

Dueling D.C. Rallies Pitch Religion and Reason As Adversaries

Reacting to Glenn Beck's Restoring Honor rally in August, Comedy Central's Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert sponsored the Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear on Saturday at the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

[Beck's rally](#) was pitched as a religious revival. The Stewart/Colbert rally was cast as a recovery of reason. It was dueling TV entertainers, dueling cable TV companies - Fox News versus Comedy Central.

Some had framed the events as the right versus the left, Republicans versus Democrats, the faithful versus the faithless, sacred superstition versus secular reason.

Anti-religious and/or nonreligious organizations rallied for the Stewart/Colbert event.

The Richard Dawkins Foundation pointed out that those attending the rally would see advertisements on bus stop shelters that asked, "Don't believe in god?" and that answered the question, "Join the club."

The ads were placed by the Washington DC Area Coalition of Reason (Washington CoR).

A Washington CoR press released [said](#) that “atheists, agnostics, humanists, Pastafarians and other nontheistic types from all over the country will come together for Jon Stewart’s ‘Rally to Restore Sanity.’”

The American Humanist Association [announced](#) that it was sponsoring an open house.

“If you are standing up for reasonableness and rationality, or annoyed at the drone of Glenn Beck and Sarah Palin followers, or if you just want to meet other people looking to bask in the sardonic glory of Jon and Stephen, then come join AHA for an evening of fun the night beforehand,” said AHA.

The faith versus reason narrative found expression in the question of the week put to panelists for the Washington Post’s [“On Faith” page](#).

The page’s editor wrote, “Jon Stewart is holding ‘a rally to restore sanity’ on the mall, two months after Glenn Beck’s religion-infused ‘Restoring Honor’ rally. Beck said he was called by God to hold the rally. Now [atheist groups](#) are planning to use Stewart’s event to promote ‘reason.’ Are ‘reason’ and ‘sanity’ the opposite of religious belief? Is taking religion out of the political debate the answer for restoring reason? Or do we need more faith?”

One Post panelist, Hemant Mehta, wrote that “reason” and “sanity” were not completely the opposite of faith, but “they certainly don’t always go together.”

Mehta, who blogs at FriendlyAtheist.com, said, “There are religious people in just about every field imaginable – including academia and science. It’s possible to be sane – ridiculously smart, even – and still believe in fairy tales.”

He added, “Religious belief does not require abandoning all reason. It does, however, require gross distortion of reality – a bending of the truth. Smart people are better able to rationalize their religious beliefs in ways that sound somewhat plausible.”

Another Post panelist, Tom Flynn, executive director of the Council for Secular Humanism, wrote, “We don’t need any more faith in public life. In fact, there’s way too much faith clogging up contemporary public discourse.”

Frank Pavone, national director of Priests for Life, said, “From a Catholic perspective, not only is religion not opposed to reason, it vigorously promotes it.”

Pavone wrote, “Now when our religion tells us that we can know God’s revealed truth, that is not an invitation to shut down the mind or stop the thinking process. Precisely the opposite is the case. When God speaks, the mind goes to work. Revealed truth opens vistas to the mind that it could not reach before, and when we take revealed truth and think about it, compare it to what we know by reason, and compare one revealed truth to another, we are engaging in the discipline of theology.”

Adin Steinsaltz, a rabbi, colorfully noted that the conflict between reason and faith looks “like fist fights between two blind men; mostly they hit the air, without touching anything of value.”

Steinsaltz wrote, “The claim that atheism is a form of sanity is just a slightly different expression of pseudo-religious fanaticism. When people have to proclaim their sanity, or their ability to reason, their slogans don’t necessarily have any more depth, sanity or reason than those of their opponents.”

The founder of the Israel Institute for Talmudic Publications added, “Self-proclaimed sanity is not more convincing than self-proclaimed righteousness.”

My travel prevented me from contributing a piece to the discussion as an “On Faith” panelist. Had I written one I would have underscored Jesus’ instructions to “be wise as serpents,” a clear call to discernment. The biblical theme of discernment counters the claim that faith is anti-thinking.

I would also have said that we need more prophetic religion in the public square, more faith rooted in Luke 4:18-19, the Golden Rule, the Sermon on the Mount, the Hebrew prophets.

While some bemoan the role of religion and others bash it, I’m hard pressed to find a more compelling argument and sustaining vision for advancing the common good than love for neighbor.

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Like a host of folk, I watched Saturday's rally via streaming video. I found the mocking benediction by the character Father Guido Sarducci at the opening of the event to be offensive. I wish the event would have pointed out the constructive role of religion in the pursuit of social justice.

I did appreciate Stewart's disclaimer in his "sermon" at the close of the show that the rally was not anti-religious.

"What exactly was this?" he asked about the event. "This was not a rally to ridicule people of faith. Or people of activism or to look down our noses at the heartland, or passionate argument or to suggest that times are not difficult and that we have nothing to fear. They are and we do. But we live now in hard times, not end times. And we can have animus and not be enemies."

Stewart and Colbert offered an entertaining show, devoid of the strained self-righteousness at Beck's pompous celebration of a generic god. They deserve a high-five for challenging the nation to transcend differences, to practice discernment and to deal with real fears, not fabricated ones.

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