
Chapter 1

Introduction to America's Sacred Ground

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Literary talents may be prostituted and the powers of genius debased to subserve the purposes of ambition or avarice; but the feelings of the heart will dictate the language of truth, and the simplicity of her accents will proclaim the infamy of those, who betray the rights of the people, under the specious, and popular pretence of justice, consolidation, and dignity.

—Elbridge Gerry, *Observations on the New Constitution and the Federal and State Conventions* (1788)¹

REFRAMING THE DEBATE

Today the debate about the role of religion in American public life, and its role in shaping American values, is mired in a clash between the religious right and the secular left—the extremes of each vying for dominance. The strident polemical rhetoric that characterizes the debate polarizes the nation

and undermines the potential for the many other voices of America's pluralistic society to be heard. The current polarization in the popular political discourse of the nation into these two main camps not only divides the nation's people, but also obscures the fundamental structures and principles that make the whole conversation possible in the first place. The result is confusion about the very structures and principles that ultimately serve liberty and equal justice, as well as the whole purpose of the America experiment: the pursuit of the good society.

This confusion is occurring because the debate between the two sides has emerged as a contest between two opposing worldviews—the winner being the side that receives the most votes and therefore gains power over the other. It is no wonder, then, that inflammatory rhetoric is everywhere in the political discourse as each side uses whatever means are available, even including (in some cases) outright dissemination of misinformation, to sway public opinion. The main problem with this situation is that each side, in effect, is assuming there are no rules other than those that make up the procedures by which decisions are made—that is, there are no principles to ground the system itself. Therefore, the idea prevails that the majority rules regardless of the result. Seeing no grounding principles, the secular left and religious right rush to fill the void.

On the one hand, the secular left takes the view that the nation should adhere to a strict interpretation of the doctrine of separation of church and state. The idea is that if the public square is purged of religious influences, and therefore religious views and values are not imposed on others through the instrumentalities of the state, then America will safely preserve liberty and justice for all. The problem with this approach is that history has shown time and again that the secularization of government and society does not necessarily serve those goals. The former Soviet Union was a secular state, and it devolved into a totalitarian regime. Saddam Hussein's Baathist government in Iraq was secular, yet it too was a brutal regime. Clearly, secularism is not the panacea that the secular left believes it is.²

On the other hand, the religious right takes the view that public opinion should be swayed to produce a majority in favor of infusing government with Christian, or some say Judeo-Christian, values. The right argues that these are the values on which the nation originally was founded, even though they are not specifically referenced in the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution. The idea is that all governments require a religious worldview to provide the values that hold societies together—and America is no different. The Christian right contends that the Christian tradition has legitimacy as the moral basis of the United States because it is the primary religion of the West, and therefore it is in large part what informed the American founders.

Here, too, however, history has shown that infusing the state with a particular religious moral worldview, even someone's particular version of Chris-

tianity, does not necessarily serve liberty and equal justice. Everyone is amply familiar with the horrors of the Inquisition in Europe, the abuses of John Calvin's Geneva, and the persecutions of the theocracies of colonial America—including the Massachusetts Bay Colony, whose Puritan founders left England's persecution of them only to persecute others in their New World home. Furthermore, Adolf Hitler originally justified persecution of the Jews on the basis of Christian tradition.³ Clearly, the imposition of a particular interpretation of Christian values onto other Christians and non-Christians through the instrumentalities of the state is not the panacea that the religious right believes it is.

In this author's view, liberty and equal justice will not be served by winning favor with the people and convincing a majority to vote for one side or the other. Nor will liberty and equal justice be served by packing the courts with judges who adhere to one view or the other. Moreover, the problem will not be solved by a mediated compromise across the boundaries of the two camps. The problem will be resolved only if Americans rediscover the founding fathers' fundamental framework, principles, and purpose underlying the American political system.

The founders' idea was to create a space for the many voices of American society to be heard by establishing a political system that preserves the peoples' civil rights, particularly the rights of conscience and expression. These are necessary not only to protect America's minorities, including religious minorities, from discrimination, but also to expand all Americans' opportunities to glean insights from each other, in the hope that together they would advance their understanding of how America can fully realize its promise. That is, although the founders did not fully realize in their own time the ideal to which they appealed, the political system they established was based on a fundamental framework and set of principles that, if fully implemented, would provide maximum liberty for all within a moral context that would serve as the means for building the good society from the ground up. This author refers to that framework and its principles and purpose as "America's Sacred Ground."

Unfortunately, however, what is occurring in the debate today is undermining America's Sacred Ground. First, the dominant participants, that is, the religious right and secular left, have become entrenched. The result is the reification of circumscribed positions and narrow reasoning, which has led to a standoff with little hope of either side or anyone else circumventing the impasse. Second, the standoff itself has led to a glorification of the battle, the "culture war"—with the media taking sides and the goal being victory of one side over the other, rather than pursuit of the good for the nation as a whole. This is why it is important, even critical, for the debate to engage a much broader spectrum of participants across America's pluralistic society.

Some contend that the engagement of those in the many minority religions with those in the majority is not warranted because those minority

faiths include only a small percentage of the American people. However, American history has shown that it is generally those from the margins of society who rise up and reinvigorate the principles of the nation, taking American ever closer to the ideal of liberty and justice of all. Further, the wisdom from the world's religions in America in conversation with American ideals no doubt will contribute to public discourse in new ways, and in so doing help to open up the now entrenched debate. Moreover, while it can certainly be said that the vast majority of America's people are Christian, what is often forgotten in the debate today is that Christianity itself is not monolithic. Christianity is wonderfully diverse, and that diversity brings a whole spectrum of pluralistic perspectives to the conversation as well. To ignore this is to ignore the ongoing discourse within Christianity itself, which is rich with insights and possibilities for moving public debate beyond its current impasse toward a greater understanding of the principles underlying the nation.

This book attempts to bring together some of the many voices of America's pluralistic society, representing several Christian perspectives (Catholic, Mormon, Baptist, Black churches), as well as Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Eclectic Eco-Spirituality, Confucianism, and Humanism, to address issues in the contemporary public debate in America today while engaging the framework, principles, and purpose of America's Sacred Ground. In so doing it is hoped that not only will it be shown how a more open discourse on critical issues of the day can be conducted without undermining the fundamental structures and values of the nation, but also how each religious perspective can contribute to the rediscovery of America's Sacred Ground.

The rediscovery of America's Sacred Ground in public discourse, however, will not provide "common ground" in the sense that it necessarily directs a particular outcome in the resolution of the issues of the day. What it can do is provide a common language, structure, and values for the debate that is consonant with the original intentions of the American founders. In so doing, America's Sacred Ground can provide moral clarity that facilitates a much broader discussion than occurs today. That way Americans can work together toward reasoned compromise, while not compromising America's Sacred Ground itself in the process. Then the American people may just fulfill the founders' hope "that America would be fertile enough for the good to take root, grow, and flourish in a lively, free, and open forum for debate about religion and morality—not by force, but by choice."⁴

Before turning to the various religious perspectives in the other chapters in this book, it will be necessary for the reader to become familiar with the fundamental framework, principles, and language of America's Sacred Ground. What follows, then, is an introduction to America's Sacred Ground. Those interested in a more in-depth philosophical and historical support for the ideas presented here are referred to this author's previous publication, *Redis-*

covering America's Sacred Ground: Public Religion and Pursuit of the Good in a Pluralistic America (SUNY Press, 2003), to which many of the contributing authors of *Taking Religious Pluralism Seriously* also refer.

BUILDING THE GOOD SOCIETY FROM THE GROUND UP

In order to rediscover America's Sacred Ground, it is helpful to explore, at least briefly in this venue, a significant aspect of the theory of government that was prevalent in Europe before the establishment of the United States. This is the theory of government that was rejected by John Locke in works that were central inspirations to the American founders a century later.⁵ That rejected approach was based on traditional Christian political theory. It was a religious justification for government that developed from the doctrine of original sin.⁶ Its central premise was this: People are inherently sinful, and so government is necessary to restrain the sinful nature of human beings. In other words, the role of the state is to keep people uniformly "in line," in accordance with the doctrines of the authorities—that is, not sinning.

This approach requires that government and religious organizations be close allies. The churches seek government's involvement for an effective means to enforce church doctrine regarding sin, and government uses the sanction of the church to justify its punishments. Under this system the state is an instrument of religion and religion is an instrument of the state. Government dominates the people by establishing a uniform moral order, which is promoted by exercise of the coercive power of the state. That is, it is a top-down overarching moral worldview *enforced* by the state. Examples of top-down overarching systems around the world include, classical Hinduism, which generated the caste system as an expression of *dharma* (the moral order) as a reflection of *rita* (the divine order); medieval Catholicism and the Holy Roman Empire; the Church of England and the seventeenth-century British Crown (which John Locke opposed); Neo-Confucianism and the eleventh and twelfth century Song Dynasty in China; and, today, Islam and Saudi Arabia.⁷ (Figure A on the following page provides a visual representation of this type of system.)

In European history, those who promoted this top-down system of government believed it provided the best way to ensure that society would be peaceful and good. But John Locke's immediate experience of his own society, and his review of societies throughout history, proved to him that this approach did not result in a society that could be thought of as good.⁸ Rather, that approach resulted in terrible wars, religious conflict and strife, the torture and hanging of heretics, and the corruption of both religion and government.⁹ Moreover, coercion of the people made no sense to Locke, because that would make them heretics to their own convictions.¹⁰ It was clear to Locke that what a top-down overarching worldview system produced in