On Sunday, May 11, 1845, Nicholas and Anton Riedel, recent arrivals with their family from Germany, penned a letter from their new home in Texas. The journey had been long and filled with anticipation. But what stood out more than anything else, now that they were here, was the freedom and the fact that people were treated equally. “This is a free land,” they wrote, “and the poorest is regarded and respected as the richest. Here no one has priority.”

The previous day a group of nearly three hundred Baptist leaders gathered in Augusta, Georgia. They too valued freedom. The central issue was freedom to own slaves, against the wishes of their northern counterparts. To be of service to the heathen and the destitute, they formed the Southern Baptist Convention.

How does religion shape a nation? Is it through the private beliefs of individuals who quietly pursue their faith in small ways? Is it through convictions that show up at work, through families, and perhaps at the voting booth? Does it come about through high-profile clergy who organize powerful mass movements and capture the attention of public officials? Or does religion matter much at all? Perhaps nations are moved only by economic and political self-interest.

When these questions are asked of America, they elicit answers that reflect the nation’s distinctive religious history. Seekers of religious freedom settled America, the argument goes, and we became a nation in which competing denominations gave voice to different ethnic groups and races and the various nationalities that constituted the population. America became a nation of Christians and Jews, Protestants and Catholics, and numerous smaller traditions. Its religious heritage gained expression in the First Amendment, in a commonsense understanding of biblical morality, and in thousands of meeting halls and places of worship. More recently the story includes chapters about the role of religious leaders in the civil rights movement and in electoral politics and referenda about abortion, gay marriage, school prayer, intelligent design, and a host of related issues.

But that story about America writ large fails to capture a huge portion of what religion is actually about. Religion may be painted in broad brushstrokes as the beliefs and practices of Christians and Jews, Protestants and Catholics, and other traditions, but it is fundamentally experienced in specific locations. It happens
among families and in neighborhoods. People worship in congregations and share their convictions and doubts with friends, coworkers, and fellow believers. For this reason a valuable approach to the study of religion has emerged in recent years focusing on the lived practices of people in congregations and communities.  

Yet, as interesting as these microlevel studies are, they tell us little about the larger influences of religion beyond the family, neighborhood, or congregation. They show that a congregation encourages volunteer work, for example, or that women feel empowered from participating in the congregation, but beyond that the implications become murky. It may help to know that there are thousands of such congregations. And yet congregations are only part of the story.  

The most neglected aspect of American religion occurs in the middle range at the level that bridges families and congregations with the nation. It was here that Alexis de Tocqueville saw the key to American democracy when he visited in the 1830s. Families and congregations effectively combine and channel their interests through entities that are large enough to convey power and yet not so large as to be impersonally beyond reach. This is American federalism, or, more precisely, the multitiered layers of government that span from boroughs and townships upward through counties to states and congressional districts. Something similar characterizes American religion as well. Congregations join together in associations, dioceses, and presbyteries, and these form larger organizations called denominations.  

These vertically and horizontally bridging organizations, though, are only part of what must be considered at the middle range. Religious practices interlace with local and regional traditions. The religious idioms through which faith is expressed are inflected by myths of origin, by prevailing understandings of race and ethnicity, and by stories of major events, such as civil conflicts and natural disasters. Bringing these into focus requires situating religion in a place that includes local communities but that also extends beyond them.  

Religion functions at this intermediate level of social organization to infuse meaning about divine purposes into the particular circumstances in which people live, including the dangers they may face, the lines that divide or unite them, and their aspirations. The dangers include universals such as illness and death but also the local uncertainties of crop failures and unemployment or threats from hostile neighbors. Lines of division and unity stem from racial and ethnic identities, differences of wealth and occupation, and political partisanship. Aspirations include hopes for a more secure livelihood, safety, and the civic institutions necessary to ensure the lives and ambitions of a coming generation. Religious idioms and practices embed themselves in these wider circumstances of life.  

It is this embedding in turn through which religion exercises its shaping influence. Religious idioms provide the language in which stories are told about heroes and villains, enemies and friends. These narratives influence racial and ethnic divisions and how to think about them. Religious organizations form that
facilitate the continuing separation of races or their coming together. These organizations facilitate the creation and maintenance of additional institutions. By articulating with an expanding population with access to enlarged resources, the idioms and practices perpetuate themselves.

In sociological parlance, the lines of division that define and separate religious traditions, ethnic groups, and racial categories can be understood as symbolic boundaries—conceptual categories present in the public mind in ways that also shape who interacts with whom and on what basis. Symbolic boundaries ebb and flow in political salience and meaning, with some constituting enduring inequalities, especially between races, while others, such as the language in which people classify themselves religiously, are often more fungible. Looking closely at a distinct geographic region over an extended period of time provides an opportunity to see how these changes occur.

I have selected instances in which the continuities and changes in categories defining the relationships among religion, race, and ethnicity can be observed in some detail. The relationships show that symbolic boundaries are influenced by the practices through which clergy and lay leaders build congregations and form alliances among those congregations—processes that demonstrate the extent to which religious leaders themselves occupy a precarious midlevel social position dependent on the approval, as it were, of authorities above and members of the local community under their charge. The relevant categories into which religious affinities are classified are in turn closely related to wider power arrangements and institutions.

This argument builds on the tradition of scholarship that emphasizes religion's role in human adaptation to the exigencies of daily life. In this understanding religion offers hope in the midst of routine hardships. It provides comfort and encouragement. For many, faith is a source of transcendence, an avenue for experiencing awe and for expressing reverence. Under widely varying circumstances, religion reinforces moral discipline and promotes cooperation. It is sometimes a source of empowerment that facilitates efforts to combat suffering and exploitation. In the process it may of course generate conflict and exacerbate bigotry. For generations of Americans who came as immigrants and carved a new life in small towns and on the open frontier, the idea of a rough country was a way of describing the exigencies of life. Rough country was terrain difficult to traverse, farmland yet to be improved, thickets needing to be cleared, and roads impassable from rain and mud. It was dangerous territory inhabited by villains and scoundrels, a place subject to the threat of ruffians. It was hardship, the grinding struggle for daily existence that stood in the way of a better life in which beauty, wonder, and creativity could more fully be expressed. To people proud of fine breeding it connoted an absence of good manners, a rough society in which roughnecks prevailed. It meant the rough treatment slaveholders inflicted on slaves. It often meant the prospect of dying in childbirth or from an incurable illness. Rough country was the equivalent of problems that are of major
twenty-first-century concern such as cancer, addiction, pandemic influenza, and weapons of mass destruction.

Religion is often thought of as the vehicle through which the exigencies of life can be escaped, perhaps by anticipating release from the present veil of tears in a perfect life to come. That may be part of it, but it is not all that religion does. The comfort that religion seeks to provide also comes through the social solidarity it facilitates and through the rituals that draw people together as well as the acts of service it promotes. It may be evident in the lament of a bereaved loved one or, as we will see, in less expected places, such as a public hanging.

A second way in which religion shapes a community or a nation is in defining evil and identifying an appropriate means of resisting it. Symbolic boundaries are not just mental categories that divide the world into “us” and “them” for purposes of cognitive convenience. The “other” is often demonized as a group in league with evil forces. Evil may reside in the person of an ominous satanic force or in more tangible dangers, such as a marauding enemy, an alien regime, or a savage neighbor. Religious leaders may take it upon themselves to draw sharp boundaries between good and evil and to show what must be done to guard against evil. The mourners’ bench is a place for such definitions to be driven home. So also may be the cry of outrage that leads to an act of vengeance.

Undergirding conventional definitions of respect is a third way in which religion influences its contexts. Whether one is rich or poor, one of the hallmarks of social status for the occupants of any social category is respect. Being a person of faith is often a means of being known as a respectable and respected member of the community. Being respected implies that a person can be trusted to behave responsibly whether in business or as a neighbor. Earning respect requires conforming to certain shared standards of morality and perhaps attempting to impose those standards on other members of the community.

And then religion addresses the exigencies of life not only through symbolic definitional endeavors but also through institution building. Congregations become the vehicles through which hospitals and orphanages are constructed. Religious leaders organize and staff schools that promote literacy and colleges that train nurses and social workers. Efforts are made to advance civilization in ways that render living in rough country less difficult. The process of institution building of course requires resources and usually brings religion into closer contact with the people who command these resources, especially public officials. The relationships between religious organizations and government agencies reflect continuing debates about who has the right to lay claim to public goods and for what purposes.

As an institution builder, religion’s role has always gravitated between generating and controlling its own resources, on the one hand, and forging ties with and facilitating the growth of organizations in wider spheres, on the other hand. Religious leaders understandably encourage members to be faithful supporters of congregations, to adhere to particular doctrines and styles of worship, and to
spend time at activities organized under religious auspices. In short, they want social networks to be centered in congregations. At the same time, religion’s influence is limited if it only focuses on its own activities. Its influence increases to the extent that it bridges into such wider venues as education, health care, charitable service, and government as well as forming specialized organizations to promote particular moral agendas and policies. A recurrent tension exists between these two tendencies, encouraging religious leaders especially to stay within their own domain and yet repeatedly promoting wider social involvement as well.

In the United States these religious activities have been profoundly influenced by race. The nation’s history of slavery resulted not only in a legacy of racial inequality and discrimination but also in racially segregated communities and institutions. Religious institutions evolved as predominantly segregated congregations and denominations with distinctive traditions and leadership styles. And yet there was typically mutual awareness and interaction. Comfort, evil, and respect were defined with racial connotations. Institution building ran in racially segregated channels and occasionally transcended them.

The particular case under investigation here provides an opportunity to examine over a period of approximately a century and a half how religious organizations developed in a context charged not only by racial and ethnic divisions but also by a long trajectory of new settlement and economic expansion. The process involves religion as a source of comfort and encouragement, a means of defining and resisting evil, a provision of respect, and a facilitator of institutions through which civilization was to be advanced. From slavery through Reconstruction, to a long history of lynching and Jim Crow segregation, and through mobilization for and against civil rights, race was a prominent influence. Racial separation was often perpetuated by religious organizations, only to be challenged repeatedly by wider connections established through benevolent associations, moral crusades, and new government initiatives. The result was a deeply religious part of America that has had an increasingly powerful influence on the nation.

Texas is America’s most powerful Bible-Belt state. It is the most populous, resource-rich, and politically influential part of the nation in which theologically conservative Protestant churchgoing thrives. Twice as many Southern Baptists—the nation’s largest and one of its most theologically and politically conservative denominations—live in Texas as in any other state. For many years the nation’s largest Southern Baptist congregation was located in Dallas. Today Dallas and Houston are home to some of the nation’s largest predominantly white, predominantly African American, and predominantly Hispanic megachurches. Several of these congregations claim to have more than twenty thousand members. In addition, Texas has long been a center of religious radio and television broadcasting and has attracted some of the most influential international ministries that send out preaching and advice videos as well as worship services and music around the globe.
As important as these religious organizations are, my interest in them stems less from their size and more from what we can learn from their history and location. American religion cannot be understood apart from considering its reciprocal relationship with race. The familiar observation that white and black churches evolved as and largely continue to be separate institutions does not go far enough. It also mattered that this institutional separation bred misunderstanding and indeed fear as well as inequality. American religion was profoundly shaped as well by the frontier experience, the westward movement grounded in the nation’s sense of manifest destiny, and the dangers involved. National encounters and immigration have repeatedly altered the contours of American religion. These are the local and regional influences that require closer scrutiny.

Besides the sheer size and strength of the state’s churches, Texas residents who are known for their personal faith or as leaders with interests influenced by religion have played a singularly important role in the nation’s economic affairs and in politics. Entrepreneurs, oil moguls, and politicians with names such as Bass, Bush, Butt, Hunt, Johnson, LeTourneau, and Perry are among the state’s and the nation’s most influential figures, past and present. With more representatives in the U.S. Congress than any other state except California, and having been the home of several of the nation’s most powerful senators and representatives, as well as of three recent U.S. presidents, Texas has been well positioned to exert its influence far beyond its own borders.

All this lends itself to ‘Texans’ long-held belief that their place in America is unique. It is the only state, Texans proudly proclaim, that has been under six flags. It is the only state ever to have declared its own independence as a separate republic. It is by far the largest state in sheer land area of any part of the United States between Mexico and Canada. More oil and gas have been supplied from here than from any other state. Even the climate is more varied than almost anywhere else in the country. In considering the role that religion and race have played, it would thus seem appropriate to treat Texas as if it were different from any other part of America.

However, that is not the perspective from which the material here is presented. Although it is true that much about Texas is distinctive to its own location and history, Texas also serves valuably as a place in which to examine the developments and cultural dynamics that have over the past century and a half decidedly shaped America. It lends itself especially well to examining the complex relationships that emerged and changed in the years immediately following the American Civil War among African Americans and white landowners and residents, and to understand those relationships as families moved from farms to cities, and in the context of a growing Hispanic population. Because of its large land area and varied climate, Texas took longer than any other state to be settled and to transform its basic institutions into the orderly system of governance and social control to which its leaders aspired. A focus on the activities of its communities and congregations evokes a larger story of how Americans confronted
their fears of evil and how they struggled to overcome roughness as they perceived it in their midst.

The story I tell here is an interpretation of those complex singular developments that occurred in this particular part of our nation. It is a story that foregrounds the interaction of religion and race and how that interaction in turn at each period influenced what was to come later. These influences shifted from decade to decade. It would be unsatisfactory, for example, to argue that everything later stemmed from the fact that Texas was settled predominantly by southerners or that it joined the Confederacy. Nor would it be satisfactory to argue that a culture of violence shaped all that followed.

The argument is rather about a series of processes that happen in distinctive ways and yet illuminate aspects of the relationship between religion and society that are best seen at this intermediate level of social organization. One of these processes derives from the ordering, chaos-reducing, nomizing role that nearly all discussions of the relationship between religion and society have emphasized. A significant aspect of that ordering role is assisting communities as well as individuals in coming to terms with the exigencies of life, particularly death and the fear of death as well as bereavement and suffering. Although specific threats, such as death from a contagious disease, may be dealt with, there is also likely to be ambiguity and indeed spillover such that dangers are mapped onto one another and blended. The blending of danger from illness, frontier life, and racial differences is particularly powerful in its religious and cultural implications.

Another connection between religion and its social environment involves efforts to define and combat evil. Religion does this through theological arguments. Preaching and teaching informs the faithful about the presence of evil and tells how to avoid it. Sometimes the arguments identify people of other races and ethnicities as singularly dangerous. Religion also combats evil by building institutions. The hope of advancing a more civilized social order in newly settled places, for example, is pursued by founding places of worship, schools, and benevolent associations. Those efforts take place amid an awareness that evil exists outside of these institutions and continues to threaten them.

For its part, institution building creates heroes and villains about whom stories are told and who serve as positive or negative role models for future generations. Fallen soldiers, great leaders, cowboys, and wildcat oil drillers may be among the most familiar heroes and villains, but circuit riders, poorly educated frontier preachers, school teachers, and even victims of lynch mobs may be among them as well. These heroes and villains provide personified symbols of larger themes, such as the value of being a free spirit or of contributing to the development of one’s community.

The interplay among specific religious beliefs and practices and these wider themes includes a prevailing tension between the roughness of lived experience, especially in new settlements on the open frontier, and aspirations for a more civilized society in which danger from violence and disease is reduced and moral
behavior is rewarded. The interplay includes a recurring ambivalence especially among the white population about the roles that African Americans are expected to play, ranging from subservience to cooperation to self-improvement. A further interplay casts regional independence and personal autonomy against national identity and incorporation. The shifting definition of the region itself in relation to the United States, Mexico, the North, South, and Southwest emerges as a continuing theme.

Although the story of the place we call Texas could begin with Spanish explorers in the sixteenth century or with indigenous people considerably earlier, the narrative in which the state’s influence as an emerging power in the American Bible Belt dominates begins much later. After the scattered settlements established there by Americans from other states in the 1820s, and following the victory at San Jacinto that led to independence in 1836, eastern Texas attracted a steady stream of settlers in the 1840s and 1850s. With statehood in 1846, the population reached 212,592 in 1850 and then climbed to 604,215 by the 1860s. Having been settled largely by residents from the Deep South and having relied heavily on slavery to develop its growing cotton industry, Texas joined the Confederacy and with the rest of the South experienced the Civil War and Reconstruction in ways that would long shape its self-perception. Especially during Reconstruction and in the years immediately following, a new relationship between blacks and whites, and between religion and politics, was formed that would influence much that was to come.

Three themes in particular become evident in these years. For the white population, religious involvement is not only a source of assurance about eternal salvation but also a reliable means of attaining and demonstrating respectability. That is especially true among families who are or who aspire to be regarded as members of the respected middle class. For the black population, religion is more clearly a means of dealing with insecurity and making sense of suffering. That is also true for those among the white population who have fewer resources. Neither theme is particularly surprising or by any means unique. Both are themes that have been evident before and that will remain in other locations. But on the emerging frontier and with the aftereffects of war far from settled, there is a third theme which is best expressed in the observation that nearly everything is rough: the land is rough, earning a living is rough, the people are rough, even the preachers are rough. What to make of this roughness, and how to overcome it, are the most basic questions of everyday life.

During the quarter century from around 1870 to 1895, the struggle to overcome roughness gains expression largely through efforts to define and restrain evil. Nearly every firsthand account during this period, whether from newspaper stories or from letters and diaries, speaks of troubling, violent, and even catastrophic events. Neighbors are killed, women are raped, bad weather destroys crops, and people die from typhoid and yellow fever. The word that appears again and again is outrage. Innocent citizens have been the victims of outrage.
committed against them by Union soldiers or by federal agents during Recon-
struction. Outrage has been committed against white women, reports declare, by
surly, dark-skinned bucks. Indian raids periodically effect outrage among settlers
on the new frontier. It is this sense of outrage, either as having happened to one's
family or neighbors or as an imminent threat, that stands always in the back-
ground as people seek ways to restrain evil through their beliefs, their efforts to
build churches, and their attempts to gain social control.

By the end of the nineteenth century, these efforts have achieved sufficient
success that a new kind of individualism is evident. This individualism is pos-
sible because of the social institutions that have been successfully established.
It differs from the ragged individualism usually associated with life on the open
plains or with the rugged cowboy spirit so often associated with the region. It is
of course resonant with the emphasis on personal salvation that has always been
central to American Protestant Christianity. But now it is more nearly the kind
of personal ethic that Alexis de Tocqueville argued was needed when he visited
America in the 1830s and hoped would become more pervasive as American
democracy progressed. He called it individualism rightly understood. It com-
bined the pursuit of individual self-interest with an appropriate level of self-
restraint oriented toward the common good. It was, as many of Tocqueville's in-
terpreters were to suggest in later years, an ethical commitment instilled in the
conscience of good citizens. However, what closer inspection of the evidence
shows is that it also required a framework of established and reliable institu-
tions. Right-minded individualism depended on knowing that one's property
was protected by law, that one's children could better themselves by attending
local schools, and that there were opportunities to be pursued in business and
the professions. In religion, this is the social context in which personal piety
increasingly comes to focus on leading an orderly and productive life in the
present world.

As religious and civic institutions expanded, the emerging understanding
of individual responsibility necessarily posed questions about the relationships
among these institutions. In particular, there were questions about the appro-
priate role of clergy in relation to government, and about how best to ensure
individual liberty while maintaining a desired level of social order. The resources
available for working out the answers to these questions are invariably present in
the founding myths of a nation, or in the case of Texas, in its myths of origin as a
republic. The watchword was liberty: liberty of conscience, liberty from tyranny,
and liberty from religious authority. And yet it included respect for certain inter-
pretations of that authority. It was significant that the region's dominant religion
was Baptist, and that Baptists could look to a tradition that called for strict sepa-
ration of church and state. But it was also significant that the region could point
to a time when the Roman Catholic Church had prevailed under Mexican rule
and that a growing share of the population was Catholic. As the national strength
of the Democratic Party increasingly depended not only on the Protestant South
but also on the votes of Catholics in northern cities, these traditions required new thinking and redefinition.

Against the backdrop of anti-Catholicism and concerns about the shifting role of African Americans, Texas became the home of white fundamentalist preachers who fought evolution and modernist theology by inveighing against it from large urban pulpits and in the state legislature. Important as they were in founding and growing new congregations, they were more influential in pulling the large Baptist and Methodist denominations that dominated the state to the right. There was reason to believe that Texas was part of the fundamentalist belt even though the rubric did not quite fit the reality. Fundamentalism here was more politically active than in many parts of the country, and it was a significant force in the rise of premillennial dispensational theology.

By 1936, when Texas celebrated the centennial of its independence, America was in the throes of the Great Depression. Parts of Texas were suffering from the same drouth that resulted in the Dust Bowl and caused sharecroppers to emigrate to California, while other segments of the population were faring reasonably well because of the expanding oil industry. As was true in northern cities, the African American population was increasingly relocating from small towns and rural areas to urban locations. Dallas and Houston were well on their way toward becoming large cities. The understanding of how blacks and whites should interact was changing but also reflected earlier misgivings and racial prejudice, as well as notions about freedom of conscience and moral uplift. The legacy of lynching that had been present for so many years continued even more prominently in Texas than in many other locations. White church leaders quietly deplored the practice but said little in public. They preferred to think that separate black churches and schools were best for everyone. Jim Crow laws solidified and postponed for a later generation what would be needed to protest effectively against them.

Having been identified in the 1920s as part of the fundamentalist belt and then in the 1930s as a significant location of America’s Bible Belt, Texas came increasingly to be linked in popular mythology and in reality to northern evangelical Protestants. After World War II these linkages intensified in conjunction with trade, population growth, and the nation’s growing dependence on oil and gas. This was the context in which Texas abandoned its Reconstruction-born loyalty to the Democratic Party by voting for Dwight Eisenhower in 1952 and 1956 and setting the stage for the closely contested race in 1960 between Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy, with Kennedy choosing Lyndon Baines Johnson as his running mate. With national influence already having risen, Texas came suddenly to the forefront with Kennedy’s assassination in 1963 and LBJ’s succession to the White House.

Other than Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., no person played a more pivotal role in the civil rights movement than LBJ. It fell to his leadership to pass the federal civil rights legislation that institutionalized much of what the movement
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had championed. It was his administration as well that evoked the considerable backlash between 1964 and 1968, first from those on the right who opposed the civil rights movement and the Great Society legislation, and then from those on the left who opposed the Vietnam War. New arguments about the nation’s moral decline brought religion increasingly into partisan political debates. Through these dramatic and often conflicting developments, the changing configurations of race, religion, and regional politics could also be seen. Slowly a new awareness of their potential role in local and national affairs became apparent among white and black religious leaders alike.

Mobilization and division about how best to achieve racial integration grew in intensity with the black power movement at the end of the 1960s. The period is particularly instructive in illuminating the social factors facilitating and inhibiting alliances among African American clergy through congregations and civil rights organizations with local and state public officials. Chicano activism emerged as well, bringing questions about possibilities of support and opposition from Catholic leaders to the forefront as never before.

At first blush the line separating the progressive politics of the civil rights movement from the conservative Reagan-era politics of the 1980s could not be more distinct. However, a closer look at what was taking place in Texas illuminates a connection that was generally overlooked but also important in many other locations. Religious leaders who had for decades argued for strict separation of church and state, and indeed who knew the dangers locally of speaking too forthrightly about social and political issues, came increasingly to think differently about their role in public life. This was true of the few white clergy from theologically liberal denominations in the North that went south to participate directly in the civil rights movement. Less apparent was the fact that other clergy, including ones who were against the movement or indifferent to it, also decided that it was appropriate to speak out. White clergy who never would have imagined taking an active role in political events learned that it was possible and even desirable to do so. In Texas they also found role models in community activists working among farm laborers and with Hispanic immigrants. When concerns among conservative clergy about abortion, gender equality, and homosexuality moved to center stage, ideas about clergy activism were already in place.

Nowhere was the campaign for a moral America that took place in the 1970s and 1980s more seriously undertaken or with as far-reaching consequences as in Texas. The two Virginians who became the national symbols of moral conservatism—Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson—came and went without ever exerting much influence beyond their own evangelistic empires. But the efforts in Texas that observers there at the time recognized contributed significantly, despite resistance, to the triumph of the more conservative faction within the Southern Baptist Convention and to Ronald Reagan’s successful southern strategy for the presidency in 1980 and the eventual success of two presidents named George Bush. It mattered that Texas was a large state with significant electoral
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clout. It also mattered that white conservative Protestants were well organized and numerically dominant. Much of the mobilization that occurred among conservative religious leaders was connected through a growing perception that the federal government was an enemy and that conservatives were a political category with increasing potential to influence elections.

With all that has been written about the Religious Right and its role in opposing abortion and homosexuality, surprisingly little attention has been given to the connection between these efforts and fiscal conservatism. And yet the argument that taxes were too high and that welfare spending should be reduced was a strong theme among the opponents of LBJ’s Great Society legislation in the mid-1960s, and there was some evidence that it carried implicit, if not overt, connotations of continuing prejudice among white voters against African Americans. It was a theme Ronald Reagan honed in campaigning for Barry Goldwater in 1964 and that became particularly prominent in Reagan’s campaign for the presidency in 1980. Texans prided themselves on fiscal conservatism, pointing especially to the fact that they had no state income tax and frequently arguing that private charity was better anyway than expensive public programs. George H. W. Bush raising taxes after promising not to was widely regarded as a reason for his defeat for reelection in 1992 against Bill Clinton, and fiscal conservatism was one of the appeals voiced loudly and frequently by Texan H. Ross Perot in his third-party bid in that campaign. All this served as background for the theme of compassionate conservatism that emerged in the late 1990s during the governorship of George W. Bush, and that became a feature of the Bush administration’s national emphasis on faith-based community initiatives.

Another theme that became part of the Reagan legacy and carried through the two Bush administrations was the idea that small government is best. Although the scope and cost of federal government grew steadily under these administrations, the rhetoric was, as Reagan had said in his first inaugural address, that government is not the solution, government is the problem. By 2008, with war costs and federal debt spiraling, and Barack Obama becoming the nation’s first African American president, the stage was set for libertarian champions of small government to reemerge under the banner of Tea Party activism. Among its advocates was conservative Texas governor Rick Perry, who on at least one occasion made headlines by suggesting that if things did not shape up in Washington, Texas might just secede. While the Tea Party’s eventual role in national politics remained uncertain, its appeal again evoked questions that had been asked before. What is the relationship between faith and politics? Between conservative faith and conservative politics? Between race and faith?

Because these are recurring questions does not mean they should be asked each time in the same way. The relationship of race and politics has of course been examined again and again, usually with the results showing that white and black Americans hold different views of government and accordingly vote differently much of the time. How the Hispanic electorate behaves is of more recent
interest and has proven to be less predictable. Religion’s role in American politics has been monitored with growing interest since the rise of the Religious Right in the 1980s and has generally been expressed in evidence that white conservative evangelical Protestants and conservative Catholics vote Republican. Race enters the picture in treatments of religion mostly through discussions of black churches as historically separate institutions.

What I have tried to do here is to complicate the story by examining how the policies and social orientations of white conservative Christians were influenced, inadvertently, implicitly, or explicitly, by the presence of racial and ethnic divisions in their communities. This is not to suggest that racial and ethnic relations were always the decisive considerations, but to acknowledge that those relations could seldom be ignored. Nor was it the case that dominance and discrimination were always the prevailing motivations, although they certainly were at times. The evil that white settlers sought to restrain on the open frontier was stoked by fears of black insurrection and by violence committed by whites and blacks against each other. Outrage was a crime that carried racial and ethnic connotations. Lynching clearly did. Less obvious but equally important was the view that racially separate churches, each promoting individual moral uplift, were the best way to effect racial harmony. White Protestant leaders could safely refrain from becoming directly involved in politics because the dominant party was seldom challenged. Changing all that resulted in new roles for clergy. It also provoked new concerns about morality, welfare spending, and the size of government.

Texas is a location in which these complicated relationships among religion, race and ethnicity, and politics repeatedly came into sharp relief. But it is not unique. If Texas has a distinctive history, its history is thoroughly a part of America’s story. If Texas is large, that is all the more reason to understand that it is inextricably entwined with the nation. Texas is one of the nation’s centers of conservative religion. That does not imply that its political or economic influence can be understood only as an expression of its churches or that the Bible Belt functions differently there. It does imply that insight about America can be found within its borders and in the connections that transcend them.

The freedom that Nicholas and Anton Riedel cherished as Texas immigrants in 1845 was about religious liberty as well as economic and political opportunity. In their community the first worship services were held at an outdoor meeting on Good Friday. A Protestant church was founded that welcomed the faithful of all denominations, and soon afterward a Catholic church began as well. A visitor in 1854 found that many of the original settlers had moved on and been replaced by more recent immigrants who cultivated small farms, tended shops, raised large families, and attended the Protestant or Catholic church. But outside of town was a wealthy landlord who owned a hundred slaves. The visitor wondered if the community’s commitment to freedom would prevail. “Will this spirit resist the progress of slavery westward,” he wrote, “or must it be gradually lost as the community in which it now exists becomes familiar with slavery?”