RELIGION, HUMILITY, AND DEMOCRACY IN A DIVIDED AMERICA

POLITICAL POWER AND SOCIAL THEORY

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POLITICAL POWER AND SOCIAL THEORY VOLUME 36

RELIGION, HUMILITY, AND DEMOCRACY IN A DIVIDED AMERICA

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First edition 2019

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-78973-950-3 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-78973-949-7 (Online)
ISBN: 978-1-78973-951-0 (Epub)

ISSN: 0198-8719 (Series)

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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BEYOND THE DOGMATIC BELIEVER: RELIGIOUS CONVICTION ACROSS THE AMERICAN POLITICAL DIVIDE

Ruth Braunstein

ABSTRACT

A growing interdisciplinary literature explores how people can simultaneously hold strong convictions and remain open to the possibility of learning from others with whom they disagree. This tension impacts not only knowledge development but also public discourse within a diverse and disagreeing democracy. This volume of Political Power and Social Theory *considers the specific question of how* religious *convictions inform how people engage in democratic life, particularly across deep political divides. In this introduction, I begin by discussing how a narrow vision of religious citizens as* dogmatic believers *has led observers to frame religion as a concerning source of democratic distortion – encouraging too much arrogance and not enough humility. Yet this dogmatic believer narrative captures only one aspect of American religion. Juxtaposing a snapshot of dogmatic believers alongside two other snapshots of religious groups engaging in political life raises complex questions about the relationship between religious conviction, humility, and democracy in a time of deep political polarization. I argue that answering these questions requires a sociological approach that is attuned to power, context, culture, institutions, and history. At the same time, I show how attention to the tension between conviction and humility has the potential to enrich the*

Religion, Humility, and Democracy in a Divided America
Political Power and Social Theory, Volume 36, 1–22

ISSN: 0198-8719/doi:10.1108/S0198-871920190000036002

sociological study of religion and democracy, and particularly ethnographic research across the moral/political divide.

Keywords: Religion; American evangelicals; political polarization; democracy; humility; arrogance

RELIGION AND AMERICAN DEMOCRATIC LIFE – THREE SNAPSHOTS

Snapshot One: The 81 Percent and the Dogmatic Believer Narrative

It does not happen often, but occasionally a statistic captures our national imagination. In recent years, at least among people interested in the relationship between religion and politics in the United States, few figures have garnered as much interest as "the 81 percent" (the addition of a "the" in front of this number underscores its significance). What is the 81 percent, you ask? It is the percentage of white evangelical Protestant voters who cast ballots for Donald Trump in 2016 (Bailey, 2016; Smith & Martínez, 2016). This is, according to an article in the evangelical magazine *Christianity Today*, "the most infamous statistic about faith and the 2016 election" and the basis for a new "go-to narrative" about the politics of white evangelical Christians in the United States (Stetzer & McDonald, 2018).

Nearly a year after the election, a *Washington Post* feature breathed life into this statistic (McCrummen, 2018). The author traveled to the small town of Luverne, Alabama, to take the pulse of the 81 percent. The goal of the article was to understand how the members of a local Baptist church were navigating the "unavoidable moral dilemmas" presented by Trump's presidency – namely, he supported "pro-life" policies aligned with their religious beliefs, yet his casual cruelty, lies, greed, narcissism, and adultery undermined decades of evangelical efforts to police moral character. It was not clear, however, that the white Baptist churchgoers of Luverne felt much of a moral dilemma. They framed "Trump's agenda" as aligned with "God's agenda for America" and explained, "What a good Christian was supposed to do was pray for God to work on Trump." "If they were somehow wrong about Trump," one woman explained, "in the end it doesn't really matter." Another man elaborated on this sentiment, "A true Christian doesn't have to worry about that," because "Jesus had died on the cross to wash away their sins, defeat death and provide them with eternal life in heaven" – no matter their missteps on earth.

One journalistic portrait of a small southern church community certainly does not define all white evangelicals, but along with scores of similar articles it helped solidify a particular image of this group of voters. The stories told about the 81 percent cast white evangelicals as a blind unaccountable herd, who traded their moral principles – and perhaps even their ability to think for themselves – for the possibility of power. During the 2016 campaign, as Trump's supporters remained loyal even after revelations of his extreme views and inappropriate

behavior, Trump famously said, "I could stand in the middle of 5th Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn't lose voters." Surely, observers protested, religious conservatives would not stand by this immoral man. Yet they did stand by him, and they have continued to do so. Not only did nearly 70 percent of white evangelicals hold a favorable view of Trump just ahead of the midterm elections, according to PRRI's 2018 American Values Survey, but 25 percent of them reported "there is nothing Trump could do to lose their support" (Vandermaas-Peeler et al. 2018).

The fact pattern provided by the 81 percent fuels a common narrative about the role of religion in politics, which I call the *dogmatic believer* narrative. According to this narrative, religion (defined narrowly as dogmatic belief) is a problematic source of closed-mindedness, intractability, and impermeability to reason (Habermas, 1991, 2006; Rawls, 1993, 1997; see also Guhin and Markofski in this volume). Political theorists implicitly rely on this narrative to identify both substantive and procedural problems with religion. On substantive grounds, they worry that religion engenders intolerance of social others and leads to exclusionary policies rooted in ethnic-style tribalism (e.g., Gorski, 2017b). On procedural grounds, they worry that if religious citizens are unwilling or unable to respond rationally to new information as they receive it, if they are as unmovable as this narrative suggests, then they cannot fulfill their responsibilities as members of a democratic public sphere and instead drive entrenched polarization that undermines democratic life.

These concerns dovetail with those raised by a growing interdisciplinary literature exploring how people can simultaneously hold strong convictions and remain open to the possibility of learning from others, with the understanding that striking the right balance is crucial not only for knowledge development but also for constructive public discourse. When considering the more specific question of how *religious* convictions inform how people engage in democratic life across deep political divides, it is not surprising that the dogmatic believer narrative would lead to a view of religion as a concerning source of democratic distortion – encouraging too much *arrogance* and not enough *humility*.

Arrogance, and specifically what Lynch (forthcoming, p. 134) calls *epistemic arrogance*:

> can be roughly described as an unwillingness to regard your worldview (or some aspect of it) as capable of epistemic improvement from other people's knowledge or experience. […] To be epistemically arrogant is to be dogmatic in the common sense of the term.

This can be contrasted to *intellectual humility*, defined most commonly as open-mindedness (Riggs, 2010) or the "owning" of one's biases and intellectual limitations (Whitcomb, Battaly, Baehr, & Howard-Snyder, 2017). Put simply, it is an openness to the possibility that one could improve one's understanding by listening to people whose views differ from one's own (forthcoming, Lynch, 2018).[1] This is not to suggest that intellectual humility requires that one always be persuaded by others' arguments – to the contrary, what is required is that one accurately appraise the quality of one's own knowledge and beliefs in relation to

others' (Church & Barrett, 2016; Tanesini, 2018). Abandoning well-founded views and holding fast to unfounded views are *both* problematic.

Religious dogmatism is viewed as an impediment to achieving this optimal balance between conviction and humility. But lest we draw general conclusions about "religion" based on the dogmatic believer narrative, it is important to recognize that this narrative is both oversimplistic in its account of dogmatic belief and also captures only one aspect of American religion.[2] Indeed, white evangelicals represent only one of many religious traditions that comprise America's diverse religious landscape, and each of these traditions is lived out in varied and complex ways, especially with regard to their political engagements. It is thus imperative we decenter the dogmatic believer narrative. To this end, below I present two additional snapshots of religious groups engaging in democratic life, to be considered alongside the previous snapshot of the 81 percent. Juxtaposing these three snapshots not only troubles the conclusions we typically draw from the dogmatic believer narrative but also forces us to be reflexive about the political biases we bring to conversations about religion and democracy.

Snapshot Two: The Humble Believer (Complicating the Dogmatic Believer Narrative)

Set against depictions of the closed-minded white evangelicals who comprise the 81 percent, recent research reveals efforts within Christian communities to open up difficult conversations about issues that have long been considered off-limits. One case in point involves conversations about gender and sexuality. While liberal faith communities have been at the forefront of these efforts, members of theologically conservative Christian communities are also demonstrating increasing openness on this issue. Coley (2018), for example, reports on recent campaigns to enhance LGBT inclusion and representation on Christian college and university campuses, including some representing conservative theological traditions. While all Christian campuses have not embraced LGBT equality, the fact that 45 percent of these institutions have officially recognized LGBT groups and 55 percent have "adopted nondiscrimination statements inclusive of sexual orientation," according to Coley's (2018, p. 35) data, will come as a surprise to many. So too will accounts of conservative Christian students reevaluating what it means to be a Christian and a Christian community upon learning of the challenges facing their LGBT peers.

These efforts are not limited to younger generations either. Moon and Tobin's research ((2018), see also their chapter in this volume), for example, sheds light on:

> the movement among conservative Christians, mostly in the United States, to open up conversation with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) members and in many cases, to affirm same-sex marriage, gender transitions, and LGBTI identities.

These conversations are often driven by a desire to preserve important relationships, for example, with children or other loved ones. In so doing, conservative

Christians are engaging in thoughtful and open-ended dialogue about an issue that was once considered beyond debate and, in some cases, changing their position on the issue.

This research offers a corrective to accounts that position people of faith on the opposite side of an intractable "culture war" with LGBT activists. This is not to say that this culture war is a fiction; to the contrary, religious conservatives have battled directly with the LGBT rights movement for decades (Fetner, 2008). But as Coley (2018) argues, the culture war dynamic is not necessarily the *norm* or an *inevitability*. Religious leaders were early allies of the gay and lesbian community, and before the Religious Right transformed gender and sexuality into nonnegotiable "wedge issues," the question of how Christians were supposed to view these issues was subject to debate and disagreement.

This account of devout Christians being open to changing their minds about this and other issues runs counter to the dogmatic believer narrative, but should not actually be surprising. Indeed, most faith traditions formally *encourage* this stance, drawing on biblical calls for humility and practices that help balance conviction with humility, as Markofski's and Wood's contributions to this volume detail. This open-mindedness is also consistent with Putnam and Campbell's (2010) more general observation that, given high levels of diversity in the United States, even the most devout Americans have relationships with religious and moral "others" that ultimately make them more tolerant of difference. This "Aunt Susan Principle," as they call it, explains how the United States manages to be diverse, devout, and (largely) tolerant. Finally, as Hartley's contribution to this volume shows, relatively dogmatic religious leaders may also have *strategic* reasons for engaging in dialogue with religious/political others, even about issues of deep theological significance. It is thus unwise to assume that there is something intrinsic to Christian (or any religious) theology that prevents intellectual open-mindedness and closes down the possibility of dialogue. Rather, it suggests that religious citizens' likelihood and willingness to engage in open-ended inquiry about controversial issues are shaped by a variety of factors – including shifting cultural norms, political forces, and social network configurations – that inform how they draw upon, interpret, and determine the "salience" (Guhin, 2016) of their religion in the context of different political debates.

Snapshot Three: The Righteous Prophet (Inverting the Dogmatic Believer Narrative)

The previous two snapshots show two different faces of conservative Christianity – one arrogant and one humble – yet they share a common *moral*: that excessive moral certainty closes down the possibility of open-minded dialogue, drives polarization, and is thus a problem for democratic life. But what about instances in which religious conviction fuels moral certainty that *enables* citizens to advance democratic aims?[3] "Prophetic" religion, for example, has been an essential component of historical movements for freedom and justice precisely *because* it is uncompromising in its moral critique, and on this basis, it

calls societies to account for their collective sins (Weber, 1993; see also Raboteau, 2016; Reed, Williams, & Ward, 2016; Williams & Alexander, 1994). This should not suggest that humility does not have a place in prophetic religion, but rather it calls attention to the possibility that moral certainty could be virtuous in some instances.[4]

Consider, for example, one of America's foremost civic prophets, Rev Martin Luther King, Jr. From inside an Alabama jail cell, in 1963, King explained why he had no choice but to join the campaign of nonviolent civil disobedience that led to his arrest. In his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," he argued that segregation "is not only politically, economically and sociologically unsound, it is morally wrong and sinful." He could not in good conscience continue to obey unjust laws. Although Birmingham was not his hometown, King explained he had been called there – by God. "The prophets of the eighth century BC left their villages and carried their *thus saith the Lord* far beyond the boundaries of their home towns," King wrote. Like these biblical prophets, he continued, "so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town."

The white moderates to whom he addressed his letter claimed to agree with his goals, yet they viewed his uncompromising stance as "extremist." It would be more appropriate, they argued, to be patient, to negotiate, to engage in dialogue with those who were not yet persuaded of his cause. Rejecting their calls for moderation, King unapologetically embraced their "extremist" label:

> But though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love […] Was not Amos an extremist for justice […] Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel […] Was not Martin Luther an extremist […] And John Bunyan […] And Abraham Lincoln […] And Thomas Jefferson […] So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice?

Aligning himself with biblical and modern prophets that most Americans would be hard-pressed to reject as unsavory figures, he reframed "extremism" as a moral, even democratic, virtue.

From the civil rights movement (Marsh, 2005) to the Catholic Worker (Braunstein, 2018b) to today's movement of faith-based community organizing (Braunstein, 2017; Delehanty, 2016; Wood & Fulton, 2015; see also Wood in this volume), and to a range of other progressive religious movements (Braunstein, Fuist, & Williams, 2017; McKanan, 2011; Raboteau, 2016), American history has been punctuated by the actions of righteous prophets who have typically fought on behalf of the most marginalized and vulnerable members of society. Many of these men and women are remembered today as champions of democracy and human rights, yet they were often viewed in their time as crazies, troublemakers, and extremists, crying out in the wilderness, speaking truth to power, however unpopular it made them. They persisted because the strength of their religious convictions helped them remain confident in their cause, amid the crush of voices telling them they were crazy.

Understanding how these righteous prophets could be virtuous while dogmatic believers are problematic requires we recognize that the actually existing public sphere is not the level playing field it is ideally imagined to be (Fraser, 1990; Habermas, 1991). Rather, it represents an "epistemically hostile environment" that discredits members of nondominant groups, like women and people of color (Battaly, 2018, p. 267; see also Morris & Braine, 2001). The same can be said of smaller-scale communities or institutions, as Moon and Tobin's chapter in this volume demonstrates in the case of LGBTQI members. In this context, marginalized groups may embrace a prophetic stance in order to sustain confidence in their humanity and right to be heard. Although this is likely to be polarizing in the moment (indeed, that is often the goal), it has ultimately enabled these groups to press for greater justice, equality, and inclusion – widely considered democratic goods.

Juxtaposing the Three Snapshots

This volume of *Political Power and Social Theory* addresses the question of how religious convictions inform citizens' engagement in democratic life, particularly across deep political divides. Juxtaposing these three snapshots helps us begin to answer that question. To be sure, none of these snapshots reveals the one "true" story of American religion, nor are they a representative sample of this diverse world.[5] Yet the variation they reveal underscores the extent to which we must paint with a fine brush when discussing how religious individuals and groups engage in public life.

The first snapshot – of the 81 percent, and more generally of the dogmatic believer – looms large in our public and scholarly discussions about the role of religion in politics, reinforcing liberal secularist anxieties about the problems that religion poses for democratic life. In this account, religion fosters toxic levels of moral certainty, which fuels insularity and closed-mindedness, and prevents religious citizens from fulfilling their duty to engage in open-minded deliberation with diverse and disagreeing others. This is viewed as a problem for a functioning democratic society insofar as it drives entrenched polarization and conflict between groups.

Meanwhile, the second snapshot – of devout but humble Christians engaging in open-minded dialogue about an issue of theological and political significance – provides a glimpse into a side of religious life that is rarely seen and is at odds with the dogmatic believer narrative. Yet like the first snapshot, it supports the conclusion that excessive moral certainty is problematic and that practices encouraging intellectual humility are necessary to break through "culture war"-style polarization and support healthy democratic life. We also learn, however, that this kind of openness is more possible in some historical moments than others, depending on the broader social, cultural, and political context.

The third snapshot – of righteous prophets fighting for social change – differs from the first two by challenging the view that more humility and less conviction are necessarily good for democracy. Rather, attention to prophetic religion reveals that strong religious convictions have been marshaled

throughout American history in order to sustain campaigns for equality and justice that have ultimately advanced democratic ideals. This has been particularly true for oppressed and marginalized groups that otherwise have little public voice or standing. Through this lens, moral certainty can, under some conditions, advance democracy, as can some conflict and polarization.

The juxtaposition of these narratives not only decenters the dogmatic believer narrative and suggests a more complex set of relationships between religious conviction, humility, and democracy; it also raises questions about political bias. After all, my (democratically good) righteous prophet may be another observer's (democratically problematic) dogmatic believer, and vice versa. This bias might be rooted in one's preference for a particular conceptualization of "democracy" or in political opposition to different moral/political groups. For example, observers more socially or politically aligned with white evangelicals may be more likely to accept their long-standing claims that their own marginalized and "embattled" status (Smith, 1998) within an "epistemically hostile" secular world justifies their insistence on remaining firm in their beliefs. While there are clear differences in the social positions and political goals of white evangelicals and civil rights activists, which shape their respective impacts on democratic life, it is nonetheless unavoidable that our political or moral affinities with one or the other seeps into our evaluations of their democratic goodness.

Similarly, we must ask whether we are more likely to view Christians' openness to revising their traditional views on gender and sexuality in positive terms because this brings them more into alignment with our own (and, increasingly, the broader society's) views. Willingness to change may not be virtuous in itself: imagine, for example, a group of staunch political liberals reopening dialogue about the moral status of white supremacy. Surely, most of us would not applaud their open-mindedness. Each of these snapshots describes how religious groups interact with others around issues of public concern. But they are not just descriptive; they are also imbued with normative assumptions that must be identified before we can draw broader conclusions about the relationship between religious conviction, humility, and democracy.

This volume takes this complexity as its starting point. It does so by looking beyond the 81 percent, and the dogmatic believer narrative more generally, and instead examining multiple ways in which religious groups engage in American democratic life. Together, the chapters that follow prompt us to recognize that strong religious conviction can encourage greater political arrogance, but also greater humility; can lead to deepening political polarization that threatens democracy, but also commitment to causes that advance democracy; can encourage the building of walls, but also of bridges. They also begin to identify the factors driving each outcome. As I argue in the following section, this work contributes to the emerging literature on intellectual humility by demonstrating the value of sociological approaches to studying religious conviction that are attuned to power, context, culture, institutions, and history. At the same time, as I argue in the final section, greater attention to the tension between conviction and humility also has the potential to enrich the sociological study of religion