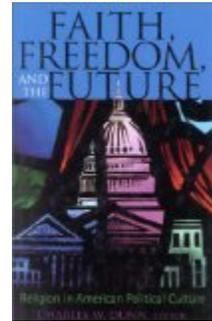


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Charles W. Dunn, ed. *Faith, Freedom, and the Future: Religion in American Political Culture*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003. xxiii + 115 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7425-2330-2.

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## A Resurgence of Religion in the Public Square?

Readers who have kept abreast of the debate over the status of religion in contemporary politics will find this collection of essays challenging and provocative. In 2001, Grove City College celebrated its 125th anniversary by inviting eight prominent scholars, including historians, social scientists and natural scientists, to address the theme "Faith, Freedom and the Future." This theme, instead of providing a common focus, prompted the participants to explore the intersection of religion and the world of politics from a multiplicity of perspectives.

In an introductory essay, Charles Dunn, the editor of this collection, describes the evolution of the American polity from a nation founded on the unifying values of Protestant Christianity to a pluralistic, secular society, often overtly hostile to religion. He notes that paradoxically the flourishing of political freedom prompted the immigration of Roman Catholics, Jews, Muslims and other non-Christian groups as well as the proliferation of Protestant denominations. As a consequence, Christianity no longer plays "its historic role in American politics" (p. xxiii). Dunn questions whether the current kaleidoscope of secular values can sustain either national unity or the future health of Christianity.

Marvin Olasky shares Dunn's description of the contemporary American polity but finds hope in President George W. Bush's "faith-based initiative." Olasky anticipates that President Bush's personal faith convictions may overcome "Christophobia," which surfaces whenever the role of religion in public policy is discussed.

However, the author argues forcefully that Christian believers must be free to evangelize and proselytize as they serve the poor, the needy, and the addicted if "faith-based initiatives" are to be truly transformative. The flourishing of religious-based social services will not signal the end of the reign of secularism but will be a first step toward restoring religion in public life.

>From his perspective as a religious historian, Mark Noll focuses on the most significant and unanticipated changes that occurred within American Christianity during the twentieth century. His interpretation counters the tendency to identify hostile secular forces as the sole cause of the changing status of religion. The twentieth-century theological focus on the Holy Spirit fueled Pentecostal and Evangelical church movements, which in turn expanded American religious pluralism. Consequently mainstream Protestant denominations declined. Simultaneously there was an unanticipated increase in Protestant-Catholic engagement and a surge in ethnic Christian communities. Noll predicts a future in which there will be "*both* increasing Christian vitality and decreasing Christian influence" (p. 38). Christians will exhibit a more lively intellectual life, they will approach politics from a wider range of perspectives, and they will increasingly identify with the world-wide Christian community.

James Billington and George Weigel analyze the collapse of European Communism from the perspective of faith and freedom. Billington places these events in the

context of Christianity's historical role in forming Europe's political regimes. He concludes that in the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union "a key role was played by the resurfacing of suppressed Christian ideas and by the actions of ordinary Christians, most of whom have not yet been discovered by the historians" (p. 9). George Weigel provides a contrasting account. He identifies Pope John Paul II's moral appeal to conscience and culture as motivating people to overcome their passive acceptance of Communism. Weigel's concluding question is whether Communism's collapse was caused by the cultural revitalization of Christianity, or whether this transformation was "the result of a singular personality meeting a unique set of circumstances with singular prescience and effect" (p. 108).

George Marsden and Jean Bethke Elshtain explore the intersection of "faith and freedom" in the context of the evangelical Christian tradition. Elshtain focuses on why many Christian evangelicals are morally reluctant to engage in politics and government. Applying the perspective of St. Augustine and Reinhold Niebuhr, she argues for a Christian realism that fosters active participation in politics to achieve the best possible expression of an earthly justice, one that will only imperfectly reflect divine justice. Marsden acknowledges the tendency of some Christian evangelicals to see academic scholarship as either antithetical or irrelevant to their evangelical mission. He argues that since ideas are a force in shaping history, Christians must be intellectually engaged. Post-modern America offers Christian colleges a unique opportunity to participate in and influence the mainstream intellectual dialog about politics, culture and history.

The essays of Robert George and Michael Behe are examples of George Marsden's description of Christian scholarship. Utilizing a natural law analysis, Robert George argues that the "rule of law," even if viewed as a narrow legal concept, testifies to the human capacity to use "practical reason" to make moral choices. By recognizing our ability to choose, the law implicitly affirms

the spiritual dimension of human nature. Michael Behe summarizes his previous published critique of Darwinian evolutionary theory. According to Behe, the theory of natural selection inadequately explains the complex biochemical changes involved in the adaptation of biological systems to new environments. Behe concludes that a close investigation of the "evolution" of the physical world reveals the existence of intelligent design, even though scientific scrutiny may never reveal the identity of the "designer."

Placing within a single book a series of lectures delivered over the course of a year has its risks. Though lacking a unified focus, this book compels the reader to confront the range of possible interpretations of the contemporary juxtaposition of faith and freedom. Among possible responses are these three. First, does the presidency of George W. Bush indicate that religious values are again at the core of debate over public policy, or are we only witnessing a temporary public display of religious symbols in an otherwise irreformably secular political culture? Second, four participants who speak from the Roman Catholic intellectual tradition were invited to present lectures before a mainly Protestant Evangelical audience. Does this signify that the intellectual and cultural differences between Catholics and Evangelical Protestants have evaporated, or are these differences only temporarily shelved in order to achieve shared cultural and political objectives? Finally, did the rejection of Communism in Eastern Europe reflect the resurgence of the cultural/political influence of Christianity, or will the influence of religion rapidly fade as Eastern European consumers expand their quest for the materialistic delights of capitalism?

This collection of essays should not be overlooked because it lacks a central unifying theme; it should be read because it requires readers to form their own response to the intersection of religion, culture, and politics in contemporary life as interpreted by nine thoughtful and insightful commentators.

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