CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The first amendment of the U.S. Constitution erected a high wall between church and state, but no such barrier exists between religion and politics. Religion is, and always has been, woven into the fabric of American political life. Indeed, it played a major role in the very founding of the nation by offering a moral sanction for the revolt against the British.

Many of the nation's most gifted leaders have been deeply religious people who called on their faith in times of trouble and asked their fellow citizens to do the same. And many an electoral coalition has been built and sustained on the strength of shared religious beliefs.

Today's climate is one of greater religiosity among politicians, but many Americans find it disturbing to hear an increasing number of candidates and officials air their personal faith in public places with apparent political intent. Until Jimmy Carter, presidents had largely declined to discuss their personal beliefs; now, however, presumably under perceived pressure from the religious right, virtually every ambitious politician does so. Thus Texas governor George W. Bush, leader in the race for the Republican presidential nomination for 2000, proclaims that he has "recommitted his life to Christ." Vice president Al Gore tells the press, "the purpose of my life is to glorify God." The Reverend Jesse Jackson, a sometime Democratic candidate, defends those who openly parade their religious belief: "Jesus never

performed any miracle at night!"[1] Leaders have always claimed that their faith informs their decisions, but equally religious people, even in the same U.S. Congress, can come to opposite conclusions. In the view of many seculars and non-Christians—as well as mainline Protestants and Catholics who express their faith more privately—the new phenomenon of politicians making public witness to their Christian faith smacks of cynical posturing. After the presidential prayer breakfast in September 1998—at which Clinton confessed that he had sinned, asked forgiveness, and promised atonement for the Monica Lewinsky affair—almost two hundred religious scholars across the political spectrum produced an angry declaration protesting "the manipulation of religion" for political and personal motives.

Whatever the public attitudes of political figures, the issues before us now are whether religion has a significant impact on politics, whether that influence is changing, and if so, in what ways. Has the American public become more religious or less? What is the relationship between religious affiliation and political beliefs? How does religious commitment affect opinion on public policy issues? How much politicking from the pulpit actually occurs? By addressing these and similar questions, we seek in this volume to enlarge public understanding of religion's influence on politics—and, in particular, to assess how that influence has changed during the past three decades.

From Identity to Issues

It is the level and type of activism of the churches and their partisan mobilization that are new, not the reality that people of similar faiths have similar values and often vote alike. Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal coalition, for instance, reflected a pattern of sectarian voting in which Catholics, Jews, and evangelical Protestants supported Roosevelt, while mainline Protestants supported the Republican opposition. In each case, the distinctive identities of these religious communities tied them to political alignments.

The political impact of religious identity was never greater than in the election of John F. Kennedy. After the defeat of Al Smith in 1928, it was thought that no Catholic would ever have a real chance to win the White

1. Quoted in Sally Quinn, "The G-Word and the A-List," *Washington Post,* July 12, 1999, p. C1.

House. It would take thirty-two years and eight more presidential elections to shatter that belief. Although Kennedy publicly distanced his politics from his religion, Roman Catholics overwhelmingly supported their favorite son with a loyalty that was based more on religious pride than on Democratic ideology. The larger lesson of the 1960 election, however, was not the solidarity of one minority religious group but the willingness of the Protestant majority to help elect someone of another faith.

At least in presidential elections, religion's direct influence on American voting patterns varied during the four decades that followed Kennedy's election. At its weakest during the economy-driven elections of 1976 and 1980, religion's influence became steadily ascendant in the years that followed. And,although this point is often overlooked, religion's growing influence is manifest at both ends of the political spectrum. White evangelical Protestants have indeed shown increasing support for Republican candidates; but at the same time,their religious and often cultural opposites—the seculars—have shown steadily increasing support for Democrats.

From Left to Right

The more direct relationship between religion and politics that is with us today began to emerge in the decade immediately following Kennedy's election, when a number of nascent political and social movements with ties to various religious communities began to affiliate with the Democratic party. The civil rights movement, for example, which was eventually folded into the Democratic party, was created and sustained by black religious leaders and their churches. Similarly, many leaders of the anti–Vietnam War movement came out of Jesuit seminaries and the World Council of Churches (a mainline Protestant organization), and they, too, found a home with the Democrats,as did the women's movement and the environmental movement—both of which included contingents of religious activists.

By the mid-1970s, however, much of the energy fueling religious activism came from outspoken clergy representing the concerns of evangelical Christians. The dramatic ascendancy of the right as the center of religious activism was largely a response to fundamental cultural changes that had begun in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Women entered the work force in unprecedented numbers, the divorce rate escalated, and traditional standards of morality and behavior—particularly with respect to sexuality and drug use—seemed to have all but disappeared. In the governmental arena, two

Supreme Court decisions—one that made abortion a protected right and another that declared organized prayer in public schools unconstitutional—seemed representative of what religious conservatives regarded as the increasingly liberal and secular tone of American life and politics.

Building on the success of fellow televangelists Oral Roberts and Jimmy Swaggart, religious conservatives Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson sold their followers on the need to protect Americans' moral values through political action. When the Democrats balked at embracing such a crusade, Falwell and Robertson held out the Republican party as a safe haven for devout evangelical Christians. Although some GOP leaders were dismayed, the Republicans did nothing to reject the evangelicals.

In all faiths, people who show high levels of religious commitment—that is, who engage in traditional practices and hold to traditional beliefs—tend to be more politically conservative, but the political impact of faith and religious commitment is most potent among white evangelical Protestants, who now represent 24 percent of registered voters (up from 19 percent in 1987) and who have been overwhelmingly loyal to the Republican Party. White evangelical Christians are not only much more politically conservative on sexual and moral issues, such as abortion and homosexuality, but also on a range of other issues, ranging from foreign policy to the environment. Moreover, their conservatism on nonmoral issues is independent of demographic factors such as income, education, or region of residence. In short,the conservatism of white evangelical Protestants is the most powerful religious force in politics today.

The Diminishing Divide

Although public acceptance of religion's role in the political process has increased since the 1960s, the issue of how much political power certain religious groups enjoy continues to provoke concern. Gallup polls in the 1960s found that, by a margin of 53 to 40 percent, Americans believed that churches should refrain from involvement in politics, and only 22 percent of respondents believed that it was acceptable for clergy to discuss political issues or candidates from the pulpit.[2] By 1996, however, these results had reversed: by a margin of 54 to 43 percent,the public thought that churches

2. November 1965 and February 1968.

should express their views on political and social issues of the day, and 29 percent of respondents supported outright politicking from the pulpit.

Against this backdrop, some political observers expected Clinton's scandal-dominated second term to strengthen the political influence of evangelical churches and produce a huge increase in Republican turnout for the 1998 congressional elections. Not only did such predictions not come to pass, but Republican efforts to embarrass Clinton, using the drumbeat of conservative religious values as justification, may well have backfired. Outrage over Clinton's sordid sexual conduct and lies did not lead to higher turnout by evangelical Protestants in the midterm elections; moreover, like other conservative blocs, evangelical Protestants did not vote as solidly Republican that year as it had in 1994. Support for GOP congressional candidates, in fact, declined by seven percentage points (from 80 to 73 percent) among the conservative bloc. At the same time, support for Democratic candidates increased by a comparable amount among seculars—a group that had consistently been among Clinton's strongest backers and that was highly critical of the GOP's impeachment drive. Support from nonreligious Americans combined with tremendous mobilization on the part of African Americans to provide the victory margin for Democrats in the off-year balloting.

The outcome of the election and Clinton's acquittal in the Senate shook the political confidence of conservatives in general and members of the Christian right in particular. Paul Weyrich, founder of the Heritage Foundation and a leader of modern social conservatism, announced in the aftermath of these events that "politics has failed" to reverse the cultural revolution of the 1960s. In a much-publicized letter, Weyrich declared that "we probably have lost the culture war," lamenting that "what we have been doing for thirty years has not worked" and that "a moral majority" no longer exists in the country. While denying that he had surrendered, Weyrich proposed that social conservatives should "quarantine" themselves against "this hostile culture."[3]

The rise of centrist politics as Clinton's tenure ends may change the role of religion in American politics. Like military campaigns, election campaigns tend to fight "the last war," applying to the current conflict whatever strategy won the last time. In the post-Reagan years, for example,

3. Paul M. Weyrich, "Separate and Free," *Washington Post*, March 7, 1999, p. B7.

politicians tried to emulate "the Great Communicator's" strategy, which was first and foremost to rally his base of support: the coalition of economic and social conservatives, which included religious conservatives as an integral element. Bill Clinton's approach was quite different, but equally successful: go to the middle. His "triangulation" strategy placed him—and ultimately his party—to the right of traditional Democratic positions but well to the left of traditional Republicans. Not incidentally, he also openly courted religious voters in various ways, from naming his election platform the New Covenant to prominently carrying a Bible to church. His strategy worked, and as the century drew to a close—with the nation enjoying economic prosperity, lower crime rates, and a budget surplus—political moderation became the watchword.

From the right,front-running GOP candidate George W. Bush has made clear that his administration appointees would not be subject to litmus tests on conservative issues, such as abortion. From the left, Democrat Al Gore joins GOP candidates in welcoming "faith-based"solutions to social problems. Disillusionment with the centrist, pragmatic strategy of Bush and other Republican moderates caused at least two presidential candidates—commentator Patrick J. Buchanan and Senator Robert C. Smith—to desert the Republicans in favor of a third party, complaining that in its positions on such issues as abortion, gay rights, and gun control the GOP has betrayed its core principles.

The role of religion in politics today is more direct—almost a blunt,self-conscious force in the political process. Cohesion among religious groups once grew indirectly from life in tightly knit communities with distinctive cultural identities. Now, parishioners' shared beliefs and values are seemingly marshaled directly into political action by clergy, active laity, and specialized political groups, from the Christian Coalition to The Interfaith Alliance: religion thus plays a crucial role in shaping today's political landscape. It is a growing force in the way Americans think about candidates and issues, as well as in politics itself.

The Diminishing Divide: Religion's Changing Role in American Politics lays out the background against which religion's power in American politics will be played out at the turn of the millennium. Chapter 2 offers a historical overview of religion in U.S. politics. Chapter 3, an examination of the "patchwork quilt" of American religion, traces changes in religious belonging, behaving, and believing since the 1960s. Chapter 4 explores the complex relationship between religion and political attitudes, and chapter 5 examines the

relationship between religion and political behavior—particularly with respect to party affiliation and voting habits. Chapter 6 considers the changing role of religious institutions in American political life since the 1960s. Chapter 7, the final chapter, summarizes our conclusions and offers a look to the future.

Readers interested in more detail may wish to consult the appendixes at the end of the book: appendix A profiles the social and political characteristics of the major religious groups in the United States, appendix B describes the sources of the statistics presented in the text, appendix C explains the criteria used to determine membership in the various religious groups described in this book, and appendix D is a table illustrating the effects of demographic and religious variables on voting in presidential elections.

CHAPTER TWO

Religion and Politics at Century's End: Something New, Something Old

The votes in the 1996 election had hardly been counted when the struggle to interpret the results began. From the Sierra Club and the AFL-CIO to the Chamber of Commerce and the National Rifle Association, interest groups scrambled to claim that the election outcomes vindicated their efforts and demonstrated support for their agenda. Among the most vocal groups were rival factions that claimed to speak for "religious people." Ralph Reed, who at the time led the conservative Christian Coalition, took credit for Republican congressional victories: "Conservative evangelicals were the firewall that prevented a Bob Dole defeat from mushrooming into a meltdown all the way down the ballot." Jill Hanauer, of The Interfaith Alliance, a voice for religious liberals, adamantly disagreed. Pointing to Democratic party successes, Hanauer proclaimed, "Yesterday's results clearly show that when the Christian Coalition is confronted on values-based terrain by an authentic, faith-based voice, the hypocrisy of its so-called pro-family agenda is exposed for all to see." These antagonists seemed to agree on just one thing: religion mattered at the ballot box.[1]

These rival voices represent something new and something old in American politics. On the first count, the marshaling of religious conser-

1. The quotations were drawn from press releases issued the day after the 1996 election by the Christian Coalition and The Interfaith Alliance, respectively.

vatives on behalf of the Republicans and religious liberals on behalf of the Democrats is a recent phenomenon.[2] This emerging cleavage cuts across religious communities and involves increased political activity in and by religious institutions. To many Americans, especially those who came of age after the Second World War, this diminishing divide between religion and politics is unsettling. Such overt politicking replaces a more subtle link between religious communities and public affairs, one characterized by a much sharper demarcation between religious life and the political process.

On the second count, the direct involvement of religion in politics is as old as the republic itself. Throughout American history religious communities have often played a major role in the drama of national politics. The costumes and staging—and the actors themselves—have changed from one era to the next, but religion's impact on the political process has been persistent and often of great consequence. Indeed, the now tame differences between Protestants and Catholics—and even between Protestant denominations—were once as fierce as the current conflicts between the religious right and its opponents.[3] Religion has always been part of the basic stuff of politics, but its precise impact has varied with the times. As we enter the twenty-first century, the interaction of religion and politics represents a new variation on an old theme.

What has caused the divide between religion and politics to decrease during the past thirty years? Scholars have put forward two possible answers. First, changes within religion may account for its increased salience in politics. Many observers believe that as the twentieth century draws to a close, the United States is experiencing yet another "great awakening" of "enthusiastic religion," not unlike those of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries;[4] other observers perceive an important—but less dramatic—restructuring of American religious communities, in terms of both beliefs and behavior.[5] But in either case,the new prominence of theologically conservative churches has provided support for conservative politics, while the decline of mainline churches and the parallel increase in the nonreligious population have generated support for liberal causes. Political clashes

2. Wuthnow (1989).
3. McCormick (1986).
4. Fogel (1999).
5. Wuthnow (1988).

between these rival religious perspectives are the source of the much-discussed "culture wars" in American politics.[6]

The second possibility is that changes in the political agenda have increased the importance of religion. In the last four decades of the twentieth century, the emergence of new issues—from abortion and homosexuality to school prayer, welfare, and the environment—may have linked religion to politics in new ways.[7] According to this view, these new issues antagonized religious conservatives and energized religious liberals, generating new conflicts and new opportunities for political action.[8]

Whatever its cause, the broad shift in the relationship between religion and politics has important national consequences. The diminishing divide has brought new groups into politics,altered party coalitions, and influenced election results. Churches and other religious institutions have become more actively engaged in the political process, and religious people have increased the level and broadened the range of their political participation.

The impact of these changes should not be overstated: it is important to remember that religion is just one of many factors that affect American politics and is not always the most important. Moreover, because American religion is a veritable "patchwork quilt" of affiliations, practices,and beliefs, its political influence is neither uniform nor consistent. Nonetheless, religious people have been an important force in politics since the founding of the republic, and they remain so today.

Great Awakenings, Social Movements, and Party Coalitions

American history has been periodically marked by dramatic expansions in the impact of religion on politics. Such expansions have often been associated with great awakenings—eras of religious fervor when the variety, size, intensity, or public presence of religious groups suddenly increased.[9] Some scholars believe that the First Great Awakening, during the colonial period, set the stage for the American Revolution by preaching the importance of individual conscience and stressing the rights of common people. The

6. Hunter (1991).
7. See Shafer and Claggett (1995).
8. Layman (1999).
9. See McLoughlin (1978).

Second Great Awakening, which occurred during the early years of the republic, contributed to the conflict over slavery and ultimately to the Civil War. The religious revivals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sometimes referred to as a third Great Awakening, made mass public meetings and moralistic appeals staples of electoral politics.

Religion's influence on politics has also made itself felt through social movements.[10] The abolition, prohibition, and women's suffrage movements are examples from the nineteenth and early twentieth century; the anticommunist crusade and the civil rights and anti–Vietnam War movements offer more recent examples. Religious fervor and social movements sometimes contributed to third-party protests, including the Know-Nothings, the Populists, and the Progressives. Within social movements, religious groups were in the forefront of political action.

Less dramatically, religious groups have also influenced politics by serving as building blocks in the creation of party coalitions.[11] In fact, religious ties have often been as important to party coalitions as regional or economic factors. In the presidential election of 1800, the religious establishment of the day (Congregationalists, Episcopalians, and Presbyterians) backed John Adams and the Federalist party, while religious minorities (such as Baptists and Quakers) supported Thomas Jefferson and the Democratic party. By the mid-nineteenth century, the major parties had strong religious constituencies. First the Whigs and then the Republicans were the party of the culturally dominant Protestant churches, and both the parties and the churches supported economic modernization and moral reform. The Democrats were the party of religious minorities—Catholics, Jews, nonbelievers, and the smaller Protestant sects. Both the Democrats and their constituent religious groups were suspicious of market economics and staunch defenders of their particular cultures.

Perhaps the best known of these alliances was Roosevelt's New Deal coalition, which arose in the 1930s and dominated American politics until the 1990s.[12] The New Deal coalition cannot be described without reference to religious groups: it brought together Jews and ethnic Catholics from the North, southern evangelicals, black Protestants, and secular cosmopolitans.

10. See Hammond (1979).
11. See Swierenga (1990) and Thomas (1978).
12. Kellstedt and Noll (1990).

The coalition's Republican opponents were largely northern mainline Protestants: Congregationalists, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Methodists, and Presbyterians.

American Exceptionalism: Faith and Freedom

Religion's role in the American political process is an important element in the notion of *American exceptionalism*—a shorthand way of referring to the ways in which the United States is unlike other industrialized nations.[13] Whereas most modern, technologically advanced democracies have low levels of religiosity, America is both a highly modern and deeply religious nation.[14] Indeed, since the beginning of its history, America has been defined at once by market economics, technical progress, and religious faith—a peculiar combination. Alexis de Tocqueville, writing in the early nineteenth century, observed that in America, "faith and freedom" worked hand in hand rather than at cross-purposes, as in the Europe of his day.[15] This nexus of faith and freedom has helped sustain a vigorous individualism and moral self-restraint;it has also produced bitter disputes over individual rights. Historian Richard Swierenga captures this aspect of the American ethos well:"People act politically, economically, and socially in keeping with their ultimate beliefs. Their values, mores, and actions, whether in the polling booth, on the job, or at home, are an outgrowth of the god or gods they hold at the center of their being."[16]

The combination of faith and freedom has been especially potent in America because Americans have had at once so many faiths and so many freedoms. Put another way, the country has had many gods—or approaches to God—and comparatively little governmental restraint.

Many Faiths

Three elements of religion have had important consequences in American political life: belonging (affiliation with a religious community), behaving (engaging in religious practices), and believing (holding religious beliefs).

13. See Lipset (1996).
14. See Inglehart (1990).
15. de Toqueville (1845, pp. 30–44).
16. Swierenga (1990, p. 154).

Each of these elements can play a role in determining how and to what extent a person's religion influences his or her political views, affiliations, and activities. We will use two concepts—religious tradition and religious commitment—to summarize how belonging, behaving, and believing affect politics.

Belonging to a church or other religious community provides the social context for religious behaviors and beliefs. Some people belong to denominations, which are highly institutionalized organizations (such as the Roman Catholic Church), while others belong to religious movements (such as the fundamentalist movement), which are loosely organized challenges to denominations, and some people belong to both denominations and movements. Belonging can matter in politics by providing a forum in which religion can be linked to political issues,parties, candidates, and activities.

Religious tradition is a useful way to summarize belonging: it refers to a set of denominations and related religious movements that share similar behaviors and beliefs.[17] Six major religious traditions are commonly recognized in the United States: evangelical, mainline, and black Protestants; Roman Catholics; Jews; and secular (nonreligious) people, who are often considered to be the equivalent of a tradition.

Engaging in religious behavior connects individuals with the religious community to which they belong. Some people engage in public rituals (such as attending worship services), others in private devotions (such as personal prayer), and some in both. Such behaviors can affect politics by exposing individuals to the political positions,party affiliations,and candidate preferences of their coreligionists. In addition, religious practices can teach civic skills (such as organizing meetings,speaking in public,and writing letters) that allow individuals to participate effectively in politics.

Belief is the prime motivation for religious belonging and behavior. Some beliefs concern the nature of the divine and its relationship to humankind, and others focus on appropriate personal behavior and social arrangements. Members of religious communities frequently partake of special sets of beliefs that set them apart from the members of other communities. Such beliefs can matter politically by serving as the basis for positions on issues, attachments to political parties, and evaluations of candidates—as well as for ideas about the proper role of believers and religious communities in the political process.

17. Kellstedt and Green (1993).

Religious commitment is a useful way to summarize religious behavior and belief: it refers to the extent to which an individual engages in practices and holds beliefs.[18] Thus, within a religious tradition, one can distinguish those individuals who have a high degree of commitment (engage frequently in religious practices and adhere to strongly held traditional beliefs) from those who have a lower degree of commitment (rarely practice their faith, lack firm traditional beliefs, or both). Committed members of a religious tradition sometimes differ in important ways from their coreligionists on political matters.

Many Freedoms

Two features of American politics are especially important to the role of religion in the political process: the First Amendment and the two-party system. To ensure what is often referred to as "the separation of church and state" (although neither *church* nor *state* appears in the Constitution itself) the First Amendment prohibits an "establishment of religion"—that is, forbids the creation of an official state church. At the same time, the First Amendment guarantees the "free exercise" of religion—the unimpeded practice of faith.

These strictures have contributed to the vitality of American religion, keeping government interference to a minimum and precluding any governmental role in or funding for religious groups. Under these circumstances, religious groups could survive and prosper in the United States only by developing a private following—that is, nongovernmental support. By the same token, religious groups could exercise political power only by mobilizing their members to take part in political life.Like free enterprise and a free press, religious freedom has produced potent resources for politics.

The American two-party system, which arises from the legal structure of the electoral system, has driven diverse elements of American society—including its religions—into a narrow political space, thus providing a strong incentive for building broad-based coalitions. The quest to build such coalitions has led politicians to appeal regularly to religious constituencies. At the same time, religious groups have routinely sought to join such coalitions, even when they were not entirely comfortable with the coalitions' other members.

18. Stark and Glock (1968).

Although political parties based on particular religious traditions (as are found in some European countries) cannot be sustained in American politics, many religious constituencies can be accommodated in broader party coalitions for considerable periods of time. Such accommodations can also change, of course, with religious groups shifting their allegiance from one political coalition to another. Just this sort of change seems to have occurred in the 1990s:as the divide between religion and politics diminished, political alignments were in flux.