

MASS HUMANITIES 2008
SYMPOSIUM
November 22, 2008
Boston College
Robsham Theater

**ONE NATION UNDER GOD?
THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE**

Alexis de Tocqueville, the brilliant early 19th-century French chronicler of democracy in America, recognized the distinctive role that religion played in shaping American culture. “This civilization is the result . . . of two quite distinct ingredients, which anywhere else have often ended in war but which Americans have succeeded somehow to meld together in wondrous harmony; namely the spirit of religion and the spirit of liberty.”

Almost two centuries after de Tocqueville penned these words, the “spirit of religion” remains a powerful force in shaping the views and values of the American people. Evidence of this can be found in the *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey* recently published by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life. Th

SESSION II: RELIGION AND ELECTORAL POLITICS

The separation of Church and State is “enshrined” — as it is said — in our Constitution, and yet Americans have a powerful inclination to mix religion and politics. Throughout our nation’s history, great political and social movements – from abolition to women’s suffrage to civil rights to gay marriage – have drawn upon religious institutions for moral authority, leadership, and organizational strength. In the past several decades, religion has been woven deeply into the fabric of partisan politics. The Pew study notes that the degree to which a person regularly attended religious services was a more powerful predictor of his or her vote for president in 2004 than was gender, age, income, or region.

The last two presidential primaries and campaigns featured candidates who openly discussed their creedal beliefs, while churches have become increasingly active in political mobilization, and Barak Obama, during his own campaign for the Democratic nomination, expressed his interest in expanding the delivery of social services through churches and other religious organizations, vowing to achieve the unfulfilled promise of the Republican President George W. Bush’s “faith-based initiative.”

What is the proper role of religion in electoral politics? How has it changed over the course of two American centuries? How ought we understand the meaning of “separation of church and state”?

PANELISTS

MIKE HUCKABEE, former Governor of Arkansas, former candidate for Republican nomination for United States President, and ordained Southern Baptist minister [not confirmed].

BISHOP HARRY JACKSON, JR., Senior Pastor of Hope Christian Church in the Washington, D.C. area, and Founder and Chairman of the High Impact Leadership Coalition.

AMY SULLIVAN, the Nation Editor for *Time Magazine* and author of *The Party Faithful: How and Why Democrats Are Closing the God Gap* (2008).

STEVEN WALDMAN is co-founder, CEO, and Editor-in-Chief of Beliefnet.com, the largest faith and spirituality website, and author of **Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America** (2008).

MODERATOR

HANNA ROSIN

SESSION III: RELIGION, MORALITY, AND THE LAW

A common view of the relationship between religion, morality, and the law was famously expressed by George Washington in his Farewell Address: *And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.*

What does this signify for a country that is less and less able to agree on what it means to be “without religion?” Can we sustain law, virtue, and generous goodness in the United States if we cannot agree that God — or a particular God — wills us to be moral creatures? This is a highly significant question in 2008, when a host of difficult ethical issues — unimaginable to George Washington — vexes our culture, including abortion rights, doctor-assisted suicide, stem cell research, gene therapy, the allocation of health care, treatment of illegal immigrants, environmental protection, and punishment under the law—whether in a prison death chamber or at Guantanamo Bay.

Many people of faith say that we can – and should – be guided by principles derived from religion and a right understanding of God. Others argue — with evidence of the day’s headlines before them—that adherence to a belief in the divine is hardly a guarantee of moral behavior toward other human beings, but that our moral principles must rest on sturdier foundations, such as the “reason and experience” cited by Washington.

Whose argument should hold sway in the United States? Is it dangerous for a society to abandon the idea that a divine will and command anchors our laws and behaviors? And what ought to be the relationship between our moral convictions—whatever their provenance—and the law of the land? And where laws seem unjust or immoral by our standards of religion or reason, how ought