

**“Religion & Secularism: The American Experience”**

Dr. Wilfred M. McClay

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga; Ethics &amp; Public Policy Center

December 2007

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Ladies and gentlemen, Professor McClay is going to be addressing how we settled our disputes in American history between religious believers and secular believers. He wrote an important essay in *The Wilson Quarterly* some years ago called “Two Kinds of Secularism.” Not only is he a professor of American intellectual history, but he wrote a book in 1995 [\*] called *The Masterless: Self and Society in Modern America*. It was the winner of the 1995 Merle Curti Award. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Bill McClay.

**DR. McCLAY:** Thanks, Mike. I’m very happy to be here. Being a historian by training, I do tend to think in terms of particular cases and situations rather than generalities, vast and otherwise. I’m not convinced that in my subject—religion and secularism and the relationship between them in American history — that I’m necessarily setting out some universal model that’s going to be universally applicable.

Also, there’s a problem with the word “secularism.” It means so many different things. The distinction I want to make is between philosophical secularism, which is secularism as a kind of godless system of the world, a system of beliefs about ultimate things, and secularism in a political sense: that is, secularism as recognizing politics as an autonomous sphere, one that’s not subject to ecclesiastical governance, to the governance of a church or religion or the church’s expression of that religion. A secular political order may be one in which religious practice or religious exercise, as we say, can flourish. So it’s distinct from the philosophical understanding of secularism.

As I say, to some extent the usage of these terms is defined by history, and I think we go astray if we try to define things too abstractly. Even the word religion, I think, may depend on: What religion are we talking about, and when and where are we talking about it? It

makes a great deal of difference when we talk about Islam whether we're talking about Islam in Saudi Arabia, or Islam in Indonesia, or whether we're talking about the Islam of the relatively tolerant 19th century Ottoman Empire, or the Islam of radical madrassas today, although all four of them have certain things in common, and they may have certain obstacles [in common,] relevant to our discussion today, to their ability to embrace Western European-style secularism in all of its senses.

I took a trip about a year ago to Turkey under the auspices of the State Department. Turkey [is] a country 95 percent Muslim, where other religions have no particular political profile or public profile at all. The imams are paid by the state. Religious garb, as you know, is forbidden in public institutions or by public officials because of the rigid secularism of the Turkish state. The Turks have a certain understanding of the separation of religion and public life.

What I was speaking about [in Turkey] was how Americans understand the separation of church and state, and I went all over the country speaking to various audiences about this subject, and they were absolutely fascinated. Many of them were interested to hear about America, and, in the question period, they asked me all sorts of questions about Turkey, which of course I was not competent to answer, but they immediately wondered if the American model might be a model for their own troubled secularism, which has arguably been too rigid, modeled on the French *laïcité* model, which is a very, very forbidding and strict form of secularism. It proscribes public expression of religion to a very high degree.

What I ended up having to say to these audiences again and again is that I didn't know, [and] I doubted very much that the American way would be applicable. I kept saying again and again, "The United States has a unique history. Our ways of managing the relationship of religion and secularism didn't arise out of abstract theory so much as it arose out of concrete practices that were a result of the particular circumstances that we had to manage, that the circumstances forced us to think as we do." I added that Americans are not in complete agreement about these things or [do not] view them as settled, that they're constantly being fought over, constantly being contested, and that [it] is not such a bad thing that these are inherently conflict-ridden issues, and [that,] in fact, the American system thrives on conflict.

However, I did come away feeling it's important to point out there [in Turkey] and here that Americans have managed to produce a pattern in the relationship of religion and secularism that differs in marked ways from the example of, say, the Western Europeans, and it's a pattern that-as Stephen [Prothero] has already said-defies the expectations of many of the theorists of modernity, the exponents of modernity who all thought that secularization and secularism would be the same thing; that modernization and economic matters and commercial matters and so on would translate into the gradual disenchantment of the world and the evaporation of religious faith, [which] has manifestly not happened. So this is an achievement, even if it was not always [as] self-conscious [an] achievement as Americans would like to think; and it's one I think we should understand better than we do.

So let me begin with two propositions. The first one is that in the American experience, the separation of church and state, which by and large we acknowledge as a rough-and-ready principle, does not necessarily mean the separation of religion from public life. Another way of saying this is that America has a strong commitment to secularism, but it is secularism of a particular kind, understood in a particular way.

Second, that the United States has achieved in practice what seemed impossible in theory: a reconciliation of religion with modernity, in contrast to the Western European pattern. In the United States religious belief has proven amazingly persistent even as the culture has been more and more willing to embrace enthusiastically all or most of the scientific and technological agenda of modernity. Sometimes the two reinforce one another. Sometimes they clash with one another, but the American culture has found room for both to be present.

I should add that all this makes sense in light of the fact of [a] third proposition: that American institutions and culture are intrinsically and irreducibly complex. The complexity takes a particular form: that politics and culture are designed around an interplay of competitive forces, which is, I think, the key to understanding a lot about the United States. The Constitution was based on the assumptions that in any dynamic society there would be contending interest groups, and [that] one could best counteract their influence by systematically playing them off against one another. That was the reasoning

behind separation of powers. That was the reasoning behind the federal system. These different parts of the government are supposed to fight with one another. That's how the Constitution is supposed to work.

People from abroad look at the American government and think it's always on the brink of collapse. They don't understand, and many of *us* don't understand, that this is, in fact, the way it's supposed to work. There are *supposed* to be countervailing forces holding one another in check. There is *supposed* to be common and constant tension.

Socially and culturally speaking, the country has evolved in a similar way, not intentionally but with similar effect. No one at the time of the American founding envisioned the nation as a great bastion of cultural pluralism, in which a wide variety of cultural forms and religions would coexist. They probably would have found the idea unintelligible, but it turned out to be one of the most salient features of American life. Some of this was driven by religion — the desire of Puritans and Quakers and Baptists and other Protestants to worship God as they pleased—but a lot of it was driven by economics. When you have a country with an abundant supply of land and a scarce supply of labor, and you want to grow economically, you cannot be terribly choosy about the people who come into your country, and the immigration could not come from just England or northwestern Europe, so eventually Germans, Italians, Poles, Russians, Greeks, Turks, Chinese, Japanese, and so on would come. And the nation couldn't afford in the long run to be too choosy about the religious beliefs of these new immigrants. Hence, the history of American religion and the history of American immigration often track with one another pretty closely.

That history affects the particular valence of the idea of the separation of church and state, as it's understood in American history. No one group ever entirely dominates, at least not for long, when the competition of political and social forces becomes as institutionalized as it has in the United States. Paradoxically, this competition has engendered habits of tolerance. So what I'm arguing here is that social and religious tolerance became practical necessities before they became enshrined principles. The wars of religion in the 16th century in Europe fostered tolerance simply because of the inability of one religious party to dominate over the others, which meant that religion itself could no longer be a basis for public order and public culture. Something of the same thing happened in a far less violent way in the United States. This is one of the keys to

understanding the relationship of religion and secularism in the United States. American secularism derived from the strength of religion, not from its weakness.

The ability of the United States, then, to reconcile religion and modernity depended in part on its ability to hold groups and ideas in competition with one another, and this ability has roots that go even deeper than the country's actual beginnings. Ultimately, they are grounded in certain characteristic features of Christianity itself, which is one of the reasons why, when we talk about religion as if all and any religions can impart the same results, I think we're misleading ourselves. There is something very particular about Christianity, a particular virtue it brings to the table in this matter, and that is its emphasis on what is variously called the two spheres or two kingdoms or two cities that have always been taken to divide up reality.

You'll recall that Jesus of the Christian scriptures surprised his followers by declining to be a political leader and declaring that his kingdom was not of this world; but at the same time he and his early followers, notably Paul, insisted on the legitimacy of worldly authorities and insisted that one should, in Jesus' famous words, "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's" — a really astonishing statement because it credits the secular authority with having a proper and independent role to play in the scheme of things. In other words, Christianity had certain theological resources available already at the very beginning for a kind of separation of church and state.

Two kingdoms, two cities, two spheres — this feature of Christianity is one of the chief resources it has always brought to the problem of the organization of political life in a religious society, and it's one of its chief resources now.

Another feature that helped to establish the religious tone of early American history was the curious fact that the Europeans settling British North America were not merely Christians but [rather] the modernizing rebels within the Christian world. [These] Protestant Christian Reformers, whose agendas were various and much conflicted among themselves, had in common a rejection of the standard traditional hierarchy, priestly authority, and traditionalism of Roman Catholicism, and to some extent Anglicanism as well.

Many of these immigrants were openly seeking to restore the Apostolic church. That was their dream: to bring back the simplicity and mutuality of the church of Christ's time and strip it away of all of the traditional encumbrances and barnacles that [had] accumulated over the centuries and get back to the simplicity and charisma and equality among members that was characteristic of the Apostolic church as you see it described in the Acts of the Apostles.

They all shared a belief, to a greater or lesser extent, that individuals could approach the Holy Scriptures, which were taken to be the ultimate authority, unaided and enjoy through the scriptures an unmediated relationship with God, and that the measure of one's faith was not a church membership or the reception of the sacraments from an authorized priest, but whether one had experienced the relationship with God through Christ freely, firsthand, and in a way that was most reliably expressed by conversion. Of course, in early Puritan congregational churches, the sine qua non for admission to the church was [to] deliver a convincing conversion narrative, which the elders in the church would find sufficiently persuasive to believe you'd really had the experience you claimed to have, and so you were in.

The individual conscience in this view is the ultimate measure of authentic faith, and [the] individual conscience should never be coerced by priests or ecclesiastical traditions or anything else aside, of course, from the Bible itself. This very individualistic, voluntaristic, Protestant approach to religious faith and the absence of any serious opposition to it led America to a high degree of democratization of religion. Religion was more market-driven, more even consumer-oriented, as has been described. People could affiliate or not affiliate by choice precisely as their consciences dictated.

Far from undermining religion, this voluntarism made it thrive in modern America, and I think one can probably attribute the ways in which the face of evangelicalism [and] even non-evangelical varieties of Christianity [and] Roman Catholicism [have] come into play through that pervasiveness of this market-driven approach to religion. Also helping along the reconciliation of religion and modernization was the fact that both secular and religious thinkers so often agreed on things for a long time in American history. There was very little conflict between the more secular-minded and the more religious-minded over, for example, the drafting of the Constitution. The conception of the Enlightenment as



essentially anti-clerical, irreligious, rationalistic [and] philosophically materialist is a generalization from the French experience, which doesn't fit the American one.

The U.S. Constitution and the First Amendment to the Constitution were not intended to create a purely secular government, neutral or indifferent to religion as opposed to irreligion. The Constitution itself, at the time it was drafted, was largely a procedural document, which sought to enumerate carefully the powers of the national government while leaving the police power and most substantive questions of morality, religion, education, and such, to the states — I'm talking about the Constitution as it was drafted; not as it's been interpreted.

Furthermore, the First Amendment, which prohibits the establishment of a religion and protects the free exercise of religion, was not intended to secularize the national government, but instead to protect against sectarian conflict and exclusiveness and the power grab by some national church. The founders understood the term "establishment" in a very specific way as referring to a state church established by a national government that could command assent to, or at least privilege, its doctrinal statements, receive tax monies — that's the important thing — to support it, and perhaps require attendance at its services. But certainly tax revenues [were] the main thing.

The founders did not want this. They prohibited the national government from doing it, but they prohibited only the national government from doing it. They did not prohibit the states from doing it. The First Amendment not only leaves open the possibility of state establishments, but in fact there were state establishments of religion, mainly in New England, I think, up to the 1830s.

More generally, 18th-century Americans experienced surprisingly little tension between their version of the Enlightenment and their version of Protestantism. In many ways, the two were entirely complimentary. Both emphasize the central importance and independence of the individual conscience. Both embrace the absence of religious establishment. Both eschewed the use of coercion. Whatever the theological differences [were among] figures such as Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, George Washington, James Madison and Thomas Jefferson, [these men] were of one mind in endorsing the crucial importance of religion for the sustenance of public morality.

Now, they may have thought religion was "a good thing" — as people used to say about neoconservatives, [they think] religion is a good thing for other people to have — but [they made] a very strong endorsement of the need for religion to be a force in public life, as a part of public discourse affecting the public sphere. The single best analyst of all of this, is Alexis de Tocqueville. His experience of France brought home to him during his visit to America in the 1830s how remarkable it was that the spirit of liberty and the spirit of religion co-existed and reinforced on another in the American context, in a manner that was completely contrary to the French historical example.

Tocqueville, of course, is known for producing a very memorable portrait of America as a middle-class society, in all the best and worst senses of that term, and a feverishly competitive, commercial, acquisitive, practical-minded, jealously egalitarian and, of course, restlessly mobile society. He saw the chief dangers in the society as the twin phenomena of individualism and materialism, the tendency of citizens to withdraw from public life and regard themselves as autonomous actors with no higher goal than the pursuit of material well-being. Tocqueville was a great believer in the need for public virtue, but he realized that a modern commercial democracy was not going to naturally produce such qualities in human beings. So, what to do? How to counteract the corrosive tendencies of a commercial democracy? His notion was that self-interest, rightly understood, could serve in the breach as a kind of antidote to those tendencies, but self-interest, rightly understood for him, meant that religion had to be a very important part of American life.

Tocqueville was very impressed by the degree to which religion persisted in the American democracy and that religious institutions seemed to support American democratic institutions. The latter seems unexceptional to us, but from his point of view it was very surprising. From a French point of view, if you were a liberal in politics, you had to be anti-clerical; the educated Europeans were abandoning religious faith and practice in the belief that the spirit of liberty was incompatible with the spirit of religion, and one was, in a sense, forced to vote the straight ticket. To be a political liberal, you had to be an ecclesiastical one, and vice versa. But Tocqueville's visit to America convinced him that liberty and religion were not necessarily opposed to one another and their antagonism or attention was not necessarily a bad thing.



In America, religious beliefs and institutions restrained self-assertion in ways that simulated the effects of virtue and made the exercise of freedom more stable [and] more effective. He even went so far as to say that for Americans, religion was the first of their political institutions, indispensable for the maintenance of republican government. What Tocqueville was describing, in fact, is a distinctly American version of secularism, a secularism in which, still, religion is the first of American political institutions — a paradox. It points in the direction of a useful distinction, which I made briefly at the outset, and [which] I'll [make in] a little more detail here, between two broadly different ways of understanding the concept of secularism, only one of which is hostile or even necessarily suspicious of the public expression of religion

On the one hand [is] as a way of understanding the secular idea as an opponent of established belief, including a non-religious established belief. This is something like the political secularism I was talking about at the outset. It also protects the rights of free exercise and free association. I think the latter of those [two] is very important because free exercise can be an entirely individual right, but [with] religion being a social institution, freedom of association is necessary for that exercise to be complete.

On the other hand, the second understanding of secularism understands the secular ideal as a proponent of established unbelief, and as a protector of strictly individual expressive rights, a category that includes the rights of religious expression. So the right of protecting what might be called the corporate liberty of religious associations is not necessarily included in that; religion is an entirely private and individual matter in which one should have maximum freedom as long as, you know, one doesn't scare the horses or otherwise disturb the public peace. It's an individual matter. So this second kind of secularism is closer to what I called at the beginning philosophical secularism.

The first of these is a fairly minimal, even negative, understanding of secularism in the same way that Isaiah Berlin talks about negative liberty. It's a freedom from imposition by any kind of establishment on one's freedom of conscience. For it, the idiom of secularism is a kind of lingua franca, which serves to facilitate commerce and communication among different kinds of belief but that doesn't make any claims for the absolute character of reality; [it] doesn't claim to be an Esperanto that has taken all the messy languages of the historic faiths and translated them to [a] pure and solid gold one. Secularism in this view is a more provisional thing. It's an account of the rules of

engagement rather than the content or results of the engagement itself, and it's compatible with very strong religious commitments and very liberal free exercise of religious sentiments.

The second view, what I called the philosophical view or the positive view, is much more assertive, more robust, more positive by affirming secularism as an ultimate and alternative faith that rightly supersedes the tragic blindnesses and, as [Christopher] Hitchens would have it, [the] “poisons” of the historical religions, particularly so far as activity in the public realm is concerned.

The first of these secularisms — the limited one, the political one, the negative one— resembles the language of the First Amendment and the practice of the First Amendment as it's evolved over much of American history, although Supreme Court decisions [have gone] back and forth on different aspects of it. It looks toward a non-established secular political order, one that's equally respectful of religionists and non-religionists alike. Such an order preserves a core insistence on the freedom of the uncoerced individual, that fundamental Protestant principle, but it also has a more liberal, more capacious understanding of the religious needs of humanity, and therefore doesn't presume that the religious impulse is merely an individual matter; or as one Supreme Court decision put it, something that we tell ourselves about the mystery of human life.

On the contrary, it would insist that religion is a social institution for whose flourishing the rights of free association are necessary. It insists that pluralism, rightly understood — pluralism having to do with the corporate liberty of groups — is a necessary concomitant of liberalism because we are social creatures, because our social existence is a prior condition of everything else that we value.

This American understanding of secularism is different from the strict*laïcité* of the French and the Turks, and one should admit it is not perfectly observed by Americans themselves. It's a very difficult ideal, I think. There's a tremendous and understandably human desire to line all our commitments up with one another and to have our philosophical and political and other convictions all in accord. But it may be [required] in the long run, as many political things require us, to renounce the things we would like to put in a line. It may be a far more workable approach to the idea of secularism than the alternative, precisely because it can draw on the moral energies of the historic Western religious

traditions at a time when, arguably, the West is badly in need of them, and one need not be a religious believer of any kind to accept that this may be so.

This is one final observation about the relationship of religion and secularism in American life: that the most successful movements for social reform in American history are likely to have had, at the very least, a respectful relationship to the country's religious heritage, if not being driven by it. One might cite, not only as Stephen did, the civil-rights movement, certainly the movement for the abolition of slavery, which was an even more religious movement, or women's suffrage, or even the American Revolution itself are examples of this. The interesting thing in each case is that one can find both religious and secular rationales for change, in which the two sets of justifications were mutually supportive and even mingled to an extent that would be unthinkable in other cultures.

That congruency, that mingling, is a key element in the genius of American politics and of American religion. That's why Martin Luther King's finest rhetoric can, with equal plausibility, not only invoke the prophetic books of the Bible, of the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, but also the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution and the words of the founders. And why when Stewart Burns wrote a biography of King, he was not being fanciful in calling [King's] lifework "a sacred mission to save America." We enshrine the separation of church and state, but at the same time we practice the mingling of religion and public life. It's not always logical, but there are times when it makes good sense.

It is not to deny that there aren't religiously grounded arguments against such admirable changes, notably the case of slavery, [which] has already been mentioned, and is not to deny that sometimes religious and secular arguments for reform [support] bad ideas, like prohibition. Nothing in life is foolproof; one can find secular and religious justifications for that statement. But there are almost no examples in the American past of successful, widely accepted reforms that do not pay their respects to both America's religious and secular sensibilities. The way I like to put this — and [this is] my final statement — [is] they are required to pass through a bicameral body politic, both religious and secular. Thank you.

**DAVID VAN BIEMA, *Time*:** Among some evangelical thinkers these days you hear people talking about how to preach the gospel in a post-Christian country. I'd be really interested to hear your analysis of both the premises and the argument.

The second question is, you've talked a lot about the origins of secularism A, but aside from mentioning France briefly at one point, not so much about the American tradition, such as it is, of secularism B, and I'm wondering whether it has a strong enough tradition to speak of.

**DR. McCLAY:** What I'd say about the rhetoric of post-Christian America is that, in a sense, it's not anything new. One of the aspects of being a fundamentally Protestant country is that we have this rhythm of revivalism built into the way we do business in religion. There are these periods of decline and then renewal and decline and renewal. A certain revivalistic spirit is very much a part of the way we do things. If you look at it in the time leading up to Cane Ridge and the Second Great Awakening, you see all these denunciations of the country as having lost its way and lost the spirit of '76 and lost the faith of the fathers and the descending into iniquity; and then, boom, comes an awakening. So there's a bit of an academic patina to some of the arguments you're talking about, at least the ones I've read, where they like to talk about post-modernism and show they've been to college. But I don't think it's really that different from the path of revivalism as it's been taken in the past.

**MR. VAN BIEMA:** What they're describing is the situation that tended to precede revival?

**MR. VAN BIEMA:** So that means essentially you're in agreement with them, that there is some general absence of a religious approach to things?

**DR. McCLAY:** Yes, but of course saying "post-Christian" is implying a kind of historical vantage point that they don't really have. One can't know for another 200 years or so whether it's really a post-Christian time, but yes.

To your second question about secularism B and how deep its roots are in America: not very, I think. The fact that it's absolutely inconceivable that an openly atheistic candidate

could even consider running for the presidency is an indication. There's a lot of agnosticism and a lot of indifference, but a commitment to secularism as an agenda? There's very little of that.

**MR. HARRIS:** I would like to hear you elaborate a little bit on your critique of the Kennedy speech from the perspective of the separation of church and state, and also as it pertains to Romney, and what you would advise him.

**DR. McCLAY:** It's striking to me how inadequate it would be now to simply say, particularly for Romney and his situation, "We believe the separation of church and state should be absolute," as I believe Kennedy says. It's very strong language about the degree of the separation, and that the religion of the candidate should have nothing to do whatsoever with the view of the electorate of his capacity for office. To do what needs to be done, he will have to go further than that and say something about the content of his faith and why it is congruent with the American civil religion, that is, with this basic residuum of shared commitments and convictions about the meaning of the American experiment.

I don't think it's enough for him to say what up to now it seems to me he's been saying: in effect, "None of your beeswax," or "We believe in religious liberty. Get off my back." That may be a good legal strategy, but it's not a good political strategy. He has to give us a reason why his religion is not only not a liability — or should be bracketed-but why it's an asset. I think if he does a rerun of the Kennedy speech, it won't work for him.

**KATTY KAY, BBC:** You said just now that Romney will have to say something about this faith. What does he have to say about his faith?

**DR. McCLAY:** The antagonism between Protestants and Catholics is such a powerful theme in American history. I find my students are completely uncomprehending of this, so much has the world changed. But in 19th century American history, it is one of the greatest themes. I think part of what happened is that the theological differences, while they still exist and are important to some people, became mitigated somewhat because, for various reasons including the second World War, Protestants became convinced that Catholics were no longer "the other." They were not incomprehensibly different; they

were regular folks, and they had certain views that Protestants regarded as odd, just as vice versa, but a social comfortableness in the coexistence of Protestants and Catholics led to the theological differences being bracketable and not really that important anymore.

I think something like this could, conceivably, be done with Mormonism. What would be a very big mistake — as it would have been for Kennedy — is to play up the history of oppression. Certainly Mormons have a story to tell there, too, very much so. With Romney, you do feel there are times when you feel a certain anger in him that may reflect some of that sense of having been victimized in the past, of Mormons having been marginalized or otherwise dissed in American life. I think it would be a big mistake for him to go down that road.

I think he needs to make it clear that there's nothing in what he believes, and in the Mormon faith as he understands and practices it, that is in any way in conflict with fundamental American commitments and that, in fact, it reinforces them. I think that case could be made. This is one case where I think maybe staying away from the doctrine, staying away from the social separation of Mormons, and concentrating on a fundamental ethos would serve him best.

He definitely needs to stay away from the parts of Mormonism that most people are going to find strange and off-putting, although he can't be seen as avoiding the subject. It's a very tricky thing. I don't think this would be so hard for him if he hadn't waited so long to do it. He clearly doesn't want to do it, which makes me think he won't do it very well.

**KATHY SLOBOGIN, CNN:** I was struck by your description of a successful reconciliation between modernity and religion in America. My understanding of a force that has so changed American politics in the last 30 years — the rise of the religious right, the Christian fundamentalists and evangelicals getting into politics in a big way— is that that is a rejection of the status quo and a rejection of the balance between the sacred and the secular in this country and a reaction against the fact that religion has been pushed so much to the periphery of the public square. I'm wondering whether your more sanguine description of this goes all the way to the present day, or does it stop in 1979 when Jerry Falwell basically declared war on secular America?



**DR. McCLAY:** If we’re talking about a reconciliation of religion and modernity, in some ways, nobody has done it better than the mega-church building, media-savvy evangelicals — they are not rejecting modernity, per se. They are, in fact, assuming that you can take certain features of modernity and put them to work for the sake of traditional core values that they see as being fundamental. We’re not looking at people who think we need to foreswear all modern conveniences and live like Amish or Luddites.

It depends on what you mean by secular. If you mean this sort of secularism that views religion as a poison, as something that needs to be if not stamped out, at least relegated to strictly private status that has no bearing on public life...antagonism is not only characteristic of the religious right. I think you see [it] in issues arising out of the Christmas celebrations and that sort of thing. These are widely resented by many Americans who otherwise would not be seen as members of the religious right.

**JACQUI SALMON, *The Washington Post*:** I wanted to know what you would make of this revivalism in atheism of Christopher Hitchens and his ilk. We know that doesn’t mean Americans are converting from devout religious faith to atheism, but they are certainly a lot more outspoken. Does this have any parallel in U.S. history in other areas?

**DR. McCLAY:** I’m not sure there is a parallel, although I’m also not sure that it’s really as significant a phenomenon as it seems to those of us who read books and follow the *New York Times* Book Review. In thinking not so much about the books, but the debates that are held all over the country, the fascinating thing about those, and forgive me to those of you who were sitting with me at lunch since I already said this, is that these are almost always being sponsored by Christian organizations. They are very interested in this kind of thing. They are very interested in engaging in debates.

I think this is a sign that, in fact, there’s a certain intellectual self confidence among some Christians. They’re not afraid to subject themselves to a withering examination of their faith, which I think is very good. One of the things I’ve always said is that if Christians want to have a voice in the public square, they have to be willing to take it as well as dish it out. So for people like Hitchens and Dawkins to be very rough in the things they say is quite appropriate because that’s what it means to be in the public square. It shouldn’t be, “Oh,

we don't want to insult people of faith because they have deep convictions." No, if you want to be in the public square, you have to be willing to be criticized.

So I see it as all positive; I think the books are positive. There's a certain annoyance that people who are of various degree of hardness in their secularism have been feeling for a number of years, and these books have given expression to that. I think it's actually a very healthy thing. One of the unhealthy things about our religious culture is its evasiveness, the degree to which so many Americans think that religious questions can essentially be put off to another time: "Do I really have to decide about this now? It doesn't really matter very much to me." There is a view that these questions are non-essential. I think that's absolutely wrong. It both demeans religion and irreligion. At least atheists are people who have made a decision; they've taken the question seriously. I think this is why Christians really like them and prefer them to these "oh, whatever," veil-of-fog types, which is actually what most Americans are, I'm afraid. I think it's very healthy to have strong voices that take the question seriously out there.

**MR. BARONE:** You say most reform impulses paid respect to religion. It seems to me that the progressive reformers of the early 20th century—Herbert Croly, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson—it seems to me that if we want to put reform movements on a spectrum from heavily influenced by religion to very lightly influenced by religion, that would be the one I would see as on the secular end of that spectrum.

**DR. McCLAY:** I think there were certainly progressives who were more or less religious in character. I didn't mean to imply that all reform movements are Christian, but I'm very hard-put to think of one that didn't past muster. That's why I like this bicameral image and, incidentally, this is why on issues like gay marriage, some of the most important battles are going to be fought in the churches. Because if the churches, overall, take a position one way or other on that issue, then that will go a long way to deciding whether gay marriage can be institutionalized.

**ANDREA STONE, *USA Today*:** What about the early 20th century labor movement, which was more socialist in some areas? Also, what about the stem-cell debate in which scientists have been pushing against the church?

**DR. McCLAY:** Well, I did qualify it. What I said is, the successful reform movements.

There certainly are Christian commonwealth elements in the labor movement. The Knights of Labor were heavily Christian-socialist in their rhetoric and in their organizing principles. The AF of L set the pattern much more for what American labor became than the Knights of Labor, but that certainly was an element. People like Edward Bellamy, who was much more of an important figure in the 19th century than we remember him now, operated in a quasi-Christian solidaritist tradition that was more religious than secular in character.

But again, I'm not saying that there are no reform movements that have enjoyed some success that have not been primarily secular in character. But by and large, the big ones, the ones that have really had a lasting effect had to, as I put it, past muster with the prevailing religious sensibilities. My real point is that it's a very bad strategy to put yourself in opposition to them.

**NAOMI SCHAEFER RILEY, *The Wall Street Journal*:** I wanted to ask you about two books that have come out recently that seem to address this question of separation. The first is Ruth Wisse's book about Jews and power. It traces the evolution of Jewish thinking about whether Judaism should render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and I wonder if you think the religious minorities in America, as well as the Catholics, have adopted what I think you characterized as a more Protestant understanding of separation and whether that's a good thing or not.

The second book is Mark Lilla's new book. He seems to trace some of the ideas of separation back long before the American founding. I was wondering if there were threads of ideas of the separation in European intellectual history long before the American founding that you think are important to acknowledge?

**DR. McCLAY:** I don't know Ruth Wisse's book, but I think that separation is very important for religious minorities because it's their protection. It's a protection against forced conversion or marginalization of their religious practices in the majoritarian culture. It's

always been important for American Jews to support a separationist doctrine. The render-under-Caesar thing is a little different. The separation is a deduction from the idea that the civil magistrate has a power and legitimacy of its own; it doesn't need to be sanctified by the church. Romans 13 spells all of this out: God gives this power to the magistrate. The magistrate wouldn't be in charge if it were not divinely ordained.

I haven't read Lilla's book either. I read the long piece he did in the *New York Times*. He's very much taken with this notion, which I expressed, too, that the wars of religion were the fundamental agent in bringing about the fact of religious toleration in the West and that our commitment to it is a fragile one because it's a negative principle. I don't know whether I'd go that far. I actually think it's a stronger, more robust commitment than he makes it out to be. But he goes back to the wars of religion as a really important starting place for all of that.

**MS. SCHAEFER RILEY:** He seemed to suggest there's a strong temptation that we will always want to use politics to solve our theological problems. I wonder whether you see that strain in America, too, and whether this is a concern, or whether you think we've gotten beyond that idea.

**DR. McCLAY:** No, I don't think we've gotten beyond that. I don't think we'll ever get beyond that idea. I think this is one way that the two-spheres approach of Christianity wars with human nature — there's a lot of Christianity that self-consciously wars with human nature — because I think that desire to bring one's metaphysical and political commitments in line with one another is quite natural. Again, this is something where it seems to me Islam has a real problem, that there are these mediating factors in Christianity that are absent in Islam. Even the whole question of the ontological character of the scriptures; this is a fascinating subject that various people have written about. In Judaism and Christianity, but Christianity has articulated it the most clearly, the scriptures are God-breathed; they were inspired, which means that, in some mysterious way, the authors of each of the books have a role. This is part of being an incarnational theology, that somehow the divine will is working, not only through the inspiration, but through the agent that puts the inspiration down on paper.

Whereas for Islam, the Koran is literally dictated, which is why it's untranslatable and why, in terms of the exegesis, there's not a whole lot of room to play around with, say, Moses crossing the Red Sea. They don't have that fudge factor, that mediator.

**MR. DOUTHAT:** I wondered if you could speak to the possibility that while American religious life overall has ebbed and flowed, and you have periods of awakening and periods of declining belief, that there seems to be, maybe beginning in the 19th century, a steady secularization of American intellectual life that I think may play a profound role in the shape of religious life in America going forward. If you think that's true, do you think it's reversible, changeable? If not, what does it mean?

**DR. McCLAY:** I think you're right that there has been a steady secularization and specifically de-Christianization of higher education in American life, no doubt about it. I think it reflects the larger currents of Western intellectual history over that period of time. A couple of observations. One piece of evidence that the secularism we're experiencing now may have greater institutional heft, partly because of the academy and the media both being primarily secular in character and not unaggressively so, is the emergence of movements like the orthodox ecumenism of *First Things* magazine, or the otherwise unthinkable alliance of Jews and evangelicals, partly for political reasons, but partly, I think, for larger reasons of opposing what they see as a militant secularism that is more threatening. They make the judgment that it's more threatening to them than their confessional or faith differences, which are of time immemorial.

These are quite remarkable developments, the rapprochement between Catholics and Protestants, between Christians and Jews, particularly evangelical Christians and Jews. These are testimony to the perceived power of an ascendant and dominant intellectual secularism. So I think you're right about that.

It will take a long time for these kinds of things to have ramifications in institutional form. There's nothing more conservative than the academy, nothing more resistant to change. The institutions just roll on in the same form with the same departments and the same structure and the same criteria. But eventually, I think there's a chance those things will change. We're in a phase where the old way is dying and the new way is powerless to be

born. The fact that those are old and familiar words may indicate this could go on for a long time.

**MR. DOUTHAT:** When I look at the American scene now, it seems like the opposite is happening, that the absence of intellectuals in religious communities makes those religious communities increasingly anti-intellectual, which, in turn, makes would-be intellectuals ever less likely to be religious. And so, the divide widens. So I'm skeptical about the prospects for that push.

**MR. DIONNE:** I love your two secularisms essay. Where do you put Germany, Italy and Britain, which are not really secular in either sense and yet have societies that are more secular than ours?

**DR. McCLAY:** That is a complicated issue. Certainly, religion lacks vibrancy in the British, the Scandinavian, and, to a lesser extent, the German situations. They validate the American approach, that it's much better for religion not to be supported by the state. One of the arguments against the faith-based initiative and the use of government funds funneled towards religious institutions is that, in the end, they'll be bad for them by robbing them of their independence and yoking them to secular government policies.

**CLAUDIA ANDERSON, *The Weekly Standard*:** I want to ask more about biblical sources of this distinctive American pattern of vibrant religion, but also strong modernities and lots of secularism. Would it also be the case that the picture of Christianity you get in the New Testament, which is a picture of a minority religion and a persecuted minority, where the teaching is explicit that every follower must be prepared to be persecuted — would it be paradoxically the case that the more Bible-focused the religion, the more comfortable it is with the idea that there's a secular world out there that is distinct from believers, the idea that Christians are strangers in the world? Is it historically the case that this also was influential in the idea that you could have a vibrant church in the middle of a secular society, and there's nothing surprising about it, it doesn't require explanation?



**DR. McCLAY:** I think it depends on how the Bible is read. One of the things about both the 17th century New England Puritans and a group as different from them as African-American slaves is their way of reading the Bible saw the great stories as templates for their own experience. In both cases, the crossing of the Red Sea, the exodus, is taken as being emblematic of the great migration to North America or the prospect of emancipation.

That's a certain way of reading the Bible that's enormously consoling in times of oppression or difficulty or uncertainty because it gives a narrative in which the chaos of your own life can be made into something that makes sense and has a transcendent grounding to it.

[A key difference is viewing] the Bible as a collection of propositions that you can draw upon as opposed to [viewing] the Bible as narrative. I'd like to think about it a little bit more, but there's a different kind of power that comes from being able to take these stories. You see it all the time in 17th century New England sermons. But it's different when you're pulling out propositions, using the Bible as a kind of textbook. The thing that really is at the foundation of a great community is a powerful narrative. What's kept the Jews together for so long is that the seder is a recounting of the great narrative. When you have that strong sense of a narrative, you have a strong sense of peoplehood. When you don't, then it tends to be defined in opposition more than out of a sense of identity grounded in something positive.

**JOHN SINIFF, *USA Today*:** I wonder to what degree you see the secularism in the media and in academia as responsible for contributing to, at least, the political divide that we have today.

**DR. McCLAY:** As media disaggregate more and more, as you have more of a fragmentation of media, I think that's probably a good thing in terms of allowing different perspectives to emerge. There's a way in which, especially if you go back to the three networks era, that the pressure to come up with a definitive account of things that would be the view of it from every perspective, from no place in particular, is, in a way, too much expect, and that it's much healthier now to have a sense that different venues are going to have

a different characteristic outlook. That's more in line with what the history of journalism has been. I'm all for objectivity and I don't view it as a myth. But at the same time, it seems to me a very, very hard ideal, particularly with the complexity of the issues you have to wrestle with.

So I think some of the problem will be addressed, if not solved, by more and different outlets, rather than an effort in the executive suite to decide, "When have we gotten balance on this issue?"

I think mainstream media are covering religion more and more because they've had to. On balance, I think they're doing a better and better job of it. So I'm not giving up on that, but I also think there's a place for CBN, *Christianity Today*, *World Magazine*, and these outlets, too. They may not have the same credibility, although in certain circles, they'll have more credibility than CNN or NBC or whatever. I think there's value in the proliferation of these outlets that no amount of re-jiggering things to make sure you've got the appropriate balance is going to accomplish.

It's very hard for people to cover subjects for which they have absolutely no sympathy. I do think it's important to make sure you hire people who have some interest in religion if you want them to cover religion.

**CLAIRE BRINBERG, CNN:** My question picks up along these lines that Romney is in a different position from JFK. JFK, if I remember correctly, said in his speech, "I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute." And Mike Huckabee is appearing with David Barton this week. Romney is running as the candidate of the people that are most suspicious of him, so it puts him in a different position. He has to talk about how his faith influences his politics. That's what gets him into this Catch-22. Huckabee says that his faith influences every decision he makes, whether it's about losing weight or abortion or whatnot. So I'm wondering how Romney is going to be able to walk that line, and how you think he can do that.

The second question I have gets to the idea of specifics and how much he should talk about the particularities of the Mormon faith. Should he address specifically the whole idea of taking direction from the president of the church?

**DR. McCLAY:** To take the second one. That is a tough question, but I think he should certainly suggest that it's one of those things where you don't want to say, "I have stopped beating my wife." Even to raise the suggestion that it's thinkable that he could take direction from the church — he could hurt himself by saying that. I don't think he can do that. I like what you say, that he needs to win over the very people who are most suspicious of him, the base that he needs for an eventual victory.

Insofar as he's a political figure and being a person of faith matters for a political figure, he has to find a way of affirming that without saying, "Mormons are Christians." This is exactly what the evangelicals will absolutely not forgive him for doing.

**DAVID SHRIBMAN, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*:** I wonder whether the indignity, "I'm insulted by this suggestion," might not work because he's otherwise so cool and so processed, it seems, that what would be wrong with him showing some anger about this, if it's honest anger?

**DR. McCLAY:** When Ronald Reagan got angry and said, "I am paying for this microphone," it wasn't just that he won people over: He made George Bush look like a wimp. Is there something comparable here, where his losing his temper would score points? It would be great if he could be responding to another candidate. I think it becomes a question of who the anger is directed at. When Reagan lost his temper, he wasn't directing it at the audience; he was directing it at Breen or Green or whatever his name was. If Romney gets angry, it's because there are these people out there whose votes he wants who are suspicious of him. He can't say, "Damn it, you have no right to be suspicious of me; vote for me!" I just don't see how that is a workable approach.

**STEVE LAGERFELD, *The Wilson Quarterly*:** For most people who are very nervous or intolerant about any inclusion of religious thought, religious currents in public life, the issue really is tolerance. Their concern is that religion as they see it is the source, of

intolerance. We see that, of course, manifested in all kinds of issues where views that are considered tolerant on abortion or stem-cell research or you name it have a religious inspiration in the eyes of many of these people. So what about the idea of tolerance and the history of tolerance? Where does that come to us from? Is there a religious basis for that idea? You mentioned some historical antecedents, but they're earlier than even the American experience. What are they, and are they religious?

**DR. McCLAY:** One of the cases I tried to make is that religious tolerance in America and religious tolerance in Europe, too, is not something where an idea of toleration inspired actions by enlightened leaders to create a political, legal system in which toleration was implemented, but that toleration is something that arose out of necessity, that in 16th century Europe, where you have horrible warfare going on-which, by the way, was not necessarily caused by religion, and no religious authority has the ability to define the public realm, then you have a need for some other legitimating power or authority to establish public order. And it can't be religion anymore when religion is so divided.

So that's when you come up with the Westphalian idea, and a notion that the civil realm is an autonomous realm, civil-political realm, and religion is something that operates-this actually goes beyond Westphalia-but religion is something that operates in its own sphere.

It's interesting to me that all of the years I've been studying history and seeing the way historians write religion out of history, that every religious event in American history is actually an economic event, for which religion is just serving as the front. There's a lot of validity to some of this scholarship. But then, when it comes to causing wars and social conflict, religion becomes a primary cause, and that doesn't seem to make sense to me. If you look at Europe, Reformation 101 says that the Reformation would not have occurred when it did if there hadn't been a whole slew of economic and social and other forces in play, at the ready to ignite something that could have been just a little theological controversy into something world-shattering. So I have trouble with the idea that religion is as much of a primary cause of social conflict and social change as people like Hitchens seem to assume it is.

**MR. COFFEY:** I wonder if you could then take the idea of the bicameral passing of the reform issues, give us a look ahead, and say which issues you think we ought to be looking at that will be the bicameral, great reforms, at least the battles over them, ahead of us.

**DR. McCLAY:** Speaking of bioethics is a biggie; there are a multitude of specific issues, each one of which may be decided differently. I think something a little more mundane but of more concern to more people is the whole question of how health insurance is going to be provided to the great mass of Americans, and what kind of programmatic solution to that problem can be found. Obviously, there will be factors in play other than religious ones, but I think, on some level, there needs to be a moral consensus for a solution to be effective and widely accepted.

In the '90s, I was very worried by currents I saw in the Christian world that were strongly separatist. It seemed to me a very worrisome thing that such a large portion of this country could come to be so deeply disaffected. Now I think that some of that worry is on the other side of the spectrum. Every time I look at the Daily Kos or something like that, I come away with this sense of fear that that part of the body politic is becoming rabidly disaffected. Again, I won't make a judgment about the legitimacy of the disaffection, although, when it's on that scale, it has a legitimacy just by virtue of being as powerful as it is. That kind of social polarization worries me. It may be this is a test case of the ability of the bicameral arrangement to work.

**MR. VAN BIEMA:** It seems to me that for a long time, if you wanted to be anything in the United States, it would be in Christian terms. That is, if you were an abolitionist, you would put it in Christian terms. If you were for slavery, you would put it in Christian terms. And then, once it ceased to be the only language in town, and I think of the 1960s or 1970s as a moment when even the civil religion began to fade away or be eaten away at —if you work from that moment on and talk about reform movements, whether it is the women's movement post-its beginnings, but really during the bra burning, the period when it obtained some of its greatest successes, or if you look at gay liberation, I'm not certain you find that those were supported by evangelical Protestants. I wonder whether there isn't some proof there that some of the same people who may have issues, who may fall

into the B category, are capable of some of the same good things that we've attributed to Christians.

**DR. McCLAY:** I really wasn't making a point about individual reformers. I was making a point about movements; the bicameral legislature is of the society as a whole. There seems to be a way in which the reforms that are most successful and most enduring and become uncontroversial are ones that clear both hurdles. Which is another way of saying that something the religious component of the culture wants to push — let's say not only *Roe v. Wade* being overturned, but some Supreme Court decision or constitutional amendment that absolutely flips it — this is not a reform that's going to succeed because it won't clear the other house of the bicameral body.

**MR. CROMARTIE:** Ladies and gentlemen, let's thank Professor McClay.

**\* Please note corrections to the following factual inaccuracies in the written transcript, video and audio:**

- *Wilfred McClay's Summer 2000 article in The Wilson Quarterly was incorrectly identified. The correct title was "Two Concepts of Secularism."*
- *Professor McClay's book, The Masterless, was published in 1994, not 1995.*

♦ END ♦

The Faith Angle Forum is a program of the Ethics and Public Policy Center.

For more information visit our website: [www.faithangle.org](http://www.faithangle.org)

or contact Michael Cromartie at [crom@eppc.org](mailto:crom@eppc.org)