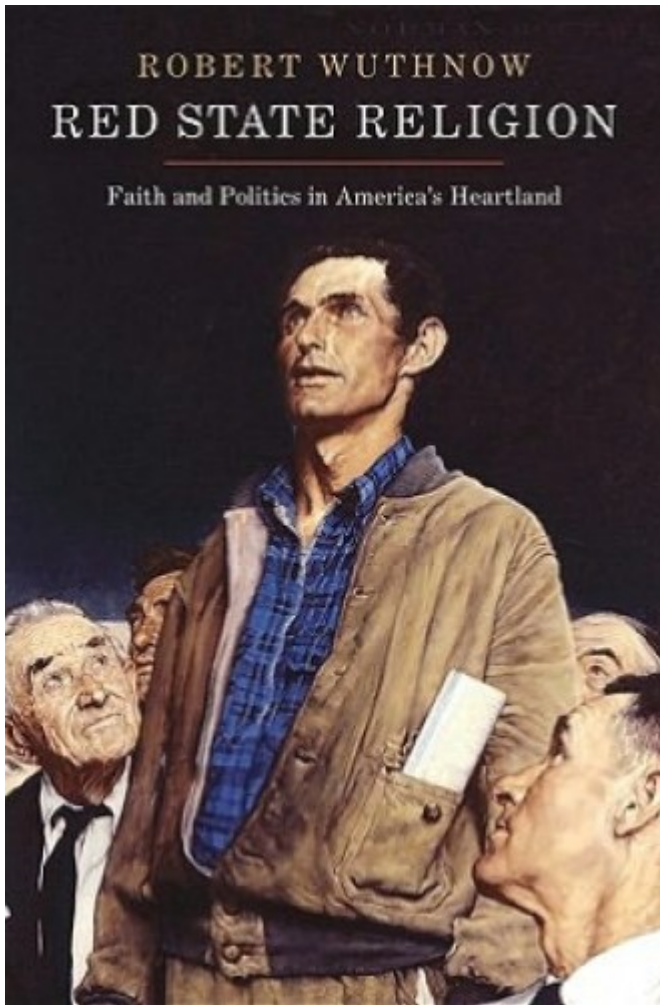


Red State Religion, by Robert Wuthnow

reviewed by [Rebecca Barrett-Fox](#) in the [August 22, 2012](#) issue

In Review



Red State Religion

By Robert Wuthnow
Princeton University Press

Kansas is about as Republican as any state could be," notes sociologist of religion Robert Wuthnow at the start of *Red State Religion*. From efforts to include the teaching of intelligent design in science curricula, to the murder of abortion provider

George Tiller, to the state House's recent passage of the anti-gay Kansas Preservation of Religious Freedom Act, Kansas politics are often polarizing and angry—and rooted at least rhetorically in socially conservative Christianity, both Protestant and Catholic. Since the election of Republican Sam Brownback as governor in 2010, critics have come to call Kansas “Brownbackistan”—a state in which conservative Christianity helps justify state policy.

But if the situation seems dire to those critics, including many moderate Republicans, Wuthnow provides encouraging news: Kansas has always been a place of political drama, stories of which are celebrated in literature, legend and song. Kansas was born in bloodshed over slavery, and Harper's Ferry ringleader John Brown worked the area extensively (he was the subject of a 2008 production at Kansas City's Lyric Opera). Brown is one of many in a long line of Kansans whose political activism has pushed against or beyond the boundaries of the law: hatchet-carrying temperance activist Carrie Nation, participants in Operation Rescue's Summer of Mercy abortion protests, antigay Westboro Baptists. Some of the earliest lunch counter sit-ins were in Wichita (in 1958), and school desegregation was mandated by *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. As Wuthnow recognizes, Kansas has been “dominated by moral politics all along.” The particulars of moral politics have shifted, but the fight to legislate Christian morality continues.

Wuthnow credits Kansas's continued conservatism to four sources: antipathy toward big government, which emerged during the New Deal; resentment of being depicted as bumpkins in the popular national imagination; a strong valuation of associational democracy; and a demographic shift that has brought more conservatives, especially from the South, to the state.

Though these trends mean that Kansas's conservatism is unsurprising, Wuthnow argues that researchers could have anticipated little about the state's history by studying only its religion and politics. For one thing, Kansans have resisted politics that have gone to the extreme right. Wuthnow smartly avoids an overly simplistic explanation of Kansas politics and religion, noting that Kansas conservatism is more pragmatic than ideological.

Carefully documenting the battles over slavery and, later, civil rights, Wuthnow shows that all along Kansans have debated and pushed back. Some of the pushback has been from leftist radicals, such as the people who founded a socialist college in Wichita and those who worked for the world's largest socialist publishing house,

located in the southeast corner of the state, in the early 1900s. Yet Kansans have also compromised; they have been less committed to ideological or theological purity than to making the state work.

The situation in Kansas cannot be understood merely as “conservatism in one era dictating conservatism in the next” because the historical record is mixed. The state has elected a number of Democratic governors; the most recent was Kathleen Sebelius, a Catholic who was denied communion because of her pro-choice politics and who left the governorship in Kansas to head the Department of Health and Human Services in the Obama administration. Few cheered when Tiller was murdered; Kansans these days are cautious, as were John Brown’s critics, about mixing religion and violence. Most Kansans find the members of Westboro Baptist Church to be incorrect in their theology—and embarrassing.

The opponents of the Kansas Preservation of Religious Freedom Act warn that imposing an antigay rights position on the state will dissuade Fortune 500 businesses from coming there, and Kansas’s agriculture sector has requested waivers to anti-immigration laws so undocumented workers can fill the labor shortage in the state’s fields. In sum, although Kansans talk tough on culture war issues, they frequently compromise in pursuit of stability and economic interests. In this way, the moderate Republicanism of Dwight Eisenhower, the only president from Kansas, remains influential.

Ultimately, Wuthnow argues, neighbors want to get along. Competition between Methodists and Catholics, historically the two largest and most influential religious groups in the state, has effectively moderated them both. Kansans of all religions have had to cooperate for practical reasons: towns could quickly disappear into tornados or dust storms or could die when the railroad went an unexpected direction.

Though many see Eisenhower’s oft-cited claim that “our government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don’t care what it is” as an endorsement of vacuous religiosity, he captured some of the nuance of Kansas religion. Too much religion can threaten the neighborliness that maintains the social fabric, but religion is still good citizenship. Wuthnow spoke to many religious leaders—some of whom asked to remain anonymous for fear of alienating their flocks—who are concerned that a focus on abortion and gay rights overshadows concerns about poverty, education and health care. Wuthnow sees such examples

as evidence that dissent exists among Christians despite the strength of conservatism at the local and state level. “Goodness and mutual respect” describe Kansans as much or more so than strict adherence to a party line or church doctrine.

Wuthnow’s examination of Kansas is detailed and thorough, a strength that at times is also a flaw, as readers who are unfamiliar with the state’s history, politics or geography will sometimes have to map towns and counties and keep track of an array of political figures on their own. Furthermore, Wuthnow’s narrow focus on Kansas, which allows him to delve deeply into the place, sometimes makes it difficult to connect *Red State Religion*’s rich content to the national scene. It is a challenge for readers to pull back to a wider perspective when the examples are so specific to the place. The paradox that Kansas is both regarded as the heartland of America and rejected as flyover country remains unresolved. These, though, are minor complaints about a book that so thoughtfully and compassionately explores the rich and complex political and religious history of the place.