Culture Wars and Enduring American Dilemmas

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CHAPTER 2
Respect for Religion but Uncertainty about Its Role

When Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States in the 1830s, he observed that the American case belied the eighteenth-century philosophers’ assumption that religious faith would decline in the face of broader freedom and knowledge: “In America, one of the freest and most enlightened nations in the world, the people fulfill with fervor all the outward duties of religion” (1848/1961, 1:319). He also noted that although a politician could attack a particular sect without being damaged, “if he attacks all the sects together, everyone abandons him” (317). In this regard, little appears to have changed.

The Public Sphere and Civil Religion

In keeping with the general American tendency to view religion as a positive force, all of the journals of political opinion show a respect for religion. Although *The New Republic* editorializes against the Religious Right’s “conflation of religion with morality,” it nevertheless chides liberals not to assume “that the godless have nothing to learn from the godful” (Editorial 1994a, 7). However, it is not only the Religious Right that conflates religion
and morality. Five years after that editorial appeared, an article published in the same magazine argued that we are now “more moral” than we were earlier. The writer’s progressive sympathies are clearly indicated by his measures of moral progress: declines in sexism, racism, ageism, and discrimination against homosexuals and the disabled. Nevertheless, he also lists as indicators of moral progress a slight increase in church attendance and prayer and no decline in religious belief (Whitman 1999, 18).

A broad consensus holds that religion contributes to civil society. As one commentator sees it, if all religious claims were to be deemed inadmissible in the public arena, we would be “depluralizing our polity,” to its detriment. Religious ideas and communities encourage civic participation, mutual assistance, and humanistic values. And it is not possible for “persons of faith” to “bracket their beliefs when they enter the public square.” Much of the animus against religious participation in public life comes from the style of that participation, which should be altered to be intelligible to those who do not share the faith (Elshtain 1996, 25).

Articles in magazines across the political spectrum suggest that debates in the public square must be based on secular reasons, not on faith. Because religious reasons are not persuasive to the nonreligious, the secular reasons must be debated, even in matters such as abortion (Editorial 1994a, 7). Whatever public policies arise from religious understandings “will have to be justified, in the public square, on other grounds” (Pollitt 1996, 9). To be sure, some conservative religious spokespersons contend that religious debaters can bring “a nuanced appreciation of complexity and a level of public reasoning that can elevate the otherwise debased moral discourse in American society” (Neuhaus 1986, 46).

Articles by William F. Buckley Jr. and Harvey Cox nicely illustrate the convergence between Left and Right in their support for religious discourse within the public sphere. While Buckley writes in National Review that public figures should be able to say that greed or adultery is wrong, as the New Testament tells us (1996, 63), Cox argues in The Nation that religious discourse can enrich political discourse and that either politics is “linked to morality or it withers” (1996, 20). A conservative writer in The New Republic also argues that “conservatives are not the only ones who are troubled” by the question of “what happens to a free society when a major source of its values—religion—declines” (Krauthammer 1981, 25).

Of the forty-six articles that deal with aspects of religion other than the
creationism disputes, half maintain a favorable view of religion, while only six are clearly negative. The remaining seventeen articles are neutral. Even within the sample in *The Nation*, six of the articles addressing religion are neutral or positive (three of each), while five are negative. In the discussions of creationism, only three of the nine articles are clearly hostile to religious encroachments against science; two are neutral, and four support religion’s claims to be heard in the classroom, albeit not as science.

Support for religion in the public sphere includes the idea of strengthening American civil religion. The American civil religion—including a belief in God and the hereafter, religious tolerance, and the notion that virtue should be rewarded and vice punished—has enriched the nation for two centuries, one writer argues. Though it is now jeopardized by the “Holy War” between the Fundamentalists and the secularists, its purpose is “to infuse American life with a sense of transcendence, not to impose a religious order on individuals.” (Krauthammer 1984, 19). Keeping God out of the public schools, says another commentator, “prevents people from drawing on this country’s rich and diverse religious heritage for guidance and it degrades the nation’s moral discourse” (Gibbs 1991, 68).

Though calls for the rejuvenation of American civil religion are essentially calls for consensus and unity, the concept itself is fraught with controversy and conflict. Attacked as a form of national self-righteousness, defended as a transcendent standard of judgment for the American polity, the idea of American civil religion embodies the long-standing connection between religion and politics in the United States. Despite American devotion to the separation of church and state, civil religion has served to legitimate and sanctify both the government and various social movements. As numerous commentators have pointed out, the very language of the Declaration of Independence contains tenets of American civil religion, suggesting that God’s laws rule over humans and that God has given us “unalienable rights.” But the very “elasticity” of civil religion “as a symbolic resource means that its content is contested” (Rhys H. Williams and Alexander 1994, 4).

While the phrase civil religion originated with Rousseau, who saw it as a creed developed and implemented by rulers to assure citizens’ loyalty, its use has also reflected the Durkheimean understanding that every social group has a religious dimension. The application of the idea to American society received its classic form in the work of Robert Bellah in the late
1960s. Bellah defended his concept against the accusation that it represented “national self-worship” by arguing that its central idea is “the subordination of the nation to ethical principles that transcend it and in terms of which it should be judged” (Bellah 1970, 168). In Bellah’s understanding at the time, the references to God in our currency and in our pledge of allegiance to the flag, in the oath of office and in the inaugural addresses of most American Presidents signify that though sovereignty is in the hands of the citizenry, it ultimately rests in God. There is thus a “higher criterion” by which to judge the will of the people (171). The beliefs (including the idea of America as the promised land and the idea that “God has led his people to establish a new sort of social order that shall be a light unto all the nations”) (175), the symbols (the flag), and the rituals (the presidential inauguration, the Fourth of July, and Memorial Day) together constitute a civil religion that is nonsectarian and is not tied to Christianity, though they may share some ideas.

Bellah recognized that the American civil religion could be used for good or for ill. Though it is “difficult to use the words of Jefferson and Lincoln to support special interests and undermine personal freedom,” the theme of the American Israel was used to justify shameful treatment of the American Indians, and “an American-Legion type of ideology that fuses God, country, and flag has been used to attack nonconformist and liberal ideas and groups of all kinds” (1970, 182). Yet his tone remained guardedly optimistic. Even a decade later, he asserted, “I am not prepared to say that religious communities, among which I include humanist communities, are not capable even today of providing the religious superstructure and infrastructure that would renew our republic” (1978, 200). This is of great importance, Bellah argued, because civil religion is “indispensable” to the existence of a republic—a government in which there is an active political community that has purpose and values (197).

But by 2001, when analysts saw a resurgence of American civil religion in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, Bellah was clearly skeptical of the uses to which civil religious themes were being put. He was highly critical of an address given by President George W. Bush at the Washington National Cathedral, calling it “stunningly inappropriate . . . because it was a war talk” (Broadway 2001, B09). The use of the concept had clearly now become so identified with conservative causes that Bellah and other liberals no longer felt tied to it. Bellah’s initial discussion of civil religion had ap-
peared during the liberal era of the 1960s. At that time, he cited as an example of American civil religion President Lyndon B. Johnson’s 1965 address calling for a strong voting-rights act, which concluded, “God will not favor everything that we do. It is rather our duty to divine his will. I cannot help but believe that He truly understands and that He really favors the undertaking that we begin here tonight” (Bellah 1970, 181).

Twenty years after this use of civil religious language to promote the cause of civil rights, noted theologian Martin E. Marty asserted that civil religion “has been transposed in public perception, from moderate and liberal contexts to conservative and nationalist ones” (1985, 16). Robert Wuthnow proclaimed that there were now two versions of American civil religion: conservative and liberal, with the former emphasizing biblical origins and economic and other freedoms and the latter concerned with peace and security and America’s role in the world (1988, 281). Both sides talk of “higher principles” that govern what America should be (Derek H. Davis 1997), but the Right emphasizes “one nation under God,” while the Left stresses “liberty and justice for all” (Guinness 1993, 232). While it may seem like an oxymoron to talk of competing civil religions, Bellah et al. argue that the two do not represent “a polarization of American civil religion.” Rather, American popular culture embraces the values proclaimed by both sides; it’s not a matter of either/or (1991, 215).

In the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, “the ailing civil religion” seemed to come back to life. Large numbers of Americans went to church for comfort and displayed American flags everywhere—“an instinctive melding of the religious and the civil” (McClay 2004, 16). Those on the Christian Right, such as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, who viewed the attacks as evidence of “God’s displeasure at America’s having turned away from its Judeo-Christian roots” were “quickly and soundly rebuffed” (Machacek 2003, 157), their credibility damaged (McClay 2004, 6). Perhaps, one analyst argued, “a great many Americans” understood that “their brand of narrow-minded religiosity is not, after all, the ‘American way’” and that American civil religion can be inclusive of all Americans (Angrosino 2002, 265).

The search for a “common faith” remains (McClay 2004, 19), as does the desire for a more expansive civil religion that affirms “religious diversity as a positive value” (Machacek 2003, 157). Civil religion is seen as providing “a second language of piety” within a pluralistic society where “reli-
gious believers and nonbelievers alike need ways to live together” (McClay 2004, 19).

Struggles over how to define the civil religion are certainly not new. Indeed, “it is doubtful whether America ever existed as an ideological whole” (Demerath and Williams 1985, 163). The Durkheimean image of moral integration and cultural consensus was probably never accurate. Our newer understandings of culture make it clear that the unifying characteristics of a civil religion have been exaggerated.

Though Bellah disputed any necessary connection between Christianity and American civil religion, such connections clearly are often made. As one historian has noted, the idea that “Christians have a proprietary relation to the United States” dies a very slow death (Hollinger 2002, 863). Efforts at greater inclusion through the use of the term Judeo-Christian are not persuasive in a twenty-first-century America whose population includes many Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, and members of other faiths. In such a religiously pluralistic society, no “religious common denominator” is possible, “no faith can be shared, public, all-American—and transcendent” (Guinness 1993, 233–34).

While members of both the contemporary Left (as represented by Bellah) and Right (as represented by Guinness) view civil religion as requiring a standard of judgment that transcends the social system, some earlier observers defined American civil religion as the equivalent of a “folk religion” (D. G. Jones and Richey 1974, 15). Thus, for Will Herberg, the American Way of Life “is a civil religion in the strictest sense of the term, for, in it, national life is apotheosized, national values are religionized, national heroes are divinized, national history is experienced as . . . a redemptive history” (1974, 78). To critics such as Bellah and Guinness, this is little short of idolatrous. Indeed, the very Durkheimean understanding of religion as a kind of societal self-worship makes civil religion “inescapably idolatrous” (Guinness 1993, 225). Another critic points to the contradictory elements in American civil religion. “Can American civil religion be anything other than the patriotic cult of the manifest imperial destiny of the American nation or the cult of a nation made up of individuals pursuing their own private utilitarian forms of religion? Both would undermine republican virtue” (Casanova 1994, 60).

The few efforts to test the idea of American civil religion with empirical data have not produced convincing evidence. A study of editorials in one
hundred newspapers during the Honor America Day celebrations of July 4, 1970, found surprisingly few mentions of any of the themes of American civil religion as enunciated by Bellah. The references that existed did not contain religious connotations but were purely secular—for example, discussion of human rights without any suggestion that they come from God. Contrary to researchers’ expectations, civil religious content was more prevalent in large urban newspapers than in newspapers in small towns and rural areas. Perhaps, the authors suggest, “a well-defined thesis of civil religion may be more the creation (and fantasy) of the liberal political intellectual elite than active faith among the masses” (Thomas and Flippen 1972, 224). American churchgoers may well see public values as being Christian or secular rather than a matter of civil religion (223).

Another study, using a small sample of conservative religious Protestants, does find support for a separate civil religious dimension (Wimberley et al. 1976). However, from the vantage point of more than three decades later, the indicators for this civil religious dimension would likely be seen as anathema by substantial portions of the American population. Far from being a matter of cultural consensus, they would likely provide little more than evidence of “culture wars.” The agree/disagree items in question include “We should respect the president’s authority since his authority is from God”; “It is a mistake to think that America is God’s chosen nation today”; and “National leaders should not only affirm their belief in God but also their belief in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord” (893).

More broad-based adherence to civil religious ideas is found in a 1975 North Carolina survey that called for agreement with the ideas that America is God’s chosen nation; that the flag of the United States is sacred; that human rights come from God and not merely from laws; and that if government does not support religion, government cannot uphold morality. In this study, while both religious and political conservatives show more adherence to civil religion than do others, a majority of participants in liberal religions and more Democrats than Republicans and independents also support civil religion. But while support for civil religion is found across most social segments, those at or near the top of both social and religious hierarchies—“professionals, ministers, and officials”—are not supporters (Christenson and Wimberley 1978). Bellah suggests that questions asking respondents whether political leaders or institutions have a religious or sacred quality do not tap civil religion. Instead, he argues, we should be
asking if respondents agree that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, and that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed (1976, 155).

Perhaps the main conclusion to be drawn from this brief review of four decades’ worth of discussion of American civil religion is that the idea of viewing political issues in religious and moral terms remains a significant element in American culture. Whatever the ongoing contests, however varying the interpretations of civil religion that reign at different times, there is the continuing tendency to seek divine legitimation for American political ideas and social movements. If today the conservative uses of civil religion seem dominant, it is well to remember the role of civil religion in the Populist movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. William Jennings Bryan declared in 1896 that “every great economic question is in reality a great moral question,” and the Populists condemned economic inequality “as a violation of God’s ‘natural order’” (Rhys H. Williams and Alexander 1994, 6). They repeatedly recalled the image of Jesus throwing the moneychangers out of the temple. “American Populism—so often considered an ‘economic’ ideology—was also a religio-moral enterprise” (12).

Despite—or because of—the perceived conservative domination of civil religious thought in the contemporary period, several articles in The Nation discuss the contributions that religion can make to progressive causes (Cox 1996; Ferber 1985; Kazin 1998). These articles note that the “religious revival” in contemporary American society includes movements for social justice and disarmament. All agree that the Left must not relinquish the terrain of values and transcendence to the Right. “We must recover some of our own lost traditions—such as the Romantic rebellion against early industrial capitalism—which were infused with moral and religious themes.” Moreover, the secular Left needs the Religious Left. Religious institutions “provide a space that is relatively untouched by the commercialization of the larger society” and can thus serve as “centers of a counterculture, pockets of resistance [to] the dominant bureaucratic culture” (Ferber 1985, 12). “To rule out religious imagery is to ignore a discourse that at its best can speak out powerfully against greed, ennui and coldness of heart.” Religion can help us “to imagine creatively different ways of organizing economies and politics” (Cox 1996, 23). “The bashing of religious faith serves neither
our democratic principles nor the practical need to build a culturally inclusive mass movement” (Kazin 1998, 19). Railing against “popular religion violates the first principle of democratic politics: Empathize with the concerns of everyday people, even if they are not your own” (16). The writer identifies himself as a Jew and an atheist but sees his own beliefs as irrelevant in view of the need for democracy and democratic social movements to take religion seriously. Barack Obama’s 2008 campaign clearly heeded this message.

Whether one believes that religion should speak to public issues is perhaps less a matter of what one’s religion is than a question of what the issues at hand are. During the 1960s, mainline Protestants advocated taking public stands, whereas evangelical and fundamentalist Protestants more often do so now (Regnerus and Smith 1998). Nevertheless, some highly religious evangelicals would prefer “religious separationism” (Jelen and Wilcox 1997, 286). And recent evidence suggests that their numbers are growing. In 2008, 36 percent of white evangelical Republicans thought that churches should keep out of politics, an increase of 16 percent since 2004 (Pew Forum 2008b).

Dilemmas of Church-State Relations

Those who argue that religion has an important role in civil society must nevertheless deal with the question of how exactly church and state are to be separated. Many commentators insist that religion must not be ruled out of public life. Thus, an opinion piece in Time suggests that “a healthy country would teach its children evolution and the Ten Commandments” and that biblical creation should be taught not as science but for its “mythical grandeur and moral dimensions.” Furthermore, although “creationism is back door to religion, brought in under the guise of . . . science,” secularists have been doing the same thing. Teaching the proper way of using a condom “is more than instruction in reproductive mechanics. It is a seminar—unacknowledged and tacit but nonetheless powerful—on permissible sexual mores” (Krauthammer 1999, 120). An article in Time about the separation of church and state argues that “for God to be kept out of the classroom or out of America’s public debate by nervous school administrators or overcautious politicians serves no one’s interests” (Gibbs 1991, 68). Supreme Court rulings
against prayer in the public schools, says one conservative, go against “the intended meaning of the First Amendment from its inception.” It “was the work of people who believed in God and who expressed their faith as a matter of course in public prayer” (M. S. Evans 1995, 76).

In the enduring American view, religion provides the basis of morality, moral behavior, and social values. Thus we are told that the rigid wall of separation between church and state mandated by recent Supreme Court decisions has helped to bring “deterioration in American life” (Buckley 1994, 86–87) and that “how the nation defines itself spiritually will have much to do with its future political directions and with the strength of its moral foundations” (Ostling 1989, 94). “It is a mistake to assume that rejecting the lunacy of the far right means we must deny the value to society of a religious sensibility” (Krauthammer 1981, 25).

A commentator on the right suggests that “the bent condition of human existence in these closing decades of the twentieth century is an affliction resulting principally from the decay of belief in an ordered universe and in a purpose for human existence” (Kirk 1983, 626). And one on the left proposes that “the Christian left offers Americans something its secular counterpart no longer seems to favor: a sincere faith in moral progress” (Kazin 1998, 18).

Articles in both *Time* and *The New Republic* decry the fact that religion has been relegated to a minor role in school textbooks. The writer in *Time* suggests that schoolchildren deserve “a more profound image of, say, Thanksgiving than as a pumpkin-pie party with the Indians” (Bowen 1986, 94). The discussion in *The New Republic* suggests that for the most part, history textbooks “place religion at the lunatic fringe of American society” and that liberals should view this situation as a serious deficiency (Pasley 1987, 20). Some scholars, however, dispute the contention that contemporary textbooks give less attention to religious history, a point to which I will subsequently return.

It is also a sign of respect for religion that various commentators are dismayed by the use of religion for purposes of therapy, “lifestyle,” or other reasons of social utility. One writer notes that from Norman Vincent Peale in the 1950s through Robert Schuller in the late 1980s, religion itself has been transformed “into primarily a social and therapeutic activity. . . . [R]eligion has become a lifestyle strategy,” as when a Dallas Cowboys representative told a talk show host that “being a Christian has become Deion
[Sanders]’s lifestyle” (Judis 1999, 56). Another commentator suggests that one must be careful to avoid “using culture, as many have tried to use religion, as a kind of social therapy” (Howe 1991, 47). Creationists who say that adopting Darwinian ideas would deprive life of its meaning are taken to task for their admission “that the moral and social utility of religion is what recommends it” (Editorial 1999, 11).

Perhaps, too, the sheer amount of attention paid to religion in these magazines signals its importance in American life. The two ends of the political spectrum, represented here by The Nation and National Review, tend to devote more attention to attacking the views of their opponents than to affirming their own positions. Thus, for example, National Review published seventeen articles discussing the general idea of multiculturalism, while The Nation published only one. Similarly, The Nation printed two articles about multicultural education, compared with eight in National Review. By contrast, the number of articles dealing with “family values” was greater in The Nation (seven) than in National Review (four). On religious matters, however, the two magazines published almost identical numbers of articles: on church-state relations, The Nation has five and National Review has six; on internal religious issues, six pieces appear in The Nation, and seven appear in National Review.

Of the nine articles in our sample that discuss creationism, four appear in Time. Two of these works offer straight reporting on the struggles between the two sides, one is clearly hostile to religious intrusion into scientific education, and the remaining article advocates teaching the Bible for values and morals, not as fact or science: “if we were a bit more tolerant about allowing the teaching of biblical values as ethics, we’d find far less pressure for the teaching of biblical fables” (Krauthammer 1999, 120). An editorial in The New Republic sides with “science,” suggesting that any effort to “delegitimate” it “is a counsel of despair and an American disgrace” (Editorial 1999, 12). The three articles in National Review argue that science and creationism (or intelligent design) can be reconciled (Buckley 1997; Glynn 1999; Kirk 1983). The one article in The Nation, perhaps surprisingly, advocates teaching both evolution and creationism as an object lesson in what science is about. If students receive the tools to evaluate a scientific theory—ideas of falsifiability and the ability to generate reliable predictions—there is no doubt which theory will emerge as superior. Liberals and pro-evolutionists seem to fear that religion will undermine scientific belief, just
as the religious feared the teaching of evolution in 1925. But creationism needs to be taught because “it has a hold on the minds and emotions of large numbers of Americans” (Postman and Postman 1986, 5).

A 2005 national survey by the Pew Research Center found 64 percent of Americans amenable to the idea of teaching both creationism and evolution. This majority included secular respondents and liberal Democrats as well as conservative Christians, those who believe in natural selection and those who do not. A majority of those who accept natural selection theory (62 percent) support teaching creationism along with evolution. The public apparently favors having more viewpoints offered where there is controversy (Pew Research Center 2005). The well-publicized debates on this issue apparently have increased uncertainty in the population. Between 1985 and 2005, the proportion of Americans who were not sure about evolution increased from 7 percent to 21 percent, while those accepting the idea of evolution declined from 45 percent to 40 percent and those rejecting the idea declined from 48 percent to 39 percent (Jon D. Miller, Scott, and Okamoto 2006, 765).

Only a small number of commentators seek a reduction in religious influence. They express frustration that remarks that are deemed “offensive” to religion are not tolerated anywhere. Contrary to allegations about “liberal intellectual elites who disdain religious belief and have denied it a respected public role,” it is not possible to attack religion in American society without being seen as violating the norms (Kaminer 1996, 25). This sentiment echoes Tocqueville’s observation that in America, “those who do not believe conceal their incredulity,” whereas “those who believe display their faith” (1848/1961, 1:324).

At the same time, supporters of religion claim that American society excludes “anyone who takes seriously religious belief or traditional moral norms” (Wagner 1986, 28). Though we tolerate all who treat their religion as if it were no different from any consumer preference, there is intolerance for those who take religion seriously; we tolerate only “people who don’t believe in anything” (Krauthammer 1998, 92).

Given the American taste for moderation, it can be argued that both the supporters and the detractors of religion are correct. Thus, four-fifths of Wolfe’s small middle-class suburban sample believed “there is such a thing as being too religious” (1998, 83). National surveys between 1988 and 1996 found that approximately one-fifth of the respondents expressed intense
hostility toward Christian Fundamentalists, rating them no more highly than illegal aliens (Bolce and De Maio 1999a, 39). At the same time, however, a 2003 national survey found that “from a list of groups that also includes Muslims, recent immigrants, and homosexuals, Americans name atheists as those least likely to share their vision of American society. They are also more likely to disapprove of their children marrying atheists” (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006, 212). In interviews, respondents portrayed atheists either as “immoral people who threaten respectable community” from below or as “rampant materialists and cultural elitists that threaten common values from above” (227).

Americans reject not only extremes in religious beliefs but also what they perceive as extreme views concerning the role of religion politically. Thus, in a 2006 survey, 69 percent of respondents answered yes to the question, “Have liberals gone too far in trying to keep religion out of schools and government?” At the same time, 49 percent said yes to the question, “Have conservative Christians gone too far in trying to impose their religious values on the country?” (Pew Research Center 2006a). Similarly, 48 percent of the population in 2008 believed that religious conservatives have too much power over the Republican Party, and 43 percent believed that nonreligious liberals have too much power over the Democratic Party (Pew Forum 2008b).

Historically, of course, religious groups have spoken publicly about most of the major issues facing the nation. Sometimes, as in the case of the slavery debate, they have been arrayed on both sides. And those who decry the excessive liberal influence in keeping religion out of American schools and government cut across party lines: large majorities of Republicans, Democrats, and independents share this view; only those who identify as liberal Democrats do not (Pew Research Center 2006a). Americans’ uncertainty about the role of religion is well illustrated by a January 2007 Gallup Poll that asked whether the influence of organized religion on the nation should increase, decrease, or stay the same. Thirty-nine percent of the population want the level of religious influence to remain the same, 27 percent want an increase in religion’s role, and 32 percent favor a decrease (Feldman 2007, 13). The complexity of American attitudes toward religion in the public sphere is compounded by the fact that Evangelicals are themselves ambivalent on the subject, given their concerns for individual spiritual conversion and their sense that the political sphere does not deal in the
eternal (McConkey 2001; C. Smith 2000; Wolfe 1998). Some analysts have argued that evangelical Protestants abandoned their reluctance to get involved in politics when the Republicans articulated concerns about moral decline in American society (Leege et al. 2002, 89).

The relatively small contingent of political commentators who are opposed to religious influences argue that there is no true separation of church and state in American society. Rather, they contend, we “live in a society that favors all religions equally” (Pollitt 1983, 24), a society in which religious institutions are exempt from equal opportunity statutes and do not lose their tax exemptions when they use their money for political causes (Pollitt 1983; Vidal 1997). “The official American civil religion” currently appears to be that “what religion you have” is “your own business, . . . but it’s society’s business that you have one” (Pollitt 2000, 10).

These critics argue that there is neither equal treatment of the nonreligious in American society nor recognition of the connections between church and state powers. In the United States, one critic asserts, even those on the left tend to be more respectful of religion than is the case in other societies. Elsewhere it is recognized that “the Church is part of the material reality of the ruling order” and that “temporal ruling elites” need religion in some form to “convince themselves that they rule in the interests of all.” In the United States, by contrast, “the left is either actually religious or secular in a semi-apologetic way” (Hitchens 1984, 230). Another critic of religion argues that as religion and politics “are once again mingled, . . . it is time that humanists wipe the respectful smile off their faces when organized religion is discussed.” There are, after all, “no events on record where the orthodox acted more humanely or nobly than the unorthodox” (Koning 1980, 501).

This critic of religion and others argue that the nation’s laws and institutions are public, but beliefs “are purely private matters.” They “may give comfort to those who hold them, but they have no brief to give discomfort to those who do not. They have been private matters since the last public burning of a heretic” (Koning 1980, 501). Put with more civility by another critic of the sacredness of religion in American life, “Secularists are often wrongly accused of trying to purge religious ideals from public discourse. We simply want to deny them public sponsorship” (Kaminer 1996, 32).

Supporters of religion, by contrast, do not see such mingling of religion and politics. They contend that religion is effectively ruled out of the pub-
lic sphere. While “every manner of political argument is ruled legitimate in our democratic discourse, . . . invoke the Bible as grounding for your politics, and the First Amendment police will charge you with breaching the sacred wall separating church and state” (Krauthammer 1998, 92).

The idea that religion needs to be protected from too close an alliance with politics or the state can also be seen as an aspect of the American respect for religion. Thus, an editorial in *The New Republic* argues that we must be vigilant about the “crevices” in the wall of separation between church and state not because “American democracy is . . . crumbling before American religion” but because of “the damage that politics may do to religion.” Religion is cheapened and trivialized by things like “Jesus Day” (proclaimed in Texas by Governor George W. Bush). “A faith that requires the support of a government is an infirm faith,” and believers must recognize that “the freedom from religion is also the freedom for religion” (Editorial 2000b, 9).

To be sure, those hostile to religion also see this connection. They contend that school prayer may help undermine religion, since established religions generally have less public support than religion has had in American society (Editorial 1984, 308). If schools must scrupulously avoid religion, there is the possibility that religion will gain “the romantic aura of the forbidden—Christ is cool” (Pollitt 1994b, 788). Once again, one can hear echoes of Tocqueville in this discussion. The American clergy, he argued, perceived that to avoid the vicissitudes of politics, it was wise to renounce state support. As a result, religion in American society may be less powerful than it has been elsewhere and at other times, but “its influence is more lasting” (1848/1961, 1:323).

Conservatives, too, suggest that religion must not succumb to political involvements. Indeed, one conservative argues that “conservative activism has contributed powerfully to the politicizing of religion that most conservatives deplore. . . . Far from providing a common resource of belief, tradition, and moral judgment, politicized religion turns societal conflicts into crusades. This is bad for public life; it is worse for religion” (Neuhaus 1988a, 46). When religion and politics are too closely aligned, religion is compromised (Gibbs 2000, 38). The mainline Protestantism that has defined the spiritual and moral ethos of American society for more than three centuries is in decline, in part because of “a preoccupation with political and social issues at the expense of good old-fashioned faith” (Ostling 1989, 94).
While various writers on the left value the moral critique that religion can offer to society, some conservatives fear that a politicized church can no longer serve moral purposes. Today, “churches that once served as sources of clear moral guidance are . . . grappling uncertainly . . . as they try to decide whether their sexual standards will derive from biblical tradition or the fluid folkways of modernity” (Ostling 1991, 50). In contemporary theological discussions, everything seems up for debate—homosexuality, premarital sex, even adultery. “The obvious secular explanation for this hubbub is that America’s churches are internalizing the mores of a developed society. . . . Like most obvious secular explanations, this one is shallow. American churches don’t just passively receive ideas from the general culture. They also stimulate them.” In fact, innovators and traditionalists within the church disagree about sex, as they do about everything else. “The disputants are primarily motivated not by policy considerations, but by what they believe to be right. That is what makes this fight so all-American, and so angry” (Brookhiser 1991, 70).

Those who see churches as yielding to the norms of secular society fear that this process is ultimately self-defeating. The “watering down of moral requirements” and the “substitution of politics for morality” produce a “kitsch religion” that is “free of troublesome moral obligations.” This dilution provides a feeling of spirituality without requiring orthodox belief and action. The result is that the church loses members to such alternatives as the gym, politics, and New Age movements (Klinghoffer 1996, 52). If the religion that is currently flourishing is “religion on our own terms,” then “secularization has triumphed after all,” since religion of this sort “is devoted to need-meeting rather than truth-telling” (Neuhaus 1989a, 20).

Along with respect for religion and a tendency to cast issues in moral terms, Americans often manifest a great reverence for the Founding Fathers, and disagreements on issues of the separation of church are state are often formulated as different interpretations of the intent and religiosity of the Founding Fathers. People have commonly argued that the Founding Fathers were attempting to protect religion from political influences (Editorial 2000b, 9), to prevent the establishment of a national religion that would threaten the religious diversity of the states (M. S. Evans 1995, 58), to invoke God to give “America’s rights a Source beyond the state’s power to modify or amend” (Editorial 1994b, 18), to remind people that our rights derive from natural laws and “Nature’s God” (Brookhiser 1994, 84). The dis-
senters—those who would reduce religious influences—argue instead that the Founding Fathers did not all believe in God and intended the separation of church and state to serve as a way of minimizing the power of both the church and the state, since the latter would gain from any implication of divine authority (Ehrenreich 1992b, 72).

Religious Belief and Secularization

Elite opinion in the United States confers respect on religion and its role in the public sphere. In recent American politics, Democrats and Republicans alike have supported “faith-based initiatives.” There is no “culture war” at issue here, no dispute between advocates of moral absolutes and supporters of individual discretion. While policy disputes arise about how to implement faith-based initiatives—for example, whether churches should be required to employ nonmembers—most Americans appear to accept the basic principle. There are some dissenters, of course, just as there are a small number of commentators in our sample who are unhappy with the role of religion in American society and politics.

The culture wars are clearly related to the strength of religion among some Americans. For example, between 1984 and 1996, a dramatic increase occurred in the percentage of survey respondents who identified “family decline” as the “most important problem” facing the United States. The proportion of the population responding in this way rose from just under 2 percent to almost 10 percent, and the vast majority of those who responded this way were evangelical Protestants who attended church regularly (C. Brooks 2002, 198, 203).

American political campaigns also have been exceptional. Where else “could one find in the year 2000 a political campaign in which voters were obliged to choose between two more-Christian-than-thou candidates?” George W. Bush declared Jesus Christ to be his favorite philosopher, and Al Gore claimed to solve ethical questions by asking, “What would Jesus do?” (Hollinger 2001, 143).

The increased relevance of religion to American politics in the late twentieth century might appear to be anomalous in view of secularization and declines in religious participation. Yet perhaps the empirical reality does not match the cultural perceptions here. A majority of Americans be-
lieve that religious influence is in decline (Pew Research Center 2002), but those who study religion are not as certain.

In recent American politics, the Christian Right has mobilized voters for various causes and candidates. A study of the factors that make people susceptible to having their votes influenced by the Christian Right found that those who see themselves as “culturally embattled” are more likely than others to be so influenced. The sense of cultural embattlement was measured by questions asking whether or not the mass media, feminists, and the public schools “are hostile to your moral and spiritual values.” To be sure, there are possible reciprocal influences involved: having a sense of being embattled makes one more receptive to the Christian Right, but being in the Christian Right constituency increases consciousness of such issues. The political involvement of the devoutly religious is motivated by a desire to protect the “private lifeworld” rather than for reasons of economics or status. “Those who ‘vote their pocketbook’ do not care to vote by the Christian Right’s suggestions” (Regnerus, Sikkink, and Smith 1999, 1391, 1392, 1394).

Some analysts have speculated that the increased political involvement of committed white Christians might well be a reaction to the growth of a more secular and diverse society (Kohut et al. 2000, 123) or at least the perception thereof. Between the late 1980s and the late 1990s, increases occurred in the intensity of religious belief, in the number of people who “strongly agreed” that God exists, and in the number of people who believed that divine judgment is inevitable and that there are clear guidelines about good and evil (Kohut et al. 2000, 28). This increased intensity of belief occurred among all groups, including seculars. One may indeed wonder what secular means in American society when Pew Research Center data from 1997 show that 44 percent of those identified as secular “strongly agree” with the statement, “I never doubt the existence of God” (Kohut et al. 2000, 28–29).

What, then, is the status of religious belief and participation in contemporary American society? Ambiguities abound, despite the fact that Americans are notoriously more religious than citizens of other Western industrialized societies. In 1995, 50 percent of Americans rated the importance of God in their lives as a 10 on a ten-point scale; no other advanced industrial society even came close (Baker 2005, 40).

Analysts have long suggested that American religious strength is based
on the absence of an established church, on the voluntary nature of American religion. More recently, this idea has been formulated in terms of an economic model: “an open market is conducive to religious vitality” (R. S. Warner 1993, 1057). However, religious pluralism in European societies does not seem to be conducive to individual religiosity. While government subsidies to established churches and government regulations might make the competition less open in European societies than in the United States, religious pluralism in Europe appears to undermine certainties and to increase religious tolerance. The result is less rather than more religiosity in the population (Halman and Draulans 2006, 268, 285).

It has also long been noted that immigrants to the United States have retained their religious practices while otherwise assimilating into American life. Famously, Herberg noted in the middle of the twentieth century that being Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish is a way “of being an American,” that not to identify with a religion “is somehow not to be an American” (1956, 53, 274). Survey data from 2003 show that many Americans continue to believe that “affirming a religious identity is an important way of ‘being American’” (Edgell, Gerteis, and Harmann 2006, 216). That migration to the United States increases one’s religious belief is suggested by a study that attempts to account for the significant recent increases in belief in an afterlife among Catholics, Jews, and those with no religious affiliation: “immigrants are significantly less likely to believe in an afterlife than are their grandchildren” (Greeley and Hout 1999, 813). The authors suggest that “religious competition for the hearts and souls of the immigrants and their children led to a more vigorous religious socialization in the United States than that experienced by youth in most of the countries that sent emigrants to this country” (819–20). One of the authors of this study has also argued that in a pluralistic society without an official religion, religion plays more of a role in conferring identity and hence generates higher levels of devotion than it does in societies that have established churches. But within a society that has an established church, being a member of an alternative church or denomination would also have importance in conferring identity and should thus predict greater loyalty. By this logic, non-Anglicans in England should be as likely as Americans to believe in God and to attend church regularly, and the data support this hypothesis (Greeley 1991, 114–15).

Commentators have also noted that the cultural respect for religion in
the United States and the social acceptability of religious participation have likely led to some exaggeration in the portraits that survey data reveal. For many Americans, expressions of belief in God and reported levels of religious participation may reveal more about “cultural expectations” than about the reality of their beliefs and practices (Demerath 2002, 17). If indeed it is true that the actual church attendance of Americans is approximately half of what they report, and if similar studies in other societies reveal less of this overreporting, then “a different sort of ‘American exceptionalism’ is at work. Americans may not differ much in terms of behavior, but rather in how they report that behavior” (Hadaway, Marler, and Chaves 1993, 749). While various methodological criticisms have been offered of the studies that show a gap between actual and reported church attendance (see Hout and Greeley 1998; Woodberry 1998), other research has demonstrated that the apparent misreporting is likely “caused mainly by social desirability pressures associated with interviewer-administration.” Both self-administered questionnaires and time-use studies minimize such overreporting (Presser and Stinson 1998).

That norms of social desirability encourage Americans to overstate their religious participation—just as they similarly overstate their participation in voting—is itself a commentary on American attitudes toward religion. In addition, while young people in the United States are less religious than their elders, few “are irreligious—compared with young people in most wealthy industrialized nations, most are remarkably religious” (Zukin et al. 2006, 166), or at least they claim to be. It may well be true that in a religious society such as the United States, “irreligion . . . replicates itself across generations less effectively than active religious preference” because people “are surrounded more by religion than by irreligion” (R. S. Warner 1993, 1077). And the finding that the overwhelming majority of Americans believe people should arrive at their religious beliefs independently of any church or synagogue attests to the significance of the voluntary nature of American religion (1075, 1080).

While belief in God has remained remarkably stable, hovering around 95 percent for more than half a century, questions may be raised about this finding as well. For one thing, the proportion of the population that is absolutely certain of God’s existence has declined, although the percentage remains quite high (Bishop 1999, 423). For another, the proportion that believes not in a personal God but rather in “a higher power of some sort” has
slowly but steadily increased from 5 percent in 1964 to 10 percent at the end of the century (425). Perhaps, then, the addition of the phrase “or a universal spirit” to the “Do you believe in God?” question has masked trends in religious beliefs (426). Nevertheless, 87 percent of the population in a 2003 survey agreed with the statement, “I never doubt the existence of God.” And while only 69 percent “completely agreed” with the statement (the equivalent to “absolute certainty” in other surveys), this number represented an increase from the 60 percent who completely agreed in 1987 (Pew Research Center 2003).

There is no doubt that since the late 1960s, increases have occurred in the number of people who never attend religious services and in the number who identify as seculars or religious “nones” (Kohut et al. 2000, 123; Layman 2001, 313). But it is difficult to understand the meaning of these figures in light of the fact that in 1998, for example, “almost 60 percent of ‘nones’ said that they believed ‘that God watches over me,’ and nearly 40 percent reported praying at least weekly” (Fischer and Hout 2006, 193). By contrast, among Europe’s unchurched, 27 percent identify themselves as religious, while 57 percent say they are not religious and 16 percent identify themselves as atheists (Halman and Draulans 2006, 282).

Whether the importance of religion has declined in modern societies, as many sociologists and laypersons alike believe, has been a matter of considerable scholarly debate. The idea of secularization has long been one of the taken-for-granted elements of modernization. Like industrialization, urbanization, and bureaucratization, secularization was so well integrated into the modernization paradigm that few questioned the idea, and it “became sacralized” (Hadden 1987, 588). Yet some contemporary sociologists debate both the extent of secularization and its meaning. Does secularization simply indicate religious decline (that is, a decline in religious belief or participation)? If so, since belief and participation do not necessarily go together, which of the two is more essential? Or does secularization simply mean the separation of religion from all other social and cultural institutions, the differentiation between religious and other institutions? One sociologist has argued that if secularization just means the differentiation of religious from secular institutions, there is no basis for disagreement, since all can agree that the political power of Catholic bishops is less today than it was centuries ago (Stark 1999, 252). If differentiation is the central meaning of secularization, so that most public institutions no longer fall under
the sway of religious institutions and values, has religion also become “privatized”? If so, has religion necessarily been weakened at the individual level? Or could private religious experiences flourish “even as public religious institutions flounder?” (Gorski 2000, 162). Perhaps secularization means competition or pluralism in defining the sacred. The competing institutions are not simply alternative religions but other institutions in which people place faith, such as education and science (Swatos and Christiano 1999, 225).

Those sociologists who take issue with the secularization hypothesis contend that it has exaggerated both the religiosity of people in past centuries and the irreligion in contemporary societies. There really was no golden age of faith, and even the most seemingly secular societies today have large numbers of believers in their midst. In Iceland, for example, only 2 percent of the population attends church services weekly, yet the 1990 World Values Survey found that 81 percent of Icelanders say they believe in life after death, 82 percent say that they sometimes pray, and only 2.4 percent describe themselves as “convinced atheists” (Stark 1999, 264).

Other sociologists, however, point to a decline in religious authority over both societies and individuals. To be sure, much variation exists among social groups in contemporary American society, with white Protestant Fundamentalists and African Americans showing lower levels of secularization than other religious groups. But, for example, by 1990, only 12 percent of American Catholics accepted the church’s ban on artificial contraception (Chaves 1994, 768). The increase in religious intermarriage likewise suggests the decreased salience of religion. When religious authority is strong, religion significantly affects behavior, and religious endogamy is high. “If religious differences are increasingly irrelevant for marriage decisions, then religious authority’s scope surely is narrowing” (768). Moreover, members of conservative Protestant denominations report having more sexual partners than do mainline Protestants, quite the opposite of what would one expect based on the beliefs of these denominations (Greeley and Hout 2006, 135).

While few doubt the significance of religion for those who are seriously committed to it, much less clarity exists about the significance of the kind of religious affiliation that is little more than nominal—identification with a religious tradition that does not translate into religious participation or agreement with its doctrines. This form of “cultural religion” may have
public as well as personal significance because it may be activated during periods of crisis or conflict. “It is the stuff of civil religions,” a “reservoir of meanings and values” tapped by religious and cultural leaders (Demerath 2002, 17–18). Tocqueville observed this sort of connection between religion and societal unity, noting, “I do not know whether all Americans have a sincere faith in their religion—for who can search the human heart?—but I am certain that they hold it to be indispensable to the maintenance of republican institutions. This opinion is not peculiar to a class of citizens or to a party, but it belongs to the whole nation and to every rank of society” (1848/1961, 1:316). More recent analysts see “strong beliefs in religion and God” as embedded in “America’s traditional values” (Baker 2005, 54) and part of the “imagined community” on which American society rests.

Yet Americans’ religiousness has long seemed to lack depth or seriousness. Even during the 1950s, large numbers of people were attending religious institutions and identifying themselves in religious terms while seeming disconnected from “matters central to the faiths they profess” (Herberg 1956, 14). Herberg’s classic treatise on American religion detailed the “triple melting pot” of Catholics, Protestants, and Jews and noted that even people who valued the Bible as revelation were unable to name the first four Gospels (14). Almost half a century later, Chaves noted that “religious faith in the United States is more broad than deep,” as only half of those who believe the Bible is the Word of God can name the first book, and even evangelical or born-again Christians simultaneously believe in “ideas foreign to traditional Christianity,” such as reincarnation and astrology (2002, 20). Herberg characterized American “religiousness” as being “without serious commitment, without real inner conviction,” although it generates “the sincere feeling of being religious” (1956, 276). Chaves similarly noted that although more than 90 percent of Americans believe in a higher power, “only one-third say they rely more on that power than on themselves in overcoming adversity” (2002, 20).

Religiosity in the United States may well be based more on the cultural encouragement that it receives than on deep personal convictions. Thus, there is more religious belief and practice among the nonchurchoing public in the United States than in Canada, suggesting the pervasiveness of “American culture-religion,” the sheer social desirability of religiosity in American society (Reimer 1995). This cultural religiosity is also manifest in the greater difference in Canada than in the United States between the be-
liefs and practices of those who attend church regularly and those who do not. And even secular Americans and those with weak religious ties believe that American society would be better off if religion’s influence were on the rise (Pew Research Center 2002).

The secularization thesis has included the idea that in modern societies religion becomes privatized, confined to the realm of personal individual beliefs. But though the secularization thesis remains accurate insofar as the secular spheres are emancipated from religious institutions, religious decline and privatization do not necessarily follow. Indeed, it can be argued that a deprivatization of religion became widespread in the 1980s. Varieties of “public religion” now act as “normative critiques of dominant historical trends,” raising questions about the moral norms or human considerations inherent in institutional activities (Casanova 1994, 43).

The belief that religious expression can contribute to American democracy has a long history, as does the belief that any religion is a good thing. Yet such ideas must “seem like a deplorable heresy to the European churchman” (Herberg 1956, 97) and may also deny the reality of tensions among religious groups. In the United States, Herberg suggested, “every tension between religious communities, however deep and complex it may actually be, tends to express itself as a conflict over church-state relations” (248). Disputes about the First Amendment often occur as conflicts between those who argue that there is not enough religion in the public square and those who think there is too much. Many of those in the latter camp see a continuing mainstream Protestant hegemony, so that diverse religions are marginalized and kept that way (Beaman 2003, 318).

The political salience of being an evangelical Christian appears to be greater in areas where there are higher proportions of secularists (religious nonadherents). In such areas, Evangelicals are more likely to vote Republican (Campbell 2006, 109). Observers suggest that Evangelicals feel threatened by larger number of secularists in their midst and that this tension is but the latest example of religious conflict in American politics, similar to earlier Catholic-Protestant conflicts (113). Perhaps, too, those who are anti-Fundamentalist feel threatened by the perceived increased political visibility of Christian Fundamentalists. They thus perceive Christian fundamentalist leaders as “too pushy” in asserting traditional values and exaggerate the degree to which they maintain ideologically “extreme” positions (Bolce and DeMaio 1999b, 514, 515).
Criticism of contemporary Fundamentalists comes from within as well. In *Beyond Culture Wars*, Michael S. Horton takes Christian Evangelicals and Fundamentalists to task for participating in culture wars that view “moral issues as ultimate instead of as effects of one’s deeper theological and philosophical beliefs” (1994, 38). “It is a recovery of the Christian faith within the church itself, not the imposition of Christian values over a hostile society, that holds the only possibility for meaningful change” (281). Members of evangelical churches are just as worldly as liberals. Horton writes, “Our own people cannot name the Ten Commandments, and yet we are outraged that they are removed from the public halls” (123). “The ‘testimony’ (‘what Jesus did for me’) and personal experiences are often the most authoritative tests of truth in evangelical circles today” (67). Evangelical spirituality now contains the same “self-centered, self-deifying impulse” as secular humanism and New Age spirituality (63). Horton’s view receives some confirmation in the work of a sociologist who analyzed the Lincoln-Douglas debates about slavery in comparison to the culture war discussions during the 1992 election. While the former legitimated arguments through the use of religion, the latter were largely therapeutic on both sides of the divide (J. L. Nolan 1996, 184).

The political behavior of Christian activists also receives criticism from within for negating the chief contribution that faith can make to politics: ensuring that the transcendent perspective of faith judges politics. When Christian “report cards” are issued, measuring how members of Congress vote on “key moral/family issues,” the resulting anomalies are shameful. Members of Congress who have been involved in corruption and sex scandals may receive high scores, while highly moral Democrats get low scores. The problem is that “politics, not piety or ethics, was the ruling criterion” (Guinness 1993, 191).

**Conclusions**

When culture was understood to consist largely of values that were internalized and that shaped people’s behavior, churches were seen as exercising a beneficial influence on the society by influencing individual members’ values. When this view of culture began to come into question, churches began to exercise their power by attempting to influence the morality that
was “lodged in the culture at large rather than in individuals” (Wuthnow 1988, 69). As the social movements of the 1960s—beginning with the civil rights movement—challenged churches to take a stand on social issues, a split arose between those that supported activism and those that maintained their role in guiding individual consciences (147–48).

Since that time, churches and their parishioners have wrestled with the question of their proper public role. Although religion undoubtedly “propelled some people into politics” during the 1990s, “the politicization of religion might have caused people who dissent from the conservative agenda of vocal Christian leaders to stop identifying with those religions.” This phenomenon could account for the increase in “unchurched believers”—people with conventional religious beliefs who nevertheless express “no religious preference” because they are alienated from organized religion (Hout and Fischer 2002, 179). Fears of alienating parishioners by political activism have also led to the dismissal of several celebrated pastors, as their congregations’ lay leaders saw activism as “getting in the way of the Gospel” (Kirkpatrick 2007, 39).

In the late 1990s, in a moment of despair about the progress of the Religious Right’s causes, a leading spokesman for the movement, Paul Weyrich, suggested that Evangelicals needed “to get out of politics, go back to the churches and change hearts one at a time, in the belief that the culture will someday follow” (Gibbs 1999, 47). After the 2004 election, however, Weyrich was exultant. He issued a letter to Evangelicals that read, “God is indeed a Republican. He must be. His hand helped re-elect a president, with a popular mandate” (Rosin 2005, 120).

Cycles of increasing and decreasing separation of church and state and increasing and decreasing secularization are probably inevitable in a society that respects religion but lacks consensus about its public role. It is clear, however, that the very waging of the culture wars over the past few decades belies the claim that religion has been privatized. And this very public argumentation has produced internal dissension on all sides. Evangelicals debate their public involvement, while nonbelievers on the left contend with the majority who see religious influences as beneficial.

While most Americans maintain a “quiet faith” that entails respect for the beliefs of others, even nonbelievers (Wolfe 1998, 50–54), many church-going Protestants maintain the contradictory beliefs that “everyone should be free to live as they see fit” and that “Christian morality should be the
primary authority for American culture and society” (C. Smith et al. 1997, 190). Reconciling these contradictory ideas has become more challenging as the non-Christian population in the United States has increased.

Increased religious diversity has also made consensus about American civil religion more difficult, although disputes about civil religion began during the Vietnam War, when arguments about America’s role in the world were compounded by theological disputes about the meaning of God. Theologians no less than social scientists have shown a heightened “concern for the symbolically constructed character of reality” (Wuthnow 1988, 299).