In the winter of 1954, Will Herberg, the best untrained sociologist in America, turned his attention to the sociology of American religion. Nine months later, he emerged with Protestant-Catholic-Jew, still a classic of American religious history.

Fifty years after its first publication, Herberg's critique of pluralism is still impressive, as are his ideas about the importance of group identities and his derision of "the melting pot." And yet, one cannot help wondering if Herberg was right in his description of America. Was American social life really divided into three separate parts, one Protestant, one Catholic, one Jewish? Despite these divisions, was there really an "overarching sense of unity," a "common religion," that most Americans believed? Although the book reminds us of a time when deep social divisiveness was not at the core of the culture wars, was he right to suggest that religion was an under-acknowledged party in American discussions about pluralism? Were postwar Catholics and Jews the first multiculturalists?

Protestant-Catholic-Jew made two large claims--that America contained a "triple melting pot" and that the religious revival of the 1950s was essentially superficial--though really only the first is much remembered. Herberg's "triple melting pot" idea was relatively simple. He had little use for the notions of Israel Zangwill, who had popularized the phrase "melting pot" in the title of a 1908 play, or of Henry Ford's image of a foreigner jumping into the pot and coming out in a gray flannel suit waving an American flag.

Still, Herberg said, these ideas were only partly wrong. It was true that national-origin identities had softened since the restrictive immigration laws of the 1920s. It was also true that working-class identities had been weakened by the broadening of the American middle-class and by the demonization of Soviet-style socialism. Sectarian differences within the major faiths had dulled as well. (As one of the book's great blind spots, Herberg did not spend much time considering racial divisions in America, calling them an "anomaly of considerable importance" to his general scheme.)

Instead, he focused on the "triple melting pot," which posited that, while most other identities had fallen away, religious divisions between Protestants, Catholics, and Jews had not. To be an Irish American did not matter so much, but to be Catholic carried social significance. To be a Methodist was only nominally or regionally important, but to be Protestant meant something.

Herberg acknowledged they were all Bible-based, Abrahamic faiths and therefore had some things in common. But he was more interested in the fact that each religion was presumed to possess the same "spiritual values" of "the American Way of Life," by which he meant a soft-hearted faith in democracy (political, economic, and religious) combined with a more robust faith in idealism, activism, and moral conviction. Coming in the wake of several interfaith battles where Catholics were thought to be insufficiently independent from the dictates of a foreign pope and Jews were chastised for advocating an extreme separation of church and state, Herberg's claim of the fundamental...