“GOD AND CAESAR IN AMERICA”
A Youth/Adult Conversation
On the Relation of Church and State in America

Session 3

To a degree not seen since at least the 1850s, religious mobilization is now tied directly to party politics, especially Republican Party politics. Yet, while religion’s influence on U. S. politics is at an all-time high, its role in the lives of ordinary Americans is ebbing.

In 1957, 69 percent of Americans surveyed by Gallup said the influence of religion was on the rise. More Americans than ever were attending religious services, more churches were being built to accommodate them, and more Bibles were being sold and read. But in President Eisenhower’s America, religion had no partisan overtones. Then came the 1960s and a dramatic turn in attitudes toward authority and especially toward conventional sexual morality, an issue tightly connected to religious belief. In just four years, between 1969 and 1973, the percentage of Americans who approved of premarital sex doubled, from one-fourth to one-half. That increase was stunning and almost entirely concentrated among the baby boomers, who were then coming of age.

By 1970, fully 75 percent of Americans surveyed concluded that religion’s influence was waning. Collapsing church attendance confirmed their view. Yet even then, religiosity did not skew more to the right than to the left. Instead, at the same time that liberal Protestantism and church-going Catholicism were virtually collapsing, many Americans who sought a reaffirmation of traditional norms, especially when it came to sex and “family values,” found what they were looking for in evangelical Protestantism—where, unlike their fundamentalist forebears, they did not shun a sinful world but instead sought to change it through its politics.

An early harbinger of evangelicalism’s new political role was the 1976 presidential campaign of Jimmy Carter, a self-identified “born-again Christian,” a label once unthinkable in mainstream American politics. Moral conservatives aligned with the Moral Majority and the Christian Right banded together to fight the Equal Rights Amendment, gay rights, and abortion. Evangelicalism began morphing from a purely religious movement into a political one that allied devout Americans from many denominations, including Catholics and Mormons.

Then, in his 1980 presidential bid, the Republican Ronald Reagan actively courted the vote of the religious right with considerable success, and both he and the Republican candidates who followed him began to pick up the support of formerly Democratic evangelicals in the South and observant Catholics in the North. In the process, a Republican activist base that advocates both moral traditionalism and a greater role for religion in the public square was formed. And with the rise of the religious right came the “God-gap” between Republicans and Democrats as formerly religious Democrats drifted away from the church and formerly unobservant Republicans rediscovered religion again.
In 1988, Pat Robertson mounted a bid for the presidential nomination, losing out
to the cradle Episcopalian, George H. W. Bush, but helping spark the creation of Ralph Reed’s
Christian Coalition, which for the next decade was to exert a growing evangelical influence
on American politics. Held at bay during the Clinton presidency, the conservative right
nonetheless capitalized on Clinton’s sexual scandals and organized a massive push from the
right to help George W. Bush secure the presidency in 2000.

Bush, who had been a hard drinker, said he was “born again” during a private walk
on the beach with Billy Graham and his profile in faith was the persona he presented to
voters. During the Iowa caucuses, he confessed that Jesus was his favorite philosopher
“because he changed my life,” and that in a dream God had personally chosen him to be
President of the United States—a distinction also conferred upon Donald Trump by some of
his loyal base in 2017. Enough voters were persuaded that if Bush could, with Jesus’ help,
affect his own reclamation from sin, perhaps he could rescue the nation from the
tawdriness of the Clinton years. With a little help from Kathrine Harris in Florida and the
Supreme Court, Bush was eventually declared the winner and 43rd president of the United
States. But after the first several months of his presidency, things began to look doubtful—
until 9/11 exploded and Bush ascended the throne. Though catapulted to high approval
ratings in the wake of that attack, Bush’s overall performance rating dropped to one of the
lowest on record before leaving office, having given rise to the creation of the Tea Party
within the Republican Party itself.

The emergence of the Tea Party in 2009 was posited on an overriding concern for
smaller government and less federal spending, but the rank and file is really after a godlier
government. A 2006 poll indicated the strongest predictor of a Republican becoming a Tea
Party supporter is whether he or she evinced a desire to see religion play a prominent role
in politics. Tea Partiers are, on average, more religiously observant than the typical
American, but not more so than other Republicans. Rather, they are distinctively
comfortable blending religion and politics. Tea Partiers are more likely than other
Republicans to say that U. S. laws and policies would be better if the country had more
“deeply religious” elected officials, that it is appropriate for religious leaders to engage in
political persuasion, and that religion should be brought into public debates over political
issues. The Tea Party’s generals might say that their overriding concern is smaller
government, but the rank and file is after a godlier government. Its ranks are swollen with
self-professed “dominionists” who are dedicated to bringing all aspects and dimensions of
life—be it public, private or corporate—under the dominion of God’s rule.

Following an eight-year presidency of Barack Obama, marked by uncompromising
opposition from the most conservative elements within the Republican Party, Donald J.
Trump was elected the forty-fifth president of the United States. Backed by a popular swell
of nationalistic populism and the near unanimous support of religious evangelicals and Tea
Party Republicans, Trump succeeded in winning the electoral college vote even while
losing the popular vote by a count of over three million, leaving some of his most ardent
supporters to say that while he may not have been duly “elected, by the people, he was
nonetheless divinely appointed by God to be president—and so he is.