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## *The Religious Factor*

Americans have always been, as Justice William Douglas repeatedly pointed out in the Supreme Court opinions he wrote on relations between religion and the state in the 1950s, “a religious people.” Religion played an important part in motivating colonists to come to the New World in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and was a major factor in the movement that led to the American Revolution and the formation of the United States. The First Amendment to the Constitution specifically guarantees “free expression” of religion.

As the twenty-first century gets under way, about 85 percent of Americans tell pollsters they identify with some religious faith (although this share is down from almost 95 percent in the early 1980s). More than 40 percent say they attend religious services at least once a week. By most measurable standards the United States is a more religious country than any European nation except Ireland or Poland.<sup>1</sup>

Just how religious commitment should relate to the operations of government and politics, however, has often

been a subject of controversy and debate. Along with its tradition of religious faith, the United States has also maintained a strong tradition of separation between church and state. The same First Amendment that guarantees free exercise of religion prohibits Congress from making any law “respecting an establishment of religion.” Since the 1940s the Supreme Court has interpreted the Fourteenth Amendment, enacted at the end of the Civil War, to extend this prohibition to the states. Many constitutional experts and ordinary citizens would not go so far as Thomas Jefferson in advocating an unbreachable “wall of separation between church and state,” but there can be no doubt that both constitutional authority and social tradition require, at a minimum, that government refrain from sponsoring or regulating religious belief.

After John Kennedy was elected as the first Catholic president, in 1960, religion for about fifteen years seemed to have become a relatively minor factor in national politics. When Jimmy Carter ran for president in 1976, his highly publicized evangelical faith was treated by the media almost as an oddity. With the rise of the religious right in the late 1970s, and the rising salience of the abortion issue among some religious and secular groups at about the same time, however, religious observance—and even religious belief—again became important factors influencing voter choice.

In the 2000 presidential election, persons who reported usually participating in religious services at least once a week voted 58 percent for the ultimately victorious Republican candidate, George W. Bush, and 40 percent for his defeated Democratic opponent, Al Gore—a spread almost twice as great as the famous gender gap. Among the 15 percent of voters who identified themselves as having no religious connection, on the other hand, 65 percent voted for Gore and only 35 percent for Bush.<sup>2</sup>

## **The Problem Defined**

Active participation in electoral politics by some religious groups and the widely held perception that these activities differ in kind from earlier involvements by churches and synagogues in public life have rekindled some apprehensions that many Americans have long held. Religion by its very nature touches deep human emotions. If these emotions are introduced directly into political campaigns or legislative debates, some commentators ask, do we not risk the kind of murderous civil conflicts that throughout history have racked societies divided by religiously inspired

convictions or prejudices? If a particular religious group through its political exertions wins a share in governmental power, will the United States be safe from repressive measures like those that triumphant religious establishments have sometimes imposed? If religious bodies become deeply involved in politics, will not religion itself eventually be corrupted, as Baptists, among others, have always warned? On the other hand, if religion is virtually excluded from the “public square” and the political arena, as some secularists propose, will not civil life be morally and spiritually impoverished?<sup>3</sup>

Responses to these and related questions provide bases for four distinguishable points of view. *Strict separationists* insist that an impenetrable wall must be maintained between religion and all aspects, substantive or symbolic, of public life. *Liberal social activists* agree that religion and the state should be kept institutionally far apart, but argue that churches and other religious bodies are morally obliged to play active political roles in promoting “social justice” and other worthy social causes. *Moderate accommodationists* hold that religion should exercise at least a symbolic presence in many areas of public life (such as the frieze depicting the Ten Commandments above the Supreme Court dais) and that religious bodies should help set the moral direction of civil society. *Direct interventionists* hold that religious communities should participate as organized interest groups in all phases of elective and legislative politics.

On key questions of separation between religion and government and the role of religious institutions in politics, the attitudes represented by these four general points of view may be identified as follows:

	<i>Separation between church and state</i>	<i>Role of religious bodies in politics</i>
Separationists	Strict	Small
Social activists	Strict	Large
Accommodationists	Moderate	Moderate
Interventionists	Loose	Large

Different groups have been drawn to these varying points of view at different times. In recent years the strict separationist position has been advocated by some religious and secular liberals and by a remnant of traditional Baptists. The social activist approach commands the allegiance of national leaders, and some local clergy and laity, of the so-called mainline Protestant denominations (Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and

some Lutherans, among others) and of some Catholics and most Jews (though Jewish participation in politics is largely carried out through Jewish service agencies rather than through specifically religious bodies). The accommodationist view retains popularity with more traditional Catholics and many conservative mainline Protestants. And direct intervention has many supporters, at the opposite ends of the political spectrum, among African American Protestant churches and among a growing share of white evangelicals.

These questions and conflicting positions together lead to a recurring and crucial issue of American democracy: What should be the role of religion in public life? Clarification and elucidation of this issue, with a view to working out practical strategies, form the objective of this book.

## A Common Medium

Religion and politics have both played major roles in human experience from a very early time, the first giving individuals an explanation of their relationship to the totality of existence and a means of transcending their apparently inexorable mortal fates, the second providing techniques and institutions for managing the social units through which humans have always sought material security and emotional satisfaction. The two have usually been closely intertwined. In order to understand how religion and politics relate to each other, it is first necessary to find a common cultural medium in which they interact. This common theater of interaction, to which chapter 2 devotes some preliminary investigation, lies in the realm of human values.

Human values can usefully be analyzed, for our purposes, through a theoretic structure of seven value systems around which are organized the drives, hopes, goals, and moral principles that motivate particular individuals and social groups. Four of these systems rely in one way or another on religion: *monism*, rejecting the apparent world of material reality in favor of a totally spiritualized view of existence; *absolutism*, identifying social authority as the embodiment of divine will; *ecstasism*, pursuing transcendence through individual experience; and *transcendent idealism*, basing both individual human rights and social morality on transcendent purpose. The other three value systems acknowledge no source of transcendent authority or purpose: *egoism*, reducing all value to the drives and appetites of human individuals; *collectivism*, basing value

entirely on the welfare of the social group; and *civil humanism*, attempting to balance individual rights against social responsibilities without relating either to transcendent moral law.

A critical question for all modern democracies is whether the three secular value systems, either separately or in some combination, can provide sufficient moral basis to maintain the cohesion and vitality of a free society. If the answer to this question is no, as most of the American founders, including George Washington, John Adams, James Madison, and much of the time even Thomas Jefferson, argued, then the four value systems based in one way or another on religion must be scrutinized to determine how transcendent moral authority or inspiration can be maintained in a democratic society while minimizing the risks of bigotry, fanaticism, irresponsibility, and obscurantism that some tendencies within religion have all too often fostered.

Monism, based on a completely spiritualized outlook on existence, has never had much cultural impact in the United States (despite brief vogues at various times, such as during the late 1960s, for monistically inclined religions). But the other six value systems have all exerted significant influence and continue to generate attractions of varying intensities within contemporary American society.

Transcendent idealism, conveyed by the Judeo-Christian tradition—and tempered by moral realism as I will explain in the next chapter—has, until recently at least, formed the moral norm and dominant cultural standard, publicly acknowledged if not necessarily followed in practice, for most ordinary Americans. Tendencies growing out of absolutism and ecstasism, both of which will be defined more fully in the next chapter, have at times effectively rivaled transcendent idealism within the religious community, sending shocks through the larger society. Secular egoism has been associated with economic individualism and is aggressively promoted in contemporary American life by themes exalting self-gratification in mass advertising, psychological therapy, and popular entertainment. Secular collectivism exerts more influence than is generally recognized within institutional bureaucracies, both public and private, and has found proponents on the extremes of both the political right and left. Secular civil humanism, though regarded with suspicion and distaste by much of the general public, has a distinguished line of advocates stretching back at least to the Enlightenment, and since the 1950s has provided the basis for what has become almost an established ideology among intellectual and cultural elites.<sup>4</sup>

The contending value systems give shape and direction to religious and political institutions. Current relationships between these institutions are derived in considerable part from trends and constitutional arrangements that developed during the formative years of the American Republic, examined in chapter 3. Puritanism was the strongest cultural force in most of the British colonies in North America during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. By the time of the revolution, however, the Puritan “way” had been joined by influences stemming from the Great Awakening of the 1730s, the Enlightenment, and several variants of traditional Christianity, including a growing representation of Roman Catholicism. This mixture led in time to the religious clauses of the Bill of Rights, which protected free expression of religious faith while setting in motion an almost unprecedented experiment in religious and cultural pluralism.

The issue of religion in American public life includes much more than the constitutional relationship between religion and government. But the constitutional framework does provide the legal structure within which the larger interaction between religion and civil interests takes place. Chapter 4 studies the evolution of judicial interpretations of the free exercise and establishment clauses.

Before the 1940s the Supreme Court rarely took stands on church-state issues. But beginning with the *Cantwell* decision in 1940, which upheld the right of a member of Jehovah’s Witnesses to proselytize within a predominantly Catholic neighborhood, even at the risk of provoking public disorder, the Court gradually defined a broad right to free exercise of religion. With the *Yoder* decision of 1971, approving the exemption of Amish children from public education beyond the eighth grade, the Court found that this right could even take precedence over uniform application of civil law. During the 1990s the Court adopted a more constricted view of free exercise, causing alarm among champions of religious freedom.<sup>5</sup>

While finding the free exercise clause in the Bill of Rights in the 1940s, the Court also began bringing the states under the authority of the establishment clause, previously held to limit only the federal government. Starting with the *McCullum* decision of 1948, which declared unconstitutional the practice of allowing churches and synagogues to provide religious instruction during periods of “released time” in the public schools, the Court set out on a wavering course toward prohibiting many of the means through which state and local governments traditionally had accommodated or acknowledged religion. During the 1980s and 1990s,

the Court seemed to pull back somewhat toward a more accommodationist position, but stopped far short of authorizing return to earlier practices.<sup>6</sup>

Even at its most separationist, the Supreme Court has never found anything in the Bill of Rights to prevent religious bodies from playing an active role in elective or legislative politics (though tax exemptions granted to religious bodies have been found to justify limiting their direct involvement in lobbying or election campaigns). Some denominations, such as the Baptists and the Lutherans, until the 1980s usually gave secular politics a wide berth. But others, especially Methodists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Episcopalians, Quakers, and Jews, vigorously backed such diverse social causes as abolition of slavery, prohibition of the sale of liquor, defense of the gold standard, enactment of women's suffrage, and promotion of civil rights for African Americans. Up to the First World War, the Catholic Church pursued its particular interests, such as defense of parochial schools, but usually avoided taking public positions on broader political issues. In the 1920s the newly organized National Catholic Welfare Council began issuing pronouncements on domestic economic and social questions but still gave little attention to foreign policy. Chapter 5 traces the history of church involvement in politics from the division between evangelicals and socially conservative denominations in the early years of the Republic to the start of the civil rights struggle and the election of John Kennedy as president in 1960.

From the 1960s through the 1980s, most religious denominations experienced considerable internal ferment. Many changed their orientations toward public life and their political alignments. The leaderships of most major mainline Protestant denominations, which had formed the core of the Republican party in the North since the Civil War, moved far to the left on the political spectrum, though survey evidence showed that mainline laities remained moderately conservative in their political views and electoral behavior. Most mainline denominations opened public policy offices in Washington that lobbied for a wide variety of liberal causes. The Catholic Church, led by its increasingly activist bishops, displayed a growing inclination toward political involvement in the 1960s after the Second Vatican Council. Catholic bishops joined political conservatives in fierce opposition to legalized abortion, while aligning themselves with liberals on issues like nuclear disarmament and expansion of the welfare state. Some Jews expressed dissatisfaction with contemporary liberalism on issues ranging from Middle Eastern policy to affirmative action, but

most Jews remained electorally loyal to the liberal wing of the Democratic party. African American Protestant churches, historically major sources of political organization and direction for the black community, played leadership roles in the civil rights struggles of the 1960s, and followed up by exercising increased influence in politics at all levels, almost always in alignment with the Democratic party. Most dramatic of all, white evangelical Protestants, usually politically passive, particularly after the failure of prohibition in the 1920s, and predominantly Democratic in their voting, switched to political militance and overwhelming support for Ronald Reagan and other conservative Republicans. Chapter 6 examines these changes and their implications for the future influence of the churches on government policy and electoral politics.

Chapter 7 carries the story to the opening years of the twenty-first century. During the 1990s, many religious groups, somewhat chastened by the political confrontations and disappointments of the 1980s, pulled back from the fierce militancy of the previous decade. Political realignment of some religious groups continued. By the end of the decade, substantial majorities among the more religiously observant members of most groups, though not including African Americans and Jews, were aligned with the Republican party. At the same time, some liberal and conservative religious groups found it possible to work together on some issues, such as forgiveness of debt for Third World countries and consideration of means for organized religion and government to work together in meeting moral and social needs among the most vulnerable. All forms of traditional religion were increasingly challenged by the expanding influence of secularism in culture and society.

The basic question underlying the involvement of religion in American public life remains whether a free society depends ultimately on religious values for cohesion and vindication of human rights. Chapter 8 confronts this question directly, testing the moral and social adequacy of each of the value systems set forth in chapter 2, and then considers some practical and philosophic questions affecting future participation by religious groups in the formation of public policy.

The narrative portions of this book deal mainly with the experiences of mainline Protestant denominations, making up about 20 percent of the total population (down from 30 percent in 1985); the Roman Catholic Church, about 25 percent; the white evangelical Protestant churches, about 25 percent (up from 20 percent); African American Protestant churches, about 8 percent; and Jews, about 2 percent. Other significant



religious groups, such as Mormons, Orthodox Christians, Christian Scientists, and growing numbers of Moslems and followers of Hinduism, Buddhism, and other eastern religions, are discussed only in passing or in connection with constitutional questions that some of them have raised. More examination of these groups would obviously have produced a more comprehensive picture. The five major groups, however, include all but about 5 percent within the 85 percent of Americans who identify with some religious faith. Because my objective has been to study critical issues rather than to construct an inclusive record, I feel reasonably satisfied that the examples offered provide representative instances of the role of religion in American public life.