</sup>

Although rejecting the separationist model that privatizes religion, Obama is even more dismissive of those who yoke American identity and democratic politics too tightly to a single religious tradition, whether Christianity or the newly invented Judeo-Christian tradition. This is a recurring refrain in his writings and speeches. As he remarks in a 1997 address, “Whatever we once were, we are no longer just a Christian nation.” This same point makes its way into his presidential inaugural address, when he claims our “patchwork heritage” as a strength: “We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus—and nonbelievers.”<sup>36</sup> This is a symbolically profound observation. Noteworthy, of course, is the prominent place accorded Muslims, an effort to counter their all-too-frequent demonization. Although Muslims have for centuries been seen as the menacing “other” in the formation of Western identity, this has been rekindled in the aftermath

of September 11, with revealing episodes during the campaign when charges that Obama was a Muslim were hurled as slurs. Also noteworthy, and unprecedented, is his explicit embrace of nonbelievers as full members of the American community. This counters a long tradition in which religious identity (initially Protestantism, though slowly expanding) functions as a litmus test for national identity, and faith is assumed to be a prerequisite for a moral life.

Significantly, Obama's insistent attention to the diversity of the American religious landscape does not stop with attention to the multiple traditions of belief and unbelief that inhabit it. Religious traditions themselves are highly diverse, and reflect theological strains that push in very different political and social directions. Even if all Americans were Christian, he asks pointedly: "whose Christianity would we teach in the schools? James Dobson's or Al Sharpton's?...Or should we just stick to the Sermon on the Mount—a passage that is so radical that it's doubtful that our Defense Department would survive its application?"<sup>37</sup> Attention to theological diversity is critical because it exposes the distortions that come from any bloc or wholesale appeal to a religion to ground identity.

Although Obama advocates cutting the cord between national identity and religion, features of the campaign and his inauguration reveal how tightly bound they remain. Consider, for example, the ready agreement of the candidates to accept the invitation of prominent evangelical minister and author Rick Warren to participate in a nationally televised serial interview at his Saddleback Church, and to answer such questions as "what does it mean to you to trust in Christ?"<sup>38</sup> That a conservative evangelical Protestant minister could broker such an event, CNN broadcast it, and the public not express outrage captures the ready alignment and blend of nation, state, and Christianity in 21st-century America. Or consider some of the rituals of the presidential inaugural ceremony that he chose to continue despite their symbolic tension with his vision. We have become so familiar with them that we fail to see their role in sustaining the religion-nation continuum. Just think of the tradition going back to our first president of taking the oath of office on the Bible, a practice, incidentally, that not all presidents followed. Or think of his decision to continue the tradition, going back to Franklin Roosevelt in 1937, of opening and closing prayers at the inauguration. Although his selection of Rick Warren and Glen Lowrey, an African-American civil rights leader, provided a measure of racial and political diversity, these two Protestant ministers

did not symbolize Obama's vision of transcending the historic links of nation and Christianity. When the news broke, I was in a group that participated in an interesting thought experiment, trying (to no avail) to identify two names that would signal religious diversity adequately. Obama's vision strains against the presidential inaugural rituals that work to sustain the alignment of religion and nation identity. As these strains intensify, I think we will see an end to prayers at presidential inaugurations.

Rejecting a version of secularism that quarantines religion in the private domain, *and* one that takes Christianity as the privileged source of American identity and democratic values, Obama advances an alternative that envisions a more pluralistic interactive border between religions and the secular. This way of imagining the religion-secular divide is driven by both political and theological convictions. In other words, it is not simply a commitment to a pluralistic democratic secular politics that underlies this approach, but also a particular perspective on religion. Again we bump up against the fact that models for negotiating the relationship of religious and secular domains rely upon working out both sides of the equation. Whether one envisions conflict, fusion, or more pluralistic interactions between religion and the secular depends fundamentally on how one defines not just the secular, but religion as well. There are two currents that merge in Obama's perspective on religion that contribute to the plural, interactionist model that he embraces: a sense of religion as personal spirituality, and the tradition of black liberation theology.

He stands within a liberal tradition of religion that is marked by inclusivity, antipathy to dogma and religious organizations, and an eclectic appreciation for diverse sources of moral and spiritual illumination. He has, as he puts it, a "polyglot" background, acknowledging a wide variety of influences across religious traditions, cultures, and geographical regions, from Africa, to Indonesia, to Hawaii. Combined with his mother's anthropological embrace of religious and cultural diversity, it has made him highly suspicious of religious dogmas or any claims to have a "monopoly on the truth."<sup>39</sup> His eclectic background convinces him that, "there are many paths to the same place."<sup>40</sup> This inclusive theological sensibility also impels him to embrace doubt as a welcome shadow of religious conviction, rather than its enemy. "Religion at its best," he remarks, "comes with a big dose of doubt."<sup>41</sup> This is not an off-the-cuff comment, but a conviction that was featured on his official campaign website, with a prominently displayed quote by E.J.

Dionne, remarking that, "Obama offers the first faith testimony I have heard from any politician that speaks honestly about the uncertainties of belief." Expounding on this theme in a recent address, Obama explains that doubt should not replace faith, but it should "humble" us and "compel us to remain open, and curious, and eager to continue the moral and spiritual debate."<sup>42</sup>

If his eclectic, personalist, critically reflective take on religion is one strand that accounts for his vision of the religion/secular divide, then his participation in the liberation traditions of the black church is another. It is a Christian faith shaped by the "particular attributes of the historically black church" that emerged out of its centuries-long struggle against slavery and racism. Because of this history, he claims, "the black church understands in an intimate way the Biblical call to feed the hungry and cloth the naked and challenge powers and principalities."<sup>43</sup> This is not a spiritualized version of faith focusing only on belief, or personal experience, or the otherworldly—all variations that lend themselves to privatization. Nor is it an appeal to religion to ground national identity and values. He was drawn to this tradition, he claims, because of its power to "spur social change," convincing him that faith is not a set of private beliefs or merely compensation for the pain and injustices of life, but "an active, palpable agent in the world."<sup>44</sup> It is, as he depicts it, a sense of relationship to all forms of life that carries the imperative to work towards the common good. This means, as he most frequently puts it, "we are our brother's keeper, we are our sister's keeper."<sup>45</sup>

In Obama's spiritual universe the distinction between religion and the secular is both powerfully affirmed, and yet also bridged. It is affirmed in and through a principled commitment to the constitutional separation of church and state, the decoupling of religion and national identity, and the democratic virtue of translating religious values and visions into a more universal language that fellow citizens within a diverse society can understand. But the boundary is hardly a high wall that separates and isolates religious faith from secular knowledge or the practices of the political and social world. In his words, "religious commitment did not require me to suspend critical thinking, disengage from the battle for economic or social justice, or otherwise retreat from the world that I knew and loved."<sup>46</sup> This way of envisioning the religion-secular alignment is not laicist secularism or a Christian secularism that asserts a rather static religious ground for national identity and the democratic project. It has the ingredients of a far more dynamic

and pluralistic engagement of religious and secular traditions within public space. These include a more fluid boundary between them, as well as a more inclusive, eclectic, and non-dogmatic take on religion. For some, the rubric of “spirituality” more adequately captures the form of religiosity that refuses some of the defining features of religion as conventionally understood. Evidence suggests this form of religion is on the rise, not just in Obama’s electability, but also in recent polls that track American attitudes to religion.<sup>47</sup> The religious landscape is growing more diverse, Protestantism will soon be a minority religion, and the number of those identifying as unaffiliated or nonbelievers is among the fastest growing segment. There is, moreover, a striking fluidity across religious boundaries, as individuals increasingly shop the spiritual marketplace in their personal quest for a more tailor-made religion.

#### **IV. Concluding Reflections**

In working out the appropriate role of religion in American public life we are inevitably contending with the major currents that have been in play in recent decades. Both of the major streams have pushed a captivating but ultimately misleading picture of the opposition between religion and secularism. Escaping from this picture and recognizing the cross-fertilization across these currents is critical to fashioning a more constructive response to the place of religion in a religiously plural, democratic, secular state. The story of a secular America is as misleading as a story of a Christian America, neither able to illuminate the interplay between the religious-secular divide in our nation’s history. The metaphor of a “double stranded helix” better captures the way in which religious, primarily Protestant, and secular democratic principles have collaborated in shaping our past and present. Although an apt metaphor for an earlier time, our challenge today is to multiply the strands to make room for the greater diversity of voices among us. Moving in this direction requires the further decoupling of religion and national identity, the further de-privileging of Christianity—from presidential ceremonies to the practices and culture of the military—and greater collective will to free electoral politics from mobilizations around religious identity.

Making room for this interplay reflects both democratic and theological convictions. To advance this model requires that we work both sides of the aisle, so to speak. It is necessary to counter the deeply

rooted assumption that secularism and democracy are so tightly linked that they necessarily demand the privatization of religion. Religious voices and perspectives are appropriate democratic expressions and oftentimes valuable moral resources for reflecting on matters of our common life. Their public role belongs within the sphere of civil society, but not in relation to the symbols, practices, and institutions of the state, nation, and electoral politics. American Christians might imagine this as the disenfranchisement of Christianity, given its privileged role in our nation's history—as a surrender to the religion of secularism. Yet I would argue, in the tradition of the 17th-century Protestant dissenter Roger Williams, that moving in this direction is essential to preserving the purity of the spiritual life from the corruptions of worldly affairs. Moving in this direction liberates Christian faith from its entanglements with state and politics. American Christianity has too often played a priestly role in sacralizing the nation and its mission, rather than a prophetic role. Cutting its privileged ties to state and nation can unleash this prophetic power.

Developing a more interactive and pluralistic border zone between religions and secular discourses and practices is the further extension of a mediating tradition that can be traced back to a long line of American thinkers who sought to integrate the cross currents of religion, democracy, and science.<sup>48</sup> The election of Barack Obama brings a spotlight onto this tradition, and captures in his rhetoric and symbolically in his life story the globalizing impulses of this tradition that he may be peculiarly positioned to advance. This directional shift has become increasingly urgent. The colliding and mixing of cultures and identities has accelerated through new technologies and population migrations. Telling a better story about the dynamics of religion and American national identity and politics is not only important for purposes of American civic life but for cultivating a more cosmopolitan horizon within which to negotiate the multiple religious and secular traditions that jostle in the global public square.

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## Notes

1. James Davison Hunter used the rubric of the "culture wars" to analyze American religious and political life in *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).
2. Kevin Phillips, *American Theocracy: The Peril and Politics of Radical Religion, Oil and Borrowed Money in the 21st Century* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2006), epitomizes this narrative. For its critique, see Ross Douthat, "Theocracy, Theocracy, Theocracy," *First Things* (August/September 2006).

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3. Bill Berkowitz, "Gay Marriage to End 'Culture Wars?'" *Religion Dispatches* (21 July 2008). Accessed online on 17 May 2009 at [www.religiondispatches.org/archive/sex-and-gender/362/gay\\_marriage\\_to\\_end\\_'culture\\_wars](http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/sex-and-gender/362/gay_marriage_to_end_'culture_wars).
4. Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: Norton, 2004); Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006); Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007).
5. Diane Winston, "Back to the Future: Religion, Politics, and the Media," *American Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (2007): 973.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 986. The media's failure to interrogate the religious politics of President George W. Bush points to their location *in* the story. As Winston writes, "the Bush government yoked American politics to the conservative Christian project, and the press reiterated this message without question or comment for nearly five years" (p. 980).
7. See, especially, Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 1–17. As the alignment *between* religion and the secular grows less and less stable, so too does any ready consensus about the shape and boundaries of the terms being aligned. This not only draws attention to the construction of the secular, but to the construction of the modern category of religion. A large literature has developed on this topic, including, for example, Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1993); Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999); and S. N. Balagangadhara, "The Heathen in His Blindness": *Asia, the West, and the Dynamic of Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 1994).
8. Barack Obama uses the phrase "choose our better history" in *Dreams From My Father* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1995), p. 439. It appears again in his Inaugural Address, delivered on 20 January 2009.
9. A small sampling of this literature includes Rajeev Bhargava, ed., *Secularism and its Critics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, ed., *Secularisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); T. N. Madan, *Images of the World* (New York and New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006); Linell Cady and Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, ed., *Remaking Religion: Comparative Secularisms in a Global Age* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming 2010); and Timothy Fitzgerald, *Religion and the Secular: Historical and Colonial Formations* (London: Equinox, 2007).
10. Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 8.
11. Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), especially pp. 22–45.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
14. For a very illuminating study that explores these strands in American life, using a regional lens to explore their primary locations and roots, see Anatol Lieven, *America Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).
15. Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the 19th Century* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 88–93.

16. See George Marsden, *The Soul of the American University* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Julie Reuben, *The Making of the Modern University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); and Jon H. Roberts and James Turner, *The Sacred and the Secular University* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).
17. Christian Smith, "Introduction," *The Secular Revolution: Power, Interests and Conflict in the Secularization of American Public Life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), p. 1.
18. Noah Feldman, *Divided by God: America's Church-State Problem and What We Should Do About It* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), p. 183.
19. John F. Kennedy, Speech on Religion, November 12, 1960, accessed online on 26 February 2009 at [www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=16920600](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=16920600).
20. James Morone, *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 24–26.
21. Scott Thomas, *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, "Theorizing Religious Resurgence," *International Politics* 44, no. 6 (November 2007): 647–665; Fabio Petito and Pavlow Hatzopoulos, ed., *Religion in International Relations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Douglas Johnston, *Religion, The Missing Dimension of Statecraft* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).
22. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, edited by J. P. Mayer, translated by George Lawrence (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 292.
23. William Hutchinson, *Religious Pluralism in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 21.
24. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 293.
25. William Connelly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 24.
26. Hugh Heclo, *Christianity and Democracy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 35.
27. See Eldon Eisenach, *The Next Religious Establishment: National Identity and Political Theology in Post-Protestant America* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000); R. Laurence Moore, *Touchdown Jesus: The Mixing of Sacred and Secular in American History* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003); David L. Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).
28. James Morone, *Hellfire Nation*, p. 11.
29. See, for example, Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007) and Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, "Introduction," *Secularisms*.
30. William Hutchinson, *Religious Pluralism in America*, p. 196.
31. See Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption*, p. 3.
32. Charles Taylor, *The Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 455–456.
33. I have explored these traditions through the prism of American presidential politics in "A High Wall, A Sacred Canopy, A Conversation," *Religion Dispatches* (25 February 2008), accessed online on 17 May 2009 at [www.religiondispatches.org/archive/politics/99/a\\_high\\_wall%2C\\_a\\_sacred\\_canopy%2C\\_a\\_conversation](http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/politics/99/a_high_wall%2C_a_sacred_canopy%2C_a_conversation).

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34. Barack Obama, "Call to Renewal," Keynote Address, June 28, 2006, accessed online on 18 February 2009 at <http://blog.beliefnet.com/stevenwaldman/2008/11/obamas-historic-call-to-renewa.html>.
35. Barack Obama, "Call to Renewal Address."
36. Barack Obama, Inaugural Address, January 16, 2009, online at [www.whitehouse.gov/blog/inaugural-address/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/inaugural-address/).
37. Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006), p. 218.
38. Saddleback Presidential Candidates Forum, aired 17 August 2008, accessed online on 18 February 2009 at <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/080817/se.01.html>.
39. Barack Obama, Interview with Cathleen Falsani, March 27, 2004, accessed online on 22 February 2009 at 39. Barack Obama, Interview with Cathleen Falsani, March 27, 2004, accessed online on 22 February 2009 at <http://blog.beliefnet.com/stevenwaldman/2008/11/obamas-interview-with-cathleen.html>.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.
42. Barack Obama, Commencement Address at Notre Dame, May 16, 2009, accessed online on 19 May 2009 at [www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/05/17/obama-notre-dame-speech-f\\_n\\_204387.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/05/17/obama-notre-dame-speech-f_n_204387.html).
43. Barack Obama, "Call to Renewal Address."
44. Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, p. 207.
45. Barack Obama, Interview with Cathleen Falsani.
46. Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, p. 208.
47. See the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, accessed online on 15 December 2008 at <http://religions.pewforum.org/reports>. The survey underscores the increasing diversity and fluidity of religious identity, including a growing number who are unaffiliated.
48. Jeffrey Stout paints a compelling portrait of a mediating democratic tradition that he describes as secularizing, not secularist, in *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).