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3-7-2009

### March 7, 2009: Day 2 of the Conference

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Title: Day 2 of the Conference

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3/7/2009--Day 2 of The New School Conference on the Religious/Secular Divide in America went in a somewhat surprising direction. The second day was devoted to politics past, present and future. Plainly, the moderators, and probably also the Conference organizers, expected to hear discussion of church/state issues, such as the word God in the Pledge of Allegiance. But this did not occur. Most of the speakers were expecting new kinds of interactions of religion and secularism in the future. There was a great deal of hostility to religion in the audience, but very little on the podium. Most, although not all, of the speakers took their own secularism or weak religiosity for granted but did not seem in a mood to directly challenge the place of religion in America. There seemed to be a turning away from legal challenges, and even direct political action, to mutual cultural enrichment. This was not quietism, but perhaps a parallel to Obama-like post-partisanship. One theme addressed only by one speaker was the role of Muslims in the U.S. I guess that most people did not expect hostility toward Islam to be any more of a problem for America than earlier hostility against Catholics, Jews and Mormons. That is, any overt discrimination would be quickly prohibited. It is remarkable that Americans, even in the middle of the War on Terror, do not expect the kind of problems that Europe and Canada are having over head scarves and other manifestations of Muslim identity. Maybe we have more to be thankful for in our constitutional tradition than we usually admit. I was disappointed by the failure of the Conference to address the facts of religion and secularism on the ground. One questioner asked whether religion would lose support in the future and the panel said no. Obviously, this is not how things look to me. Because the speakers did not anticipate fundamental sociological changes, they had no reason to consider the future of secularism in a serious way. So the central question of the sustainability of a genuinely secular society just did not come up. But that question is the one that will dominate the future.