

In God We Trust: Religion and American Political Life

Corwin E. Smidt (Editor)

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The “Editor’s Preface” to this volume begins: “This text is designed primarily as a supplemental volume for introductory courses in American politics” (11), but this raises a question: What professors might see the need to *assign* a supplementary volume on religion and American politics? The editor helps to answer this question, as the collection is a production of Christians in Political Science (CPS), a subsection of the American Political Science Association. Further, the front matter tells us that this book has been produced “in partnership with the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities,” further specifying the intended audience. The authors, all CPS members, have contributed short essays, which are compiled in a manner more or less mirroring the organization of an introductory American government textbook. We therefore see chapter titles like, “Religion and the Constitution,” “Religion and American Public Opinion,” “Religion and American Political Parties,” “Religion and Congress” and so on. By this self-defined criterion—providing supplemental material for beginners—the volume is a success.

Given the intended audience, it is no flaw that—with the notable exception of the chapter on the Congress by James Guth and Lyman A. Kellstedt, which provides interesting (if tentative) data on religious traditions and political coalitions in the United States Congress—the book breaks no new ground. Instead, the relevant literatures are succinctly reviewed and an “approved solution” generally endorsed, at least tentatively. Each chapter is followed by a short appendix that includes discussion questions, topics for research, and follow-up exercises. While I did not always agree with the conclusions of the contributors, the discussions were generally fair, with most views receiving a respectful hearing. Most important, the collected authors do make the point—whether explicitly or implicitly—that most of their fellow political scientists have downplayed, if not ignored, the importance of religious belief in both forming political attitudes and influencing political behavior. In driving home this point, the authors do a service.

Two issues keep me from enthusiastically recommending this book. First—and perhaps inevitably, given its stated purpose—the book is somewhat dull. Reading this book was an obligation for this reviewer, and I have no doubt that most students to whom the book might be assigned would reach a similar conclusion. Even acknowledging the need to “dumb down” the material for general education purposes, surely such a project could be made more user-friendly and stimulating than are the (notoriously mind-numbing) primary texts it is intended to supplement?

My second reservation also concerns the book’s purpose, but in a somewhat different light. To say that the book is designed as a supplement for *any* American Politics course is perhaps a bit disingenuous. It is instead—in this reviewer’s opinion—specifically designed for use at evangelical Protestant colleges and presents a tentative

evangelical consensus on the role of religion in politics. This common philosophical and theological outlook of the authors (almost all of whom have previous affiliation as coauthors, colleagues, or former students) is a significant limitation of the book. For example, that the participation of Christians in politics is an unmitigated good is never questioned in any of the included essays and is enthusiastically endorsed in the closing chapter. And in fact, such an assessment is generally shared by this reviewer. However, a not insignificant strand of Christian thought (going back to Tertullian's *Apology*, at the very least) maintains that the State is utterly alien to the Christian. Since this interpretation is clearly a marginal voice in contemporary evangelicalism (several prominent Anabaptist-influenced theologians notwithstanding), it seems not to receive a respectful hearing but is, instead, brought up as a straw man to be easily dismissed. An unspoken yet clear evangelical consensus regarding the role of religion and politics forms the basis of the volume. This is no vice, but perhaps it could be more clearly articulated to the prospective purchaser.

This outlook is perhaps best illustrated in the introductory chapter on religious traditions and politics, where Catholicism (despite an apologetic footnote) is conflated with a particular variety of political Augustinianism. Such an oversimplification may suffice for use at one of the aforementioned colleges, but, for example, for a politically aware Catholic undergraduate attempting to sort through a two-thousand-year-old political tradition, confused by the tensions and incompatibilities between the political projects of neoconservative and liberal Catholics (let alone the proponents of confessional States or Catholic Worker pacifists!) this essay is of little assistance. A look at the references cited in both the opening and closing essays adds evidence to this specifically evangelical orientation. Yoder and Niebuhr are cited in both essays; Maritain, Murray, Neuhaus, Novak, Schindler, or Simon (*inter alia*) in neither. In fact, Catholic thinkers are notably absent from almost the entire work. Again, such an oversight seems to reflect an unspoken understanding that neither Catholic scholars nor Catholic students need be engaged. While I cannot speak for them, I suspect that an Anglican or Latter-Day Saint might have similar reservations.

In short, this is a work by evangelical Protestants for evangelical Protestants. It is recommended for the target audience of schools in the aforementioned Coalition of Christian Colleges and Universities, where it would be quite helpful in explaining politics as understood by most of the denominations that have provided the student body.

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