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God and the American Experiment An Introduction

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One could imagine the question posed in the title of this book provoking two legions to mass against each other. They'd offer sharply different accounts of the role of God and organized religion in creating and nurturing the American experiment.

In one view, it is America's pluralistic and secular Constitution that has promoted freedom, diversity, and, oddly, the very strength of American religious communities. A state independent of organized religion has been freedom's, and religion's, finest friend. Was not a central motivation for the creation of free and tolerant institutions a desire to end wars over God and religion?

In the other account, freedom itself is rooted in a theistic—many would say Judeo-Christian—commitment to the inviolable dignity of the individual human being. This belief arises, in the words of the Declaration of Independence, from “the Law of Nature and of Nature's God.” A belief in God places healthy restraints on the human tendency to deify political systems or individual political strongmen—and insists that even strongmen are accountable to a Higher Authority.

This argument is as old as our republic, and in truth the two views just offered are not mutually exclusive. The essays presented in this book make no pretense of settling the debate definitively. As Alan Wolfe writes in these pages, “Two hundred years after the brilliant writings of James Madison and Thomas Jefferson on the topic, Americans cannot make up their minds whether religion is primarily private, public, or some uneasy combination of the two.” But precisely because of the ambiguities Wolfe describes, arguments about the role of God and religious faith in our democracy are now, and always have been, central to our understanding of its workings.

Wolfe’s comments remind us why we should not be surprised that religion and questions surrounding it played such a large role in the early rounds of the 2000 presidential campaign. While it could not be predicted that Governor George W. Bush would say in a debate that Jesus Christ was his favorite political philosopher, one could predict that Bush’s answer—and his explanation for it—would arouse intense debate. When asked to explain why he had named Jesus and how Jesus had changed his life, Bush replied, “Well, if they don’t know, it’s going to be hard to explain.”

Many evangelical Christians knew exactly how Bush felt and identified with his answer. Not surprisingly, conservative Evangelicals became his most loyal supporters in his intense primary battle with Senator John McCain. Yet many Catholics and Jews, mainline Protestants, and nonbelievers saw Bush’s answer as inadequate or worse. “In principle, it’s appropriate for a religious candidate to make known and explain his religious convictions. It leads to a richer and more informed public debate,” said Father J. Bryan Hehir, a professor at Harvard Divinity School. But Father Hehir added, “Religion is certainly about the heart, but it’s about more than the heart. It’s about an intellectual structure of belief, and a candidate needs to explain what that intellectual structure is about. And that was totally missing from Bush’s answer.”

That was only the first skirmish. Bush’s visit to Bob Jones University unleashed attacks from Democrats but also from McCain who pointed to the school’s history of racism and anti-Catholicism. Bush captured the conservative evangelical vote and won the crucial South Carolina primary. But McCain capitalized on a backlash to the Bush tactics by, among things, launching thousands of phone calls to Catholic voters in Michigan, where the subsequent primary was held, informing them of Bush’s Bob Jones visit

and the university's attitude toward Catholics. McCain then raised the stakes around the religious issue by denouncing Christian conservative leaders, the Reverends Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, both of them Bush supporters. All this happened within just the first few months of Campaign 2000.

When religious issues of this sort arise in political campaigns, the response is usually rapid polarization around absolute positions held with utter conviction. Yet absolute answers to questions about the relationship of religious faith to our democratic life tend to obscure as much as they illuminate. The history of religion's relationship to America's democratic freedoms is told quite differently within different faiths, denominations, and political communities.

We Americans—almost all of us—can be quite inconsistent in our views of how and when religion should influence politics. Many who welcome the prophetic role of the churches in movements to abolish slavery, promote civil rights, and secure social justice are skeptical of applying religion's prophetic voice to matters such as abortion, sexuality, or family life. Many who welcome the second set of commitments can be just as wary of crusades rooted in a social gospel. Richard Parker's essay is an important reminder that for all the emphasis in standard contemporary accounts about the role of the religious right, some of the most compelling action on the progressive side of politics is being organized through religious institutions. Citing a Methodist document on the economy, Parker notes that "the Methodists' vision is much more progressive than anything emanating from Democratic Party platforms or policies in the last thirty years." In another powerful challenge to our stereotypes about the relationship between religious faith and action, W. Bradford Wilcox and John P. Bartkowski argue that the evidence shows conservative Protestants to have an approach to family life "in many ways more progressive" than that of other Americans.

In his autobiography, *Strength for the Journey*, the Reverend Jerry Falwell is admirably candid in acknowledging the contrast between his reaction to church-based civil rights activists in 1965 ("Preachers are not called upon to be politicians but to be soul winners," he said then) and his later embrace of political activism in response to the Supreme Court's 1973 decision legalizing abortion. Falwell's words are worth remembering as you

read Taylor Branch's powerful essay—drawn from his book *Parting the Waters*—on Martin Luther King's address on the Montgomery bus boycott. To contrast King with Falwell, or Falwell's earlier views with his later views, is to learn a healthy wariness about sweeping statements concerning the relationship between religion and public life.

God Meets the Social Scientist

While there is a long and honorable history of engagement between social science and the study of religion (from Max Weber and Emile Durkheim to Will Herberg, Robert Bellah, and Andrew Greeley), arguments about God and politics rarely stay on the neutral ground defined by the statistical techniques that give comfort to social scientists. For believers, the final answers can never lie in factor analysis or regression coefficients.

Yet paradoxically, the origins of this book lie precisely in that old tradition of social science research. An organization dedicated to saving historic church buildings, Partners for Sacred Places, invited Ram Cnaan of the University of Pennsylvania to conduct a classic form of the social science study. Partners wanted to know what inner-city congregations were doing to meet the social needs of their neighborhoods. What kind of services did they provide and to whom?

Cnaan did what social scientists do: he conducted a survey, in his case of 113 congregations in Chicago, Indianapolis, Mobile, New York, Philadelphia, and San Francisco. The results of Cnaan's work, reported in these pages, were unsurprising to those who knew what was happening in the religious institutions and yet dramatic nonetheless. Reacting to this study, William J. Bennett noted that social science often involves "the elaborate demonstration of the obvious by methods that are obscure." Cnaan used the most straightforward methodology to capture what people in the trenches of community work see every day.

Simply put: the congregations do a great deal. They set up soup kitchens and feeding programs for the homeless, recreational programs for young children and teens, alliances with neighborhood associations, clothing drives, and important forms of fellowship for the elderly and the sick. One of

Cnaan's most important findings is that congregation members performed these services not primarily on behalf of one another but for those outside their ranks. This was, to use a favorite term of both social scientists and theologians, "other-regarding" work.

Sacred Places, Civic Purposes

Cnaan's findings are consistent with those of other social scientists. Father Andrew Greeley aptly summarized the evidence in an essay in the *American Prospect*. The research has consistently shown that both "frequency of church attendance and membership in church organizations correlate strongly with voluntary service."¹ The best available data suggest that religious organizations and "relationships related to religion" are clearly the major forces mobilizing volunteers in America. Even a third of secular volunteers—people who did not volunteer for specifically religious activities—relate their service "to the influence of a relationship based on their religion." Sacred places, it seems, serve civic purposes.

What grew out of the Cnaan study, thanks to help from the Pew Charitable Trusts and the energetic work of Luis Lugo, the director of its religion program, were two meetings sponsored by Brookings in 1997. At the first, in November, Cnaan presented his findings for comment from Senator Joseph Lieberman, William Bennett, and a group of inner-city pastors.

At the second meeting, in December, a broad group of activists, religious leaders, and social scientists debated the role of religiously based institutions in alleviating poverty. They addressed in particular the proper relationship of government to this work.

The ensuing debate was lively and moving, and it crossed many political lines. At times, representatives of the Gospel Mission movement seemed to share common ground with a representative of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State. Liberals and conservatives, often at odds on many questions, shared a hopefulness about the activities of churches as providers of services to the poor, as prophetic voices on their behalf, and, in the words of Father Michael Doyle of Sacred Heart Church in Camden, N.J., as "base operators of great community organizing, where

people can be brought together to do for themselves.” It’s fair to say that the spirit of the meeting was captured in an adage coined by Martin Luther King. In the struggle against injustice, King said, “God isn’t going to do all of it by Himself.”

This book grows out of those meetings. Some of the essays (by Ram Cnaan, Glenn Loury, James Q. Wilson, and John DiIulio) are revised and, especially in Wilson’s case, extended versions of their remarks and papers. We have added many new essays, including reports to provide a baseline for the debate—Richard N. Ostling’s historical look at the changes in the nation’s religious landscape and an examination of public attitudes by Robert Blendon, Richard Morin, and their colleagues.

A “Passion for the Possible”

The interest in faith-based charity should be seen as a particularly promising aspect of a larger transformation in the discussion of religion and politics in America. To characterize the new discussion in what some might see as an excessively optimistic light, it does appear (despite the polarized politics of the 2000 Republican primaries) that many among devout believers are more sensitive than their forebears might have been to the demands of religious pluralism and tolerance; and that many Americans inclined toward secularism are more alive now than they were even a decade ago to the contributions made by religious people and institutions to social renewal. “The role of government at all levels is being redefined, but so is the role of religion,” Jim Wind of the Alban Institute said at the December meeting. “We must find new ways to think about the relationship of religion and public life.”

There is also an opening toward a more nuanced understanding of the interaction between religious commitment and social change, between personal transformation and social justice. That both Bush and Vice President Al Gore have endorsed government help to “faith-based organizations” suggests how much the debate had changed and reflects a new recognition of the power of these institutions to solve problems. And, as evangelical writer and activist Jim Wallis points out in his essay, these institutions are now so

much part of the public policy debate that they have their own wonky set of initials. They are now known as “FBOs.” The importance of these groups is further underscored in the essays by two former mayors, Stephen Goldsmith, a Republican from Indianapolis who is a leading policy adviser to Governor Bush’s campaign, and Kurt Schmoke, a Democrat from Baltimore.

Yet even the strongest advocates of the FBOs acknowledge that religion’s role in renewing society will most often begin at the level of the individual, not the government. “Religion’s chief contribution to morality is to enable people to transform their lives,” Wilson writes. “Faith can only transform one person at a time, and then only as the result of the personal attention of one other person.”

Patrick Glynn makes a powerful parallel case. “Religion does its real work in politics not by arousing moral indignation, but by awakening the individual conscience,” he writes. “The distinction is a subtle but important one. Moral indignation drives us to condemn others; conscience prompts us to question ourselves.” Or, as the theologian Jurgen Moltmann said of Christian hope, “It will constantly arouse the ‘passion for the possible,’ inventiveness and elasticity in self-transformation, in breaking with the old and coming to terms with the new.”

Contemporary talk about “opportunity” and “responsibility” among both Democratic and Republican politicians reflects another aspect of this search for balance. As Glenn Loury put it in an essay in the *New York Times* discussing conservatism, a mature public philosophy “acknowledges personal responsibility as one part of the social contract, but also understands the importance of collective responsibility.”² In Glynn’s terms, conscience may prompt individuals to change their own behavior and also prompt them to become agents of social change. The role of faith in either case is not to impose itself through the state but to move individual citizens to demand greater responsibility from themselves and from their institutions.

There is also this overarching fact: all the reports of the death of organized religion and religious sentiment in America have been greatly exaggerated. Since the end of World War II, we have witnessed what Roger Finke and Rodney Stark have aptly described as the “churching of America,” resulting by the mid-1990s in a nation with an estimated half-million churches, synagogues, and mosques, 2,000 or more religious de-

nominations, and an unknown number of independent churches. In 1995 Gallup's Religion Index, an ongoing measurement of the religious beliefs and practices of the American public, hit a ten-year high. That same year, Nobel economist Robert W. Fogel of the University of Chicago speculated that the United States was in the midst of "its Fourth Great Awakening," a "new religious revival." Staci Simmons's comment on the WWJD?—What Would Jesus Do?—phenomenon is a further piece of evidence for Fogel's assertion.

Charitable Choice

Great Awakening or not, public laws have grown more "faith friendly." The federal government's latest welfare overhaul (a bill, it might be noted, criticized by both authors of this essay in many of its other aspects) includes what was labeled the Charitable Choice provision. It encourages states to use "faith-based organizations in serving the poor and needy" and requires that religious organizations be permitted to receive contracts, vouchers, and other government funding on the same basis as any other nongovernmental providers of services. Importantly, the measure includes a provision designed to protect "the religious integrity and character of faith-based organizations that are willing to accept government funds."

As enacted in 1996, Charitable Choice covers each of the major federal antipoverty and social welfare programs (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income, and food stamps). Some are now proposing to expand Charitable Choice to juvenile justice programs and other federal policy domains. Many states, notably Texas, have moved aggressively to reorient their antipoverty programs around Charitable Choice.

Charitable Choice has largely been supported by conservatives and opposed by liberals—with some important exceptions such as Senator Paul Wellstone of Minnesota. But that is only part of the story, and Gore's endorsement of Charitable Choice suggests the story is still developing. A 1998 survey of 1,236 religious congregations by Mark Chaves of the University of Arizona found that the law may prove of far more benefit to the more liberal congregations. "Politically conservative congregations are much

less likely to apply for government funds than are middle-of-the-road or liberal congregations,” Chaves found. He also reported that predominantly African-American congregations are “very substantially more likely to be willing to apply for government funds than are white congregations.”

In one sense, this is not surprising: more liberal congregations, and especially the African-American churches, have strong traditions of social outreach to the poor and, in many cases, a history of accepting federal funds in other spheres. Ronald J. Sider and Heidi Rolland Unruh cite one study’s finding that 63 percent of faith-based child service agencies already receive a fifth or more of their budgets from public funds.

Still, these studies bring home the distortions that can be introduced into discussions of faith-based social services if they are seen only through the liberal-conservative lens. As Chaves notes, “If charitable choice initiatives are successful in reaching American congregations, the congregations most likely to take advantage of them may not be the ones our political and religious leaders expect to take advantage.”³ The more liberal churches may benefit from a conservative initiative.

While Sider and Unruh make a strong and, we think, quite convincing case for Charitable Choice, making Charitable Choice work remains an enormous challenge because constitutional worries about the free exercise of religion cannot be lightly dismissed.

Seen from the perspective of religious groups, there is the danger that entanglement with government will require them to weaken or water down their faith commitments, no matter how strongly the law tilts in their favor. Seen from the perspective of those fearful of intimate ties between government and religion, there is legitimate worry that supporting the religious groups with the highest success rates will entail government aid to precisely those organizations that require the strongest level of religious commitment from participants. As scholars such as Sider, Unruh, and Amy Sherman have found, the more spiritually demanding programs appear to produce the best results.⁴ Those who fear that government support of religiously based charities could move quickly into “excessive entanglement” with religion can cite the most optimistic research on the success of such programs to justify their concerns. These fears are powerfully expressed in these pages by Melissa Rogers of the Baptist Joint Committee. She argues

that too much government help to the good works carried out by religious congregations is “the wrong way to do right.”

Wilson’s suggestion that we “facilitate the movement of private funds into church-connected enterprises” could provide a useful tool for strengthening the work of the congregations while placing reasonable limitations on government involvement. The truth is that these organizations always will—and always should—rely primarily on private support. Finding a way to strengthen these institutions without implicating government too deeply in their work is the conundrum. One of the most heartening aspects of the current debate is a new openness across political lines to a search for balance that might resolve it.

Religious Wars

To be sure, the debates about religion and politics to which we have become accustomed since the late 1970s have not gone away. The mere mention of government-supported vouchers to allow children to go to religious schools can unleash a furious debate over the meaning of the First Amendment and whether or not it really requires a “wall of separation.” Controversy over the role of the Christian Coalition and other groups of religious conservatives has sharpened in the early stages of the 2000 campaign. Even within religious conservative ranks, as the essay here by Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson shows, there is a great debate over whether religiously motivated political activists are being “seduced by the siren song of temporal political power,” as Thomas and Dobson put it.

The battle over President Clinton’s impeachment aggravated relations between liberals (both religious and secular) and organized religious conservatives. Attacks on the Christian right appeared quite effective for many Democratic candidates in the 1998 elections. The insistence by Christian conservative groups that Congress go ahead with impeaching the president in the face of the election results appeared to play a large role in getting impeachment articles through the House of Representatives to the Senate.

Several essays here explore the Clinton episode, which is destined for some time to shape—and perhaps distort—discussions of religion, moral-

ity, and politics. For all the honorable talk about putting the dreadful matter “behind us,” a battle so divisive and so resonant with both moral and partisan meanings is certain to leave a long-lasting imprint on American political discourse.

Many combatants on both sides of the Clinton case were moved to seek religious justifications for their positions. In the final months of the controversy, there was a running argument among pro- and anti-Clinton religious factions about the definitions of forgiveness, the requirements of repentance, and the public use of religious symbols.

There seemed to be a contest over which injunctions mattered most—Judge not lest ye be judged was stacked up against Thou shall not commit adultery or bear false witness. It was possible to harbor, of both sides, a suspicion that C. S. Lewis voiced decades ago about his fellow Christians: “Most of us are not really approaching the subject in order to find out what Christianity says. We are approaching it in the hope of finding support from Christianity for the views of our own party.” Peter Wehner’s essay, inspired by Lewis’s *Screwtape Letters*, is an amusing but trenchant comment on the dangers of putting religion to the service of politics. Wehner, a conservative activist, offers a strong warning to his own side—but not just to his own side.

The religious confusion bred by the Clinton scandal debate inspired some 140 theologians to issue a “Declaration concerning Religion, Ethics, and the Crisis in the Clinton Presidency,” later published with a volume of essays on the subject, *Judgment Day at the White House*.⁵ It is discussed and critiqued here in a thoughtful essay by Alan Wolfe. Wolfe warns that “any attempt to judge political leaders by the standards of religious values raises questions about which values should be used.” Wolfe shares the suspicions of the declaration’s signers about the president’s decision “to seek the judgment of God [and] his fellow parishioners in highly visible, seemingly orchestrated, ways.” Yet he worries that “not only are they judging Mr. Clinton’s actions, they are also judging the depths of his religious beliefs.” This is an awkward issue to raise in a society that is characterized by religious pluralism—and that has long resisted religious tests for those in public office. But Jean Bethke Elshtain, one of the organizers of the declaration, offers a powerful defense of its premises, arguing that “one cannot drive a wedge

between ethics and politics” and warning against what she calls “amoral Machiavellianism.” The distinguished theologian Max Stackhouse also offers a brief reply to Wolfe’s argument.

Few in America felt the awkwardness of the president’s very public search for redemption more personally than the Reverend Tony Campolo, who became one of the president’s spiritual counselors. His essay is a document of our time, a reflection on what it feels like to be caught in the crossfire of a religious skirmish in a political war. One might note this irony: those who criticized Campolo for putting religion to the service of politics may have been calling upon him to do precisely that—to resist the opportunity to minister to the president because of a widespread belief that the president’s quest for counseling was Machiavellian, not authentically spiritual. That Campolo would not have run into such public resistance had he instead counseled a convicted murderer on death row raises interesting questions.

Religion-in-Public

Campolo’s difficulties help explain why religion’s relationship to public life is such a vexing issue. As a country, we are terribly torn about what religion-in-public should mean. Collectively, we seem suspicious of politicians who are too religious and suspicious of politicians who are not religious at all. This can lead to the very worst forms of religious expression. As Gregg Easterbrook writes in his recent book, *Beside Still Waters*: “If a politician or celebrity stands up to mumble about being blessed by the Lord, and speaks in a manner unmistakably vacuous and intended for public consumption, nobody minds. If the same person says with conviction, I really believe my faith requires me to do this or that, the expression will be condemned as inappropriate.”⁶

The paradoxes of religious faith are obvious. It can create community, and it can divide communities. It can lead to searing self-criticism, and it can promote a pompous self-satisfaction. It can encourage dissent and conformity, generosity and narrow-mindedness. It can engender both righteous behavior and self-righteousness. Its very best and very worst forms

can be inward-looking. Religion's finest hours have been the times when intense belief led to social transformation, yet some of its darkest days have entailed the translation of intense belief into the ruthless imposition of orthodoxy.

But the history of the United States, despite many outbreaks of prejudice and nativism, is largely a history of religion's role as a prod to social justice, inclusion, and national self-criticism. The historian Richard Wightman Fox has noted that religion can be seen "both as a democratic social power—a capacity to build community—and as a tragic perspective that acknowledges the perennial failing of human beings to make community endure."

"Religion," Fox continued, "allows people to grapple with the human mysteries that neither science nor politics can address. But it also provides a force that science and politics can call on in their effort to understand and transform the social world." For that reason alone, God and arguments about God will always have a great deal to do with the American experiment.

