

Speaker Urges Separation of Public Policy from Religious Rhetoric

Written by Eric Junco

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Both Democrats and Republicans are doing harm to society by invoking religion, author Susan Jacoby argued in a November 29 lecture at Augustana College.

Jacoby's lecture, "Whose God, Whose Trust? Religion, Secularism, & American Patriotism," offered a historical perspective on what she called the "great American paradox" - the separation of church and state. She said that the conflict between secularism and religion is at an all-time high, and that both liberals and conservatives cross a moral boundary when using religious rhetoric to influence the general public or public policy.

Jacoby was a Pulitzer Prize finalist in the nonfiction category for *Wild Justice: Evolution of Revenge*, and she has also written books on religion, women's rights, medicine, and law.

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Jacoby said that it was President George W. Bush's address three days after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks that sparked her interest in secularism and compelled her to write her latest book, *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism*. The *New York Times* called it an "ardent and insightful work";

Bush, in his address at Washington's National Cathedral, said, "God's signs are not always the ones we look for; we learn in tragedy that his purposes are not always our own. ... On this national day of prayer and remembrance, we ask Almighty God to watch over our nation and grant us patience and resolve in all that is to come."

Jacoby's response was strong. "I think it is insulting for the president to say this sort of thing to Americans who do or who do not share the beliefs that God has some higher purpose in permitting the murder of thousands," she said. "And there are many people of faith as well as atheists and agnostics who reject the vision of a God who kills people for reasons that we mortals cannot understand and therefore can only accept";

She also noted that "Bush's very presence at the pulpit attested powerfully to the erosion of American secular traditions. ... Most sitting American presidents would have regarded the choice of a religious sanctuary for a major speech as a gross violation of the respect for separation of church and state constitutionally required of the nation's chief executive."

Jacoby emphasized that the founding of the United States was in part a reaction to "the very worst horrors of the union between church and state." Just two decades before the Constitution was written, for instance, Europeans were still being executed for having religious beliefs other than Christianity. Jacoby argued that the omission of God from the Constitution was deliberate, making the United States the first secular government in the world.

"I don't mean to imply that they [the founding fathers] were either hostile to or unmindful of religion," Jacoby said. "On the contrary, the experience of the 'old world,' in which union of church and state was then universal, had convinced them that there may be no liberty of conscience unless religion was free of government interference, and that there could be no decent government unless government was free from religious interference."

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Jacoby said that the separation of church and state made the "Jewish success story" in America possible in a time when Jews in Europe had to convert to Christianity to hold any kind of public office.

She also noted that Catholicism has thrived in the U.S. because of the country's secular government: "Even though 19th Century popes were engaged in a relentless rear-guard action against separation of church and state, the flourishing of American Catholicism here, even though many Americans then had strong personal anti-Catholic prejudices, was also made possible by our legal separation between church and state."

Despite the success of American secularism, Jacoby said, tension between church and state remains a problem. Jacoby said that the fundamental issue is that public policy is sometimes based on religious beliefs rather than results-driven government or social policy. "What we are talking about here is turning political campaigns to a duel of theologies rather than a rational debate about what policies make sense for all of our citizens in the world," she said.

Jacoby asked the audience to consider the death penalty as one example of how religious rhetoric can confuse public discussion. The Roman Catholic church is strongly opposed to capital punishment, she noted. "The pope's argument against the death penalty is based on the premise that only God has power over life and death," she said. "Therefore the state has no right to usurp God's prerogative."

On the other hand, Supreme Court Justice (and Catholic) Antonin Scalia uses his faith to support the death penalty. "Scalia argues that since the powers of all legitimate governments come from God, and since God has power over life and death, so should we too as God's executioners."

Jacoby believes that the views of neither the pope nor Scalia should be used in deciding whether the death penalty is good public policy. "There is always a chance that innocent people might be executed, and above all ... it coarsens the ethical fabric of a society that engages in it," Jacoby said. "I don't think that looking to the Bible - which has many different things to say about the death penalty - gives us an answer as a civil society."

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Jacoby emphasized that there is a danger in suggesting that God has conferred his approval on a particular set of policies or positions. "Democrats wanting to retake some 'moral real estate' from the Republicans are now using religious language every chance they get," she said. Democratic House leader "Nancy Pelosi pressured fellow Democrats last year to vote against Bush's budget cuts for the poor as a quote 'act of worship.' ... There's everything wrong with politicians suggesting that the main reason to vote against aid programs for the poor is because God demands it or because the Bible says so in some of its passages."