

## Introduction

# Is God's Work Our Work?

### FAITH, DOUBT, AND RADICAL AMAZEMENT

Consider a political story told long ago that reminds us that the words “Jesus” and “religious” were not always reflexively associated with the words “right” or “conservative.” It is the story of Mrs. O’Reilly and her son who was dutifully taking her to the polls on Election Day. Mrs. O’Reilly always voted straight Democratic. Her son, a successful member of the upper middle class, had become an independent and voted for many Republicans.

As was their routine, the son asked the mother how she would vote, and, as always, she answered, “Straight Democratic.” The exasperated son replied, “Mom, if Jesus came back to earth and ran as a Republican, you would vote against him.” And she snapped back, “Aw, hush, why should He change His party after all these years?”

A great many Americans have come to believe that He has, in fact, changed his party after all these years. On significant parts of the right and left, there is a sense that religion always has been and always will be a conservative force. There are Republican candidates and political operatives who assume that religious people live on the political right, care primarily about issues such as gay marriage and abortion, and will forever be part of the GOP’s political base. There are liberals—though fewer than conservatives think—who buy this Republican account and write off religious people as backward and reactionary busybodies obsessed with sex.

This book insists that religious faith should not be seen as leading ineluctably to conservative political convictions. In fact, religious people hold a wide array of political views. Religion is not the enemy of reason (or

science), and people of faith are not blind automatons who never question themselves or their deepest beliefs. At the heart of my argument is the view that religious faith, far from being inevitably on the side of the status quo, should on principle hold this world to higher standards. Religious people should always be wary of the ways in which political power is wielded and skeptical of how economic privileges are distributed. They should also be mindful of how their own traditions have been used for narrow political purposes, and how some religious figures have manipulated faith to aggrandize their own power. The doctrine of original sin and the idea of a fallen side of human nature apply to people who are religious no less than to those who are not.

Throughout history, our great religious traditions—this is especially obvious in the Christian and Jewish scriptures—have preached a message of hope for more just and decent human arrangements. One of my favorite teachers, the theologian Harvey Cox, argued many years ago that “the theological enterprise seeks to grasp the problems man faces in this historic present in the light of the past and his future, that is, in light of faith and hope.” Cox was right to call for a church “which speaks with pointed specificity to its age, which shapes its message and mission not for its own comfort but for the health and renewal of the world.” Or, as the bishop who confirmed my son James put it in his sermon, Christianity is a faith of the living.

Marx saw religion as the “opium of the people.” But that can be true only if religion is seen as utterly indifferent to what happens in this world—or if it becomes a kind of decent drapery, to use Edmund Burke’s evocative term, to disguise or rationalize the authority of the already powerful. Such a faith would be incapable of challenging injustices and unconcerned about how God’s children are treated by their governments, by their employers, by their societies. Such a faith would reflexively support the status quo by offering its blessing to whatever happened to be fashionable or to whomever happened to be in power. But that is not the faith of the scriptures. It is certainly not my faith.

The title of this book can be read in two ways. It speaks to our country’s exhaustion with a religious style in politics that was excessively dogmatic, partisan, and ideological. It is a style reflecting a spirit far too certain of itself, and far too insistent on the depravity of its political adversaries. Linking religion too closely to the fortunes of one political party, or to one leader or group of leaders, is always a mistake. It encourages alienation

from faith itself—where, after all, did Voltaire come from?—by turning a concern with the ultimate into a prop for temporal power. It distorts great traditions by requiring their exponents to bob and weave in order to accommodate the political needs of a given moment or the immediate requirements of a given politician. Thus do great traditions drain themselves of their critical capacity. I do not for a moment pretend that this tendency is unique to political conservatives. The Left is also quite capable of using, and distorting, religion for its own purposes. But for more than a quarter century, it is the political Right that has used, and I believe abused, religion. A great many people—including a great many religious people—have had enough.

They have had enough for the reason embodied in the other sense of the title: reducing religion to politics or to a narrow set of public issues amounts to a great sellout of our traditions. It is common to speak of religion as “selling out” to secularism, or to modernity, or to a fashionable relativism. But there is a more immediate danger, particularly in the United States, of religion selling out to political forces that use the votes of religious people for purposes having nothing to do with a religious agenda—and, often enough, for causes that may contradict the values such voters prize most. It is a great sellout of religion to insist that it has much to teach us about abortion or gay marriage but little useful to say about social justice, war and peace, the organization of our work lives, or our approach to providing for the old, the sick, and the desperate. Religion becomes *less* relevant to public life when its role is marginalized to a predetermined list of “values issues,” when its voice is silenced or softened on the central problems facing our country and our government.

## II

I write at a moment when the religious winds are changing. Over the last two decades, and especially the last several years, we have witnessed a great commotion over religion and politics. As I argue in chapter 1, the commotion reflects both a broad renegotiation of religion's role in our public life and a particular political moment when conservative forces set about, with considerable success, to organize religious traditionalists as a voting bloc on behalf of the Republican party.

Much of the public discourse thus saw religion as a right-wing force. This assumption shaped how religion was covered in the mass media. Once, the media paid much attention to a broad range of religious figures—from Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, and Karl Barth to John Courtney Murray, Billy Graham, and Martin Luther King Jr. Beginning in the late 1970s, the focus of interest narrowed. To be sure, Pope John Paul II earned his share of coverage. But in the United States, the attention lavished on Pat Robertson, the late Jerry Falwell, and James Dobson suggested that to be religious was to cling to a rather restricted set of social and political views. The public voice of religion, as reflected in the supposedly liberal mass media, was deeply inflected with the accents of a largely southern, conservative evangelicalism.

The future of religious engagement with American public life will not be defined by the events of the recent past. In the new millennium, fresh religious voices are rising to challenge stereotypical views of religious faith. I refer here not only to Jim Wallis, Amy Sullivan, Bob Edgar, and others who have joined them in speaking eloquently on behalf of religious progressivism. There is also Rick Warren, a religious and political conservative who nonetheless insists that if Christians do not care about the poorest among them in the world, they are not being true to their faith. There is Rich Cizik, a loyal conservative and a top official of the National Association of Evangelicals, who insists that a concern for life entails an engagement with the stewardship of the Earth and the problem of global warming. There is Bono, who said he could be considered a man of the cloth only if the cloth might be considered leather. He, too, challenged Christians to stand up for the poor. And religious liberals who had spent much time reacting to the religious Right in the 1980s by arguing against religious engagement in politics found their voices as people of faith insisting on a different interpretation of their traditions, and the scriptures.

The era of the religious Right is over. Its collapse is part of a larger decline of a style of ideological conservatism that reached high points in 1980 and 1994 but suffered a series of decisive—and I believe fatal—setbacks during George W. Bush's second term. The end of the religious Right does not signal a decline in evangelical Christianity. On the contrary, it is a sign of a new reformation among Christians—Warren and Cizik are representative figures—who are disentangling their great movement from a political machine. This historic change will require liberals and conserva-

tives alike to abandon their sometimes narrow views of who evangelicals are and what they believe.

From the 1960s forward, the term “spiritual suburbanization” was used with some disdain by social critics, left and right, to refer to a kind of leveling down of spiritual demands, spiritual discipline, and spiritual authority. Yet the suburbanization of the United States has created its own spiritual style, much as the urbanization celebrated by Harvey Cox in his influential 1965 book *The Secular City* created distinctive approaches to spirituality. Much of what is interpreted in contemporary American Christianity as specifically Republican in politics and right-leaning in ideology owes far more to traditions associated with the most conservative parts of the rural white South—whose residents began finding a home in the GOP during the 1964 election—than to the growing, dynamic parts of the evangelical movement found in the new, often nondenominational, megachurches and in other suburban and exurban congregations.

Many members of these churches are, to be sure, moderately conservative in their inclinations, and most of them voted for George W. Bush in the 2004 election. But their approach to worship, faith, church membership—and their attitudes toward those who do not share their own commitments—reflect a contemporary and decidedly middle-of-the-road style associated with suburban and exurban life. On the whole, as Alan Wolfe demonstrated in books that shrewdly challenged conventional understandings, *One Nation, After All* and *Moral Freedom*, it is a style that resists being “judgmental,” that emphasizes personal choice—“the idea of people having the freedom to choose their own way of believing,” as Wolfe puts it—and insists that “any form of higher authority has to tailor its commandments to the needs of real people.” The best word for this style was discovered by David Brooks, who speaks in his best-selling *Bobos in Paradise* of a yearning for “flexidoxy.” He defines this wonderful word as “the hybrid mixture of freedom and flexibility on the one hand and the longing for rigor and orthodoxy on the other.”

Robert Wuthnow, one of the nation’s premier sociologists of religion, offered data that supports Brooks’s intuition. In *American Mythos*, Wuthnow, reporting on his 2003 Religion and Diversity Survey, notes that while 58 percent of Americans agreed that “Christianity is the best way to understand God,” only 25 percent “said it was best for everybody.” These are more the views of flexidox believers in moral freedom than of a nation of “theocrats” intent on imposing a particular form of belief on everyone.

In his earlier book *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s*, Wuthnow spoke of a “subtle reordering” of “how Americans understand the sacred itself.” Wuthnow saw “a new spirituality of seeking” replacing the “traditional spirituality of inhabiting sacred places.” For seekers, Wuthnow argued, “the congregation is less aptly characterized as a safe haven” than as “a supplier of religious goods and services.” One may react to these developments in various ways, but this approach to spirituality is anything but authoritarian.

The builders of the new megachurches, notably the most successful such as Rick Warren, are closely attuned to the demands of the new believers. In a 2005 conversation with a group of reporters organized by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, Warren offered a fascinating look at how he built his Saddleback Valley Community Church in Orange County, California, from scratch to a membership of more than twenty thousand. He spoke of spending twelve weeks going door to door, telling those who answered that “I’m not here to sell you anything, I’m not here to convert you, I’m not here to witness to you. I just want to ask you three or four questions.” Warren’s approach and his questions are revealing, even ingenious:

Question number one: “Are you an active member of a local church—of any kind of religion—synagogue, mosque, whatever?” If they said yes, I said, “Great, God bless you, keep going,” and I politely excused myself and went to the next home. When I’d find somebody who’d say, “No, I don’t go anywhere,” I’d say, “Perfect; you’re just the kind of guy I want to talk to. This is great, you don’t go anywhere. So let me ask you a question. Why do you think most people don’t attend church?” And I just wrote the answers down. I asked, “If you were looking for a church, what kind of things would you look for?” And I’d just list them. “What advice would you give to me as the pastor of a new church? How can I help you?” So they’d say, “I think churches exist for the community; not vice versa,” and I’d write that down.

Now the four biggest reasons in my area why people didn’t go to church—here’s what they were: Number one, they said, “Sermons are boring and they don’t relate to my life.” So I decided I had to say something on Sunday that would help people on Monday. Number two, they said, “Members are unfriendly to visitors; I feel like it’s a clique.” Number three, they said, “Most churches seem more interested

in your money than you as a person.” And number four, they said, “We want quality children’s programs for our children.”

Now it’s interesting to me that out of the four biggest reasons why people said they didn’t go to church, none of them were theological. They were all sociological. And I had people say, “Oh, it’s not that I don’t like God. I like God; I just can’t stand church.” I go, okay; we’ll build a whole new kind of church.

This is a very American story. It is, in many ways (though not exclusively), a suburban story. The core concerns of the unchurched whom Warren brought back to worship are basic: a desire for inspiring sermons, a friendly congregation, a pastor who did not seem greedy, and a healthy concern with the lives of their children. It is certainly not a story about right-wing politics, theocracy, Republican organizing, or extreme orthodoxy. It is impossible to understand the religious future without taking Warren’s testimony seriously.

### III

My hope is that this book might contribute to broadening the conversation about religion and politics. It is aimed at both the believer and the nonbeliever, and it is unapologetically an attempt to influence the political dialogue in the post-Bush era. It is intended to make the case that liberals dare not relegate people of faith to some outer darkness of supposed ignorance—even if liberals have every right to oppose ideologues on the right who invoke faith for narrow electoral purposes. Liberals should respect the religious convictions of those who take their faith seriously and engage them in a common struggle on behalf of a common good.

But a word of warning: many liberals discovered God in the exit polls after the 2004 election. God, of course, can be discovered anywhere. Yet it would be a terrible mistake if liberals and Democratic politicians began treating religious people as just one more interest group, tossing a few bits of scripture into their speeches or inventing religious pasts for themselves that do not exist. This book is a case for taking religion seriously, not for using it in a slapdash way to win an election or two.

It is also intended to make the case to religious people that faith calls us to social as well as individual responsibility, and that politics is not

primarily a realm of cultural combat in which only abortion and gay marriage matter. All believers should be wary of reducing a religious tradition to the moral seriousness of a political direct mail piece.

It is also an argument with those one might call the neo-atheists. The new atheists—the best known are the writers Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, and Christopher Hitchens—insist, as Harris puts it, that “certainty about the next life is simply incompatible with tolerance in this one.” That’s why they think a belief in salvation through faith in God, no matter the religious tradition, is dangerous to an open society.

The neo-atheists, like their predecessors from a century ago, are given to a sometimes charming ferociousness in their polemics against those they see as too weak-minded to give up faith in God. What makes them new is the moment in history in which they are rejoining the old arguments: an era of religiously motivated suicide bombers combined with far less virulent challenges from various forms of religious fundamentalism to science and religious pluralism.

As a general proposition, I welcome the neo-atheists’ challenge. Theirs is an unsurprising response to what Ronald Aronson, writing in the *Nation* in 2007, called “the in-your-face religion that has come to mark our society.” The popularity of the neo-atheists’ books suggests that those who have pushed religion to the right have done more to arouse enmity toward religion than to win adherents to faith.

The most serious believers, understanding that they need to ask themselves searching questions, have always engaged in dialogue with atheists. The Catholic writer Michael Novak’s 1965 book *Belief and Unbelief* is a classic in self-interrogation. “How does one know that one’s belief is truly in God,” he asks at one point, “not merely in some habitual emotion or pattern of response?”

In 2004 the *New Republic* offered a delightfully ironic cover line, “God Bless Atheism.” Inspired by arguments over whether the words “under God” should remain in the Pledge of Allegiance, Leon Wieseltier, the magazine’s literary editor, praised atheists for taking the question of God’s existence so seriously that they forced believers to do the same.

If the basis for religion “is not an intellectually supportable belief in the existence of God,” Wieseltier wrote, “then all the spiritual exaltation and all the political agitation in the world will avail it nothing against the skeptics and the doubters, and it really is just a beloved illusion.” He



went on: "There is no greater insult to religion than to expel strictness of thought from it." Wieseltier made clear by implication why it is easy for the nonbeliever to insist upon religious freedom and pluralism. Since the nonbeliever sees faith as an irrational "preference" among many other preferences, government has no business privileging one preference over another.

The believer's basis for supporting religious freedom will necessarily be more complicated because the believer, by definition, sees faith not as a "preference" but as truth. The believer can certainly support religious freedom on pragmatic grounds. History has shown that the alternative is chaos, persecution, war, and mass murder. But it is also possible for the believer to be intellectually rigorous and still acknowledge a debt to the Enlightenment, to the Age of Reason—and, yes, to atheists.

The Jesuit theologian David Hollenbach has offered a stronger basis for religious liberty than simple "tolerance." He urges us to seek and live in "intellectual solidarity." I hope this book is written in that spirit. "Tolerance," Hollenbach noted, is "a strategy of noninterference with the beliefs and lifestyles of those who are different or 'other.'" That is the classic Enlightenment view. Intellectual solidarity demands more. It "entails engagement with the other . . . in the hope that understanding might replace incomprehension and that perhaps even agreement could result." Those who subscribe to various faiths or to none agree to put their own understanding of things at risk, "to listen as well as to speak, to learn from what they hear, and, if necessary, to change as a result of what they have learned."

Those who believe they possess truth should not fear entering what Hollenbach calls "a community of freedom." Doing so is not a sign of intellectual fuzziness or a lack of faith. On the contrary, it means embracing the very "strictness of thought" that Wieseltier rightly demands of believers. It is only in dialogue with others that our faith is tested, our ideas made explicit, our errors corrected.

Yet this view raises a difficulty for the neo-atheists, who often seem as dogmatic as the dogmatists they condemn. They are especially frustrated with religious "moderates" who don't fit their stereotypes. In his bracing polemic, *The End of Faith*, Sam Harris is candid in asserting that "religious moderates are themselves the bearers of a terrible dogma: they imagine that the path to peace will be paved once each one of us has learned to respect the unjustified beliefs of others."

Harris goes on: “I hope to show that the very ideal of religious tolerance—born of the notion that every human being should be free to believe whatever he wants about God—is one of the principal forces driving us toward the abyss. We have been slow to recognize the degree to which religious faith perpetuates man’s inhumanity to man.”

Arguments about faith do not, in the end, hang on whether religion is socially “useful” or instead promotes “inhumanity.” But since the idea that religion is primarily destructive lies at the heart of the neo-atheist argument, its critics have rightly insisted on detailing the sublime acts of humanity and generosity that religion has promoted through the centuries.

There are many paradoxes here, of course. It’s true that religious Christians were among those who persecuted Jews. It is also true that religious Christians—if far too few—were among those who rescued Jews from these most un-Christian acts. And it is a sad fact that secular forms of dogmatism have been at least as murderous as the religious kind.

Particularly bothersome is the suggestion that believers rarely question themselves while atheists ask all the hard questions. History, as Michael Novak argued in a 2007 critique of the neo-atheists, suggests the contrary. “Questions,” he noted, “have been the heart and soul of Judaism and Christianity for millennia.”

“Christianity is not about moral arrogance,” Novak insisted. “It is about moral realism, and moral humility.” Of course Christians in practice often fail to live up to this elevated definition of their creed. Believers are always wrong—and usually disappointed with the results—when they seek to impose their faith through force and the power of the state. But atheists are capable of their own forms of arrogance. Indeed, if arrogance is the only criterion, the contest could well come out a tie. This book might be seen as a brief against arrogance where questions of faith are concerned. Arrogance is truth’s enemy because it closes us to self-criticism, self-correction, and honest doubt.

My friend Korin Davis had it right when she said in a conversation one day that the neo-atheists are *an overreaction to an overreaction*. Religious conservatives had a legitimate grievance against their sense of exclusion from elite conversations and elite culture. But the religious Right overreacted by creating a dogmatic and partisan ideological movement. Atheists and secularists have a legitimate grievance against this narrowly politicized form of religion, its resistance to critical inquiry about faith, and the efforts of some on the religious Right to revive the old and destructive

wars between religion and science. But the new atheists have overreacted by insisting, wrongly, that religious faith is irrational and reactionary in all its forms and by denying the good works and the great intellectual achievements that our faith traditions have called forth.

#### IV

The decision to believe or not to believe is an individual choice. We are all shaped by the traditions in which we are nurtured and by whether we grow to accept, reject, or modify them. Because this is so, it is fair for a reader to ask about the stories that shaped the narrative I offer here.

My own account would certainly include Sister Genevieve, my sixth-grade teacher, who may have had more influence on my views of racial justice and civil rights than anyone else. A warm and lovely woman with a deep southern drawl, she was teaching us kids in Fall River, Massachusetts, with our sharp New England accents because, as I always understood the story, she had been kicked out of Louisiana in the 1950s for organizing an integrated First Communion ceremony. Sister Genevieve was no radical. She was simply Christian. She thought all kids were children of God. How could one possibly imagine that the reception of the Eucharist should be organized by race?

When I was in high school, I was taught by a remarkable group of Benedictine monks. The head of the monastery, Dom Aelred Graham, spent years in dialogue with Buddhist monks and wrote—long before it became a fashionable topic—a book called *Zen Catholicism*. He later wrote a fascinating spiritual autobiography, *The End of Religion*. Reading it, I was struck by how a person could be so open and intellectually serious and at the same time so humble and matter-of-fact about his own simultaneous commitment to orthodox Catholicism and to a life of spiritual questing.

At that Catholic high school—then the Portsmouth Priory, now the Portsmouth Abbey—I was drawn to the writings of Dr. King and wrote an essay on his collection of sermons, *Strength to Love*. I have absolutely no memory of what I said. I do remember that the book forced me to think anew about the social and personal obligations of being a Christian.

Religion and politics were matters of constant discussion in our Catholic home when I was growing up. My parents were the sort of Christians who believed they should behave toward others in the ways their faith

prescribed. Their faith was warm, not cold, embracing, not excluding, open-minded, not narrow. My dad, a dentist, set up a free dental clinic for poor kids in our city. Like most in his profession at the time, he was strongly opposed to socialized medicine; unlike many, he predicted its day would come because members of the medical and dental fraternity he loved (it was mostly a fraternity then) would be insufficiently generous toward those in need. My mom spent much of her life as a teacher, in both public and Catholic schools, and as a librarian. One of her great passions was getting kids who didn't have very many books in their homes to learn to love reading. When she died in 1994, students she had taught more than sixty years earlier came to her funeral, as did countless others she had encountered more recently.

My late dad was a warmhearted man, conservative in his politics but liberal in spirit. One of his dear friends, Dr. Murray Goldin, was a member of the NAACP in our city, which had a small black population. I once asked my dad why his friend belonged to the civil rights group. My dad explained that Dr. Goldin was a Jew, and that Jews, like blacks, had experienced discrimination. His friend, he said, felt it was important to stand up for others who had faced bigotry. My father was a Goldwater supporter at the time, but he spoke admiringly of his friend's moral commitment. That made an impression on me, too.

So I never had those personal resentments about religion that so many others have described in recounting their confrontations with what they saw as the hypocrisy of their parents or their congregations. My parents' behavior—behavior is, for kids, more important than words—said that faith mattered and that it demanded of those who held it certain standards of generosity and decency. Because of them, I have always seen faith as more enriching and challenging than oppressive.

I offer these stories not because they are exceptional, but because I think they are rather typical. More than many believers usually want to admit, our attitude toward faith, as toward many other things in life, is in part a predisposition shaped by our own experiences. (The same, of course, is true for nonbelievers.) We are influenced by events that end up teaching us larger lessons than we realize we're receiving at the time. I am sure my father had no idea that his offhand comment about his friend would affect my views for life on the matters of racism and anti-Semitism. Sister Genevieve probably *did* intend to affect our views on race. The monks who taught me definitely *were* trying to shape my faith. But here again, their

actions and attitudes were probably at least as powerful as their words. Later in life, I always rejected the counsel of those who insisted that believers were inevitably ignorant, blind, culturally backward, or intellectually unsophisticated. Here were some of the most intelligent and sophisticated people I would encounter who could speak of faith—and also of culture and politics—with clarity, erudition, even elegance. This did not mean that they were right. It certainly meant that they were not fools.

In college, I found myself writing paper after paper on subjects related to religion and politics: the interactions between the Russian Orthodox Church and Stalin's government during World War II; the remarkable points of similarity—despite fierce, even deadly, differences—between mystics and anarchists during the Spanish Civil War; the sharply opposing stances taken by Catholic diocesan newspapers toward Joe McCarthy in the 1950s; and the complicated workings of a coalition of convenience between Christian and left-wing pacifists and pro-Nazi, pro-fascist forces when each side opposed American entry into World War II for rather different reasons. (That paper may have been the beginning of my lifelong love for Reinhold Niebuhr, the great progressive theologian who broke with pacifism in the face of Hitler's threat to humanity.)

Readers of this book will be spared my thoughts on these subjects. I mention the papers to suggest that it seemed to me perfectly natural in the late 1960s and early 1970s, long before the rise of the religious Right, to take an interest in the relationship between religion and politics. This can serve as a reminder that religious politics and political theology are not new, and are not exclusively right-wing. Indeed, in those years, I came to admire such religiously engaged and politically sophisticated writers as Peter and Peggy Steinfels, Peter Berger, Garry Wills, Abraham Heschel, Robert Coles, and Andrew Greeley, and theologians including Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr, Richard Rubenstein, Johannes Metz, Jurgen Moltmann, and, of course, Harvey Cox. Their work, in turn, led to engagement with other thinkers and writers—readers will run across many of them in this book—including Lisa Sowle Cahill, Jonathan Sacks, Avery Dulles, Monika Hellwig, Eugene Kennedy, Glenn Tinder, Martin Marty, and Jean Bethke Elshtain. Later still, I discovered the largely hidden world (hidden, that is, from large parts of the intellectual mainstream) of the new evangelical scholarship through Mark Noll, Grant Wacker, George Marsden, and Nathan Hatch.

I was also deeply affected when I was young by the moral witness of Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement and of the Berrigan brothers, even if I decided early on that I was neither a pacifist nor a radical in the sense that they were radical. Other inspirations included Michael Novak and Richard John Neuhaus. Now staunch Catholic conservatives, Novak and Neuhaus were in those days committed to the Christian Left. They helped persuade me toward the views that I now hold, which in many, maybe most, areas are views both of them now reject. I remain grateful for what they taught me.

None of these biographical reflections constitutes a defense of belief, let alone a rationale for a particular creed. By acknowledging that all of us are shaped by our experiences, I am conceding a key point to critics of religious faith: that the typical believer rarely arrives at his or her faith through a process involving reason alone. On the contrary, faith can be a form of loyalty (to one's parents or tribe or ethnic group or community). It can be an aesthetic judgment (that a rational, well-ordered universe is simply more attractive than a chaotic mess with no purpose or harmony). It can be a pragmatic choice (all things being equal, religious belief encourages better behavior, a greater regard for others, an aspiration to things higher than the self). It can be a psychological comfort (for many, it's easier to live in a world with a loving God at the center and with a promise of eternal life). Just to annoy our religion teachers—but also because I think he believed it at the time—a high school friend would regularly wear a button to class that read: “A Benevolent God is the Greatest Creation of Man.” It's worth mentioning that this friend won the Christian Doctrine prize year after year.

I would insist with Novak that believers usually get around to thinking seriously about whether what they believe is *true*. Does God exist? How do we *know*? What was the nature of the covenant between God and Moses? What is the meaning of the Exodus? Who was Jesus? Who did Jesus think he was? What is the meaning of the empty tomb at Easter? What is one to make of the different forms of revelation—to Muhammad, to the Buddha—and how they relate to each other? Can one be a believer in religious openness without falling prey to an “everything is everything” relativism? Do believers in specific creeds *really* believe each doctrinal point that they might recite from memory every Sunday? Are they fooling themselves or others? Or do they make mental compromises? Or are they just

disguising doubt behind bold declarations that whatever they believe is really a mystery to be taken on faith?

I offer this list—I think it's fairly typical of questions believers ask themselves at one point or another, and sometimes all their lives—to be honest with readers and to underscore that few believers are blind automatons who never subject their beliefs to serious inquiry. Mother Teresa was not alone among believers in asking why she was not hearing from God.

One other autobiographical note is relevant here. In the mid-1980s the *New York Times* sent me to Rome, which gave me the opportunity to cover the Vatican and some of the most vigorous days of the papacy of John Paul II. So much of what I cared about as a student—the relationship between faith and social justice, the rise of the liberation theologians I read in Harvey Cox's classes, the challenge of the modern age to believers and of believers to the modern age—was suddenly relevant to my day-to-day work. My personal interest in figuring out the relationship of faith, politics, and society became, in those years, a matter of professional obligation, even urgency. Some of those journalistic passions are also reflected in these pages. In particular, I have chosen to share reporting and reflections on the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, partly because both have influenced the course of religious and political life far beyond the confines of the Roman Catholic Church, but also because the challenge of coming to terms with their ideas and commitments has been part of my own religious and political journeys.

My specific interest in religion *as a liberal* arose from a concern developed many years before the 2004 election that some of my fellow liberals harbored certain prejudices against people of faith. I say *some* because there are many on the left who never harbored such prejudices. But there definitely *was* a sense on parts of the liberal Left that the “yahoos” of “Jesusland” supported George W. Bush out of their fanaticism and ignorance—and the intellectual seeds of that view were planted many years ago. I believe devoutly, if I may use that term, that this attitude toward people of faith is destructive to liberalism not only at the ballot box but also intellectually and morally. One of liberalism's great achievements has been its resolute opposition to bigotry. Bigotry against people of faith is not only ugly; it is inconsistent with the liberal creed.

But people of faith should not be harboring bigotry against liberals, either. Listen to some right-wing preachers and you'd imagine—I exaggerate a little—that liberals are out to destroy the family, burn down the

churches, require unwed teenagers to have sex and then abort their children, and insist that the schools teach atheism or exotic forms of New Age spirituality. It never crosses the minds of these right-wing religious critics of liberalism that many of their own evangelical forebears were at the vanguard of progressive social action. Evangelicals spearheaded the movement against slavery and struggled on behalf of so many other progressive causes, from bringing an end to child labor to reclaiming the slums. Dr. King's arguments for civil rights were rooted in Jefferson's Declaration of Independence—and in the scriptures. Unless you are willing to delete Isaiah, Micah, Amos, and the Sermon on the Mount from the Bible, you cannot deny the religious roots of liberalism.

Thus began the road that led to this book. The notion that religion should be disconnected from politics always seemed odd to me simply because I couldn't understand how you could separate the two. If religion mattered, and if the content of your faith was true, it had to affect all you did. And if politics also mattered, the obligation of the believer was to sort out how politics and faith related to each other. The task was especially complicated for believers who saw religious and political liberty as gifts to be treasured and preserved. That meant working out the relationship between one's own faith and politics in a way that respected the beliefs of others—including those who rejected faith as an irrational illusion.

This was why the rise of religious conservatism in the 1970s and 1980s was, for me, both entirely understandable and peculiar. I will always defend the right of religious conservatives to bring their faith to bear on political questions. I have always done the same, so it would be hypocritical of me to do otherwise. Christian faith, as I came to understand it, pushed me toward liberalism. I thus have no grounds for challenging the right of conservatives to root their own views in faith. "Faith," St. Paul wrote in his letter to the Hebrews, "gives substance to our hopes." The root of the word "faith," as Jaroslav Pelikan wrote, "carries the connotations of trustworthiness, reliability and loyalty, still suggested in the English adjective 'faithful.'" Surely these are virtues that believers and unbelievers alike would wish to see reflected more perfectly in our politics.

Yet this is also at the heart of my argument with the Christian Right. It is impossible to see Jesus as a tool of the Establishment. It is difficult to imagine this revolutionary figure arguing that cuts in inheritance and capital gains taxes should be the highest goals in politics. Far more persuasive, to me at least, is the account of Christianity offered by the theology of



hope. Jurgen Moltmann, one of the theologians who pioneered this view, argued that Christianity teaches “the passion for the possible” and keeps at the forefront the idea of “breaking with the old and coming to terms with the new.” If religion means anything, as Michael Walzer has written about the meaning of the Exodus story, it means that the door of hope always remains open.

V

This is not a creedal book. It is intended as a description of our current religious situation and makes a series of arguments about how best to deal with it. It's an American's dialogue with his fellow Americans over how we should think about religion's public role—and, in passing, an American's argument with a great many Europeans who believe, wrongly, that ours is a nation of religious fanaticism. It's a liberal's argument with his fellow liberals over the respect owed believers and the impossibility of separating religion from politics—even if the state itself must remain disentangled from religion for the sake of religious liberty. It's a believer's argument with other believers over what faith asks of us—and in particular, an argument against a style of religious conservatism that has become too ideological and too partisan. It is an empirical argument that the categories we use to describe religion in public life are far more relevant to the 1980s or 1990s than to the current moment. The new reformation that has begun will privilege religious moderation over religious conservatism and, perhaps more importantly, broaden the agenda that religious people bring to politics. It is a Roman Catholic's argument with some in his church who believe that certain “nonnegotiable” issues such as abortion, stem-cell research, and gay marriage must always be more important in politics than the Church's rich social teaching that privileges the poor, insists on economic justice, calls the death penalty into question, and puts a heavy moral burden on those who would advocate for war. It is, finally, a rationalist's argument with the insistence of certain strands of neo-atheism that belief cannot escape becoming dangerous, fanatical, and destructive.

Yet if I do not propose a creed, certain beliefs are at least implicit in the text: that we know God by faith and hope, and that keeping God transcendent and absolute helps ensure that we work tentatively and humbly in our human realm, always open to self-correction in the light of new experi-

ence. “If God is God,” wrote the Christian writer Jacques Ellul, “he obviously cannot be totally known or circumscribed or put into a human formula. There is always something more to know and understand and receive.” Accepting the “social context” of our modern (or, perhaps, post-modern) condition, as Peter Berger wrote in *A Far Glory*, means “acknowledging the fact that the certainties of a traditional, pre-modern or non-modern society are not available to us.” Modern pluralism, Berger argues, presents us with “a challenge to hold convictions without either dissolving them in utter relativity or encasing them in the false absolutes of fanaticism. It is a difficult challenge, but is not an impossible one.” This means, Berger insists, that competing religious traditions honor each other by arguing with each other, accepting together what, for believers, is the hardest fact of all: “the burden of God’s silence.” A belief in God can be accompanied by all manner of foolishness, including foolishness of a very dangerous sort. But the advantage of what H. Richard Niebuhr has called “radical monotheism” is that a belief in one God as the ground of being promotes a sensible skepticism about everything else. “Radical monotheism,” Niebuhr wrote, “dethrones all absolutes short of the principle of being itself.” It is my view that, perhaps paradoxically, believers may be *less* credulous and naive than unbelievers when it comes to worldly institutions and systems of thought. That is certainly their mission.

## VI

This book is organized with the aim of developing these arguments about religion’s role in American public life while also offering an account of our current political moment. Readers who disagree with some of the views I advance will, I hope, still find the analytical and historical material helpful in defining the stakes in our coming dialogues and debates.

Chapter 1 makes the case that to a far greater degree than we realize, the history of American liberalism is bound up in the nation’s religious history. Without religious inspiration and the organizational role of the churches, many of the greatest achievements of American progressivism would have been impossible.

Yet although I can be fairly characterized as a Christian liberal, it is not my view that religion in general (if there is such a thing) or my own tradition in particular must inevitably side with the political Left. On the

contrary, I also argue in the first chapter that there are deep affinities between religion and conservatism. The religious imagination is not an ideological imagination. George F. Will has written that conservatism is “a complex constellation of ideas and dispositions,” and that description applies as well to our religious traditions. At the outset, I try to make clear that I am not looking for religion to do the work of liberals in our politics. Rather, I believe that at its best, religion—in particular, the Christianity and Judaism with which I am most familiar—challenges all ideologies. I also argue that the current engagement between religion and public life reflects a new stage in our more than two-century-long dialogue about how best to preserve religious liberty. This is not a development to be feared, but an opportunity to be seized.

Chapter 2 discusses the injuries caused to our public life by culture-war politics—it is, I argue, the wrong war—and how the culture-war debate has affected our politics. It goes on to examine the importance of cultural, religious, and moral factors in the 2004 and 2006 elections. For those who love data, it is the most data-rich chapter in the book, and also the chapter that focuses most specifically on recent political campaigns. While I lay out the indisputable evidence of religious polarization, I challenge the view that religion and morality were decisive in the 2004 presidential contest.

Because the 2004 election played such a central role in sparking new debates about religion and politics (and important new forms of religious activism in the center, on the left, and inside the Democratic party), I look at the results in some detail, balancing the impact of religion against other forces at work in our politics, including those of race, class, and region. If religion's role in our politics should not be demeaned or ignored, it does religion no favors to exaggerate its influence or to see its hand at work when it is not. Finally, I argue that the 2006 election created a new religious landscape, and that this new array of forces is more relevant to our future than were past alignments. The results reflected the declining influence of the religious Right, which has gone from being a major force in a majority coalition to acting as an irritant within a minority coalition. The difficulties the religious Right experienced in uniting behind a candidate in the early stages of the campaign for the 2008 Republican presidential nomination were a sign of its organizational difficulties and a certain ambivalence toward the movement within Republican ranks. Even one of the cause's strongest potential champions, former governor Mike Huckabee

of Arkansas, went out of his way to link his faith to concerns about poverty, education, and health care.

Chapters 3 and 4 argue specifically for a broadening of the religious agenda. Chapter 3 looks at the rich history of religious debate over economic justice and pays attention especially to arguments among Catholics—fueled by the American Catholic Bishops in the mid-1980s and the social encyclicals of popes John XXIII and John Paul II. I pay particular attention to (and offer a critique of) Michael Novak’s economic thinking. While I disagree with Novak, he usefully offers one side of an argument Christians should be having with each other. In the course of the chapter, I also argue that George W. Bush and Hillary Clinton represent two distinct traditions of argument among Christians about the causes and cures of social ills. If the tradition that inspired Bush’s view was dominant in the first years of the new millennium, the version of Christian social thought reflected by Clinton, Barack Obama, and other prominent progressives is now in the ascendancy.

Chapter 4 grapples with the politics of moral issues in the Bush years, and the specific role played by George W. Bush himself. Bush has been much criticized for his use of religion and for seeming to suggest, at times, that his presidency was in some sense the product of divine inspiration. I offer many specific criticisms of my own. But I also argue that in certain respects, Bush’s presidency marks less of a break from the past on religious questions than many assume. That’s especially true of Bush’s rhetoric, which is more consistent with past presidential pronouncements on religion than either his critics or his friends might believe. The chapter reflects my own efforts to come to terms with precisely what it is Bush believes and how best to understand the role of religion in his political life. It then moves to specific controversies of the Bush era, including the political clash over the fate of Terri Schiavo. It offers suggestions aimed at encouraging less polarized and more productive approaches to three of the thorniest moral issues facing us today: abortion, the battle against teen pregnancy, and gay marriage. It concludes with a discussion of the new directions in evangelical life bravely pioneered by Cizik and others who are seeking a more productive and less divisive relationship between faith and public action.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus specifically on the Catholic Church, the largest single denomination in the United States—and one in which, as I’ve already confessed, I have a personal interest. Chapter 5 is devoted to the

papacies of John Paul and Benedict. John Paul is a paradoxical figure who simultaneously confirmed many of the liberal achievements of Pope John XXIII *and* moved the church to the right, especially on internal questions such as the Vatican's authority, the all-male celibate priesthood, and liberation theology. Benedict, as Cardinal Ratzinger, the head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, was a prime mover in the Vatican's shift rightward and yet is a complex and intellectually fascinating figure who cannot be written off as an ideologue.

Chapter 6 focuses specifically on the struggles inside the American Catholic Church and the critical electoral role Catholics play as swing voters. If the evolution of evangelical Christianity in a less ideological direction is destined to have a large impact on American political life, so also will the battle over the future of American Catholicism. And both will also affect mainline Protestant churches, who once provided the civic and moral glue that held American public life together—and continue to play a far more important public role than many appreciate.

A concluding chapter looks at where our public conversation on religion is going. In the coming years, I believe, Christianity's liberal commitments will be seen as more relevant than its conservative impulses. Reinhold Niebuhr's theology will be far more influential than Pat Robertson's. The economic requirements for a decent family life will trump rhetorical appeals to "family values." Evangelical Christians are increasingly restive and dissatisfied with narrowly ideological definitions of their public role. Republicans who preached about their traditionalist commitments have had to come to terms with the private behavior of their party's own public figures—Mark Foley, David Vitter, and Larry Craig among them. They are being called upon to square their moralism at election time (and during the controversy over Bill Clinton's scandals) with the private behavior of many in their own ranks. If religious commitments are only about private matters, then religion's public role will be judged primarily in relation to the personal lives of public figures. This is surely not what religious conservatives should want, and it is not what religious progressives believe. These are among the reasons why I am hopeful that the coming religious conversation will be more productive, less divisive, and more inclusive than it has been in the recent past.

Two notes to readers: First, some may be jarred by the fact that my second references to clerical figures usually do not include their formal titles. For example, in second references to Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger be-

fore he became Pope Benedict XVI, I refer to him simply as “Ratzinger.” I do so, following the approach typically used by Italian writers about the Vatican, not out of disrespect, but because other forms of reference (“former Cardinal Ratzinger”) seemed clumsy and seriously cluttered the text.

Second, while this book is the work of a Christian, the influence of Jews and Judaism on my thinking is obvious throughout. This is both a biographical matter (I grew up as a Catholic in a Jewish neighborhood and have been personally close to Jews and the Jewish tradition all my life) as well as a matter of spiritual and intellectual inclination. There are moments in the book when I discuss “religion” and other times when I speak specifically about Christianity and Judaism. I have tried to avoid the popular “Judeo-Christian” formulation—except in quotations of others who used the term. Of course I believe the two faiths share common roots, a fact reflected in their scriptures and in the person of Jesus Christ. But I find the phrase less respectful to both traditions than it is designed to be. That is especially true in relation to Judaism, since the formulation is often invoked by Christians as a euphemism when they are really referring to their own tradition.

The role of Muslims in American politics—visible in our elections since 2000—is destined to grow. I do not, however, pretend to deal with this role in any comprehensive way. That’s especially true in the parts of the discussion that focus on a time before the Muslim community began to loom larger in the minds of political strategists and political scientists. (I also avoid the successor phrase to “the Judeo-Christian tradition” intended to cover Muslims, “the Abrahamic tradition,” out of the same desire to respect each tradition’s specificity.) The rise of new faith communities in the United States—not only Muslims but also Hindus, Sikhs, Baha’i, Buddhists, and many others—is obviously critical to the next chapter in our nation’s religious story. The presence of these new neighbors and fellow citizens will only highlight the power of our tradition of religious openness and pluralism, and the importance of nurturing it.

## VII

It’s obvious by now that I believe a serious embrace of Christianity inevitably leads one into politics, since sin is social as well as individual. That is why my critique of the Christian Right is about the content of the move-

ment's politics, not the fact that it is politically engaged. Yet Christianity, as Reinhold Niebuhr so powerfully taught us, enjoins the believer to beware of the fanatical potential of all religion when it enters the social domain, to know that "the worst corruption is a corrupt religion." We need "a sense of modesty about the virtue, wisdom and power available to us" and "a sense of contrition about the common human frailties and foibles which lie at the foundation of both the enemy's demonry and our vanities." Americans, Niebuhr argued, are never safe "against the temptation of claiming God too simply as the sanctifier of whatever we most fervently desire." In making arguments for what Christianity has to say about political questions, all of us who are Christians can fall prey to the temptation simply to ransack the scriptures or the tradition to justify conclusions we've already reached. "Most of us are not really approaching the subject in order to find out what Christianity says," C. S. Lewis wrote. "We are approaching it in the hope of finding support from Christianity for the views of our own party." The believer must always ask whether the voice he or she hears inside is really the voice of faith.

Certain political beliefs are implicit and sometimes explicit in these pages. Above all, I am impatient with the ways in which the political discourse of recent years has divided what are typically called "values" issues from economic issues, cultural questions from matters of social policy. These divisions are artificial and misleading—and not just because inequality and social injustice relate no less to our "values" than do our views on abortion and gay marriage. As I will be arguing in the book's early chapters, it is impossible to talk about parental responsibility, healthy family lives, reducing the number of abortions, and creating communities that nurture our moral sense without dealing with issues related to the structure of work, the distribution of wealth and income, and the promotion of genuinely equal opportunity.

This book draws upon many years of research, writing, and conversation about religious issues, and questions related to religion and politics. I try in the acknowledgments to discharge my many debts to the publications that allowed an early testing of some of these ideas, to the institutions that have supported my interest in this subject, and to dear friends, colleagues, and teachers who have helped me grapple with these issues. But precisely because this book is the product of a lifetime of reflections—imperfect, to be sure—it is, finally, a very personal book. Thus do I write a great deal about society, politics, and culture, but I also write about flesh-

and-blood human beings who, for me, embody the spirit that Abraham Heschel, the modern Jewish prophet, argued should characterize our approach to the world: a sense of “radical amazement.”

“Wonder rather than doubt is the root of knowledge,” Heschel insisted. “Doubts may be resolved, radical amazement can never be erased.” The people who helped me keep the faith in the face of my own doubt and skepticism lived by the Heschel Imperative: to “keep our own amazement, our own eagerness alive.” I hope, in a modest way at least, that this spirit is alive in these pages.