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The Religious Right in America

Impact in America

Thomas Jefferson's famous metaphor to the contrary notwithstanding, there has never been an absolute wall between church and state in American society. Ever since the Puritans came ashore in the early 1600s, religious leaders have often sought to influence public policy on a variety of social issues, and political leaders of all persuasions have just as readily appealed to the divine. A generation before the Civil War, for instance, the churches had already clashed and divided over slavery; in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the social gospel inspired many churchgoers to pursue legislative remedies to urban, industrial ills; the adoption of the Eighteenth Amendment on prohibition in 1919 was a crowning achievement for the religious establishment; and today many religious bodies maintain lobbyists in the nation's capital to sway politicians on everything from prayer in public schools to world hunger.

To many religious leaders, political activism in no way violates the separation of church and state, for in their view religion has a responsibility to address vital issues. Likewise, public officials have often invoked the authority of religion, hinting that a divine force directed American history. Both Abraham Lincoln in his second inaugural and John F. Kennedy in his 1961 address, for instance, used a religious framework to explain national purpose. In 1949 Harry Truman described the Cold War as a contest between the powers of light and darkness; in 1953 'God's Float' led Dwight D. Eisenhower's inaugural parade; and since 2001 President George W. Bush, who as governor of Texas had appealed to many Christians by proclaiming June 10, 2000, "Jesus Day" in Texas, has frequently used the language of religion to justify domestic and foreign policies. Typical was his 2003 State of the Union address in which he spoke of the "power, wonder-working power, in the goodness and idealism and faith of the American people," an obvious reference to that evangelical hymn, "There is Power in the Blood." His 2005 inaugural address, called "God drenched" by one observer, was somewhat unique in that it moved from overtly Christian to more ecumenical rhetoric, as in the

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allusion to “the truths of Sinai, the Sermon on the Mount, the words of the Quran, and the varied faiths of our people.” Small wonder many Americans easily blur the line between church and state and shroud their history in religious symbolism, with George Washington likened to Moses and July 4 and December 25 both serving as occasions for nationalistic and religious exaltation.

Despite the religious shallowness of many Americans, there is no denying the religiosity of the American public. This struck Alexis de Tocqueville, that discerning Frenchman who crisscrossed the nation from New York to New Orleans in 1831. There was ‘no country in the world,’ he observed, ‘where the Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America.’ De Tocqueville’s observation has a contemporary ring, for surveys from 1947 to 2006 suggest America is the most religious of the modern western nations. And “nothing in the last half-century,” wrote George Gallup, Jr., in June 2000, has “dislodged the conviction of Americans that there is a power in the universe . . . greater than ourselves—not wars; not the problem of evil and the obvious sufferings of innocent people; not the ‘death of God’ movement; not social upheavals nor the lures of the modern world.” Indeed, current surveys show that 96 percent of all adult Americans believe in God, 84 percent contend God is actively involved in their lives, 85 percent insist God performs miracles today, 70 percent belong to a church or synagogue, 40 percent claim to attend church weekly, 59 percent believe religion is an important aspect of daily life, and 65 percent consider religion the answer to many of the nation’s present ills. This augurs well for calls to political action rooted in religious principles, as shown only a generation or so ago by the ‘religious left.’ In pursuit of racial justice, for instance, the National Council of Churches pricked the nation’s conscience in the 1950s and 1960s. This coalition of religious groups, along with Presidents Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, challenged Americans to live up to the egalitarian ideals of their faith. Accordingly, the Council brought the power of religion to bear on the civil rights legislation of the 1960s.¹

So in light of this country’s long-standing interaction between religion and politics, why has the religious right attracted such attention since World War II? Why have Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority and Pat Robertson and the Christian Coalition aroused such alarm in some quarters? What is so different about the religious right? In terms of fundamental theological concerns, there is nothing particularly new. Contemporary Christians on the right are no less disturbed by higher criticism of the Bible and Darwinian evolution than their conservative forebears of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as attested to by persistent efforts over the last decade or so to have ‘creation science’ or “intelligent design” accorded equal time with Darwinism in public school classrooms. Two developments in this ongoing tug-of-war have had an unsettling effect on much of the scientific community. In October 1999 Baylor University, a reputable Baptist institution in Waco, Texas, established the Michael Polanyi Center to study intelligent design, the idea that some life forms are too complex to have evolved by chance through a process of Darwinian