Religion, Economics, and Public Policy (Book Review)

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Like many Christians, Andrew Walsh noticed early in life that people’s religious values seem to make a difference to their views on public policy. In this book, he seeks to analyze the “culture wars”—the battle for the hearts and minds of America between, on the one hand, conservative, orthodox Christians and Jews and, on the other hand, nominal religionists whose views have been formed by secular (and often more liberal) elites. The former group shares a commitment to certain transcendent truths (the truths of religion), which they take to be a guide to morality and the way to live; the latter group does not. It is easy to see the way that this division works out politically: the former group tends to lean towards laissez-faire capitalism and the views of the Republican party; the latter tends to lean towards greater government intervention and the dogmas of the Democratic party.

Except, of course, this picture is an oversimplification. Not all evangelical Protestants vote Republican; nor do all secularists vote Democrat. Libertarians, whatever their religious beliefs, will tend to favour the small-government approach of the Republicans; African American Christians tend to vote Democrat.

Dr. Walsh’s thesis is that the culture-wars hypothesis is too crude, especially in its analysis of social and economic policy. Is it really true that orthodox Christians inevitably find that their faith leads them to support free market economics, or that a loss of faith is associated with more sympathy for the role of government in the economy? Dr. Walsh answers this question by examining the history of relationships between religion and political economy. To illustrate his arguments, Dr. Walsh uses the second part of the book to examine the part played by religious groups in two of the policy debates of the mid-1990s: health-care reform (the defeat of “Hillarycare”) and welfare reform (the 1996 amendment providing term limits for government-funded benefits). Walsh has relatively little to say on economics per se, focusing rather on the effects of religious belief on social policy. However, underlying social policy decisions are some assumptions about economics: as John Maynard Keynes once commented, “Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist” (The General Theory 383).

Evangelical Christianity has not always been a friend of the political right. Dr. Walsh’s account of what he calls the “ironies of the twentieth century” starts with William Jennings Bryan, whose concern about the poor made him an icon of the Democratic party long before he became a martyr for the fundamentalist cause at the Scopes monkey trial. And yet, after the failure with the prohibition experiment, evangelical interest in politics waned until the rise of the new religious right of the Christian Coalition and Moral Majority in the 1980s. While Bryan would stress Jesus’ compassion and concern for the poor (as expressed in the kingdom ethic of the Sermon on the Mount), the new Christian right stresses the need for responsibility and accountability. The sinful nature of mankind means that people will
Hal Lindsay’s political activity on this earth wasn’t even worthwhile. through more government but through less. Perhaps failed to deliver, redemption must come about, not shifted the terms of the debate. Because government had Keynesian consensus. The stagflation of the later 1970s Nixon observed in 1971, “We’re all Keynesians now.” ameliorate the fallen state of the earth. As Richard Kingdom of God in America, could, nevertheless, action, if not exactly capable of establishing the government and growth in the belief that political success of the New Deal ushered in an era of expanding government programs to help the poor. The perceived remove the curse of unemployment led to the growth of governments could successfully manipulate the economy to the discovery that, in certain circumstances, govern-ments based on the assumption that governments could (and should) improve the lot of the poorest members of soci-ety. When the Reagan administration moved away from this consensus, the National Council of Churches passed resolutions deploring the trend. However, hardly any-one paid attention: they were at odds with the spirit of the times. Similarly, churches’ criticisms of the first and second Gulf Wars and of the impeachment of President Clinton tended to be out of step with the feelings of believers in the pews.

The decline in influence of the old mainline Protestant denominations (as the pronouncements of their leaders tended to become politically and theologically ever more liberal than their membership) set the stage for the rise of a challenge from the theological and political right for the hearts of evangelical believers. Dr. Walsh’s own denomination, the Disciples of Christ, has not been immune from this trend. Prior to Mr. Reagan’s presidency, successive administrations had increased the scope of social policy in the wake of the New Deal, based on the assumption that governments could (and should) improve the lot of the poorest members of society. When the Reagan administration moved away from this consensus, churches’ criticisms of the first and second Gulf Wars and of the impeachment of President Clinton tended to be out of step with the feelings of believers in the pews.

The history of the Roman Catholic Church in America is different in a number of important respects. Firstly, the Roman Catholic church was essentially one of nineteenth-century immigrants, of the underclass in American society. Secondly, during the twentieth century the Roman Catholic Church became steadily more significant, as a higher proportion of new arrivals in the U.S. were Catholic rather than Protestant. The latest mass influx—of Hispanics—suggests that this trend will continue. Thirdly, it is a church not given to theological liberalism, but it is socially liberal. The long tradition of Catholic social thought, dating back to the late nine-teenth century, lines up with old mainline Protestantism to stress compassion and the need for social justice, while Catholic opposition to legalized abortion gives it a common cause with the new Christian right.
Dr. Walsh does not specifically mention the Reformed churches in his analysis. Kuyperian sphere sovereignty allows for a more nuanced and richer account of the interaction of faith and culture. It is not necessary to believe that one’s preferred positions must be worked out via the legislative process. Thus, one could hold both that homosexuality is an abomination in God’s sight and that justice requires that there be no discrimination against gay men and women. As a result of this approach, the Reformed tradition could also play a mediating role in the culture wars, albeit from a rather different standpoint than that of the Roman Catholic tradition.

Religion, Economics and Public Policy was published in 2000. If anything, its thesis has become more relevant since then. The 2000 general election showed a nation divided in half, and the effects of President Bush’s tenure have been to widen the rifts between the two sides of the culture wars. The developing discussion over gay marriage is the latest battle. The secularized view that sexual morality is a matter of personal preference, not something in which the state should be seen to be discriminatory, is pitted against the deeply-held conviction of most Christians and Jews that the creational norm for marriage is a life-long union between one man and one woman. The debates over abortion, stem-cell research, and even such matters as vouchers for education are likely to continue to be important battles in the war.

Identification with the conservative consensus of the 1980s has declined, as America seems to be becoming a more polarized nation. Perhaps one consequence of the popularity of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins’ “Left Behind” series and of the revival of a Hal Lindsay apocalyptic will be a new cultural disengagement by Christians. Mel Gibson’s The Passion of the Christ, which stresses Jesus’ suffering and the way of the cross, will no doubt strike a chord with many who are disenchanted with the kind of Christian triumphalism that thinks that political action is the means of redemption.

But this is speculation. Dr. Walsh is to be commended for providing a clear and concise account of twentieth-century trends in the culture wars, one that gives perceptive hints concerning how the culture wars may play out in the future.