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July 22, 2010: Can Religious Believers Be Good Democratic Citizens?

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Title: Can Religious Believers Be Good Democratic Citizens?

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7/22/2010--For some reason, the Journal of the American Academy of Religion chose to publish in its current, June 2010 issue, the transcript of a program from 2003 discussing Jeffrey Stout's book (or thought since the book came out in 2004) Democracy and Tradition. The fundamental issue it raised was the relationship of religion to democracy. Stout was of the view that for different reasons both religious traditionalists and liberal secularists argued that religious belief and democracy are incompatible—a view Stout contested. The issue comes down to the source of norms. If the source of what we ought to do as a nation comes from God's will rather than from democratic agreement, then the religious believer is bound to obey God rather than men. This discussion is rather dated. It was possible before the 2004 Presidential election to debate whether religious believers have a role in democratic life. But then they re-elected George Bush, thus reminding everybody that religious believers can do whatever they want because they are the majority. But the more fundamental issue is whether there is any source of norms that is objective. Or, to put the matter bluntly, can the majority be wrong? I don't believe in God but I still think the majority can be wrong. So, how am I in principle any different from the religious believer? Many secularists believe in objective morality, or think that they do. Consider the tradition of fundamental and universal human rights. Trammeling these rights is wrong regardless of numbers of voters. I am beginning to suspect that the anti-religion position by some secularists has little to do with religion and much to do with ontology—the nature of the real. If you think right and wrong are real, you are on the religious side, regardless of your religious beliefs.