Introduction: Religion in American Politics

Charles W. Dunn
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CHARLES W. DUNN
Editor

Less than ten years ago, hardly anyone in political science, at least anyone who was somebody, seriously studied the subject of religion in American politics. The number of political scientists doing research on this subject could probably have fit in a telephone booth or a Volkswagen Beatle without fear of winning Ripley's "Believe it or Not" award for the most people in either. The study of religion in American politics was like rich land neither surveyed nor settled. It was waiting for explorers to chart the course of settlement.

Political Science and Religion

By the 1980s, however, serious scholarly research on religion and American politics began to make its presence felt at annual meetings of the American Political Science Association (APSA) as a half-dozen or so panels and roundtables were held on the subject. In the early days, though, most of the participants on these panels and roundtables were from religious schools, normally Roman Catholic and evangelical protestant. Though obviously interested and generally skillful in their research, their attention to the subject did not always receive the favor it deserved. First, they were in religious institutions perceived to be outside of mainstream political science. Second, in the graduate schools of the best and the brightest, research on religion and American politics was usually considered beyond the pale.

Political Science Professor Robert Booth Fowler (University of Wisconsin-Madison) edited a special interdisciplinary issue of Humanities in Society (Winter, 1983) that published articles by several political scientists, including Charles W. Dunn (Clemson University), Timothy Fuller (Colorado College), Mary Hanna (Whitman College), Wilson Carey McWilliams (Rutgers University) and Neal Riemer (Drew University). This was the first major collection of political science research on the subject in a scholarly journal.

Very early on a Saturday morning at the 1985 American Political Science Association meeting in New Orleans about 50 political scientists, mostly from state colleges and universities, unexpectedly showed up at a roundtable to consider the state of research on the subject. All but one of the six members of the roundtable were from state universities. Described variously as "a happening," "a catalyst," and "a turning point," political scientists from religious institutions and state universities were ecstatic at both the quantity and the quality of interest in the subject.

Between 1984 and 1987, political scientists at state universities authored four books on religion and American politics. They were Charles W. Dunn of Clemson University, American Political Theology (1984), Robert Booth Fowler of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Religion and Politics in America (1985. A. James Reichley of the Brookings Institution, Religion in American Public Life (1985) and Kenneth


Mainstream political science owes a great debt to the political scientists in the religious colleges and universities who kept the flame of scholarly research burning, particularly in view of the obvious religious issues injected into American politics during the 1980s. Jesse Jackson and Jesse Helms were a part of a much larger number of practicing politicians overtly raising religious issues at the local, state and national levels of American politics. Theologians, historians and sociologists did a far better job of keeping abreast of the subject than political scientists except for those in the religious institutions.

When I issued a call for manuscripts for this special issue of the *Journal of Political Science* on “Religion in American Politics,” I expected to receive maybe a dozen or so. By last count, about 40 had been received, and over one-half of them were from professors at state colleges and universities. While mainstream political science has not yet caught up with needed research on the subject, at least it is on the playing field.

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As editor, I could have chosen any one of several themes as the principal criterion for the final selection of manuscripts to be published. There were enough good manuscripts, for example, on Roman Catholics, Evangelical Protestants and the First Amendment to have had a separate and a solid issue on each. Of course, I could have picked the six or eight best manuscripts not only from these, but also from among those on other aspects of the subject. Finally, I decided to choose as controlling criterion the point from which all studies necessarily have their origin either directly or indirectly, the religion clauses of the First Amendment, their origins, interpretations and impact on society.

The first article by Robert Booth Fowler (University of Wisconsin-Madison) argues that religion serves American culture by providing Americans a haven from the excesses of liberal individualism. Religion, Fowler says, serves as an escape from the limitations of liberal culture with its emphasis upon skepticism, uncertainty and relativism. Religion is like an anchor of absolutism in the sea of doubt. Moreover, Fowler contends that community, an essential part of the religious experience, helps individuals to adjust to society and its norms. Religion then is a buffer between the excesses of atomistic liberal individualism on the one hand and the totality of governmental power on the other.

The second article by Clarke Cochran (Texas Tech University) sets forth not so much the tension and strain between private religions
and public life, but the essential need one has for the other in a truly healthy society. Religion, he notes, is both private and public. It should not dominate public life nor be dominated by it. Rather, religion and politics should challenge and test one another. The moral values of religion should, for example, serve as a testing ground or a measuring rod of the propriety of public policy.

The third article by Kevin L. Clauson (Liberty University) explores the views of the little-known “reconstructionist” movement that has greatly influenced the thinking of people like Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell. Who are the “reconstructionists”? What do they think? How would their views affect public policy? Few political scientists have ever heard of the “reconstructionists,” but the movement’s practical political effects have been far reaching. The movement’s view of private religion and public life differs dramatically from that set forth by Clarke Cochran.

The fourth article by John R. Vile and Andrew W. Foshee (McNeese State University) follows in a new line of scholarly writing best illustrated by former APSA President Aaron Wildavsky (University of California-Berkeley), whose book *The Nursing Father: Moses as a Political Leader* (1984) examined political leadership from a biblical case study. Vile and Foshee look at contemporary American political problems through the biblical case study of Gibeah in the Book of Judges which occurred during a time of domestic turmoil. They conclude that this case study points to the need for a more regularized system of leadership and a more far-sighted federalism as well as for better application of justice and virtue in the Hebrew sense.

The fifth article by Neal Riemer (Drew University) studies the “creative breakthroughs” in American politics fostered by Roger Williams and James Madison. Riemer’s thesis is that religious ideas, such as religious liberty, separation of church and state and religious pluralism, have been “creative breakthroughs” at key times in American history and that many reform movements, such as anti-slavery, women’s suffrage, peace, economic opportunity and anti-discrimination, have been dependent upon prominent religious ideas and roles.

The sixth article by Peter Augustine Lawler (Berry College) discusses a sticky and sometimes murky subject, secular humanism, by showing that not only do today’s secular humanists and fundamentalists represent two extremes on the American political spectrum, but that there have always been in American politics factions and movements roughly comparable to these two groups. This, he argues, is a part of the strength and health of liberal democracy.

The seventh article by Norman De Jong (Trinity Christian College) compares nineteenth and twentieth century Supreme Court interpretations of the religious clauses of the First Amendment, showing the very different nature of the two and the impact of each on society.

The eighth article by Paul J. Weber (University of Louisville) traces the development of the “strict neutrality” principle of interpreting the First Amendment’s religion clauses and presents the assets and liabilities of this position. If properly understood, Weber believes that “strict neutrality” will be the next stage in First Amendment
The ninth article by William R. Marty (Memphis State University) compares the views of America’s founders with those of the Soviet Union in an article entitled “Religion, The Constitution, and Modern Rivals: Our Founders and Theirs”. Marty’s essential thesis is that the successes of American democracy have been largely dependent upon application of principles developed by the Founders and that success and failure in the Soviet Union may be largely attributed to the founding principles of Marx and Engels.

The purpose of these articles is to stimulate scholarly dialogue on the subject of religion and American politics. Neither the authors nor I claim to have the last word. Our goal is to raise the horizons of thought and scope of research on this increasingly controversial and critical subject.