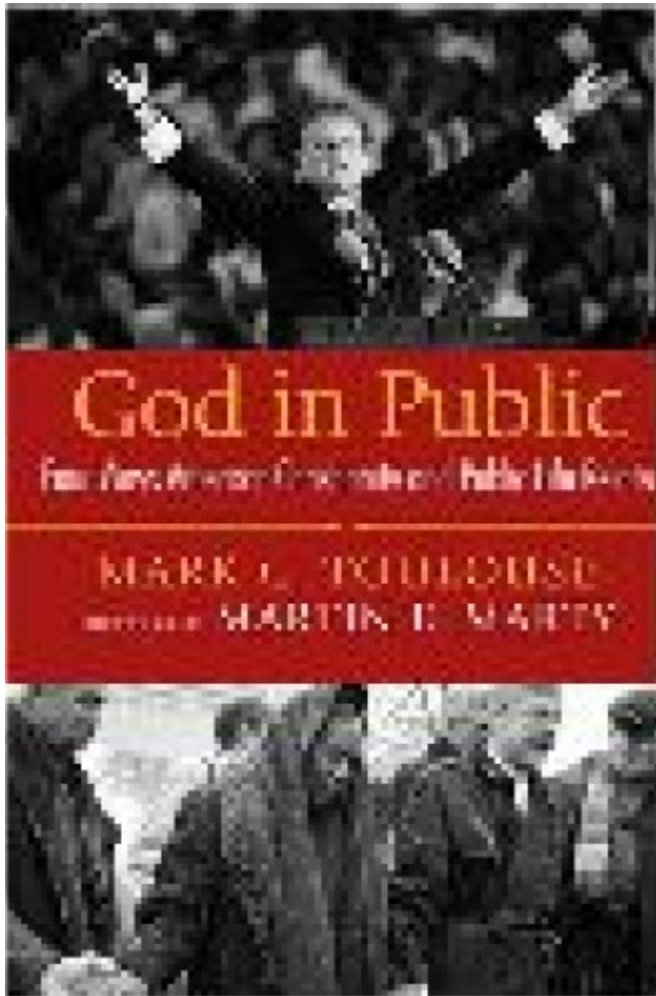


Public visions

By [Timothy Mark Renick](#) in the [May 1, 2007](#) issue

In Review



God in Public: Four Ways American Christianity and Public Life Relate

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By some accounts, the 2006 elections signaled a seismic shift in the political landscape for American Christians. Allies of the Christian right such as Senator Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania and Representative John Hostettler of Indiana were ousted. Measures to ban same-sex marriage (Arizona) and require parental notification for teenage abortions (California) failed. And the winning candidate for governor in Ohio—a former Methodist minister who spoke openly of “Christian values,” placed ads on Christian radio stations and garnered nearly half of the state’s white evangelical vote—was a Democrat.

These results may have been confounding to political pundits. They would not be to Mark Toulouse. In his ambitious and provocative new book, Toulouse, a professor of American religious history at Brite Divinity School, sets out to explore the diversity of contemporary Christian roles in public life.

Whereas conventional wisdom holds that, at least politically, American Christians are largely divided into two camps, evangelical and mainline, Toulouse argues for the importance of a “muddled middle” that is “neither well defined nor well organized, and cannot properly be fully characterized as either liberal or conservative.” The majority of American Christians are not “purebreds,” he tells us, but hold a complex mix of beliefs and positions that defy easy categorization. As the 2006 elections revealed, there are mainline Christians who oppose gay rights and evangelicals who support stem cell research and vote Democratic. More than this, there are conservative Christians who do not believe that the church should have any role in defining the laws of the state, and mainliners who favor legislating morality. “The truth is that both mainline Protestantism and evangelicalism, as coherent movements, have pretty well disintegrated.”

How, then, should we understand the public role of American Christians today? Toulouse argues that there have emerged four competing (and far from equally worthy) visions of what it means to be a Christian in the American political context.

Iconic faith is a blending of Christianity and American nationalism with “a purpose that is not primarily Christian.” Individuals who hold this sort of faith use the symbols and trappings of Christianity and the American nation interchangeably. The Ten Commandments, the flag, school prayer and the Pledge of Allegiance are all treated as sacred, often equally so. Yet the primary objective of iconic faith is to promote nationalism, “not to underscore America’s need to worship a God who cares

about all people of the world.” Many American Christians, Toulouse laments, are of this sort, employing Christian symbols to advance an unabashed and uncritical nationalistic agenda.

Priestly faith is characterized by an unwavering confidence in Christians’ ability to identify the worth and weaknesses of the nation. This is not blind patriotism, since the “priest” perceives much that is wrong with America: sexual license, abortion, divorce, godlessness. Following the model of the prophets of the Old Testament, people of priestly faith believe that certain individuals have been chosen by God to pronounce the sins of the nation and to direct its people onto a righteous path. Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, Toulouse tells us, fall into this group. Followers’ confidence in the pronouncements of the leader is often unwavering because they believe the prophet’s message is revealed directly to the leader by God. Like those characterized by iconic faith, these Christians understand their faith in nationalistic and, Toulouse believes, idolatrous terms. The goal is to cleanse America and to return the nation to its “Christian origins.”

Augustine provides the inspiration for the third category, *public Christians*. Public Christians see the church as wholly distinct from the state and advocate that this separation be preserved. They fear that, as was the case with Augustine’s City of Man, the state and its ways inevitably corrupt Christian ideals. Hence the church must tend to salvation, the state to the political order. As individual citizens, Christians certainly can become involved in the political order through voting, running for office and advocating particular positions. The church as an institution, however, “does not act publicly or politically except as a witness to the truths associated with faith.” Toulouse believes that many American Christians are drawn to this model since it allows for an individualism consistent with American political principles, but he worries that it causes the church to abdicate one of its primary responsibilities: to be a critic of and a contributor to society.

The most vital and complex model of Christian citizenship for Toulouse is the *public church*. The public church is founded on “a deeply rooted belief that God acts in history and that Christian people ought to recognize transcendent purposes in history.” The public church is suspicious not merely of the state (a defining trait of public Christians) but of itself. “When they are true to their theological beliefs, Christians who articulate this faith in the public arena include themselves among those who could be wrong and among those who are to be judged.” The goal is not to impose a biblical ethic upon all but to respect the realities of American religious

pluralism. The crucial characteristic of the public church orientation is that when Christians stand to speak in the public realm, they do not represent particular cultural or national identities, they do not speak as Republicans or Democrats, they do not even speak as Methodists or Baptists. Their goal is to “speak as Christians who believe in the meaning of the gospel.”

Toulouse’s categories are, no doubt, imperfect. At times, they seem to be drawn too obviously in order to lead the reader to the conclusion that the public church orientation is truest to Christianity. The labels themselves can be obscuring rather than clarifying. “Priestly faith” may suggest to some readers a Catholic link which is unintended; I found myself repeatedly confusing the terms “public Christian” and “public church,” a distinction that is absolutely crucial to the argument.

But what is genuinely important about these four ways of understanding Christian citizenship, and about Toulouse’s book in general, is that they break down the conventional categories that define the debate about Christian public life, and they ask us to examine Christian obligations and responsibilities anew. Iconic Christians—Christians who use Christian symbols uncritically and superficially to justify their political agendas—might well include (some) liberals fighting global warming as well as (some) conservatives defending the war in Iraq. Public Christians—Christians who refuse to participate fully in the state for fear that doing so will require moral and spiritual compromises—could range from evangelical homeschooling parents to disillusioned mainline pacifists. Similarly, Toulouse’s favored category of “public church” Christians—Christians critically engaging the gospel to shape their public persons as a collective group—includes conservatives and liberals, Republicans and Democrats. Examples discussed by Toulouse range from Jonathan Edwards to Martin Luther King.

Christians need to radically recast the contemporary dialogue about their public lives, Toulouse seems to be telling us. Instead of accepting the labels applied to them by secular political pundits, Christians need to explore crucial theological questions: How does one employ the gospel? Does one see the sin in oneself or only in others? Does one work toward the good of all people or just of Americans?

The change in thought that Toulouse is advocating is a simple but profound one. Christians must recognize that an active and engaged public church is a concept and a calling that is neither Republican nor Democratic, neither evangelical nor mainline, neither conservative nor liberal. It is Christian.

Compared even to the surprises of the 2006 elections, such a change in the political landscape would be seismic.