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978-0-521-77570-0 - Religious Commitment and Secular Reason

Robert Audi

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[More information](#)**RELIGIOUS COMMITMENT AND SECULAR REASON**

This book is a balanced treatment of religion and politics in a pluralistic society. It describes the foundations of a free democracy, develops a theory of church-state separation, and integrates secular moral ideals with commitments of religious citizens. Just as there should be separation of church and state, there should be a balance between religious and secular arguments regarding law and public policy. To achieve this balance, Audi offers principles that accommodate religious reasons for action but rule out restricting freedom except on grounds of a kind that any rational citizen should accept. He shows how religious and secular moral considerations can be integrated in a world of religious pluralism and proposes ideals of civic virtue that express the mutual respect on which democracy depends. The book should engage readers interested in religion, journalism, or public affairs as well as readers in philosophy, law, political science, and related areas.

One of the most important questions for the new century is how to balance the demands of politics and of religion. . . . *Religious Commitment and Secular Reason* is the best philosophical treatment to date. Any future discussion should take account of it.

John Haldane, University of St. Andrews

Audi has been one of the most thoughtful, provocative voices addressing this issue. . . . essential reading for all who would think clearly about religion in politics.

Michael J. Perry, Wake Forest University

Its analysis and argument should engage serious attention from political philosophers . . . religious scholars who make social and political policy recommendations . . . and denominational and other institutional leaders who make moral pronouncements.

James M. Gustafson, Emory University

. . . a helpful introduction to the current philosophical debate about religious argument in a liberal democracy, at the same time . . . a distinctive contribution to it . . . a fine text for introducing students to the topic.

Charles Larmore, University of Chicago

Robert Audi is Charles J. Mach Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. His books include *The Structure of Justification* (1993), *Moral Knowledge and Ethical Character* (1997), and (as editor) the widely acclaimed *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, now in its second edition.

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*To the Memory of My Father,
Who Was Fascinated by the Subject*

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PREFACE

Religion and politics are perennial topics of concern and debate in any free society. Their interaction has recently become a major preoccupation in many parts of the world and especially in the United States. It is inevitable that reflective religious people should discuss religion and that thoughtful citizens should discuss politics. It is perhaps not inevitable, but it is altogether appropriate, for a liberal democracy – a free and democratic society – in which religion is a major cultural force to concern itself with the relation between religion and politics. This is particularly so where the religions represented in the society imply, or are readily seen to imply, a political philosophy or at least an ethic that bears directly on politics. All that certainly applies to Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, which are immensely important in the contemporary world and are the main religious perspectives of concern in this book.

My primary aim is to articulate a perspective on religion and politics that is appropriate for both citizens and institutions in a liberal democracy. I have in mind particularly, but by no means exclusively, religious citizens and governmental institutions. This task requires a position on separation of church and state. But even more urgently, it demands a good understanding of the proper balance between, on the one hand, religious commitments that bear on what sort of society we should have, and on the other hand, political and other secular considerations pertinent to the same range of objectives.

The broad area of my concern here is what might be called *the ethics of citizenship*. My main question in this domain is what ethical standards are best for religious citizens and for other citizens acting in ways that significantly affect religion. Citizens with roles in governmental or other influential institutions are commonly in the second category and often

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in the first as well. Parts of the book, however – such as the accounts of civic virtue and of grounds for governmental restrictions of liberty – bear on ethical questions of citizenship in non-religious matters.

I have written on this topic on a number of occasions in the past decade, but there are important aspects of the topic I have not previously addressed, and there is much that should be said to fill out and extend the position I have previously set out. My earlier work has not considered the normative grounding of a free and democratic society: roughly, how it can be justified as a political structure. A major basis for a good theory of the proper relation between religion and politics – applicable both to church-state separation and to the balance between religious and secular considerations in individual conduct – is an account of the ways in which a free democracy can be plausibly grounded. Chapter 1 provides a brief account of this sort. My earlier writings have also omitted consideration of a number of questions about the kinds of public discourse appropriate for religious citizens adhering to the principles I propose. This gap is filled mainly in Chapter 6. Given their much smaller scope, my previous essays do not discuss a number of other theorists addressing the same range of problems; in this respect, too, this book advances and clarifies my position, though even here I avoid lengthy discussions of the literature and often respond to critics, or refer to appropriate literature, in the notes that appear at the end.

As to clarification of the position I have so far set out on these matters, there have been many misinterpretations in the literature, and my experience in presenting my position to various audiences shows that it requires some reflection to get clearly in view. That understanding a complex theoretical perspective should require reflection is not unusual, but in this case there is the added problem that my position has been assimilated by some readers to other broadly liberal views – usually views less accommodating to religion – or, worse still, has been thought to have implications to which no major liberal theorist is committed.

The systematic articulation of my position that this book offers should do more than provide a wider basis for, and systematically set forth, my theory of church-state separation and of the proper balance between religious and political considerations. It should also state the theory in a way that makes it both more accessible and more plausible for general readers. Beyond that, it extends the theory in several directions, including the style and content of public discourse in which reli-

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rious citizens may most appropriately bring their faith to bear. There are places where philosophers or legal or political theorists or clergy or students of religion will take a special interest; but even these more narrowly focused discussions are couched in as plain language as I could find, and the general movement of the book should be clear to readers with no special background in these fields.

This book has benefited greatly from the comments of friends, colleagues, critics, audiences I have addressed, students I have taught, and other writers on the topic, many (though unfortunately not all) of whom are referred to in the notes. My recent work has been supported by a generous fellowship from the Pew Foundation, by the University of Nebraska, particularly its Center for the Teaching and Study of Applied Ethics and its College of Arts and Sciences Initiative on Public Discourse and Human Values, and by Santa Clara University (where I have twice served terms as Distinguished Professor). Without the research opportunities they have provided, the book would have been at best delayed.

For permission to use, in revised form, material published in my essays, I am grateful to a number of editors and publishers. Although no chapter consists of a previously published work, and none of my previously published essays is reproduced either in its entirety or without revision of any parts of it that do appear, I have drawn substantially on my writings in the past decade. My first essay on this topic, "The Separation of Church and State and the Obligations of Citizenship" (*Philosophy & Public Affairs* 18, 3, 1989), provides background for some of Chapters 2 through 4 and contains some of the main principles defended there. "The Place of Religious Argument in a Free and Democratic Society" (*San Diego Law Review* 30, 4, 1993) is also a source of some of my ideas, particularly in Chapters 3 and 5. A wide-ranging essay called "Liberal Democracy and the Place of Religion in Politics," which appeared in *Religion in the Public Square: The Place of Religious Convictions in Political Debate* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), a book written jointly with Nicholas Wolterstorff as discussion partner, has provided material appearing in various places in Chapters 2 through 6. Chapter 6 incorporates parts of my essay "A Liberal Theory of Civic Virtue" (*Social Philosophy and Policy* 15, 1, 1998), and Chapter 7 draws on my "Preventing Abortion as a Test Case for the Justifiability of Violence" (*Journal of Ethics* 1, 2, 1997). Chapter 1 and the conclusion were written entirely for this book.

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I cannot name all the people from whom I have learned something important on this general topic since beginning to address it publicly in the 1980s. But both from many conversations and from their work I have learned immensely from Kent Greenawalt, Michael Perry, and Nicholas Wolterstorff. Greenawalt's work was an early stimulus, and his books and many articles on the topic have been a lasting resource. Perry's writings have brought home new dimensions of the topic and posed challenges I am still addressing. Wolterstorff has provided both a contrasting perspective from which I continue to learn and insightful criticism that has led to many improvements. For detailed and helpful comments on and discussions of earlier versions of the entire manuscript I am grateful to Stephen Kershner, Brian Lepard, and James B. Murphy. I have also benefited much from the comments of Larry Alexander, William Alston, Theodore Blumoff, Norman Dahl, Richard Duncan, Evan Fales, Richard Flathman, Jorge Garcia, Eugene Garver, Bernard Gert, James Gustafson, Stephen Kalish, Hugh LaFollette, Charles Larmore, Craig Lawson, Hugh McCann, Joseph Mendola, Allison Nespor, William Prior, Jack Sammons, Robert Schopp, Jeff Spinner-Halev, James Sterba, Eleonore Stump, Richard Swinburne, Mark Timmons, Mark van Roojen, William Wainwright, Linda Zagzebski, and especially Philip Quinn and Paul Weithman, who, in both their published criticism and their comments on work in progress, have indicated a number of places where my theory needed development or defense. Anonymous readers of this and other work of mine on the subject also deserve thanks, and I am grateful to Walter Havighurst for expert copy-editing and helpful queries. I only wish time had permitted doing justice to all the comments they and other readers of my work have given me, but I am confident that in numerous places they will see the effects of an effort to develop the needed responses.