THOMAS S. KIDD

AMERICA'S RELIGIOUS HISTORY

FAITH, POLITICS, AND THE SHAPING OF A NATION

A PDF COMPANION TO THE AUDIOBOOK
Chapter 1

Religion in Early America


More than a century after the start of English colonization, the Great Awakening reshaped religion in British America. In the 1730s and '40s, thousands of people professed to have been born again, a reference to Jesus’s words in the third chapter of the Gospel of John. Many colonists experienced conversion under the dazzling ministry of the Anglican revivalist George Whitefield, who became the most famous man in America. The revivals of the Great Awakening continued in regional expressions through the 1770s and '80s. The later stages of the awakening drew the American South into the fold of evangelical faith too. The southern colonies once had the lowest rates of church attendance, mostly because there were so few churches there. Now southern Christianity began to awaken.

Critics of the Great Awakening thought the revivals amounted to emotional chaos. The traveling Anglican minister Charles Woodmason was one of those critics. In 1767, Woodmason found backcountry South Carolina “eaten up by itinerant teachers, preachers, and impostors,” including many Baptists, Presbyterians, and other evangelical missionaries who had come from the North. The backcountry settlers had so little experience with formal Christian religion that Woodmason believed it
WORKS CITED AND FURTHER READING


Chapter 3

Religion and the American Revolution
difficult to contain within a single narrative thread. This is especially the case if you extend the focus beyond the thirteen British colonies declaring independence to non-Anglo settlements such as the new one in San Francisco. The Revolution itself was no war of religion, but religious categories framed and inspired it. Developing alongside the major themes of American independence was a dizzying host of visionary prophets, founders of immigrant congregations, and clashing Europeans and Indians. Still, the era of the American Revolution ushered in an unprecedented era of religious liberty, with cascading effects for the vitality and conflict in American religion.

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By the year 1800, American Christianity, in tandem with the nation’s population, entered a new phase of westward growth and organization. The nation’s progress into the West displaced many Native Americans and precipitated the monumental Louisiana Purchase of 1803, by which the United States roughly doubled in size. Even before the Louisiana Purchase, white settlers surged into the Ohio River Valley region and the Deep South. By the 1840s, westward settlement spread out to California and the Oregon Territory, with people seeking gold and more farmland. Churches and itinerant pastors kept up with and even surpassed the pace of settlement, and they sometimes sought to address the plight of displaced Native Americans. Led by the Methodists and Baptists, churches socially organized the West on the ground level.

The Second Great Awakening was punctuated by massive revivals. These included its seminal event, the Cane Ridge Revival in Kentucky in 1801. Revivals often resulted in significant seasons of church growth. More than a series of revivals, the Second Great Awakening was also a process by which millions of Americans came into the fold of Christian faith.
by the eve of the Civil War. Particularly across the frontier regions of
the Ohio River and Mississippi River Valleys, restless and relentless
leaders forged a new infrastructure for American religion. Fueled by
bursts of revival, the pastors of the Methodists, Baptists, and many
smaller denominations went from town to town starting new churches
that would become the social and spiritual sinews of a growing nation.
For lack of a better term, we call this sprawling organizational and
revivalist process the Second Great Awakening. The leaders of that
awakening were hardly satisfied with just building churches. They
wanted to transform American society and evangelize the world.

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Chapter 5

GLOBAL AND DOMESTIC MISSIONS
term did not necessarily mean entire abstinence, but in the mid-1800s it became increasingly common for Protestants to believe that an obedient Christian should never take a drink. The movement helped attach a new social stigma to drunkenness, and America's per capita rate of alcohol consumption dropped significantly between the 1830s and 1850s.

By the mid-1800s, Americans had made significant advances in spreading the Christian gospel, and the Bible itself, throughout America and around the world. They had also opened significant new fronts in battles against poverty, drunkenness, and lack of education. In the 1830s, the abolitionist movement— perhaps the most celebrated reform effort of the era— was just beginning. Many white northern Christians would also come to denounce slavery, but many other white Americans in the South and North saw the Bible as endorsing slavery. Most African American Christians, of course, had no doubt about the institution's immorality and did whatever they could to undermine it. In time, this moral debate would feed the acrimony that finally led to the Civil War.

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Chapter 6

Slave Religion and Manifest Destiny
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Chapter 7

The Slavery Controversy and the Civil War
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Chapter 8

Immigration and Religious Diversity
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Chapter 9

Evolution, Biblical Criticism, and Fundamentalism
being, modernism did seem ascendant in many of the large northern-dominated denominations. Traditionalism prevailed, however, in the Southern Baptist Convention, in Lutheran, Holiness, and Pentecostal denominations, and among the top leaders of the Roman Catholic Church. Of course, conservative theological opposition to modernism was hardly over. Within a half century of the Scopes Trial, it would be the modernist-led mainline denominations that seemed to be struggling for relevance and survival.

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Chapter 10

The Religious Challenges of the World Wars
In the wake of the war, as the horrors of it and the extermination wrought upon Europe's Jews became more known, many Americans were left perplexed and adrift. Similarly to how Reinhold Niebuhr had urged theological humility and realism, post-Holocaust writers such as the Romanian Jew Elie Wiesel, an Auschwitz survivor who moved to the United States after the war, wondered about God's silence. Where was God during the Nazis' murderous rampage? In his book Night, translated into English in 1960, Wiesel wrote of the spiritual devastation wrought by the Nazis' death camp: "Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky. Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust."

The Depression, the world wars, and the Holocaust resulted in a loss of spiritual innocence for many as it did for Wiesel. The conclusion of World War II also left America as an economic and military superpower locked in a global struggle with the forces of Soviet communism, and the Cold War would come to exert a powerful influence on the shape of American religion and Americans' sense of national purpose.

WORKS CITED AND FURTHER READING

Chapter 11

Civil Religion and the Cold War
remained the core message of his crusades, but the specifics of that
preaching received relatively little media coverage after 1949. Graham
would receive much more secular coverage for appearances at patriotic
occasions and for his friendship with politicians, usually (though not
exclusively) Republican ones, beginning with his fateful courtship of
Dwight Eisenhower to run for office in 1952. Graham’s remarkable
access to presidents from Eisenhower to George W. Bush helped other
evangelicals envision permanent proximity to powerful politicians. It
was an enticing prospect. A desire to acquire and sustain political
influence became one of the distinguishing marks of white evangelicals.

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Chapter 12

Civil Rights and Church–State Controversy
evangelicals joined with mainliners, Catholics, and Jews in elevating American civil religion to a more heightened status than ever before in American history.

Yet the 1960s and '70s gave conservative people of faith reasons to believe that their quasi-established status was under attack. Some whites were unsettled by the tactics of civil rights reformers. Others worried that the forces of "secular humanism," as popular evangelical philosopher Francis Schaeffer called it, had forced prayer and the Bible out of schools and legalized abortion in Roe v. Wade. Traditionalists grasped for ways to retain their claim on American culture. Many of them, especially starting with the founding of the Moral Majority, would seek to do so through politics and the courts. Evangelicals still believed, however, that spiritual transformation remained the essential solution to Americans' troubles. As Larry Norman put it in a 1972 song, "Why don't you look into Jesus? He's got the answer."

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In 1976, it remained unclear exactly what form conservative Christian political alliances would take. Billy Graham had helped to secure the white evangelical nexus with the Republican Party starting in the early 1950s. Yet many of Graham's fellow white southern evangelicals remained attached to the Democrats' traditional coalition, if they were politically active at all. Then in the aftermath of Richard Nixon's resignation over Watergate, Democrats in 1976 nominated Georgia governor Jimmy Carter, one of the first evangelicals since William Jennings Bryan to run for president. The Baptist Carter did not mind telling reporters about his born again experience. Charles Colson, a convicted former Nixon aide and new evangelical believer, also helped to popularize evangelical conversion in his popular and controversial 1976 memoir *Born Again*. Newsweek pronounced 1976 the “year of the evangelical,” and suddenly it seemed that evangelicals were one of the nation’s hottest news stories.
founded the evangelical Patrick Henry College in Virginia in 1998, which catered to students from Christian homeschooling backgrounds. Traditionalist Christians in the 1970s and ’80s vacillated in their stance toward dominant American society. The Moral Majority and the evangelical alliance with the Republican Party signaled a renewed establishmentarian impulse in which Christians sought to influence the political order and to bring their values back into the public sphere. Their record in the culture war battles was mixed. Roe v. Wade and decisions about teaching creation science suggested to conservative Christians that they were being pushed to the margins of American society. On those margins, some Christians built alternative schools and forged subcultural educational realms such as creation science and homeschooling. Overall, the educational and cultural changes of the post-1965 era left many Christian traditionalists wondering whether they should seek to reclaim the nation or retreat from a secular American Babylon.

WORKS CITED AND FURTHER READING

Chapter 14

Immigration, Religious Diversity, and the Culture Wars
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changed his heart. Bush won the allegiance of Christian conservatives, who helped him defeat Gore in one of the narrowest presidential victories in American history.

Taking cues from evangelical professor and journalist Marvin Olasky, Bush as president emphasized “compassionate conservatism” and government partnerships with faith-based charitable organizations.

But domestic issues would not define George W. Bush’s presidency. The threat of jihadist terrorism and war in the Middle East would be his signature concerns following the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, DC, on September 11, 2001. Those attacks made the fear of Islamic terrorists one of the defining issues in early twenty-first-century American religion.

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epilogue

American Religion in the Twenty-First Century
sources of religious vitality have, undeniably, produced or overlapped with rhetorical rage and political combativeness and occasional outright violence, giving critics ample opportunity to attack American believers' sincerity. Nevertheless, the intensity of American religious zeal shows little sign of waning. In the coming decades, we should expect Americans of differing faiths and of no faith in particular to continue clashing with one another over culture, belief, and the exercise of religion in all its forms.

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