The Right to Be Wrong: Ending the Culture War Over Religion in America

Kevin Seamus Hasson
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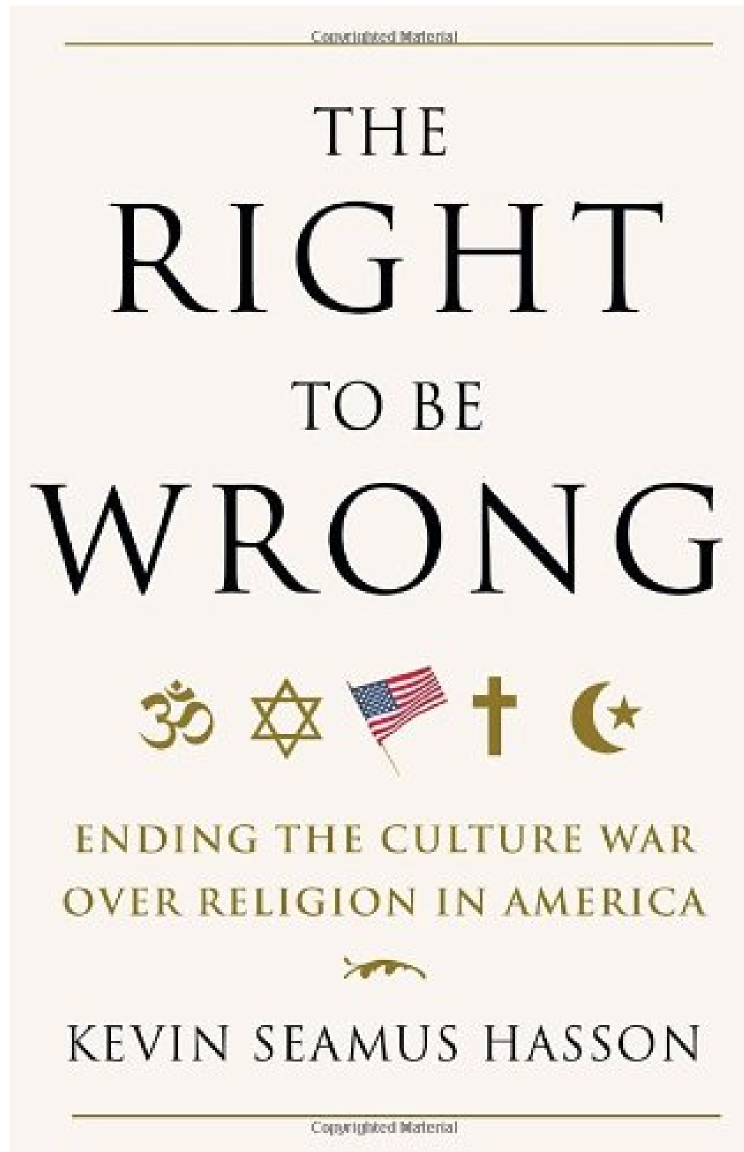

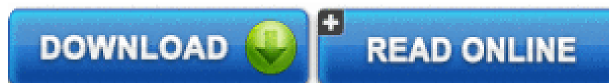

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Kevin Seamus Hasson : The Right to Be Wrong: Ending the Culture War Over Religion in America before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Right to Be Wrong: Ending the Culture War Over Religion in America:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Real tolerance is a two way streetBy Kodiak readerA must read for

those who recognize true tolerance is a two way street. Author is the founder of The Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, and this book is a great introduction to his organization and how they strive to promote religious freedom.3 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Magnificent Overview of Right to Religious LIbertyBy A Lancaster, PA readerI highly recommend this book if you are interested in a thoroughly-engaging, very informative look at the evolution of religious liberty in America.I breezed through it quickly because the author has a quirky, conversational style (and a great sense of humor -- I laughed out loud a couple times during my reading). This style, however, is not an indication of lack of depth. He clearly has a thorough understanding of the history of religion in America, from the early colonies (where things weren't so free) through the construction of the First Amendment and on to the interpretations of the Amendment up to the time the book was written (2005).What I also liked about this book was the author's conviction that religious liberty is a "natural human right" based on aspects of human nature itself. As he puts it: "....saying that people have religious liberty because God told you so convinces only the people who believe that God talks to you..."So, oddly enough, he is a man who passionately defends religious freedom (and sounds very faith-filled himself)....but believes that right does not spring from religion itself per se. Or rather, does not need to be argued from that standpoint.Highly, highly recommend it.2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Excellent!By Pen NamePerfectly gives voice to the difference between freedom from religion and freedom of religion. We all have the right to be wrong, and this book gives great historical insight into why that is so important and pertinent to today's issues of liberty.

In the running debate we call the "culture wars," there exists a great feud over religious diversity. One side demands that only their true religion be allowed in the public square; the other insists that no religions ever belong there. The Right to Be Wrong offers a solution, drawing its lessons from a series of stories--both contemporary and historical--that illustrates the struggle to define religious freedom. The book concludes that freedom for all is guaranteed by the truth about each of us: Our common humanity entitles us to freedom--within broad limits--to follow what we believe to be true as our consciences say we must, even if our consciences are mistaken. Thus, we can respect others' freedom when we're sure they're wrong. In truth, they have the right to be wrong.

Seamus Hasson is a gifted storyteller who also happens to be a genuine hero of the struggle to make the First Amendments promise a reality for members of all religious traditions. Mary Ann Glendon, professor of Law, Harvard UniversityThis is a rollicking, surprising, wholly original way of presenting the rival arguments for religious liberty in public America. Michael Novak, author of No One Sees GodAbout the AuthorKEVIN SEAMUS HASSON is the founder and chairman of the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, a nonpartisan, interfaith, public-interest law firm that protects the free expression of all religious traditions. He holds a law degree and an M.A. in theology from the University of Notre Dame and lives with his wife, Mary, and their children in Fairfax County, Virginia.Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.ONEOf Pilgrims and Park RangersThe extremists among usIt is perhaps Americas most enduring myth: The Pilgrims came here looking for religious freedom, found it, and we all lived happily ever after.They werent. They didnt. We havent.As well see, the Pilgrims actually came here looking mostly for real estate. They were a quirky, if courageous little band of religious separatists. And like religious separatists before them and sincefrom the authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls to the monks of the Egyptian desert to the Amish of todaythey wanted nothing so much as to be left alone to live in their own world according to their own vision of the truth. They came to America not because it offered freedom for all but simply because it offered a refuge for them.The problem was, other people kept showing up. Even aboard the Mayflower there were the strangers, whom the Pilgrims English investors had insisted accompany them. Then, after theyd established Plymouth Colony, more ships brought more strangers. As well also see, the Pilgrims did not respond well to this unplanned pluralism. In fact, they attempted to outlaw it. They set up tax-supported churches and banned competing religious services or cultural displays. They kept dissidents from proselytizing. They had religious tests for public office. And they refused to exempt conscientious objectors, like Quakers, from obeying their laws.We havent lived happily ever after, either. We have, of course, come a long way since the Pilgrims first measured out their stingy servings of tolerance. Nevertheless, the fundamental problem that the Pilgrims and the strangers faced when confronted with each other is still with us: How do you reconcile claims of absolute truth with human freedom in a pluralistic society?In fact, that problem is not only still with us, it is growing ever more serious as our society grows ever more pluralisticand as the extremists on both sides grow ever more polarized. It has reached the point where we aptly call the whole imbroglio one of the culture wars.How to resolve it? We must begin by understanding it. So lets meet the combatants.In this corner, wearing the funny hats . . . the PilgrimsOn the one hand there are still many Pilgrims among us, people who want to use the state to coerce the religious consciences of those with whom they disagree. For these latter-day Pilgrims the relationship of truth and freedom seems every bit as straightforward as it did to their namesakes in Plymouth Colony: The truth is, well, true. So how, they demand to know, can they not seek to establish it legally? If they dont, wont they be conceding that they harbor some doubts after all? And even if they did succeed in legally establishing the true religion, would that be such a bad thing? Wouldnt they really just be doing a favor to the not-yet-enlightened by hastening the

day when their eyes are opened?Most Americans instinctively recoil from such logic. We know it cant be right. We may or may not know how to parse the philosophical mistake involved, but were sure there must be one in there somewhere. We know that religious truth cannot be embraced authentically unless it is embraced freely. To American ears, the idea that truth is somehow opposed to freedom rings false. Pilgrims are obviously extremists.And in this corner, wearing the hapless expressions . . . the Park RangersBut Pilgrims arent the only extremists. On the other hand there are the Park Rangers, who insisteven after the tragedies of the last centurythat only a society that owns no truth at all can be safe for freedom. For them, the price of freedom for everyone is that no one can be allowed to publicly claim that anything transcendent is absolutely true. Why call them Park Rangers? In honor of a particularly memorable example of their zeal. Perry Mason might have called it The Case of the Sacred Parking Barrier.It all began in the Japanese Tea Garden of San Franciscos Golden Gate Park in 1989. The tea garden had long been a particularly well-groomed part of the park, a haven from the stresses of urban life. That year, however, there was a problem. A crane operator had abandoned a traffic or parking barrier at the back of the tea garden. It was a small, bullet-shaped lump of granite that clashed with the ordered nature of the place, an irritant that park-goers periodically tried to have removed. Bureaucrats being what they are, however, the stray parking barrier remained.It remained, that is, until 1993, when the bureaucrats learned of a New Age groups interest in it. The New Agers, it seemed, had recognized something significant about the shape of the parking barrier: It resembled a Shiva Lingam, a manifestation of the Hindu god Shiva. What was more, they had come upon it unexpectedly and in a wooded setting, just the way youre supposed to discover a Shiva Lingam. The little band of believers had rejoiced and begun to worship. In fact, they now came regularly to pray and make offerings of incense and flowers to the stone bullet. All of which greatly alarmed the very same authorities (with a little poetic license, the Park Rangers) who had resolutely neglected to remove the traffic barrier as an eyesore. The bureaucrats roused themselves and announced that it was their duty to prevent worship on (not to mention of) public property; the parking barrier had to go.Whereupon, the New Agers promptly got a lawyer and sued for an order blocking removal of the little granite lump. The case settled two months later, in January 1994. Rather than spend time and money in court, the authorities agreed to give the spare barrier to its devotees, who agreed to pray to it in private, someplace else.Now, as lawsuits go this was hardly a legal landmark. After all, the parking barrier really was public property and the authorities always were free to do with it as they pleased. As an account of religion in public life, however, the case is something of a parable. If ever there was a religion that was not threatening, either politically or culturally, this had to be it. Nobody could ever have mistaken parking-barrier worship for an officially established religion, even in San Francisco. No one could really have wondered whether it would be politically correct to be seen leaving flowers in front of the thing. Nobody could honestly worry that tax money might be spent on incense for it. In short, this particular piece of religious expression did not remotely threaten to coerce anyone to do anything. Whats more, the tea garden was a public park. If people could come to admire the shrubbery, why couldnt they come to worship the parking barriers?Because, said the authorities, parking-barrier worship was religion and religion didnt belong on public property. Religion belonged in private. It was just that simple.There are many Park Rangers among us, from zoning commissioners to school administrators to . . . actual park rangers. And they all seem to think its just that simple. They come out in force at the holidays. Controversies over Christmas Nativity scenes and Hanukkah menorahs have, of course, become a yearly ritual. But the battle lines have moved far beyond them. There are now annual debates over a variety of cultural offerings. Some Park Rangers, stung by criticism that the Easter Bunny isnt already a secular enough symbol, have made over the little creature as best they can. For example, the public school system in Lansing, Michigan, now offers, in lieu of Easter, a Breakfast with the Special Bunny. And, until nearly everyone laughed at it, the public library in Arlington, Virginia, had replaced its annual Easter Egg Hunt with a Spring Egg Roll. Other places have banned in-school celebrations of Halloween, on one of two conflicting theories: either because its an inappropriately Catholic celebration of All Hallows Eve, or else because its an inappropriately pagan celebration of something else. At least one school system has banned Valentines Day because its named after Saint Valentine. The kids can still send each other notes, though they cant call them valentines. They have to call them special person cards.What drives these people? Some are devout deconstructionists. That is, they are convinced that there really is no such thing as objective truth at all. Most Park Rangers, though, are not. Most, ever so privately, believe in something or other. But theyre Park Rangers still. Why? Because they think that freedom is incompatible with public claims of any religious trutheven their own. All religion, they insist, must be purely private. And just why is that? Its largely because theyre afraid of the Pilgrims.To hear the Park Rangers tell it, the West is free because Westerners are mostly easygoing folk, untainted by fanatical devotion to absolute truths. Columnist Andrew Sullivan memorably made this case in his fierce post-9/11 New York Times Magazine cover article, This Is a Religious War. Sullivan framed the war against al-Qaeda and other anti-American terrorist groups as a conflict between two kinds of religion: It is a war of fundamentalism against faiths of all kinds that are at peace with freedom and modernity. He charged that belief in absolute truth, which he seemed to equate with fundamentalism, inevitably produces coercion. If you believe that there is an eternal afterlife and that endless indescribable torture awaits those who disobey Gods law, then it requires no huge stretch of imagination to make sure that you not only conform to each diktat but that you also encourage and, if necessary, coerce others to do the same. . . . In a world of

absolute truth, in matters graver than life and death, there is no room for dissent and no room for theological doubt. In other words, only uncertainty can save us from the killing fields. The only good religion is a relativist one.What to do, then, with all those recalcitrant religions that insist they really do possess the truth? The Park Rangers answer is simple: Push them out of public life and keep them as culturally marginal as possible. Replace all that messy competition with a wrinkle-free, synthetic, one-size-fits-all culture.As well see, thats literally inhuman.Its also self-defeating. It doesnt resolve the culture war; it enflames it. It alarms the Pilgrims every bit as much as their sermons frighten the Park Rangers. So both sides take to their direct-mail houses to quote each other and amass bigger war chests by sowing further anxiety. Each ends up being the others best fundraiser and worst bogeyman.(The Park Rangers position is counterproductive in a subtler way as well. Barring public truth claims about who God is often morphs into barring public truth claims about who we are. Yet truth claims about ourselves are what human rights are based on. Barring such truth claims in the name of freedom is like sawing off the limb youre sitting on.)In short, the Park Rangers solution to pluralism is as defective as the Pilgrims is. In their drive to prevent theocracy, the Park Rangers end up promoting a society that is insufficiently humanand is at least as divided as the one theyre trying to forestall.This Way OutIt sometimes seems we are condemned to an endless tug-of-war between Pilgrims and Park Rangers and we dare not let either side win. If the Pilgrims prevail, both freedom of conscience and civil society diminish. We will have once again the gray hypocrisy of government-imposed orthodoxy. If the Park Rangers win, we risk having only the sort of temporary, politically based religious liberty that has proven so inadequate throughout much of the world. And we will certainly have a vapid public culture. We will be nervous for our rights in the midst of one vast, unending Breakfast with the Special Bunny.Either way, religious freedom suffers. But it, and we, suffer from the ongoing struggle as well. Must this be? Not if we can rise above the impasse. To do this, we must be able to guarantee a robust religious freedom for alland not just for someand base it on something thats undeniable to both Pilgrims and Park Rangers. That is, we must ground religious freedom for all in something more universally convincing than the parochial truth claims of the Pilgrims, but do it without contradicting those truth claims. We must guarantee the Park Rangers (and everyone else) their freedom of conscience, grounding it in something far firmer than just their own anxieties, while not unduly aggravating those anxieties. That is our challenge and also the subject of this book.Well approach it by considering a series of stories. In the rest of Part One, well highlight the big questions of religious liberty by telling the stories of the early colonists blunderssome earnest, some hapless, some funny, and some tragic. They shed light on the origins of pluralism and the tension between conscience and community, on the question of religious expression in public culture, on the perennial controversy over proselytism, and on the issue of conscientious objection to law. Well end Part One with stories of the best idea that the colonies came up with to deal with those questionsand how it wasnt then, and isnt now, good enough. That is, well see why tolerance, as nice as it sounds, has always been an inadequate basis for religious liberty.In Part Two, well tell the story of how an inkling grew into an idea and then lost its way. The story begins with the adventures, and misadventures, of James Madison and Thomas Jefferson as they started to argue for a religious freedom based on human nature. The story continues with tales of the compromises that crept in as religious liberty was then codified in the United States Constitution. It ends with the religious riots and legalized persecutions that followed.In Part Three, well return to first principles and propose an updated model of religious liberty that both remains faithful to its origins and transcends the extremists running feud. It points the way to a pluralism both honest and untidy, but firmly grounded. And well tell some good stories there, too.Throughout, well maintain a running critique of the Pilgrims and the Park Rangers among us. (We just have to refute them; we dont have to make them comfortable.)Well start with the story of the arguments aboard the Mayflower, for the light it sheds on where pluralism comes from. So the saga really does begin with the Pilgrims after all. But it begins with the real Pilgrims, not the mythical ones.TWOPluralism, Conscience and CommunityReections on the Pilgrims lack of progressThe saints and the strangers were arguing. The saints (what the Pilgrims called themselves) were insisting thatthe strangers (what they called the non-Pilgrims aboard the Mayower) yield to their vision of how life should be when they reached America. The strangers were having none of it.It was an omen, of sorts.