

Religion in Public Life

To make its research readily available to a broad audience, the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy publishes a quarterly newsletter: *QQ—Report from the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy*. Named after the abbreviation for “questions,” *QQ* summarizes and supplements Center books and working papers and features other selected work on public policy questions. Articles in *QQ* are intended to advance philosophically informed debate on current policy choices; the views presented are not necessarily those of the Center or its sponsors.

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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

belief in America are higher than in Europe and Latin America, and equal to those in the Far East and sub-Saharan Africa. Indeed, our abiding religious faith may be a more salient fact about the United States than our attachment to democratic political institutions: "The proportion of Americans claiming to speak in tongues . . . exceeded the proportion who worked for a party or candidate in 1980."

Nonetheless, one of our bedrock assumptions as a polity is a belief in the separation of church and state. The First Amendment to the Constitution proclaims that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," thereby establishing a "wall of separation," in Jefferson's metaphor, between religion and politics.

While almost everyone agrees that some line must be drawn between the two domains, however, where and how the line should be drawn is a matter of intense dispute. Almost two centuries after the ratification of the Bill of Rights, church/state wrangles are still alive in the courts and in the headlines. Controversies over school prayer and over the teaching of evolution, Rasputin-like, refuse to die. The unexpected political muscle shown by fundamentalist Protestants in the last two presidential elections, as well as key political pronouncements by leading Catholic clergy, raise for some the specter of religion overstepping its rightful bounds; for others, the hope of religion regaining its rightful place.

As consensus over the proper boundaries between church and state comes under increasing pressure, it may be helpful to look more closely at exactly why we want separation of church and state. What values does it seek to secure? How well does it secure them? What role do we want religion to play in American public life?

Protecting Religion from Government

Some degree of separation between church and state has been sought as a way of both protecting the church from the state and protecting the state from the church.

While many early settlers would have preferred a government that protected their religion and persecuted everybody else's, others recognized the danger that followed upon any government establishment of religion.

Ideally the principle of separation is not intended to denigrate the authority of either sphere, but to codify in legal terms the scriptural injunction to render unto God that which is God's and to render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's. Both concerns played a role in the founding fathers' deliberations at the Constitutional Convention, and both play a role in contemporary debates.

Until recent efforts to purge the public school curriculum of any mention of religion, school children grew up learning that the Pilgrims came to Plymouth Rock to seek freedom of worship. That ours was a nation settled in part by those fleeing religious persecution explains one reason for an early insistence on protecting religious faith from governmental intrusion. While many early settlers would have preferred a

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government that protected *their* religion and persecuted everybody else's, others recognized the danger that followed upon any government establishment of religion. A principle protecting all religions from state interference serves as a guarantee that one's own religion will be protected whatever the prevailing political or theological fashion.

Separation of church and state also ensures that even the majority religion is not dominated by government interference and placed under the legislative control of secular authorities. As the price of its state support, the Church of England has been subject to Parliamentary oversight even on strictly ecclesiastical matters: earlier in this century, a Parliament in which members of the Anglican Church formed a minority twice rejected a proposal put forward by church fathers to revise the Anglican Prayer Book.

A further argument that the church should resist entanglement with the state grows out of a conviction that the church should maintain its sanctity as a sphere apart, a garden in the wilderness, a refuge and sanctuary from worldly strife. By speaking out too vehemently on the matters of this world, the church compromises its commitment to the world beyond. It espouses truths that are not timeless but trendy and runs the risk of estranging many of the once faithful. De Tocqueville, who had much to say about religion in America, cautioned, "As long as a religion rests only upon those sentiments which are the consolation of all affliction, it may attract the affections of all mankind. But if it be mixed up with the bitter passions of the world, it may be constrained to defend allies whom its interests, and not the principle of love, have given to it; or to repel as antagonists men who are still attached to it, however opposed they may be to the powers with which it is allied. The church cannot share the temporal power of the state without being the object of a portion of that animosity which the latter excites."

The institution of religion seems to be strengthened, moreover, by the diversity that flourishes in the

absence of an official, state-dominated church. Wald suggests that "the persistence of religion in the United States can be related to the remarkable diversity of denominations in the country. . . . Pluralism has forced the churches to compete for members and so has encouraged them to adapt to new social realities." The vitality of American religion is striking in contrast, for example, to the lukewarm attachment of Scandinavians to the state-supported Lutheran church that all but a minuscule minority attend only to be "hatched, matched, and dispatched." A persuasive case can be made, then, that a separation of church and state invigorates religion.

Protecting Government from Religion

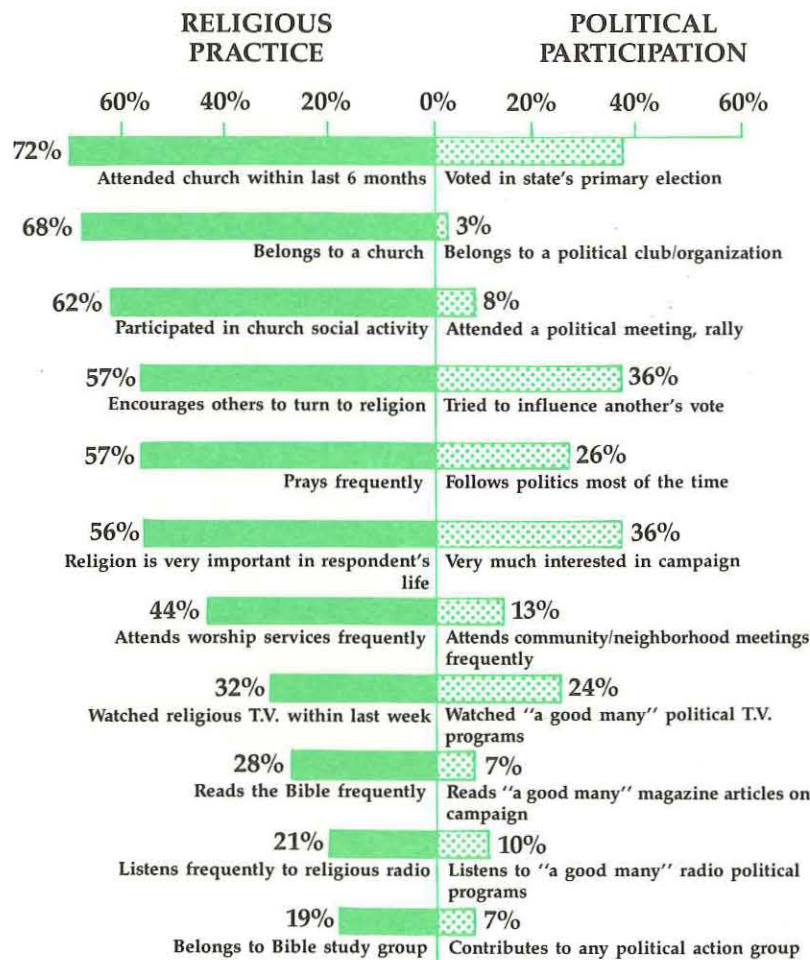
It has been even more widely accepted that some insulation between church and state is essential to protect government from religion. Democratic politics are based on the art of compromise, prospects for compromise are brightest if deeply held passions are given limited sway in the public arena, and no passions are more intemperate than those grounded in religious zeal. Sectarian strife in India, Lebanon, and Northern

Ireland serves as a searing reminder of how religious hatred can erupt in political discord. In our own history, religious fervor against the institution of slavery fanned the flames of civil war. Today the religiously fueled abortion debate is among the most intractable issues on the public agenda.

Religious convictions are not only too intense to be safely contained within democratic debate; they are arguably inappropriate not only in degree, but in kind. Public decisions must be made by arguments that are public in character; religion, however, draws upon deeply private sources of faith.

Robert Frost once observed that good fences make good neighbors. Both religion and government have been held to benefit from some clear boundary between their respective spheres. The contours of this boundary have been shaped by a doctrine of government neutrality both among competing religions and, as the First Amendment has increasingly been interpreted since the Second World War, between religion and irreligion. Reciprocally, religion has exhibited its own stance of neutrality toward government, buttressed by provisions of the tax code that bar churches from political lobby-

Religious and Political Participation in the United States



Source: Kenneth D. Wald, *Religion and Politics in the United States*

ing and outright political endorsements on penalty of losing their tax-exempt status.

Of late, however, churches have chafed under this political neutrality. The Catholic Church has petitioned Congress to lift tax-code restrictions on political activity by religious groups, in the wake of public chastisements by Catholic clergy of pro-abortion candidates for public office. Protestant fundamentalists are preparing to take an aggressive role in the 1988 presidential election, as signaled by the declared candidacy of television evangelist Pat Robertson. When charged with rupturing the established covenant of reciprocal neutrality, church leaders in many cases insist that they are only defending themselves against repeated governmental attacks on religion and religious values. Religion is becoming less neutral about government, they say, as government is becoming less neutral about religion. How should we understand these claims?

Neutrality as a Liberal Smokescreen

The branch of government most often accused of undermining state neutrality toward religion is the Supreme Court. Critics charge that numerous landmark decisions embody not neutrality but outright hostility toward religion. In the 1963 case *Abington Township School District v. Schempp*, which barred Bible reading in Pennsylvania public schools, even several Supreme Court justices expressed worry that the trend toward secularism would be carried too far. Justices Goldberg and Harlan, though voting with the majority, warned against "a brooding and pervasive devotion to the secular and a passive, or even active, hostility to the religious." Justice Stewart, in dissent, argued that "a refusal to permit religious exercises... is seen, not

as the realization of state neutrality, but rather as the establishment of a religion of secularism."

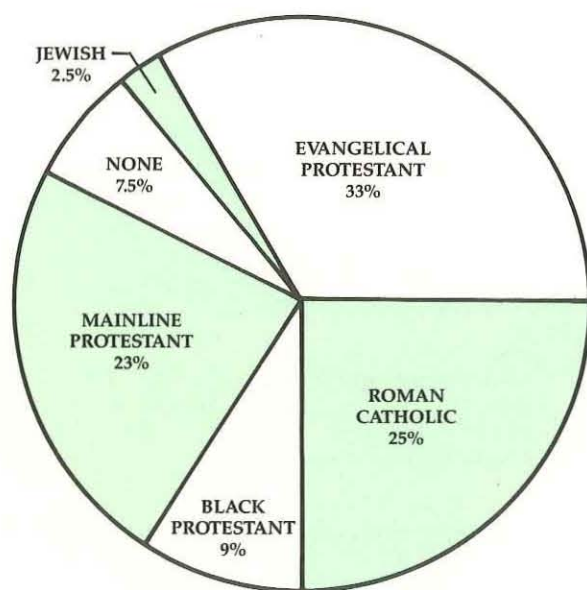
Religious groups, particularly those that emphasize traditional moral values, have begun to challenge protestations of liberal neutrality as a smokescreen behind which the state advances liberal ends. Thomas Nagel, professor of philosophy at New York University, calls attention to doubts that professions of government impartiality "are made in good faith. Part of the problem is that liberals ask of everyone a certain restraint in calling for the use of state power to further specific, controversial moral or religious conceptions—but the results of that restraint appear with suspicious frequency to favor precisely the controversial moral conceptions that liberals usually hold." Those who argue most vociferously against school prayer often turn out to be crusading atheists; those who argue against the restriction of pornography or homosexuality on the ground that the state should not attempt to enforce religiously based standards of morality often don't think there is in fact anything wrong with pornography or homosexuality. Thus the suspicion is raised "that all the pleas for toleration and restraint really disguise a campaign to put the state behind a secular, individualistic, and libertine morality—against religion and in favor of sex, roughly."

William Galston, of the Roosevelt Center for American Policy Studies, likewise notes that Supreme Court decisions on pornography, school prayer, and abortion are hardly viewed by religious traditionalists as marking out a neutral government stance on the issues in question. They reject the argument that the state acts neutrally on, e.g., abortion by leaving individuals to choose for themselves. "To permit a certain class of actions," as Galston explains their argument, "is to make the public judgment that those actions are not wrong. No one denies that the state should prohibit murder. To permit abortion is therefore to determine (at least implicitly) that abortion is not murder. But this is precisely the issue between proponents and opponents of abortion. Permitting abortion cannot be construed as neutrality, because it rests on a substantive moral judgment that is anything but neutral."

Religious groups thus maintain that since the state has already launched its own campaign against religious values, by taking an active political role to defend those values they do no more than redress the imbalance. But evident in their new partisan stance is also a challenge to the very ideal of religious disengagement from politics.

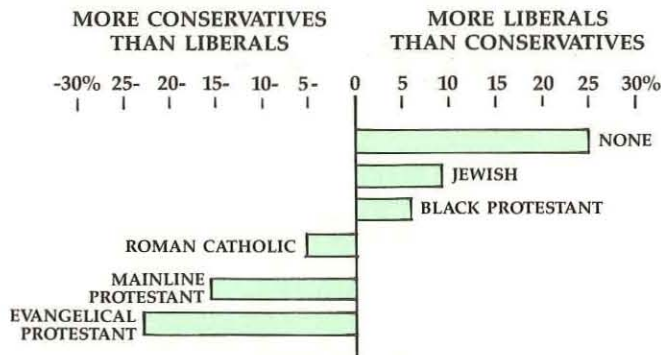
Religious adherents may reject the argument that their most deeply held convictions would be unduly disruptive of public debate. To insist that public debate be purged of all passion results only in a public conversation that is terminally bland. The emphasis on avoiding controversy at all costs, Galston suggests, flows from the twin liberal goals of avoiding oppression and preserving civil tranquility. But while "tranquility is an important good, ... it is not the only good.

U.S. Religious Preferences in the 1980s



Source: 1980-84 General Social Survey

Ideological Self-Description by Religious Preference (Percentage Difference Between Liberals and Conservatives)



Source: 1980-84 General Social Survey

And it is not oppression [in the eyes of the religious believer] when right conduct is commanded and wrongful acts prohibited." Even the potential for civic disruption inherent in religious controversy need not pose a definitive objection to a vital religious presence in public life: "How many Americans believe that the Civil War was too high a price to pay for the abolition of slavery?"

Religious adherents may also challenge the argument that private faith has no legitimate place in public debate. The claim that religious conviction is essentially private seems to imply that religious truth is subjective, arbitrary, simply a "matter of opinion," not truth at all. But if religious conviction is grounded in some truth of the matter, why not give this truth expression in public as well as private spheres? Nagel asks how we can be asked to cordon off beliefs that we hold to be true in determining acceptable public policies: "If I believe something, I believe it to be *true*, yet here I am asked to refrain from acting on that belief in deference to beliefs I think are false." Government impartiality toward religion seems to rest on a skepticism about the possibility of religious truth. And that skepticism the faithful reject.

Neutrality Defended

Can we locate a rationale for keeping distinctively religious convictions out of politics that doesn't rely on dismissing the seriousness with which they are held as true by the believer—and the possibility that they may indeed *be* true? One answer, in Nagel's view, lies in looking more closely at the special features of *political* dialogue and action. Political dialogue is special, for it takes place against the background of the state's coercive power; it shapes policies that all will be compelled to support. This element of state coercion, Nagel suggests, "imposes an especially stringent requirement of objectivity in justification."

Nagel proposes that we need to draw a distinction between what justifies an individual's own beliefs and what justifies appealing to those beliefs in support of the exercise of political power. The latter requires a higher standard of objectivity, an impersonal justifica-

tion that, if not universally convincing, is at least accessible to all who share a stake in the political outcome. This means that we must look at even our most deeply held convictions "from the outside," and ask of them whether they can be justified to another in impersonal terms. That some of our beliefs cannot meet rigorous tests of impersonal justification does not mean that these are not true, but only that their truth cannot be argued for impersonally.

Nagel holds that this requirement of impersonal justification calls for a "preparedness to submit one's reasons to the criticism of others" and to accept the possibility that rational consideration of the evidence will reveal that one is mistaken. "This means that it must be possible to present to others the basis of your own beliefs, so that once you have done so, *they have what you have*, and can arrive at a judgment on the same basis. This is not possible if part of the source of your conviction is personal faith or revelation. . . ." The fundamentalist insistence on a personal "born again" experience as the only avenue to religious truth, for example, limits the possibilities for dialogue between politically active fundamentalists and their adversaries.

Second, in arguing that those who do not share your views are *wrong*, one should be prepared to give an explanation of their error which goes beyond the mere assertion that they do not believe what you hold to be the truth—an explanation in terms of identifiable errors in their evidence or in their arguments from it. "A disagreement which falls on objective common ground must be open-ended in the possibility of its investigation and pursuit, and not come down finally to a bare confrontation between incompatible personal points of view. I suggest that conflicts of religious faith fail this test, and most empirical and many moral disagreements do not." Thus, Nagel concludes that religious convictions are rightfully excluded from the public stage when whatever truth they contain cannot be justified impersonally and impartially.

Conclusion

That explicitly religious arguments should not ground the claims that we make against one another does not mean, of course, that religious groups cannot join with all others in arguing about the issues of the day on their merits. But it does suggest caution in indulging openly religious rhetoric in the halls of Congress or in election-year debates. Where religious convictions give rise to clearly defined moral views that can be examined in their own right, these latter should certainly be a subject of shared public scrutiny. But the principle of insulating religion from politics and politics from religion seems to remain one well worth honoring.

Sources quoted in this article are: Kenneth D. Wald, *Religion and Politics in the United States* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987); Thomas Nagel, "Moral Conflict and Political Legitimacy," *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, vol. 16, no. 3 (Summer 1987); and William A. Galston, "Public Morality and Religion in the United States," *PS*, vol. 19, no. 4 (Fall 1986).