Chapter 5

Culture, Religion and American Political Life

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Of all the terms commonly employed when scholars discuss religion and American politics, none is so confusing nor as essential as “culture.” Virtually everybody who writes about the topic portrays religion as intimately tied to and expressive of culture but each study offers a unique explanation of what is meant by the term. The student who delves into this literature encounters a bewildering array of views about what culture actually denotes. The problem is not unique to the analysis of religion in American political life: the meaning and significance of culture are strongly contested in all the social sciences regardless of the specific object of inquiry.

This chapter explores the role of religion in American culture and, ultimately, in political life. Reflecting the absence of any single authoritative understanding of culture, we utilize the concept in two different ways. We start with culture in its most traditional sense to encapsulate the content and meaning of core American values. In this holistic conceptualization, religion is an important element in the system of beliefs and values widely shared by the people of the United States. In the discipline of political science, culture has often been narrowed to refer only to core beliefs and values relevant to governance and public life. Accordingly, we will focus our attention on the religious elements of American “political culture” or what is sometimes called American civil religion.

Another section of the chapter explores culture and religion through an alternative framework. Recent work on culture has tended to see it not as a “thing” or “entity” attached to a plot of land or a group of people, as in the holistic understanding, but rather as a socially-constructed process or form of relationship. The emphasis of this perspective is on culture as a distinct sphere of human activity in which society transmits meaning through specialized institutions that enable individuals to locate themselves in the social order. Most accounts of culture written from this viewpoint emphasize diversity rather than unity, asserting that multiple subcultures abound and brush up against each other in the social and political sphere. Consistent with this emerging perspective, the chapter thus considers culture as a source of identities and norms for behavior and explores how such subcultures are mobilized on behalf of political ends. We conclude with thoughts on future research directions in the study of culture, religion and politics.

Culture as a Concept

Before exploring how culture and religion intersect to influence American political life, we must first try to clarify culture as a concept. Reviewing how ‘culture’ has been
conceptualized and used by social scientists, W. H. Sewell, Jr. (1999) usefully distinguishes between two basic approaches. As Gupta and Ferguson (1992) explain, the older approach tends to associate culture with collectivities defined typically by either geography (e.g., French culture, the American South) or race and ethnicity (typified by, say, Arab culture). In this view, culture consists of the ultimate values that knit together people with some kind of common ancestral tie, real or imagined. Each such collectivity develops a distinct package of “knowledge, beliefs and values” that demarcates the group from others (Kuper 1999: 16). Culture thus represents “a concrete and bounded world of beliefs and practices” that belongs to a group (Sewell 1999: 39). In some treatments of culture from this perspective, culture is portrayed as so deeply-rooted, so fixed, such a quintessential trait of persons from a group, that it almost seems like a “natural” trait. (Viewing cultural traits as primordial qualities, likening them to biological or genetic factors, is known as essentialism.) It is that sense of the term—culture as a collective property—that we employ for the most part in the sections devoted to religion as an element of American culture and as a source of its political culture. We label this traditional approach “holistic” because it posits a common culture that suffuses a collectivity.

For at least two reasons, social scientists grew increasingly dissatisfied with this approach in the 1970s. First, culture seemed to be so vague and diffuse a concept that it could seemingly be stretched to describe almost anything that was not otherwise accounted for in theories of political behavior. Scholars almost reflexively attributed the residual variance in any analysis to the influence of “culture,” reducing the concept to little more than a label. Aside from that shortcoming, other scholars wondered how something that seemed so durable and fundamental could explain political change. If culture was deeply rooted and durable, how could it be utilized to account for the dynamic nature of political development? Hence, political scientists began to explore alternative ways to think about the phenomenon of culture (Spiro 1987; Eckstein 1988; Wedeen 2002).

Rather than start with something entirely new, they drew on the idea of ‘culture’ as a process, “a theoretically defined category or aspect of social life that must be abstracted out from the complex reality of human existence” (Sewell 1999, 39). Culture in this new key has to be distinguished from other causal agents such as “political and economic forces, social institutions, and biological processes” (Kuper 1999: xi). Culture so defined is distinctive in several aspects that have been elaborated by the advocates of the “cultural turn” in the 1980s and 1990s. For one thing, culture is learned. People are not born with a culture but into a culture that has to be created by humans and passed on from one generation to the next through the process of socialization. (This was not a new observation but something given greater significance than it had enjoyed in the holistic approach.) As a distinct sphere of human learning, culture is about the infusion of meaning:

Culture comprises the symbols and meanings that give coherence to a society; basically it constitutes those forms of expression that link individuals together by serving as a means of understanding how each group or individual relates to another. In this sense, culture or tradition is reproduced through a number of means (such as language) and acts like ballast, providing a sense of collectivity that holds individuals together (Yengoyan 1986: 372).
Accordingly, scholars must pay attention to the “practices of meaning-making” (Wedeen 2002, 714) by the sphere of society that specializes in transmission of culture. This comprises institutions “devoted specifically to the production, circulation and use of meanings”—institutions that include education, art, literature, media and, most important for our purposes, religion (Sewell 1999: 41). Furthermore, culture is typically expressed in terms of myths and symbols. Cultural ideas are most effectively communicated and understood not on the cognitive plane but through affective symbols and images that evoke powerful emotional reactions—the American flag, the Twin Towers of 9/11, Willie Horton, the welfare mother, educated elites (eggheads, pointy-headed intellectuals, effete snobs, social planners), and so on. Culture is also expressed through practice. To take but one example, American private citizens who patrol the shared Mexican border and build fences to separate the United States from its southern neighbor call themselves “Minutemen,” claiming common ancestry with the patriots who battled British colonial authorities at the time of the American Revolution. Theirs is a form of cultural labor intended to harness a powerful symbol on behalf of an exclusive definition of citizenship and law. Finally, culture is increasingly understood as dynamic rather than static, a redefinition which seriously subverts the holistic view of culture as largely fixed. Ann Swidler (1986) famously characterized culture as a “toolkit” of resources that can be drawn upon to cope with changing circumstances. Cultures grow, adapt, and adjust, providing individuals with no single roadmap but instead a plethora of templates to understand and respond to social change.

Even with these diverse approaches to culture, it seems obvious why religion and culture would intersect in scholarly accounts of religious influence on American politics. The holistic concept of culture as a package of ultimate values—“the whole body of practices, beliefs, institutions, customs, habits, myths and so on” that characterize a people (Sewell 1999: 40)—makes it virtually impossible to discuss American culture without referring to religion. If religion is central to culture, then it seems almost inevitable that religion contributes to American life and to core understandings about the purpose of governance. In this sense, religion is thought to be an integrative force that promotes consensus about political ends. The alternative approach to culture reminds us that religion can also be a force for difference and disintegration when it helps to form distinctive subcultures. Religions develop and promote meaning about such basic questions as the purpose of life and standards of behavior, meanings that may not be universally shared by all members of society. Virtually all cultures identify and demonize an “Other”—a group of people who are not “us”—and draw distinctions between themselves and outsiders as a means of boundary maintenance. Moreover, people often derive their notions of what political ideas logically “go with” religious values through education in religious institutions. In this sense, religion as culture may provide the basis for political disagreement and conflict. We need to consider both possibilities—that religion has the capacity to promote political cohesion and political difference.

Religion in American Culture

From the colonial period through the current day, European visitors to the United States have commented on the powerful current of religiousness that appears to affect all aspects of American life. The most celebrated foreign observer of American society, Alexis de Tocqueville, could not escape the pervasiveness of religion in the early American Republic and described it as
the first of American institutions (Bryant 2005). Tocqueville was not alone in this perception. Observers from abroad frequently echoed his assessment of the primacy of religion, one going so far as to label the United States “a nation with the soul of a church” (Chesterton 1922). Not all of these perceptive visitors respected the religious leavening of American culture but few denied its palpable presence.

Whether we examine belief, belonging or behavior, the religious motif of American culture remains quite striking today. Surveys of American opinion document that religious belief is widespread: nearly all Americans profess a belief in God, anticipate an afterlife, and report that religion is important in their lives. Beyond these affirmations, which even Tocqueville suggested might have more to do with habit than conviction, religious zeal is also evident when Americans are asked by pollsters to assess various groups in society. Since the 1930s, the Gallup organization has asked Americans if they would vote for well-qualified presidential candidates from various minority groups defined by race, religion, sex and other traits. In 2007, more Americans said they would refuse to vote for an atheist than for a candidate from any other group—including a homosexual (Jones 2007). In fact, an atheist was the only candidate in the survey who would draw electoral support from less than a majority of voters simply because of his or her religious (in this case, non-religious) identity. According to a national survey by Edgell, Gerteis and Hartmann (2006: 218), atheists topped the list of social groups whom Americans believe do not share their vision of society, leading gays by almost 2-to-1 and “recent immigrants” by 3-to-1. In terms of social boundaries, more Americans would disapprove if their child wanted to marry an atheist (47.6%) than a Muslim (33.5%). As the authors conclude, part of what it means to be a “good American” to most citizens is some kind of religious faith, a perspective that seems to have changed rather little over the last half century (Herberg 1955).

For most Americans, religious belief is expressed through affiliation with religious organizations. Despite a tendency to venerate spirituality above “organized religion” (Wuthnow 1998), most Americans do in fact maintain some kind of connection with formal religious traditions. At the most abstract level, typically 80-90% of respondents to opinion surveys are willing to identify themselves with a specific local church, denomination, or religious tradition (Kosmin and Keysar 2006: 24). Although there are legitimate doubts about how accurately we can measure these kinds of things, somewhere between one half (Kosmin and Keysar 2006: 51) and two-thirds (Winseman 2005) of adult Americans belong to churches, mosques, synagogues and other religious institutions. That membership percentage far exceeds the equivalent figure from what some people imagine as the golden age of American religion in the late 18th century when it is reckoned that less than one-fifth of the population was similarly affiliated (Finke & Stark 1992). Church membership also dwarfs the level of affiliation with any other voluntary social institution in the United States and is much higher in the US than other countries (Curtis, Grabb and Baer 1992).

What of the so-called “unchurched,” the large percentage of Americans who do not belong to churches or otherwise affiliate religiously? One describes these people as “secular” with great reservation, because many if not most who fall in this category are not lacking religious belief nor are they hostile to religion at all. In fact, as Reimer (1995: 452) documented, strong majorities of Americans who rarely if ever attend church and foreswear religious labels
nonetheless share beliefs in the existence of God, sin, the soul, life after death, and the efficacy of prayer. Whereas lack of religious attachment indicates anti-clericalism in most societies, Americans who are religiously unfettered in organizational terms are not always different in their religious beliefs and behavior from the church-affiliated. They may simply pursue their spiritual life through non-institutional paths (Fuller 2001).

Saying one believes in God and or even writing a check to a religious organization are relatively passive activities, so one might legitimately wonder if we find the same high level of engagement when we turn to the realm of behavior. Most Americans say that religion is important in their lives and figures prominently in their decision-making. Americans do not just join religious institutions; they participate in them. Roughly four in ten Americans tell pollsters they have attended religious services each week and the number would increase if we added persons who did not attend but watched or listened to religious broadcasts from home.

Apart from formal worship, Americans join congregational groups that serve a remarkably wide array of interests, participate on the boards and committees of religious institutions, and devote considerable time to volunteer work on behalf of religious concerns. Drawing on the tangible resources provided by congregants, religious institutions are by far the most favored source of and target for philanthropy (Brown, Harris and Rooney 2005).

Collectively, religious institutions spend more on social welfare activities, broadly defined, than any source other than the government. Religious institutions send abroad more representatives—disaster relief workers, missionaries, teachers, doctors, and other personnel—than the U.S. State Department (McDonough 1994; Nichols 1988: 21). In fact, the U.S. government is a primary source of funds for religiously-connected non-governmental organizations because of their reputation for efficient and effective social service delivery (Degeneffe 2003: 381). This trend was established long before the adoption of “Charitable Choice” and other efforts to increase the flow of federal funds to what have been called faith-based social service agencies.

Should these data be taken at face value to indicate that religion suffuses American life and culture? Among the many voices that argue otherwise, we can discern four broad critiques of American religiosity. Many foreign visitors who were impressed by the breadth of religious sentiment in the United States were equally strongly put off by its apparent lack of depth. (In Nebraska they have a saying that preachers, politicians, and the Platte River have two things in common—they are all a mile wide and a foot deep.) As surveys have repeatedly shown, Americans know remarkably little about religious doctrine and often understand it in simplistic terms (Prothero 2007). Moreover, they change denominational loyalties, if not religious traditions, quite frequently. All of these traits raise a question about the authenticity of such apparently shallow religiousness. Second, contemporary critics have argued that Americans do not practice what they preach or, rather, do not tell the truth about how often they hear preaching. According to careful observations of congregational worship, actual attendance at church services is well below the levels reported in surveys (Hadaway and Marler 2005). The tendency to inflate attendance appears strongest among white evangelical Protestants and Catholics, two groups that report attendance rates well above the general population. The discovery that churches that place a premium upon attendance also generate the highest levels of inaccurate recall suggests that over-reporting is a function of group cultural norms. In another assault on the image of the United States as a society with a deeply religious culture, various studies of
“popular religiosity” show how Americans often believe doctrines and practice rituals that are inconsistent with the official views of their religious communities. Throughout history, for example, Americans have simultaneously participated in orthodox religious rites and dabbled in magic (Butler 1992). Nancy Reagan, the former first lady, was not the first avowed Christian who consulted an astrologer before making major decisions, even though such behavior is deemed heterodox within Christianity. Finally, some observers wonder how Americans can simultaneously pursue God and Mammon. Noting the strong emphasis on material values characteristic of American attitudes and behavior (McClosky and Zaller 1984), there is some doubt that people so focused on the here and now are truly influenced by deeper views about the ultimate purpose of life.

Although these criticisms certainly raise questions about the meaning of religiousness to many Americans, they do not necessarily cast fundamental doubt on the centrality of religion in American culture. It could just as easily be argued that many of the practices simply constitute a particularly American way of being religious. Consider the claim that Americans know very little about religion and act in heterodox ways. If one defines religiousness as familiarity with the details of religious doctrine, then the unfamiliarity of many Americans with their denominational creed surely undercuts the image of a nation with the soul of a church. However, observers going back to Tocqueville have noted that American religious intensity was not expressed via deep learning about denominational creeds but rather focused on visions of common morality. Perhaps, as Johnson (2006) speculates, this lack of attentiveness to denominational niceties reflects a tradition where preachers were “called” to the pulpit rather than trained for it in formal seminaries. In any case, Americans embrace what is sometimes called “religion in general” rather than making sharp distinctions between different denominations or sects. Changing from one local church or denomination to the next does not seem so significant in this environment.

By the same token, the ability of some Americans to believe in both traditionalist religious doctrine and alternate forms of folk spirituality seems quite common across the world. Elements of pagan worship styles—statuary, prayer to ancestors (saints) other than God—quickly took their place in Christianity. Many of the great Christian worship centers were built on the holy sites of other religions. Voodoo and animism accompany Christianity in many West African and Caribbean locales. Field goal-kickers and free-throwers commonly make the sign of the cross before performing their decidedly non-religious behavior—probably evidence of superstition. By distinguishing between “official” and “popular” religiosity in theoretical terms, the field of religious studies has demonstrated convincingly that belief in a church-prescribed creed is seldom the sole marker of strong religious identity. Even in the most doctrinaire churches, individuals often develop their own “practical” or “everyday” theologies that reflect personal experience and immediate concerns without in any way diminishing the importance of the church to them (Moon 2004).

The argument that Americans overstate their religious behavior—specifically, their rate of church attendance—is harder to dismiss but, from a cultural perspective, it seems more important that church attendance is deemed worthy enough to exaggerate. Survey research on truth-telling in surveys suggests that respondents are prone to exaggerate behavior that is valued highly, such as making charitable contributions and voting on Election Day (Cahalan 1968). That
attendance at worship is similarly inflated attests obliquely to the continuing status of religious behavior as a highly valued activity.

Finally, the strong emphasis on both materialism and spirituality in American culture may seem strange but is hardly evidence that religion is trivial. Max Weber noted the “elective affinity” between Protestantism and capitalist development in his famous “Protestant ethic” thesis (1958). Weber contended that the Protestant Reformation put a premium on habits and behavior that could translate into entrepreneurial zeal and economic success, explaining the strong connection he observed in Europe between nations’ Protestant affiliation and economic prosperity. In a religious tradition where a person’s status in the eyes of God could not be known for certain, material prosperity was often interpreted as evidence of God’s grace. This “prosperity gospel” has become a powerful force in contemporary African-American Protestantism and white Pentecostalism and also in church growth dogma and televangelist preaching across traditions. Although this perspective can legitimately be considered “instrumental,” using religion for purposes other than pure faith and moral uplift, it does not mean that religiousness is inauthentic.

Having established the importance of religion in American culture, we now confront the puzzle of its persistence. The continuing strength of religious attachment in the United States, a key component of so-called “American Exceptionalism” first noted by Tocqueville, has drawn attention from both scholars and foreign observers (Tiryakian 1982). As we just noted, some people “explain” the persistence of religion by casting doubt upon its seriousness or meaningfulness. But those who take seriously the high level of religiousness in the United States still have to explain how it coexists with two other traits typically associated with low levels of religious commitment: modernity and a secular system of government. As a rule, the populations of economically-developed nations with high rates of urbanization and education exhibit less attachment to traditional religious values (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2006: 8-9). The persistence of strong religious loyalties in a society that has long defined “modernity” runs counter to this pattern. The strength of religious sentiment and institutions in the United States also confounds observers who assume that a secular state must enforce be hostile to religion. The government of the United States is secular in at least two ways: the state does not endorse or subsidize religion (although at times it provides it with benefits such as property tax exemptions), and citizenship is not contingent on membership in any religious community. At the time of the founding, this feature was revolutionary because it contradicted the almost universal belief that strong religion required state patronage.

Scholars have offered multiple explanations for the persistence of traditional religion in what appears to be such an inhospitable environment. We will group them into (1) theories that highlight the “need” for religion as a consequence of American social and economic development and (2) explanations that emphasize religious diversity as a spur to high levels of religiousness. The former are functional because they treat religion as a factor that remedies defects in American life while the latter are structural, identifying rules and institutions that enhance religious vitality.

An immigrant nation like no other, America drew people from many lands and its population continues to grow via immigration. For many immigrant groups, particularly in the
first and second generations, the church and the party machine, often overlapping, functioned as institutions that addressed both immediate needs and the desire for fellowship. The church and precinct organizations were perhaps the only institutions where the poor immigrant could expect to be treated with dignity and respect. Detailed studies of contemporary immigrant churches and congregations demonstrate that they still meet the multiple social, economic and cultural needs that would otherwise be unfilled in the lives of members (Min 1992; Nanlai 2005). Religion serves similar purposes for other Americans, Robert Booth Fowler (1989) has argued, because it supplies consolation otherwise lacking in American society. Although liberalism has been an important and constructive element in American life, he argues, its emphasis on the autonomy of the individual often leaves people without either a meaningful sense of community or clear standards for behavior. Religion thrives, Fowler asserts, because it addresses these important needs in a liberal society. It provides people with both a set of standards for living a morally upright life and a group of fellow believers with whom one can share fellowship. This approach can be understood as a more general version of the ethnic diversity argument.

The second functional explanation, economic and psychological insecurity, accepts the general argument about the negative relationship between religiousness and economic development but accommodates the American experience to it. According to Norris and Inglehart (2004), traditional religion appeals most powerfully to people who experience existential stress and insecurity in their lives. As a consequence of the development of the welfare state and social safety net programs, people in more developed societies generally experience reduced risks to their lives and health and have less need for religious consolation. However, Norris and Inglehart note that such conditions are not universal and that highly developed societies may nonetheless have substantial pockets of poverty. Moreover, despite a high level of societal affluence, Americans face considerable economic insecurity because the traditional Protestant emphasis on personal responsibility has retarded the growth of the welfare state. This forces many Americans to “face risks of unemployment, the dangers of sudden ill health without adequate private medical insurance, vulnerability to becoming a victim of crime, and the problems of paying for long-term care of the elderly” (Norris and Inglehart 2004: 108). Such a precarious state of affairs may reinforce belief in the supernatural as a means to ward off insecurity. Thus the United States may fit the general model more closely than is realized.

The structural explanations deal explicitly with religious diversity. As a consequence of its immigrant population, the United States quickly became one of the most religiously heterogeneous societies in the world. The diversity was further strengthened by the development of new religious traditions by religious entrepreneurs (Marty 1984) and by new immigrants who carried with them religious traditions that were not well-established in the United States (Eck 2001). This diverse religious environment, it has been argued, has created a virtual “religious marketplace,” a “divine supermarket” (Ruthven 1989), that offered consumers a startling array of choices. This diversity forced the state to forego religious regulation. In most countries, where it was taken for granted that the nation had a particular religious identity and that the government was obligated to support it in various ways, the state typically granted one religion what amounted to monopoly status. State churches were—often still are (Fox 2007)—provided financial support in the form of tax support for church buildings, the education of church leadership, funding of clerical salaries and so forth. Such provisions are often accompanied by
limitations on competing religions, restrictions that further privilege the dominant religious tradition at the expense of alternative belief systems.

Drawing from economic theory, scholars liken such favored churches to “lazy monopolies” which are protected from competition by their own resources and regulations that hamper alternative traditions: lacking incentives to appeal to a captured market, they simply refuse to innovate or to worry much about customer service (Stark and Finke 2000). Accordingly, religious enthusiasm withers. Before the Revolution, the American colonies typically followed this pattern by giving various benefits and legal privileges to certain religious groups (Borden 1984). The religious regulation that was common in the colonial period could not survive in the face of the robust growth of and enthusiasm for disfavored religions whose members demanded a state that would be neutral in matters of religion. By the early 1800s, the benefits of state patronage had been withdrawn in all the thirteen states at the behest of religious groups who had grown dramatically and who resented state favoritism for their competitors (Lambert 2003; Gill 2008). Stripped of all privileges (with non-establishment guaranteed), religions were placed on equal footing and forced to vie for adherents. The consequence, it is argued, is a religious sector where institutions compete for market share by offering appeals that will capture the loyalties of citizens and where some traditions prosper by identifying unfilled “niches.” Some of the very qualities that seem to make American religion “thin”—the low level of doctrinal awareness or knowledge—may be a consequence of the pressure to simplify the product in order to compete successfully in an unregulated environment.

Having examined the centrality of religion to American culture, we now turn to the more explicitly political dimension. The next section of the chapter explores how the pervasiveness of religion in American culture affects the operation of the political system. The emphasis on religious diversity in this section of the chapter has raised an interesting and perplexing question about how a nation whose citizens follow so many different religious traditions manages nonetheless to hold together. Can a diverse religious heritage contribute to an integrated political tradition or does it necessarily undermine civic unity? For many scholars, the answer depends on the phenomenon of ‘civil religion.’

Religion and Civic Integration

According to British historian Paul Johnson (2006: 18), “No one who studies the key constitutional documents in American history can doubt for a moment the central and organic part played by religion in the origins and development of American republican government” (see Witte 1990 for details). The strength of religion in American culture has translated into political ideas. During the colonial period, when the Bible was by far the most common book in the United States and public discussion was couched in religious language, certain religious ideas exerted powerful impact on the nature of governance (Lutz 1984). The Biblical covenant became a model for the voluntary associations formed by early settlers (Lutz 1994). The founders justified democracy and a republican form of government on the basis of the Christian notion of original sin (Wright 1949). If no person was above temptation, as they believed, government could not be entrusted to a single person (a monarch or elected official) and would best operate if authority was divided among multiple centers of institutional power, each jealous to defend its
own prerogatives. Thus the concept of separation of powers was justified by reference to widely shared religious doctrines, and religious thinking provided one set of influences that affected the design of the state. But in time, as secular justifications gained more influence, the role of religion became politically significant primarily by how it helped define and maintain America’s national identity as a democratic nation.

Although it is easy to take for granted how religion contributes to American unity and the persistence of democracy, a glance around the globe dispels any idea that such a connection is automatic. The U.S. invasion of Iraq and removal of Saddam Hussein created a power vacuum that was filled in part by religious communities. The consequence was something that looked a great deal like a civil war based on competing sects of Islam (with an ethnic Kurdish component on the side). If Iraq seems familiar, it is because so many states have similarly experienced civil war in which religion defined the contestants. The break-up of the former Yugoslavian state produced a bloody internal conflict in which Orthodox Serbs fought Muslims and Catholic Croats. Lebanon has periodically fractured by Christian-Muslim hostility while the contest in Northern Ireland has pitted Protestants against Catholics. Algeria and Turkey have struggled with yet another variant of religious competition—near-civil war between Muslims who call for state adoption of Islamic identity and secularists who want no such mingling of mosque and state. Post-colonial India, a land mass containing an enormous range of ethnic groups, tribes and religions, was fractured into two nations—one primarily Hindu (India) and one Islamic (Pakistan) and a region (Kashmir) that remains a festering conflict. East and West Pakistan, separated geographically, soon became distinct nations—Pakistan and Bangladesh (which involved many Christians). All three resulting nations are frequently unsettled by communal warfare. These examples suggest that religious differences are incendiary forces that can easily overwhelm a political system because they involve deep matters of faith that simply cannot be compromised (Rose and Urwin 1969). That insight has become the basis for an influential school of thought that anticipates a post-Cold War era of civilizational conflict with religion as the cultural basis of contestation (Huntington 1996).

So why has the United States escaped the same fate? At times and in certain places, religion has certainly stimulated or justified political violence in American life. Anti-Catholic riots were a common occurrence in the nineteenth century. Unconventional religions like Mormonism encountered state-sponsored violence in their formative period, and some people believe that same dynamic was responsible for the federal government’s 1993 onslaught against the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas (Tabor and Gallagher 1995). Although the Civil War was not fundamentally about religion, it took on added ferocity because Northerners and Southerners alike believed fervently that God was on their side (Woodworth 2001). The Ku Klux Klan, born in the Reconstruction South as a mechanism of white resistance to black freedom and reborn in the 1960s in response to the civil rights movement, actually reached its peak of national power in the 1920s when it appealed most strongly to those fundamentalist Protestants who feared the insidious effects of Catholic and Jewish immigrants on the American character (Jackson 1967). The nativism of the Klan has found an echo in the so-called Patriot movement that has promoted and inspired various acts of violence since the 1960s (Aho 1991). The liberalization of abortion laws in 1972 has also stimulated isolated assaults against abortion providers and property (Blanchard and Prewitt 1993).
Despite these outbreaks, the United States stands out by the ease with which the political system has accommodated religious differences. The influential British weekly, *The Economist* recently rendered such a verdict with its back-handed compliment that America “has mastered the politics of religion at home, but not abroad” (“Lesson from America” 2007). Scholars from Tocqueville onward recognized that much of the activity that sustained a viable democracy would come from civil society, including religion. For Tocqueville, religious institutions would nurture respect for others and provide transcendent standards of justice by which to measure the effects of legislation. He contrasted the kinds of Puritan and low-church Protestantism dominant in the young United States with the Catholicism dominant in France. He liked the fact that rank in the community - knowing who to trust in economic bargains and to whom to entrust political authority - paralleled the hurdles of membership in religious congregations. It instilled active behavior rather than the passivity of receiving sacraments for the remission of sin, while expecting priests to be hired holy men. Given the separation of powers, multiple levels of government, the minimization of the state, and the penchant of organizations in the civil society to solve collective problems, he did not spend much time worrying about the threat of religious fanaticism to the viability of the American democratic experiment.

To explain American Exceptionalism further, contemporary scholars have deployed what might be considered both negative and positive explanations. That is, some theories argue that the U.S. lacks qualities that have made religion such a lethal political force elsewhere, while others argue that religion has been a cohesive force in and of itself.

Students of religiously-based political conflict have suggested at least two reasons why the American experience has differed from the global model. One explanation distinguishes between plural societies—states where conflict is essentially limited to two competing groups—and pluralistic states with high levels of fractionalization (Rabushka and Shepsle 1972). In places with just two major players, politics is likely to be a zero-sum game such that a victory by one side produces defeat for the other. The side with fewer resources—population, wealth, power—is likely to lose every election and thus has little or no incentive to participate in conventional politics. Options such as secession or terrorist action make more sense as a minority strategy in such environments. But when the population is extremely fragmented as in the United States, when there are many different religious communities and politically-relevant differences such as race and region that further fracture the population, no single group is likely to win consistently. Diversity encourages a politics of coalition formation and log-rolling: groups cohere on the basis of common interests but divide and reform new groupings as interests change. Political participation offers a chance to small groups.

Nevertheless, despite the presence of religious pluralism within the American context, some scholars believe that religion actually serves to integrate Americans. The nineteenth-century social theorist Emile Durkheim argued that religion should be understood as a means by which societies develop common myths to sustain national unity (Pals 2006: ch. 3). The nation is treated not as a mere collection of people who live together but as a force sanctioned by the divine and serving a larger purpose than mere security or collective self-interest. By sanctifying the state, this “civil religion” constitutes “a projection by a civic order of its experiences and values onto the cosmic order for the sake of social solidarity. It is, so to speak, society worshiping the image of itself, from the bottom up” (Stackhouse 2004: 291). Despite its
religious diversity, it is argued, the United States has developed its civil religion by selecting common elements of various creeds to unite people around a shared identity. This is not a collection of sectarian doctrines that compete in any way with religious traditions but rather a culture of its own that transcends differences that otherwise divide Americans into competing religious communities.

Discerning the content of a concept as vague as ‘civil religion’ is challenging. In a broad sense, as Robert Bellah (1966) argued in his classic statement about the phenomenon, civil religion is the common belief that the United States stands for something more noble than self-interest. In the eyes of its citizenry, the nation embodies humankind’s aspirations for freedom and peace. Leroy Rouner (1999: 4) distilled the essence of the civil religious creed from the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. In his view, it comprised the values of sacrifice, loyalty, brotherhood, sisterhood, and freedom. These are the values repeatedly invoked and venerated in American political discourse, especially in moments of national crisis such as the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Like religions in general, civil religion has holidays (Memorial Day, the Fourth of July), monuments like the Constitution and Lincoln Memorial (Meyer 2001), temples and priests (the Supreme Court), solemn rites (inauguration, citizenship ceremonies), sacred relics in the form of the flag (Welch 2002), and a corpus of popular music (Meizel 2006). With such a civil religious background, patriotism is as much love of the American Idea as of America the country. To become American is to assent to this idea. Hence becoming an American does not require the sacrifice of any religious beliefs or conversion to other gods. American does not have civic religion—a common dogma enforced by the power of the state—but a civil religion that sustains the political order through voluntary absorption and personal commitment (Rouner 1999: 5).

How do we know this rather poetic construct is real or that it matters to the maintenance of national identity and political cohesion? To avoid a circular argument—the survival of the United States “proves” that it has a common religiously-based political culture—there needs to be some evidence that assesses the civil religion hypothesis. Scholars have searched for that evidence in American political culture by using such disparate research tools as participant observation, survey research, and ethnographic studies. Several scholars have parsed the content of American political rhetoric in search of civil religious themes. Presidential inaugural addresses and similar political addresses have been especially fertile territory for such analysis because the occasion seems ripe for recitations of core American values (Toolin 1983; Hansen 2006; Linder 1996). A number of community surveys have reported widespread public agreement with such themes as American destiny, the sacredness of freedom, the religious status of the Constitution, and the like (Wimberly 1976; 1979; Christenson and Wimberly 1978). Smidt found similar sentiments widespread among American school children (1980; 1982). Participant-observation techniques used by Gamoran (1990) also found some evidence that civil religion is an important motif in schools, socializing institutions which play an important role in providing meaning for young people. When they content analyzed the publications of a major fraternal organization, Jolicoeur and Knowles (1978) discovered persistent repetition of major civil religion themes (but see Thomas and Flippen 1972).

While civil religion appears to exist as an integrative factor, it has also been cited as a destructive influence on American political life. Some critics believe that civil religion is nothing
more than “a form of patriotic self-celebration” (Stackhouse 2004: 275), mere religious nationalism that leads to excessive pride, an aversion to self-criticism, and a degree of nationalist assertion that disfigures American foreign policy. How can one criticize “God’s country” without criticizing God? Scholars associated with the influential “realist” school of international relations contend that moral considerations undermine the rational pursuit of national self-interest and call on the United States to forego such pursuits, molding foreign policy around power rather than rectitude (Donnelly 2000).

Defenders of civil religion believe that it has a built-in self-correcting mechanism. At its best, Bellah argued, civil religion is a blend of two impulses. The priestly dimension of civil religion does indeed amount to a kind of blessing of the country, emphasizing that it is a force for good. But alongside the tendency to endow the nation with transcendent qualities, civil religion also contains a prophetic element. The idea of a nation “under God” means both that the nation enjoys divine sanction and that it is responsible to divine authority in the exercise of power. Each dimension should balance the other.

The two components may fuse in the idea that the United States will continue to enjoy the blessings of Providence only so long as it acts consistently with Biblical morality. Critics of both the left and right have found reasons to chastise the nation for straying from the main path. Both Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King argued that the U.S. had abandoned Divine will first, by tolerating slavery and then, accepting the oppression of blacks after Emancipation. During the Vietnam era, war critics argued that U.S. behavior violated accepted codes of morality. With the rise of Christian conservatism a decade later, the same logic undergirded critiques of American social policy. By tolerating such moral outrages as abortion, homosexuality, drug use and sexual experimentation, some movement leaders argued, America had forfeited God’s protection. As an extreme but no means atypical expression of that view, two prominent Protestant televangelists explicitly interpreted the 9/11 attacks as God’s punishment for American licentiousness. Recently, a sectarian group in Kansas has disrupted the funerals of American soldiers killed in Iraq by arguing that the soldiers were punished for America’s willingness to tolerate homosexuality.

Even though Bellah identified both priestly and prophetic components as necessary for a constructive civil religion, it may be that essentially two different civil religions have developed (Wuthnow 1988). The priestly civil religion tends to venerate the United States and assumes that it is on the side of the angels. Such a perspective, described by Bellah (1966: 16) as “an American Legion-type of ideology that blends God, country, and flag” is relatively intolerant of any self-criticism. With that kind of perspective, some defenders of the American mission in Iraq publicly cloaked the mission in religious terms, effectively rendering disagreement with the war as tantamount to support for terrorism (Boyer 2005). On the popular side, a substantial part of religious America argued that George W. Bush, a man of God, was chosen by God to lead this Christian nation in a time of trials against fundamentalist Islam. The alternative prophetic tradition constantly holds the nation up to high standards of morality and finds that it invariably falls short—whether its intervention is meant to stop genocide in Bosnia by defending Muslims or to take sides in the Muslim civil war that has overtaken Iraq. Taken to extremes, as it has been from time to time, this approach may simply paralyze action by arguing that American intervention always involves self-interest and material gain rather than a higher purpose, and the
nation should thus refrain from any military engagements outside its borders. Neither perspective is particularly useful alone because of what it refuses to see or consider.

The debate over civil religion reminds us that deep-seated cultural values may divide as easily as they unite. In the next section, we turn to cultural differences as source of political conflict and competition. This section will draw heavily on the newer stream of cultural studies outlined earlier in the chapter.

Cultural Differences in American Politics

The cultural turn in social science (Bonnell and Hunt 1999) called attention to the multiplicity of cultural conflicts and forms that persist in most societies. This research emphasizes the divisive capacity of group differences in society, politics and economics. This reality is most apparent when we shift focus from political culture as a holistic phenomenon to ongoing cultural conflicts that arise over specific issues, policies and campaigns.

Long before social scientists rediscovered the divisive aspects of culture, historians had already noted its potency in American political life. Beginning with the work of Lee Benson and Samuel Hays in the 1950s (see Swierenga Chapter 3 of this volume), historians began to challenge conventional wisdom about the dominance of economic interests in American political development. A new school of “ethnocultural” political analysis called attention to ethnic and religious communities as key forces in party competition (McCormick 1974). Most importantly, this stream of research joined social and political history by demonstrating that many political issues were at base conflicts over ultimate values rooted in cultural understandings. For example, northern workers opposed slavery not simply on economic grounds but because it offended their ideas about the nobility of free labor and encouraged immoral behavior by slaveholders (Holt 1969; Ostreicher 1988). Battles over free trade were similarly rendered into broader symbolic contests over competing ways of life that touched on deeply-held communal values. The Cold War was not solely a competition between different styles of economic policy but rather, in the eyes of some protagonists, a larger struggle between Godliness and atheism (Canipe 2003). This work usefully broadened the discussion of culture beyond a single-minded focus on overtly religious issues.

Unlike history, however, political science was slow to appreciate the political significance of cultural differences rooted in religious understanding. At the time American political science developed as a discipline in the late 19th century, religion was often thought to be a relic of the past, a form of tribalism to be overcome, not a positive force contributing to democratic development, as it had been at Tocqueville's time. In part this reflected the heavy Hegelian and post-Hegelian influence on the American academy. In part it reflected the liberation from old binding sources through the higher education of the sons of families wealthy enough to send them to college. Even the social science professoriate, drawn disproportionately from children of mainline Protestant clergy (Fox 1993, Ross 1991), saw science as the solution to social ills, and religion as a limiting force that created a false consciousness. It is no surprise then that neither the most influential work in comparative politics with "culture " in its title,
Almond and Verba's (1965) *The Civic Culture*, nor its successors, paid much attention to religious institutions and religious values as positive or negative forces for democracy.\(^7\)

The awareness of religion as a basis of cultural politics first seeped into political science through the subfield of public policy. Focusing more intently on a class of disputes over what became known as “morality politics,” political scientists have investigated the roots of this apparently unique and quintessentially American style of political conflict (Morone 2003; Sharp 1999; Clark and Hoffman-Martinot 1998; Meier 1994; Tatalovich and Daynes 2005). These studies have drawn on the seminal work of Daniel Elazar (1984) who argued that differences in the style and content of public policy among the American states often reflected settlement patterns that went far back in time. Ethnic groups carried with them divergent moral cultures as they migrated across North America, each bringing a distinctive ethos to the area where its members concentrated. This insight fueled a surge of studies demonstrating a powerful linkage between social composition (typically operationalized by ethnic and religious profiles) and public policy adoption (summarized in Meier 1994). In time, scholars developed a general model of morality politics that differentiated it from other forms of conflict. Such conflict was largely unrelated to tangible economic interests, focused more heavily on symbolic debates over ultimate moral values, and typically engaged a wider array of actors than other kinds of political issues (Mooney 2001). A particularly compelling theory of political parties uses morality politics, narrowly defined, to show how party goals and composition changed in the latter half of the 20th century (Layman 2001).

A sociologist, James Davison Hunter (1991), provided a general framework for this literature through his work on “culture wars.” Although the phrase was borrowed from nineteenth century German politics (and mistranslated *Kulturkampf*, as *Kampf* became “wars” instead of “enduring struggles”), the concept itself was an extended version of “New Class” theory popularized by some sociologists in the 1970s (Bruce-Biggs, 1979; Kellner and Berger 1992). New Class theorists argued that modernity had given rise to a new set of social actors whose principal task was symbol manipulation. These new professionals—university professors, social workers, journalists, public school teachers, and the like—were said to constitute a distinctive stratum that was not tied to traditional institutions. With an essentially oppositional perspective on American life, it was claimed, they set out to undermine traditionalist institutions and values. They were able to mount an effective attack on older verities by virtue of their concentration in key sectors of cultural socialization—education, the mass media, government, and so on. “New Class” theory, which relied on a large number of assertions that were belied by careful academic investigation (Brint 1994), became part of Hunter’s culture war model.

In Hunter’s version of culture war theory, there are two broad camps—defined by their differing notions of moral authority—contesting for public supremacy in the United States. One bloc, committed to traditional values anchored in belief in a transcendent God, defends moral values in public life. It competes with a “progressive” alliance, essentially the New Class, some of which want nothing of religion or moral suasion in public life and others of which see morality as compelling yet situational. This battle between the two camps is joined over questions about sexuality, the flag, drug use and other symbols of public morality. To some degree, this underlying conflict is really an ongoing debate about the 1960s (Himmelfarb 1999). In the eyes of traditionalists (or, as Hunter labeled them, the “orthodox”), the Sixties spawned a
variety of social movements that undercut traditional values and introduced damaging alternative lifestyles to Americans. Those who feel to the contrary, a group labeled “progressives,” contend that the Sixties represented cultural revitalization, embrace the new trends, and continue to question received cultural norms long after the decade has passed. However, not all who initially embraced the spirit of the 1960s remained in that camp. Observers have suggested that so many of the 60s generation later “found” churches and religious values because drugs, music, and sex failed to answer ultimate questions about meaning and behavior (Tipton 1982). One reason Hunter's *Culture Wars* was found compelling by many is that he developed a typology of cultural differences in the origin and binding nature of authority for an anomic society.

The language of culture war was soon picked up by political elites as a rallying cry and reflected in journalism through simplistic Red State-Blue State terminology. Whatever the label, the perspective assumes a massive increase in polarization at both the elite and mass levels, fueled by cultural differences, that has generated a new and somewhat toxic politics of conviction.

On the whole, Hunter’s work, like New Class theory, has not fared well in empirical research. On the one hand, one cannot deny the evident growth in irreligion among many people in the younger age cohorts as a product of advanced education. The emergence of this sector offers an appealing target for politicians who want to inflame cultural tensions. By the same token, there has been a growth in polarization among the mass electorate (Abramowitz & Saunders 2005, Campbell 2005, Nivola & Brady 2005, Green, Guth, Smidt, and Kellstedt 1996). Yet whether using depth interviews in local communities or sample surveys of the entire population, scholars have raised strong doubts that the American public (as opposed to elites) is deeply polarized, that such differences reflect cultural fault lines that threaten the stability of the country, or that such differences drive political conflict beyond a narrow range of issues (cf. Olson and Carroll 1992; Carroll 1995; Evans 1997; Miller 1998; Fiorina 2005; Davis and Robinson 1996; Layman and Green 2006; Wolfe 1998; Bartels 2006). As Nicholas J. Demerath (2001, 166), trenchantly observed after a global tour of states like Rwanda, Lebanon, and Northern Ireland that were torn apart by ethno-religious differences, “applying the phrase ‘culture war’ to the United States makes a mockery of nations elsewhere that fulfill the criteria all too well.” This is not to deny that American politics reflects cultural differences, which are not the same thing as culture war, nor to challenge evidence that religious communities have group affinities in the voting booth. Rather, culture war theory is simply too broad and theoretically underdeveloped to capture the complexity of cultural tensions in the American polity.

One important alternative to “culture war” theory, represented by the scholarship of Ronald Inglehart (1990; 1997), called readers’ attention to materialist and post-materialist values in advanced industrial societies. In Inglehart’s view, cultural values largely reflect the social conditions under which people are raised. Those who come of age in periods of war and economic deprivation will prize political order and affluence above all such social values, preferring political movements that give priority to those ends. On the other hand, people raised in times when political order and affluence can be taken for granted—the post World War II cohorts in most western democracies—look to politics for what Abraham Maslow called “self-actualization.” They care passionately about quality of life issues and freedom of expression and
judge political movements accordingly. This divide creates a tension between traditionalism—in which religion may well be a constitutive element—and progressivism which might incorporate secularist viewpoints. Inglehart argues that this latent conflict underlies political conflict in many societies.

For all their insights, neither of these approaches to culture explains how culture is drawn into the political realm. This defect of culture war theory has prompted scholars to pay more attention to the process by which cultural tensions are translated into social and political debates, drawing on the “culture as process” approach that was identified early in the chapter. Unlike Hunter and others who seem to think that religion is the basis of culture and somehow becomes automatically ingrained in partisan conflict, this alternative scholarship has attempted to break down the steps involved in politicizing cultural differences. Aaron Wildavsky’s seminal article (1987) set the stage by reminding political scientists that there are several viable cultural traditions in American life that provide answers to the existential questions that all people face, questions of identity, behavior, and boundaries. At any time, advocates of these various perspectives may be engaged in political efforts to enshrine their own cultural values as public policy.

The great virtue of Wildavsky’s work was to emphasize the role of social construction in cultural debates. Such conflicts are not natural or inevitable but must be treated as variable. Most social practices are not intrinsically offensive to alternative cultures but have to be framed in certain ways so that they resonate politically. In like manner, Swidler (1986) spoke of culture as a tool kit from among many optional answers about a moral order. Alternate choices could be used by elites or groups to justify statuses in the social order. In the hands of political elites, choices can be quite fluid. In 1980, Ronald Reagan ran for the Republican presidential nomination as a pro-life candidate, although as governor of California he had signed a very permissive abortion bill into law. George H. W. Bush, Reagan’s successor, was pro-choice in 1980 but by 1988 he had converted into the pro-life candidate. Senator Al Gore of Tennessee was pro-life in those days but became pro-choice by the time he ran for president in 2000. Former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney has undergone similar “learning” experiences as he changed his policy positions in a way that conforms more closely to those of his party’s electoral bases in the 2008 presidential campaign. Fluid selection among the toolkit of values is probably more common among ambitious political elites than among the general public (Beck and Parker 1985). Conversion of politicians’ positions to conform to the cultural values of strategic sectors of the electoral base is implicated in both Layman’s (2001) and Gill’s (2008) treatment of party transformation and politicians’ interests.

The work of cultural education takes place in a variety of social institutions—schools, churches, voluntary associations, etc. Whatever the locale, individuals must learn to think of themselves as members of a community or subculture, develop grievances linked to their personal identity, locate the source of their unhappiness, and develop an overarching cognitive framework—a schema—that tells them how best to respond to the grievance. This can certainly happen in religious environments. Kristi Andersen (1988) recounted interviews with Ohio women active in the movement against the proposed Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. These activists did not oppose the ERA until they understood it as a fundamental challenge to their worldview. That is, they first needed to perceive this legal provision as part of
a larger onslaught on the proper moral order governing the social roles of men and women. ERA became linked in their minds to such unsettling social trends as liberalized abortion law, tolerance and celebration of homosexuality, easy divorce, and the embrace of moral relativism in public education. Rather than a simple measure that empowered women, they came to view the ERA as an important pillar of cultural degradation and a revolt against God’s law. This transformation occurred under the tutelage of clergymen and conservative political activists who helped the women link their concern about several moral trends to the underlying “threat” posed by the amendment. Catholic women, who were more likely to be employed outside the home than other women and who would have had a stronger interest in equal pay for equal work, were recruited to both the anti-abortion movement (Luker 1984) and the anti-ERA movement by means of a similar process (Mansbridge 1986, Leege et al 2002).

The centrality of public education as a venue of cultural transmission accounts for the sometimes ferocious political conflicts that arise in this domain. If one understands public education not as a place merely for the inculcation of tangible skills that enhance one’s economic prospects but as an environment where cultural values are propagated, the stakes over control become much easier to appreciate (Peshkin 1987, Rose 1987). That is why, for example, traditionalist groups are vigilant in monitoring what they see as cultural pollution in public school curricula. Numerous conflicts have broken out over the adoption of texts that emphasize such progressive ideas as autonomy, skepticism, gender equality and relativism, values seen to be in conflict with such religiously-sanctioned ideas as self-discipline, self-control, gender complementarity, and immutable truths grounded in revealed religion. The exclusion of state-sponsored religious exercises from public schools at the behest of the U.S. Supreme Court, a trend that progressives celebrate as a victory for free inquiry, strikes some traditionalists instead as a policy that excludes their cultural perspectives from the public realm. The emergence of anti-discrimination policies that cover sexual orientation, gay-friendly curricula and gay-themed student organizations similarly is taken as evidence that control over socialization has been captured by advocates of immorality. For various reasons, including both the content and quality of education provided, some parents choose to remove their children from what they denounce as “government schools” in favor of homeschooling or religious schools where their personal or group values will be propagated and reinforced. All these tensions can be understood as conflicts over controlling the authoritative transmission of meaning to young people.

In the political realm, this framing is often done effectively on a mass scale by extra-legal (meaning unofficial) social movements, a term that denotes organizations and constituents who mobilize to achieve broad social goals. Such movements are not created out of whole cloth but usually capitalize upon the links of communication, social interaction, and cultural values of pre-existing institutions. This process of identity creation, grievance generation, and interpretive framework has been on display in the movement to restrict illegal immigration by people from Mexico (Preston 2007). In mid-2007, the Republican president urged Congress to enact a comprehensive bill that would, among other provisions, permit immigrants who had crossed the border illegally to apply for citizenship after demonstrating a period of good behavior and paying a fine. This produced a firestorm of cultural rage. Grass-roots activists who opposed legislation granting what they called “amnesty” to illegal immigrants repeatedly described themselves as ordinary, hard-working Americans who followed the law and played by the rules. Ranged against them, “the Others” were identified as a subculture of “undeserving immigrants who do
not speak English and would soon become a burden on public services that Americans need in a time of economic uncertainty.” Although economic resources were part of the argument, the conflict was not simply or primarily about tangible resources (Citrin et al. 1997). Rather, the rhetoric of immigration opponents was suffused with the kind of normative language typically found in cultural conflicts. Despite an emphasis on “taking care of our own people first,” many of the activists who fought the bill had limited encounters with illegal immigrants and could not identify any personal harm they had suffered on that account. Rather than focus on self-interest, they objected in cultural terms, in terms of right and wrong, to the proposal that would, in their eyes, degrade the value of American citizenship and thus undermine the moral order of Americanism. They publicized their views through web-sites and talk radio programs and recruited like-minded friends and neighbors from organizational networks, public demonstrations, gun shows, and other venues (see “Minutemen” 2007). Judging by the failure of the legislation that enjoyed support from Democratic leaders, some Republicans in the Senate, and President Bush, this movement achieved its short-term political aim.

For any of this to happen requires the intervention of political activists and elites (Layman 2001). Indeed, the most important and original argument of Hunter’s critics is that the autonomy of the political sphere facilitates or impedes political mobilization based on cultural grievances. In one ambitious effort, Leege et al (2002) developed a systematic model of cultural conflict that puts political entrepreneurs at the center of the electoral process. In their view, ambitious politicians constantly monitor the landscape for social conflicts with the potential to produce political gain. Although the short-term goal may be to raise a faction to majority status within the party, cultural conflict is most useful as a means of gaining control of government institutions. This objective is driven by the simple rules of the electoral process. Parties can win elections by either mobilizing all their supporters (if they happen to enjoy latent majority support) or, in the case of minority parties, by persuading members of the majority coalition to abstain from voting or encouraging sizable numbers of them to cross party lines. In practice, it is easier to utilize cultural appeals to persuade people not to vote for their customary party than to cross over to the other side.

Thus parties often direct their campaigns to members of a majority coalition who seem rife for disaffection and thus for demobilization. This outcome is encouraged by a particular style of issue framing. Voters react powerfully to emotional symbols, perhaps more so than to rational appeals to self-interest (Marcus, Neuman and MacKuen 2000; Neuman et al. 2007). The key to cementing and undermining voter blocs is to manipulate symbols that evoke powerful feelings. The candidate that the opposing party’s voters would normally support must be portrayed as out of sympathy with the core cultural values of that party. This was accomplished with great effectiveness by the GOP’s usage of the Willie Horton advertisement in the 1988 presidential election. Threatened by low poll numbers for its candidate, the Republican campaign sought to portray the Democratic nominee, Michael Dukakis, as a threat to social order and thus not worthy of the support of normally Democratic voters who were worried about personal security. To convey the notion that the Democratic nominee was soft on crime, George H. W. Bush’s campaign promoted an ad that linked Dukakis to Horton, a convicted felon who committed a rape while on furlough from a state prison. Horton, described by Bush’s campaign manager as “a big black rapist” (Blumenthal 1990: 265), was a perfect distillation of white fears about dangerous black males who were coddled by liberal politicians (Mendelberg 1997). Cultural
norms about race and crime were fused, tied to the Democratic candidate, (who had continued a program introduced in federal prisons under President Reagan’s watch) and used with great effectiveness to depress participation by erstwhile Democrats on Election Day. Even within a party, the same process is used to undercut support for a rival within an undecided bloc – witness Governor Mike Huckabee’s central description of himself not as a governor but as a “Christian leader” to draw contrast with front-runner Governor Mitt Romney’s Mormonism during the 2008 Iowa caucus campaign (Luo 2007).

As a minority party (in terms of baseline support by the electorate), the GOP has been more inclined to embrace this style. During the 2006 mid-term election, however, some Democrats took a page from their opponents’ playbook by capitalizing on one of the scandals that had broken out among GOP congressional representatives. Congressman Mark Foley, a Florida Republican, was publicly revealed to have sent suggestive emails to young male pages in the House of Representatives. Reports indicated that the House GOP leadership had been warned by staff members of Foley’s behavior but did nothing to stop him. This scandal tapped into various moral orders—such as beliefs about rectitude and corruption in public office and fears about homosexual predators, and had been sharpened by recent revelations of pedophile priests—that were ripe for exploitation. Armed with this information, Democrats accused their Republican opponents of guilt by association with Foley and with those in the House Republican leadership who had looked the other way. The ads run by Democrats in many districts featured Foley prominently and attempted to link GOP candidates to him. Tying the GOP to immorality (homosexual advances against underage legislative pages) and political corruption (a cover-up) was a classic cultural strategy.

Advances in the tools used in modern campaigns make it possible to micro-target specific groups and subcultures with powerful cultural appeals. For example, Monson and Oliphant (2007) and Campbell and Monson (2007) examined the mass mailings the Republican National Committee made to twenty-four target groups in 2004. Some, from the party’s base, were to be enraged, and thus mobilized by the appeal. Others, from the opposition’s base, were to be demobilized with graphic information about what their party had become. In several battleground Electoral College states, Campbell and Monson demonstrated that antigay materials provided by the RNC seemed to have tipped the balance to President Bush. Direct mailings, narrow-cast television, talk radio, videos and DVDs permit candidates to aim at smaller confined populations with incendiary messages rather than muting the appeal to be acceptable to general audiences.

Many studies have shown that voters, far from being atomistic consumers, make decisions based on processing of information within social groups and networks (Huckfeldt, Plutzer and Sprague 1993; Djupe and Gilbert 2006; Wald, Owen and Hill 1988). Because voters are embedded in social groups, no matter how informal, it is easier for candidates to demonize the “other” (a form of social categorization) and to enhance the solidary power of one’s own reference group. That is because meaning inheres in those groups with which we interact frequently (social cohesion) or identify with closely (social identification). Many such groups and networks are religious in composition, as we noted earlier. That would enhance boundary-maintaining appeals to religiously-rooted moral values. But, many groups are also not about religion, and often relate to interests—economic or status-maintaining. Individuals hold
overlapping memberships and identifications that may mute cultural appeals. Choice becomes a calculus based on priorities in any given election and on issue framing. Often, then, the campaigner will try to frame cultural material to appeal to a sense of *relative deprivation*: the “other” practices immoral values or is undeserving of the recognition or rewards that the opposing party affords. But again, the process of heightening cultural appeals is a strategic choice that political elites make, not some inexorable outcome that depends on rank-and-file group properties. With their ears to the ground, elites seek advantage—within the boundaries of America’s general sense of tolerance. (A perceptive discussion of reality framing during both the Florida vote count [2000] and post-9/11 America is provided in Jamieson and Waldman [2003].)

This approach improves on culture war theory in significant ways. First, it calls attention to the mechanism by which social tension becomes politically relevant—namely, the activities of partisans and political activists. Second, it emphasizes the potency of emotion-inducing symbols in the conflict over cultural norms by employing the behavioral theory of affective intelligence (Marcus et al. 2000; Neuman et al. 2007). Third, it explains why such campaigning is rational from the perspective of candidates and activists, particularly those associated with the minority party. Even more fundamentally, however, the alternative approach in Leege et al. (2002) overcomes the tendency of culture war advocates to limit culture to the realm of religion and religiously-based issues such as prayer in school, abortion, homosexuality, gender roles, and such. Drawing on recent cultural theorists (summarized in Wuthnow 1987), Leege et al. argue, there are multiple moral orders that cover a wide range of issues—international policy, domestic economics, race relations, and immigration. In debating such issues, people raise questions about fairness, justice, the source of authority and the right way to order society. Such questions tap into moral concerns every bit as much as the issues commonly deemed “religious.” Certainly, religious groups may offer certain perspectives on these questions but voters do not seem to react based solely or principally on religious affiliation. This approach thus suggests that cultural analysis needs to move beyond its preoccupation with religion and recognize that virtually any issue has the capacity to be approached from a cultural perspective (Mockabee 2007). The ongoing debate over immigration is a case in point.

**Cultural Impact on Religion in Politics: Research Opportunities**

This chapter has explored the cultural dimensions of religion in American public life. We began by noting the conceptual confusion and disagreement that characterize “culture” in the social sciences. Out of a morass of conflicting and overlapping definitions, we extracted two broad approaches to culture. The first or holistic approach treats culture as a property of social collectivities and spatial units and tends to emphasize culture as a common property that infuses a community and promotes political integration. Many scholars regard American culture as heavily weighted with religious sensibilities and therefore as an important source of American political norms and institutions. The most important manifestation of this tendency is the prevalence of a “civil religion” that provides powerful symbols, ideas, and themes that stress the transcendent nature of American nationhood. There is a second approach to culture, however, that emphasizes its capacity to undermine unity and promote conflict. In this perspective, culture needs to be understood principally as an inherently conflictual realm of society devoted to
promoting meaning. One important albeit deeply flawed manifestation of this approach, culture war theory, illustrates how differences over the source of social authority may become grist for competing political movements. A theory of cultural conflict offers a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of moral debate in public life. Culture provides individuals with a sense of identity, standards of behavior and an identification of outsiders. Conflicting views about these matters can be made politically relevant when elites sense political advantage in making them salient. The effect is likely to be disintegrative in the sense that it encourages polarization.

It is commonplace to note the growing multicultural nature of American life, a product of increased exposure to world currents transmitted by globalization and transnationalism. This growing social complexity appears to offer fodder for cultural conflict in politics as evident in recent disputes over immigration, language issues, diaspora engagement in foreign policy, representation and other areas. More so than at anytime in the 1920s, Americans seem to debate “who we are” as a people (Huntington 2004) and how we should order our lives. As a consequence of these fissures, issue entrepreneurs who troll the political seas in search of potentially divisive issues with the capacity to confer political advantage face a decidedly bullish market.

As the foregoing discussion suggests, we see the most productive research opportunities on religion and politics in the cultural studies approach that has developed over the last twenty years. While the holistic approach to culture has offered some important insights, its essentially static nature seems ill-equipped to explain a dynamic political system in which religious appeals wax and wane. That is why, for instance, empirical research on topics such as “civic culture” and “civil religion” has largely reached a conceptual dead end. The newer approach to culture offers more promise because it recognizes the fluidity of a socially-constructed domain of culture. Such a perspective warrants that scholars pay closer attention to at least three phenomena.

First, it is important to broaden the understanding of “culture” beyond overtly religious issues to appreciate how cultural conflict inheres in debates over a wide range of issues that do not appear on the surface to be religious in nature. Scholars of religion and politics often work with a pre-set domain of “cultural” issues, e.g. abortion, gay marriage, educational values, evolution, family preservation and promiscuous sex, etc. How can this be reconciled with evidence that most of the partisan mobility in the post-New Deal period, including the shift of many Protestant evangelicals toward the Republican Party, was the result of attitudes toward African-Americans and the role of the federal government in furthering equality of opportunity (Leege et al. 2002, ch. 9; Valentino & Sears 2005)? There is no paradox here if we remember that race has been a “carrier” for debates over cultural values associated with competing moral orders—as in the case of affirmative action. Some opponents of compensatory programs—whether minority preference in college admissions or “set-asides” for minority contractors on public projects—argue their case against such programs in a way that draws on such hallmarks of cultural thinking as group categorization, relative deprivation, and reference groups. On the assumption that black Americans no longer face discrimination because of civil rights laws, these critics contend that any failure by blacks to achieve full inclusion in the American dream owes principally to deficiencies in their own culture. Specifically, because black Americans “do not conform to traditional American values, particularly the work ethic, as well as obedience to
authority (as in schools, the workplace or law enforcement) and impulse control (concerning such issues as alcohol, drugs, sexuality, and prudent use of money); they suffer bad economic outcomes (Sears, Henry and Kosterman 2000, 77). Hence, claims for government preference to offset the effects of these outcomes are perceived as illegitimate demands for “special” benefits rather than legitimate policies to compensate individuals for the harm done to them. Government affirmative action programs, it follows, amount to a capitulation to those who are undeserving of such assistance. None of this makes sense unless we remember that culture encompasses ideas that legitimate policies as right or wrong based on a moral calculus.

Moving into the third millennium of the Common Era, many journalists and scholars have missed the cultural value priorities that frame vote preferences among religious conservatives. For many Americans, the events of 9/11 raised concerns about war, national security and terrorism to the top of the public agenda, pushing social issues further down the queue. However, religious conservatives did not abandon their traditional political priorities but rather accommodated the newest threats to their world view. They did so by applying to this phenomenon the same kind of cultural frame once employed against global communism (Durham 2004). Terrorism looms so large for some in this sector of the electorate because it is Islamic terrorism and this has become for them another part of the kampf between Christian culture and Islamic culture. From this perspective, Muslims are the infidel devils, not merely a political adversary. Accordingly, some religious conservatives may have given support for President Bush’s war in Iraq because they believed God had placed him in the White House at this time of tribulation in order to stop such adversaries in their tracks. Similarly, even after what they acknowledge as failed military policies, many have argued against withdrawal from Iraq as giving renewed vigor to the terrorist forces (Lawton 2006).

A theory of cultural politics should never start with a limited and pre-defined domain of issues. Rather, it spreads the net widely to find what religious values are behind what appear to be straight-forward non-religious issues. And it uses multivariate tools to estimate which dimensions are dominant and by what paths to the outcome. We have used race and national defense/patriotism to illustrate the matter, but we could do just as well with economic issues. The debate over “welfare reform” is inexplicable without recognizing the underlying power of religious views about the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor.

Second, religiously-based political behavior should be understood to encompass both positive acts and forms of withdrawal. Much attention is given to mobilization since it is thought easy to measure from survey data (past record of participation) or, better, precinct books that map turnout over time. Hence, many studies trace change in the partisan orientation of religious groups from one election to the next. However, potential voters face two choices in an election—which candidate to support, the datum normally reported—and the prior decision of whether to vote at all. It is every bit as easy to measure demobilization—purposive nonvoting—and its antecedents; Leege, et al (2002) regressed vote or failure to vote on a variety of issue and group factors, along with demographic variables that helped interpret turnout in past participation studies (cf. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Coefficients for groups targeted by campaigners were compared—both cross-group comparisons and through-time comparisons—to assess the unsettling (dissonant) effects of campaign themes and candidate personae. For example, when Democrats decided to push civil rights measures, white Southern Democratic
turnout declined well beyond what demographic factors predicted; eventually this dissonant information led white Southern Democrats to seek consistency in the Republican Party. We know from the statements and behaviors of campaign managers that suppressing turnout among vulnerable target groups in the rival party’s coalition is an important strategy in modern campaigning (see Wirthlin 1981, Monson and Oliphant 2007). Clearly, religion and politics specialists would do well to build failure to vote into their models.

Third and finally, it is absolutely critical to study the role of government and political elites as forces that facilitate cultural expression in American politics. Early sociological studies and empirical research by various political scientists (Wilson and Banfield 1964) displayed how WASP culture among mainline Protestants reinforced a strong commitment to Republicanism. By contrast, a very different cultural orientation to politics undergirded the worldviews of Catholic and Irish Protestant immigrants, manifested in a strongly Democratic partisan identification. Both these tendencies have subsequently frayed under the influence of cultural change. In The Inheritance: How Three Catholic Families Moved from Roosevelt to Reagan and Beyond, journalist Samuel Freedman (1996) examines successive generations of two Irish Catholic families in New York City and upstate New York and a Polish Catholic family in Baltimore. Freedman shows how the norms of a tight cultural community sustained loyalty to Democratic candidates, but when the national parties changed policy objectives and the cultural backgrounds of leaders, later generations shifted to Reagan’s Republicanism. For their part, WASP Republicans have often reacted uneasily to the growing religious enthusiasm and cultural Puritanism expressed by the GOP as it has become decidedly more Southern and evangelical. Such pillars of northeastern Republicanism as John Danforth and Christine Todd Whitman have warned about the “capture” of their party by forces that now appear hostile to the cultural values that once dominated the GOP. This should not be confused with secularism, as Hunter’s model tends to do, but with a different way of linking religious values to political causes.

These ideas merely suggest some productive possibilities for social analysis of religion and politics that is informed by newer approaches to cultural studies. Such work will help to resurrect culture as more than a residual category to be employed when analysts cannot otherwise account for patterns of mass political behavior. In time, a cultural theory of politics may join the economic and sociological models that still dominate the study of American political behavior, putting religion back in to the equation but broadening its meaning considerably.
References


“Minutemen making inroads in Iowa.” 2007 (September 7). Cedar Rapids Gazette. Available online at


Notes

1 This section draws on Wald and Calhoun-Brown (2006, ch. 1).

2 For a useful summary of data on this point from one of the most respected academic surveys, see the section on religion and religious practices at “Social and Religious Characteristics of the Electorate,” American National Election Studies, http://www.electionstudies.org/nesguide/gd-index.htm#1.

3 This tendency was documented memorably by an episode in the satirical fake news television program, the Colbert Report. While interviewing a Georgia congressional representative who had repeatedly sponsored legislation mandating the display of the Ten Commandments, the genial host asked his guest to name the commandments. The congressman came up with only three. This priceless interview is available at: http://www.crooksandliars.com/index.php?s=COLBERT+%22TEN+COMMANDMENTS%22

4 Some scholars believe that inflated attendance reports may be the consequence of oversampling people who are members of churches.

5 In a classic study, Allport and Ross (1967) distinguished between “intrinsic” and “extrinsic” religious motivation, suggesting that the latter tendency to embrace religion for its social advantages represented a less authentic form of commitment. But as Lenski demonstrated (1963), religions also serve a communal purpose that is equally as meaningful as other forms of commitment. Cohen et al (2005) have forcefully argued that devaluing such communal attachment amounts to adopting an exclusively Protestant model of religiosity that devalues the communal dimension of faiths such as Roman Catholicism and Judaism.

6 Left-Hegelian philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, in exploring the notion of alienation and false consciousness, had argued that, at the level of the individual, the Divine is nothing more than the best human traits and aspirations projected onto a transcendent Other. His anthropomorphic interpretation of Christianity addressed individuals, while Durkheim addressed broader institutions of the whole society.

7 It is interesting to note that Verba’s highly influential later work (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995) treats religion as a major factor in explanations of political participation.