
Religion, Politics, and Education: Faith-filled Pedagogy in a Campaign year

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From Abraham Lincoln's speech at Cooper Union, to the Vietnam War protests, American colleges and universities have a long tradition of fostering political discussion. Inspired, perhaps, by Barack Obama's "Yes We Can" enthusiasm, opposition to the Iraq War, the slumping economy, or religious convictions, a record number of young people have registered to vote. Thus, it seems timely to ask how our schools can improve the course of our republic; and, in particular, how educational institutions can help students of faith integrate their religious beliefs with political action in a pluralistic democracy.

In *God's Harvard: A Christian College on a Mission to Save America*, Hanna Rosin illustrates one faith-based educational paradigm and demonstrates the fissionable nature of religious schools. Patrick Henry College, located within commuting distance of Washington, D.C., is a self-described "classical liberal arts" college with a "biblical world view" (*Patrick ... About*). The college was founded in 2000 to educate an army of political operatives for Christ. With a home-schooled *Generation Joshua*¹ student body, the school opened its doors at just the right time to take advantage of a right wing Republican White House and Congress. In 2004, 7% of the college interns roaming the White House corridors were Patrick Henry students, a ridiculously high percentage considering the school's small size (240 students) and, at the time, lack of accreditation (Kirkpatrick).

God's Harvard, however, is more than just a day-in-the-life account of uptight Karl Rove wannabes. The book takes a dramatic turn as it recounts Patrick Henry's first internal crisis – a crisis of freedom and faith that challenges all religiously motivated institutions of higher education. A perfect storm erupted between Michael Farris, who founded the college on the basis of Scripture as the source of all knowledge and truth, and the liberal arts professors who taught their students to value the classics. Each of these professors had been vetted by Farris and had willingly signed Statements of Faith and Biblical Worldview that included the assertion, "The Bible in its entirety (all 66 books of the Old and New Testaments) is the inspired Word of God, inerrant in its original autographs, and the only infallible and sufficient authority for faith and Christian living" (*Patrick ... Fundamental*). Nevertheless, they dared to promote non-Biblical sources as legitimate founts of knowledge. Following Western intellectual tradition, they taught their students to question authority. The most controversial professor told his students, "'The Bible says so,' is never the answer" (Rosin 106), but, for the administration and parents of most Patrick Henry students, "The Bible says so," is always the answer. As Rosin writes, it was impossible to meet the "twin demands of Farris's mission: intellectual rigor and a sound Biblical worldview" (Rosin 176). In 2006, several of the most popular professors, nearly one third of the faculty, were fired or resigned over issues regarding academic freedom (Rosin 256, 262).

Students at Patrick Henry College also suffered disillusionment when the politicians for whom they worked exhibited feet of clay, and the 2008 Republican primaries failed to produce a truly "Christian" nominee (Rosin 270-73). Patrick Henry College did not disintegrate as a result of these trials and tribulations. Despite the internal turmoil, the school continues to attract exceptionally bright, well-spoken, well-informed, politically active students. Time will tell whether Patrick Henry lives up to the *God's Harvard* moniker, but the subtitle of Hanna Rosin's book begs the question, does America need to be "saved"? And, if it does, how can that be accomplished?

A quick tour through your local bookstore or a run through the dial of political talk shows indicates that many Americans are asking and answering these questions. Almost everyone agrees that America needs, if not redemption, at least revitalization (Jacoby; *Lou Dobbs*). Their suggestions for how to achieve this renewal, however, differ greatly. Michael Farris and other conservative religionists, such as Pat Robertson, founder of Regent University, and Tom Monaghan, founder of Ave Maria University, disgusted with America's alleged slide into mass immorality, have answered by creating educational institutions that will train the next generation of government leaders and business executives to "bring the truths of the faith to bear on [societal] issues" (*Ave Maria*).

This does not necessarily mean winning the hearts and minds of Americans; it does mean forcing our society to give concessions to fundamentalist voters. As *God's Harvard* tells it, Farris preaches a stealth warfare that is calculated to slowly, but surely, change the fabric of society. He instructed a constitutional law class, for example, to advocate for legislation that would require schools to teach "both sides" of the evolution debate. This strategy would have a better chance of success than if proponents raised Biblical arguments (Rosin 68).

Strict church/state separationists, fearful of any entanglement between religion and politics, tremble at the thought of a spiritual response to our national malaise. "Any attempt to build a jurisprudence on the word of God," writes prominent lawyer, professor, and author Alan Dershowitz, "must fail" (78). "The case for building a high wall of separation between the military power of the state and the religious power of the church, mosque, or synagogue has been strengthened ... by the new dangers posed by radical religious states with nuclear weapons" (185). Writer, and sometimes political press secretary, Tim Hackler, questions the survival of democracy in a United States so divided into "hostile camps" by the Bush campaign strategy, that "it is almost impossible to have a mature, adult, logical national debate about important issues." The April 16, 2008 Pennsylvania Democratic primary "debate," during which Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama spent almost an hour answering "specious and gossipy

trivia” questions on “tired tripe,” may have proven Hackler right (Shales).

Thus, America’s future success might depend on education bridging the seemingly impassable chasm between influential voices such as Dershowitz and Farris. After all, it was Thomas Jefferson who opined, “Whenever the people are well-informed, they can be trusted with their own government.” Educators, unlike television pundits, are not limited to sound bites. The power of the grade book gives professors a captive audience who must give their attention to the power of the pen.

American educators, however, are ill-equipped to meet this challenge. Most learned at an early age, usually just prior to a potentially volatile holiday meal to which feuding relatives had been invited, to “Never discuss religion and politics.” Self-censorship may be an effective means to prevent turkey legs from being launched across the dinner table, but it does not help educational institutions fulfill their mandate to promote civic engagement (Morphew), and, for religiously affiliated institutions, to promote faith-based values. Thus, at myriad schools throughout the nation, religion and politics must be discussed. The proper nature of these discussions is a crucial question for us all.

Two books, *God in the Whitehouse: A History: How Faith Shaped the Presidency from John F. Kennedy to George W. Bush* (Balmer) and *The Mighty & The Almighty: Reflections on America, God, and World Affairs* (Albright), which have nothing to do with education, but much to say about politics, offer an answer. *God in the Whitehouse*, written by a self-professed “evangelical Christian whose understanding of the teachings of Jesus points him toward the left of the political spectrum” (4), is an instructive evaluation of the influence of faith on the modern U.S. presidency. The book chronicles our national journey from tolerance to intolerance of religious differences and accuses contemporary Americans of seeking “cheap grace” (155-73) through the professed religious inclinations of our elected officials.

Although George W. Bush was elected president in large part due to his Born Again Christian identity, he did not speak on the evening of September 11, 2001 about turning the other cheek to

Islamic terrorists, and it is doubtful that most Christian Americans would have wanted him to have done so. Consequently, Balmer urges the electorate to put aside the false hope of reclaiming our moral compass by electing politicians skilled in the rhetoric of faith, and challenges us to “engage in the arduous work of living up to our professed ideals, both individually and collectively” (173). In short, we must either abandon religion as irrelevant to political life, or begin to actively practice our religions and embrace the spirit of compassion, tolerance, and dialogue found at the heart of them all.

God in the Whitehouse teaches us that it is not enough for educators to encourage students to engage in the political process. Rather, the proper role of faith-filled pedagogy in an election year is to teach our students to value the fundamental tenets of the U.S. Constitution and our faith traditions.

Madeline Albright echoes this sentiment in *The Mighty & The Almighty*. The former Secretary of State chronicles the intersections of religion and politics throughout her personal and professional life. She acknowledges that America and the world have suffered greatly due to our ignorance regarding the immense power of religion to shape the course of human events. Like Balmer, she denies that religious fervor must divide. “[R]eligious faith,” she writes, “[means] showing respect for every person and being willing to help others. . . . It is a perversion of faith to turn religion into a source of conflict and hate; it also creates severe problems for America and for the world” (13). The remedy to religious intolerance and violence is not to excise religion from politics. This would be not only impossible, given most people’s religious nature and inability to totally separate faith from action, but also undesirable, as religion shapes our “views of justice and right behavior” (285).

Albright urges Americans to embrace “[r]espect for the rights and well-being of each individual [as] the place where religious faith and a commitment to political liberty have their closest connection” (289). As a nation, we must abide by Article VI of the U. S. Constitution and abstain from any religious test for office. As a nation, we must abide by the First Amendment to the U. S. Constitution and neither establish, nor prohibit religion. But,

as a religious people, we must endeavor to discover the true nature of our faiths, which call us to inner transformation and enlightened persuasion.

The Mighty & The Almighty points to a few faith-based successes as examples that this equation has potential: John Paul II's radical encouragement of democracy in Poland, extraordinary humanitarian efforts across religious borders sponsored by groups such as World Vision, and the Camp David peace accord between Egypt and Israel (Albright 65-78). Alas, these models of peaceful religious engagement in world affairs seem few and far between.

Albright's book also demonstrates that all human knowledge is imperfect. Even an army of analysts cannot predict every consequence of every decision, and difficult choices between the lesser of two evils often must be made by political leaders. Thus, the search for a panacea, "cheap grace," as Balmer puts it, is impossible. Courage and wisdom are required to put ideals into practice. "Wisdom," Albright writes, "comes from learning, which comes from education. The heart of education is the search for truth. But there are many kinds of truth" (290). "Ay, there's the rub," as Hamlet observed (Act III, Scene I).

Pope Benedict XVI weighed in on the matter of the proper role of education in religious and political life during his April 2008 visit to the United States. Speaking to Catholic educators about the Church's participation in the public forum, he emphasized the importance of civic engagement and education for all Americans. He stated, "The Church's primary mission ... is consonant with a nation's fundamental aspiration to develop a society truly worthy of the human person's dignity." At Yankee Stadium, he told a crowd of 57,000, the words of the Lord's Prayer, "Thy Kingdom come," "means rejecting a false dichotomy between faith and political life." It means defending life, educating the young, caring for the poor, the sick, and the stranger. "It means working to enrich American society and culture with the beauty and truth of the Gospel." These are beautiful words when spoken to believers, but can be threatening when heard by atheists and strict separationists who rightly fear, for example, that "defending life" means ending a woman's right

to terminate a pregnancy.

Tim Hackler views the Enlightenment that gave rise to our democracy as “a kind of miracle.” Perhaps it was, but it was not an easy miracle. It was laden with controversies and compromises between faith and reason that plague and challenge us to this day. It is a miracle that cannot be taken for granted; a miracle that must be reworked in every generation. Patrick Henry College is on a mission to rework that miracle by reshaping our political structure according to Biblical mandates. Alan Dershowitz calls for a totally secular theory of rights. Madeline Albright implores us to focus on the similarities between authentic religion and democratic political principles. Randall Balmer cautions us that a worthwhile integration of faith and politics cannot be accomplished merely by casting a vote on election day. Pope Benedict preaches human dignity and love within the structure of Catholic doctrine.

How can education reconcile these conflicting, contradictory interests and save America? By teaching students to listen to all these disparate voices. Our political legacy of religious freedom requires that the atheist and the preacher be given equal respect and opportunity. Although as individuals and a nation we must eventually make choices that will be contrary to the views of some of our fellow Americans, those choices and compromises might be easier to accept if they are made after careful deliberation, rather than dictated by preemptory prejudices. All Americans – educators, students, voters, and politicians, alike – must continually ask how best to preserve the spirit of liberty that is central to our democratic republic. We will not find easy answers, but, as the poet Rainer Maria Rilke advised, we must “[l]ive the questions now. Perhaps [we] will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer” (35).

Notes

¹*Generation Joshua*, named after the Hebrew leader who took back the Promised Land from the Canaanites, is a division of the Home School

Legal Defense Fund. Founded by Patrick Henry's founder, Michael Farris, *Generation Joshua* is a politically oriented Christian youth group for children ages 11 to 19. See <www.generationjoshua.org>.

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