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Frank Lambert: Religion in American Politics: A Short History

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From the birth of the republic, religion and politics have operated most of the time in separate spheres. Fearing sectarian strife in a society characterized by religious pluralism, delegates to the Constitutional Convention in 1787 opted against a federal religious establishment, giving the government no power over religion and religion no official role in the state. Indeed, one of the exceptional features of the American Revolution was the separation of church and state. Separation did not, however, mean that religion was regarded as unimportant in the new nation; on the contrary, many deemed it to have a mission far more important than that of politics. Samuel Williams, pastor of the First Church in Bradford, Massachusetts, discussed the proper place of religion and the delicate relationship between the church and civil society in a 1779 sermon. He declared that “religion is a *private* thing.” It was, in his words, a “personal transaction between God and a devout soul,” and he added, “society can have nothing to do with it.”¹ Until 1965, Jerry Falwell, the Lynchburg, Virginia, Baptist minister who helped make the Religious Right a political force in the 1970s, expressed similar sentiments. “Preachers are not called upon to be politicians,” he insisted, “but soul winners. Nowhere are we commissioned to reform the externals.”²

However, religion does have, and always has had, a public dimension. In that same sermon in 1779, Williams asserted that

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“religion is also a *public* concern.” More pointedly, he asserted that the Christian religion is “well adapted to do the most essential service to Civil society” through its moral teachings.³ Most of the time, religious influence is exerted primarily in the private sphere, within the walls of churches, synagogues, and mosques, and within families of the faithful. But as religion shapes individual character and moral development, it thereby influences public affairs, albeit in an indirect way. Through moral instruction, religion informs the values, priorities, and decisions of citizens and officeholders as they enter the voting booth and the statehouse. On occasion, such as when Falwell mobilized his Moral Majority, religious groups become more directly involved in the political process. At those times, they behave much like other interest groups. They lobby Congress to enact or oppose specific legislation, participate in electoral politics on behalf of candidates who support their agendas, and offer the full range of their institutional resources to sympathetic political parties.

One early instance of religious involvement in politics began on July 4, 1827, when Ezra Stiles Ely addressed a patriotic crowd gathered at the Seventh Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. A prominent Calvinist minister in the city, Ely was sorely displeased with the republic’s godless drift in recent years, and he blamed the nation’s immorality on its leaders, men given to secular freethinking, deism, and Christian heterodoxy. He was active in a campaign led by the major Protestant denominations to overturn the 1810 federal law mandating Sunday mail service, an act that to him underscored the country’s moral decline. In Ely’s eyes, the problem and its solution were evident: a “Christian nation” was being led by un-Christian men, and Christian voters must elect Christian legislators and executives. He stated his case clearly: “We are a Christian nation: we have a right to demand that all our rulers in their

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conduct shall conform to Christian morality; and if they do not, it is the duty and privilege of Christian freemen to make a new and a better election.” To mobilize Christians and return the nation to its religious foundation, Ely proposed “a new sort of union, or, if you please, a Christian party in politics.” He insisted that his was no pipe dream, that Presbyterians alone could deliver a half million votes, and if the Baptists, Methodists, and Congregationalists joined the new party, they could restore America’s Christian heritage.⁴

Reaction to Ely’s call was swift and largely negative. Predictably, “freethinkers,” as secularists of the day were known, opposed the scheme for a Christian Party. But so did many Christians, who viewed it as a threat to religious liberty. “The cry of war is already sounded by the enemies of our religious freedom,” trumpeted the Universalist magazine *Olive Branch*, adding, “It is time the lines were drawn between the friends and enemies of a national religious establishment.” Many evangelicals, including some of his fellow Presbyterians, also spoke out against Ely’s “immoderate” stance and called his plan a blatant sectarian attempt “to obtain civil domination.”⁵

The most recent manifestation of a religious coalition’s concerted effort to shape American politics is the rise of the Religious Right. Reacting to what many conservative evangelicals thought was an assault on American moral values during the 1960s, Reverend Jerry Falwell organized the Moral Majority in the 1970s and called for like-minded Christians to “take back” the country from secular humanists who ran the government. They decried court decisions banning prayer in public schools and denounced the judicial imposition of a “wall” separating church and state that had the effect of virtually removing religion from the public square. But the issue that galvanized religious conservatives more than any other was the Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade* (1973) declaring unconstitutional

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most laws prohibiting abortion and making the decision to terminate a pregnancy the mother's choice. Through effective use of the Internet and cable television, the Religious Right energized millions of conservative evangelicals who had long shunned electoral politics, believing that their focus should be on eternal spiritual matters, not transitory things of this earth. Falwell's Moral Majority became the heart of what Richard Nixon had envisioned as a "Silent Majority" of Americans who were fed up with "liberal" social policies that trampled on traditional family values. Much of the GOP's recent success, beginning with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, can be accounted for by the Religious Right's energetic participation.

The rise of the Religious Right as a political force has attracted much scholarly attention. Indeed, the impressive literature on religion and politics in the United States over the past twenty-five years has focused primarily on the post-World War II period with special attention given to the politicization of religion embodied in the Religious Right.⁶ Scholars portray the period as unique in the history of religion in American politics, a dramatic break with past religious excursions in politics. Sociologist of religion and director of the Center for the Study of Religion at Princeton University Robert Wuthnow sees the postwar period as the "restructuring" of American religion, a transformation that has altered the way religious groups engage the public on moral issues. Among the major changes he cites is the emergence of "big government" with its enormous social, educational, and medical programs that meet needs formerly satisfied by religious organizations. Thus, increasingly, religious groups must engage in the political process in order to carry out their mission of serving the poor and aiding the afflicted, and to ensure that government policies conform to moral principles. Moreover, Wuthnow notes the breakdown of religious denominations that used to be the major vehicles of public

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expression and action; more recently these have been replaced by larger coalitions organized around ideology, seen in the emergence of the Religious Right—and, in opposition to the Right, the reemergence of the Religious Left.⁷

While acknowledging the restructuring of American religion, this book takes a longer look at the question of religion in American politics, that is, one with a broader chronological sweep. Viewing religion in politics in historical terms, it begins with the birth of the republic in the late eighteenth century and examines the intersection of religion and politics at several moments throughout the nation's history up to the present. Though discontinuity is evident in the changing composition of the religious culture over time and in the receptivity of political parties to religious agendas, so is continuity. Change in historical and social contexts is inevitable, and those changes must be detailed to frame specific attempts by religious groups to reshape the country's political and cultural direction. But while religious agendas differ according to particular social changes defined by a historical moment, certain religious claims and moral visions recur. Though separated by more than a century and a half and operating in vastly different contexts, both Ely and Falwell made the same claim that America was a Christian nation, and that their coalitions represented moral visions rooted in that claim.

The political movements inspired by Ely and Falwell and the opposition they sparked illustrate the two main arguments of this book. The first is that religious coalitions seek by political means what the Constitution prohibits, namely, a national religious establishment, or, more specifically, a *Christian* civil religion. Religious groups become politically active because of their dissatisfaction with prevailing public policy. In some instances, such as those which motivated Ely and Falwell, the federal government, through specific legislation and court deci-

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sions, seems to be leading the country away from its religious heritage and moral foundation. In others, such as the rise of the social gospel movement in the late nineteenth century and the civil rights movement in the mid-twentieth century, it is the inaction of the government to deal with social injustice that stirs religious groups to political activism. Whatever the grievance, politically active religious groups are inspired by a particular vision of America as a Christian nation. Some, like the Religious Right, want to restore the country to its Christian origins. Others, like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s organization during the civil rights movement, want America to become in fact the Christian nation that it has never been. Depending upon their particular notions of the nation's religious heritage, religious groups develop moral agendas that become the centerpieces of their political campaigns. They then must find a political party willing to adopt their agendas and find candidates who will embrace their values and express their visions. On occasion, as in the case of Ely, they attempt to operate as a separate party; more often, as in the case of Falwell, they work within an existing political party.

The book's second argument is that religion in American politics is contested. That is, any religious group's attempt to represent the nation's religious heritage or claim to be its moral conscience is sure to be met with opposition from other religious groups as well as from nonreligious parties. In American political culture, religion matters, and politicians often recognize its influence by invoking the name of God in public addresses. However, any reference to a particular religion, such as a presidential candidate's speaking in the name of Christ, is viewed as sectarian. Further, some construe as partisan any religious group's pronouncements on public affairs, no matter if couched in universal language. Pluralism explains part of the

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resentment. Each religious body has its own notions concerning public and private morality and is against claims purporting to represent all people of faith. Religious individualism also plays a role. Some persons embrace the idea that religion is strictly a private concern and, therefore, corporate religious statements have no place in the public square. Thomas Jefferson was of that mind, declaring himself to be of a “sect by myself,” a sentiment shared by Thomas Paine, who avowed, “My mind is my own church.”⁸

While powerful and persistent in shaping the nation’s culture, religion is not the only influence on morals. Secular notions and material interests exert enormous influence on the nation’s political culture, and often they collide with religious agendas. Science, for instance, offers hope for medical breakthroughs in stem-cell research, research that transgresses the moral teachings of some religious groups. And merchants offer consumers ever-expanding choices that promise to satisfy every conceivable appetite, including those that some religions deem sinful. The result is sometimes a clash between the country’s secular laws, which reflect the tenets of liberal capitalism and the free exchange of goods, and the “higher laws” that religious groups cite to condemn certain goods and services offered in the marketplace. As the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville observed in the 1830s, “the law permits the American people to do everything, religion prevents them from conceiving everything and forbids them to dare everything.”⁹ Thus, in a secular and material culture that emphasizes individual liberty and freedom of choice, religious moral codes that threaten liberty or restrict choice face certain opposition.

Questions of religion and politics in the United States date to the birth of the republic. In 1776, delegates to state constitutional conventions debated such fundamental issues as government support of churches and rights of dissenters, and nowhere

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were these matters more hotly contested than in Virginia. Patrick Henry and James Madison staked out the positions that framed the debate and still account for the contention surrounding religion in American politics. As a member of the Virginia House of Delegates, Henry in 1784 opposed the establishment of the Episcopal Church, as some had advocated, as a violation of the “liberal principle” that animated the new republic, but he thought it wise for the state to support the “Christian Religion”: not any particular sect, but Christianity in general. He believed that despite sectarian differences all Christians could agree on the fundamental principles of Christianity, and that those principles constituted the moral foundation of republican virtue. Madison demurred, opposing the proposal on the grounds that Christianity could not be defined to the satisfaction of all. There were numerous sects in pluralistic America, he argued, and they disagreed with each other on basic assumptions of faith and practice. What authority defined Christianity, he asked? Was it the Bible, and if so, which edition and what translation? Within the Bible, which books were deemed to be canonical and which apocryphal? And whose interpretation of those sacred writings should prevail: the Trinitarian’s, the Socinian’s, the Arian’s? A worse prospect inherent in Henry’s scheme, Madison thought, was what might happen if Christians could not agree on a common definition of their faith. Then the matter would fall to the government, and who in government, he wondered, would determine its meaning as a guide for ordering civil society. Would it be legislatures or judges or magistrates?¹⁰

With the 1785 passage of the Virginia Act for Religious Freedom, Madison’s position prevailed in Virginia and became the model for the federal constitution as well: no religious establishment of any kind and freedom of religion as a right that government cannot abridge. For Madison, the new republic’s

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religious pluralism, if unfettered by government interference, would contribute to a moral society while at the same time guaranteeing religious liberty. He reasoned that myriad competing sects would vigorously promote their own interests, and would in the process spread religion to every man, woman, and child, while checking ambitions of any rival group that might attempt to foist its views on the whole. Patrick Henry remained unconvinced. He feared that left to voluntary support, religion would languish, to the detriment of society. Better, he argued, that the public support religion. He had a different view of religious pluralism; he believed that the various sects shared common Christian beliefs that could form the basis of a Christian establishment. Religious groups purporting to speak for “Christian America” subscribe to Henry’s vision as they seek to shape public policy according to their moral agendas. Those who oppose them claim, as Madison did, that there is no agreed-upon “Christian America,” and that representations of the nation as such are partisan.

Social scientists and historians often express surprise that religion persists as a topic of public debate in the United States. Foreign observers in particular are astonished that Americans, whom they regard as the most materialistic people on earth, are at the same time so openly spiritual and express their spiritual concerns in politics. Further, they are perplexed at seeing religion and politics so enmeshed in a country committed to the doctrine of separation of church and state. Part of the explanation lies in the theoretical lens through which they view American politics. Embracing secularization theory as an explanatory framework, they conclude that when society becomes more secular—as manifested by a powerful, expansive state, a vigorous capitalist economy, and a supreme confidence in science—religion is relegated to the private sphere, becoming the keeper of traditions that have little if any impact on modern culture.

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But that theory fails to account for the continued vitality of religion in the United States, as attested to by rising rates of church adherence, and the vigor with which religious groups pursue their agendas through political means. An alternative framework, and the one that informs this book's investigation, is the theory of religious economy. According to this sociological perspective, the presence of a multitude of religious groups, each free to pursue its own moral vision and each relying only on its own members for support, ensures a vigorous competition among those groups. To attract and retain members, they appeal to a variety of interests and tastes and employ innovative strategies for recruiting new devotees. In recent years, we have seen the rise of so-called megachurches located in suburban communities and offering an optimistic message, music with a rock beat, and social and educational opportunities for all ages. Many of these churches, often aligned with the Religious Right, make full use of cable television and the Internet to reach a wide audience. Those same tools prove to be effective means of mobilizing the faithful behind specific public policy initiatives and particular candidates for office.

This brief history explores religion in American politics by examining some of the public moments when religion and politics have intersected. Organized chronologically, it attempts to capture the circumstances and character of religious activism within particular historical periods. Each of the eight chapters examines moral issues within specific contexts, an exploration that addresses the character and composition of the prevailing religious pluralism, the coalition or coalitions that emerge to give voice to a moral vision in the political arena, and the political expression of that vision. The book begins at the founding of the republic with the question of the optimal role of religion in American public life, and ends in the twenty-first century

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with moral questions debated by the Religious Right and the Religious Left.

Anyone writing on religion and politics must begin with clear definitions. In this book religion is defined as a set of beliefs in a transcendent God, grounded in an authoritative sacred text, and expressed by a body of believers through the performance of certain rituals and adherence to a specific moral code. It is not used in a broad functional sense in which anything that demands one's devotion counts as religion, such as nationalism or even fashion; the belief in a transcendent god must be at the center. Politics is defined as both the process that establishes priorities, formulates policies, and allocates resources among competing interests, and the political culture that informs the underlying assumptions, beliefs, and values of voters and politicians. This book examines how religion engages in the political process in pursuit of specific policy and electoral outcomes, and how it shapes the political culture as well.

Meanings also change over time. For example, the phrase "Christian America" has resonated differently to a range of groups at various times. In the early nineteenth century it meant "Protestant America" or, more specifically, "Evangelical America." As Catholics became a major presence in American religion in the late 1800s, "Christian America" for some took on a more expansive meaning to include all Christians, including Catholics. However, fundamentalists narrowed the meaning in the early twentieth century, insisting that "Christian" meant subscribing to a number of specific beliefs. As the country grew more secular in the twentieth century, some religious conservatives redefined "Christian America" to mean "Judeo-Christian" or "theistic" America as opposed to "secular" or "nontheistic" America. In its latest meaning, "Christian America" is a contested term debated by the Religious Right and the Religious Left.

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Religious groups themselves are often conflicted over what they are called. Consider the term “evangelical.” For some, it is a broad designation for all Protestants whose faith centers on the Bible and whose mission is to “win souls” for Christ. In that sense, it has come to include all those groups outside “mainline” Protestantism, the phrase used to characterize older, more traditional denominations such as Episcopalians, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians. However, many evangelicals are uncomfortable with being lumped with “fundamentalists,” who insist that only those subscribing to certain fundamentals of faith can be properly designated Christian. Recently, evangelical leaders have debated whether evangelicalism should be “a big tent, open to more divergent views, or a smaller, purer theology.” And politics complicates the issue. Evangelicals are divided over such questions as whether they should engage in activism concerning global warming and immigration, or whether they should retreat from politics altogether.¹¹

The presence of a wide spectrum of religious groups in the United States poses an additional challenge for the student of religion and politics. Though not every group is active in the political process, all have views concerning public matters. However, the goal of writing a brief treatment of the subject precludes any attempt to be inclusive. Rather, the aim here is to identify the major coalitions that claim to speak for religion in politics. Such a strategy runs the risk of distorting the positions of individuals and specific groups. For instance, fundamentalists are subsumed in this book under the heading “Religious Right” or “religious conservatives” though we know that fundamentalists do not constitute a monolithic bloc. The labels used herein are by and large political tags that come out of historical engagements, such as that between modernists and fundamentalists. Locked in battle over rival claims, each side has been quick to label the other and ascribe certain views to

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it. Further, each side has pigeonholed whole groups of people into one faction or the other, regardless of whether the designation fit or was accurate.

The individuals and groups highlighted in this book are drawn predominantly from the Christian faith, and, more specifically, from Protestant Christianity. This selection does not minimize the contributions of non-Christians and non-Protestants in political contests; rather, it reflects the historical predominance of Protestants in the nation's religious heritage and their claims to speak for that heritage. Because Protestantism prevailed at the nation's founding, Protestants are most likely to demand that voters restore America as a "Christian nation."