

The following essay is included in the inaugural Spirited Debate essay collection, “White Evangelical Christians and Politics.” This collection includes competing perspectives from Peter Wehner, “What’s God Got to Do with Renewing American Democracy?,” and Ralph Reed, “God and Country: Effective Citizenship as a Christian Duty.” To see all the Spirited Debate essays currently published and continue reading about the PRRUCS Religion & Democratic Renewal project, see [Spirited Debate](#).

The Kind of America I Believe In

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In September 1960, Massachusetts senator John F. Kennedy, then the Democratic nominee for president, spoke before a group of Protestant ministers in Houston who had expressed concerns about a Roman Catholic running for president. The “so-called religious issue,” as Kennedy termed it, had dogged his candidacy from the beginning. Indeed, not since a wave of anti-Catholic sentiment helped the Republican Party defeat Democrat Al Smith in 1928 had a major political party even nominated a Catholic for president.

Thus, against the wishes of advisers who wanted him to avoid the issue altogether, Kennedy chose to address the issue head-on. Speaking before the Greater Houston Ministerial Association, he argued that “we have far more critical issues in the 1960 campaign”—including communism, poverty, and public education—“which should decide this campaign.” However, inasmuch as the “real issues in this campaign have been obscured . . . it has apparently become necessary to state once again . . . what kind of America I believe in.” Then, evoking patriotic strains that would cause even the most callous citizen to salute the flag, Kennedy delivered a masterful speech, framing his vision of his candidacy, the presidency, and the country within the noblest traditions of the American experiment.¹

As a young child growing up in the Philadelphia area in the 1960s, I found my initial impressions of what it means to be an American to be shaped largely by Kennedy’s vision. For example, I was always intrigued by the challenge to altruistic service issued in his inaugural address: “Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.” I was further captivated by the

visual images, and especially the slogan, of the Peace Corps: “The hardest job you’ll ever love.” While I had never before thought about its impact in this way, I came to realize that Kennedy’s call to service may have instilled in me some of the early seeds of my ministry to the homeless, the incarcerated, and their families.

To be sure, these early seeds were watered and nurtured by my religious upbringing. Like most African Americans of my generation and those before, I was reared in the Black church; and as I matured, I came to embrace its traditions of racial pride, self-sacrifice, and service to the community. Following in the tradition of the Philadelphia-based Free African Society²—which was designed to serve the financial and social needs of newly freed slaves—the Black church addressed (and in large measure continues to address) a broad range of community needs, including those of tutoring and mentoring programs for children, funds for scholarships for college-bound students, community-feeding programs for the hungry, and housing assistance for the homeless.

For us, the biblical accounts of God’s deliverance of the children of Israel were a source of inspiration and hope in a segregated world: “If God delivered them, He can deliver us.” Thus, the moral tone of the Civil Rights Movement—which saw the ’60s era Civil Rights, Voting Rights, and Fair Housing Acts shepherded through Congress and signed into law by the previously segregationist Texan Lyndon B. Johnson—was set largely by Black church leaders.

By contrast, it was almost unheard-of for White churches to allow African Americans to even attend their worship services. As Martin Luther King said, “11:00 on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America.” Of course, this was nothing new; the disconnect between salvation and social equality had always existed in White Christian America, particularly in the South. Reflecting on his experience as a budding theologian in Little Rock, Arkansas, in the late 1950s, James Cone, who became known as the “father of Black Theology,” noted that “White churches, almost without exception, were adamant in rejecting integration in churches, schools, and social gatherings. Black churches, however, were equally determined on the other side of the issue. How can both black and white churches be Christian if they took opposite stands and both claimed Christ and the Bible as the basis of their views?”³

How indeed. And yet racial division in the church is nothing new. Before the Civil War, for example, northern Quakers led hundreds of runaway slaves to safety via the Underground Railroad. At the same time, Southern theologians debated whether the salvation of the Black man's soul necessarily obligated the slave owner to set him free.

In fact, in the years leading up to the Civil War, the body of Christ became so divided that the two major factions eventually saw themselves as not having Christ in common. Each side blamed the division within the church (and within the country) on the other, while at the same time declaring that divine providence was on "our side." Church historian William A. Clebsch cites one writer as saying that such arguments "generally pictured the struggle in black and white lines, with little or no intermediate shading: their side was absolutely right, their opponents absolutely wrong."⁴

To be sure, racial thought was far from unanimous on either side of the Mason-Dixon Line. For example, in Philadelphia, where abolitionist activity was particularly strong, the failure of church leaders to allow Blacks to pray at the altar of a Methodist church led former slaves Richard Allen and Absalom Jones to form the aforementioned Free African Society. Allen later founded the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church—the first Black denomination incorporated in the United States—while Jones helped to establish, "through the grace and divine assistance of the friends and *God opening the hearts of our white friends and brethren,*" the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas, the first Black congregation in the city of Philadelphia.⁵

At the heart of this issue, of course, was the inherent worth of Blacks as compared to that of Whites. Simply put, the Black man was deemed inferior to his White counterpart. Furthermore, this inferiority was understood to exist at virtually every level of social interaction: in intellect, ethics, morals, and behavior. Moreover, this line of thought was consistent with and underscored the notion of Manifest Destiny, "the idea that America was 'manifestly destined' for greatness and thus had a special claim on God's favor." As I noted in a Religion News Service (RNS) article in 2002,

the phrase was coined in 1845 by John Louis O'Sullivan, an American diplomat and journalist, to justify the annexation of Texas and the eventual settlement of the entire continent. O'Sullivan based his conclusion on the virtues of the American experiment. A few years earlier, in 1839, he wrote: "It is our unparalleled glory that we have no reminiscences of

battlefields but in defense of humanity, of the opposed of all nations, of the rights of conscience, the rights of personal enfranchisement. . . . The expansive future is our arena, and for our history. We are entering on its untrodden space, with the truths of God in our minds, beneficent objects in our hearts, and with a clear conscience unsullied by the past. We are the nation of human progress, and who will, what can, set limits on our onward march? Providence is with us, and no earthly power can.”

Curiously, the national virtues O’Sullivan cited—of having God’s truth in their minds and beneficence in their hearts—were understood to be available only to “Anglo-Americans.” As historian Frederick Merk wrote some four decades ago, Manifest Destiny, while providing for the spiritual regeneration of those referred to as “the backward peoples” of the continent—namely Mexicans, Native Americans, and black slaves—nevertheless offered precious little comfort for their earthly existence.⁶

Little wonder, then, that free Blacks began to establish not only their own churches but also their own newspapers, publishing houses, and educational institutions, and eventually their own medical, legal, financial, and other professional organizations as well. They simply had no other choice. Having been shut out from the mainstream of American life, including—and especially—worship with fellow believers of the dominant race, they had to create their own society and embrace their own culture.

Meanwhile, Manifest Destiny quickly became a theme that the young country embraced, facilitating what Brookings Institution scholar E. J. Dionne termed “white Protestant hegemony.” “I use this term,” he wrote in *Commonweal*, “not in a pejorative sense, but simply as a description of reality. Protestantism did much to shape our national character, our nation’s identity, and much of our public rhetoric, to the point where American Jews and Catholics and Muslims and Sikhs and atheists are more than a little bit Protestant. Our nation drew upon this shared Protestant spirit to connect people to one another and to the institutions of their common democracy.”⁷ “This is in large measure,” I contended in a 2001 RNS column,

because the biblical tradition—in its varied permutations—was predominant on the European continent, which was the founders’ ancestral home. Islam and other Eastern faiths were not widely practiced in either Europe or the fledgling United States. And thus it remained for most of the history of our country.

However, immigration has introduced a broad array of cultural and religious traditions to the American experiment. As Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and others live, work and become citizens of this nation, they become stakeholders in the rights guaranteed all citizens under the Constitution.⁸

Continuing this trend of thought a few years later for Patheos.com, I wrote,

[Moreover,] the social, cultural and political cataclysm of the 1960s included the election and subsequent assassination of the nation's first Roman Catholic president; the civil rights movement, which challenged the nation, in the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., “to live out the true meaning of its creed”; the emergence of the feminist movement on the heels of the civil rights movement; and the war in Vietnam. All served to undermine the religious assumptions on which the culture was based.

The net effect was that the white Protestant baby was thrown out with the cultural bathwater, as millions of congregants fled mainline denominations in pursuit of a different expression of faith or no faith at all. Indeed, separate surveys conducted in recent years by the Gallup Organization and the Barna Research Group suggest that while most Americans still self-identify as Christians, 16 percent claim no religious identity or affiliation. [As a result], notions of what constitutes civil society in America no longer coalesce around “traditional” (spelled “Protestant”) values.⁹

In 2019, the Pew Research Center did an updated survey and pegged 26 percent of Americans as religiously unaffiliated, or “Nones” for short; 4 percent atheists, 5 percent agnostics, and 17 percent who describe their religion as “nothing in particular.” Other, still more recent estimates of “Nones” range as high as 36 percent.¹⁰

Thus, Dionne determines in *Souled Out: Reclaiming Faith and Politics After the Religious Right*,

the era of the Religious Right is over. Its collapse is part of a larger decline of a style of ideological conservatism that reached high points in 1980 [with the election of Ronald Reagan] and 1994 [when Republicans regained control of the House] but suffered a series of decisive—and I believe fatal—setbacks during George W. Bush’s second term. The end of the Religious Right does not mean the end of evangelical Christianity. On the contrary, it is a sign of a new reformation among Christians—[Rick] Warren and [Rich] Cizik are

representative figures—who are disentangling their great movement from a political machine. This historic change will require liberals and conservatives alike to abandon their sometimes narrow views of who evangelicals are and what they believe.¹¹

Sadly, Dionne’s calculation proved incorrect. The Religious Right and its influence are stronger than ever. Appalled and incensed by what they believe is a compromise of their goals and tactics, many conservative Christian leaders are redoubling their efforts to literally take over the government and thus the country. Witness, for example, self-described Christian nationalist Russell Vought. Vought, who according to published reports expects to hold a high office in a second Donald Trump administration, proposes that “we are in a post constitutional moment in our country. Our constitutional institutions, understandings and practices have been transformed over decades, away from the words on the paper into a new arrangement . . . that pays only lip service to the old Constitution.”¹² Like many conservatives, he rejects the notion of a “living Constitution” that he feels has perverted the original document by altering its meaning and intent. He contends further that “the Right needs to throw off the precedents and legal paradigms that have wrongly developed over the last two hundred years and to study carefully the words of the Constitution and how the Founders would have responded in modern situations to the encroachments of other branches [of government].”¹³

As a means of fulfilling this goal, Vought runs the so-called Center for Renewing America, which is pushing the Heritage Foundation’s Project 2025 agenda for reinterpreting—and thus effectively weaponizing—the Constitution.¹⁴ According to Trump associate Steve Bannon, “We’re going to rip and shred the federal government apart. And if you don’t like it, you can lump it.”¹⁵

All of which brings me back to Kennedy’s speech to the pastors in Houston. In what could almost be viewed as a prophetic insight into our present-day challenge, Kennedy said, “I would not look with favor upon a President working to subvert the first amendment’s guarantees of religious liberty. Nor would our system of checks and balances permit him to do so.” Rather, Kennedy said, he would like a leader who will be “responsible to all groups, and obligated to none.” This, he argued, is the kind of America that he “fought for in the South Pacific, and the kind my brother died for in Europe. No one suggested then that we may have a ‘divided loyalty,’ that we did ‘not believe in

liberty,' or that we belonged to a disloyal group that threatened the 'freedoms for which our forefathers died.'”

Thus stated, he concludes by sharing his hope for the future. Sadly, it is a future that more than 60 years later has yet to be realized:

Finally, I believe in an America where religious intolerance will someday end—where all men and all churches are treated as equal—where every man has the same right to attend or not attend the church of his choice—where there is no Catholic vote, no anti-Catholic vote, no bloc voting of any kind—and where Catholics, Protestants and Jews, at both the lay and pastoral level, will refrain from those attitudes of disdain and division which have so often marred their works in the past, and promote instead the American ideal of brotherhood.

That is the kind of America in which I believe. . . . I do not intend to apologize for these views to my critics of either Catholic or Protestant faith—nor do I intend to disavow either my views or my church in order to win this election.

If I should lose on the real issues, I shall return to my seat in the Senate, satisfied that I had tried my best and was fairly judged. But if this election is decided on the basis that 40 million Americans lost their chance of being President on the day they were baptized, then it is the whole nation that will be the loser, in the eyes of Catholics and non-Catholics around the world, in the eyes of history, and in the eyes of our own people.

But if, on the other hand, I should win the election, then I shall devote every effort of mind and spirit to fulfilling the oath of the Presidency—practically identical, I might add, to the oath I have taken for 14 years in the Congress. For without reservation, I can “solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution . . . so help me God.”¹⁶

Amen, Mr. President, amen.

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Notes

- ¹ John F. Kennedy, *Address of Senator John F. Kennedy to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association, September 12, 1960*, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, [Address of Senator John F. Kennedy to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association, September 12, 1960 | JFK Library](#).
- ² Elise Kammerer, “Free African Society,” Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia, [Free African Society - Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia \(philadelphiaencyclopedia.org\)](#).
- ³ James H. Cone, *My Soul Looks Back* (Abingdon, 1982), p. 27.
- ⁴ William A. Clebsch, *Christian Interpretations of the Civil War* (Facet Books, 1969), p. 3.
- ⁵ “The Causes and Motives for Establishing St. Thomas’s African Church...,” PBS, [Africans in America/Part 3/The Causes and Motives for Establishing St. Thomas's African Church \(pbs.org\)](#).
- ⁶ Samuel K. Atchison, “Sept. 11: The End of Protestant Hegemony?,” *Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life*, July 8, 2002.
- ⁷ E. J. Dionne, “After the Religious Right,” *Commonweal*, February 11, 2008, [Faith & Politics | Commonweal Magazine](#).
- ⁸ Samuel K. Atchison, “Pluralism Fuels the Nation’s Cultural Divide,” *Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life*, August 6, 2001.
- ⁹ Samuel K. Atchison, “Social Conservatism and White Protestant Hegemony,” Patheos, May 22, 2011, [Social Conservatism And White Protestant Hegemony \(patheos.com\)](#).
- ¹⁰ John J. DiIulio, Jr., “From Nuns to Nones,” *Claremont Review of Books*, Fall 2021.
- ¹¹ E. J. Dionne, *Souled Out: Reclaiming Faith and Politics After the Religious Right* (Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 4.
- ¹² Russell Vought, “Renewing American Purpose: Statesmanship in a Post-Constitutional Moment,” *American Mind*, September 29, 2022, [Renewing American Purpose - The American Mind](#).
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ “The Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise,” *Project 2025*, edited by Paul Dans and Steven Groves, (Heritage Foundation, 2023), [2025_MandateForLeadership_FULL.pdf \(project2025.org\)](#).
- ¹⁵ Beth Reinhard, “Trump Loyalist Pushes ‘Post-Constitutional’ Vision for Second Term,” *Washington Post*, June 8, 2024, [Russ Vought's 'radical constitutionalism' plan for Trump's second term - The Washington Post](#).
- ¹⁶ Kennedy, op cit.