

Religion and American Politics: Domestic and International Contexts, edited by Paulina Napierała, Peter Lang Group, Berlin, 2024.

Dóra Busz¹

R*eligion and American Politics: Domestic and International Contexts* explores the intricate and often contradictory role of religion in American politics, highlighting how it influences the domestic and international politics of the United States, as well as the political attitudes of its citizens. The volume is divided into four thematic sections, each focusing on a different aspect of the intersection of religion and politics, beginning with a chapter from editor Paulina Napierała which outlines the competing models for analyzing religion, and describes the research approaches taken in the volume. This explanatory section provides a conceptual framework for the following studies, emphasizing their methodological similarities, as well as the ways in which they differ from one another. As the book brings together authors from diverse academic disciplines, their various perspectives and theoretical backgrounds result in a multi- and interdisciplinary evaluation of the question at hand.

The first section of the book, “Evolving Relations Between Religion and American Politics,” encompasses two studies that focus on religiosity and (private and collective) social behaviour. Károly Pintér examines the concept of American civil religion (ACR) in historical and contemporary contexts. Pintér argues that Donald Trump’s brazen rhetoric significantly differed from previous civil religious tradition with its exclusionary, partisan, and populist themes, reflecting on the discordance between the values of ACR and the legacy of the first Trump presidency. Pintér touches on the evangelical Christian support for Donald Trump, which the following study by James L. Guth and Lyman A. Kellstedt elaborates on. Through empirical analysis, the two authors examine how religion may be a predictor for right-wing populist sympathies. Testing for the most prominent features of populist rhetoric and policies, the chapter reveals that Evangelicals form the most dedicated

¹ Eötvös Loránd University, busidora@student.elte.hu

core of the populist Republican base, while atheists, agnostics, and “nones” tend to be more critical of conservative populist messages.

In “Constitutional Dimensions of Religious and Political Debates in the United States,” contributors focus on legal issues, showing changes in the Supreme Court’s relationship with religion through the examination of significant court cases. Sebastian Kubas tackles the Christian Right’s influence on the process of the judicial review and utilization of the legal system to push political aims. Kubas argues that the Supreme Court significantly shifted the interpretation of the religion clauses of the First Amendment over time. Similarly, Jerold L. Waltman focuses on the First Amendment, particularly the recent evolution of the free exercise jurisprudence of the Supreme Court. Through case studies, Waltman reveals recent conservative successes in the legal reinforcement of religious liberty, which, the author explains, happened in the face of social change, in particular the rise in the number of atheists or agnostics in the country, or the growing acceptance of homosexuality. Both previous authors point to the continuous shift in the interpretation of the First Amendment’s clauses with societal transformation. Differentiating between positive and negative conceptualizations of liberty in context of gay marriage, Emily R. Gill illustrates how the dissonance between the two interpretations colours the way conservative Christians and civil rights activists assess the expansion of the right to marry. The last piece in this section brings an interesting new element to the study of the First Amendment, namely the situation of the Muslim community in the US after 9/11. Treating Yasir Qadhi’s work as an illustration, Elad Ben David describes the careful balancing of Islamic and American values that Muslims had to undertake amid the increasing hostility towards them in the post-9/11 era, showing that bolstering their American identity became crucial for many Muslims amid growing Islamophobia in the country.

Next, “Religion, Race and Politics: The Political Role of the Black Church” tackles the relationship of the Black Church with politics, focusing on the social mobilizing role of Black religious institutions. Paulina Napierała retells the history of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, expounding through the actions of its subsequent pastors on the strong activist tradition that weaves through the fabric of the church. Over the course of the history of the church, Napierała highlights, theological shifts occurred towards more liberal views, however, perhaps the most important factor in their ongoing commitment to activism was pastors’ acceptance

of the social gospel. Cristóbal Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes takes a closer look at Martin Luther King, Jr.'s prophetic mysticism as it addressed racism, poverty, and militarism, arguing that for King, the three were closely intertwined. In the context of the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War on the one hand, and amid the tradition of prophetic mystics on the other, King's activism takes a holistic approach to righting social wrongs through nonviolent resistance, marrying Christian theology and political activism. Michael McLaughlin focuses on the Black Power Movement, illuminating the crucial role churches played in the success of the Black Panthers' Breakfast Program. Despite police intervention, Panthers and church officials cooperated to provide locations for the program, highlighting the social work that the group facilitated. Finally, Jajuan S. Johnson offers an overview of the history and current reality of Black church burnings, especially in context of the Black Lives Matter movement and the election of Barack Obama. Calling attention to the symbolic role of church fires, Johnson reflects on the issues of racial violence and Black liberation theology by placing cases of church arson into their broader social and political contexts.

The last section, "Religion, International Politics, and Global Issues," as the first part did, focuses on the interplay between individual political and religious attitudes and collective political opinions, broadening the scope of analysis to the international scene. James L. Guth and Brent F. Nelsen examine religious support for the "Trump Doctrine's" various facets, namely nationalism, militarism, and a unilateral approach to international relations. As in previous chapters, emphasis is placed on Trump's evangelical base, in a political landscape where increasingly, "religious influences ... are now 'baked into' the party system" (320). One area where foreign policy and religion have considerable effect on each other, argues Husam Mohamad in the next chapter, is Israel and Palestine. After examining the dispensationalist and Christian Zionist understanding of the Bible's end-time prophecy, Mohamad explores how these groups successfully lobbied to advance their own policy goals, namely securing American support for Israel. Although geopolitics and security also play significant roles in US policy regarding the region, Mohamad argues that theologically motivated Christian Zionist political influence severely hindered the possibility of de-escalation between Israelis and Palestinians. Last, Lyman A. Kellstedt and James L. Guth explore how attitudes regarding global warming are affected by religious sentiment. Investigating quantitative survey data,

the authors find that religious traditionalism correlates with sceptical attitudes towards environmental protection, while those more progressive in their religiosity, as well as atheists and agnostics are more supportive of such policies. The authors do not find any indication that a straightforward and ubiquitous process of “greening of religion” (369) has taken place in the United States.

Overall, if there was one word to describe the collection of studies in this book, it would be interdisciplinarity. Introducing scholars from various fields, from political science to law, cultural studies, or history, the perspectives of different disciplines enter into conversation with one another in-between the chapters, with some contributors focusing on the national, while others on the global level, some taking on qualitative, others quantitative approaches. The selection of studies in *Religion and American Politics* covers a wide array of topics related to American religiosity and politics, but by virtue of recurring issues (such as the question of school prayer, gay marriage, or the interpretation of the First Amendment), shared historical reference points, and theoretical overlaps the book remains coherent, offering appropriately varied commentary on the complex relationship between religion and politics in the United States.