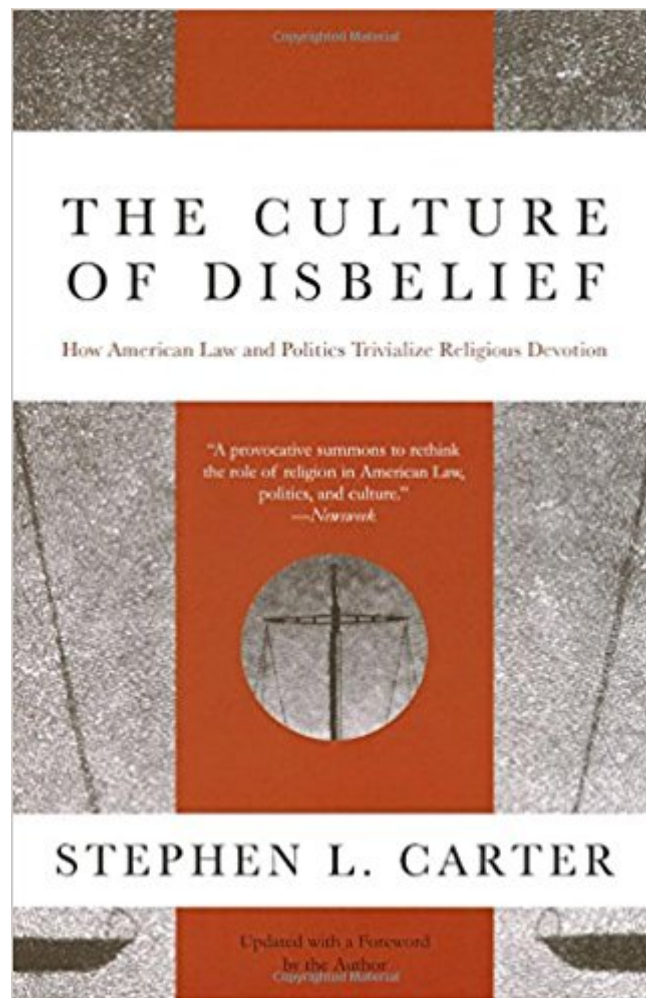


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The Culture Of Disbelief: How American Law And Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion



Synopsis

The Culture Of Disbelief has been the subject of an enormous amount of media attention from the first moment it was published. Hugely successful in hardcover, the Anchor paperback is sure to find a large audience as the ever-increasing, enduring debate about the relationship of church and state in America continues. In The Culture Of Disbelief, Stephen Carter explains how we can preserve the vital separation of church and state while embracing rather than trivializing the faith of millions of citizens or treating religious believers with disdain. What makes Carter's work so intriguing is that he uses liberal means to arrive at what are often considered conservative ends. Explaining how preserving a special role for religious communities can strengthen our democracy, The Culture Of Disbelief recovers the long tradition of liberal religious witness (for example, the antislavery, antisegregation, and Vietnam-era antiwar movements). Carter argues that the problem with the 1992 Republican convention was not the fact of open religious advocacy, but the political positions being advocated.

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Customer Reviews

The author of Reflections of an Affirmative Action Baby examines the role of religion in American society. Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Carter, a professor of law at Yale University and author of the acclaimed Reflections of an Affirmative Action Baby (LJ 9/15/91), advances the thesis that American law and politics "trivialize"

religion by forcing the religiously faithful to subordinate their personal views to a public faith largely devoid of religion. Carter argues that religious faith can and must be a significant element of our public life, even as we affirm the importance of the separation of church and state. He accepts the place of prayer in education and in developing family values, and he questions accepted public policy in matters such as abortion, euthanasia, and capital punishment. As with Carter's earlier book, which questioned the utility of racial preferences, this book can be used in helping us examine accepted views. For another opinion, the careful reader might want to consider E. Forrester Church's *God and Other Famous Liberals: Reclaiming the Politics of America* (S. & S., 1991).- Jerry E. Stephens, U.S. Court of Appeals Lib., Oklahoma City Copyright 1993 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Stephen Carter's thesis is quite a noble one: he thinks that we as a society have taken religious freedom and morphed it into something of an anti-religion bias. The public square, for instance, seems to give less and less credence to arguments or ideas informed by religion. Pro-lifers or those opposed to gay marriage are written off as 'fanatics' or simply holders of weak, because religiously informed, positions. The establishment and free-exercise clause (which Carter DOES see as a wall of separation between church and state) has increasingly been used to banish religion from the public square entirely. This is all quite unique for me because I am a non-believer, probably unlike many reviewers here. Even as a non-believer (polite term for atheist) I can see the trivialization of religion in our culture and particularly in the political arena. As we speak, George W. Bush is being dismissed as a 'fundamentalist' because he, like most Americans (according to current surveys) opposes gay marriage. Apparently opposing gay marriage ipso facto makes one a fundamentalist which ipso facto marginalizes the whole opinion. Here's the problem: the three stars I've given this book are for the thesis and the very good research (especially in part 1, where the problem is surveyed). The other two stars that I did NOT give the book were for execution. Each chapter seems to be on a wholly new topic (a separate essay unto itself) and Carter does little to hold them together. The first section diagnoses the problem, the second section discusses the 1st amendment religion clauses (and as a law scholar, Carter gives a VERY surface level account) and the third section (apparently) works at a solution (which I was still waiting for when I closed the book for the final time). In brief, the research was good and Carter brings up many good points; they are just packaged in a quite random, meandering, book. The only other problem to speak of is that on the one hand, Carter chastises current politics (liberal politics) for discounting religious faith; on the other he chastises religious faith for often being too dogmatic and zealous. BUT THAT IS WHAT

RELIGIONS DO! Not all, to be sure, but most any catholic sect, for instance, takes stands, believes sincerely in them, and is convinced that their take is the only right one. Quite simply, most religions firmly believe that their way is right and others are wrong - that they have access to the 'truth as revealed through god' where the rest are mistaken. To suggest that religion can still be religion while saying, "But I may be completely wrong about divine revelation or commandment," seems to take the religion out of religion. Thus, I (and Stanley Fish has wisely said just this about Carter) think Carter is trying to let faith back into liberalism by telling religion to be more secular. (Be open minded about gay marriage; you might be wrong, after all, Mr. Robertson!). [Read the section on religion in Stanley Fish's "The Trouble With Principle" for these critiques.] To conclude, the issue is one that needs to be addressed and Dr. Carter has produced a well-researched attempt to highlight what is wrong. Sadly, I did not come away from this book with a feeling that its direction and layout were strong, or that Dr. Carter's solutions were workable.

While not possessing the wonderful immediacy of his masterpiece, "Civility", Dr. Carter's "The Culture of Disbelief" very artfully highlights an often latent national sentiment. Characteristically referenced meticulously, Carter cites specific instances, modern and historical, of the trivialization of religiousness to support virtually every statement he makes. At the same time, he maintains an easy and accessible style that transitions smoothly from the casual to the sobering. Carter attempts to inject an urgent tone at some points, and while reading one may find oneself nodding along in agreement, but the galvanic effect of "Civility" was not present. Nonetheless, an excellent read from cover to cover.

There was a time when religion in America was treated with greater respectability than it is today. Professor Carter's 1993 book shows that deference to faith had already eroded in American culture as far back as the early nineties. People not old enough to recall the 50's and 60's will not understand this book on the same level as older persons (such as myself) who do recall those days. Carter's observations, in my estimation, are accurate in numerous meaningful ways. For instance, the First Amendment's Establishment Clause is meant to protect religion from the state. But to hear some agnostics tell it, the Clause should protect any unbelief from ever having to hear the tenets of faith. Carter exposes that common error. Also, the current trajectory of secularism that has infected our nation certainly does demean and trivialize people of faith with an arrogance of assumed superiority, and sometimes this arrogance is judicial, happening in the courts of our land, and victimizing adherents of various faiths. Ample documentation detailing this trend is

provided. From a liberal perspective, he champions some of the best attributes of liberalism, yet also justifies the voices of conservatives. He also shows himself to not be averse to voicing the weaknesses of both camps as well. He argues for all views to have a real voice and unencumbered choices. But therein lies the dilemma. The separation of church and state is not so easily achieved, and fairness in many issues is not so easy to define or to ensure. To do the best we can do, the issues Carter takes up need attention. This book does not have all the answers. It just points us in the direction of asking some of the right questions. And he points out that putting a lid on faith is no viable answer. Professor Carter also demonstrates that experts are not always right just because they are experts. Not too many people would write a book that included why a Supreme Court judge was wrong in a certain decision, but Carter did not hesitate to do so. If Carter thinks you're wrong, he tells you. But at the same time, he wants us all to be able to talk it out, to work it out, and not force each other into an embittered, silent defeat under the oppressive power of the state. That is part of what the Establishment Clause was meant for. I personally think Carter was wrong in a few spots. He pronounced that creationism is bad science. From my view, this further illustrates how experts can be wrong just like everybody else. Granted, young-earth creationism - the best-known form of creationism - is bad science. But not all creationists accept the popular form of mainstream-creationism that demands a young earth. Perhaps Carter could look up author Gorman Gray to absorb this perspective. On page 173 he actually calls John Dewey "estimable." Well, to the mainstream, Dewey was a hero. Some of us think a bit differently about that. Professor Carter also affords Darwinian evolution the respect that academics are expected to. Perhaps Professor Carter could read "In The Minds Of Men" by Ian T. Taylor, or "The Ascendancy of the Scientific Dictatorship" by Phillip and Paul Collins, or "The Evolution Handbook" by Vance Ferrell to (at least) consider the view that evolution is part of a broader conspiracy. But will that happen? Not likely. Academics remain successful as academics by steering clear of said conspiracy. The parameters of available knowledge one can come to know and be dedicated to are largely determined by the networking circles one moves in. Yale University, where Carter is employed, is firmly entrenched in the conspiracy, being the home of Skull and Bones, and in the Ivy League. People who "know better" never learn. No one in that cultural eco-system of epistemology ever survives adopting the view to which I ascribe greater truth. And by survival, the least I mean is keeping your job. Professor Carter's Postscript mentions the Branch Davidian massacre, and the murder of Martin Luther King, Jr. To be fair, it was 1993. So how could Carter have known that the U.S. government would actually be found guilty of murdering Rev. King in a civil case in 1999? And the revelations that our American government was the culprit behind the atrocity of Waco was not yet clear. So Carter

writes as if these events were simply manifestations of misunderstandings. The type of misunderstandings his book was intended to point out and help rectify. Did the professor ever learn that our own government is behind all those murders? And that there are serious problems deeper than mere misunderstandings? Nevertheless, I heartily recommend "The Culture of Disbelief." It is well written and worthy of your attention if American citizenship means anything to you.

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