

Center for American Progress



Religion in the Public Square: The Role of Faith in Civic Life

June 25, 2008

For more on this event, please visit the [events page](#).

Watch highlights of the event:

“[In the] early 21st century, America is the most religiously diverse nation, perhaps in human history, among the most religiously devout nations in the West, at [a] time of global religious conflict. What opportunities and challenges does that afford us, who discuss vaunted things like the American public square?” Eboo Patel asked the audience at an event at the Center for American Progress on Tuesday.

Patel, founder and executive director of the Interfaith Youth Core, participated in a panel discussion about religion in 21st-century American democracy. The discussion coincided with the release of a book of essays co-authored by Patel and several other leading thinkers and scholars entitled, *Debating the Divine: Religion in 21st Century American Democracy*. The debate was moderated by E.J. Dionne, Jr., senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, syndicated columnist, and author of *Souled Out: Reclaiming Faith & Politics After the Religious Right*.

“I think the purpose of this panel is to arrive at...religious solidarity, and I think you will hear that there are a lot of good arguments along the way,” said Dionne. The panel included Patel, Melissa Rogers, professor and director of the Center for Religion and Public Affairs at Wake Forest University Divinity School, and David Hollinger, Preston Hotchkis Professor of American History at the University of California, Berkeley.

Hollinger argued that religious ideas should be subjected to scrutiny if they are used to justify public policy decisions. Currently, he said, politicians acknowledge the role of their faith in their decision making, but reject criticism of that faith—a situation he said amounts to “tell but don’t ask.” “I hope we can agree that any political actor who invokes religion in a public-policy context should be ready to defend his or her religious ideas in standard public democratic debate,” he said.

Hollinger provoked discussion by asserting that, “Perhaps the salient solidarities are not communities of faith and of unbelief, but of people adhering to modern structures of cognitive plausibility and of people rejecting those structures.” Patel and Rogers both disagreed with him, arguing that Hollinger failed to adequately understand religious Americans.

Rogers agreed with Hollinger that religious ideas should be scrutinized if they enter the public debate, but countered, “I don’t think it’s productive to suggest, in democratic debate, that religious people should embrace faiths that, as David Hollinger said, are more consistent with standards of cognitive plausibility.” Rogers said that, especially in Washington, diverse religious coalitions effectively advocate for issues based on their faiths. Such coalitions can bridge gaps, she said, because leaders ask, “What’s more important here—finding the common ground to advance the common good, or making sure that everyone got there the same way?”

“There are things that matter to me deeply, that I want my nation to be about, that I want my world to be about, matters of morals and of ethics, matters of equality and justice, that I don’t find in places that I label cognitive plausibility,” Patel said. Hollinger responded, “one way to express respect is to critically engage our fellow human beings and our fellow Americans...maybe our society would be better off if we had a robust discussion.”

All panelists acknowledged the tradition and importance of religious plurality in the United States. Rogers noted that, “the Constitution assumes that people of all faiths and none can work together to advance its principles.” Similarly, Patel said, “When I am asked the question, ‘tell me how you from your deepest identity, from what matters to you, can contribute to the common good’—I’m a citizen. And I actually think that that’s exactly what America is built on.”

For more on this event, please visit the [events page](#).

To speak with our experts on this topic, please contact:

For print, John Neurohr, Deputy Press Secretary
202.481.8182 or jneurohr@americanprogress.org

For radio, Andrea Purse, Deputy Director of Media Strategy
202.446.8429 or apurse@americanprogress.org

For TV, Sean Gibbons, Director of Media Strategy
202.682.1611 or sgibbons@americanprogress.org

For web, Erin Lindsay, Online Marketing Manager
202.741.6397 or elindsay@americanprogress.org

© Center for American Progress | [About Us](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Press Room](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Reuse Policy](#) | [Terms of Use](#)