Protestant, Catholic, Jew ...

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WILL Herberg’s Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology was originally published in 1955. It is a classic work in the sociology of religion, once described by the noted historian of American religion Martin E. Marty as “the most honored discussion of American religion in mid-twentieth-century times.” But shortly after making this favorable judgment, Marty went on to assert that Herberg “failed to anticipate almost every important turn in subsequent American life.”

In fairness to Herberg, he did not claim that his book predicted the American future or propounded timeless truths about America’s religion and society. Instead, he modestly declared that he hoped only that it would “contribute to a better understanding of both religion and society in mid-twentieth-century America.” Nor could Herberg reasonably have been expected to provide an accurate forecast. He wrote as a champion of religion and biblical prophecy, but he did
not claim that he himself was a prophet.

In many important respects, American religion today departs significantly from the depiction offered by Herberg. On the other hand, in notable respects, his depiction continues to ring true. It is accordingly useful to reconsider Protestant-Catholic-Jew a half-century after its initial appearance, as an aid to determining what has changed and what remains the same after that span of time. To understand the book, however, we must first comprehend the intellectual trajectory that led Herberg to write it.

Confession of faith

Born in Russia to atheist socialist parents in 1901, Herberg immigrated to the United States along with them in 1904. He became a communist, figuring prominently as a young man in intraparty political and intellectual debates. Around 1940, however, Herberg became one of the many who rejected the communist god that failed.

Influenced by reading and meeting with Reinhold Niebuhr, and then—at Niebuhr's instigation—by reading the existentialist Jewish thinkers Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, Herberg instead became a passionate and articulate proponent of biblical religion—devoting himself to serving the God who, Herberg believed, does not fail. He affirmed this in his first book, Judaism and Modern Man, which he published in 1951. There he asserted that man's existence is "self-transcending," pointing beyond itself to "something larger, in which the self attempts to ground itself and establish its security. Man, we may say, is always searching for a 'god.'"

But "the 'god' that man finds as long as he relies simply on himself," Herberg observed, "is never the true God; it is always some idol constructed after his own heart." In his "confession of faith" (as he described his book), Herberg argued for the need to reject man-made idolatries such as ethical systems, cosmic principles, or social utopias, and instead turn to belief in the truly transcendent God:

As the misery of existence is, at bottom, due to our alienation from God, so our "return" to him opens the way for
the validation of life, individual and collective. The “return” to God is faith; it is faith that restores the wholeness of life and reorients our total existence in a new direction, toward the Living God who is the source and end of our being.

Herberg’s passionate belief was unmistakable. But were other American believers as serious about religion as he? In a sense, that was the question Herberg asked and answered in Protestant-Catholic-Jew.

Religion and secularism in America

In Protestant-Catholic-Jew, Herberg contended that Americans were at once a religious and a secular people. On the one hand, surveys found that upwards of 95 percent of Americans professed to believe in God, and that 75 percent regarded themselves as members of churches or synagogues. But on the other hand, Americans were overwhelmingly ignorant of the religions in which they expressed belief, and they also gave little indication that their religious beliefs affected their conduct in any serious way. More than half of Americans could not name one of the four gospels, and more than half maintained that their religious beliefs had no effect on their ideas about politics and business. How, then, were Americans’ professions of religious belief to be understood?

Herberg answered that question by asserting that religious affiliation gave Americans a place in society and helped them understand it. Making a claim that was to be refuted a few years later with the publication of Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s Beyond the Melting Pot, Herberg posited that “the perpetuation of ethnic differences in any serious way is altogether out of line with the logic of American reality.” Immigrants and their descendants were expected to assimilate, but Americanization did not entail religious conversion. Instead, the descendants of immigrants almost always maintained their ancestral religious allegiances. Thus “it was largely in and through ... religion that [the immigrant], or rather his children and grandchildren, found an identifiable place in American life.”

Herberg cited data showing that 68 percent of Ameri-
cans were Protestant, 23 percent Catholic, and 4 percent Jewish. (The remaining 5 percent expressed no religious preference.) He therefore concluded:

By and large, to be an American today means to be either a Protestant, a Catholic, or a Jew, because all other forms of self-identification and social location are either (like regional background) peripheral and obsolescent, or else (like ethnic diversity) subsumed under the broader head of religious community. Not to be a Catholic, a Protestant, or a Jew today is, for increasing numbers of American people, not to be anything.

Adhering to their ancestors' religion enabled the children of immigrants "to define their place in American society in a way that would sustain their Americanness and yet confirm the tie that bound them to their forebears." Thus Herberg noted that, as of 1955, 96 percent of Americans continued to belong to the religious community in which they were raised, hardly ever converting to or intermarrying with a member of another faith. This led him to speak of a "triple melting pot."

The three great American religious communities had much in common. All identified equally with the "American Way of Life." All expressed, in their own particular way, "the 'spiritual values' American democracy is presumed to stand for (the fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man, the dignity of the individual human being, etc.)." Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism were understood by Herberg to be "three diverse, but equally legitimate, equally American, expressions of an overall American religion, standing for the same 'moral ideals.'"

**Critique of American religion**

The three religions had accordingly become homogenized and Americanized—downplaying theological and liturgical disputes, focusing on ethical behavior, and espousing a moralistic and idealistic outlook. Belief in religion—as opposed to belief in any particular religion—was understood to be an individual, as well as a collective, good. This celebration of religion in the abstract and indifference to interreligious disputes is captured wonderfully by
Herberg in a quote from then-President Eisenhower: “Our government makes no sense, unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith—and I don’t care what it is.” (The emphasis is Herberg’s.)

As Herberg noted, the focus on what unites rather than divides the three American religions points to a great measure of tolerance and cooperation among them: “In America religious pluralism is ... not merely a historical and political fact; it is, in the mind of the American, the primordial condition of things, an essential aspect of the “American Way of Life,” and therefore in itself an aspect of religious belief.” As a result, “virtually every civic enterprise possessing any moral, cultural, or spiritual aspect is today thought of, and where possible organized, along interfaith—that is, tripartite—lines.”

Because Herberg judged this Americanized religion by the lofty standard he had formulated in *Judaism and Modern Man*, it is not surprising that he subsequently criticized it. “The religiousness characteristic of America today is very often a religiousness without religion, a religiousness with almost any kind of content or none, a way of sociability or ‘belonging’ rather than a way of reorienting life to God.” In fact, Herberg contended that “the authentic character of Jewish-Christian faith [was] falsified and the faith itself reduced to the status of an American culture-religion.” When judged by the standard of authentic Christianity or Judaism, this “civic religion of the American people” is “incurably idolatrous,” in that it “validates culture and society, without in any sense bringing them under judgment.”

Herberg feared that such a form of belief “seems to be very largely the religious validation of the social patterns and cultural values associated with the American Way of Life.” Although he discerned “signs of deeper and more authentic stirrings of faith” in America, Herberg nevertheless concluded that American religion was far likelier to celebrate American actions than to criticize them.

This religiosity very easily comes to serve as a spiritual reinforcement of national self-righteousness and a spiritual authentication of national self-will.... In its crudest form,
this identification of religion with national purpose generates a kind of national messianism, which sees it as the vocation of America to bring the American Way of Life, compounded almost equally of democracy and free enterprise, to every corner of the globe; in more mitigated versions, it sees God as the champion of America, endorsing American purposes, and sustaining American might.

No matter how critically Herberg judged America’s religion and politics, he was far more critical of communism. He accordingly continued his journey rightward in the years following the publication of Protestant-Catholic-Jew. In 1959, he became religion editor of National Review, whose readers might have been surprised to learn that only a few years earlier Herberg had invoked religion to criticize American “self-righteousness.” But even when he wrote as a self-identified conservative, Herberg continued to express discontent with “what passes for conservatism in contemporary American politics.”

Religion and secularism today

To what extent does Herberg’s depiction of American religion continue to apply today? Parts of it remain true; other parts have been refuted but detract little from Herberg’s overall thesis; still other parts have been falsified in ways that cannot be reconciled with his thesis.

Herberg’s major claim—that Americans are at once a religious and a secular people—would seem to be as true today as it was in 1955. In fact, if a single timeless truth about American religion exists, it would appear to be Americans’ unique combination of religiosity and secularism. Nineteenth-century European observers (not just Tocqueville, but also Harriet Martineau, Anthony Trollope, and Lord Bryce) repeatedly commented on the religiousness of Americans and the paucity of American atheists. In the words of Robert Baird, an American Presbyterian minister who lived in Europe from 1835 through 1843: “In no other part of the world, perhaps, do the inhabitants attend church in a larger proportion than in the United States; certainly no part of the Continent of Europe can compare with them in that respect.”
But these same observers also commented on American secularism—by which I here refer to Americans’ indifference to religious doctrine. Trollope, for instance, reported that “the question of a man’s religion is regarded in a free and easy way.” Anticipating Eisenhower’s view almost a century beforehand, he commented that “everybody is bound to have a religion, but it does not much matter what it is.” For his part, Tocqueville judged as follows: “What is most important to [American society] is not so much that all citizens profess the true religion but that they profess a religion.”

Turning to recent and current survey data, one finds continued support for Herberg’s claim. The pollster George Gallup, Jr., reported in 1999 that “95% of the public in 1947 said they believed in God; 96% hold this belief today.” Herberg cited data showing that three-fourths of Americans regarded themselves as members of churches. In 1999, Gallup found that this percentage had dropped only modestly to 69 percent.

At the same time, current survey data continue to confirm Herberg’s contentions that Americans know little of the Bible they profess to read faithfully, and that the actions of Americans are seldom deeply influenced by their religious beliefs. Half of the Americans who describe themselves as Christians do not know who delivered the Sermon on the Mount. Amusingly, one apparently widespread misconception is the belief that Noah’s wife (who is unnamed in the Bible) was called Joan, as in Joan of Ark.

Gallup’s findings confirm that American faith is broad but not deep. In 1992, he calculated that “only 13% of Americans can be said to have a deep, integrated and lived-out faith.” The shallowness (or at least inconsistency) of American professions of faith is evident, for example, in Gallup’s finding that “evangelicals are slightly more likely [than other Americans] to believe in astrology and in witches.” More than a quarter of all evangelicals reportedly give credence to astrology.

Assessing the beliefs of American Protestants, a second pollster, George Barna, himself an evangelical, asserted in 2001 that
the Christian body in America is immersed in a crisis of biblical illiteracy. How else can you describe matters when most church-going adults reject the accuracy of the Bible, ... believe that good works are one of the keys to persuading God to forgive their sins, and describe their commitment to Christianity as moderate or even less firm?

Conversion and intermarriage today

Herberg’s argument on behalf of the “triple melting pot”—in which there was little movement from any of the three American religious communities to any of the others—is distinctly less plausible today than it was in 1955. Even then, it must be said, his argument stood on shaky ground. The only evidence that Herberg offered to support this thesis was a 1944 study of intermarriage trends in New Haven from 1870 to 1940.

The study did, in fact, confirm the infrequency of religious intermarriage. It is noteworthy, though, that intermarriage rates were increasing for all three religious communities. With the benefit of hindsight, this appears to be a case in which the trend line was more telling than the raw data. Thus the study found that over 95 percent of Catholics married other Catholics in 1870, with the figure dropping below 86 percent in 1900 and below 84 percent in 1940. The comparable figures for Protestants were above 99 percent in 1870, below 91 percent in 1900, and below 80 percent in 1940. Intermarriage was least common for New Haven’s Jews, all of whom married other Jews in 1870. The figure hardly dropped at all thereafter, falling below 99 percent in 1900 and below 95 percent in 1940. Still, the intermarriage trend line rose in New Haven between 1870 and 1940, and that rise has been replicated across the United States in the years after 1940.

Religious conversion is also far more common now than it was when Herberg wrote. In 1988, the sociologist Robert Wuthnow cited Gallup poll data showing that, in 1955, only 4 percent of Americans no longer adhered to their childhood faith. By contrast, 1985 Gallup data demonstrated that a third of Americans had switched their faith. To be sure, many of these conversions were from one Protestant de-
nomination to another, changes that are compatible with what Herberg reported. (Herberg acknowledged that Protestants often changed from one denomination to another but emphasized that they tended to remain Protestant.) But the data cited by Wuthnow also showed that 15 percent of those raised as Jews and 17 percent of those raised as Catholics—that is, roughly one out of six adherents to each of these religions—had converted to another religion.

More recent data, which I cite by permission from work in progress by the Berkeley sociologists Michael Hout and Claude Fischer, confirm the increase in intermarriages as well as conversions. Taking their data from responses to the General Social Survey, Hout and Fischer conclude that—among Catholics and Jews born in 1975—roughly a fourth of the Catholics and almost half of the Jews no longer profess the religion in which they were raised. Hout and Fischer also find that roughly 20 percent of the marriages of those born after 1959 now unite Protestants and Catholics, Protestants and Jews, or Catholics and Jews.

Finally, and most strikingly, the American Jewish Identity Survey of 2001 found that, “of all adults married since 1990, who say they are Jewish by religion or of Jewish parentage or upbringing, just 40% are married to a spouse who is also of Jewish origins; 51% are married to a spouse who is not of Jewish origins and an additional 9% are married to a spouse who is a convert to Judaism.” That finding lends considerable support to Irving Kristol’s aphorism that “the danger facing American Jews today is not that Christians want to persecute them, but that Christians want to marry them.”

On one level, these data surely poke sizable holes in Herberg’s triple melting pot. On another level, though, they actually reaffirm a broader and more important tenet of Herberg’s argument. If, as he suggested, intrareligious marriages predominated because they were in effect acts of filial piety (a means of maintaining and expressing ties to one’s immigrant forebears), it is hardly surprising that intermarriages should become more common over time. The religious persuasion of an immigrant ancestor could be expected to have little effect on the marital choices of descendants four or five generations after his arrival, as
opposed to one or two. Since Herberg maintained that the three American religions were "equal ... and equally American," it stands to reason that more Americans should be willing to switch from belief in one of them to belief in another. To do so, one can argue, is only to take to heart Eisenhower's emphasis on "a deeply felt religious faith—and I don't care what it is."

To this should be added that personal reinvention has always been attractive to Americans, and there are few more spectacular ways to reinvent oneself than to intermarry or to convert. Either action leads one to associate—on a more or less intimate basis—with people different from oneself. Intermarriage and conversion were less frequent in the past, it could be argued, only because the opportunities—not the temptations—were fewer. When there was less social mobility, chances to meet and become comfortable with persons of different backgrounds were much less likely. The intrinsic appeal of intermarriage, even in the past, may be evident in the great popularity of Abie's Irish Rose—which, as the title suggests, celebrated an Irish-Jewish marriage. The play opened on Broadway in May 1922 and did not close until October 1927.

**Immigration and American religions**

Herberg's sociology of religion emphasized the importance of the immigration of ancestors to explain the religious choices of the Americans of his day. Herberg took it for granted, though, that immigration to America had effectively come to a halt as a result of restrictive legislation in the 1920s. Needless to say, he did not anticipate the passage of legislation, enacted in 1965 and thereafter, that reopened America's borders to a substantial influx of immigrants. The resulting increase in immigration to America—in particular the large rise in immigration from south and east Asia—has transformed American religion, adding religions other than Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism to the national mix.

At first glance, this renewed immigration might seem to have rendered obsolete Herberg's vision of a Judeo-Christian America. He wrote at a time when 19 out of 20 Americans declared themselves to be Protestants, Catho-
lics, or Jews, so he could plausibly contend that

not to be—that is, not to identify oneself and be identified as—either a Protestant, a Catholic, or a Jew is somehow not to be an American. It may imply being foreign, as is the case when one professes oneself a Buddhist, a Muslim, or anything but a Protestant, Catholic, or Jew, even when one's Americanness is otherwise beyond question.

That argument would clearly be harder to sustain today than it was in 1955. Between 1990 and 1999, the number of Asian Americans—many of whom are neither Christian nor Jewish—increased by 43 percent, reaching a total of 10.8 million. Muslim chaplains now serve in the U.S. armed forces. A Muslim imam and a Hindu priest have offered prayers at the opening sessions of the House of Representatives. A Buddhist astronaut died on the Challenger. The Republican candidate in Louisiana's recent gubernatorial election was born a Hindu (though he converted to Catholicism). These facts lend support to the claim of Harvard scholar Diana Eck, who contends that "the 'Protestant, Catholic, Jewish' image of America has been amplified to include many other voices, and a new era of America's religious pluralism has begun."

Because of these developments, public officials who remain wedded to Herberg's thesis can find themselves embroiled in controversy. In September, on the "Charlie Rose Show," Secretary of State Colin Powell cut himself off mid-sentence in an apparent endorsement of the thesis. He declared that he expected Iraq to remain "an Islamic country by faith, just as we are a Judeo-Christian—," but he abruptly stopped. He then quickly backtracked, adding that "it's hard to tell any more, but we are a country of many faiths now." A second and more amusing episode occurred in November, when the director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives raised hackles by doubting the existence of pagan faith-based charities, in particular pagan groups that care for the poor. Seeking to confirm the existence of pagan compassion, spokesmen for the International Pagan Pride Project countered that these groups have collected 74,000 pounds of food and donated $51,000 to homeless shelters, interfaith food banks, and other charities. The assertiveness of the Pagan Pride spokesmen may reflect the
fact that paganism is one of the fastest-growing American faiths: As of 2001, according to the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS), there were over 300,000 American adults who described themselves as pagan.

America is undeniably more multireligious than it was when Herberg wrote. Nevertheless, both empirically and theoretically, the increased number of adherents of non-Western religions does less damage to Herberg’s thesis than might be supposed. The number of American Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists is simply not all that great. A large majority of current immigrants continues to be Christian: Since 63 percent of those who immigrated in 2000 hail from Europe, North America, and South America, that fact should not be surprising. According to ARIS, as of 2001, no more than 3.7 percent of the American adult population was non-Christian. Seventy-seven percent was Christian, 14 percent offered no religious identification, and the other 5 percent did not respond to the survey. Among the adult population, ARIS counted only 1,104,000 Muslims, 1,082,000 Buddhists, and 766,000 Hindus. Citing earlier but not radically different figures for religious affiliations, Richard Parker of Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government asserts that America is still “an overwhelmingly ‘Christian’ country—more Christian, in fact, than India is Hindu, Israel is Jewish, or Latin America is Catholic.”

The ARIS estimates are controversial and may well be unreasonably low. (It must also be emphasized that the ARIS figures are for the American adult population—not for the total American population.) Eck’s estimates are considerably higher: She counts 6 million Muslims, 4 million Buddhists, and more than one million Hindus. Nevertheless, even Eck’s numbers are not all that large in comparison to the total American population that now exceeds 290 million.

Arguing for the significance of the increased number of believers in non-Western religions, Eck contends there are now “as many Muslims as there are Jews” in the United States. But if that is the case, what it shows is not how many Muslims there are, but how few Jews there are. Herberg reported data showing that 4 percent of the American population was Jewish; by contrast, according to ARIS, 1.3 per-
cent of American adults identified themselves as adherents of Judaism in 2001. If one adds in those of Jewish ancestry who claim to adhere to no religion or to another religion, the figure would rise above 2 percent.

Today, as when Herberg wrote, the vast majority of Americans are still Protestant or Catholic. The reaction of these American Christians to today's non-Christian immigration is also worth noting, because it testifies to the tolerance and secularism Herberg discussed. Despite the fear of Muslim terrorism occasioned by the September 11 attacks, it is significant that Americans continue to view Muslim Americans favorably: According to a 2002 survey by the Pew Research Center, 51 percent of Americans hold a favorable view of Muslim Americans, whereas only 24 percent view them unfavorably.

It is also striking that the objections raised to immigration almost never relate to the religious beliefs of non-Christian immigrants. Opponents of immigration target the "culture," not the religious beliefs, of today's immigrants; and their cultural objections extend equally to adherents of Western religions like Latin American Catholics and non-Western ones, such as Asian Buddhists and Hindus.

Although I have seen no data on this score, my guess is that Americans as a whole are less troubled by the immigration of Asian Buddhists and Hindus—who, judged from the standpoint of Jewish or Christian theology, could perhaps be classified as atheists or polytheists—than they are by the immigration of monotheistic Latin American Catholics. Both sets of immigrants are likely to bring with them—in Francis Fukuyama's words—the virtues that parents display when they "make large sacrifices for their children" and the virtues that employees display when they "rise early in the morning and labor long hours in order to get ahead." But members of the former set of immigrants are more likely also to bring with them skills that will enable them to make a greater contribution to the American economy.

If Americans are not more perturbed by the immigration of Buddhists and Hindus, that would testify to the American obliviousness to religious doctrine of which Herberg spoke. He posited that American religion emphasizes "deeds, not
creeds.” Praiseworthy deeds might once have been thought somehow to derive from the Christian creed, since the virtues displayed by self-sacrificing parents and diligent workers earlier characterized, as Fukuyama notes, Americans who had been “formed by a Christian culture.” But if—as is clearly the case—those virtues are also possessed by non-Christians, there is good reason to emphasize the immigrants’ deeds and to ignore the fact that their creeds are not Christian.

Thus, to the extent that the religious affiliations of Asian immigrants—at least of non-Muslims—have become a non-issue for most Americans, Herberg’s understanding of American religion is confirmed rather than contradicted. A half-century ago, Herberg marked the advance of religious pluralism by portraying Judaism as a religion thought by Americans to be of equal stature with Protestantism and Catholicism. Now that greater numbers of Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus reside in America, the legitimacy previously accorded to the three great Western religions is seemingly being extended to the Eastern ones as well. That progression constitutes an extension and development, rather than a refutation, of Herberg’s position.

From consensus to culture wars

Herberg depicted an America characterized by widespread religious agreement, in which Protestants, Catholics, and Jews all united in defense of the American way of life. In this respect, Protestant-Catholic-Jew is very much a product of its time, a reflection of the consensus that prevailed in the 1950s.

Herberg was not wrong to discern a lack of religious controversy in America in the 1950s. At that time, in Wuthnow’s words, “an uncannily high degree of consensus appeared to exist within most denominations.” But that consensus was anomalous from a historical perspective. Fifty years earlier, American churches were divided by disagreements about the Social Gospel, as religious leaders debated whether Americans must somehow take collective responsibility to improve the lot of impoverished industrial workers. A half-century before that, American churches were even more fiercely divided by dis-
agreements over slavery and abolitionism.

In any event, the consensus that Herberg portrayed was to disappear, as American churches came to be embroiled in the social unrest that swept America during the 1960s. Wuthnow notes that the civil rights movement "opened up a fundamental issue that was increasingly to become defined as a division between [religious] liberals and conservatives." That disagreement was not foreseen by Herberg, whose analysis of American religion—focusing as it did on the attitudes of the descendants of European immigrants—in effect treated American blacks as invisible men.

If the civil rights movement began to push some American religious forces to the Left, the rise of evangelical Protestantism signified the movement of other forces to the Right. But Herberg's treatment of Protestantism emphasized the mainline denominations and had little to say about evangelicals and fundamentalists: "Whereas the Methodists and Baptists and Disciples have become great churches, the peripheral sects of today seem to be denied such possibilities. They emerge on the fringe of Protestantism but never appear able to get much closer to the center."

With the benefit of hindsight, that judgment now seems spectacularly wrong. The mainline Protestant denominations are now much smaller than they were in the past, whereas fundamentalist and evangelical churches now constitute the center of American Protestantism. Membership in the mainline denominations has declined by 25 percent in the last three decades, while membership in what have been called the "enthusiastic" churches has nearly doubled. According to Gallup survey data, in 1998, a remarkable 47 percent of Americans described themselves as "born-again or evangelical Christians"—a figure that includes Catholics as well as Protestants. A 2003 Pew survey reports that 30 percent of Americans describe themselves as evangelical Protestants, including 28 percent of whites and 50 percent of blacks.

Although disputes between religious camps had earlier arisen with respect to civil rights and the war in Vietnam, religious culture wars took on still more momentum in the 1970s and 1980s, when questions about public morality, abortion, and church-state relations became more promi-
nent. Religious conservatives had previously been rather apolitical. But in the words of Stephen Carter of Yale Law School—not himself a religious conservative—Christian fundamentalists concluded that “the secular world was on the verge of destroying the tight religious cocoons in which they had bound their communities.” Perceiving that the dominant culture—and much of mainline Protestantism—was rejecting traditional Christian teachings about sexual mores and the family in particular, fundamentalists attempted to restore the authority of those teachings through political action and religious disputation. Wuthnow rightly regards the resulting conflict between “self-styled religious ‘conservatives’ and self-styled religious ‘liberals’” as “the most serious division in American religion.”

James Davison Hunter, the sociologist who popularized the term “culture wars,” observes that these disagreements have radically transformed the religious landscape. Significant divisions now exist within Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism:

It is increasingly difficult to speak of the Protestant position or the Catholic position or the Jewish position ... vis à vis American public culture. Meanwhile, other kinds of differences have expanded: increasingly, the politically consequential divisions are those that separate the orthodox from the progressive within religious traditions.

But at the same time, he contends, alliances have now been created across the traditional dividing lines that had hitherto separated the three great American religions: “Progressively oriented Protestants, Catholics, Jews, and secularists share more in common with each other culturally and politically than they do with the orthodox members of their own faith tradition (and vice versa).”

As a result, Hunter argues, “the practical effects of the birth of Christianity and the Reformation have, at least in the U.S. context, become both politically and culturally defunct.” In that respect, Hunter’s analysis reflects and resembles Herberg’s. Both portray an America in which Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism have in a way amalgamated into a shared American civil religion. But Herberg, describing an era of religious consensus, presented a shared
American way of life uniting the three faiths, whereas Hunter, describing an era of religious polarization, presents two competing conceptions of America, each of which unites some Protestants, Catholics, and Jews in opposition to others.

One manifestation of this religious bifurcation, unanticipated by Herberg, is the promulgation of a second American civil religion rivaling the one Herberg described. It is expounded by religious progressives and, as Wuthnow notes, is critical of American domestic and especially foreign policy. Proponents of the progressive civil religion believe that “America has a role to play in world affairs” but chiefly “because it has caused many of the problems currently facing the world.” America is blamed for using its great wealth and power to create and perpetuate gross inequities. It is generally seen as a force for ill rather than good in the world.

Herberg was not wrong to criticize the celebration of America at the core of the civil religion that he described, to observe that it ran the risk of “identify[ing] the American cause with the cause of God.” He did not, however, anticipate the very different sort of self-righteousness (perhaps sanctimoniousness is the better word) that can characterize the progressive civil religion so prone to blame America first in any international conflict. Just think, for example, of the foreign policy pronouncements of the National Council of Churches.

The rise of secularism

The contemporary culture wars, however, transcend even the dispute between two warring religious camps. To some extent, they must also be seen as a conflict between a secular Left and a religious Right. This was a development unforeseen by Herberg, who contended that “explicit secularism—hostility or demonstrative indifference to religion—is a minor and diminishing force.”

Instead, an explicit secular force has grown powerful over time. As Hunter notes, secularists (whom he defines as those “who respond ‘none’ when questioned about religious preference”) “represent the fastest-growing community of ‘moral conscience’ in America.” Whereas secular-
ists comprised only 2 percent of the American population in 1952, 11 percent of the American population was secular by the end of the 1980s. More recently, ARIS—as noted earlier—found that 14 percent of American adults identified themselves as secular in 2001. When analyzing these findings, the same observation Herberg missed in the case of intermarriage trends must now be emphasized: the trend line is more important than the raw data.

Secular opposition to organized religion affects both policy and politics in the United States. To speak first of policy, Stephen Carter notes in *The Culture of Disbelief* the zeal with which America guards its public institutions against "explicit religious influences." American rhetoric "treats the religious impulse to public action as presumptively wicked—indeed as necessarily oppressive." Carter's analysis was arguably substantiated not long ago by the minority opinion in the Supreme Court case *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, in which a bare majority of the court upheld the constitutionality of Ohio's school voucher program. The justices in the minority were obviously perturbed by the likelihood that parents in Ohio would use the vouchers to enroll their children in religious schools in which the children would be subjected, in the words of Justice Stevens, to "indoctrination ... in particular religious faiths."

As noted earlier, America's religious Right emerged in response to what were seen as attacks on traditional morality emanating from the Left. That reaction has in turn further fueled left-wing hostility to religion. Many on the Left now equate religion with conservatism. Carter calls attention to the left-wing conviction that the Right is "asserting ownership in God." He suggests that the secular Left opposes religion largely because of its association with conservatism: "The religious voice is required to stay out of the public square only when it is pressed in a conservative cause."

The resulting polarization of religious and secular forces has transformed and continues to transform American politics, as Republicans have in effect become the "God party" and the Democrats the secular party. Louis Bolce and Gerald de Maio have recently described in these pages
secularism’s influence on the Democratic party. Sixty percent of the first-time white delegates at the 1992 Democratic national convention (as opposed to 5 percent of the first-time delegates at the Republican national convention) were secular, in the sense that they claimed no attachment or displayed only a minimal attachment to religion. Secular voters comprise 16 percent of the electorate, and two-thirds of them supported Gore in the 2000 election. This means, in Bolce and DeMaio’s words, that “secularists today are as important to the Democratic party as another key Democratic constituency, organized labor.”

Current survey data further testify to this theologico-political polarization. A recent Pew survey finds that 63 percent of those who attend church more than once a week vote Republican. By contrast, of those who seldom or never attend, 62 percent vote Democratic.

Interestingly, American secularism today does not altogether stem from a loss of religious faith. In an article in the American Sociological Review, Berkeley sociologists Michael Hout and Claude Fischer show that less than one-third of those without religious preference are atheists or agnostics. For the most part, secularists are “believers opting out of organized religion rather than people who [have] lost faith as well as religion.” The greater number of people who declare no religious preference is found only among liberals and moderates, and “the magnitude of the change increase[s] with political distance from the right.” Much of the rise in secularism can thus be explained as a result of “estrangement from organized religion,” reflecting a “dissent from the affinity that [has] emerged between conservative politics and organized religion.”

**Herberg’s America and ours**

In many respects, Herberg’s analysis continues to speak to our situation: America remains a country characterized by a religiososity that is broad but not particularly deep. Notwithstanding the surge of immigration from Asia, Protestantism and Catholicism (and, to a far lesser extent, Judaism) continue to be the predominant American religions. The religious tolerance and pluralism that Herberg highlighted are if
anything more prominent today than they were in his era.

Herberg’s analysis cannot, however, account for our contemporary culture wars. A half-century ago, he argued that affirming religion was, for both better and worse, a way of affirming a shared American way of life. But if Hout and Fischer are correct, today, by contrast, “affirming religion increasingly carries the meaning of being conservative, much more so than in an earlier era.” Thus Herberg’s vision of a harmonious, if idolatrous, religious belief uniting virtually all Americans no longer characterizes our situation. Instead, at least for a significant number of Americans on the religious Right and the secular Left, religion is now a force that divides Americans and sets them against one another.

The importance of the contemporary culture wars between religious and secular forces, however, should not be exaggerated. Obviously, the American Civil War was infinitely more wrenching. Nevertheless, it is also wrong to minimize the importance of today’s secular-religious conflict. In that context, it is worth noting that Lincoln (in his Second Inaugural address) was able to take and offer at least some consolation by pointing to religion as a force that united the two warring camps. After all, he noted, both North and South “pray[ed] to the same God.”

Nearly a century later, Herberg wrote at a time when religion continued to unify an America whose inhabitants could still be said overwhelmingly to pray to the same God. By contrast, religion today is more of a polarizing force than it was in Herberg’s time. To a far greater extent, we no longer pray to the same God—not because many Americans are now Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus, but because a gulf has arisen between the majority of Americans who pray and the minority who do not.