

Editor's Note

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There was a brief period in recent U.S. history when it looked like the movement toward cultural secularization—the idea that religion and religious viewpoints should be kept out of all “public” conversations—was inexorable. Leading political philosophers had recommended the move as a way of advancing a stable society. The Baby-Boomers had laid siege to traditional authorities, including the church. The U.S. was becoming increasingly pluralistic. Prominent religious figures were becoming better known for misbehaving than behaving and a presidential candidate had to assure voters that he wasn't too Catholic. Surely, the thought went, the causes of stability, suspicion, reception, and security mean that religion is best kept behind closed doors.

And then the secularization project collapsed. New challenges from historians and philosophers pushed against the visions of the earlier political philosophers. The Religious Right was born. Being a Christian became more synonymous with being an embattled righteous minority than being a citizen in the majority. Up sprang Christian bookstores and record studios; avowedly religious political candidates and prayers at the center of football fields; fish bumper-stickers and WWJD bracelets. Whatever else the U.S.A. now is, it is NOT secular.

But is all this public display of religious faith a good thing? Are there costs that we Christians aren't acknowledging? Can we distinguish between persons whose faith sends them into the public and those who use the languages and symbols of faith to sway the public for their own purposes?

In his lead essay, Jonathan Malesic takes on these questions. Malesic, a theologian teaching at Kings' College in Wilkes-Barre, has a new book out, *Secret Faith in the Public Square: An Argument for the Concealment of Christian Identity* (Brazos, 2009), which won the 2009 gold medal for the religion category in *ForeWord* magazine's Book of the Year Awards. Maybe, Malesic argues, we need to pay attention to a long tradition within the Christian faith of keeping faith private.

Malesic's provocative essay meets responses from three thoughtful scholars. Beth Johnson, the J. Davidson Phillips Professor of New Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary, explores the way New Testament writers advocated for—and against—private faith. Pamela Cooper-White, the Ben G. and Nancye Gautier Professor of Pastoral Theology, Care and Counseling at C.T.S., wonders about the relations of privacy, confidentiality, and responsibility in her response. And Tim Beach-Verhey, Co-pastor of Faison Presbyterian Church in North Carolina and the author of the new book, *Robust Liberalism: H. Richard Niebuhr and the Ethics of American Public Life*, explores reasons that making faith public may make faith better.

This series of essays concludes with Malesic's replies to his respondents, therein modeling the kind of searching, charitable, and helpful theological conversation that can be so helpful for the church. Also included in this edition are a series of curricula to use in teaching from these essays and on this topic written by CTS alum Kathy Wolf Reed and a bibliography of resources for those who want to do further research on the topic compiled by current student Carrie Bowers. As you sample through these pages, may you enjoy the riches of this edition of *@ This Point!*

Sincerely,

Mark Douglas

Editor, *@ This Point: Theological Investigations in Church and Culture*