Introduction

This book brings together two subjects, religion and politics, that might seem to have little to do with each other. Religion reaches toward the transcendent, expressing a belief in supernatural beings and powers that intervene in human affairs. Politics, on the other hand, is oriented toward this world, a process of making decisions in groups that relies on pragmatic compromise to distribute power and resources. Religion claims ultimate loyalty, while politics creates ever-shifting alliances. If religious believers have often condemned the political arena as a cesspool of corruption and dishonesty, political philosophers have often distrusted religion as a seedbed of narrow-minded fanaticism.

Despite this apparent dichotomy, Americans have throughout their history also seen religion and politics as deeply intertwined. Upon reflection, this is not surprising, for the two realms have some things in common. Both assert the authority to guide and even coerce the behavior of individuals, both claim to offer solutions to the challenges of living together in communities, and both generally promote some version of a greater good that extends beyond narrow self-interest. Religious people have brought their faith commitments to politics, as when Martin Luther King, Jr. insisted that Christian conceptions of divine justice required the extension of political equality to African Americans. Conversely, political developments have shaped the character of religious groups, as when Unites States Muslims were pressured to articulate their loyalty to the nation in the wake of the al Qaeda attacks of September 11, 2001. In short, the relationship of religion and politics has framed some of the most urgent questions about American democracy.

American Religion, American Politics is an anthology of significant writings on these two subjects from the colonial period to recent times. Rather than offering a comprehensive prescription for our public life, the book presents an extended conversation. Often the authors in these pages disagree with each other, and readers will undoubtedly disagree with some of them as well. As editor, I have sought to produce not a theological treatise but a useful text for the academic study of American religion. That kind of study tries to leave aside questions of ultimate meaning, at least provisionally, to treat religion as a product of human history and culture. My goal is to have readers understand the range of debates over religion and politics and to encourage them to work out their own interpretations based on their interests and the expectations of their particular disciplines.

This book has the word "religion" in its title, but it is emphatically not for believers only. The issues in these pages confront readers of all spiritual and political persuasions. For example, anyone, religious or not, concerned about the protection of civil liberties has to reckon with the Supreme Court's decisions in the 1940s regarding Jehovah's Witnesses, a small apocalyptic sect that refused to salute the flag or participate in other patriotic rituals. Anyone interested in the long history of feminism will find it useful to work through the critiques of Christian patriarchy by Frances Willard and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Anyone studying the ethical concept of the just war will gain insight from Reinhold Niebuhr's searching analysis of the sometimes conflicting requirements of love and justice. In other words, the readings have been chosen to highlight religion as a force in its own right and also as a site for discussing a wide range of ostensibly secular subjects.

The conception of "politics" in the volume has a similarly capacious scope. Some of the texts reprinted here are obviously political: presidential speeches, laws, and Supreme Court decisions, to name a few. Yet to restrict politics to the official operations of government would present an impoverished view, one that would miss many of the most pressing issues in American history and culture. Therefore, this volume also includes many representatives of major social movements, people who never held elective office but who expressed ideas that shaped the power dynamics of the nation's public life. For instance, John Shelby Spong's endorsement of gay marriage may seem at first to deal only with the behavior of individuals in the privacy of their bedrooms. However, the LGBT rights movement (like feminism before it) showed marriage to be also a public legal construction, one that became the site of intense political debate leading up to the land-

mark 2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision, which legalized same-sex unions. Politics, then, is not only what the president or Congress does; it is also the activity of lesser-known pressure groups that can, over time, change the government from the outside.

Although this volume covers a wide range of subjects, it returns throughout to three interrelated themes, common problems that persist across historical eras. The first theme deals with the scope of religious freedom and religious toleration, values inextricably linked to the First Amendment's religion clauses: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." With this bold statement, the founders made a significant break with the colonial model of religious establishment, the framework of government-supported churches that had reigned in Europe for hundreds of years and in the New World colonies as well. Following in the spirit of the First Amendment's imperative, ordinary Americans transformed the spiritual landscape in the first half-century of the nation's life, flocking to fledgling evangelical denominations such as the Methodists and Baptists and starting a dizzying array of brand-new groups. The legal and social shift to acceptance of religious diversity signaled the acceleration of a distinctly American experiment.

Religious freedom, though, had important limits. Even after the Bill of Rights was ratified, individual states maintained their official support of churches (Massachusetts did not end the practice until 1833, the last state to do so). Furthermore, Protestant Christianity constituted in many ways an unofficial establishment despite the First Amendment's claims, a phenomenon criticized by the freethinker and suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who appears in this volume. For most of American history, Protestants dominated the leadership of the country's economic, political, and educational institutions. Blasphemy and obscenity laws were used throughout the nineteenth century to enforce specifically Protestant ideas about God and morality. Even as the boundaries of religious toleration have expanded in the twenty-first century, opinion polls still consistently show that large numbers of Americans would refuse on principle to vote for a presidential candidate who was an atheist. The story of religious freedom, then, is a story of continuing expansion and, at the same time, persistent barriers to inclusion.

The second theme of the book addresses religion's role as an ethical compass for public life. What should religious people do about racial slavery, or global warfare, or homosexuality? And is religion a

trustworthy guide to public morality in the first place? Such ethical questions often played out less in the legal realm than in the arena of social reform and dissent across the political spectrum. This anthology therefore includes selections from figures inside and outside government who developed moral visions of the good society and launched moral protests against perceived obstacles to it. This kind of religious politics goes back to the Puritan John Winthrop, a dissenter from the Church of England who admonished his fellow settlers to create a new community "knitt together" by Christian love. It continues through the most contemporary readings in the book, including Wendell Berry's insistence on a religious respect for human limits in an age of ecological devastation.

The third major center of gravity, which intermingles with the first two, is about the character of the American nation. Is it Christian, inclusively religious, secular, or something else? What does it mean to assign the nation a religious identity? Would that identity be a description of what America is, or rather a hope (or a fear) concerning what it might become? Over and over, conceptions of nationalism have been tied up with ideas about God, faith, and sacred history. The most famous example in this volume is Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address, in which the president grimly suggested that the carnage of the Civil War was a divine judgment on the country, North and South, for the social sin of slavery. Nearly a century later, a Washington, DC minister named George Docherty proposed, more optimistically, that religion was central to America's success and that the phrase "under God" ought to be added to the Pledge of Allegiance to recognize this fact. Whether commentators wanted to rebuke the United States or celebrate it, they often understood it as having religious meaning and significance.

Of course, this book can hardly present a full survey of American religion and politics. By its nature, it focuses on the ideas of elites. Even those authors who are not presidents or ministers were sufficiently educated to be able to write coherently and obtain a hearing from their audiences. Readers need to be aware, therefore, of the rich worlds of "lived religion" and "infrapolitics" that scholars have emphasized in recent studies. Lived religion refers to the practice of faith, especially as that practice diverges from official theological tenets, while infrapolitics names the subtle everyday struggles for power that operate beneath the organized world of parties, elections, and marches. I have tried to balance authors in the rarefied worlds of national government with those, less eminent, who connect at some level

to broader social movements and shed light on the politics of dissent. Still, much of American religion and politics operated beneath the radar of expressly articulated thought.

All this is to say that *American Religion, American Politics* is an invitation to further study and reflection. It is a starting point for understanding one of the most important and exciting conversations in American history, a conversation that began before our nation's founding and continues today. These texts are important for believers and atheists, for Republicans, Democrats, and independents. I hope that readers, regardless of their religious or political allegiances, will use these selections to deepen their understanding of America's history and future.