

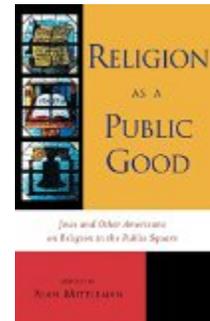
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Alan Mittleman, ed. *Religion as a Public Good: Jews and Other Americans on Religion in the Public Square*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003. x + 336 pp. \$96.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7425-3124-6; \$36.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7425-3125-3.

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Religion's Role in

Even before the events of September 11, 2001, religion played a prominent role in the American public square. Typically, George W. Bush punctuated his speeches with the formulaic refrain “God bless America” and spoke with some pride about his “born-again” experience. Beyond this, the Bush administration proposed to establish an office to encourage “faith-based initiatives”—benevolent activities undertaken by certain religious communities selected to receive a portion of their funding from the government. After the attacks on New York and Washington, D.C., the United States commenced what was termed a “crusade” against world terrorism. Now a war-time president, Bush revealed that he consulted regularly with a higher “father” as he prosecuted the war against what amounted to—by his reckoning—the forces of evil. General William Boykin, touring the United States after accomplishing the mission of conquering Iraq, attributed (perhaps prematurely) the United States’ victory to his conviction that “my God is much bigger than their Allah.” Meanwhile, on campuses across the United States, scholars of Islam were called in to give lectures on a variety of topics that, at base, had to do with the “true” nature of Islam or that focused on some variant of the question “why do ‘they’ hate ‘us’ so much?”

And so this book appears on the scene at a propitious moment. Its main title, *Religion as a Public Good*, suggests a thesis that some of the book’s many authors dispute and others take for granted. The subtitle, *Jews and other Americans on Religion in the Public Square*, identifies

the lens through which the matter of religion in America is regarded. Most of the writers are Jewish scholars or scholars of Judaism. Emphasis on this particular tradition gives the volume focus and a common vocabulary—or “insider discourse”—that unites the many essays even though they are anchored in a variety of different disciplines including legal studies, history, sociology, political science, Jewish and religious studies, and theology.

The plan of the book, as outlined by its editor Alan Mittleman in a helpful introductory essay, consists of five interrelated sections. The first section offers a historical discussion and philosophical critique of the rights-oriented political thought, or “liberalism,” that originated in the seventeenth century and was foundational for the American republic. The “great wall of separation” between church and state receives extensive consideration here. Jean Bethke Elshtain, for example, laments the de facto relegation of religion to the role of “public nuisance” and argues for an increase, rather than a lessening, of expressions of religious commitment in the public square. Alan Mittleman, meanwhile, argues that religious communities and the larger society are interdependent and that society as a whole thrives when religious communities are healthy. “Charitable choice” programs that allow faith-based groups to receive money to provide social services emerge as one way for the society to “cultivate virtue”: to advance its own concerns—for morality, among other things—while also aiding particular religious communities.

The second section revisits the wall of separation, this time considering whether religion itself ought to be a public or a private matter. Two authors, Kenneth Wald and Erwin Chemerinsky, suggest that by keeping religion private, religious freedom—that is, freedom *of* religion—is preserved. Chemerinsky, for instance, insists that money “given” to religious groups by government agencies inevitably come with strings attached (p. 108). A third author, Gertrude Himmelfarb, argues that society is “nurtured by the virtues that traditional religions promote” (p. 8). Freedom of religion should not, in other words, be confused with freedom *from* religion. The crucial matter of who gets to decide what constitutes a “traditional” and, therefore, “legitimate” religion is left unconsidered in (historian) Himmelfarb’s essay, although the author’s appreciation for the phrase “axis of evil” to designate certain enemies of the United States and her agreement with the current administration’s policies toward Israel suggest that the state—or at least this particular configuration of state—would be in a position to make appropriate decisions. (Indeed, the Bush administration did propose to exercise this power when determining what religious groups would qualify for government grants through its Office for Faith-Based Initiatives; the administration insisted that the Nation of Islam, among other non-mainstream sects, would not qualify for funds, and by implication, as a legitimate religion.)

This leads into the third section in which the authors consider how Jews, in particular, ought to construct their role in the public sphere. Important conceptions arise here such as the “common good,” the legitimacy of secular authority from a particular Jewish perspective, and the different obligations incurred from the Noahide and Mosaic covenants—that is to say, the good sought for society in general and the particular ethical demands placed upon Jews by virtue of their faith. The fourth section engages the matter of contemporary American religious pluralism.

Many of the authors in this section rely on the concept of a Judeo-Christian tradition (an “American way of life”) as articulated half a century ago in Will Herberg’s *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* (1955). The discussions in this important section range widely. Alan Wolfe asserts that a love for liberty has become the common possession of all Americans and this affection, nurtured by all religious viewpoints as well as non-religious ones, requires no specific anchoring in “some shared religio-moral underpinnings.” Carl Raschke, on the other hand, calls for a radical reassessment of the virtues of pluralism in the aftermath of September 11. He advocates an affirmation of

the “Judeo-Christian” tradition as definitional for American identity.

The final section contains the reflections of two public figures. Mickey Edwards describes how Judaism informed his public personae and political deliberations as an eight-term member of Congress from Oklahoma. Kevin Hasson, the founder of an interfaith public law firm dedicated to the advancement of religious liberty, offers what amounts to an Eliadean concept of the essentially religious human being. He argues that pluralism is the consequence of an innate longing for transcendence. The human person’s search for both truth and goodness is ontologically grounded. Thus human rights proceed naturally from a definition of who the human person is. In an afterword, Jonathan Sacks compares and contrasts the “Jewish political tradition” with the Greek system and argues that republican government in the United States is more dependent upon Judaism than is generally acknowledged. Here Sacks revisits aspects of an argument advanced in the nineteenth century by Oscar Strauss, a prominent Jewish lawyer and lecturer who served as ambassador to Turkey during the administration of Grover Cleveland and as Theodore Roosevelt’s Secretary of Commerce and Labor. Strauss’s almost-forgotten work is signaled by Mittleman in the introduction. Because Sacks develops Strauss’s argument along lines Mittleman encourages and because Sacks’s essay touches neatly and concisely upon many of the issues that are addressed in detail from chapter to chapter, I would recommend reading it at the beginning, rather than the end, of the book.

The diversity of disciplines represented in this book is a significant strength. It participates, for example, in conversations about the origins of the American self as articulated by scholars such as Bernard Baylin and Gordon Wood. Students of the American constitution—especially the long historical struggle over the doctrine of “separation of church and state”—will find many of these essays provocative and informative. When it comes to matters of public policy, I found myself particularly engaged with the debate about the desirability of a voucher system for religious schools. While some authors expressed extreme skepticism about this kind of support (suggesting, as in the case noted above with reference to Erwin Chemerinsky, that the other foot will inevitably drop and an unhealthy interdependence with the government would ensue from such an arrangement), Alan Mittleman and Gertrude Himmelfarb, for example, found common cause with Evangelicals who also support this program. Those in favor of vouchers note that Jewish religious schools would be better able to offer training in

the traditions of Judaism—a key to Jewish survival in a culture of intermarriage and other forms of assimilation. Jewish religious education, meanwhile, would benefit the culture at large on account of its moral teachings. While the case for Jewish schools might not raise a great deal of concern for the “liberal minded,” the idea that the government, through its system of taxation and redistribution of capital, would help support institutions that advance the doctrine of “creationism,” for example, seems neither a particularly desirable arrangement to me nor a contribution to the public good. And this would be one of the more benign examples of the kinds of notions that could be perpetuated in the name of education under a voucher system. Meanwhile, the suspicion seems well-founded that the state would come back asking for something in return for its beneficence. When one considers the recent revelation that the Bush-Cheney campaign has asked sympathetic churches to serve as bases for political “informational” activities in anticipation of the upcoming national election, one detects the reverberations of a vowel shift from “tit” to “tat.”

The essays in this volume were prepared for presentation at a national conference sponsored by the Pew Charitable Trusts that was to have taken place on September 11, 2001. As a probable consequence of their pre-September 11 composition, many of the essays seem to adopt the notion advanced most explicitly by Kevin Hasson that religion is a basic and (therefore?) essentially good human activity. Although it does not undercut

the enduring significance of these essays, most of them have not been reconceived in the aftermath of September 11—though occasional passing reference to that cataclysm is made in a few essays. A notable exception is Carl Raschke’s chapter, “9/11 and the Aftershocks: Rethinking American Secularism and Religious Pluralism.” Raschke raises crucial questions about America’s embrace (in theory and rhetoric, at least) of religious pluralism. Interestingly, his “rethinking” results in an affirmation of a “Judeo-Christianity” at the core of American civil religion. Many of the book’s authors also appeal to some variant of this construct to signal the original and ongoing importance of Judaism in the making of American society. (A similar appeal to this tradition is also made by former Alabama Supreme Court justice Roy Moore and his supporters to signal the need for a Ten Commandments monument in the state’s hall of justice.) In curious ways, this appeal to “Judeo-Christianity” as a core feature of American identity sounds a lot like Josiah Strong’s insistence, over a century ago, that the animating force of American society was “Anglo-Saxon” culture. Strong advanced his vision for America in the book *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis* (1885). *Religion as a Public Good* can be understood as both a continuation of, and a contribution to, the ongoing conversation about who the implied “we” are—culturally, legally, politically, religiously—behind the possessive pronoun in Strong’s highly contestable—and enduringly debatable—notion of “our country.”

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