

Religion as Unifier and Divider / Prof. Alan Wolfe. —
In : Annales de philosophie et des sciences humaines.
— N° 21, t. 2 (2005), pp. 397-411.

Cover title : Annales de philosophie et des sciences
humaines. — Foot notes.

1. Religion and culture. 2. Religion and geography.

PER L1044 / FP195612P

RELIGION AS UNIFIER AND DIVIDER

PROFESSOR ALAN WOLFE

Boston College - Boston

THE GREAT DIVIDER

It has been a long time since religion was thought of as a unifying force. The moment such a description perhaps best applies was during the height of Christendom, say the fourteenth or fifteenth century, when at least one of the world's great monotheistic religions, Catholicism, could claim something like universal status. That, of course, changed with the Protestant Reformation, but even after that epochal event, when Latin remained the lingua franca of the intellectuals and the Tridentine Mass became an unchanging liturgy for ordinary Catholic believers, Catholicism was hardly universal even its own bailiwick. Eastern Orthodox Catholics had their own rituals. Many Roman Catholics had a less than faithful relationship to their Church, and their Church borrowed from so many traditions that its practices approached syncretism. The universal church was universal in name only.

Whatever unifying potential Catholicism once possessed, the rise of Protestantism was synonymous with the rise of sectarianism. Martin Luther's great contribution was not only to reform the corruption of the Church, but to create a German religion, tied, forever after, to the language and history of one particular country, even as other countries, such as those in Scandinavia, became

Lutheran as well. Nationalism gave Protestant sects their strength, but at the cost of contributing to, rather than abating, the cultural forces that were dividing the world. And even within the nations that committed themselves to a particular Protestant sect unity proved to be illusive; before long, there would be many different varieties of Dutch Calvinists or German Lutherans, each claiming a monopoly of a particular truth and identifying as the infidel those closest in cultural affinity rather than some distant target.

Religious conflict was one of the many aspects of European culture brought across the Atlantic as colonists, most of whom were Protestants, settled in what would become the United States. Significant voices hoped that the new country could avoid the sectarianism that in Europe had been associated with religion. "Providence," wrote John Jay in *The Federalist Papers*, "has been pleased to give this one connected country to one united people – a people descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion, attached to the same principles of government, very similar in their manners and customs, and who, by their joint counsels, arms, and efforts, fighting side by side throughout a long and bloody war, have nobly established general liberty and independence"¹. Even at the time he wrote these words, however, Jay was expressing more of a wish for, than offering an accurate description of, his country. In fact, the reason for writing the *Federalist Papers* in the first place was because national unity was so problematic; due in part to the heroic efforts of Jay, Madison, and Hamilton, the Constitution was (just barely) ratified, but it would take a Civil War and the overcoming of entrenched sectional resistance after that, before anything like unity was achieved. Neither a common language nor the presumption of a common religion proved powerful enough in their own right to overcome American disunity.

This has not, however, stopped commentators from continuing to look to religion as a source of national identity. The latest inheritor of John Jay's position is the Harvard political scientist Samuel P. Huntington. In his recent book *Who Are We?*, Huntington claims to find a common Anglo-Protestant culture in the United States, one particularly marked by the dissenting or evangelical approach to Jesus². This, as I argue in my review of his book in *Foreign Affairs*, is not an accurate picture of religion in the United States, either at the founding or at the present time³. At least two of our original religions were

1. Federalist #2, http://memory.loc.gov/const/fed/fed_02.html

2. Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We?: The Cultural Core of American National Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004).

3. Alan Wolfe, "Native Son," *Foreign Affairs*, 83 (May/June 2004), 120-125.

established rather than dissenting: Presbyterianism, once the state Church of Scotland, and Episcopalianism, which was the American off-shoot of the Church of England. The Dutch, who are not Anglo (and who offered the Puritans a home before they came to the United States), were disproportionately strong in New York and New Jersey. Maryland was founded by Catholics; within one hundred years, they would become the largest denomination in America. Rhode Island was settled by Baptists, many of whom were Anglo-Protestant dissenters, but the religion itself had its origins in the German reformation.

As Huntington's choice of an example inadvertently shows, if we look to religion to find a force for unity, based on the premise that a society needs a common culture in order to flourish, American history does not offer it. We have had so many different cultural imperatives because we have had so many different religions. The fact that nearly all of them, at least until the second half of the nineteenth century, called themselves Protestant does not mean that they shared the same views about Biblical authority, the role of the clergy, the place of women, the significance of race, the nature of the liturgy, or the necessity of mission. Northerners and Southerners who shared the same religion went to war against each other. Urban and rural differences persisted despite belief in the same God. Long before we were a religiously diverse nation we were a politically and economically divided one. Indeed if one compares the era of the civil war to the era of affirmative action, we were more divided when we shared a common faith than now when we no longer do.

True when most Americans shared at least the two testaments of the Hebrew and Christian bible, the inability of faith to serve as a force for unity is even more noticeable now that we have so many religions and sacred texts flourishing in the United States.¹ Just to offer one illustration of our diversity, an organization formed in 1927 to promote inter-religious cooperation was called the National Conference of Christians and Jews. Formation of this organization was something of a daring act; before we started calling ourselves Judeo-Christian – that would only come about during World War II in response to Hitler's attacks on the Jews² – the founders of this group believed that the cause of inclusion would best be served by giving Jews equality with Christians in the

1. For accounts of American religious diversity, see Diana Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Now Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (San Francisco: Harper, 2001) and Peter H. Schuck, *Diversity in America: Keeping Government at a Safe Distance* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

2. Mark Silk, *Spiritual Politics: Religion and America Since World War II* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988).

name of their organization. In 1998, the NCCJ – in a move to keep at least the same initials – changed its name to the National Conference for Community and Justice. Its former title, once a symbol of inclusion, had become a mark of exclusion, for kept outside the range of the organization's name were Muslims and Buddhists, both of whom probably outnumber Jews in the U. S. population, as well as numerous other religions that arrived in these shores in response to the Immigration Act of 1965. So diverse is the state of American religion at this time that we no longer have a name capable of characterizing ourselves. After the passing of the term "Judeo-Christian," some have proposed "Abrahamic," for that would include Muslims. But even that term would not include many of the Asian religions and would therefore be obsolete the moment it was adopted.

It is common to speak about race as a divisive force in America, but the number of races is far smaller than the number of religions. And while it is difficult to find people who have no race, there are people who have no religion. Because non-believers are a significant and perhaps growing percentage of the American population, even if we were to find a way of unifying all our diverse believers, still left out would be those who do not believe. There are, in fact, reasons to believe that the conflict between religion and non-religion is far more divisive in American life than the conflict between religions; conservative Catholics, Protestants, and Jews are more likely to find a common enemy in secular humanism than they are to struggle with each other over fine points of theology.¹ Our first culture war – the battle over public schools in cities like Boston or the battles over admissions to Ivy League universities – were fought between religions. Our current culture, as in the Pledge of Allegiance case, is being fought between believers and non-believers. Whether from within or without, in short, religion has a way of polarizing people that makes one wonder whether unity can ever be possible the moment God comes into the picture.

Religion in Theory, Religion in Practice

Despite this history of division, however, there is one way in which religion can serve as a force for unity in American society. A widespread gap exists between religion as it is supposed to exist in theory and religion as it actually exists in practice. Much of the discussion about religion has concerned the former. But in recent years sociologists, especially those trained in ethnographic methods, have been examining in detail what religion actually means to

1. Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

believers in the course of their worship¹. The focus on practice, or, as it is frequently called, “lived religion,” tends to demonstrate how similar people of faith are even when the religions in which they believe are very different.

Take, to begin, the term “belief” itself. Beliefs have been at the core of religion’s history of strife and conflict. Religious creeds have traditionally been efforts to codify the truths that define one religion – and that make it distinct from others. The sociological reality of many religions combined with an epistemological assumption of one exclusive truth for each of them is a formula for discord. For if my truth is, so to speak, true, another’s is, by definition, false, and if religion is central to the salvation of the soul, as many believe it is, then my obligation is to do whatever is in my power to persuade another of his or her false understandings. Religion would hardly be worth dying for, let alone requiring considerable investments of time and money, if its truth claims were not taken seriously.

Yet Americans tend to become a bit uncomfortable around strong epistemological claims. As I demonstrated in my book *One Nation, After All*, there is a strong current of non-judgmentalism in the attitudes and opinions of ordinary Americans². It is not just that Americans are adverse to conflict, although, in general, they are. It is also that they are quite aware of the history of religious sectarianism and do not want to see it repeated. Catholics, for example, generally know that their faith has been defined as that of the one true church. They, or at least many of them, would insist, moreover, that their religion is true. But they tend to draw the line at suggesting that it is the *only* true church, with the corresponding conclusion that people who hold to another faith adhere to false beliefs. “For me and for my children and my family, it’s the one true church,” as one believer put it. “But to God, I don’t think it is the one true church.... I really believe that the God that I think is out there isn’t really going to care that the Episcopalians do things one way and Catholics do it another”³.

-
1. Efforts to offer overviews of this approach can be found in David D. Hall, ed., *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) and Colleen MacDannell, ed., *Religions of the United States in Practice*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).
 2. Alan Wolfe, *One Nation, After All: What Middle Class Americans Think about God, Country, Family, Poverty, Work, Immigration, the Right, the Left, and Each Other*. (New York: Viking/Penguin, 1998).
 3. Cited in Dean R. Hoge, William D. Dinges, Mary Johnson, and Juan L. Gonzales, *Young American Catholics: Religion in the Culture of Choice* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 223-24.

This is not an attitude, needless to say, exclusive to Catholicism. A study of reform Jews found that many of them worry about believing in a God who is “too Jewish,” for the notion of a commanding and distant figure is not what attracts them to their religion in the first place¹. And the much noticed rise of evangelical and fundamentalist forms of Protestantism is not only a move from liberalism to conservatism, but is often a move from denomination to non-denomination. Conservative Protestants often look with suspicion at doctrinal differences in favor of a personal relationship with Jesus that transcends considerations of creed; indeed, our largest evangelical religion, Baptism, considers itself anti-creedal, as if formal confessions of the faith are too Catholic for Baptist sensibilities.

The presence of non-judgmentalism among religious believers has religious origins; many of those I have interviewed cite scripture as their authority for judging not. But non-judgmentalism also has a secular dimension; it is one of those legacies of the 1960s that seems to have engulfed the entire culture and not just flower children and anti-war protestors. Like grade inflation or social promotion, non-judgmentalism reflects an unwillingness to be cruel, a sense that society may have gone too far in stigmatizing people whose differences from the rest of society may not represent moral failings but are reflective of the fact that people come with different abilities – and different beliefs. Even though religious non-judgmentalism comes close to laissez-faire indifference than pure liberal tolerance – “I won’t judge you if you don’t judge me” is the way the ideal is usually expressed – it does contrast sharply with a period in which religious believers fought, sometimes to the point of violence, over creed. What unifies Americans, in short, is not specific beliefs but the belief that specific beliefs should not divide us. This is not a robust form of communitarianism; it focuses on what we should not do rather than on what we share. But it does provide more for unity than for division and in that sense possesses at some communitarian benefits.

Much the same is true of another dimension of religious practice: tradition. Religion and tradition are so closely intertwined that the two terms become synonymous with each other. No wonder, then, that those who find religion a source of conflict discover the same result when tradition is an issue. An example is offered by the political commentator Michael Barone, who wrote of the 2000 election that “the single greatest divide in American politics is that the Bush coalition consists of people who are religious and respect traditional

1. Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen, *The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 155.

morality while the Gore coalition consists of people who are not traditionally religious and favor a more relativistic morality"¹. In the Red States/Blue States metaphor of American politics, it is an accepted fact that half of the country believes in the importance of tradition while the other half is modern or even, these days, post-modern,

Not only are Americans divided over tradition, we are frequently told, they are also divided among them. Barone's formulation, for example, would include among the traditionalists people whose actual traditions vary greatly, Orthodox Jews and pre Vatican II Catholics can both call themselves traditionalists, but their respective traditions include considerable distrust of each other; what we now call traditional Catholics were once convinced that the Jews killed Christ and evangelical Protestants, despite their lack of interest in creeds, were typically united in viewing Catholics as the anti-Christ. The more we evoke tradition, it would seem, the more divided we will be.

Yet Americans evoke tradition in ways that do not always fit the role that tradition is expected to play. Tradition in American life has qualities much like ethnicity in American life. As sociologists study the dynamics of ethnicity, they often find that while Italians, Poles, or Chinese speak with great pride about their customs, they speak in very similar ways, emphasizing closeness of family, the importance of food, or clothing, music, and other distinguishing rituals. As sociologist Mary Waters has observed, it is as if there is a generic form of ethnicity into which all specific ethnicities can fit; what matters is that you are ethnic, not which ethnicity you are.²

As generic ethnicity exists in the social sphere, generic traditionalism exists in the religious sphere, as the anthropologist Melinda Bollar Wagner has pointed out.³ Obviously religions have different traditions and honor them in different ways; Jews consider tradition more important than belief, which evangelical Protestants do not, and the traditions honored by Jews are different from those honored by Christians. But one thing unites all religious traditionalists in America: they are striving to hold onto the old in a society that worships the

1. Cited in Adrian Wooldridge, "As Labor Lost Ideology, U. S. Parties Found It," *New York Times*, July 22, 2001, IV, 4.

2. Mary C. Waters, *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

3. Melinda Bollar Wagner, "Generic Conservative Christianity: The Demise of Denominationalism in Christian Schools," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 36 (1997), 13-24.

new. The constant process of adjusting traditions to fit new realities unifies them even as their specific traditions divide them.

Numerous examples exist of this generic traditionalism in American life. One of the most interesting concerned the reaction to the movie, "The Passion of the Christ." Although the film relied on historical sources that had anti-Semitic overtones, a number of conservative Jews praised the film because it evoked a sense of religious traditionalism. In a similar way, evangelicals – who not only have had a history of anti-Catholicism but who also typically do not identify with Jesus suffering in favor of Jesus the redeemer – flocked to an explicitly Catholic treatment of the Passion for the same reason. In America we welcome tradition even if we tend to gloss over the details of the traditions we welcome.

An even more striking example of generic traditionalism is offered by the experience of Muslims and Jews in America. Jews constitute a majority in Israel and Muslims are a majority in Saudi Arabia or Pakistan, but in the United States, both are minority religions. No minority religion can experience tradition the way it can when it is in the majority; so long as both Islam and Judaism exist in a primarily Christian society, their respective religious laws can never become the secular law. Minority status gives both religions something in common. Despite the fact that Jews and Muslims kill each other in the Middle East, in the United States they both face the question of how to interpret their dietary laws, deal with feminism, send their children to school, and contemplate the possibility of inter-marriage.¹ When Muslims decide that in the absence of a halal butcher it is appropriate to opt for a kosher one instead, American culture has made its mark on religious traditionalism.

No aspect of the religious life is more conducive to disunity than the fact that some religions consider it a duty that the faith spread the word to others. Proselytizing has been the core of many of the U. S. Supreme Court decisions dealing with religious conflict, since those who are the object of another religion's efforts to convert them nearly always view such efforts as invasions of their privacy or violations of their own religious freedom². Aware of the dangers

1. For examples of how this works, see Etan Diamond, *And I Will Dwell in Their Midst: Orthodox Jews in Suburbia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000) and Elise Goldwasser, "Economic Security and Muslim Identity: A Study of the Muslim Community in Durham, North Carolina," in Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John L. Esposito, eds., *Muslims on the Americanization Path?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

2. For helpful overviews of the issues involved, see John Witte, Jr., *Religion and the American Constitutional Experiment: Essential Rights and Liberties* (Boulder: Westview, 2000).

posed to unity by aggressive efforts at evangelization, the U. S. Supreme Court has tried to define various tests that distinguish between the freedom of a religion to advocate its beliefs and the rights of religious minorities. The most famous of such tests is the one that says that public funds should be denied to those faiths that are “pervasively sectarian”¹.

It is certainly true that evangelical Protestants in particular insist on the importance of witnessing their faith; in the evangelical world, the term “Christian” is often used to indicate another evangelical, not a Catholic or mainline Protestant, and when evangelicals are in the majority, say in small towns in Texas, their public manifestations of their faith can seem offensive to other Christians, Jews, Muslims, and non-believers. For this reason, witnessing the faith can hardly be considered a force for communal unity. Yet it may also be the case that witnessing is not as disunifying as commonly believed. To understand why, it is important to consider the acute dilemma in which evangelicals find themselves in the United States. If they reject the culture in favor of a fundamentalist purity, few will be converted. On the other hand, if they want to spread the word effectively, they have to join, rather than to marginalize themselves from, the culture around them. Most evangelicals take the second path. Because they do, evangelicalism is a growing faith but it is not the sectarian faith it once was, since, in adapting to the culture, evangelicalism will inevitably be shaped by it. It is difficult, in fact, to be sectarian in American life since sects tend to die out and what flourishes typically becomes inclusive.

Although the literature on social capital and the literature on evangelization are rarely related to each other, the much lamented tendency of Americans to bowl alone also has had a significant impact on the way Christians spread the message of the gospel. Ensnared in exurbia developments with few spaces for public interaction, afraid of knocking on doors for fear of crime, harassed by the demands of dual income families and over-scheduled children, Americans who bring Jesus into their lives often seek creative methods of witnessing their faith. One of the most popular has been called “lifestyle evangelism” by the sociologist Joseph Tamney². The idea is to live as best you can according to your religious principles, for if you do, the theory goes, you will glow as a result and others will notice you and ask you about it, offering you a non-confrontational

-
1. *Hunt v. McNair*, 413 U. S. 734 (1973). See also Stephen V. Monsma, “The ‘Pervasively Sectarian’ Standard in Theory and Practice,” *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics, and Public Policy*, 13 (1999), 321-40.
 2. Joseph Tamney, *The Resilience of Conservative Religion: The Case of Popular, Conservative, Protestant Congregations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

and friendly way to share your convictions. Compared to “cold calling” methods of evangelizing such as knocking on doors or handing out pamphlets, methods that generally do not work in any case,¹ lifestyle evangelization constitutes a sharp break with the conflictual history of Christian proselytizing. And since Americans share lifestyles even as they adhere to different religions, lifestyle evangelism becomes one more force downplaying divisiveness in favor of unity.

At the same time as evangelicals bend their practices to meet the expectations of American culture, non-evangelicals develop a personal relationship with the deity that overlaps with the way evangelicals typically approach their faith. Especially since Vatican II, American Catholicism, forced to compete with evangelicals churches for members, has relied less on an authoritative clergy and more on emphasizing a close and personal God to keep the faith². Even Jews, as one study of moderately affiliated modern Jews discovered, want a more personal relationship with God³. American religions engage in less conflict with each other at least in part because they are becoming more like each other, as each finds ways to respond to a widespread desire among believers for a faith that speaks to their needs. Paradoxically, the one thing Americans have in common is their individualism, and it is to such individualism that most religions find themselves appealing.

One final example can be used to illustrate the proposition that religion in practice tends to be more unifying than religion in theory: sin. Religions typically acts in good Durkheimian fashion as a form of the collective conscience, insisting that some forms of behavior, especially those of an anti-social nature, ought to be prohibited because they violate God’s moral teachings. Yet while the main Abrahamic religions emphasize the ubiquity of sin and the need to seek redemption, they all do so in different ways. Catholics have tended to emphasize the power of reconciliation more than some Protestant sects, while Jews (and Muslims) have typically been more legalistic in their approach to sin. No wonder, then, that in a multi-religious society there have been multiple sins, as well as a variety of paths to salvation. Under such circumstances, religiously pluralistic societies lack common agreement on the behaviors to be prohibited as

-
1. Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Exploring the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 135.
 2. See, for example, Bernard J. Lee, S. M., with William V. D’Antonio, *The Catholic Experience of Small Christian Communities* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000).
 3. Cohen and Eisen, *op cit*.

sinful and societies that commit to the separation of church and state cannot make what religion deems as sinful automatically illegal under civil codes.

In practice, however, religions of all kinds in the United States have increasingly adopted therapeutic methods and psychological language when dealing with the problem of sin¹. Sin is more likely to be viewed as behavior that harms the self rather than as conduct that violates the collective conscience. Focussed on the bottom line of church growth, clergy are reluctant to insist on the ubiquity of sin for fear of turning off potential congregants in a highly competitive market for souls. Upbeat language tends to be more popular among church-goers of all faiths than dark and brooding views of human nature². Critics frequently point out the shallowness of a therapeutic faith; one conservative Protestant views trends like these as the triumph of the “culture of narcissism” in the religious community³. And indeed there is much truth in the charge. The best-selling books in Christian bookstores are not those that explicate the Bible but those that offer religious approaches to dieting, personal problem solving, and even business success⁴.

As problematic as narcissism may be for traditional religious teachings, however, it is a force for unity in the culture. Unlike strict religious approaches to sin, therapeutic ones emphasize the problems that all people have in common and seek solutions that cut across the denominations and creeds that characterize a religiously pluralistic society. Although psychology focuses on individual selves, the self is something that every American can understand whatever their religious upbringing and current convictions. In a way not fully appreciated by those who proclaim the existence of a culture war in the United States, the new rules that Daniel Yankelovich seems coming out of the 1960s and 1970s have

-
1. James Davison Hunter, *The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age Without Good or Evil* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).
 2. Marsha Witten, *All is Forgiven: The Secular Message in American Protestantism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).
 3. Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).
 4. See, for example, Michelle Mary Lelwica, *Starving for Salvation: The Spiritual Dimensions of Eating Problems among American Girls and Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) and R. Marie Griffith, *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

influenced everyone in America, not just leftist adherents to the counter-culture, but religious believers, including conservative ones, as well.¹

For all of religion's history of sectarianism and division, culture is generally a force for unity. This is as true for American culture as it is for any other society's common beliefs and practices; our culture may not be as deep as some others, but it is widespread, appealing, and inclusive. American culture influences just about all of America's institutions and practices, from entertainment and sports to education. No wonder, then, it will influence religion as well, and in turn, that religion will shape itself to the culture. Whether or not this is good for religion, it is good for America, for it gives all believers, whatever the specifics of their faith, the common language, symbols, and identities with which to overcome some of their differences.

BEYOND THE DIVIDE OVER FAITH

Religion has been at the core of the culture war that has engaged so many pundits and politicians since the *Roe v. Wade* abortion decision in 1973. Some of the issues involved in the culture war, such as affirmative action, do not have an explicitly religious basis. But nearly all of the others do, from abortion itself, which lives on in controversies over late-term procedures and overseas family planning policy, to debates over the Pledge of Allegiance and faith-based initiatives. Especially with the election of George W. Bush in 2000, religion has been especially prominent in American public debate. Two highly publicized decisions have focussed attention on the potentially divisive role of religion: stem cell research and gay marriage. President Bush, clearly determined to appeal to his core voters in the religious right, has taken positions on both of these issues, reflecting a strategy which holds that mobilizing the base can be more important than appealing to the center.

This persistence of religious-based issues that divide Americans into camps comes as no surprise to many on both sides of the faith divide. Those such as Susan Jacoby, who views religion's entry into politics as hostile to civil liberty and equality; for her, the Bush Administration's policies confirm her conviction that believers are intolerant and unwilling to accord respect to their adversaries.² On the other side of the spectrum, defenders of the faithful frequently admire

1. Daniel Yankelovich, *New Rules: Searching for self-fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down* (New York: Random House, 1981).

2. Susan Jacoby, *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004).

religious people for their uncompromising stands; they do not make good liberal citizens, an admirable quality from this point of view, because they believe in prophecy more than in politics.¹

Yet a funny thing has happened to the role of religion in the culture just as the point when, in theory, Americans ought to be most divided from each other. None of the wedge issues involving religion seem to be dividing Americans as much as they were expected to.

This is especially the case with stem cell research. No doubt to the shock and surprise of President Bush, former First Lady Nancy Reagan has taken a very public position in favor of using stem cells to help find cures for diseases such as the one afflicting her husband, even if such cells may originate from human embryos. And she is not the only conservative advocating such a position. Senator Orin Hatch of Utah has said that being pro-life includes attempts to prevent human suffering and to extend life where possible and ethical. Across the spectrum, the idea of human cloning has almost no supporters. But the notion of using therapeutic cloning as potential cures for dreadful diseases has united more than divided those Americans who pay attention to this issue. As an issue in the culture war, stem cell research is a non-starter.

Gay marriage is an even more interesting test case of the ability of religion to serve as a force for disunity. If one went out searching for an issue that would expose divisions over faith, gay marriage would appear to be the choice. For devout evangelicals and Catholics, homosexuality is a sin that should, in the few of some, be punished or, at the very least, not be explicitly sanctioned. Conservative clergy will cite homosexuality as a cause for the breakdown of traditional family values and will find support in scripture. For some religious conservatives, gay marriage is, as a political issue, almost too good to be true, since the state that legalized it, Massachusetts, is the home of both the 2004 Democratic convention and the candidate chosen there to run against President Bush. As with abortion and race, gay marriage ought to be a way of uniting the conservative base of the Republican Party while dividing the Democrats.

Yet gay marriage never turned out to be quite the divisive issue that many had predicted. Conservative congregations were not quite as angry about gay

1. See, for example, Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens: A Provocative Christian Assessment of Culture and Ministry for People Who Know that Something is Wrong* (Nashville: Abington Press, 1989).

marriage as many leaders of the Christian right predicted they would be.¹ A surprising number of conservative intellectuals argued on behalf of marriage, pointing out that since homosexuality is real and unlikely ever to disappear; conservatives ought to want to see gay people in strong relationships and not as promiscuous free floaters.² Although the clergy of mainline and liberal Protestant churches were divided over the issue, other clergy were the ones officiating at marriages once they became legal. The issue, in short, turned out to be gray more than it was black and white, and as a result, neither party rushed to take advantage it; even President Bush endorsed a constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage late and then did not make it a central issue in his campaign.

Part of the reason for the failure of gay marriage to ignite a furious culture war may be due to the fact that even those who have strong feelings on the issue do not consider gay marriage as important as the war on terrorism or job loss. But that is only part of the explanation. One must also consider the difference between religion in theory and religion in practice that I have tried to address in this essay. In theory, homosexuality is a sin. In practice, it is difficult for even the most devout believers to watch gay people engaged in a marriage ceremony and not come away at least a bit moved. In theory, marriage is traditionally defined as a man and a woman. In practice, there are so many varieties of heterosexual marriage – second marriages, childless marriages, step-children, artificially conceived children – that adding one more non-traditional form of marriage does not seem so big a deal. In theory, homosexuality violates scripture. In practice, religion is a powerful force for the satisfaction of needs, including the need for companionship and security. In their religious lives as in their secular lives, Americans tend to be more experimental and pragmatic than ideological, and as uncomfortable as gay marriage makes many Americans, they can also respond to the idea that if it works, perhaps it ought to be tried.

Only time will tell whether differences over gay marriage will become as polarizing as divisions over abortion were for a previous generation of Americans. But given that young people tend to be more sympathetic to gay marriage than older Americans, there is grounds for believing that this issue will not lead to a replay of the backlash against *Roe v. Wade*. If so, then gay marriage, the issue that in theory was supposed to have kept the culture war alive, will instead become the last battle in the struggle, for if Americans are not

1. David D. Kirkpatrick, "Backers of Gay Marriage Ban Find Tepid Response in Pews," *New York Times*, May 16, 2004, p. 1.

2. See Jonathan Rauch: *Gay Marriage: Why It's Good for Gays, Good for Straights, and Good for America* (New York: Times Books, 2004).

to be all divided over this religious-based issue, it is hard to imagine any other playing the same role.

None of the analysis in this essay should be taken to suggest that we can now count on religion to be a source of unity for otherwise divided societies; the history of religious sectarianism, as well as the ongoing conflict between believers and non-believers, is not about to die out anytime soon. Nor has the point of my analysis been to suggest that either conflicts over faith or among them have easy solutions; we can expect that U. S. Supreme Court litigation over these kinds of issues will continue unabated. The more religions there are in the United States, including various forms of spirituality that reject organized faiths as well as people who insist that they are not religious at all, the more we can expect suspicion and hostility from all sides in these never-ending controversies.

At the same time, however, religion is not the permanent force, the rock of ages, it is sometimes said to be. As Catholics know after Vatican II, as Jews experience when they intermarry, as Protestants discover when they attend a new megachurch and as Muslims find out when they move to London or Detroit, religion is a dynamic force constantly adopting itself to new situations. There is no reason why such a process of adaptation cannot include the building of bridges between believers as they discover that, whatever their differences in doctrine and tradition, they are practicing their faiths in remarkably similar ways.