Religious Belief, American Democracy, and our Inescapable Culture: Some Preliminary Observations

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Dr. Peter Schotten is Professor of Government and International Relations at Augustana College, Sioux Falls, South Dakota. This article appears in issue 14 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

How ought religion, including Modern Jewish Orthodoxy, interact with America's political democracy? And can it survive our current culture? Not surprisingly, these simple questions simultaneously point in many directions. However, my interest is specific. I wish to understand how secular politics and culture affect religion in the United States and vice versa. Although answers are complex, I do think that a few meaningful generalizations are possible.

Let us begin our inquiry by asking the following question: How is religion viewed politically? In the United States, this is first of all a Constitutional and legal matter. After all, it is the Constitution that defines what policies and programs the national government can legally undertake. Usually, any discussion of the relationship between religion and government focuses upon explicating the First Amendment, a legal guarantee that prohibits the national government from establishing religion while guaranteeing to its citizens the free exercise of their religion. However, often overlooked is an even more foundational constitutional guarantee that defines the relationship between the national government and religious practice in the United States. Remarkably, despite the fact that 11 states had established religious oaths as prerequisite for holding political office, the Founders outlawed them in the new Constitution. Article VI, paragraph 3 of the Constitution stipulates that "no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust in the United States." The intention of

those who wrote the Constitution remains clear: Public officials in charge of the government were required to act legally, not piously. The Constitution demanded only that officeholders in the national government swear to uphold and defend the Constitution.

Although the metaphor of a wall of separation between church and state rather overstates the matter, there exists little doubt that the Founders created a secular government designed to be governed by officials who aim to advance the public interest through the fidelity to the Constitution and the rule of law. It might be said that the Constitution's emphasis on constitutionalism was intended to supply the essence of a public religion much in the way halakha constitutes the core of Judaism.

Where did this secular definition of politics leave organized religion? The Founding generation wrote a Constitution that was premised upon a number of widely shared and nuanced assumptions about religion—assumptions that remain important for us to understand today. First, the Founders believed that it was dangerous when the powers of church and state merged, and religion formally intruded itself in the state's governing. The Founders responded by creating the secular Constitution to which I have alluded. Second, those who wrote the Constitution almost uniformly feared religious fanaticism. Modern European history suggested that religious fanaticism was the most common kind of a fanaticism, and fanaticism was a mindset that usually produced intolerance and violence incompatible with responsible self-government. It is important here not to confuse religious orthodoxy with fanaticism. Religious orthodoxy represents an adherence to doctrine about God that is believed and lived. Only when its adherents seek forcibly to impose it on others can orthodoxy slip into a politically dangerous fanaticism.

If religion, under the wrong conditions, could be dangerous for self-government, its practice nonetheless was a matter of conscience and could be politically valuable; therefore it required protection. For that reason, the founding generation shared a third view of religion, namely that its reasonable practice required protecting. Different rationales could be detected here. Influential thinkers such as Jefferson pointed out that a citizen's religious freedom was a subset of freedom generally, and that one of the purposes of self-government had to do with the securing of liberty for all citizens: Not only do my neighbors have a right to their religious opinions, but how my neighbors practiced their religion did not adversely affect me. In Jefferson's words, whether there were 20 gods or no god, "neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg." Endangering one's neighbor's

religious freedom was unacceptable because every citizen's religious belief and practice deserved respect. Furthermore, any government that could threaten anyone's religious belief could also threaten one's own freedom of conscience specifically and one's political freedom more generally.

A somewhat different defense of a robust religious practice was provided by Founders such as George Washington. Washington often enunciated that political morality, and therefore American national well-being, decisively depended upon religion. For Washington, religion was a source of morality that strengthened citizenship and, by so doing, empowered responsible self-government. Religion clarified the sort of ethical behavior that was expected of us. Contemporary academic studies tend to confirm Washington's observation, revealing a correlation between citizens who regularly attend religious worship and increased contributions to charity, more frequent civil engagement, and higher levels of empathy toward others.

Shorn of formal involvement in state affairs, and absent any fanatical tendencies, the Founding generation assumed that the practice of religion would be concentrated in the private realm and that its influence would be positive. They championed the widespread reasonable private exercise of religion (combined with infrequent, ceremonial, traditional public acknowledgments of God or religion) because they believed that it benefitted the political order by protecting liberty and enhancing morality. Therefore, from a secular point of view, the Founders praised religion because it was politically useful. The Constitution required from public officials no opinion whatsoever about the truth of any particular religion or about religion generally. But the Founders never denied the importance of religion or its frequent positive influence upon self-government.

This briefly summarizes the U.S. Constitution's and its government's view of religion. But what can we say about the opposite perspective? How have religions, and their practitioners, interacted with government? The first thing to be said is perhaps obvious. Citizens who are religious but desire to influence civic and public policy have sought public office since the Constitution's ratification. Not unreasonably, they have brought with them their religious convictions. Nor could it have been otherwise. It would be unreasonable, not to mention impossible, to expect such citizens to leave their most deeply held, religiously based beliefs behind. But our politics requires that even arguments made by political leaders who are privately religious be publicly made in secular terms. Religion in the United States most frequently and successfully enters the public square indirectly and diluted, dressed in the garb of secular language about public good. Politicians

advocating this or that policy inevitably phrase their appeal in the language of perceived secular advantage, even if that advantage coincides with the teaching of their religious doctrine.

There is another way religion reacts to government in the United States. Often, religious individuals are wary of laws or policies that threaten to put religion generally, or their religion in particular, at a disadvantage. Such a situation can arise in several ways. Actions of an expanding government may restrict religious practices, or contradict religious dogmas or beliefs, or treat them less generously than strictly public institutions. This is particularly true for religiously sponsored private institutions that perform a public function, including day care centers, charities, hospitals, and schools. To the extent that such issues are not settled by the courts, religious leaders seek to influence elected officials. They often seek assurances that their institutions are not politically or financially disadvantaged by restrictive rules or funding in the public arena.

The fear of an intrusive government, indifferent to the sensibilities of religious organizations and the beliefs of their practitioners, constitutes a dominant fear of America’s religious leaders. Another is the rejection of religion, or particular religious sects, particularly by the young. Often, this is cited as evidence of religions’ declining influence. In order to combat this threat, many religious sects have sought to become more culturally sensitive and aware. This trend has larger political implications. Rather than reinforcing the larger secular culture of its moral responsibilities and obligations, it appears that religion itself is increasingly being subverted by that culture. The importance of this change cannot be overestimated. Often, religion is pictured as a foundation of society, strong and unchanging. The truth can be quite different. There exists widespread concern that religion, society’s bedrock, is slowly but surely being eroded by the popular culture the Founders hoped it would support.

James Davison Hunter (in The Death of Character) has outlined the problem brilliantly. A therapeutic, relativistic culture currently dominates in the United States. In its battle with traditionally defined religion, it is winning. The ascendency of the pervasive popular culture can be seen both in obvious and profound ways. Here are a few (but only a few). It is no accident that psychologists and social workers have replaced clergy in times of public distress and great tragedies. Nor is it meaningless that schools and popular culture and peer groups have supplanted churches and religion as the arbiters of moral behavior. Furthermore, morality is no longer thought to be divinely rooted but is increasingly seen as individually determined. In its increasingly frantic attempt to

be relevant, religion has sought to blend. In such a world, right and wrong is no longer found in sacred texts. Increasingly it is pronounced individually, different practices and behaviors being fobbed off as mere difference. Difference here masquerades as a moral term, a word designed to display tolerance, but which effectively obliterates the very morality it pretends to describe.

Even if the name of religion has not changed, this has become soft religion without meaningful content. Such an approach can be seen most obviously in a surprisingly large number of Americans who define their religiosity by referring to their spirituality. Traditionally understood, religiosity is about belief and action, about faith in God, and about acting in accordance with God's guidance of our fellow human beings. By contrast, spirituality is all about feeling. It knows nothing about God and postulates nothing about ethical obligations. The locus of the feeling can be located in the experiences and emotions of the affected person. God, if God matters at all, constitutes a mere afterthought.

Although an extreme example, an increasing emphasis upon the self is indicative of a trend in contemporary American religion. Generally, religion in the United States has moved away from its traditional religiosity in the direction of spirituality. An increasingly frantic organized religion in America has chosen to confront a self-referential culture by catering to it. Today, the common question posed to would-be churchgoers and congregants asks whether this or that religious experience is personally fulfilling. Religion, like its larger surrounding culture, has become mired in the ethos of egalitarian individualism.

Having shorn religion of its content, mainstream churches and synagogues have sometimes attempted to remain relevant by significantly supplementing—some would say conflating—liberal political and social doctrine with religious content. This phenomenon is widespread. It has characterized the mainline Protestant Churches for almost 50 years. Similarly, Reform Judaism, repeatedly trumpeting the idea of tikkun olam, has pursued a similar route (leading one wag to remark that the primary difference between Reform Judaism and the Democratic Party has become the holidays).

The consequences of this strategy have not been encouraging. The mainline Protestant Churches have been characterized by internal dissension and today are in notable decline. Within Reform Judaism there has ensued something of theological crises. Consider: Judaism has long understood itself in terms of chosenness. It proves hardly surprising that the idea that the Jewish people uniquely had received God's Divine Covenant has profoundly informed Jewish practice, belief and liturgy. Furthermore, in very specific ways, the idea of

chosenness led the rabbis to reflect in very precise ways on what it meant to live a distinctively Jewish life. God's Covenant—and what led up to it—was an essential for defining Jewish obligation, of what constituted a Jewish obligation to one's fellow Jews, to all people everywhere, and to God.

The problem for religion such as Reform Judaism is that the notion of chosenness, at the very least, is in tension with the pervasive idea of equality. Equality is modernity's—and hence this age's—most powerful idea. More than any other single concept, it alone frequently defines social justice. Furthermore (as Tocqueville would remind us), its increase has been advanced by every major scientific innovation for hundreds of years—from the invention of firearms and the printing press to the development of the automobile and the iPad. Reform Judaism's espousal of contemporary liberalism required that it embrace equality; its affiliation with Jewish tradition pointed simultaneously to Jewish distinctiveness and chosenness. Reconciling the two proved to be no simple task. More specifically, the idea of retaining a specific Jewish identity in an age that sees all ethnic and religious identity merely as equally shared group characteristics remains challenging.

What are the social and political consequences caused by the weakening of many of America's most influential and important religious sects? On the one hand, a diluted religion does have some positive social consequences. Most specifically, such a religion is more tolerant and accepting of other religions (and perhaps even of people who do not practice religion). It is important to recognize that this desirable social consequence often can result from a dilution of religious belief as well as a lessening of faith in a specific differentiating religious doctrine. To the extent that I value my religion because it is mine, or because it is familiar, or because of sheer inertia (rather than because I believe that my faith is correct and others are quite misguided), the more likely I am to view all religion inclusively. Stating this same conclusion negatively, the more a religious person sees another individual as expressing similar religious ideas as themselves, the less likely that person will be to ridicule, marginalize—or advocate, condone, or practice violence against that person.

But such social acceptance comes with a cost. Doubtlessly, the weakening of a believer's religious belief adversely affects the intensity and vitality of that person's religious practice. The question becomes: what are the political implications of increasing numbers of people ceasing to regard religion as a first order matter—as a matter of caring for one's soul and that human being's relationship to God? To what extent will the United States be changed as religion

no longer remains a matter of urgent faith for many citizens, and increasingly becomes a mere preference, little different from any other consumer preference? The Founders had assumed the existence of, and therefore counted upon, a robust religion, a religion whose doctrines were alive and vibrant to its practitioners. They believed that only such a religion could impart the moral urgency to remind human beings of their civic duties and responsibilities to others. In a decent political order, they hoped that the religiously inspired teaching like that which proclaims the importance of loving one's neighbor could, more often than not, modify the first fact about human nature, namely that human beings are motivated by self-love and therefore often act from self-interest. A successful politics could not ignore the harsher side of human behavior. But neither did it always have to settle for it.

So it turns out that the relationship between revealed religion, American democracy, and our current culture is complex. As such, it is not reducible to simple slogans or clichés. Yet one cannot help but notice the positive implications of this analysis for a religion like such as Jewish Modern Orthodoxy. Its orthodoxy reflects a belief system that is neither flabby nor formless. As a religion rooted in revelation but well disposed to reason, it combines a core coherent belief about its own faith with a respect for others. Equally important from a political perspective, it partakes in the larger culture without succumbing to its influence. To the contrary, Modern Orthodoxy proves quite capable of applying well articulated and thoughtful standards of moral judgment to it. As such, it does not lack influence. Specifically, it can and does help fashion the conscience and convictions of morally grounded citizens who can participate in political discussion and in the public realm. In return, like all other religions, it receives the Constitution's broad protection of religious free exercise. A contract of sorts between (this) religion and state would seem to exist. Fortunately, it is a good political bargain, for all Americans derive benefit from its existence.

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