

# Faith in Politics, by A. James Reichley

reviewed by [James W. Skillen](#) in the [June 14, 2003](#) issue

The founding fathers were right, says A. James Reichley; "republican government depends for its health on values that over the not-so-long run must come from religion." The founders were right because democracy needs "a value system that legitimizes both individual rights and social authority and establishes a balance between the two." Only religion of the type that Reichley calls "transcendent idealism" can provide such a system. But is it only the values which religion supplies, or also the religion supplying them that is essential to republican government? And is Reichley really talking about anything more than the values of an American civil religion when he discusses faith and politics?

Reichley's judgments come at the conclusion of his book, which builds on and significantly revises his 1985 *Religion in American Public Life* (also published by Brookings) and his 2001 *The Values Connection* (Rowman & Littlefield), in which he explains in detail the seven major value systems summarized at the beginning of *Faith in Politics*. Reichley was for years a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, Washington's oldest and leading think tank. One of only a few Washington students of politics who is learned in American religions, philosophy and political thought, Reichley is now a senior fellow at the Public Policy Institute of Georgetown University.

*Faith in Politics* is really two books that are insufficiently integrated. The first summarizes his "theoretic structure of seven value systems." There are four major religious value systems, according to Reichley: monism, absolutism, ecstasism and transcendent idealism. The three major secular value systems are egoism, collectivism and civil humanism. Reichley constructs these categories as universal types and is interested primarily in how each relates to politics and government.

Yet these abstract, typological categories have very little to do with the second book, which is made up of chapters three through seven. Here the author tells the story of American politics from the nation's founding to 2002, giving special attention to the ways churches and religious organizations have been involved. This

comprehensive account makes fascinating reading. It touches on the huge variety of shifts and changes in the practices of Protestants, both black and white, Catholics and, finally in the 20th century, Jews.

In this historical part, Reichley presents little analysis that depends on his value typology. The story itself helps to explain the disconnect. Few Americans of any religious stripe think of themselves as "transcendent idealists." They believe in God and the Roman Catholic Church, or in Jesus Christ as personal savior, or in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Most blend this faith with some degree of faith in America. Religious Americans both love and hate politics and government, tensions that are on display in Reichley's history. The narrative of this hustling, bustling national political history is not enhanced or illumined by means of the sevenfold typology.

In the end, the lack of connection between the book's two subjects does not matter too much. Reichley's history is well worth reading, and his conclusion that American democratic values have religious roots is hardly controversial. Yet he does not resolve the question of whether the values that come from religion need a continuing religious vitality to sustain them. European Christianity has almost disappeared, yet democratic systems engendering respect for both individual rights and social authority seem to be surviving quite well. Reichley observes that secular civil humanism also values personal freedom and social authority, though it does so without reference to a transcendent balancing authority.

Perhaps Christianity was important to America in the past, helping to give birth to its republican values, but is no longer necessary to sustain those values. Though Reichley himself does not draw this conclusion, his book does not convince this reader that religion, as he describes it, is essential to republican democracy, as he presents it. And I find this perplexing since I am convinced that Christianity, on its own narrative terms, offers the strongest foundation for genuinely open societies, for recognition of the integrity of both government and nongovernment institutions, and for the equal public treatment of all faiths.