

# Religion and American Politics: A Historical Overview

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An article with so sweeping a title needs to begin with a consideration of methodological issues and the author's premises. The most important of these is that the United States is not just a big European country that floated across the Atlantic. In some ways the United States has more in common with Brazil—the other large country in which slavery lasted well into the nineteenth century—than with France or even the United Kingdom.

All countries are “exceptional” in varying degrees depending on the frame of reference, but virtually everyone agrees that an important part of current American distinctiveness—a term less fraught with implications of superiority—is the high degree of religiosity. By many standards the United States is the most conventionally religious big, rich country. Claimed weekly attendance at religious services hovers around 40% of the population compared to 10 to 15% in Western Europe. To be sure, claimed church attendance is not the only—or even necessarily the best—measure of faith. Brazil and Mexico, for example, may be imbued with higher levels of day-to-day religiosity than the United States. Still, the need to claim attendance at religious services even among those who do not actually go illustrates how important professions of faith remain in American life.

Even a long book could barely do justice to the complicated connections between American religious faiths and politics. For the past two decades commentators have discussed what they call (with characteristic American hyperbole) a “culture war” containing a large religious component. Suspicious of the military metaphor that evokes images of religious conflicts in Iraq or the Balkans, I prefer to think in terms of a “cultural shouting match,” the latest in a long series of shouting matches through which we

have tried to define and redefine a normative “American Way of Life.” Whatever the preferred term (I have almost given up trying to delegitimize “culture war”), we must recognize that religion-related conflict has persisted at the local level even in eras when the shouting rarely made national news. Although Americans, unlike citizens of many other countries, have never killed each other in large numbers for reasons relating to religion, neither has there been a golden age devoid of significant religious conflict.

For the purposes of this brief article, I define American political life as *national* politics and government. In keeping with the interests of my audience, I tilt the story toward relatively recent events and increasingly attend to presidential politics as we approach the present.

In making sense of faith and politics, we must remember, too, that not only have the specific religions in the United States changed since independence in 1776, but so, too, has the general degree of religiosity, in and out of the public sphere. For instance, viewed collectively and in historical context the most recent six presidents (Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush) were more conventionally Christian than the first six (George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe, and John Quincy Adams).

In addition, we must avoid theological determinism. Scholars routinely acknowledge the chicken and egg relationship between puritanism and the rise of capitalism. Similarly, no one claims that the Taiping rebellion in nineteenth century China, probably the largest civil war in history, occurred simply because Taiping leader Hong Xiuquan had mystical visions which he interpreted under the influence of Western Christian missionaries. Yet, particularly among rivals in our current cultural shouting match, there is a strong inclination to exaggerate the significance for public policy of the “theology” of American political leaders past and present. Nor should we forget that presidents—and other political leaders—are people too. As with other people, their “theologies” may change over time, their religious habits may persist even after the supernatural foundations erode, and their day-to-day behavior may not match their declared beliefs.

Nothing is less edifying than the vogue of interpreting contemporary American foreign policy via allusions to puritan John Winthrop's description of his 1630 Massachusetts settlement as a "city upon a hill." Many who cherish this allusion in 2008 have no idea that Winthrop took this phrase from Jesus's Sermon on the Mount.

In short, throughout American history, the private and public faith of national leaders has been influenced by non-religious factors—notably economics, class, race, and foreign policy—as well as the other way around.

In 1776 the free population of the newly independent United States consisted overwhelmingly of heirs to the British or German Protestant Reformation. Ethnic and theological differences among these "denominations" bulked larger at the time than is usually recognized by twenty-first century commentators, who tend to regard most white Protestants as nearly indistinguishable. The population also included roughly 25,000 Catholics and a few thousand Jews. Many of the Protestants had had their fervor enhanced during a mid eighteenth century revival that is usually called, though not without controversy, the First Great Awakening. Scholars disagree about the greatness and number of awakenings over the centuries, with plausible estimates ranging as high as six and as low as zero. I believe that something important happened but, shunning typical American hyperbole, will describe the mid eighteenth century revival as the first of five Pretty Good Awakenings.

A less amicable dispute rages over whether or not the United States was founded as a Christian nation. The controversy centers on the faith of the capital F Founders with whom most Americans have at least a vague familiarity: Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, and Benjamin Franklin. As journalist Jon Meacham recently observed, conservative Christians are seeking "historical benediction by association with the origins of the Republic" (Meacham, p.235).

Aside from their place in the patriotic pantheon there is no good reason for the popular argument about religion in the early republic to center on Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, and Benjamin Franklin. These men

differed among themselves about the importance of church attendance, the possibility of life after death, and the degree to which God guided human affairs. Nonetheless, influenced by Enlightenment deism, they were not among the most devout Americans of their day; their God was amorphous rather than anthropomorphic. Contemporary conservatives who want to emphasize the importance of Christianity in the early republic would do better to elevate the reputations of less famous but more orthodox figures to the rank of capital F Founder. Rev. John Witherspoon, a delegate to the second Continental Congress that declared independence, and John Jay, the first Chief Justice, would be good prospects. Or conservatives might observe, in a kind of religious Charles Beardianism, that the Constitutional Convention of 1787 was unrepresentative of the population at large. Accordingly, the definition of a (male) capital F Founder should be broadened to include at least anyone who fought in the Revolution, served at any level of government between 1774 and 1789, or voted for delegates to the state conventions that ratified the Constitution.

As an economic Beardian, I favor a broader definition of capital F Founders in general, but such a modification as I propose here would provide only limited solace to contemporary evangelicals in search of a usable past. The Constitution and First Amendment were adopted during the least conventionally religious period in American history and, in combination, they created a secular republic at the federal level. Unlike the Articles of Confederation, the governmental charter it replaced, the Constitution made no reference to God; it also forbade a religious test for federal office. The First Amendment barred a national “establishment of religion” as well as interference with the “free exercise thereof.” Like many parts of the Constitution as adopted and amended, these provisions involved compromises and/or were the products of haste rather than a careful parsing of language. Some orthodox Christians joined Enlightenment thinkers in opposing a federal establishment of religion in order to protect their mild state establishments, through which citizens were taxed to support one or more faiths; the last of these, in Massachusetts, was abolished in 1833. The religious clauses of the First Amendment were

necessarily general and potentially in conflict with each other, especially as later generations tried to stuff the realities of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries into an eighteenth century social contract.

As Jefferson observed in *Notes on Virginia* (1786) and as some contemporary social scientists now argue with an economic twist, the absence of an established church helped religion to flourish. Lacking government support, denominations had to compete for members and contributions in order to thrive. Competing faiths found many customers, so to speak, among nineteenth century democrats who believed that every free white man had a right to his own interpretation of Scripture. Religious diversity affected politics from the outset. In the first party system that began to form in the 1790s, Republicans (the ancestors of the contemporary Democratic party) tended to favor what their first president, Thomas Jefferson, later called a “wall of separation” between church and state. During the presidential campaign of 1800, in which Jefferson ultimately defeated Federalist President John Adams, the Federalists inaccurately portrayed Jefferson as a “howling atheist.” In theology, Jefferson had much in common with Adams, who also denied Jesus’s divinity, but his outspoken endorsements of religious liberty and enthusiasm for anticlerical French revolutionaries obscured the similarities.

Important religious changes were well under way by the time Jefferson was elected in 1800. A Second Pretty Good Awakening, begun in the 1790s, continued until the 1840s. Church membership grew rapidly; Baptists and Methodists imbued with the democratic ethos fared particularly well in the market place of religious ideas. New religious groups spun off from Protestantism, notably the Seventh-day Adventists and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS), popularly known as Mormons. Starting in the 1830s, the arrival of hundreds of thousands of German and Irish Catholic immigrants complicated the religious scene. Substantial German Jewish immigration added another layer of complexity starting in the 1840s.

Mainstream awakened Protestants increasingly cooperated in a wide array of reformist organizations promoting temperance, peace, education, insane asylums, prison reform, foreign missions, conversion of Catholics and

Jews, and (for a brave minority at first) anti-slavery. Less likely to be remembered even by historians is the effort to pass a constitutional amendment declaring the United States a Christian nation. Unlike twenty-first century evangelicals and fundamentalists, these nineteenth century activists knew that the Constitutional Convention and First Amendment had created a secular republic. Equally revealing, the Christian Amendment never came close to congressional passage. Despite the Second Pretty Good Awakening, many Enlightenment attitudes, including skepticism of supernatural religion and religious establishments, never entirely disappeared.

The thirty years prior to the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 brought the fiercest public clashes over religion-related issues in American history. These issues divided the two major parties in the second party system, the Whigs and the Democrats (successors to the Jeffersonian Republicans). Broadly speaking, while the Whigs became the home of white Protestants in general and white Protestant reformers in particular, the Democrats brought together under the leadership of Andrew Jackson were more hospitable to free thinkers and Catholic immigrants. There were exceptions to the rule, however, including in the 1830s and 1840s the free thinking young Whig Abraham Lincoln. As states started to create public school systems, Catholics and Protestants began their long shouting match over the curriculum, which often inculcated de facto Protestant beliefs, and the question of government funding for Catholic parochial schools. Catholics and Protestants sometimes fought or even killed one another in election day riots though no one should assume that the working class toughs involved were motivated by the fine points of theology.

The most vehement critics of the Catholic Church and its immigrant sons and daughters are usually called nativists, a derisive term coined by their foes. Speaking in the typical conspiratorial idiom of the mid nineteenth century, nativists envisioned a remarkably effective Catholic conspiracy stretching from the Vatican to American parishes. Protestant nativist activity included incessant polemics, frequent political mobilizations, occasional acts of violence, and countless petty offenses. A block of marble donated by

Pope Pius IX for inclusion in the Washington Monument was destroyed by nativists who feared that the “Pope’s stone” would defile George Washington’s memory. During the 1850s the nativist American party, better known as the Know Nothings, elected more than 100 members of Congress.

Although still useful to historians and social scientists, the category nativist must be applied with care. There were (and are) legitimate conflicts over religion and public policy that sloppy use of the term obscures or oversimplifies. Moreover, even in the volatile three decades before the Civil War, conflict between Protestants and Catholics fell far short of a culture *war*. In 1829, when Catholics became eligible to run for the British Parliament, they already held high office in the United States. In 1836 Roger B. Taney, a Catholic former secretary of the treasury, was appointed Chief Justice. When the United States went to war against Mexico in 1846, President James K. Polk, a devout Presbyterian, repudiated any notion of an assault on Catholicism, employed Catholic diplomatic emissaries, and appointed Catholic military chaplains. Of course fervent Protestants viewed the war as a victory over popery. To a large degree, however, advocates of “Manifest Destiny” thought American expansion was ordained by a non-sectarian Providence.

The pre-Civil War debate over slavery shows how political issues—in this case, *the* great public issue of the nineteenth century—can influence religious developments as well as the other way around. Both advocates and enemies of slavery cited the Bible to support their respective positions. Despite some ambiguities, a literal reading of the text served southern slaveholders better than northern abolitionists. As they pointed out, Jesus had never condemned slavery and St. Paul had urged masters to treat slaves well, a sign that Paul accepted the institution as legitimate. In response, anti-slavery clergy both invoked the general humane spirit of Christianity and noted that many practices sanctioned in the Bible had become outdated. Less committed than southerners to a literal reading of Scripture on the slavery issue, northern Protestant abolitionists became less committed to a literal reading of Scripture in general. When the Civil War ended, their hearts and minds were thus prepared to accept higher criticism of the Bible

and related aspects of liberal theology.

If the death and destruction caused by the Civil War had come fifty years later when secular and anti-religious ideas were much stronger, as was the case in Europe during World War I, these horrors might have made the United States less religious in the long run. In fact, the war made the country more religious.

President Abraham Lincoln is a case in point. Lincoln's religion has recently attracted enormous scholarly attention, not least because contemporary theological conservatives sometimes try to claim him, like the capital F Founders, as one of their own. Here, too, the effort is in vain. Although Lincoln grew up in a religious family, knew Scripture well, and quoted it often, his shifting faith was influenced by the residual currents of free thought that survived long after the Enlightenment. He never joined a church or claimed Jesus as a personal savior. His spiritual search ultimately led to what a recent biographer, Allen Guelzo, calls "Calvinized deism" (Guelzo, p.447). The outcome of the Civil War, Lincoln suggested in his famous second inaugural address, might be determined by God's will rather than human efforts.

The era between the Civil War and the 1890s produced a Third Pretty Good Awakening with the usual pattern of results along with some new developments. There were fresh religious spin-offs from Protestantism, including Christian Science and the much persecuted Jehovah's Witnesses. Protestant reformers escalated campaigns against prostitution, pornography, tobacco, alcohol, and secularism. A minority among them tilted toward economic liberalism in the American sense of the term, that is, advocacy of government regulation on behalf of the working class and the poor. An even smaller minority, represented most impressively by Rev. Walter Rauschenbusch, favored an American version of Christian socialism. Yet most social gospellers emphasized not public works but private charitable deeds—often mixed with personal sacrifice. This was the main message of the most popular of many social gospel novels, Rev. Charles Sheldon's *In His Steps*, which prompted readers to ask, "What would Jesus do?"

During the Third Pretty Good Awakening Protestant orthodoxy faced the strongest challenges since the Enlightenment. Higher criticism of the Bible and Charles Darwin's theory of evolution precipitated a split between theological liberals and theological conservatives (the most active of whom came to be known as fundamentalists by the 1920s). Adversaries from the two camps disagreed about biblical inerrancy, Jesus's divinity, human sinfulness, and the nature of God's kingdom. The underlying issue was whether or not Christianity is a supernatural religion. Yet even among contending clergy, few chose to pose the question so starkly, and many churchgoers chose in time honored fashion to mix liberal and conservative positions in ways that felt personally comfortable.

An overwhelmingly Protestant culture encountered these intellectual challenges at the same time as a predominantly Catholic and Jewish "new immigration" began in the 1880s. By the 1920s, roughly 27 million immigrants had arrived. Unsurprisingly, then, Protestant reform often included heightened nativism. Anti-Semitism rose steadily from the Civil War to the 1940s. The American Protective Association (APA), a grassroots anti-Catholic lobby, was founded in 1887. Unsurprisingly, too, conflicts connected to religion were commonplace in politics. Before Prohibition became a strong national movement in the early 1900s, the most prominent of these conflicts still centered on the dual question of de facto Protestantism in the public school curriculum and possible government funding of Catholic schools.

The Republican Party, founded in the 1850s as a coalition of former Whigs, Know Nothings, and anti-slavery Democrats, succeeded the defunct Whigs as the favored party of northern white Protestants. The late nineteenth century Democrats, in many ways still a Jacksonian party, remained religiously more diverse and philosophically more skeptical of legislation enforcing personal morality. To put the point more vividly, Republican presidents in the late nineteenth century typically drank lemonade and sang hymns around the White House piano, while Grover Cleveland, the only Democrat elected between 1856 and 1912, enjoyed a good glass of beer. Cleveland may have won in 1884 partly because his

predecessor, Chester A. Arthur, an atypically urbane Republican president for that era, alienated temperance voters by restoring alcohol to White House dinners.

Amid the Third Pretty Good Awakening, 1896 produced the most devout pair of major party presidential nominees in history—Presbyterian Democrat William Jennings Bryan and Methodist Republican William McKinley. As a candidate, McKinley flirted with the nativists. As president, he appointed a Catholic attorney general and welcomed the foremost Catholic clergyman, Cardinal James Gibbons, to participate in inaugural ceremonies. The war against Spain in 1898, McKinley emphasized, was not an assault on Catholicism. McKinley also declared national days of prayer during the war, asked God whether or not the United States should keep the Philippine islands that had been captured from Spain, and inferred that God answered in the affirmative.

Middle class fear of social turmoil, the brief rise of the People's Party (considered radical in the American context), and genuine humanitarian sentiments combined to produce what historians warily call the Progressive era in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Questions of labeling aside, this period did yield a basic regulatory state at the national level. Two of the progressive era presidents, Republicans Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft, were pro forma Christians whose faith was reminiscent of that of the capital F Founders. A Unitarian, Taft did not consider Jesus the Son of God. At minimum, Roosevelt had doubts about Jesus's divinity and the existence of an afterlife. Presbyterian Democrat Woodrow Wilson, whose name became synonymous with the American sense of mission, was a theological liberal who described the Bible as a reformist "people's book of revelation." Despite their liberal theology, both Roosevelt and Wilson said occasionally that God had made them president.

The so-called Progressive era coincided with a Fourth Pretty Good Awakening. Accordingly, Protestant reformers played major roles, especially in local humanitarian efforts to improve living and working conditions. Nationwide Prohibition, which began in 1920, was at least as much a "progressive" cause as creation of the Federal Reserve System.

Progressivism as a worldview emphasized national unity across class, ethnic, and religious lines. To some extent, therefore, nativism at the national level was submerged beneath a surrogate religion of “100% Americanism.” Theodore Roosevelt appointed the first Jew to a cabinet post and began the presidential practice of consulting with Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish leaders about reformist measures.

Nonetheless, religious conflict and outright bigotry persisted and may have grown stronger at the grassroots. Protestant advocates of municipal reform denounced Catholic urban bosses and saloon keepers (categories that sometimes overlapped in fact as well as rhetoric). Opponents attacked President Wilson for appointing a Catholic as his chief White House assistant and a Jew as an associate Justice of the Supreme Court. Intra-Protestant conflict also seems to have been on the rise during the so-called Progressive era. Some theological conservatives were appalled by Taft’s election. The split within Protestantism widened between liberals, who were increasingly attracted to the social gospel, and conservatives, who viewed saving souls as the highest priority.

World War I and the intense fear of revolution that followed—the Red Scare—turned cultural splits into chasms. The “twenties” was the most intense period of religious conflict since the three decades before the Civil War. Protestant theological liberals and conservatives bitterly disputed doctrinal questions within several major denominations. Although esoteric in some respects, this “fundamentalist controversy” reached a national audience when theological conservatives advocated bans on the teaching of Darwinian evolution in the public schools. One such law, in Tennessee, was challenged by secularists and religious liberals in the legendary 1925 “Scopes monkey trial”; the legal challenge failed and state bans were not ruled unconstitutional by the United States Supreme Court until 1968.

Evidence for the continued rise of anti-Semitism is ubiquitous during the 1920s. Leading universities, law schools, and medical schools restricted the admission of Jews. An extraordinary conspiracy theory, whose sponsors included Henry Ford, held that a secret cabal of Jews controlled both

capitalism and Communism, all the better to destroy Christian civilization. The Ku Klux Klan, which attracted as many as five million members early in the decade, damned Jewish cosmopolitanism as one of two outstanding threats to “100% Americanism.” The other outstanding threat was Catholicism in manifestations ranging from an undemocratic church structure controlled from abroad to culturally inferior immigrants taking control of American cities.

Throughout the 1920s Republicans and Democrats differed much more about issues relating to religion than about economics and foreign policy; the prevailing opinion in both parties favored limited government at home and pursuit of an “informal empire” of trade and influence abroad. The Democrats remained much more hospitable to Catholics and, partly for this reason, contained the most prominent critics of Prohibition (“wets” in the idiom of the day). In 1928, on his second serious attempt, the “wet” Catholic Alfred E. Smith won the Democratic presidential nomination. A devout church goer nonetheless devoid of doctrinal interests, Smith never understood why his faith became a major issue in the election.

Although Protestant theological conservatives offered the fiercest rhetoric, liberal social gospellers also criticized Smith as the representative of an undemocratic, alien church. Republican nominee Herbert Hoover endorsed religious tolerance—which voters could interpret either as a rejection of anti-Catholic nativism or as a criticism of papal autocracy. Republican officials worked behind the scenes with avid nativists on Hoover’s behalf.

The Great Depression that followed the stock market Crash of 1929 ended four decades of Republican dominance of national politics. The New Deal begun under President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s leadership in 1933 not only expanded the regulatory state and created a basic welfare state, but also helped to change the American religious scene. Roosevelt brought the overwhelming majority of Catholics and Jews into his remarkable coalition, a coalition that still contained most southern white conservative Protestants, for whom religious issues seemed less important than economic need or preservation of white supremacy.

Roosevelt famously deflected a question about his philosophy by calling himself a “Christian and a Democrat.” Although he attended church irregularly, he *was* a Christian—an ecumenical Episcopalian whose simple faith included a sense of duty and a commitment to religious tolerance. In 2008, political and religious liberals are less likely than conservatives to recall that FDR spoke often about religion. Sometimes he brought eminent foreign visitors, including King George VI and Winston Churchill, along to services. Roosevelt urged an appreciation of all faiths. He frequently cited the Almighty as the source of political freedom and asked God to bless America. Among the evils of Nazism, FDR said in 1941, was Adolf Hitler’s plan to destroy all religions—Hindu and Muslim as well as Christian and Jewish. Roosevelt announced the D Day invasion of Europe in June 1944 by reading a long prayer he had written himself.

Roosevelt’s public religiosity derived from political needs as well as private faith. During the Depression he succeeded so well as an advocate of economic liberalism *because* he sounded sufficiently conservative on cultural issues, including matters of faith, to deflect charges that the New Deal was un-American. This strategy was not easy to manage because, from the perspective of religious conservatives, his alliances and actions seemed anything but conservative. There *were* many Catholics, Jews, and irreverent cosmopolitans in his administration.

The fiercest criticism came from a Christian right that began to mobilize against the New Deal from the outset. Although only the name of Father Charles Coughlin, the “radio priest” who supported and then broke with FDR lingers in American memory, many other devout Catholic and Protestant critics of the New Deal were equally notorious during the 1930s. In their view, Roosevelt’s sins typically included recognition of the Soviet Union, association with Jews and cosmopolitan secularists, and marriage to a feminist “new woman.” The worst leaders of the old Christian right accused Roosevelt of belonging to the international Jewish conspiracy working to destroy Christian civilization. Unlike their Catholic counterparts, the Protestant rightists also stressed the repeal of Prohibition in 1933. There was enough common ground, however, for Protestants to build alliances

with Catholics on the right that would have been inconceivable during the 1920s.

Most fundamentalists did not become political activists of any sort. Rather, they spent the 1930s building an infrastructure of colleges, seminaries, and publications—and praying for a religious revival that finally began as the United States edged toward entry into World War II.

This Fifth Pretty Good Awakening continued at least until the early 1960s, when church and synagogue membership stood at roughly 70% of the population. Once again the revival spawned new religions (notably Scientology) and surrogate religions (notably humanistic psychology). Our main concern, however, is the religious mainstream during the “social-cultural fifties” (which needs to be distinguished from the mere chronological fifties as defined by the decimal system). The social-cultural fifties stretched from roughly 1947-48, when Cold War orthodoxy came to dominate the national mood, to 1965-1966, when doubts about the Vietnam War catalyzed a reconsideration of social and cultural issues that had been dormant or suppressed since the 1920s or 1930s.

The “fifties” religious mainstream was broader than leading social scientists, blinded by a secularization model of modern society, discerned at the time. Instead of dying out, Protestant theological conservatism adapted and thrived. Many of these conservatives joined Rev. Billy Graham in calling themselves evangelicals rather than fundamentalists. Graham became more stylish in his self-presentation, dropped old obsessions like temperance and Darwinism, and eschewed *public* criticism of Catholics and Jews. Pentecostals adapted less rapidly than evangelicals though animosity between these two versions of Protestant conservatism declined. The Fifth Pretty Good Awakening also inspired some unreconstructed fundamentalists, including young Rev. Jerry Falwell who founded a separatist Baptist congregation in 1956.

A common misperception is that religious conservatives took little interest in politics until the 1970s. In a relatively staid period like the “fifties,” there were fewer explicitly Protestant mobilizations on the right than had been the case during the 1930s. Nonetheless, efforts to influence

government policy continued. Behind the scenes Billy Graham, a friend of both President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Vice President Richard M. Nixon, was up to his neck in Republican politics.

As Graham's increasing polish and public veneer of nonpartisanship suggest, as religious faith became more pervasive in the "fifties," its sectarian content eroded. While agreeing that the United States was one of the most religious big, rich countries, skeptical commentators wondered how much substance lay behind routine attendance at religious services. Jesuit John Courtney Murray grumbled about the country's adherence to "religion-in-general, whatever that is" (Murray, p.37)

What that is had been clear since Benjamin Franklin walked the streets of Philadelphia. According to Franklin, all faiths except a few on the fringes were legitimate and should cooperate to promote private well-being and public virtue instead of squabbling about doctrine. After the Enlightenment, proponents of religion-in-general typically expected God to bless America. During the "fifties" this nationalistic form of civil religion energized—and was energized by—the Cold War against "godless Communism." Congress adopted "In God We Trust" as the national motto and added "under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag.

President Eisenhower worked diligently to personify the virtues of religion-in-general. Perhaps, as historian Gary Scott Smith suggests, Eisenhower looked more religious than FDR because the whole American *Zeitgeist* had become more religious since the 1930s. He certainly looked devout in comparison to his Democratic opponent in 1952 and 1956, Adlai Stevenson, who was the most secular major party nominee since William Howard Taft.

Eisenhower joined the Presbyterian church after his election to serve as an example to the nation, delivered a prayer he had written at his first inauguration, began cabinet meetings with prayer, and appointed a Congregationalist minister as his White House religious liaison. In 1959 he invited the visiting Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev to join him at Sunday services; Khrushchev declined. Eisenhower's frequent invocations of God as the source of freedom and protector of the United States resembled

Roosevelt's—though Communism now replaced the Axis as the national enemy. The White House tried with mixed success to promote broad interfaith cooperation in international affairs. The President was exasperated that Catholics, Jews, Muslims, and various kinds of Protestants could not bury their doctrinal differences in order more effectively to combat Communism.

Eisenhower has often been ridiculed for saying that the American “form of government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply-felt religious faith, and I don't care what it is” (quoted in Meacham, p.177). Certainly this off hand comment was not the most learned defense of religion-in-general. Nonetheless, these sentiments fitted into a coherent worldview and deliberate political strategy. Although his own Republican party had inflamed the bitter shouting match over foreign policy that helped to elect him in 1952, Eisenhower then sought to unify and calm the country. Furthermore, religion-in-general was not without merits compared to religion in sectarian particular. Anti-Semitism declined steadily after the late 1940s as celebration of a recently conceptualized “Judeo-Christian tradition” superseded references to “Christian Americanism.” The Mormons, the only church that had engaged in an actual religious war (a small one against the United States army in the 1850s), finally won acceptance as a reputable denomination.

The “fifties” seem bland to Americans looking back from 2008 not only because there was peace after the Korean truce in 1953 as well as extraordinary prosperity, but also because this stability was sandwiched between two remarkably volatile eras. Depression and World War II had come before; the Vietnam War and social upheaval followed. Even so, none of those who risked their lives to end white supremacy in the segregated South recalls a period of domestic tranquility. War scares and frequent paramilitary interventions suggest that international peace was equally ambiguous.

Nor was the religious scene devoid of contention. Indeed, while adherents to diverse denominations usually lived amicably as neighbors, Catholics and Protestant leaders escalated their cultural shouting match.

There were important issues at stake. Most Catholics still wanted government aid to parochial schools and most Protestants still opposed it. The Catholic hierarchy denounced birth control and favored censorship of sexy books and films; liberal Protestants frequently disagreed.

Above and beyond the specific issues, Catholics felt unappreciated. Catholics had served disproportionately in the armed forces for more than a century and, unlike a notable minority of liberal Protestants, none had flirted with Communism during the 1930s. Despite this record of "100% Americanism," their fellow citizens balked at electing a Catholic president.

After Democrat John F. Kennedy defeated Republican Richard Nixon in 1960, pundit Richard Scammon quipped that a Catholic could win the presidency if he was a millionaire war hero with a beautiful wife. And, as Scammon might have added, if he ran as a sturdy cold warrior.

According to the standard estimate, Kennedy's Catholicism cost him 1.5 million votes in 1960. He compensated in part by winning roughly 80% of the Catholic vote. Some Protestants and Jews voted for Kennedy as a testimony to tolerance, an appeal subtly used by the Democrats. Nixon privately grumbled about this tactic but to his credit never allied with religious bigots eager to mobilize on his behalf. Evangelicals and fundamentalists painted the most lurid picture of a Catholic in the White House. Several prominent liberal Protestants with an exaggerated sense of the Pope's power over his worldwide flock also looked on with suspicion.

Kennedy managed to win narrowly because religion-related issues were not as central to national politics as they would become within a decade and a half. There were abortions and gay Americans in 1960 but presidential candidates were not expected to answer questions about such underground behavior. Thus Kennedy could neutralize what he labeled the "so-called religious issue" by rejecting diplomatic relations with the Vatican and repudiating government funding of parochial schools as unconstitutional. To be sure, JFK had to make these points over and over and over again. In the end, he defended an "absolute" separation of church and state that from the perspective of presidential candidates in 2008 sounds almost as dated as Jefferson's deism. "The President is not elected to be protector of the faith—

or guardian of the public morals. His attendance at church on Sunday should be his business alone, not a show case for the nation (Kennedy, pp.112-119).

It was not only Kennedy's election but also and perhaps more importantly his assassination, followed by intense national mourning and a televised Latin Mass, that legitimized Catholicism in the White House. Moreover, the divisions associated with the "sixties" quickly dwarfed this religious issue. After JFK's successor Lyndon Johnson led the United States into the disastrous Indochina war, hardly anyone cared that the leading anti-war candidates in 1968, Democratic Senators Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy, were Catholics.

Like the "fifties," the "sixties" need to be reconceptualized with due disregard for the decimal system. As a social and cultural "decade," the sixties stretched from roughly 1965-66 to 1973-74. Once again we must dig beneath clichés and nostalgia. The "sixties" was not a radical era but a polarized era.

Although far less dramatic than campus demonstrations, let alone burning cities, signs of polarization could be found on the religious scene. While Protestant theological conservatives tended to support the Vietnam War out of routine patriotism, liberal Protestants and Jews disproportionately joined the doves out of principle. Both Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Senator George McGovern, the 1972 Democratic presidential nominee, rooted opposition to the war in their own versions of the social gospel. Eugene McCarthy's anti-war candidacy highlighted a change that seemed inconceivable in 1960, the development of a Catholic left. Similarly, there was a rightward shift among Jews who felt threatened by affirmative action for blacks and disliked ebbing support for Israel among liberals. The loosening of sexual mores, resurgence of feminism as a social movement, and start of a national campaign for gay rights further divided religious liberals and conservatives.

Americans struggled to make sense of deep social changes amid judicial decisions that rendered the United States officially less religious. According to the Supreme Court, compulsory prayer in public schools violated the First

Amendment. Although unrelated to religion as a technical legal question, the decision in *Roe v Wade* (1973) that legalized almost all abortions turned abortion into the most volatile religion-related issue since Prohibition.

In this context, President Richard Nixon—not George W. Bush, Ronald Reagan, or Jimmy Carter—brought overtly politicized religion back to the White House. After his election in 1968 Nixon aspired to build a “new Republican majority” by appealing to “Square America,” a constituency committed at minimum to religion-in-general. Nixon held religious services in the White House and advertised his friendship with Billy Graham, with whom he privately exchanged anti-Semitic banter. Running against McGovern in 1972 Nixon became the first Republican to carry the Catholic vote.

Not surprisingly after the turmoil of the “sixties” and the Watergate scandal that forced Nixon to resign in 1974, 1976 produced the most devout pair of presidential candidates since McKinley and Bryan 80 years earlier. Both Republican President Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, the Democrat who narrowly defeated him, considered themselves “born again” Christians. Compared to Episcopalian Ford, Southern Baptist Carter talked much more openly about his faith—to the discomfort of some Catholic and Jewish voters. But Carter understood that the bloc of evangelical voters that had been growing since World War II would rally to one of their own as a presidential candidate.

A competent lay theologian influenced by the “Christian realism” of Reinhold Niebuhr, Carter was essentially a theological liberal with a southern evangelical style; in recent years he has broken with the increasingly conservative Southern Baptist Convention. In 1976, this style attracted a significant minority of theologically conservative Protestants who otherwise would have voted for Ford. Cosmopolitan journalists stunned by the news that at least a quarter of the population consisted of born again Protestants marveled that Carter taught Sunday school and signed letters, “Your brother in Christ.” Struggling to catch up with this aspect of American reality, they over-reacted and exaggerated the influence of Carter’s faith on his presidency.

Carter's religion affected his policies in one important respect. Drawing on Niebuhr, he thought that nations—like individuals—should guard against the sin of pride. As much as was possible for any American president, Carter criticized his own country as a prideful and arrogant nation. He showed more genuine respect for small and non-white nations than any of his presidential predecessors. Carter quickly identified himself with the issue of international human rights, which was already on the American agenda when he ran for president. Although Carter's foreign policy fell far short of the "absolute" human rights policy he promised, his efforts on behalf of dissidents did save lives in several countries.

Carter's fragile political coalition was eroded primarily by economic "stagflation" and foreign policy crises, but religious factors also contributed to his defeat in 1980. Evangelicals and fundamentalists soon realized that he was religiously and politically more liberal than he had appeared in 1976. He was one of a long line of Baptists who believed in the strict separation of church and state. Although personally opposed to abortion he rejected a Right-to-Life Amendment to the Constitution to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. Starting in 1978-79, Republican political professionals recruited influential "televangelists" to transform amorphous fundamentalist and evangelical discontent into political action. The most prominent of the proliferating "new Christian right" organizations was the Moral Majority led by Rev. Jerry Falwell. Catholics and Protestants on the right cooperated more than ever but Protestant theological conservatives provided the bulk of the rank-and-file.

At the same time, many Jews thought Carter too soft on the Soviet Union and too hard on Israel. Jewish political intellectuals took the lead in creating what came to be known as "neoconservatism," a worldview that accepted much of the welfare state rejected by traditionalist conservatives while also demanding an assertive foreign policy. Running against Republican Ronald Reagan and independent John Anderson, a moderate evangelical, Carter in 1980 received a lower percentage of Catholic and Jewish votes than any Democrat since the 1920s.

In religion as in other respects, Reagan put together the most

remarkable coalition since that created by his erstwhile hero FDR; it stretched from the fundamentalist Falwell to the self-described “saloon singer” Frank Sinatra (who, like Reagan, was a former Democrat). Although Reagan in 1980 said that he had experienced something like an evangelical spiritual rebirth, he was remarkably eclectic in his faith. The eclecticism came naturally from his background; the child of a Catholic father and Protestant mother, he was brought up as a tolerant and optimistic member of the Disciples of Christ. While in Hollywood, Reagan gained fame (and a nickname, the “Gipper”) playing a Catholic football star on screen. Over the years he showed interest in B’hai, the Shroud of Turin, and premillennialist Bible prophecy. After an assassination attempt in 1981, he concluded that God had spared him to end the Cold War. In this religious eclecticism, shared by millions of Americans in the 1980s, Reagan resembled a New Age version of Eisenhower.

The Christian right held a very junior partnership in Reagan’s coalition. Tax cuts and assertive foreign policy were his main concerns; administration priorities never included the Right-to-Life Amendment or restoration of prayer to public schools. Nevertheless, evangelicals and fundamentalists became the most important mass constituency in the Republican party. Alarmed liberals, including 1984 Democratic presidential nominee Walter Mondale, tried in vain to convince voters that Reagan was a tool of the new Christian right. Citing Reagan’s flirtation with Bible prophecy, a few cosmopolitan theological determinists speculated that he might start a nuclear war in order to hasten Jesus’s return.

While Protestant right leaders like Falwell had to settle for routine endorsements of school prayer and brief visits to the White House, Reagan worked closely with Catholic cold warriors at home and abroad. The most prominent of these was Pope John Paul II, who became a de facto Central Intelligence Agency partner in the effort to undermine Communism in Eastern Europe. In 1984, when Reagan established diplomatic relations with the Vatican, his allies on the Protestant right barely complained. That same year, he became the second Republican to win a majority of the Catholic vote.

By 1988, not only did diverse presidential aspirants emulate Reagan's standard closing line in speeches, "God bless America," but putative religious conversions had also become so fashionable that Vice President George H.W. Bush said that he, too, was a born again Christian. Certainly he was a Christian, with a life long record of attending Episcopal and Presbyterian services and teaching Sunday school. In addition, the Vice President actively courted the new Christian right. Still, few evangelicals counted Bush as one of their own. They had little political alternative, however, after Bush won the Republican nomination. Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis, a pro form adherent to the Greek Orthodox Church, was the most secular major party nominee since Adlai Stevenson. Among Bush's many appeals to patriotism and faith during the 1988 campaign, he noted the absence of the word "G-O-D" in the Democratic platform.

Bush lost to Democrat Bill Clinton in 1992 because the economy had sunk into a recession. Religion-related issues affected the ethos of the election rather than the outcome. President Bush had paid even less attention to core Christian right issues than Reagan had. Partly for this reason, his renomination was challenged by Pat Buchanan, a Catholic conservative with support among evangelicals and fundamentalists. To pacify this constituency, Buchanan and conservative Pentecostal televangelist Pat Robertson were allowed to deliver militant speeches at the Republican National Convention. Buchanan in particular stressed a "cultural war" in the United States, with godly Americans on one side and relativists, secularists, and enemies of the family on the other. According to Buchanan, Bill and Hillary Clinton had stood with the cultural radicals since the "sixties." Probably more than any other event, Buchanan's speech sealed the hyperbolic term "culture war" into the national political lexicon.

The cultural shouting match with the Clintons has never ended. From one perspective, the conservative attack makes sense. Although self-consciously centrist in economics, Bill and Hillary Clinton were socially and culturally the most liberal President and First Lady in American history. President Clinton has had black friends all of his adult life. Early in his administration he tried unsuccessfully to lift the ban on gays in the military.

Clinton did reverse executive orders by Reagan and Bush that restricted international aid to programs offering advice about abortion. His personal life made matters worse. In 1998-99 the Republicans in Congress tried to remove Clinton from office because he had lied under oath about a sexual relationship with a woman young enough to be his daughter.

Although predictable under these circumstances, the Christian conservative shouting at the Clintons looks odd in one respect: both are personally at least as religious as their respective predecessors, George H.W. Bush and Barbara Bush. Hillary Clinton has been a Methodist social gospeler since adolescence—a social gospeler who believes in the power of prayer to affect human affairs. During the mid 1990s, along with millions of other Americans, she flirted with New Age supplements to her Christianity. Formally a Baptist, Bill Clinton combined womanizing with spiritual searching in a fashion reminiscent of Lyndon Johnson; certainly no other future president has been curious enough to attend a Haitian voodoo service. While in office he continued the practice of ending speeches by asking God to bless the United States. He also signed the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, which was intended to export the current American version of religious freedom to the rest of the world. In the end, much as theological conservatives and social gospelers have confronted each other since the 1920s, the Protestant right dislikes the Clintons so intensely because they practice what seems to be the wrong kind of Christianity.

In 2000, the Democrats nominated Vice President Al Gore, an ostentatiously non-womanizing spiritual searcher who had begun life as a Baptist. At that point, Gore's spiritual search had led him to join in the fad of wearing a "WWJD" pin, an allusion to Charles Sheldon's question "What would Jesus do?" From the perspective of the history of American religion and politics, the most notable aspect of Gore's candidacy was his selection of Senator Joseph Lieberman, a "modern Orthodox" Jew, as his running mate. There was virtually no anti-Semitic backlash.

Republican George W. Bush, who defeated Gore in a close and controversial election, was the most convincingly born again nominee since Jimmy Carter. Unfortunately, the news media's understanding of

evangelicalism has not improved much since 1976. Overall mainstream journalists exaggerate or misinterpret the influence of Bush's religion on his public policies. At least some evangelicals know better but prefer to celebrate the President as one of their own instead of closely examining his beliefs and actions. In 2008, therefore, Bush's administration is formulaically caricatured as a "faith-based" presidency.

Bush is a born again Christian. Growing up, he attended Episcopal and Presbyterian services. He remained a practicing Protestant even as a young adult, when he drank heavily, used illegal drugs, and floundered in search of a career. The spiritual rebirth came at roughly age 40 in the mid 1980s. At minimum, this embrace of evangelical Protestantism helped him to stop drinking and to start making his way in business and politics. Asked in 1999 to name his favorite philosopher, Bush cited Jesus Christ—because, he said, Christ saved his life, meaning his earthly life. Carter's conversion was bland by comparison. Indeed, no other American president has undergone such a basic behavior change in midlife.

Of course neither Bush's behavior nor his personality changed completely. He regularly reads the Bible and commentaries on Scripture yet, unlike Carter, shows no interest in the intellectual side of Christianity. The sense that he had found Jesus reinforced one long standing trait, a strong confidence in his own ability to make the right decisions. Bush also retains his pre-conversion sense of humor. To the distress of his most pious supporters, he occasionally lapses into obscenities and bestows vulgar nicknames on associates. Nor is he a strict parent.

In addition to misconstruing Bush's personal faith, pundits emphasize four other facets of his ostensibly "faith based" administration: his appointment of evangelicals; his endorsement of conservative Christian positions on abortion, birth control, and stem cell research; his advocacy of "faith based initiatives" in social welfare policy; and his public religious practices and rhetoric. All of these factors need to be examined more carefully.

Leading Protestant conservative appointees have included Bush's first attorney general, Pentecostal John Ashcroft, and his best speech writer,

evangelical Mark Gerson. At the top ranks, however, most positions have been filled by routinely religious (by American standards) Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. There has been no “born again” test for appointment. Since the resignations of Ashcroft and Gerson, no evangelical has belonged to Bush’s inner circle. The President’s current chief of staff, Joshua Bolten, openly lives with his girl friend. In the long run Bush’s most consequential appointments for religion-related issues are Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts and Associate Justice Samuel Alito, both conservative Catholics.

Bush has given more mid level posts to conservative Protestants than Reagan did, especially in program areas related to sexuality. These officials regard family planning as a question of sexual abstinence rather than birth control. Such appointments reveal less about Bush’s theological affinities than about the increased influence of evangelicals and fundamentalists in the Republican party since the 1980s. Although Bush probably dislikes abortion at least as much as Reagan did, he has done even less to advance a Right-to-Life Amendment. Indeed, nothing Bush has said matches Jimmy Carter’s statement in 2005 that he could not imagine Jesus sanctioning an abortion.

The faith-based initiative was the religion-related issue closest to Bush’s heart during his first term. This proposed legislation would allow religious social service agencies to compete for federal funding on the same basis as secular groups. The constitutional question was as nuanced as the court decisions were murky. Religious social service agencies already received millions of dollars from the federal government, particularly for humanitarian work abroad. Federal courts had regarded this practice as constitutional for more than a century—as long as the religious groups did not engage in “pervasively sectarian” behavior. This term was imprecise, as were the Supreme Court decisions in the 1990s that urged “neutrality” in choosing between religious and secular groups seeking government contracts. As construed by the Bush administration, these recent rulings allowed faith-based charities to emphasize their religious side while still competing for funds on the basis of their social service competence. The

legislation Bush proposed in 2001 would have made this right explicit. At the same time his executive orders established new offices in the White House and several departments to help the process along.

Although Clinton and Gore also endorsed faith based initiatives in principle, congressional Democrats complained that Bush's specific proposal was rooted in Republican partisanship as well as religious faith. Their suspicions were well founded. Partly because his own conversion helped to save Bush from alcoholism, he does believe that a religious component enhances efforts to rescue addicts, rehabilitate criminals, and uplift the poor. Nonetheless, expanded appropriations for religion-related social services could have brought a financial windfall to Christian right groups so important to the Republican coalition. The faith-based initiative stalled in Congress and then, after the United States was attacked on September 11, 2001, received minimal attention from the White House. The chief results have been a small increase in funding for conservative religious social services and a change in the tax code to encourage charitable donations.

An extraordinary Republican mobilization of evangelicals and fundamentalists helped Bush to defeat Democrat John Kerry in 2004. Much more interesting was the twenty-first century version of the Catholic issue. Though a fairly devout Catholic, Kerry defended the constitutional right to abortion; he was openly criticized by a handful of Catholic bishops for doing so. On election day, Bush narrowly carried the Catholic vote. Thereafter religion-related issues sank to a new low on the President's list of priorities. Indeed, one disillusioned evangelical, a former White House adviser on religious matters, published a book charging the administration with cynically courting devout Christians for political gain. Notwithstanding Bush's sincere personal faith, it was always naïve to think otherwise.

Meanwhile, political and religious liberals continue to object that Bush prays for divine guidance before making major foreign policy decisions and justifies American actions abroad in moralistic, sometimes explicitly religious language. What needs to be emphasized is that such behavior is hardly unprecedented among American presidents. British Prime Minister Tony Blair may have joined Bush in prayer (to the consternation of many

Blair supporters in the United Kingdom) but this event, if it occurred, was less remarkable than Eisenhower's attempt to take Nikita Khrushchev to church. Bush prayed for divine guidance before going to war in Iraq; Carter prayed for divine guidance before making one last effort, ultimately successful, to negotiate the Camp David Accords in 1978. Bush calls freedom a gift from God; so did Franklin Roosevelt, Eisenhower, and the second sentence of the Declaration of Independence. Speech writer Michael Gerson has emphasized his debt to the righteous rhetoric of FDR and JFK.

No historian's appeal for an accurate understanding of the past has ever stopped a cultural shouting match. I do not expect to succeed either. Depending on where we look and how we conceptualize the question, the United States has grown both more religious and less religious since 1960. The loudest shouters on both sides of this divide dislike the status quo. While many Americans want the United States to become more religious, hopefully through a Sixth Pretty Good Awakening, others want to make the country more secular. Both celebrants and critics of the Bush administration may legitimately prefer a president who speaks often or never about his personal faith as long they do not claim that their respective positions are warranted by the whole of American history. The secularists would be on firmer intellectual ground if, after acknowledging a long if intermittent tradition of strong presidential religiosity, they candidly argued that the country now must move on. However the rival arguments develop, the latest cultural shouting match will undoubtedly persist for the foreseeable future.

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## Summary

This article traces the impact of religion on American national politics from independence in 1776 to the present. The story begins with the current controversy about the religious beliefs of the most famous “Founding Fathers” and the creation of a secular republic via the Constitution and its First Amendment. The nineteenth century was marked by growing religious diversity, notably fragmentation within the Protestant majority and the arrival of significant Roman Catholic and Jewish minorities, as well as the growing impact of religious issues on politics. In general devout Protestants supported the Federalist, Whig, and Republican parties, while Catholics and free thinkers usually favored the Democrats, a tendency that has continued to the present. Protestant advocates of the “social gospel” were especially active during the pre-World War I reform movement that historians warily call Progressivism. World War I deepened religious divisions, and the 1920s was marked by many bitter religion-related controversies, including increased anti-Semitism and Protestant opposition to the first Catholic nominated for president by a major party (Democrat Al Smith in 1928). During the Great Depression President Franklin D. Roosevelt created a remarkable Democratic coalition that included most Catholics and Jews along with many southern conservative Protestants. The period between World War II and the early 1960s brought a multifaceted but increasingly tolerant religious revival that has affected national politics to the present. The most recent six presidents (Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush) have been more conventionally Christian than the first six (George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe, and John Quincy Adams). Nonetheless, religion-related conflict has persisted and, compared to the 1950s, even escalated. President Ronald Reagan brought a “new Christian right” into his Republican coalition, and President George W. Bush, a born again Protestant, courted this conservative constituency with some high level appointments and the rhetoric of American mission. Democrats and secularists harshly criticized Bush’s tactics. We must beware

of joining commentators who describe these conflicts, in typical American hyperbole, as a “culture war.” Rather, they represent the latest in a long series of cultural “shouting matches” seeking to define a normative “American Way of Life.”