

Religion in Public Life

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In this issue:

Does the heightened presence of fundamentalist Protestants and Catholic clergy in American public life raise the specter of religion overstepping its rightful bounds—or the hope of religion regaining its rightful place? p. 1

Eugenics makes us uneasy, but it turns out to be no easy task pinpointing why p. 6

Racist and sexist jokes are funny to some, offensive to others. How bad are they really? . . p. 9

Teaching philosophy and public policy: some strategies for defusing the menace of moral relativism p. 12

Available Center publications p. 15

In 1965 the Reverend Jerry Falwell chastised fellow clergymen who were taking part in the civil rights movement for neglecting what he saw to be the only appropriate mission of a sacred calling in a profane world: “Believing in the Bible as I do, I would find it impossible to stop preaching the pure saving Gospel of Jesus Christ, and begin doing anything else—including fighting communism, or participating in civil rights reforms. . . . Preachers are not called to be politicians but to be soul winners.” Today, of course, Falwell is better known as the founder of Moral Majority, a Christian activist group lobbying for a sweeping agenda of conservative legislation. Which Falwell provides a better model for the proper relationship between religion and politics?

Although ours has been derided as an age of eroding religious commitment, America remains an almost anachronistically religious society. In a recent study of religion and politics, social scientist Kenneth Wald notes that “by all the normal indicators of religious commitment—the strength of religious institutions, practices, and belief—the United States has resisted the pressures toward secularity.” The proportion of church members aged fifteen and older is virtually the same today (76.9 percent) as it was in 1950 (78.5 percent), and “by overwhelming majorities, Americans have continued to endorse the core assumptions of Christianity—the existence of God, the divinity of Jesus, the reality of an afterlife—and to insist on the importance of these values in their own life.” Levels of religious