

Timothy L. Smith, who teaches history at the Johns Hopkins University, finds that much of the argument about religion in American education is based on myths. He concludes, contrary to these myths, that (1) church-sponsored schools have not neglected the social and vocational needs of their students, (2) public schools in the mid-nineteenth century were not wholly secularized, (3) church schools set up in immigrant communities did not retard Americanization, and (4) public funds have repeatedly been used to support private schools in both the nineteenth and the twentieth century.

"Those of us who consider ourselves champions of the public schools ought now to support every compromise of policy that is not a clear and immediate threat to the constitutional guarantee of the free exercise of our several faiths. . . . The warning that this might set in motion irresistible tendencies toward more basic compromises of principle is an argument from fear. It denies the faith in democratic processes. . . . It ignores the fact that a large number of the Catholic and Protestant laypersons who are now involved in promoting parochial or private schools, perhaps a majority, believe deeply in the separation of church and state."

**Christianity and Politics:  
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**S U M M A R Y**

### **Christianity and Politics: Catholic and Protestant Perspectives**

*Edited by Carol Friedley Griffith*

The debate over the proper relation between Christianity and politics began when some critics tried to entrap Jesus of Nazareth by asking: "Is it lawful to pay taxes or not?" They were silenced, at least temporarily, by his reply: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's."

The struggle between politics and faith has raged throughout Christian history, sometimes in the works of great theologians like Saint Paul and Saint Augustine and sometimes on bloody battlefields, as when Constantine cried: "By this sign we conquer." The relation between the City of Man and the City of God in a changing world has never been adequately defined in theory or settled in practice.

Christianity has a well developed social ethic. Originating in the Scriptures, it has been enlarged and enriched in the writings of the Church Fathers, Saint Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and, more recently, great men like Jonathan Edwards, John Witherspoon, Jacques Maritain, and Reinhold Niebuhr. Regrettably, leaders of both the old religious left and the new religious right tend to neglect or dilute this rich moral heritage as they address specific domestic and foreign policy issues. What we need, as Professor Paul Ramsey has repeatedly emphasized, is a renewed Christian ethic that is faithful to the great theologians of the past and relevant to the perplexing problems of the present.

It was in pursuit of such an ethic that this symposium on Christianity and politics was conceived. The first two essays deal broadly with the relation of a Christian ethic to the political and social order, one from a Protestant and the other from a Roman Catholic perspective. The four chapters that follow apply the Christian ethic to particular areas of public policy.

**Richard John Neuhaus**, a Lutheran pastor, theologian, and social philosopher, examines the impact of religion on American culture. He says that the mainline, established Protestant churches—mainly Methodist, Presbyterian, and United Church of Christ—have by default lost their leadership position in American society. The default began with the social gospel movement in the late nineteenth century, when establishment Protestantism adopted a supportive posture toward the culture. It decided that the mission of the Church was not to *transform* but to *conform to* the prevailing culture, for that culture was inevitably moving toward the Kingdom of God on earth. Today many mainline leaders no longer believe in the American experiment and therefore seek to change it radically or even replace it.

The possible successors in the role of culture-shaping, Neuhaus says, are Roman Catholics, Lutherans, evangelicals, and fundamentalists. “The most aggressive force moving, indeed leaping, into the vacuum is the religious new right. As long as other religious candidates hold back or disdain the culture-forming tasks, the religious new right will seize the attention and grow in influence. I do not expect, however, that Moral Majority and its allies will have the field to themselves for long. . . . The religious new right is not up to the task that must be undertaken.” The most likely successor to mainline Protestantism among the four possible candidates, says Neuhaus, is the evangelicals.

**James V. Schall, S.J.**, professor of government at Georgetown University, examines the development of Catholic social theory, especially in regard to capitalism, socialism, and Marxism. Conservatism, he says, is both intellectually and politically stronger today than ever before in the modern era, in part because secular liberalism and socialism are spiritually vacuous and have been proved unsuccessful by practical experience. Yet the Catholic left persists in trying to move Catholic social doctrine away from its Aristotelian roots toward socialism as the sole valid Christian political structure, despite the failure of existing socialist systems to honor human rights and to stimulate economic development. Catholic intellectuals in Latin American countries are “the only ones who do not seem to know that Marxism is dead,” says Schall. “Are we facing the irony of seeing religion become the savior of Marxism?”

**David Little**, who teaches religion at the University of Virginia, contrasts the positions of Jerry Falwell and the new religious right on legislating morality with those of an earlier Christian dissenter, Roger Williams, a Puritan forerunner of evangelical Protestantism. Little says that Falwell has three basic positions: (1) public morality must be legislated, (2) it should be legislated by consensus or majority rule, and (3) a standard of public morality is right only if it is

grounded in the Bible. He is correct about the first, says Little, but seriously mistaken about the second and the third. On the second: “Legislators must ask not just *what* the people believe and want but also *why* they believe and want it.” Considerations of coherence, consistency, relevance, and respect for the rules of evidence are binding upon all legislators, especially when they deal with controversial topics like homosexuality, the status of women, censorship, racial discrimination, and war and peace. On the third basic Falwell position: “The attempt to ground legislative proposals in parochial religious interpretations is a profound threat to our pluralistic tradition. Americans of many different persuasions are right to be apprehensive about ‘the thunder on the right.’ ”

**Michael Novak**, a Catholic lay theologian, a political philosopher, and a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, addresses the relation between Christianity and democratic capitalism. He concludes that democracy and the market system take into account the Christian doctrines of sin and grace more than do any alternative political or economic systems. In the pre-industrial era, says Novak, the moral concern was rightly with just distribution, but today we must develop a “theology of economics” that also emphasizes production, fueled by need and fostered by invention and creativity. “No realistic theology of the world, or of the laity, or of work, is conceivable until we have placed the theology of economics on a sounder basis. For all practical purposes, this will mainly involve a theology of democratic capitalism. For that is politically the freest and economically the most prosperous of the social systems in which Christians and Jews today find themselves.”

**Whittle Johnston**, professor of government and foreign affairs at the University of Virginia, comes to grips with the perennial problem of power in foreign policy and world politics. Drawing on the classical Christian concepts of the just war and the responsible use of power, he focuses on the contemporary struggle between totalitarianism, represented by the Soviet Union, and the democratic West and its allies. He, too, notes the moral bankruptcy of Marxism-Leninism, and he insists that the United States by virtue of its power, wealth, and cultural heritage must take strong economic and military measures to defend the shrinking perimeters of freedom in a dangerous world.

“America’s responsibilities are in some ways comparable to those Britain bore in the era of the Pax Britannica,” says Johnston, “and derive their ethical dimension in part from the fact that the United States protects the autonomy of many other states beside itself. Yet its duties are more onerous than Britain’s were then, in part because . . . no other state serves as a net under America now, as America served as a net under Britain then.”