

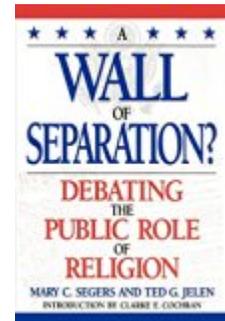
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mary C. Segers, Ted G. Jelen. *A Wall of Separation?: Debating the Public Role of Religion*. Lanham, Md. and Oxford, England: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998. xx + 191 pp. \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8476-8388-8.

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Not Whether, But How

Should religion have a role in political discourse in the United States? Cochran, Segers and Jelen do not pretend to offer new answers to this question. Indeed, the title of the book is somewhat misleading. All agree that the question is not whether religion will play a role in American politics, but how that should be done. As political scientists, the three display well the complexity of the issue and the range of answers that have been given in this already crowded field. The strength of the book lies in the clarity and straightforwardness of the prose, particularly that of Cochran and Jelen. Furthermore, all three eschew simple answers.

As the title indicates, this book is set up as a debate. It has four parts: an introduction by Clarke E. Cochran outlining the context for the contemporary debate about the role of religion in politics in the United States, an essay by Ted G. Jelen arguing for a minimal political role for religion, an essay by Mary C. Segers arguing on behalf of a public role for religion, and a set of primary documents referred to by the debaters. (The documents are obvious choices: Jefferson, Madison, Kennedy, Cuomo and several U. S. Supreme Court Cases.) It is designed as an undergraduate political science text. Used with other readings that put into issue the underlying historical and theoretical assumptions of the debate, I think it would work well in an undergraduate classroom.

Cochran's Introduction sets the context for the debate. He emphasizes that religion has been a constant

factor in American public life throughout American history, that American litigiousness and rights consciousness pushes church/state issues into the courts, that arguing for the usefulness of religion may undercut its prophetic role, and that, for him, this debate is about how democracy works. Cochran's conditions for participation by religious actors in political debate make clear that it is democracy that is fundamental, for him, not religion. Religious groups that wish to participate should, in his view, conform to the following: 1. be democratic in the way they run their own affairs; 2. develop political language; 3. stay clear of civil religion; 4. do their homework about issues; and, finally 5. model whatever they are preaching about. Cochran acknowledges that these are aspirational. He also issues a loud and helpful warning that religion is messy and that politics is about power.

Jelen's essay is certainly the better of the two. It derives an advantage from being placed first, but it is also the most clearly and forcefully argued. It is refreshingly candid about the downside of religion. While one might argue with all of Jelen's points, they are carefully and clearly presented. Jelen's thesis is that "for the sake of both politics and religion, religious values are best compartmentalized into a private sphere of activity" (p. 3). Jelen argues first that religion does not and cannot provide publicly accessible arguments for political action, because it is a matter of opinion, not judgment and that there is no public moral or religious consensus on

which to base such arguments. What there is a consensus about is democratic process, and religion, Jelen argues, has largely been and continues to be a force for political dysfunction, subverting not promoting democratic values. Jelen then lays forth the case that politics is also bad for religion; in order to participate in politics, religion has to dilute or compromise its principles, so it, too, is better off with privatization. Jelen concludes: "It is unreasonable to require democratic government to collaborate in challenging and limiting its own legitimacy" (p. 43).

Segers, like Cochran, announces a "fundamental commitment to liberal, democratic values" (p. 54). But she argues that "religion promotes and enhances democracy in the United States" (p. 55). She starts with a 10-page summary of American religious history to support her contention that evangelical religion has always been hand in glove with American politics. In the second part of her essay describing religion's contemporary role, Segers argues that religion broadens political representation, trains citizens in political skills and transmits moral values. Religion is useful to a liberal democracy because it provides mediating structures that help democracy function. Segers ends with the question: "As a society, we have come to accept that one's race, gender, and ethnicity provide valuable insights and perspectives that should be brought into our civil conversation. If this is true, why exclude religion from the mix of backgrounds, contexts and perspectives" (p. 108)?

The most serious problem with the book is not in deficiencies of the essays but in the limitations posed by the question. It is virtually meaningless to ask whether religion "in-general" should play a role in American public life. Religion is too complex and too intertwined with other cultural and social forms to be separated out. It will go on being there, providing imagined realities for people, being constructive and destructive, no matter what the political scientists say. The question posed by this book is left over from a time in which religion meant Protestant Christianity and the state meant the pre-welfare state. It is left over from a time when the evils of European religious establishment were in the front of everyone's minds and when separation seemed possible. All that began to change in the early republic. Religion and government changed and expanded and both were democratized. And our understanding of religion changed. Maybe this is not an "enduring question," as the title of the series suggest, but one which we should stop asking.

What can/does "religion" mean? What is the his-

tory of the meaning of this word? What happens when "religion" and particular religions are reified in legal and political language? Can we talk about religion without privileging Christianity? These questions are not just for religion scholars. Students should be introduced to the idea that a particular understanding of "religion" is built into the contemporary American debate about religion and politics, an understanding the historical origins of which are largely concealed. "Religion" is merely gestured to here as if everyone knows what it is. It is also used synonymously with "belief." For many religion scholars today religion would be more nearly synonymous with "culture." Most religion is not about "belief." A Protestant model of religion as individual, chosen and believed dominates this discussion and the larger public debate. Very little time is given to religion that is communal, given, and enacted. Religion is described by Jelen as being "contaminated" by politics. When is religion not "contaminated" by politics? There is no pure religion which can act for better or worse. Everything is mixed up together. Hard questions about the complexity of religious reality and the language that is used to describe it are mostly avoided here.

Historians will have difficulty with the way all three use history in service of their political ends. The larger public debate, of which this book forms a part, has been highly polemical, rife with claims that "history shows." That tendency is evident here, too. Segers, in particular, indulges in the use of "law office history" to support her positions. Her summary of American religious history abounds in assumptions about the motivations of religious actors and contains no citations to primary or secondary historical works. She conflates historical movements, institutions and events at a breathtaking speed. In arguing for the intentions of the founders, Segers uses a by-now hackneyed contrast between Roger Williams and Thomas Jefferson, with no real acknowledgment that they lived 150 years apart, a critical one hundred and fifty years in American history. Roger Williams is a somewhat dangerous ally. Yes, he was concerned about the encroachments of the world on the church, but he had severe doubts about whether the church existed at all outside a small gathered community. His position was probably closer to Jelen's than Segers's. He was committed to a civil society and deeply suspicious of those who claimed to act in God's name. Jelen, on the other hand, attempts to avoid the problem of selective historical references by saying that history is irrelevant, but he then argues that American history "shows" religion's threat to democracy.

In all fairness, this book is about democracy, not religion or history. And on democracy our debaters do not really disagree. All three are committed to the importance of a “civil society.” For all three, it is democracy that is fundamental, or “ultimate,” to use Paul Tillich’s word, not God. It would have been interesting to have someone argue against democratic values, or at least to

argue that when religion acts prophetically, it subverts democratic values in a healthy way. Maybe religion cannot always be civil. Maybe that is its value.

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