

A Three Religion Country?

Summary: In 1955, Will Herberg published Protestant, Catholic, Jew. He argued that America had become a “three religion country,” where religious commitments matter more than ethnic ones, and that, despite irreconcilable religious differences, Americans together form a kind of American “common religion.” It also seemed as if the U.S. were no longer a distinctly Protestant nation after the election of the Catholic John F. Kennedy in 1960. However, Herberg’s theory was thoroughly challenged in the following decades for his insufficient attention to segregation in Protestant churches, the presence of Eastern Orthodoxy and African American Islam, and the proliferation of multitudinous complex identities complicating a simple tripartite system.

In 1955, the sociologist Will Herberg published a book with the simple title *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*. In it he articulated a new status quo for America, arguing that “America is a three religion country”—Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish. “The newcomer,” he wrote, “is expected to change many things about him as he becomes an American—nationality, language, culture. One thing, however, he is not expected to change—and that is religion.” In the prosperous suburbanization of the post-war years, these three were the principal religious groups in the United States. In light of the strong anti-Catholic and anti-Jewish rhetoric of the past, the 1950s seemed to signal that both communities had become sufficiently “assimilated” to have a permanent place in America’s public self-definition.

Herberg argued that after thirty years of sharply reduced immigration, the “cultural pluralism” described by Horace Kallen was not at all the reality of American life. “Religious pluralism” had replaced ethnicity and culture as the “differentiating element” in American life. According to Herberg, the Jews who moved to the suburbs in great numbers after World War II no longer described themselves to their neighbors as Russian or German Jews, but simply as Jews. The Catholics who earlier would have identified themselves as Irish or Italian were now simply Catholics. The Swedish Lutherans, German Lutherans, and English Methodists thought of themselves as Protestants. By the third generation, he insisted, people did not establish their social location in terms of ethnicity, but more generally by the religious community with which they identified.

Herberg drew upon a study by sociologist Ruby Jo Reeves Kennedy demonstrating that in New Haven, Connecticut, the Germans, Irish, Poles, Scandinavians and Italians increasingly married outside their ethnic group, but still inside their religious group. In the third generation, Catholics still tended to marry Catholics, but not necessarily Italian Catholics or Polish Catholics. Jews tended to marry Jews, but not

necessarily from the same ethnic background. The Protestants, Catholics, and Jews comprised “the three ‘pools’ or ‘melting pots’ in and through which the American people is emerging as a national entity after a century of mass immigration.” Thus, the phrase “triple melting pot” was coined.

In the 1950s, religious identification was on the upswing: 95% of Americans polled perceived themselves and identified themselves as “religious,” with 68% Protestant, 23% Catholic, and 4% Jewish. Church membership was growing. Hundreds of larger, more visible synagogues were built in the suburbs, replacing the small urban synagogues of first and second generation immigrants. Faith, whether it be Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish, was understood to be fundamental. In 1954 the term “under God” was added to the Pledge of Allegiance. As President Eisenhower put it: “Our government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply felt religious faith—and I don’t care what it is.”

Herberg also argued that Americans also have a “common religion,” stronger than any religious differences, that of the “American Way of Life”—a set of ideas, rites, and symbols that defines the civil society and supplies an “overarching sense of unity.” This “common religion” includes, above all, democracy; in economic terms, free enterprise; in social terms, egalitarianism and individualism; in spiritual terms, idealism and a strong moralistic impulse. The Fourth of July, Labor Day, Thanksgiving, a wholly Americanized Christmas, and Memorial Day comprises its ritual calendar. In the 1960s, the sociologist Robert Bellah further explored this American “civil religion.”

For Herberg, pluralism was not simply a fact, but “an essential part of the American Way of Life, and therefore an aspect of religious belief.” Americans, he purported, take for granted the fact of religious difference. Whether Catholics, Protestants, or Jews, Americans “tend to think of their church as a denomination existing side by side with other denominations in a pluralistic harmony that is felt to be somehow the texture of American life.”

In the late 1950s John Courtney Murray, a prominent Catholic, was also writing about the pluralist “project” that is America. He emphasized not only the right to be different from a religious or cultural standpoint, but also the responsibility to be engaged in the common enterprise of the nation. “By pluralism” he wrote, “I mean the coexistence within one political community of groups that hold divergent and incompatible views with regard to religious questions—those ultimate questions that concern the nature and destiny of man in a universe that stands under the reign of God.” The vigorous

engagement of people of different religious beliefs around the “common table” of discussion and debate is at the heart of a democratic, pluralist society. Catholics could and should participate in that vigorous discussion. Murray’s book *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (1960) is a major contribution to the understanding of a pluralist society.

Herberg’s *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* came at a time when the complete dominance of Protestants in American public life was nearing its end. In 1957, the U.S. government reported that of the 528 members of the 85th Congress, there were 416 Protestants, 95 Roman Catholics, 12 Jews and one Sikh. Though Protestants were still in the vast majority, for many there was the disturbing realization that, as Herberg put it, “Protestantism is no longer identical with America.” The election of John F. Kennedy, a Catholic, as president in 1960 marked the full-fledged entry of Catholics into the public sphere. Kennedy’s administration included prominent Jewish cabinet members, such as Abraham Ribicoff and Arthur Goldberg.

During the 1960s, it became clear that the “triple melting pot” was too simple a view of America. Herberg had considered only in passing the fact that African American Protestants were not part of the Protestant “melting pot,” and that Sunday morning remained the most segregated time of the week. He had skimmed over the Eastern Orthodox history and presence on the American scene, and had overlooked the rise of black Islam. As religious scholar Martin Marty noted in his introduction to the 1983 edition of the book, Herberg had not foreseen the revival of the “identity” issues that would be so pronounced within a few years. Marty writes: “A decade after he published, America had broken into a complex of identity-giving collectivities: Orthodox, black Protestant, multiethnic Catholic conflict groups, Jewish ‘sectarianism,’ feminist and generational causes and movements, Indian and Hispanic power fronts, Eastern ‘cults.’ Even Protestantism was drastically sundered by an unforeseen recovery of fundamentalism-evangelical-pentecostalism over against a dwindling ‘mainline’ in which Herberg has placed so much stock.”

Just a decade after the publication of *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, the Immigration Act of 1965 was passed, launching a new phase of immigration that would make American ethnicity and religion more textured and more complicated than Herberg had ever imagined, with the growth of substantial Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and Sikh communities.