

The Vigorous Presence of Religion in a Religiously Pluralistic Society

By James Turner Johnson

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We are gathered together here in the sight of God and in hope of his blessings.

I would like to extend my thanks to my hosts, who have invited me to visit Oman and made this lecture possible; to all of you in attendance today; and to all those others who have contributed to make my visit here a pleasant experience.

My general topic today is the subject of religion in America. If I were to try to do justice to the entire breadth and depth of this topic we would need entire books, not a single relatively brief lecture. But I hope in fact to be able to give a bit of the flavor of the whole by concentrating on one aspect of this wide-ranging, complex, and deeply important topic: Namely, the relation between religious belief and practice, on the one hand, and the American public order on the other.

By "public order" I mean more than simply the sphere of politics as this is normally understood. Later this week I will address that topic more directly in another lecture by talking about the interaction of idealism and realism in political decisionmaking, that is, the tense relationship between so-called "value-driven" and "interest-driven" politics, with religion among the factors taken into account in the former and explicitly excluded from the latter. But my focus today is at a different level, that of the broader societal context within which religious belief and practice, and behavior influenced by such belief and practice, interact with American public life.

This is a topic poorly understood by friends and enemies of the United States alike, as well as by those in between. It is a topic of deep complexity, which shows different faces in different contexts.

Consider some typical misunderstandings: Continental Europeans have often derided the importance of religion in American public life and the statistics showing that a considerable majority of Americans profess religious belief. To these European critics, this high profile of religion in American society shows that the United States is insufficiently enlightened by the light of reason, which presumably illuminates their own societies and their own political decisions. At the other end of the spectrum, radical Islamists have repeatedly criticized American society for its secularity, focusing especially on evidences of individual moral laxity and immoral behavior. Nearer the middle of the spectrum, I have been struck in my own experience by the tendency among Muslim intellectuals to think of religion and public life in America as much the same as that defined by the French idea of *laïcité*, that is, as one of a rigid exclusion of

religion from the sphere of public life. All of these views miss the mark, though they do so in very different ways.

If they are wrong, though, then to what should we look for the right picture? I want to try to answer this question through what we might term several "snapshots," different illustrative views of the functioning of religion in American public life which combine to form a composite picture of this complex and deep-rooted relationship.

Let us begin with an event which took place a bit over a month ago, the state funeral in Washington, D.C., for the thirty-eighth president of the United States, Gerald R. Ford, who died at the end of December [2007]. The funeral services in the nation's capital were bracketed at either end by private religious services at President Ford's church in California, where he lived, and by the burial services in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where he had been born, lived his early life, and where he had begun his career as a United States congressman. But the official ceremonies in Washington were the ones that reached out to embrace the nation as a whole, both symbolically and through the medium of network television. These, too, are the ceremonies that provide one example of the real and deeply important, if complex, interplay of religion and American public life.

These ceremonies involved two main events. First, the casket containing President Ford's body was received at the Capitol building, where Ford had served both in the House of Representatives and as President of the Senate before becoming President. Its arrival at the Capitol was marked with military honors and by the presence of major political figures; this could be expected in a state funeral even in the most secular of societies. The same could be said of the place where the flag-draped casket lay in state until the next morning: the great hall of the Capitol Rotunda, where long lines of grieving citizens passed by to pay their final respects to the dead president. But the casket's arrival at the Capitol building was also marked by a public prayer joined in by all those in attendance, a prayer given in this instance by the Roman Catholic Cardinal Archbishop of Washington. That prayer was followed by the singing of a hymn, a religious song of praise and supplication to God, by a military chorus, in which many of the observers also joined. After the placement of the casket in the Rotunda, another prayer was offered, this one by a Protestant clergyman who serves as chaplain to the Senate. The two public prayers, offered by clergymen representing very different strands of American religious life, and the hymn were elements of this distinctively American funeral event that one would never find if the society were so secular as some of its critics claim.

The next morning, after hundreds of visitors had passed by the casket containing President Ford's body, many offering personal prayers as they did, the casket was transported to the site of the funeral service itself — the Washington Cathedral, located on the highest point in the capital city. Once again, military honors and political presence were joined to religious ritual, as they had been at the Capitol building, but now the specifically religious element was the dominant one. The Washington Cathedral is Episcopalian, the name by which the American branch of the Anglican communion is known. But more than this, it was built intentionally as a site for national religious ceremonies without regard to its character as a church of a specific form of religion in America. In this broader character it has served as a site for a variety of types of religious activities in which, by design, representatives of the country's broad range of religious

affiliation have taken part. It is a cathedral church of a particular American religious body, but it also seeks to be a house of worship for expression of the religious convictions of the nation at large. In this it mirrors institutionally the many inter-faith religious efforts found in local communities across the country as a whole.

Both the specific and the general character of the Washington Cathedral showed through in this funeral. As President Ford was himself an Episcopalian, the presiding priest was the President's own pastor from his church in California, and the funeral service itself was according to the Episcopal liturgy. But we must not forget the presence of the military honor guard, a military orchestra and chorus in addition to the cathedral's own choir, or the presence among the mourners of people of many different religious affiliations. Among those who gave eulogies, brief speeches honoring the dead president's life, were another Episcopalian, former President George H.W. Bush; a Jew, Henry Kissinger, who had served as Secretary of State under Ford; and the current President Bush, a member of another American Protestant Christian church, the United Methodists. As President Ford had served in the United States Navy during World War II, the Chief of Naval Chaplains, who is a serving rear admiral, offered a concluding prayer.

All this, I offer, exemplifies a distinctive facet of American national life: The importance of religion, recognized in its variety, to bring the nation together symbolically in times of crisis or, in this case, a time of national grief and mourning. The fundamental pattern of the events I have described have become familiar across American society and had been repeated not many months earlier by the state funeral of former President Ronald Reagan. About forty years ago, an American academic, the noted sociologist Robert Bellah, wrote a widely read article in which he took examples like this, together with the role of religion in national holidays and other features of American public life, to argue for what he called an American "civil religion," similar to the "civil religion" described by Rousseau and, more distantly, to the state religion of ancient Rome. Bellah's view has been highly influential, but like all academic positions, it has also been widely criticized. For my own part, I believe Bellah's construct of "civil religion" is mistaken in its filtering out certain elements of religion in a way that allows them to be mixed together homogeneously and without conflict. The result is a form of religion that has lost what gives religion its fire and appeal. What one actually can see, I suggest, when one observes events like the Presidential funeral ceremonies I have described, is a good deal more than Bellah would allow in his "civil religion," which is drained of any particular faith character. The reality is that religion in America has its own life, rooted in the beliefs and behaviors of its many varieties of persons of faith, which on specific occasions comes together with elements from the political and other spheres to offer guidance, consolation, solidarity, and hope to all. The aim is not to remove all reference to the faith character of any and all forms of religion, but to provide for the free expression of the various forms of faith in American society and to incorporate the strengths these offer into the fabric of national life.

We can see this more clearly by shifting our gaze to another "snapshot" view, this one the picture defined by the treatment of religion in American constitutional law. The key text here is the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, the first of ten amendments collectively termed the "Bill of Rights," adopted shortly after the Constitution itself. The Constitution makes no mention of religion. The First Amendment, though, begins with a statement that treats religion directly: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the

free exercise thereof." The sentence continues, "or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or of the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances." The four freedoms defined here had historically been understood as given to every individual in nature, so that the effect of the First Amendment is not to establish these freedoms, but to stipulate that Congress may not legally restrict them. The right to free exercise of religious belief and practice belongs to everyone, and government is forbidden to limit this either by restrictions on individual beliefs and practices or by preferential treatment of any form of religion relative to others. To understand the full implications of this we need to consider the context.

First, when the United States was formed it was already a deeply religiously pluralistic nation. Some of the original thirteen colonies had been founded by diverse religious groups seeking freedom from persecution, and others had been founded by settlers at home with the established Church of England. Immigration had added further diversity, and theological divisions as a result of colonial movements of religious revival had brought still more diversity. At the time of the adoption of the First Amendment several states had legally established forms of support for religion, while others were adamantly opposed to this. Both the supporters of establishment and its opponents, though, agreed on the heart of the matter: that religious faith is a good thing, and is essential to the health and stability of the social and political order. Their difference was over how best to ensure the health of religion itself, whether by formal public support or through keeping the public sphere open for voluntary forms of religion and religious associations. The language of the First Amendment prohibited Congress from setting up a religious establishment that might compete with those already in place in several states while adopting the principle of free and voluntary exercise of religious faith and practice.

Second, many of the "founding fathers" of the United States, while members of various sorts of churches, were Deists, a form of religious belief in which God was recognized as having created the world and established the order of nature within it. This order of nature not only governed the sun and moon, tide and wind, birth and death, and everything else of such kind, but also established a moral law binding on all mankind. The rights and freedoms treated in the Bill of Rights were understood from the perspective of Deism as part of this moral law rooted in nature, and through nature, in divine action. Governments were charged with honoring this moral law, and every individual likewise was charged with obeying it to the best of his ability. But at the same time, the meaning of naturally given human freedom, for the Deists, was that the understanding of the moral law was something that must develop within each individual; it could not be imposed from above. Coercion might ensure behavior in accord with one or another view of the divinely rooted moral law, but it could not ensure understanding of that law in the hearts of those coerced. For the Deists among the founding fathers, then, the language of the First Amendment removed the possibility of religious or moral coercion while explicitly preserving the freedom of the individual to come to know the natural law written on his or her heart.

Third, the result of this approach to the relation between religion and government was the exact opposite of the approach adopted by Revolutionary and Imperial France and by subsequent French republican constitutions. The American approach sought to protect the divinely given natural right of freedom to religious faith and practice, as a source of benefit to the society as a whole; the French approach denied any place for religion in affairs of the state. Within the frame

of this latter approach it was a short step to demeaning religion as ignorant, superstitious, and irrational. On the American approach the secular — that is, "this-worldly" — separation between religion and the state is defined in terms of protecting religion from the state; on the French approach, *laïcité* aims at protecting the ostensibly rational state from the irrational superstitions of religion. The two conceptions of the proper functioning of religion and the state in relation to each other are completely different.

At this point I should note that in contemporary American life there is a significant intellectual constituency that favors, often in outspoken terms, a rigid separation between religion and the sphere of public life much the same as the French model of rigid separation. At the same time, there is a quite different constituency, in the form of the so-called "religious right," which would in effect remake the religion-state relationship into a form of theocracy. Both these diametrically opposite views receive a good deal of media attention from time to time &151; some positive and some negative. But neither is properly representative of the core conception of the nature and role of religion in relation to the sphere of public life and in relation to government as defined in the First Amendment. To say it again: The American approach seeks to protect the divinely given right of freedom to religious faith and practice as a benefit to society as a whole. Political legitimacy, accordingly, is not defined by either a rigid separation of the state from religion or by any form of religious establishment, but by the protection the political sphere provides to the free exercise of religious faith and practice.

Let me turn now to a third form of "snapshot" of the relation between religion and society in America, focusing more closely on a phenomenon I have already mentioned in another connection: the multiplicity of forms of religion in the United States. In a classic study of the historical development of American religious diversity, the historian H. Richard Niebuhr noted several main sources of this diversity: theological differences, differences of national origin as immigrant groups brought their own religious ways with them to America, differences rooted in social class, differences rooted in race. By the early national period — the early 1800's — every major form of religion in Europe had been transplanted to America. The practice of slavery brought African religious themes and influences as well. Religious revivalism led to the creation of new religious groupings or "denominations" ("names" of religious groups) alongside traditional forms, and as the new forms themselves became traditional in their own ways, later efforts to "revive" the faith led to still more new denominations. Alongside this centrifugal development was a smaller but also important centripetal one, as denominations joined to create new ones. All this, and more, formed the subject of Niebuhr's book. His study focused mainly on the various diverse forms of Christianity, especially Protestant Christianity, for this was overwhelmingly the dominant kind of religious faith in the United States up to the time he wrote. He neglected the development of Judaism, whose presence in America dated to the colonial period and whose numbers had been greatly augmented by immigration beginning in the late nineteenth century. But the patterns he sketched applied also to the development of Judaism in American society, which itself has divided into several "denominations."

When Niebuhr wrote the great cycle of immigration of recent decades had scarcely begun — a cycle that has brought important non-Christian forms of religious presence into American life. That these have been treated like the older forms of religion within the framework of American social and political life testifies to the far reach of the Constitutional conception of the

importance of religious faith and practice, and the importance of religious freedom, for the national health and well-being. Recent immigrants have brought various forms of Hinduism, Buddhism, and, importantly for this gathering, Islam into the developing mainstream of American religious life. Other developments have sought to recover forms of Native American religion. Still others — the so-called "New Age" religions — have focused in different ways on signs of personal experience of divinity. Whatever one thinks of each of these individually — and I regard the "New Age" religious activity in particular as woefully misguided — they are all treated with respect within the framework of American law and allowed to seek a continuing place in American society.

Another scholar of American religion writing at about the same time as Richard Niebuhr was the sociologist of religion Will Herberg. Herberg focused on the way religious belief and practice developed among immigrant groups over their first three generations. He identified a three-stage pattern: The first generation, the immigrants themselves, tended to hold closely to the patterns of religious understanding and behavior they had known in their old countries; the second generation, by contrast, tended to reject these, often doing so completely in their private behavior, attempting in their own way to become like America as they saw it; but the third generation, and subsequent generations, have tended to find a way to unite their own religious traditions with full participation in American life. This is a pattern that continues to show itself in recent waves of immigration. The goal at which this third generation and those following it seek is deeply in accord with the fundamental pattern shown in the first two "snapshots" I have described: respect for religion and protection for the free development of religious belief and practice as integral to the health and stability of American society.

As my final "snapshot" of religion in America I want to speak particularly of the place of Islam in America today. The growth of Islam in the United States is a relatively recent phenomenon, which has taken place only over the last few decades. The most generally accepted estimates put the number of Muslims in the United States at about six million. Of these about sixty percent are African-Americans, most of them converts from the heterodox "Nation of Islam" or "Black Muslim" movement to orthodox Sunni Islam. The remainder are immigrants or the children and grandchildren of immigrants. These latter have come from virtually every nation where there is a large population of Muslims, from Africa across the Middle East to South and Southeast Asia. The result is a very much more culturally diverse Muslim population than is typical in the societies from which they came or in European countries. This population is also religiously diverse in terms of their varying understandings of Islam, including significant numbers from most of the major strands of Islam found in the world today.

Let me illustrate this very general description by talking about my own state of New Jersey, whose northern part belongs to the New York City metropolitan area, and which has historically been a state where large numbers of immigrants settle. I teach in New Jersey's public, or state, university, whose students come mainly from the state. One of my colleagues in the Department of Religion is a formerly Jewish convert to Islam, while another is an Afghan-born Sunni educated in the United Kingdom. If one went to the departments of science or the School of Engineering, one would find significant numbers of Muslims from Middle Eastern countries. Two good friends from among the senior faculty teach in the school of urban planning; one is an Iranian immigrant and a Twelver Shiite, while the other is an Egyptian immigrant and a Sunni. I

might add that these two are also close friends of each other. A student who works in my department is a Shiite Muslim who comes to work fully veiled. I teach a course in which a quarter of the students are Muslims of varied backgrounds and forms of Islam; this past semester there were students with Turkish, Afghan, Pakistani, and Arab names. There is always at least one woman student in *hijab* in this course, as was the case last semester. One of my best students in recent years in this course was an Ismaili, part of a significant number of Ismailis in New Jersey. I recently wrote letters of recommendation to graduate school for another former student, an exceptionally intelligent young woman who is a Sunni Muslim whose parents had immigrated to the United States from Afghanistan. Two years ago I served as adviser to a male student, a Sufi, who was doing an honors thesis.

This list could go on and on. What I mean these examples to convey, though, is how much a part of normal, everyday American life this is. Let me return to the scholar I mentioned earlier, Will Herberg. Herberg described three stages of religious and cultural reaction to American life among immigrants. What I regularly witness at my university and in my state is a much more complex, diversified process, in which individuals find their own paths to integrating and reconciling their own backgrounds and their participation in American life. Muslims in the United States have become a part of the broader religious landscape, in which faith distinctions are maintained and honored but personal and cultural differences that might lead to discord tend to disappear.

Let me dwell for a moment longer on the lifestyle of Muslims in the United States. Historically, when the United States has received large numbers of immigrants from a single place, united by bonds of language, culture, and family ties, they have grouped together for mutual support: The ethnic neighborhoods of late nineteenth-century New York City illustrate this at its height. Some similar communities of Muslims have formed over the last few decades: in my own state of New Jersey there is one such community in the city of Patterson, a short distance from New York. But this is not the general pattern. Just as Muslims who have immigrated into the United States come from all over the Muslim world, so they have largely settled not in communities narrowly defined by culture and religion but among the population at large, becoming part of the ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity that marks American society as a whole.

Classical Islamic conceptions of the "people of the Book" assumed a kind of religiously defined tribalism: People of a common religion would gather in specific communities, where they would lead a distinctive lifestyle relative to other religiously defined communities. The Ottoman Empire dealt with its widespread and religiously diverse population on this model. The Lebanese republic offers another kind of example of how this conception might be institutionalized within the framework of a national government. Interestingly, if not by intelligent design, the sequestration of Muslim immigrants into specific suburbs of French cities and the segregation of those immigrants from the larger national French community preserves this model. But as these last two examples especially show, it is not clear that the model of treating religion in terms of discrete communities is a positive model for the contemporary world. Religion here tends to make for strife, not for harmony. The American model I have sketched is quite different, respecting religion while treating it as an affair for individuals. Individuals of shared religious faith form their own communities for the purposes of prayer, worship, and fellowship, but do so within the frame of a larger common community that includes all of them. We have many

religions in the United States, but we do not have religious wars. In times of national crisis or tragedy, people of different religious faiths tend to come together in mutual support, rather than to divide. For Muslims living in the United States, this is not a model they see as in conflict with the teachings of Islam. I am happy to count many of them among my colleagues, students, neighbors, and friends.

Thank you for your attention to these brief comments.

May the peace of God be upon us all.