**Author Meets Critics: “The Religious Test”**

Opening remarks by Erik Owens

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Our topic for this evening is the ever-fraught relationship between religion and politics in liberal democracies, particularly here in the United States. I don't need to tell you how relevant this question is in contemporary American politics, following a presidential campaign which pitted a Southern Baptist minister against an elder in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, a African-American member of the nation’s largest congregation of the United Church of Christ, a United Methodist and several Catholics of various theological inclinations. The victor in that campaign, Barack Obama, has already made several high-profile speeches in Ankara, Cairo, Oslo, and -- this week -- in Jakarta, in which he discusses the reality of religious differences and the imperative of recognizing common religious values.

The question for us as citizens -- those of religious faith as well as those of no religious faith – is how to think about the importance of a political leader’s religious faith as we consider his or her fitness to represent and to lead us. While our constitution prohibits an explicit religious test for office, citizens clearly have a *de facto* set of concerns about a candidate’s religious belief that come into play as we consider whom to support. The devil is in the details of the religious beliefs in question; this, at least, is one of Damon Linker’s central arguments.

The impetus for this discussion is the recent publication of Mr. Linker’s latest book, *The Religious Test: Why We Must Question the Beliefs of Our Leaders*, about which we shall hear much more in a moment. In the tradition of the Boisi Center’s ongoing series of “Author Meets Critics” events, we are delighted to also host two incisive thinkers who will consider the book’s themes from their own perspectives. Allow me to introduce them:

**Damon Linker** is the author of our book for discussion this evening, *The Religious Test: Why We Must Question the Beliefs of Our Leaders*, as well as the much-discussed 2006 book *The Theocons: Secular America Under Siege*. A contributing editor -- and frequent blogger -- at *The New Republic*, he is also Senior Writing Fellow in the Center for Critical Writing at the University of Pennsylvania. Linker’s essays and reviews also appear in an array of publications from *The New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* to *The Weekly Standard* and *The Public Interest*. From May 2001 to February 2005, he worked at *First Things*—first as associate editor of the journal, then as its editor. Prior to joining the magazine, he taught political philosophy at Brigham Young University and served as a speechwriter for New York’s Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani. Linker earned a BA from Ithaca College, an MA in European history from NYU, and a Ph.D. in political science from Michigan State University.

**Patrick J. Deneen** is Associate Professor of Government and holds the Markos and Eleni Tsakopoulos-Kounalakis Chair in Hellenic Studies at Georgetown University, where he is founding director of the of the Tocqueville Forum on the Roots of American Democracy. Professor Deneen’s scholarly interests include ancient political thought, American political thought, democratic theory, religion and politics, and literature and politics. He is the author of *The Odyssey of Political Theory* (2000) and *Democratic Faith* (2005), as well as co-editor of a book entitled *Democracy's Literature* (2005). He, too, has published widely across scholarly and popular journals, and he blogs at frontporchrepublic.com. Prior to joining the faculty at Georgetown he taught at Princeton University, and before that was principal speechwriter for Joseph Duffey, Director of the U.S. Information Agency. His Ph.D. in political science is from Rutgers University.

**Mark Silk** is Professor of Religion in Public Life at Trinity College (Connecticut) and director of its Program on Public Values, which encompasses the Greenberg Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life, and the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture. Professor Silk is a journalist as well as a scholar; he is former editor of the Boston Review, former reporter and columnist for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, and is founding editor of *Religion in the News.* He is the author of, among other books, *Spiritual Politics: Religion and America Since World War II* and *Unsecular Media: Making News of Religion in America;* and most recently co-author of *One Nation, Divisible: How Regional Religious Differences Shape American Politics*. He blogs at http://www.spiritual-politics.org and on beliefnet.com. His undergraduate and doctoral degrees are from Harvard University.

**Here is the format we have agreed upon this evening:**

* Prof. Linker will open the panel with a 10-15 minute presentation of his main arguments;
* Our critics, Profs. Silk and Deneen, will each have 10 minutes for their remarks, on any aspect of the book
* Prof. Linker will then have ten minutes to respond.
* The remaining 40 minutes or so will be given to discussion with the audience

So let’s get started with Damon Linker.