

Religion and Politics:
How Religion Should and Should Not Inform the Public Discourse
Compiled by Rabbi Sarah Bassin

We're fine with religion in the public sphere as long as it agrees with our stance. But how do we develop a culture where religion is not just one of the many things that has become politicized? We'll explore a mix of Jewish texts along with other religious thinkers and detractors about what parameters we believe should guide all discourse of how religion informs the public sphere. What limits and protections should we seek for others and ourselves?

Session 1: Jewish historical approaches to interacting with the government

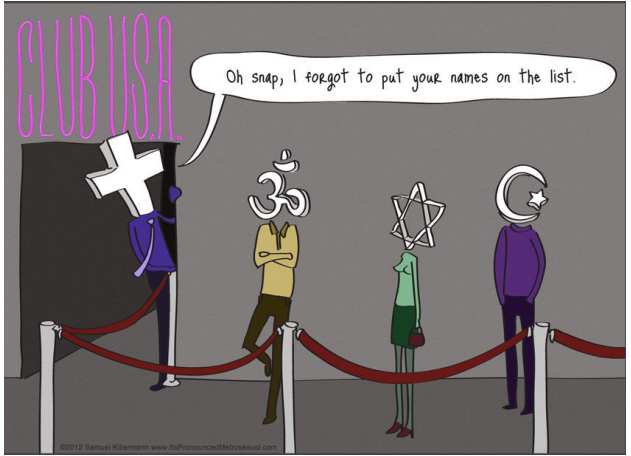
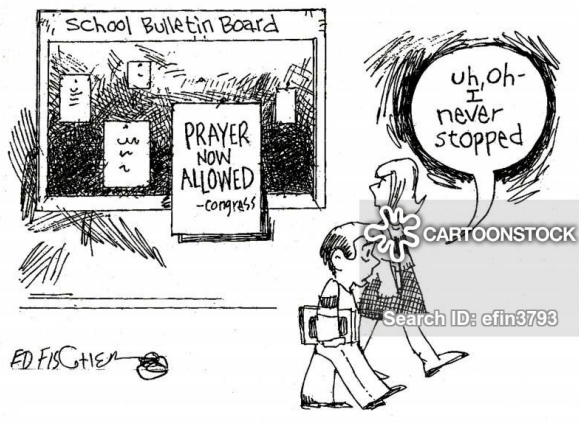
Session 2: Frameworks for the interaction between Church and State

Session 3: Applied Case Studies: State in the Church and Church in the State

*Only moral action grounded in theological learning and reflection can rise
above mere political activism.*

-Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

What speaks to you?



John Locke Letters of Toleration

For the commonwealth of the Jews, different in that from all others, was an absolute theocracy; nor was there, or could there be, any difference between that commonwealth and the church. The laws established there concerning the worship of one invisible Deity were the civil laws of that people, and a part of their political government, in which God himself was the legislator. Still, the impression left from reading the Hebrew Bible is that the religion is the political order. Thus, the biblical metaphors of intentional disobedience to that law revolve around treason and betrayal no less than sin.

Moreover, the story tells of the founding of a nation organized for political action. Not only is biblical law concerned with issues pertaining to the land of Israel and to the establishment of political structures—monarchy, judiciary, and so forth—it also addresses the rights of citizens and resident strangers within the nation-state. In short, the Hebrew Bible presents law suitable for a national, political life. This national, political, and religious order came to an end with the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E.

Jeremiah 29:7

דַּרְשׁוּ אֶת־שְׁלוֹם הָעִיר אֲשֶׁר הִגַּלְתִּי אֶתְכֶם שָׁמָּה וְהִתְפַּלְּלוּ בְעֵדָה אֶל־יְהוָה כִּי בְשָׁלוֹמָה יְהִי לָכֶם שְׁלוֹם:
 And seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you and pray to the LORD in its behalf; for in its prosperity you shall prosper.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

“Jeremiah, in other words, was doing what no one had ever done before -- he was telling the exiles that they could preserve their identity as... Jews while at the same time pursuing the common good of a society whose culture and religious beliefs were entirely opposed to their own. And they could achieve this difficult twin task without assimilation.... He was describing what it was to be a *creative minority* -- a group that was in but not entirely of the larger society...

David Brooks, June 20, 2019

Jeremiah was saying you don't need to assimilate into the new place. Nor do you need to withdraw into a culturally pure enclave. Instead, don't be afraid to be a distinct, orthodox version of yourself within a larger society. Build a rich moral community. Just don't try to universalize your faith or even become a dominant minority. Interact with the world around you, confident in your own particularity, but realize that every time you seek to dominate others, you will wind up dominated.

In a world of radical pluralism, we are all Jews. We have no choice but to build a mass multicultural democracy, a society that has no dominant center but is a collection of creative minorities.... Radical pluralism also necessitates retelling the nation's history. We've always been a universal nation, a crossroads nation, a nation whose very identity is defined by the fact

that it is a hub for a dense network of minorities and subgroups, and the distinct way of life they fashion to interact and flourish together. I used to think that America had to find a new unifying national narrative. Now I wonder if not having a single national narrative will become our national narrative.

Pirkei Avot 3:2

Rabbi Hanina, the vice-high priest said: pray for the welfare of the government, for were it not for the fear it inspires, every man would swallow his neighbor alive.

Yoma 69a

It was on that day that the Samaritans requested the House of our Lord from Alexander the Macedonian in order to destroy it, and he gave it to them, i.e., he gave them permission to destroy it. People came and informed the High Priest, Shimon HaTzaddik, of what had transpired. What did he do? He donned the priestly vestments and wrapped himself in the priestly vestments. And the nobles of the Jewish People were with him, with torches of fire in their hands. And all that night, these, the representatives of the Jewish people, approached from this side, and those, the armies of Alexander and the Samaritans, approached from that side, until dawn, when they finally saw one another.

When dawn arrived, Alexander said to the Samaritans: Who are these people coming to meet us? They said to him: These are the Jews who rebelled against you. When he reached Antipatris, the sun shone and the two camps met each other. When Alexander saw Shimon HaTzaddik, he descended from his chariot and bowed before him. His escorts said to him: Should an important king such as you bow to this Jew? He said to them: I do so because the image of this man's face is victorious before me on my battlefields, i.e., when I fight I see his image going before me as a sign of victory, and therefore I know that he has supreme sanctity.

He said to the representatives of the Jewish people: Why have you come? They said to him: Is it possible that the Temple, the house in which we pray for you and for your kingdom not to be destroyed, gentiles will try to mislead you into destroying it, and we would remain silent and not tell you? He said to them: Who are these people who want to destroy it? The Jews said to him: They are these Samaritans who stand before you. He said to them: If so, they are delivered into your hands to deal with them as you please. Immediately, they stabbed the Samaritans in their heels and hung them from their horses' tails and continued to drag them over the thorns and thistles until they reached Mount Gerizim. When they arrived at Mount Gerizim, where the Samaritans had their temple, they plowed it over and seeded the area with leeks, a symbol of total destruction. This was just as they had sought to do to the House of our Lord.

It is apparent that Shimon HaTzaddik wore the priestly vestments even outside the Temple. This would seem to be in contravention of the ruling of the other laws prohibiting this. The Talmud resolves the contradiction: If you wish, say Shimon HaTzaddik did not wear a set of genuine, sanctified priestly vestments; rather, he wore garments that were fitting to be priestly vestments in that they were made of the same material and design. And if you wish, say instead that he indeed wore a set of genuine priestly vestments, but in times of great need, such as when one

seeks to prevent the destruction of the Temple, it is permitted to violate the *halakha*, as indicated by the verse: "It is time to act for the Lord, they have nullified your Torah" (Psalms 119:126). עת לעשות לה' הפרו תורתך

Rev Broderick Greer

Historically, Christianity has held in tension various approaches to **cultural domination, withdrawal and transformation**. Some Christians have sought holiness through withdrawal (nuns, monks, the Amish), others through domination (the Inquisition, the Crusades, colonization, settlement schools) and yet others through progressive social transformation (Quakers advocating for abolition, black southern Christians fighting for civil rights, the Moral Mondays movement). Those preoccupied with personal salvation have often found themselves unconcerned by systemic evil; those preoccupied with social transformation have often found themselves unconcerned with personal evil; and those preoccupied with domination have found themselves concerned with painting those not in their camp as evil and deserving of a sort of heavy-handed spiritual domestication.

Ask the Rabbis | Does Politics Belong on the Bima? Moment Mag 2008

Sephardi

Politics is inappropriate for discussion in mixed company. Political opinions are considered highly personal and extremely sensitive in our culture. The advocacy of any particular viewpoint in a place of worship is almost certain to cause offense and is likely to alienate congregants who disagree. To ensure that our synagogues are warm and comfortable “homes away from home,” it is imperative that the pulpit not be used as a political soapbox. On the other hand, a rabbi’s primary role is to serve as a teacher and spiritual guide, and any light that the Torah’s wisdom may shed on political matters is certainly worthy of being shared with one’s congregation. Thus, the approach I adopt is twofold. I attempt to model the application of traditional Jewish methods of critical thought and moral analysis to matters of public policy by demonstrating how one must try to penetrate beneath the surface of political debate, cast aside the rhetoric and then clearly identify and precisely define the issues. Furthermore, I like to encourage my congregants to assume full responsibility for their “take” on a given political point, diligently studying it from all sides, contemplating its nuances rigorously and not allowing the media or “spin doctors” to do their thinking for them. All the while I strive to keep my personal views out of the picture and hope that the tools with which I equip my congregants help them in their quests to develop well-informed and reasonable ideas.

Rabbi Joshua Maroof, Magen David Sephardic Congregation, Rockville, MD

Modern Orthodox

This question offers a classic case of on the one hand...and...on the other hand. On the one hand: Judaism asks us to live religiously in every aspect of life. The prophets challenged kings’ moral failure, royal exploitation of the people and favoritism to the powerful and wealthy. Therefore, rabbis should discuss burning political issues, apply Torah principles to them and maybe even endorse (or reject) candidates. On the other hand: Most rabbis know less about politics than well-informed analysts—who may be their congregants. So rabbis are likely to dissipate their credibility by indulging in political analysis. Furthermore, religious interventions frequently harm the political process. Democracy depends on negotiations and compromises

amid constantly changing conditions. Religious approaches tend to wrap issues in the mantle of absolute values and eternal, unchanging divine commandments, which block compromise. Religious interventions have led to extremist, sometimes violent politics. Who can forget how right-wing, religious rabbis denounced Israel's offer of territorial compromises and two important Orthodox rabbis spoke menacingly about the right to kill Israel's prime minister? In the U.S., polarization, government gridlock and the culture wars of the past two decades reflect, in part, the evangelical intervention in American politics. Jews also worry that "Christianization" of American politics may roll back Jewish gains in becoming fully equal in American public life. So on which hand should we act? Since it is illegal under American law for non-profit, tax exempt organizations to take part in politics, rabbis in synagogues should not be in politics.

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, New York, NY

Conservative

Recently, I was urged to teach my congregation about the developing situation between Israel and Iran because it may be a mortal threat to Israel. Since I have no greater expertise than many members of my community, I responded, in part, by speaking of "the belief that I share with all my rabbinic predecessors that knowledge of Torah and Jewish spirituality are the bedrock of strength and tenacity in any Jewish community. That's my post, and I shall not abandon it to take on someone else's assignment. God forbid that we should ever turn all of our rabbis into political analysts and military advisers. Judaism, and thus Israel itself, would be dangerously, if not disastrously, impoverished." On the other hand, when it is argued—to take one example—that torture can be tolerated in extraordinary times because mortal threats to the nation override normal legal and ethical constraints, I am duty bound to teach that (a) Judaism has never believed that all steps are legitimate when attempting to save a life; (b) one may not simply assume without argument that threats to a nation are different from threats to individuals in this respect; and (c) torture in interrogation desecrates the divine image in every human being to which an abundance of classical texts testify. On such issues, I do preach and teach. When one does so, however, one should never lose the ability to say to oneself those four very civilizing words: "I might be wrong."

Rabbi Gordon Tucker, Temple Israel Center, White Plains, NY

Reform

Issues, not individuals. Policies, not partisanship. Concerns, not candidates. These guidelines should direct synagogues as they chart their critical role in this election season. Global warming, the Iraq war, Middle East peace, health care reform, the role of government in securing a safety net for Americans in need, immigration policy, confronting terrorism effectively, economic hardship—these are just some of the great moral issues and political challenges confronting America. Synagogues have long been powerful prophetic voices in American public life and must continue to be so. Educational debates and presentations are candidates for rabbinic sermons; adult education classes, social action, social service and advocacy programs constitute appropriate ways of raising awareness of such issues....The key legal limitation on synagogues is that they cannot spend one penny, or one second of staff time, supporting or

opposing a candidate or party. It is also good policy: The last thing we need is to tear our synagogues apart over which candidates they should oppose or support. By sticking to issues and not candidates, synagogues can fulfill our obligation of prophetic witness without violating the law.

Rabbi David Saperstein, Director, Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, DC

Reconstructionist

Judaism, as a tradition of values, demands our involvement in public affairs. From Isaiah to Maimonides to Judith Plaskow, thoughtful Jews concur with Elie Wiesel: “Indifference is not an option.” Where we gather in real time (*bet kneset*), we address issues of the day. Where we study (*bet sefer*), the learning must lead to action. Even public prayer (*bet tefilah*) requires nine others. Every function of a synagogue demands our engagement with current societal needs. Congregations discuss values, and with them, political issues. But promote political parties? Prohibited. Candidates? We can’t...We must not bifurcate between “spiritual” and “political.” The *yotzer* nature blessing should motivate us to stem global warming; our “Redemption Song,” *Mi Chamocho*, should recall those too impoverished or oppressed to be free. These are political and spiritual concerns in which upcoming elections loom large. Avoiding them, we risk irrelevance. Bless the tradition that encourages us to grapple, to take respectful action, and to vote for whomever we deem likeliest to heal our country and our world.

Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb, Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation, Bethesda, MD

Renewal

An evangelical Christian pastor said that Bible-loving Christians come to different conclusions about the issues of our day, including abortion. He concluded that it was not his work to tell them for whom to vote, but to remind them of their loyalty to the Kingdom of God. I resonate with him. If politics in the synagogue means endorsing one candidate or party over another, then I don’t want politics in my *shul*. (Besides, its not legal, at least in the U.S.!) However, it is appropriate to focus on the criteria we use to choose our governments.

Rabbi Daniel Siegel, Director of Spiritual Resources, Alliance for Jewish Renewal, Philadelphia, PA

Independent

The nexus between religion and political life invites us to revisit the roles of priest and prophet in Biblical society and discuss their relevance today. Historically, the *Tanach* separated civil and religious authorities. In “Priest and Prophet,” Hayim Nachman Bialik describes the prophet as an uncompromising zealot who seldom engages in diplomacy. Moses is not a people pleaser; if Moses had led our ancestors into the Promised Land, he might well have engaged in holy war against the Canaanite nations to fulfill the divine command. Moses’ successor, Joshua, shows a priestly personality when he makes covenants with the surrounding Canaanite nations.

The Hebrew word for prophet, *Navi*, means “speaker.” Neither seers nor clairvoyants, the prophets spoke out against society’s evils. Not afraid of condemnation or incarceration, they were among the first to stage demonstrations against governmental oppression. Jeremiah wore

an ox's yoke over his shoulders to demonstrate the heavy burden of King Jehoachim's rule. Prophets also challenged the priesthood when it engaged in practices that negated fundamental principles of religious belief and doctrine.

The roles of priest and prophet should not exclude one another, particularly in this election year. *Kadosh* translates as both "holy" and "other," and Martin Buber says, "holiness is otherness." Therefore, the synagogue would be amiss if it were not involved in presenting dissident political views. The synagogue should maintain its three-fold function as the house of prayer, study and gathering.

Rabbi Harold S. White, Senior Jewish Chaplain, Georgetown University, Washington, DC

Politicians and Faith

Joe Lieberman

In this spirit, the subject I would like to discuss with you this morning is the relationship between religion and politics in America, a subject that is very personal to me. You see, my Jewish faith is central to my life, including my career in politics. My faith has provided me with a foundation, an order, and indeed a purpose, and has so much to do with the way I navigate through each day, both personally and professionally, in ways both large and small...

The United States was formed, as the Declaration of Independence says, to secure for the people of this country the "inalienable rights" of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" that were endowed by our Creator. In that way, the United States of America was and is a faith-based initiative. What is equally striking and remarkable is that although our Founders were overwhelmingly men of the same Christian faith, the founding documents they bequeathed us guarantee religious freedom, including the right of every American to hold elective office regardless of his or her religion.

In American history, the sublime and serious combination of religion and democracy has been a force for good in our public life. Some of the great movements of conscience in America emerged from the convictions of religious people and used the language and liturgy of faith to build support... People of faith are also strengthened by their faith in God to make clear and proper distinctions and choices. This view is antithetical to moral relativism—it is a positive, affirmative worldview that is not only deeply American, but that is a crucial ingredient to any culture that aspires to be free and prosperous. After all, the greatest source of America's strength and hope is not in the divisive politics of Washington. It is in the broadly shared values of the American people and the unity of action so many of us derive from the strength we find in the varied houses of worship we attend.

Jimmy Carter

"I believe now, more than then, that Christians are called to plunge into the life of the world and to inject the moral and ethical values of our faith into the processes of governing." "What is the proper response from people of faith when there is an obvious disparity between our

government's policies and our religious beliefs?" asks Carter. Several sentences later, he answers: Look to the example of Jesus and his disciples, who demonstrated that "civil disobedience is in order when human laws are contrary to God's demand."

Pete Buttigieg

"I think it's unfortunate [the Democratic Party] has lost touch with a religious tradition that I think can help explain and relate our values," Buttigieg told *The Washington Post*. "At least in my interpretation, it helps to root [in religion] a lot of what it is we do believe in, when it comes to protecting the sick and the stranger and the poor, as well as skepticism of the wealthy and the powerful and the established."

Charles Taylor, *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*:

1. No one must be forced in the domain of religion or basic belief. This is what is often defined as religious liberty, including of course, the freedom not to believe. This is what is also described as the "free exercise" of religion, in terms of the U.S. First Amendment.
2. There must be equality between people of different faiths or basic belief; no religious outlook or (religious or areligious) [world view] can enjoy a privileged status, let alone be adopted as the official view of the state.
3. All spiritual families must be heard, included in the ongoing process of determining what the society is about (its political identity), and how it is going to realize these goals (the exact regime of rights and privileges)

People for the American Way -- 12 Rules for Mixing Religion and Politics

1. There can be no religious test for public office, nor a religious test for participation in the political process.
2. While it is appropriate to discuss the moral dimensions of public policy issues, religious doctrine alone is not an acceptable basis for government policy.
3. Public officials have every right to express their personal religious beliefs, and no right to use the power of their office to proselytize or coerce others to adopt any religious beliefs or practices
4. Government institutions must show neither official approval nor disapproval of religion, or favor one religion over another
5. Religious institutions may cooperate with government in programs supporting the common good, but public funds must not be used to support proselytizing, religious education, worship or discrimination
6. Government has a right to demand that religious institutions and individuals comply with reasonable regulation and social policy
7. Public officials cannot use their religious beliefs as a rationale for failing to uphold the duties of their office
8. Political discourse should respect religious pluralism

9. Political figures and the media should not treat religious constituencies as monolithic; political and religious leaders should not claim to speak for an entire religious community on public policy issues
10. Politicians and media should not equate orthodoxy with authenticity
11. Religious and political leaders should not “cry wolf” about religious persecution
12. Religion should not be used as a political club.

Hanotein Teshua -- Praying for our government in contemporary Orthodox siddurim

“He who grants salvation to kings and dominion to rulers, whose kingdom is a kingdom spanning all eternity, who releases David his servant from the evil sword, who places a road in the sea and a path in the mighty waters, may he bless The President, the Vice President, and all the Constituted Officers of Government of this Land. The King who reigns over Kings in his mercy may he protect them from every trouble, woe, and injury, may he rescue them and put into their hearts and into the hearts of all their councilors compassion to do good with us and

with all Israel, our brethren. In their days and in ours, may Judah be saved and may Israel dwell securely, and may the Redeemer come to Zion. So may it be his will, and let us say: Amen.”

First printed version of hanotein teshua

“He who grants salvation to kings and dominion to rulers, whose kingdom is a kingdom spanning all eternity may he strengthen, bless, and uplift higher and higher our Lord King Fernando. May the King of Kings redeem his soul from death and in war from the sword. And may He incline his heart to do good to Israel and to speak good of them wherever they are and let us say Amen.”

Creative Prayers for the Government

Prayer for our Country in a National Emergency by Rabbi Chai Levy

God of Justice, Help us in this time of national emergency, The real national emergency, that is: A crisis of leadership at the highest levels of government, A crisis of truth, A crisis of the abuse of power, A crisis of democracy. God of Truth, Help us face the real national emergencies: The climate crisis that threatens Your precious and precarious world, The crisis of gun violence, as we mark the anniversary of another school shooting and remember the lives stolen and shattered, The crisis of the deep divides in our country, The crises of hatred, racism, and poverty. God of Hope, Give us faith in America, and help us work toward an America that merits our faith. Amen.

T’ruah: Rabbis for Human Rights

Our God and God of our ancestors, the One who inspires salvation, Source of life and power, may You bless and protect the leaders of our nation and all those who exercise authority in keeping with our laws. May the Holy One of Blessing bring strength to all who work in our communities on behalf of those who need our support, strengthening them both in body and in spirit, and rewarding their efforts with success. May those in leadership act in accordance with the rabbinic insight that the truly strong are those who raise up the fallen; the truly honored are those who honor caregivers; and the truly wise are those who acknowledge the vital work of all our teachers. We turn to our leaders for inspiration and hope, direction and guidance. May they lead us in paths of peace, build communal cohesion through both word and deed, and bring about the blessing we pray for at the conclusion of each prayer service: May the One who brings peace on high, keeping fire and water in a delicate balance, bring peace and growing safety and prosperity to our world below. And let us say: So may it be.

Most U.S. adults want religious groups to stay out of politics

% of U.S. adults who say churches and other houses of worship should ...



During political elections, should churches/other houses of worship come out in favor of one candidate over another?



Churches and religious organizations have ...



Note: Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

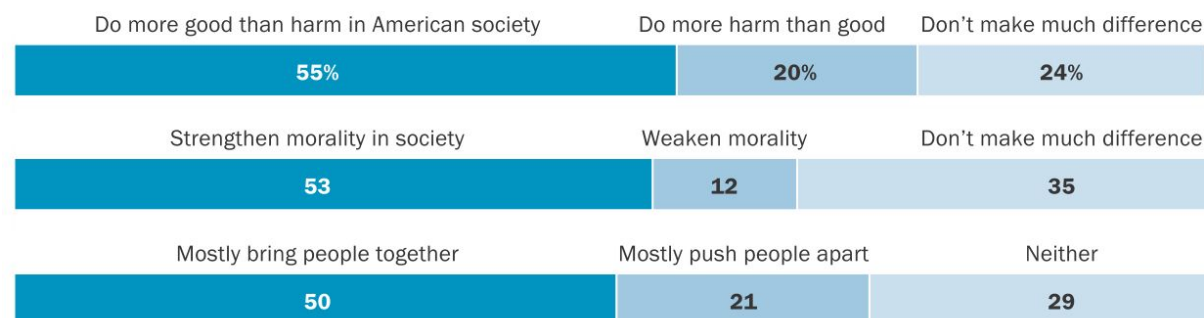
Source: Survey conducted March 18-April 1, 2019, among U.S. adults.

"Americans Have Positive Views About Religion's Role in Society, but Want It Out of Politics"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Many in U.S. see religion as force for good in society

% of U.S. adults who say churches and religious organizations ...



Note: Those who did not answer are not shown.

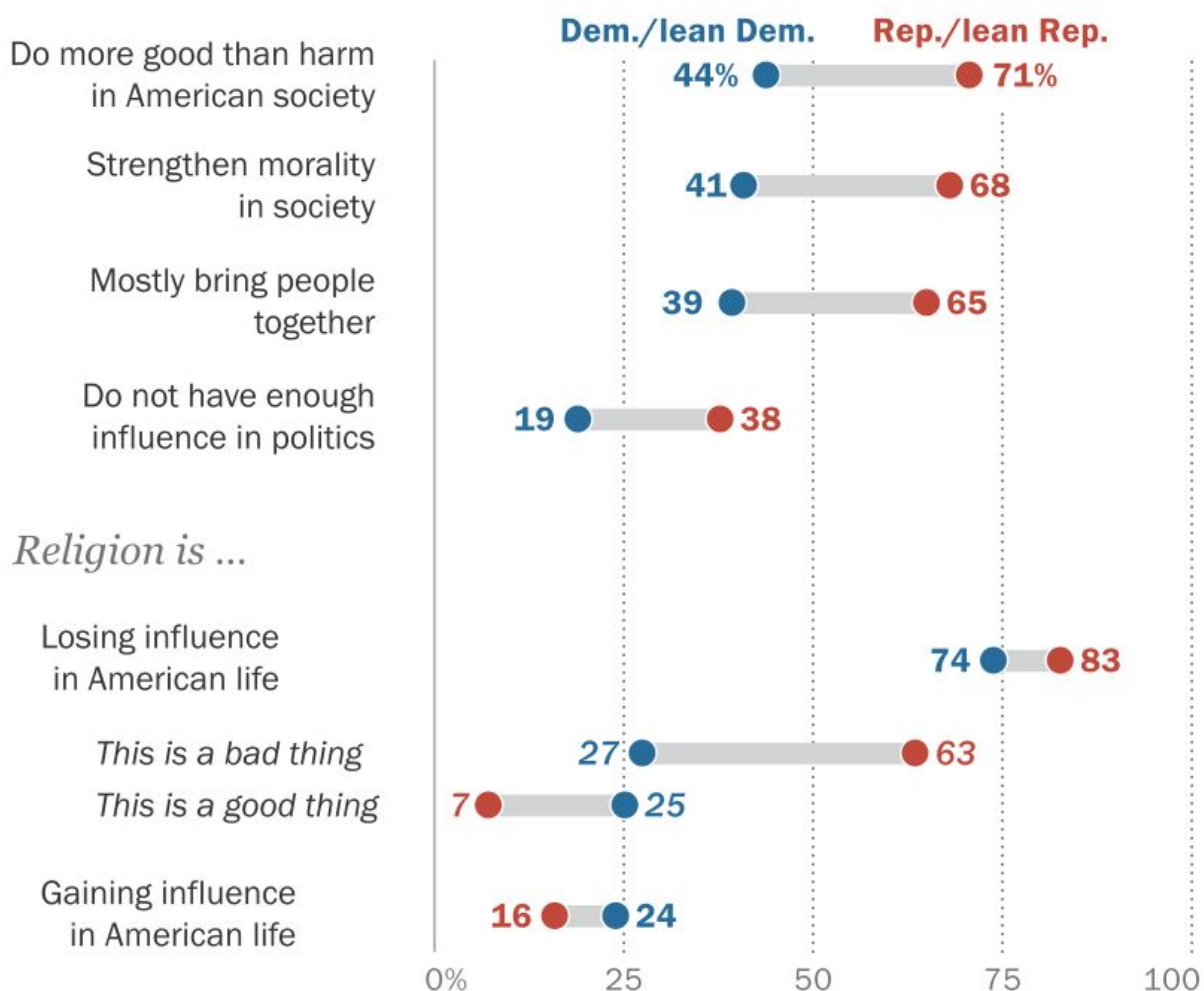
Source: Survey conducted March 18-April 1, 2019, among U.S. adults.

"Americans Have Positive Views About Religion's Role in Society, but Want It Out of Politics"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Republicans and Democrats have very different views about religion's impact on public life

Churches and religious organizations ...



Source: Survey conducted March 18-April 1, 2019, among U.S. adults.

"Americans Have Positive Views About Religion's Role in Society, but Want It Out of Politics"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Christian Coalition

Christian Coalition offers people of faith the vehicle to be actively involved in impacting the issues they care about - from the county courthouse to the halls of Congress. The Coalition is a political organization, made up of pro-family Americans who care deeply about ensuring that government serves to strengthen and preserve, rather than threaten, our families and our values. To that end, we work continuously to identify, educate and mobilize Christians for effective political action.

Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism

For six decades, the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism (the RAC) has been the hub of Jewish social justice work. As a joint instrumentality of the Union for Reform Judaism and the Central Conference of American Rabbis, we represent the values of the largest and most diverse Jewish Movement in North America. The RAC mobilizes around federal, state, and local legislation; supports and develops congregational leaders; and organizes communities to create a world overflowing with justice, compassion, and peace. As part of a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, our work is completely nonpartisan.

Chabad -- A challenge by Jay Michaelson forward.com

Why is Chabad's leadership cozying up to extremists and theocrats? To be sure, there are some ideological affinities. For decades, Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jews have supported the Christian Right's efforts to enshrine religious principles in civil law, increase funding to religious institutions (especially their own) and exempt religious entities from civil rights laws. But the World Congress of Families goes beyond those efforts... Perhaps Chabad's leaders do not know of the extent of WCF's extremism. And yet, everyone in Russia knows what's in store for the gay and lesbian community. Chabad leaders can't stand next to President Putin and the Orthodox patriarchs and pretend that they are favoring only benign conservative policies. Nor can they read through next week's WCF program and fail to notice its overwhelmingly conservative-evangelical, hard-right orientation. Some have suggested more earthly motivations. Cozying up to Putin has given Chabad influence in Russia that is unparalleled anywhere else in the world. That influence comes with power (especially over Russia's Jewish community), prestige and money. And since Putin's inner circle helped found the World Congress of Families, the network is Putin is power is cash.

Likewise, in the United States, faith-based initiatives and other erosions in the wall between church and state have yielded short-term bonanzas for Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox institutions. Some, as this newspaper has reported, are outright scams, siphoning taxpayer dollars to nonexistent schools and academies. Others are perfectly legal. But however tasty the right-wing porridge may be, it comes at the expense of American Jewry's birthright: a democratic country in which religious dogma is not imposed as law. That birthright has enabled our community to survive, grow and flourish. It is a *chillul hashem*, a desecration of God's name, for Chabad to help those who would destroy it.