

Religious Interests in Community  
Conflict

*Beyond the Culture Wars*

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Editors

BAYLOR UNIVERSITY PRESS

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## Toward a Fuller Understanding of Religion and Politics

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Religion and politics have been profoundly intertwined in the United States since before the founding of the republic, despite constitutional prohibitions against state intervention in religious matters. Religious interest groups lobby government alongside secular interest groups. Political candidates target specific religious constituencies for their votes. Clergy speak out on key issues of the day. The heavy religious overtones of the 2004 presidential campaigns again highlighted the important role of religion in the practice of American politics (Green, Smidt, Guth, and Kellstedt 2004; Pew Forum 2004). Much scholarly and popular attention has been rightfully paid to the macro-level relationship between religion and politics. Religion and politics, however, intersect just as profoundly at the local level as they do on the national stage—and over similar issues. The growing religion and politics literature has barely explored the specific nature of these local-level interactions, even though a local milieu would allow researchers greater perspective and validity in making causal claims. This is the approach we utilize in this volume.

Our project represents a systematic attempt to explore the political motivations, effectiveness, and interplay of organized religious interests as they confront public policy problems in their local communities. In other words, we are concerned with the degree of *representation* of religious interests in political conflicts. Accordingly, three guiding questions unite the volume's chapters. First, what motivates organized religious interests to confront public problems? Second,

do religious interests cooperate with one another to confront public problems, and what barriers exist that might hinder them from doing so? Third, how effective are religious interests when they choose to confront public problems?

Motivated by both substantive and theoretical concerns, we have assembled an expert team of authors to explore the extent to which religious groups involve themselves in different types of community political debates. Each chapter offers an illustrative case study of a different policy problem in a different community. Significantly, each chapter is organized tightly around a common outline and we urged contributors to be as inclusive of religious interests as possible. With this common design, we are able to maximize the cumulative impact of our case studies and enhance our understanding of religion and politics in the United States. Thus, in the concluding chapter, we integrate the insights offered by the substantive chapters to comment on the extant theories of religion's effect on political behavior. We also offer a general theoretical interpretation of how religion and politics intersect at the community level.

Toward the goal of creating a meta-analysis in the concluding chapter, the case studies presented in the volume are designed to constitute a *de facto* sample including communities with diversity on several variables of interest. We include investigations of some of the most visible hot-button issues in American politics today, including gay marriage and race relations, along with ongoing concerns that sometimes fly below the mass media's radar, such as health care and homelessness. The chapters investigate a diverse range of communities, including those in which one faith dominates (such as Salt Lake City) and those which have considerable religious diversity (such as Cincinnati). The communities studied also span the gamut from rural to urban and are located in all major regions of the continental United States.

We are especially interested in the extent to which the full range of religious interests either comes together to address the issue of concern, or fails to do so. We are, therefore, interested in the concept of ecumenism—or the formal practice of working together across ecclesiastical dividing lines. This volume is not, however, merely a study of ecumenical cooperation. We are just as interested in circumstances characterized by a lack of cooperation among religious actors, and the cases presented in these chapters reflect both ecumenism and a lack thereof.

The volume itself is organized around four substantive themes: religion in the public square, social justice, race relations, and moral concerns. These substantive themes capture the diversity of issues about which organized religious interests have tended to express greatest concern in the past several decades. Each chapter is an investigation of an individual issue that falls under one of these broad rubrics of public discourse.

### The Study of Religion and Politics in the United States

Research on the role of religion in American politics has proceeded along a wide range of avenues that tend to head off in different directions. One of the more interesting facets of the study of religion and politics in the United States is its diversity. Scholars conceive of “interests” at the individual, group, and governmental levels: citizens, clergy, churches, denominations, public interest groups, peak associations of denominations, elected officials, and others. Of course, this diversity is a blessing as well as a curse since it encourages us to understand one actor at a time.

Scholars have debated the extent to which the framers of the Constitution wished to establish a Christian nation; related questions about the meaning of the separation of church and state in the United States keep many constitutional experts busy (Dreisbach 2003; Jelen and Wilcox 1995; Witte 2005). A small body of literature also explores the effect of religion on the behavior of contemporary political elites (Benson and Williams 1982; Layman 2001; Legee, Wald, Krueger, and Mueller 2002; Oldmixon 2005). Meanwhile, scholars have noted that both voting behavior (Deckman 2004; Green, Guth, Smidt, and Kellstedt 1996; Green, Rozell, and Wilcox 2000, 2003; Guth and Green 1991; Kellstedt, Guth, Green, and Smidt 1994; Kohut, Green, Keeter, and Toth 2000; Layman 2001; Rozell and Wilcox 1995, 1997) and public opinion on key sociomoral issues are informed by religious beliefs (Byrnes and Segers 1992; Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox 1992; Deckman 2004; Green et al. 1996; Hunter 1991; Jelen 1995; Kohut et al. 2000; Layman 2001; Layman and Green 2005). Another strand highlights religious contexts, typically in churches, which have been shown to support political mobilization (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001; Campbell 2004; Djupe and Gilbert 2003; Gilbert 1993; Harris 1999; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Wald, Owen, and Hill 1988, 1990) and the development of social capital and civic

skills (Djupe and Gilbert 2006; Djupe and Grant 2001; Putnam 2000; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).

Studies also have documented the fact that the pluralistic American interest group (Byrnes 1991; Hertzke 1988; Hofrenning 1995; Moen 1992) and social movement (Findlay 1993; Harris 1999; Morris 1984; Zald and McCarthy 1987) universes have long included religious voices among their ranks. Such religious interests span every major religious tradition and offer messages ranging from left-wing calls for social justice to conservative campaigns of the Prohibition era and late twentieth-century, Christian Right politics.

In the late 1960s, a team of prominent sociologists of religion led by Rodney Stark studied California clergy and found that they were not providing a sustained religious witness on the pressing issues of the time: social unrest, such as race riots; the assassinations of prominent religious and political leaders, and the mounting number of casualties in the Vietnam War (Stark, Foster, Glock, and Quinley 1971). This shocking conclusion belied a profound disjuncture between religious and public life in the 1960s. Significant changes have occurred since then as Christian conservatives have been drawn into politics, and the political activity gap between modernist and conservative religious groups has narrowed (Guth, Green, Smidt, Kellstedt, and Poloma 1997; Kohut et al. 2000). Significant events (such as the September 11, 2001, terror attacks and the war in Iraq), contentious issues (such as stem-cell research and gay marriage), and prominent organizations (such as the Republican Party and Bread for the World) continue to encourage religious voices to engage significant public problems.

Under what circumstances might organized religious interests get involved in addressing public problems at the local level and when are their efforts effective? Are religious groups able to work together or are there barriers that prevent cooperation? Researchers have arrived at different answers to these questions over the past several decades. Early research found few clergy willing to take part in politics. Hostile congregations stymied mainline Protestant clergy in Little Rock, Arkansas, when they tried to fight racism in the mid-1950s (Campbell and Pettigrew 1959). Clergy in a mill town in the South in the 1930s were likewise unwilling to take a stand against oppressive working conditions and labor agreements because they were under the economic thumb of the mill operators (Earle, Knudsen, and Shriver 1976; Pope 1942). On the other hand, more recent

illustrations show that religious individuals and interests *are* willing to take a public stand on pressing issues—and evidently with increasing frequency (Crawford and Olson 2001a; Djupe and Gilbert 2003; Guth et al. 1997; Kohut et al. 2000; Olson 2000).

The current volume stems from conversations between the editors through our work and in person, as we attempted to remedy some of the problems with our work and test our conclusions more broadly and convincingly. Building on previous research on the political activity of clergy, Paul Djupe and Christopher Gilbert (2003) suggest a framework of four collections of forces that advance or inhibit clergy participation in public life: personal motivations, congregational resources, denominational culture and mobilization, and community needs. Even so, although Djupe and Gilbert took steps to identify the common connections among religious interests, their study of clergy in just two Christian denominations limits the generalizability of their research and means more studies are needed.

Research with different tacks has also been less than thoroughly satisfying. Laura Olson (2000), for instance, studied the activity of clergy in one city, which provides substantial depth about that case but also significantly limits the generalizability of her conclusions (see also Crawford 1995; Jelen 1993b). James Guth and colleagues (1997) surveyed clergy nationwide in eight denominations, providing them with a large and wide-ranging database. However, they focused exclusively on Protestants and incorporated little information about either clergy's local communities or the relationships they form with clergy of different faiths.

Moreover, individual studies of religious activism overwhelmingly have focused on one type of actor. Several studies examine specific denominations or religious traditions (for example, Byrnes 1991; Djupe and Gilbert 2003; Guth et al. 1997; Harris 1999; Leege 1988; Maisel and Forman 2001) but do not look beyond these ecclesiastical boundaries. Many excellent studies analyze religious interest groups and social movements (Byrnes 1991; Findlay 1993; Harris 1999; Hertzke 1988; Hofrenning 1995) but do not purport to cover the full range of the political activism of religious interests. Scholars tend to study either clergy (Crawford and Olson 2001a; Djupe and Gilbert 2003; Guth et al. 1997; Jelen 1993b) or the mass public (Green et al. 1996; Kellstedt, Green, Guth, and Smidt 1994; Kohut et al. 2000), but very rarely do they examine both (but see Djupe and Gilbert 2006).



While there are sensible reasons to limit the focus of a study to one type of actor at a time, in practice different types of religious actors are knit together to address public problems. The only other volume in the literature that addresses political activism and includes some religious interests at the local level in a systematic way (Sharp 1999) focuses primarily on abortion and gay rights.

The solution, we concluded, was to combine the strengths of all these approaches. By employing numerous community case studies, we multiply the depth that Olson (2000) was able to provide. We include a diversity of faith traditions as did Guth and colleagues (1997). We mandate a multifaceted definition of religious interests to maximize generalizability. Finally, we build upon a framework that can fully test Djupe and Gilbert's (2003) four-pronged theory of religious activism.

### Data Sources and Research Design

The research of this volume has been designed to bolster internal and external validity. To establish internal validity, we explicitly asked each contributor to provide comprehensive coverage of as many different types of religious interests in a community as possible, to use multiple methods, and to use community conflict about a single issue to frame their investigation. The questions of why and how religious interests address each particular conflict, therefore, lie at the center of each chapter. To augment external validity, we include a nearly random selection of issues and communities with high internal validity. Thus, in the concluding chapter, we are able to conduct a meta-analysis that allows us to compose more confident answers to the three core questions that motivate the project.

The value of studying individual communities derives from the rich depth of study that such an approach affords. It is possible to study the full range of organized religious interests in an individual community because it is geographically bounded and because each author is well acquainted with the community under study. The chapters as a group constitute a wide-ranging sample themselves because they include many different political contexts.

Within each of four broad issue rubrics (moral concerns, religion in the public square, social justice, and race relations), our contributors study a diversity of community types: rural and urban communities from different regions of the country. Given the explanatory power that this diversity provides, we have the raw materials to make

more confident conclusions about how organized religious interests work together (or find themselves at loggerheads) in addressing a broad range of public problems.

Moreover, the contributors to this volume employ a wide variety of research methods. Data are drawn from sources as diverse as surveys of clergy and citizens, in-depth interviews with religious leaders and politicians, and archival materials from the news media, religious organizations, and local governments. Although we have been ecumenical about the specific research methods employed by contributors, we explicitly required the authors of each chapter to employ some form of direct observation beyond the written record. Thus, we are able to take advantage of the particular methodological expertise of the contributing authors who have amassed a wealth of data to bear on their questions.

We place great confidence in the conclusions drawn from these community case studies. Validity is achieved primarily through exceptional clarity about the cues to which both researchers and their subjects are responding. For instance, it has been common practice in the study of clergy political activity to ask individual clergy if they have addressed certain issues, such as “race relations,” in the past year (Djupe and Gilbert 2003; Guth et al. 1997; Olson 2000). Yet the exact meaning of an issue like race relations varies significantly from one community to another. Our approach in this volume allows us to move beyond the generalities of the term to three specific instances in which religious interests chose to take action around issues or events in their communities that involved race. In Cincinnati, as Anand Sokhey shows in chapter 9, the concept of race relations is tied specifically to the race riots of April 2001 and their aftermath. In chapter 7, James Guth and colleagues discuss how religious interests engaged the question of celebrating the Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday in Greenville, South Carolina. Meanwhile, Franklyn Niles documents the response of the religious community to a Ku Klux Klan rally in Siloam Springs, Arkansas, in chapter 10. Thus, we are able to illuminate the ways in which religious actors approach the broad and nebulous notion of race relations from three widely divergent contextual perspectives.

Another major strength of our local focus is that it allows the case studies to establish a more comprehensive and reliable sense of what is meant by the phrase “religious involvement in public life.” Many observers talk frequently about the idea that religion is highly

relevant to American politics and American public life, but the specific nature of this involvement is multifaceted and difficult to summarize concisely. As but one illustration of the difficulty inherent in defining “public religion,” consider the fact that America’s preeminent religious historian Martin Marty recently spent several years engaged in a major research project designed specifically to define this term and its parameters (see Blumhofer 2002; Marty 2000).<sup>1</sup> What does political activism of religious interests include? According to the chapters presented in this volume, it consists of activities ranging from protest marches to providing for the needy and from attending city council meetings to facilitating discussion and education groups (and see also Ammerman 2005; Chaves 2004; Wuthnow 2004 for other accounts of the range of such activity in the United States).

Lastly, we can conceptualize our collection of case studies as a sample of interest group systems: governmental jurisdictions in which religious interests pursue their goals interdependently. A focus on systems allows us to engage a growing literature on the study of interest groups that addresses representational patterns (Gray and Lowery 1995; Nownes and Freeman 1998). This linkage will be explored in great depth in the concluding chapter because of the analytical power it provides.

### Looking Ahead

Part 1 of the volume addresses the most visible policy areas in which religious interests engage: moral concerns. In chapter 2, James Penning and Andrew Storteboom examine community conflict over a proposal by the Match-e-be-nash-she-wish Band of Pottawatomie Indians to build a \$100 million casino in a rural, culturally conservative county in southwestern Michigan. Over time, conflict over the casino escalated both in scope and intensity until it involved local, state, and national governments. The chapter examines the roles of various interests and actors in the conflict, focusing in particular on the activities of clergy and churches. The chapter provides insights regarding the role of people of faith in community conflict, the escalation of community conflict, and the impact of federalism on community conflict.

David Damore, Ted Jelen, and Michael Bowers offer the first of two chapters that examine the role religious interests play in battles over gay rights. In chapter 3, Damore and colleagues present an

analysis of Nevada's enactment of an amendment to the state constitution that defines marriage as a union between a man and a woman despite the fact that Nevada's political culture is widely regarded as highly libertarian and individualistic. Many observers attributed the passage of the amendment to the activities of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, a prominent, but by no means dominant, group in Nevada politics. This chapter details the manner in which religious leaders advanced arguments in favor of the amendment in an environment that at first glance would appear hostile to them.

In chapter 4, Paul Djupe, Jacob Neiheisel, and Anand Sokhey examine the role played by religious interests in the battle over another proposed constitutional amendment, this time in Ohio. Addressing scholars' lack of understanding of local-level debate about gay marriage, Djupe and colleagues ask how local clergy inform the opinions of the faithful and the proximate. With whom do clergy and churches align themselves in this fight? Which organizations were active in mobilizing religious interests and which interests did they mobilize? Did clergy deemphasize homosexuality as an issue when their congregations disagreed with them, or did they speak prophetically in an attempt to change hearts and minds?

Part 2 addresses religious interests and their work to address social justice issues. In chapter 5, Sue Crawford explores the quiet work that religious interests have undertaken to address a policy crisis in the absence of an overt community conflict. She tells the story of a coalition that has worked to address health concerns in a rapidly changing urban area. The neighborhood population and the congregational memberships of neighborhood churches include sizable groups of two vulnerable health populations: the elderly and new immigrants. Congregations (represented by clergy) comprise the core of the coalition, but religious health system professionals, religious university professionals, and other nonprofit and neighborhood leaders also participate in the coalition. This chapter illustrates ways in which the work of the local health coalition benefits from ideas developed within broader religious institutions such as seminaries, large health system associations, networks of parish nurses, and the national health ministries association.

Laura Olson investigates a similar midwestern religious coalition in chapter 6, this one designed to address homelessness. For twelve years, the small city of Racine, Wisconsin coped with its burgeoning homeless population through the work of a network of churches that

volunteered to shelter the homeless one night each week. This now-defunct network, which called itself the Racine Emergency Sheltering Taskforce (REST), represented a significant range of religious perspectives, including the dominant faiths of the Upper Midwest (Lutheranism and Catholicism), African-American Protestants, and evangelical Protestants. Because representatives of these churches were not required to meet in the same room with one another, theological conflicts were minimized and true ecumenical cooperation prevailed. This chapter documents the reasons why REST congregations chose to participate in a program that depended almost entirely on their own resources (in terms of volunteers, physical space, and money) and why these congregations were willing to overlook the theological differences that would otherwise have separated them.

Part 3 addresses religious interests and the public square. In chapter 7, James Guth, Lyman Kellstedt, Joshua Copeland, and Christine Rowland investigate a battle in Greenville, South Carolina, over whether to observe the federal and state Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday as a county holiday. The fact that Greenville County was one of the few counties in South Carolina to have offices open and employees working on Martin Luther King Day became the most hotly disputed issue in local politics. Religious organizations played a central role in the struggle, as both African-American and white mainline Protestant churches rallied as never before to put pressure on the Council to adopt the holiday. Part of the community's deeply conservative—and politically powerful—Bob Jones University constituency even supported the creation of an official county holiday. This religious mobilization was matched by the similar activation of key economic and political elites. A Citizens' Study Committee, consisting of leading conservative and liberal activists, produced a compromise proposal with widespread endorsement among community elites, though that was not the end of it.

In chapter 8, Quin Monson and Kara Norman examine another public-square controversy that erupted in Salt Lake City when the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints purchased a section of Main Street from the city (located between the Salt Lake Temple and the LDS Church Administration Building) and converted it to a pedestrian plaza. The chapter outlines the contours of the controversy over free speech on the Main Street Plaza, describing it as emblematic of long-standing cultural and religious divisions between Mormons and non-Mormons in Salt Lake City and other

parts of Utah. As was the case in the Greenville holiday dispute, the settlement of the Salt Lake City controversy was aided in large part by the work of a coalition: the Alliance for Unity, a civic institution that community religious and civic leaders formed to bridge the divide between Mormon and non-Mormon Utahns. This chapter aids our understanding of religion and community conflict by demonstrating the importance of nonreligious institutions in resolving conflicts, especially when religious and governmental institutions lie at the center of the conflict.

Part 4 examines religious interests and race relations. In chapter 9, Anand Sokhey explores the ways in which religious interests can come together to address racial unrest. In April 2001, riots wracked Cincinnati after police shot and killed Timothy Thomas, an unarmed African-American youth. After the riots were quelled, religious leaders played prominent roles in promoting racial reconciliation. Although many clergy became active in these reconciliation efforts in a plethora of ways, others remained silent. Sokhey conducted interviews and a mail survey of clergy in the Cincinnati area to document and explain the racial reconciliation activities that they undertook in the wake of the riots. Overall, Sokhey finds that clergy were deeply engaged in racial reconciliation activities, although he also validates, to an extent, an old finding of the “suburban captivity of the churches” (Winter 1966).

Finally, Franklyn Niles approaches race relations from a different perspective in chapter 10: how do religious interests respond when the Ku Klux Klan comes to town? This chapter investigates the causes and consequences of collective clergy behavior. It focuses on the strategies that the Siloam Springs Ministerial Alliance (SSMA) in northwest Arkansas used to mobilize parishioners to protest peacefully against the Ku Klux Klan, which held a rally in Siloam Springs in August 2000. According to clergy and city leaders, mobilization efforts were extraordinarily successful, with ministers estimating that 25 percent of their parishioners participated in protest activities including silent “prayer walks.” Noteworthy about these mobilization efforts is that prior to the Klan rally, the SSMA had never engaged in organizing or promoting social protest. In fact, as of 1998 the Alliance was organizationally moribund. Why, despite years of inactivity and substantial organizational barriers, did the SSMA succeed in mobilizing parishioners to protest peacefully against the

Klan? How are collective interests identified and mobilized within a ministerial organization?

In chapter 11, we take stock of where we are as a subfield, since this volume was designed to take a systematic look at religion and politics theory. But we also need some standards of what these theories need to account for in order to pass muster. Thus, we start with a system-level perspective that draws on recent innovations in the study of interest group systems. In essence, theories should explain individual and group level behavior and the system-level representational patterns that result. That is, we should have a representational theory of religious interests. Instead of simply adding another voice to the cacophony, we review the literature with these criteria in mind. Then, we take advantage of the tightly controlled research design of the project by leveraging the findings of each chapter to make generalizable comments on how and why religious interests decided to address community problems and how effective their efforts proved. In the end, we find a lot to like in the religion and politics literature, but also suggest that a substantial shakeup is desirable.