The HOLY VOTE

The Politics of Faith in America

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TWO

How Did We Get Here?

One of the most frequently cited ideas about American origins, and contemporary religious and political debates, is this: "America is a Christian nation." As it happens, this is also one of the most frequently refuted ideas. Who is right? Is anybody right? Is America a Christian nation, or just a nation with a lot of Christians?

In the way that we debate these questions in modern America, to embrace one story is to reject the other. To highlight the absence of the word "God" in the United States Constitution (don't bother . . . it's not there) is to reject the stirring retelling of the Christian origins of our modern state: from John Winthrop's shivering Christian dissenters on one coast, to Brother Junipero Serra's Catholic missions strung all along the other coast, converting Indians and naming the western-division cities of major league sports.

It's not *either or.* It's *both and.* The United States, from its earliest days, has been a country that gathered in people fleeing religious oppression, leaving them free to flourish, and occasionally persecute others. The United States has also been a place where there also lived, sometimes quietly, sometimes boldly, people convinced that God, if there was one in the first place, took no interest in the petty details and daily lives of his creation.

So you, twenty-first-century American, are free to cherry-pick. On one side of the table, build a pile of quotations, anecdotes, and citations that demonstrate how deeply religious early Americans were, and how their convictions shaped the country's early history. Just be sure that sitting right across from you are those gathering a formidable collection of cita-

tions for the secular origins of American culture and the American way of politics. Otherwise, you will get only half the story.

Father Martin Smith, an Episcopal theologian and writer, reminds audiences that this country's claim to religious distinction is sound. "America's separation of church and state is a unique event in the history of the world. Recall that most of the people who have ever lived, lived in states where the myth of creation established the existence of the people as a unique group, and married that to the authority structure of the state.

"Untethering those two lines of authority from each other was a revolutionary act as significant as separating from England, and created the Petri dish in which a nationhood not based on clan and religion could flourish." That's strong stuff. It is a recognition of the centrality of religious faith to millions of Americans. It is at the same time an endorsement of America's secular approach to governance, *untethered from religion,* fostering a fertile religious environment.

During the 2004 national election, Americans argued over whether they lived in two Americas or not. The Red State–Blue State dichotomy that was a gift of the 2000 race was still very much with us, overlaid with other "twonesses": the Americas of black and white, rich and poor, urban and suburban, churched and unchurched.

While they rose in 2004 to grab even more real estate in the popular consciousness, many of those two-Americas questions are simply a part of everyday life in a continent-sized country with three hundred million people.

I remember one morning appearance on C-SPAN's morning news roundup program. I was nursing a cup of coffee while running through the newspapers with Brian Lamb, and he presented me with an unexpected topic of morning chitchat, Thomas Jefferson. I talked about the just-passed anniversary of his birth, the rehab job just completed on his memorial in Washington, D.C., and almost as an aside, given the religious fervor with which Bill Clinton's moral failings were being debated in the Capitol, how the Sage of Monticello would match few members of the Christian Coalition's definition of a Christian.

A caller from South Carolina dismissed my opinion of the third presi-

dent's religiosity from the secure bunker of ignorance, calling it, "sickening," and "typical anti-Christian, NPR propaganda." Well, ma'am, as we survey the cavalcade of American history, there are many presidents whose religious convictions might be called a mystery, but Jefferson is not on that list. The prolific Virginian sometimes seems scarcely to have had a thought in his long and active life that he didn't commit to paper.

One of my Jefferson favorites is a letter to his nephew Peter Carr, in 1787. His nephew is moving ahead with a demanding course of study, which Jefferson heartily approves. He endorses the study of Spanish over Italian, and speculates on astronomy and math. When he comes to the subject of religion, Jefferson suggests, "Question with boldness even the existence of a god, because, if there be one, he must more approve the homage of reason than that of blindfolded fear."

This isn't bad advice even for the twenty-first-century Christian. If that approach leads you to faith, it gets you there from conviction rather than from intellectual laziness. If it leads you to unbelief, you get there with integrity, rather than with a shrug. Jefferson continues, "Read the bible then, as you would Livy or Tacitus." Now we're treading on dangerous ground. The word of God, even his very existence, held up to the same kind of analysis and consideration as a work of literature, or a philosophical treatise?

Then Jefferson "outs" himself as a son of the Enlightenment, "For example in the book of Joshua we are told the sun stood still for several hours. . . . The pretension is entitled to your enquiry, because millions believe it. On the other hand you are Astronomer enough to know how contrary that is to the law of nature that a body revolving on its axis, as the earth does, should have stopped, should not by that sudden stoppage have prostrated animals, trees, buildings, and should after a certain time resumed its revolution, and that without a second general prostration. Is this arrest of the earth's motion, or the evidence which affirms it, most within the law of probabilities?"

In a final riff of advice to young Carr, the future president delivers what would be the final blow to his chances for election in 2008 instead of 1802. "You will next read the new testament. It is the history of a person-

age called Jesus. Keep in your eye the opposite pretensions. 1. Of those who say he was begotten by god, born of a virgin, suspended and reversed the law of nature at will, and ascended bodily into heaven; and 2. Of those who say he was a man of illegitimate birth, of a benevolent heart, enthusiastic mind, who set out without pretensions to divinity, ended in believing them, and was punished capitally." Though the then-ambassador to Paris doesn't come right out and say it in this letter, he's siding with the second bunch. Jefferson's Jesus was a moral teacher of modest birth, who did not call himself God.

Above all Jefferson, this exquisitely educated man, counseled an even-handedness in assessing the world that we don't see much in evidence in the modern political class. He asks his nephew to keep an open mind and never rely on the beliefs of others to make up his mind for him, "I repeat that you must lay aside all prejudice on both sides, and neither believe nor respect any thing because any other person or description of persons have rejected it or believed it."[1]

It is frequently declared in the current debates over religion in public life, the separation of church and state, and the use of publicly owned land and buildings for religious purposes that America was founded as a Christian nation. The people who say it in speeches or write it in essays often use the phrase with full and serene confidence that the listener or reader knows what that might be. What is a Christian nation? Is the United States one of them? If the majority of Americans really wanted to aspire to the lofty boast of this being a "Christian nation," what obligations, if any, would they have to undertake?

Author and Christian layman Bill McKibben notes that 75 percent of Americans believe, as evidenced in a recent survey, that the adage, "God helps those who help themselves," comes from the Bible. Its actual author was none other than that crusty old skeptic, Benjamin Franklin. Maybe you have heard that saying your whole life without thinking too much about where it comes from. The distinction is crucial. "God helps those who help themselves" is a very *American* notion, and one that flies directly in the face of almost everything Jesus taught.

Being a Christian nation would mean finding a way to stop being the

wealthy, industrialized nation with the highest rates of murder and violent crime on the planet. Being a Christian nation would mean finding a way to climb up from the bottom of the chart of government giving by wealthy nations to the world's poor.[2]

Both the very secular and the very religious make key errors in looking back at American history: the very secular almost erase the impact of religion or ascribe only negative effects to its profound presence in the daily lives of many Americans; the very religious exaggerate its place in America's founding documents, among its Founding Fathers, and in charting the course of the country's growth, from an insecure archipelago of former colonies to a globe-straddling commercial and military power.

The people we now call the Pilgrims, Anabaptist dissenters from England's established church who came to the northern Atlantic coast of what is now the United States in the early seventeenth century, were indeed deeply religious. To merely look back and note their search for religious freedom and take that as proof of America's religious foundations is to purposely ignore the brand of religion they practiced, and the kind of society they made.

The characteristics of the settlements that spread into New England from Plymouth Rock were the antithesis of what would become our national aspirations, and what we value about being American. The theocratic settlements were rigid, intolerant, racist, dishonest, and occasionally murderous in their dealings with the Indians. Can you take your Pilgrims *à la carte*? Can you vaguely endorse their religiosity and then close your eyes to its impact on the kind of place it made early New England?

That naïve, purposeful mistelling of American history has its uses on both sides of the cultural divide. However, if you are willing to present only some parts of the lives of early Americans as admirable and worthy of imitation, you reveal much when you draw the line. There is a certain intellectual dishonesty in quoting the Mayflower Compact, finding the roots of modern Thanksgiving in Plymouth Plantation, but then quietly erasing the mass murder of Pequots a few decades later.

One of early America's most prominent preachers and theologians, Cotton Mather, was not shocked by the massacre of hundreds of men,

women, and children. He did not peer into the Gospels for ammunition to condemn wholesale murder. Instead, he noted with some satisfaction that some six hundred Indian "souls had been sent down into hell," where they belonged.

No doubt early New Englanders were frightened of Indian reprisal. Invaders often are. But these early American Christians also exhibited an all-too-human failing. They denied the humanity of their enemies in order to make killing them easier. Because the Pequots, the Wampanoags, and many other tribes that were hunted to near-extinction were not Christian, in the eyes of early New Englanders they failed to meet a baseline test for compassion.

Down the coast in Virginia, sons and daughters of England were embarking on a very different kind of experiment. They had few pretensions to creating "a citty on a Hill," as longed for by John Winthrop. They longed for gold, and found it not in mines, but in tobacco. Virginia was a tough place to live. Its new inhabitants did not seek a higher power as much as the power of the sword and the purse. Named for Elizabeth I, the Virgin Queen, it divvied up the vast lands into estates for a transplanted English aristocracy. The muscle to exploit the land came from indentured servants and slaves, and the frontier threat came from Indians roughly pushed inland by the new British dominion.

The church, as institution, in much of English-speaking America did not have the far-reaching power it had back in Europe. The established, that is, government-supported, churches kept their doors open with state subsidy and commanded an uneven loyalty from Massachusetts to Georgia. Roman Catholics were fully free in Maryland, and for much of the early story of the United States, Baltimore exerted a tremendous influence on American Catholicism.

Jews lived in small communities along the seaboard. They could be found from Newport, Rhode Island, to Savannah, Georgia. In early America the Sephardim, the Jews who spread through the Mediterranean world after the Portuguese and Spanish expulsions, gave American Jewry a very different flavor from that of its later nineteenth-century incarnations. The German Reformed Jews and the Yiddish-speaking Ashke-

nazim of Eastern Europe would lay the demographic foundations for the twenty-first-century Jewish community.

The thinly settled western edges of British America, bumping up against French Louisiana, were places where "church" was an informal thing: a community leader holding group prayer in his home, or a more formal liturgy when a clergyman came through town as he rode a "circuit" that passed through networks of small settlements.

For many early Americans, religious life was a loosely structured, episodic affair. Popular preachers were the pop stars of their era, before mass communication and easy transportation. Meetings in clearings and barns resembled competitions, with traveling preachers showing their best stuff in front of enthusiastic crowds hungry for stimulation and news of the outside world.

Then as now, the religious life of Americans was one of stunning contrasts and bewildering variety. The largely self-taught preachers of the slave quarters kept the hope of freedom alive with the promises of the Psalms and the liberation of Israel. The theological debates of Protestant Europe ricocheted through the still-young colleges in Cambridge, New Haven, Princeton, and New York, and found an American iteration in the pulpits of Unitarian, Congregational, Anglican, and Methodist churches.

Some colonists translated the New Testament from the original Greek. Others learned chapters by rote in the light of a flickering fire, after long days of backbreaking labor. That same variety of religious conviction was on display in the taverns and coffeehouses of the port cities, in the artisans' societies that sprang up everywhere, and eventually in the state assemblies and the Continental Congress that met to invent the United States.

There is a funny little paradox that becomes evident when trying to understand America's Christian roots and whether and how they lead us to the yeasty diversity and bitter debates of today. In eighteenth-century America, church attendance was very low compared to today. Yet any literate person knew the Bible well, both the Old and New Testament. Even the semiliterate and illiterate knew whole hunks of the Bible by heart: the Psalms; the Beatitudes; the foundational stories of Adam and Eve, Job, and the passion of Jesus.

Today, with the highest level of church attendance in the wealthy world and one of the highest rates of self-declared god-belief in all the world, scriptural illiteracy in the U.S. is widespread. I have already mentioned the revealing assignment of "God helps those who help themselves" to Scripture instead of *Poor Richard's Almanack*. Even as battles over Ten Commandments monuments in courthouses and copies nailed to schoolhouse walls reach the nation's highest court, a sizable majority of Americans can't name the laws handed to Moses on Mount Sinai, even out of order.

Let's head to Philadelphia in the mid-1770s. Historians have noted the sizable presence of Deists among the delegates to the Continental Congress. Deists were skeptics. They were unsure of the Divine hand in the daily workings of the world and wondered about the involvement of the Creator even in the watershed events of humankind. They assumed a Creator, but differed on his continued involvement in his handiwork, their opinions falling along a continuum that ranged from a Creator with profound, high-impact interest in the affairs of people, to something more like a watchmaker who sends his creation off to whirr and spin, tick and count the hours, without any further effort from the watchmaker.

When that first Congress ratified and signed the Declaration of Independence, it contained ringing and inspirational language from the twin fonts of American thought: Christian theology and classical philosophy. The two were well represented in the Declaration's main author, Thomas Jefferson, a man who revered Jesus of Nazareth and Epicurus, the pre-Christian Greek philosopher, with near-equal fervor.[3]

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, and are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights. That among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Jefferson was already a successful politician in his home colony of Virginia and a successful drafter of laws when he penned those words. They are as close to secular scripture as Americans get, invoked along with the preamble to the Constitution and parts of the Bill of Rights and the words of Lincoln like a well-remembered psalm or parable.

During the long gelling of the United States as a functioning political

and economic system, roughly from the first Continental Congress to the end of George Washington's presidency, more than twenty years, there were plenty of debates about the role religion was going to play in the life of the new country. Newly independent colonies had to decide, and in some cases headed to court to hash out, the status of their once-established, government-supported churches.

While the stirring, persuasive, and rhetorical Declaration of Independence mentions God at many points, the Constitution hardly mentions a Creator at all. Their functions are quite different: the Declaration is both an indictment and a "Dear John" letter (a "Dear George letter," perhaps?) from an entire subcontinent to a distant monarch. Written more than a decade later, the Constitution is a schematic diagram and operator's manual for the running of a state. In the few places religion is mentioned in the Constitution, it is there by subtraction, forbidding a religious test for public office, and in the Bill of Rights, guaranteeing there could be no state church and that people would be free to worship as they choose.

In the run-up to the ratification of the Constitution by the states, literate America was treated to a public hashing out of the arguments for the new compact. The series of essays and commentaries by James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay, now called the Federalist Papers, walked the public through what the constitution could and could not do.

In Federalist Number 10, Madison sets out a theory of factions; as he sees it, a zero-sum idea of competing desires held by different parts of a divided public: "By a faction I understand a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse or passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community." It might work to insert the word *denomination* here in place of *faction*.

Madison finds a parallel between freedom of thought in politics and the natural world: "Liberty is to faction what air is to fire, an aliment without which it instantly expires." That is a concrete, and stirring, example of how freedom inevitably leads to differing convictions. It is a strength, and for the foreseeable future, a signal of man's imperfection: "As long as the

reason of man continues fallible, and he is at liberty to exercise it, different opinions will be formed."

For Madison, the mechanics of the Constitution will help a naturally divided people find common ground. This Virginian is a religious man who finds it hard to believe that God did not take a hand in the creation of the new United States: "It is impossible for the man of pious reflection not to perceive in it a finger of that Almighty hand which has been so frequently and signally extended to our relief in the critical stages of the revolution."[4] At the same time, he finds no special place of honor for the faithful in the structure of the new country: ". . . the door of this part of our federal government is open to merit of every description, whether native or adoptive, whether young or old, and without regard to poverty or wealth, or to any particular profession of religious faith."[5]

It may be true of all people, but it is particularly true of Americans that they habitually compare the morals, day-to-day life, and values of past generations and find them superior to those of today. The imagined American past is particularly open to this kind of speculation. It is common to find in the statements of the most religious Americans a yearning for a long-ago America that is a better place than this one.

The profane, violent, and rough world of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America is thought to be a less immoral place than our own country. Unfortunately, a moral calculus that exalts sexual morality above all things finds a long-ago America of chronic poverty, disease, starvation, and the exploitation of the weak by the strong to be a more admirable place than the America where a man can ask another one out on a date and the central government demands income taxes. It is common to imagine that the immortal prose of the Declaration and the visionary wisdom of the Constitution resulted in a place where both were respected as law.

One phrase that appears nowhere in either document is "wall of separation between church and state." It is an oft-repeated article of faith among today's conservative Christians that because that phrase is only a quotation from an 1802 letter to a Connecticut church from Thomas Jefferson, it should hold no claim on our view of America today.

Writing to a congregation from the famously separationist Baptist

Church in Danbury, Jefferson said, "Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith and worship, that the legislative powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should 'make no law . . . free exercise thereof,' thus building a wall of separation between Church and State."

Though the quote has no force of law, it does anticipate a diverse and multifaceted nation that lies far in the future, long after Jefferson's death. He goes on to write, "I see with sincere satisfaction the progress of those sentiments which tend to restore to man all his natural rights, convinced he has no natural right in opposition to his social duties."

Jefferson's idea of human beings acting in the marketplace out of private conviction, restrained by law and "social duties," is a good approximation of how a secular state that is home to religious citizens may happily function. What remains for us in twenty-first-century America is to decide how true to our actual roots in free exercise and rigorously secular government we are going to decide to be.

Rabbi David Saperstein sees the genius of the founders in the secular design of a state by often deeply religious men. Furthermore, in its radical departure from the nation-states of Europe, defined by blood and clan, religious identity and class, America became a great place, a safe place, to be a Jew. "The genius of America was for the first time in human history to create a political order in which your rights and opportunities as a citizen would not depend upon your religious identity, beliefs, or practices. That was an extraordinary, revolutionary idea. To minority religions, particularly, who so often had been the victims of discrimination and persecution, it made all the difference. And this was a land in which Jews have known more freedoms, more rights, more opportunities, than we have known in 2000 years of Diaspora, Jewish life.

"It was precisely during the war and postwar era that asserted the rights of women and minorities—Jews, Catholics, dissenters, disabled, agnostics, atheists—against the whim of white males in the majority, that Jews were able to move from the peripheries of American society to the

very center of American academic, professional, political, economical life, in a way that had never been, with opportunities never accorded to us anywhere before in our history. It happens precisely because of that revolutionary vision of the relationship of the political order and religion in American life."

Rabbi Saperstein also sees a parallel founding ethos, that of the New England religious settlements, Manifest Destiny, and countless settlers who hoped to establish a social order following God's laws rather than man's. "They really believed that they were creating an order in which the coercive of power of government could and should be used to implement God's law here on earth. So what we are seeing played out today was played out in the two founding narratives of our nation and has been with us ever since in this regard." Needless to say, the rabbi sides with the framers, but concedes that America's story is shot through with this parallel ideal.

The long century from the first presidency and the infancy of the Constitution in the 1790s to the Gilded Age of a continent-sized, rich, and increasingly powerful America is one of great secular thought and significant religious foment. To say the country was all one thing or all another is to seriously misread our history.

Men like Ralph Waldo Emerson and William Lloyd Garrison blazed an intellectual trail across the mid-century that perhaps owed its inspiration to religious thinking and texts, but was rigorously church-free. As adults both men rejected organized religion, and both men saw the individual as the source of reform. Filling lyceums and tents and auditoriums across the young country, Emerson told Americans that the power to tame and perfect the self lay in the self, rather than in the will of God. After following his father into the ordained ministry, Emerson had broken with the church, and spent much of his long life moving further and further from it. He said, "In the matter of religion, people eagerly fasten their eyes on the difference between their own creed and yours; whilst the charm of the study is in finding the agreements and identities in all the religions of humanity."

Garrison did not start with Emerson's advantages of good name and exquisite education. His restless and self-cultivated intellect, and his will-

ingness to ceaselessly pound the powerful and influential, mark him as a particularly nineteenth-century character. In an age of what were called "enthusiasms," his angry war on slavery, hatred of drink, and suspicion of organized religion made him a passionate standout in a passionate age. Garrison wrote, "Tell a man whose house is on fire to give a moderate alarm; tell him to moderately rescue his wife from the hands of the ravisher; tell the mother to gradually extricate her babe from the fire into which it has fallen; but urge me not to use moderation."

Remember, the country was on fire with campaigns for political reform, westward expansion, abolition, temperance, women's suffrage, socialism. The loose grip of denominational religion made possible by the eighteenth-century gift of no established church allowed these movements to rise up in an almost rain-forest-like natural frenzy.

In the same era, the social inventiveness of Americans gave rise to tremendous religious adaptation, shape-shifting, and invention. The singing and shouting of revivalism might have attracted the condescension of the clergy learned in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin back in the east, but a new American religious continuum was hammered together in the nineteenth century. It glowed in torchlight and was cooled by mass baptism at the riverbank. There was a religious scene like Ptolemy's universe, fixed and orderly, back in Boston, Baltimore, and Savannah.

Beyond the reach of the denominations were American originals like Joseph Smith, whose visions in upstate New York began the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, the Mormons. In the same cluster of years, William Miller began the preaching about the Second Coming, which would lead to the creation of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church. As the Millerites were winning converts and Joseph Smith was writing down what would become known as the Book of Mormon, Mary Baker Eddy was a little girl in New Hampshire. In an America struggling to recover from the Civil War, her ideas about prayer and Scripture would begin the foundation of the Christian Science Church.

Frantic, brutal, bloody nineteenth-century America was a place where military men became "heroes" by slaughtering Indians. It was a place where treaties were routinely broken with indigenous nations shortly after

the ink on them was dry. It was a place where black women were property, and casually raped after dessert. It was a place where a dustup as phony as the Gulf of Tonkin incident could be cooked up for nineteenth-century consumption and used as the justification for a war of conquest against Mexico that was meant to push the Stars and Stripes, and slavery, to the Pacific.

For a "Christian country," it was not an era covered in glory, or a time easily dressed up for later consumption. It was a time of sparse church attendance, situational ethics, and incidents needing plenty of sugarcoating to make a history worth singing about. But the decades of expansion, Civil War, Reconstruction and turmoil, industrialization and immigration, also set the table for the rise of religion and its embrace of politics more than a century later.

In America in 2006, a persistent idea peddled is that the country is a fallen one, far less religious than in more pious times past. This creates twin imperatives: recapture a lost past and reject the customs and common life of your own time. That American tendency is not serving us well in the twenty-first century. We will return to this theme later on.

The Reverend Barry Lynn is a United Church of Christ minister and the head of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State. His reading of American history leads him to a strict separationist stance. "I would say the majority of the framers of the Constitution, for example, were people who believe fundamentally in private religious expression. Now, they used religious language like politicians do today for a variety of reasons, but they were not people who felt that the essential nature of America was as a religious country."

Lynn sees an American operator's manual meant for a young country to grow into. Which is why, he insists, the framers were specific when they needed to be, and vague when they wanted to be. "We know general principles only because these were written in what subsequent jurists have often called majestic generalities, because clearly the Bill of Rights was designed unlike other provisions in the Constitution with considerable vagueness, deliberately so. When the Congress wanted, when the drafters

of the original Constitution wanted to be real specific, they'd say you have to be thirty years old in order to serve office in the House of Representatives. However, when they didn't want to be specific, then they used these kinds of phrases, and they're pretty clear, I think, as you read enough of founding documents, that they knew they were writing for a future that they assumed would be long in duration—that this was the beginning of a governance structure. It was not the end of it. They clearly knew that. They provided multiple methods for amending the Constitution precisely because they knew that as the country grew, as the government became more complex, people would say that we have to think about this and that and you guys didn't."

That idea of continued revelation in a civic sense mirrors Lynn's view of sacred texts as well. "I do believe that the Bible is an important source of information, advice, but it is not the final word. God still communicates with us through the act of prayer and that as a consequence we have kind of an ongoing revelation of God in our lives."

It should come as no surprise that over the course of my research and interviews, a general rule prevailed: those Americans who saw the Constitution as a document whose modern meanings had changed from its origins and throughout American history also saw the Bible as a document open to new interpretation, to unfolding revelation. In general, those whose theology tended toward biblical inerrancy and a literal meaning of Jewish and Christian scripture also endorsed what is often called "strict constructionism," a reading of the Constitution that attempts to understand what the men who wrote it meant and intended.

One marked contrast between the men who wrote the New Testament, whether you believe it was from their own imagination or divine inspiration, is that many of them thought they were writing toward the end of time. Those who fought over, amended, and ratified the Constitution framed it with the hope that their handiwork would last far into an unimaginable future.

The Constitution includes specific instructions for changing it. It is a tribute to the structure of the document that only a little more than two

dozen times in more than two centuries has our basic law needed modification. The Bible, for better or worse, is fixed, and beyond our ability to know the motivations of its writers.

The writers of the Bible could not have imagined the U.S. Constitution. What Americans of all religious persuasions now think of both of those texts, and their intersections, has created conflict. An increasingly assertive evangelical movement is banging up against a resistant secularist faction, guaranteeing fights in the legislatures and courts for years to come.

America came roaring out of victory in World War II ready to make up for lost time. There were weddings to be thrown, babies to be had, houses to build. A broad religious consensus had been reached that saw religion, not as a divisive institution, but one that could serve as social glue, according to Professor R. Scott Appleby of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at Notre Dame University: "Will Herberg wrote *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology,* which argued, okay, we're no longer WASPs. We're certainly not Catholic fully; we're not Jewish in terms of a dominant religious culture.

"But we've kind of achieved a comfortable amalgam. And that signaled something new on the American horizon. And that book was well received in scholarly circles and also kind of quasi-popularly. And that thesis was part of the 1950s on one level. The idea that, okay, we have religion. It's a similar religion. It's in these three denominations. It doesn't threaten the political order. It's comfortable. It's part of the American character. It's not going to be decisive politically, but it's there and we respect it and recognize it.

"By the '60s that had changed. In the early '60s for all kinds of complicated reasons, you get what, as far as the fundamentalists and the evangelicals are concerned, and what the Catholics refer to as 'a disastrous decade,' the long 1960s. From prayer in public schools being outlawed by the Supreme Court to 1973, *Roe v. Wade.* That long '60s is a time that those people see, people on the religious right see, as the dark period in which a Protestant-Catholic-Jew affirmation is undermined, first by the irrele-

vance of religion in public life, and this more insidious assault on religion in public life."

It is easy to see why the quiet embers of religious politics in the South would finally be blown into flame by the postwar decades. What Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention calls "the sin of segregation" was in full rout, with its legal consequences about to remake the daily lives of people across a large swath of the country.

There is a lot of agreement across the political spectrum about the evangelical foray into politics. Albert Mohler is president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Like many other Christian conservatives, he saw the glimmerings of the movement in the large vote among evangelicals for Jimmy Carter in 1976. "There was an enormous transition between 1976 and 1980; you can roughly equate that with the years of the Carter administration. For the Southern Baptists there came an enormous shift in consciousness in 1980, when we became more involved in marriage, family, and a host of related issues. The development of a new Christian right came in with the campaign for Ronald Reagan. It became a new cause.

"Candidly, there had been tremendous disappointment in Jimmy Carter. Remember, at that time the South was still largely Democratic. A large share of Democratic congressmen and senators were elected from the South. We thought of Carter as one of our own, and he was a huge disappointment. And in 1980 that new sense of urgency led to a movement. The movement preceded Ronald Reagan. Some people think he created it. In fact the concern was already there. What was lacking was a leader whom we could approach with those concerns."

The Reverend Dr. C. Welton Gaddy is the president of the Interfaith Alliance, which describes itself as "the faith-based voice countering the radical right and promoting the positive role of religion." He is hardly what you would call a screaming liberal. He still serves a Southern Baptist Church in Louisiana while doing his advocacy work in Washington, D.C. Back in the Nixon years, he took a high-profile post with the Southern Baptist Convention: "In 1971 I went to work at what was called the Chris-

tian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention. It was the social ethics agency in Southern Baptist life. My title was director of Christian Citizenship Development.

"My challenge was that Southern Baptists had never really motivated its church members to be good citizens. The challenge that I faced at that time was cliché-ish in nature. It was the regular response, 'politics and religion don't mix.' Politics is a field that is dirty, and if you get involved in it, it's going to pull you down more than you'd pull it up.

"I'm saying to you, somewhat tongue in cheek, I'm sorry we did such a good job on that, because what happened was we began to see around 1975, 1976 much greater involvement on the part of Christian evangelicals in the political process. I kind of go back to that gathering call to the Religious Roundtable, in Reunion Arena in Dallas just prior to the Reagan campaign, as the place where the evangelical Christian community kind of came together and said, we're going to get on board, behind what was a fairly partisan political agenda."

Today Dr. Gaddy thinks he did not change as much as his denomination did, and he thinks he knows why: "I think I saw many of my colleagues in the evangelical tradition watch with admiration the way in which mainstream Protestantism had success in the civil rights movement, had success in probably cutting short the war in Vietnam, and several of the leaders began to think, here is an avenue of power for us. Here is a way for us to express ourself in society and perhaps even to garner more political power than we ever thought we might have on a national basis. And I think that's what happened. And unfortunately in some instances, not in all, but in some instances the driving force was not about the discovery of a new means of serving the nation, but it was about a new means of controlling the nation. So it was about power more than service."

The Reverend Richard Land, working as a pastor in those same years, has a very different story of who was moving away from whom. He portrays rising Christian political activity as all in a day's work in the American marketplace of ideas. "Because some things are good for folks, and some things aren't. And if we're a person of faith, our religious faith informs our moral values. And we have a right to bring our religiously in-

formed moral values into the public marketplace of ideas, just like those who are without significant religious faith have a right to bring their moral values to bear, and hopefully through vigorous debate, those with the better ideas, the ideas that work, win."

But Land also has a strong disagreement with the Gaddy version of the conservative Christian foray into politics. Southern Baptists and other organized evangelicals were not getting into politics because of the power. They were, in his memory, frightened of what was happening to the country. "You had, growing up in the '60s and the '70s in this country, a feeling that among the various elites in our culture—and I hope this doesn't come as a shock to you that we do have elites in this culture—that the various elites, the legal elite, the educational elite, the social elite, and even to some degree the religious elite, did everything they could to trivialize religion and marginalize religious faith from the public-policy square."

When it's portrayed that way, it is hard to disagree, and hard to separate the new conservative evangelical activism from any political movement of the last two hundred years. Engaged citizens organize around a cause and agitate until they win. What could be wrong with that?

"I think it leads them to be unrealistic about their government," the Reverend Gaddy told me. "Because if you expect the government of the United States to be the instrument for ushering in the morals, visions, and relationships of the realm of God, I think you're going to be sorely disappointed. Because that's not the purpose of this government."

The 1980s were a good time for the conservative evangelical movement. As Ronald Reagan told the National Association of Religious Broadcasters, "I know you can't endorse me. But I endorse you." A slice of the American culture that had felt locked out of the action for more than a century was suddenly parlaying with the president of the United States. Conservative Christians might have still been treated with condescension and scorn by elements of the culture, but it didn't matter. They were going to remake the culture in their own image, with statehouses, the national legislature, and state boards of education behind them. Or, at least, that is how it looks from the secular side.

Albert Mohler is not convinced. He rejects the notion that taking a

more active role in politics has meant a surrender of precious moral capital: "I don't think anything's been given away. In terms of partisan identification, back in the 1960s evangelicals were as solidly identified with Democrats as they are with Republicans today. So over our history there has been no real neutrality."

I asked the pastor and educator if the solid backing of the Republican Party has been worth it for Southern Baptists and other conservative Christians. "I think it's a mixed bag. You can look at it this way. Twenty-five years after the election of Ronald Reagan, *Roe v. Wade* is still ruling precedent. Just to continue with that one issue of abortion, we have made headway in the culture. Young people are less likely to be pro-abortion, but the gains have been incremental."

From the secular side looking over at the politically active religious, you see a movement at the top of its powers, with significant influence, if not control, of major power centers in Washington, D.C., and across the country. Yet one of the best-known Christian conservatives is not even sure his side has won much. At least not yet. "With the judiciary as a whole, we've made some considerable and incremental gains. And the nation really faced a judiciary that was hostile to the political and religious convictions of a lot of Christians. The other big issue is where we would otherwise be . . . that's a continuing question that requires a lot of reflection. If evangelicals hadn't been a countervailing force, what kind of shape would we find the country in today?"

Rabbi Saperstein sees this as a battle where one side, inexplicably, has been able to capture and hold all the high ground. "You know, I look on Capitol Hill, and 90 percent of the people I know who are Republicans or Democrats really are seriously religious people. And yet if they're not talking the fundamentalist rhetoric, it just doesn't count.

"I was invited to address the Democratic retreat, the annual retreat for the House of Representatives, the Democratic caucus, down in Williamsburg, on the issue of religion, morality, and values. You know, so many of these people believe in their hearts, but they're kind of frustrated and chagrined that the right has abrogated religion itself. They feel this way not just for political reasons but because it affronts their entire religious world-

view. But they don't quite know how to comfortably talk about it in public life.

"So I think it's a misread to think that the triumphalism that the right feels in its gut, that is driving so much of the political impact that they have, is the *only* impact that religion has on American politics. Day in and day out, in all the social-service entities working in the public-interest world, religious values are being played out equally in American life and in an equally genuine, effective way."

One Sunday morning at Prestonwood Baptist Church in Plano, Texas, a suburb of Dallas, I watch as police officers direct traffic into a stadium-sized parking lot. The people leaving the cars stream into a vast, horizontal structure along the back of the lot. They pass under a soaring archway and through a waiting rank of glass doors. I have left the comfort of my Sunday morning routine, a worship service rooted in the nineteenth century, and entered the air-conditioned, plushly carpeted, high-tech world of twenty-first-century worship.

A pop chorus gets the crowd clapping and singing, prompted by giant screens along the walls. Six trumpets, electric guitars, and drums back the singers and an enormous choir standing on semicircular risers. The comfortable, theater-style seats at Prestonwood sweep across a vast worship space. It is comfortable. It is reassuring. It is not for me, but I can readily see why this crowd of thousands has come from near and far to be here.

After the baptism of several new members are projected on the enormous, and beautiful, projection screens, the pastor, Dr. Jack Graham, greets the huge crowd. He gets a special guest to stand for a round of applause: the senior U.S. senator from Texas, Republican Kay Bailey Hutchison. Dr. Graham delivers an interesting and affirming sermon, and sends the multitude out, fortified for the coming week. Prestonwood offers a full-service ministry, special activities to fill out the rest of Sunday afternoon for members of all ages (including lunch for a large seating, to be drawn in by signs proclaiming today's menu in the broad corridors), and I meet the pastor.

In his office are pictures of Dr. Graham with various Republican dignitaries, including the best-known Texan in American politics, George W. Bush. He knows why I have come to talk to him, and notes, "It was ironic that the senator was here today." With a silver mane and healthy tan, Dr. Jack Graham looks like much of Prestonwood's congregants: comfortable. The lampoon version of huge churches that might live in the minds of hard-core secularists or the unchurched is not on display in Plano that morning. The message was not a fiery rant about *them and us,* but an exhortation to be a better person.

Dr. Graham tells me the wider culture is catching up with something that has been happening among evangelicals for decades: "Christians who previously thought that politics was dirty and we don't want anything to do with it got more involved in the process and certainly are publicly outed now regarding that."

Like Land and Mohler, Dr. Graham says in a way this is nothing new. "So there's no question that there's more personal and political involvement by churches than in the past, but it's always been present, and I'm hopeful. The civil rights movement of the '60s came out of the churches, came out of the African American churches. The church was two-sided, unfortunately, back during slavery. The church should have done something. We've had to apologize because we did nothing. Where was the church during those years of slavery? It was silent and often accommodating."

Is it right for the church to take strong, public political stands? "Some of it depends on what your politics are. Sometimes politics on the left by the church is acceptable and politics on the right is not as acceptable. But for me—I can't speak for anyone else—but for me the balance is in maintaining your real mission. I could turn this whole church into a political-action committee. We have people constantly requesting endorsements, the signatures and petitions. We do a minimal amount of that because that's not our purpose. Our purpose is not to be a political-action committee.

"Our purpose is to fulfill the mission of Christ on earth and, when it comes time, to step up to the plate and speak out on the issue of the sanctity

of life, and believe it or not, there are more evangelicals interested in social justice than imagined. More and more evangelical Christians are concerned about poverty and helping the poor and ministering to the poor. We maybe go about it in a different way than some."

I wondered whether there was a big difference, on the Sunday morning before the Tuesday of Election Day, between suggesting that people vote and suggesting who they vote for? "First of all, it's illegal to do that, so you're breaking a law of the land. If I get up and say go vote for Kay Bailey Hutchison, I have just crossed the line, legally. So absolutely. We don't, we do our very best. I want to say that we don't endorse candidates, but people know. They know who I voted for for president and what my persuasion is politically, so I don't have to stand up and say, you know, vote this way or vote that way."

They know? How do they know?

"By my preaching and my teaching. I mean, if they're politically astute at all; I mean they can add two and two and get four. So, you know, it's kind of a silly way to put it, but I'm sure there wasn't a person in the congregation that would have thought that I supported John Kerry for president, because they know what I believe and what I preach and what I stand for, and if they pay attention to what he was saying. So I'm just saying that's the example. I don't know if that's crossing the line or not. To me it isn't. To me it is talking about issues.

"And of course there is quite a bit of hypocrisy, really, because evangelical Christians get pretty well called on the carpet for stepping on the line or over the line on that, and on the other side, I was just infuriated. That's too strong a word. I was righteously ticked off that John Kerry was making appearances in churches every week during the campaign. He has every right to do it, and those parishes have every right to have him, and that's fine. George Bush didn't speak in any churches. But people knew of his faith and what he believed, and supported him based on that, not on the fact that he made appearances at churches. So anyway, I'm just kind of going off on that. John Kerry got up and quoted scripture in an Atlanta church and talked about the president—in fact, the scripture that I quoted this morning in James where 'Faith without works is dead.' And he was

attacking the president on the fact that he's got this faith that's dead because he doesn't help people. So, boy, you know had George Bush stood up and used a scripture to attack his opponent, can you imagine what would have happened?"

To be a politically aware conservative Christian in the first decade of the twenty-first century is to nurse a sense of grievance. How come we get in trouble and they don't? Could you imagine how much trouble I'd get into if I did that? All we're doing is what they do; we just do it better.

For Martin Marty, a Theologian and Lutheran pastor, it is not convincing: "There is a strong spirit of score settling and vengeance. It's the politics of resentment. A lot of fundamentalists did get kicked around; then they moved to the will to power. They found power lying in the streets and they picked it up. Catholics and mainline were kind of weary; there was a void.

"The game Land is now playing is pretending to be a beleaguered minority . . . Look what they have! White House, House, Senate, Media . . . When you're selling 29 million 'Left Behind' books, you can't say you're being ignored."

Rabbi Saperstein thinks there is divisiveness embedded in the Christian conservative message: "True pluralism presumes some measure of equality. But theirs is at best the kind of tolerance that says, 'We tolerate these minorities. We're nice to them.' But as a point in fact, much of their rhetoric is exclusionary. There is a dismissal, a whole-handed dismissal of the religious authenticity of the other side.

"Liberals talk much more about God having called us to use our wisdom to understand what is, how to apply God's values into the world today. Fundamentalists believe they can extrapolate from specific biblical quotations the answers to specific political problems that we face today. Two very different approaches to religion, and therefore they're going to sound different and they're going to feel different about it, and liberals lacking that specifity, are at a disadvantage in this, in this debate and discussion in American public life."

But is it a permanent disadvantage?

Will the public continue to be swayed by the religious appeals made

during this tense and unusual time, or is there a day of reckoning approaching in different regions of the country and different segments of the American people? There are places where the wall of separation has been breached. Next we will look at some of the issues that have brought religious appeals from both sides flooding into places where religion belongs, and where it is out of place.