

# Journal of Civil Rights and Economic Development

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Volume 22  
Issue 2 *Volume 22, Fall 2007, Issue 2*

Article 5

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September 2007

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### Recommended Citation

Steinfels, Peter (2007) "Is Religious Ignorance a Crime Against the First Amendment?," *Journal of Civil Rights and Economic Development*: Vol. 22 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarship.law.stjohns.edu/jcred/vol22/iss2/5>

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# IS RELIGIOUS IGNORANCE A CRIME AGAINST THE FIRST AMENDMENT?

## LUNCHEON ADDRESS

PETER STEINFELS\*

It is an honor to be asked to be the luncheon speaker at a symposium featuring so many distinguished scholars, many of whom I have admired, read, interviewed and generally exploited over the years. The only drawback is—I haven't the slightest idea of what a luncheon speaker is supposed to do.

I do have some ideas about what a luncheon speaker is not supposed to do. He should not compete with the scholarship of the symposium's presenters—or even with the quality of the dessert. He should not be too serious or too subtle; better to be personal or at least provocative. And he should not speak for too long.

In the cause of mild provocation, my remarks will address a simple question, "Is Religious Ignorance a Crime Against the First Amendment?"

But first I should say that from the age of nine, I found issues of church and state, religion and morality in the public square, absolutely absorbing. For a politically ambitious Catholic kid, these all boiled down to one thing: Could I get elected president of the United States? If the presidency was out of reach, after all, I might have to redirect my plans toward the papacy. For any of you unfamiliar with the papacy, it is a position in Rome roughly similar to that of an editor at the New York Times—or even a religion writer—although it involves less frequent claims to infallibility.

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I was eight when Paul Blanshard published *American Freedom and Catholic Power* and ten when he followed this with *Communism, Democracy, and Catholic Power*. I actually became aware of his argument at the age of twelve when he initiated a campaign to have the American citizenship of Archbishop Gerald P. O'Hara of Savannah-Atlanta revoked because he had been named papal nuncio to Ireland, in the diplomatic service, as Blanshard insisted, of a "foreign power."

Blanshard's thesis was originally aired in the good liberal weekly *The Nation* and, as John McGreevy has documented, was welcomed by some of the most esteemed minds in the American intellectual firmament. The thesis was simple: that the Catholic Church posed a threat to American democracy parallel to that of Stalin's Communism. Of course, no child of that era was unaware that Stalin's Communism constituted an evil so great that we were ready to wage atomic warfare to resist it. No Catholic child was unaware of brutal persecutions that Stalinism had carried out in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. So the magnitude of what Blanshard was saying about my church could not be avoided.

I followed Blanshard's debating points as they were addressed in *Commonweal* magazine. Many of them rested on a studied ignorance about Catholicism, but many also rested on official church statements that were not displaced until a decade and a half later at the Second Vatican Council. I took from that a permanent lesson no less relevant today in our discussions, whether of Islam or conservative Christianity, about the difference between a religion on paper and the same religion as actually lived.

My interest in the intersection of religion and politics and church and state did not disappear even when John F. Kennedy beat me to the White House. To this day, I find it deeply moving that our nation's courts can get entangled not only over what the right to practice one's religion implies for a sect of hallucinogenic tea-drinkers or for Muslims in jail but what it implies as well for imprisoned Wiccans and even self-declared Satanists. I will not deny the comic aspects of the Supreme Court worrying through the implications for religious freedom as well as freedom of speech of a student banner saying "Bong Hits 4 Jesus"—or the annual judicial exercise of figuring out how many accompanying

elves and reindeer render a Christmas crèche secular—but beyond the comic there is an admirable respect for integrity of conscience and its centrality to a free society.

But to turn to the question, “Is Religious Ignorance a Crime Against the First Amendment?” I do not want to engage in Monday-morning quarterbacking of the panel discussion we have just had. I instinctively lean toward the translation of religiously motivated concerns into vocabulary, appeals, and arguments accessible to all reasonable citizens. This undoubtedly reflects a Catholicism that has given a pride of place to philosophy as well as theology and kept alive its own notion of natural law. But I cannot join in the blanket banishing of all religion-specific appeals and argument from political argument, partly because experience has also taught me that philosophical or secular appeals, that to me as a Catholic seem neutral or universal or accessible to all reasonable citizens, often seem to others distinctly faith-inflected if not faith-based.

As a practical matter, we are going to live with both approaches. There will always be many political questions that can be handled on the basis of common denominator concerns about public safety, the general welfare, or the common good. Public health dictates that it is better to be prepared for bird flu than unprepared. But what happens when as a society we must tackle the genuinely difficult questions—for example, how much of our individual freedom would we sacrifice to reduce the risk of an outbreak of bird flu? At these moments, we find that non-religious language and argument rest on deeply held personal commitments, intuitions, images, upbringing, and narratives that are no more neutral or accessible to all reasonable citizens or likely to elicit agreement than their religious equivalents. In other words, there are non-religious convictions that deserve the description “faith claims” every bit as much as religious ones. Of course some language can be more neutral than other language, or more accessible to at least a greater number of citizens, but I believe that thoroughgoing neutrality is impossible—and that there will also remain pivotal moments when we cannot resolve an issue without bringing our ultimate commitments, whether religious or non-religious, into play.

I agree with the view of Jeffrey Stout and others that at those moments, despite the elusiveness of a common, religion-free, and

preferably neutral language in which to conduct our political deliberation, we need not be reduced to shouting and power plays pitting one group's rock-bottom religious commitments (or rock-bottom secular commitments) against another's. We need not picture political deliberation as taking place solely in one big auditorium or stadium but also as a great chain of overlapping conversations carried on in different terms with different citizens.

In those conversations, I could acknowledge the Catholic Christian premises at work in my advocacy on some such issue, exposing them to the critique of a Buddhist or Muslim or agnostic who can indicate why they cannot accept my premises or perhaps why those premises do not necessarily lead to the political position I advocate. I can do likewise in response, suggesting to the Buddhist that my political cause could also flow from Buddhist premises, or from Islamic premises in the case of the Muslim, or for the agnostic from premises compatible with her agnosticism.

Similarly, with those non-religious commitments that have a quasi-religious status in the real world, I can propose to the feminist that the feminist premises determining his position on some basic political issue are wrong or perhaps at odds with other premises in the rich array of feminist thought, or I can argue that my position is actually more consistent with his own feminist premises. And so on, with the utilitarian or the libertarian as with the evangelical or the mainline Protestant or the Mormon or the Orthodox Jew.

This idea of overlapping conversations or deliberation thus becomes a crucial component of our efforts to honor the First Amendment's dual concern with neither imposing religion nor restricting its exercise. But if instead of banishing religious commitments and premises from our public and political deliberation we attempt to engage them in one way or another, then as active citizens we are going to need some working familiarity with the religious traditions of our fellow citizens. We will need to know some of their traditions' basic teachings. We will also need a sense of how they feel and think about what others think about them, and how they worship and worry about their kids—the kind of thing that requires imagination, empathy or, best of all, real encounters.

This, of course, is where one encounters a rather striking degree of resistance. Many years ago, I was on a panel with George Gallup at a convention of people from charitable foundations. Mr. Gallup mentioned the curious gap between the large percentage of Americans who claimed to be regular readers of the Bible and the remarkably small percentage who could name Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as the authors to whom the four Gospels were traditionally attributed. A woman in the audience took the microphone in a fury. What business did Mr. Gallup have supposing that she or anyone should know the traditional names of the four Gospels? I don't remember whether her outrage was actually greeted with applause. I do remember that she enjoyed enough sympathy in the auditorium that Mr. Gallup walked on eggs formulating a reply rather more diplomatic than the one that I would have been tempted to offer.

Stephen Prothero, who chairs the religion department at Boston University, has just published a rather blunt book titled *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn't*. He documents the astonishing religious ignorance of this astonishingly religious citizenry—and yes, he is tempted to wonder if there isn't a connection. Polls have reported high school seniors who think Sodom and Gomorrah were husband and wife and Joan of Arc was married, naturally, to Noah. People impassioned to have the Ten Commandments displayed in court houses cannot name half of them; in fact, only one out of ten co-sponsors of the Alabama bill to defend the public display of the Commandments could name all ten.

Prothero regales readers with the reports from his own classes and elsewhere of students who believe that Paul bound Isaac, Noah led the Israelites out of Babylon, Abraham was blinded on the road to Damascus, Moses received the Law on Mount Cyanide, Joshua fought the Battle of Geritol, and the epistles were the wives of the apostles. (The last three *must* be apocryphal.) Never mind what little people know about the Qur'an or the Four Noble Truths, and what less than little they know about Hinduism or even Eastern Orthodox Christianity.

Prothero's agenda is not religious, however much he suspects that "faith without knowledge is dead." His agenda is civic, that American citizens should "know enough about Christianity and

the world's religions to participate meaningfully—on both the left and the right—in religiously inflected public debates.”

Prothero does not stop with exhortation. He proposes that high schools should require a course in the Bible and a course in world religions, that colleges should require at least one course in religious studies for graduation, and that all these should be and can be taught in terms of providing basic information, not moral uplift or proselytizing either for a specific faith or for the equality of all faiths or even for the ideal of religious pluralism. This proposal, which he calls modest, would obviously be grist for at least one conference, like today's, of constitutional scholars, joined by educators and religious leaders.

I part company with Prothero on a number of points, including whether the kind of knowledge that can be imparted in classrooms is really the foundation for the kind of imaginative leap needed to enter into real conversation with another ultimate religious or philosophical outlook.

In some ways, my own thoughts are even more modest. It would be naïve to expect all Americans, or even all politically active Americans, to become walking founts of comparative religion or participants in religious dialogue. I do agree with Prothero that gross religious illiteracy is now an impediment to active citizenship, an illiteracy that begins in many cases with the religious tradition of our own upbringing. I do think that our opinion-shaping elites should both manifest such empathetic knowledge themselves and encourage it in others. Of course, the wider and deeper this knowledge, the better. But it need only extend to the faiths and communities that are of particular political importance at a given moment, while standing ready to learn about new ones as they emerge. We are at least twenty years past the time when active citizenship and political engagement in the United States demanded some knowledge of evangelical Christianity, some feel for its style, some exposure to the publications and voices that evangelicals themselves recognize as representative, and not just those anointed by the media or their own skills at self-promotion. It is shameful that so many opinion-makers who hold forth on evangelicals appear to be completely unfamiliar with the flagship evangelical magazine or with the fact that many evangelicals have long rejected

Falwell, Robertson, and Dobson as representing evangelical views.

It is now at least ten years past the time when something similar was demanded in regard to Islam. And, it is long overdue that something similar occur regarding non-believers and that fast-growing group that tell pollsters “none” when asked about their religion and yet, in surprising numbers, also tell pollsters that they pray and expect to go to heaven. Evangelical citizens owe secular humanist citizens some accurate and empathetic religious understanding—or should I say a-religious understanding?—and vice versa. Catholic citizens owe something of the same to pro-choice Americans and advocates of gay rights.

Is religious ignorance a crime against the First Amendment? Certainly not at Harvard, where the First Amendment is worshiped, but where a proposal to make “Reason and Faith” a mandatory area within which students would have to take one course created such jitters that it was quickly withdrawn by a task force revamping the core curriculum. Harvard students may still learn about religion under the swiftly devised area of “Culture and Belief.” That was not the problem. The problem was that the previous label might associate the university with the idea that religious knowledge was actually an essential aspect of being an educated citizen.

In his *Harvard Crimson* brief against defining an area of study as “Reason and Faith,” the psychologist, Steven Pinker, insisted that “universities are about reason, pure and simple,” and faith, which he defined as “believing something without good reasons to do so,” has no business there. What must be avoided, he wrote, was “to magnify the significance of religion.” To leave any impression that religion might rank as a matter for study with science, culture, history, and current affairs, presumably all in their religion-free forms, is “an American anachronism . . . in an era in which the rest of the West is moving beyond it.”

Compare this reluctance to Professor Prothero’s claim that, “In today’s world it is irresponsible to use the word *educated* to describe high school or college graduates who are ignorant of the ancient stories that continue to motivate the beliefs and behaviors of the overwhelming majority of the world’s population. In a world as robustly religious as ours it is foolish to imagine



that such graduates are equipped to participate fully in the politics of the nation or the affairs of the world.”

The nation’s culture-shaping elites, conservative and liberal, certainly differ greatly on how to interpret and apply the clauses of the First Amendment. Fortunately, they are agreed in viewing the First Amendment as a touchstone of our civic ideals in a way that no one would, say, of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Amendment or even the Fifth or Second Amendments. I believe these elites would unite in rejecting any naked defense or excuse of establishing religion or prohibiting its exercise.

Likewise, it is understandable that people differ on how best to remedy religious ignorance, but shouldn’t the nation’s culture-shaping elites be united, in the name of those very civic ideals, in similarly rejecting any defense or excusing of religious ignorance? That, I suppose, is the question lurking behind the one I chose to ask.

Is religious ignorance a crime against the First Amendment? When I mentioned that formulation to my wife as a topic for today, she replied, with what I presume was skepticism, “Are you thinking of a capital crime or merely 8 to 15 years in prison?”

Well, I said, maybe I should rephrase the question to be “Is religious ignorance a *sin* against the First Amendment?”

“A *sin* against the First Amendment?” she said. “Don’t even think about it.” So I won’t.

Thank you.