

Christ College Alumni Reading Groups
Chicago, Minneapolis/St. Paul, Indianapolis,
Saint Louis, Denver, Washington DC, Phoenix

Spring 2006

Faith and the Public Sphere

Perhaps especially since the last presidential election, it has become difficult to ignore the role of faith in U.S. politics. For better or worse, politicians have been appealing to religious communities, religious leaders have influenced public policy, and the media has deemed many of the exchanges significant and newsworthy. President George Bush designed much of his re-election campaign to appeal to conservative Christians, including evangelical Protestants and traditionalist Catholics. And in the final days before the election, John Kerry realized that he too needed to make his previously quite private Catholic faith public before the nation. After the election, in *New York Times* op-ed columns, former Missouri Republican senator and Episcopal minister John C. Danforth criticized his party for letting conservative Christians set its agenda, and pleaded with moderate Christians to speak up (30 March, 22 June 2005). And in another *Times* op-ed column, Jim Wallis, the founder of the evangelical magazine *Sojourners*, urged Democrats to stop conceding religious values to the right, to recognize that poverty and stewardship of the environment are also religious issues, and that not all people of faith agree with conservative stances on abortion, the family, and national security (4 August 2005).

It may seem self-evident that these candidates and columnists and many others like them were engaging both faith and the public sphere. Presidential campaigns and newspaper columns are, after all, public, and they both concern public issues. Yet a true “public sphere” in a democracy depends on reasoned debate about critical public issues. Applying such a definition of the “public sphere” raises challenging questions. Do public expressions of faith, and especially of the political views said to derive from them, contribute to the rational public discourse appropriate to a democracy? Does religion, in all its complex dimensions, bring a valid and valuable perspective to politics that enables members of the general populace to contribute in fresh and vital ways to their own ostensibly representative government? Or does it introduce into the body politic an element of transcendent and essentially non-debatable moral and social perspectives that threaten the public sphere rather than vitalize it? If democratic politics requires rational discourse among people with seriously competing values, as the influential German political theorist Juergen Habermas has contended, how can those whose political views derive from faith engage their political—and religious--opponents in such discussions? Do we tend to think differently about the political engagement of faiths we disagree with than those we find more sympathetic? Also, many observers have especially noted that in the United States, for better or worse, religion has long been far more visibly linked with politics than it has in Europe. How then does the engagement with religion shape the U.S. public sphere, and make it distinct from its European counterparts? Is this a positive or threatening feature of American democracy? These are questions that the readings and syllabus are intended to engage.

The other term in our theme—faith—is also open to interpretation. For faith regularly refers to both religious identity and religious practice. And both religious devotion and religious behavior are manifested in diverse and often competing religious organizations. It may seem possible for citizens to discuss religion, and even for a devout citizen to engage fellow citizens in dialogue. But can the believer practice his or her faith while he or she is also engaging the public sphere? Can she or he actually exercise serious devotion and piety, and at the same time operate as a rational, critical, political agent among his or her fellow citizens who may not share those beliefs? How then does the political activity of fervent religious believers affect politics? Should only bland or “non-offensive” religion be allowed into the public sphere? And how does sustained investment in particular political causes change believers, their theology, and/or their church? Does continual involvement with contested public issues strengthen or weaken religious institutions and religious faith itself?

The syllabus begins with some background on the historic role of the Bible and Protestant Christianity in American politics, and on the unique American relationship between religion and republicanism (later democracy), provided by Wheaton College historian Mark Noll. Noll contextualizes the emergence of the United States’ “Christian republicanism” by citing a range of international critics, virtually none of whom regarded Christianity as a good fit with the new American style of government and citizenship. Also in the first batch of readings, new Christ College faculty member Andrew Murphy focuses on the history of certain types of religious rhetoric in American politics. (An additional, optional reading that incorporates more detailed discussion of how religion affects a variety of particular political issues—especially those where “sin” is seen as a relevant category—is a selection from *Hellfire Nation* by Brown University political scientist James Marone.)

If this first group of readings focuses on the history of how faith *has* influenced American public life, and does not directly address how it *should* affect politics, the second meeting turns to two more prescriptive interventions: former Lutheran pastor, current Catholic priest, and conservative journal editor Richard John Neuhaus’ *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America*; and a chapter from Princeton Professor of Religion and African-American studies Cornel West’s *Democracy Matters*. To be sure, both Neuhaus and West have things to say about the past; but in these pieces they have written not histories, but persuasive arguments about how faith ought to play out in the public sphere. Both disagree with those who would confine religion to private life, but their sense of what that faith is and how it should function in political life are very different.

Our third meeting dramatically tightens the focus, from our previous authors’ national perspectives, to Harvard assistant professor of African-American and Religious Studies Marla F. Frederick’s more intimate case study on black women of faith and their struggles with church government and local politics in North Carolina. Our fourth and final meeting departs from the U.S. scene altogether to look at one of Noll’s international critics of America’s “Christian republicanism:” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran theologian and pastor who was executed for conspiring to assassinate Adolf Hitler. Bonhoeffer’s evolution from a rather traditional Lutheranism that eschewed political involvement to active engagement in the most extreme form of religiously motivated politics—a violent coup attempt—provides a revealing test case for our views of the proper relationship of faith and

the public sphere. Was Bonhoeffer's crisis a result of Germany's failure properly to engage religion and politics over the years? And what lessons might Americans draw for America's own quite different political and religious environment in the twenty-first century?

Reading List

Meeting One

Mark Noll. "The Bible in American Public Life, 1860-2005: Dilemmas at the center, insights from the margins." *Books and Culture: A Christian Review* 11.5 (September/October 2005) 7, 46-50. <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/bc/2005/005/15.07.html>>

Mark Noll. *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002: 51-92.

Andrew R. Murphy. "'One Nation Under God,' September 11 and the Chosen Nation: Moral Decline and Divine Punishment in American Public Discourse." *Political Theology* 6.1 (2005) 9-30. (*Enclosed*)

Optional

James A. Morone. *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2003: 1-116.

Meeting Two

Richard John Neuhaus. *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984, esp. 78-93. (*Christ College will provide a copy of the reading*)

Cornel West. *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism*. New York: Penguin, 2004: 145-172. (*Christ College will provide a copy of the reading*)

Meeting Three

Marla F. Frederick. *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2003.

Meeting Four

Bonhoeffer. Martin Doblmeier, dir. DVD. 2003. (*Christ College will provide one copy to each reading group*)

Meeting One

Mark Noll. "The Bible in American Public Life, 1860-2005: Dilemmas at the center, insights from the margins." *Books and Culture: A Christian Review* 11.5 (September/October 2005) 7, 46-50. <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/bc/2005/005/15.07.html>>

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James A. Morone. *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2003: 1-116.

By surveying international responses to the American mixture of religion and politics, alongside a range of American voices, Noll presents the United States' historic connection of Christianity and republicanism as unique, and makes clear that the Bible and religion have clearly influenced American public life. If the role of religion in the American public sphere does not fit European models, Noll in effect asks how and why America is exceptional in this regard? Noll's American sources represent a variety of religious and ethnic communities; do these early Americans' perspectives on politics contribute to rational democratic discussion? Elsewhere in *America's God*, Noll briefly argues that it was in the religion-saturated United States, more than in European models, public: "where a civil society constituted by middle-class participants for their own purposes came to flourish most vigorously during the early years of the nineteenth century. . . . The alteration required for Habermas's theory to fit American experience is to add self-regulating religious behavior to economic and ideological forces" (188-89). In theory or practice, has faith been so easily, and unproblematically, added to the other (secular) forces that motivate political participation?

Political theorist Murphy may suggest answers to this last question. Like Noll, Murphy agrees that the Christian rhetoric of national morality, if not the Christian faith, has significantly influenced American history. And he joins Noll in criticizing certain problems that have resulted from this influence. But as a political scientist, Murphy seems more concerned with the health of democracy and the state rather than with the church—as perhaps a political theorist should be. By contrast, Noll, as a historian of religion, seems equally interested in both state and church—that is, with both the moral component of politics and the proper practice of faith. If this is so, does it make the historian's account more attentive to the potential positive influence of even unsettling religious activity in American politics than the political scientist's? Or does it place Noll's work too close to outmoded confessional models of historiography (in which Protestants would praise the Reformation, Catholics would demonize it as a schism, etc.), and show Murphy doing a better job of holding politicized Christianity accountable to shared and rational public norms in a way that it must be in a pluralistic no-longer-Protestant society and before an increasingly diverse citizenry who have no reason to grant special standing to Christian or even religious beliefs?

Meeting Two

Richard John Neuhaus. *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984, esp. 78-93.

Cornel West. *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism*. New York: Penguin, 2004: 145-172.

Whereas last meeting's readings dealt largely with the history of faith in the public sphere, these two texts dwell more on proposals regarding what relationship faith should have to the public sphere, in the present and future. As Andrew Murphy explained in a retrospective panel on *The Naked Public Square* (published in Neuhaus' journal *First Things*), the book "captured the sense of exclusion and frustration experienced by large numbers of cultural conservatives, a frustration powered by revulsion at the increasingly radicalized social movements of the 1960s, separationist Supreme Court rulings on church and state, especially after 1963, and the widening distance between the Christian elements present at the nation's founding and the character of America's late twentieth-century culture." For Neuhaus, first writing in the 1980s, the American public square was becoming "naked" insofar as these secularizing developments had stripped it of religion by demanding that religion be treated as a strictly "private" affair comparable to personal hobbies or entertainment preferences. In proposing to "clothe" American public life again, Neuhaus presumes that faith can and must operate in the public square, and also argues that such politically engaged faith can make the public square look quite different than it once did, or would otherwise. More than twenty years after his book was published, have Neuhaus' prescriptions been filled? Has the U.S. public sphere been clothed with religion, with Christianity, with evangelical Protestantism, or with socially engaged Catholicism? And if so, has this contributed to rational democratic debate, to a greater emphasis on the moral foundations of politics, or to a sense that average citizens actually influence public matters?

In his book chapter "The Crisis of Christian Identity in America," Cornel West clearly agrees that Christianity can influence, and has influenced, politics, at least from the time of the Roman emperor Constantine and certainly in the contemporary United States. And West, like Neuhaus, believes that a religious presence in the "public square" is a good thing. But West distinguishes a "Constantinian" Christian tradition in politics from a "prophetic" tradition, with particular reference to the U.S. Whereas Constantinian Christians assume continuity between their religion and their government (whatever the particular form of government may be) and use religion to prop up the status quo, prophetic Christians work outside of and against "imperial" powers and on behalf of social justice? Is Neuhaus then a Constantinian Christian in West's terms? Do Constantinian and prophetic Christians have equal access to the public sphere? Does West paint with too broad a historical brushstroke to persuade? Could people on quite opposite ends of the political spectrum agree that there is a place for moral witness in politics? If so, what should that place be?

Meeting Three

Marla F. Frederick. *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2003.

If our previous readings have raised questions about whether religion encourages or undermines rational democratic debate, or enables members of the general public participate in the public sphere, Frederick's study of black women in North Carolina presents us with citizens who lack the political influence that some of our authors and their subjects enjoy. And if previous readings have been more concerned with the state than the church, or with religious difference than devotion, Frederick makes clear her interest in her subjects' spirituality. Does their activism that, in at least this case, faith has operated to create a genuine, "alternative," public sphere (as Frederick defines the black public sphere in relation to an "elite" public sphere, p. 224, note 22)? Frederick also notes that, in several cases, the church increases access to the public sphere by providing its members the support and motivation to engage in dialogue with opponents, whether through legal action or boycotts, or simply by serving on the local school board. Would Frederick's subjects have a role to play in Neuhaus' "clothed" public square? Does the religious right have its own alternative public sphere? How do we recognize that an alternative public sphere has become mainstream or dominant?

Meeting Four

Bonhoeffer. Martin Doblmeier, dir. DVD. 2003.

In our excerpt from *America's God*, Noll quotes Bonhoeffer among his international critics of the United States' Christian republicanism—or, more to the point, American Christians' belief that republican liberty is some kind of special blessing. For Bonhoeffer, the church did not need, and would be hindered by, the freedom provided by a state. Rather, the church would be free “only where the Gospel really and in its own power makes room for itself on earth, even and precisely when no such possibilities are offered to it” (55). Paradoxically, only without the freedom offered by the state is the church free to follow the gospel—even if doing so requires resisting the state. Does Bonhoeffer's view effectively banish faith from the public sphere? Or does it explain the only way that faith, in the fullest sense, can actually “make room for itself” in the public sphere? As Noll briefly notes, and as our film rather strongly suggests, Bonhoeffer's thoughts on American faith and politics had much to do with the position of the German Lutheran church under the Third Reich. Not entirely unlike Cornel West, Bonhoeffer did not want the church to submit to an imperial power. Yet more so than even Noll or Frederick, Bonhoeffer's concern was faith, not (primarily) the faith of religious identity and difference, but that of practice and devotion. In a Germany that had witnessed the disintegration of the public sphere, and the complete subservience of the church to political power, did not Bonhoeffer and his fellow travelers practice their faith; carry on rational and critical debate as citizens; and at least attempt to oppose an imperial power? Would any motivation besides religion have provided the kind of passionate commitment, even martyrdom, that Bonhoeffer underwent? Is Bonhoeffer's example one to follow vis-à-vis any imperial power, or only those that go to the extremes of the Third Reich? What are the larger lessons of this experience for the proper relationship of faith and the public sphere?