

## ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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### *Evangelicals, Politics and Religious Liberty in 2013*

Since the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan, evangelicals have played a major role in presidential politics. They played a decisive role in Reagan's 1980 election, his 1984 reelection, the Republican victories in 1994 and the Bush victories in 2000 and 2004. But the evangelical influence appears to be waning and the 2012 presidential election adds credence to that claim. Despite the fact that 79% of white evangelicals voted for Romney (about the same percentage Bush received in 2004) this November, Obama won a decisive victory. On top of that victory, four states voted to legitimize same-sex marriages. What is going on? Although evangelicals comprise 27% of the electorate, there is little doubt that the size of the evangelical vote is not as important as it once was. Other important groups (e.g., Hispanic Roman Catholics, African-American Protestants and Jewish-Americans) overwhelmingly support the Democratic Party and their support and size are decisive. Further, the evangelical influence is conspicuously waning. During the 1980s and 1990s, evangelicals helped set the agenda for the culture, especially during the Republican presidential administrations. No longer. The pluralistic and secular nature of American culture is taking its toll, especially among the emerging adults (ages 18-30), who do not consider themselves evangelical. Finally, as Jonathan Merritt correctly observes, there is a paucity of evangelical leadership. There are no significant replacements for the authority and voice of past evangelical leaders such as Jerry Falwell, D. James Kennedy and Pat Robertson. The current leaders apparently have little influence and their collective voice has little if any effect. As Merritt points out, for example, the current evangelical leadership met behind closed doors in Texas during the Republican primary and endorsed Rick Santorum, who could not compete with Gingrich and Romney. He did not even come close to gaining the nomination. Whether the evangelicals of America can ever enjoy the influence they once had is an open question, but movements go through cycles and perhaps there will be a cycle of rebirth for the evangelical movement. Only time will answer that question.

As the evangelical influence in the American political culture is certainly changing and no doubt waning, there is a far more important cultural and political issue developing—the genuine threat to religious liberty in America and even to the larger role of religion in our culture. To that end, Wilfred McClay of the University of Tennessee argues that “. . . beneath the controversy about religious liberty is a deeper controversy about the nature and status of religion itself in the American legal and political order.” This controversy McClay cites raises several important additional questions: What is so special about religion and why should it receive “special privileges,” as it does in our culture? Why should religious association be viewed any differently than other voluntary or social associations in America? Why should we treat religious liberties any differently than other liberties? We are, after all, still a “religious” nation. We still have “under God” in our Pledge of Allegiance and on our money. We still have military chaplains and tax exemption for religious institutions and many other manifestations of our “religious” culture. So, we are not quite a secular nation but there is no doubt that “religion” in America and

the nature of religious freedom are changing. There is a growing number of people and organizations questioning the “special privileges” America grants to religious organizations and institutions. Some call them needless, embarrassing or downright illegitimate. What should we who believe in the supreme importance of religion in public life and in the absolute necessity of preserving religious liberty do? Can we make a case for the vital importance of religion and religious values in the public square? McClay presents five major reasons why religion and religious liberty are important for America:

1. Our founding tradition as a nation links religion, and the active encouragement of religious belief, to the success of the American experiment. Although there were significant differences between Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, they both agreed on the inescapable importance of religion to the Republic—and this extended to institutions as well as individuals.
2. The free flourishing of diverse religious identities provides a powerful source of moral order and social cohesion for the American culture. It is essential that religious liberty be understood not only as individual liberty but as “corporate liberty,” a liberty that applies to and inheres in groups, and defends the integrity and self-governance of such groups. There must be a liberty to freely exercise faith, for people to raise their children and to order their community life—all guaranteed by the Republic. Religion and religious values are central to social order.
3. Human beings are naturally inclined toward religion. Even a superficial study of human history demonstrates that profound truth. Is there something or someone transcendent beyond our physical world and has that someone revealed Himself? The Bible makes it clear that there is and that He has revealed Himself (see Romans 1:18-2:16). We will either respond in faith or we will suppress that revelation. The secular order of this nation must not seek to inhibit this inclination.
4. Religion deserves an exalted place in American life because of the extensive good works religious institutions reliably perform. The vast scope of charitable, medical, and educational activities undertaken by religious groups makes for a better society and culture. In addition, a growing number of scholars (e.g., Robert Putnam, Jonathan Haidt, Byron Johnson) correlate religious belief with the fostering of generosity, law-abidingness, helpfulness to others, civic engagement, social trust and other important traits necessary for ordered civilization.
5. Religion should have a high place in public life because religion is humanity’s single most important body of reflection regarding the ultimate meaning of the universe and the proper conduct of human life. There is a growing recognition that religion serves as an indispensable bulwark for human dignity. In many ways, our Postmodern civilization threatens both liberty and dignity. Religion provides a much-needed check.

McClay raises an even deeper question: “Can our freedom itself, and more generally the rights-based liberalism [in the 19<sup>th</sup> century meaning of this term] we have come to embrace in the modern West, survive without the Judeo-Christian religious assumptions that have hitherto

accompanied and upheld it?” I believe that the only intellectually honest answer to this question is no, it cannot. Thomas Jefferson once wrote these rather poignant and alarming words: “God who gave us life gave us liberty. Can the liberties of a nation be secure when we have removed a conviction that these liberties are the gift of God? Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, that his justice cannot sleep forever.” These words are on one of the panel walls of my favorite place in Washington, D.C.—the Jefferson Memorial. If a skeptic like Jefferson understood this, how much more should we embrace and affirm the profound truth that God is the author of liberty? To preserve it and protect it is an important virtue. May we be re-awakened to this truth in 2013 and may God be merciful to this nation in 2013.

See Jonathan Merritt in the *Atlantic* (12 November 2012) and Wilfred McClay in *Christianity Today*, (November 2012), pp. 25-29.