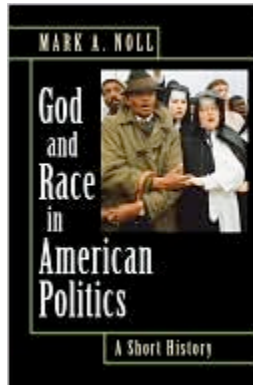




## God and Race in American Politics: A Short History

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- [Introduction](#)
- [Remarks](#)
- [Questions and Answers](#)

### Introduction

**JOANNE MYERS:** Good morning. I'm Joanne Myers, Director of Public Affairs Programs, and on behalf of the Carnegie Council I'd like to thank you all for joining us for our discussion this afternoon on [God and Race in American Politics](#). This book was based on a series of [lectures](#) that Professor Noll delivered at Princeton University in 2006.

I know you all have had a copy of his bio, but I would still like to point out just a couple of special items. Besides being a widely acclaimed scholar and a prolific writer, in 2005 *Time* magazine [identified](#) Professor Noll as one of the 25 most influential evangelicals in America. He is also the recipient of a National Humanities Medal.

Throughout our nation's history, great political and social movements, from abolition to women's suffrage, and from civil rights to today's struggles over abortion and gay rights, have all drawn upon religious institutions for moral authority, inspirational leadership, and organizational power. While religion has been a powerful political force throughout our history, and increasingly so in recent times, it is with the addition of race that we come to the subject of our discussion today. As Professor Noll explains in his latest book, when race is coupled with religion in the political arena, the results can be explosive.

Take the most obvious example. I think we all remember when during the primary season questions were first raised about [Senator Obama's](#) long-term relationship with his church's pastor, the Reverend [Jeremiah Wright](#). Wright's inflammatory racial statements from the pulpit prompted the Illinois senator to deliver a historic [speech](#) on race and politics in America, correcting his pastor's views. This speech encouraged media figures, politicians, and academics to revisit questions such as the viability of minority candidates and the future of racial relations in America.

In *God and Race in American Politics*, Professor Noll tries to show how the concerns of race have combined with the interests of religion to decisively shape the course of American political history and our country's discourse on race and social justice. He takes us on a historical journey, beginning with the 1830 [slave revolt](#) of [Nat Turner](#), through the [Civil War](#), [Reconstruction](#), and the long [Jim Crow](#) era, to [George W. Bush](#) and values voting in recent presidential elections. Along the way, he demonstrates how both supporters and opponents of slavery and segregation drew equally on the Bible to justify the morality of their positions. He shows how a common evangelical heritage supported Jim Crow discrimination and contributed powerfully to the Black theology of liberation preached by [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#) In the end, he argues that "the greatest transformations in American political history constitute an interconnected narrative in which opposing appeals to biblical truth gave rise to often contradictory religious and moral complexities."

With the candidacy of Senator Obama, issues of race, religion, and politics have emerged as hot topics among politicians, pollsters, pundits, and the general public. Yet, in this election, which at once seemed to promise a new national conversation about race, an open dialogue about historical animosities and prejudices has only demonstrated the ways in which Americans have and have not moved beyond their prejudicial past.

To root us in this complex history of race and religion and its manifest impact on our politics, please join me in welcoming one of the most influential historians of American religion writing today, our speaker, Professor Mark Noll. Thank you for joining us.

## Remarks

**MARK NOLL:** It's a treat to be here with you tonight in New York, and I'm grateful to the Presidential Debates Commission for consulting with the Carnegie Council so they could schedule the debate after you have had your historical lesson here late this afternoon.

Maybe, if the book were entitled *God and Money in American Politics*, there might have been even a larger crowd. But I think actually this topic is of a longer-range significance in understanding American history and, in many ways, understanding the American present.

The book is about why religion plays such a large role in American politics. The answer that the book gives is race, but race understood in its various combinations with politics, social order, and other developments in American history.

I was asked just two weeks ago to address a meeting in Berlin sponsored, interestingly enough, by a representative of the [Christian Democratic Union](#) and a representative of the [Social Democratic Party](#)—so political opponents, yet ones who cooperated in their religious lives. I was asked by them to address for this German audience the same question we are looking at tonight: why is religion so prominent, so evident, so up front in American politics?

Some of you will know that yesterday our neighbors to the North, the Canadians, held their [federal election](#). Over the last decades in Canada, there have been serious Catholic candidates and there have been serious Protestants of several varieties, running for national office, heading up the parties that contend in Canada for superiority in the Canadian Parliament. Never in the last 30 and 40 years has religion played the salient role in Canadian political life as it has in the United States.

What has been obvious in the recent past is that presidential history is tied in intimately with religious history. So in 1976 [Jimmy Carter](#) was both praised and blamed for speaking openly about being a born-again Christian. In the 1980s [Ronald Reagan](#)'s popularity rested substantially upon the support he had gained from two traditional swing, or even Democratic, constituencies, white evangelical Protestants and Roman Catholics. And obviously, in both 2000 and 2004, George W. Bush's overwhelming support from white evangelical Protestants was crucial to his electoral victories.

When the religiously charged issues that make up much of the agenda of American political life are considered, there is even more reason for asking why does religion play such a salient role. We have heard already about Barack Obama's pastor and his inflammatory statements that led to Obama actually quitting his church, leaving the particular congregation that he had been closely associated with for 20 years.

Senator [John McCain](#)'s selection of Alaskan Governor [Sarah Palin](#) for his vice presidential running mate has raised the salience of religion even higher. Clearly, McCain felt that her selection would energize the base of evangelical Protestant supporters that had been such an important part of the Bush winning constituency in 2000 and 2004.

My answer to why religion remains so important in American politics is a history of race and religion in America. I'm going to start off in the 1830s. I'm going to try to zoom fast—I promise to have you out of

here by at least 10:30 p.m. tonight. We're actually going to end with current events. But we're going to try rapidly and succinctly to talk about five distinct acts in American history that lead us to this present moment.

The first of those acts is religion, slavery, and the Civil War. The Civil War was a religious event, the Civil War was a religious struggle, because of the way, from the Nat Turner Rebellion in the early 1830s, specific considerations of the Bible had come to play in American public life and the debate over slavery.

In the early 1830s, the [Abolitionist Movement](#) in the United States began to attack the practice of slavery by using the Scriptures. In response, there grew up—it wasn't new, but it became much stronger—a vigorous defense of slavery predicated upon the Scriptures. Abraham had slaves, Moses regulated slavery, Jesus and the Apostle Paul could not condemn slavery; how could then the Bible be used in the latter day to condemn slavery?

By the 1850s, there had grown up such a vigorous biblical defense of slavery that in the North most moderate to conservative religious believers had conceded that at least the Bible allowed for slavery. Two factors made this a matter of extreme importance.

One factor was the nature of American civilization as it had developed since the time of the American Revolution. In a nation that was huge by European standards, almost unpopulated by European standards, with no inherited monarchy, no inherited institutions of education that were respected, the churches put together American civilization. The churches that did this were, we would say today, sectarian, evangelical, populist.

It's hard, I think, to imagine the strength in social and civilizational terms of the Methodists, the Baptists, the Presbyterians, the Congregationalists in the [antebellum](#) decades of the United States. By 1860, there were about 55,000 religious congregations in the United States. About 95 percent of them were Protestant. About 90 percent of them were Protestant of British origin.

Between 1850 and 1860—there were good federal censuses that took in religion in those days—the number of Catholic parishes and the number of Jewish places of worship had actually increased dramatically, but increased on the order of from two and three percent of the total American worshipping congregations to four and five percent. At the time of the Civil War, there were more Methodist ministers than workers for the American postal system.

At the time of the American Civil War, 1860, before the buildup of the troops, the voluntary contributions to churches and religious voluntary societies exceeded by far the income of the American railroad industry, which was the largest industry at the time, and came close to the income of the national government.

So the churches were important. But even more than simply the churches being important, the kinds of churches that had developed in America were bottom-up, populist, democratically inspired churches.

A great slogan of these churches turned upon the ability of individuals to understand the Scriptures: "No creed but the Bible." This form of Protestant Christianity placed a premium upon individuals reading the Scriptures for themselves and then acting decisively in creating a society. It was this phenomenon that led [Alexis de Tocqueville](#) in the 1830s to marvel at the apparent un-organization, the disorganization, of American church life and then the striking pervasive influence of the churches in America.

With this kind of religious life, the pro-slavery defense was a piece of cake: "Read the Bible for yourselves. Don't listen to the elites try to tell you disorienting and confusing information about the ancient world. Just read the Bible for yourself."

The second factor that came into play was the systematic confusion, which in some ways exists to this day, between the slavery that was described in the Bible and the black-only slavery practice in the United States. There were a number of African-American public voices. There were very few white Protestant—not Catholic yet; that would come later—voices that tried to point out that, yes, the Bible

seems to have accepted slavery, but almost all of the slaves in the Bible were Caucasian, were white. This was a message that simply gained no traction in the United States.

With this background, the American Civil War was a religious conflict. Prominent voices for the South defended the Confederacy as a God-given republic. In response, prominent voices in the North defended the northern cause as defense against "infidel aggression."

So that's the first part of the story.

The second part of the story is the effects of the Civil War on race and nationalism. The North, of course, won the military struggle. Under the leadership of [Abraham Lincoln](#), the [Civil War amendments](#) were passed. Slavery was abolished. Civil rights were guaranteed to liberated slaves.

Yet, victory in the military struggle by no means undermined the persistent racial and racist ordering of American society. Local communities in the South resisted assimilating liberated African-Americans. Northern communities did only a little better in granting civil rights reluctantly to their African-American population.

Victory in battle did lead to a widespread sense that there was a divine destiny making the United States important for world history. After only a very few years, that sense of the United States as important under God, providentially for world history, was actually supported by the reconciled South, which came eventually to see that they had had a baptism of fire that gave the reunited United States a special place in the world.

For African-Americans the Civil War had a different meaning. For African-Americans the Civil War opened up space to organize churches, publishing houses, educational institutions for themselves. Given what happened after the Civil War, it didn't seem in national terms like these self-standing black organizations could be important. They were neglected, they were not on the radar screen of national political life, but they were there. In the longer scope of history, they became a ticking time bomb that would explode after the Second World War.

Third, the effects of the Civil War on politics.

Immediately after the Civil War, liberated African-Americans and free blacks enjoyed about a decade of full civil rights. But then, from 1876 and the end of Reconstruction, the Northern armies ceased their occupation of the South. Jim Crow racial segregation was imposed upon the South—and actually in many places in the North—a regime that could only be called a regime of terror, silenced African-Americans in the South as participants in civil life.

From the 1870s into the 1920s, as many of you know, there was a horrific era of [lynching](#) that led to the violent death by burning, hanging, even being drawn and quartered, of African-Americans who offended various conventions of the racial code.

The key aspect of religion in this sad part of American history was that the white churches in the South almost universally supported or accepted the new Jim Crow arrangements, while the churches in the North mostly lost interest in black civil rights once slavery had been formally abolished.

The [Democratic Party](#) benefited from its support of the end of Reconstruction. The Democratic Party surged back into absolute control of the South by championing segregation and by attacking the opponents of segregation as "black Republicans." This ending of Reconstruction gave Democrats a lock on political power in the South for almost a century. It meant that every Democratic presidential candidate started out with about one-half of the electoral votes needed for victory.

There was actually only one election between 1876 and 1952 when the [Republican Party](#) did fairly well in the South—and New Yorkers should know what that was. In [1928](#), when the Catholic candidate, [Al Smith](#), was the Democratic nominee, there were actually only four Southern states, former Confederate states, that voted for [Herbert Hoover](#). In the period from 1876 to 1952, there was only one other Southern state in one election that had voted for the Republican candidate.

What was significant also in Republican politics after [1876](#) was a turn away from the use of government as a major force in the society toward what we would call a small-government republican attitude toward government power. So long as the [Union Army](#) was occupying the South, the Republicans backed what we would call a comprehensive, capacious understanding of government power. After 1876, principles of laissez-faire, principles of free-market operation, became much more important for Republicans. This was part of the political change that allowed for the reconstruction of American politics after the end of Reconstruction.

The paradox involved in the political situation by the end of the 19th century can be stated simply. On the one hand, small-government republican principles stimulated economic growth, they allowed many communities to flourish as centers of social well-being, and they offered a good environment for church growth and personal religious development. On the other hand, small-government republican principles allowed for violent racism to flourish, they permitted the South to stifle democracy, and they equated American patriotism with a minimal federal state.

Act four, the civil rights movement as a religious event.

From the late 19th century into the 1950s, religion in American public life mostly worked to uphold the status quo. Evangelical and mainline Protestants in the South were solid for the Democratic Party. In the North, evangelical and mainline Protestants leaned mostly to the Republican Party. Roman Catholics were solid for the Democrats because that party was far friendlier to immigrant communities than had been the Republicans. Black voters in the North strongly supported the Republican Party until the [Great Depression](#).

FDR, [Franklin Delano Roosevelt](#), had not been particularly active as a promoter of civil rights, but he did reach out with economic programs that included African-Americans. It is worth noting, however, that as late as 1960 [Martin Luther King, Sr.](#), was a serious supporter of [Richard Nixon](#) in the election with [John F. Kennedy](#) because Kennedy's Democratic Party was so strongly associated with what had been the racist regime of the Democratic Party in the South.

The status quo began to change because of [World War II](#) and the [Cold War](#). Religion actually begins to come back into American public life in a new way in the 1930s and 1940s because of the rhetoric of the West in the Second World War and in the Cold War. Franklin Roosevelt joined [Winston Churchill](#) in talking about the struggle with Nazism and fascism as "a struggle of Western Christian civilization." And in the immediate postwar period, American leaders spoke often of "the Judeo-Christian values that were being threatened by the forces of godless Communism."

I was a young person in that era, and I thought that was just one word, "godless Communism," which was the way it was always put together. The [civil rights movement](#) brought sharply focused religion back into American public life. Of course, there were other things besides religion that were important in the civil rights movement. President [Harry Truman](#) certainly played a part in his efforts at integrating the military after the Second World War.

But that episode, too, was tied into a larger religious matter. A profitable propaganda line of the Soviet Union was to point to the segregated American military and say, "Yes, of course, Americans present themselves as friends of liberty in the world, but we know what they are like. Look at their military that is segregated." Truman acted against that propaganda line to desegregate the military. And of course, there were legal efforts of many kinds, some sponsored by the [Association for the Advancement of Colored People](#), some by white liberal groups, that fed into the historic 1954 [Brown v. Board of Education](#) decision.

Yet, even with these other forces acknowledged, the civil rights movement did not really take hold until black religious leaders mobilized a largely black church constituency by using the language of prophetic Christianity to demand dramatic changes in the United States's racist practices.

The historical work on the civil rights movement is massive, as you can imagine, and there is a great deal

of contestation over exactly how to account for the effectiveness of the civil rights movement. Certainly many factors are involved. But very strong arguments have been made that those forces working against America's segregated way of life were not particularly effective until they were vivified by the sharply religious interventions of the leaders and followers of the civil rights movement.

It is important, I think, to remember, though, that the leaders and the followers of the civil rights movement presented a complex, as well as a sharply focused, religious presence. [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#), and his colleagues are of course best known, and there is certainly with King a kind of biblical and evangelical basis that goes back to the religion of the slaves in the antebellum period.

But by the 1950s, black Christian religion in the United States had taken on characteristics that none of the white churches—none of the white religious organizations of any kind—in the country had embraced. So for example, some of the teachers of King in Atlanta, and then associates at [Howard Divinity School](#) in Washington, D.C., had traveled to India and had sat at the feet of [Mahatma Gandhi](#) and other leaders of nonviolent Hindu resistance to the British and brought back elements of Hindu pacifism that were eventually incorporated into the mindset of leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. Other influences on King had begun to advocate socialism as a solution to America's racial problems.

There weren't too many white religious people who salted their religious convictions with Hinduism and socialism in the 1950s. So King's message was eclectic. His biblical emphases came out of a long tradition of African-American Christian life, but to this root had been grafted in many elements that made his message distinct in American intellectual life.

The foot soldiers of the civil rights movement were much closer to the religious forms of black religion that had taken shape in the early years of the 19th century. This religion was visceral, not cerebral; it was biblical, not philosophical; it was supernatural, not rational; it was prophetic, not theoretical. It gave staying power to those who bore the brunt of resistance in the civil rights movement.

Here are words about [Annell Ponder](#), who was jailed once in Winona, Mississippi, because of her efforts at registering fellow blacks to vote. As reported by a friend who was in jail with her, Annell Ponder was beaten by guards when she refused to address them as "sir." As this friend reported: "But anyway, she kept screaming, and they kept beating on her, and finally she started praying for them, and she asked God to have mercy on them because they didn't know what they was doing."

The United States government first responded to appeals for reform through the courts. [Brown v. Board of Education](#), in 1954, was followed gradually—and the "gradually" I think needs to be emphasized—by other judicial decisions enforcing civil rights.

Then, there were a series of significant civil rights laws passed by the United States Congress. The [first](#) of these bills, in 1957, was enacted under President [Eisenhower](#). It was a weak bill, and not particularly effective, but it did represent, in 1957, the first national effort to enforce the civil rights provisions of the post-Civil War amendments since the 1870s.

Effective national civil rights legislation followed under the presidency of [Lyndon Johnson](#), with the general [Civil Rights Bill in 1964](#), which Johnson took as his legacy to the assassinated President Kennedy; in 1965, a [Voting Rights Act](#); and by 1968, further [legislation](#) against discrimination.

The political effect of this legislated enforcement of voting rights and civil rights was immediate. In the first presidential [election](#) after the passage of the Voting Rights Act, voter participation was up 31 percent in Virginia, 52 percent in Alabama, 60 percent in Mississippi.

I just read, I think yesterday or the day before yesterday, that one of the most recent comprehensive polls for this current election shows McCain ahead of Obama with white voters by about eight percentage points, Obama ahead of McCain with African-American voters by an astounding 83 percentage points. This sounds dramatic, but it is actually not that far out of line with voting patterns in the 1970s.

So the implementation of what had been constitutional immediately after the Civil War has had a major

effect. Religious conflict attended this civil rights revolution, obviously. Black Christians were prime supporters. Some mainline Protestants also supported it. White Southern Protestants at first vigorously resisted. Evangelical Protestants not in the South mostly sat on the sidelines. The leadership of the Roman Catholic Church was strong for civil rights. Local Catholics were sometimes opposed. The combination of active black religion and passive white religion was enough to overcome the well-established structures that had long upheld the United States' racist social order.

Now, in Act 5 we come to the present, the complicated reactions in the wake of civil rights reform.

When the Civil Rights Movement by itself is in view, the story is pretty simple. White Christian resistance was relatively weak. Within a matter of years, most white Protestants and most white Roman Catholics accepted that it was a good thing for their African-American fellow citizens to enjoy full civil rights.

Complications multiply, however, when the civil rights movement is set in broader context. Here two important contextual matters are of greatest importance.

The implementation of civil rights reform was not the beginning of big-government presence in American life, but it was the most widespread and the most dramatic expansion of big-government interest in the day-to-day domestic lives of Americans. The Great Depression, World War II, had begun a process of overturning the small-government principles and practices that prevailed since the late 19th century, but the Civil Rights Movement was the government-backed activity, government-backed influence, phenomenon, that altered the daily fabric of more Americans' lives than any previous activity of government.

After a few years, that particular expansion of federal government power was accepted by almost all segments of American society. However, the expansion of central government authority on other matters was not. Coinciding with the Civil Rights Movement was the national government's entrance into the promoting of systematic science curricula, in response to the [Sputnik launch](#) of the 1950s. These new curricula, just by the merest back of the hand, sometimes mentioned evolution and became a spark for controversy in many localities in the country.

In 1962 the Supreme Court [ended](#) the recitation of prayers in all of the nation's public schools. In 1963 it [stopped](#) devotional readings from the Scriptures in all public schools. I recently read in a very fine new book from Princeton University Press, [Does God Belong in Public Schools?](#), by [Kent Greenawalt](#), that there were more protests to the Court on these two decisions, about prayer and devotional readings of Scriptures, than there had been to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in the 1950s.

In 1973 came the historic ruling, [Roe v. Wade](#), which guaranteed a woman's right to abortion. This decision galvanized Roman Catholic and eventually conservative Protestants, and actually pushed them together in ways that helped to overcome the longstanding and virulent relationships between Catholics and conservative Protestants in American history.

Soon, further advocacy groups began to use the tactics of civil rights reform to argue for their own causes. As these activities have unfolded, particularly in court challenges to traditional laws and homosexual rights, there was more and more resistance from religious communities that were accepting of big government for civil rights but were not accepting of big government for other matters. The agitation in response to this expansion of national government contributed to the great political realignment of the political parties after the 1960s. It was this that, I think, troubled the publishers at Princeton in trying to put these graphs and things in that looked at the broad scope of American political history.

It is extraordinary to see the parts of the country that were most Democratic in presidential elections become, after the 1960s, the parts of the country that were most Republican in presidential elections. Roman Catholics, who had once been reliable voters for the Democratic Party, are now a divided constituency. Amongst Roman Catholics, as well as, I believe, every other religious group in the United States, more regular church or synagogue or mosque participation is correlated with stronger support of the Republican Party.

In the Reagan years, those whom pollsters identified as "seculars" were either evenly divided or leaned toward the Republican Party. Today, those who identify themselves as "not religiously affiliated" are one of the strongest constituencies in the Democratic column.

A final index of how this long-term history plays out is to look at the two demographic groups in American society that are closest in matters of religious conviction and religious practice. Those two groups are black churchgoing Protestants and white churchgoing evangelical Protestants. Beliefs, practices, cannot hardly be distinguished; on political allegiance there is a vast gulf.

These long-term relationships in American history, it seems to me, are the explanation for these dramatic political divides explained by religion and for the dramatic salience of religious issues in American politics.

I have raced over a lot of history here tonight, but what I hope I have shown is that this connection, the nexus of race, religion, and politics, has been very tight. The way religion and race bear on politics has changed over the decades. The fact of that influence remains undeniable.

All who want perspective on American religion and politics should, of course, pay attention to debates over the economic crisis, debates over the Iraq war, debates over health care, debates over other matters. But all of us need to see that the present grows out of the deep past.

The reasons—and here we come back to the present—why Sarah Palin was chosen to energize the white evangelical base of the Republican Party go back to the era of the Civil Rights Movement. The current chapter in the endless American debate over the potential for good and for evil of central government authority goes back to the 1870s.

The reason that Barack Obama's candidacy is such an important matter for the American history of race, religion, and politics goes back to the 1830s. It's a long history, but a history crucial for understanding what is taking place in the United States today.

Thanks very much.

### Questions and Answers

**QUESTION:** That was definitely a terrific race through history. Thank you. You indicated that at a certain point Americans accepted that slavery was not right and equal rights was the right thing. How do you explain the speculation that during the election, on election day, there will be lots of people who say they will vote for Obama but not do it when they pull the lever? So something is still there. Could you explain that?

In other words, they won't vote for him. They will say they are going to vote for him, but they will not because of racism.

**MARK NOLL:** The question you are asking really has a term of art. It's the [Bradley effect](#). I'm sure most of you know that [Tom Bradley](#), who was the mayor of Los Angeles, was actually a candidate for governor of California on two occasions, and both times the polls had a much higher figure of support for Bradley than actually voted. I think maybe one time he was defeated and one time he snuck through.

**JOANNE MYERS:** He was six points ahead going into the actual election.

**MARK NOLL:** And then lost. Yes, I think there certainly will still be a Bradley effect. Whether or not it will be as strong as that effect was 20-plus years ago is something we'll find out. Whether or not Barack Obama has succeeded in presenting his platform and his personality as the things people will vote for or against is something that will take a lot consideration.

I actually think—maybe I'm too hopeful and too optimistic—that pure race rejection of the candidate will play a smaller—I'd like to say a much smaller—factor in this particular election than in the past. It

certainly will be there. I think it will be balanced by a countervailing support for Obama, quite apart from his personality and his platform, that feels the time is right to make a statement about turning a corner. That particular vote, which will be also hard to enumerate, I think will come from Caucasians and Asians and Hispanics as well.

So yes, there are subterranean forces at work in this particular election. They could be decisive. Historians should never be prophets, so I am not going to prophesy.

**QUESTION:** Apropos of the Bradley effect, there was a [letter to the editor](#) in today's New York Times by the campaign manager for [Harold Ford, Jr.](#), who was supposed to lose by 2 percent and then actually lost by 4 percent.

**MARK NOLL:** The Tennessee senator.

**QUESTIONER:** So that is just the opposite of the Bradley effect. That could happen now, that many whites are apt to be diffident about saying they would vote for a black but when they get into the booth they will do what's right.

**MARK NOLL:** Yes. He was running in Tennessee; is that right?

**QUESTIONER:** Yes, there was a scurrilous campaign against him.

**MARK NOLL:** Right. A good intervention.

**QUESTION:** I didn't in your analysis hear you talk much about the difference of generations in terms of the current situation. But it seems to me that the current views of the young voters, both in relation to race and religion, are quite different from the seniors. Could you comment on that?

**MARK NOLL:** That's a most apropos comment. On the one side, I do think that the Bradley effect, that the residual racism that I think defined American public life for a very long time, has been much reduced.

There are more and more integrated school districts. There are more and more white and Asian and Hispanic children who have a positive relationship with middle- and upper-class black kids. There has been certainly a steady drumbeat of teaching, propaganda, ideology, that demonizes the overt kind of racism that was common in the American past. I think these things have had an effect. Younger generations, even of people who are actively religious, prove to be less keen about drawing boundary lines on race, less keen on drawing boundary lines on things like gay marriage.

Okay, that's the one side. The other side—and I'm a little more familiar with this now because of teaching at Notre Dame—is that nonracial ideological matters also in some cases seem stronger in the younger generation. So each January several hundred Notre Dame undergraduates travel to Washington at their own expense and take part in the national day of protesting the *Roe v. Wade* decision—strongly committed religious views are as characteristic of the college-age and immediate-college-age generation as of the older folks, at least by what I have read from some survey researchers.

To me that's a healthy sign that race is not the crucial determinant of political allegiance. Of course, I'd like everyone to have my views and be strongly committed to my views on what is right in public life, but I think at least some survey research would indicate that matters of conviction on other nonracial matters are actually as strong or stronger in younger people than in their elders.

**JOANNE MYERS:** I think it's also instructive, which you told me before when we were chatting, that 50 percent of the student body is for Obama.

**MARK NOLL:** Right. There was a mock election at Notre Dame and Obama won 50 percent to 41 percent, which is significant.

**QUESTION:** Actually, my question ties in to what you are talking about. Do you have any idea of how many people in the country, or what percentage of the population, hold their religion closely and how

many people hold it loosely?

**MARK NOLL:** What the survey researchers I have drawn on, and am really very much dependent upon, have done increasingly—it comes in two-year election cycles—is to ask a stronger array of questions to just the general population.

As some of you know, the University of Michigan has for decades sponsored a regular—I think it's an annual—survey of American citizens that includes a lot of political and religious matters. In the early days of that survey, questions were asked about denomination that people held. Then, eventually, there was a question asked, which actually came from the George Gallup people, about having had a born-again experience. These questions actually did correlate fairly well with some broad political allegiance.

In the last four or five, or six maybe, presidential elections, there have been more questions asked about how important religion is to someone, how often they attend religious worship, how much they are involved in voluntary activity and donation of private funds to religious activities. It turns out that although religious adherence or religious identification is important, it is not nearly as important as a combination of belief, behaving, and belonging.

So, for example, in the [2004 presidential election](#), if you identified yourself as a Catholic, all self-identified Catholics gave a majority of their vote to [John Kerry](#), by a small percentage. It wasn't large, but it was not close. But Catholics who were regular participants in their parish were a strong majority for George Bush.

The evangelical designation—there are a lot of problems with that in survey research—is used by the survey researchers I rely upon to identify about 25 percent of the nation's population—24, 25, 26 percent. Of that population, half or slightly more than half are regular participants in their churches' activities. That half is the strongest Republican segment in the political economy, apart from the active Mormons.

Evangelicals who are not active are very much closer to the general population. I think actually in 2000 and 2004 people who said, "I'm a Southern Baptist" leaned toward Bush. People who said, "I'm a Southern Baptist, I go to church regularly, religion is important to me," were very strong for George Bush.

It's actually a very interesting shakeout. It's actually the same with African-American religious participants, but in reverse. So in 2000 and 2004, if someone said, "I'm a member of the [A.M.E. Zion](#)" [African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church] but didn't take part in church activities too much, that person was more likely to vote for Bush. If the A.M.E. person said "that's what I am, and I am in church every week," that person was more likely to vote for Kerry. So participation in activity turns out to be very important as a political discriminator.

**QUESTION:** What impact do you think the fiscal crisis will have on religious convictions or its effect on the polls?

**MARK NOLL:** Obviously, that's a pressing issue. Obviously, economic matters have pushed other matters aside. My own conviction is that there are profoundly moral, maybe even theological, dynamics at work in just the ongoing commercial activity, economic activity in general. This is partly drawing upon research from the [Depression of 1837](#) more so than the current thing.

I am also fairly sure that the religious groups in the United States have never unpacked economic life in strongly theological or moral terms. In other words, part of what it means to be an American religious practitioner is you just go along with some degree of the free market and some degree of entrepreneurial religious activity. This is a great challenge, particularly for groups like the Lutherans and the Catholics, who came from Europe in highly organized, centralized forms of church life. But they have become, relative to their peers in other parts of the world, freeform democratic egalitarian.

I think that the impact will be to push other matters into the background. I don't think we are going to

see—and certainly not before the election—a strongly articulated moral position, except that everybody who watches their retirement thinks, "We've been shafted by somebody out there." But it's not the kind of focused moral and religious ongoing trajectory that we have with race issues.

**QUESTION:** I have a question about the politicization of these church groups in America. I'm thinking about [mega-churches](#) and other things, and what role you think those have.

**MARK NOLL:** The question is on the politicization of the churches. I actually think that the politicization of the churches has been overstressed in the media. You mentioned the mega-churches. My sense is that most of the strong politically oriented religious advocacy of the last, say, three or four elections has not come from mega-churches.

It is significant to me that [Rick Warren](#), pastor of a large mega-church in California, held a forum that invited Obama and McCain to both appear, and that he asked the same questions to each. Although he in the past has been associated with Republican leaders more than with Democratic leaders, he has also been severely criticized by members of what we would call the religious right for inviting Obama to his church to take part in a program aimed at AIDS and HIV eradication in Africa.

The new president of the [National Association of Evangelicals](#) is a man named [Leith Anderson](#) in the Twin Cities, Minnesota. He has a large church of several thousand members. He is intentionally apolitical in what he does in church, and I don't believe people know what his political position is.

The region of the country makes a difference. Southeast, South, Southwest, large churches, large white churches and large black churches, both tend to be more overtly and obviously political.

Church life in the United States did not receive a lot of attention by those who were interested in politics until the Civil Rights Movement brought together groups that had been kept apart. So long as there was a solid Democratic South, so long as race was the deciding matter for the Democratic Party in the South, natural alliances between southern evangelical Protestants and northern evangelical Protestants, say, were impossible.

Once the civil rights movement took place and race was to some extent removed as the strong variable that it had been before, it was possible to see groups actually acting together with political effect.

In the first Jimmy Carter election in 1976, the white evangelical population of the United States, as determined by good survey researchers, was split about 50/50. Thereafter it began to move much more in the direction of the Republican Party. The 1976 election, however, was emblematic of what had happened way back so long as polls were taking place. The white evangelical vote was a divided vote because it was divided north and south.

Once the division north and south is undermined by the successful civil rights legislation, you then have a much bigger and potentially stronger voting bloc. It's when that happened—it's not coincidental, I think—that 1976 and 1980 were the years when the word "evangelical" began to enter the American political discourse.

Did the churches change immensely? Did they all of a sudden start becoming political hotbeds? I don't think so. I think what changed was that the ancillary political activity of the churches actually began to accumulate and move in the same direction. I've never met—well, maybe there's one exception—a person who goes to church because they want to express being a Democrat or being a Republican. People go to the church, they go to the synagogue, they go to the mosque, because they want to go to worship. There are political reverberations, political effects, and those have become more important.

Actually, one last thing I would say. I do think that among some of the stronger religiously motivated political actors—I think this is on the left and the right—I think there has been more reflection, in part promoted by the Obama speech after Wright, which everybody has read. You don't have to like Obama, but it was a calm and deliberate address. And there have been comparable approaches to political life from the religious right by people like Rick Warren, simply not so well covered in the press because they

are not so prominent.

**QUESTION:** You raised an interesting point, that because of forced integration in certain parts of the country, there has been a great deal more observation of children having good relationships. You mentioned white children having warm relationships with middle-class and upper-class blacks and Hispanics and so forth. I have also heard that this reaches down in those parts of the country to the lower class, the working class, blue-collar families, and that the incidence of good old miscegenation, which was the great fear of the segregationists, is much further advanced in the South and the Midwest than it is on the coasts, where integration was not mandatory by busing. I have not seen the statistics, but I am told that that's something that has been observed.

I'd like to ask you two questions in that connection. First of all, do you understand that to be the case? And would you comment on, in particular, are young people who are brought up in evangelical congregations encouraged or discouraged from fraternizing with the other races, and have the evangelical congregations noted—do they keep any records or is there anecdotal evidence of great connection between the races?

**MARK NOLL:** That's actually a very nice question. Let me make a historical statement first and then answer the questions. I could have expanded this in either Act 2 or 3 of the talk today.

Clearly, what drove Jim Crow segregation was a great fear of what was then called [amalgamation](#) or [miscegenation](#). Not all of the lynching events were related to a kind of fear of sexual predation, but many, if not a majority, of them were. My own conclusion is that that fear is the most irrational phenomenon in American history, since the actual mixing of the races was carried out in the slave regime for centuries before it became a cause of white fear of liberated blacks.

The questions that you raise—I have actually read the same thing, about a not spectacular, but a steady, growth in what we would call cross-race marriages. I read this in [The Economist](#), which serves for me as the kind of Bible for much of the rest of the world that I don't study myself, so it must obviously be true.

The question of evangelical congregations is trickier because, in part, of the strength of both black and white traditional Protestant churches. There is a very fine sociologist at Rice University, [Michael Emerson](#), who with a team of sociologists has actually studied the phenomenon of racially mixed churches.

Racially mixed churches are more common in mainline Protestants, but they tend to be small and not very significant churches. Some of the large evangelical churches, particularly those that are more Pentecostal, those that are in the major cities of the South and Southwest, are thoroughly integrated. I have been told that the huge church pastored by [Joel Osteen](#) in Texas is one of the most thoroughly integrated congregations in the United States. That would fit with at least the recent history and some of the early history of Pentecostal churches.

My tendency would be to say that the evangelical churches probably are not as integrated as some of the other churches and religious groups in the country. But I think that would be an issue to be studied with real serious research.

**JOANNE MYERS:** I want to thank you for giving us so much to take home tonight before the debate. I invite the rest of you to join us and continue the conversation. Thank you.

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