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# American Democracy and the Democratization of American Religion

ROBERT WUTHNOW

THE relation between democracy and religion in the United States has a complex and illustrious history. State and church, despite formal separation, have always intermingled, often resulting in confusing and seemingly contradictory alliances and cleavages. At the present, the one clear thing about the relation between religion and the state is that this relation is anything but clear. The purpose of this paper is to consider this relation in light of some current ideas about the state and about American culture.

Kristin Luker argues in her valuable book on the abortion controversy that fundamental differences in world view separate the two sides on this issue. Pro-life activists and pro-choice activists, she finds, differ from one another not only with respect to views on abortion but on a variety of other issues and values as well.<sup>1</sup> This is perhaps not surprising, given the level of polarization and, indeed, acrimony that has surrounded the abortion debate. Luker's findings do, however, raise the question of how deep this cultural division may be: Is it focused mainly on the abortion issue—generated mainly by the fact that this issue has become controversial? Or is there perhaps a deeper division in American culture—a division to which the abortion controversy is related, a division that is nevertheless rooted in broader contradictions in American society?

This essay considers the extent to which the division Luker finds between pro-life and pro-choice activists is also present more generally in American religion. As a second task, the paper also considers the nature of that division in relation to some characteristics of the contemporary state.

Luker's study leads naturally to questions about religion. Not only have religious groups, from the Catholic church to the Moral Majority, taken

controversial stands on the abortion issue, but also nearly every opinion survey on abortion attitudes has found them related to religious views and practices. Luker's own data clearly demonstrate the relevance of religion to the abortion debate:

Perhaps the single most dramatic difference between the two groups . . . is in the role that religion plays in their lives. Almost three-quarters of the pro-choice people interviewed said that formal religion was either unimportant or completely irrelevant to them, and their attitudes are correlated with behavior: only 25 percent of the pro-choice women said they *ever* attend church, and most of these said they do so only occasionally. Among pro-life people, by contrast, 69 percent said religion was important in their lives, and an additional 22 percent said it was very important. For pro-life women, too, these attitudes are correlated with behavior: half of those pro-life women interviewed said they attend church regularly once a week, and another 13 percent said they do so even more often. Whereas 80 percent of pro-choice people never attend church, only 2 percent of pro-life advocates never do so.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, strong commitment to a traditional style of institutional religion seems to characterize the pro-life activists, whereas a lack of such commitment is evident among pro-choice activists.

Turning from abortion activists to the larger public, we might expect, given these findings, that the important cleavage to be examined would be that between the religious and the nonreligious. That, however, proves not to be the case for the general public since over 90% still affirm some belief in God and maintain some preference for a religious tradition. Several other standard ways of thinking about religious differences—for example, differences between Protestants and Catholics, Christians and Jews, or evangelical Protestants and mainstream Protestants—are also less than satisfactory. Instead, much of the current tension in American religion is captured by a relatively straightforward distinction between "religious conservatives" and "religious liberals." This may appear to be a rather insensitive, unnuanced oversimplification of current religious affairs. Some data, however, will demonstrate not only the importance of the division between religious liberals and conservatives but also how deep, and how fraught with tension, that division currently is.

#### THE TENSION BETWEEN LIBERALS AND CONSERVATIVES

The following data are from a national survey of the U.S. adult population conducted in June 1984. The study was designed by the author in collaboration with George Gallup, Jr., of the Princeton Religion Research Center and conducted under the auspices of that organization.<sup>3</sup> Only a few of the relevant results can be summarized here.

1. In terms of the way people themselves describe their religious views, the American public is currently divided almost equally between religious

liberals and religious conservatives. Specifically, 43 percent classified themselves as liberals, 41 percent classified themselves as conservatives, and 16 percent did not respond. At the extremes, the public is also about evenly divided: 19 percent classified their religious views as very liberal; 18 percent, as very conservative.<sup>4</sup>

2. People who classify themselves as religious liberals or conservatives do, in fact, differ from people in the other group on a variety of theological, religious behavior, and sociomoral variables. For example, five out of six religious conservatives (83 percent) said they had "no doubts" that "Christ was fully God and fully human during his life on earth," compared with only a bare majority of the liberals (51 percent). Moreover, four out of five conservatives said this belief was very important to them, compared with only two out of five liberals. On other doctrinal issues, the two groups were also sharply divided. For instance, nearly two-thirds of the conservatives took a literalist view of the Bible, compared with only one-fifth of the liberals. The liberal-conservative distinction is also closely associated with attitudes on the abortion issue. Fully three-quarters of the conservatives said they were opposed to "abortion on demand," whereas nearly six in ten (57 percent) of the liberals said they favored it. Moreover, a discriminant analysis revealed that responses to the question about abortion ranked as one of the highest attitudinal variables differentiating religious liberals and conservatives.

Overall, people who identified themselves as religious conservatives did, in fact, appear to be conservative in their views on religious and moral issues, taking fundamentalist or evangelical positions on doctrinal issues, actively involving themselves in traditional religious institutions, and adopting strict "thou shalt not" attitudes on moral questions. In contrast, people who said they were religious liberals were more likely to admit doubts about traditional doctrines, retain some distance from religious organizations and express relativistic or permissive views on moral issues, even though it was clear that a majority still valued religion and identified with religion in some ways.

3. The division between religious liberals and conservatives is perceived by the public as an area of disagreement and tension. Forty-five percent of those surveyed said that there are "serious disagreements" among religious people in the United States, and 60 percent thought that there was currently at least a fair amount of tension between people with conservative religious views and people with liberal religious views.<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that the survey was conducted in June 1984—well before the religious debates that surfaced in September in conjunction with the presidential campaign.

4. Other results from the study testify to the current high level of misunderstanding and tension between religious liberals and conservatives.

For example, only 32 percent of the liberals in the sample said their contacts with conservatives had been "mostly pleasant"; the remainder said their contacts had been mixed or unpleasant. Similarly, only 42 percent of the conservatives said their contacts with liberals had been pleasant. Two scales were constructed to measure negative stereotyping—one for negative stereotypes about religious liberals, the other for negative stereotypes about religious conservatives. Among liberals, 50 percent scored high on the anticonservatism scale; among conservatives, 30 percent scored high on the antiliberalism scale.<sup>6</sup> More specifically, liberals tended to view conservatives as fanatical, intolerant, rigid, and overly strict. Conservatives viewed liberals as loose, shallow, unsaved, unloving, and guided by false teaching. Other findings from the study also underscored the tensions between liberals and conservatives. For example, liberals tend to think conservatives have too much power in many sectors of American life; conservatives think the same about liberals.

That this should be the case is perhaps not too surprising. Other results, however, were more unusual. For example, the study suggested that tensions between liberals and conservatives are currently much deeper than the traditional tensions that have existed between Protestants and Catholics and among Protestant denominations. On these issues, measures of negative stereotyping and social distance were comparatively quite low. Other questions showed that Protestants and Catholics and members of different denominations are likely to favor interfaith cooperation and are likely to have worshipped in one another's churches; indeed, large minorities of all denominations were reared in a denomination other than the one to which they currently belong. These results, it should be noted, have been borne out in a large number of other studies: tensions between Protestants and Catholics have greatly diminished over the past three decades; the two have become virtually indistinguishable in terms of most social background and attitude questions; denominational identities have ceased to be important to most Protestants; members of most denominations do not perceive significant theological differences between themselves and members of other denominations; and even between Christians and Jews, levels of anti-Semitism have greatly diminished, and sensitive issues such as interfaith marriages have come to be regarded with a high degree of tolerance, if not indifference.<sup>7</sup> The results of the Gallup survey also indicated, contrary to studies of prejudice and stereotyping of other kinds, that greater degrees of contact between liberals and conservatives *did not* reduce negative attitudes of either toward the other. Indeed, the greater the contact with the other group, the more likely was a negative view of that group.

These results empirically support what many commentators have observed about American religion: it is currently divided by a decisive cleavage between liberals and conservatives. This division is accompanied by a high degree of negative stereotyping and animosity. It also cuts across major denominational lines. Thus, conservative Catholics are divided from liberal Catholics, conservative Methodists from liberal Methodists, and so on.

Several other aspects of the current cleavage, gleaned from a more general reading of the recent history of American religion, need to be understood. First, it is related to, but quite different from, the split between fundamentalists and modernists that characterized American religion earlier in the century. That split, for all the publicity it received, was concerned primarily with theological issues rather than broader political and moral questions and was contained almost entirely within two denominations—the Northern Baptist and Presbyterians (northern branch). Moreover, the tensions between fundamentalists and modernists, while still sometimes referred to in religious rhetoric, had largely ceased to be important by the mid-1930s and were largely obscured in the 1940s and 1950s by the greater bonds that unified Protestants, particularly a common interest in church growth and a common hostility toward Catholics. The present division is, in this respect, relatively new. On the liberal side, its origins go back primarily to the heyday of civil rights activism and antiwar protests in the 1960s and early 1970s. On the conservative side, its roots stem mainly from the "evangelical" movement that began in the late 1940s, differentiating itself sharply from earlier separatist fundamentalism, a movement that grew rapidly but quietly during the 1950s and 1960s, but only in the 1970s acquired new leadership that brought it into direct involvement with political and moral issues.

Second, the current cleavage remains primarily a *cultural* division rather than a division between two internally unified organizations. It should not be referred to, as some have, as a "two-party" religious system because neither side is actually organized on a centralized or national scale anything like the two political parties. Instead, each side consists of a large number of smaller organizations that remain separate from one another and put crosscutting pressures on members' loyalties. Despite their declining cultural significance, denominations remain important as the primary bureaucracies through which clergy are recruited and trained, congregations are financed and disciplined, and larger national purposes are pursued. Differences in liturgy still present major barriers to Catholics and Protestants; among religious conservatives, sectarianism and strong traditions of congregational autonomy still prevent large-scale cooperative efforts; and among liberals, major divisions exist among those in liberal denominations, such as the Episcopal and Presbyterian

churches, who are committed to institutional religion, those who have adopted a noninstitutional or "privatized" style of faith, and those (like Luker's pro-choice activists) who have abandoned all commitment to religion.

Finally, and in contrast to the previous point, it must be recognized that the two camps are not entirely lacking in organization and national unity. The liberal side is well represented by national agencies such as the National Council of Churches, the World Council of Churches, and the National Catholic Welfare Council. The conservative side developed strength in the 1950s and 1960s primarily by forging a national network among conservative seminaries and colleges; by organizing informal cooperative ventures around revivalists, missionary programs, and religious radio and television broadcasting; and by building its own set of formal organizations on a national scale, such as the National Association of Evangelicals.

Since the early 1970s, the conservative side has also gained enormous resources and has translated these resources into highly effective local and national organizations through the use of religious television programming. At the grass-roots level, liberals and conservatives have also begun to gravitate toward their own kind of organizations. Most significant on both sides has been the growth of "special purpose groups"—Bible study groups, campus ministries, women's organizations, movements oriented toward school prayer and moral reform, peace fellowships, antinuclear religious coalitions, religious feminist organizations, community action programs, and the like. According to the Gallup survey, one person in three is currently involved in at least one of these movements, and liberals and conservatives tend to join movements that reflect the larger ideological differences between the two.<sup>8</sup>

#### THE STATE AND RELIGIOUS TENSIONS

What are the sources of this cleavage? Viewed broadly, some of its sources are historical and theological. As already noted, its roots can be traced in some ways to the cleavage between modernists and fundamentalists that emerged toward the end of the last century, if only because this earlier cleavage established an ideological precedent for conflict between liberals and conservatives to be regarded as a mode of cultural differentiation. Since World War II, organizational factors have contributed to the deepening of this cleavage. Conservative sects, colleges, and evangelistic denominations have grown enormously, whereas liberal denominations have barely managed to hold their own. Indeed, some of the more prominent liberal denominations (for example, Presbyterians and Episcopalians) have declined in membership by nearly 25 percent since the 1960s. As a result, conservatives are now in a much stronger position to voice their claims than they were even a generation

or two ago. In addition, issues such as abortion have contributed to the polarization of the two factions—and abortion is only one such issue. School prayer, pornography, homosexuality, Christian schools, and interest groups like the Moral Majority have all contributed to the animosity dividing religious liberals and conservatives. If not directly, these issues have stirred up hostilities by virtue of the way they have been treated by the press and by political candidates. All of these factors have been fairly obvious, although much could be done in tracing their impact in greater detail.

Broader social changes have also contributed to the current tensions between liberals and conservatives. As I have argued elsewhere, the rapid growth of higher education during the 1960s played a major role. The better educated became proportionately more numerous in the large religious denominations, pressuring them to take liberal stands on issues such as civil rights, the Vietnam war, and ordination of women and homosexuals; other segments of the educated elite defected entirely from organized religion but identified with quasi-religious movements and privatized forms of religion. The less educated, in contrast, were in many cases clearly threatened by these tendencies and migrated to more traditional religious organizations and started their own conservative counterorganizations. One of the clearest overall signs of the impact of higher education was that by the early 1970s level of education had become the single best social background predictor of religious views, whereas studies in the 1950s and early 1960s had shown few religious differences between the more and the less educated.<sup>9</sup> In the 1970s and early 1980s, these differences persisted. The expansion of technical education, however, resulted in an overall upgrading of the levels of education among religious conservatives as well.

Thus, many of the sharpest differences in religious ideology now exist between those with training in the humanities and social sciences and those in engineering, business, and other applied disciplines.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, the current tensions between religious liberals and conservatives do have some basis in contemporary class structure, but the relation is far from simple and by no means determinative. Moreover, studies of the *joint* effects of class (usually educational level) and religious orientation on a wide range of policy issues generally show that religious ideology is the stronger predictor.<sup>11</sup>

But what of the state? As suggested at the outset, a second task of this essay is to consider the current religious cleavage in relation to some broader ideas about the state. To put the question more specifically: Are there broader divisions or contradictions in the way the state has developed over the past decades that may be contributing to the cultural cleavage evident in American religion? To suggest that there are may at first seem farfetched—and, at any



rate, all that can be offered here is highly speculative. Nevertheless, it may seem less farfetched to introduce considerations about the state if one other finding from the previous study is mentioned. That finding comes from the discriminant analysis that was performed to determine which attitudes differentiate religious liberals and conservatives most strongly.

The attitude that discriminated most strongly of all—even more strongly than any of the religious questions—was support or opposition toward government spending on social programs.<sup>12</sup> Three-quarters of the religious liberals were in favor of "more government spending on social programs," compared with fewer than half of the conservatives. This finding, although difficult to interpret by itself, generally corresponds with the observation of the popular press, political commentators, and students of contemporary religion that religious conservatives have throughout most of the period since World War II been firm supporters of free enterprise in economic theory, staunch advocates of laissez-faire in the government's relation to the economy, and suspicious of welfare programs and government planning that, to them, often smacks of creeping socialism or conspiratorial communism. Liberals, in contrast, have long been more critical of laissez-faire capitalism, have advocated policies of government regulation for purposes of ending discrimination and alleviating social injustice, and have been more in favor of welfare programs and other rights of entitlement.<sup>13</sup> Clearly, the state is a relevant consideration in attempting to understand the current tensions between religious liberals and religious conservatives.

As a point for discussion, the following argument might be considered. Over the past half-century or so, the scope and functions of the state have grown enormously. This has been especially true in areas commonly described as welfare functions, in regulatory activities governing the economy, and in providing infrastructural support to the economy through such programs as education, transportation, and fiscal policy. The state's role in developing advanced technology through the sponsorship of scientific research in applied fields has also been particularly evident.

Much of the state's growth has been closely linked with broader features of the capitalist world economy. It has been suggested in various formulations that the United States has, for some time, been in a transitional period in terms of the dominant mode of capitalist organization. From the laissez-faire, decentralized, firm-oriented capitalism of the nineteenth century, the United States has shifted increasingly toward a regulated, centralized, state-sponsored form of capitalist organization. This shift, it has been argued, has been especially pronounced since World War II. A growing globalization of the world market, in which some 75 percent of all American-

made goods now compete with foreign products, has led to an aggressive effort to promote high-technology industries. Military interests, motivated by competition with the Soviet Union, have obviously contributed to this orientation. At the same time, broader social welfare programs have been promoted and greatly expanded the skilled labor market and stabilized domestic politics.

This transition, however, has not been smooth. As with other major social transitions, the present one has involved both adaptation and resistance. Groups have attempted to adapt to changing circumstances; they have also resisted making changes. *Laissez-faire* models still compete with ideas of central planning; a mixture of industrial and "post-industrial" programs clearly remains; strong interest groups can usually be found on both sides of major issues; and government policy vacillates among competing alternatives. In short, the present transition cannot be described as a simple shift from *A* to *B*; rather, it is a series of moves that come in fits and spurts, contain elements of both *A* and *B*, and involve competing visions of *B* itself.

Much of this may seem remote from the issue of current religious divisions—until it is remembered that American religion is, as Weber recognized, heavily influenced by an inner-worldly asceticism that connects it with a host of broader ethical and social concerns. The major ingredients in the broader political and economic transition are also ones in which American religious groups have been vitally interested. Consider the connections often drawn between religious and economic conceptions of freedom; the religious conceptions of social justice that have influenced the development of the American welfare state; the intensive historical involvement of American religion in higher education and the changes in this involvement that have come about as a result of state efforts to build a system of public higher education; the threats that many religious groups continue to perceive to their own teachings from the advancement of science; and the ambivalence toward capitalism itself that is generated by religious concepts of stewardship, equality, peace, love, and ultimate worth. The shift in broader societal forms has generated religious responses—and religious counterresponses—on all of these issues.<sup>14</sup>

What does all of this have to do with the "democratization" of American religion? In bare outline, broader societal conditions have contributed to the declining significance of what was once a multiplex denominational system in American religion and have nurtured the rise of a system that at present is deeply polarized. As survey data show, one side represents a broad coalition of people bound together by similar religious, moral, and social orientations; the other side differs sharply on mostly of the same issues. As in Luker's

study, the data also reveal that religious liberals and conservatives are distinguishable in terms of social characteristics—female participation in the labor force, levels of higher education, age—that reflect social positions in relation to the broader societal transition. Still, it is also the ambivalent nature of this transition that reinforces the cleavage between religious liberals and conservatives. Each side finds its supporters among political candidates; each side sees government policies that promise to reaffirm its own view of justice and morality; and each side has constituents with considerable economic resources to devote to its cause.

This is by no means a one-to-one relationship between the current religious cleavage and differences in models of political economy. Conservatives, for example, are not consistent advocates of laissez-faire in all matters of government, nor are liberals strict proponents of government intervention and welfare state planning. It is more accurate to characterize each side as having its own, traditionally informed views of what government should be. Religious conservatives have been outspoken supporters of free enterprise and critics of government intervention in the economy, but they have generally drawn on longstanding religious conceptions of the state—conceptions articulated clearly in the major Reformation traditions from which American Protestantism descends—that hold the state responsible for the supervision of morality, including laws restricting moral deviance, and that attach high importance to the state's role in maintaining national defenses. Religious liberals subscribe to strong ideas of equality and social justice, also rooted deeply in the Judeo-Christian tradition, which require the state to intervene on behalf of these principles, but they subscribe no less strongly to principles of separation of church and state and to conceptions of civil liberties that require the state to be restrained on matters of lifestyle and morality.

In both cases, religious ideology is a complex of relatively sophisticated, historically constructed arguments that are not easily reducible to simple formulas or partisan platforms. Nevertheless, both sides have found support for at least some of their views among the different factions that currently compete for ascendancy in the broader public sphere. Again, the divisions evident in current views of political economy are not determinative of religious ideology. But the two arenas of debate reinforce one another. Indeed, it could not be otherwise. Were the broader society tightly integrated around a single conception of the state, religion would undoubtedly show greater ideological unity—as it did during World War II. In contrast, the deeper social divisions associated with the United States' transitional status in the world economy have contributed to the divisions presently evident between religious liberals and conservatives.

American religion is a product of American culture as well as a contributor to that culture. As a cultural product, it has been shaped by the deep ambivalence currently present in American democracy—the ambivalence between a classic laissez-faire conception of the state in which redistributive social programs take second place to ideals of individualism and traditional moral virtue, and an emerging but still unclear welfare model that envisions state-sponsored social programs accompanied by a relatively libertarian approach to traditional morality. Although creation of a national culture has eroded many of the traditional ethnic and regional cleavages among religious groups, a new cleavage between liberals and conservatives has emerged, at least in part because of these ambivalent tendencies in the larger culture. Religious conservatives have adapted relatively well to some of the newer directions of state expansion, such as the push toward greater expertise in high technology, but have generally been more favorable to political rhetoric promising to maintain traditional morality and keep government out of churches and family life. Religious liberals, in contrast, have enjoyed a stronger institutional base in the mainline Protestant denominations (especially in their central bureaucracies) than have fundamentalists and evangelicals; for this reason, liberals have felt more capable of identifying themselves with broad social programs and have often looked to government for help; they have also favored their own approach to moral issues rather than legal attempts to restrict morality to the standards of particular groups; and they have found considerable support in government programs to eradicate discrimination and inequality and to create a more equitable society along humanitarian lines.

The democratization of American religion, therefore, has taken a curious form. At the same time that the Supreme Court asserts the need for a policy of "strict neutrality" toward religion on the part of the state, the broader actions of the state are proving to be anything but neutral toward religion. The internal contradictions that characterize the present form of state capitalism are, it appears, being reproduced in the religious sphere. Religious communities have been active participants in the process. Their actions, however, have also been influenced by broader social conditions.

#### NOTES

1. Kristin Luker, *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

2. *Ibid.*, 197.

3. *How Can Christian Liberals and Conservatives Be Brought Together?* 2 vols. (Princeton: Gallup Organization, 1984).

4. The question read, "Where would you place yourself on this scale in terms of your RELIGIOUS views?" A six-point scale was presented, with "1" labeled

"conservative" and "6" labeled "liberal." Scores of 1 and 2 were marked by 18 percent of the respondents; 3, by 23 percent; 4, by 24 percent; and 5 and 6, by 19 percent.

5. In response to the question, "How much tension would you say there is at present between people with conservative religious views, and people with liberal religious views?", 22 percent said "quite a lot," 38 percent said "a fair amount," 19 percent said "only a little," and 3 percent said "none" (18 percent had no opinion).

6. The anticonservatism scale consisted of seven items selected on the basis of a factor analysis of a larger list of statements that included both positive and negative perceptions. Scores of 4 through 7 were classified as high. The antiliberalism scale consisted of six items also selected on the basis of a factor analysis. Scores of 4 through 6 were classified as high.

7. Some of the evidence supporting these conclusions has been presented in my book, *Experimentation in American Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); and in "Anti-Semitism and Stereotyping," in *In the Eye of the Beholder: Prejudice and Stereotyping*, ed. Arthur G. Miller (New York: Praeger, 1982), 137-87.

8. Robert Wuthnow, "The Growth of Religious Reform Movements," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 480 (July 1985): 106-16.

9. These findings as well as the broader effects of higher education on American religion since World War II are discussed in my paper "Religious Movements and Counter-movements in North America," in *Religious Movements and Rapid Social Change*, ed. James A. Beckford (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1986).

10. Robert Wuthnow, "Science and the Sacred," in *The Sacred in a Secular Age*, ed. Phillip E. Hammond (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 187-203.

11. For example, see *The Connecticut Mutual Life Report on American Values in the '80s: The Impact of Belief* (New York: Research and Forecasts, 1981).

12. The question was stated simply "more government spending on social programs." Respondents were given four categories with which to answer, ranging from strongly favor to strongly oppose. The canonical discriminant function coefficient for this item—in relation to religious conservatism versus religious liberalism—was 0.283. This was the highest score of seventeen items entered in the analysis. By comparison, the coefficients for several other items were church attendance, 0.271; favoring the Moral Majority, 0.232; attitudes toward pornography laws, 0.156; and valuing one's relationship with God, 0.070.

13. Robert Wuthnow, "America's Legitimizing Myths: Continuity and Crisis," in *America's Changing Role in the World-System*, ed. Terry Boswell and Albert Bergesen (New York: Praeger, 1986).

14. For a discussion that situates these responses in a more historical context, see Robert Wuthnow, "World Order and Religious Movements," in *Studies of the Modern World-System*, ed. Albert Bergesen (New York: Academic Press, 1980), 57-75.

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