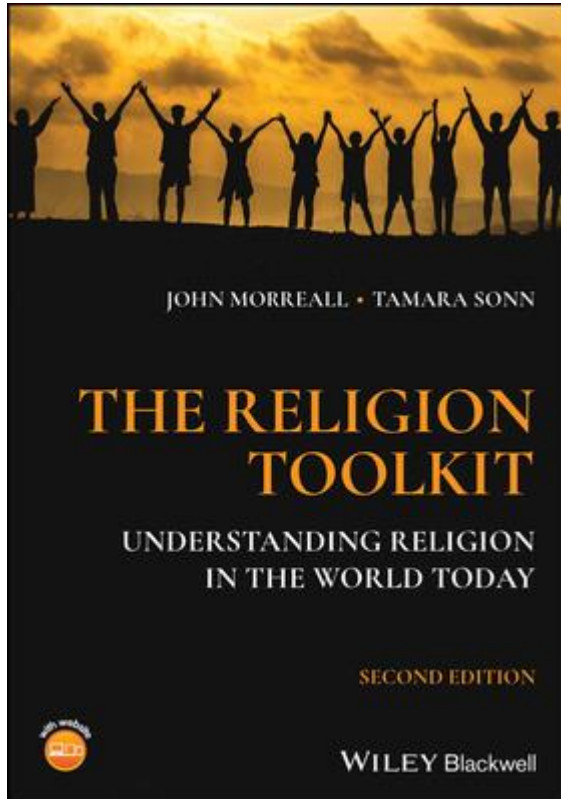


THE RELIGION TOOLKIT: UNDERSTANDING RELIGION IN THE WORLD TODAY

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A comprehensive survey of the study of religion worldwide, from ancient indigenous traditions to today's religious nationalism.

“This is an excellent book that is a good, comprehensive overview of the history of religions and the ways of studying religion within Religious Studies... it really brings religions to life for the reader.”

—Gavin Flood, Professor of Hindu Studies and Comparative Religion, Oxford University

“The authors provide a clear, first-rate introduction to the study of religions, origins, leading scholars and their theories and beliefs.... This is by far the best introductory volume I am aware of both in terms of substance, clarity, and insights.”

— John L. Esposito, Distinguished University Professor, Georgetown University, and Past President of the American Academy of Religion

The Religion Toolkit: Understanding Religion in the World Today is a clear and comprehensive introduction to the academic study of religions, providing readers an

introduction to the history and theories of Religious Studies, a survey of global religious traditions, and an overview of religion in the public sphere today.

- Discusses theory and methodology in religion, including the disciplines of anthropology, psychology, philosophy, biblical studies, and theology
- Describes the early development of religion, with overviews of traditions around the world, including Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Baha'i, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Daoism, Confucianism, and Shinto
- Covers traditions not commonly addressed in introductory textbooks, such as Santeria, Vodou, Tengrism, and indigenous traditions of the Americas
- Examines recent developments and contemporary issues such as secularization, bioethics, and the rise of religious nationalism
- Includes access to a companion website with discussion questions, additional material, and helpful primary and secondary sources

Excerpt from Chapter 11, "Religion, Identity, and Politics"

The Development of Religious Nationalism in the U.S.

Despite the transparently secular profile of the early United States, two interrelated factors remained problematic for some people. Christian supremacism -- the ancient notion that Christianity is superior to other religions and certainly to atheism -- remains the official teaching of many Christian denominations. And racism has proven intractable. These two factors had intersected in colonial America, where slavery was rationalized on notions of Christian supremacism and even those who converted to Christianity continued to be discriminated against. As historian Rebecca Anne Goetz has shown, many Christians of European ("white") heritage believed they were superior to non-Christians and to people of color, even those who were Christian. Influenced by emerging European theories about a hierarchy of human "races," many believed that traits inferior to those of Europeans were inherited, regardless of religious identity. Resistance to post-Civil War laws protecting equal rights for all citizens manifested itself in the formation of the earliest white Christian nationalist group in U.S. history: the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), in 1865. The KKK has evolved over the decades, its membership has ebbed and flowed, its structure has changed, and its list of groups considered inferior to white Christians has grown. But [it remains committed](#) to the notion that the United States is and should be exclusively a white Christian nation.

Euro-Christian/white supremacism was also manifested in a political change following the U.S. Civil War and the end of slavery. Voters in the Confederate states -- "the South" -- were incensed by the loss of their unpaid labor force and turned overwhelmingly against the Republican Party, the party of Civil War President Abraham Lincoln. The south became a secure source of Democratic votes. The phrase "yellow dog Democrats" became popular in the early 20th century, with claims that Southern voters would vote for a yellow dog rather than a Republican. Democratic candidates routinely won local and state elections, and Republican candidates in national elections could not count on Southern votes. It was under Democratic Party governance in the late 19th and early 20th century that restrictions on the rights of formerly enslaved people were imposed, in violation of Federal laws.

By the mid-20th century, Republican Party strategists began to devise ways to attract Southern votes. They also wanted to attract the votes of the “working class” generally, given the perception of the Republican Party as the party of corporate elites: anti-union and anti-labor. This was in the context of the emerging Civil Rights Movement in the U.S., a widespread social movement focused on abolishing discrimination against people of color that still existed throughout the country but was particularly egregious in Southern states. Discrimination included not only interference in voting rights but also property ownership restrictions, and segregation of schools, public transportation, businesses, restaurants, theaters, and other public spaces. The mid-20th century was also the era of the Cold War – the competition between the capitalist United States and Western Europe, and their former allies the Communist Soviet Union and its allies in Eastern and Central Europe, for dominance in the global economy.

The Civil Rights Movement and the Cold War both involved religion. Many key figures in the Civil Rights Movement were religious, most prominently, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. And the “East-West conflict,” as the Cold War was sometimes called, was characterized in the U.S. as a struggle between the godless, dictatorial Communists and the righteous, democratic West. These intersections helped politicize religion in the U.S.

The 1950s overall saw concerted efforts to make religion public. According to historian Angela Lahr, “[Evangelist Billy Graham and other evangelical leaders consistently referenced Cold War events and promoted Christian nationalism while at the same time calling on Americans to turn to God and away from sin.](#)” In 1949 Republican media mogul William Randolph Hearst told his newspaper chain to “[puff Graham.](#)” Graham was holding religious revival meetings in tents in Los Angeles at the time, with little fanfare. But Hearst saw his preaching against the evils of Communism as potentially useful to the captains of industry who viewed the Civil Rights Movement as socialist and therefore a threat to their corporate privilege. Religious fear of Communism could help their cause. Hearst’s promotion of Billy Graham catapulted him to national fame. In 1954 President Eisenhower inserted the phrase “under God” into the Pledge of Allegiance. The Ad Council, a group of executives formed in 1942 to promote the war effort, shifted to promoting freedom – interpreted economically as free enterprise, and going to church – encouraged on billboards along the country’s highways. Some Republican activists overtly added religion to their economic agenda. In 1960, founding editor of the conservative journal *National Review* William F. Buckley launched an effort to recruit college students to the Republican agenda. He convened students from across the country to form the [Young Americans for Freedom](#), pledging allegiance to a set of principles linking capitalism to “the individual’s use of his God-given free will.”

During the 1960s, the U.S. war in Vietnam, in addition to the Civil Rights Movement, deeply affected the post-Cold War youth generation. Many young people began to question the pious certainties of the older generations they believed responsible for both racism and unjust wars. Some people saw anti-war and Civil Rights activists as threatening their sense of security and even feared anarchy; calls for “law and order” increased. While religious leaders led the Civil Rights Movement and many opposed the Vietnam War, pro-status quo movements also emerged in Christianity. Among them was Evangelical political activism.

As we saw in Chapter 8, Evangelicals emphasize personal attachment to Jesus, belief in Jesus’ death as their salvation, and literal though selective interpretations of scripture. Miracle stories and history are understood literally, if not teachings about the importance of good works and struggling for social justice. They also stress the need to evangelize – preach the gospels and convert people to Christianity -- to save the country.

This was the Christianity called into service politically by Republican President Richard Nixon, who befriended Billy Graham and initiated what was called the Southern Strategy. The Southern Strategy was a plan that began with the premise that, despite the noble record of Republican President Thomas Jefferson, the Republican Party in its current pro-business form was unable to attract the majority of Black voters. But President Lyndon Johnson had passed the Voting Rights Act, and he was a Democrat. That gave the advantage to Republicans among voters opposed to Civil Rights, particularly in the South. In the words of Nixon's political strategist Kevin Phillips, ["The more Negroes who register as Democrats in the South, the sooner the Negrophobe whites will quit the Democrats and become Republicans. That's where the votes are."](#) Jemar Tisby, theologian and president of The Witness: A Black Christian Collective, reports that Nixon "emphasized that you have to face the fact that the whole problem is really the blacks. The key is to devise a system that recognizes this while not appearing to." (*The Color of Compromise*, 160). Exploiting the backlash against Civil Rights, anti-war protests, and social unrest more generally, Nixon emphasized the importance of law and order to those he dubbed the "silent majority" [in a 1969 speech](#), a veiled reference to Euro-Christians/white people.

Cold War hysteria about godlessness contributed to the religious nature of the reaction against 1960s-era civil unrest. So did the 1973 Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision decreeing that governments cannot interfere with a woman's choice to terminate a pregnancy in the first trimester. Nixon's Silent Majority gradually became the Moral Majority of Virginia preacher Jerry Falwell (d. 2007) in the 1970s. Among the Moral Majority's initial political demands was government support for private schools in which they could preach their interpretations of Christianity. Evangelical Christians began to support the Republican opposition to social spending more generally. They provided active support in the 1980s for Republican President Ronald Reagan's opposition to welfare spending and calls for "limited government" in favor of "states' rights." Limited government did not refer to the overwhelming portion of Federal spending devoted to the military – [according to Forbes magazine in 2015](#) the largest employer in the world, nor to government intervention in private matters such as family planning and people's sexuality. But it did include opposition to Civil Rights laws. And those issues became attractive to voters convinced that the U.S. was created by and for Euro-Christian/white people. "States' rights" was also attractive to industrialists opposed to Federal protections of public lands and resources. Ronald Reagan appointed James Watt (d. 2023), a lawyer committed to dismantling environmental protections and opening public lands to commercial exploitation, as the Secretary of Interior (responsible for managing public lands). Watt loosened environmental protections and opened previously protected waters and lands to drilling, mining, and deforestation. When asked about preserving the wilderness for future generations he answered, "I do not know how many future generations we can count on before the Lord returns." (Veldman, p. 28) He dismissed people concerned about the health of the planet as un-American, concealing their true fascist and communist agendas behind environmentalism.