

# For Goodness' Sake

Why So Many Want Religion to Play  
a Greater Role in American Life

A report from Public Agenda prepared for The Pew Charitable Trusts



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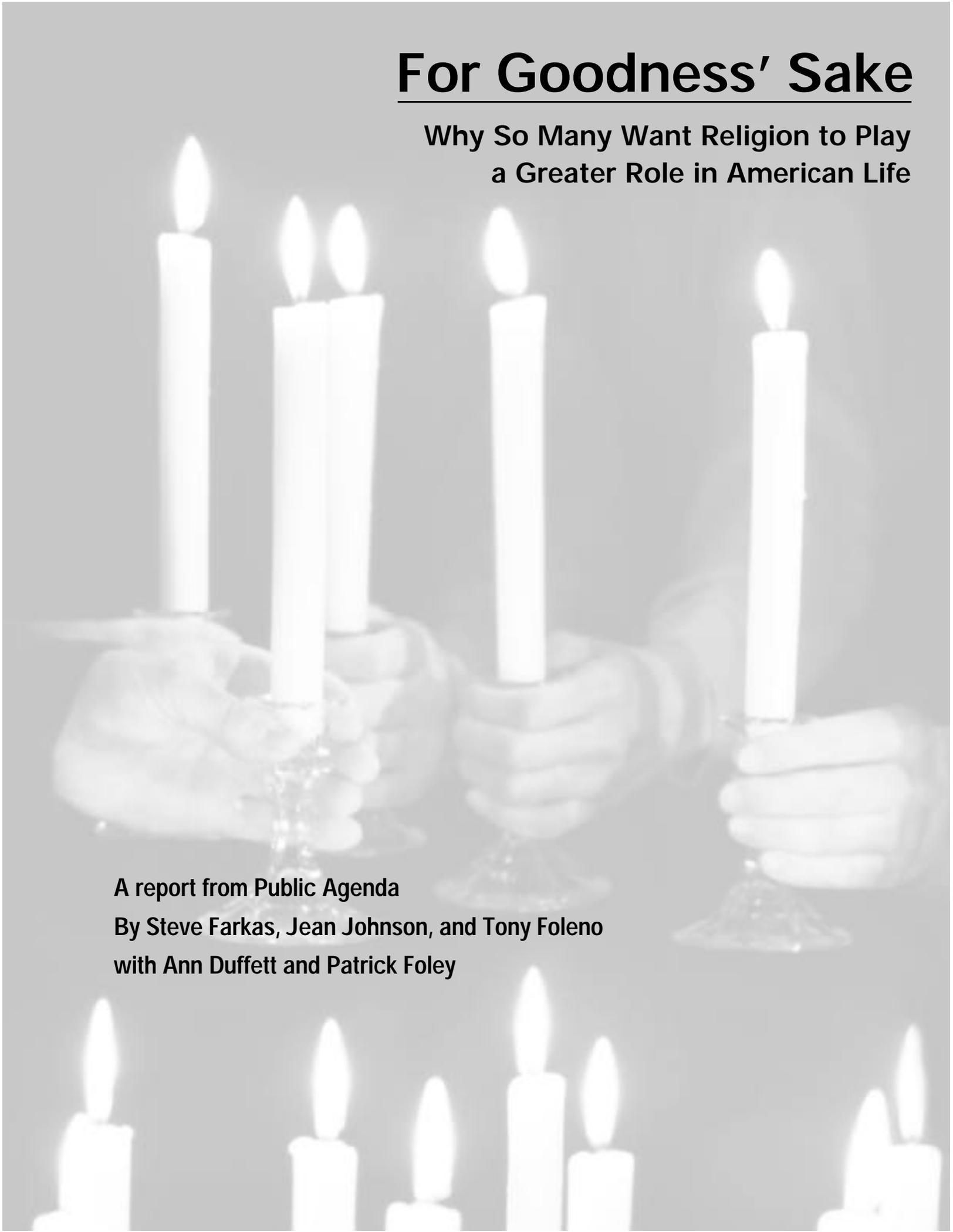
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a Greater Role in American Life

A report from Public Agenda

By Steve Farkas, Jean Johnson, and Tony Foleno  
with Ann Duffett and Patrick Foley



# ABOUT PUBLIC AGENDA

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Founded in 1975 by social scientist and author Daniel Yankelovich and former U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Public Agenda works to help the nation's leaders better understand the public's point of view and to help average citizens better understand critical policy issues. Public Agenda's particular expertise lies in crafting research studies that explore different points of view with empathy and that probe beneath surface responses to capture the public's concerns and assumptions. Our in-depth research on how citizens think about policy forms the basis for extensive citizen education work. Our citizen education materials, used by the National Issues Forums and media outlets across the country, have won praise for their credibility and fairness from elected officials from both political parties and from experts and decision makers across the political spectrum. Our Web site, Public Agenda Online ([www.publicagenda.org](http://www.publicagenda.org)), provides comprehensive information on a wide range of public opinion and public policy issues.

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# INTRODUCTION

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Few Americans were surprised to find religion a continuing leitmotif in the past year's presidential election. As in previous campaigns, both candidates regularly attended services and met with prominent leaders of different faiths. Both candidates, Vice President Al Gore and Governor George W. Bush, spoke in sometimes personal terms about their own religious beliefs. The nomination of Senator Joseph Lieberman, the country's first-ever Jewish candidate on a national major party ticket, sparked laudatory editorial and public comment and prompted nothing more than a short-lived, inside-the-Beltway controversy over whether some of Senator Lieberman's campaign comments put too much emphasis on religion or just the right amount.

During the campaign, the Reverend Billy Graham announced support for Mr. Bush. Meanwhile, the Reverend Jesse Jackson backed Mr. Gore. At various points in the campaign, Mr. Bush reached out to his base of traditional Christian voters, while Messrs. Gore and Lieberman looked to African American churches to help get out the vote.

## Acceptance and Controversy

While most Americans seem to accept this interplay of religion and politics as a matter of course, the role of religion in public education has been far more contentious. School prayer, holiday plays, Bible clubs and the teaching of evolution have ignited controversy and litigation, often launching decade-long community debates. Typically, these debates unearth what seem to be irreconcilable differences between popular opinion and constitutional principles. While communities often seem to call for more religion in public schools, judges routinely make rulings that seem, in the public's mind, to prescribe less.

In their private lives, Americans say they value their religious faith and seem especially devout. Surveys show that Americans are more likely than the British or the Germans, for example, to say that they have never doubted the existence of God.<sup>1</sup> Americans often name loss of religion as a leading cause of intractable social problems such as drugs and crime. In fact, even a

majority of teenagers—a group often assumed to be totally captivated by the here and now—says faith in God is an important part of their lives.<sup>2</sup>

## A Secular Cast

At the same time, much of American life has a far more secular cast. Americans cherish their own faith, but the vast majority also consider freedom of religion a uniquely important national value. People may call for more religion to counter social ills, but they also put their faith in science and technology. Americans may value spirituality, but money, power and fame seem to garner more attention. News media routinely offer an agnostic view on religious matters, and some have charged that the country's mass entertainment media are not just worldly, but sometimes utterly contemptuous of religious faith. Yet the popular media—profane as they may be—remain just that: wildly and broadly popular.

*Why is it that Americans so often lament the loss of religion in public life, and what exactly do they mean by this?*

## Too Much Religion or Not Enough?

So what exactly does all this mean? What are Americans saying about faith and religion and its importance in their own lives and the life of the nation? Why is it that Americans so often lament the loss of religion in public life, and what exactly do they mean by this?

With the support of The Pew Charitable Trusts, and in conjunction with the establishment of The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, Public Agenda recently completed an in-depth national study of Americans' views on these issues. *For Goodness' Sake: Why So Many Want Religion to Play a Greater Role in American Life* is the summary of this research.

The Pew–Public Agenda project touched on a wide range of issues. We hoped to learn, for example, whether individuals of different faiths and backgrounds see

these issues and questions differently. We wanted to know whether those seeking to increase religion's role in public life share any views with those who fear that religion is sometimes less than benign. Or are these two groups irreconcilably divided? Is there really a gap between what most typical citizens want and the nation's historic commitment to separation of church and state, and if so, how wide is it? What role, in the end, do Americans really want religion to play in the political arena, in the nation's schools and in their social and community lives?

### Helping People Feel Comfortable

Like most Public Agenda research, *For Goodness' Sake* grows out of a multifaceted effort extending over many months. The research began with interviews with experts whose work focuses on religion and public policy. Researchers then conducted focus groups with typical Americans in cities nationwide. Although some of these groups included Americans of many faiths, others were organized with distinct subgroups so that respondents would feel relaxed expressing their views and so that researchers could devote more concentrated attention to their particular concerns. In addition to the general groups, focus groups were conducted with evangelical Christians, Catholics and Jewish Americans. The study also takes a look at the views of three leadership groups—elected officials, journalists and Christian leaders.

### Taking a Half Hour of People's Time

The centerpiece of the research is a national random sample telephone survey of 1,507 Americans nationwide, an in-depth exploration that took a full half hour for respondents to complete and contained over 100 different question items. The survey covers the views of evangelical Christians and Catholics, among others, and includes oversamples of Jews and nonreligious respondents.

Public Agenda routinely pretests questionnaires for comprehension and clarity, but the research team redoubled their efforts for this study. For example, we added special questions to the general questionnaire to capture specific concerns of particular groups such as evangelical Christians or Jews. Senior Public Agenda

researchers also personally administered draft questionnaires to respondents, specifically looking for questions that made them uncomfortable or seemed off-base. They then openly sought respondents' advice on areas that needed to be reworked.

### What About Muslims and Other Major Faiths?

Many readers may wonder why this study, which captures the views of several different religious groups, does not report the views of Muslims, Buddhists or other major faiths. Readers should be assured that individuals of every religious persuasion are included in the general random sample to the extent that they are represented in the national population. However, the pragmatic reality is that authoritative research comparing the views of multiple subgroups comes at a stunningly high cost, and this consideration has limited the scope of our current work.

We certainly recognize the increasing importance of Islam and other faiths to hundreds of thousands of Americans nationwide, and we hope to conduct similar research—equally specific and targeted—with other groups at a later time.

*Is there really a gap between what most typical citizens want and the nation's historic commitment to separation of church and state, and if so, how wide is it?*

### No Blueprint for Policy Makers

Public Agenda has a considerable track record exploring public attitudes in a variety of policy arenas, including education, child care, health care and foreign policy. Often our research studies uncover the broad outlines of legislative or other policy proposals likely to win far-reaching support. Our reports frequently lay bare public concerns that cry out for leadership response. In some cases the research yields a fairly crisp "action" agenda that leaders and experts can, if they deem it useful, immediately put into play.

But *For Goodness' Sake* is quite different. We present our findings not so much as a portrait of what people want but as a portrayal of how they think. Indeed, many

of the topics covered in this study are constitutional questions that are only modestly amenable to legislative action, even if such action were judged to be wise.

### **Capturing the Voices of the Minority**

There is, however, an even more important reason why this study in particular should not be read as a recipe for policy making. On many issues, in our democratic government, the voice of the majority takes precedence. But on these issues distinctively, focused as they are on the intersection of religious belief and the nation's governmental and public institutions, the voices of the minority must also be honored. That is why, in this research, we have sought to capture the views of groups such as Jewish and nonreligious Americans, along with those of the Christian majority. Our purpose here is not to lay out an agenda for policy, but rather to offer insights into the perspectives and concerns of diverse groups of Americans.

### **From Voting Booth to Small Talk**

From its inception, the thrust of our work with The Pew Charitable Trusts and the new Pew Forum has focused on what might be called “the crossroads of religion and public life.” And while the term “public

life” may initially evoke visions of elections and D.C. policy debates, we have interpreted the concept more broadly. Our goal is to illuminate the expectations and individual reasoning that people bring to voting, to the schools, to their jobs, to family matters, even to their social interactions at work and in the neighborhood.

We believe that *For Goodness' Sake* offers some instructive and sometimes counterintuitive glimpses at how typical Americans think about the role of religion, faith and personal morality, and we are acutely aware that we have merely scratched the surface of the many complex topics we address. Nonetheless, we hope that thoughtful readers concerned with the current tenor of our national life will find much to ruminate on. Joining with The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, we trust that *For Goodness' Sake* will open the door to more perceptive and empathetic discussions of these issues among Americans of different faiths and viewpoints.

***Our goal is to illuminate the expectations and individual reasoning that people bring to voting, to the schools, to their jobs, to family matters, even to their social interactions at work and in the neighborhood.***

# CHAPTER ONE: THE BLESSINGS OF RELIGION

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**For most Americans, a preeminent benefit of faith is its capacity to improve individual behavior and personal conduct. If more Americans were more religious, people believe crime would go down, families would do a better job raising their children, and people would be more likely to help each other. Indeed, most Americans fear that the country would decline if people lost their religious faith. Ironically, Americans are not particularly well-informed about the religious make-up of the country, or about the tenets of religions other than their own. What's more, groups in the minority, such as Jewish or nonreligious Americans, are more cautious about religion gaining more influence in society.**

Americans, it has often been said, are a religious people, and it is tempting to assume that this is the explanation behind the newly energized discussions of religion's role in the nation's public life. But when social commentators talk about religion's role in public life, they typically focus on its influence on politics and public policy. While these issues draw heat in leadership circles, when ordinary Americans imagine the impact of religious faith on their society, they are nearly always thinking about its influence over the lives of individuals and how they conduct themselves in daily activities. Americans define public life much as this New Jersey focus group participant put it, "nothing more than when you go out of your family home, you're going into the public domain. Not anything to do with government, but just life in general outside of your family setting." Fundamentally, their optimism about the good religion can do stems from a different definition of how to live up to their religious inheritance.

## Losing Our Moral Footing...

For some time, surveys have shown persistent concern—if not alarm—among the public with the state of morality in the nation. To cite just one example, in a 1998 Gallup poll almost half (49%) said there was a moral crisis in this country; with another 41% calling it a major problem but not a crisis.<sup>3</sup> Public Agenda studies have consistently picked up reverberation of this theme in subjects as diverse as welfare reform, education reform, child care and crime.

Focus group discussions conducted for this study and others shed light on which values people seem to be most troubled about. People talk about the deterioration in the family structure, declining civility and respectfulness, coupled with rising materialism. "I think there has been a decline in values, a loss of mutual respect, which was taught to me by my family," said a New Jersey man. "And it reflects itself in the very simple things of your everyday life. The saying of 'excuse me' or 'please' or 'thank you.' Let's face it: on our highways what is the big deal about stopping for a moment and letting the guy merge? So we get road rage. It is right down to that simple politeness, that sensibility that used to be and now is no longer there."

A woman in Ohio said, "Everyone wants immediate gratification. And the sense of responsibility and the sense of working for something so that you've earned it

I think has gone out the window. It is not: 'What can I earn?' It is: 'What can I take?' 'What can I get right now?'" These kinds of sentiments are pervasive and cut across demographic and religious lines. "There is a breakdown in society in general. We could sit here all night and talk about it," said a Long Island man.

People are firmly convinced that moral deficiencies are at the core of the societal and individual shortcomings they see. They are likely to attribute the daily wrongs they encounter—from rude drivers, to indifferent sales-

*People talk about the deterioration in the family structure, declining civility and respectfulness, coupled with rising materialism.*

people, to impolite teens—to this moral slippage. They are also likely to connect broader social troubles—crime, single-parent families, harsh politicking—to the same trend.

### ...And the Way to Regain It

When people think about morality, they can't help but think that religion could have a powerful, well-tested role to play. "I basically think you have to have it," said an Ohio man. "It's the best thing out there to teach you right from wrong. If you didn't have it, what are you going to have?" "Morality goes back to religion," said another. "If you don't have religion, you don't have morality." Taken in this context, it should come as no surprise that a large majority (70%) of Americans want religion's influence on American society to grow.

And although it would seem that anything that promised to enhance and foster a moral tenor in our society would gain an appreciative public ear, it is also clear that people look at religion as more than just "anything." They see religion as a unique force especially capable of righting a ship on the wrong course: 69% say "more religion is the best way to strengthen family values and moral behavior in America"; only 25% say "there are many other effective ways to combat these negative trends—we don't have to rely on religion"; and 4% say "family values and moral behavior are not in decline" to begin with.

Moreover, the vast majority (80%) reject the view that "our society would do well even if many Americans were to abandon their religious faith." In the focus groups, even people who turned away from religion as adults after being raised in religious households would sometimes acknowledge that it shaped their character for the better. In California, a man who had been raised a "strict, strict Catholic" and said religion was "irrelevant" to his present life nevertheless believed it made him a better person. "Absolutely! I do credit what I am today—the good part of me—with what I learned through my religious upbringing."

### Guiding Personal Behavior

In the focus groups, when people talked about religion's potential to improve things, they were almost invariably

talking about how it can help individuals live better, more upright lives. When they are asked to choose the most important meaning of being religious, they are more likely to say it means

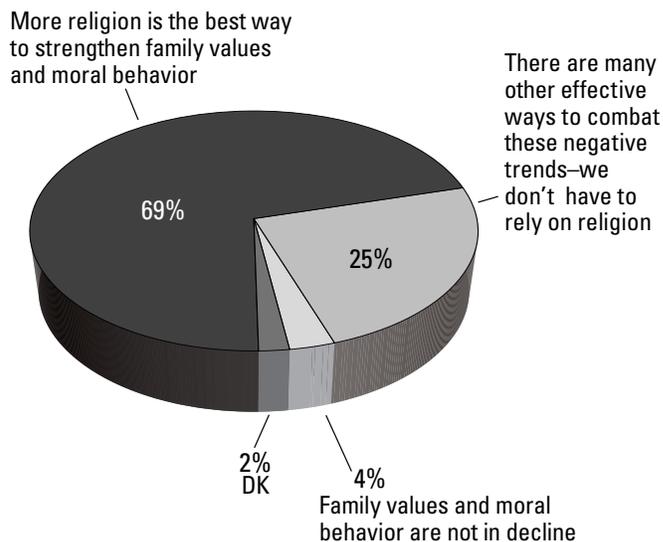
"making sure that one's behavior and day-to-day actions match one's faith" (53%), not attending religious services (5%) or even feeling the presence of God (33%). To be religious, in their eyes, means to be a moral human being.

**Only 18% of Americans believe our society would do well if many people were to abandon their religious faith.**

When asked to choose, people say it is most important for religion to influence how people behave in their personal lives (62%); far fewer say that to them it is most important for religion to have an impact in the public schools (14%) or on the policies our government makes (5%).

### Religion Strengthens Families

Which of these statements comes closer to your view about religion and morality in America?



### GENERAL PUBLIC

Note: Percentages in charts and tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories. Rounding may also cause slight discrepancies between numbers in the text and numbers in the charts.

Note: In all charts, DK stands for "Don't know"

In the focus groups, the impact religion could or should have upon government policies was often the last thing on people's minds. The dominant theme—reverberating throughout the focus groups and the survey responses—is that being religious meant one's actions and behavior would be guided by a moral code. Action and follow-through on religious precepts are the ultimate signals that someone is religious. "You have to live your religion," said a man in Ohio. "You can't be hypocritical." To a New Jersey man being religious meant "If

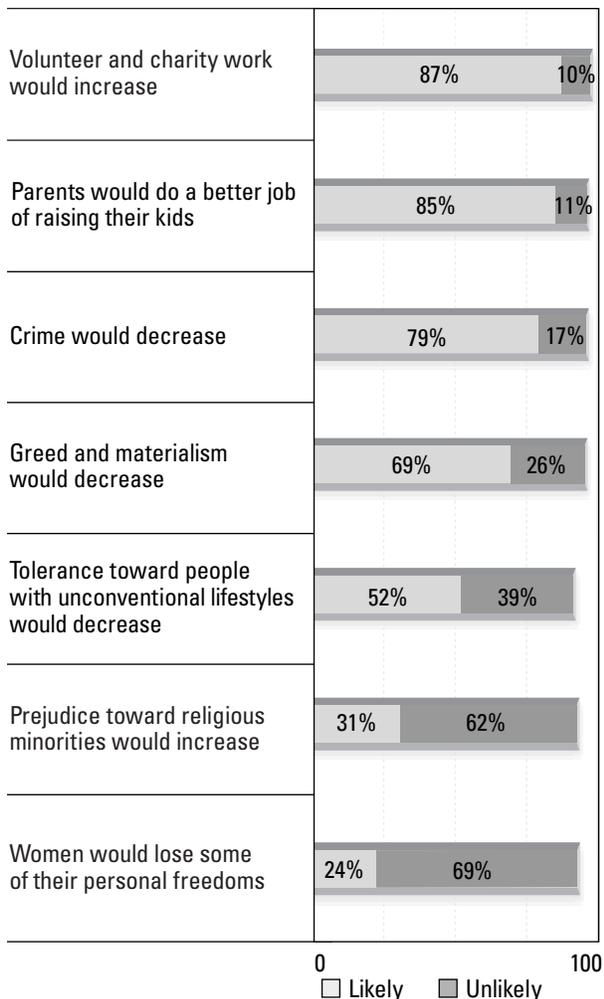
you really believe, your actions will follow. You would not be hypocritical to your own beliefs and to yourself. So once you establish those morals and values for yourself, then I think your actions tend to follow."

To these Americans, practicing what you preach is more important than preaching what one ought to practice. "Someone religious is someone who practices whatever it is that they believe. Usually if somebody is devout, you will know it just by their actions and not by them screaming it at you," said another New Jersey man.

### More Religion Can Help

If many more Americans were to become deeply religious, do you think it is likely or unlikely that each of the following would happen?

General Public



### Less Crime, Less Greed

So what do people expect would happen if religion were to become more influential in society? In many different ways, the public's expectations are quite optimistic—although not uniformly so, as will be seen below. "If many more Americans were to become deeply religious,"\* a large majority say it is likely that crime would decrease as a result (79%); that people would do more volunteer work (87%); that parents would do a better job of raising their kids (85%); and that there would be less greed and materialism (69%).

"I think that overall [religion] prevents a lot of violence and it adds a lot of harmony to our community and society....People will do things because they want to go to heaven or to please whomever they believe in, so they act in a positive manner to each other. I think that a lot of charitable acts and good deeds might not take place otherwise," said a New Jersey man.

In the minds of Americans, religion would even seem to offer hope for some of the nation's most reflexively reviled people—its politicians. Although here confidence seems to wane, nearly half (47%) of Americans say that "If many more of our elected officials were deeply religious, the laws and policy decisions they make would probably be better"; but 39% say they would be neither better nor worse, and 11% say they would be worse. The influence of religion on politicians and public policy is fully explored in chapters 4 and 5.

\* Early in the survey, all respondents were read the following statement: "When you hear the term *deeply religious* in this survey, it means to strongly believe in the teachings of a religion and try to live life accordingly."

## Surviving Bad Times

It would be simplistic—even unfair—to reduce the importance of religion and religious faith to purely behavioral terms. In the focus groups, people sometimes spoke quite eloquently about having a personal relationship with God and how faith was such a central part of their lives. An Ohio woman described how faith supported her in her hour of need, helping her with the pain of losing both her parents within a short time span: “I can’t imagine getting through 1998 without faith, I just can’t imagine how I would have survived that year because I was completely unglued. But knowing that they were in heaven and knowing that I will see them again someday means a lot to me.” In California, a man spoke directly: “I don’t go to church. But I believe in God. I think about God. I fear God.”

Others talked about the sense of community and belonging made possible by religious affiliation. Across the country, people looked to churches, synagogues and mosques to provide personal support and warmth, ready-made social networks where they could feel at home. “There’s community involvement with churches,” said a California woman, “where people have a chance to come together where they otherwise wouldn’t in this society.”

## A Few Downsides

Some observers might be troubled by Americans’ seeming interest in greater religious influence. They may wonder: Are Americans naively ignoring the possibility that intolerance would grow? Shouldn’t they worry about how religious minorities—let alone the nonreligious—would fare in a society experiencing religious resurgence?

It is clear that this is not what most Americans expect, or want, to happen. More than six in ten (62%) say it is unlikely that “there would be more prejudice toward religious minorities” if many more Americans became religious, and almost seven in ten (69%) say it is unlikely that “women would lose some of their personal freedoms.”

\* In this survey, Jews are defined as those who self-identify as “Jewish,” or those who self-identify as “no religion” but have one or both parents who are Jewish.

Nonreligious people are defined as those who are atheist or agnostic, or who have no religious preference and never attend religious services.

There is, however, some sense that in at least one area some may not benefit from a resurgence of faith in America: 52% say it is likely “there would be less tolerance toward people with unconventional lifestyles,” while 39% think this unlikely. What’s more, as research described throughout this report and in chapter 7 clearly indicates, there are far greater qualms and reservations among some groups not in the majority in America—survey respondents who are not religious and those who are Jewish.\*

For example, 54% of Jews say it’s likely that there would be more prejudice toward religious minorities if more Americans became deeply religious. Only 31% of the general public agrees.

*The view of almost the entire sample (96%) is that “one of the greatest things about this country is that people can practice whatever religion they choose.”*

## “Cramming Their Beliefs Down Your Throat”

Living side by side with Americans’ conviction that more religion is needed is a deeply ingrained norm of tolerance and appreciation for diversity—and it is a norm that has a powerful hold on the American ethos. The view of almost the entire sample (96%) is that “one of the greatest things about this country is that people can practice whatever religion they choose.” When wariness of religion did emerge in the focus groups, it was typically voiced by people worrying about religious extremists and intolerant individuals: wariness of those who would try to “cram their beliefs down your throats,” in the words of a woman in Ohio, who described herself as deeply religious. Of those who want religion to become more influential in America, the majority (76%) say it does not matter to them which religion it is. Only one in five (21%) assume it would be their own religion. Nor is religion the only way to be a moral person—as more than half (58%) say, it’s not necessary to believe in God to be moral and have good values. Not surprisingly, the nonreligious concur in even higher numbers (88%).

## Harmony, But Little Knowledge

If Americans are quite comfortable in the knowledge that ours is a nation of many faiths living together harmoniously, the fact remains that few know very much about the beliefs and practices of non-Christians. Most are also fairly uninformed about the actual numbers of religious minorities in this country.

With all the talk about religion in the focus groups, the conversations would occasionally digress and people would wonder about the views of religious minorities: “What makes us different? What do Jewish people actually believe? What do Muslims celebrate?” Their curiosity was sincere and reflected a real lack of knowledge. Only 17% say they “understand very well” the basic ideas of Judaism and only 7% the basic ideas of Islam. A Catholic woman who has lived in the New York City area for more than 40 years, when asked how well she knows the basic concepts of the Jewish religion, responded after a long pause: “Not too well. I just know that for them, the Messiah hasn’t come yet. I wouldn’t know it in depth.”

And though they appreciate religious diversity, relatively few Americans have spoken to members of religious minority groups about religion. Asked if they have had an opportunity to have an in-depth conversation about religion with any of the following in recent years, only 20% have spoken with a Muslim, 40% with a Jewish person, and 44% with an atheist. When asked to estimate the percentage of America’s population that is Jewish, only 18% come close, picking a number between zero and nine percent (in actuality, Jews make up about 2% of the adult population<sup>4</sup>). The rest either greatly overestimate or simply do not know. Americans do better estimating the proportion of the U.S. that is Muslim: 43% of survey respondents estimate between zero and nine percent (Muslims make up no more than 2% of the adult population<sup>5</sup>).

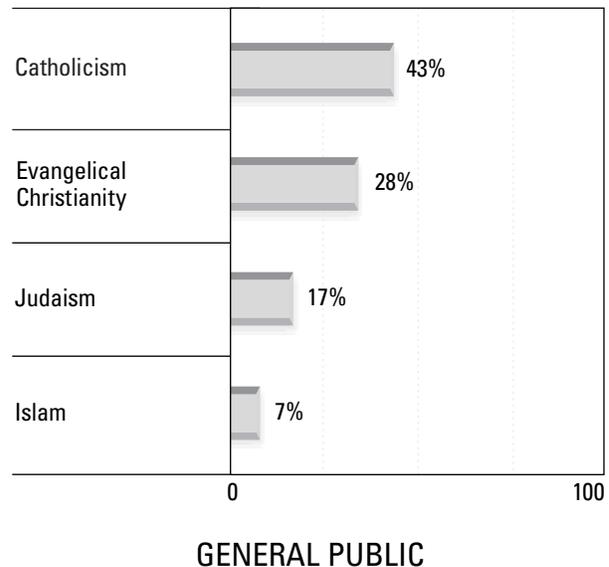
## A Reliable, Proven Tool

Americans are optimistic about what religion can do for their society. They think that religion is a proven, reliable tool for encouraging people to behave morally. With greater reach, they believe religion will pay long-term dividends for society.

But Americans also have a deeply held appreciation for the nation’s religious diversity and for the inherent right of people to worship—or not worship—as they see fit. They therefore attempt to balance this with their wish to see religion strengthened in their nation. In the following chapters we will see how the effort to balance dual purposes and values plays out in three key arenas—in the domain of social interaction, in the schools and in politics and public policy.

### Limited Understanding of Other Religions

% of general public who say they understand the basic beliefs of each of the following “very well”:



## CHAPTER TWO: AS THE TWIG IS BENT

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**Since most Americans believe in religion’s power to instill morals and good behavior, they are persuaded that religion should be a visible part of a child’s education. Most—but certainly not all—seem to feel that efforts to keep religious expression out of the schools have gotten out of hand. However, they recognize the need to respect and accommodate the diversity of religious beliefs in the school setting. Most try to balance their desire to find a place for religion in the schools with their wish to be inclusive to families of all kinds of beliefs. As a result, the majority prefer a moment of silence as opposed to prayers that refer specifically to Jesus or God. Jews and nonreligious Americans are far more wary of efforts to expand religion’s role in the schools.**

Most Americans see religion as an antidote to a declining social morality, so it’s not surprising that they see a special role for religion when it comes to kids. In the 1997 report *Kids These Days*, Public Agenda documented Americans’ growing alarm over the state of our youth—their values, their manners, their behavior.<sup>6</sup> We continued to hear this dismay in our most recent focus groups and interviews. “I work in the schools, so the major thing that I see is that kids have a lack of conscience. They’re not respecting each other, and they’re blatantly cruel to each other without giving it a thought,” a New Jersey teacher complained. Her take on kids today may seem extreme, but it’s far from unusual. There’s a mounting sense, compounded by high-profile tragedies in Columbine and other schools, that something is seriously wrong with many of our kids.

The public schools consequently are an arena where many feel religion should play an important role. School prayer, once a daily practice in many public schools, over the years has become a hot-button issue, not just in education circles but in national politics as well. Some argue that the Constitution prohibits schools from sponsoring any religious activity, since doing so would violate the Founders’ intent for a strict separation of church and state. Others argue that the Founders never intended to limit religious people’s freedom of expression and that current school policies place an unfair burden on those who want to come together for religious expression.

For over four decades, advocates for a strict separation of church and state have frequently prevailed in legal decisions that proscribe school-sponsored religious expression. One of the purposes of this study is to explore what the public is calling for in the schools and why. This survey suggests that many people want religion re-introduced into the schools, but in a way that respects the religious diversity of today’s families.

***“I work in the schools, so the major thing that I see is that kids have a lack of conscience.”***

— *New Jersey teacher*

### Religion Helps with Raising Children

As noted earlier, most of the parents we spoke with believe that religion needs to be part of their children’s upbringing. Going to church, talking about God at home—these are essential methods parents use to instill a sense of morality in their children. As a mother in Ohio remarked, “The Bible says raise a child the way he should grow, and then the child will always come back to that. So it’s good to raise a child and give them some kind of instructions or the Ten Commandments. That’s giving a kid instructions, showing them what sin is. . . . For a kid who has nothing to fall back on, that’s basically what’s wrong with kids now.” Asked point-blank, almost three out of four (74%) of the public agree that “it’s a bad idea for families to raise children without any religion.” Americans 65 and over are more likely to agree than those under 35 (85% vs. 63%).

## “It Certainly Wouldn’t Hurt Anyone”

What’s more, many believe that religion—so important for children at home—should also be a presence during the school day. Most think that school prayer, properly implemented, is a good way to shore up the crumbling values of today’s kids. Almost three in four (74%) agree that school prayer teaches children that faith in religion and God is an important part of life, a sentiment widely shared by most Americans.

Fifty-six percent also agree that school prayer is one of the most effective ways we can improve the behavior of today’s young people. Not only does most of the public want school prayer, but most are also confident that it will have a real effect on young people’s behavior. In Alabama, a woman who works in the schools remarked, “I see what goes on, and I think to myself that we shouldn’t be keeping the kids from praying. It certainly wouldn’t hurt anyone.”

There is some appreciation for the value of separating church and state, with 61% saying it’s “one of the most important reasons our political system is successful.” College graduates are more likely to agree with this than high school graduates (a 69% to 54% margin). But most also reject any clear-cut legal firewall between religion and schools. Fully six in ten (60%) disagree that “school prayer violates the Constitution and the idea of separation of church and state.”

## Struggling to Find a Middle Ground

Opinion surveys have long documented public support for school prayer. The Gallup Organization, for example, recently reported that 70% favor rather than oppose daily prayer spoken in the classroom.<sup>7</sup> Public Agenda took the question one step further and asked people to select their favored school prayer policy. Significantly, most (53%) think it would be best for public schools to have a moment of silence. Only 20% would prefer a spoken nondenominational prayer (“a prayer that refers to God but no specific religion”). Very few (6%) favor what many school prayer opponents fear most—a Christian prayer that refers to Jesus. And in the end, fewer than one in five (19%) believe that public schools should avoid all of these. A moment of silence—in many ways the middle ground between

spoken prayer and no prayer at all—is clearly the most favored option.

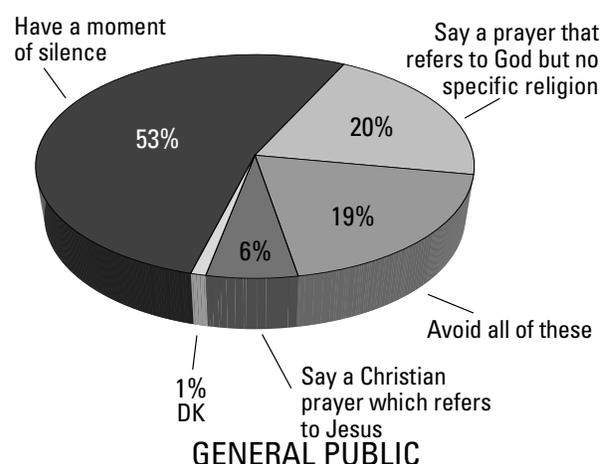
In the focus groups, we observed citizens come to this same conclusion after some prolonged back-and-forth. A young man in New Jersey struggled with the issue: “Well, I don’t think that in public schools if you are going to do prayers that it should be just one type of prayer. What religion are you going to pick or choose in these schools? You can’t do that. There are so many different religions with so many different beliefs.” After grappling with the same questions, a nonreligious parent in Ohio concluded: “I don’t want someone praying to my kid. I love the moment of silence. That is what we did in school growing up... This way, no one can stop someone from praying. I can pray then and no one knows I’m praying.”

## Arguments Against School Prayer Resonate Too

Remarkably, a majority of the public also agrees with arguments against school prayer. This phenomenon reveals a public that is deliberative, with people doing their best to acknowledge the various points of view on the issue—they see reasonableness on both sides. A majority (57%) of the public, for example, agrees that

## Few Prefer School Prayer That Refers to Jesus or God

How should the public schools deal with the issue of prayer in the classroom?

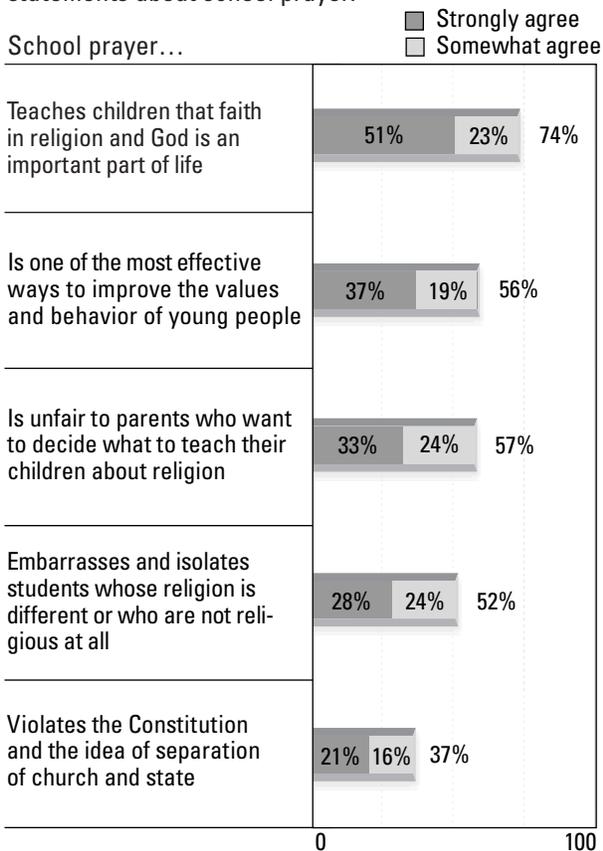


school prayer is unfair to parents who think they, not the schools, should be the ones to decide what to teach their children about religion. A New Mexico Catholic parent opposed to school prayer stated, “Public school is not the place for religion. You are there to learn your basics, your math, your reading, your writing. If you want to take your child to catechism classes, I think that is something you do on your own time.”

Just over half (52%) say that school prayer “embarrasses and isolates students whose religion is different or who are not religious at all.” Participants in the focus groups struggled to articulate a position that gives students a daily dose of religion without forcing students to participate in a religious activity they don’t believe in—something the courts and the legislatures have also been struggling with for quite some time.

### Benefits and Drawbacks of School Prayer

% of general public who agree with the following statements about school prayer:



### Is the Public Contradicting Itself?

When it comes to a complex constitutional issue like school prayer, a majority of the public believes it would do a lot of good for young people, but many also agree with the arguments raised by school prayer opponents. While people are hardly experts on constitutional issues, they are not wholly ill informed or insensitive on this topic—nor are people overly nostalgic for a time when such issues seemed simpler to solve. Rather, it’s important to understand the nuances of the public’s position. A strong majority wants to see a softening of the strict separation of church and state in the schools. Many also seem to resent efforts that appear to eradicate all trace of religious sensibilities in the schools. At the same time, however, most people are sensitive to the fact that children of all creeds attend the public schools and want a policy that is as inclusive as possible. This explains the popularity of a moment of silence over other, more explicitly religious options like spoken prayer.

### Jews and Nonreligious Americans Are Wary

But while large numbers of Americans are looking for the middle ground on the school prayer issue, it would be misleading to underplay the strong opposition of those who are Jewish and those who are nonreligious. Results for those two groups reveal that many who are not in the Christian majority are firmly against school prayer. For a constitutional issue like school prayer, registering this opposition is especially important, since the rights of religious minorities and the nonreligious are at the heart of the debate. Six in ten (60%) Jews and 56% of the nonreligious feel that public schools should keep prayer or a moment of silence out of the schools entirely. Only 19% of the public agree.

Jewish focus group participants in Long Island, New York worried about sending their children to schools that would disregard their religious traditions. “I think [prayer] belongs in my Hebrew school, and it belongs in my temple. The only place in a public school where talk about religion would be appropriate would be a social studies classroom where you are studying religions,” argued a Jewish mother of two children. “The parents can remind kids of their religious beliefs. It’s not the public schools’ job.”

Indeed, significantly higher numbers of those who are not Christian agree with arguments against school prayer. Seventy-eight percent of Jews and 72% of the nonreligious—in contrast with only 37% of the general public—agree that school prayer violates the Constitution and the idea of separation of church and state. Very strong majorities (84% of Jews and 82% of the nonreligious) also agree that school prayer is unfair to parents who think they should be the ones to decide what to teach their children about religion, and that school prayer embarrasses and isolates students whose religion is different or who are not religious at all (78% of Jews and 85% of the nonreligious). Smaller majorities of the public at large agree with these arguments.

## Be Inclusive

Debates over school prayer have drawn the lion's share of public attention, but other issues relating to religion in the schools are also embroiled in controversy. Disagreements simmer in areas such as religion and the curriculum, how teachers talk about religion in the classroom, and the best way to celebrate religious holidays. For example, more than half (56%) of the public think that if Muslim parents request it, their public schools should give a major Muslim holiday the same attention that Christmas celebrations get. Sixty-six percent share the same opinion if Jewish parents request that schools give attention to a major Jewish holiday. Findings like these demonstrate that the public not only wants respect for the majority's tradition, but they also want the schools to be inclusive and accommodating to religious minorities.

The rub, say many, is where to draw that line. Many in the focus groups wanted to see their schools become more accommodating, while others felt that Christian religious expression is already unduly burdened. A father in California said this: "I feel funny at Christmas pageants or Christmas carols. You try to do a Christmas pageant, and you either have to do one that has many cultures in it, or none, and it wouldn't be recognized as the Christmas story, the Nativity story. That feels odd because that's my tradition."

Indeed, when schools go out of their way to limit the use of religious symbols during holiday celebrations

like Christmas, just over half (52%) of the public believe that the schools "are often going overboard and taking the meaning out of holiday celebrations for the majority of students." However, a sizable number (42%) feel strongly enough to say that such schools "are usually doing the right thing and are being sensitive to the diverse backgrounds of today's students." Younger adults—those under 35—are even more likely to agree with this point (54%).

## Learning About Other Traditions

Most like the idea of offering courses in world religion in the schools' curricula. A strong majority thinks that their local public high schools should offer students a class explaining the world's major religions, such as Buddhism, Islam, Christianity and Judaism. Almost eight in ten (79%) think the class should be an elective, and another 11% think it should be required. Only 10% think that such a class should not be offered at all, demonstrating that the public thinks there is very little to fear in exposing students to other religious traditions. A middle-aged New Jersey resident, a transplant from the South, remarked, "At 12 years old I was baptized and became a member of the Baptist Church. I didn't ever at that point in my life have the opportunity to sit down and talk to anybody. I knew other religions as to what kind of faith it was, but I had not a clue as to what the day-to-day beliefs of that religion are. I like the idea of being able to share your faiths and your beliefs in the public school and to talk about the differences and the likenesses."

***"The parents can remind kids of their religious beliefs. It's not the public school's job."***

*— Jewish mother of two,  
Long Island, New York*

Most people, however, draw the line at teachers talking about their own religious beliefs with children in the classroom. Six in ten (60%) believe that this is inappropriate. Several people in the focus groups worried that this could get out of hand, fearing that a person in power over their child may go too far and begin proselytizing. It seems that parents do not object to having their children exposed to different religious

beliefs, but they don't want a situation where schools can inculcate children with religious beliefs.

### Attempting To Navigate A Middle Ground

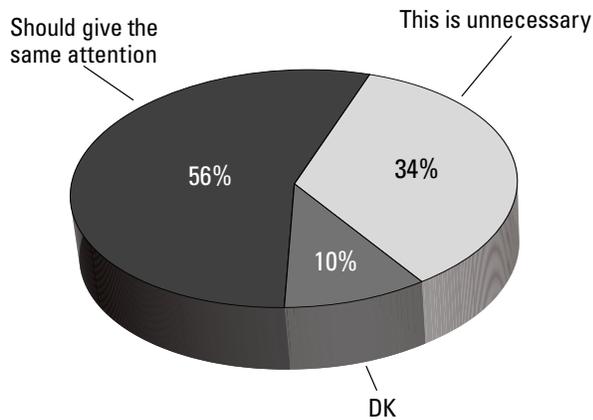
The disputes in the schools are often a microcosm of larger debates on values and national priorities. On the one hand, most of the public want to encourage a religious presence in public institutions. On the other,

people are not blind to the tensions this can lead to, given the multiplicity of beliefs in the country. The example of the schools makes clear that the public is attempting to navigate the middle ground. Most believe the nation has gone too far in removing religion from the public schools, but most also don't want to rebound too far in the opposite direction. In the following chapters, we will see that this dynamic plays out in other domains as well.

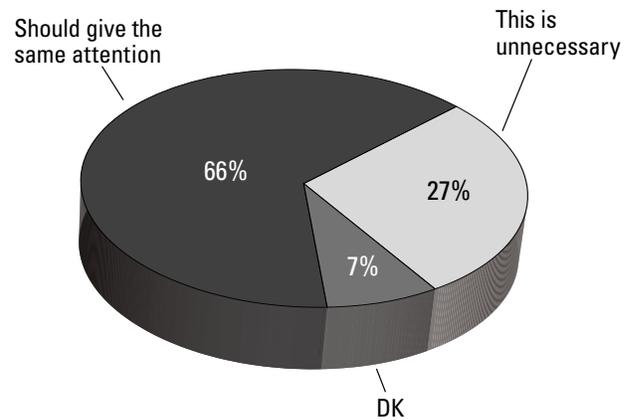
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### Include Other Religious Holidays

If Muslim parents request it, do you think their public schools should give a major *Muslim* holiday the same attention that Christmas celebrations get, or is this unnecessary?



If Jewish parents request it, do you think their public schools should give a major *Jewish* holiday the same attention that Christmas celebrations get, or is this unnecessary?



GENERAL PUBLIC  
(Split Sample)

## CHAPTER THREE: WE GATHER TOGETHER

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**The balance people attempt to strike in the schools is replayed and reiterated in other arenas. Americans are proud of the country’s religious diversity and anticipate few problems with people of different religious faiths living together. Indeed, most seem remarkably willing to accommodate and celebrate different faiths—not solely the Christian faith of the Founders. And because they value the nation’s religious diversity, they expect people to exercise tact and discretion. They also seem to recoil at the use of religion as a litmus test.**

Americans’ careful and deliberative efforts to balance the right to religious expression against the possibility of offending others extend far beyond the public schools to other social arenas. It is very instructive to observe how discreetly people approach their social interactions—how careful they are about when and how to talk about religion with family, friends or co-workers and especially when they are among strangers. Perhaps it is this discretion, combined with the ethic of tolerance, that has enabled passionate religious faith to thrive without overturning the nation’s social peace.

### Don’t Preach

Undoubtedly there is an inherent tension between strong faith and self-restraint in talking about it. True believers may find it difficult to remain silent if they feel themselves to be morally obliged to “save,” convert or simply preach to those who lack the proper faith. Doesn’t this attitude make judgmentalism and intolerance almost inevitable?

In this study, we explore this possible tension in a number of social arenas. For starters, most of the public (61%) agree that “deeply religious people are being inconsiderate if they always bring up religion when they deal with other people.” Wariness of religious zeal also emerged in the focus groups. There, people described individuals who were overbearing and unrelenting in their religious pronouncements, prone to being judgmental and self-righteous. Thus it should come as no surprise that as religious as so many Americans seem to be, and as hopeful as they are about religion’s positive impact, only 35% say deeply religious people “should spread the Word of God whenever they can.” The plurality (46%) say they “should

be very careful about doing this so that they do not offend people,” and another 18% say they “should keep their faith a private matter altogether.”

### Unless the Door Has Been Opened

As a result, Americans have developed finely tuned and evolved sensibilities about how to handle religion in their daily social interactions. One rule: When it comes to talk about religion in public, discretion and tact should be your guide. People instinctively take care not to offend and are sensitive about when, how and whether to talk about religion. “I think it makes people uncomfortable to discuss religion, unless a door has been opened,” said a woman in New Mexico. “If someone says, ‘I am having a tragedy and I need to reach out to someone,’ then it is appropriate that you can go ahead and say, ‘Well, you know prayer might help you.’ Otherwise I feel it is a boundary that you don’t step over until someone opens that door.”

Americans have a reputation—deserved or not—for being all too willing to talk in social settings about such personal matters as surgery or psychological counseling. But as religious as they are, they clearly don’t see religion as just another dinner topic. For example, only 14% say it is almost always appropriate for a person to bring up religion when they are with friends and acquaintances at a social occasion such as a party. The majority (63%) instead believes a person should only bring up the topic

***Most of the public (61%) agree that “deeply religious people are being inconsiderate if they always bring up religion when they deal with other people.”***

with care, with another 22% saying it's best to avoid it altogether. "You don't know what religion they are. They might have their beliefs and you might have your own. You might feel comfortable letting people know that you are a religious person and a Christian, but as far as debating one religion versus another, I think that is a line."

Interviews indicate people seem to collect experiences—good and bad—which they use to build and fine-tune their approach to the issue and to develop a list of do's and don'ts. An Ohio man had to adjust—and limit—his instinct to talk about religion after he got married: "I married into a family where I find that my views are a little different. My mother-in-law just really doesn't think that they're normal, or right. The way I was brought up, religion was just sort of something you talked about. But now it is something that I don't talk about... I feel like I kind of have to step back now and not say exactly what I feel."

### Tread Gingerly at Work

People also seem to show heightened circumspection about faith when the venue is the workplace. Only 9% think it is "almost always appropriate" to bring up religion when they are at work. The strong majority (60%) again says religion "should be brought up only with care," while another 30% say it's best to avoid it altogether.

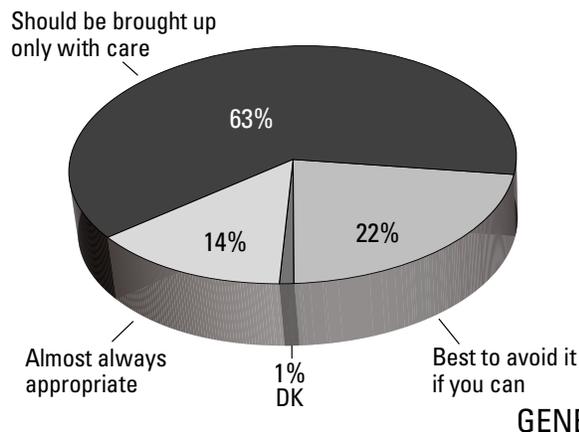
A deeply religious man in Ohio described the care he took to avoid the appearance of seeming to push his faith upon others: "It has never been a tug-of-war situation or a situation where I would have to try and convince someone. I try not to get into those situations because I respect everyone's beliefs. Who am I to say that they're right or wrong?" And in New Mexico, a medical professional recalled how objectionable and disruptive it had been when this unwritten rule was violated: "I had this patient and he confronted me and he was putting me down for being Catholic," he recalled. "It was in the heat of the moment, and he wanted me to engage him and to be antagonistic with him. I said, 'We can't talk.' It was a really bad situation, because I was having to work with this guy every day."

### Not the Company's Responsibility

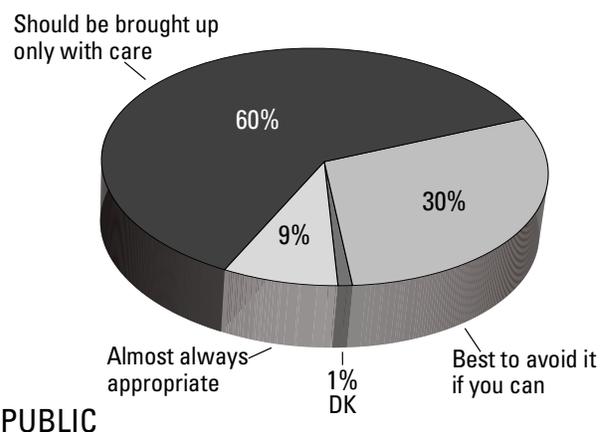
The workplace demonstrates how Americans wrestle with religion in their public lives: in principle, most believe individuals, not employers, should take responsibility for enabling the coexistence of work and religious observance. If workers need to practice their religion during the day, 70% versus 23% say it is mostly the responsibility of employees themselves to find jobs where they can practice their religion, not the responsibility of companies to make this happen. The bottom line is that religion is the employees' business: "You are free to work anywhere. If you don't think you are being treated fairly, go elsewhere," said an observant Jew.

### When Is It Appropriate To Bring Up Religion?

#### With Friends At A Party



#### With Co-Workers At Work



GENERAL PUBLIC

In the real world, many nevertheless expect to see reasonable employers and reasonable employees accommodating each other's needs. "There are now a lot of city bakeries that are owned and operated by Muslims," said the owner of a New York area wholesale food distributorship. "What happens is that they rotate. One person will go, then the next. If you have a reasonable plan, it will work. So the employers should say: 'You're a good worker, I will try to accommodate you, but you have to work around a schedule that won't put my business out of business.'"

### Muslims, Christians and Jews

It is this expectation of reasonable accommodation that perhaps explains why people soften a bit when they are given specific scenarios of religious workers who need to take breaks each day for religious observance, with about four in ten saying the company should be required to provide them. But when people want companies to accommodate their workers, are they thinking of workers whose religion is like their own? Do they extend the sympathy when the religion is very different?

To try to answer this question, Public Agenda built an experiment into the survey to discover whether people's views changed depending on the religious affiliation of workers. One-third of the sample received a question about deeply religious Muslim workers who need two or three breaks for religious observance, another third received a question about deeply religious Jewish workers, and another third received a question about deeply religious Christian workers. Would respondents be more likely to recommend that companies accommodate workers when the workers are Christian? Do Muslim workers fail to get as much sympathy as Jewish workers?

The results are provocatively consistent across the three groups: 42% say the company should be required to give deeply religious Muslims two or three breaks for religious observance; 44% say this when the workers are described as deeply religious Jews; and when the workers are described as deeply religious Christians, the number drops to 33%.

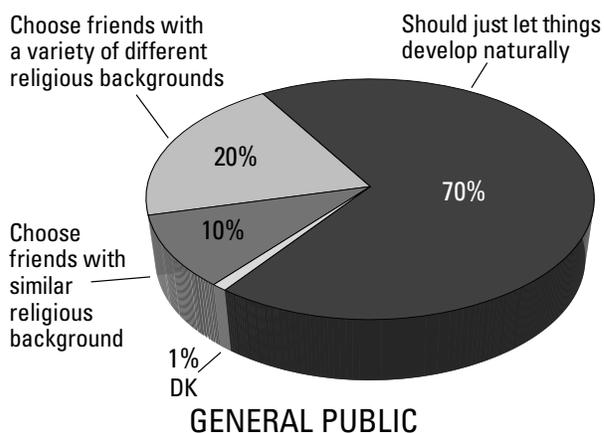
### Religion and Children

The religious circumspection of Americans in social matters continues into other realms, even when it touches upon children—an area where, as we have seen, the public's interest in transmitting values is heightened. Given the strength of the public's conviction that children need religion, is there a chance that parents might be more protective—perhaps even narrow-minded—as their children enter a diverse social world? Do people think their child will be better off socializing with children of the same religion? Only 10% say parents should encourage their kids to choose friends whose religious backgrounds are similar to their own, and only 20% say they should encourage friends whose religious backgrounds are different. The vast majority (70%) says parents should let things develop naturally.

"My kids go to school. Everybody would come home with friends whose parents spoke bizarre languages and practiced strange religions. Yet we all seemed to get along very well together... I think it's been a tremendous gift," said a father in California. Participants respond similarly when given the scenario of a battle over child custody: if one parent is not religious at all, should the judge take this into account? Only 15% say the judge should allow this to reflect negatively on that parent, and only 9% feel it should reflect positively.

### Children's Friendships

Do you think parents should encourage their children to choose friends with a similar religious background, with a variety of religious backgrounds, or should they just let things develop naturally?



The vast majority (70%) says religion should not be a factor at all.

## “I Threw Love at Him”

Rightly or wrongly, much of the debate over increased prominence among religious groups has focused on the role of evangelical Christians—from national politics down to the level of school boards. Americans, by and large, adopt a live-and-let-live attitude, but are evangelicals the exception? The general public is more likely to believe (a 45% to 30% margin) that evangelical Christians tend to be more judgmental of people with different religions or lifestyles because of the intensity of their beliefs, not that they are gentler because of the Golden Rule.\*

Evangelical Christians have a different view: 52% say that they are gentler because of the Golden Rule, 33% that they tend to be more judgmental. The focus group conversations with evangelicals suggested that many were likely to have paid attention to this issue and to have thought it through. This may be because they have had more incentive or more personal experiences in how to handle religious conversations. In Ohio, a self-described born-again Christian said, “We have to respect each other’s religions. Jesus told us not to judge one another. Who am I to judge her? I’m not supposed to judge my brother, because that’s not my business. There is a Judge at the end, but for now, I should respect and love her regardless of what she believes in—no matter what. I have no reason to push my religion on her.”

Evangelical Christians seem just as aware as others of the red lines demarcating social propriety, and many have worked out some strategic approaches that allow them to keep faith and still avoid crossing those lines. “Personally, if I see somebody doing something that is against my religion—for example, if I know somebody is flat-out lying—it may not be my place to say he is doing wrong. He is going to be living an immoral life, but it is not my place to say, ‘You are wrong.’ I will let them live with their conscience. But if they come to me and they say, ‘Am I living a moral life?’ or if there is some big issue that is going to affect the way I live my life, then I think you have full right to stand up for yourself. Raise your hands and say, ‘I don’t like this. This is how I think it should be.’”

In Alabama, an evangelical Christian went to the race-track so that she could spend time with a younger sister who was far less religious. “There was a guy that was talking nasty and flirting with her on the way out, and I said, ‘No, don’t talk like that in front of her, please.’ And I did it in more of a teasing way. I said I had some soap in my pocket and I would wash his mouth out. He said, ‘I’m sorry, ma’am.’ ‘That’s okay,’ I said. I threw love at him.”

It is an open question whether the recipients of this approach always see care and gentleness in how the deeply religious handle their interactions. So much may depend on the intensity of the talk, how often it is repeated and how far it goes in questioning the legitimacy of their lifestyles and beliefs. Indeed, the evangelical Christians reported that they are often seen as oddballs and sticklers when they mingle in nonreligious circles. And in the focus groups, the occasional harsh comment did in fact emerge: “All of the good people don’t stand up. We just let all of this garbage go by us, and no one stands up. That is exactly why this country is going to pot now,” said an evangelical Christian.

## Walk the Walk

These findings suggest the ways in which people juggle strong personal faith with an accommodationist demeanor in their social and public lives. This is what ordinary Americans appear to ask of themselves: to walk a fine line, be true and represent your beliefs to the world, but do so in a way that does not judge or offend others. It all goes back to

***“For me, religion is a way of life, so they are going to see it. I don’t have to preach or try to force it.”***

— New Jersey woman

their original definition of how Americans define being religious—action, not words; righteousness in personal behavior, not in personal dealings with others. “Action speaks better than words,” said a New Jersey woman. “A person on the job is going to know your lifestyle. They are with you every day, so you don’t have to preach. For me, religion is a way of life, so they are going to see it. I don’t have to preach or try to force it.” This expectation carries through, as we will see in the next chapter on politics.

\* Respondents who did not know what the Golden Rule is were told it means: “Do to others as you would have done to yourself.”

## CHAPTER FOUR: GOOD GOVERNMENT

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**Most Americans believe that religion helps individuals become better human beings. Consequently, many also believe that religion might help elected officials become more honorable and ethical decision makers. But the public's views on the role religion should play in political life are subtle, and the public seems almost intuitively wary of religion determining the substance of today's political debate. Whether the issue is abortion or gay rights, poverty or the death penalty, Americans expect their political leaders to negotiate with those who believe differently. And in the end, Americans seem far from ready to use religion as a pivotal factor in casting their votes.**

In the campaign season of the year 2000, remarkable attention was paid by the press and by a number of commentators to the personal religious beliefs of the candidates for the presidency, the influence these beliefs may have had on their campaigns, and the influence they may yet have on their policy stands in office. But just because pundits, candidates and journalists put a spotlight on an issue and say it is important does not mean the public will follow their lead.

### What Religion Is Mr. Gore?

To most Americans, the very idea that a candidate's religious affiliation might matter to voters and sway their hand in the voting booth seems improper. Indeed, about six in ten (58%) believe it is wrong for voters to "seriously consider the religious affiliation of candidates when they decide whom to support." What's more, not only do most think it's wrong to weigh a candidate's religion, most don't seem interested enough in this information to collect it. In this survey, about two-thirds did not know the specific religious affiliation of either George W. Bush or Al Gore (64% and 66%, respectively). A final indication of disinterest: Only 26% would like "the news media to devote more attention to the religious backgrounds and beliefs of candidates running for elected office."

### Would Politics Improve?

The decided dispassion of Americans toward the religious affiliation of their politicians is noteworthy given the most recent campaign season. The explanations for it, however, are even more notable: Americans doubt

the sincerity of politicians when they seem to make too much of their religious faith; they are pragmatic in thinking that politics is a tough game that would inevitably be hard on religious principles; and they have a healthy respect for the art of compromise in politics.

There is only muted faith in the capacity of religion to redeem America's politicians and to better their work. Nearly half (47%) say that "If many more of our elected officials were deeply religious, the laws and policy decisions they make would probably be better," but half say the quality would not improve (39%) or would even worsen (11%).

Pessimism about religion's effects is even more pronounced among those who are not religious, with only 9% believing the quality would get better.

### The Reality of the Game

One might have expected more optimism, given the public's sense that religion can at least partly answer some of society's problems, and given that the conduct of politicians today is questioned so routinely. But the public is of two minds over whether greater religious faith is the answer for the nation's politicians. Nearly half (48%) say the nation needs more politicians with honesty and integrity, not more politicians who are religious; nearly half (49%) say if more politicians were religious, they would be more likely to be honest and have integrity. "This is such a complex issue," admitted a California woman. "I feel like I want the president to

***Only 26% would like "the news media to devote more attention to the religious backgrounds and beliefs of candidates running for elected office."***

be a good human being and have a good heart and be really an ethical person. But I know that if you get to be the president, you've stepped on a lot of people. You've used power and dirty politics because that's the reality of the game. So I feel a little cynical about the Christian presence...the reality of how that whole system operates is not a pretty sight in my mind." Evangelical respondents are far more likely to believe that more religion would lead to greater honesty and integrity among politicians (72%). Jewish and nonreligious respondents are far more likely to say the opposite—the nation does not need more religious politicians (81% of Jews and 90% of the nonreligious).

### "They're Just Looking for Votes"

But regardless of their religious affiliation, Americans have a jaded response when politicians talk about their personal religious beliefs during elections. About three in four (74%) say that when politicians do this, "they are just saying what they think people want to hear." "You would be hard-pressed to find—I am not saying it is impossible—but you would be hard-pressed to find a politician that wouldn't compromise for votes," said an evangelical Christian in Alabama. With the Republican and Democratic nominations clinched by Bush and Gore at the time, a New Jersey man said, "I have a tough time with anything that either of those two gentlemen says because it always comes around to the fact that they are looking for votes."

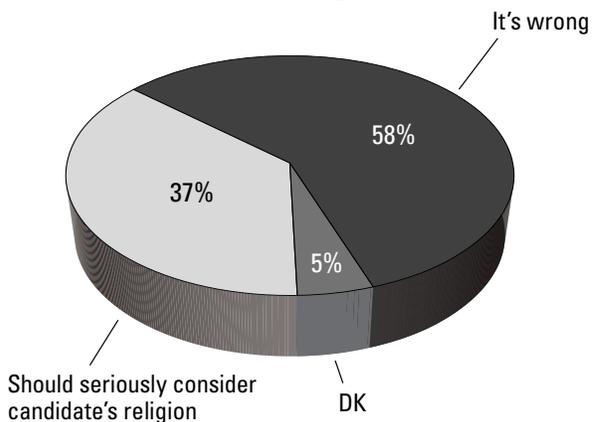
Aside from people's skepticism about maintaining—or retrieving—honor in politics, some recognize that the world can be a rough place that occasionally requires tough-minded—perhaps even harsh—actions, even from an elected official whose religious views might counsel gentleness. In one of the focus groups, the first response was, "Unfortunately no," when the moderator asked, "Would we be better off if our political leaders paid more careful attention to religious values when they made policy decisions?" The response continued: "Let's just say I am going to follow 'Thou shalt not kill' as strictly as possible. What do you do when we have to go to war? You have to look at what is more important—upholding your belief or making sure our country succeeds. It is a time where you have to be hard-nosed."

### "They Have to Wheel and Deal"

Even more important, most people simply believe that a willingness to compromise and a desire to participate in give-and-take are inevitable, even desirable, qualities given how government works. They therefore expect that their elected leaders—even if they are deeply religious—will have to act accordingly. "We tend to think that politicians have the power to make decisions autonomously, and they do not," said a New Jersey man. "They have to work with other individuals who have different beliefs and different value systems. They have to wheel and deal."

### It's Wrong to Vote by Religion

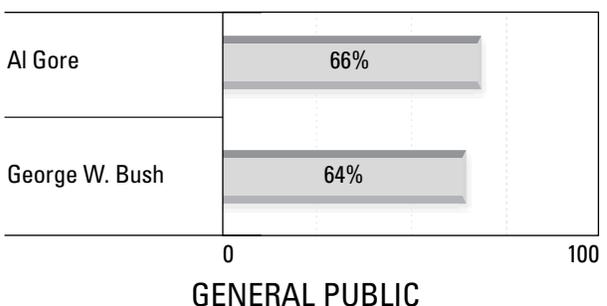
Do you think that voters should seriously consider the religious affiliation of candidates when they decide whom to support, or is it wrong to do so?



### Most Don't Know Religion of Gore and Bush

Can you tell me the specific religious affiliation of Al Gore/George W. Bush?

% of general public saying "Don't know"



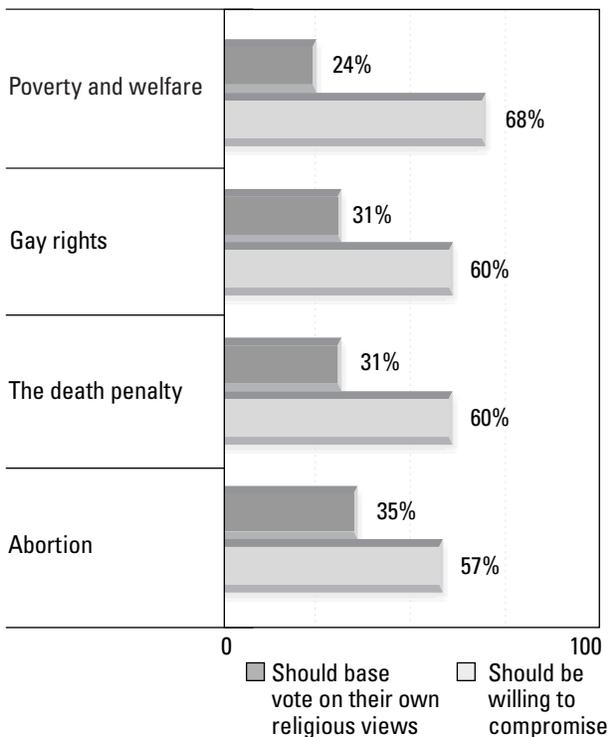
An overwhelming majority (84%) believes “Even elected officials who are deeply religious sometimes have to make compromises and set their convictions aside to get results while in government.” “You want a leader who believes in God. But it is really hard for him to stick to his beliefs because he is going to have to please different groups,” said a woman in Ohio.

## Should They Compromise on Gay Rights? Abortion?

The notion that compromise is inevitable carries over even when the focus is on highly contentious issues, such as gay rights or abortion, that are emotionally and morally charged and about which religious appeals are routinely made.

### Expecting Compromise on Hot-Button Issues

When elected officials who are deeply religious have to vote on issues related to each of the following, do you think that they should base their vote on their own religious views, or that they should be willing to compromise with other elected officials whose



Most (60%) believe, for example, that when deeply religious elected officials vote on gay rights, they should be willing to compromise with those whose views are different. Only 31% would expect officials to base their vote upon their religious views. “I don’t want society to let them [gays] get married, no,” an Ohio participant said. “That’s my opinion, that it’s wrong. But then again, if we start letting the state tell us that we can’t get married, that gives them too much control.”

Similarly, most (a 57% to 35% margin) expect compromise on another of the nation’s most difficult issues—abortion. “I don’t agree with abortion,” said a woman in New Mexico, “but I don’t believe that you can impose how you feel about a particular thing when you are in government. I don’t think so. They elected him to govern the state, not to throw his religious beliefs on us.”

Opinion about how religious beliefs ought to affect political decisions on the death penalty is no different: 60% say lawmakers should be willing to compromise with those whose views are different, 31% to vote according to their religious views. Expectations of compromise are slightly stronger when the issue is poverty and welfare, with 68% saying officials should be willing to compromise and 24% to vote their views.

Evangelical Christians, as will be seen in more detail in chapter 6, tend to take a dimmer view of political compromise on all of these issues. The majority (55%) of evangelical Christians, for example, would rather see officials vote based on their religious views—rather than attempt compromise—when the issue is abortion.

### Do Their Doggoned Best, But...

People are not saying that issue positions are unimportant and there is a substantial minority that rejects the possibility of compromise in some areas. In the focus groups, people would often go through a two-step process, first delineating their personal stand on the issue and only then talking about how they want leaders to deal with it. “You’ve picked really hot-button issues,” pointed out one participant to the moderator. “If you agreed with your governor or senator on that issue, you want them to do the best they could to win that point. You want them to do their doggoned best. But you have to realize they may not win that point, they may lose.”

## Consulting Church Leaders

Many Americans think religious faith can make an elected leader better, but they are probably thinking about the benefits of having an internal compass, not an ideological blueprint of how to govern. Just over half (52%) say they would be more likely to vote for a candidate who “draws emotional comfort and strength from religion.” On the other hand, distrust is triggered when the candidate is an atheist: most (54%) say they are less likely to vote for a candidate who “is open about not believing in God.” To harbor doubts is one thing, but to lack any sort of faith is a signal of trouble to many Americans.

Religion in the service of inspiration and emotional fortitude is one thing—in the service of policy making it is quite another. Here many Americans seem to harbor their misgivings or indifference. Only 26% would be more likely to vote for a candidate who “always votes for legislation according to his or her religious convictions.” Most say either that they would be less likely to vote for such a candidate (40%) or that it would make no difference (29%). “I don’t think that religion should really affect your work,” said a woman in New Mexico. “I know for myself, I do my best. My professionalism comes from my education and my experience. I am there to do a job. You would hope that a governor, a leader, would be the same.” In the same vein, the plurality (40%) would find a candidate more appealing if he or she kept “religious faith separate from actions while in government.” The plurality (44%) would also be less likely to vote for a candidate who “relies on church leaders for advice on how to vote on specific legislation.”

## Not Voting Blindly for Anything

Civil libertarians who have dedicated their careers and their lives to the domain of separation of church and state may not be reassured by how ordinary Americans discuss the issue. If one asks people to discuss separation of church and state in focus groups, one had better expect a vague, ill-defined conversation that lacks passion and certainly clarity. What people do understand, however, is tolerance for different values; after all, they live according to this principle in their daily interactions with fellow citizens. Watching their government work—from local city councils, to state government, to Washington, D.C.—they understand that the political process has been engineered to insure compromise. Almost begrudgingly, compromise has become an admired mode of operation.

For voters to divvy their loyalties to candidates according to religious identification strikes most Americans as flat-out wrong, just as the notion of voting blindly according to party identification is far from popular these days. Nor are ideological litmus tests on issues on the public’s mind. People still hunger for principles and for politicians who act according to them. But they also carry with them a suspicion that extremism in the pursuit of principle may be not only wrong in theory, but also unrealistic in practice.

*If one asks people to discuss separation of church and state, one had better expect a vague, ill-defined conversation that lacks clarity... What people do understand is tolerance for different values.*

## CHAPTER FIVE: THE MORE, THE BETTER?

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**Americans make some subtle distinctions about the role religion should play in government itself, but they strongly endorse the right of religious groups and leaders to speak out on social and political questions. Most have little fear that the country could be pulled into sectarian strife. The public believes religious groups and leaders have every right to have their say—although groups in the minority, such as Jewish and nonreligious Americans, are worried that this can get out of hand. Despite these differences, few see religious involvement as the magic solution to the nation’s dilemmas. The public is also dubious about the media’s fairness on religious issues, but these concerns are not especially intense.**

Religious leaders and organizations have always participated in America’s political process, speaking out, mobilizing supporters, protesting and working to heal the nation’s divisions. The Christian Right and Jewish Americans—to name just a few groups—are seen as significant voting blocs. Leaders in the Catholic Church speak out on abortion, the death penalty and social welfare. Some observers hold grave reservations about religious leaders and groups participating in the political process, arguing that this could eventually lead the country into sectarian strife—something the United States has rarely seen.

### Relatively Unruffled

But the American public does not seem to share in these worries—most people are unruffled about religious leaders’ political involvement. At the same time, however, they are not enthusiastic enough about it to believe that increased religious involvement will be a boon for politics. In fact, more than six in ten (63%) believe that our political system could handle it if religious leaders and groups were to become a lot more involved in politics, while half as many (31%) predict that our political system would be threatened.

In the focus groups, this conviction seemed to stem from participants’ general confidence in American pluralism. “We have people in this country with a lot of different views,” said an Ohio man, “and our system lets them have their say... We can take it.” Focus group participants, although cynical about politicians, were notably idealistic about the openness of politics. In a

sense, they felt that when it comes to religious groups, everyone has a place at the table, and they wouldn’t want it any other way.

However, not everyone shares this confidence. In contrast with the general public, for example, almost half (49%) of Jews believe that the political system could be threatened by more religious involvement. Those who are not religious agree (56%).

### A Resilient System

Given focus group participants’ general disdain for religious extremism, it seemed reasonable to assume that the public would be as apprehensive about the participation of ultra-orthodox groups. But this does not appear to be the case, at least among the majority of the public. Respondents who believe that our political system could handle more religious involvement were asked a follow-up question: What if these religious leaders and groups were fundamentalist or ultra-orthodox? Significantly, 70% of these respondents still believe that our system could handle even this extreme type of religious involvement. Among the general public, fears of extremists hijacking political discourse are far outweighed by Americans’ confidence in the system’s resiliency.

***Among the general public, fears of extremists hijacking political discourse are far outweighed by Americans’ confidence in the system’s resiliency.***

## As Much Right as Anyone Else

Very few people want to close the door on religious leaders wishing to speak out politically. When asked about religious leaders who regularly speak out on political issues, a full 85% agree (55% “very close,” 30% “somewhat close”) that these religious leaders have as much right as anyone else to participate in the political process. Focus group participants showed very little unease over priests, ministers or rabbis speaking up; in fact, most took it as a matter of course that religious leaders, as citizens, are just as free as anyone else to get involved. “That’s part of the political process. Whether I enjoy or not enjoy it, it’s part of the political process, and they have the right to speak their piece, and maybe they should,” said an Ohio focus group participant.

## Little Yearning for Religious Voices

The survey findings show that the public endorses the right of religious leaders to be involved in politics, and few are alarmed by the prospect. But do people look to religious leaders as the answer to their dissatisfaction with the current state of politics? Judging from a variety of survey findings, the public does not view religious leaders’ involvement as the cure-all that will transform politics for the better.

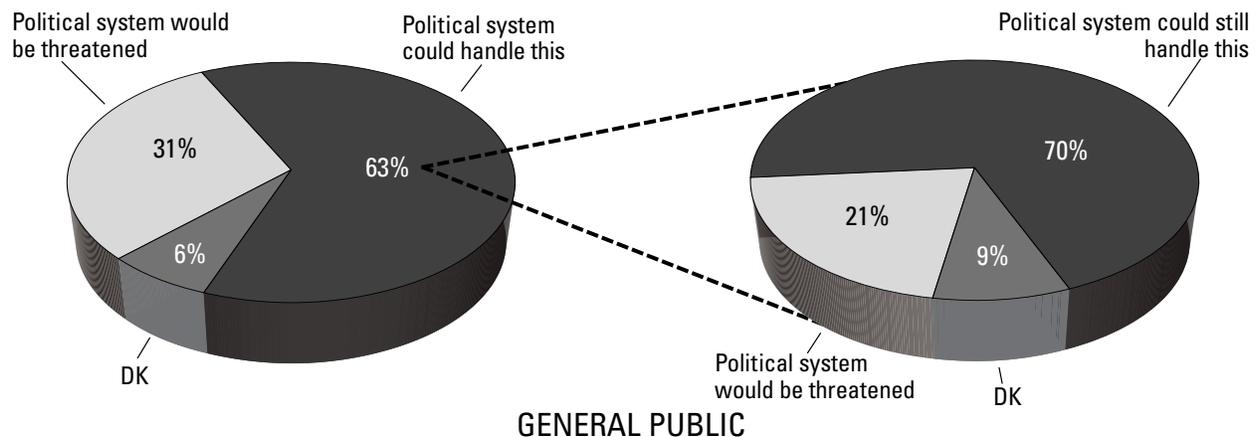
“The majority of the religious leaders who are interested in politics, I’m definitely not interested in. It seems to be that in order to be interested, they have to have some qualities that I don’t think make them a very good religious leader,” said an Ohio woman very unhappy with the state of politics today. Indeed, many seem skeptical about religious leaders who take a stand on political issues. When asked if they think that religious leaders are intruding into areas best left to politicians when they speak out on political issues, the public is split—about half agree (49%) and about half disagree (48%).

Much of the public responds in a neutral manner to religious leaders who throw their weight behind political issues or candidates. In fact, more than half of the public (52%) say their reaction would be neutral if more religious leaders were to take public positions on specific legislation and urge their congregations to adopt their point of view—another 24% would react positively, and 22% would react negatively. What about if more religious leaders were to urge their congregations to vote for the candidates they prefer? The findings are not dramatically different—about half (48%) would be neutral, with another 17% seeing this positively and 34% seeing it negatively.

## Suppose Their Views Are More Extreme?

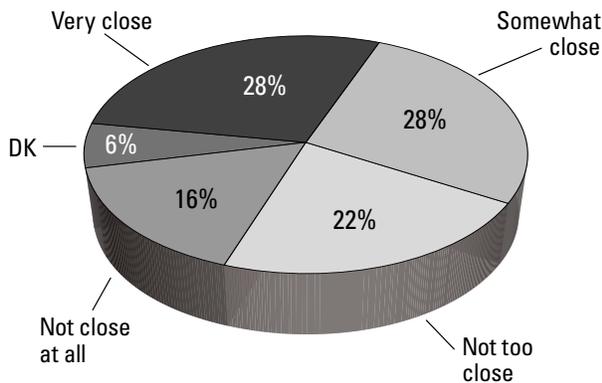
Do you think that our political system would be threatened if religious leaders and groups were to become a lot more involved in politics, or do you think our political system could easily handle this type of involvement?

What if these religious leaders and groups were fundamentalist or ultra-orthodox? [Asked of the 63% of the sample that said “Political system could handle this” (n=936)]

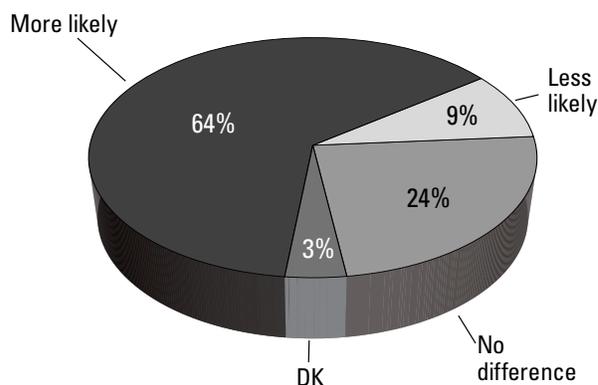


## News Coverage of Religion Seems Unfair

How close does this statement come to your own view? Too many journalists have a built-in bias against religion and religious people.



Compared to other issues, do you think news coverage of religion is more likely to focus on scandal and sensationalism, less likely, or is there no difference?



### GENERAL PUBLIC

## The Clinton-Lewinsky Matter

Public Agenda asked the public, in retrospect, how religious leaders should have responded to the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal and found that there's no clear consensus on the proper role they should have played. At the time, some church leaders took on a visible media role. The president called in a host of religious leaders for counsel and prayer, while other religious leaders were publicly chiding the president for his behavior. A third (33%) of the public say that they should have spoken out forcefully to say we're all human and deserve forgiveness, and another 23% say that leaders should have spoken out forcefully to condemn the behavior. But fully a third (34%) say that they should have stayed clear of the scandal altogether.

This lack of consensus may stem from the fact that the public sees religious leaders as just as fallible as the rest of us. A vast majority of the public (86%) believes that leaders of religious groups or organizations are as capable of unethical behavior or abusing their position as any other leaders. While surveys regularly show that religious leaders are held in higher esteem than political, business or media leaders,<sup>8</sup> it seems that many people assume religious leaders are not immune to moral failings. Focus group discussions revealed that people's knowledge about religious leaders' misdeeds

plays a role when they're asked about religious involvement in politics.

## Media Coverage of Religion

Whether or not people feel it's appropriate for religious leaders to speak out on political issues, does the public believe that the news media is giving them a full and accurate hearing? The public gives the news media notoriously negative ratings in quite a few areas, but for this project it was important to see if people have a specific problem with religion coverage. And in fact, 46% of the public believe that coverage of religious topics is the same—no better, no worse—compared to coverage of topics like politics and crime. "Yes, in one sense, the media keep showing bad stuff about religion," remarked a California woman, "but that's what's going on. Also, that's what people are watching." But nearly as many (44%) say that coverage of religion is worse than coverage of other topics.

One reason for this might be that much of the public suspects that journalists don't have a great deal of respect for religion. Over half (56%) think that too many journalists have a built-in bias against religion and religious people. Even higher numbers of evangelical Christians—almost three-quarters (74%)—agree.

Most in the public (64%) also charge that media coverage of religion—even compared to other issues—is more likely to focus on scandal and sensationalism. A New Jersey man observed, “The thing that pops into my mind was probably something out of Canada—there were priests who were abusing children. That very much upset me. And the Tammy Faye thing. There are certainly not positive things coming out. They are not saying, ‘Look at how many wonderful things churches are doing.’”

### If It’s a Religious Topic...

But this dissatisfaction with media coverage does not translate into a call for expanding religion coverage. Given the public’s tepid response to religious leaders speaking out on political topics, it comes as little surprise that they don’t expect the media to take extra steps to seek out a religious perspective on most stories. When the local news runs stories about an issue facing a community, only about a fifth (21%) of the public think it’s important for reporters to routinely cover the viewpoint of local religious leaders—the vast majority (73%) instead believes this is important only if the issue clearly deals with a religious topic. In another question, only 19% select religion as the topic they would like to see more coverage of, compared to other topics like education.<sup>9</sup> These findings suggest that public criticism of the media on this front does not represent a wellspring of intense disapproval.

### Social Welfare: Let Religious Organizations Help Out

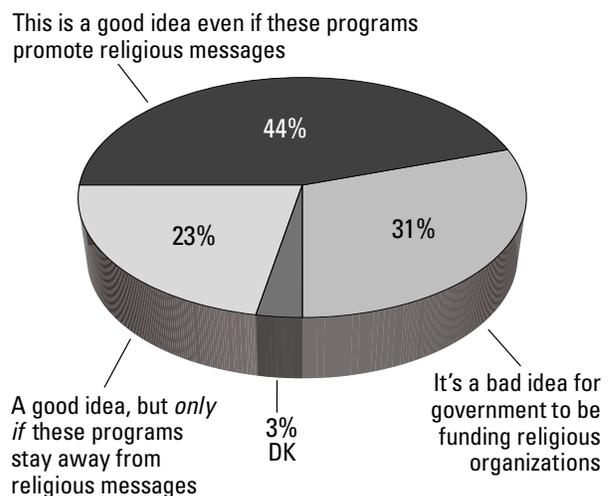
The public does not expect religious leaders to dramatically alter the political realm, and they are less than hopeful that the media will give them a full hearing. But when it comes to a heightened role in the social realm—namely, helping those in need—the public is certainly more enthusiastic. Many favor government funding of “faith-based” organizations to administer social services traditionally overseen by government agencies—called “charitable choice” by its supporters.

More than six in ten (63%) favor giving religious groups and churches government money to fund their programs aimed at helping the poor, while only 34% oppose the idea. In the focus groups, most were supportive. A Long Island woman had no problem with the idea: “I feel that if the group is helping a person who is alcoholic or on drugs, then that is great no matter what religion that is, as long as they are helping the individual.” A few, however, did voice some objections. “If I were a drug addict, the last place I would want to go is the church,” said a New Jersey man. “I don’t want to hear, ‘Praise God.’ I want someone to get to the point. Forget religion—help me get straight or get sober.”

But it seems many in the public don’t have a problem with using religious messages in these government-funded programs. A plurality (44%) of the public support government funding of religious programs that help drug addicts or the homeless, even if these programs promote religious messages. Twenty-three percent take the middle ground, believing it’s a good idea only if these programs stay away from religious messages. About a third (31%) say that it’s a bad idea altogether for government to be funding religious organizations.

### Government Funding of Faith-Based Organizations

Some people suggest that the government should increase its funding of religious groups and churches that offer programs to help drug addicts and the homeless. Which comes closer to your own view?



GENERAL PUBLIC

# CHAPTER SIX: EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANS

**As a group, evangelicals take a distinctive view on many issues. Their religious faith is an especially vital and uplifting part of their lives, and most feel obligated to share their beliefs with others. Despite their commitment to sharing their beliefs with others, most say they strive to negotiate social interactions with tact. What’s more, many evangelicals themselves say they often feel discriminated against and marginalized. On certain issues, like religion in the public schools, their views are in step with the rest of the public—they favor a moment of silence over an explicitly Christian prayer. But evangelicals are less likely to support compromise on hot-button political issues.**

## Especially Important to Consider

Many evangelical Christians seem to have a distinctive worldview, different from that of the rest of the public, which in turn informs their social interactions, their politics and their positions on social issues. Evangelical Christians also make up a significant segment of the population—when asked in this survey, 24% of respondents identified themselves as evangelical Christian.\* *Throughout this chapter, their views are contrasted with the views of “nonevangelicals”—meaning all others in the general public who do not call themselves evangelical Christian.*

## A Distinctive Worldview

Religion plays an especially vital role in the lives of evangelical Christians. Over half (53%) call their religious faith “the most important influence” in their life. In contrast, only 20% of nonevangelicals call their faith most important. For many evangelicals, their faith has a firm hold over the way they conduct their daily lives—and influences them to look at the world in more absolute terms. “Nothing is right or wrong anymore. Nothing is black or white, and we believe in black and white,” commented one evangelical woman in Alabama. “The society as a whole is moving further and further from black and white and towards gray in whatever you believe... So much is accepted now.” An especially high proportion of evangelicals (86%) strongly or somewhat agrees that “the Bible is the actual Word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word.”

This sentiment can translate into a tendency to see social debate as part of a larger battle of good versus evil. Fully 84% of evangelicals agree that Satan is behind the fight against religion in public life in this country. A deeply religious Christian in Alabama, in agreement with several others, remarked, “It’s a spiritual war. You take Satan. He has always been fighting the Christian way of life, and he is still doing that... He will come at you in all kinds of ways to make you think this is right.”

## Feeling Like Outsiders

Findings like these raise the eyebrows, if not the ire, of many—religious and nonreligious—who worry about an undue influence of conservative Christians in public discourse. But from our discussions with evangelical

## Evangelical Christians: A Distinctive Outlook

	Evangelical Christians
Satan is behind the fight against religion in public life	84%
There’s a lot of prejudice in this country toward evangelical Christians	68
Deeply religious people should spread the word of God whenever they can	61

\* In this chapter, evangelical Christians (n = 368) are compared to people who are not evangelical Christian (n = 1,139).

Christians, it became clear that, far from feeling confident, most feel they have been on the losing end of the debate for years. It's beginning to make many feel like outsiders.

When asked directly, more than two-thirds (68%) of evangelical Christians agree that there's a lot of prejudice in this country toward them. They also sense disrespect from the news media—74% of evangelical Christians agree that too many journalists have a built-in bias against religion and religious people. “We as Christians have to put up with a lot of garbage,” complained a born-again Christian in California. “I have people come up to me and say a lot of things to me. I feel like I'm a human trashcan. I don't want to hear it, you know? Don't place that on me.”

### Tactfully Spreading the Word

In most evangelical denominations, a key tenet is “spreading the Word”—sharing their religious views in an array of forums, using a variety of styles. Six in ten (61%), in fact, believe that deeply religious people should spread the Word of God whenever they can. Only 26% of nonevangelicals feel this way.

But many evangelicals belie the stereotypes they are saddled with—such as being people who inject religion into nearly every conversation with nearly every stranger they encounter. Just about half (51%) agree that deeply religious people are being inconsiderate if they always bring up religion when they deal with other people—65% of nonevangelicals feel this way.

In our conversations with them, evangelicals contended that being too assertive is counterproductive—plus it's not in keeping with their beliefs. When it comes to talking about religion at social occasions like parties, the majority of evangelicals (66%) agree with nonevangelicals (62%) that religion should be brought up in conversation only with care. “I believe it is very important the way that you come to somebody, because you never know how close that person is to being saved,” said a Baptist man in Alabama. “A lot of times Christians can be too harsh in the way you say something, and that offends people. That will make them go against God or curse God or whatever... You have to come across in a nice and loving manner, because if

you just come out and say, ‘Well, this is the way you are supposed to be doing it,’ they are going to say, ‘Well, who are you to tell me how to live?’ ”

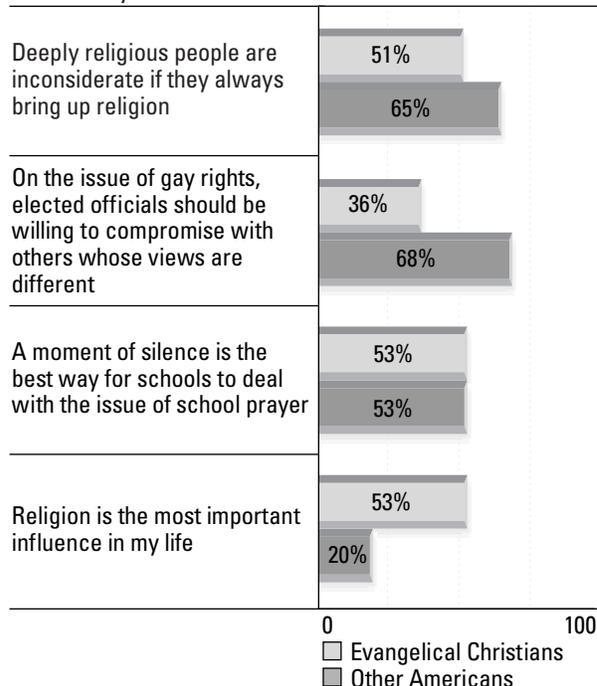
This is a pragmatic point, but it's often born out of a conviction that it's best to be humble and gentle with those who are different. About half (52%) agree that because the Golden Rule is so important to them, they tend to be gentler toward people with different religions or lifestyles—but a surprisingly large segment (33%) opted for this description: “Because their religious commitment is so intense, they tend to be more judgmental.”

### Do They Support Christian Prayer in School?

As one might expect, most evangelical Christians are firmly in favor of efforts to bring more religion into the public schools. But, perhaps surprisingly, most evangelicals, just like most nonevangelicals, are in favor of the middle-of-the-road solution in the school prayer debate—a moment of silence. Given a variety of

#### Evangelical Christians Weigh In

% who say that:



options, 53% of evangelicals favor this resolution, which mirrors the 53% of the nonevangelicals who also favor this option. Only 12% of evangelicals are in favor of a prayer that refers to Jesus. Perhaps out of the same spirit of inclusiveness, majorities of evangelical Christians—like the general public—believe that public schools should give major Jewish holidays (61%) and Muslim holidays (52%) the same attention that Christmas celebrations get, if parents request it.

A higher proportion of evangelicals agrees with arguments in favor of school prayer; for example, 75% of evangelicals agree that school prayer is one of the most effective ways we can improve the value and behavior of today's young people, compared with 50% of nonevangelicals. What's more, only about a fifth (21%) of evangelicals agree that school prayer violates the Constitution and the idea of separation of church and state. But surprisingly high numbers are also inclined to agree with some of the arguments against school prayer. For example, nearly half (48%) agree that school prayer is unfair to parents who think they, and not the schools, should be the ones to decide what to teach their children about religion. And nearly half (46%) say it's inappropriate for teachers to talk about their religious beliefs in the classroom.

### Less "Give" in Politics

If evangelicals strive to be gentle in their social interactions, and try to find middle-of-the-road solutions in the schools, there is decidedly less "give" in the political stances of many. Almost three-quarters (73%) of evangelicals—compared with 38% of nonevangelicals in the public—believe that if our elected officials were deeply religious, the laws and policy decisions they make would be better. And a higher percentage of evangelicals (72%) believes that if more politicians were religious, they would be more likely to be honest and have integrity. With this confidence in the effects of religion, it's not surprising that the majority of evangelicals believes voters should seriously consider the religious affiliation of candidates when they decide whom to support. Fifty-nine percent feel this way, compared with only 30% of nonevangelicals in the public.

### Less Inclined to Support Political Compromise

Evangelical Christians want to see elected officials who are deeply religious, and they also call for officials to stick to their religious values on some core issues. We asked survey respondents a battery of questions on an array of controversial issues—abortion, the death penalty, gay rights, welfare—to see if people would rather officials try to compromise or adhere closely to their religious views. When it comes to these issues, most nonevangelicals say it's more important for deeply religious elected officials to compromise with other officials whose views are different. In contrast, evangelicals are more divided on whether political compromise is desirable. Only 36% of evangelicals, for example, say that deeply religious officials should compromise with other officials on gay rights (compared to 68% of nonevangelicals). Findings are similar for other issues.

*A higher percentage of evangelicals (72%) believe that if more politicians were religious, they would be more likely to be honest and have integrity.*

Evangelical Christians seem to feel that such issues are related to their core religious beliefs and at this point in time seem less likely to countenance compromise—they would rather see religious politicians sticking to their religious convictions.

### Modest Expectations

Despite their desire for political leaders to stand by their religious principles, evangelicals do recognize that at some point compromise might be necessary. For example, evangelicals (79%) are almost as likely as nonevangelicals (86%) to agree that even deeply religious officials sometimes have to make compromises to get results while in government. What's more, they share Americans' widespread skepticism about contemporary politics. Almost seven in ten (69%) agree that "when politicians talk about their religious faith during elections, they are just saying what they think people want to hear."

## CHAPTER SEVEN: SOME BEG TO DIFFER

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**There are strong concerns among American Jews as well as nonreligious Americans that introducing more religion into public life could backfire. While most Americans believe their society can lay claim to the benefits of religious faith without creating division and prejudice, Jews and nonreligious respondents—for different reasons—sound a cautionary refrain. Majorities of both groups are wary of religion in politics, social life and the public schools.**

Previous chapters have shown broad confidence among Americans in the notion that more religion will have a positive effect on the nation's well-being—and among evangelical Christians this confidence is heightened. But most Americans share two characteristics: they are religious, and they are of the Christian faith. Just how confident are people whose religious beliefs are in the minority? Are Jewish Americans more likely to evince wariness of religion in public life? Are nonreligious Americans as optimistic about the impact of religious faith? A nation with venerated ideals and constitutional principles intended to protect the rights and freedoms of religious minorities will inevitably ask—and be asked—how well it lives up to them.

This chapter puts a special focus on those two minority groups—Jewish Americans and nonreligious Americans—because, for different reasons, their views stand out as particularly distinct. (Since the views of Catholics are virtually indistinguishable from those of the general public, they are reported in the supporting tables, not here.) Precisely because each group represents such a small percentage of the population—of the general public sample, 2% are Jewish, and 7% nonreligious\*—their outlook may also reflect a greater sense of vulnerability as they face the views of the majority. Indeed, this sense of vulnerability can be quickly confirmed: 54% of Jews and 67% of nonreligious people responding to this survey believe it is likely that if many more Americans were to become deeply religious there would be more prejudice toward religious minorities—a view shared by only 31% of the general public.

The findings for the general public and for the oversamples tell two different stories. The general public would like to see more religion in public life, but hope to see it occur in a balanced way that respects the nation's religious diversity. American Jews and the nonreligious people put up warning signals when they hear of a push for more religion in public life.

### American Jews Advise Caution

A focus group conducted with American Jews initially seemed to track the conversations held with Americans of other faiths—they evinced the same concerns about values, they too focused on religion's impact on individual behavior as key. But it soon became apparent that the group would have a very different—and far more wary—take on the role they wish religion to play in society, schools and politics.

The survey results confirm these impressions. For example, a significant portion of the general public hopes that more religion can provide some salvation to politics. But American Jews, across a variety of questions and issues, are consistently more wary of religion's role in politics and more likely to want to keep religion at arm's length from politics.

*A nation with venerated ideals and constitutional principles intended to protect the rights and freedoms of religious minorities will inevitably ask—and be asked—how well it lives up to them.*

\* In this survey, Jews are defined as those who self-identify as "Jewish," or those who self-identify as "no religion" but have one or both parents who are Jewish. Out of the general public sample of 1,507, 28 respondents are Jewish. An additional 172 interviews were conducted with Jews, bringing the total sample of Jewish respondents to 200.

Nonreligious people are defined as those who are atheist or agnostic, or who have no religious preference and never attend religious services. Out of the general public sample of 1,507, 107 respondents qualify as nonreligious. An additional 101 interviews were conducted with nonreligious people, bringing the total sample of nonreligious to 208.

A majority of Jewish respondents (62%) says they are more likely to vote for a candidate who keeps religious faith separate from actions while in government, but only 40% of the general public agree. Only 14% of Jews—but nearly half (47%) of the general public—believe that “if more of our elected officials were deeply religious, the laws and policy decisions they make would be better.” Jewish Americans seem not only less hopeful that religion can help, they are also more likely to worry about its potential to do damage to the political process. About one in two Jewish respondents (49%) thinks our political system would be threatened if religious leaders and groups were to substantially increase their involvement, but a solid majority of the general public (63%) thinks our political system would easily handle it.

### “You Could Get into a Little Problem with Freedom of Religion”

Moreover, Jewish respondents seem more likely to appreciate institutional barriers to religious influence on politics and government. Substantially more Jews (86%) than the general public (61%) embrace the view that “one of the most important reasons our political system is successful is the principle of separation of church and state.” “I think it’s inappropriate, you could get into a little problem with freedom of religion,” responded a Jewish focus group participant to the question of injecting more religion into public life.

“According to the Constitution, everyone has the right to practice their own religion. If you think back, that is one of the reasons people came to this country. And there is separation between church and state. Religion should be each person’s own thing.” And while much of the general public (61%) seems to have become frustrated with the Supreme Court for “trying so hard to remove religion from public institutions that it has become hostile toward religion,” most Jews (60%) don’t agree with this statement.

### Closing the School Doors

As we saw in chapter 2, Jews are far more intent on keeping religious observance out of the realm of public schools. Six in ten Jews (62%) think that public schools usually do the right thing when they limit the use of religious symbols during the holidays, compared to just 42% of the general public. While a majority of the general public (53%) settles on having a moment of silence in the classroom as their preferred approach, the majority of Jewish respondents (60%) says the public schools should avoid any prayer or a moment of silence. Jewish focus group participants were adamant about keeping religion out of the public schools. “I don’t want anything of any religious affiliation displayed in the schools, because it opens the door to other religions posting theirs, too. I don’t want mine up, and I don’t want others up,” said one man about posting the Ten Commandments.

## Some Americans Have Concerns

% who say that:	General Public	Jewish	Non-religious
Opening the door to more religious influence in public life can easily get out of hand	54%	73%	75%
It’s likely that there would be less tolerance toward people with unconventional lifestyles if more Americans were to become deeply religious	52	59	68
It’s likely that there would be more prejudice toward religious minorities if more Americans were to become deeply religious	31	54	67
The political system would be threatened if religious leaders and groups were to become a lot more involved in politics	31	49	56

## Living in America

Why are Jewish respondents so consistently reluctant to open the door to increased influence of religion in public life? Several explanations suggest themselves. Jewish Americans are probably thinking: ‘If religion were to become more influential in our society, chances are it won’t be our religion.’ It is perhaps predictable that a distinctive religious minority living in an open society would have trouble maintaining its identity and would like to avoid making this even more difficult. America’s Jews seem to be facing this struggle: more than six in ten (64%) say that “maintaining a Jewish identity is a constant struggle for Jews living in America.”

## On Guard

Some of the wariness may also be explained by the history of the Jews, a history with unique elements that go beyond that of simply being a religious minority. Although their history is obviously about far more than suffering, American Jews seem on guard because of their past. Eight in ten (80%) agree that “even in America, Jews have to be on guard because anti-Semitism could always become a powerful force here”; only 17% instead say that “Jews have very little to worry about when it comes to anti-Semitism in America.”

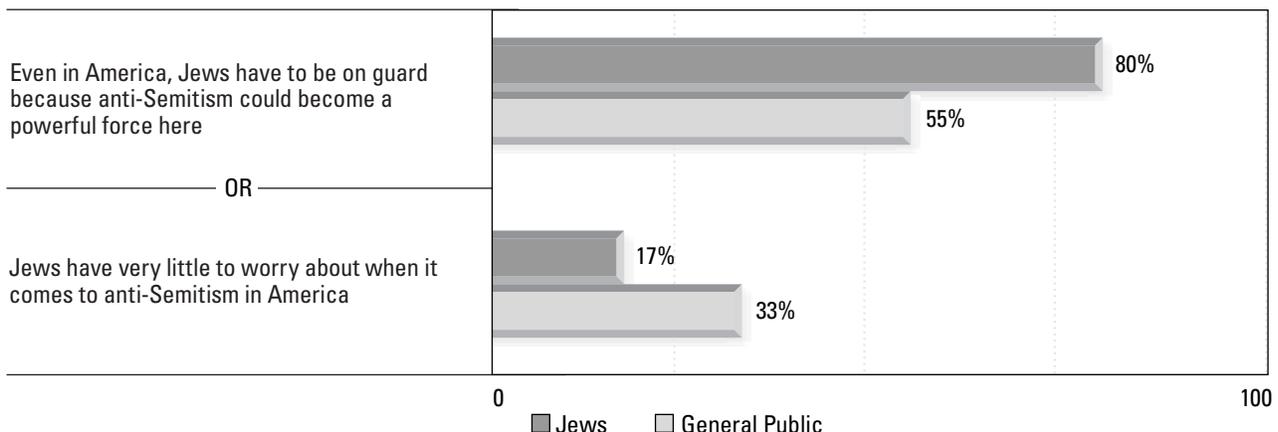
It did not take much digging to get to fears of anti-Semitism in the focus group. “I worry more about violence than taking my job or rights,” said one woman. “There are actual groups out there looking to kill. My sisters and I go into a Jewish chat room frequently, and about once a week some nut comes in there with messages like ‘Hitler rules.’ That really scares me. How do we know this guy doesn’t have 50 million behind him? If he can’t leave me alone in a chat room, how is he going to feel when he meets me or my children?” Many among the general public do not think the notion of pervasive anti-Semitism in the United States is farfetched. A little over half of the general public (55%) believe that anti-Semitism could surge even in the U.S.

## Nonreligious Americans

Given improved social sensibilities and the desire to give socially desirable answers, it is very rare these days to see a survey in which Americans voice negative attitudes toward minority groups. One of the most glaring exceptions to this trend, however, is the view toward people who don’t follow any religion. For example, when Gallup gave respondents a list of eight candidates of different backgrounds, overwhelming majorities of Americans say they would vote for their party’s presidential candidate if that person were black (95%), Jewish (92%), a woman (92%) or a homosexual (59%). But a candidate described as an atheist? That person tumbles to the bottom of the list—only 49% say

## Anti-Semitism in America

Which of the following comes closer to your view?



they would vote for him or her.<sup>10</sup> In this study as well, 54% of the general public say they would be less likely to vote for a candidate who is open about not believing in God.

Unlike most Jewish Americans, nonreligious people are not a group concerned about protecting a distinctive culture and tradition. Yet they clearly have reasons to feel like a minority—in a society where religious worship and affiliation is so widespread they are but a tiny fraction of the population.

### Will There Be Less Tolerance?

Perhaps reflecting the experience of living without religion in a religious society, it is the nonreligious people (68%)—even more so than Jews (59%)—who anticipate there would be less tolerance for people with “unconventional lifestyles” if many more Americans became deeply religious. One man spoke about his experiences as a youth: “I was forced to participate in the prayer before the football game. Otherwise, ‘You are a godless son of a gun that would not join your team in praying to their God for your victories.’ I felt—even if I was moving my lips to make it sound like I was going along with them—I had to put my hand in there and be a part of that prayer celebration. If I did not, it would have affected my ability to work with those people in playing the game. I regret that I did it. I regret that I did not have the stature to stand up and say they couldn’t force me to do that.”

### Religion—Far from a Required Subject

The nonreligious are hardly arguing that waning values are not a problem in American society—only 6% say family values and moral behavior are not in decline. They do feel, however, that “there are many other effective ways to combat these negative trends” besides religion (79%). Religion is clearly not the only path to goodness, according to nonreligious Americans: fully 88% say, “It’s not necessary to believe in God in order to be moral and have good values.”

As usual when it comes to questions of values, it is around children and families that differences are drawn in sharpest relief. The overwhelming majority of the

general public (74%) believes “it’s a bad idea for families to raise children without any religion,” but only 33% of nonreligious Americans agree. The nonreligious also question the efficacy of prayer for the young: only 15% say school prayer is one of the most effective ways to improve the values of today’s young people. Reflecting a special concern for the social pressure kids may face, more than eight in ten (85%) nonreligious respondents believe that school prayer embarrasses and isolates students whose religion is different or who are not religious at all, with 62% agreeing strongly.

### A Mixed Blessing

As seen in chapter 1, Americans are widely optimistic that more religion will provide help and relief to society in such specific areas as crime, parenting and materialism. But nonreligious Americans are not only far from sure this will happen, they also see potential for bad news. They say more religion in our society could be a mixed blessing and could lead to backsliding in some key areas.

On the one hand, only 41% of the nonreligious think that crime would decrease if many more Americans became religious; only 45% that parents would do a better job of raising their kids; and only 33% that there would be less greed and materialism. By the same token, the nonreligious think it is likely that there would be less tolerance toward those with unconventional lifestyles (68%), and that women would lose some of their personal freedoms (54%).

Given such decidedly mixed expectations, it is no wonder that few nonreligious Americans want religion’s influence in society to grow and that most think we can thrive

without it. Unlike the rest of the general public, most nonreligious respondents want the influence of religion on American society to either weaken (40%) or remain the same (41%). Indeed—though only 18% of other Americans agree—54% of the nonreligious insist “our society would do well even if many Americans were to abandon their religious faith.”

***“I was forced to participate in the prayer before the football game. Otherwise, ‘You are a godless son of a gun.’”***

— Nonreligious man, California

## Politics and Religion Don't Mix

Although they say religious leaders have as much right as anyone else to participate in the political process (78%), nonreligious respondents consistently preferred a “keep it down” course for religion as they responded to a variety of questions on its influence on politics.

A surge of involvement by religious groups or leaders would be of particular concern to nonreligious Americans. More than half (56%) say it would threaten our political system, compared to only 31% of the general public. “I’m sort of thinking about the Christian Right and the power behind the scenes that they are trying to build,” said one man. “That makes me uncomfortable. It doesn’t bother me to where I’m losing sleep over it. But it does bother me.” Only 9% of nonreligious respondents think that if more politicians were religious, they would be more likely to be honest and have integrity; among the general public this number grows to 49%.

### “That’s Their Right”

But those who are not religious are apparently not hostile toward religion and religious people, nor do they idealize atheism. Only 24% say they would be more likely to vote for a candidate who is open about not believing in God; most (62%) say it would make no difference to them. Only 13% say they would be less likely to vote for a candidate who draws emotional comfort and strength from religion; once again most (67%) say it would make no difference to them. “I’m not religious and I don’t believe anybody should have any form of religion forced upon them,” said one nonreligious man. “But if kids want to pray before a game, I think that’s their right too. I think that’s what we call religious freedom. I’m saying that I don’t think I have the right to tell anybody what to believe or how to practice their beliefs.”

## Not Under Threat Right Now

America’s Jewish and nonreligious citizens—each group for its own particular set of reasons—clearly express why they are more sensitized to the negative consequences of a heightened religiosity in American public life. But while they may feel a predisposition to vulnerability or concern, they are not feeling under threat at this moment in time. Given a direct statement—“Disagreements sometimes break out over the role of religion in our society, in the schools, in the workplace or in politics”—survey respondents were asked whether they think these disagreements are overblown or if they reflect serious differences of opinion over important issues. There is virtually no difference between the responses of Jewish and nonreligious minorities compared with those of the general public: just over half think too much is made of such disagreements (54% of Jews, 53% of nonreligious people and 55% of the general public).

Echoing the general public, the comfort level of the nonreligious is buttressed by their confidence that the nation’s political system has built-in safeguards against extremism. “The point is that our political system has been designed to be so cumbersome that no one can take over,” said one nonreligious participant. “It’s unlikely to happen. We have three branches of government. That’s what controls the PACs and special interest groups. You can only influence so many Congressmen. You do have a system of checks and balances. It doesn’t work all the time, but it works most of the time.”

***“I’m sort of thinking about the Christian Right...That makes me uncomfortable. It doesn’t bother me to where I’m losing sleep over it. But it does bother me.”***

— New Jersey man

# CHAPTER EIGHT: THE DISTINCTIVE VOICES OF JOURNALISTS, CHRISTIAN LEADERS AND ELECTED OFFICIALS

**In this chapter, we turn to the views of people who presumably have given more thought to religion’s role in the public square: journalists, Christian leaders and elected officials. Each group brings its own voice and set of concerns. Journalists are especially sensitive to separation of church and state issues—and surprisingly self-critical about media coverage of religion. Christian leaders, more than the other groups, look to religion as a solution for society’s problems and have a positive view of the role religious leaders play in public life. Elected officials, similar to the public, are largely concerned about balancing personal religious beliefs with tolerance for others.**

Altogether Public Agenda surveyed 219 newspaper, television and radio news journalists; 254 state senators and mayors of large cities; and 286 heads of local churches and congregations. Virtually all of the heads of local churches and congregations who responded to the survey are Protestant (97%), with three out of four (75%) identifying as evangelical Christian. (For more information about each of these samples, see the Methodology.)

## Journalists Are Most Sensitive to Separation of Church and State

A number of questions in the survey asked about the principle of separation of church and state. We reasoned that people representing the media, the government and the clergy, if no one else, would have had reason to think about this issue.

Journalists, perhaps because First Amendment rights are so important to them, have a heightened sensitivity to constitutional matters. The majority of journalists (57%) think that most people who are opposed to school prayer and the use of religious symbols in public institutions have “reasonable concerns about a constitutional issue” compared to 34% who say these people are “simply hostile to religion.” Fewer than half look to school prayer as an effective remedy for improving the values and behavior of youngsters (43%). Seventy-two percent of journalists consider the separation of church and state to be one of the most important reasons our system of government is so successful, and 75% credit it for America’s lack of religious conflict. On virtually all questions asked about the Constitution or separation of church and state, the views of journalists are markedly different from those of Christian leaders or elected officials.

## Views on the News Media and Religion

How close do each of the following statements come to your own views about the news media’s coverage of religion and religious issues?

% responding “very close” or “somewhat close”	Journalists	Elected Officials	Christian Leaders
The news media tend to focus on soft, “feel good” stories about religion, especially during the holidays	75%	67%	72%
The news media are especially eager to report scandal and sensational news when the subject is religion	59	72	90
Too many journalists have a built-in bias against religion and religious people	46	54	78
The news media do a very good job covering religion	35	31	11

## The Quality of Religious Coverage

Chapter 5 described the public’s dissatisfaction with press coverage of religion—44% say it is worse than coverage of other topics, and majorities fault the press for being especially biased and sensationalist when it comes to religion reporting. Journalists also question the quality and tenor of religious news. Of the 219 journalists surveyed—reporters who cover straight news stories, not those who exclusively work the religion beat—only 35% agree with the statement “On the whole, the news media do a very good job of covering religion and religious issues.” Almost six in ten (59%) journalists express concern that “the news media are especially eager to report scandal and sensational news when the subject is religion.” And compared to coverage of politics or crime, 59% of journalists them-

selves say that religion reporting is worse; only 1% say it’s better, and 37% say it’s about the same.

As one might expect, Christian leaders also are harsh in their assessment of the press: only 11% think the news media do a very good job covering religion, and the vast majority (90%) believes the news media rush to cover religious scandal. In response to the survey, one religious leader wrote: “The media by and large do not have a clue about [religious] distinctions, nor do they bother to try.”

## Anti-religious Bias

As noted earlier, Public Agenda regularly hears criticism of the media in our research. In this study, we were especially curious about claims that the media are

## Views on Religion in the United States

How close do each of the following statements come to your own views about religion in America today?

% responding “very close” or “somewhat close”	Journalists	Elected Officials	Christian Leaders
With a little more common sense and goodwill, many of the controversies over religious expression in public places could be avoided	85%	84%	87%
Being a nation with a diverse collection of religious groups has been one of our greatest strengths	81	83	68
America’s strong tradition of separation of church and state has protected us from the religious conflict many other countries have experienced	75	68	61
It’s a bad idea for families to raise children without any religion	73	87	97
Separation of church and state is one of the most important reasons our Constitution and political system have been so successful	72	62	53
Something is seriously wrong when freedom of speech protects offensive or hateful speech but does not protect talk about God or religion	59	72	83
Many deeply religious people are insensitive when they constantly bring up their faith in their dealings with people	53	55	37
The country—especially our children—lose something important when religion is taken out of the public schools	45	59	70
The Supreme Court has been trying so hard to remove religious expression from public institutions that it has become hostile toward religion	39	57	70
Our society would thrive even if many Americans were to walk away from their religious faith	19	14	5

either anti-religion or at best uninformed about the topic. While journalists themselves are split as to whether too many journalists have a built-in bias against religion and religious people—46% say this comes close to their view, and 52% say it does not—majorities of Christian leaders (78%), the public (56%) and elected officials (54%) believe such bias exists. In addition to complaints about the rush to cover scandal, Christian leaders and journalists alike are also mindful of soft-pedaling on the part of the press: more than seven in ten agree that “the news media tend to focus on soft, feel-good stories about religion, especially during the holidays” (72% of Christian leaders and 75% of journalists).

Nevertheless, the journalists who responded to our survey show no indication of personal hostility towards religion or religious people. More than three out of four think that if many more Americans were to become religious, the results would be positive: crime would go down (76%); politeness (77%) and compassion (79%) would go up. They are twice as likely to say that “a resurgence of religious faith is the best antidote to weakening family values and declining moral behavior in America” than they are to say “we don’t have to rely on religious faith” to combat these problems (59% vs. 28%).

### Christian Leaders See Religion as Solution

Findings in the general public survey document Americans’ strong belief in the power of religious faith to improve individual behavior, help families raise kids, encourage tolerance in a nation characterized by difference and help elected officials make honorable and ethical decisions, to name but a few. Overwhelming majorities of the Christian leaders we surveyed, as well, believe that a shift toward more religion may prove effective in solving many of the morality, civility and values problems they see in contemporary American life. According to them, families play an important role. Ninety-seven percent believe it’s a bad idea for families to raise children without any religion, and almost nine in ten (88%) see religious faith as an antidote to weakening family values and declining moral behavior. Re-introducing prayer into the public schools also is considered an effective solution for improving young people’s values, but by a much smaller margin (55%).

### Religious Leaders Have a Voice

These survey findings leave no doubt that the American public is comfortable with religious leaders voicing their opinions on political issues; 85% think religious leaders have as much right as others to participate in the political process. For their part, the Christian leaders we surveyed say the quality of the political debate is improved by their participation (73%), and large majorities reject the notions that their involvement is divisive (84%) or that it endangers their moral authority (69%).

But Christian leaders are by far more confident than other groups in the nation’s ability to withstand organized religion’s involvement in public affairs. By a margin of 72% to 16%, they believe our political system could “easily absorb it” if

religious leaders were to become a lot more active in politics, rather than believe the system would be “threatened.” The margins are somewhat narrower among the general public (63% vs. 31%), elected officials (62% vs. 24%) and journal-

ists (49% vs. 31%). But while each group puts a premium on America’s religious diversity, overwhelming majorities of the general public (96%), elected officials (83%) and journalists (81%) consider it to be one of the country’s greatest strengths, compared to a smaller majority of Christian leaders (68%). Said one survey participant in a written comment: “The United States is enriched by its ethnicity and its religious diversity. Our nation suffers virtually no religious strife compared with other countries around the globe.”

***Almost six in ten (59%) journalists express concern that “the news media are especially eager to report scandal and sensational news when the subject is religion.”***

### Elected Officials—Balancing Personal Beliefs with Public Tolerance

Elected officials view religion as a mostly positive force and place a great deal of value in personal religious faith. Majorities say they would be more likely to vote for a candidate for political office who draws strength from religion (74%) or who uses it for guidance when

making policy decisions (62%). Half the elected officials surveyed (50%) think society would suffer if many more people who lack religious convictions were to enter public life (although almost half disagree).

Yet given the nature of their work, elected officials know firsthand about the importance of balancing personal religious beliefs with practical reality. Like the public, they respect and value others' beliefs and expect even the very religious among them to be considerate of those who think differently. A substantial majority of the state senators and mayors surveyed acknowledge that even their deeply religious colleagues must compromise and set religious convictions aside at times in order to get things done (61%). Sixty-three percent

also say they would be less likely to vote for a candidate who relies on church leaders for advice about decisions on specific legislation.

The public is highly skeptical of expressions of religious faith by politicians. But elected officials themselves disagree—63% reject the statement “its very hard to trust politicians when they talk about their religious faith during campaigns.”

***A substantial majority of the state senators and mayors surveyed acknowledge that even their deeply religious colleagues must compromise and set religious convictions aside at times in order to get things done (61%).***

# AFTERWORD by Deborah Wadsworth

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Religion and politics top the list of controversial topics in American society, subjects we've long been advised to avoid lest we generate unpleasant confrontation. At the same time, however, surveys suggest that we are a very religious nation and that Americans yearn for more religion in our national life. Based on recent political campaigns, it seems as though religion and politics—each controversial in its own right—are increasingly linked in our public dialogue.

*In For Goodness' Sake: Why So Many Want Religion to Play a Greater Role in American Life*, Public Agenda set out to better understand what Americans think about religion and its role in the United States today. Our purpose was not to provide guidelines for policy or even suggest how the winds are blowing on legislation or constitutional amendments. Instead, we sought to convey how Americans with differing perspectives and of different faiths view the intersection of religion and politics, religion and public issues, and religion and social interaction. The results are illuminating.

## Society's Salvation

One message arrived loud and clear: Americans strongly correlate religion with individual morality and behavior, considering it one of very few antidotes to the moral decline they observe in our nation today. That's particularly important since people are increasingly alarmed by what many consider a national moral crisis caused by such factors as a declining family structure, disappearing politeness and civility and rising materialism.

Americans believe that if individuals were more religious, their behavior would improve and our society would be stronger as a result. Crime, teen pregnancy, divorce, greed, uncaring parents, unfeeling neighbors—Americans believe that such problems would be mitigated if people were more religious. And to most citizens, it doesn't matter which religion it is. In fact, for over half (53%) of those surveyed, being religious means "making sure that one's behavior and day-to-day actions match one's faith," not attending religious services or even feeling the presence of God.

## Side-by-Side Convictions

In short, people equate religion with personal ethics and morality. And as a result, seven in ten (70%) Americans want religion's influence on American society to grow. However, alongside this strong conviction that religion benefits society is an equally strong adherence to a respect for religious diversity that translates into a surprising tolerance of other people's beliefs and practices. This is no mere lip service on the public's part, nor is it an abstract ideal that disintegrates the moment it is tested. Americans seem to have an ingrained expectation that they will encounter people with different ideas about religion in their daily lives, and the idea of tolerance is so well accepted that it has been absorbed into daily standards for social conduct.

This side-by-side recognition of the importance of religion and religious diversity is evidenced repeatedly throughout the study.

*Americans seem to have an ingrained expectation that they will encounter people with different ideas about religion, and the idea of tolerance is so well accepted that it has been absorbed into daily standards for social conduct.*

## The Balancing Act

Consistent with the belief that religion improves individual behavior, Americans overwhelmingly agree that it's a bad idea for families to raise children without any religion. Likewise, most people see an important role for religion in our public schools. But while a substantial majority of Americans thinks the nation has gone too far in removing religion from the schools, they're cautious about how to correct this imbalance. It seems remarkable that so few Christian respondents (7%) insist that school prayers be tailored to their own beliefs. Reaching for balance—seeking to honor religion while respecting differences—the public clearly favors a moment of silence over a spoken nondenominational or denominational prayer.

Civil libertarians, historians, legal and constitutional experts and others who have struggled with these issues throughout their careers often fear that Americans are fundamentally uninformed and sometimes simplistic in

their perspective on these issues. This study and other opinion research do suggest that many Americans have not thought very carefully about the implications and potential downsides of many of their views.

## Trying to Accommodate the Pros and Cons

But at the same time, it is hard to argue that Americans' views on school prayer are simple-minded or knee-jerk. Most Americans readily acknowledge that there are persuasive arguments on both sides of the issue. Most strongly believe that children need to understand that our society values and honors religion and prayer, and they want schools to play a role in accomplishing this goal. At the same time, most are reluctant to embarrass or isolate students whose beliefs about religion are different from those of the majority. They also voice concern that school prayers may infringe on the rights of some parents who want their children to share their own family's beliefs and rituals.

Attempting to balance these twin concerns, Americans want schools that are inclusive and that accommodate religious minorities. Very few parents would screen their children's friends based on religion, or urge judges to consider religion in custody cases or want teachers to discuss their own religious beliefs in the classroom. Such views are compatible with a 1998 Public Agenda survey (*A Lot to Be Thankful For*) that found very strong parental support for respecting those with different ethnic, racial or religious backgrounds.

## Compromise: Not a Dirty Word

This attitude extends to the way Americans view the role of religion in politics and government. They would, without doubt, like their political leaders to be more religious as individuals and to exhibit the sense of integrity and honor that they believe religion can kindle. But they are little interested in a candidate's specific religious affiliation, let alone think it should be the basis for their vote. What's more, they are suspicious of politicians who wear their religion on their sleeve. They understand and appreciate the role of compromise in our system of government, recognizing that even elected officials who are deeply religious may be forced to set their convictions aside in the interest of

necessary compromise and results. Even on such volatile issues as gay rights, abortion and the death penalty, Americans are generally pragmatic and accept the notion of political reality.

## A Relaxed Attitude Toward Religion and Politics

By and large, the public also takes a laissez-faire approach to political participation by religious groups and leaders. They are little concerned about religious leaders joining in the political process, seeing that as their right and expressing confidence that our democracy is resilient enough to handle any difficulties that might result. Further, most support government funding of so-called "faith-based" organizations to administer social services and would give churches and religious groups government money to support their programs to help the poor.

*This study and other opinion research do suggest that many Americans have not thought very carefully about the implications and potential downsides of many of their views.*

## Some Beg to Differ

Many may find the public's relaxed and even-handed views on the appropriate mix of religion and politics quite to their liking. But this research would be irresponsibly incomplete if it did not also capture the voices of those who start from a different perspective. Opinions differ markedly when we turn to religious minorities and those for whom religion is not meaningful or important. They are much more unnerved by the prospect of mixing religion and politics, with many Jewish and nonreligious Americans worrying that more political involvement by our religious leaders would threaten our political system. Large percentages of Jews report that maintaining their identity is a constant struggle and that they must remain constantly vigilant about the potential for anti-Semitism. Large majorities of nonreligious Americans feel strongly that being ethical, honorable and compassionate human beings does not depend on their believing or practicing a formal religion.

Evangelical Christians also have a particular perspective worthy of attention. Though hardly a monolithic group—not many back Christian prayer in the schools or choose candidates based on a religious match—they, too, sometimes believe they are victims of disrespect and prejudice.

### **Don't Box Us In**

Thus, when it comes to religion, Americans won't be boxed into the usual political and ideological categories, and they resist the tendency of many politicians, opinion leaders, media and others to fit them neatly into one-size-fits-all spiritual blocs. They believe fervently that religion is important and are disturbed by civil libertarians who appear to be busily eradicating religion from every sector of American life. But neither do they give much comfort to those who would inject an intrusive, judgmental, sanctimonious faith into the public sphere and invoke the public's name for their own purposes.

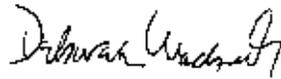
In short, they want Americans to be more religious but hold an almost intuitive aversion to letting religion take

too great a hold on politics or other areas of life. Religion is a good thing, most people believe, but voting for a candidate based upon his or her religion is not.

Americans aren't looking for a litmus test. They are not doctrinaire. They don't want religion interjected into politics. They just want their fellow

citizens to live moral lives and think religious belief is a tried-and-true path for making all of us better.

***When it comes to religion, Americans won't be boxed into the usual political and ideological categories, and they resist the tendency of many politicians, opinion leaders, media and others to fit them neatly into one-size-fits-all spiritual blocs.***



Deborah Wadsworth  
President  
Public Agenda

**TABLE ONE: Optimism About Religion’s Impact**

If many more Americans were to become deeply religious, how likely do you think it is that each of the following would happen?

% RESPONDING	GENERAL PUBLIC		CATHOLIC		EVANGELICAL		JEWISH*		NONRELIGIOUS**	
	Likely	Unlikely	Likely	Unlikely	Likely	Unlikely	Likely	Unlikely	Likely	Unlikely
People would do more volunteer and charity work	87	10	87	9	93	5	76	19	68	26
Parents would do a better job of raising their kids	85	11	86	11	96	3	61	28	45	44
Crime would decrease	79	17	79	16	93	6	57	34	41	50
There would be less greed and materialism	69	26	70	26	81	16	41	47	33	58
There would be less tolerance toward people with unconventional lifestyles	52	39	51	41	48	43	59	31	68	26
There would be more prejudice toward religious minorities	31	62	29	64	18	77	54	36	67	29
Women would lose some of their personal freedoms	24	69	22	71	11	84	45	45	54	40

General Public: n = 1507  
 Catholic: n = 359  
 Evangelical: n = 368  
 Jewish: n = 200  
 Nonreligious: n = 208

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories. Rounding may also cause slight discrepancies between numbers in the text and numbers in the tables.

\* In this survey, Jews are defined as those who self-identify as “Jewish,” or those who self-identify as “no religion” but have one or both parents who are Jewish. Out of the general public sample of 1,507, 28 respondents are Jewish. An additional 172 interviews were conducted with Jews, bringing the total sample of Jewish respondents to 200.

\*\* Nonreligious people are defined as those who are atheist or agnostic, or who have no religious preference and never attend religious services. Out of the general public sample of 1,507, 107 respondents qualify as nonreligious. An additional 101 interviews were conducted with nonreligious people, bringing the total sample of nonreligious to 208.

**TABLE TWO: Views on Religion in the United States**

How close do each of the following statements come to your own views about religion in America today — very close, somewhat close, not too close, or not close at all?

% RESPONDING	GENERAL PUBLIC				CATHOLIC				EVANGELICAL				JEWISH				NONRELIGIOUS			
	Very	Some what	Not too	Not at all	Very	Some what	Not too	Not at all	Very	Some what	Not too	Not at all	Very	Some what	Not too	Not at all	Very	Some what	Not too	Not at all
One of the greatest things about this country is that people can practice whatever religion they choose	82	14	2	2	84	13	2	1	80	16	1	2	88	10	2	1	79	17	1	2
It is a bad idea for families to raise children without any religion	56	18	11	14	55	18	15	11	76	10	3	11	27	28	24	19	12	21	25	40
One of the most important reasons our political system is successful is the principle of separation of church and state	35	27	17	18	37	32	15	13	23	26	20	26	70	17	7	7	60	20	8	9
The Bible is the actual Word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word	35	25	16	23	23	29	24	23	62	24	7	6	8	20	16	55	3	7	20	69
The Supreme Court has been trying so hard to remove religion from public institutions that it has become hostile toward religion	33	28	17	18	30	28	20	17	50	29	12	7	14	19	21	40	8	16	29	41
It is not necessary to believe in God in order to be moral and have good values	33	25	15	26	30	33	15	21	22	22	17	37	71	15	7	6	74	14	4	7
Deeply religious people are being inconsiderate if they always bring up religion when they deal with other people	27	34	21	17	28	36	21	13	19	32	24	25	37	35	17	10	47	29	15	8
Our society would do well even if many Americans were to abandon their religious faith	8	11	22	58	7	12	26	53	5	5	14	76	19	23	18	34	25	29	22	18

General Public: n = 1507  
Jewish: n = 200

Catholic: n = 359  
Nonreligious: n = 208

Evangelical: n = 368

**TABLE THREE: Encountering People from Different Faiths**

In recent years, have you had occasion to have an in-depth conversation about religion with [INSERT ITEM], or not?

% RESPONDING	GENERAL PUBLIC		CATHOLIC		EVANGELICAL		JEWISH		NONRELIGIOUS	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
An evangelical Christian	52	46	34	65	85	14	42	57	40	59
An atheist — that is, someone who doesn't believe in God	44	55	37	63	45	54	59	40	57	42
A Jewish person	40	60	42	59	40	60	88	12	43	57
A Muslim	20	80	17	83	18	82	29	71	21	79

General Public: n = 1507  
 Catholic: n = 359  
 Evangelical: n = 368  
 Jewish: n = 200  
 Nonreligious: n = 208

**TABLE FOUR: Understanding the Tenets of Different Religions**

Thinking about the religious beliefs of [INSERT ITEM] how well do you think you understand the basic ideas of their religion— very well, somewhat well, or not too well?

% RESPONDING	GENERAL PUBLIC			CATHOLIC			EVANGELICAL			JEWISH			NONRELIGIOUS		
	Very well	Some what well	Not too well	Very well	Some what well	Not too well	Very well	Some what well	Not too well	Very well	Some what well	Not too well	Very well	Some what well	Not too well
People who are Catholic	43	40	17	77	19	5	35	48	16	35	45	20	37	40	22
People who are evangelical Christians*	28	32	38	11	34	55	58	31	10	17	33	48	21	30	47
People who are Jewish	17	43	39	13	47	40	22	45	33	68	25	8	18	45	37
People who are Muslim	7	26	66	5	20	75	8	28	63	10	38	52	11	28	61

General Public: n = 1507

Catholic: n = 359

Evangelical: n = 368

Jewish: n = 200

Nonreligious: n = 208

\*Question wording: How well do you think you understand the basic ideas of what it means to be evangelical?

**TABLE FIVE: School Prayer**

Regardless of how you feel about school prayer, please tell me if you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about the issue.

% RESPONDING	GENERAL PUBLIC		CATHOLIC		EVANGELICAL		JEWISH		NONRELIGIOUS	
	Agree Strongly/ Somewhat	Disagree Somewhat/ Strongly								
School prayer teaches children that faith in religion and God is an important part of life	51 / 23	13 / 11	50 / 28	13 / 8	68 / 22	5 / 4	17 / 25	21 / 37	13 / 19	24 / 41
School prayer is one of the most effective ways we can improve the values and behavior of today's young people	37 / 19	18 / 24	37 / 19	21 / 21	55 / 20	13 / 10	11 / 10	18 / 61	6 / 8	19 / 66
School prayer is unfair to parents who think they should be the ones to decide what to teach their children about religion, not the schools	33 / 24	23 / 17	31 / 26	22 / 18	21 / 27	27 / 21	63 / 21	9 / 7	65 / 17	10 / 7
School prayer embarrasses and isolates students whose religion is different or who are not religious at all	28 / 24	23 / 22	25 / 25	25 / 22	15 / 25	29 / 28	65 / 13	11 / 10	62 / 23	6 / 8
School prayer violates the Constitution and the idea of separation of church and state	21 / 16	22 / 38	20 / 17	27 / 33	10 / 11	20 / 56	62 / 16	10 / 10	58 / 15	14 / 11

How should the public schools deal with the issue of prayer in the classroom? In your view, would it be best to:

% RESPONDING	General Public	Catholic	Evangelical	Jewish	Non-religious
Have a moment of silence	53	57	53	30	36
Say a prayer that refers to God but no specific religion	20	22	26	9	7
Say a Christian prayer that refers to Jesus	6	4	12	2	1
Avoid all of the above	19	17	7	60	56

General Public: n = 1507  
Jewish: n = 200

Catholic: n = 359  
Nonreligious: n = 208

Evangelical: n = 368

**TABLE SIX: Religious Candidates**

Would you be more likely or less likely to vote for a candidate for political office who [INSERT ITEM], or would this make no difference to you?

% RESPONDING	GENERAL PUBLIC			CATHOLIC			EVANGELICAL			JEWISH			NONRELIGIOUS		
	More likely	Less likely	No difference	More likely	Less likely	No difference	More likely	Less likely	No difference	More likely	Less likely	No difference	More likely	Less likely	No difference
Draws emotional comfort and strength from religion	52	7	39	42	8	49	78	4	16	28	13	58	19	13	67
Keeps religious faith separate from actions while in government	40	24	33	44	16	37	26	43	28	62	12	25	68	8	23
Always votes for legislation according to his or her religious convictions	26	40	29	13	45	37	50	22	23	13	65	19	7	66	25
Relies on church leaders for advice on how to vote on specific legislation	25	44	29	20	44	35	40	29	27	11	69	19	7	73	20
Is open about not believing in God	11	54	33	11	48	40	9	76	12	16	22	61	24	14	62

General Public: n = 1507

Catholic: n = 359

Evangelical: n = 368

Jewish: n = 200

Nonreligious: n = 208

**TABLE SEVEN: Politics and Compromise**

When elected officials who are deeply religious have to vote on issues related to [INSERT ITEM], do you think that they should base their vote on their own religious views or that they should be willing to compromise with other elected officials whose views are different?

% RESPONDING	General Public	Catholic	Evangelical	Jewish	Non-religious
<b>Poverty and Welfare</b>					
Should base their vote on their own religious views	24	16	38	13	10
Should compromise with other elected officials whose views are different	68	78	52	81	84
<b>Gay rights</b>					
Should base their vote on their own religious views	31	19	50	16	13
Should compromise with other elected officials whose views are different	60	75	36	79	79
<b>The death penalty</b>					
Should base their vote on their own religious views	31	24	46	17	13
Should compromise with other elected officials whose views are different	60	69	42	78	79
<b>Abortion</b>					
Should base their vote on their own religious views	35	26	55	14	14
Should compromise with other elected officials whose views are different	57	68	34	81	81

General Public: n = 1507  
 Catholic: n = 359  
 Evangelical: n = 368  
 Jewish: n = 200  
 Nonreligious: n = 208

# ENDNOTES

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1. The World Values Study Group, *World Values Survey*, 1990-1993. Samples consisted of adults age 18 and over in 45 countries. Sample sizes varied from country to country. Percent of adults who “completely agree” to “I never doubted the existence of God”: United States: 60%; Britain: 31%; West Germany: 20%.
2. Public Agenda, *Kids These Days '99*, 1999. National telephone survey of 328 young people age 12-17. “Faith in God is an important part of my life. How close does this come to your own view?” Very close: 66%; Somewhat close: 24%; Not too close/not close at all: 10%.
3. The Gallup Organization (Sponsored by Cable News Network/USA Today). National telephone survey of 1,010 adults conducted March 20-22, 1998. “Which of these statements do you think best describes the condition of morals in the country today?” There is a moral crisis in this country: 49%; There are major problems with morals in this country, but it does not represent a crisis: 41%; Moral conditions in this country do not represent a major problem: 8%; DK/Ref: 1%.
4. Hunter, Preston, “Largest Religious Groups in the United States of America,” Adherents.com, 2000. [http://www.adherents.com/rel\\_USA.html](http://www.adherents.com/rel_USA.html) (2000-December-7). Most of Hunter’s figures are based on the work of Barry A. Kosmin and Seymour P. Lachman’s National Survey of Religious Identification (NSRI), a 1990 national survey of 113,000 adults sponsored by the Graduate School of the City University of New York.
5. Ibid
6. Farkas, Steve et al., *Kids These Days: What Americans Really Think About the Next Generation*. Public Agenda, 1997.
7. The Gallup Organization (Sponsored by Cable News Network/USA Today). National telephone survey of 1,016 adults conducted June 25-27, 1999. “I’m going to read a variety of proposals concerning religion and the public schools. For each one, please tell me whether you would generally favor or oppose it...Allowing daily prayer to be spoken in the classroom.” Favor: 70%; Oppose: 28%; No opinion: 2%.
8. See, for example, The Gallup Organization. National telephone survey of 1,011 adults conducted November 4-7, 1999. “Please tell me how you would rate the honesty and ethical standards of people in these different fields.” Percent of the public saying “very high” or “high” for the following professions: Clergy: 56%; Journalists: 24%; Business executives: 23%; Congressmen: 11%.
9. Respondents were asked: “If you had to pick one area where you would like to see more news coverage, would it be...?” Respondents were given four responses to select from: Education (48%); Religion (19%); Foreign policy (19%); Crime (11%). Respondents were asked this question before they knew this survey concerned religion.
10. The Gallup Organization. National telephone survey of 1,014 adults conducted February 19-21, 1999. “If your party nominated a generally well-qualified person who happened to be [INSERT ITEM], would you vote for that person?” Black: Yes: 95%, No: 4%; Jewish: Yes: 92%, No: 6%; A woman: Yes: 92%, No: 7%; Homosexual: Yes: 59%, No: 37%; Atheist: Yes: 49%, No: 48%.

# METHODOLOGY

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*For Goodness' Sake* is based on a nationwide telephone survey of 1,507 adults aged 18 years or older, plus oversamples of 208 nonreligious and 200 Jewish adults, and a nationwide mail survey of 219 journalists, 286 Christian leaders and 254 elected officials. The surveys were preceded by seven focus groups conducted in sites across the country, as well as consultations with experts on the topic of religion and public life.

## The Survey of the General Public

A total of 1,507 telephone interviews with adult members of the general public were conducted between November 4 and November 25, 2000. The interviews averaged approximately 30 minutes in length. The interviews were conducted using a random sample of households and a standard, random-digit-dialing technology whereby every household in the 48 contiguous states had an equal chance of being contacted, including those with unlisted numbers. The margin of error for the 1,507 members of the general public is  $\pm 3$  percentage points; the margin of error is higher in comparisons of percentages across subgroups.

Interviews were conducted with 208 nonreligious adults. Screening questions were asked to ensure that only those who met the definition of "nonreligious" were included in the final nonreligious sample. "Nonreligious" respondents included those who: a) responded "atheist" or "agnostic" when asked their religious preference; or b) responded "none/no religion" and said they "never" attend religious services. Of the 208 nonreligious respondents, 107 were culled from the general public sample and 101 from a random oversample.

Interviews were also conducted with 200 Jewish adults. Jewish respondents included those who a) responded "Jewish" when asked for their religious preference; or b) responded "none/no religion" but also indicated that at least one of their parents was Jewish. A total of 28 Jewish respondents were culled from the general public sample; 28 from pre-screened samples where respondents self-identified as Jewish; and 144 from a

stratified sample that targeted the top ten Metropolitan Statistical Areas by Jewish population. The geographic distribution of Jewish respondents in the oversample closely matches the distribution of Jews in the U.S. population.

## The Mail Survey

A leadership questionnaire was mailed on October 16, 2000 to the following groups: a) 1,400 religious heads of local churches and congregations with more than 150 members; b) 2,000 elected officials, including 1,000 state senators and 1,000 mayors of cities with populations of 30,000 or more; c) 2,100 journalists, including newspaper editors-in-chief and news editors, and news-related television and radio producers and news directors. A reminder postcard was sent out on October 23, followed by a second mailing of the questionnaire on October 31. All responses received through November 13 were included in the final results. The process netted responses from 219 journalists, 286 religious leaders (virtually all are Christian) and 254 elected officials. The response rate for religious leaders was 20%, for elected officials 13%, and for journalists 10%.

Samples were supplied by Mailings Clearing House (Religious Data Services), the United States Conference of Mayors, the National Conference of State Legislatures and Burrelle's 2000 Media Directory.

## The Questionnaires

The questionnaires were designed by Public Agenda, and all interpretation of the data reflected in this report was done by Public Agenda. As in all surveys, question order effects and other non-sampling sources of error can sometimes affect results. Steps were taken to minimize these, including extensively pre-testing the survey instruments and randomizing the order in which some questions were asked.

Both the telephone and mail surveys were fielded by Robinson and Muenster Associates, Inc., of Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

## The Focus Groups

Focus groups allow for an in-depth, qualitative exploration of the dynamics underlying the public's attitudes toward complex issues. Insights from these groups were important to the survey design, and quotes were drawn from them to give voice to attitudes captured statistically through the survey interviews.

A total of seven focus groups were conducted in the spring of 2000 in six cities: Old Bridge, New Jersey

(mixed general public); Cincinnati, Ohio (mixed general public); Long Island, New York (Jews); Birmingham, Alabama (one group of evangelical Christians and another of African American Christians); Albuquerque, New Mexico (white and Hispanic Catholics); and Albany, California (mixed general public and nonreligious people). Focus group quotes are identified using participants' home state.

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