

David W Fletcher, Spring 2005

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ROBERT WUTHNOW'S *THE RESTRUCTURING OF AMERICAN RELIGION:  
SOCIETY AND FAITH SINCE WORLD WAR II*<sup>1</sup>

In *The Restructuring of American Religion*, Robert Wuthnow, professor of sociology at Princeton University, gives his sociological overview of what has happened to American religion from the 1940s, or post-World War II, to the mid-1980s, the time of his writing. This mosaic of broad brush strokes, that overlap and interweave, tries to illuminate two polar trends in American religion that have influenced the nation politically, namely, conservatism and liberalism. This is the brunt of his basic “restructuring” of an older fundamentalism versus modernism. Wuthnow argues against seeing a strict evolutionary process at work in the secularization of the nation’s faith and rightly so. In his thinking, religion has become less public or privatized. But as he correctly acknowledges, this oversimplification does not account for the exercise of religious faith in other public ways. Wuthnow thrives on general statements that can be countered by other general statements, so much so that the reader easily can be puzzled about Wuthnow’s main purpose for writing—“to say what has changed, and what has not changed, about the place of religion in American society since World War II.” His thesis is simple and obvious enough: “that American religion has undergone a major restructuring during this period” (5). Few would disagree with this sweeping observation. Perhaps, though, the real contribution from Wuthnow lies in his methodology that attempts to link this restructuring not so much to social processes but

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<sup>1</sup>Studies in Church and State, edited by John F. Wilson. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988. 374 pages with forward, preface, notes, selected bibliography, and index.

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to cultural structures and symbols. In this respect, he highlights the nexus between cultural and social aspects of the changes in American religion.

Wuthnow uses a topical approach to indicate these developments. He first broaches the question of restructuring and explains his approach (chapter 1). He says, “Many social scientists have grown accustomed to using structure to indicate everything except culture: the real nuts and bolts of social life, such as organizations, economic factors, social class, and social networks. My usage of the term is quite different. To me, structure means an identifiable pattern in the symbolic-expressive dimension of social life” (9). For this definition, he is indebted to anthropologist Mary Douglas. By looking at symbols, he means to include in his analysis “ritual acts, gestures, discourse, moral obligations, [and] commitments”(10). As a result, he talks a lot about “symbolic boundaries” of religion in America. This allows him to explicate the “cultural dimension” of American religion and its existence in the social environment.

Next, he talks about the religious mood of the post-World War II period, its “Heritage and Vision,” its “Vision of Promise and Peril,” and its “Conscience and Conviction in Public Life” (chapters 2, 3, and 4). Then, he surveys the “Declining Significance of Denominationalism” and the “Growth of Special Purpose Groups” (chapters 5 and 6). In the following three chapters (7, 8, and 9), what he calls “the main argument of the book” (12), he discusses the growing tensions between religious conservatives and religious liberals—“The Great Divide: Toward Religious Realignment,” “Mobilization on the Right,” and “Fueling the Tensions.” After this, he looks at conservative and liberal differences in terms of civil religion (“Civil Religion: Two Cheers for

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America,” chapter 10) and the shift he sees from civil religion toward a myth of technology (“From Civil Religion to Technological Legitimacy,” chapter 11). Finally, Wuthnow draws conclusions about the effect of religion on American politics and, conversely, the influence of the government on religion (“A Broader Context: Politics and Faith,” chapter 12).

Wuthnow’s sociological methods compel him to reduce “religion” to a unified, singular phenomenon. Semantics plausibly makes this reductionist jargon necessary. But more often than not, this caricatured paradigm forces him to assess “religion” and “its” cultural expressions in isolation from any realistic mooring. In other words, he offers the reader bland surveys, cold statistics, models not reality, trends not lives. As a result, none of rich analysis of religion’s phenomenology—cultural expressions of belief and faith—comes out in Wuthnow’s work. If he discusses them at all, he subordinates cultural phenomena like his “ritual acts, gestures, discourse, moral obligations, [and] commitments” to an overriding pattern, usually so vague as to be refutable and often void of meaning. Biography, by contrast, would be refreshing.<sup>2</sup> In a few instances, he admittedly quotes from religious leaders, and these intellectual expressions give the reader a hint of how certain people felt. But such insightful glimpses are a rarity in Wuthnow’s *Restructuring of American Religion* and makes this reader question the value of the work as a helpful study of changes in American’s religious culture since World War II.

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<sup>2</sup>Compare the anecdotal and highly descriptive approach of Patrick Allitt, *Religion in America since 1945: A History*, Columbia Histories of Modern American Life (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2003).