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OP-ED COLUMNIST

## Let's Talk About Faith

By [ROSS DOUTHAT](#)

Liberal democracy offers religious believers a bargain. Accept, as a price of citizenship, that you may never impose your convictions on your neighbor, or use state power to compel belief. In return, you will be free to practice your own faith as you see fit — and free, as well, to compete with other believers (and nonbelievers) in the marketplace of ideas.

That's the theory. In practice, the admirable principle that nobody should be persecuted for their beliefs often blurs into the more illiberal idea that nobody should ever publicly criticize another religion. Or champion one's own faith as an alternative. Or say anything whatsoever about religion, outside the privacy of church, synagogue or home.

A week ago, Brit Hume broke all three rules at once. Asked on a Fox News panel what advice he'd give to the embattled Tiger Woods, Hume suggested that the golfer consider converting to Christianity. "He's said to be a Buddhist," Hume noted. "I don't think that faith offers the kind of forgiveness and redemption that is offered by the Christian faith."

A great many people immediately declared that this comment was the most outrageous thing they'd ever heard. Hume's words were replayed by Jon Stewart on the Daily Show, to shocked laughter from the audience. They were denounced across the blogosphere as evidence of chauvinism, bigotry and gross stupidity. MSNBC's Keith Olbermann claimed, absurdly, that Hume had tried to "threaten Tiger Woods into becoming a Christian." His colleague David Shuster suggested that Hume had "denigrated" his own religion by discussing it on a talk show.

The Washington Post's TV critic, Tom Shales, [mocked the idea](#) that Christians should "run around trying to drum up new business" for their faith. Hume "doesn't really have the authority," Shales suggested — unless of course "one believes that every Christian by mandate must proselytize." (This is, of course, [exactly what Christians are supposed to believe.](#))

Somewhat more plausibly, a few of Hume's critics suggested that had he been a Buddhist commentator urging a Christian celebrity to convert — or more provocatively, a Muslim touting the advantages of Islam — [Christians would be calling for his head.](#)

No doubt many would. The tendency to take offense at freewheeling religious debate is widespread. There are European Christians who side with Muslims in support of blasphemy laws, lest Jesus or the Prophet Muhammad have his reputation sullied. There are American Catholics who cry "bigotry" every time a newspaper columnist criticizes the church's teaching on sexuality. Many Christians have decided that the best way to compete in an era of political correctness is to play the victim card.

But these believers are colluding in their own marginalization. If you treat your faith like a hothouse flower,

too vulnerable to survive in the crass world of public disputation, then you ensure that nobody will take it seriously. The idea that religion is too mysterious, too complicated or too personal to be debated on cable television just ensures that it never gets debated at all.

This doesn't mean that we need to welcome real bigotry into our public discourse. But what Hume said wasn't bigoted: Indeed, his claim about the difference between Buddhism and Christianity was perfectly defensible. Christians believe in a personal God who forgives sins. Buddhists, as a rule, do not. And it's at least plausible that Tiger Woods might welcome the possibility that there's Someone out there capable of forgiving him, even if Elin Nordegren and his corporate sponsors never do.

Or maybe not. For many people — Woods perhaps included — the fact that Buddhism promotes an ethical life without recourse to Christian concepts like the Fall of Man, divine judgment and damnation is precisely what makes it so appealing. The knee-jerk outrage that greeted Hume's remarks buried intelligent responses from Buddhists, who made arguments along these lines — [explaining their faith, contrasting it with Christianity](#), and describing how a lost soul like [Woods might use Buddhist concepts](#) to climb from darkness into light.

When liberal democracy was forged, in the wake of Western Europe's religious wars, this sort of peaceful theological debate is exactly what it promised to deliver. And the differences between religions are worth debating. Theology has consequences: It shapes lives, families, nations, cultures, wars; it can change people, save them from themselves, and sometimes warp or even destroy them.

If we tiptoe politely around this reality, then we betray every teacher, guru and philosopher — including Jesus of Nazareth and the Buddha both — who ever sought to resolve the most human of all problems: How then should we live?

It's reasonable to doubt that a cable news analyst has the right answer to this question. But the debate that Brit Hume kicked off a week ago is still worth having. Indeed, it's the most important one there is.

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