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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Faith vs. the Faithless

By [DAVID BROOKS](#)

Jon Meacham is the editor of Newsweek and the author of “American Gospel,” which describes the history of religious liberty in the United States. Richard John Neuhaus is the editor in chief of First Things and the author of “The Naked Public Square,” which is about efforts to banish religion from public conversation.

Yesterday, Mitt Romney delivered a speech that artfully blended the centrist Meacham and the conservative Neuhaus.

From Meacham, whose book he has read twice, Romney borrowed the language of America’s political religion. He argued that beneath the differences among America’s denominations there is a common creed, a conception of a moral order described in the Declaration of Independence, and lived out during the high points in the nation’s history. He recounted Sam Adams’s plea for unity in a time of crisis, and how his own father’s commitment to the basic American creed caused him to march with Martin Luther King Jr.

From Neuhaus, Romney borrowed the conviction that faith is under assault in America — which is the unifying glue of social conservatism. He argued that the religious have a common enemy: the counter-religion of secularism.

He insisted that the faithful should stick stubbornly to their religions, as he himself sticks to the faith of his fathers. He insisted that God-talk should remain a vibrant force in the public square and that judges should be guided by the foundations of their faith. He lamented the faithlessness of Europe and linked the pro-life movement to abolition and civil rights, just as evangelicals do.

It is not always easy to blend an argument for religious liberty with an argument for religious assertiveness, but Romney did it well. Yesterday, I called around to many of America’s serious religious thinkers — including moderates like Richard Bushman of Columbia, and conservatives like Neuhaus and Robert George of Princeton. Everyone I spoke with was enthusiastic about the speech, some of them wildly so.

Before yesterday, most pundits thought Romney was making a mistake in giving the speech now. But in retrospect, it clearly was not a mistake. Romney didn’t say anything that the Baptist minister Mike Huckabee couldn’t say, and so this one address will not hold off the Huckabee surge in Iowa. But Romney underlined the values he shares with social conservatives, and will have

eased their concerns. Among Mormons, the speech may go down as a historic event.

And yet, I confess my own reaction is more muted.

When this country was founded, James Madison envisioned a noisy public square with different religious denominations arguing, competing and balancing each other's passions. But now the landscape of religious life has changed. Now its most prominent feature is the supposed war between the faithful and the faithless. Mitt Romney didn't start this war, but speeches like his both exploit and solidify this divide in people's minds. The supposed war between the faithful and the faithless has exacted casualties.

The first casualty is the national community. Romney described a community yesterday. Observant Catholics, Baptists, Methodists, Jews and Muslims are inside that community. The nonobservant are not. There was not even a perfunctory sentence showing respect for the nonreligious. I'm assuming that Romney left that out in order to generate howls of outrage in the liberal press.

The second casualty of the faith war is theology itself. In rallying the armies of faith against their supposed enemies, Romney waved away any theological distinctions among them with the brush of his hand. In this calculus, the faithful become a tribe, marked by ethnic pride, a shared sense of victimization and all the other markers of identity politics.

In Romney's account, faith ends up as wishy-washy as the most New Age-y secularism. In arguing that the faithful are brothers in a common struggle, Romney insisted that all religions share an equal devotion to all good things. Really? Then why not choose the one with the prettiest buildings?

In order to build a voting majority of the faithful, Romney covered over different and difficult conceptions of the Almighty. When he spoke of God yesterday, he spoke of a bland, smiley-faced God who is the author of liberty and the founder of freedom. There was no hint of Lincoln's God or Reinhold Niebuhr's God or the religion most people know — the religion that imposes restraints upon on the passions, appetites and sinfulness of human beings. He wants God in the public square, but then insists that theological differences are anodyne and politically irrelevant.

Romney's job yesterday was to unite social conservatives behind him. If he succeeded, he did it in two ways. He asked people to rally around the best traditions of America's civic religion. He also asked people to submerge their religious convictions for the sake of solidarity in a culture war without end.

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