

“Sacred Politics?: Bringing Faith into Public Life” with Rabbi David Segal • January 28, 2021 • Sponsored by the Religion and Public Life Program at Rice University

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*Elaine Howard Ecklund: This conversation is called “Sacred Politics: Bringing Faith into Public Life.” This is an incredibly important topic, just one week after the inauguration – this is a conversation that’s definitely worth having. I probably don’t need to convince you, but just a few quick comments in terms of why the intersection between faith and politics matters.*

*Religion and politics are intimately intertwined in public life, even though the US has legally mandated the separation of church and state. Religious organizations and individuals – we all know this deeply – still play an incredibly important part in shaping political action. Religious congregations provide people with resources for political involvement in very tangible forms like experience with leadership, ability to form social networks, and places to meet both virtually and in person. Religious congregations also provide people with identities that shape certain kinds of political affiliations. And often religion and politics overlap with other social locations and power structures, like those relating to race or gender and other kinds of identities. There is [an article by Gallup polling](#) that I just put or I should say honestly that Hayley will put in the chat window, our program manager for the Religion and Public Life Program. And we can provide other resources as well through the Religion and Public Life Program. I also want to draw your attention to a parallel outreach to these gatherings that we have just started a podcast last year through the Religion and Public Life Program called [Religion Unmuted](#) and we have several episodes from the podcast on religion and politics. I really encourage you to listen to them – our producers tell us to also encourage you to review them and rate them wherever you listen to podcasts.*

[...]

*Elaine Howard Ecklund: Here’s how the rest of our time is going to proceed. I’m going to ask our speaker some questions that that I’ve prepared in advance. And then we will send all of you off into breakout rooms, to have some small group discussion. Each room will be facilitated by a Religion and Public Life Program fellow. And then we’ll return to the main room and at that point, there should be some time for you to ask any additional questions of our speaker. We’re going to shoot to wrap up at 5pm central standard time.*

*With that, I’m pleased to introduce our special guest today who is Rabbi David Segal. Rabbi David Segal was ordained by the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion in New York in 2010. For the next seven years he was the Rabbi of the Aspen Jewish Congregation in western Colorado. And in 2017 he returned to Houston and, since then, has been the Texas Organizer with the Religion Action Center of Reform Judaism. In this role he works to build a*

*statewide organization of Reform synagogues in Texas and works with congregations across the state to make their justice work more strategic and rooted in their people's stories. And I should say that Rabbi David has been a real friend of the Religion and Public Life Program and I've had the privilege of hosting him in my home several times for our Religious and Civic Leader Gatherings. As most of you know, that's where these gatherings would usually be held. But it is awesome to see people who would not be able to attend those gatherings if they were in person on this call this evening, and that is really great that is a redemptive side of these times that we find ourselves in, so thank you for those especially who are coming from outside of Houston to join us.*

*So Rabbi David what are, this is my first question, what are diverse approaches to the connection between religion and politics? I love these questions that the students and I come up with right because you could say about which many books have been written if you can answer that question, in a few sentences that would be awesome. So again, the question is, what are some diverse approaches to the connection between religion and politics?*

*Rabbi David Segal: Well, first I want to just say thank you for inviting me and to everyone for joining in this conversation. I will say that the food is better when it's hosted at your house than it is today, but so glad we're able to be together and honored to be part of this program as a participant many times and now as a conversation starter.*

*One of the ways we talk about—it is often called church-state separation, which is already a loaded term—but that it's a one-way separation. In other words, that it's really designed to prevent the government from interfering in freedom of conscience and religion, but it's not about limiting our right to bring our voice, coming from a faith perspective, into the public square. One of my teachers really on this and ally is Reverend Charles Johnson. Charlie Johnson is with Pastors for Texas Children, so you may know, if you're in the advocacy space on public education in Texas, you will have come across him. And he leads the group, originally of Baptist ministers, many of them in conservative areas, many of them themselves more on the conservative side, many Republicans, many rural leaders who are deeply invested in protecting public education for children of Texas and opposing vouchers from an explicitly Christian place. And as he puts it, it's not a naked public square. We bring our faith commitments in with us; we don't check them at the door, that would actually be a bit of a fallacy to even think we could.*

*So that's where even though I'm sort of on a progressive side of organizing and many issues, I tend to bristle when I tend to hear it more on the left, so to speak, and I grant these are clumsy terms, but for the sake of conversation. I tend to hear it more on the left, people will say like keep your faith out of my politics or that kind of approach and I don't think it's possible actually. And I'd rather—that's something Jeffrey Stout who's a religion professor has said, that better that we actually lay our faith commitments out on the table for all to see, so we know where we're coming from, rather than pretending that we can pretend that they're not an animating force in what we—and what's worse actually is, when they're not the enemy force but they're actually just the rhetoric that people use to advance a certain cause, which also happens, but I also don't love being in the position of judging the authenticity of someone else's faith commitments. That's not a comfortable thing either.*

*So I don't have a perfect answer on that. I do think that that needs to be part of the conversation, because if someone is going to wave the banner of their faith, it does open it up to public reaction so figuring out a way into that conversation is also important.*

*And, in this very polarized time, I don't I don't know the best way to do that. Because people just wave the banner and hide behind it. It's like what Jeff said, the idea of sacred as being like you know sacrosanct – uncompromising – that is a problem for the kind of politics that we think about as productive and solving real problems. So yeah we can talk about that more too – that's worth exploring.*

*The other thing I wanted to say, since you talked about the inauguration, and I've read a few pieces on this, but I think it's authentic to President Biden – Catholicism is a deep part of who he is. I think that's true. Actually there was a great interview with him and Stephen Colbert years ago where he is – there's two practicing Catholics talking seriously about their faith on national TV, which was like unusual in a way for public figures to do that. What's interesting about it, though, is that – it was a very faith forward inauguration. And it was very Christian. And, and even though it had a kind of tone of welcome and inclusivity, it was, it was only Christian. And I got to thinking like, it didn't rub me the wrong way at the time. I think it's authentic to who the President is actually in a certain sense. Someone pointed out well he had a Catholic priest and a black Protestant minister, and that's like the core of his base in a way. You think of like is who he is and who got him in there, in a way. And, and yet are those the limits of like public religious pluralism? Like we had different kinds of Christians. And imagine like a Muslim speaker or a Buddhist speaker or any other kind of religious – it would have felt different, and it would have been more controversial, I think.*

*So that's in my head too. I'm thinking about all this and about what Sumbul said. If I'm saying your name wrong, I apologize – about Muslims being just like you're very identity, religion identity, it is sort of like, by the way our politics work, is itself politicized. That, that is true, I think, and imagining that inauguration with different faith leaders, I think, is a thought experiment in that direction. I think I'll stop there, for now.*

*Elaine Howard Ecklund: Yeah. Let me move on to another one, if I may. So another question that the students and I have is, what are thoughtful ways religious groups might become involved in politics, while recognizing the constraints and honoring them even? What are some practical examples you have? I was, just to give you a little background of this question, for our Religion Unmuted podcast we did an interview with Laura Olson who's a well-known political scientist at Clemson University and I asked her if she thought religion was too much involved in politics. And she kind of caught me off guard when she responded, “no, I don't think authentic religion is enough involved in politics, people are letting their politics influence their religion, they're not letting their religion influence their politics enough.” And I thought, wow, that really caught me. How do you think people ought to be – what are some thoughtful ways that religious groups might become involved in politics?*

*Rabbi David Segal: I think there are a couple of key things that we have to build that are slow and local. Namely, relationships that have to proceed – political negotiation. So*

*meeting people – my base that I work with is this congregation, so all the wonderful things and challenging things that exist in congregations, I'm very well aware of. But even within congregations, there needs to be better work done about people knowing each other and hearing each other, seeing each other, you know authentically. Knowing each other's stories and then taking that across lines of faith and class and race and all the other things that divide us, I think that's a start.*

*As one of my friend-mentor-colleague Rabbi David Stern in Dallas says, the good news and the bad news in this work is that it's very slow. And that I think is very true.*

*The other thing is just the way we define politics. Actually, I really liked how Geoff at least implied in the definition earlier, that it really is about how we come together to solve problems. And often I think congregations are very, tend to have knee-jerk reactions against, "oh that's too political," when they may mean "that's too partisan." And we have not been trained in the art of relating to each other across lines of political negotiation, so we think that's supposed to stay outside the congregation.*

*Some people want that sanctuary – and I use that word deliberately – to be a place that is separate from that toxic polarizing political mess that is out there. Like, this is my time in the week when I can avoid all that. And you have to provide some of that some of the time. And also, where else if not in a sacred community can we learn how to relate to each other that transcends those ideologies and political or partisan debates and allows us to come together to solve problems as the community with just enough common connection that we care about a collective outcome. And I think one of the reasons it's so incredibly hard to be a congregational clergy person of any faith is that it's impossible to do both of those things, all the time. I think you have to do both. The classic phrase – to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable is the role of faith leadership and a congregation.*

*Elaine Howard Ecklund: Certainly we're in a time where there are increased and needed calls for racial justice. I've had some offline conversations about this and I just would love to hear your thinking on, what are some different Jewish responses to racism in American society right now?*

*Rabbi David Segal: One of my professors in rabbinic school used to say, Jews are just like everybody else only more so. And I do think about that a lot in any number of issues, and it sort of applies here. Although there is something that's unique, in the following specific way. Most American Jews are white. And most of our institutions are built around that identity, whether they know it or not.*

*So there are a bunch of challenges to that. One is that, there actually is such a thing as Jews of color, and a lot of our synagogues are not as welcoming as they think they are to non-white Jews, and that includes Jews, of what you would call African American or black, that includes Latino Jews, that includes Arab Jews from anywhere around the Middle East or Arab countries or Indian subcontinent. The ethnicity question is really fascinating for Jews. It's sort of a historical accident, because of immigration laws really, that Ashkenazi Jews are the norm and the way America thinks of Jews, and the way American Jews think of Jews frankly.*

*That's starting to shift but it's really slow and it's complicated because it's threatening, unfortunately. And so, there are a lot, I'm very proud of our reform movement, the reform denomination, because – we're not perfect by any stretch – but we're naming that we have a problem. We're actually finding resources for congregations who want to become more anti-racist and become more truly welcoming to people, really across the board, but including Jews of color.*

*It's threatening like I said, because you then have to hear stories about how the congregation that you think is welcoming actually was really horrible to someone, because someone made a bunch of assumptions about someone because of what they look like when they walked in. "Oh, you must, you must work here," or "oh really, how did you come to be Jewish?" or "were you born Jewish?," which are questions that I don't get asked when I walk into a synagogue.*

*You see it in a grander scale – there's this fascinating community in Africa, called the Abudaya, that's a Jewish community that sort of converted following their tribal leader. I think it was 100 years ago, or so, maybe 200, but they have started having members of the community trained to become rabbis. They've started doing conversions through the conservative movement globally. Just recently, I guess it was the Israeli Foreign Minister, declared that they are not legitimate Jews. Even though – I have my own very strong opinions on this – but by any stretch, one of my rabbi friends said that's because that particular Foreign Minister is a racist.*

*So this is just another example of where these ethnicity and religion and politics things intersect and collide. I'll say one more thing. My work is about helping congregation leaders organize teams within their synagogues to better identify what issues they can work on but also then to join in coalition with other, how's the worship with other organizations, to then work effectively on those issues and so they're not doing it alone.*

*Elaine Howard Ecklund: Along those lines of not doing it alone, I mean you've been a real leader in bridging coalitions across difference really. Along those lines, how can those of different faith traditions and no faith tradition use research on religion and work across religious lines for common good efforts? What is advice that you have about how we can work together better?*

*Rabbi David Segal: Again I think some of it comes down to just knowing each other more. And, research and education is a really vital piece of that.*

*I think you know the kinds of things that Interfaith Ministries does with the different faith explorations – like there are lots of opportunities for that in Houston. There could always be more. I think Houston is a really, almost like a pioneer, at least in terms of the religious diversity here. It is the way the rest of America may be going in a certain number of decades, who knows exactly – well you know exactly because you study it and you measure it.*

*But it's thinking about how do we really engage that diversity. I've done in my past some other Jewish, Christian dialogue work and there's a version of interfaith dialogue that I think*

*is not so useful, which is, look how similar we are. And I think it's important to talk about similarities, but if you don't also just confront real differences, you're not really being seen authentically, and I don't think it's useful or productive in the same way.*

Elaine Howard Ecklund: *That was excellent and just gives us so much to dig into, even in this short time together, I think you've given us a lot to dig into. Thank you for that.*