

Religion and Politics in the United States: Money, Free Speech, and Deference to America's Religious Heritage

Stephen J. Wayne, Professor of Government, Georgetown University

Abstract

Church and state in the United States are not and have never been completely separate from one another. Government provides aid to religious organizations for their nonreligious activities, grants them tax benefits as nonprofit, charitable entities, protects their freedom of belief, speech, and most of their religious practices, and allows them to participate in most political activities with the exception of campaigning for specific candidates for office.

Most people approve of this government-church relationship; they regard it as part of America's political heritage, consistent with its constitutional strictures, and beneficial to the moral and ethical fabric of society.

Introduction: Theory of Church and State in America

Church and state in the United States are separate in theory but not in practice. Nor have they ever been. Escape from religious persecution was a cause not consequence of the European immigration to the New World in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The new settlers, eager to practice their own religion without fear of government coercion, did not extend their newly found freedom to others within their communities who dissented from their views. Most of the original colonies had established churches; in many of them, nonbelievers and dissenters from the dominant faith faced persecution, incarceration, or banishment.

The movement toward nonsectarian government began with the founding of Rhode Island by Roger Williams in 1635.¹ Only four colonies had no formal religious affiliation; three others abandoned theirs during the Revolutionary period, but it took until the early 1800s for Connecticut (1818) and Massachusetts (1833) to disestablish their official churches. Religious tolerance was slow in coming despite the founding fathers' constitutional dictum that precluded religious tests as a qualification for holding public office and permitted an affirmation supporting the Constitution to be substituted for an oath of office.²

The Bill of Rights went further in formally separating church and state. Proposed in 1789 and ratified in 1791, the First Amendment created the framework in which religious freedom for all would be protected by excluding the sectarian arena from the reach of government with the

¹ The charter that established the colony prohibited punishment for religious views.

² Article VI of the United States Constitution states: "The Senators and Representatives before mentioned, and the Members of the several State Legislatures, and all executive and judicial Officers, both of the United States and of the several States, shall be bound by Oath or Affirmation to support this Constitution; but no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States."

words, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...”

In matters of church and state, the federal government, and later by interpretation, the states were to be completely neutral, neither aiding nor inhibiting religious worship.³ In practice there was to be in Jefferson’s words, “a wall of separation” between church and state (Jefferson 1808). That wall was designed to protect minorities, both sectarian and secular, from the dictates of the dominant religious group which at the time of the Constitutional Convention varied from state to state. The framers regarded this protection as essential to the maintenance of political liberty.

The position of such a proscription at the very beginning of the First Amendment attests to the importance of religious freedom in the minds of the framers and to its place in the hierarchy of liberties which the first ten amendments were intended to guarantee and protect.

Practice of Church and State in America

Simple words do not necessarily convey simple or clear meanings; nor does the same meaning extend for all times and in all instances. Ambiguity in the words and phrases of the Constitution, which has enabled that document to stand the test of time, has also guaranteed that each generation would be able to shape to some extent the constitutional tradition it inherits. Thus the constitutional prescription on church and state must be regarded as a generic precept, a broad goal to keep in mind, not a rigid rule to apply to every situation.

The establishment and free exercise clauses guarantee freedom *from* government-imposed religion as well as protection *for* all religions. They do not, however, define what a religion is nor prescribe the activities that are protected or proscribed. The principle, however, is clear: the state must remain neutral between religion and nonreligion; it cannot aid religious organizations at the expense of non-religious groups; it must allow people to worship as they please, but it can prevent practices that extend from religious beliefs if those practices threaten the health, welfare, or security of the state.

Proscribed Practices

³ The prohibition against Congress establishing religion was explicitly extended to the states in *Everson v. Board of Education*, 330 U.S. 1,15 (1947). In this case, the Supreme Court ruled that a New Jersey statute that reimbursed parents for expenses incurred in transporting their children to school did not violate the establishment clause of the First Amendment even though parents of students attending parochial schools were eligible for reimbursement. The Court viewed the intent of the legislation as secular, to benefit education not religion.

Forum on Public Policy

Laws restricting religious practices have been quite limited, but often highly controversial within the religious communities which had adhered to these practices. Prohibitions on polygamy, human and animal sacrifice, possession of poisonous reptiles, barred substances, even solicitation on government property have become public policy in the United States despite claims that these practices followed from the beliefs of religious groups. Similarly, constraints placed on religious organizations that employ people in commercial activities or in the distribution of social services may restrict their ability to hire, fire, set salaries below the minimum rate, or even exercise total control over the work environment. The only exception is the selection of religious leaders and the teachings they present to their congregants. Even here, types of political communication from a church official to the congregation, such as endorsing a candidate for election, can result in the loss of a government benefit, namely a tax exemption.⁴

Although American laws emanate from a heritage in which religion has played a prominent role in the shaping of public policy, it is obligation of government to make and police laws within the framework of the U.S. Constitution, not necessarily that of the tradition from which they evolved. Government cannot hold religious organizations to a separate legal standard. In this sense, government trumps religion in the here and now by establishing and enforcing public policy. Thus, a state may require that all children be vaccinated for a certain disease even though the minor's parents, such as Jehovah Witnesses or Christian Scientists, object to it;⁵ similarly, a state's medical examiner's duty to perform autopsies on people whose death is sudden and inexplicable overrides a Orthodox Jewish family's wish to adhere to religious practices which forbid desecration of the body after death; and a state may deny its employees unemployment insurance if they were fired for consuming an illegal drug (peyote) even though they did so in a religious ceremony.⁶

⁴ In the case of the *Branch Ministries v. Rossotti*, No. 99-5097, 2000 FindLaw 995097A (D.C. Cir. May 12, 2000), the Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia upheld the IRS's removal of tax exempt status of a church that engaged in political activity. The Church had run ads in the *Washington Times* and *USA Today* urging Christians to vote against Bill Clinton because of his position on a range of social issues.

⁵ *Cude v. State*, 237 Ark. 927, 377 S.W. 2d 816 (1964).

⁶ *Employment Division, Department of Human Resources of Oregon v. Smith*, 494 U.S. 872 (1990).

Forum on Public Policy

On the other hand, the Court has ruled that a state cannot compel Amish children to attend school beyond the eighth grade;⁷ that parents have a right to send their children to religious schools⁸ but states have the right to certify these schools; nor can government force the children of Jehovah Witnesses to salute the American flag or recite the pledge of allegiance in violation of their belief against worshipping a graven image.⁹

So long as a law has a secular purpose, is not designed to aid or inhibit religion, and does not entangle government excessively with religion, it meets the constitutional strictures of the First Amendment as enunciated by the Supreme Court in the case of *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, 403 U.S. 602 (1971). In voiding Pennsylvania and Rhode Island statutes that provided subsidies to teachers in nonpublic schools, the Court held that the legislation in question involved government in an excessive entanglement with religion in violation of the Constitution's separation of church and state.

In other cases, however, and despite the specificity of the Lemon and subsequent tests for determining the constitutionality of law,¹⁰ the Court has had difficulty differentiating between direct assistance to religious organization which violates constitutional prescriptions and indirect assistance which may not. It has permitted construction grants,¹¹ revenue bonds,¹² tax deductions for school-related expenses,¹³ even special services, such as a sign-language reader, for children who attend religious schools.¹⁴ On the other hand, it has also nullified laws that grant parents of children in religious schools reimbursements for some of the tuition costs they pay,¹⁵ provide

⁷ *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, 406 U.S. 205 (1972).

⁸ *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* 268 U.S. 510 (1925).

⁹ *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624 (1943).

¹⁰In subsequent decisions following the *Lemon* case, the Supreme Court has taken into account the amount of pressure applied on individuals by the state, *Lee v. Weisman*, [505 U.S. 577](#), (1992) as well as whether the state implicitly or explicitly endorsed, favored or promoted a particular belief, *Allegheny County v. ACLU*, [492 U.S. 573](#) (1988).

¹¹ *Tilton v. Richardson*, 403 U.S. 672 (1971).

¹² *Hunt v. McNair*, 413 U.S. 734 (1973).

¹³ *Mueller v. Allen*, 463 U.S. 388 (1983).

¹⁴ *Zobrest v. Catalina Foothills School District*, 113 S. Ct. 2462 (1993).

¹⁵ *Sloan v. Lemon*, 413 U.S. 825 (1973).

sectarian schools with counseling, psychological, and testing services,¹⁶ and as give instructional materials, equipment, and transportation for field trips to these schools.¹⁷

The line between permissible and prohibited actions is often quite thin and the Court has not always been consistent in drawing it. Sometimes religious symbols are deemed a violation of the separation of church and state, such as placing a tablet containing the Ten Commandments in a public school¹⁸ or courthouse,¹⁹ and sometimes they are not, such as placing a nativity scene on government property²⁰ or having a national Christmas tree and Menorah on the mall, including the motto, “in God we trust,” on U.S. currency, or placing the words, “one nation under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance. Sometimes religious activities are banned altogether—prayers in public schools²¹-- and sometimes they are permitted—a prayer breakfast in the White House, prayers that begin daily sessions of Congress, and prayers of church-affiliated clubs meeting after-school hours in public schools. Treating the Bible as literature is generally acceptable; viewing it as an object of worship is not. Teaching evolution in a science curriculum is standard; teaching Creationism or Intelligent Design in that same curriculum is not. Even inserts into texts asserting that evolution is a theory, not a fact, have been challenged as a violation of the separation of church and state.²²

Indirect Aid

Although government cannot support religion over nonreligion, it can use tax payer money to provide religious benefits for government and military personnel such as chaplains, chapels, and even excused time for worship. But it can also deny the use of taxpayer funds for certain types of family planning, prohibit abortions in government hospitals, limit stem cell

¹⁶ *Meek v. Pittenger*, 421 U.S. 349 (1975).

¹⁷ *Wolman v. Walter*, 433 U.S. 229 (1977).

¹⁸ *Stone v. Graham*, 449 U.S. 39 (1980).

¹⁹ *McCreary County v. ACLU of Kentucky*, 545 U.S. 844 (2005).

²⁰ *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 688 (1984).

²¹ *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962).

²² In the case of *Cobb County School District (of Georgia) v. Selman, et.al* , 05-1034 and 05-13725, the Court of Appeals in the Eleventh Circuit ruled that such inserts violate the establishment clause and are therefore unconstitutional.

research to certain embryonic lines, and deny state benefits to same-sex partners. Each of these policy judgments on contentious religious issues presumably falls within the purview of government's legitimate authority to promote the health, welfare, and safety of its populous.

Tax issues have also become highly controversial, establishment issues. Religious organizations are normally exempt from the payment of property taxes. Although that exemption was formally established in the case of *Walz v. Tax Commission of the City of New York* 397 U. S. 664 (1970), most religion institutions never paid property in the United States. The Court ruled in the Walz case that such exemptions were not intended primarily to aid religion nor were they available only to religious groups, and therefore, they did not provide direct support for religion nor give preference to religious groups. Similarly, the courts have upheld tax deductions for contributors to religious institutions, tax-free bonds to improve religious facilities, even the elimination of sales taxes on religious items so long as these benefits are available to all groups that meet certain secular criteria: nonprofit, charitable, nondiscriminatory, and open to the public. On the other hand, a Texas law that would have granted a specific exemption to religious publications from the state's sales tax did not meet constitutional muster because it favored religious publications over nonreligious publications.²³

Indirect aid is permitted, so long as the benefit is social and extended to non-religious groups as well. States can provide subsidies for school lunches, transportation, and non-religious books; a school system can permit its buildings to be used by church groups in non-school hours so long as non-church groups are given the same option. Government vouchers to attend private and parochial schools have also been upheld as valid.²⁴

Executive actions may also extend government benefits to religious groups. President George W. Bush implemented his faith-based initiative by issuing an executive order to include religious groups in the organizations eligible to receive federal assistance. Thus far, the administration has provided over \$2 billion in federal funds to faith-based organizations (Singer and Friel, 14). The only restriction is that faith-based groups do not discriminate on the basis of religion in their performance of social services nor use the money to indoctrinate recipients in the

²³ *Texas Monthly, Inc. v. Bullock*, 489 U.S. 1 (1989).

²⁴ *Zekman v. Simmons-Harris*, 536 U.S. 639 (2002).

religious beliefs of the group administering the aid.²⁵ The federal government has also pressured the states to administer federal block grants in a similar manner.

Although in theory, the government is prevented by the Constitution from favoring religious groups over nonreligious groups, in practice it does so. Religious groups are not required to submit tax returns nor apply for tax-exempt status, while other nonprofit groups are. Religious theme parks may be exempted from taxes but nonreligious parks are not.²⁶ Housing or housing subsidies provided by churches to their religious leaders are not subject to taxation as income;²⁷ nor do churches need to pay unemployment insurance or social security payroll taxes if they do not desire their employees to receive such government benefits. However, religious leaders must pay personal income taxes on the money they earn and churches must pay taxes on properties they used for commercial purposes.

Another benefit that religious groups have is the virtual immunity they enjoy from nongovernmental suits on their tax benefits. Litigants must have standing to bring cases to court. Standing requires a demonstration of personal injury suffered as a result of the alleged illegal practices. Thus, ordinary taxpayers cannot challenge administrative decisions or actions of government; they may, however, challenge an appropriation of funds by Congress.²⁸

The Supreme Court denied standing to a group, American United for the Separation of Church, which challenged the government's decision to give a military hospital to a religious college;²⁹ it denied standing to an Abortion Rights group that protested the Catholic Church's involvement in electoral campaigns. Only the Internal Revenue Service can initiate

²⁵ One of the most contentious issues is whether churches can discriminate in hiring social workers. Naturally, religious groups wish to employ members of their faith, but many laws prevent religious qualifications from being used as a condition for employment, especially if federal monies are involved.

²⁶ A Florida court ruled in 2005 that The Holy Land Experience, a theme park that featured scenes from the Bible and ancient Israel, was religious in nature and therefore not subject to a county tax. A year later, the Florida legislature enacted legislation that exempted all religious theme parks in the state from property taxes.

²⁷ The "parsonage exemption," begun in 1921, allows religious leaders to deduct housing or a housing allowance from their gross income if the housing is a part of the compensation package they receive from the religious organization. Leaders of nonsectarian, nonprofit organizations do not have the benefit of a similar deduction.

²⁸ *Flast v. Cohen*, 392 U.S. 83 (1968). The Supreme Court ruled that taxpayers do have standing to sue to prevent government funds from being used to aid religion in violation of the First Amendment's establishment clause. This exemption, however, applies only to legislative appropriations.

²⁹ *Valley Forge College v. Americans United*, 454 U.S. 464 (1982).

investigations for alleged violations of its code for tax-exempt groups that engage in illegal political activities. And it has done so infrequently. The violations must come to the IRS's attention and appear on the surface to be flagrant for that agency to get involved.³⁰

Similarly, in 2004, the Supreme Court denied standing to a father who objected to his eight-year old daughter reciting the Pledge of Allegiance with the words "under God" in it. Divorced from the child's mother and without legal custody of the minor, the Court ruled that the biological father lacked standing to sue.³¹ And in June 2007, the Supreme Court denied standing to a group calling itself the Freedom from Religion Foundation which had opposed the Bush administration's "coaching" of faith-based groups on how to apply for federal grants. Writing for the majority, Justice Samuel Alito Jr. stated:

The payment of taxes is generally not enough to establish standing to challenge an action taken by the federal government. If it were, and every taxpayer could sue to challenge any government expenditure, the federal courts would be relegated to general complaint bureaus.³²

Political Protections

Religious organizations enjoy freedom of speech. They can spend money lobbying Congress on matters of public policy; they can run get-out the vote campaigns, engage in issue advocacy, even invite candidates to speak at their congregations but they cannot specifically endorse those candidates, raise money for them, or urge their congregants to vote for them without jeopardizing their tax exempt status under a 1954 amendment to the Internal Revenue code. The Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (2002) added an additional restriction on issue advocacy ads. The mere mention of a candidate's name in such advertisements 30 days or less before a primary election or 60 days or less before the general election was prohibited. The name ban was intended to stop commercials in which candidates were presented favorably or

³⁰ The IRS has been slow to investigate complaints of violations. In 2004, they instituted 82 investigations of nonprofit groups, including churches, which may have engaged in partisan political activity, found that three-quarters of the investigation had merit, but only revoked the tax-exempt status of three groups, none of them religious organizations. "IRS Releases New Guidance and Results of Political Intervention Examinations," Internal Revenue Service, February 24, 2006. www.irs.gov/newsroom/articles/0,id=154780

³¹ *Elk Grove Unified School v. Michael A. Newdow*, 542 U.S.1 (2004).

³² *Hein, Director, White House Office of Faith-based and Community Initiatives, et. al. v. Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc., et. al.* 06-157, June 25, 2007. In his opinion, Justice Samuel Alito Jr. made a distinction between funds directly appropriated by Congress and those over which the president has been given discretion.

unfavorably, amounting in effect to tacit endorsement or opposition. In June 2007, the Supreme Court ruled that the restriction on mentioning names during this period unconstitutionally denied the group's freedom of speech in violation of the First Amendment.³³

The political influence that churches and other religious groups can and have wielded in the political process has discouraged politicians of both major parties from challenging their political activities. White Protestant fundamentalists and evangelicals have been a core constituency within the Republican Party's electoral coalition since 1980. They figured prominently in the successful Republican turnout strategy in 2004. More than three out of four people that identified themselves as Protestant fundamentalists or evangelicals voted for George W. Bush in his two presidential elections. The priority which these religious groups give to such issues as abortion, stem cell research, and same-sex marriage has been reflected in the Republican Party platform, the policy positions of its presidential candidates, and that party's emphasis on these issues during recent electoral campaigns.

Democrats too have tried to make a case for supporting traditional family values. Instead of challenging the religious right's priorities, they have tried to emphasize their own religiosity, moral policy positions, particularly within the economic arena, and love of God, country, and traditional American values. "God-talk" has infused Democratic rhetoric as the party's candidates for national office appeal more overtly to the moral and ethical concerns of the American electorate. Since the 1930s, most Democratic presidential candidates have spoken at African American churches which, in turn, have mobilized their communities to support Democratic presidential candidates. Democrats have also targeted secularists. However, this group is not nearly as large or as well organized as religious groups aiding the Republicans.

The political activism of religious adherents in U.S. elections reflects the attitudes, opinions, and policy preferences of the American people as expressed in contemporary public opinion polls. It is to these polls that we now turn.

Consensus and Conflict over Church and State: Beliefs of Americans

The favorable view of religious institutions stems from the professed religiosity of the American people and the place of religion in the American political tradition. Most Americans claim that

³³ *FEC v. Wisconsin Right to Life* 546 U. S. 410, and *McCain et.al Wisconsin Right to Life* , No. 06-970 (2007).

they believe in God³⁴ and view the Bible as the word of God although they differ over how literally to interpret its teachings.³⁵ They also contend that religion plays an important part of their lives³⁶ even though many do not regularly attend religious services.³⁷ Most people bemoan the perception that that church affiliation and attendance at religious services is declining in the United States.³⁸ They do not believe that President Bush mentions his religious faith and prayer too much in his public statements,³⁹ think that government officials should be influenced by religion when making public policy decisions,⁴⁰ and also agree that those leaders should speak out on public policy issues.⁴¹

On a personal level, people cite religion as an important guide to good behavior, a cue for assessing public policy positions, and an influence on their own voting behavior. Empirical studies confirm that religious beliefs do help to determine the salience of some issues, shape public attitudes on those issues, and affect voter turnout and voting behavior. Scholars who have studied religion and politics note that religion has frequently been a factor in U.S. elections and cite “the God gap” as a variable that explains voting behavior since the 1980s (Dionne, 175-205).

³⁴ In a 2007 Gallup Poll, 86 percent of the respondents stated that they believed in God, 6 percent said that they did not with the rest uncertain. “Poll Topics: Religion,” Gallup Poll, May 10-13, 2007. www.gallup.com/content/default.aspx?ci=1690 (accessed June 21, 2007).

³⁵ “Many American Uneasy with Mix of Religion and Politics,” The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, August 24, 2006, p.19.

³⁶ “Poll Topics: Religion,” Gallup Poll, May 10-13, 2007. www.gallup.com/content/default.aspx?ci=1690 (accessed June 21, 2007).

³⁷ In its 2006 survey Gallup found that 43 percent of respondents said that they attended religious services almost or at least once a week, 15 percent once a month, 28 percent seldom and 14 percent never. Ibid.

³⁸ Thirty-six percent of those surveyed by Pew in 2006 felt the decline of religious influence was a bad thing compared to only 8 percent who thought it was good. Of those who perceived religious influence on government was increasing, 15 percent thought it was a good thing while 24 percent viewed it as a bad thing. “Many American Uneasy with Mix of Religion and Politics,” The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, August 24, 2006, p.29, question 38 and 39F2.

³⁹ Only 24 percent said that Bush mentioned his religious faith too much compared to 52 percent who said he mentions it the right amount and 14 percent who indicated that he mentioned it too little. Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., questions 38 and 39.

⁴¹ For the last decade, a majority of people believe religious leaders should express their opinions on social and political issues while 44 percent do not. Ibid., question 34.

Forum on Public Policy

Traditionally, different religious groups vote in distinctive ways: Protestants have tended to support Republican candidates throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries while religious minorities, such as Catholics and Jews, have given support to Democrats during much of this period. Beginning in 1976, however, “born again” Christians who had voted along economic lines since the 1930s and primarily for Democratic candidates began to shift their political allegiances to the Republican Party. Jimmy Carter, himself a born-again Christian, was the last Democrat to win a majority of this group’s electoral support. Today, Protestant fundamentalists and evangelicals have become the religious group that is most supportive of the Republican Party while mainstream Protestant support has declined. On the Democratic side, religious minorities, particularly Catholics, Jews, and Muslims, have maintained their Democratic allegiances although the voting preferences of non-Hispanic Catholics for Democratic presidential candidates have declined.

The shifts within the Catholic and Protestant communities reveal divisions within the religious movements themselves. Those who subscribe to more orthodox or fundamentalist religious beliefs, adhere to the traditional practices of the religion, and attend religious services and activities on a regular basis tend to be more Republican than those who have adapted their religious beliefs to modernity, attend services less regularly, and have modified their religious practices the most (Guth, Kellstedt, Smidt, and Green).

The extent of religious activism seems to be the critical variable which distinguishes partisanship and voting behavior. The more regularly people attend services and engage in religious activities, the more likely they will vote Republican. This generalization is applicable for most religious groups, including conservative and doctrinaire Catholics and Orthodox Jews (Green).

Although most people believe that religious organizations and their leaders have a right to speak out on policy issues and try to affect public policy outcomes, and that they do so on a regular basis,⁴² they also support laws that limit religious groups’ participation in elections. Substantial portions of the population resent religious and non-religious groups trying to impose their own beliefs on them. However, according to a 2006 national survey conducted by the Pew

⁴² The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life reports in its 2006 survey that people who attend church regularly say that their religious leaders do address social, political, and environmental issues such as abortion, gay marriage, Iraq, evolution, science, and environmental issues. These leaders regularly talk about food, hunger, and poverty. “Many Americans Uneasy with Mix of Religion and Politics” August 24, 2006.

Research Center on the People and the Press and the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, there is more resentment toward liberal groups promoting strict separation between church and state in the public schools than there is toward conservative Christians imposing their moral and ethical values on others.⁴³

In short, most Americans see most of the political activities of religious groups as a legitimate and positive influence on government and public policy. They do not, however, subscribe to a theocratic view of the state. Most (62 percent) believe that the will of the people as expressed in public law should be controlling, even when it conflicts with the Bible. In contrast, only about one-third (32 percent) believe the Bible should be dominant in cases of conflict with civil law.⁴⁴

To summarize, people in the United States value religion, see it as a positive force within society and on government and public policy, and for the most part, do not subscribe to a rigid separation of church and state in practice. The minority that does tends to be secular in outlook, liberal in ideology, and Democratic in partisanship.

Americans do not reject the advances gained from modern science, but they still divide along religious lines over such contentious issues as abortion, stem cell research, same-sex unions and marriages, and evolution and contending theories of Creationism and Intelligent Design.⁴⁵ This division pits those who hold traditional religious beliefs, Protestant evangelicals and fundamentalists, conservative Catholics, and Orthodox Jews, against mainline Protestants, less observant Catholics, Reform Jews and secularists.

Conclusion: Wither the Church and State in America? Don't Hold Your Breath!

⁴³The 2006 Pew survey on religious beliefs found that 69 percent of the respondents say that "...liberals have gone too far in trying to keep religion out of the schools and government" compared to 49 percent that contend that "Conservative Christians have gone too far in trying to impose their religious values on the country." Ibid. p.13.

⁴⁴ Ibid. p.5.

⁴⁵ The 2006 Pew poll found almost two-thirds believing that scientific advances have helped mankind. This percentage includes majorities in every major religious group. Ibid. p. 15.

⁴⁶ Forty-two percent of those questioned in the 2006 Pew survey believed that God gave Israel to the Jewish people although 37 percent did not believe that statement was literally true. Question 58 in the Pew Survey. Ibid. Recent Gallup Polls show that whites who identify themselves as members of religious groups are more sympathetic to Israel than whites that do not do so. Similarly, people who attend religious services most regularly, once or more than once a week, are the more supportive of Israel than those who attend less frequently. Frank Newport and Joseph Carroll, "Republicans and Religious Americans Most Sympathetic to Israel," Gallup Poll, March 27, 2006. www.galluppoll.com/content/Default.aspx?ci=22063&pg=1&t=mu721

Forum on Public Policy

There is little evidence that Americans are trending to greater secularism or greater religious fanaticism at home despite the public perception that religious influence in America is declining. The extremism evident in the Middle East and in some European immigrant communities is not apparent in the United States. There was a small anti-Muslim, anti-Arab backlash after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, a backlash that government and religious leaders tried to defuse. Occasional incidents have been reported, magnified by the media, and occasionally by the Bush administration when alleged terrorist plots have been uncovered, but the impact of these incidents on the attitudes and opinions of the American people has not been readily apparent in the absence of another terrorist attack in the United States.

If anything, the war in Iraq has promoted some Americans to turn inward and become more resistant to threats to their political culture and personal beliefs. The immigration debate, in particular, has evidenced a “we/they” mentality and clash of cultures, particularly among those opposed to guest workers programs and amnesty for illegal immigrants and those that favor these programs. Conservative Republicans have emphasized the dangers posed by porous borders and millions of illegal immigrants entering the U.S. They see this danger as political (the Democratic preferences of Hispanic voters), cultural (the increased use of the Spanish language in public places), and social (the potential for more criminal behavior, more terrorists getting into the country, and more dependence on government social services) while liberal Democrats see the problem as humanitarian (unifying divided families), ideological (help for the downtrodden) and cultural (promotion of diversity). Labor Unions perceive the issue in economic terms (lower wages and more competition for jobs) as do business organizations although the latter see the need for immigrant workers in the agricultural and service industries. Interestingly, no group thus far has raised the religious issue posed by contemporary immigration to America--the growth of Catholicism in a Protestant country.

The debate between religious and nonreligious communities and within the religious community itself (between traditionalists and modernists) is likely to continue along much the same lines that it has been waged in the past. The same issues (abortion, stem cell research, same-sex marriage, and school board fights over the teaching of evolution) are likely to remain salient regardless of which party is in power. References to God in public places, at public events, and on public currency, indirect payments to religious organizations and tax benefits given to them, and even foreign policy preferences based on Biblical prophecy-- support for

Forum on Public Policy

Israel⁴⁶-- will continue to divide Americans. Although ideological convictions may soften and partisanship become less strident, religious preferences and the attitudes associated with those preferences are likely to persist because of the role which religious institutions continue to play within American society, the moral and ethical values they advocate, and the sense of identity, community, and salvation they provide for millions of people in a country growing larger, older, more diverse, and more preoccupied with itself.

References

Dionne, E. J. Jr. 2006. "Polarized by God? American Politics and the Religious Divide," in Pietro S. Nivola and David W. Brady, eds. *Red and Blue Nation?* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press).

Jefferson, Thomas. 1808. "Letter to Virginia Baptists."

Green, John C. et. al, 2005 "The American Religious Landscape and the 2004 Presidential Vote: Increased Polarization," Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics, University of Akron.
www.uakron.edu/bliss/docs/TheAmericanReligiousLand.pdf (Accessed June 21, 2007).

Guth, James L., Lyman A. Kellstedt, Corwin E. Smidt, and John C. Green, 2005, "Religious Mobilization in the 2004 Presidential Election," paper prepared for delivery at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, DC.

Singer, Paul and Brian Friel, Jan. 6, 2007. "Leaps of Faith," *National Journal*.

Published by the Forum on Public Policy

Copyright © The Forum on Public Policy. All Rights Reserved. 2006.