

FORUM: MODERN AMERICAN HISTORY

# Pluralism, Secularism, and Religion in Modern American History

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Historians of American religion return time and again to a whole host of texts, but for the twentieth century, few so recurrently crop up as a reference point than Will Herberg's *Protestant–Catholic–Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (1955), a rumination on America's tri-faith landscape that was as much theological as sociological in its argument.<sup>1</sup> Part of a family of Russian Jewish immigrants, Herberg arrived in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century when still a small child. As his family struggled to make its way in New York City, Herberg set his sights on education as his ticket to greater security and consequence. He soon found that path blocked, however, after he was suspended from City College in 1920 for failing to meet the requirements in physical education and military science. Thereafter, he patched together an intellectual career as a social critic and political commentator, first through the Marxist Left in the 1920s and late in life through the conservatism of the *National Review* in the 1960s. In between he also invented an academic identity for himself, partly by falsely claiming he had earned a Ph.D. from Columbia University and partly through his punditry on American religion and modern Jewish thought. Though *Protestant–Catholic–Jew* was a relatively hurried piece of armchair sociology, it nonetheless gained widespread attention at the time and ever since. More than anything else he wrote, it fortified Herberg's standing among major mid-century intellectuals such as Reinhold Niebuhr, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and John Courtney Murray. The book provocatively opened up two questions that have proven absolutely crucial to the ways in which historians have framed their stories about modern American religion: (1) how to describe the relationship between religious pluralism and national identity and (2) how to think about the interplay of religion and secularism in American culture.<sup>2</sup>

Herberg's trifold view of American religion was a posture of compromise—a way of endorsing the persistence of religious difference, while maintaining a consensus about American ideals of democratic citizenship. He positioned himself between melting-pot demands of thorough Americanization and cultural pluralist views of cosmopolitan transnationalism. In language, dress, education, economic aspiration, and political formation, Herberg argued that immigrant assimilation had proceeded apace. In the domain of religion, however, diversity continued to prevail, Herberg suggested, because of the fundamental durability of three major categories: Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. These religious markers, in Herberg's view, had become

<sup>1</sup>Will Herberg, *Protestant–Catholic–Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (1955; Chicago, 1983).

<sup>2</sup>For Herberg's biography, see Harry J. Ausmus, *Will Herberg: From Right to Right* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1987). For more recent analysis of the impact of Herberg's work, see the special issue of the *U.S. Catholic Historian* 23, no. 1 (Winter 2005), which was devoted to discussion of *Protestant–Catholic–Jew* on its fiftieth anniversary. See also K. Healan Gaston, "The Cold War Romance of Religious Authenticity: Will Herberg, William F. Buckley Jr., and the Rise of the New Right," *Journal of American History* 99, no. 4 (March 2013): 1133–58; William R. Hutchison, *Religious Pluralism in America: The Contentious History of a Founding Ideal* (New Haven, CT, 2003), 196–209; and Kevin M. Schultz, *Tri-Faith America: How Catholics and Jews Held Postwar America to Its Protestant Promise* (New York, 2011), 85–9. Gaston is especially perceptive in situating *Protestant–Catholic–Jew* within Herberg's increasingly conservative political and religious views, including his anti-secularism.

indispensable forms of social identification in Cold War America—three distinct ways of preserving subcultural particularity, while at the same time displaying a shared commitment to the nation’s democratic norms and Judeo-Christian values. “Being a Protestant, a Catholic, or a Jew is understood as the specific way, and increasingly perhaps the only way, of being an American and locating oneself in American society,” Herberg averred. “Unless one is either a Protestant, or a Catholic, or a Jew, one is a ‘nothing’; to be a ‘something,’ to have a name, one must identify oneself to oneself, and be identified by others, as belonging to one or another of the three great religious communities in which the American people are divided.” Herberg imagined the durability of these religious differences as fundamentally constitutive of twentieth-century American society; he wanted the story about modern American religion to be about immigration and dissimilarity, not about the long shadow of Puritan origins or the inescapability of Protestant power. He echoed Oscar Handlin, not Perry Miller. But Herberg nonetheless framed his narrative in such a way as to delimit religious pluralism within the narrowly prescriptive confines of Judeo-Christian concord. As Herberg flippantly remarked, a few American eccentrics might adopt “Buddhism or Yoga” as their “exotic cult,” but “such people are few and far between in this country and are not even remotely significant.” American citizenship was, as Herberg constructed it, especially the preserve of Christians and Jews, not Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, or atheists.<sup>3</sup>

*Protestant–Catholic–Jew* fell in the middle of a long and ongoing debate about how to frame the story of religious pluralism in modern American history. Herberg expanded the prevailing Protestant narrative—it was no small achievement to make the Catholic and Jewish stories coequal with the still reigning Protestant mythos—but he nonetheless stopped well short of the pluralist, cosmopolitan, transnational visions of Randolph Bourne or Horace Kallen. His was not the World’s Parliament of Religions (1893) brought to glorious fulfillment; instead, it was another containment strategy in an era of containment strategies. Pluralism was no longer menacing, but it was fully manageable: Herberg made the boxes of Protestant–Catholic–Jewish identity look so all-containing that he barely found it necessary even to consider religious minorities, whether Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, or the Nation of Islam. His blind-spots extended beyond religious upstarts and newcomers. Glaringly, for example, the evangelical movement was something that Herberg associated almost entirely with the nineteenth century. Even though he spoke often of the nation being in the midst of a religious revival in the 1950s, that had little to do with Billy Graham crusades, let alone the spirit-filled meetings of Pentecostalism. Despite the various inadequacies of Herberg’s tri-faith containers, the challenges he faced in mounting his argument remain familiar to anyone trying to tell a full-orbed history of modern American religions: namely, how to construct a coherent narrative without simply refocusing the story on Protestantism, whether in its liberal ecumenical or rightward evangelical forms, and without settling for an encyclopedic, A–Z account of religious variety. In many ways, historians of modern American religion still choose among stories highlighting the ascent of religious diversity, the cultural weight of the ecumenical Protestant establishment, and the resurgence of evangelical conservatism.<sup>4</sup>

Herberg’s formulation also revealed the ways in which the tri-faith rendering of American religious diversity effectively obscured other critical religious and social differences, especially racial divisions. This was a pluralism, Herberg claimed, “of a very special kind”—one that recognized “no permanent national or cultural minorities”; it was, in other words, a pluralism of expanding whiteness (Figure 1). Hence Herberg saw African American churches as anomalies within the

<sup>3</sup>Herberg, *Protestant–Catholic–Jew*, 39–40.

<sup>4</sup>For outstanding examples of these three possibilities, see Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (San Francisco, 2001); David A. Hollinger, *After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History* (Princeton, NJ, 2013); and Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York, 2011).



**Figure 1.** With the slogan, “Protestant, Catholic, Jew ... It’s all AMERICAN Blood!” the Institute for American Democracy advertised religious tolerance in 1944, but in a way that erased African Americans from the nation’s religious landscape. During World War II, “Negro” blood was segregated from white blood. Weegee (Arthur Fellig)/International Center of Photography.

“triple melting pot,” which were impossible to incorporate into the “ethnic amalgamation” that he found otherwise characteristic of American religious plurality. Indeed, race almost left Herberg speechless in *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*, but, unsurprisingly perhaps, not in his wider political and religious commentaries: He emerged as a noted critic of Martin Luther King’s tactics of resistance in the civil rights movement. Herberg’s “very special kind” of pluralism may have been especially ill-suited for crafting stories that combined religious with racial difference, division, and conflict, but it is an analytic problem that persists for historians of American religion: how to put together narratives that account both for the proliferating variety of American religions since the end of the nineteenth century and for the enduring structures of race that have conditioned how that diversity has been patterned and understood.<sup>5</sup>

Herberg set himself up as a defender of a tri-faith form of American religious pluralism, but, when it came to his second major theme—the paradoxical secularism of American culture—he embraced instead the role of social critic and prophetic theologian. Whether in membership statistics, building campaigns, Bible distribution, or presidential rhetoric, religion appeared to be flourishing as an anti-Communist bulwark in the Cold War United States. It was, by almost all measures, a floodtide of religious revitalization, and yet, as Herberg surveyed the scene, he saw secularism pervading American culture: that is, most people were “thinking and living in terms of a framework of reality and value remote from the religious beliefs [they] simultaneously professed.” As Herberg concluded plainly enough, “America seems to be at once the most religious and the most secular of nations.” While Herberg was not alone in his paradoxical rendering of “the religiousness and the secularism of the American

<sup>5</sup>Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*, 37–8, 42, 112–14; Ausmus, *Will Herberg*, 171, 199.

people” (other influential commentators of the period, including Reinhold Niebuhr and Martin Marty, amplified it), his observations were especially forceful. All the attention being paid to religious growth and vitality had to be paired with an analysis of American secularity. It was not, Herberg insisted, that atheistic associations, humanistic fellowships, or ethical societies were actually serious alternatives to churches and synagogues. He considered organized irreligion, for all practical purposes, as dead as Robert Ingersoll or Clarence Darrow. Instead, what required attention was the “secularism of a religious people” or “religiousness in a secularist framework.” Here Herberg anticipated the ways in which Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age* (2007) emphasizes the need to see secularity in all-enveloping terms—as the intellectual, political, and imaginative conditions—of modern forms of avowed belief. Like Taylor, Herberg saw secularism as a ubiquitous and unavoidable malaise. Hence Americans’ vibrant religiosity had to be viewed against a secularist backdrop that was essentially inescapable. “The secularism characteristic of the American mind,” Herberg concluded, “is implicit and is not felt to be at all inconsistent with the most sincere attachment to religion.”<sup>6</sup>

In viewing secularism as socially embedded and largely unspoken, Herberg made it plain that he was no champion of the usual secularization thesis in which religion was seen as slowly but surely disappearing “in the face of the steady advance of science and reason.” For Herberg, there was too much contradictory evidence, especially in the postwar United States, to sustain a vision of inevitable secularization as a story line. Instead, he called attention to the secular qualities of American religiousness, especially the ways in which American expressions of faith—at least since the late nineteenth century—had been gradually thinning out into a feel-good, prosperity-driven, consumerist therapy. He dwelled especially on how prone Americans were to view religion through the lens of Norman Vincent Peale’s gospel of positive thinking, peace of mind, and worldly success (with Catholic and Jewish analogues in Fulton Sheen and Joshua Liebman). The most popular American pieties all seemed so narcissistic and anodyne, with “no sense of transcendence,” no shattering of self-regard, no sin, and no judgment. From Herberg’s neo-orthodox vantage point, America’s God appeared little more than a sanctification of free enterprise, liberal democracy, and personal serenity—metaphysical window-dressing for the American way of life. His critique of both American religion and American secularism flowed from that neo-orthodox theological stance—particularly the recovery of the biblical God of Judaism. Herberg’s efforts at theological reconstruction are not what engage most historians when discussing *Protestant–Catholic–Jew*, but it was nonetheless those preoccupations that helped him to see religion and secularity as much more than a zero-sum game. For Herberg, the categories of the religious and the secular kept turning back on each other in such a way as to problematize and destabilize both. Especially in the domain of modern American history, where a secularization narrative can still operate by default, an insistence on paradox and irony remains interpretively useful. The trick is explaining how irrelevant religion can seem to so much of American life and yet also how inescapable it remains.<sup>7</sup>

Just as Herberg’s view of religious pluralism left much out, so did his understanding of American secularism. Seeing Protestant, Catholic, and Jew as the three identifiers that mattered most in American culture, his account focused only on secularist dispositions that found expression *inside* these three religious subcultures. He had no account of highbrow atheism in the universities and the arts, no acknowledgment of the humanistic ferment from Walter Lippmann and John Dewey forward, no serious engagement with the freethinking arguments for strict church–state separation then gaining ground, no recognition of the thoroughly secular

<sup>6</sup>Herberg, *Protestant–Catholic–Jew*, 2–3, 270; Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA, 2007).

<sup>7</sup>Herberg, *Protestant–Catholic–Jew*, 265, 268. Jon Butler pinpoints the assumption of secularization as one of the major impediments to religion’s full integration into the historiography on the United States since 1870 in “Jack-in-the-Box Faith: The Religion Problem in Modern American History,” *Journal of American History* 90, no. 4 (March 2004): 1360–8.

Judaism of his youth and early career. Having himself been drawn as a young man to a godless Marxism, he erased that attraction and the anarchic, irreligious radicalism it represented. With his theological and political stances turning increasingly conservative by the 1950s, Herberg blotted humanists, atheists, agnostics, and skeptics out of his picture of American religious life. Diagnosing secularism as a problem within Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish ranks, Herberg used that critique to prod believers to a more demanding and less idolatrous faith. Beyond those religious circles, secularists were dismissed as inconsequential, incapable of standing on their own—on par with marginal, foreign exotics like Buddhists and Muslims.

However resonant Herberg's anti-secular polemic was in the throes of the Cold War, few historians or sociologists would find it a convincing rationale now for neglecting nonbelievers and avowed secularists. As the number of religiously disaffiliated Americans has trended toward 25 percent in recent years, scholarly attention to the irreligious has increased correspondingly. Quite evidently, at this point, the history of modern American religion is also a history of non-belief and overt anti-religion—before, during, and after the Cold War revival. The flipside of rightwing evangelicalism's political ascent in recent decades has been a steady growth in secularist identification, especially among those under age thirty. As with the fundamentalist-modernist showdown in the early decades of the twentieth century, secular liberalism thrives in its opposition to science-denying, moral-crusading, demagogue-enabling forms of evangelicalism. Though it would not sit well with Herberg's own neo-orthodox conservatism, it could well be time to examine more fully the history of that secularist reflex.

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