Religion Returns to the Public Square
Faith and Policy in America

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Woodrow Wilson Center Press
Washington, D.C.

The Johns Hopkins University Press
Baltimore and London
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What Is a Public Religion?

José Casanova

To the seemingly straightforward question, “What is a public religion?” one could offer a seemingly simple answer: A public religion is one that has, assumes, or tries to assume a public character, function, or role. The complications begin the moment one tries to ascertain the diverse, often incongruous meanings of “public”; and it becomes even more complex if in talking about religion one distinguishes what Hugh Heclo has termed the behavioral, the institutional, and the philosophical levels of analysis—levels that correspond to what sociologists tend to call the interactional, the organizational, and the societal levels.¹

Beginning with the various meanings of “public,” one could use the analytical distinction between the three areas of the polity—the state, political society, and civil society—to distinguish three different types of public religion that correspond to these three areas.² Established state churches would be the paradigmatic example of public religion at the state level. Religions that mobilize their institutional resources for political competition through political parties, social movements, or lobbying agencies
would be examples of public religion at the level of political society. Finally, public religions at the civil society level would be exemplified by those that enter the public square—that is, the undifferentiated public sphere of civil society—to participate in open public debates about the res publica—that is, about public issues, public affairs, public policy, and the common good or the commonwealth.

In the United States at least, there is a near unanimous consensus concerning the desirability of maintaining the separation of church and state. The voices advocating church establishment (i.e., public religions at the state level) are few and marginal. The contemporary debates in America, therefore, are not over disestablishment, which few people question, but over the structure of the wall of separation, that is, how impermeable or porous should this wall be and which kinds of religion should be allowed to enter the public sphere or to become publicly entangled. Concerning the kinds of religion that may enter the public sphere, I will briefly look at the less contested individual behavioral level of analysis before focusing on the more contested institutional and societal levels.

The Individual’s Religion and the Public Sphere

The individual behavioral level is simultaneously the most fundamental level and the most elusive. It is fundamental because religion is unlikely to be of much public relevance unless it is relevant in the life of the individual citizen as a norm of conduct, as a motivational source of civic engagement, or as a discursive or normative resource for the citizen’s public voice and public choices. Yet it is elusive because of the ideological bias toward the privatization of religion that is built into secularist readings of the “wall of separation” and into the “neutrality” principle of liberal theories of the public sphere. Secularist constitutional theories and liberal ideologies are not necessarily hostile to religion; they may even welcome it as a positive foundation for civic virtue, civic engagement, and the normative integration of the polity.

However, according to those theories, religion should remain private and implicit, rather than public and explicit. The positive liberal principle of “dialogic neutrality,” which is meant to facilitate universal and equal access to the public sphere and to protect against discrimination based on religion, gender, race, or other ascriptive identities, is turned into an incapacitating “gag rule” the moment citizens are expected to relinquish their religious identities upon entering the “public square” and to exercise conversational self-restraint by banishing religious language from public discourse. The model of the “unencumbered self” in this case turns into a hindrance.

Therein lies the paradox of the American experience. On the one hand, religion thrives in the private sphere; European observers since Alexis de Tocqueville have been struck by the widespread religiosity and by “the still impressively strong church-mindedness” (Max Weber) of the Americans; and religious belonging has appeared almost as a condition for creditworthiness, at least in the past, and for political respectability and electability, even today. Yet it is religion in the abstract, not any particular religious doctrine or denominational allegiance, that is supposed to have a positive effect upon civic life. As President Dwight D. Eisenhower is reputed to have said, “I don’t care which religion Americans have, as long as they have a religion.”

Tocqueville’s analysis of the relevance of religion for the transcendence of individual egoism and privatist solipsism and, even more so, his analysis of the relevance of religious voluntarism and religious associations for civic associationism in general and, thus, for the vitality of civil society sounds as valid today as ever. Religious commitment continues to be a primary motivational source, a “habit of the heart,” for involvement in social movements of all kinds and one of the keys to the shifting involvements between private interest and public action. Moreover, even though playing alone, like “bowling alone,” may be on the increase and according to Robert Putnam’s computations American “social capital” may be diminishing, much of it still remains stored in religious associations. Survey research and electoral polling keep tracking the changing relations among religious affiliation, shifting party alignments, and electoral choices, which in turn affect directly public policy. But to examine the relationship between religion and the public sphere in more depth, one needs to go beyond the individual behavioral level of analysis.

Religious Institutions, the Secular State, and the Public Sphere

Karl Marx, of all people, articulated the unique paradox of American exceptionalism most succinctly in his essay “On the Jewish Question” when following Tocqueville he observed that America was both the model of “perfect disestablishment” and “the land of religiosity par excellence.” This unique paradox is constitutionally embedded in the dual clause of the First Amendment, which maintains a wall of separation between the state and any and all religions, while simultaneously guaranteeing the free exercise of
religion, although the state through the courts reserves itself the right of
determining what constitutes a religion and which religious activities de-
serve constitutional protection. It is the tension and the balance between
these two interrelated principles that makes the American experience of re-
ligious freedom so different from the European one, "the lustre of our
country," in John T. Noonan's words. It is not necessarily the case that
there has always been greater freedom of religion in the United States than
in Europe.

Some European societies, most notably England, developed a pattern of
religious freedom and toleration of religious minorities as early, if not ear-
lier, and as lustrous as that of the United States. Yet in England this
achievement was accompanied by the preservation of the formal establish-
ment of the Anglican Church, which continues today. Other European coun-
tries, most notably France, after much struggle erected a wall of separa-
tion between church and state as strict as that of the United States. Yet in
France disestablishment was accomplished by a laicist state that aggres-
sively curtailed the free exercise of religion. Following Wilfred M. Mc-
Clay’s “two concepts of secularism,” one could say that France evinces an
extreme form of “positive secularism,” whereas the United States has
tended to display a more limited “negative” understanding of secularism.

I repeat, the debates and the conflicts over secularism in America are
usually not over the validity of disestablishment and strict separation,
which few people question; nor are they usually based on a secularist En-
lightenment-related bias, which viewing religion as an obstacle to
progress, freedom, and reason, would like to curtail its free exercise. The
debates are over the right balance at any given time, mediated by the
debates, between the establishment and the free exercise clauses—a balance
courts, before the establishment, or the legal exemptions to par-
religious practices, if necessary granting special legal exceptions to par-
ticular religious communities to accommodate their religious practices.
But such a requirement would go not only against the principle of equality
before the law, but also against the core principle of the establishment
advantage to any particular religious community over another.

The areas of contestation, moreover, have shifted along with the chang-
ing relations among federal and state governments, public opinion, and re-
ligious majorities and minorities. Throughout the nineteenth century,
under conditions of de facto Protestant hegemony in the public sphere of
civil society, court decisions often reflected the religious sensibilities of
the Protestant majority and served to protect establishmentarian Protestant
norms. So-called church–state conflicts between the government and re-
ligious minorities, rather than being the expression of a “neutral” state zeal-
ously protecting no establishment, mostly reflected the confrontations be-
 tween nonconforming religious minorities and the Protestant religious
majority.

Through these confrontations and through litigation to protect the free
exercise of their religion, nonconforming religious minorities have been
instrumental in the constant expansion of the area of free exercise and in
the institutionalization of more genuine religious pluralism. Increasingly,
however, during recent decades—as religious, cultural, and moral plural-
ism expanded and Protestantism lost progressively its majoritarian and es-
 tablishmentarian character in religion, culture, and morality—the state
(particularly the Supreme Court) has adopted a more “neutral” secular
stance, which many critics view as a radical departure not only from estab-
lished practice but from the Founders’ intent. In the words of Charles J.
Reid Jr., “the Court has moved into a realm where an aggressive establish-
ment clause and timid free exercise jurisprudence threaten religious free-
dom.” This is arguably an overstatement, at least as regards the threats to
religious freedom, but it is indicative nonetheless of the contemporary
highly contested debates.

The widespread perception, at least among many religious groups and
sympathetic scholars, that the Court has moved too far in a “positive secular-
it” direction has led to a concerted effort from many sectors of society to
move the pendulum back in the opposite direction. Indeed, there are clear
 signs that the correction towards the free exercise clause in two main areas
of public policy, education and welfare, is well under way, as the debates over
“school vouchers” and “faith-based charities” would seem to indicate.

Undoubtedly, when religious organizations become providers of public
services with public funding, one may well speak of a particular form of
public religion, if not of church–state entanglement. Throughout history in
the United States as elsewhere, churches and religious groups have served
as primary providers of social services—of education, health, and welfare.
The increasing appropriation (and at times the monopolization) of these pub-
lic services by states and government agencies, particularly during the past
century, has been usually portrayed as a main indicator of the supposedly
progressive process of secularization. Today, with the proliferation of schemes of privatization of public services and the renewed involvement of religious organizations in their provision, one can justifiably speak of a reversal of the process of secularization—yet another instance of what I have termed “the de-privatization of religion.” In any case, it puts into question liberal and secularist claims that religion in the modern world is and ought to remain exclusively a private affair.

For peculiar historical reasons connected with the complex relations between the Protestant nativist majority and Catholic and Jewish immigrant religious minorities, entanglements in the area of public education are viewed most apprehensively by the courts and by secularist vigilantes as threats to the wall of separation. By contrast, religious advocates today tend to defend the same entanglements of religion in the provision of public services as legitimate expressions of the free exercise of religion. Although those might be the kinds of public religion that provoke much heated debate and litigation, they are not in my view the most analytically interesting or publicly relevant kinds. More interesting both analytically and practically are those instances in which religious groups or religious organizations enter the public sphere of political or civil society to participate either in political contestation or in public debate.

Elsewhere, I have used the public reemergence of Protestant Fundamentalism and the political mobilization of the Moral Majority into the New Christian Right as an example of public religion at the level of political society, whereas the public interventions of the Catholic bishops on issues such as the nuclear arms race, the U.S. economy, and abortion—especially once the bishops abandoned their initial strategy of electoral mobilization—are presented as instances of public religion in the public sphere of civil society. Those are of course strictly speaking analytical distinctions, which are rarely present in such a clean clear-cut form in the messy reality out there. Nonetheless, it is important in my view to maintain the analytical distinction because of the actual repercussions that tend to follow from the different types of public religion.

Public Religions of Political Society

Public religions of political society may be conceptualized as the collective self-organization and mobilization of religious groups and their institutional resources as interest groups competing with other interest groups to advance their ideal and material interests in the political arena. This self-

organization and mobilization can take three main forms. The first form is the mobilization of religious groups in single-issue social movements such as abolition, prohibition, civil rights, or the pro-life movement. This is the most typical form of public religion throughout American history.

The second form includes institutional lobbying by religious groups at the federal, state, and local levels. Strictly speaking, lobbying agencies are usually only quasi-public. They are public insofar as they are publicly registered. But most of their activities in trying to influence legislation and government policies take place in a secretive sphere outside of the public limelight. This form has become paramount in recent decades with the expansion of public policy and government intervention in all spheres of life, particularly after the New Deal.

The third form is the electoral mobilization of religious groups and their organization into political parties at the local, state, or federal level. Although the religious factor has been an important ingredient of American politics from the very origins of the U.S. party system and the fusion between party and denominational allegiance has generally been important, nonetheless the party system, at least at the federal level, has not been organized along strict denominational lines or secular–religious cleavages, as was the case in most European countries. At the local level, however, given the frequent overlap of ethnic, religious, and class identities (working-class Irish Catholics being a case in point), the mobilization of religious resources and identities was a crucial ingredient in the organization of urban political machines.

The electoral mobilization of the New Christian Right may be viewed as a paradigmatic case of a public religion in political society. Mountains of books and articles, most of them polemical, have been written about the Christian Right. Here I can only quote from my own concluding remarks in my historical reconstruction of the transformation of Evangelical Protestantism from civil religion, to Fundamentalist sect, to New Christian Right:

One might consider the basic dilemmas facing any religion, particularly a fundamentalist one, which wants to enter the competitive field of modern democratic politics and to score victories there. . . . Modern agonistic electoral politics has certain rules of engagement which are inimical to fundamentalism. The name Moral Majority already signaled simultaneously the fundamentalist claim to hegemony, the choice of electoral mobilization as the road to power and public in-
fluence, and an implicit willingness to submit the cognitive, practical, and moral validity claims of fundamentalism to the discretion of the ballot box and to the principle of majority rule. Mobilizational and electoral success, however, require not only strategic adjustment to the rules and dynamics of the organizational society and electoral politics but also ideological compromises, which tend to undermine fundamentalist principles and identities. A well-organized militant minority taking advantage of the element of surprise or using stealth methods can score early victories. But the successful mobilization of fundamentalism soon called forth the countermobilization of its opponents. Moreover, in order to join an electoral majority it became necessary to enter into electoral alliances and to fill a circumscribed and subordinated niche as a faction of a broad Republican party coalition. Soon it also became obvious that the very goal of legislating fundamentalist morality could hardly be reconciled with the kind of normative compromises and parliamentary horse trading that are usually required for legislative success.19

Public Religions of Civil Society

Public religions of civil society can be defined as those religions that enter the undifferentiated public sphere of civil society in order to participate in open public debates about the res publica, that is, about public affairs and the common good. The style of public Catholicism that emerged in the late 1960s after the Second Vatican Council may be considered a paradigmatic example. Using David O’Brien’s characterization of the three different historical styles of Catholic involvement in American politics, which he terms “republican,” “immigrant,” and “public,” will help to clarify what I mean by such a novel form of public religion.

“Republican” Catholicism

For O’Brien, the kind of “republican Catholicism” that emerged after the American Revolution was the natural style of a self-confident Catholic colonial elite which, well-versed in the “survival tactics” of Catholicism during years of suppression in England, had learned to keep their private piety and their public affairs strictly separate.20 His characterization is very much akin Bernhard Groethuysen’s masterful characterization of the eighteenth-century, self-made French Catholic “bourgeois.” Both types represented the style of successful Catholic laypeople, faithful to the church but fully at home in the world, who had learned to segregate rigidly, in the liberal secular tradition, their political, economic, and religious roles. They urged the church to “stick to religion,” while they “engaged in economic and political life with no direct and little indirect reference to religious faith.”21 John Carroll, the first Catholic bishop in the United States, reflected this liberal consensus when he noted: “I have observed that when ministers of religion leave the duties of their profession to take a busy part in political matters they generally fall into contempt.”22

Bishop John England of Charleston still reflected this consensus when in his address to Congress on January 8, 1826, he concluded:

We desire to see the Catholics as a religious body upon the ground of equality with all other religious societies. . . . We consider that any who would call upon them to stand aloof from their brethren in the politics of the country, as neither a friend to America nor a friend to Catholics. . . . We repeat our maxim: Let Catholics in religion stand isolated as a body, and upon as good ground as their brethren. Let Catholics, as citizens and politicians, not be distinguishable from their other brethren of the commonwealth.23

But John England’s vision of the place of Catholicism in the American Republic and in the pluralist, denominational religious system would not be realized, at least not until the 1960s. The competing vision of a Christian America, zealously pursued by Evangelical Protestantism, and the system of Protestant denominationalism that ensued did not allow for the acceptance of Catholicism as just another American denomination. Moreover, the massive immigration of impoverished Irish Catholics made them clearly distinguishable, by class and ethnicity, from their fellow citizens and presented the Catholic hierarchy with radically new challenges. A very different type of Catholic church, the immigrant church, with a new type of episcopal leadership emerged in the 1840s.

“Immigrant” Catholicism

Most commentators have viewed Bishop John Hughes of New York as the most forceful and articulate representative of the new immigrant Catholic Church. Two incidents will serve as illustration. Bishop Hughes was appalled by the passivity and seeming impotence of Bishop Francis P. Kenrick of Philadelphia during the 1844 “Philadelphia riots.” When plans for
an anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic nativist rally at city hall in New York City were announced, Hughes demanded a meeting with Mayor Robert Morris to warn him that, “if a single Catholic church is burned in New York, the city will become a second Moscow.” He added: “We can protect Italy. . . . I come to warn you for your own good.”24 Thereafter, the Catholic bishop of New York—and bishops of other cities where Catholic immigrants would constitute a majority of the working class—would be a power to be reckoned with by politicians and elected officials.

The republican Catholic style had been based on the model of autonomous Catholic individuals, who entered the public sphere not as Catholics but as indistinguishable citizens, to participate in the advancement of the public good. The immigrant Catholic style, by contrast, was based on the premise of the collective organization and mobilization of Catholics as a group—distinguishable from other groups by religion, class and ethnicity—to advance their particular interests. The church, with the bishop as “church boss,” became a vehicle for the protection, self-organization, and mobilization of Catholic immigrants. Once Irish Catholics began to control the urban political machines of many cities, the power of the local bishop became naturally enhanced. Although Bishop Hughes actually failed in his attempts to create a Catholic party under his control, nonetheless he taught the immigrants that a militant, politically united Catholic bloc, normally tied to the Democratic Party, could best defend their interests.

In 1841, Bishop Hughes had decided to enter a “Catholic ticket” in legislative elections, urging all Catholics to vote for it. At issue was the city’s public schools, which in New York were funded with public monies but were operated by the Public School Society, a private, mainly Protestant organization, which promoted a sectarian, denominational religious education. Hughes objected to the use of the Protestant King James Version of the Bible in the public schools. When he failed in his efforts to get the Protestant Bible out of the public schools, he campaigned for state funding of Catholic schools, provoking in the process a Protestant nativist reaction.

When both major parties, Whigs and Democrats, refused to support his efforts, Bishop Hughes entered his own candidates, in support of state aid to Catholic schools. The Catholic ticket was defeated, but it obtained sufficient votes to persuade the New York state government to take over the administration of the city’s public schools. If Hughes could not get state aid for Catholic education, at least he would remove Protestant education from the public schools. Moreover, a separate Catholic parochial school system now seemed more justified than ever, and Hughes became its most decisive champion. “To build the school-house first, and the church afterwards,” became his famous dictum.

Many interpreters have seen the incident as a turning point in the history of American Catholicism. It certainly marked a turning away from John Carroll’s and John England’s vision of a fully integrated, equal American Catholicism. Having himself exacerbated anti-Catholic nativism with his abrasive and confrontational style, Hughes now viewed American society as hostile, and American culture as a threat from which it was necessary to protect the Catholic faithful. To keep the faith of the immigrants, protecting them from Protestant America, while helping them take their rightful place as a “separate but equal” ethnic and religious group in American society, became the central task of the immigrant church.

The repeated controversies surrounding public and parochial schools became the most evident signs of the different visions that Protestants and Catholics had of the United States and of religion’s role in public life. The Protestant clergy active in the common school movement viewed the public school as a vehicle to Americanize, that is, Christianize religiously indifferent and immigrant Catholic alike, by teaching them personal morality and self-discipline, civic virtue, and true Christianity. With the creation of the parochial school system, the Catholic Church was serving notice that it had its own agenda of Americanization.

In 1884, at the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore, the American bishops promulgated a wide body of legislation that would set the direction of the Catholic Church in the United States for the next seventy years. Among the resolutions passed was a decree to establish a parochial school in each parish, commanding pastors to build them, the laity to finance them, and parents to send their children to them. Parochial schools soon multiplied.25 In some cities, the Catholic school population became larger than that of the public schools. The combination of unique constitutional arrangements giving the Catholic Church unusual operational freedom and the Catholic perception that the public school system was an agent at first of Protestantization and then of secularization, led to the creation of a system of Catholic education unique and unparalleled in the entire Catholic world. The church and all its institutions would play a crucial function in the assimilation—Americanization—of Catholic immigrants, but it was done on Catholic terms. Out of the most varied national groups, there emerged one single Catholic religious body that stood distinctly apart from other religious bodies and from the dominant American culture.”
“Public” Catholicism

Until the 1950s, the process of Americanization had taken place within the safe haven of a quasi-segregated Catholic subculture built around the neighborhood ethnic parish. But World War II, the G.I. Bill, and the general economic boom set American Catholics on a new journey of emigration and geographical, educational, and occupational mobility—away from the working-class, urban, ethnic neighborhoods of the Northeast and Midwest and into higher education, higher income levels, and middle-class suburbs across the country.²⁷

Paradoxically, after much resistance Catholics were fully incorporated into the national civil religion despite their separate school system. Will Herberg showed how by the mid-1950s, Protestant-Catholic-Jew had become the three denominational forms of a new American civil religion that had the Protestant ethic and faith in America’s millennial role as its moral and doctrinal core.²⁸ The election of a Catholic president and the inaugural address of that president, John F. Kennedy, were viewed as confirmation of the thesis. Indeed, they were used by Robert Bellah to formulate the very thesis of an American civil religion.²⁹

At last, after a long and unexpected detour, John England’s liberal republican vision was being realized. American Catholics were joining the U.S. mainstream—indeed, they were more than any other group were beginning to define middle America—and were entering public life not as Catholics, in defense of their particular group interests, but as “citizens and politicians” less and less distinguishable from other Americans. Whether intentionally or not, Kennedy’s famous speech to Protestant ministers in Houston was almost a replica of John England’s address to Congress.³⁰

In his speech, Kennedy offered the classic liberal position of radical separation between the private religious and public secular spheres. Religious views are the individual’s own affair and ought to be irrelevant in public affairs or in the exercise of public secular roles. Moreover, churches ought to stick to religion and not meddle in public matters. Actually, historical precedent, trends, and pressures in this direction were such that, had the Second Vatican Council and developments in global Catholicism not interfered, this liberal position probably would be today the de facto official position of the American Catholic Church. Instead, we witnessed in the late 1970s and 1980s a new style of “public Catholicism,” which is clearly distinguishable from both the “liberal republican” and the “immigrant” styles.³¹

At the very moment when Catholicism had finally become American and the tension between Romanism and the Republic seemed to have been resolved (thanks in part to the anticommunist crusade of the Cold War), the Vatican’s aggiornamento reopened again the old vexing question of the relationship between being Catholic and being American. Albeit for different reasons, Catholic liberals like Kennedy and conservative Catholics like Francis Cardinal Spellman of New York shared the conviction that there could be no conflict between the Catholic Church and the Republic. For Kennedy, this was because there was a wall of separation between private faith and the modern secular world. For Spellman, this was because Catholicism and American patriotism had become indistinguishably fused in the American civil religion.

These were the two minds of American Catholicism entering the Vatican Council. As the Roman aggiornamento reached U.S. shores, it became obvious that both types of Catholicism were being challenged by a new understanding of the relation between religion and world. Both the liberal wall of separation and the civil religion fusion were put into question. Private faith could no longer leave secular public matters alone. Nor could spiritual truths ignore the “signs of the times” or be immune to freedom of inquiry. A rediscovered eschatological dimension also warned not to identify any social order with God’s Kingdom. A new tension, this time voluntary and purposeful, between Catholicism and Americanism emerged. For the first time, Catholic faith dared to challenge American public affairs.

Public Religion and Res Publica

It should be evident that the three styles of Catholicism presented here—republican or liberal, immigrant, and public—correspond to the three levels of analysis that (according to Heleó) one can use to examine the interrelations between religion and politics: the behavioral, the institutional, and the philosophical.³² The behavioral refers to the ways in which private religion may affect, indirectly as it were, public affairs through the public choices and voices of the individual religious citizen. The institutional refers to the ways in which organized religions and religious groups may compete in the political arena to advance their ideal and material interests. The philosophical refers to “the intersections of religion and policymaking that involve ideas and modes of thought bearing on the fundamental ordering of a society’s public life.”³³
At this philosophical level, one can distinguish two fundamentally different models of "republic" or res publica to which correspond two different models of civil public religion, "civil religion" proper and what I have termed public religions of civil society. The modern concept of civil religion, as elaborated by Bellah, goes back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's discussion "Of Civil Religion" in The Social Contract. According to Bellah, the idea of a nondenominational civil religion that was made up of a peculiar combination of biblical-Puritan, republican-Enlightenment, and liberal-utilitarian religious-moral principles.

The vision of "One Nation Under God" that had sustained the American civil religion was grounded in the nondenominational version of Evangelical Protestantism that grew out of the Second Great Awakening and became established as the hegemonic form of public religion in civil society throughout the nineteenth century. Progressively, however, throughout the twentieth century the model of a "Christian" nation was expanded into that of a "Judeo-Christian" one with the successful incorporation of the Catholic and Jewish minorities into the national covenant. It is this new national consensus that was described in Will Herberg's Protestant-Catholic-Jew and celebrated in Bellah's portrayal of the American civil religion.

But the celebration of the new national consensus of the 1950s and early 1960s did not last very long. In a few years, Bellah himself lamented that the national covenant that had sustained American civil religion had been "broken." Moreover, it was not simply the case that the upheavals of the 1960s—the civil rights movement, the youth counterculture, feminism, and the Vietnam War—civil religion was in a "time of trial" from which it could easily recover through some kind of new great awakening. The welfare state and consumer capitalism itself fed the "cultural contradictions" that undermined the Protestant ethic irrevocably. A third disestablishment of Protestantism, this time that of the Protestant ethic from the American way of life, was under way. From now on, the American way of life would be characterized by the plurality of ways of life, by a kind of moral denominationalism. Public morality was being secularized, leading to the emergence of a pluralistic system of norms and forms of life, which we have come to call "multiculturalism."

It is, moreover, fallacious to blame "secularism" and its imputed carriers—either professional public schoolteachers, or a Supreme Court that has gone too far in the direction of the establishment clause—for these developments. Public schoolteachers, or the school system as a whole, are not to blame for failing to transmit a moral consensus or a civil religion that does not exist anymore. In this respect, Charles Glenn's diagnosis is correct. A morally pluralistic society calls for a pluralistic educational system, and a civil society-, community-, and family-oriented strategy of diversification, responsive to the educational goals of parents, seems most appropriate.

The subsidiarity principle on which such a strategy should be based, however, would seem to require not only that schools become responsive to the local community and to parents but that parents and the local community be responsible (i.e., accountable) for the local schools. Moreover, the parallel guiding principle of social justice would require that federal, state, and local governments still to ensure that every child receives equal access to a standard education. Without these guiding principles, school vouchers or similar privatization plans would amount to unsolidaristic strategies based on self- or group-interest and designed to enable citizens to abandon a sinking ship.

In my view, it is misleading to attribute the educational crisis to the triumph of secularist ideologies, which has resulted in "the eventual exclusion of all reference to contemporary religious belief from public schools," and thus to frame the issue as a case of free exercise of religion. Bringing school prayer or religion back will not solve the public school crisis. But neither will it endanger the establishment clause. Thus, it should be presented in less dramatic terms on both sides as a relevant yet mainly symbolic gesture. Nothing more, nothing less.

Indeed, to an outside observer like myself it seems ludicrous on the part of the courts or secularist vigilantes to keep using the public school as the last bulwark and juridical litmus test of the strict wall of separation between church and state, as the place, in the words of Justice Felix Frankfurter, where one ought to maintain "zealous watchfulness against fusion of secular and religious activities by Government itself," since "the public school is a symbol of our secular unity," "at once the symbol of our democracy," and "the most persuasive means for promoting our common destiny."

Today, when judges, presidents, and many of those who can afford it send their children to private rather than public schools, these solemn words sound hollow. They were uttered, however, at a high point of national moral consensus, at a time of general religious revival, when Baptists still acted as high guardians of the separation of church and state, and there reigned still a consensus among Protestant and secular elites that Catholicism, which after all was the target of these court rulings, represented the
most serious threat to the separation of church and state and to U.S. religious freedoms.  

Indeed, to understand how the public school became not so much a "symbol of our secular unity" but "an island of secularity," one must take into account the peculiar historical dynamics between the Protestant religious majority and the Catholic and Jewish religious minorities in this country. The Protestant majority, or at least its elites, conceived the "common school" and the public school as instruments of Christianization and Americanization (for a long time both meant the same thing) of the immigrant "other."  

The Catholic minority, or rather the primarily Irish church hierarchy, suspicious of this project of Christianization and of the "Protestant Bible," rejected this project and established its own system of separate Catholic schools precisely as an instrument of Americanization and Catholic homogenization, as a kind of Catholic ethnic "melting pot." Jews, the other significant religious minority, who were equally suspicious of the Protestant project of Christianization and of all the rhetoric about the Christian nation, chose the opposite strategy, embracing the public school as a vehicle of Americanization and social mobility, while using the establishment clause to divest the schools of any Christian remnants, symbolic or real.  

Only this historic dynamic can explain why, as Glenn points out, "religion receives much more public recognition and support in Congress, in the military, in government-funded social and health services, in prisons, and in higher education than it does in public schools." It is one of the peculiarities of American secularism that the schools remain the battleground over the wall of separation long after the successful Americanization of Catholics and Jews was accomplished and the dynamics of religious and moral pluralism in American society have changed radically, specially with the new wave of massive, mainly non-European, immigration from all over the globe.  

Yet it is surprising that one hears few voices today calling for the public schools to play their traditional role of Americanization, that is, of incorporation and assimilation of the new immigrants. This may be due partly to the generalized perception of crisis in the public school system and partly to the realization that the meaning of assimilation has changed radically, as is illustrated by the debates concerning the "segmented assimilation" of the second generation. Indeed, new immigrant families, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, as well as African-American families, are sending their children to Catholic schools in formerly Catholic neighborhoods in the inner cities, sometimes at significant costs given their low income, in the hope that they will receive the effective academic and moral education that they think their local public schools are failing to provide.  

It sounds ironic, however, given the history of the Catholic school system, to hear contemporary critics, many of them non-Catholic, offering the Catholic schools as a successful alternative to the allegedly failing public schools. No less ironic is the fact that such proposals promoting private religious schools (to be financed partly with public funds through vouchers) come at a time when the Catholic school system has entered a serious internal crisis. Insofar as this crisis is partly financial, public subsidies in whichever acceptable form, most likely indirect ones through tax deductions to skirt contested issues of church-state separation, would do no help to close the serious deficit gap that is forcing dioceses across the country to close parochial schools.  

But the roots of the problems go much deeper. The crisis is primarily one of mission and identity, secondly one of an increasing shortage of the priests and religious brothers and sisters who have been the backbone of the system at a meager financial cost, and thirdly one of geographical dislocation of the existing parochial schools. The financial crisis itself is rooted in these three interconnected crises. Surely, the financial incentive of public subsidies could help in addressing those problems with greater confidence and determination. But the structural nature of the problems needs to be confronted directly and systematically.  

Moreover, it is misleading to present such proposals foremost as an issue of the free exercise of religion. Surely, suburban middle-class Catholic families, which are now sending their children to public schools for which they pay local taxes, may consider (given the right financial incentive) sending their children again to parochial schools. But most Catholic families would not do it primarily for the sake of a Catholic religious education for their children, any more than non-Catholic families send their children to parochial schools for the sake of a Catholic "sectarian" education. They would do it if they thought that the local Catholic schools were comparatively better, academically and morally, than the local public schools.  

By moral education, I do not mean particular Catholic moral teachings, but rather moral education in the broad Durkheimian sense of the term, comprising the three elements of "spirit of discipline," "attachment to social groups," and "autonomy or self-determination." Durkheim expected public schools in France to provide the kind of secular moral education
identities among the self-governing people who are called upon to oversee these decisions. These three observations imply that the interaction of religion and public policy will be a growing challenge in the years ahead.45

The result is a continuous expansion of the res publica while the citizen’s republic becomes ever more diverse and fragmented. That is, the increase in the number and the complexity of issues becoming open to public deliberation, moral contestation, and partisan policymaking coincides with the proliferation of diverse publics and interest groups, with a pluralism of moral positions often perceived as a dissolution of the prevailing moral consensus, and with competing visions of the common good that seem to lead to a fragmentation of the Republic.

As if this challenge were not serious enough, one must confront, moreover, yet another brute fact: globalization. This fashionable, controversial, much abused yet indispensable buzzword serves as shorthand for a complex multidimensional process that, though still only in its initial stages, is already challenging our very model of national public policy, civil society, and politics. The res publica—along with our markets, mass media, cultures, identities, and practically every social phenomenon that in the modern era had been circumscribed within the territorial boundaries of the nation-state—is becoming de-territorialized and is assuming increasingly transnational and even global dimensions.

National borders are becoming ever more porous, while the traditional distinctions and boundary lines between domestic and foreign issues and affairs are becoming ever more blurred and obsolescent. Foreign problems anywhere in the world—economic crises, environmental and natural disasters, epidemics and famines, civil wars and regional conflicts, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity, human rights violations and gender discriminations, migration and refugee flows—easily turn into domestic policy issues and concerns not only because of the traditional geopolitical interests of a superpower, but also because of the increasing perception of global interconnectedness made tangible by the electronic media and because of the mobilized engagement, ideal or material, of multiple American and transnational publics in those issues.

As a counterpart, U.S. domestic policy issues and public debates—on the economy, energy, environment, defense, immigration, abortion and reproductive health, civil or penal codes—soon become global concerns and the preoccupation of foreign publics. The shrinkage of the planet into a
global village is accompanied by the expansion of the circles of human solidarity and by the transformation of the *res publica* into a world domestic policy arena.

Religion at all three levels of analysis—behavioral, institutional, and philosophical—is not only intrinsically affected by these brute facts and by the transformation of the *res publica* they entail. Religion is also one of the primary resources we possess in facing these new challenges. The penetration of all spheres of life, including the most private, by public policy; the expansion of scientific-technological frontiers giving humanity demystic self-creation and self-destruction; the compression of the whole powers of human rights and world peace into a single common home for all of humanity; and the moral reality that seems inherent to multiculturalism—all these new transcendent issues engage religion and provoke religious responses. At the same time, the great world religions in particular, as the stored collective memories and moral memories of humanity, are bound to become a valuable resource for dealing with these issues. Thus, the interconnectedness of religion and public policy is only likely to increase in the future as we enter uncharted moral territory.

**Public Religion and Contemporary Global Trends**

Although this volume is meant as a retrospective look at the relations between religion and public policy in the twentieth century, I would like to conclude with a prospective, somewhat speculative look at what appear to be new global trends that are likely to affect the types and styles of public religion in the future. The style of public Catholicism that has emerged since the Second Vatican Council, which I view as paradigmatic of the kind of public religion called for by the new global condition, must be viewed in many ways as a new creative response to those trends.

A transnational religion like Catholicism, which for centuries had felt constrained by the straitjacket of the territorial nation-state, is being transformed and somewhat liberated by processes of globalization, and is regaining its “catholic” (i.e., universal or global) dimension and identity. Progressively, from the end of the nineteenth century to the present, one can witness the reconstruction, reemergence, or reinforcement of all those transnational characteristics of medieval Christendom that had nearly disappeared or been significantly weakened since the sixteenth century: papal supremacy and the centralization and internationalization of the church’s government; the convocation of ecumenical councils; transnational religious cadres; missionary activity; transnational schools, centers of learning, and intellectual networks; shrines as centers of pilgrimage and international encounters; and transnational religious movements. The other world religions are undergoing their own particular transformations as a response to the same global processes.

At issue is not anymore the old conflict between Romanism and the Republic, that is, the perceived threat that a foreign authoritarian power and potentially disloyal citizens presented to national sovereignty. What is at stake is the fact that all public issues are becoming “catholic,” that is, normative issues of global concern to all of humanity. The engagement of the Catholic Church in public debates and moral contestation throughout the world—on abortion and sexual mores, on economic policies, social justice, and a fairer distribution of global resources, and on democracy, human rights, and world peace—is a manifestation of this transformation. Two recent interventions of Catholic leaders may serve to illustrate the self-conscious engagement and adaptation of the Catholic Church, at least of its leadership, to ongoing processes of globalization.

During his last visit to Mexico in 1999, Pope John Paul II gathered the bishops of all American countries, consecrated Our Lady of Guadalupe as the Virgin of all the Americas, and urged them to cease viewing themselves as separate national Catholic churches and to become one single Pan-American Catholic Church. Only a few decades ago, such a statement would have been unutterable and would have provoked vehement accusations of popish interference and Romanist threats to national sovereignty, both in the United States and in Mexico. But today such a statement can practically pass unnoticed in its normalcy, or it can be understood as a normal pastoral response to ongoing processes of continental integration spearheaded by the North American Free Trade Agreement and carried by the ongoing massive Latin American and Caribbean migration to the United States and Canada.

The Pope, in a way, is only responding to global structural developments that are making Southern borders and North–South boundaries ever more porous. Yet if his strategy of turning the Virgin of Guadalupe into a religious symbol unifying all the American Catholic churches into a single imagined community is in any way successful, it will open up a globalizing dynamic of its own that will further undermine the territorialization of national cultures.

Latin American societies are being penetrated ever more by Anglo-American culture, but the reciprocal process of Latinization of North
American culture is taking place as well. The mutual penetration and reciprocal acculturation is taking place not only in the fields of popular culture, music, sports, and culinary habits, but also in the sphere of religion. The Protestantification of Latin America and the Latin Americanization of U.S. Catholicism go hand in hand. Both may be viewed as instances of the de-territorialization of cultures associated with globalization.


In the next millennium, as the modern nation state is relativized and national sovereignty is displaced into societal arrangements still to be invented, it will be increasingly evident that the major faiths are carriers of culture and that it is more sectarian to be French, American or Russian than to be Christian or Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist. Inter-religious dialogue is more basic to the future of faith, therefore, than is Church-state dialogue, important though that remains. And among the dialogues, that between Christians and Muslims promises to be the most significant for the future of the human race. Islam did not undergo the Renaissance and Enlightenment and therefore enters the post-modern world as a fully universal faith without having gone through the experience of modernity which shaped European cultures and the Christian faith. The conversation between Christianity and Islam is not yet far advanced, but its outcome will determine what the globe will look like a century from now.

To a certain extent, this conversation among all world religions is already taking place in the United States as a result of the new global migration flows. The United States has again become an immigrant society. During the past decade alone, approximately 1 million immigrants annually have entered the United States, the largest wave in the nation’s history, even outnumbering the 9 million immigrants who came during the first decade of the twentieth century.

More important than the increase in numbers, however, are the changes in the origin and characteristics of immigrants. Whereas the “old” immigrants were almost exclusively European, the new immigrants are primarily non-European. The largest numbers are Asian, Latin American, and Caribbean in origin, but increasing numbers are also coming from Africa—indeed, from all regions of the world. This means not only a broader range of linguistic and ethnic diversity, but also an unprecedented representation of all the world’s religions. For the first time in its history, the United States has large Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim populations.

We have entered a new phase in the American experiment. The models of immigrant incorporation have been radically altered by expanding multiculturalism at home and by the proliferation of global transnational networks. The increasing global immigration in turn leads to a spiraling acceleration of multiculturalism and religious pluralism, now encompassing all world religions. The United States is called to become not just the “first new nation” made up primarily of all the European nations. The traditional model of assimilation, turning European nationals into American “ethnics,” can no longer serve as a model of assimilation now that immigration is literally worldwide.

The United States is bound to become the “first new global society” made up of all world religions and civilizations, at a time when religious and civilizational identities are regaining prominence in the global stage. At the same moment political scientists like Samuel Huntington are announcing the impending clash of civilizations in global politics, a new experiment in intercivilizational encounters and accommodation among all the world religions is taking place at home. American religious pluralism is expanding and incorporating all the world religions in the same way as it previously incorporated the religions of the old immigrants.

A complex process of mutual accommodation is taking place. Like Catholicism and Judaism before, other world religions—Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam—are being “Americanized,” and in the process they are transforming American religion. Moreover, the religious diasporas in the United States are simultaneously serving as catalysts for the transformation of the old religions in their civilizational homes, in the same way American Catholicism affected the transformation of world Catholicism.

Besides the relevance of the Christian-Muslim dialogue stressed by Cardinal George, of all the new immigrant religions Islam represents the most interesting testing ground and challenge to the pattern of immigrant incorporation, for three interrelated reasons. Th first is that, more than any other world religion, Islam is still represented frequently in the United States as “the other” and therefore as “un-American,” due to geopolitical rationales and the common essentialist portrayal of Islam as a fundamentalist religion. Tragically, these debates have only exacerbated in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, perpetrated as they were by Muslim militants, and the military response of the Western alliance in
Afghanistan against the Taliban regime and against Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda global network of terrorists.\textsuperscript{51}

It is not surprising that many have viewed the terrorist attacks and the Western military and police responses as a dramatic confirmation of the civilizational clash between Islam and the West. Such an interpretation of the conflict appears to have found considerable resonance throughout the West as well as the Muslim world. The public denials of Western leaders that their interventions are not directed against Islam seem hardly credible when they are accompanied by the widespread and indiscriminate surveillance and detention of Arabs and Muslims in the United States and when those infringements of individual liberties go unchallenged by the courts and are condoned by public opinion, as if to confirm that Arabs and Muslims are collectively suspected of potential complicity with the terrorist perpetrators and presumed guilty by ethnic and religious association.

In turn, the public condemnations of the attacks by most Muslim political and religious leaders and their attempts to dissociate Islam from the illegitimate terrorist methods, if not from the legitimate anti-Western grievances that may have fueled them, are received in the West as ambiguous and inadequate responses to the U.S. categorical presidential ultimatum to be "with us or against us" in the global war against terrorism. Paradoxically, however, the events of September 11 and their aftermath are forcing not only a debate about the alleged civilizational conflict between Islam and the United States, but also a recognition that Islam has taken roots in America and is becoming a major American religion.

The second important reason that the incorporation of Islam in America may hold special relevance is because Islam has resisted perhaps better than any other world religion the modern colonial logic of racialization. Given the corrosive character of this logic of racialization so prominent in American society, the dynamics of religious identity formation among immigrants in the United States assume a doubly positive form. The affirmation of religious identities is enhanced among the new immigrants because of the established historical pattern of acceptance of religious pluralism and diversity.

But this positive affirmation is privileged even more by what appears to be a common defensive reaction by most immigrant groups against pervasive ascribed racialization, particularly against the stigma of racial darkness. Plural religious identities and plural ethnic or racial identities are likely to become, after all, the two main competing alternative forms of organization of American multiculturalism. The challenge confronting Islam in the United States is how to transform diverse immigrant groups from South Asia (which today constitute the largest and fastest growing group of Muslim immigrants), from Arab countries, and from West Africa into a single American Islamic community.

In this respect, the process of incorporation is not unlike that of the incorporation of different Catholic ethnic groups into a single American Catholic Church. The two options being debated today within Islamic communities across the United States—often put in terms of the Nation of Islam model versus the model of an assertive and powerful Jewish minority—reiterate some of the debates in nineteenth-century American Catholicism. Indeed, structurally the position of Muslims in the United States today is in many respects similar to that of Catholic immigrants in the nineteenth century. At issue is whether Islam should be constructed as a segregated defensive subculture protecting itself from corrosive Americanization, or whether it should organize itself as a public self-assertive cultural option within competitive multiculturalism. The threat of Americanization of Islam this would entail would be balanced by the opportunity of the Islamization of America, which many Muslims view as an actualization of Islam's universalism.

The third reason that the incorporation of Islam is particularly relevant is because of the growing Islamization of the African-American community, in a process that African-American Muslims often depict not as conversion but rather as reversion to a preslavery African Islam. Indeed, the often contentious dialogue and dynamic interaction between African-American Muslims and immigrant Muslims is bound to have a dramatic impact upon the transformation of American culture.\textsuperscript{52}

The process of the Americanization of Islam is already taking place, despite all the difficulties presented by internal pluralism and external nativist resistance.\textsuperscript{53} Islam is becoming not just a fast-growing religion in the United States, but an American religion, one of the denominational alternatives of being religiously American. Moreover, Islam is destined to become, like Catholicism, an important public religion that is likely to play a relevant role in U.S. public debates in the future.

Notes


8. See chapter 6 of this volume.


12. However, as Charles Glenn shows in his analysis of John Dewey’s influential educational philosophy in chapter 10 of this volume, some of the same Enlightenment-based bias was operative in the transformation of the public school system in the twentieth century.


15. See chapter 3 of this volume.


23. Quoted in O’Brien, Public Catholicism, 124.

24. At the time of the council, four of every ten Catholic parishes had primary schools. Following the council decree, and spurred by the dramatic increase in Catholic immigration in the following decades, the number of parochial schools grew from 2,246 in 1880 to 3,811 in 1900 and to 4,845 in 1910, while the number of students rose from 405,234 in 1880 to 854,523 in 1900 and to 1,237,251 in 1910. The figures are taken from Hennesey, American Catholics, 242–43.


33. Heclo, 5.


35. Bellah, “Civil Religion.”


38. For an analysis of the three phases of the disestablishment of American Protestantism, see Casanova, Public Religions, chap. 6.

39. Quoted in Reid, “Religious Conscience,” 76.

41. See chapter 10.
43. This is one of the preliminary findings of a research project, "Religion and Immigrant Incorporation in New York," led by Aristide Zolberg and José Casanova at the International Center for Migration, Ethnicity, and Citizenship at New School University.
47. It is already having some visible effects in New York City. Four boroughs (Manhattan, the Bronx, Queens, and Staten Island) have already recognized officially the Feast of the Virgin of Guadalupe on Dec. 12 as a religious holiday. The festivity is solemnly celebrated at Saint Patrick’s Cathedral by the cardinal with public representative participation of Mexican and other Latino immigrants as well as American Catholics from all over the city. More than forty Guadalupano committees have been established throughout the city, most of them linked to the Tepeyac Association, a religious-cultural organization of Mexican immigrants led by a Mexican Jesuit. By symbolically linking the sacred image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexican national identity, and the self-organization of the Mexican community in New York around the human, civil, and labor rights of immigrants, in a few years the Tepeyac Association has already had significant effects on the incorporation of Mexicans, the most recent Latino immigrant community, into the U.S. Catholic Church and into the socio-political life of the city.
53. The presence of a Muslim imam along with a Protestant minister, a Catholic priest, and a Jewish rabbi in the opening of public ceremonies is becoming routine. Among the symbolic milestones one could mention: The first commissioned Islamic chaplain in the U.S. Army was established in 1993, and in the U.S. Navy in 1996; a Muslim symbol was displayed on the White House Ellipse in 1997; the Pentagon hosted its first Ramadan meal for Muslims in 1998; on the first day of Ramadan in Nov. 2000 the New Jersey legislature opened its ceremony with a reading of the Qur’an by an imam. The Muslim public presence in official ceremonies and in interfaith encounters has become even more prominent after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.