



The History of Religion and Politics in America

SESSION 1

| *As a nation, where have we been and where are we going?*

In 1858 Abraham Lincoln, in his classic “House Divided” speech, said, “If we could first know *where* we are and *whither* we are tending, we could then better judge *what* to do and *how* to do it” (emphasis added).

The work of these two sessions will be completed when and if they provide some narrative and description to match something of what Lincoln meant when he said we must “first know where we are.” A person and a nation cannot know that unless they have some sense of what brought them to where they are. By definition this means that they need to explore the past and the study of the past—in short, to learn history.

By *religion* in the present case we mean all the ways citizens in and through institutions such as churches and synagogues interact with unseen powers or forces, usually responded to as God or the gods. By *politics* in the same case we refer to all the ways the same citizens transact with one another through agencies of government.

Five Spheres for Interaction

Citizens historically have done this interacting and transacting in one or more of several modes, or spheres. First, they acted as *individuals* who brought religion to bear on their politics to inform their consciences and choices. Second, for most individuals, religion and politics did come together in community, which in the religious world took on the form of *local churches*: synagogues, mosques, and the like. The local unit was well poised to gather people, but it brought risks of alienating some individuals or factions who may not have agreed with a particular action or strategy of the majority.



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Next, in the new nation, *denominations*, which were national or international organizations, clustered *congregations*. Many of them nurtured agencies to represent issues in politics and often to mobilize members’ energies. Later these denominations became part of interchurch, ecumenical, and interfaith organizations made up of groups of people who represented a wide diversity of political positions, often wider than the pronouncements of the organizations might have suggested.

They also formed what are called *voluntary associations* across denominational lines. These were often led by laypeople. *Causes* gathered people who associated for particular purposes and who could possess relatively homogeneous outlooks and positions. For example, people joined temperance societies or pacifist groups and thus committed themselves to the political positions and activities that these agencies embodied and promoted.

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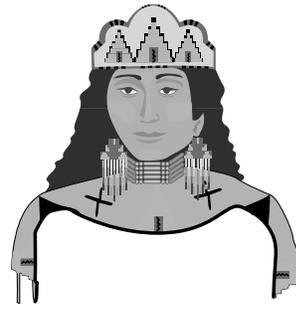
formula. Whether or not they conceived of themselves as politically involved, it was impossible for citizens or religious organizations not to be so, if only because they paid taxes or were exempt from them, had to follow regulations and laws, enjoyed public police and fire protection, and the like. Politics in such cases simply meant being involved with the *polis*, the human city. Believers may have thought of themselves as being otherworldly, yet so long as they were in this world they were involved with the polis. Even if they were apathetic or passive, the political order was working on them. If they were religious, they were likely to want to respond by “working” on that order.

The “Outsider” Peoples and Their Politics: Native and Black Americans

The people and organizations represented different interests in various times and places. The *Native Americans*, the Indians who occupied the territory that became the United States, were, in almost all definitions of the term, religious, but in almost no definitions of the term were they political. Yet the political intentions and ambitions of the Europeans who settled among them, drove them off, or penned them in to reservations were combining religion and politics to justify their actions. When they were enabled to become politically active, many Native Americans on reservations undertook political actions and often justified their actions by reference to their native religion or to the Christianity that was imposed on them and some adopted.

Before the Mayflower, as one book title has it when referring to the *African American* experience, from 1619 on, blacks were on the scene. They were not free to be political agents in any way for almost two centuries, and then they remained restricted by slavery and segregation until 1863 and through much of the twentieth century. Most of the blacks were Christians, thanks to their conversion under slave owners or their own enterprise in forming churches and congregations in the early nineteenth century. They learned to use religious symbols, as reflected in their spirituals, to rally and motivate moves toward freedom and to interpret both their bondage and their free activities.

The history of African American religion was closely involved with politics at every turn. Churches were



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one of the main modes of gathering and motivating blacks back when they were so often denied the ballot, but later no candidate for mayor of a northern city could get far without treating positively the leadership and congregations of African Americans. Black citizens demonstrated coherent needs and views in respect to rights, poverty, opportunity, and resources, forcing politicians to respond.

Anglo and Continental European Peoples

In the southern colonies after 1607 at Jamestown and then Williamsburg, the religious adherents represented the Church of England as established by law. They could not have been thus established without having been political. They arrived with royal charters. They tried to make their voices heard in parliamentary politics an ocean away. Many of the laypeople, while remaining church members, became founding fathers of the nation, being devoted to the religion of the Enlightenment, which stressed reason and morality more than revelation and salvation.

In the northern colonies, some who came in 1620 and 1630 were Separatists from the Church of England or Puritans who would reform it. The colonists, whether following English prescriptions or seeking independence from them, justified their acts by reference to the Bible. The Massachusetts Bay and later Connecticut churches were established by law, which meant that the government determined many aspects of colonists' lives. Many of them explicitly referred to “the law of Moses,” that is, the divine regulations that they believed were directed both to ancient Israel and to them. They used biblical language such as *covenants* to describe their life together. Certain preachers were appointed to deliver fast day and Election Day sermons with political overtones. At one time only persons who could certify their conversion experience could vote.

In nine of the thirteen colonies, then, religion and politics met partly under the umbrellas of government and the established churches. There were, however, dissenters, as among the Baptists in Rhode Island and the Quakers in Pennsylvania. Dissent against religion established by law meant more, not less, energetic political action among those who were seeking an independent way. Their calls and actions for liberty almost always were phrased and shaped by reference to the will of God, the grace of Jesus Christ, the working of the Spirit, and the biblical calls for justice and righteousness.

In the 1730s revivals that came to be called the Great Awakening brought new intensity to religion. Its devotees concentrated on salvation and "other worldliness," but most were motivated to act in this world and its affairs. Many of these converts found the established churches too passive, and they began to organize politically, for example, to call for independence from England or for just representation when it came to taxation. Historians often treated the period from midcentury, as the Awakening's fires were cooling, down through the American Revolution after 1776 as a time when religious people and agencies were being upstaged by politicians and religious organizations declined.

Not so, say historians who are now taking a second look. Back-country Calvinist converts and urban liberals who were turning Unitarian alike began to call for independence and liberty, almost always citing their Scriptures and often organizing their congregations. At the same time, a new voice or interest made its appearance. Technically it was philosophical or political, but careful students of this movement, which they called the Enlightenment, showed it to be thoroughly religious, if not in its own way sectarian. George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and dozens of other shapers of the new republic were and remained church members, but they were usually critical of what they thought were sectarian interests, and they would correct them.

So it was that as they made their way through independence and the Constitution-writing era, they often invoked providence or the deity, heaven or the Divine Architect, to try to bring people together and motivate their actions. Paradoxically, even as they wrote documents allowing for a line of distinction between religion and civil authority, they were stressing the ethical side of the various Scriptures and church traditions in efforts to give shape to the nation. Needless to say, some in the

churches found these activities congenial, but many in the intense religious groups saw them as betrayers or rivals, since they did not share the doctrines of the churches except in general terms and with interests in morality and ethics but not in salvation.

After the Constitution, While Nation Building

The First Amendment to the Constitution in 1789 included sixteen words that served as the framework and boundary for religion and politics ever after: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." At first glance the Constitution appeared to many of the religious to be godless; it did not invoke God. It prevented the federal government from "establishing" religion as it had been established for two and a half centuries while it assured religious freedom, a combination that inspired the churches and other religious agencies to compete, show imagination and entrepreneurship, and prosper. Keeping law at some distance did not mean that the no longer privileged and now legally voluntary churches were nonpolitical.

While churches fought over the godliness or godlessness of the Jeffersonians or the Republicans and Federalists, something new was taking shape. Seeing needs for education, charitable work, and reform, individuals and the voluntary churches organized largely nonsectarian agencies to achieve their goals. Since these meant temperance in the matter of alcoholic consumption, works of mercy among the needy, pro- or antislavery causes, regulating the observance of the Sabbath, and many more, they were top to bottom involved with politics. Some tried to organize "a Christian party in politics," but it did not go far and left political organization more diffuse and less partisan. Still, on all the great issues of the time, culminating in the Civil War, citizens on all sides used ballots and bullets to make their political cases, always with support of the Bible or other documents regarded as legitimating or limiting political acts of justice and mercy.

The Catholic Presence

Most of this action occurred within a generally Protestant framework until the Civil War. At the time the nation was born, perhaps only about three thousand Jews and thirty thousand Catholics, people who often spoke non-English languages or were seen as cultural misfits

lacking in political power. Yet both of these non-Protestant clusters were well represented in acts of independence from England. They were gathering chiefly in a few East Coast cities, while the West was being populated by Protestant evangelizers and doers of good.

Still, all through the decades, especially around the 1840s when there were a potato famine in Ireland and blights and troubles in Continental nations and while a new industrial society was uprooting people and depriving many of opportunities, Catholics especially kept arriving from Ireland, Germany, and elsewhere. Often impoverished, they were gathered into parishes, where under capable priests they acquired a voice and in other ways made impacts on culture. Before the Civil War their politics often were limited to protecting Catholic interests, fending off Protestant attacks, and explaining how Catholicism could be compatible with democracy.

After the war things began to change, as Catholic parishes prospered and attracted wave after wave of fresh immigrants, who built churches and organized life around them. Many of the newcomers were laborers and began to organize into labor unions. While this was seen as inimical to the church in most of Europe, the new leadership here, as personified by James Cardinal Gibbons, refused to condemn labor and thus helped keep most of them loyal to the church. Now involved in city politics, they often organized and could on many occasions determine who ruled in city hall.

Post-Civil War Changes

Drastic changes were occurring in American life. With the growth of cities, immigration, and the rise of corporate life, after the war it became more difficult for religious groups to have an impact on politics than it did in times of simpler, local, often face-to-face political life. The individual could do little to bring about causes of justice when large corporations and businesses could by direct action take away the jobs of tens of thousands of workers, especially when they tried to organize labor. As these situations developed, there were two basic sets of concerns or strategies.

One informal party, the ancestry of present-day evangelicalism, was concerned with politics, where it had an impact on individual lives and where individuals could make a difference. These could usually be categorized as dealing with virtues and vice. The churches organized

and often helped pass laws dealing with temperance, Sabbath breaking, prostitution, and the like. They often stressed otherworldliness, but they did find ways to relate to politics in the new America.

The other still-forming and informal party was often called progressive or liberal. The leadership here tended to be more optimistic about effecting change or, as many put it, "bringing in the kingdom." They saw sin to be not so much personal as systemic: that is, the structures of society, the corporations and businesses, were seen to be oppressive bearers of evil. They had to be faced. One of the best-known ways for facing them came to be called the Social Gospel. While its fuller development awaited the twentieth century, its leaders, professors and pastors such as Walter Rauschenbusch and Washington Gladden, began to provide a religious justification for addressing the needs of labor and laborers, improving education, and seeing a fairer distribution of goods.

It is hard to separate the work of these Protestant liberals from that of secular progressives. Change was in the air, and under whatever auspices and with whatever effects, religious people at least "talked a good line" about bringing the will of God and God's kingdom to bear on the way the world was organized. Many historians say that while talking a good line, most of the Social Gospellers belonged too much to the middle class, were too remote from immigrants and labor unions, and lacked vision, energy, or organizing capabilities to do much more than motivate the work of the progressives round them. Still, at the very least, they showed that many in the churches believed that linking religion and politics could be done while honoring the constitutional interests that separated religion from civil authorities and would be done with interest not only in individual but also in social forces.

Thus Catholics who were friendly to labor, evangelicals who concentrated politically on virtue and vice, and progressives whose gospel was social and structural groped for ways to deal with human need and religious motives in matters of politics as they entered the twentieth century.

About the Writer

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