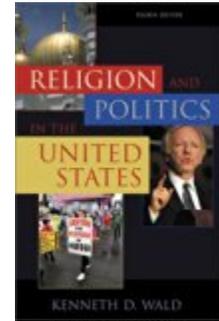


Kenneth D. Wald. *Religion and Politics in the United States*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003. xvii + 381 pp. \$96.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7425-1840-7; \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7425-1841-4.

Reviewed by Marty McMahon (University of Mary Hardin-Baylor)
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Balancing Act: Confronting the Difficult Role of Religion in American Politics

Religion and politics have often been described as the two subjects that should not be discussed in polite company. How much more would that be true of the intersection of the two? Yet, understanding the relationship between the two is critical to addressing political issues in the United States. Most nations throughout history—and even in much of the world today—would find it surprising that anyone would doubt the importance of religion to political decisions. Americans have, however, often assumed that the two should be separate. Kenneth Wald argues that religion plays a more significant role in American politics than most people imagine, but not always in the most expected ways.

Wald's primary interest is the relationship of religion and politics in the post-World War II United States. The vast majority of the book focuses on that era. However, he does provide grounding for modern issues by showing how similar issues have been addressed throughout American history—and how American cultural forces helped to shape those issues. He gives a powerful picture of this by providing four vignettes that appear (to a modern reader) to describe the David Koresh incident, Jewish Zionism, opposition to abortion and Catholic opposition to nuclear arms.

Instead, they represent conflicts with nineteenth-century Mormons, Irish-American support for a free Ireland, abolitionism, and the pacifism of William Jennings Bryan (pp. 23-4). Wald also shows how colonial religious history contributed to the development of some of

the core principles of American democracy. The Puritans might not have intended to create religious freedom, but they set in motion forces that made it more likely to develop. If it is necessary for individuals to make a choice in order to respond to Christ, then the choice cannot be coerced. Roger Williams would argue that long before Jefferson. The Puritans certainly rejected Williams's interpretation, but Williams proved to be on more logical ground.

The basic theme of the majority of the book is that religion is often influential in helping persons to develop political positions, but it is rarely predictive of the political perspectives that individuals will hold. In looking at six different religious groups (mainline Protestants, evangelical Protestants, black Protestants, Catholics, Jews and seculars), Wald finds that all sides of most political issues can be represented within all the groups. Each group may have a basic orientation, but there is also a lot of variety. However, those who most closely identify with their religious affiliation (those who are more active in their church) are more likely to share the basic political orientation of their church. The primary exception comes in the area of "family" issues. In those areas, individuals are likely to reflect the views of their church more consistently.

One of the strengths of Wald's work is the balance with which he attempts to treat those he discusses. Unlike many who write on religion and politics—and especially those who write on the Religious Right—Wald at-

tempts to understand the people he describes. In addressing the political mobilization of Evangelical Protestants, for instance, he notes that Evangelicals remain a diverse group who are hardly all committed to the ideals and approach of the more extreme members of the Religious Right. Yet, he also notes the dangers of a political approach that sees no room for compromise and demonizes opponents. Even in doing so, though, he recognizes that religious belief is not the only thing that can lead to such extremes. Some political commentators seem to imply that those who believe too deeply become a danger to the political system. Wald notes, correctly, that it is the content of belief and not the depth of it that determines the compatibility of a religious system with democratic government. For instance, a person who believes that faith only has meaning if entered voluntarily is not likely to believe that coercing belief is a reasonable activity. On the other hand, secularists at times can be dismissive of the value of religious commitment to the individual; the recent French decision to ban the Muslim headscarf in schools is a good example.

Wald's chapter on "Religion and the State" is the most curious element of the book. Wald attempts to give a brief overview of how the controversies surrounding the First Amendment have been addressed by the Supreme Court. The chapter seems unnecessary since Wald acknowledges that most of the religious issues on the national agenda do not involve the legal standing of religion. Forty pages of text are simply not sufficient to do justice to the complexities of the church-state issue. That leads to oversimplifications. For instance, Wald refers to Justice Douglas's comment that "we are a religious people whose institutions presuppose a Supreme Being."^[1] as the "clarion call for accommodation" (p. 88). Given

that Douglas quoted that phrase again in his concurring opinion in *Engle v. Vitale*, where he also indicated that the *Everson* Court was not separationist enough, it is hard to see how Douglas could qualify as an accommodationist.^[2] To some extent this shows the problem of the separationist/accommodationist dichotomy, which fails to adequately address the difficult church-state cases. Regardless, Wald is simply not able to give the kind of attention to the church-state problems that he gives to the issue of religion and politics in the rest of the book. The book would be stronger if the chapter was simply removed.

Another area that might strengthen Wald's work is a more thorough look at the institutional power of the church. Wald tends to approach the subject of religion from an individualistic viewpoint. He examines how Catholics respond to political issues, but what about the Catholic Church's role as a whole? While the community and institutional issues are addressed, they do not seem to have the same interest for Wald that the individualistic questions do. More attention to the role of the institutional church in American politics would be helpful.

Overall, Wald's treatment of the questions surrounding religion and politics in the United States is excellent. The book would be excellent for an upper level or graduate course that introduces students to the complexities of religion and politics in a free democracy.

Notes

[1]. *Zorach v. Clauson* 343 U.S. 306 (1952).

[2]. *Engle v. Vitale* 370 U.S. 421 (1962).

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