



THE PEW
FORUM
ON RELIGION
& PUBLIC LIFE

ONE ELECTORATE UNDER GOD?

A DIALOGUE ON RELIGION AND AMERICAN POLITICS

*The Pew Forum Dialogues on Religion and Public Life address the moral and religious dimensions of important policy-related questions. The latest volume in the series, **One Electorate Under God?**, brings together over 40 essays dealing with the connections between faith and politics. Its contributors represent a wide range of religious traditions, political points of view and professional experiences. The authors include politicians, theologians, preachers, pollsters and intellectuals from such different sectors as the trade union movement, the law, history, sociology and journalism. The essays go back and forth from Left to Center to Right, and include the views of Catholics, Jews, Protestants and Muslims. The editors of the Dialogue Series, E.J. Dionne, Jr., Jean Bethke Elshtain and Kayla M. Drogoz, recognize that this collection does not exhaust the possibilities for this discussion. They hope, however, that the essays challenge the stereotype that when religion enters the public square, civility inevitably gives way, tolerance invariably disappears and rational argument is made impossible. This executive summary, drawn from the volume's introduction and essays, highlights some of the themes in this Dialogue.*

IN THE BEGINNING

The anchor of this collection is a conversation between Mario Cuomo, a Democrat who served three terms as governor of New York, and Mark Souder, an experienced Republican member of the House of Representatives from Indiana. Cuomo and Souder first came together at an event sponsored by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life in Washington, D.C., in October 2002. Cuomo, a Catholic and a liberal, and Souder, an Evangelical Protestant and a conservative, were asked to offer their reflections on faith and politics. These two men, from profoundly different political and religious traditions, help deepen our understanding of American politics by using the lens of personal religious commitments.

At the heart of Cuomo's view is an emphasis on two principles he believes are "shared by most if not all of our nation's religions.... Look at the earliest monotheistic religion, Judaism," Cuomo writes. "Two of

Judaism's basic principles, as I understand it, are *tzedakkah* and *tikkun olam*. *Tzedakkah* is the obligation of righteousness and common sense that binds all human beings to treat one another charitably and with respect and dignity.... The second principle, *tikkun olam*, says that, having accepted the notion that we should treat one another with respect and dignity, we come together as human beings in comity and cooperation to repair and improve the world around us."

"Would it not be nice," Cuomo asks, "to find a way simply to announce at once to the whole world that before we argue about the things that we differ on, we concentrate on the two things we believe in? We are supposed to love one another, and we are supposed to work together to clean up this mess we are in, because that is the mission that was left to us. I cannot think of any better guidance."

While Cuomo sees no problem with policymakers applying those universalistic "natural law principles" to political judgments, he is very clear that politicians

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

should not apply particularistic theological views when making policy decisions in a pluralistic democracy. As he writes, “Catholics who also hold public office have an additional responsibility. They have to try to create conditions under which all citizens are reasonably free to act according to their own religious beliefs, even when those acts conflict with Roman Catholic dogma regarding divorce, birth control, abortion, stem cell research and even the existence of God.”

“Catholic public officials, like all public officials,” Cuomo continues, “take an oath to preserve the United States Constitution, which guarantees this freedom. And they do so gladly, not because they love what others do with their freedom but because they realize that, in guaranteeing freedom for others, they guarantee their own right to live their personal lives as Catholics, with the right to reject birth control, to reject abortions and to refuse to participate in or contribute to removing stem cells from embryos.”

Souder takes a different view of the role religious convictions play in the lives of policymakers. “Conservative faiths, even sects within these faiths, differ on how involved the City of God should be with the City of Man,” he writes. “But this much is true: Conservative Christians as individuals do not separate their lives into a private sphere and a public sphere.”

“To ask me to check my Christian beliefs at the public door,” Souder explains, “is to ask me to expel the Holy Spirit from my life when I serve as a congressman, and that I will not do. Either I am a Christian or I am not. Either I reflect His glory or I do not.”

Souder argues that “most political issues are moral issues.” “When you serve in government, as I do, every day, every hour you make moral decisions — like making new laws to restrict cheaters like Enron exec-

utives. Why restrict cheating?” Souder asks rhetorically. “Because it is a moral premise of society. When we deal with rape, with child support enforcement, with juveniles in trouble with the law, why do we not let both sides fight it out and let the strongest win? Because of certain moral premises that society shares.”

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Mario Cuomo

“But I find that I am allowed to use these Christian values in speaking out for national parks and in speaking out against spouse abuse,” Souder continues, “but not when I speak out against homosexual marriage, pornography, abortion, gambling or evolution across species.”

Souder’s conclusion is that it is “unfair” to ask believers to “check those beliefs at the public door. It is not going to happen. The challenge is to find ways to continue to allow personal religious freedom in America, as guaranteed by our Constitution, while working

through the differences.”

BALANCING THE FIRST AMENDMENT

To build on the Cuomo–Souder dialogue, the editors invited other public figures to add their voices to the conversation. Specifically, the contributors were asked to read the Cuomo and Souder essays and to either respond directly to them or to provide their own take on religion and politics in America. A number of the respondents took on Cuomo or Souder directly, challenging the logic of their arguments or their understandings of their own faiths. All of the writers addressed issues of major national significance, some taking an historical view, others focusing on specific contemporary concerns. No two authors express exactly the same ideas, but many of them touch on similar themes.

One theme that emerges repeatedly is how complicated it is in a free and pluralist society to find the

right balance between the two halves of the religion clause of the First Amendment to the Constitution. How should we as a people properly interpret the amendment's guarantees of the free expression of religion and its prohibitions on the establishment through government of any particular religion? In our time, this debate is often expressed in less constitutional terms. How much should religion enter our public debate? How can we guarantee the rights of religious people in the public sphere without threatening the rights of those who are not religious? As M. A. Muqtedar Khan, a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution and vice president of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists, argues in these pages: "Today, as all religions experience revivals, we must find ways to guarantee religious freedom without proscribing the scope of religion." And that is not easy.

Robert Bellah, one of our country's premier interpreters of religious and ethical questions, is acutely aware of the difficulties. It is, he writes, "perfectly appropriate to base one's political stand on the particular faith tradition to which one is committed and to explain that tradition in arguing one's case. The only caveat is that one's argument must appeal to general moral principles in persuading others. One does not have the right to demand that others accept the tenets of one's own faith in making a political decision."

As Bellah knows perfectly well, matters often get more complicated still. "But if public action is legitimately, and perhaps inevitably, based in significant part on the religious beliefs of public persons, as both Cuomo and Souder seem to agree," he writes, "then the nature of those religious beliefs is also legitimately part of the public discussion."

Some of the contributors, however, question whether contemporary politicians successfully balance both sides of the First Amendment. As Jeffrey Stout, a professor of religion at Princeton University, writes, "The religion that politicians practice in public blurs the line between piety and nationalism; it smells of self-idolatry. Its symbolic gestures make for bad religion and bad politics. Claiming to speak for the people as a whole on religious topics, the politicians imply that citizens who refuse to be spoken for in this way are less than full-fledged members of the people. When dissenters object, they are demonized as secularists. Symbolic sacrifice of the secularist scapegoat is itself a ritual essential to the public religion that some politicians would have the nation adopt. Here, too, the spirit of the First Amendment is as important to keep in mind as the letter. Even when such rites do not add up to the literal establishment of a religion, they rend the body politic at the very moment that they purport to be binding it together symbolically."

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Mark Souder

A CALL FOR LEADERSHIP

Stout is not suggesting that religion be removed from the public square. Like many of the other contributors, Stout is concerned foremost with the

social welfare of the nation and whether or not politicians are attending to it. As he writes, "A country that has preachers, prophets, poets, houses of worship and open air does not need politicians expressing its piety in public places. Individual citizens can be trusted to find appropriate ways to express their own religious convictions and train the young in virtue. What the people need from political leaders are the virtues of truthfulness, justice, practical wisdom, courage, vision and a kind of compassion whose effects can actually be discerned in the lives of the poor and the elderly."

Writers on the Right and Left share this concern for the social and political matters at stake in policy

debates, although they focus on different issues and find different answers to the question of how well politicians are tapping into values — religiously inspired or otherwise — in their efforts to lead the country. As journalist Michael Barone writes, “Some commentators have decried the role of religion in politics and argue that Christian conservatives should not be using political means to achieve their goals. But on issues like abortion it was secularly inclined elites, operating through unelected officials, who were imposing their own moral principles on the larger society and trying to prevent the elected representatives of the people from deciding them. Handling such issues through electoral politics is arguably more likely to produce acceptable results than allowing elites to decide them insulated from popular response.”

Other contributors are concerned with the role religion is — and isn’t — playing in American foreign policy. *New York Times* columnist David Brooks describes himself as a “recovering secularist,” someone who, in large part because of September 11, is newly attentive to the role religion plays in the world at large. In seeking direction and understanding in a world thick with religion, Brooks wishes that we had a public prophet with the moral clarity of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. As Brooks writes, “America could use a Reinhold Niebuhr today, to police its excesses — to make the country aware of its prejudices, both religious and secular, and the way these prejudices prevent fine-tuned understanding of this new world.”

CHALLENGING THE STEREOTYPES

The many conservative voices gathered in this volume help explode stereotypes surrounding the question of the relationship between religion and politics, specifically the idea that religious conservatives simply want to impose their beliefs on the willing and unwilling alike. Many of our conservative contributors emphasize the importance of respecting the country’s religious diver-

sity. As Republican Representative Amo Houghton of New York notes, it is our destiny to be a special nation that draws “strength from its religious pluralism.”

Michael Cromartie of the Ethics and Public Policy Center argues forcefully that conservative Christians “would be more effective if they developed a public language, a public philosophy and a public posture that communicates a concern for the common good of all and not just of fellow believers.”

Terry Eastland, the publisher of *The Weekly Standard*, is just as clear. “Were I an officeholder or candidate for office,” he writes, “I would be willing to state what my faith is, though I would not want to use my faith as an instrument of politics, something to hold up

before certain audiences to gain their support.... I would want to be persuasive, and, on most issues, arguments from explicit doctrine are not likely to persuade majorities drawn from a religiously pluralist society.”

Stephen Monsma, a professor of political science at Pepperdine University, also argues that there are “proper and improper uses of religion in the public realm.” “One way that religion is sometimes improperly used in the public realm is as a symbol to garner votes,” he writes. “Another improper use of religion is to seek a preeminent

place for one’s own religion in the public policy realm ... an improper goal in a religiously pluralistic society.”

Liberals in these pages also operate against stereotype. Michael Kazin, a professor at Georgetown University who is working on a biography of William Jennings Bryan, uses Bryan’s example to show how important religious commitment is — and has been — to social progress. “Bryan transformed his party from a bulwark of conservatism — the defender of states’ rights and laissez-faire economics — into a bastion of anti-corporate Progressivism that favored federal intervention to help workers and small businesses,” Kazin writes. “Undergirding [his] stand was a simple, pragmatic

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Robert Bellah

gospel: Only mobilized citizens, imbued with Christian morality, could save the nation from ‘predatory’ interests and the individuals who did their bidding.” “The Left,” Kazin declares in an intriguing sentence that will provoke much debate, “has never advanced without a moral awakening entangled with notions about what the Lord would have us do.”

Paul Begala, an architect of Bill Clinton’s victories in the 1990s and the staunch liberal on CNN’s *Crossfire*, is uneasy with how progressives treat religion, as well as with how people treat those who are both religious and liberal. “My friends in what the media calls the religious Right sure know how to fight,” Begala writes. “But too many religious progressives do not. And what is worse, the very phrase *religious progressive* is seen as an oxymoron, like jumbo shrimp or compassionate conservative, because much of the Left is far too secular, even antireligious.”

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE 2004 ELECTIONS

Writing in an election year, many of the authors pay particular attention to the role this religious divide is likely to play in November 2004. As pollster Anna Greenberg notes in her essay, “In 2000, 62 percent of voters who attend church every week voted for George W. Bush, while 62 percent of voters who never attend church voted for Al Gore. These trends are persistent and are likely to emerge in 2004 as well.” Greenberg discusses the significance of these numbers for Democrats while cautioning against missing the nuances behind the numbers. She writes, “There is no question that it is important for Democrats to speak without embarrassment, or fear of alienating base Democratic voters, about their faith if for no other reason than to counter the assumption that the Republican Party is the party of the faithful and the Democratic Party is the party of the godless. This construction is patently untrue — just look at African

Americans, the most reliably Democratic voters in the electorate and possibly the most faithful people in the country.”

Gary Bauer, chairman and founder of the Campaign for Working Families, says discussions of the role of religion in politics may enrich the 2004 political debates. He writes, “Call me an optimist, but I believe that 2004 can be a watershed year for the rediscovery of the vital, and positive, connection between religion and politics.” After considering the way in which September 11 and subsequent events have caused many to reconsider the role of religion in America’s history, Bauer argues, “The last thing America wants or needs is more symbolic God talk to religious people as a pet constituency. Voters — Evangelicals, Jews, Catholics, mainline Protestants and people of other faiths — are more sophisticated than that. Elements of the media and judicial elite have something odious in common if they believe that religious and moral convictions can be satisfied with nothing more than a little God talk, acceptable when it is trivial, dangerous when it is actually believed and unconstitutional when it is expressed in public policy.”

FINDING MEANING IN POLITICS

Religious voices and insights rooted in faith have a great deal to contribute to our public deliberations about politics and public policy. As Jean Bethke Elshtain, one of the editors of this volume, writes in her essay, “American politics is indecipherable if it is severed from the interplay and panoply of American religions.”

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Gary Bauer

Figuring out how a polity can be open to religious insights without succumbing to the temptation to impose specific religious beliefs through the state might be said to describe the fundamental challenge of religious freedom. As Martha Minow, a professor at Harvard

Law School, writes, “Religiously inflected arguments and perspectives bring critical and prophetic insight and energy to politics and public affairs.... There is some-

thing woefully lacking in any view that excludes religion entirely from the public sphere.” One can believe this, she notes, and still accept that “difficulties arise if government actions cross over from reflecting religious sources of vision and energy to preferring one kind of religion over others.”

As distinguished academic Alan Wolfe writes at the conclusion of his essay, “Americans believe in God and they believe in freedom. They take religion seriously, but unlike many other societies in history that have also given a prominent place to God, they do not enshrine any one religion as the official religion of their society. They also take freedom seriously, but unlike many other countries in the world that also do, they have not used their freedom to create a society in which faith plays no especially visible role.

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Alan Wolfe

It is never easy to balance faith and freedom,” he continues, “which is one reason that our courts and legislatures revisit these issues so often. Finding the right balance between them may not therefore involve discovering some constitutional secret or passing a piece of extraordinary legislation. That balance can only come if believers and nonbelievers act out of toleration for each other. Some on both sides of the divide never will, but the great majority find ways to live together. And as long as they do, we need fear neither the triumph of secular humanism nor the establishment of theocracy.”

This volume reflects that effort to find ways to live together, with toleration and good will, with honesty and rigor, with faith and hope, with democracy and open debate. Its contributors helped make this conversation a rich one, with no simple answers but many thoughtful insights.

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