book reviews

The Anonymous God: the church confronts civil religion and American society

Edited by David L. Adams and Ken Schurb
St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2004

Real-live Christians need help understanding the two realms of God’s rule. This book of ten essays provides some assistance. While consistent in quality, like many essay collections it varies in rigor: some elementary, some reflective and informative, and a few over-long. The reader unfamiliar with two-kingdom doctrine will find valuable background and perspectives but will be puzzled about some everyday issues not addressed. The reader acquainted with the church- and state conversations will gain some updates about America’s version of civil religion while reviewing familiar territory.

As described on the back cover, “The contributors reflect on the importance of knowing and worshiping the triune God without confusing Him with the state and its rule of law.” The authors directly or indirectly use two points of departure for their comments. One is 9/11. The other is a highly regarded essay called “Civil Religion in America” written by Robert Bellah (best known for the book, Habits of the Heart).

Bellah’s 1967 essay became the accelerant for decades of discussion about civil religion which essayist Alvin Schmidt defines as the deeply held beliefs regarding American values and practices pertaining to freedom, democracy, equality, opportunity, tolerance, and pluralism. These beliefs are portrayed by national symbols in gatherings where they are publicly revered as sacred because they represent God. God, however, remains undefined in these gatherings, but this god has chosen the United States to play a special, salutary role in human history.

The concern is that this civil religion is an idolatry to which Christians and non-Christians are highly susceptible, especially in times of national crisis. Thus 9/11, the other touchstone, the essayist sees as an emotionally powerful reference for invoking the god and socially pragmatic values of our civil religion. To the editors’ credit, the essays rarely refer to the Prayer for America event at Yankee Stadium and never to David Benke, focusing instead on historical and biblical content.

By way of strengths, the essays examine in several ways what co-editor David Adams calls Christianity’s scandal of particularity. Civil religion must leave its god unspecified and allow today’s polytheistic participants to fill in the blank. Christians are seen to commit the cardinal sin against pluralism by naming Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life.

To lend perspective to the issues and problems of civil religion, the book also offers several historical treatments of such figures as the second century church father, Athenagoras, America’s founding fathers, C.F.W. Walther, and the 20th century work of Martin Marty and Sidney Mead. The influences of deism and freemasonry as taproots for America’s “publick religion” (Benjamin Franklin’s term and goal) are featured along the way.

As a reader for book groups or classes, The Anonymous God may be most valuable for the questions it prompts but does not address. The Afterword, written by Adams, acknowledges that despite its idolatry, civil religion does serve important functions in a democracy, such as sustaining religious discourse in the public square. The readings do not explore the ways state Christianity in Europe has degenerated to secularism while, comparatively, the Gospel thrives alongside America’s anonymous deity.

More practically for most readers, the book does not consider the Christian pastor’s or laity’s participation in our usual intersections with civil religion, including weddings, funerals, boy scouts and girl scouts, baccalaureates, team prayers at the local high school, “See You at the Pole” prayer gatherings for high school students, and local civic celebrations. (Seward, Nebraska, begins its nationally recognized Fourth of July celebration each year with a public prayer service at the courthouse.

Tune in on Good Morning, America as, by yearly turns, each of the local pastors … well, never mind.)

Adams does offer some principles that may help devise responses to such situations, and the collected writings recognize that answers may not be transparent. They recommend both due diligence regarding our involvement in civil religion and forgiveness for those with whom we disagree. The role of either forgiveness or forbearance in circumstances of adiaphora or about which informed Christians may disagree is itself a matter for further discussion that the book does not examine but that readers can.

Chapter eight, “The Church in the Public Square in a Pluralistic Society,” tries an interesting thought experiment by adding a third realm to the usual Lutheran two-realm perspective. As a device for assessing participation in activities that may compromise our witness to the Gospel, the author proposes “an additional realm that is at the same time civil (or civic) and religious.” Events in this domain seek to advance the public good by practicing overt discourse about god or gods. We Christians, otherwise free to participate in activities that are conspicuous either in the right-hand or left-hand realm, would need to decide whether our involvement in this civil religious realm would advance or confuse our witness. This thought experiment is not entirely successful—civil religion is certainly a feature of the left-hand kingdom where God’s rule of law prevails and the Gospel does not, and is not its own realm—but the notion does prompt further inquiry into the two-kingdom doctrine.

Real-live Christians do need additional assistance and Christian education about the two realms. Perhaps some who read these essays will be motivated to write a sequel that devotes one chapter to this volume’s chief insights about civil religion and then examines the two realms of God’s rule not just in terms of church and state but in the multifaceted ways that Law and Gospel inform the entire vocation of the Christian.

Russ Moulds
Op-Ed Editor, Issues in Christian Education

God’s Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It

Jim Wallis
San Francisco: Harper, 2005

Jim Wallis, an evangelical social activist, is the leading voice of the progressive Christian movement. In God’s Politics, Wallis exposes what he sees as the flaws of the current use of religion...
in politics and presents his overarching goal to transform America into a truth-telling, peace-seeking, poverty-busting nation.

The current problem with religion and politics, according to Wallis, is that neither party uses religion correctly. Democrats refuse to allow religious faith a public role, relegating it to the private sphere. Wallis rejects a solely private faith, arguing that this tactic leaves the country without a moral guide. The Republicans, on the other hand, have limited the scope of Christianity. To them, Christians should be concerned only about keeping the Ten Commandments in front of courtrooms and abortion. By focusing solely on these issues, Republicans miss what Wallis considers the crux of biblical teachings: to promote social justice and peace throughout the world.

Wallis’s answer to the current ideological standoff between Democrats and Republicans is to forge a new grassroots option, which he labels “prophetic politics.” Prophetic politics, based upon the words of Christ and the various prophets of the Old Testament, would create solutions by using the best techniques of both parties. Prophetic politics would also create a seamless garment of life, in which every life would be valuable, including the unborn, the elderly, the poor, and the oppressed. While Wallis’s vision of prophetic politics is powerful, he fails to explain how a grassroots movement could not only break down each party’s ideological barriers, but also financially compete with the special interest groups lobbying candidates.

Wallis then explains how prophetic politics would address two important issues: terrorism and poverty. Wallis presents strong arguments dealing with the issue of poverty. Using numerous examples from the prophets and Christ’s own words, he condemns current American economic practices. He also urges third-world debt cancellation, fair-trade practices, and economic practices. He also urges third-world debt cancellation, fair-trade practices, and economic practices. He also urges third-world debt cancellation, fair-trade practices, and economic practices. He also urges third-world debt cancellation, fair-trade practices, and economic practices.

Politics. Perhaps that is the irony of politics based on the prophets: while the message is correct, the prophets were ignored by Israel until it was too late. Nevertheless, God’s Politics is a thought-provoking book, and while the reader may or may not agree with Wallis’s conclusions, his arguments are worth pondering before the next trip to the ballot box.

Kory Bajus
2004 Graduate of Concordia University, Nebraska. Graduate Student, University of Nebraska-Lincoln


Roy Moore
Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005

On June 27, 2005, four days before she announced her retirement this past summer, Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor highlighted the role and importance of the First Amendment in protecting the free exercise of religion:

At a time when we see around the world the violent consequences of the assumption of religious authority by government, Americans may count themselves fortunate: Our regard for constitutional boundaries has protected us from similar travails, while allowing private religious exercise to flourish. . . . Given the history of this particular display of the Ten Commandments, the Court correctly finds an Establishment Clause violation. . . . The purpose behind the counties’ display is relevant because it conveys an unmistakable message of endorsement to the reasonable observer. [McCreary County v. American Civil Liberties Union of Kentucky, 125 S. Ct. 2722, 2746 (2005).]

In So Help Me God: The Ten Commandments, Judicial Tyranny, and the Battle for Religious Freedom, former Alabama Supreme Court Justice Roy Moore describes his personal and professional journey to acknowledge God from the bench of the Alabama Supreme Court by creating and displaying a two- and a-half ton granite monument engraved with the Ten Commandments and other references to God in the rotunda of the Alabama State Judicial Building. Moore’s story begins with his childhood in Etowah County, Alabama, and ends with his removal from his position as Chief Justice of the Alabama Supreme Court by a state ethics panel.

Moore’s account is one-third chronological account of his court battles, one-third history lesson regarding the religious convictions of America’s forefathers, and one-third sermon on the so-called moral decay of society and the need for courts and legislatures to publicly acknowledge the Bible and the Judeo-Christian God as the moral foundation of the American law and justice system. It is frequently difficult to follow the thread of Moore’s logic as he struggles to explain how displaying the Ten Commandments is not an endorsement of Judeo-Christian faiths.

Moore’s legal battles began when he displayed a wooden placard of the Ten Commandments and invited clergy to say prayers in his first courtroom as an Etowah County Judge. From the beginning of his tenure on the bench, Moore faced opposition from the American Civil Liberties Union and other organizations who contested Moore’s religious displays. Shortly after being elected to the Alabama Supreme Court, Moore commissioned the granite monument of the Ten Commandments. On the day of the installation of the monument, Moore said that he hoped that “this day marks the beginning of the restoration of the moral foundation of law to our people and a return to the knowledge of God in our land.”

The Establishment Clause of the Bill of Rights prohibits any law “respecting an establishment of religion.” Glaswright v. Moore, 335 F.3d 1282, 1293 (11th Cir. 2003). The United States Supreme Court has interpreted this phrase to mean that “government may not promote or affiliate itself with any religious doctrine or organization, may not discriminate among persons on the basis of their religious beliefs and practices, may not delegate a governmental power to a religious institution, and may not involve itself too deeply in such an institution’s affairs.” Id. Moore’s display of the Ten Commandments was ultimately struck down by the United States District Court for the Middle District of Alabama as an unconstitutional violation of the Establishment Clause. In analyzing Moore’s display, the Eleventh Circuit explained the potential impact of allowing Moore to display the Ten Commandments. “[I]f we adopted his position, the Chief Justice would be free to adorn the walls of the Alabama Supreme Court’s courtroom with sectarian religious murals and have decidedly religious quotations painted above the bench. Every government building could be topped with a cross, or a menorah, or a statue of Buddha, depending upon the views of the officials with authority over the premises.” Id. at 1294. The decision of the Alabama district court was affirmed by United States Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit.
Following the decision of the trial court and the expiration of his appeal, Moore refused to comply with the order of the district court to remove the Ten Commandments from the rotunda of the Alabama State Judicial Building. Following a trial before a state ethics panel, Moore was removed from his position as Supreme Court Justice for his refusal to comply with the court order.

Moore regards the judicial outcome of his display of the Ten Commandments as an attack on Christian morality and the religious roots of our nation. Moore’s one-sided account of the history of religion in society fails to appreciate the sentiment expressed by Justice O’Connor above—that the separation of church and state protects and benefits religion. In a separate case finding an unrelated display of the Ten Commandments unconstitutional, Justice O’Connor reminds us of the historical basis and importance of prohibiting Establishment Clause violations.

The First Amendment expresses our Nation’s fundamental commitment to religious liberty by means of two provisions—one protecting the free exercise of religion, the other barring establishment of religion. They were written by the descendents of people who had come to this land precisely so that they could practice their religion freely. . . . They embody an idea that was once considered radical: Free people are entitled to free and diverse thoughts, which government ought neither to constrain nor to direct. . . . By enforcing the Clauses, we have kept religion a matter for the individual conscience. . . . Our guiding principle has been James Madison’s—that “[t]he Religion . . . of every man must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man.” Government may not . . . prefer one religion over another or promote religion over nonbelief. . . . When we enforce these restrictions, we do so for the same reason that guided the Framers—respect for religion’s special role in society. . . . Voluntary religious belief and expression may be as threatened when government takes the mantle of religion upon itself as when government directly interferes with private religious practices. When the government associates one set of religious beliefs with the state and identifies nonadherents as outsiders, it encroaches upon the individual’s decision about whether and how to worship. . . . Allowing government to be a potential mouthpiece for competing religious ideas risks the sort of division that might easily spill over into suppression of rival beliefs. Tying secular and religious authority together poses risks to both. (McCreary County, 125 S. Ct. at 2746–2747.)

Madeline Roebke, J.D.
Graduate of Concordia University, Nebraska
Attorney in Omaha, Nebraska

continued from page 31

Hannah Weyeneth
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