

**THE PEW FORUM ON RELIGION & PUBLIC LIFE**  
**FIRST AMENDMENT CENTER**

**“TEACHING ABOUT RELIGION IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS:  
WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?”**

DINNER SPEAKER:  
JON BUTLER, YALE UNIVERSITY

FREEDOM FORUM  
ARLINGTON, VIRGINIA  
MAY 20, 2003  
7:00 PM

*Transcript by:  
Federal News Service  
Washington, D.C.*

**CHARLES HAYNES:** Welcome to the Freedom Forum First Amendment Center, and on behalf of the Pew Forum on Religion in Public Life and the First Amendment Center, we are deeply grateful for your participation in this conference. It's going to be a great conference. There are so many interesting and important things to talk about.

I want to thank our senior vice president, Mary Kay Blake, for being with us tonight. She's sitting over here. (Applause) She's in charge of partnerships and initiatives. I'm not sure all of what that entails, but this is certainly a partnership and an initiative with the Pew Forum, and we are delighted that we are collaborating together on this conference.

I'm going to say thank you a number of times during the conference to a few people, and I want to get in the habit of saying it, because the real people who do the work ought to be thanked as much as possible. Certainly Marcia Beauchamp, for all of her work in organizing this conference, should be thanked right away. She used to work for us all the time, and then she decided to stay and enjoy San Francisco and California – I don't know why – and go back to some school out there, so we lost her. But occasionally we get her back. And the person who has worked very, very hard – all of you probably have been in touch with one way or the other because she's done the work of 10 people to get you all here tonight – is Euraine Brooks, who's sitting back here. I want to thank them tonight, just in case things don't go well and you aren't so happy with them on Thursday. Just ahead of time, thank you very much for your good work.

Melissa Rogers gets to come up and greet you and say hello, and she's going to introduce our guest tonight. We're glad that Jon took the hard assignment of being the opening speaker, after dinner no less, which Os Guinness liked to say is like speaking in someone else's sleep. We wish him well. Melissa, I'll turn it over to you.

**MELISSA ROGERS:** Good evening. It's nice to be with you here tonight. I'm glad we've all had this wonderful dinner. I have to tell you a little joke. When I was back at the Baptist Joint Committee doing legal public interest work, we would frequently have meetings here at the Freedom Forum. And my boss always used to call it the "feed 'em forum" because we didn't eat very good meals then, and yet we got to come here and attendance was always high, and we always got to enjoy these really first-class meals. So it's always a joy to be here, and I know you've enjoyed a little bit of that tonight yourselves.

It's great to see everyone. I know many of you have traveled and we're very appreciative of the time that you've taken from your schedules to be with us. We're really looking forward to the next couple of days. As I look around the room, I know already that it will be a very good conversation, with lots of different perspectives folded in, which I think makes for a really great conference.

I also want to thank Marcia so much for all the hard work she's done, and Euraine. They've just done outstanding work. And I want to thank Charles, for all that he's done, and the Freedom Forum for its leadership on these issues.

I just wanted to offer a quick word about the Forum. The Forum is supported by The Pew Charitable Trust, and we're very grateful for that support. We attempt to serve as a clearinghouse of information and as a town hall on religion and public affairs. We enjoy bringing people together from many different points of view for discussions about various timely issues that have relevance for policymaking.

Tomorrow, E.J. Dionne, one of our co-chairs, will be with us, and I know he's really looking forward to that. Jean Bethke Elshtain is the other co-chair of the Pew Forum, and she, unfortunately, could not be with us tonight, but does send her greetings. She is the Laura Spelman Rockefeller professor of Social and Political Ethics at the University of Chicago. And E.J. Dionne, as you know, is a columnist for *The Washington Post* and senior fellow at the Brookings Institution.

Without further ado, let me introduce our speaker tonight. We're very honored to have Jon Butler with us. I have admired his work for so many years, and I know that many of you have too. He is the Chair of the Department of History and the William Robertson Co-professor of American Studies and History at Yale University. And he's co-author of *Religion in American Life*, and author of *Becoming America: The Revolution Before 1776*, and I'll just mention one of his other books. I love the title of this book. It's called *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People*. So we're definitely grateful and honored by his presence here tonight.

He is going to kick off the conference by giving us his thoughts on this important and sensitive issue – teaching about religion in our public schools. There couldn't be a better choice to get us launched on this great discussion that we're going to have over the next couple of days. So I hope you'll join me in welcoming Professor Butler for his remarks at this time.

**DR. JON BUTLER:** Thank you very much. It's a pleasure to be here. I want to thank Melissa and Charles especially, because of all the work that they've done over the years to bring the issue of our intelligence about religion in American culture and history to a much larger audience than we have had in the past. That's what I want to talk to you about tonight.

I really want to deal with three issues related to teaching about religion in public schools, teaching about religion in our own society, teaching about religion in the world in which we live.

I would like to say something about religion in the modern world, by way of trying to explain to you why we are here. There's a peculiar way in which we really ought not to be here. That is, we should live in a society that is so knowledgeable about religion, that is so knowledgeable about the facts of religion – its character, what

religions there are in the world – that this would be a given, because it's a given in the world in which we live. And yet that's not true. Our ignorance is the reason we're here, and I want to say something about how it is that that came into being.

I also want to explain to you how we have religion without history, and I will try to explain to you what I mean by that.

And lastly, I want to close with some comments that derive from my own experience in editing a series of books for Oxford University Press called *Religion in American Life*. When they are finished, we will have 17 volumes on various aspects of religion in American life. Some are chronological, some are topical, and some deal with denominations. All of these books, which began to be published in 1997-1998, are being remarketed, with different titles, for adults. These books were originally written for serious adolescents – that's not an oxymoron, by the way, and I know, because I have two sons who were also serious adolescents.

It's very important when we think about teaching about religion in the public schools and when we think about educating on the subject of religion that we deal with it as a contingent and a complex phenomenon. Religion is not a given, it's not simple, and it's not something that stays the same all the time. If we remember that, then the work that we can do in education – whether it's at the college level, at the high school level or at the elementary level – can be successful.

If we don't remember that religion is a complex and contingent phenomenon, the work that we will try to do will be troubled and unsuccessful. I think it's important to keep that in mind when we think about how to approach the subject that we're dealing with.

In some regards, we are dealing with a phenomenon that, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, many intellectuals and many religious leaders worried would not exist, namely, the phenomenon of religion itself. It's important to remember the extraordinary influence of the great German sociologist Max Weber. He didn't believe religion would wither away because it was illegitimate, but Weber was convinced that religion as a phenomenon would move aside as the world became industrialized, particularly as the world became bureaucratized and systematized.

To Weber, a phenomenon like religion, which seemed to depend upon sensibilities, emotions, and mental images derived from the past, would be wiped away by the phenomenon of modern life, which would emerge as highly rational, extraordinarily bureaucratized, synthetic in ways that men and women hadn't yet experienced, and, above all, anonymous, because society was changing. The world was becoming industrialized and urbanized, which meant that the locale in which religion had flourished and emerged in the distant memory of human beings was not to be the world that would be known in the future. For centuries, life had been lived in a world where men and women knew each other, where people lived face-to-face with each other. Ideas that were a part of religion in that world, such as the idea of a personal God, for example,

seemed alien to Weber as he thought about a bureaucratizing, industrializing, anonymous world. Religion couldn't survive, Weber believed.

Freud, the great psychologist of the 20<sup>th</sup> – and for that matter the 21<sup>st</sup> – century, believed religion was an anachronistic phenomenon. That is, religion came out of the deepest roots of human beings, and yet it was also something that could fade away as society and individuals matured, as they moved past a kind of adolescent phase of human existence which required religion. But a new, more rational, more understanding world wouldn't really need religion.

Now Freud and Weber could be regarded as secularists, and as secularizing figures. But they were hardly alone in their views. Major religious leaders of virtually all the Western religions also were fearful about the future of religion at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Christian leaders, Roman Catholics as well as Protestants, major Jewish figures among the already fractured Judaism at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, religious leaders throughout Europe and throughout America worried that as American society changed, and as world society changed, religion didn't have a future.

They had evidence to back that up. It was well known by the 1880s and the 1890s, for example, that church attendance in Berlin was no higher than five to seven percent on the typical German Sunday; that French citizens were deeply secular, even if they were also nominally Catholic, so that enormous numbers of French men and women and children only attended services at Easter and ignored church services on most Sabbaths.

In the United States, every Protestant leader involved in the Social Gospel movement was deeply fearful of the erosion of Protestant authority at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They feared the incoming immigrants, Roman Catholics and Jews most notably, who posed a threat to that old Protestant hegemony, although from my historian's perspective, Protestants exaggerated the immigrants' influence, although they deeply believed in that influence and they believed it necessary to the continuation of the American republic.

These feelings, views, and beliefs ultimately came together under the theory of "secularization." The 20<sup>th</sup> century was to be – not just from the perspective of Weber and Freud, but from the perspective of so many American and European Christian and Jewish leaders – a century of secularization in which religion would simply disappear.

The difficulty, as we know here in 2003, is that something went wrong with the secularization thesis. Secularization simply didn't triumph, certainly not in the United States. And if it triumphed in Europe, this happened not quite in the ways that European religious and intellectual leaders believed it would happen. And it probably didn't triumph in the rest of the world either. If we want some testimony to that, we have to understand that in the United States, even with the privacy of a Gallup poll taker, somewhere between 97 and 99 percent of all Americans polled over the last half century

have said that they believe in God, in some kind of supernatural force, some kind of supernatural being. Fifty-five to 65 percent of Americans since the mid-1950s attach themselves in regular ways to religious organizations – a synagogue, a church and, now, many more varieties of religious organizations altogether.

It's also important to remember – and I draw on my own scholarship on the colonial period (the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries) – that on the eve of the American Revolution it is impossible to count more than 20 to 25 percent of white Americans belonging to any kind of religious organization. And in the 1810s, '20s and '30s, that figure barely moved from 20 to 25 percent up to 30 and 35 percent, and, in fact, moved very slowly into the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century up to somewhere around 40 to 45 percent. The great rise actually came in the post-World War II period, with a great growth of denominations of all kinds, particularly in the American suburbs, deepening work that had originated in the American cities. For the first time, only in the 1950s, church or synagogue attachment in the United States moved above 50 percent until at the election of John F. Kennedy it probably stood somewhere at 60 to 65 percent.

If there has been a slight downturn in that from the 1960s, the turn is only slight, and can oftentimes be accounted for by a variety of statistical anomalies because these kinds of figures actually are difficult to come by. One of the interesting characteristics of our own society, most denominational leaders will tell you in secret, is that we live in a society where, for the last 15 to 20 years, more people actually claim to be members of congregations of any kind than is in fact demonstrably true. Probably somewhere around 75 to 80 percent of American adults will claim some kind of religious affiliation. But when you pull together all the denominational statistics, only 55 to 65 percent of adults actually can be found as registered congregational members. We're missing 10 to 15 percent of all these people who claim they have some kind of formal religious affiliation.

The rise of militant Islamic fundamentalism has transfixed the Middle East and world politics. Aggressive Christian proselytizing for the past century has transformed the national culture and societies of Africa, of Asia and of Latin America. In India, increased, not decreased, religious tension divides its many religions. At the personal level, it's important to remember how in villages and cities and towns across the United States, down into Mexico, throughout Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, Europe, Russia, Asia, Australia, men and women by enormous numbers live their lives through codes they will deem to be religious, that they deem have a connection to a larger sense of purpose, to a belief in transcendence, or depending upon their own views, to a belief in something called God. And their views reflect the primary ways scholars conceptualize religion—beliefs linked to ideas about the divine, the transcendent, and the purposeful.

If that's true, why are we here at a conference on how to teach about religion in the public schools? It's not, as some commentators would have it, just because of a strict separationist understanding of the First Amendment. It is because, I want to suggest, as intellectuals, as educators, indeed also as religious men and women, Americans have shied away from a discussion of religion in the abstract and from conversations about religion in particular. This is a part of our national heritage—the failure to discuss

religion, the idea that religion is such a private phenomenon that it cannot be discussed in the classroom, that it's inappropriate to discuss it in a high school assembly, that it's inappropriate to discuss American religious traditions in an American history class, beyond the Puritans. This failure to deal intellectually and collectively, as well as individually, with the problem of religion is the major reason we are here at this kind of conference.

I'm going to make an argument that no reading of the sixteen words in the First Amendment that deal with religion has ever or does now prohibit in the public school classroom an intellectual conversation about what religion is, how religions are practiced, what kinds of religions exist in the world, and what a difference religions do and don't make to the men and women who do and don't practice them.

We're poorly prepared, then, to comprehend a world that is aflame in faith. College students frequently know little about religion in the United States, much less about religion in the world. High school graduates who overwhelmingly constitute the military in the United States, know almost nothing about Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, or those branches of Christianity they do not practice themselves. And yet they have been asked to fight wars in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, and Iraq over the past 15 years in which religion has stood at the very center of each conflict. And they are equally poorly prepared to deal with the aftermath of the war that they have just fought. (Fortunately, in the United States military today, they may now actually learn something about various rudiments of Islam – even if that knowledge is not particularly sophisticated and may in many regards be erroneous – if not other religions. They learn this in military briefings that are held because of the reality of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.)

Professional historians in and out of the academy, have failed to explain, first, how religion could have survived so deeply and so aggressively in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; and secondly, how religion has survived and prospered and even changed given the nature of modernity. In what way have the conditions of modern life – anonymity, technology, the rise of the corporation, bureaucratization, the very factors that Weber thought would lead to the decline of religion – transformed the phenomena that we call religion? Have they? Shouldn't we know that? Shouldn't we know something about some kind of transformation, standing as we do amidst a world exploding with religious vitality as well as religious conflict?

The result, I want to suggest, is that we have a kind of jack-in-the-box history in which religion pops up mysteriously in American history textbooks in the 1980s. Why? Because someone has to explain how Ronald Reagan came to the presidency. Someone has to explain the "Christian right" and the liberal response. If the textbooks describe a movement called the Moral Majority, they don't explain where the Moral Majority came from or how it came to exercise so much political power so suddenly.

Previous references to religion in most U.S. history textbooks covering the 20<sup>th</sup> century, whether for high school or college, will be completely frustrating to any student

who happens to perceive the connection, because it's probably to the 1925 Scopes trial on the teaching of evolution in the state of Tennessee,. Typically as well, the textbook will treat the Scopes trial and William Jennings Bryan's performance attack on evolution as a somewhat ludicrous event that led to the downfall of fundamentalism.

If a student matches this section of the textbook with the account of the Moral Majority in the 1980 presidential election, the observant serious adolescent will say, "I don't get it. How did we get from 1925 to 1980. I thought, Mr. Butler, this is what you historians are supposed to explain. But there's nothing here."

This is jack-in-the-box history. And it's the fact that we have jack-in-the-box history, whether it's at Yale, or the University of Illinois in Chicago, where I spent 10 wonderful years, or the University of Minnesota, where received both my B.A. and Ph.D. Everywhere we have trouble explaining the presence and the vitality of religion in modern times, in modern America, much less in the world, much less in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East. In a certain sense everywhere except Europe, which probably is the most secularized single geographical area of the world population, in which men and women may lead their lives less attuned to the strictures or the guidelines or the belief values of formally organized religious movements and societies than any other place of human habitation.

In world history texts, we pay little attention to the massive Christian proselytizing and Christianization of so many areas of the world throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century that has changed so many world societies. Instead, we emphasize modernization, and by modernization generally mean secularization—the coming of technology, urbanization, industrialism to societies that were profoundly rural. What does modernization mean to India? What does modernization mean to South Africa? What does it mean in Latin America? And how has religion survived in each place? Most world history textbooks do not deal with this question.

Indeed, religion is generally most commonly present in those sections of history textbooks that deal with societies before 1800. Religion is treated as an antique phenomenon, something that people used to do. The Puritans did it. The Romans did it. Medieval Christians did it. Ancient Hindus did it. Mohammad did it, Buddha did it. All a long time ago. Religion, then, is literally a historical phenomenon. It is the one aspect of life that falls away when we talk about modern societies. There are economies in the treatment of the Roman Empire, there are politics in the treatment of the Roman Empire, there are technologies in the treatment of the Roman Empire, and there is religion in the treatment of the Roman Empire. But when we modernize the Roman Empire, or modernize Latin America, or modernize Africa or modernize the Middle East – well, with the exception of the Middle East – we don't have much on religion. Religion usually disappears some time in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and then almost completely vanishes by the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

What, then, is our task? Our task, I want to suggest, is to take seriously religion as the complex, contingent, often powerful phenomenon in human affairs, ancient and



modern alike, whose comprehension as an intellectual curiosity is vital to understanding the world in which we live, the world which we came from, and the world we are going to inhabit. Whether we like it or not, whether we appreciate it or not, religion is a phenomenon we must deal with. And we must deal with it intellectually as well as politically. We have to deal with it in the curriculum because it is a constituent part of modern life.

American policy planners, French policy planners, German policy planners, Saudi Arabian policy planners, Egyptian policy planners have planned poorly to the extent they have not themselves taken account of religion. Religion was the surprise of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. But religion also was the "surprise" of the 1990s, of the Reagan Administration, of Jimmy Carter, and of John F. Kennedy. Religion may be peculiar, odd, something that doesn't really fit in the twenty-first century, and yet it's here, still reshaping the world.

How should we do this? I want to suggest three means. First, I want to suggest that the most fruitful way to deal with religion is to deal with it as an intellectual and phenomenological issue. I don't mean by that something fancy. I mean something very simple: that religion is a behavior and a mode of thinking that simply exists, that it is powerful and exerts influential roles across the world, in our own society, and in many, many other societies, and that it shapes individual lives. Ask men and women both before and after September 11<sup>th</sup> about the way in which religion shaped their individual lives in the United States. Or go to rural Mexico or rural South Africa, or to modern Cairo, or even to Paris, to Moscow, to Sydney, Australia, and ask men and women how do they think about the way they live out their lives. It is not universally true that these men and women will say that religion plays an important role in their life. But it is frequently true, and it's true at a level that historians as well as policy analysts must account for, lest they miss such a critical dimension of the way in which men and women conceive of the nature of their lives and the way in which they make meaning in the world.

Thus, religion shapes twenty-first century politics. If we don't see this in our own society, surely we see it in world politics. It is now inescapable, tragically so. Here it is best to take a clue from William James, the great psychologist and, in fact, moralist of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries who also wrote *Talks to Teachers on Psychology: And to Students on Some of Life's Ideals* (1899) because he was concerned about a larger intellectual dimension to American public life.

In what is arguably James's most famous book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) James made a simple and profound observation about religion that disturbed many traditional religious leaders, one I'll try to explain. Arguing against Weber and what soon would be Freud's position, James wrote that religion, frequently an unseen phenomenon, is real. How do you know it's real? Talk to men and women who are religious. Ask them how religion changes their lives. Ask them how it shapes their lives. Ask them what it means to be religious. Now, James also had an interest in what and still is called "parapsychology," such as ghosts, and James was actually the president

of both the American and the British Society for Parapsychology. But above all, James believed in the power of the unseen, specifically of religion, to shape lives.

James then said that religion wasn't valid because the Christian Bible says it's valid. It's not valid because there is a Hebrew Bible. It's not valid because there is the Koran. It's not valid because there are other texts that claim to speak for religion. Rather, James argued that religion was valid because its believers said they believed in it, because they can demonstrate how religion changed their lives. In short, religion was not valid because of a power up there or out there but because men and women demonstrate its existence here.

This made James a "behaviorist." He said religion is valid simply because these people say it is, and these people have experiences which they ascribe to religion, and here is how they describe it. Here is how someone who is troubled and has what James called a sick soul describes his experience. And here is how someone who has just undergone a conversion experience describes the nature of that experience, a profoundly transformative experience. James said, that's what religion is. And on those grounds it's valid. We don't need other grounds. That was James' argument.

One can take James or leave James on that question. But the point James made is very important. His argument essentially was, we can't study God. We can't study the transcendent. But we can study human beings, and we can study the way they express religion, the way they experience religion, the way they describe religion, the way they use religion to organize their lives, the way they use religion to organize politics, the way they use religion as an ideal. That's what we can study, what we have to study, and it's why we have to take that study seriously.

My own view is that James was on to something. And, regrettably, so many in American society have not been onto that. That is, in some regards, we have dealt with religion as a kind of up there, out there phenomenon and not dealt with it on the ground level, with the way in which men and women experience it, the way that men and women used religion to transform and energize the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, the way in which men and women use religion to transform the conservative political movement of the 1970s and '80s, just to take two relatively recent examples.

Thus, James wasn't interested in the truth claims of religion. But he very much was interested in claims about the way religion worked among individuals. It's true that James was notorious for ignoring how religion worked in society and for studying religion's effects on solitary individuals. But one doesn't need to follow James on that point. For James, religion just produced results. It transformed men and women. In some cases, James made the argument that some of those transformations didn't seem to be particularly healthy. Other changes he found amazing, and extraordinarily healthy in individuals – that religion produced a fuller, more transcendent human being able to achieve extraordinary results because of the religion this individual professed.

James also believed that the study of religion shouldn't be privileged but should be studied as an intellectual phenomenon. James didn't regard religion as necessarily better or worse than other ways of thinking about the world. Indeed, I'm not so sure myself— and here I disagree with my friends Charles Haynes and Warren Nord when they write in their book, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum* (1998) that religion offers a better, richer view of human life than do many of the sciences, in part because I want to argue there isn't such a thing as "religion" in the abstract there are only many different religions that men and women practice in many different ways.

In some cases, a religion offers a very constricted, narrow, difficult view of life, whereas some interpretations of the sciences can be extraordinary in their fullness. So, too, can some interpretations of religions – Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism. There's a give and take there and that's true whether one is thinking of the field of economics, whether one is thinking of the field of law, whether one is thinking of the field of technology. In each one of these fields there are pluses and minuses, there are strengths and weaknesses, there are views that are enlivening and produce real and useful results, and there are views that are narrow and crabbed and closed and lead to a narrowing and difficulties in societies.

We need to think critically, but also imaginatively, about the way religions work and shape values, individuals, societies and politics. In order to do that, we need to appreciate the phenomenon itself. We have to understand how it's important for men and women in the way in which they live.

I want to suggest that religion is also, by necessity, complex and not simple. It's a caricature to think that religion is the subject when in fact the subject centers on particularistic expressions of faith. Religion as a generic phenomenon is not nearly as interesting as religion is in the concrete. This is seen in our particular varieties in America, the home of three varieties of Judaism, all each in their own way, including Orthodoxy, invented, if not exclusively here in America, then frequently here in America; or in the many varietal practices of Roman Catholicism; or in the innumerable branches of Protestantism.

For example, what enlivened the study of Puritanism in American culture and society, from Perry Miller in the 1930s to Edward Morgan in the 1970s, was the detailed study of the ways Puritan values shaped colonial New England, for better or worse, and now historians divided on those questions. (My own view is that if you've been to Plimoth Plantation in Plymouth, Massachusetts, you'll know that the Puritans exhibited Hobbes' view of life as "nasty, brutish and short." Most Puritans were indeed short – 5'1", 5'2", 5'3". At Plimoth Plantation, with its reconstruction of early Puritan homes, even a 5'8" historian like me has to duck to walk through the doors. And these short Puritans frequently were difficult, if not brutish. Think of living in a society in which the only way you have to explain young girls' dreams about husbands who might bring them acres and acres of land is to say that they have been visited by a specter of the Devil, which was evidence of witchcraft. It didn't occur to Rev. Samuel Parris of Salem village that his parishioners had come to America not only to worship but also to get ahead and

that the girls' dreams weren't just the work of the Devil but a consequence of their simple dreams for a better life.)

Religious values thus can provide difficulties for society. Religion, gives rise to enormous conflicts, not just in Salem, where it cost 19 men and women their lives, but in the modern world. And those conflicts can be particularly intractable, precisely because they are *religious* conflicts. Why? Because unlike economic conflicts, unlike nationalistic conflicts, religious conflicts appeal to something that most of those other conflicts don't – to a sense of the transcendent, a sense of the divine, a sense of the all-knowing purpose, a sense of that which is eternal.

It isn't just the interest of the United States, in short, or the interest of Canada or the interest of Saudi Arabia that might be at stake, although those can arouse plenty of passion on their own. It now becomes the interest of Christianity, or the interest of Judaism, or the interest of Islam, or the interest of Hinduism, and one can keep going for all the religions that there are. Religion has a way of deepening and making other kinds of conflicts that occur in the world all the time more difficult. Think of equivalents for Salem's witchcraft episodes in our subsequent history – the controversies in Boston over the teaching of religion and the reading of Bible verses in Boston in the 1820s, '30s and '40s, struggles between Protestants and Catholics that led to the burning of the Ursuline convent in Boston, to John Brown's apocalypticism and his dreams of the end of slavery. Or think of the conflicts within American Catholicism over birth control, abortion, or the possibility of women priests. Or the conflicts not only among the three major branches of Judaism but within each one of those branches about women's ordinations or about the dietary laws. These are realities, and they are important precisely to men and women who participate in them because they are religious.

Finally, I want to suggest that religion is contingent. Its expression, its influence, its character is linked to, but sometimes independent of, the cultures in which they all exist. There is no easy formulation to say when they are the products and the captives of their cultures and when they inform their cultures on an independent basis. A historian who suggests easy answers to the question of contingency, the degree to which religion is linked to the culture or is linked to economics, or is linked to some kind of political system, and that's the way religion always is, is not a good historian. For every case that one can cite in one direction, one can cite a case in another.

What does "contingency" mean? It means that the decisions we make today count. They're not necessarily part of some larger inevitable stream. The moral choices we make count. Consider the fate of the great 20<sup>th</sup> century German conductor, Wilhelm Furtwangler. Furtwangler was well known in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s as an opponent of the Nazi regime. He never joined the Nazi party. But under Hitler he accepted a position on a widely publicized but unfunctioning national council, he conducted in Hitler's presence, even if he refused to salute Hitler, all while, for example, refusing to move Jewish musicians from the front rows of the Berlin Philharmonic and helping Jewish musicians survive and then escape to other parts of Europe.

Furtwangler believed that somehow he could save German culture from Nazism. His behavior, which was condemned – he underwent de-Nazification after the Second World War – was more than compromised. But it also was far more exemplary than the behavior of many Roman Catholic priests, German Lutheran ministers, and evangelical ministers under the Nazi regime who, to their toes, not only acquiesced before Hitler but actively supported the Nazi regime.

What difference did it make? It made a difference to the men and women Furtwangler helped, just as the behavior of Oscar Schindler, immortalized in Stephen Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, made a difference to the Jews Schindler saved, despite his apparent amorality. Why did Schindler save those Jews? One never really found out at the end. But what he did produced a good result. Did it come out of religion? Did it come out of some secular notion of morality? We don't know, for either Schindler or for Furtwangler

Contingency means that your choices make a difference, just as they did for Furtwangler and Schindler. And most religions, by their own claim if not always by their own acts, claim that most people, most adherents, make those choices in religious grounds.

The historian's task, the scholar's task, the teacher's task is to explain when that happens and when it doesn't happen. When was religion compromised? When did it lead the way? When did it transform society in the ways that were good? When did it turn society in directions that not only were bad but became horrific? It's important to know, and it's not easy finding out.

To grapple with those questions, we have to know when religion is important and not important. Consider the case of immigration in American history. Indeed, the famous cases of religious immigration to America involve the Puritans, some 18<sup>th</sup> century Germans, some Jews in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – German Jews as well as Russian Jews at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, post-World War II Jewish refugees. It's also important to know how often religion was not important in motivating immigrants to come to America. Most Scandinavians, for example, did not come to the United States for religious reasons from 1860 into the '20s. Neither did many Irish or Italian Catholics, most of whom emigrated to America to escape economic impoverishment in their homelands.

What is interesting in this question is not just the question of motivation, but what happened to these immigrants and their religion after they got here. In the case of Italian immigrants, the Church successfully drew ambivalent, hostile immigrants inside the Roman Catholic Church when the immigrants could have moved outside, particularly in an industrializing, urbanizing, secularizing society filled with Protestant lures. Virtually every Protestant denomination proselytized in every major American city with Italian immigrants, trying to convince these immigrants not that they should be secular, but surely they should be Lutherans. Surely they should be Congregationalists, they should be Baptists. This did not succeed.

And religion changes through time. Religion simply is not the same in the 17<sup>th</sup>, the 18<sup>th</sup>, the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. What we would do best in thinking about how to consider religion in the classroom is to treat religion like we treat other subjects seriously – as part of our intellectual inquiry about the world in which we live, the world that we have inherited and the world that we are going to shape for better or worse over the next decades.

Religion isn't an intellectually privileged phenomenon, even if it exudes a peculiar influence in human affairs and oftentimes claims to be privileged. Religion often claims to be privileged because it empowers, because it furnishes ideals, because it sets aside visions for the future, or simply because it deals with the divine. Religion often also disappoints. It fails. It disappoints in its excesses. It commissions behavior in the name of transcendence. Therefore, we rightly approach this subject with some caution, not only because of the complex ways in which religion works in our world, but because of the deep ways in which some of our constituents, some of our students, are going to view religion. How will we tread on them when we teach, not about religion as a good phenomenon or a bad phenomenon, but just what it is? That, in some cases, is going to be controversial.

For Americans, this sense of contingency, the sense of idealism, this muted sense about the hopeful and the bittersweet in our own society and, sometimes, in our own religions, is for me best expressed in the last paragraphs of the greatest of all American novels, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.

Fitzgerald was not by most standards a religious person. But listen to Fitzgerald's own sense of broad ideals we have in America about transcendence, ideals we need to understand, ideals on which I want to conclude.

*And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.*

*Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter — tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther . . . And one fine morning —*

*So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.*

Thank you.

**MR. HAYNES:** Thank you so much, Jon. That was an excellent start and really framed for us a lot of the questions that we need to think about. It was a wonderful look at our history and how we think about it. I asked him before he spoke if he was going to talk much about the history. He said, Oh, no, not going to do that. I was a little worried because he's the historian, after all, and I think that he was just putting me on because he really gave, I think, a wonderful sense of our history and some of the great issues that we need to struggle with over the next couple of days.

Does anyone want to try a couple of questions before we break for the evening?

**Q:** (off mike)

**DR. BUTLER:** The first thing one needs to do is ask what the questioner means by religion. I don't mean to just play tricks about that. It's just important when people ask about that, or when you're teaching, to have some concept of what is meant by religion. It is not an easy subject. But I'll give you an example of how I try to deal with it. I teach a lecture course at Yale, "Religion in Modern America: 1865-2000." I have about 100 students, and I really try to deal with particulars. I try to stay away, in general, from the overarching question of religion in American life, as though it's something that has an overarching character and that has an impact because of some grand abstract truth. I'm speaking as an historian and I don't think it's true in any decade.

Frequently the experiences and the ways in which religions work in American society are very different from decade to decade and among different groups. The religious experience of Jewish immigrants in America, for example, is markedly different than the experience of Scandinavian immigrants. And yet there is something that ties them together. Part of it has to do with the function of religious groups as community organizers. I'm sorry to put that in such mundane terms, but the point about community identity is extremely important.

One of the reasons, I am convinced, that religion in general plays such a profoundly powerful role in 20<sup>th</sup> century American life is that so many denominations learned – exactly how they learned isn't entirely clear – that they would succeed best when they organized on the neighborhood or community level, and when congregations performed social functions. The American fundamentalist movement of the 1910s and '20s made a great point of criticizing Social Gospel leaders who were forming so-called institutional churches. But the fundamentalist leaders missed the point. The "institutional church" they criticized was, from 1905 up well into the 1960s, a church that provided a whole array of social services. It provided child care, it provided education, it taught literacy, it taught job skills. By the 1930s, where do people have their first sort of mass movement for marriage counseling? It did not come in the United States by people going to psychiatrists. They went to their clergy. Where did the clergy learn it? They learned it in divinity schools, which began teaching psychology, pastoral counseling, and using modern psychology.

This is how congregations really prospered in America, whether they were Roman Catholic congregations, Jewish congregations, or Congregationalist congregations. If you look at so many vital religious organizations in the United States in 2003, you will discover that most of them are performing many social services a century later. If there are lessons that have been learned, and long-lasting lessons, that's one of them.

Is this religion in general? I don't think so. Each one of these denominations worked it out in their own way. One of my Ph.D. students is researching a wonderful dissertation on the transformation of marriage counseling in the United States from the 1930s to the 1970s and '80s. She didn't expect this to involve religion when she started. Now three-quarters of the project she's working on involves congregations, Roman Catholic congregations, Protestant congregations, non-denominational congregations, and Jewish congregations. That's not an accident. It has to do with the way that religion becomes meaningful to the participants, just as meaningful as the liturgical aspects of religion, just as meaningful as the doctrinal aspects of religion.

**ERIC HOLMES:** Eric Holmes, elementary principal from Utah. Dr. Butler, you talked about the surprises that have come up over the last several years where religion keeps popping its head up and society said, oh, there you are again. Could you predict some of the surprises that may be coming up in the future, and what we may be able to do with them? Any guesses?

**DR. BUTLER:** First of all, I do think that we are here because there is a problem in our society, in our educational system, in our intellectual system of grappling with religion. We know it's important, and yet we feel like we don't know how to deal with it. How do you teach children about this? That's come up largely, I would suggest, because of the deep involvement of religion in American politics over the last 25 years.

I'm going to make a suggestion that if there had never been a Moral Majority, if there had never been a Jerry Falwell, I don't think that the evangelical credentials of Jimmy Carter would have led to the kind of deep inquiry about religion that we experienced over the last 20 years, without the link of political conservatism to born-again politics. I think there's a direct political link.

A question has been posed by Cal Thomas, who's not a historian, but who is very often historically astute. Thomas became very wary of the religion-politics link in the late 1990s, and it's not clear to me where this politicized religion, largely conservative Protestantism, is going. At what point do the politics begin to transcend faith, if I can put it that way. In fact, how many questions can you have that are so deeply political and partisan, particularly in a society that is as partisan as ours?

When I took a cab from the airport to the hotel, I almost told the driver to go back to the airport and then come again because he was listening to Rush Limbaugh. Now I'm neither a Rush Limbaugh fan nor much of a media person. But I was intrigued by the rhetoric, by the anger. I was intrigued by the very distinct references, repeated references



to religion. It took me about 12 minutes to come from the airport and a lot of allusions to religion were uttered in those 12 minutes.

I think that Cal Thomas is probably right – that in American politics the question is, how politicized can religion get, or how sacralized can our politics become before we get ourselves into a lot of trouble? I don't know where we're going on that question. I wouldn't begin to predict, but it's an intellectually and politically and religiously interesting question that was not a question that people were raising. People were raising it in 1960, but only in the most narrow of ways. My father was a Minnesota farmer who happened to be virtually the only Democrat in his township. He got letters from relatives who sent anti-Catholic tracts, which I still have, saying they couldn't believe that a Butler could possibly vote and campaign for John F. Kennedy, because didn't we know that the Pope was coming? This was serious stuff.

After my father died, we discovered he had save a small stack of Masonic magazines, and we wondered why. When I began to look at them, I realized why he had saved them. He was upset because issue after issue had anti-Catholic articles, all directed to Kennedy's presidential candidacy. The issues these articles discussed represented an older American anti-Catholicism, not the broadly ideological politics that that emerged in the civil rights movement and later in Christian right-wing conservative politics. Together, however, they represent the many dimensions that relations between religion and politics can take.

I think there are interesting coalescences in those relationships, relationships whose futures are very much up in the air.

**MR. HAYNES:** Let's thank Jon again. He answered all of their questions. I'm going to declare it so you can get some rest because you have two days ahead of you to talk a lot more about all of this.