



Latter-day Saints at Liberalism's Crossroads: A Response to Hancock

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CHURCH & STATE

August 1, 2025

Can Latter-day Saints engage liberalism without compromise? Faith can lead with courage rather than fear.

It has been thrilling times for members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the United States. The deepening polarization in US politics has shone a spotlight on efforts made by leaders of the Church to reduce the intensity of political conflicts. It is into this moment that Brigham Young University's Wheatley Institute invited Jonathan Rauch to speak about his new book, *Cross Purposes: Christianity's Broken Bargain with Democracy*.

The invitation should not be surprising given the book's generous engagement with Latter-day Saint politics, history, and doctrine. Few books and authors by non-Latter-

day Saints have sought to understand the faith and its political journey in the US with such kindhearted interest. And this interest comes despite the chasm between the author and the LDS faith on “culture war issues.” This sort of engagement should prompt some thoughtful reflection by Latter-day Saints regarding the ways in which their faith intersects with today’s political environment, and Rauch’s visit should inspire efforts to establish a distinct civic theology that uplifts people and supports the republic.

But that does not seem to be initially what has happened in one neighborhood of Latter-day Saint thinking. In [two essays](#) published in *Public Discourse*, Ralph Hancock, a professor of political science at Brigham Young University, addresses the problems he thinks emerge when a faith with a distinct moral framework engages with a person or group of people who do not share that framework. Indeed, he writes pessimistically about the chance of bringing together people who come from such disparate starting assumptions, and it appears to completely overlook the counsel directed at Latter-day Saints and others by President Dallin H. Oaks at his 2021 [Joseph Smith Lecture at the University of Virginia](#).

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The crux of Hancock’s critique seems to be that Rauch’s olive branch is really a poisoned apple—that Rauch’s proposed liberal/Christian synthesis will undermine Christian witness in general and Latter-day Saint beliefs in particular. Though “liberalism” does a good deal of heavy lifting in Hancock’s argument, he does not define it with enough precision to know whether it actually poses a threat to Christian beliefs. His argument seems to have three steps: liberalism undermines Christianity; Rauch is a liberal; therefore, Rauch’s thinking undermines Christianity. But one could accept the first and second steps without accepting the third. “Liberalism” means many things to many people, but for Hancock’s argument to work, we are simply supposed to accept on faith that liberalism carries within itself a moral framework that poses a threat to Christian belief and practices. QED.

While Hancock does not provide his own definition of liberalism, he assigns one to Rauch. The definition that Hancock saddles Rauch with [involves](#) being “governed by

rules and not by rulers.” The definition places emphasis on the procedures and processes by which citizens of a polity arbitrate their differences. Hancock further garnishes the definition with negative moral implications. He [writes](#) that “[we] are thus asked to believe that the “rules” we must follow favor no class of persons and are absolutely neutral with respect to contending views of human flourishing, as if a regime of laws, institutions, and regulations could somehow equally honor all possible priorities of the governed.’ That characterization of liberalism reduces politics to a static zero-sum game.

And yet Rauch himself does not make those claims for liberalism. Rauch already concedes that the application of rules and the outcome of processes will not, if ever, be equal. For that reason, politics will always be necessary to sort out the competing claims made by citizens and groups. Rauch’s interest in Christianity is that the process itself might be less bitter and divisive if a process that is ongoing is fortified by values that only Christianity can impart to the political process.

Hancock casts doubt on the sincerity of such a project by arguing that Rauch once believed that the only way for the religious and the non-religious to exist was by creating a strict separation between the practices of the two. Hancock [says](#) “[w]hereas he [Rauch] once thought the best way to deal with the religion and politics question was to require a strict ‘separation between church and state,’ he now sees this approach as simplistic and inadequate. The problem today is that religion (the former majority belief, which Rauch labels ‘white Protestantism’) is bound up with politics in the wrong way.” The outreach that Rauch makes is not to be received because his original position somehow taints the current effort to work with religions.

This is why Hancock’s attack on Rauch for his scientific framework is puzzling. Early on, Rauch [writes](#), “My claim is not just that secular liberalism and religious faith are *instrumentally* interdependent but that each is *intrinsically* reliant on the other to build a morally and epistemically complete and coherent account of the world.” This does not sound like a rationalist project to replace religion. Rather, it sounds like the project described by Charles Taylor in his tome *A Secular Age*. Taylor [writes](#) that we have moved on from a condition “in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others ... Belief in God is no longer axiomatic. There are alternatives.” Rauch seems to be doing what believers and non-believers have done ever since: explore the borderlands between

two powerful modes of thought and see whether a society composed of multiple moral claims can cohere. But Hancock will have none of it. He does not want to engage, [writing dismissively](#) that “Rauch seeks a Christianity that will somehow complete liberalism in practice, but without interfering in any substantial way with its ‘scientific’ epistemology or with its ‘progressive’ understanding of ‘freedom’ and ‘equality.’”

But what is wrong with accepting Rauch’s contention that he now thinks there might be a better way? And why simply assume that the collaboration between religious and liberal frames will simply result in liberal claims undermining religious claims? President Oaks [believes](#) those who are not religious can recognize “the positive effects of the practices and teachings in churches, synagogues, mosques, and other places of worship.” This will, in turn, lead those who are not necessarily religious to believe that they, too, have a stake in protecting religious freedom. This seems to be at the heart of Rauch’s outreach. He has acknowledged the benefits that a “thick” religion can have on the broader public. But those benefits can only be recognized by the broader public if religions truly seek to live up to the standards they hold. We should make a good-faith effort to listen carefully and not dismiss too easily. Getting people to cooperate and agree relies on more than just agreed-upon procedures. A substantive form of cooperation [demands](#) that “Christianity support the civic virtues.”

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Rather than disparaging Christianity’s contribution, Rauch is highlighting it as part of a moral foundation that can make meaningful democratic deliberation possible. In these sorts of interactions, the parties must not dominate each other or seek to always have their position prevail. Once again, President Oaks [acknowledges](#) the possibility of such a dynamic when he writes, “[on] a broader front, what if the conflicting demands of civil and religious law are such that they cannot be resolved by negotiation? Such circumstances rarely exist. If they do, the experience of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints suggests that a way can be found to reconcile divine and human law — through patience, negotiation, and mutual accommodation, without judicial fiat or

other official coercion.” This is a message of hope that Hancock’s pessimistic view of liberalism impulsively forecloses.

Hancock also disapproves of those who use the language of modern liberalism to seek compromise. For Hancock, the liberal framework flattens the moral terrain by demanding that people must “respect” all opinions and treat all people with “fairness.” He **claims** that it would be “wrong” to respect a particular practice even when we are required to live with it as a feature of a nation’s legal and social practices. The challenge for Christianity is to avoid “losing its vertical orientation, its moral and religious substance.” Indeed, from Hancock’s perspective, it would be impossible to extend real “respect” to such practices because their violation of a moral law is not something that can be respected. Latter-day Saints may be able to accommodate the practices, but they can never respect them. Thus, when they use such terms as “respect and “fairness,” they have unwittingly adopted the individualistic and relativistic frameworks that reduce all morality to a contest of opinions.

There is a contradiction, though, in this argument. Hancock **cites President Oaks’ 2011** essay as support for the faith’s values: “Our tolerance and respect for others and their beliefs does not cause us to abandon our commitment to the truths we understand and the covenants we have made. We must stand up for truth, even while we practice tolerance and respect for beliefs and ideas different from our own and for the people who hold them.” But earlier, Hancock **asserts** that, “If the metaphysical demand for human autonomy that underlies the radical redefinition of marriage is wrong, even evil, then it would be wrong to ‘respect’ it, even when we must accommodate it legally and politically.” So, which is it? Is respect possible when there are fundamental disagreements, or is President Oaks wrong to suppose that some form of respect is possible with others who believe differently?

Hancock **writes** that “It is hard to make a democratic bargain based on a rhetoric that says: ‘You are profoundly and disastrously wrong, but I see for now that your view must to some degree prevail.’” Is it hard? Yes. But in some circumstances, this is exactly what a “democratic bargain” is supposed to do or what President Oaks **described** as “the essence of constructive politics, which is something to be emulated in our own day.” This is why we have

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politics: it is a way of resolving these sorts of disagreements without having to resort to “anarchy and terror” (Doctrine & Covenants 134:6).

What is the alternative to Rauch that Hancock is proposing? Ultimately, Hancock’s view of politics seems to be a pessimistic one. His formulation of the problem does not require much in the way of new efforts from Latter-day Saints. Indeed, it seems to parrot the approach of those elements of modern Christianity who fervently embrace fear. “Sharp” Christianity is a Christianity that approaches politics out of fear. A fear of having its tenets undermined or its congregants corrupted. The fear originates in the lack of or ineffective ways in which Christians learn and practice their faith. This is the “thin” version of Christianity Rauch describes. It is a version of [Christianity that is](#) “too thin to provide meaning and morals to the culture and thus reliably support democratic society.” And it does not seem to be able to generate versions of “respect” and “love” that can provide more stable foundations for a republic. Is this effort dangerous for Latter-day Saints? Only if you accept Hancock’s papering over of the differences between “thick” and “thin” Christianity.

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A further concerning aspect of Hancock’s critique is the rhetorical strategies he uses to sow doubt about the desirability of engaging somebody who makes arguments like Rauch’s. Hancock’s argument invokes a form of psychologizing, [speculating](#) that the interest expressed by Latter-day Saints in such endeavors must be rooted in some “psychological and sociological need felt by many Christians.” Thus, people who would want to engage Rauch must suffer from some inferiority complex.

But if we are going to allow speculation about the motives of the Latter-day Saints who listened attentively to Rauch, why not also consider in those speculations the *stated* motives of the people who organized the event and who were there? Apparently, those motivations cannot explain the interest. For Hancock, the only people who can show interest in these ideas have some subconscious need to be liked by a representative of the “liberal” establishment.

Hancock’s response also demeans Rauch’s efforts in cruel ways, [stipulating](#) that “the author’s efforts are in the end of no great significance either in terms of political

philosophy or of Christian theology.” That is a high bar because not much that gets published these days is of “great significance” to either of those enterprises. However, seeking to contribute to theology or political theory is not really the project here. Rauch’s book explores ways to begin an engagement with people who start from a different perspective. And on that count, the book and the interactions before, during, and after the talk are at least noteworthy if “of no great significance.” But Hancock seeks to assure readers that there is nothing there of any merit to interest Latter-day Saints.

Hancock’s rhetoric also “poisons the well,” a logical fallacy meant to demean a person or group and to distract the reader. Rauch confesses he does not share in the faith practiced by the religious. But Hancock asserts that arguments or efforts that originate from such a place cannot be taken seriously. He [writes](#), “It is from this standpoint that [Rauch] proposes to instruct the reader on the true, operative meaning of Christianity in American society today.” Well, yes. We know that Rauch is an atheist. But what is it about atheism that disqualifies Rauch from talking about Christ-like values? Hancock never really says. Apparently, a different set of cosmological assumptions means that Rauch can no longer engage the dynamic between Christian belief and questions of good government. And the tactic of labeling Rauch as an “atheist” only seems intended to inhibit engagement. If we want to foster engagement that can help alleviate the rancor in politics, we might consider following the counsel of President Oaks in his Virginia speech when he [said](#) that “[a] basic step is to avoid labeling our adversaries with epithets such as “godless” or “bigots.”

Latter-day Saints, and presumably others, must find a way to extend more than a cursory respect to people on the other side of the disputes. It is a tall task and requires Latter-day Saints to find a way to truly love people while disagreeing with them about the most fundamental issues. When the stakes seem existential, as they often do in a two-party system, both the winner and the loser in these contests must act even better by recognizing the challenge. This is where the “thick” form of Christianity practiced by Latter-day Saints can come in handy. President Oaks [writes](#), “What I have described as

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necessary to going forward—namely, seeking harmony by finding practical solutions to our differences, with love and respect for all people—does not require any compromise of core principles.”

Latter-day Saints, with their access to the resources of the restored gospel, can accomplish more than what Hancock thinks possible. We can engage in politics with love and respect. In the Virginia address, President Oaks [hints](#) at where we might begin by telling the story of Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks. “When he [the rabbi] agreed to meet with a staunch atheist who detested everything he held sacred, the Rabbi was asked whether he would try to convert him. “No,” he answered, “I’m going to do something much better than that. I’m going to listen to him.” So, what are we, as Latter-day Saints, going to do that is “much better?”

About the author

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