

Conference, Symposium, and Panel Reports

Religious Americans and Political Choices

The *Journal of Law and Religion* held its 2006 Law, Religion, and Ethics symposium, “Religious Americans and Political Choices,” at Hamline University. The event focused on reframing the divide between the so-called religious “Red State” and secular “Blue State” political discourses. Its objective was to discover what the major American faith traditions share by way of political values and understandings about the critical issues facing the United States, particularly in the areas of race, poverty, environmental protection, and restorative justice.

Keynoter David Gushee (Graves Professor of Moral Philosophy, Union University) began with an “insider’s critique” of how evangelicals have allowed political conservatives to capture their commitments on issues that do not fully reflect their broad priorities as Christians. He argued that evangelical Christians should cast a wary eye on politico-religious alignments in accord with their basic principles. Evangelicals, Gushee noted, believe that God is redeeming the world on His own time and that a Christian’s first loyalty must be to Jesus Christ as Lord, not parties, and teaching the Good News as well as loving God and one’s neighbor. This evangelical commitment entails the recognition that political activity cannot redeem the world; but because the world is an arena of moral concern, politics is a necessary (if sinful) part of life. Thus, Christians must seek peace and prosperity for the entire human community, with a consistent ethic of life that embraces those members of the wider world community who have been marginalized.

In the panel on race and poverty, David Skeel (professor of law, University of Pennsylvania), an evangelical Christian, continued this theme by discussing the important role that evangelicals and other Christians have played in pursuing debt relief for Africa, despite their traditional suspicion of big government. He called for religious Christians to identify the “moral blind spots of our age” and demand that political leaders recognize the equal worth of every human being, both at home and abroad.

Jose Roberto Juarez (dean, University of Denver Law School), Jace Weaver (theologian, University of Georgia), and Ahmed Souaiaia (professor of religion, University of Iowa) spoke on the political dilemmas of Latino, American Indian, and Muslim peoples in the United States. Juarez noted that Latinos have been taken for granted by political leaders and, working from their religious faith, must put themselves in the place of those on the margins and align their political commitments accordingly. Telling many stories of American oppression of Native peoples, Weaver concluded that it has been hard for Native peoples to bring their holistic, relational values, which stress generosity and belonging, to bear on American political life. Souaiaia spoke on the critical contribution that Islam, due to its focus on the inevitability of pluralism that is coupled with an understanding of each human being's equality and relatedness, could make to American politics.

Shelley Ross Saxer (professor of law, Pepperdine University), Mark Berkson (professor of religion, Hamline University) and Betty Mensch (professor of law, SUNY-Buffalo) looked at critical emphases in Christian and Buddhist thought between the relationship of human well-being and political commitments to protect the environment. Saxer described the Christian concept of stewardship over creation and how it might be used to create environmental law that protects Earth. Berkson dispelled common myths about Buddhism's views of the interconnectedness of life and mentioned how Buddhist views might be distinguished from Christian, Jewish, and other concepts of stewardship. Mensch explored how such historical religious movements as millennialism have surprisingly influenced the United States' environmental policy. Mensch's and Berkson's work, along with Gushee's address, is scheduled to be published in the journal.

Finally, Howard Zehr (co-director and professor, Center for Justice and Peacebuilding, Eastern Mennonite University), Howard J. Vogel (professor of law, Hamline University), and Thomas W. Porter, Jr., (executive director, Just Peace Center for Mediation and Conflict Transformation), analyzed the prospects for religious people to find common ground around the restorative justice movement. Zehr described how restorative justice responds to crime and other social ills by recognizing the interconnectedness of human life, the necessity of human accountability for wrongdoing that harms others, and the importance of humility and respect in dealings with others. He also noted that violence is most often an effort to do justice or undo injustice because of the violator's belief that he or she has been victimized. Restorative justice creates the prospect that dialogue can open people to the reality that we are all wounded and understand how we can live together, given the realities of human conflict.

Vogel continued this theme, describing how such dialogue must be disciplined, exploratory, engaged with the other, and careful to pass judgments. He presented the Dakota tribe's quest to protect sacred lands and burial sites against modern urban encroachments. Porter described how the Christian communion table can be used as a location for the joining of conflict and the building of shalom among all peoples, the practice of forgiveness and reconciliation with others. Summarist James W. Lewis (executive director, Louisville Institute) noted the complexity of the political problems raised at the conference and reminded the audience that religious traditions offer a rich supply of complex resources to respond to them. He also suggested that Christians and others do more than just offer religious warrants for their beliefs – they must create a publicly accessible conversation that can begin to bring both prophetic criticism and the religious emphasis on forgiveness to this country's major political problems.

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