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Diversity and Stability: The Paradox of Religious Pluralism

"CONGRESS SHALL MAKE NO LAW respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," the First Amendment to the United States Constitution states straightforwardly, and this simple principle, unprecedented in Western societies, has always attracted a good deal of notice from historians and legal scholars. "Religion in America takes no direct part in the government of society," Alexis de Tocqueville observed, "but nevertheless it must be regarded as the foremost of the political institutions of that country; for if it does not impart a taste for freedom, it facilitates the use of free institutions."[1] De Tocqueville was not the last to remark upon the unique relation of church and state, religion and politics, in American society.

From Blessed Assurance: A History of Evangelicalism in America *(1999), a book that offers a historical perspective on Evangelicalism's abiding importance in American culture and politics.*

1. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America,* ed. Henry Steele Commager, trans. Henry Reeve (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), 200 [Balmer's note]. Tocqueville (1805–1859) was a French political philosopher.

In 1844, historian Robert Baird extolled the voluntary principle in the United States as the "great alternative" to all European societies and their long, troubled history of church-state entanglements. "Religious liberty, fettered by no State enactment," Baird wrote, "is as perfect as it can be."[2] Although Philip Schaff, a native of Germany, harbored some old-fashioned notions about the unity of the church and the ability of Christianity to "leaven and sanctify all spheres of human life," in 1855 he offered grudging admiration for the American configuration of church and state, which he regarded as a "peculiarity in the ecclesiastical condition of North America."[3]

The willingness to give free rein to religious expression, to eschew an establishment, and to countenance the ambiguity arising from that social and political configuration has prompted twentieth-century historian Sidney E. Mead to characterize the relation of church and state in the United States as a "lively experiment."[4] His contemporary Winthrop Hudson defined voluntarism in America and the equilibrium between church and state as the "great tradition of the American churches."[5]

Historians have argued that although it was indeed unprecedented, the impetus for religious disestablishment as embodied in the First Amendment grew out of disparate impulses dating back at least to the Protestant Reformation.[6] Martin Luther's[7] emphasis on the priesthood of believers and each individual's responsibility before God led almost inevitably (if not immediately) to the concession that people might approach God differently, and the splintering of Christianity after the Reformation demanded some sort of accommodation on the part of government and society to religious diversity. Several of the American colonies had done just that; Thomas Jefferson[8] cited the examples of New York and Pennsylvania, which tolerated many denominations, in his *Notes on the State of Virginia,* written in 1781. In other colonies, however, such groups as the Anglicans in Maryland and Virginia, and the Congregationalists

2. Robert Baird, *Religion in America,* abridged edition with an introduction by Henry Warner Bowden (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 120, 110 [Balmer's note]. Baird (1798–1863) was an American clergyman and historian of religion.

3. Philip Schaff, *America: A Sketch of Its Political, Social, and Religious Character,* ed. Perry Miller (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1961; original published 1855), 11, 73 [Balmer's note]. Schaff (1819–1893) was a Swiss-born historian and Protestant theologian.

4. Sidney E. Mead, *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963) [Balmer's note]. Mead (1904–1999) was an American historian of religion.

5. Winthrop S. Hudson, *The Great Tradition of the American Churches* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953) [Balmer's note]. Hudson (1911–2001) was a Baptist minister and historian of religion.

6. A sixteenth-century Christian reform movement that led to a proliferation of Christian denominations.

7. Luther (1483–1546) was a leading figure in the Protestant Reformation.

8. Jefferson (1743–1826) was the primary author of the Declaration of Independence (1776) and the third president of the United States (1801–09).

in Massachusetts and Connecticut, stubbornly defended their establishment status. Several historians look to such figures and movements as Isaac Backus and the Separate Baptists in Connecticut or William Livingston and the Presbyterian party in New York as influential opponents of religious establishment.[9] Most often, however, when historians retrace the steps of religious disestablishment in America their paths lead to Roger Williams, in the seventeenth century, and to Jefferson himself.

Williams, a Puritan minister at Salem, Massachusetts, had grown increasingly uneasy about the continued identification of New England Puritanism with the Church of England. In 1635, the General Court of Massachusetts brought charges against him for disrupting the social and religious order of New England by proposing that the church at Salem separate completely from the other Massachusetts churches. The General Court banished Williams from the colony, whereupon he fled south, in January 1636, and founded Providence, which eventually became the charter colony of Rhode Island.

In 1644, responding to a letter from John Cotton, a prominent Puritan divine, Williams set out his views regarding the relation of church and state. "When they have opened a gap in the hedge or wall of separation between the garden of the church and the wilderness of the world," he wrote, "God hath ever broke down the wall itself, removed the candlestick, and made His garden a wilderness, as at this day."[10] Williams sought to protect religion from the depredations of the state, and he saw strict separation as the way to accomplish this. If God, Williams believed, "will ever please to restore His garden and paradise again, it must of necessity be walled in peculiarly unto Himself from the world; and that all that shall be saved out of the world are to be transplanted out of the wilderness of the world, and added unto His church or garden."[11]

A little over a hundred years later, Thomas Jefferson appropriated the "wall of separation" metaphor but toward somewhat different ends. Jefferson, a deist and a creature of the Enlightenment, believed passionately that religious beliefs were a private affair, that religious coercion violated natural rights, and that compelling someone "to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves and abhors" constituted a form of tyranny.[12] Reli-

9. See William G. McLoughlin, *New England Dissent, 1630–1833: The Baptists and the Separation of Church and State,* 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: 1971); William G. McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus and the American Pietistic Tradition* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967); John M. Mulder, "William Livingston: Propagandist Against Episcopacy," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 54 (1976): 83–104 [Balmer's note]. Backus (1724–1806) was an influential Baptist minister who opposed state-established religion; Livingston (1723–1790) was governor of New Jersey and a signer of the U.S. Constitution.

10. Perry Miller, *Roger Williams: His Contribution to the American Tradition* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953), 98 [Balmer's note].

11. Ibid [Balmer's note].

12. Jefferson's "Act for Establishing Religious Freedom" (1786), quoted in John F. Wilson and Donald Drakeman, eds., *Church and State in American History,* 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 16 [Balmer's note].

gious disestablishment, Jefferson believed, provided guarantees against such tyranny. Writing nearly two decades after the ratification of the First Amendment (he had been among its principal architects), Jefferson attested to his "solemn reverence for that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should 'make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,' thus building a wall of separation between church and State."[13]

Although Jefferson had carefully couched his rhetoric so as to appear that he wished merely to provide for the well-being of organized religion by guarding it against political meddling, it is difficult to escape the impression that he was at least equally concerned that religious factionalism and contentiousness might disrupt the functions of government. While serving as president, he considered the "experiment" in religious freedom that he had helped to create in the new Republic and pronounced it good precisely because it had proved conducive to political order and stability. "We have solved by fair experiment, the great and interesting question whether freedom is compatible with order in government, and obedience to the laws," he wrote to a group of Virginia Baptists in 1802. "And we have experienced the quiet as well as the comfort which results from leaving everyone to profess freely and openly those principles of religion which are the inductions of his own reason, and the serious convictions of his own inquiries."[14]

Both Roger Williams and Thomas Jefferson, then, although separated by more than a century, advocated religious disestablishment, albeit out of somewhat different motives. Williams saw the dangers of state interference in the affairs of the church—the wilderness encroaching on the garden—while Jefferson recognized the dangers that religious interests and factions posed to the political order that he and the other founders had so carefully fashioned.

10 I should like to suggest, however, that the configuration of church and state embodied in the First Amendment—the guarantee of free exercise of religion and the proscription against religious establishment—has succeeded over the past two hundred years beyond even the boldest expectations of either Williams or Jefferson. This wall of separation—which more accurately resembles a line in the dust, continually drawn and redrawn—has satisfied Jefferson's concern that confessional agendas not disrupt political stability, and it has also ensured the religious vitality everywhere in evidence throughout American history.

One characteristic of the United States Constitution implicit in all the flummery and celebration that surrounded its bicentennial is the remarkable resiliency of that document forged in the heat of political debate and compromise two hundred years earlier. It is indeed an extraordinary achievement, a tribute not only to the ideas of James Harrington, John Locke, Common Sense Realism, and the example of such documents as the Union of Utrecht, but also to the daring and inventiveness of a group of politicians willing to build those

13. Jefferson's letter to the Danbury Baptists, January 1, 1802, ibid., 79 [Balmer's note].
14. Quoted in Mead, *Lively Experiment*, 59 [Balmer's note].

ideas into a political structure that would hold thirteen disparate colonies together.[15] The writers of the Constitution showed considerable prescience in anticipating some of the problems that the new society might encounter—so much so, in fact, that a Supreme Court nominee in the 1980s could claim that most contemporary legal disputes could be settled by simple recourse to the "original intent" of the framers—but they also crafted a document of great elasticity and adaptability.

The American form of government has endured for more than two hundred years, and that must surely be its singular achievement. But what lies at the heart of that stability? Surely the Constitution itself, with its checks and balances and its representative democracy, forms the foundation, later strengthened by the freedoms provided for in the Bill of Rights—the first ten Amendments—and by the enfranchisement of women and minorities.

The first clause of the First Amendment, with its guarantee of free exercise of religion and the proscription against religious establishment, has made a particular contribution to American political stability, I shall argue, because religious freedom has siphoned off social discontent that might otherwise find expression in the political sphere. In other words, the kind of factionalism that concerned James Madison in *Federalist No. 10*[16] more often than not has flourished in religion rather than politics, with the effect that some of the energy and discontent that might be directed toward political change dissipates in religious bickering. In that respect, the disestablishment of religion has not only reduced religious pressure on the state, it has also meant that religious factionalism has often provided a buffer against political radicalism.

The idea that religion upholds the temporal order and protects the prevailing political and cultural institutions is, of course, a common refrain, repeated approvingly by Niccolò Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, Edmund Burke, and various Erastian Anglicans, and not so approvingly by Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche.[17] The notion that religious *pluralism* can sustain the political order,

15. Regarding the influences on the founders, see Garry Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1978); James Tanis, "From Provinces and Colonies to Federated States: The Dutch-American Example," paper given at the Tenth Rensselaerswyck Seminar, Albany, N.Y., 19 September 1987 [Balmer's note]. Harrington (1611–1677) was an English political philosopher who held that a strong middle class promotes stable democracy; Locke (1632–1704) was a major English empiricist philosopher and advocate of religious tolerance; Common Sense Realism is the philosophical view that things in the world are as we perceive them to be through our senses; Union of Utrecht (1579) was an alliance that led to the emergence of the Netherlands as a modern state.
16. *The Federalist* (1787–1788) is a series of eighty-five essays on republican government by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay; Madison (1751–1836) was a signer of the U.S. Constitution and fourth president of the United States (1809–1817).
17. T. H. Breen and Stephen Foster have argued that religious principles contributed to the stability of Puritan New England from settlement to the revocation of the charter. See their "The Puritans' Greatest Achievement: A Study of Social Cohesion in

however, is a uniquely American construct. Roger Williams and the founders of Rhode Island recognized the salutary effects of religious freedom. A "flourishing civil state may best be maintained," they believed, "with a full religious liberty, and . . . true piety will give the greatest security for sovereignty and true loyalty."[18] William Livingston, inveterate opponent of religious establishment in colonial New York, remarked in 1754 (a century later) that "nothing can tend so much to maintain our freedom and independency in religion as a division into a variety of sects."[19]

15 Not all American clerics recognized the value of disestablishment to religion immediately; some had to be converted. It was only after reflection that John Henry Livingston, a Dutch Reformed minister in New York, decided that in a country "where hearing is promoted & a spirit of enquiry prevails I am not apprehensive that the Christian religion can receive any essential injury from the greatest scope that can be given to religious freedom," adding that "forcing mankind into a union of sentiment by any machine of State is altogether preposterous & has done more harm to the cause of the gospel than the sword of persecution has ever effected."[20]

In New England, where Congregationalism enjoyed the benefits of establishment, the "standing order" of Congregationalist ministers at first bitterly opposed voluntarism, this notion that no one confession would enjoy preferential status, but they came in time to recognize the salutary effects of religious pluralism. Lyman Beecher[21] initially lamented Connecticut's disestablishment of Congregationalism, in 1818, as "a time of great depression and suffering," but shortly thereafter, flushed with a general revival of religion, he changed his tune. "We were thrown on God and on ourselves, and this created that moral coercion which makes men work," he remembered in 1820. "Before we had been standing on what our fathers had done, but now we were obliged to develop all our energy."[22]

Seventeenth-Century Massachusetts," *Journal of American History* 60 (1973): 5–22 [Balmer's note]. Machiavelli (1469–1527), a Florentine political philosopher, wrote *The Prince* (1513), a book famous for its ruthless advice to rulers; Hobbes (1588–1679), an English political philosopher, advanced the idea that governments are based on a "social contract" between individuals and a ruler or state; Burke (1729–1797) was a conservative English political philosopher and member of Parliament; Erastian Anglicans adhered to the view, erroneously attributed to Thomas Erastus (1524–1583), that state authority supersedes that of the church; Marx (1818–1883) was a major German political philosopher and critic of capitalism; Nietzsche (1844–1900) was a major German philosopher and cultural critic.

18. From the charter granted by Charles II on July 8, 1663, quoted in Wilson and Drakeman, *Church and State,* 16 [Balmer's note].

19. Edward T. Corwin, ed., *Ecclesiastical Records: State of New York,* 7 vols. (Albany, N.Y.: J. B. Lyon, 1901–1916), vol. 5, 3460 [Balmer's note].

20. Quoted in Richard W. Pointer, *Protestant Pluralism and the New York Experience: A Study of Eighteenth-Century Religious Diversity* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1988), 88 [Balmer's note].

21. Beecher (1775–1863) was an American Presbyterian minister.

22. In Wilson and Drakeman, *Church and State,* 95 [Balmer's note].

One of the striking features of the United States, as compared with other Western nations, is the steadfastly centrist nature of its politics. Whereas European nations, most of them governed through the parliamentary system, undergo periodic changes—new political parties, ever shifting coalitions—the two political parties in the United States cling tenaciously to the ideological center. The very difficulty of breaking the pattern of two-party alignment (witness the failed efforts of Ross Perot in 1992 and 1996, John B. Anderson in 1980, George Wallace in 1968, Henry A. Wallace in 1948, and Teddy Roosevelt in 1912) attests to the persistence of moderate politics.[23] The United States has no Green Party to speak of, no Communist Party outside of Berkeley and Greenwich Village, no Conservative or Social Democratic Party that mounts a serious challenge to two-party hegemony.[24]

What America has, however, is religious diversity encompassing every conceivable tradition, confession, and ethnic group. The First Amendment gives all of them free rein. No religion is established, and no citizen is required to give allegiance (or monetary support) to any religious group.

And yet Americans do. The 1984 Gallup poll cited in the introduction found that only 9 percent of Americans expressed no religious preference. On the other hand, as noted previously, 56 percent claimed membership in a church or synagogue, and 40 percent said they attended church or synagogue weekly. Such figures are unheard of in England and Europe. In contrast, political participation is much higher there, while Americans are notoriously lackadaisical about exercising their right to vote. In Queens, New York, for instance, fewer than 55 percent of eligible voters are registered, and in the 1988 presidential election only 49.1 percent—less than half—of the voting-age population nationwide bothered to cast their ballots, a decrease from 53.1 percent in 1984.[25]

23. Perot (b. 1930) is an American businessman; Anderson (b. 1922) was a member of the House of Representatives (1961–1981) from Illinois; G. Wallace (1919–1998) served a number of terms as governor of Alabama (1963–1967, 1971–1979, 1983–1987); H. Wallace (1888–1965) was the vice president of the United States (1941–1945); Roosevelt (1858–1919) was president of the United States (1901–1909). Each ran unsuccessfully for president of the United States as an independent, or in the cases of H. Wallace and Roosevelt, as a third-party candidate.

24. The most votes that a Communist Party candidate for president has received was just over 100,000 (out of more than 38,000,000) in the election of 1932; the Communist presidential candidate received 36,386 votes in 1984 (Marvine Howe, "U.S. Communists May Not Field a 1988 Slate," *New York Times,* 20 November 1987) [Balmer's note]. The Green Party, Communist Party, and Social Democratic Party are European political parties associated with environmentalism, communism, and socialism, respectively.

25. "No Excuse Not to Register," *New York Times,* 16 October 1987; Michael Oreskes, "An American Habit: Shunning the Ballot Box," ibid., 31 Jan 1988; "Voter Turnout Up Slightly, Reversing Trend," ibid., 8 November 1984; "Portrait of the Electorate," ibid., 10 November 1988. Religion, of course, also serves as a conservative social force; for an excellent example of this, see Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815–1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978). See also Joseph R. Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusade: Status Politics and the American Temperance*

20 In America, then, religion rather than politics may provide the argot and the arena for popular discourse and the expression of discontent. The existence of what I've referred to as a kind of free market of religion, which means that citizen-consumers are free to shop in the unregulated "marketplace," also provides room for entrepreneurs. Anyone at all can gather around him or her a following of believers disenchanted in one way or another with the existing religious options. American history is full of examples: Alexander Campbell, Joseph Smith, Ellen Gould White, Mary Baker Eddy, Noble Drew Ali, J. Gresham Machen.[26] The majority of popular religious movements, I believe, divert social discontent away from the political and into the religious sphere. As such, religion in America has usually served as a conservative political force—that is, its very existence as a safety valve for social discontent tends to protect the state from radical zealots and the paroxysms of revolution.

Indeed, religious sentiments freely subscribed to without the coercion of the government have often served to shore up mainstream political values and the claims of the state.[27] The *McGuffey Reader*[28] of the nineteenth century, with its unabashed celebration of Protestant, middle-class, patriotic values, comes to mind, as do many other examples. The Catholic church in America, eager to shed its immigrant image, has gone out of its way to affirm the political order and to prove itself patriotic in spite of its putative loyalty to a foreign entity. Until recently, Reform Judaism required its rabbis to serve in the military chaplaincy. Most Protestants have taught their children and their congregants about the Christian's duty to the state as outlined in St. Paul's epistle to the Romans. Even the Mormons, after bitter disputes with the United States government in the nineteenth century, have become ardent defenders of the political status quo and a formidable conservative force.

The civil rights movement, deriving much of its energy and leadership from the black churches, was, in many respects, a *conservative* movement, at least in the means chosen to effect social change. Evangelicals, because of their populist theology and their genius at communication, have been particularly successful in the free marketplace of religion in America, and their reentry into the political arena in the mid-seventies—due in part to their contrived mythology

Movement (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1963); Charles C. Cole, Jr., *The Social Ideas of the Northern Evangelists, 1826–1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954) [Balmer's note].

26. Campbell (1788–1866) founded the Disciples of Christ; Smith (1805–1844) founded the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, or Mormonism; White (1827–1915) was a founding member and prophet of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church; Eddy (1821–1910) founded the Church of Christian Science; Ali (1886–1929) founded the Moorish Science Temple of America in New Jersey; Machen (1881–1937) founded the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in America.

27. Religious groups have a vested interest in upholding the claims of the state because of the tax exemptions granted to religious organizations by all levels of government [Balmer's note].

28. The *McGuffey Readers* were series of elementary-school books designed by Ohio frontier schoolteacher William Holmes McGuffey (1800–1873).

about America's "Christian" origins—has helped to sustain a conservative swing in American politics.

Both American politicians and foreign observers have acknowledged the extent to which religious sentiment in America upholds the political order. In 1835, de Tocqueville reported that Americans believed a "sincere faith in their religion" was "indispensable to the maintenance of republican institutions," and he noted that "while the law permits the Americans to do what they please, religion prevents them from conceiving, and forbids them to commit, what is rash or unjust."[29] Extolling that connection has ever been a staple of political discourse. "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity," George Washington declared in his Farewell Address, "religion and morality are indispensable supports."[30] In the mid-twentieth century Dwight Eisenhower reasserted that symbiotic relationship bluntly. "Our government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply felt religious faith," he has been quoted as saying, "and I don't care what it is."[31]

I do not think there is any kind of mystical connection between religious conviction and the durability of America's political institutions, as de Tocqueville seems to imply. Rather, just as historians of an earlier age believed that the frontier served as a safety valve for social unrest or that a plenitude of wealth ensured a certain equilibrium,[32] I believe that the cornucopia of religious options—and the liberality with which Americans avail themselves of them—has contributed to America's political stability by providing an alternative to political dissent. It strikes me as no accident, for example, that the truly radical political movement of the sixties and early seventies, the student unrest directed against America's involvement in Vietnam, eventually dissipated in a wave of Eastern spirituality. Surely other forces—political, economic, and cultural—contributed as well, but I wonder if the plethora of religions in America, an abundance guaranteed by the First Amendment, did not help to deflect the radical impulses of the day.

Religious agendas do, of course, continue to shape our political debates, as 25 they have always done. The identity of many Americans is tied up with their

29. De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America,* 200 [Balmer's note].

30. *Washington's "Farewell Address" in Facsimile, with Transliterations of All the Drafts of Washington, Madison, and Hamilton, Together with their Correspondence and Other Supporting Documents*, ed. Victor Hugo Paltsits (New York: New York Public Library, 1935), 151 [Balmer's note].

31. I express some hesitation about the quotation because it has never been documented that Eisenhower actually said it, although it is frequently attributed to him; see Patrick Henry, "'And I Don't Care What It Is': The Tradition-History of a Civil-Religion Proof Text," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 49 (1981): 35–49 [Balmer's note]. Eisenhower (1890–1969) was an army general and the thirty-fourth president of the United States (1953–1961).

32. Breen and Foster argue that the general prosperity of seventeenth-century New England contributed to its stability ("The Puritans' Greatest Achievement") [Balmer's note].

religious affiliations; many socialize almost exclusively within their religious groups and in any priority of self-disclosure would likely identify themselves as Lutheran or Catholic or Orthodox or Methodist before they would identify themselves as Republican or Democrat.

In 1855, Philip Schaff proposed that the religious verve and energy that he and other Europeans found in America could be traced to the voluntary principle, which, he said, "calls forth a mass of individual activity and interest among the laity in ecclesiastical affairs, in the founding of new churches and congregations, colleges and seminaries, in home and foreign missions, and in the promotion of all forms of Christian philanthropy."[33]

Schaff sought to vindicate his claim about the vitality of religion in America by comparing the patterns of religious affiliation in Berlin and New York City. "In Berlin there are hardly forty churches for a population of four hundred and fifty thousand, of whom, in spite of all the union of church and state, only some thirty thousand attend public worship," he wrote. "In New York, to a population of six hundred thousand, there are over two hundred and fifty well-attended churches, some of them quite costly and splendid, especially in Broadway and Fifth Avenue. In the city of Brooklyn, across the East River, the number of churches is still larger in proportion to the population, and in the country towns and villages, especially in New England, the houses of worship average one to every thousand, or frequently even five hundred, souls." And all of these, Schaff marveled, were supported not by public funds or state-enforced taxation, but by free-will offerings.[34] De Tocqueville had made a similar point twenty years earlier: "There are certain populations in Europe whose unbelief is only equaled by their ignorance and debasement," he wrote, "while in America one of the freest and most enlightened nations in the world fulfills all the outward duties of religion with fervor."[35]

The extraordinarily high level of religious belief and participation in America continues to confound Europeans today. By almost any standard, we are still a religious people. More than six Americans out of ten believe that "religion can answer all or most of today's problems," and only 10 percent express little or no confidence in organized religion.[36]

This confidence marks another distinctive characteristic of American religiosity—its lack of cynicism. Even with widespread publicity about the recent shenanigans of certain televangelists and the (sometimes disturbing, even tragic) activities of radical "cults," there seems to be very little anticlericalism—that is, animosity and suspicion toward religious leaders in general—in America today.

33. Schaff, *America,* 79 [Balmer's note].

34. Ibid., 78 [Balmer's note].

35. De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America,* 202 [Balmer's note].

36. "Religion in America: 50 Years: 1935–1985," *The Gallup Report,* no. 236 (May 1985): 18, 50: ibid., no. 222 (March 1984): 28; Richard John Neuhaus, ed., *Unsecular America* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W. B. Eerdmans, 1986), 119 [Balmer's note].

Indeed, ever since the First Great Awakening,[37] when evangelicals struggled bitterly against religious establishments and protested the European identification of the clergy with the aristocracy, American history has been virtually free of anticlericalism as such. This again derives, no doubt, from the availability of religious options guaranteed by the Constitution. Why put up with a minister, a confession, or a tradition not to your liking when there are so many alternatives for the taking? Religion has remained a force in America precisely because of this ever-changing menu of religious entrées.

England, once again, provides a useful contrast. Recall, for instance, John Lennon's offhanded comment in 1966 that "Christianity will go"—that the Beatles were "more popular than Jesus now." In Britain that observation elicited nary a comment, but in America it triggered a wave of record burnings and anti-Beatles demonstrations across the country, the intensity of which made the young Liverpudlians fear for their lives.[38] Ironically, Lennon, a former chorister at St. Peter's Church in Woolton, was probably correct insofar as his observations applied to Britain. "We are not a very religious people anymore," a woman in London informed me during a recent visit, in a tone more bemused than apologetic, "and so we have tried to devise ways to use some of these old churches creatively." The parish church adjacent to the archbishop of Canterbury's London residence, just across the Thames from Parliament, is now a garden club. Over the past thirty years nearly 2,000 of England's 16,000 Anglican churches have closed for lack of use, and the established Church of England draws only about 3 percent of the population to its worship services.[39] Perhaps after all the internecine religious battles of the Tudor and Stuart periods the English have simply wearied of religion, but I suspect that the relative absence of religious options in England has rendered Anglicanism rather bland and homogenized and that the English look elsewhere for their voluntary affiliations—to the plethora of political parties, for example, or to garden clubs.

Religious disestablishment and the guarantee of free exercise of religion in America, on the other hand, have provided the climate for a vigorous religious culture—one that is anything but bland or homogenized. Because various religious groups must compete to survive in a buyer's market, voluntarism has lent an unmistakably populist cast to religion in America. While an inevitable pandering to popular tastes has sometimes tended, I think, to elevate form over content and to diminish the overall quality of religious belief and commitment, religious freedom has also ensured a rich and variegated spiritual landscape. American religion boasts a diversity and vibrancy unmatched in any Western culture, and we Americans, with our passion for novelty and our notoriously latitudinarian religious beliefs, freely partake of this cornu-

37. A Protestant religious revival that took place in the American colonies from the 1720s through the 1740s.

38. Philip Norman, *Shout! The Beatles in Their Generation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1981), 265–66 [Balmer's note].

39. Francis X. Clines, "With Bare Churches, It's Barely England's Church," *New York Times,* 11 May 1987 [Balmer's note].

copia.[40] And, of course, there is always the possibility that if you are dissatisfied with the available options, you can start your own religious group. The First Amendment guarantees that right.

Whereas historian Charles Beard has argued that the U.S. Constitution was a conservative document in that it safeguarded the economic interests of the landed elite, I am suggesting that the Constitution was conservative in a far more subtle way: the First Amendment, by setting up a free market of religion, has not only ensured religious vitality but it has also helped to thwart political radicalism by redirecting malcontents away from the structured public sphere of American politics and into the pliant and more private domain of religion.

Thomas Jefferson and Roger Williams make strange bedfellows, and it is easy to speculate on the issues upon which they would have disagreed. Williams—first a Puritan, then a Baptist, and then a "seeker"—held strict ideas about the importance of the Bible and the need to separate from evil. Jefferson, on the other hand, excised large portions of the Bible that failed to conform to his own rationalistic, Enlightenment notions. While Williams looked forward to a "never-ending harvest of inconceivable joys" in the afterlife,[41] Jefferson fervently believed that Americans would eventually embrace Unitarianism as their religion of choice.

Despite their radical differences in terms of theology, both Williams and Jefferson agreed on the desirability of religious disestablishment, Williams because he sought to maintain a pure church and Jefferson because he sought political stability. I would suggest that after two hundred years, both might take satisfaction in the results of the unprecedented experiment in religious toleration to which they each contributed. It has lent political stability by diverting social discontent into the religious sphere, and it has ensured religious vitality by guaranteeing untrammeled expression in the free marketplace of American religion.

35 It may be too much to assume of Roger Williams and Thomas Jefferson that either anticipated fully the effects of religious disestablishment in America. Most Americans are well aware of Jefferson's manifold contributions to American life—as architect and inventor, as political theorist, diplomat, and politician—while Williams remains a relatively obscure figure. "Why is our candle yet burning," Williams asked rhetorically near the end of his life, but to serve "God by serving the public in our generation?"[42] In insisting on freedom of religion and liberty of conscience, each of these leaders provided a service that extended well beyond his own generation.

40. On American latitudinarianism in religion, see Patricia U. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 218–20; Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), chap. 9 [Balmer's note].

41. Quoted in Edwin S. Gaustad, *Liberty of Conscience: Roger Williams in America* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991), 167 [Balmer's note].

42. Quoted ibid., 189 [Balmer's note].

QUESTIONS

1. Balmer subtitles his essay "The Paradox of Religious Pluralism." Why does he characterize religious pluralism as a paradox? How does the idea of paradox structure the essay?

2. Balmer writes in a professional academic style. What are the hallmarks of this style? What might be its advantages or limitations?

3. Balmer holds that American religion has historically protected the state from political unrest by serving as a "safety valve for social discontent" (paragraph 20). Test this assertion against an example or examples from your own experience. Do you see religion working in this way? Write a response either agreeing or disagreeing with Balmer's "safety valve" theory.