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Review Essay: Religion and Politics 2008-2009: Sometimes You Get What You Pray For

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REVIEW ESSAY

RELIGION AND POLITICS 2008-2009

THUMPIN' IT: THE USE AND ABUSE OF THE BIBLE IN TODAY'S PRESIDENTIAL POLITICS. By Jacques Berlinerblau. Westminster John Knox Press 2008. Pp. x + 190. \$11.84. ISBN: 0-664-23173-X.

THE SECULAR CONSCIENCE: WHY BELIEF BELONGS IN PUBLIC LIFE. By Austin Dacey. Prometheus Book 2008. Pp. 269. \$17.80. ISBN: 1-591-02604-0.

SOULED OUT: RECLAIMING FAITH AND POLITICS AFTER THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT. By E.J. Dionne, Jr.. Princeton University Press 2008. Pp. 251. \$14.95. ISBN: 0-691-13458-8.

THE POLITICAL ORIGINS OF RELIGIOUS LIBERTY. By Anthony Gill. Cambridge University Press 2007. Pp. 263. Paper. \$18.81. ISBN: 0-521-61273-X.

BLEACHED FAITH: THE TRAGIC COST WHEN RELIGION IS FORCED INTO THE PUBLIC SQUARE. By Steven Goldberg. Stanford University Press 2008. Pp. 161. \$18.96. ISBN: 0-804-75861-1.

THE FUTURE OF FAITH IN AMERICAN POLITICS: THE PUBLIC WITNESS OF THE EVANGELICAL CENTER. By David P. Gushee. Baylor University Press 2008. Pp. 335. Paper. \$16.47. ISBN: 1-602-58071-5.

CHRISTIANITY AND AMERICAN DEMOCRACY. By Hugh Heclo. Harvard University Press 2007. Pp. 299. \$17.05. ISBN: 0-674-03230-6.

RELIGION IN AMERICAN POLITICS: A SHORT HISTORY. By Frank Lambert. Princeton University Press 2008. Pp. 294. \$18.21. ISBN 0-691-12833-2.

CHRISTIAN REALISM AND THE NEW REALITIES. By Robin W. Lovin. Cambridge University Press 2008. Pp. 231. Paper. \$29.99. ISBN: 0-521-60300-5.

GOD AND GOVERNMENT IN THE GHETTO: THE POLITICS OF CHURCH-STATE COLLABORATION IN BLACK AMERICA. By Michael Leo Owens. The

University of Chicago Press 2007. Pp. 310. Paper. \$22.00. ISBN: 0-226-64207-0.

CHRISTIANS IN THE AMERICAN EMPIRE: FAITH AND CITIZENSHIP IN THE NEW WORLD ORDER. By Vincent D. Rougeau. Oxford University Press 2008. Pp. xii + 233. \$23.96. ISBN: 0-195-18809-8.

THE PARTY FAITHFUL: HOW AND WHY DEMOCRATS ARE CLOSING THE GOD GAP. By Amy Sullivan. Scribner 2008. Pp. ix + 256. \$16.50. ISBN: 0-743-29786-5.

FOUNDING FAITH: PROVIDENCE, POLITICS, AND THE BIRTH OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN AMERICA. By Steven Waldman. Random House 2008. Pp. 277. \$17.16. ISBN: 1-400-06437-6.

*Reviewed by Leslie Griffin**

SOMETIMES YOU GET WHAT YOU PRAY FOR

The prayers of some liberal Christian authors were answered by the election of Senator Barack Obama as president of the United States in November 2008. Tired of repeated electoral defeats at the hands of the Christian Right, many liberals yearned for a powerful Christian Left whose leaders would both reflect their liberal theology *and* win elections. The devoutly and publicly Christian Obama, who urged Democrats to abandon their secular ways and campaign about their faith, appears to be a dream come true for liberal religion.

Despite Obama's election, different authors have identified valid reasons to keep religion separate from politics. If the Christian Left of Jimmy Carter led to the Christian Right of George W. Bush, which then led back again to Obama's New Christian Left, in another four or eight years, we can anticipate a president of the New Christian Right. The history of the United States and its First Amendment suggests liberal religionists may eventually understand the warning lurking in that old adage, sometimes you get what you pray for. The answer to the liberals' prayers may be a public square riddled with theological arguments that swing from one end of the religious and political spectrum to the other. Such a culture inevitably increases the need for religious authorities to resolve political controversies, and in the end, may produce "bleached

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faiths” (Goldberg 1) of all sorts.

Despite the long historical record of the dangers of mixing religion and politics, in 2008 the liberal religionists celebrated the possibilities of political power and plotted the recapture of the public square for their beliefs.

Liberal Political Religion. The books by Amy Sullivan, editor at *Time* magazine, and E.J. Dionne, columnist for the *Washington Post*, provide the most straightforward explanations of the rise of the new Christian Left. Most significantly, the books demonstrate the *religious* origins of the authors’ *political* faith. Sullivan starts her book in her Baptist church, where Pastor Mike shockingly declared it was not “possible to be a good Christian and a Democrat.” (Sullivan 2) Dionne is an agonizing liberal Catholic who “insists” from page one that “religious faith should not be seen as leading ineluctably to conservative political convictions” (Dionne 1) because the Catholic faith can be liberal and, moreover, all faith should be critical of political power. From those beginnings, both books explain the natural linkage between Christianity (or Catholicism) and left-leaning policies.

Instead of questioning Pastor Mike’s homiletic mix of religion and politics, resolving her dispute with him, or asking the Christian Right to debate politics instead of religion, Sullivan blames the Democratic Party for her outcast status. She castigates the numerous Democratic candidates who mistakenly decided to keep their faith private, attributing their errors to the elitist, anti-religious “liberal intelligentsia” (Dionne 41) who kept the Democrats silent while the Christian Right shrewdly marketed their faith to the White House.

If they are to proclaim more public faith, the Democrats need to acquire more theological language. Although Sullivan’s book, with its extensive criticism of Democratic politics, only diagnoses the problem, Dionne, Rougeau and Berlinerblau propose alternative and actual religious rhetoric for the public square. Dionne provides a tentative solution by encouraging liberals to add new values (of economic and social justice) to the political mix and to recover the language and commitments of liberal Catholicism. Similar to Sullivan’s tales of her churchgoing experience, sections of Dionne’s book are “at once, analytical and personal” (Dionne 127) as he explores his own faith, suffering through the “agony of liberal Catholicism” (Dionne 151) while offering a “defense of the liberal Catholic worldview.” (Dionne 129)

A more rigorous and detailed analysis of that worldview is provided by Notre Dame law professor Vincent Rougeau, who strives to “offer Christians and other religious believers *a richly layered argument*

that provides both theoretical and practical reasons for rejecting core intellectual commitments of right-wing politics in the United States.” (Rougeau x, emphasis added) The primary resource for that argument is Roman Catholic social thought; like Dionne, Rougeau explores how that tradition forces attention on economic and social issues long ignored by the Christian Right. Rougeau carefully explains that the Republicans do not have “a Christian mandate for their political agenda.” (Rougeau 19)

Focused on their electoral disappointments and the need to vindicate their personal faith in public, neither Sullivan nor Dionne addresses the *moral* core of the private-faith position espoused by the “liberal intelligentsia” and earlier Catholic politicians like President Kennedy, namely why would non-Baptists and non-Catholics consent to be governed by Sullivan’s Baptist faith or Dionne’s liberal Catholicism? Sullivan dismisses separationist arguments as “clever positioning” (Sullivan 171) without ever acknowledging their historical, political, religious and legal pedigree. Although Rougeau is more ecumenical than the two journalists in advocating dialogue that is pluralist and inclusive of citizens of all backgrounds, he too promotes the “universalism of Christian culture” (Rougeau 22) and concludes “Christians . . . should reject blind obedience to U.S. political and social values that are clearly inconsistent with the core values of a lived Christian tradition that has engaged with the world for 2,000 years.” (Rougeau 22) Thus he too fails to explain why non-Christian or non-Catholic citizens should prefer Christian values to those enshrined in the U.S. Constitution. Despite Rougeau’s odd suggestion that Catholicism has engaged in an ecumenical dialogue about women’s rights (Rougeau 59), for example, the U.S. Constitution is much more protective of women’s and minorities’ rights than Roman Catholicism is. The reader must ask Rougeau why Americans should be governed by a religion that is not in fact universal.

In sum, Sullivan, Dionne and Rougeau explain their disappointment that the Christian Right has outfoxed the Christian Left, but offer only their own Christian theologies to replace their opponents’. The books suggest that the Left is simply interested in finding the quickest route back to power. Jacques Berlinerblau, a professor of Jewish Civilization at Georgetown University, should be commended for making that point directly in his book about the use of Biblical language in politics: “I would like to define the Good as inextricably bound with the Victorious. Good use of the Bible is that use which in some way contributes to a politician’s winning an election (or does not do any irreparable damage to his or her interests).” (Berlinerblau 78)

After a compelling explanation why Scripture *cannot* resolve contested political questions, Berlinerblau recommends the political “cite and run” (Berlinerblau 44) approach to the Bible, in which the quotations must remain sparse, positive, vague, shallow, and veiled (i.e., lacking reference to the text’s source). The careful Biblical scholar also demonstrates that the Good can be synonymous with the Victorious; the pre-election book observed that Obama “may just have the best Scripture game in town.” (Berlinerblau 3)

Unlike Sullivan, Dionne and Rougeau, Berlinerblau does not suggest that theology—or Scripture—should form the basis of public policy. Yet he shares those authors’ contempt for secular citizens and separationist politicians, recommending that they be forgotten in favor of “religious seculars” (presumably people like Sullivan, Dionne and Rougeau) who like their faith and don’t want a public square devoid of religion. Ironically, however, those targeted religious seculars—primarily Catholics, Jews, Mormons, and Muslims—cannot expect to *win* elections conducted by Bible-thumpin’: “The sport in question is governed by rules that unequivocally favor traditional Protestant candidates, especially those of the conservative variety.” (Berlinerblau 131) In other words, according to Berlinerblau, effectively citing the Bible, but not a papal encyclical, the Book of Mormon, or the Qur’an, is the certain path to electoral victory.

Recent elections and the other books suggest, however, that “cite and run” begins an unending cycle of government by religion. The existing system favors Protestants. Perhaps Dionne and Rougeau propose *their Catholic* faith as the best source of politics because they feel shut out of the Protestant public square and want their religion instead of Protestantism?

Evangelical Protestant David Gushee, professor of Christian Ethics at Mercer University, admires “the profound resources of the magisterial Roman Catholic social-teaching tradition,” which is “sturdy and well-reasoned,” “avoid[s] swaying to and fro with every ideological breeze” and has “a determined tradition of public engagement.” (Gushee 219) Nonetheless, he too *prefers his own tradition*, criticizing fellow evangelicals who “borrow the Catholic tradition lock, stock, and barrel,” and urging them to “develop our own social teaching tradition that more aptly reflects *our particular* theological, ecclesial, and moral commitments.” (Gushee 220, emphasis added) Gushee desires in the particulars neither an Evangelical Right nor an Evangelical Left but a new Evangelical Center.

The Evangelical Center is theologically faithful to Christianity, and its goal is to be less political and more faithful than Left and Right. Although critical of both the Evangelical Left and Right, however, Gushee's Center appears to offer a combination of Left and Right rather than a reflective middle. The Center opposes abortion, euthanasia, stem cells, extramarital sex, gay marriage, poverty, racism, and routine resort to war, while favoring internationalism, peacemaking, creation care and human rights. (Gushee 88-89)

Gushee opens his book by addressing the "secularist concern" that Christian "theocrats" should stay out of politics, summarily dismissing arguments about limiting religion's role in politics by asserting that *no* American political perspective is "value-neutral." (Gushee 4-5) For that reason, Christians should feel free to campaign and govern on their values instead of their neighbors'. Similarly to the other authors' works, Gushee's value-neutral argument misses the point. Supporters of a non-religious political and legal system endorse *constitutional values*, which are common to citizens and persons of the United States. They believe that everyone should be governed by those common values, not by religious doctrine. From the Bible to Catholic Social Thought, the Qur'an to the Book of Mormon, the Southern Baptists (Jimmy Carter) to the Methodists (George W. Bush) and the United Church of Christ (Barack Obama), religious faith is particular and distinctive. Despite their proud descriptions of their own particular faiths, none of these authors provides legal or moral reasons why the rest of us should be governed by their religion or why politics should favor their faith rather than another. The disparate religious visions on the Left, Center and Right confirm that there is no universal religion to govern the United States of America.

This cacophony of religious voices should satisfy Austin Dacey, a representative to the United Nations for the Center for Inquiry in New York City, who concludes that it is a good idea for all these religious views—and more—to occupy the public square. Dacey bemoans secularism's lost soul, attributing its failure to the privatization of religion. Secularism could be reborn, he contends, if it embraced a public square where all arguments, including theological and scriptural ones, are subjected to full debate. He buttresses his argument with the august names of the Founders: "John Locke, Roger Williams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison held that religious claims, like all claims of conscience, are open to examination and discussion by the public." (Dacey 44) Dacey ignores, however, the fact that, inspired by Locke, the Founding Fathers drafted a non-religious Constitution with a secular

government in order to ensure that religious freedom would prevail. Fortunately, the historical books by Waldman and Lambert provide a more nuanced reading of the Framers and bring a broader perspective to the current debates about religion and politics.

Historical Perspective. Steven Waldman, former correspondent for *Newsweek* and co-founder of Beliefnet.com, examines the spirituality of Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. His book provides interesting details about the development of those men's religious beliefs, focusing "on how their personal spiritual journeys might have influenced their approach to religious freedom." (Waldman xv) Waldman discovers an important historical lesson in the men's biographies: "they were spiritual enough to care passionately about religious freedom, but not so dogmatic that they felt duty-bound to promote a particular faith. This combination led them to promote religious freedom rather than religion." (Waldman xv) Waldman's analysis provides a framework that accentuates the missteps of Sullivan, Dionne, Rougeau, and Gushee, who are more focused on religion than religious freedom.

Although Dacey does not promote any one religion, Waldman's history suggests Dacey is mistaken in his diagnosis as well as in his cure. The constitutional values of free exercise, free speech, and nonestablishment have ensured the *public* freedom of American religion. The First Amendment protects *public* worship and belief against ideological restriction or government censorship. Keeping the *political* domain free of religion, as the Framers desired, leaves a broad public space free for religion to inhabit. Leaving religion alone does not make it private. As Waldman concludes: "The Founding Faith, then, was not Christianity, and it was not secularism. It was religious liberty—a revolutionary formula for promoting faith by leaving it alone." (Waldman xvi)

Although the Founders had spiritual values, as Waldman demonstrates, historian Frank Lambert confirms that in the midst of religious division, they sought unity on non-religious grounds. Lambert, a history professor at Purdue University, explains that "[d]elegates wished to keep religion out of their discussion and out of the Constitution because they viewed it as divisive. Their aim was to create a 'more perfect Union,' and sectarian strife threatened that goal." (Lambert 30) Dacey's idea that broad religious dispute is healthy for the resolution of political disagreements is belied by the experience of the Founding Fathers. Their Constitution "virtually ignored religion," (Lambert 15) except with its then-original and distinctive requirement

that there be no religious test for public office.

Lambert's incisive and short history of American religion and politics demonstrates that the current debate of Religious Right and Left is nothing new; throughout American history, "religious coalitions [have sought] by political means what the Constitution prohibits, namely, a national religious establishment, or, more specifically, a *Christian* civil religion." (Lambert 5) James Madison brilliantly anticipated this problem; he recognized that religions were special interest groups

that placed their private goals above those of the public good. . . . He feared that if a majority of "the same passion or interest" were able to act in concert, they would then be able to "carry into effect schemes of oppression." Religious groups were as susceptible to exercising the tyranny of the majority as any other interest group. (Lambert 30)

University of Washington political scientist Anthony Gill vindicates Madison's insights in his book about the *political* origins of religious liberty. After examining colonial British America, Mexico, Latin America, Russia and the Baltics, Gill concludes "that *interests* play an equally important if not more critical role [than ideas] in securing legislation aimed at unburdening religious groups from onerous state regulations." (Gill 7) In blunter words, "Accepting religious liberty because John Locke and James Madison thought it was a good idea was not sufficient to change laws." (Gill 91) Instead, the patterns of religious liberty reflect the different interest structures in each society where *both* religious and political actors pursue their own interests. Thus, Gill finds that religious majorities prefer policies that discriminate against religious minorities, while the minorities naturally favor open practice of their faith. At the same time,

political actors consider a set of other *interests* when deciding how to regulate religion. Specifically, . . . politicians take into account their own political survival (i.e., ability to get reelected or stave off a coup), the need to raise government revenue, and the ability to grow the economy when writing laws pertaining to religious freedom. (Gill 9)

Madison's prophecies are fulfilled in the old Christian Right and the new Christian Left, who place their particular religious interests over constitutional liberty for everyone else. The last paragraph of Lambert's book presents the problem eloquently:

The politicization of religion and the polarization that it has promoted return us to where we began. The delegates to the Constitutional Convention in 1787 avoided religious discussion

because they knew that religion as a force in public affairs was divisive. While they believed that religion was important in the culture as a means of building the moral character of citizens, *they thought religion and the country would be best served if sectarian religion had no place in the political arena*. Further, they knew that, given the country's pluralist culture, any expression of religion offered as a guide to national policy would be labeled sectarian and would be contested as such. Two hundred and twenty years after the new republic's birth, critics of both the Religious Right and the Religious Left think the delegates were wise to keep religion out of national politics. (Lambert 250, emphasis added)

One response to this predicament, apparently favored by most of the authors in this review, is to let all religions compete for allegiance in the marketplace of ideas, where the validity of their Biblical, theological and religious claims can be subjected to criticism and then accepted or rejected. The experience of the Framers and the drafting of the Constitution suggest another model, however, one defended most recently by the late political philosopher John Rawls.

Political Liberalism. Rawls's insights are roundly derided in the books considered at the beginning of this review. Like Madison, Rawls recognized that, in a pluralist constitutional democracy, political disputes cannot be resolved by religious truth. Opening the political square to religious debate results in an *unstable* society (a *modus vivendi*), where believers constantly seek converts to their religion so that they can impose their religious views on everyone else, at least until the next religion wins more votes. We can contrast Rousseau's approach to politics with Rawls's. The law professor seeks "values shared with other religious believers" (Rousseau 183), and his "use of Catholic social teaching is a way of demonstrating that religious believers can offer thoughtful arguments in public debate that are rooted in logic and a commitment to democratic pluralism, arguments that are accessible to—and capable of being engaged by—all of the members of a democratic society." (Rousseau 183) "Thoughtful," "rooted in logic," "accessible" and "capable of being engaged by," however, set the wrong standard for *politics and law*. As Rawls explained, it is easy for me to *understand* why Catholics want to live according to papal teaching, but that comprehension gives me no reason to *endorse* government by the pope's standards. Rousseau and Dionne should not ask non-Catholics to be governed by Catholic social thought, nor should Gushee ask non-Evangelicals to follow Evangelical theology, nor Sullivan ask non-Baptists, and so forth, even if every word of their books is accessible

and logical. The Constitution guarantees a non-religious government and democracy requires a government of shared political values.

Rawls, the late James Bryant Conant Professor of Philosophy at Harvard University, remains the best representative of the elitist, ivory-tower, liberal intelligentsia now rejected by Sullivan and the other authors. But Rawls shrewdly noted what the Christian Left ignores: basing politics on religion results in the *unstable* pendulum swing from Christian Left to Right and Left and back again. Those Christian or Catholic values of the Left and Right, moreover, are not equivalent to the core values of the U.S. Constitution, which prioritizes equality and liberty in a way that most of the world's religions, including Christianity, do not.

Robin Lovin, professor at Southern Methodist University's Perkins School of Theology, is more sympathetic to Rawls. In his cogently-argued and beautifully-written book, Lovin, a noted chronicler and advocate of the Christian realism of Reinhold Niebuhr, adapts that tradition to today's world. Twenty-first century politics varies considerably from Niebuhr's era, when Christian realism and liberal political theory overlapped considerably. At the end of the twentieth century, however, the two sides parted company.

Christian realists and liberal theorists remain united in their rejection of utopian thinking that replaces the carefully worked out requirements of justice with a moral language that transcends the available political options. Realists and liberals begin to eye one another warily, however, when systems of justice are challenged by those who find the available political options insufficient. (Lovin 68)

Lovin is troubled by the possibility that an unjust system cannot be challenged within Rawls's approach to politics: "how can there be a moral or religious challenge to the shared, public understanding of justice?" (Lovin 69)

Lovin finds the solution to this problem in an "unapologetic politics" (Lovin 117) built upon an "Unapologetic Principle: *No context is required to explain itself in terms that reduce it to an instrument of other purposes.*" (Lovin 129) In other words, religious groups need not apologize for basing their policies upon their distinctively religious claims or try to translate their arguments into public reason. The Realist-Rawlsian era is over. Despite his careful analysis, therefore, in the end Lovin joins the other authors in promoting an unapologetically religious politics that defends *his own religion*, Christian realism, as the best source of political insight.

James Madison and the other Founders taught Americans that politics is about *interests*. Lovin trenchantly observes, however, “that one result of the growing diversity in contemporary society is an unanticipated public interest in ‘*values*’ rather than interests.” (Lovin 84, emphasis added) His observations are profound. When diverse people immigrate into a new community, he explains, their neighbors become “armchair anthropologists” who seek to learn more about the newcomers’ strange values. In such circumstances of diversity, “electorates seem increasingly to demand explicit reassurances about their leaders’ basic values” (Lovin 85), wanting in particular to know more about their religion, as evident in recent presidential elections. For this reason—because attention to religious values arises in situations of diversity—Lovin believes that the old liberal “separation of political choices from ideas about the good may not be possible, or that it may not be useful, even if it could be achieved.” (Lovin 86) Hence the unapologetic may proclaim their own values instead of commonly-held ones.

On this point Lovin is descriptively brilliant but normatively askew. In similar circumstances of diversity, when members of one Christian denomination barely tolerated others, and Catholics and Jews were not tolerated at all, the first American leaders identified common constitutional values and “promote[d] religious freedom rather than [their own] religion.” (Waldman xv) Like the New Christian Left, the New Christian Realism offers old Christian values to the most religiously diverse nation in the world’s history instead of welcoming the diverse to the Constitution.

Some authors more explicitly desire the United States to be a Christian nation and believe that Christianity fosters democracy. Hugh Hecló, the Robinson Professor of Public Affairs at George Mason University, insists that America *is* a Christian nation and “[t]o focus on mere religion in American political development, rather than on Christianity, is to eviscerate any historical understanding.” (Hecló 4) Because of this necessary linkage between Christianity and American democracy, Hecló fears the contemporary situation in the United States, even comparing it to the France of Alexis de Tocqueville, where “devout, serious Christians [are] alienated from the quest for democracy, and . . . devout, serious democrats [are] hostile to Christianity.” (Hecló 143-44) Hecló predicts “a coming rupture between serious Christians and our secular democracy” (Hecló 215) and, like Rougeau, hints that loyalty to Christianity must trump any allegiance to the state.

In contrast, Lambert insists that the United States is *not* a Christian nation, and his thesis that throughout American history “religious coalitions [sought] by political means what the Constitution prohibits, namely, a national religious establishment, or, more specifically, a *Christian* civil religion” (Lambert 5) is again helpful to rebut Hecló’s claims. In Virginia James Madison contested Patrick Henry’s similar argument that true religion is necessary to ensure public morality and civil order. But it was Madison’s, not Henry’s, vision that guided the drafting of the First Amendment. As Madison predicted, across the country, adherents of a Christian America, the Christian Right, the Christian or Catholic Left, and Christian Realism form powerful interest groups seeking to promote their own religions at the expense of religious liberty.

Keeping Religion Religious. Professor Lovin fears that a secular public square may silence the religious critique of injustice and therefore prohibit political reform. Sharing that concern, today some Christian advocates justify their religious/political participation by pointing to the religious nature of the Civil Rights Movement led by the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.. If public religion led to the Civil Rights Movement, they argue, then it must be a good thing! Professor Lambert, however, effectively puts paid to that argument, reminding readers that many American Christian churches, both black and white, opposed civil rights for African Americans and ignored the Movement. The Bible, after all, does not offer a clear argument for or against slavery, as Biblical scholar Berlinerblau demonstrated very effectively in *his* book. What the Civil Rights Movement did most effectively was to invoke the founding of the nation, demanding that the same rights of the Constitution be given to everyone. In that sense, “[t]he civil rights revolution . . . is an extension of the American Revolution, and the success of the former would complete the latter.” (Lambert 178)

The Civil War, the Nineteenth Amendment, the Civil Rights Movement, the failed Equal Rights Amendment, the eventual interpretation of the Equal Protection Clause to include women, the antimiscegenation laws and now, gay marriage, all confirm both that the wheels of constitutional justice turn slowly and that religious groups often oppose the expansion of constitutional rights. Extending constitutional protections to all citizens and persons is difficult enough without throwing religious disputes into the political mix. A better approach is to ask politicians, voters and citizens to make their political choices based on common constitutional arguments and to reject attempts to enact religion into law. That pledge was made and kept by

the only non-Protestant to gain the office of President of the United States, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, who famously told the Baptist ministers in Houston:

I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute; where no Catholic prelate would tell the President—should he be Catholic—how to act, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote; . . .

I believe in an America that is officially neither Catholic, Protestant nor Jewish; where no public official either requests or accept instructions on public policy from the Pope, the National Council of Churches or any other ecclesiastical source; where no religious body seeks to impose its will directly or indirectly upon the general populace or the public acts of its officials, and where religious liberty is so indivisible that an act against one church is treated as an act against all.¹

President Kennedy was more astute than our authors in recognizing the dangers associated with organized religion's dominance of politics, with priests and ministers telling politicians how to govern by their faith. In these books, religion's dark side is too frequently ignored. Catholic popes and bishops unsurprisingly turn up throughout the Catholic books by Dionne and Rougeau, but also make numerous appearances in Baptist Sullivan's work. Yet there is little commentary on the wisdom of according large political roles to the clergy. Whenever religion has an extensive political role, religious authorities also gain in political power and influence. Part of the price of public faith is to give clergy more power over politicians; if religion provides the grounds for political dispute, who is better suited than religious officials to resolve political controversies? Giving power to religious *leaders*, however, does not guarantee the constitutional rights of individual members of their flocks. Sullivan, Dionne, Rougeau, Dacey and Lovin are so intent on religion's constructive or prophetic role that they understate the ill effects of power on religious groups.

Fortunately, Professors Owens and Goldberg provide some cautionary notes for religion. Michael Leo Owens, assistant professor of political science at Emory University, provides a fresh perspective with his empirical study of church-state collaboration by African-American churches. Owens's analysis of the collaboration of black churches with the government illustrates how both religious and governmental actors pursue their interests, frequently accomplishing them through

1. John F. Kennedy, Transcript: JFK's Speech on His Religion (Sept. 12, 1960), <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=16920600>.

collaboration. Owens conducted an empirical study of African-American churches in New York City, discovering that the churches frequently collaborated with the government in order to bring economic benefits back to poorer community members who might not otherwise receive them. Through this type of activity, Owens explains, “nongovernmental organizations may use their position as collaborators to influence the agendas, policies, and programs of government agencies and help bring multilevel changes.” (Owens 11) African-American churches that provide social services in low-income black neighborhoods practice “‘programmatically religion’; they express the traditions and theologies of their faith by supporting needy individuals.” (Owens 207-08)

Owens characterizes these efforts by the churches as “acts of politics” (Owens 203) and observes that such activity carries at least two attendant risks. First, such political activity may undermine the churches’ prophetic voice. Second, there is the danger of “the political demobilization of residents of low-income black neighborhoods.” (Owens 205) In other words, when church *officials* interact extensively with the government to enact social change, church *members* may become less involved in politics. The officials, moreover, may succumb to the lure of political power. Owens’s interesting book indicates that there are risks as well as advantages to church-state collaboration.

The title *Bleached Faith: The Tragic Cost When Religion is Forced into the Public Square* conveys the thesis of Steven Goldberg’s important new book about First Amendment law. Goldberg, the James and Catherine Denny Professor of Law at Georgetown University, articulates another important strand of traditional First Amendment interpretation, namely that the union of church and state is bad *for religion* (and not only for the state). Goldberg identifies numerous instances of “bleached faith” that arise when religion pushes itself into the public square in Ten Commandments monuments, the teaching of Intelligent Design, and the commercial promotion of Christmas and Chanukah, all examples of “the empty symbolism that diminishes the power of real belief.” (Goldberg 6)

On these and other topics, Goldberg combines lucid exposition of the First Amendment cases with nuanced readings of religious traditions and a commitment to “real belief.” He explains, for example, why Jews and Christians interpret the Ten Commandments differently and complains that the commandments have become the “Nike Swoosh of religion,” (Goldberg 1) in other words, an empty symbol. He tellingly reports that for many years, the American people and the Supreme Court

rejected Jehovah's Witnesses' attempts to *obey* the commandments (by refusing to recite the pledge of allegiance) while honoring attempts to *display* empty symbols of them. Goldberg also demonstrates that Intelligent Design weakens *religion*, not science, by its "strange desire to depict God as a second-rate engineer," "reducing the Almighty to 'the God of the gaps,'" (Goldberg 3) even placing "God in a witness protection program." (Goldberg 51) He also describes how Chanukah, a minor Jewish holiday, was transformed into a major gift-giving event, and explains that the seven-branch menorah of Jewish history is not the same as the Chanukah menorah. Read further and you will learn how Frosty the Snowman saved a Christmas display. (Goldberg 75) In all cases, empty symbolism replaces real belief.

In these and other instances, Goldberg warns that in "the war to push religion into the public square. . . . the victories are more dangerous than the defeats. When religion wins, the vague and confusing symbols that enter public view do not stir anyone's soul." (Goldberg 1)

The victories are more dangerous than the defeats? *Sometimes you get what you pray for . . . a political religion that is not good for religion or politics.* As Goldberg advises, "When church and state get into bed together, it is bad news for both of them." (Goldberg 127) There was a lot of bad news in 2008-2009.

