# Religion, Politics, and the American Experience

*Reflections on Religion and American Public Life*

EDITED BY
Edith L. Blumhofer

Introduction by Martin E. Marty

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# Preface

This book is a product of Public Religion Project–sponsored explorations of public religion, politics, and government. The Public Religion Project, a three-year endeavor (1996–1999) funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts and hosted by the University of Chicago, encouraged these explorations and conversations as part of its assignment to "promote efforts to bring to light and interpret the forces of faith within a pluralistic society."

This charter called on the project to find ways to help ensure that religion in its many voices was well represented in North American public life; to bring to the fore often-neglected resources for healing of body, mind, and spirit, and public life that religion manifests; to work to clarify the roles of religion in public spheres by engaging various expressions of faith, even those that are repressive or destructive; and to lift up situations in which dialogue, mutual respect, and the search for common values and solutions have successfully proceeded.

In these pursuits, the project did not line up with partisans in "culture wars" or ideological conflicts. Certainly, the project was "pro-publicness," contending that American society is better off when it is aware of the religious forces and voices, and thus it worked to enhance this concept of "public" religion while honoring the private and communal energizing sources and outlets of people of faith.

In its undertakings, the project considered ten zones of public life where forces of faith are at work. One of these was politics. In hosting a series of conversations on this topic, the project invited politicians, the politically active, and scholars of politics and government—all with a keen interest in religion—to the table. *Politics, Religion, and the Common Good: Advancing a Distinctly American Conversation about Religion's Role in Our Shared Life* (San Francisco, 1999, by Martin E.

Marty with Jonathan Moore) seeks to reflect the voices and concerns heard around that table. This book sets out to expand on those conversations. After listening to many viewpoints, we invited leaders in a variety of disciplines to reflect on the current wisdom in their disciplines and to suggest directions or topics for emerging conversations. Looking ahead, what kinds of questions seem likely to demand informed address by legal experts, politicians, theologians, political scientists, historians, communicators?

The essays that follow are intended to stimulate conversation, reflection, and further scholarship. The mix of disciplines suggests both the variety of lenses through which questions of religion and politics may be viewed and the richness that attends cross-disciplinary consideration of things that matter deeply in the shared experiences of Americans.

Martin Marty compared the project's work to that of atomic accelerators or jet propulsion laboratories: it took objects, events, energies, and forces already extant and active and set out to propel them into new areas.

We hope this conversation, begun around our table and now continued with you, will be part of that dynamic.

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# Introduction: Eight Approaches toward Understanding Public Religion and Politics in America

*Martin E. Marty*

The words *public, religion,* and *politics* are so familiar in American discourse that they often lose their power to inform.

Everyone knows what "public" means: it is the opposite of private. So say the dictionaries. So it is in common usage.

Everyone knows to what "religion" refers. It points to all those impulses, institutions, and ideas that somehow transcend, go beyond, ordinary experience. Usually when people are being religious, they are responding to some supernatural or suprahuman force or person that acts upon their world.

Everyone knows what "politics" suggests. Politics represents a zone of action in which citizens as individuals or in groups engage in conversation, argument, competition, and conflict. But toward what end? That the individuals and groups in society give expression to their interests and have their interests represented. That these interests also somehow relate to a common good. That the arts of politics in a free society imply give-and-take, push and pull, partial victory and partial defeat, compromise and survival to fight another day, approaches to justice and the assurance that the groups in a society get out of government something proportional to what their weight in that society represents and something that assures their basic rights.

If "everyone" knows these three main things suggested by this book's title, it may seem redundant or futile to revisit them. One could think of them as three old linguistic "coins of the realm." They are necessary for anyone who wants to transact his or her way through the mazes of life as a citizen, but like old coins, they can be so worn that their outlines are no longer clear. They then offer little promise, little challenge, little possibility.

Try this, however: bring together those three words about three

zones, and you will have the equivalent of new coins. Brought together, they are capable of jarring and disturbing people. Those who could sit back passively listening to definitions or examples of "public," religion," and "politics" find themselves roused from passivity. Taken together, these three words provoke thought about matters not yet addressed—to say nothing of resolved—in a changing society. Bring them together, and you drive some people away and inspire others to argument, conversation, new thought, and new action.

This book sets out to promote such conversation by dealing with "public," "religion," and "politics" in America as potentially positive zones or spheres, each of which is made up of components necessary to the health, or at least the survival, of the republic.

To keep the book brief and convenient, the editor and, behind her, the Public Religion Project out of which it grew, had to choose topics that are central to understanding and advancing the conversation. The authors all work with the obvious assumption that America is a pluralist society, that it is marked by great religious diversity. Viewing it thus, they could have chosen to expound perspectives reflective of Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, Orthodox, Mormon, or any other of some two hundred options listed in the *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches.* It would have been interesting and useful, in other words, to do a canvass of the entire religious scene.

To do so, however, would have meant that they would be producing an encyclopedia, not a handbook providing a means of access to a national debate. Yet to go without a single case study in this handbook also would have done an injustice to the concrete and thick character of American religious life. Religion in politics is not some vague "vaporous" spirituality, as Jean Bethke Elshtain calls such an alternative. It is something one bumps into, ducks away from, uses, or thwarts in the political realm.

Because the editor and staff conceived of this book as a kind of guide, they thus proposed encountering one case story in some detail, because it gives a sample of a very important religious phenomenon. The attempt to define it, tell its story, point to its record, and study its fresh emergence can serve readers who then, by analogy, can see how and why African American Protestants, Orthodox Jews, Sunni Muslims, or the Society of Friends deal with the public order, given their different contexts.

The chosen cluster of forces in this case study is code-named *evangelicalism*. Why choose it? First, about one-fourth of the American people identify themselves as evangelical or fundamentalist or Pentecostal or conservative Protestant (as in Southern Baptist or Missouri Synod Lutheran). In his essay, Mark Noll shows how, by some measures, one-third of America is evangelical, by others, one-fifth. Whatever measure one uses, all this means that evangelicals are about as large a group as Roman Catholics or mainstream Protestants, which also have about one-fourth of the population identifying themselves with each group—although, of course, not necessarily affiliating with them.

A second reason is that the rise or return of evangelicalism to political life was one of the major civil events of the final third of the twentieth century. The nineteenth-century ancestors of today's evangelicalism were thoroughly involved in public and political life. In the earlier century, these evangelicals—heirs of Puritans, beneficiaries and promoters of revivalism and awakenings, ambitious pietists and moralists—had taken active roles on many fronts: anti-dueling, anti-prostitution, anti-gambling, anti-alcohol, pro-Sabbath-keeping, the abolition of slavery (or its defense), reform, education, and other areas that they thought needed some address by law.

In the twentieth century, however, the evangelical united front, patched back together after the schism created by the Civil War, underwent several travails and ventured into certain areas that led them to retreat from politics. In the 1920s, it was torn by a "fundamentalist/modernist" controversy. Throughout the century, it was reframed by premillennialists who foresaw the imminent return of Jesus Christ. That immediate threat or, for them, promise often meant that politics and government became less important spheres of life. They thus would try to rescue people from an evil world, not try to transform it to make it look more like the kingdom of God. To many evangelicals, politics became a distraction, an irrelevancy, or even a sphere in which the devil and the anti-Christ had special power. Through the middle third of the twentieth century, evangelicalism had become "Private" Protestantism. Meanwhile, the mainstream version, both by its posture and its choice to try to interpret and influence the social order, was "Public" Protestantism.

Somewhere around or after the Barry Goldwater presidential cam-

paign in 1964, however, many of the subgroups tabbed "evangelical" reappraised the scene and found it important to "go public" and even to turn political. We will let Mark Noll, the historian expert on this subject, tell the story of this turn. He helps measure the influence and prospects of the evangelicals who make up this case study. In the process, Noll shows how those who would conceive of public religion can deal with any number of its components. Let it be said that if Catholics, African American Protestants, Mormons, or any other religious group wants to advance in public life, they can take lessons from evangelicals. If Noll is right, they will also learn the limits of aspirations in a republic, where no single force is going to get to "run the show," however much it can influence all of it.

A side effect of Noll's essay is to introduce us to concepts and terms with which any student of this scene must become familiar. Public religion and politics is a scene that has been described as "messy," complex, dynamic, in constant flux. There is no way to nail down one religious group or another and fix it in place. Jews have changed their concepts because of Zionism and the rise of the nation of Israel and the spiritual effects of the Holocaust. Mormons in the 1990s were very different from those in the 1890s, who were ruling out polygyny, a factor in early Mormon life, and were out to convince the rest of America that Utah, their main Zion, was ready for statehood. African American Protestants before, during, and after the civil rights revolution did much adapting and changing. Mainstream Protestants, who dominated at midcentury and were hospitable to social and political activists through the 1960s, had to share place and power with others in the last third of the century and were not in the limelight so much as before. Here was another case of change. Still, as with evangelicals in Noll's portrait, they all also embody some continuities, some elements that make them, however messily, identifiable forces with which to reckon.

Noll's essay throws light on one of the motivations for political involvement for this large subgroup in American public life: they expressed grievance. Noll speaks of evangelicals' sense that they represented a "displaced heritage." That is, they saw themselves as founders of the nation and its public institutions. They claimed and recently would reclaim the signers of the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution as their own (although Noll shows

that few of them were). The generations of figures such as Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, and more were church members and at least occasional churchgoers. But their religious thought was colored by the rationalism of the Enlightenment, an eighteenth-century movement of thought that itself was upstaged by evangelical revivalists and Catholic immigrants in the nineteenth century.

Not all the components of American religious life could see themselves as representing a displaced heritage. This was so because they had never been established, had never dominated, as the white Protestants of colonial times had done. When the U.S. Supreme Court took steps after 1940 to assure that minorities were not to be dominated by the privileging of public space and time by evangelicals and other Protestants, many evangelicals felt that someone—secularists, humanists, liberals, conspirators—was depriving them of their privilege and their standing as moral guardians of America. They must fight back. They also felt stigmatized by sophisticated elements that dismissed them as being of a "Bible Belt." Again, they must fight back. But the politics of revenge soon became the politics of will-to-power, and the evangelicals often sought political alliances that would help them shape America.

I mention that here not to enter into a full-dress review of evangelicals in public life but to open the door to another realization: the religions and religionists across the board tend to feel at home in America. Those who study public religion observe that what makes America both a congenial, hospitable place—and, at times, one full of conflict and danger—is the role of religion in public and political life.

With that in mind, we can anticipate the eight approaches or components toward understanding American public religion and politics that this book outlines. This introductory chapter sets forth a road map but does not follow it, leaving the details to the essayists. Or in another image, it suggests a frame and the authors provide the pictures.

## Approaching Religion and Democracy

Picture a visitor from Asia, Africa, South America, Europe, or elsewhere and listen to her testimony about how religion and democ-

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racy relate in America. In all cases, the alert guest will express mystification about the mix of religion and democratic impulses and institutions. After all, America was born in the Enlightenment, when elites were critical of much churchly expression. They "separated church and state," as if trying to solve the problem of religion by not solving it—which means by shelving it, keeping it at a distance, and putting boundaries around it and limits on it. The legal tradition in America has helped reinforce those boundaries. The churches do not get overt and formal help from the state. (Forget, for the moment, the largesses that the alert guest will reckon comes to the churches thanks to their being exempt from taxes.)

Much of the argument for civil support of religion through establishment, which lives on in vestigial form in many European nations, was based on the claim that government had to privilege religion—perhaps even a particular religion—to provide a moral basis for civil and political life. Yet in Europe, despite this support—many Americans would say *because* of this support—church participation is very low. There may be "Christian Democratic" parties, but there is nothing overtly Christian or religious about them beyond the name and a set of reminiscences. Yet in America, there are "Christian Coalitions" that do enliven political debates and councils of churches and conferences of bishops that enter the political frays—sometimes effectively. And the public, when polled, favors religious observance and wants to make room for religion in public life—so long as it does not violate certain disputed and disputable boundaries of "the separation of church and state."

Why this support for religion, and why connect religion with democracy? Jean Bethke Elshtain cannot answer that question in detail, but she sets out on a path others can then follow. Her guide, not surprisingly, is the most eminent and perceptive European observer of American religion ever known, Alexis de Tocqueville. He provides texts for meditations and elaboration for so many who take up Elshtain's theme. She takes off from Tocqueville and gets into the basics of why in his time, the 1830s and 1840s, and ever since, citizens have invented ingenious ways to use religion as a base for much of civil life.

Understand the connection that most Americans see as natural, in-

tegral, and vital—as people in many nations do not—between religion and democracy, and you will be on course for coming to terms with "public religion in America" today.

## Approaching the Idea of Context for the Subject

That I began by imagining the perceptions of foreign visitors suggests that I know that one cannot simply walk up to public religion and politics in America and isolate it the way one may isolate a specimen in a laboratory, a particular locust in a zoology study, or a marble on a lawn. Although of course all of them have contexts, they are isolatable. Public religion in America is incomprehensible apart from its many contexts.

One way to understand this concept, elaborated by Laura R. Olson, is to imagine America if it had emerged in vastly different ways from the course it took. For example, had the fate of Islam in the Iberian Peninsula been different than it was in 1492—that is, had it prevailed in battle instead of seeing its military forces defeated and Islam set back—an expansive, missionary, and military Islamic thrust might have dominated in the exploration and settlement of America. If so, a very different complex would have developed. Would we today be writing on public religion and politics? Would the northern European Enlightenment have had any influence? Would the fruits of evangelical revival and reform ever have been evident? Islam would have provided a drastically different context than the one we take for granted.

Another sample of imagined alternative contexts: What if the settlers from the British Isles and northern Europe had freely intermarried with the Native Americans, as they did across the Rio Grande in Mexico and thus produced a new and different people? How would public religion and politics in the United States look then? There would not have been extinction of most of a native people or the movement of others to reservations. There would be different mixes of races, which play such a role in political and public life, rooted as they are in the religious imagination.

Given the populations that did and do make up America, it is still important to see contexts. We have already implied this by reference to "elites" and "the Bible Belt," the "politics of revenge" and the

"politics of will to power," or the changing fates of evangelicals, Jews, and others. Professor Olson helpfully points out that one cannot begin to make sense of the mess that will still stay messy if one neglects to observe contexts.

Thus, if one perceives the context as a "culture war" between two polarized, defined, militant forces, public religion and politics look very different than they do if one stresses the crisscross of alliance and commitments in dynamic and fluid patterns of loyalties within pluralism.

Furthermore, if one observes and reckons with contexts, she will pay attention, as Olson does, to behavior as much as to belief. Now and again, someone—I think of pre-Vatican II Catholic scholars—will write a guidebook to American religion, especially Protestantism, by referring to the tenets, dogmas, doctrines, creeds, and belief systems of Presbyterians and Quakers, Lutherans and Unitarians. Well and good; beliefs *do* have consequences. But it is hard to trace a dogmatic strain from Calvinist progenitor John Calvin to social activist Presbyterians in the 1960s. It is hard to find Martin Luther's attitudes toward "two kingdoms" in the ways of most American Lutherans. So to study the way religious individuals and groups act is to gain new access to the context.

In an inaugural address, President Lyndon Baines Johnson referred to America as a "nation of believers." It is that, but for understanding public religion many of us have noted—and I argued at book length and in its title—this is also *A Nation of Behavers.* How people act tells much about their real beliefs. The Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Protestant body, stands in a heritage of people suspicious of any governmental support for a religion. In the 1990s, in the spirit of those who claimed, again in Noll's terms, that they were part of a "displaced heritage," these Baptists in convention voted for governmentally sanctioned public school prayer. Many Southern Baptists wanted the Ten Commandments posted in classroom and courtroom. They "behaved" in a way that alters the context of all the rest.

So if Elshtain says "heed the intermingling of religion and politics," Olson continues, "heed the context in which intermingling goes on." With those two pieces of advice to keep in mind, we are ready for a third element or signpost along the way to understanding.

## Approaching the Role of Law in Public Religion and Politics

This framing of the pictures of Elshtain and Olson may have suggested that public religion was as "vaporous"—again, Elshtain's word—as the "spirituality" that has so little public or political effect. There is not much to nail down when recognizing the ever-changing perspectives and contexts of the subject. From the beginning, however, the United States has adhered to a legal or constitutional definition and set stipulations.

Some have taken one part of this legal definition and carried it to cover the whole. Specifically, they have borrowed and imported the nonconstitutional (but not necessarily anticonstitutional) language of Thomas Jefferson and reduced our whole subject to dogmas, laws, and applications of the concept of "separation of church and state," sometimes even of "a wall of separation of church and state." That is supposed to be the first and last word.

There are other ways to assess the interrelations of religion and politics in the public order, however. Although Thomas Jefferson was a genius, a seminal figure, a decisive statesmen and founder, there are not official and legal reasons to privilege his approach, as the United States Supreme Court since 1940 has done. Immigrants, members of the military, and officeholders take their oaths to follow the Constitution, which Jefferson did not write, a Constitution whose tradition has been subjected to and, John Witte in his essay suggests, might still be subjected to other interpretations.

Ingeniously, perceptively, and provocatively—as you read his chapter test those three adverbs—Witte suggests that Jefferson's contemporary and rival, John Adams, had a very different approach. That approach had as strong an influence as Jefferson's from the 1780s through the 1940s. But Jefferson was attractive to members of the Supreme Court after the 1940s and understandably so in the context of that moment. But what if Adams's alternative were restored and given a parallel place? How would American history and law look through the Adamsic prism?

As with other essays, Witte's is an approach, an invitation to conversation, and not the last word—as that could not be encompassed

at book or bookshelf length. He rightfully sees Jefferson-Adams alternatives as unfinished, as instruments for dealing with a pluralist society that differs as much from that of 1940 as that of 1940 did from that of 1789. If Olson wants us to pay attention to the behavioral context of public religion, Witte turns to the historical context, the experience of dealing with philosophy that stands behind law in the thought of but two of the founders. Where does this leave the practical politicians?

## The Approach of Practical Politicians

Campaigners for public office and holders of it are aware of the entangling of religion and democracy. They live and breathe context as they seek every individual's or interest group's vote. They inherit a legal framework inspired by Jeffersonian thought but in which something of Adams is there to inspire and haunt. But they are not political philosophers, not academics who can take refuge above the scene. They are on the scene, in the midst of what several authors speak of as "messy" American religion and public life.

Senator Paul Simon cannot let talk of "the separation of church and state," which as a representative and senator he favored, exhaust all that is to be said and done in public religion and politics. He favors such separation but neither observes nor favors a disjunction between religion and politics. Aware of how hard it is to serve all the competing voices and forces in organized religion or in the politicians' reading of American political minds, Simon is not paralyzed.

Simon is identified with a particular religion in America and perceived as friendly to more, if not most. But he has learned that the effective politician, successful though she may be at polling and reading the minds of voters, cannot follow the lines represented by leaders of the religious groups. They are all divided within and among themselves. One set of Catholics will advocate one set of political outcomes, and another, perhaps the bishops with their prestigious and weighty councils and synods, will advocate another.

Adjudicating and trying to address the interests of the internally divided and externally competitive religious institutions and forces is a tricky matter for politicians. They can be unseated if they cater to one element at the expense of another. And given the current state

of much religious discourse, a political leader may be caught in the cross fire generated within or among religious groups. So Simon makes a plea for more civil discourse.

## The Approach to Public Religion and Politics through Media

We would not likely be talking about the zone of "public religion and politics" as being urgent were it not for the fact that the media bring these subjects home to citizens.

Religion in colonial or Constitution-writing times tended to be a local affair. News traveled slowly. Citizens in many colonies through 1787 tended to think of their thirteen colonies as thirteen nations, uniting for independence and confederation. What Connecticut did about religion and politics mattered little to what the Carolinas did. They were separated in geography and interest and not aware of the details of life beyond their own state or locality. I would not want to overdo that comment, because a press had developed, as anyone who reads records of debates over the Constitution learns early. But there was not much of a national press, and, of course, the electronic media, which in the twentieth century served to speed up the transmitting of information, did not exist.

Today most of what citizens know about public religion and politics in other states and nationally they get from television and other media. One could argue that "incorporation," the Supreme Court's applying the Bill of Rights to the states nationally, was in part a reflection of the federalization induced by the media.

Until the mass media developed, Utah could try to settle its own affairs in ways congenial to Mormons, Alabama to Baptists, Rhode Island to Catholics. An Alabama judge recently posted the Ten Commandments on his courthouse wall and averred that doing so was in place because this was a Christian, not a Buddhist or Hindu nation. But mass media picked it up and showed the image in Buddhist, Hindu, and other non-Alabamian, non-Baptist homes, where the judge's claims rang hollow or were offensive.

Mass media bring signals of papal visits to America, and these are politically fraught exemplifications of public religion. The Monday television programs show presidential candidates at worship the day

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