

Why Can't Religion and Politics Just Get Along?

First Kraft panel debates the benefits and hazards of bringing religion into politics

Religion and politics—that perilous, yet inevitable, combination—were the topic of intense debate at a March 2 panel entitled “Is Religion Political?” Featuring four panelists from a variety of religious and professional backgrounds, the event marked the inauguration of Columbia’s new program series on “Religion in the Public Sphere,” sponsored by the Kraft Family Fund for Interfaith and Intercultural Awareness.

Moderator Marianne Hirsch, professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia, got the debate off to a rousing start by posing the question: “What is gained or lost when religion and politics intersect?”

Catherine S. Roskam, bishop suffragan of New York and a longtime advocate of cultural, racial and gender equality in religious life, responded that she was in favor of continued separation of church and state while also believing in the need for continuous dialogue between the two. When religion and politics

intersect, “we are impoverished,” she said, going on to note occasions in history when religion has been used to justify immoral acts for political gain.

David Allen White, a professor of English at the U.S. Naval Academy and a devout Catholic, offered a different view: “Lord Byron said that man is half divinity, half dust. The two have to be together, otherwise, we die.” When religion informs politics, a higher moral standard can be realized and a greater, absolute truth can be understood, he argued, adding the observation that attempts to separate the spiritual from the physical usually end up destroying both.

The Ann Whitney Olin Professor of American Religion at Barnard College, Randall Balmer, was more equivocal. While pointing out that religion isn’t always stuck playing the “bad guy” role, and that history attests to that, he also thinks you

“can work for the common good without being religious,” offering the antebellum abolitionist and Civil Rights movements in American history as examples.

For Randall, the genius of America is its First Amendment. “The canons of democracy dictate an etiquette that requires us to recognize truths other than our own. No one in the public sphere should be able to decide that their truth should be everyone’s truth.”

That sentiment was echoed by Jay Lefkowitz, U.S. special envoy on human rights in North Korea, when noting the differences between the founding fathers of America and the leaders of the French Enlightenment. “The founding fathers realized the danger of state-sponsored religion,” he said.

The panel also talked about issues dominating media headlines, including a Danish newspaper’s printing of cartoons considered offensive to Muslims. Discussion centered on the legality of printing the cartoons versus the ethics of doing so. As

White put it, “There is another virtue: prudence.”

Hirsch’s request that the panelists comment on the intelligent design controversy promoted White to quip: “I’ve taught English for 30 years, and I wish public schools would teach reading and writing. Why are we bothering with intelligent design? Why can’t we start with intelligent grammar design?”

Balmer offered a more thoughtful response. “As a person of faith, I believe in intelligent design. I take it as a matter of faith,” he said. “But it’s not science. It’s not falsifiable.”

By the end of the discussion, the panelists had agreed that, while religion and politics will always be inextricably bound together, it is nevertheless possible to achieve a judicious balance between the two. Balmer perhaps put it best when he said: “We need a language of morality that does no harm to any faith—or the lack of it—and that serves democracy.”

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—Randall Balmer, Ann Whitney Olin Professor of American Religion, Barnard College

Crisis in City’s Child Welfare System

National Social Work Month affords opportunity for reflection

With the death of Nixzmary Brown still a fresh tragedy, a recent panel on New York City’s child welfare system held at the Columbia University School of Social Work (CUSSW) became a forum for a candid conversation about needed reforms to the Administration for Child Services (ACS).

Held on March 2, the panel is one of a series of events CUSSW has planned for National Social Work Month, culminating on March 27 with students, faculty and alumni converging for CUSSW Community Day.

Panelist Kathryn Conroy, assistant dean and director of field education at CUSSW, credited Mayor Rudolph Giuliani with initiating the most important reforms of the past 30 years, centered around the concept of putting

children first. Since then, however, the city’s child welfare system has been beleaguered by post-9/11 budget cuts, growing caseloads and the sheer size of the system—all of which pose major challenges in the months and years ahead, she said.

The other panelist, Jane Waldfogel, CUSSW professor of social work and public affairs, stressed that ACS is “the service of last resort,” pointing to the interdependency of all of the city’s social services. “When the school, juvenile justice and mental health systems fail, it is ACS that picks up the pieces. When other agencies are cut, it affects ACS.”

The audience, many of whom were CUSSW students, expressed concern about how reforms at the top would trickle down through the system. Several underlined the need for continued attention from the city’s leadership to enforce the latest reform agenda.



Jane Waldfogel & Kathryn Conroy

Bollinger Inaugurates Institute for Israel and Jewish Studies



Eileen Barroso

Columbia’s Center for Israel and Jewish Studies, founded in 1950, has been renamed the Institute for Israel and Jewish Studies, signifying its expanded role. The Institute can now participate in joint appointments with other departments, creating additional opportunities to connect Israeli and Jewish studies with other relevant areas of study across the University. It also will sponsor educational and cultural programs and activities in the Columbia community.

“The Institute for Israel and Jewish Studies carries forward Columbia University’s long tradition of excellence in the study of Jewish civilization and society,” said University President Lee C. Bollinger at a Feb. 22 gathering of University trustees, scholars, donors and leaders at the President’s house to celebrate the event.

“This change reflects the vitality of Israel and Jewish studies at Columbia,” said Michael Stanislawski, associate director of the Institute and the Nathan J. Miller Professor of Jewish History. “The Institute will further enrich scholarship and enliven discourse on Columbia’s campus, in New York City and globally.”

Also being celebrated was the creation of the Krueger Family Visiting Professorships thanks to the generosity of Columbia College and Columbia Law School alumnus Harvey Krueger, vice-chairman of Lehman Brothers, and his wife, Constance Alexander Krueger, a Barnard College trustee and alumnus.

Anita Shapira of Tel Aviv University and Amnon Rubinstein, dean of the School of Law at the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliyah, will join Columbia as the first Krueger Family visiting professors in the spring semesters of 2007 and 2008, respectively.

Above (l-r): Harvey Krueger, vice chair, Lehman Brothers; Ezra Merkin, managing partner, Gabriel Capital Group; Michael Stanislawski, Nathan J. Miller Professor of Jewish History and associate director, Institute for Israel and Jewish Studies; Lee C. Bollinger; Yosef Yerushalmi, Salo Wittmayer Baron Professor of Jewish History and director, Institute for Israel and Jewish Studies; Richard Witten, vice chair, Columbia University Trustees.

Special Ceremony for U.S. Troops

At a special ceremony held at St. Paul’s Chapel on Thursday, March 9, University Chaplain Jewelnel Davis offered prayers for American troops and veterans in Iraq and Afghanistan. She included a special prayer for General Studies student and U.S. Marines Captain Seth Hillbrand, who has taken a leave of absence from his studies to join the First Marines Expeditionary Force (I MEF) deploying to Iraq.

The ceremony featured the military-style folding and presentation of a flag belonging to Chaplain Davis: the flag had been given to her family at the funeral of her father, a Korean War veteran.

The military veterans in charge of the flag folding were Julia Oh, Michael Nicholas, Eric Chen, Peter Kim—all of whom served in Korea—and Matt Sanchez, a corporal in the U.S. Marines. Oh is a graduate student in the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences, and the other four are students in the School of General Studies. All five are members of the U.S. Military Veterans of Columbia University (MilVets).

Also assisting were Columbia College students Mark Xue, a U.S. Marines officer candidate, and Riaz Zaidi, an Army ROTC cadet, both of whom are members of the Hamilton Society (the new name for Columbia Military Society).

To read the speeches by Julia Oh, Peter Kim, Mark Xue, Oscar Escano, go to: milvetlibrary.blogspot.com/2006/03/student-speeches-from-columbia.html



Eileen Barroso