

## *Church-State Issues in America Today*

Ann W. Duncan and Steven L. Jones, eds. *Church-State Issues in America Today*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishing, 2008. 3 vols: 840 pp. \$300.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 0275993672 (set).

Church-state issues continue to play a significant role in our politics, our public schools, and our public life. From the religious views of political candidates, to the teaching of evolution or creationism in our public schools, to issues of biomedical ethics, Americans tend to have strong opinions on issues that center around church and state. Their concerns are often personal, and reactions many times are passionate. *Church-State Issues in America Today* endeavors to address these current issues by examining the intersection of religion and politics.

The editors of this work, Ann W. Duncan and Steven L. Jones, bring to the project a variety of experiences and expertise in the subject area of church and state. Duncan's educational background is in American religious history and religious studies, and her research, publications, and conference presentations have focused essentially on the relationship between religion and politics. Jones is Associate Professor of Sociology at Grove City College and is the former associate director of the Center on Religion and Democracy at the University of Virginia. His primary areas of academic interest are political sociology and family, state, and church conflicts.

Each volume of the set consists of a collection of essays written by a wide range of scholars. These contributors bring a diversity of expertise from political science and public administration, to law and international relations, to history, ethics and theology. This variety of perspectives brings richness to the overall work.

*Church-State Issues in America Today* is part of the Praeger Perspectives Series, a series of multi-volume works dealing with current events. This three volume set on current issues concerning church and state in the U.S. covers the spectrum of this often controversial topic. Volume 1 deals with the broad topic of religion and government. Volume 2 speaks to the issues of religion, family, and education, and volume 3 of the collection deals with religious convictions and practices in public life.

In their preface to volume 1, *Religion and Government*, Duncan and Jones pose the question, "In this time of increasing diversity . . . in a nation still primarily Christian, to what extent is latent influence or traditional reference to God acceptable?" (vii) This question is addressed by the various contributors as they focus on how religion and politics intersect in federal, state, and local governments and as they demonstrate the difficulties in defining the establishment of religion. The volume is comprised of eight chapters: "Historical Perspectives on Church and State," "Religion, Rhetoric, and Ritual in the U.S. Government," "Public Expression of Faith by Political Leaders," "The Internationalization of Church-State Issues," "The Status of Faith-Based Initiatives in the Later Bush Administration," "Political Endorsements by Churches," "The Relevance of State Constitutions to Issues of Government and Religion," and "The Limits of Free Exercise in America." Barbara McGraw's excellent introduction to the set provides the historical context for church-state issues and the framework that established the American identity. Her well crafted foundation furnishes the lens through which the subsequent essays should be viewed.

Volume 2, *Religion, Family, and Education*, turns to the intersections of religion and government that address the more personal issues of parental rights, children, and the role of religion and religious observance in the schools. This often emotional topic is discussed from both sides of each issue, from an atheist's opposition to the Pledge of Allegiance to an advocate of creationist curriculum in the public schools. The contributors take on these highly volatile issues giving historical background for perspective as well as citing key court cases, laws, and policies that have helped to determine our present course.

William Lester's chapter on "Student Religious Expression within Public Schools" begins with a description of the three major competing viewpoints regarding issues of church and state: the separationists, the perspective of neutrality, and the accommodationists. Lester notes that the path to compromise is a difficult one given such divergent viewpoints. Lester presents historical background for religious expression in public schools. Citing a variety of court cases that provided the basis for the application of the First Amendment to student religious expression, he shows that freedom of speech, freedom of the press, the right to peaceable assembly, and the right to petition government all have an important impact on the issue as well as the Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause. In addition to the various laws and court cases, Lester also offers a helpful discussion of the "U.S. Department of Education Guidelines Regarding Public School Prayer." He addresses prayer in school as well as prayer during extra-curricular activities such as athletic events and graduation ceremonies and concludes this section with a discussion of baccalaureate ceremonies. Lester takes this discussion a step further by pointing out common sources of conflict and confusion that school administrators often encounter. The chapter includes some of the technical readings of the policies and laws that have been enacted concerning student religious expression within public schools but also provides a plethora of illustrations that focus more on the practical aspects of this often volatile issue. The discussion is thorough, and provides an invaluable guide for navigating these difficult waters.

In addition to the chapter on "Student Religious Expression within Public Schools," volume 2 includes essays on "The Family and Religion," "The Creation-Evolution Debate in the American Public School Classroom," "Freedom, Commitment, and the Challenges of Pledging of Allegiance in America's Public Schools," "Free Speech and the Protection of Children," "School Vouchers in America," and "Religion and Higher Education."

Volume 3, *Religious Convictions and Practices in Public Life*, covers a wide variety of topics, some of which on the surface appear to be unrelated to church and state. The essays reveal how pervasive the impact of religious conviction is on political action and how volatile the discussions can become when people on divergent sides of an issue believe they are protected by the Constitution. One of these volatile issues is addressed by Francis J. Beckwith in his essay on "The History and Controversies of the Abortion Debate." Beckwith begins with a discussion of personhood and the nature of human beings and the ongoing controversy of when life begins, all of which he concludes are explicitly or implicitly addressed by virtually every religious tradition. He then reviews the history of abortion and the current laws that impact the practice of abortion, beginning with the lesser known cases that preceded *Roe v. Wade* through George W. Bush signing into law a federal partial-birth abortion ban in 2003, which was upheld by the Supreme Court in *Gonzales v. Carhart* (2007). Beckwith continues with a variety of arguments on the topic from philosophers, theologians, and other scholars. He expresses a number of interesting insights, such as Judith Jarvis Thomson's contention that if "a pregnant woman is not responsible for her unborn fetus in cases of consensual sex--then the moral grounds of our child support laws vanishes" (3:21). Beckwith concludes

his essay by examining the problem suggested by some who believe that if a pro-life position on abortion became law, it would violate the separation of church and state since such a law would place a religious view of human nature at its center and thereby obstruct the religious free exercise rights of those who disagree with that view. The chapter includes helpful information on the history of the abortion issue as well as a lively discussion of the various perspectives on the topic.

Additional essays found in the third volume of *Church-State Issues in America Today* are “Religiously Motivated Political Action and Same-Sex Marriage,” “Conscientious Objection to Military Service in the United States,” “Religiosity, Public Opinion, and the Stem Cell Debate,” “Tracing Sanctuary and Illegal Immigration as a Church and State Issue,” “Native American Sacred Sites under Federal Law,” “Consecrating the Green Movement,” and “Religious Liberty and Authority in Biomedical Ethics.”

Each of this set’s three volumes concludes with an appendix of selected cases that were discussed or referenced in the chapters of that volume. In addition, each volume is well indexed and each essay concludes with extensive notes as well as a “Further Reading” section.

*Church-State Issues in America Today* makes a unique contribution to the literature relative to this topic. The set is extensive in its coverage of the subject, providing a theoretical framework, ample historical documentation of the various topics, well balanced discussions of the issues, and practical information that can be utilized by those for whom the subject is pertinent. The set is written for upper level and graduate university and theological studies students, faculty, and lay persons interested in the subject of church and state. Based on these features, the three-volume set *Church-State Issues in America Today* will be an excellent addition to any theology or religion reference collection.

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