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Review Essay

Religion and Tolerance in US Politics

RICHARD LOCK-PULLAN

Chris Beneke, *Beyond Toleration: The Religious Origins of American Pluralism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, £19.99). Pp. ix + 305. ISBN-13 978 0 19 530555 5, ISBN-10 0 19 530555 8. Notes, index.

Gary Scott Smith, *Faith and the Presidency: From George Washington to George W. Bush* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, £19.99). Pp. x + 665. ISBN-13 978 0 19 530060 4, ISBN-10 0 19 530060 2. Index, notes.

Bob Wineburg, *Faith-Based Inefficiency: The Follies of Bush's Initiatives* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007, \$44.95/£25.95). Pp. xxix + 166, ISBN-13 978 0 275 99312 2; ISBN-10 0 275 99312 4. Notes, index, appendices.

David Kuo, *Tempting Faith: An Inside Story of Political Seduction* (New York: Free Press, 2006, £13.99). Pp. xiv + 283. ISBN-13 978 0 7432 8712 8; ISBN-10 0 7432 8712 6. Index.

In the present political climate religion and tolerance are, for many people, odd bedfellows as they are seen as contradictory rather than complimentary terms – suicide bombers and radical Islamists face up to troops of a hardline Christian President. Religion is seen as a source of violence, not tolerance, mainly due to the European experience of the wars of religion in France and the Thirty Years War. The Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 is the legal watershed that established relations between states and saw the reduction of religion to the private sphere after the turmoil of the Reformation. In addition to this structural change, the Enlightenment in Europe often took on a deeply anticlerical role, especially in France. However, as this collection of books show, in the US Christianity is not by nature intolerant but actually the root of the civil religion that underpins the American libertarian ideal and helped create the pluralist and multicultural environment known today. It is a tradition that needs to be recovered as quickly as possible.

Religion, or more accurately Protestant Christianity, plays a far more prominent role in the US than it does in Europe because of the nature of the secularization that has taken place in Europe; that is, religious adherence is far lower in Europe. For example, approximately 40% of Americans attend church weekly, whilst only 8% do

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so in the UK. Religion and public rites have become hived off from personal searches for meaning. Despite being a derivative of European culture, American culture has taken an entirely different route in seeing religion in the modern world. As de Tocqueville noted, America is a civilization which brought the spirit of religion and liberty into harmony. The American tradition separated church from state, but not religion from society, and hence did not see it as an enemy of liberty. It is thus possible to talk of an American synthesis which brings together Protestant Christianity, pragmatic reasoning and the republican tradition, each of which distinguishes America from Europe. It is this that has provided much of the ethical framework of the nation and its vocabulary, still seen today in such terms as “the axis of evil.” Simply focussing on George W. Bush’s particular views and the Christian right, as many analysts do, does not address the complexity of the issue in the US.

The US’s sense of itself as the microcosm of the world where most religions and cultures can come together and function as a pluralist state is at the heart of US self-perception. Much is usually made of the Pilgrim Fathers and their separatist ideals but the US has actually been one of the most religiously diverse places in the world from its earliest years, containing Baptists, Methodists, Catholics, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Quakers, Dutch Reformed, German Reformed, Lutherans, Huguenots, Jews, Moravians, and Mennonites. It has continued with an ever-widening plurality of denominations and religions. In Europe the mix had helped generate the wars of religion, so why was the US able to accommodate this diversity, and thrive? Furthermore, was religion simply absorbed into the culture or did this religious diversity at America’s foundation lead to the modern pluralistic culture in the US? In his serious, praiseworthy and well-written study of ideas, Chris Beneke’s *Beyond Toleration* addresses these questions.

Beneke contextualizes the issue by showing that religious plurality and the accompanying tolerance was not exclusively American, but had a distinctive nature because of the rapidly expanding guarantees of religious liberty, the extreme mobility of society and the fact that dissent was publicly recognized and accepted. Nonetheless, it was not like this from the start as bigotry and persecution, as in Europe, was still prevalent in the early years. For example, in one of the many excellent vignettes he uses, Beneke points out that Quakers were hanged in Massachusetts in 1661 for holding their gatherings, publishing tracts and proselytizing. This was a typically intolerant European response to dissent. What is important and interesting is how the US managed to make the transition from this position to engendering of toleration, and onwards to an egalitarian mode of public discourse which has led to modern multiculturalism. As Beneke says, there were two revolutions: one in law and one in society. He concentrates on the development of the social revolution from the mid-seventeenth-century position to the foundation of the new state at the end of the eighteenth century.

Beneke demonstrates that the key for the US was not simply what he calls the revolution in laws that generated tolerance and protected religious freedom, but the equally important fact that American culture was transformed to accommodate the religious differences within it – a revolution in culture. He emphasizes the development of individual judgement, the crumbling of religious establishments, the growth of a print culture and evangelical revivalism in this process. The highly

mobile nature of society, and the dissenting tradition that many came from, meant that the church establishment was replaced by religious liberty, where the right of a person to hold a private judgement had enormous status. The authority of church and state was weaker than in Europe and the Protestant emphasis on the individual's religious identity helped fuel these developments, as did the huge growth in the variety of churches. This variety gave people a great range of choice of churches (in many parts of the country) and the plethora of churches meant that believers were shown in vivid terms how partial any religious adherence was. The role of the print media was also vital in disseminating and expanding the dissenting and pluralistic attitudes, which helped generate the culture of tolerance of different religious views. The shadow of Franklin falls on some key parts of this narrative.

From this came an expansion of individual rights, the mixing of believers and churches in the same institutions, and the introduction of more civility into public life. They all played an instrumental role in creating the religious pluralism of the United States, as they showed how to deal with the issue of living with differences in matters of the highest importance. The conclusion was that being a citizen and being a member of a particular congregation were not in contradiction. So, although the culture of formal religious tolerance had roots in Europe, in the US dissent was not seen as political subversion. These changes were enshrined in the Bill of Rights, protecting religious liberty, and established important precedents for future civil rights movements in which dignity, as much as equality, would be at stake. It also created, in Robert Bellah's terms, an American civil religion as the nation under God – it was the morality that underpinned society. Difficulties with this synthesized religious position only really arose with Catholics between the 1830s and the 1850s, and with Mormons, as they were not prepared to advocate the pluralist position and had for themselves a separate authority structure. As an aside, one could note the relevance of this for contemporary politics, as Mitt Romney's Mormon views and John Kerry's difficulties with the Catholic bishops show how much these foundational issues still resonate at election time. Furthermore, it shows how religiously deep-rooted the separation of church and state was for the Founding Fathers. The book is a story wonderfully told and an argument well supported by contemporary texts, making it a really impressive and thought-provoking read examining key issues on the foundation of the US, and how religion helped take the nation beyond mere toleration of differing viewpoints.

The libertarian tradition of acceptance of a diversity of views and the separation of church and state is brought into stark relief by the divisiveness of the current Bush administration, where some have seen him as near-saviour and others as endangering the constitution with his well-professed religious views. It is clear that Bush has challenged the tolerant "civil-religion" synthesis in a way no other modern President has come close to. It would be a mistake, however, to see him simply as an aberration in the tradition of Presidents having a clear religious position whilst in office. As Gary Scott Smith's *Faith and the Presidency* shows, religion has been a fundamental part of the presidency since Washington's inaugural.

Smith's large, well-argued and well-researched book analyses the personal belief and public policies of Presidents, and does so showing the complex and ambiguous nature of the task. He shows very effectively how faith affected how many performed their duties, especially concerning how their faith influenced their

governing, and their relationship with religious constituencies, electoral strategies and approach to public policies, as well as their overall character. All forty-three presidents have been friendly towards organized religion and thirty-two have been church members. Smith has chosen eleven exemplars either because they were deeply religious (Lincoln, Wilson, Carter, Reagan and Bush), because their religious perspectives significantly influenced key public policies (many), because they differed from the Protestant mainstream (Jefferson and Kennedy), or because their election or administration were involved in major religious controversies. He has five key themes examining their personalities, the separation of church and state, civil religion, America as a chosen nation and the issue of character. His introduction outlines the changing and complex nature many of these themes have had over the period of the nation. His focus is domestic in concern and a product of the debates thrown up by the current Bush administration. It takes a chronological rather than thematic approach, which rather weakens the commonality of the expressed idea, and there is an obvious limitation in examining the President in isolation, but what Smith sets out to do he achieves wonderfully and fills a serious gap in the field.

Though the early Presidents had little formal religious persuasion and saw it as a private affair, Smith shows the range of beliefs and influence that belief has had on the Presidents. He argues clearly for the providentialism of Washington as he shaped an unknown office and governed a fragile republic, whilst Jefferson, so often seen as a deist, if not an atheist, is shown to embody biblical optimism and the Enlightenment principles, disestablishing the Episcopal Church and separating church and state. He strove to reform Christianity by shifting its focus from theology to ethics, a trend that is still prevalent today. Lincoln, the embodiment with Washington of the leader of civil religion, placed much emphasis on redemptive suffering. His deep religiosity is universally accepted, although he was never baptized, received communion or joined a church; as Smith says, “most evangelicals today would have been troubled by aspects of Lincoln’s theology” (103). Lincoln’s approach to slavery and his understanding of the meaning of the Civil War show the positive and direct contribution of Christianity to American politics. Later Presidents, such as Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson and Jimmy Carter, are seen as champions of a pattern of engagement that emphasized civic responsibility and biblical morality, whilst F. D. Roosevelt, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Reagan and George W. Bush are seen as fighting global ideologies that were considered to embody evil.

Smith acknowledges the complexity and criticisms, but generally has a positive tone in his analysis. For example, Eisenhower is given an affirmative religious reading even though he was only baptized once in the White House at a time of huge religious fervour, when “under God” was added to the Pledge of Allegiance and when, in 1956, “In God we trust” was placed on coins and currency. This helps clarify what this book is not – it does not show how religion has influenced foreign policy. For instance, the prevalence of the Christian perspective in the 1950s meant that the US wanted to back not just anticommunists but Christian anticommunists, and did so by supporting Rhee in Korea, Chiang Kai-shek in China/Taiwan and Diem in Vietnam. They were all Christians in predominantly non-Christian countries. This sort of international issue is not touched upon, but is, quite wonderfully, in books such as Seth Jacobs’s *America’s Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem*,

Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2004). Smith's concern is domestic.

The domestic influence of Protestant Christianity is examined, showing that when Kennedy ran for office he had to down play the role of religion because of the fears attached to him as a Catholic. It was with Nixon that religion again arose to prominence in the White House, and Nixon is an odd omission from this study. An earlier survey of presidential faith, Robert S. Alley's *So Help Me God: Religion and the Presidency, Wilson to Nixon* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1972), stated that Nixon "may be the most self-consciously religious man to enter the White House since Wilson" (114). Nixon's presidency in fact helped generate the revival of stated religion in the White House, and the ignominious end his administration suffered became a clarion call to remoralize American politics, which helped lead to the election of Jimmy Carter. The failure of Carter and the disappointment of evangelicals with him led to their entry into national politics and has led to the present religiously charged political climate in the US.

President Bush is an outcome of these developments but he has a different perspective to his predecessors, shown most clearly when he established the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives in 2001, with the aim to use the churches (rather than simply government) to address society's ills. There are a plethora of accounts of varying quality of the religious nature and consequences of the current administration, but Wineburg's *Faith-Based Inefficiency* and Kuo's *Tempting Faith* are very different from the usual and far better, too. In *Faith-Based Inefficiency* Bob Wineburg, a professor of social work who has been examining the role of religious congregations' help to others for over twenty years, argues that beneath the administration's compassionate ideal lies an agenda to demolish government programmes, mobilize and increase the size of the evangelical Christian voting block, shift government money to churches and other faith-based organizations in the conservative-led culture war, and develop a smoke screen of convincing media images and baffling words to confuse detractors. His analysis crucially exposes the naivety of the administration's approach to fixing the serious and complex problems of persistent poverty. In addition, Wineburg argues that the "faith" of the faith-based initiative is actually an evangelical Christian viewpoint – Wineburg is a practising reformed Jew – and that this is not the pluralistic America he grew up in. This passionate and well-written book is a necessary balance to much of the literature on Bush's initiative, and shows how far and how deeply the policies are flawed. Kuo compliments this account by showing from the inside how the focus on one branch of Christianity has come to be so intolerant and predominant in the administration.

Kuo's *Tempting Faith* is an appealing memoir giving an insider's account of the Christian right and the vehement hatred that it directed to those it opposed, in particular the Clintons. The traditional culture of religious tolerance is shown to have disappeared completely as a hugely invigorating self-referential and self-righteous mood took hold. The book charts his "personal journey" and thereby opens up to outsiders, in a clearly and engagingly written manner, the world vision that puts such a high emphasis on the halting of abortions in the US, promoting family values and aiding the poor over all other issues. The interest in his account develops as he is in a position to try and realize these policies as part of the Bush

administration. Here his book has caused controversy. Essentially the issue is that – after being a policy adviser to John Ashcroft and speechwriter for Ralph Reed, Pat Robertson and Bob Dole – Kuo spent nearly three years as number two at the President's Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. The difficulty that Kuo faced is simply laid out – he found himself helping to manipulate religious faith for political gain. As is well known, Karl Rove and the White House were clear they needed to woo the Christian right but Kuo shows very clearly, and from an influential position, that, despite the President's personal faith, the Christian right did not influence the senior policy staff in the White House – they were actually spoken of with contempt.

Kuo is a very clear challenge to all analysts who simply see the role of the Christian right as pervading every level of the White House. This point of view alone makes the book worthwhile reading and forces many to question the sweeping assumptions of the influence and nature of the Christian right on the Bush administration. Kuo, having detailed his journey from the periphery to the centre, ends by calling for a withdrawal from mainstream politics of the major Christian leaders and groups. He sees that they have lost their way on the issue of public politics and that entrenched intolerance is not what American Christians such as himself are about.

Kuo's disillusionment is reflective of the currently damaged relationship in America between Christian churches, the broader polity and the traditional civil-religion culture based on Christian values. The tolerance that became liberty, which Beneke outlines so well, combined with the broad-based and far-reaching religious views of previous Presidents, did not lead to such fragmentation. The American civil-religion tradition has in fact been undermined by the Bush presidency and there is a need for the traditional values of dialogue, pluralism and the libertarian tradition to be recovered, restoring America's sense of itself and its past. Smith's book shows how other Presidents managed it, and Beneke shows how it was done and how it is not the enemy but the source of American pluralism. These are key insights that analysts need to acknowledge as they grapple with the complexities of the role of religion in the American polity and its international affairs – religion and intolerance are not synonymous, however things look at the moment.