

Kenneth D. Wald and Allison Calhoun Brown, *Religion and Politics in the United States*, (7th Ed). Rowman & Littlefield, 2014. pp 496. ISBN: 9781442225541.

Reviewed by Andrew Clarke

This book is an excellent and thorough guide to religion and politics in the United States, and would be useful for any student or interested reader. It counters the suggestion that modernisation breeds inevitable religious decline. Noting that the modernisation approach predicts transformations in life and thought associated with the rapid growth of cities, the rise of factory production and the spread of education, Wald and Allison argue that modernisation and secularisation actually leave room for religion to adapt to new circumstances.

The central argument is that religion is much more important in American politics than the majority of people realise. Religious influences are indeed visible in every aspect of political life. The politics that Americans entertain on a wide range of issues including abortion, homosexuality or stem cell research, are intrinsically religious in nature. While religious arguments may play a role in the politics of European countries, they do not carry the same gravitas as they would in America. Furthermore, the behaviour of political elites is a key sign that American religion is not facing its demise. Instead, policy decisions often rest on religious justifications. The authors provide the example of Obama justifying raising taxes on the rich by citing the Gospel of Luke: “for unto whom much is given, much shall be required”.

This is symbolic of perhaps the most pertinent aspect of religious influence on politics in America. It is the idea of civil religion, which suggests that American political rhetoric is infused with religious symbols and references, and that debates about contending policy choices are frequently seen in terms of moral values. Originally coined by Robert Bellah in the 1970s, the concept suggests that America tries to understand its historical experience and national purpose in religious terms. Interestingly, the authors attribute civil religion originally as something that grew from the Puritan colonists, who interpreted their passage to the New World as a re-enactment of God’s covenant with Abraham and his descendants. Indeed, these early settlers felt they had been selected by God for the purpose of bringing redemption to humankind. In modern day America, civil religion takes the form of pledging allegiance to the flag on a daily basis; the words “one nation under God” were added to the pledge as recently as the 1950s. Further examples suggest that there is civil religious sentiment in the way in which American holidays, such as Independence Day are considered as being religious as well as patriotic, while the flag of the United States is viewed as sacred.

The book justifies its arguments by the use of various studies and surveys. While they argue that religion matters in American political behaviour, the authors acknowledge that on the

surface Americans do not want to mix religion and politics. When asked whether churches should express their views on day-to-day social and political questions, over 50% of respondents said no. An overwhelming majority believe that congregations should not endorse candidates for public office and that religious leaders should not try to imitate lobbyists in influencing public policy. This is remarkable given that over 80% of Americans identify with a religious tradition. It supports the authors' argument that America has fostered an environment for religion to modify and adapt in order to continue as a defining force in contemporary society.

The authors suggest that as institutionalised religion falters, religion itself is often influential in helping people to develop their political tendencies. In looking at various different religious groups; the Christian Right/Evangelism, Catholicism, Judaism, Protestants - both African American and Latino, Jews, Muslims and Latter-Day Saints (women and homosexuals are also examined as groups), the book explores the importance of religion in the formation of the adherents' political views. The general conclusion is that those who are more institutionally religious, attending church on a weekly basis, are more likely to share the basic political orientation of their church. The authors note that the content of belief, rather than its depth, determines the compatibility of a religious system with democratic government.

With Americans believing that the institutions of Government (judiciary, executive and legislature) should be separate, it makes sense that the effects of religion on the state's institutions are examined. This is covered as a historical approach in the chapter on 'Religion and the State'. A fascinating look at religion's influence on the judicial record of America would suggest that religion has, if anything, increased as a consideration in decision making over the years. In the first 150 years under the Constitution, the authors note that apart from the controversy over the Sunday delivery of mail, few church-state items emerged to engage Congress. In the modern-day however, the Supreme Court has considered many significant church-state decisions, and the book lists 75 Supreme Court decisions made between 1943-2012 that are considered to be on religious issues. These decisions are categorised as either separationist or accommodating, i.e. whether church and the state should interact.

The book finally examines the effect of religious activism on the general tenor of political life, using anecdotal evidence of the authors' experience of phone calls received after September 11 2001. In an endless number of calls, they were asked to clearly label the attacks as either a religious act or the perpetrators as being insane. Their main conclusion is that religion in politics is "neither an unvarying source of good nor a consistent evil influence", which has the capacity to both ennoble and to corrupt political life. One example provided is the argument that the abortion debate has actually invigorated public life in America. Additionally, they counter the suggestion made by other scholars that religion is the only basis for morality in issues such as abortion.

Overall, Wald and Allison provide a detailed and almost forensic examination of the ways in which religion interacts with politics. While they do not provide definitive conclusions, instead acknowledging the rapidly changing patterns of religious influence, they end with a call for people to continue conducting research into this important and influential area.