



‘Tell Them I’m a Christian’

Why religion is no longer a major factor in American politics

Kenneth L. Woodward

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Woodward argues that, in general, any political tendency we assign to a religious group has more to do with that political group’s other demographic traits than that religion’s specific beliefs. What religious groups do you associate with specific parties and policies? Why?

2. What kinds of concerns motivate people to vote—economic, religious, social, or others? What motivates you to vote the way you do?

3. Woodward writes, “Even if religion is not a determinative factor in presidential politics, politics plays a determinative role in how American religion finds expression in our public life.” Do our religious beliefs influence our politics, or do our political commitments influence our religion? How do these beliefs relate to each other in your own life and the lives of those you know?

4. The United States is often described as a uniquely religious nation, especially compared to other wealthy, industrialized countries. But Woodward argues that in terms of those who are “religiously committed”—only 17 percent of American adults—our supposed religiosity isn’t as meaningful as we think. Do you agree with his assessment? Is the distinction between those who are “churched” and those who have a different relationship to traditional religious belief and practice a useful one?

5. If you attend a place of worship, what political messages, if any, do you hear from leaders or other congregants? How are they informed by religious beliefs?

6. How do you see political polarization affecting the life of the Church? What “mega-identities” can we break apart and consider, rather than letting general terms “do the thinking for us”?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING:

David Albertson, “American Paganism,” February 2020

<https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/american-paganism>

‘Is There a Religious Left?’ The Commonweal Podcast, May 2020

<https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/podcast/there-religious-left>

“Catholic Citizenship,” Commonweal Conversation Starter Series, 2020–2021

<https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/css>

Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life, ‘Faith and the Faithful’ Dialogue Series:

<https://catholicsocialthought.georgetown.edu/topics/faith-and-the-faithful>