

## “Religion and Liberalism: Faith and Progressive Politics in America”

10 February 2006

### Conference Highlights

During a day-long conference on Friday, Feb. 10, an eclectic mix of political scientists, American studies specialists, political activists and religious practitioners repeatedly called for greater openness among American progressives, as well as humility and—most encouraging in these acrimonious times—tact.

The conference, organized by professors **Casey N. Blake** and **Andrew Delbanco**, founder and current director, respectively, of Columbia’s American studies program, examined the relationship between faith and progressive politics in American history and explored the challenges faced by contemporary reform movements in our current age of religious controversy.

In his keynote address, titled “Is God’s Work Our Work? Religion and American Liberalism,” **E. J. Dionne**, *Washington Post* columnist and a Brookings scholar, said it was high time for liberals to “display the humility and tolerance they ask of others.”

He traced the change in America’s political climate to the 1960s, when liberalism turned away from social justice to embrace the cause of individual freedom. Little by little, the moral clarity of the civil rights movement came to be replaced by murkier matters of personal choice such as the right to abortion—thereby alienating many people of faith, Dionne claimed.

Going on to praise Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr for having rescued liberalism from its “soupy-eyed optimism” and “sentimentality,” he ended his remarks by expressing the hope that a new mood of urgency and political realism would reanimate American liberal thought.

Responding to Dionne, **Mark Lilla**, a professor at the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago, stressed the need to step back and look at what liberalism means in a broader sense, noting that a liberal democracy is a necessary precondition for the public discussion of religion.

He reminded the audience that in America, religious progressives and religious conservatives are part of the same liberal tradition. “You don’t get the civil rights movement without the Bible and the language of the Bible,” he said, a point heard repeatedly throughout the day. “You also don’t get the right-to-life movement without the Bible and the language of the Bible. If you accept one [as a legitimate form of political expression], then you are obliged to accept the other.”

Another of Dionne’s discussants, **Alan Wolfe**, who directs the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College, felt it was too easy to attribute the problems currently being faced by American liberals to the social movements of the 1960s. Inviting the audience to revisit conventional assumptions, he suggested that the group that had benefited the most from the hippie era may have been the Evangelicals, whose mega-churches are swollen with people on a spiritual quest because they feel repelled by American consumerism.

Wolfe also challenged the stereotype of conservative Christians, pointing out that they were being true to the American tradition of radical individualism and skepticism toward authority, at least in matters of faith. What could be more antithetical to the notion of tradition, he asked, than aspiring to be born again?

In addition to analyzing the roots of the present liberal crisis, participants also looked ahead to the future. **Albert J. Raboteau**, who teaches religion at Princeton, said that he drew inspiration from the Civil Rights era, when a synergy had taken place between religion and progressive politics. African Americans were able to develop a kind of social Christianity from the experience of inequality, he noted, which, in turn, had transformed the quest for social justice into an act of piety.

**Grant Wacker** of Duke University Divinity School

saw possibilities in the moderate brand of progressivism preached by Billy Graham, whose potential successors include the debt-relief activist and U2 front man, Bono.

Responding to fellow conference participants’ calls for a new, more spiritually-based liberalism, **Seyla Benhabib** of Yale University sounded a cautionary note. She cited Thomas Hobbes’ observation that it is easier to identify the common ill than the common good. Most speakers agreed with her that while liberals need to take action urgently, they would do well to remember that liberalism is most effective when it checks its salvational urges and concentrates on fixing specific problems.

**Susannah Heschel**, a professor of Jewish studies at Dartmouth College, for instance, advocated the adoption of a simultaneous “back-to-basics” approach to faith and a healthy skepticism toward religious institutions. “Theological liberalism may not be what we need today,” she said, “but rather, in fact, a neo-orthodox theology and a liberal politics.”

**James A. Forbes, Jr.**, senior minister of nearby Riverside Church, echoed Wolfe’s observation that Americans are obsessed with money, not God—and that this is what poses the greatest threat to citizens’ freedoms. “Materialism is the god in America for both the right and the left,” he said, adding that narrow self-interests are blinding prosperous Americans to the growing erosion of their civil rights.

“Religion and Liberalism: Faith and Progressive Politics in America” inaugurates an annual series of public events sponsored by the American studies program. The goal of the series is to bring historical context and perspective to bear on issues of contemporary urgency.

For more information on Columbia’s American studies program, go to: [www.columbia.edu/cu/amstudies/](http://www.columbia.edu/cu/amstudies/)



Clockwise, beginning upper left: Conference co-organizer and director of Columbia’s American studies program Andrew Delbanco with keynote speaker E.J. Dionne; religion department graduate student Rosemary Hicks and Dionne; Dionne addressing a full house at Casa Italiana; Columbia College student David Kim and General Studies student William Jordan, each of whom introduced one of Dionne’s discussants.

Eileen Barroso

## Faith and Foxholes: Fostering Religious Tolerance in America’s Armed Forces

The duties of a religious advisor to the American military are not straightforward, observed Rabbi Arnold Resnicoff at a recent meeting of the Saltzman Institute of War and Peace.

Resnicoff, who served in Vietnam before pursuing rabbinical training, returned to the Navy as chaplain in 1976, serving in related capacities until 2000.

The duties of the chaplaincy expanded considerably during that period, Resnicoff told the Columbia audience. Whereas the office was established originally to assist service people looking to practice their religions in places far from home, today chaplains are trained to minister to the needs of all service personnel, regardless of religion.

“The idea that we have representatives of different religions not to care for their

own faith but to care for others, happens every day,” he said.

One noteworthy example from his own experience occurred after the 1983 terrorist attack in Beirut, in which 241 marines were killed. Resnicoff said that he and a Catholic chaplain took care of all of the wounded, “reaching out to all, regardless of religion.”

Resnicoff was recently appointed as the first special assistant for values and vision to the secretary and chief of staff of the Air Force. The position was created in wake of the scandal of a year ago alleging that cadets and staff at the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Co., had created a climate of discrimination against non-Christians.

A final report on these charges is due this month. According to Resnicoff, the Air Force already has made progress in

correcting the situation. It has set aside equal blocks of time on Friday, Saturday and Sunday for those who want to worship their faiths. Commanders also have been sensitized to address potential problems, such as the need to accommodate a Muslim service person who may not want to take his annual physical test during Ramadan, when Muslims are required to fast.

The question of public and private prayer also is under debate, Resnicoff reported. “As long as we face danger and die, there will be prayer in the military,” he declared. But that does not mean that prayer is always allowed. For instance, prayer is not appropriate at regular meetings of military officials. “You can pray silently, but you cannot say, ‘Let us pray.’”

In Resnicoff’s view, the very fact that the American military aspires to respect all

religions and promote religious tolerance makes it unique among the world’s fighting forces. The United States “had the only interfaith foxhole in the Middle East” during the two Iraq wars, he said—going on to reflect that “if there were more interfaith foxholes, then we wouldn’t need so many foxholes.”

To watch Resnicoff’s speech, go to: [www.resnicoff.net/ColumbiaTalk.html](http://www.resnicoff.net/ColumbiaTalk.html)

