

Background

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Private Faith, Big Government: Understanding the Impact of Marginalizing Religion

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In the 20th century, America witnessed a significant transition toward a privatized understanding of religion. Social and political pressures have prompted many to view religion as inappropriate in public or political arenas. Meanwhile, trends within many churches have contributed to narrowing the focus of faith. As a result, where people once considered religion as relevant to many aspects of life and society, prevailing notions now often constrict it to spiritual beliefs and psychological health. This marginalized, inward-looking faith has the potential to weaken the perceived responsibility and social relevance of local churches.

This change has political implications, as religion's role in the lives of individuals and in society at large shapes Americans' expectations of government. When religion is pigeon-holed as private rituals and beliefs, the government more easily presents itself as the entity most responsible for solving social problems. But the Constitution declares freedom not just for private beliefs, but for the public *exercise* of religion, testifying to the nature of faith to engage the whole person and the entirety of life. When religion is exercised in this more comprehensive way, congregations can meet a wide range of needs and prevent unhealthy dependence on the government.

Dividing Public and Private

One observer of Western society claims that “the decisive feature of our culture” is “the division of human life into public and private.”¹ This division is significant because it influences the way Americans think about and categorize different institutions and

Talking Points

- Where religious congregations were once considered important institutions for meeting a wide array of needs, social pressures have relegated religion to a private realm of life while recent trends within many churches have narrowed religion's focus to spiritual beliefs and psychological health.
- The narrowing of religion to a matter of one's “insides and insights” has opened the door for government to present itself as the authority most responsible for meeting material and social needs.
- A comprehensive, robust conception of religion is important for safeguarding the constitutional freedom of people not just to believe or profess doctrines, but to “exercise” faith in public.
- Such understanding is also important for legally protecting religious communities that can provide a sense of mutual responsibility and community belonging—key factors in meeting people's needs and preventing unhealthy dependence upon the government.

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activities in society. For example, our culture tends to view the public as the realm of politics, economics, and science and the private as the realm of family life and religion.

Stephen Carter, a law professor at Yale University, describes the effects of this “privatization”² of religion: “[W]e often ask our citizens to split their public and private selves, telling them in effect that it is fine to be religious in private, but there is something askew when those private beliefs become the basis for public action.”³ At the root of this process, Carter asserts, is the widely held intuition that “religion is like building model airplanes, just another hobby: something quiet, something private, something trivial.”⁴

This segmentation of public and private worlds can easily lead to the conclusion that the contents of these two realms are separate and distinct. Because politics and religion are believed to fall on different sides of this division, people often conclude that their subject matters are fundamentally different.⁵

- Politics deals with law and order; religion deals with salvation and spiritual health.
- Politics focuses on cities and states; religion focuses on “sanctuaries” and heaven.
- Politics is about exercising power; religion is about exercising forgiveness.
- Politics concerns people’s bodies (and property); religion concerns people’s souls.
- Politics is about justice; religion is about love.

This division gives rise to social and political pressures that relegate religion to a private corner of life, a “safe” distance not only from government policy, but also from social debates and public concerns in general.

Privatization Narrows the Focus of Religion

In the midst of these social pressures, the prevailing conception of religion itself has changed in America. Many religious adherents have accepted a constricted view of religion that is conducive to its exile from politics, economics, science, and other arenas. The sub-set of issues assumed to fall within religion’s domain usually centers on doctrinal instruction and spiritual guidance—matters of “belief,” “conscience,” and “sensibility.”⁶ In short, the social pressures for privatization have fanned the flames of religiously privatized, or narrowed, forms of faith.

This narrowed focus has been especially evident in the rise of therapeutic spirituality.⁷ According to Professor James Herrick, “an extraordinary redefinition of fundamental religious belief has occurred in the West,” and “the resultant spiritual transition has been stunning in its rapidity, scope and impact.”⁸ At the center of this “new religious synthesis”—what Princeton University sociologist Robert Wuthnow describes as a “transformation of American spirituality”⁹—lies the popular conception of the self understood in terms of psychology and of religion understood in terms of self-actualization.

1. Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), p. 34.
2. Peter L. Berger, Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind* (New York: Random House, 1973), Chapter 3.
3. Stephen Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), p. 8.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
5. See Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), Chapter 2. The common stock phrases in our social discourse not only reveal this dichotomous way of thinking, but also perpetuate it. On the campaign trail, for example, questions are often raised about “bringing religion into politics,” or vice versa, as though religion is foreign cargo being smuggled across territorial boundaries. Many speak of religion and politics as “meddling” or “intruding” in each other, and some even talk about politics as an activity from which religious adherents can, and perhaps should, “retreat” or “fast.” Such phrases reinforce the mindset that the two are, in their pure and natural state, different, separate, and apart.
6. See Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).
7. For an in-depth discussion of the therapeutic tendency within modern Western culture, see Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud* (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2006).

According to theologian David Wells, what God is principally thought to offer believers in this new spirituality is relief from negative feelings like anxiety and doubt.¹⁰ This therapeutic focus was noticed by Wuthnow in a study of support groups in the United States, two-thirds of which focus on Bible study. When asked why they joined, the number one reason participants gave was to “feel better about yourself.”¹¹

How Changes in Religion Can Influence Mutual Responsibility and Community Belonging

When religion is narrowed to comprise only a certain set of issues or concerns, local congregations tend to exercise a reduced social role and relevance. Traditionally, religious communities in America have played a significant role in providing a sense of belonging and mutual aid to their members and exercising responsibility for “the least of these” in society.¹² In the past, this prompted people to turn to religious congregations not only to receive help when they were in need, but also to help others.

Many congregations still consider it important to help others today. Prevailing notions of religion, however, seem less able to offer a vibrant sense of either mutual responsibility or belonging within a socially significant community.¹³ A narrowed conception can

drain a sense of responsibility to God, dilute a sense of responsibility to others, and dampen a sense of community belonging within congregations.

Responsibility to God. According to Wells, postmodern spirituality provides less a sense of a transcendent Other who calls us to be holy than it does a sense of a God whom we incorporate to have a more meaningful life.¹⁴ Privatized, therapeutic religion can therefore drain a notion of responsibility to God—the sense of standing before an Other who summons us to obey.

The notion of responsibility is rooted in the recognition of a valid call to action.¹⁵ For people of faith, the sense of a God who calls us to be accountable—who presses in upon us and summons our most earnest attention and effort—makes the teaching to care for others binding.¹⁶ For instance, in explaining why his church took in many evacuees after Hurricane Katrina, Rev. Bland Washington of Allen Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, declared, “We’re doing it from the fact that God wants us to do this.”¹⁷

When God’s supposed relevance is limited primarily to spiritual matters, narrowly defined, government’s power can seem more immediate and authoritative in many other areas of life. For instance, the fact that government *demand*s that citizens pay taxes—while most churches only

8. James A. Herrick, *The Making of the New Spirituality: The Eclipse of the Western Religious Tradition* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), p. 17.
9. Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 14; quoted in Herrick, *The Making of the New Spirituality*, p. 19.
10. David F. Wells, *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), pp. 50–51.
11. Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America’s New Quest for Community* (New York: Free Press, 1994).
12. See Marvin Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 1992), and David T. Beito, *From Mutual Aid to the Welfare State: Fraternal Societies and Social Services, 1890–1967* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).
13. See L. Gregory Jones and James Buckley, *Spirituality and Social Embodiment* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997); Os Guinness, *The Gravedigger File* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1983); Wells, *Losing Our Virtue*; and Clapp, *A Peculiar People*.
14. Wells, *Losing Our Virtue*, pp. 16, 50.
15. See Ryan Messmore, “My Neighbor’s Keeper? Rethinking Responsibility and the Role of Government,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2058, August 2, 2007, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Religion/bg2058.cfm>.
16. Wells, *Losing Our Virtue*, p. 16.
17. Joseph B. Treaster and Deborah Sontag, “Storm and Crisis: The Overview; Despair and Lawlessness Grip New Orleans as Thousands Remain Stranded in Squalor,” *The New York Times*, September 2, 2005, at <http://select.nytimes.com/search/restricted/article?res=F50F1EFE3F550C718CDDA00894DD404482>.

encourage members to pay tithes—can foster a more concrete sense of obligation to the former. This can encourage an inclination to look to the state as the entity most capable of solving tangible problems or meeting material needs.

Responsibility to Others. This narrowed religious focus can also dilute a sense of responsibility to others by weakening the notion that people in general—and, in particular, members of the same congregation—make valid claims on each other's time, efforts, and resources. When religion is held to concern primarily spiritual concerns, meeting the non-spiritual needs of others can seem optional rather than obligatory.

In such contexts, church leaders find it difficult to train their members in challenging or uncomfortable practices that they do not already find compelling.¹⁸ Many congregation members in America seem motivated to serve others through soup kitchens or canned food drives. They may be less likely, however, to view other forms of service, such as meeting the larger financial, physical, and social needs for which government increasingly claims responsibility, as a religious obligation.

Wuthnow confirms that Bible study support groups in America are often asked to offer support to people, but seldom to challenge them to change their lives. Indeed, he reports that if such a group makes demands on people's lives, suggesting specific disciplines and practices, members will likely leave to find another, more supportive and less challenging group.¹⁹

Community Belonging. Privatized, therapeutic religion can dampen the ability of local churches to provide people with a sense of communal belonging by weakening social bonds and producing pale imitations of religious community. Herrick's and Wuthnow's work suggests that many religious adherents today do not pursue joint church projects or share

common experiences outside of once-a-week worship services, if at all.²⁰ This makes it more difficult for congregation members to know each other's needs and to develop a strong sense of communal identity and common moral purpose. As a result, this situation can not only weaken the sense of obligation to sacrifice for fellow members in need, but also lessen the tendency of those in need to look to their church for help in many cases.

If they view churches more as places to practice religion, narrowly understood, than as communities of faith to which to belong, people may only feel comfortable asking churches for assistance with "religious" matters. In a study of 15 neighborhoods in Pennsylvania, Wuthnow reports that respondents are more likely to turn to churches to meet emotional or spiritual needs while gravitating to government or other public agencies to address financial and unemployment problems (despite the fact that churches appear to be located geographically closer to most respondents than are government and other agencies).²¹

In sum, when religion's ability to foster mutual responsibility and community belonging is diluted in these ways, people's expectations tend to shift to other institutions, including the state, for meeting non-spiritual needs.

Reduced Social Role for Churches Weakens a Check on Government

As the social role of local congregations is narrowed, society loses an important check on the role and reach of government. The presence of a diversity of socially relevant, morally authoritative institutions is an indispensable safeguard against the centralization of authority in government. When non-governmental institutions—including churches—decline in significance, the role of the state is likely to increase. "The real conflict in modern political history," claims Robert Nisbet, has not

18. See Donald A. Luidens, Dean R. Hoge, and Benton Johnson's comments about the challenges of community and church authority in "The Emergence of Lay Liberalism," *Theology Today*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (July 1994), pp. 249–255.

19. Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey*.

20. For example, see Robert Wuthnow, *Saving America? Faith-Based Services and the Future of Civil Society* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 73.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 206.

been “between State and individual, but between State and social group.”²²

As religious adherents back away from viewing churches as responsible for certain areas—when they consign issues of poverty and injustice primarily to institutions in a separate realm—the government is left as the dominant institution, gradually absorbing more power and control. But religious congregations have traditionally exercised responsibility for concrete needs and social challenges, motivating sacrificial giving and mutual aid on a wide array of issues.

Narrowing religion to a matter more of one’s “insides and insights” than of the full-bodied life of a responsible community permits the growth of the paternal state. The state begins to exercise responsibility for people’s needs in ways that the church and other institutions previously did.

Public Policy Assumptions About Religion: An Example

Public policy not only reflects, but also reinforces and shapes the public imagination and discourse.²³ Policy contains conceptions of religion that can presuppose and foster either socially relevant and responsible congregations or a more privatized faith that would encourage dependence on the state.

For example, the draft language of one recent bill in Congress²⁴ attempted to define “religious” organizations as those whose primary purpose concerns religious ritual, worship, or the teaching of doctrines. Understood in these terms, “religion” is assumed to take place only in certain locations (church sanctuaries, synagogues, mosques, etc.) and at certain times, and “religious jobs” are exercised only by preachers, teachers, and worship leaders. This limited conception assumes a cordoned-off “spiritual” section of life and thus works against a

more integrated understanding of religion and life that is still held by many Americans.

Definitions of religion in law carry significant implications and highlight the need to consider seriously the way religion is understood in and shaped by policy.

Conclusion

Traditionally, religious congregations in America have served as important social institutions for providing for those who are in need, both within and outside of their fellowships. An increasing division between “public” and “private” spheres of life has relegated religion to a reduced social role as trends within many churches have led to an unbalanced focus on spiritual beliefs and psychological health.

Together, these trends narrow the focus of religion and open the door for government to present itself as the authority most responsible for meeting material and social needs. As the perceived responsibility and social relevance of local congregations weakens, citizens’ potential reliance on government is likely to increase.

A more comprehensive, robust conception of religion is important for safeguarding the constitutional freedom of people not just to believe or profess doctrines, but to “exercise” faith in public. Such understanding is also important for legally protecting religious communities that can provide a sense of mutual responsibility and community belonging—key factors in meeting people’s needs and preventing unhealthy dependence upon the government.

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22. Robert Nisbet, *The Quest for Community: A Study in the Ethics of Order and Freedom* (San Francisco: ICS Press, 1990), p. 98.

23. See Ryan Messmore, “A Moral Case Against Big Government: How Government Shapes the Character, Vision, and Virtue of Citizens,” Heritage Foundation *First Principles* No. 9, February 27, 2007, at www.heritage.org/Research/Thought/sp9.cfm.

24. Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) of 2007. See especially Sec. 6 (a) and (b) of the proposed bill (H.R. 2015) at www.govtrack.us/congress/billtext.xpd?bill=h110-2015. This bill, which prohibits employment decisions based upon sexual orientation, contains an exemption for religious organizations. The religious exemption that was passed by the House of Representatives was a heavily revised version of what appeared in the first draft of the bill.