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March 18, 2017: The Liberal Religious Cake

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Title: The Liberal Religious Cake

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3/18/2017—On Thursday, March 16, Nicholas Kristof wrote a column in the New York Times making fun of the Paul Ryan approach to poverty and government health services by contrasting it with the words of Jesus Christ—the hypocrisy of the GOP healthcare plan. It was great fun. Now forget the theology of it—Jesus was not addressing Rome, after all, and when he told the story of the Good Samaritan, he was addressing the responsibility of the person, not the government. Aside from that, what does the column tell us about the use of religion in the public square? First, the column demonstrates what I called in my first book, *American Religious Democracy*. John Rawls was just wrong in thinking there is something bad about referring to the religious commands of one religion in a debate about public policy. The column could be said to be a violation of Rawlsian public reason, but that just shows how silly Rawls' conception is. The whole culture, nonbelievers and other religious believers, has at least a general sense of Jesus and admires him. Plus, the whole culture understands the sense in which the Paul Ryan political coalition claims to be Christian in orientation while pursuing policies favoring the wealthy that Jesus would probably not favor. So, there is no reason to stay away from religious political argument. Second, this use of religious symbol by Kristof also shows what is right in Rawls. Kristof is emphasizing the universal aspect of the Christian message. You don't have to be a follower of Jesus to be bound by certain aspects of Christian teaching. It would be very different if Kristof were advocating Sunday Blue Laws, for example, to promote Christian church attendance. But then why the liberal objection to Christians arguing that homosexuality violates God's law? I don't mean why do they disagree, but why do they act like Christians at that point should leave their religion at home? It violates God's law to mistreat the poor and some would say it violates God's law to have same gender sex, or sex outside of heterosexual marriage. Both arguments are legitimate expressions of politics. Neither one establishes religion unconstitutionally.