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In God We Trust: Reconciling Religiosity in a Secular Nation

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Title: In God We Trust: Reconciling Religiosity in a Secular Nation

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Abstract: Since its founding, the United States has been composed of a diversity of religions, making religious tolerance and the separation of church and state necessary for the maintenance of a peaceful coexistence. It is inscribed in the First Amendment of the Constitution that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” Nonetheless, despite a clear institutional differentiation between religious and nonreligious spheres of society, the United States has remained, on the whole, a devout nation. In 2016, 89 percent of Americans reported that they believe in God and 72 percent said they believe in angels (“Most Americans Still Believe in God,” 2016). These facts create an apparent paradox: Americans, as a whole, fundamentally believe in a separation of church and state, yet religious imagery often pervades political discourse. Furthermore, the emergence of the Religious Right as a powerful political force would appear to contradict the premise that politics and religion occupy separate spheres in American society. However, the group’s evolution over the past 30 years and integration into mainstream society ultimately underscores the value that most Americans place on the separation of church and state and the fact that religion is able to influence American politics only insofar as it reflects the expression of individual political opinions as motivated by religious belief.

Since its founding, the United States has been composed of a diversity of religions, making religious tolerance and the separation of church and state necessary for the maintenance of a peaceful coexistence. It is inscribed in the First Amendment of the Constitution that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” Nonetheless, despite a clear institutional differentiation between religious and nonreligious spheres of society, the United States has remained, on the whole, a devout nation. In 2016, 89 percent of Americans reported that they believe in God and 72 percent said they believe in angels (“Most Americans Still Believe in God,” 2016). These facts create an apparent paradox: Americans, as a whole, fundamentally believe in a separation of church and state, yet religious imagery often pervades political discourse. Furthermore, the emergence of the Religious Right as a powerful political force would appear to contradict the premise that politics and religion occupy separate spheres in American society. However, the group’s evolution over the past 30 years and integration into mainstream society ultimately underscores the value that most Americans place on the separation of church and state and the fact that religion is able to influence American politics only insofar as it reflects the expression of individual political opinions as motivated by religious belief.

Throughout the Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary era, America developed a coherent set of values distinct from its European contemporaries. Among these values was an emphasis on individual rights and equality. This, combined with the plethora of religious denominations that comprised the colonies, would lead to the institutionalization of religious tolerance. The establishment of an official religion was simply not practical in the American case. Therefore, if the new government was to maintain both authority and legitimacy over the various religious communities, it couldn’t establish a state religion.

The First Amendment’s establishment clause and the Constitution’s prohibition of religious tests attest to the uniquely secular nature of America’s founding documents. Furthermore, the “refusal to invoke any form of divine sanction, even the vague deistic ‘Providence,’ [meant that] the Constitution went even farther than Virginia’s religious freedom act in separating religion from government” (Jacoby 2004, 29). Although many people, particularly religious leaders, were incensed by the secularism of the Constitution, citizens were remarkably quick in accepting pluralism and tolerance as fundamental values. As the religious makeup of the country increasingly diversified, “the perceived need for interdenominational harmony during [the Revolutionary War] and political unanimity afterward placed an even higher premium on the respectful treatment of other citizens’ beliefs” (Beneke 2009, 175). Absolutist claims about the inerrancy of one denomination over another quickly became unacceptable in mainstream society. Therefore, what subsequently developed was a thin line between the constraint of religion to private life and extreme insularity. Although individuals were expected to be religious within their private lives, insularity was viewed as an elitist rejection of the American civil religion.

As the separation of church and state became further entrenched within the values of American society, the role of the American civil religion grew. The civil religion supplanted denominational religion in public life insofar as it provided a baseline of morality for political dealings among the religiously diverse nation. It bridged the gap between religious and political spheres by encompassing, “the existence of God, the life to come, the reward of virtue and the punishment of vice, and the exclusion of religious intolerance” (Bellah 2016, 43). It is comprised

of vague themes of Americans as the “chosen people,” references to God, and uniquely American holidays. Although religious symbolism is frequently invoked in the civil religion, the limits on the specificity of religious references reflect its fundamental purpose, which is to encompass the values of all believers without giving preference to one denomination over another. For example, despite the overwhelmingly Christian composition of the United States, explicit references to Jesus Christ in the political sphere are generally taboo. Belief in Christ isn’t a part of Jewish, Muslim, or many other religious doctrines, thus references to Christ would alienate these sects of the population.

The inherent tension between the separation of church and state and the United States’ devout populace reached its zenith following World War II. As soldiers returned home from the war, they sought to rebuild their lives with religion taking a prominent role. Therefore, the post World War II era, “witnessed an unusual surge in public religiosity, so much so that some observers classified it as another of the Great Awakenings” (Putnam and Campbell 2010, 83). Religious worship and church-going became even more central to public life than it had before. However, a series of Supreme Court decisions pushed back against the tide of public religiosity by applying to local governments what had long been expected of the federal government. Prior to the mid-20th century, States maintained almost full authority over the legislation of religion. The establishment of religion clause was interpreted to apply to the federal government, whereas the States had the power to legislate religion as they saw fit. Therefore, “the Supreme Court’s decision to apply the Bill of Rights beyond the national government meant an end to the traditional distinction between national and state action towards churches” (Wald and Calhoun 1992, 79). What followed were a series of prominent Supreme Court cases that challenged laws on the state and local level. Additionally, the Supreme Court took a distinctly separationist approach to interpreting the First Amendment, meaning the Court believed that government and religion should be completely independent of one another. Although the composition of the Court changed after the 1970s so as to reflect a more accommodationist point of view, the new focus on state and local religious issues could not be undone. Issues such as the role of religion in public schools became prominent topics of discussion and underwent intense scrutiny.

Perhaps in reaction to what was by some viewed as an infringement upon religious liberties, a new coalition of evangelical Protestants emerged as a prominent political actor. In addition to the series of separationist Supreme Court rulings from the 1940s through the 1970s, the social upheaval of the 1960s served to further challenge the conservative norms that were cemented in the 1950s. Issues such as the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, and the sexual revolution divided the young and the old and emphasized the political and religious schisms that were developing in America. The first aftershock, however, which brought about the rise of the Religious Right, proved that a sizable segment of the American population would not tolerate the apparent decrease in the role of religion and morality in the public sphere. In direct contrast to most conceptions of secularization theory as a linear phenomenon by which religious adherence declines in response to ongoing modernization, the number of evangelical Protestants rose from 23 percent of the population in the early 1970s to 28 percent by the mid 1990s (Putnam and Campbell 2010, 103). However, the rise of evangelicalism was not restricted to an increase in the number of adherents. Various local grassroots campaigns, run by evangelicals, challenged laws and practices that were deemed incompatible with religious doctrine.

As grassroots campaigns sprouted throughout the country, the political activities of evangelicals began to coalesce and formalize their operations. Evangelical political action groups such as the Moral Majority and Christian Voice had a far broader issue agenda than their predecessors. The core agenda involved opposition to abortion, civil rights protection for gays and lesbians, and the ERA, and support for school prayer and tuition tax credits for religious schools (Wilcox and Robinson 1996, 44). The Religious Right was taking on a vast array of political issues, with religion as the basis of their mobilization. However, the pattern of U.S. history soon came full circle as the Religious Right realized the limitations of its overtly denominational rhetoric. By invoking language more specific than that of the civil religion, the Religious Right inherently established themselves as a relatively insular group. Their “moral language and censorious tone,” was ultimately divisive and hindered them from receiving more widespread support and forming coalitions (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 1992, 212). Therefore, the eventual broadening of their language allowed them to become more mainstream.

In the early 1990s, the Religious Right reinvented their image so as to become more inclusive and gain more followers, thus leading to greater political success. By referring to their target audience as “people of faith” as opposed to “Christians” and their goals as defending “traditional values” as opposed to “Christian values,” the New Christian Right’s agenda “moved beyond moral concerns...to a much broader set of issues that would appeal to secular conservatives” (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 1992, 214). The Religious Right learned that even though American was a relatively devout and overwhelmingly Christian nation, Americans nonetheless valued at least a certain degree of separation between church and state. Overtly religious rhetoric discomforted many Americans who valued the country’s pluralism. Instead, the Religious Right adopted “conservative” positions as activists avoided “explicitly religious language in public speeches and emphasize[d] positions on taxes, crime, abortion, and gay rights” (Wilcox and Robinson 1996, 50). A certain degree of separation between religious ideology and political rhetoric was needed in order for their platform to appeal to both the religious and the nonreligious.

The importance of religion to contemporary American civil society became most evident in the 1950s during the post-World War II religious revival. The soldiers that returned from the war were getting married, having children, and bringing their families with them to church. However, the increased level of religiosity among the general public does not fully explain the increase in church attendance. Religiosity also became a social norm and a symbol of respectability. Americans felt a civic duty to attend church, particularly during the Cold War, during which communism was associated with atheism and “religion represented patriotism, a central unifying theme of national purpose” (Putnam and Campbell 2010, 87). Religious institutions also became central to social life as “institutional commitment, embodied in church membership...burgeoned from 49 percent of the adult population in 1940 to 69 percent in 1960” (Putnam and Campbell 2010, 86). Religious organizations developed a variety of programs to engage and retain their members. The centrality of religion to civil society remains a fact today given that half of all volunteering taking place in religious settings, 60 percent of Americans are members of a house of worship, and over a third of Americans are associated with religious groups other than the place of worship (Fowler et al. 1985 195). All of these elements continually reinforced the centrality of religion to American life.

With religious institutions forming the bedrock of American civil society, various religious organizations seek to educate and mobilize their congregants so as to take political action. Often motivation to enter the political sphere is drawn from religious texts and traditions themselves. Postmillennial fundamentalists, for example, believe that Jesus Christ would return to earth only after a thousand years of peace. Therefore, if peace must be achieved before Christ can return, “then politics becomes an essential Christian duty” and “only by improving the state of the world can prophecy be fulfilled and the kingdom of heaven be brought into existence” (Wilcox and Robinson 1996, 33). Indeed, religious affiliation appears to be a strong indicator of policy attitudes and voting patterns. In particular, those belonging to different Christian denominations are likely to exhibit different behaviors given their religious orthodoxy. For example, whereas, “evangelical-style religiosity attends to questions of personal morality without much interest in social welfare policy...communitarian-style religiosity addresses social welfare but gives much less priority to issues like abortion and gay rights” (Mockabee, Wald, and Leege 293). Given the strong link between religion and politics in many denominations, churches and places of worship themselves can act as centers of mobilization for political action. During the civil rights movement, for example, advocacy, “was organizationally based in black churches, and many African American clergy say they could not imagine their pastoral role without a political component” (Fowler et al. 1985 125). Furthermore, since religious institutions function as centers of social life for many Americans, they also provide congregants with skills that are often necessary to incite political action. As a result, higher levels of religiosity are, “strongly associated with higher levels of interest in public life—a factor that is itself correlated with political knowledge” (Fowler et al. 1985 196).

As religious communities increasingly sought to influence politics, lobbying groups formed so as to nationalize their political agendas. One aspect of the aftershock that began in the 1970s was the massive increase in religious advocacy. Fearing the growing federal government’s infringement upon religious liberties, “many groups [arose] to monitor its impact on their religious organizations and protect basic religious freedom” (Fowler et al. 1985 120). However, with various denominations seeking different—and sometimes, conflicting—political action, they often formed coalitions with like-minded parties. The interactions between the various political groups, both religious and nonreligious, exemplify the tolerance and freedoms afforded to religious believers in the United States. When launching lobbying campaigns, different religious groups will align themselves with one another on particular issues on which they agree. For example, evangelical Protestants often side with conservative Jewish groups when it comes to U.S. support for Israel. Although the two groups represent different ideologies, they are not so insular or intolerant that they would deny cooperation with the other. By acknowledging one another as legitimate political actors and partners, religious groups implicitly acknowledge the viability of their counterparts’ beliefs. Although they may disagree, they value individual freedom of expression, which affords people the right to promote policies that coincide with their religious beliefs.

The United States may be a remarkably devout nation, but it is also extremely pluralistic. The need to accommodate a wide diversity of religions set the tone early on in American history, leading to a differentiation between religious and nonreligious spheres. Nonetheless, Americans have also been afforded substantial individual rights, including freedom of expression and freedom of religion. It is through individuals’ usage of these rights that religious beliefs are able

to influence U.S. politics today. From the 1940s to the 1970s, Supreme Court took a separationist approach to the relationship between religion and government and applied this approach to local and state governments. In reaction to this perceived infringement upon traditionally held religious liberties, the Religious Right emerged, first as a grassroots movement crusading against local policies and then evolved into a more nationalized and less overtly religious political organization. The metamorphosis of the Religious Right into a less moralistic and more mainstream entity attests to the fact that the majority of Americans believe in a certain degree of separation between the government and religion. Although they believe that people have the right to advocate for policies that reflect their religious beliefs, Americans nonetheless hold pluralism and religious tolerance as values inherent to the maintenance of democracy.

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