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 at the Saltman Institute of War and Peace.

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

Program director, Andrew Delbanco, said he still has to step back and look at what liberal means in a broader sense, noting that a liberal democracy is a necessary precondition for the public discussion of religion.

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

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 marker 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 ‘soused-up 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 Bosi 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 crisis assumptions, he suggested that the group that had benefited the most from the hippie era may have been the Evangelicals, whose megachurches are swolled with people on a spiritual quest because they feel repelled by American consumerism.

Wolfe also challenged the stereotype of conserva-
tive 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 tradi-
tion, 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 debriefed 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 liber-
als need to take action urgently, they would do well to remember that liberalism is most effective when it checks its subvalutural 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 insti-
tutions. “Theological liberalism may not be what we need today,” she said, “but rather, in a neo-ortho-
dox theology and a liberal politics.”

James A. Forbes, Jr., senior minister of nearby Riverside Church, echoed Heschel’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 pub-
lic 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/