



Susan Jacoby

“On Faith” panelist Susan Jacoby is the author of *Freethinkers: History of American Secularism*, (2004) which was named a notable nonfiction book by The Washington Post and the Los Angeles Times, and cited as an outstanding international book by the Times Literary Supplement and the Guardian. She began her writing career as a reporter for The Washington Post, and has been a contributor to a wide range of periodicals and newspapers for more than 25 years on topics including law, religion, medicine, aging, women's rights, political dissent in the Soviet Union and Russian literature. Jacoby has been the recipient of grants from the Guggenheim, Rockefeller and Ford Foundations, as well as the National Endowment for the Humanities. In 2001-2002, she was named a fellow at the Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library. Jacoby's other books include *Wild Justice: The Evolution of Revenge*, a Pulitzer Prize finalist in 1984, and *Half-Jew: A Daughter's Search for Her Family's Buried Past*. She is working on a book about the relationship between American anti-intellectualism and political polarization, to be published by Pantheon in 2008. Close.

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No Atheists (Still) Need Apply

In nearly every interview about my book, *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism*, I am asked whether I am an atheist or an agnostic. The bias--a profoundly American bias--implicit in this question is that only an "unbeliever" would want to write a historical work about the secular influences on the founding and development of our nation.

This question reflects the 25-year ascendancy of right-wing religiosity, which has fostered a general ignorance about and lack of respect for the Enlightenment rationalist side of the nation's heritage.

Although I do not believe that atheism is in vogue at the moment, there is indeed more open discussion of the subject than there was when *Freethinkers* was published three years ago. This debate has been stimulated by three books--Sam Harris's *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation* and Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*. Both Harris and Dawkins have made the invaluable point--one that has yet to be absorbed by most Americans--that religion does not deserve any special exemption from criticism. Moreover, speaking openly about atheism works to dispel the notion that atheists have horns.

However, both atheism and secularism are still largely excluded from public dialogue about the proper role of religion in American politics--an omission that I consider much more important than pointless debates between believers and nonbelievers about the existence of God.

I have written NBC's Tim Russert several times about the lack of secular representation on his many *Meet the Press* panels concerning the relationship between religion and politics. Mr. Russert has never responded to my letters. This subject was discussed once again on the show on Christmas Eve and, once again, there was no secular voice to be heard.

When the influence of religion on politics is analyzed in the press, the dialogue usually ranges from religious conservatism to religious liberalism. No secularists or atheists need apply.

Much of what has gone disastrously wrong in American policy, especially foreign policy, in recent years can be attributed to a reliance on blind faith rather than evidence. When *The Washington Post*'s Bob Woodward asked President Bush whether he had consulted his father before going to war in Iraq, Bush famously replied that he had consulted a "Higher Father."

Isn't it fascinating that the voice of God always sounds suspiciously like one's own voice? When politicians start citing God as the authority for whatever they want to do, they are usually promoting some policy that defies human reason.

There is still a deep prejudice against atheists in this country, and this prejudice is expressed in the ridiculous notion that belief in God is some sort of qualification for public office.

What we ought to be talking about are decent human values that can be subscribed to by Americans of any faith or no faith. I could not care less whether any elected official believes in God: I care about what he or she does on earth. As an atheist, I believe precisely what the Bible says on this subject: "By their fruits ye shall know them."

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