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Politics, Religion, and the Common Good

Advancing a Distinctly American Conversation About Religion’s Role in Our Shared Life

Martin E. Marty with Jonathan Moore

Jossey-Bass Publishers
San Francisco
Handle with Care
The Case Against Public Religion

Thesis: Public religion can be dangerous; it should be handled with care.

In the 1940s, what could incite otherwise law-abiding white Christian Americans to treat a group of fellow white Christian citizens like this?

In Nebraska, one member of this group was castrated.
In Wyoming, another member was tarred and feathered.
In Maine, six members were reportedly beaten.
In Illinois, a caravan of group members was attacked.
In other states, sheriffs looked the other way as people assaulted group members.
The group's meeting places were also attacked.
Members of the group were commonly arrested and then imprisoned without being charged.

Certainly the castrated, tarred, beaten, attacked, imprisoned people must have posed a great threat to the republic to prompt such behavior. They must have been revolutionaries whose ideologies led them to plot the overthrow of government by violent means. Who were they? Communists? Nazis? Anarchists?
powers to justify horrible acts. Mere place names evoke tragedies where religion plays a central role: Northern Ireland, Afghanistan, the West Bank, East Timor, Yugoslavia. It matters little which religion is involved; blood has been spilled by devotees of most faith traditions. Single-minded and impassioned, religious people often feel chosen by their God to work out the divine will against unbelievers—by any means necessary.

What about the scene closer to home?

Pro-choice people point to examples when pro-life individuals or groups inconvenience, harass, or even kill abortion providers in the name of God. Some religious groups blame religions they consider “false” as bearing responsibility for declines in morality and traditional family life.

Critics of religious groups that promote gay and lesbian marriage and fight for homosexual rights consider those groups—and their religion—dangerous because they call down or claim God’s blessings for what the critics think are abhorrent and destructive actions. On the other side, liberal Christians point out that conservative biblical interpretation denies gays and lesbians their full humanity.

Religion inspires Native American activists to make claims on lands that once were theirs, claims that inconvenience nearby non-Indian farmers. Conflict overseas that is justified or inspired by religion and that involves kin of American population elements—in Northern Ireland, Serbia, Iran—stirs passions and can disrupt community in the United States. The charismatic head of the Nation of Islam speaks incendiary anti-Jewish denunciations in Madison Square Garden, and the rest of America gasps at such language coming from a religious leader.

What goes on here and in such cases?

Religion Divides

Those called to be religious naturally form separate groups, movements, tribes, or nations. Responding in good faith to a divine call,
believers feel themselves endowed with sacred privilege, a sense of
closeness that elevates them above all others. This self-perception
then leads groups to draw lines around themselves and to speak neg-
atively of “the others.” Thus Israel had its Canaan, Christianity its
Jews and heathen, and Islam its infidels. The elect denounce “oth-
ers” for worshiping false gods and often act violently against such
unbelievers.

American history offers a long list of people who have claimed
such sacred privilege for themselves—and for the nation as a whole.
Massachusetts Bay Colony leader John Winthrop indicated this
sense of elevated status when he told his fellow colonists, “We must
consider that we shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all peo-
ple are upon us.” Others since Winthrop have sung of the United
States as “God’s New Israel.” Ronald Reagan helped draw a simi-
lar boundary when he spoke of the Soviet Union as an “evil em-
pire.” American leaders and those they represent have often
claimed special status for the United States, speaking of the country
as possessing a divinely chosen identity that places it above all oth-
ers in relation to God’s plan.

Religion Disrupts

Religious citizens do not necessarily improve community life when
they justify their actions on spiritual grounds. As noted, some fea-
tures of religion can tempt people to claim a monopoly on God or
on knowledge of God’s will—at the expense of the claims and
knowledge of others. While religions claim to be resources for heal-
ing and reconciling people, they often serve as salt in old wounds
or abrasions that cause new ones in the midst of community life.

Many of the nation’s founders, well aware of religion’s disruptive
potential, worried that officially encouraging religion would only
increase the chances for such trouble. Although some colonies had
established churches, the new national compact avoided formal
links between the state and religion. Such a linkage, constitutional

father James Madison believed, would produce “knaves, hypocrites,
and fools.” “Knaves” would willfully exploit the power of religion
to dominate the public masses, “hypocrites” would pretend that
their personal faith matched the prejudices of larger publics, and
“fools” might misunderstand the nature and power of religion and
come across as inauthentic.

Steadfastly religious members of the founding generation similarly
advised that religion and state should be kept separate. Baptist
clergyman and founding father Isaac Backus believed that both re-
ligion and the state would be better off if kept separate from each
other. “No man can be made a member of a truly religious society
by force, or without his own consent,” Backus contended, and “nei-
ther can any corporation that is not a religious society have a just
right to govern in religious affairs.”

America has become more plural in its third century. Thus the in-
trusion of religion into political matters runs an even greater risk
of causing trouble. Think for a minute of the seemingly intractable,
always contentious arguments over abortion. There religion often
seems to do more to intensify passions than achieve resolution. Simi-
larly, religion’s divisiveness in the public sphere can be seen clearly
when considering an issue such as homosexuality. Alan Wolfe has
shown that even as Americans have grown more and more tolerant
of each other, religious beliefs contribute to “a seemingly unbridge-
able gulf . . . between those who believe that the Bible’s condemna-
tion of homosexuality as an abomination must be taken as a moral
injunction versus those who believe that Christianity requires the
love and acceptance of everyone.” At times, religion seems to do
more to maintain and fortify political divisions than to heal them.

Religion Can Be Violent

“Violence is authorized by religion because religion is inherently ab-
solutist in the type of authoritative claims it makes and in the all-
ensuring nature of its demands on its followers,” wrote Brian K.
Smith. Once a particular group considers itself as divinely chosen and draws sharp boundaries between itself and others, the enemy has been clearly identified, and violence can become actual. Religion possesses special power for creating violence because its texts and injunctions have ways of locating eternal, supernatural, and absolutist impulses in the temporal world or the natural order. Other notions then follow.

To begin at the bottom, the Ku Klux Klan, both in its nineteenth-century antiblack forms and in its twentieth-century anti-Jewish, anti-Catholic expressions, was a base form of religion. Protestant clergy who replaced pulpit garb with Klan robes and exchanged the cross from their church with the burning cross on the lawn of African Americans did so invoking the Bible on their own altar.

Militia members, bombers, white supremacists, and their ilk pick up themes from scriptures, isolate them, and then treat them independently of the nonviolent and peacemaking texts to justify subversive activities.

In the eyes of many, the readiness of the clergy to bless the cannon in whatever war the United States is fighting (and there are texts aplenty for this blessing) is a sign that faith communities have no questions about armament, war, and the killing of people in "evil" places—even, and often, against the counsel of fellow believers who accent other biblical themes.

Many an adult who feels deprived of childhood, who never had an opportunity to make up his or her mind, blames religion for verbal or physical abuse: religion at its worst. And family members of those who died at Jonestown or Waco have a ready answer to anyone who asks whether religion can produce violence.

Native Americans see a certain lake or tree to be sacred and set out to protect it. But now it "belongs" to someone else, and that someone, invoking his own God, perpetrates violence and is met by counterviolence. A place comes to be seen as sacred, and the people must engage in a crusade to take it from the infidel. Or this particular time is pregnant, and a nation must use it to expand its borders. Or this cause is unique, and a tribe must follow it and engage in ethnic cleansing. Religion in its intense forms can grasp people who would otherwise have multiple commitments and exact complete and exclusive expressions of their loyalty, "even unto death."

Many critics argue that violence is the logical end of all religious faith. Some critics say that religion’s tendency to turn violent is especially true of monotheistic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, Islam. Because by nature they invoke an exclusivist, jealous God, monotheistic religions cannot avoid perpetrating violence against those outside the faith. Regina M. Schwartz offers this kind of criticism in The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism. Schwartz argues that biblical monotheism is inescapably bound up with violence and that this tradition lies behind most, if not all, of Western civilization’s evils. Because the Bible has formed and continues to form identity by designating a chosen people apart from others, Schwartz contends, it unavoidably provides divinely sanctioned justification for violence toward those outside the boundaries. “Violence,” says Schwarz, “is not only what we do to the Other. It is prior to that. Violence is the very construction of the Other.”

Though critics like Schwarz do well to point out the often deadly behavior of monotheists, they seldom clarify exactly what the more peaceful alternatives are. Some argue that the world would be safer if people simply ignored the transcendent altogether, instead using more secular and practical ideologies to order the human community. Others suggest that Eastern religions such as Buddhism or Hinduism offer more peaceful alternatives to monotheism, and some turn to Native American religions as a surrogate.

However, religions outside of the three monotheisms have not done much better in checking violent impulses. Pre-Columbian Aztec and Incan cultures, for instance, often offered human sacrifices. At the dedication ceremony of the Aztec temple of Tenochtitlán, Mexico, in 1487, tribal leaders sacrificed as many as 84,400 captives. So if monotheisms do have a record of violence, Peter
Berkowitz has noted, “it is equally true that plenty of cruelty and violence is on display in the pagan or non-biblically based religions of the world. . . . The Greek, the Norse and the Hindu gods are not exactly social democrats.”

In the United States, religions have justified slavery, the relocation or killing of Native Americans, and lynchings. But in twentieth-century America, there are almost certainly fewer deaths of citizens at the hands of others acting in the name of God than there are similar deaths around the world in any single week. This leads us to wonder, if religion is inherently violent, why has the United States, compared to other countries, been spared frequent and ongoing religious violence?

Providence, some would say, and did say back at the time of the country’s founding. Founders who were cautious about their religious expression and wary about using biblical names for God often spoke of the blessings of Divine Providence. This provident God had given a spacious continent, rich in resources, with room enough for all, and had planted a set of peoples who, after reluctant and grudging moves, learned to accept each other.

Luck, say some. Luck in having all those resources. Luck in having founders who wrote a constitution that keeps the violent away from their victims and does not make it possible to legitimate a holy warrior’s acting against other citizens. Luck that these founders adopted and advanced a philosophy born of the Enlightenment, a philosophy designed to promote generous views of other peoples and their faiths while allowing for and assuring freedom for each group to withhold consent from what others thought.

Learning, still others say. Most of the settlers from Europe knew what holy war had been like in and after the Reformation, the Thirty Years’ War, the Puritan Revolutions, and a hundred uprisings—all in the name of God. They did not want to replicate it here.

In the end, most religious interpreters of American life congratulate their predecessors and contemporaries for “keeping cool” where group meets group, however hot the passion they bring to their faith.

Nonetheless, Americans dare not become complacent about religion’s potential for violence. As the United States becomes more and more plural, many religious worldviews inevitably clash in discussions over the common good. Both worldwide and on the American scene, fundamentalisms display particular power. Though international versions have so far proved the most violent, their milder domestic counterparts shadow much of the controversy about American religion and politics. It is important, therefore, to recognize and understand fundamentalisms, as an awareness of them can deepen our public interactions while keeping us wary of religion’s potential for dangerous action.

What Does Fundamentalism Look Like?

“All fundamentalists, whatever their pattern of relation to the world, seek purity, draw sharp ideological boundaries, value mission work, and want to avoid the evils of the fallen world even as they seek to redeem it.” Scholars agree that in spite of the differences among them, all fundamentalisms share some general features: adherence to fundamentals, dependence on modernity to trigger their response, reactivity, and “doing Jujitsu.”

Adherence to Fundamentals

Protestant evangelicals embraced the term fundamentalism early in the twentieth century. They feared that “conservatives” were not firm enough and would not “do battle for the Lord.” For them, fundamentalism was a badge of pride (although later some dropped the term because it also could be a stigma).

In examining fundamentalisms, we see that each of them, usually drawing on sacred writings and traditional teachings, identifies a cluster of beliefs that must be followed and defended. In the three monotheistic faiths, the fundamentals come from the Torah, the New Testament, and the Qur’an.

The Torah? Most scholars do not equate Jewish Orthodoxy or traditionalism with fundamentalism. The Orthodox and the traditional try to retain ancient ways of being Jewish, but most of them
are not out to remake the world. Most are faithful to the covenant but do not hand out tracts and try to convert others at the airport. They may favor legislation that protects their sabbath, but they do not make efforts to use legislation to impose their will and practices on others. Yet there are some small movements, usually in the form of extremist support of Israel against the land claims of others, who lift out Torah passages and say that their stories show that God, in the promise to Moses, forever intended the land to be Israel’s. Obviously, this fundamentalist view of the land cannot be a part of Muslim faith, and only a minority of Christians, fundamentalists themselves, agree in their own way with such claims about the land.

The New Testament? Again, Christians can be very traditional, for instance, in respect to liturgy and forms of worship; they can be orthodox in respect to the creeds and confessions of their communion; they can be “conservative,” in that they try to hold to inherited patterns; they may agree with fundamentalists on the content of New Testament teaching; and yet they still wouldn’t be considered fundamentalists. Christian fundamentalists insist on being militant and are standoffish with respect to other Christians, including evangelicals, regarded as dangerous by many fundamentalists. Fundamentalists are uncompromising and insist that biblical passages do not admit of more than one interpretation. Since Christian fundamentalism centers on witness to the biblical teachings about Jesus, these teachings or doctrines along with their separatism make Protestant fundamentalists distinctive. They share some forms but, with the exception of claims for Israel, none of the content of faith with Jews or Muslims.

The Qur’an? Non-Muslim Americans are busy learning that the Muslim fundamentalist with whom they became familiar in 1979 during the Iranian revolution is not the Muslim down the street. All orthodox Muslims believe that the Qur’an is the direct utterance of Allah through the prophet Muhammad, so scriptural “inerrancy” is not the mark of the Muslim fundamentalist. Wherever movements have arisen that many scholars call fundamentalist—

while noting that many Muslims use other terms—these have been movements that paid attention to literal applications of laws from Shari’a, a body of law.

Dependence on Modernity

Fundamentalist movements often seek the restoration of a golden age, a return to first principles, but scholars see fundamentalists as a distinctly modern combination of the old and the new. Though a politics of nostalgia leads fundamentalists to wish for a return to a world they believe they have lost, that world—while rooted in historical reality—is also a mythical construction. Scholars agree that fundamentalisms look very much like contemporary creations, fresh combinations of old spiritual raw materials with new goals and circumstances.

For example, some younger women in Muslim communities wear the chador, veiling their faces. Asked whether they do this because their mothers did, they might well say that they are doing it because their mothers did not. They have reached back beyond their parents’ world and retrieved customs based on prescriptions that had been neglected or dismissed. Fearing that they will be overwhelmed by modernity and needing a badge of identity, they resurrect this symbol.

Similarly, Protestant fundamentalists are uncompromising in their biblical interpretation. For example, early in the twentieth century, their intellectual ancestors produced booklets called “The Fundamentals.” Some of these expressed mild support for moderate versions of evolution. But when some of these fundamentalists deduced that more radical forms of evolution were being taught in public schools and their denominations’ prestigious seminaries, they dug in and resisted all traces of evolutionary thinking in the sciences and in respect to scriptures. An aspect of modernity and modernization in theology triggered their fundamentalist response.

For all the similarities they bear to earlier movements, fundamentalists depend on modernity for their motivation—and their
existence. Of course, modernity can mean many things. To some it would be best represented by technology. Not here. Almost all fundamentalist groups embrace the latest in technology and employ it toward "premodern" ends. Rather, if you let each group define it, modernity is whatever it is against which they know they must react. It can mean Westernization, as in much of the Arabic Muslim world. It can mean pluralism and relativism, which have eroded boundaries between true and false communities, true and false claims.

As Almond, Sivan, and Appleby put it, "While fundamentalists claim to be upholding orthodoxy (right belief) or orthopraxis (right behavior), and to be defending and conserving religious tradition and traditional ways of life from erosion, they do so by crafting new methods, formulating new ideologies, and adopting the latest processes and organizational structures."

Reactivity

Both abroad and at home, fundamentalisms are reactive—reactive—movements. Fundamentalists find threatening certain features of contemporary life, and they react against those features by preserving their religious identities. Internationally, such threats include imperialism—hence the perception of the United States as the "Great Satan" by Iranian fundamentalists. In the United States, fundamentalists might feel threatened by a presumed conspiracy of "secular humanists" to keep religion carefully separated from public life. The Supreme Court gave credence to this belief in 1961 when it identified "Secular Humanism" as a religion. A year later, the Court disallowed prayer in public schools, and in 1963, teachers were barred from leading devotional readings of the Bible. While a Christian consensus seemed to reign over politics for most of America's first century, that consensus now appeared to be threatened by a Supreme Court grown hostile to the Judeo-Christian tradition. (The idea of reclaiming the culture for Christianity motivated more than fundamentalists. It propelled much of the New Christian Right into politics in the 1970s and 1980s.)

American fundamentalists perceive another threat in society's growing pluralism and its corollary, moral relativism—a term most fundamentalists did not use a few years ago. Instead, they talked about subversion by unbelieving theologians of their own communions, who supported progressive pursuits, evolution, or a variety of responses to moral change. Or they talked about everything as head-on satanic attacks on the bastion of truth.

Relativism strikes fundamentalists as the key feature of modernity, the main assault on the grasp of truth. Interestingly, relativism is a problem not because every system of thought, every contention, every moral decision is perceived as equally false. Just the opposite: they can all be presented positively by advocates, sold by the tolerant, until the victim of modernity decides that all truths are equally satisfying: You have yours. I have mine. I must tolerate you. What you believe makes no difference. I do not have to decide, or I can be eclectic, picking up bits and pieces from everywhere. And in the process, say not only fundamentalists, all seriousness in moral, intellectual, and spiritual searches gets sapped.

Doing Jujitsu

Jujitsu refers to the Japanese technique whereby seemingly weaker combatants can turn the strength of opponents to their advantage. Fundamentalists commonly perform a kind of Jujitsu on the forces that contemporary life throws against them. For example, modern mass media—including television, radio, and the Internet—tend to introduce a pluralism of ideas and options, something that might threaten the integrity of a fundamentalist worldview. While rejecting this effect, fundamentalists in America have turned the force of the mass media around, using it skillfully to bring their own message to the wider world.

On an intellectual level, fundamentalisms—especially American varieties—have performed Jujitsu on Enlightenment ideas. Liberal thinkers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries held to the supremacy of rational thought and often concluded that rationalism
required the sloughing off of religious belief as mere superstition. Fundamentalists performed Jujitsu on this idea, claiming rationalism in service of faith. For example, when it seemed that scientific inquiry lent credence to an evolutionist view of human origins, many religious conservatives used the same kinds of scientific investigation and arguments to claim divine origins for human life.

One of the more ingenious reversals in American fundamentalism has to do with the way church and state are to relate. Most citizens believe that they should be somehow separate and distinguished, but there is no agreement on exactly what that means. Normally, they and their legal experts make an appeal to the First Amendment of the Constitution: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” Many go on to say that the intention was to have a godless Constitution (unlike most constitutions elsewhere), thus allowing citizens freedom to develop their moral and theological commitments without state imposition or guidance. And others went still further to say that the founders tended not to be orthodox Christians but Deists or Enlightenment religiousists who were respectful of Christianity but thought you could have a moral and virtuous republic on general philosophical grounds, being subject to natural law, natural reason, and reason’s god.

Then along comes modern fundamentalism or political evangelicalism. It takes the force of modernity’s assault and argues that if the founders had a somewhat independent faith, then that faith, called “secular humanism,” is illegally privileged and established. And if the founders were more orthodox—and fundamentalists regard all but one or two, such as Thomas Jefferson, as “Bible believers”—then one must look at what their original intention had to be. In this argument, they claim that the First Amendment still allowed governmental support for religion to continue, if all religions benefit legally. Most consistently, they argue that the establishment clause tells what only Congress cannot do—leaving the states free to do their own improvising.

The Potential for Religious Violence: Liberal and Secular Alternatives

Reactive religious movements are hardly the only ones with the potential to disrupt the civil order. For all its devotion to tolerance, moderate or liberal religion has often taken intolerant forms.

We have made it clear that fundamentalist disruption of the American civil order almost never takes the form of violence or life-taking that it takes in much of the rest of the world. Instead it tends to take forms that are verbal or gestured—through images in cartoons, disdainful and demeaning remarks, and incivility, all of which make the constructive addressing of social issues more difficult.

So it is with liberal complication and disruption. If you do not believe so, ask your friendly neighborhood fundamentalist or intense member of the Christian Right. The rightist complains that all the attention falls on the rightist camp because the media are biased by liberal outlooks or because liberals are suave and subversive about the way they hold exclusionary power.

Liberal disruption shows up in primary and secondary schools, especially in the areas of sex education and social commentary. There liberals tend to acquiesce in the idea that they cannot prevent all teenagers from having sex, so they promote health causes, such as the counsel to use condoms. They might want to advance the notion that homosexual lifestyles are acceptable. They teach not a well-defined set of moral truths but “values clarification.” All these are abhorrent signs of liberal incivility to their opponents. These foes see liberals as having sneaked or forced their way into positions from which they can propagate their ideas and subvert systems. In place of condoms, the religious literalists say, why not simply promote abstinence as the only foolproof method for preventing teenage pregnancy? Why not quote the Bible’s several passages against homosexual behavior and be done with it? Why assume that all the value systems children bring need clarifying before the student engages in moral action? The Bible has clarified values once
and for all: who are the liberals to have forced their way into the world of textbooks, libraries, teacher training programs, school boards, and the like?

Liberals, their critics will tell them, "used" religion in support of the civil rights movement and various post-New Deal, post-New Frontier, post-Great Society causes. In all of these they invoked God—who was working through Martin Luther King Jr. or the National Conference of Catholic Bishops or the National Council of Churches or denominational headquarters. Who asked them to do that? How did they get into the position of helping those causes, and who gave them the monopoly on interpreting them as God's doing?

Liberals were most prominent in opposing the Vietnam War, which they had helped develop. Liberal "brightest and best" scholars and agents had prompted the escalation of the war in 1965, but they did not want to be reminded of that as they scourged Bible-quoting "hawks." When fundamentalists gravitated to the hawkish position, liberals dismissed them as less than godly, God being the God of pacifists.

Talk about intolerance, say their critics; just look at the liberal fundamentalists. They tend to speak about dialogue and conversation but are unwilling to listen on the subject of abortion. They may not be as open about using theology to justify their commitment to "choice" as their opponents will be with justifying "life," but the theology is there. And they disrupt church and civil life by supporting gay rights far beyond constitutional demands. Their expanded definitions of the family have undercut the traditional family. They are so sure they must support freedom of speech that they limit "our" freedom of religion, which finds so much speech to be blasphemous, obscene, immoral—and needing limits in law. They are not tolerant or dialogical about these matters, and in their own way, they call God down on their side. Religion, in its varied forms, seems to promote violence.

Would Nonreligion Avoid Violence?

Clearly, religion can cause trouble, even of the most deadly kind. The frequency and near universality of religiously motivated vio-

lence can make any reasonable person wonder if religion and politics might best be kept completely separate. Better to cordon off religion from politics before passions get out of hand.

Yet many twentieth-century attempts to replace religion with nonreligion have only issued in more violence. The century's totalitarianists, intending to be non- and antireligious, opposed the historic faiths. Yet the concentration camps and gulags, the famines induced by bad policies, the destruction of sacred art in cultural revolutions, the murder of priests behind barbed wire, and genocidal policies were effected not in the name of Allah or Yahweh or the Father of Jesus Christ or any of the gods. Who can speak credibly in the name of the natural humaneness of nonreligion?

If religions have a spotty historical record when it comes to violence and nonreligious alternatives have fared no better, what's left? A world of benevolent anarchy perhaps? People inevitably organize themselves into groups, tribes, or nations, so to advocate a non-organized alternative is unrealistic. People will gather together on the basis of various identities, including religious ones. So the question remains: Do religions have a proper place in the political sphere, or will they cause more trouble than other means of organization?

**Political Interaction Compromises Religion's Purity**

Some observers have insisted that the purity of both church and state is best served by keeping them apart. Virginia Baptist John Leland, arguing against general state support for religion, wrote that "government has no more to do with the religious opinions of men than it has with the principles of mathematics." Other Baptists have also played a prominent role in a long line of religious Americans seeking to keep church and state separate. Isaac Backus, whom we have already met as a prime New England Baptist, was a dissenter against the establishment's mingling of church and state. And Baptists like to claim as one of their own Roger Williams, the Massachusetts and Rhode Island pioneer, in keeping the government out of religion and religion out of government.
In our own time, Baptists of the North and South, who could not agree on many things, produced a "joint commission" to draw a clear line between church and state. They were often friends of the courts when that line needed redefinition. During the mid-twentieth century, many helped form a group (often anti-Catholic in its impulses) called Protestants and Other Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

For decades it was a badge of pride in the Southern Baptist Convention that it "stayed out of politics," except for considerable opposition to the presidential campaign of Catholic Al Smith in 1928 and repeal of Prohibition through the 1920s. That stance has changed in our own time, when recent Southern Baptist Convention votes have supported prayer in the public schools and similar policies that, in the eyes of their critics, blur or cross the line between church and state.

In contemporary America, many religious people stand in the tradition of Backus and Leland. Some feel that the purity of religion would be compromised by the inevitable give-and-take of political activity. Others, across the religious spectrum, fear that the words of religious leaders will unfairly cause a political reaction against all adherents of that particular faith, working against denominational and congregational purposes. As but one example, as recently as the spring of 1999, Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson, prominent members of the Christian Right, questioned the direct political tactics of the right for its overidentification with the Republican party and joined others in questioning whether the tactics might not be hurting both the political and the religious causes. It was time to change the culture, out of which better politics would come, they argued. In order for faith to remain pure and prosperous, they went on, a proper distance between church and state must be maintained.

Religion and Politics: Is the Mix Worth the Risk?

This brief catalogue of the dangers—both real and potential—of intermingling religion and politics points toward an obvious conclu-

sion: America will be better off if religion and politics are kept far apart. At best, religion causes division in the political realm. At worst, religion causes all kinds of deadly trouble. Perhaps religiously motivated political action has no place in a democratic republic.

The next chapter offers a substantial rejoinder to this argument. Although religion and politics can often be a combustible mix, there are many reasons for assuming that religion will continue to be involved in politics and for advocating that it be so.


Chapter One


Chapter Two


Chapter Three


Chapter Four


2. For instance, in the United Methodist Church, 81.2 cents go to local needs; 14.2 cents go to district, region, and multistate jurisdictions; and 4.5 cents go to national and international ministries; Thomas S. McAnally, “‘Apportionments’ Represent Ministries Around the World,” *United Methodist News Service*, Apr. 2, 1998.


13. In many of his writings, James Madison discusses a “line of distinction” between civil and religious authorities. See, for example, *Federalist Papers X* and LI.

**Chapter Five**


**The Author**

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Jonathan Moore is a Ph.D. candidate in the history of Christianity at the University of Chicago Divinity School. His current research examines evangelicalism and church-state conflicts in twentieth-century America.
About the Public Religion Project

This book is a product of Public Religion Project-sponsored conversations on public religion and 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, held these 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, 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 government and politics. In hosting the 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. This book reflects the voices and concerns heard around that table.

I've often 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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Worth the Risk
Public Religion and the Common Good

Thesis: Public religion can and does contribute to the common good.

Scene 1: Like millions of other Americans, you toss a dollar or ten into the red bucket of the Salvation Army bell-ringer in December. You all must feel that the Army does good work. Otherwise, you would not respond to the appeal for contributions. No similar charity has a broader appeal or raises more funds.

The word salvation suggests to you that something religious prompts the “Salvationists” to weather the sleet and buck the winds of urban corners. Unless you are one of the fewer than half a million Americans who are part of the “inclusive membership” of this disciplined organization, you may not know personally a single member of the Salvation Army. You may even be a bit uneasy about the military terminology that serves to describe the group. It is also highly unlikely that you would have sat down with a Salvationist to discuss the fine points of the “Articles of War” that all must sign, and you would be lost making your way through the eleven articles of the Wesleyan Arminian Holiness teachings that make this evangelical group distinctive.

So distinctive is the group that when it was first organized, other Christians were alarmed by many of its practices. Salvationists do not baptize or celebrate the Lord’s Supper. Their private teachings
and worship offended even that most tolerant observer of religious enthusiasm, philosopher William James. In 1897, in *The Will to Believe*, James busied himself “defending the legitimacy of religious faith” against some rationalist critics who regarded such an effort as “a sad misuse of one’s professional position.” He had to admit that he ran out of patience with some groups and as far as the Salvation Army was concerned, “what such audiences most need is that their faiths should be broken up and ventilated, that the northwest wind of science should get into them and blow their sickness and barbarism away.”

All those irritants to other Christians, rationalists, and observers such as James belonged to what we might call the private side of the Salvation Army. During the century since James wrote, the Army and the culture have changed. Today it is the public face of the Army that moves people. Let the Salvationists do what they wish to spread salvation; we are impressed that they serve human needs. Is the Army involved with the public? Indeed. The majority of the dollars it puts to work come from public revenues, from tax subsidies. Told that this is the case, most people shrug and don’t even bring up whether this practice violates the separation of church and state. They have positively assessed the public good served by this private group.

Scene 2: Although your uncles and aunts may have resisted the civil rights movement, dragged their feet when asked to march for justice in the 1960s, or felt that the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. had lost his charm before you ever found it, in their old age they are likely to take a different view of the movement, the marches, the Baptist pastor, and his coleaders. You may have resisted a King national holiday, and you may hang out with people who still enjoy regaling each other with stories about his private life that were gathered by the FBI. Yet it is hard to argue with the point that overall the legacy of the movement and the man is a positive good. Even social conservatives and people who believe you cannot legislate morality recognize gains in realizing justice among the races. The cleric whose face could have been on “Wanted” posters in many a community before 1968 is now pictured in classrooms and buildings as an American hero.

Of course, millions of Americans are unwaveringly positive about this Nobel Prize winner and champion of nonviolence, who may indeed have prevented bloodbaths. Among these supporters may be agnostics or atheists. Many are undoubtedly Jews, who massively supported the civil rights cause, even though King’s organization bore the name Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Most of these people were moved by the preacher’s rhetoric, not by the substance of his gospel. Many may not have realized that he treated the U.S. Constitution and the Declaration of Independence as sacred documents, texts for his public religion. But they could not have missed the fact that he took the faith expressed in texts from the prophets and the gospels, nurtured in private homes and small churches, and put it to work to effect change in law and attitude. This was public religion in action.

Scene 3: It would be false to the nature of religion to measure it only by its charities and its occasional contribution to the workings of justice. Faith also has to do with interpreting life and contributing to the search for meaning. Through religion, citizens find meaning that goes beyond doing good and being good. Of course, religion as interpretation is double-sided in its effects. People oppress and hate and kill in its name and under its thrall. Yet at least on many occasions, as in the slave quarters among the abolitionists, on the tongues of peacemakers and reconcilers such as Abraham Lincoln in his Second Inaugural Address, and when clergy help communities deal with tragedy and move on toward reconstruction, “public religion” appears to the vast majority as a positive good. And as an element in the interpreting of life, fulfilling religion also and always impels the prophetic note to be bounced back into the lives of people. They are supposed to be self-critical or to respond to divine criticism and judgment, to be reformed, and to renew the republic.
It is one thing to point to the presence of religion and begin to describe or define some of its manifestations. It is another to suggest, as we did in the previous chapter, that the introduction and exploitation of religion in politics and government can be a distraction or a menace. And it is yet another to adduce reasons why religion can be a good in the public order.

Yale law professor Stephen Carter has complained about the "trivialization" of religion in respect to politics and law in America. The present exercise falls into the family of what, reversing Carter, we might call the "detrivialization" of religion in politics and government.

What good has religion done, and what good can it do? Consider the following eighteen reasons, a starter set for a list that could be extended. Some items will strike readers as idealizations of religion, while others will describe characteristics that only some religious people share. Think of these less as irrefutable facts and more as directional pointers and conversation starters.

Religion Is Not Going to Disappear

Religion will not go away. Among those for whom religion is important, it is supremely important. Of course, merely pointing to the pervasiveness of religion is not enough. After all, cancer also exists, and so do noxious weeds, and our energies are usually spent working against them. Why should we work for, and not against, religion in the public arena?

Religion Deals with the Deepest Elements of Life

To those who demonstrate active and assertive attitudes toward faith, be it formal or informal, communal or individual, left or right in its propulsion of energies, there is no way to conceive of morality, ethics, and action on profound causes without recourse to those deepest religious fonts of thought, belief, and action. It is unnatural, unrealistic, and unsatisfying to ask a public servant to park his or her faith at the door when helping decide whether the nation will go to war or wage peace, whether government should be an agent in attending to welfare of the dispossessed, or whether people should pursue mere self-interest or mix that interest with the common good. To be sure, thoughtful leaders with profound religious convictions will be sensitive to the demands and expectations of a pluralistic society. Such leaders likely cannot be effective public servants if they press particularistic claims in general society. But when making their decisions with the good of the broader public in mind, they are also likely to take those precise particularities into consideration.

So it is with constituencies, participants in electoral processes, and the governed in general: to expect them to form coalitions and caucuses motivated by everything other than religion—concerns of gender, race, ethnicity, class, aesthetics, interest, ideology—is unrealistic and "against the rules" in a constitutional republic. But as with the governors, so with the governed: they take calculated risks if they demand that they have their way on the basis of the particularities of their faith. Such action might well inspire backlash, counterorganization by others, or expressions of distaste for their faith. Yet they can see the positive good in religious movements that, for all their differences, can be allied for the common good.

Religion Is Already at Work in the Public Arena

A republic would be better off if everyone brought into the open whatever motivates and impels the citizens to decide and to act. Through the centuries and recent decades, different claimants have taken the initiative in putting religion to work in the public sphere. Support for the welfare state and civil rights and opposition to some wars came from congregations, denominations, and ecumenical
forums. Support for organized labor often received a great impetus from Catholics and other churches. Support for Israel and for liberal rights and social causes came from Jews. Urban political measures drew overt support from African American congregations. The peace churches lobbied for peace. One cannot write the history of positive human achievement without reckoning with such contributions, and one must acknowledge that a republic is most healthy when all views, including religious views, are present in public debate.

Religion Provides Public Conversation with Needed Resources

Another reason for bringing religion into the open has to do with the resources it brings. We have heard modern thinkers rely on ancient religious texts to explain things “because they already knew back then what we do not know as yet.” These texts include important themes of prophecy and criticism that will not get voiced by other than religious people. It is not likely that a Martin Luther King Jr. could have achieved much of what he did had he not been dealing with a populace that felt it should make some response to what he reminded them Isaiah and Jesus and Paul said. Environmentalists often draw on unconventional and minority faiths, many of them from the East, to line up votes and promote care for the environment, and they do so more successfully than those who argue merely prudentially.

Religion Helps Illuminate the Presuppositions of All Conversation Partners

Bringing faith into the open in politics and government is also one means of “smoking out” other latent ideologies in the republic. Sometimes in an academic or civil forum, people will root their arguments in Marxist, Adam Smithian, feminist, gay, middle-class, and other ideologies disguised as self-evident ways of life. Just as with thieves spotting thieves, so with religionists in law observance: it takes one to know one. Religious people can point to elements in the worldview or propaganda of the other, the nonreligious element, that may have undisclosed and unrecognized metaphysical backgrounds and interests.

Religion Can Bring Perspective and Help Diminish Political Fanaticisms

Religion in the public order can serve to relativize other elements in that order and help bring contested items into perspective. Religionists may not always do well with their perspectives, but they are called to be responsive to the eternal and also to possess a longer view of the shorter-term temporal order. Faith can point to the limits of politics and reveal it as an aspect of life that can easily aspire to become the unlimited, the infinite, the all-consuming. A book title suggests a valid reminder from the religious world: Everything Is Politics, but Politics Is Not Everything. When the religious remember that and live by it, they can help quicken electorates from apathy without summoning them to political zealotry. Faith can help citizens learn to take something very, very seriously—but not too seriously. While ordinary people can point to the genuine hopes that come with political investment, they can also lose heart when their causes do not prosper, or they can become prideful when they succeed. The voice of faith in the political context calls for other, different responses.

Religious Freedom Helps Assure All Other Freedoms

Religion in governmental life is still “the first freedom.” The First Amendment places it there. James Madison and other founders made much of the proposition. Where religion pros pers anywhere in the world, other freedoms follow or are attached to it. So it is that
devotion to religion and religious freedoms helps the cause of liberty across the board. Many of the fanatics for religious freedom may approach it in a skewed manner and may not care as much for the common good of the republic as for their own souls or communities. That makes little difference for this issue—though it has more importance in others—since these restless seekers of their own liberty force rethinking on everyone else. Over the long run, the larger population has seen the value of making room for extremists of faith.

Religion Can Combat Apathy

Putting religion to work can be a means of quickening more voters to rise out of apathy. For example, people in a community may not notice the need for new nursing home legislation until their home church calls them to service regarding a badly run facility. Very often it has been and remains the religious agency and community that has welcomed the immigrant and engaged in relief. The religious call is constant, insistent, “for all seasons,” and can outlast appeals of merely moralistic character.

Religious Communities Are Practiced and Durable

Religious communities often keep classes, conversations, and caucuses going in a time of general public apathy. In congregations and other religious groups, people encounter those who are only in some ways like-minded. Many members do burrow down into more specialized camps to gather strength for participating in political wars, but others take advantage of belonging to groups that may bring together various interests and meet on the basis of relative consensus.

Religions Can Contribute to Conversations About the Common Good

Most religions have what we might call “theologies of public order,” thoughts about the common good that provide interpretations of the workings of the body politic and the forces in it. However, they do not express these interpretations if their adherents exclude themselves, or feel themselves excluded, from contention in the public arena. Why might it be good to have these theologies evident in public life? The record of the twentieth century has shown that when one ideology, one leadership group, or any majority seeks a monopoly, a variety of voices can help assure freedom.

Religious People Can Draw on Overlooked Resources

In the United States, “secular rationality” has a central place in political thinking, but religious groups accent other themes that also have their place. Among these we might list community, tradition, memory, intuition, affection, and hope. There is a double-sidedness to all of these, of course. Community can be exclusive. Tradition often weighs people down and limits their imagination. One cannot live in the past, which is where memory turning to nostalgia imprisons people. Intuition can go wrong. Affection extended to one’s own may rule out “the other.” Hope can easily turn into optimism and thus toward foolishness. But the positive contributions of each of these are great assets in a republic. Though it is not possible to base a pluralist republic on any one of these, each helps ensure that more interests, more people, and more dimensions of life get their hearing.

Religious People Can Provide a Voice for the Voiceless

Voices of religion can be heard where other voices are silent or where “secular rationality” is not effective. The fetus, the comatose, the mentally limited, the defenseless—all these need representation not only by secular rationalists but also by those who value what cannot always be reduced to logic, to the bartering of power based on calculated self-interest, and the like.
Religions Are Distinctively Qualified to Revitalize the Republic

Religious voices can help the larger society recover, appraise, and criticize some neglected themes that can benefit political and governmental life. It is easy, for example, to forget the power of stewardship, which is a strong element in most religions but not something on which self-interested people will reflexively draw. In times when ambition and careerism are given such a high value, the concept of vocation, as in "a vocation to public service," can help ennoble the lives of people in politics. A third religious idea that is often neglected by self-seekers in governmental life is mission. Recovery of a sense of mission can help guide people in political entities in times of drift.

Religiously Motivated Citizens Are Committed for the Long Term

Religious faith at its best involves people with outlooks on government that will sustain them in hard times. If one is truly committed to a faith, consequences follow. The religious can “hang in there,” no matter what the present circumstances. They do not merely follow the trends of the moment or lose heart when the going is tough. Any number of causes in American public life—one thinks of abolition, civil rights, the rights of laborers, the protection of children—have attracted their cohorts of fickle “Sunday soldiers.” However, people of faith, through prophecy and criticism, gesture and witness, often find reason to stay with their commitments.

Religions Often Encourage Dealing Positively with the Other

Religions can breed fanaticism and thus can disrupt political discourse among those who hold to such beliefs. But a commitment this side of fanaticism, which marks most religions, can lead faith-filled participants in political life to find new motives for dealing with “the other.”

Religions Provide Stamina for Dealing with Crises

At their best, faiths instill noble ideals and help people form habits and follow customs on which to draw in crisis. These may not be patent in the day-to-day of political and governmental life. But at times, as when President Abraham Lincoln called on them as “the better angels of our nature,” they can serve as a potential. Not that they always do appear, nor are religious people always attentive to them. But developing these better aspects of personal life and culture is part of the claims and aspirations of people of faith.

Religions Offer Chances for Renewal

In the repertory of options that most faiths seek to stock are repentance and the call to be purified, to turn. Again, nonbelievers can also find new resolve and make fresh resolutions. But in political and governmental life, where the stakes are high and mistakes are expensive, the ability to humble oneself in the face of God, of the sacred, to find motives for drastic change and consequent self-improvement, is important too. It can affect a cause, a party, and a nation.

Religions Can Help Protect the Individual in the World of Politics

Most faiths, and not least of all the prophetic religions of Judaism and Christianity, have great regard for what political philosopher Glenn Tinder calls “the exalted individual.” Believers conceive of each person as having been created “in the image of God.” A Christian gloss on this is the Incarnation, in which God honors the human
race by joining it in the person of Jesus Christ. Honoring the exalted individual and stressing the dignity of the human are major preoccupations of other religions as well. Whatever else religions do in political life, they hold the individual in high regard. They will not always do well at this, and they will not be the only ones who do so, but they have special motivations for staying with this preoccupation.

Amending the List

You will certainly be able to add many more points to this advertisement for the positive potential of some religious expression in some situations in some views of the public order. Of course, you will also want to call into question some of the rather bold claims we have just set forth. After all, there will always be days when we have to cross our fingers or hold our noses when observing what can happen in the name of religion gone public.

"Public religion" is not a top-down, worked-out, authoritative concept. It is the result of the very complex strivings and questionings of a couple of hundred million citizens. How it is realized in contemporary life depends on the quality of the questioning, the clarity of people's expression, and the seriousness of their resolve as individual citizens.

The Individual Citizen, Formed and Mobilized by Faith

*Thesis:* Individual citizens are energized by an awareness of possibilities based on their beliefs, and the effects of those beliefs provide hope for improving the republic.

When two gun-toting teenagers killed numbers of their schoolmates at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, in 1999, the citizenry screamed to legislators: "Do something!" Soon there were moves to address one of the issues, the easy availability of firearms. No one believed that stricter gun control measures would prevent incidents like that at Columbine, but many thought that such measures could be part of an arsenal of instruments ensuring restraint. Congress, state legislatures, and city councils scrambled to meet some of the new demands. Polls showed the public overwhelmingly on the side of these demands. Yet were the public's representatives listening to the public? Perhaps, but they were listening harder to particular lobbies and interest groups. These groups were acting perfectly legally, but their pressure trumped the power of the electorate.

Some voters interpret the Second Amendment to the United States Constitution in such a way that they believe "religiously" that gun ownership is their right, a sacred right, and that any restrictions violate it. Others interpret the Constitution in a different