



A Perspective on President Trump's Attempt to Channel American Religious Activism

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The U.S. religious right flexed its muscles once again during the 2016 elections. Although some high-profile evangelicals spoke out against Donald Trump, polls show that religious-minded conservative voters contributed to his victory. The outcome of the presidential contest was not shaped by any one group, but Trump's assurances on various moral issues assuaged the concerns of social conservatives and tilted battleground states in his favor.

During the campaign, Trump stated his opposition to abortion, vowed greater support to Israel, and claimed that his Democratic opponent "hates Catholics." Among the most substantive of his statements was a pledge to overturn the Johnson Amendment, a section of the U.S. tax code that revokes the fiscal exemptions of religious institutions that endorse a specific candidate or party. In his quest for faith-based support, candidate Trump pitched his promise to change this provision as a stand for religious freedom.

On May 4, President Trump signed an executive order "promoting free speech and religious liberty" that notably allows administrative discretion in the enforcement of the Johnson Amendment. Many conservatives hoped that tax reform legislation proposed and passed in late 2017 would include a repeal of the amendment. That did not happen, but further administrative steps remain possible. Through the process, Trump's efforts raise an important question: does religious activism pose a threat to the separation of church and state? Recent political history offers answers.

Modern U.S. Religious Activism from Left to Right

The interdenominational, ideologically-based groups Americans now call the "religious right" and the "religious left" were unknown in the 1950s. At the height of the Cold War, religion tended to reinforce the status quo. Churches found their role entwined with stated U.S. national purposes in the struggle against the atheistic Communist bloc. Most clergy gave their blessing to the existing order of American life.

In the early 1960s, this religious order broke down, and former barriers between religious traditions softened. Theological liberalism swept through northern Protestant seminaries. John F. Kennedy's presidency quelled fears about "Catholic power." The encyclicals of Pope John XXIII and the Second Council of the Vatican encouraged Catholic good will across faiths. At last, liberal Protestants, Catholics, and Jews answered Martin Luther King's clarion call for churches and synagogues to champion racial justice. King asked clergy to recapture a "prophetic zeal" and fulfill their worldly duties. Initial successes in fights for civil rights led many congregants to transfer their energies to antiwar protests. In all of these reform movements, old religious silos began to disintegrate.

The 1970s brought a conservative reaction among congregants hostile to the rapid social changes advocated by the religious left – a reaction buoyed by declining membership in mainline Protestant denominations. A formal rejection of artificial contraception in the papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae* promoted defections among liberal Catholics, also opening public space for conservatives. Across denominations, conservatives of all stripes pushed back against the religious left while learning from its weaknesses. Mobilized conservatives preserved standards of membership and discipline and refused to relinquish traditional rites or teachings in the interest of dialogue. By protecting the “spiritual meaning” of religion, they held firm against “indifferentism.”

As Americans of different traditions on both sides of the partisan spectrum made common cause in political efforts, partisan camps began to serve the function that denominations played in a prior era. These camps are the new echo chambers in U.S. public life: political stances often represent how Americans identify morally.

Concurrently, since the late 1960s, liberal moral rhetoric about economic opportunity, immigration, racial justice, women’s health, and other issues has weakened, as many on the left recoil at conservative faith-based activism on behalf of Republican causes. This may be understandable, yet by conceding moral ground and addressing issues in purely pragmatic terms, liberals have impaired their ability to speak authoritatively and have made it harder for the Democratic Party to welcome people of faith.

The Democratic Consequences of Religious Expression

Public policymaking inevitably touches upon moral issues, so it is not surprising that active citizens draw on religious values. That does not challenge democracy, but deeper problems lurk in institutional relationships between government and faith-based organizations. President Trump’s executive order weakening the Johnson Amendment threatens to shift the locus of religious groups’ moral concerns from policymaking to partisan politics.

Tax-exempt groups already speak out loudly and forcefully on a host of public policy issues. They regularly participate in protests and testify on Capitol Hill without fear of retribution. And religious groups have profited from significant autonomy when operating in the political sphere, as the Internal Revenue Service is cautious about revoking tax exemptions due to partisan activities. In truth, the Johnson Amendment has helped churches remain true to their calling. A majority of American church members continue to oppose explicit partisan endorsements from the pulpit and many clergy oppose weakening the Johnson prohibitions.

Trump’s new direction may be mostly for political show, but it runs the risk of transforming U.S. religion into a single party’s fiefdom. Over time, the identification of one specific moral outlook with government erodes the separation of church and state. Ironically, the solution to present-day entanglements may lie in *broader* faith-based activism, in which a greater variety of moral views are elicited and expressed in public policy debates. Ultimately, it may prove beneficial to American democracy to have a fuller range of religious groups check one another by applying various moral perspectives to public policy discussions. Surely this direction would be preferable to having courts and officials regulate the inevitable intersection of religion with government.

Read more in Patrick Lacroix, “Martin Luther Changed Christianity 500 Years Ago. It Changed Again in the 1960s,” *Time*, October 30, 2017.

January 8, 2018

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