

One Nation Under God

A journalist argues eloquently for the separation of church and state.

Reviewed by Alan Wolfe Sunday, September 17, 2006; BW09

THE HOLY VOTE

The Politics of Faith in America

By Ray Suarez

Rayo. 326 pp. \$24.95

Ray Suarez is the kind of journalist better known for getting others to speak than for speaking out himself. It thus comes as no surprise that he begins his book on religion and politics by quoting liberally from people across the political spectrum: Here is David Saperstein, a liberal rabbi, worrying about Christian exclusionism; there is Jack Graham, a Dallas-area Baptist preacher, all but endorsing George W. Bush's presidential aspirations. Ho hum, I said to myself. Having watched Ray Suarez on public television's "The NewsHour" for years without any idea of what his views actually are, now, it would seem, I had been presented with one of his books only to see him be fair to everyone.

I am happy to report that my initial complaints proved incorrect. Suarez, who identifies himself as a deeply religious person without giving specifics about his own faith, is offended by the Christian right's efforts to identify their country with their faith, and he has no problem saying so. The result is a powerful reaffirmation of America's greatest contribution to human liberty: the separation of church and state.

Suarez is at his most eloquent when discussing religion and American national security. The military exists to protect Americans against foreign threats, Suarez argues, while religion, which speaks to matters beyond time and place, should not be identified with the foreign policy of any one country. Suarez cannot understand how so many American Christians, including President Bush, can find divine inspiration for American foreign policy. For much the same reason, Suarez also wonders how the president can appear so unconcerned about the many deaths that have followed in the wake of his decision to invade Iraq. Ever since St. Augustine, Christians have pondered when war is justified and when it is not. Yet "in this reputedly most Christian of all Western nations, this central concern of the historic church was pushed to the margins of the national debate over the Iraq War."

Neither a theologian nor a philosopher, Suarez explores the conflict between military requirements and faith's demands through a concrete example: the all but explicit endorsement by leaders of the Air Force Academy of efforts to recruit cadets for Jesus through prayer, public witnessing and unofficial hazing.

True to his journalistic calling, Suarez tells the story by quoting from others, including an eloquent plea for religious tolerance from Mikey Weinstein, a 1977 Academy graduate (and registered Republican) who objects to the Academy's over-the-top evangelizing. He also gives voice to a defender of the practice; Lt. Gordon Klingenschmitt, a Navy chaplain, explains why he feels censored when superiors tell him to pray for all and not just for his fellow Christians.

Still, there is no doubting whom Suarez favors. The military protects all of us, not just the Christians among us, he points out. And God dispenses his blessings on the righteous, not just those who happen to live in one country rather than another. It therefore undermines security and cheapens religion when the academy commandant sends an e-mail to all the cadets encouraging them to "ask the Lord to give us the wisdom to discover the right" or when mandatory academy events open with prayers in Jesus's name. Because Suarez acts as more than a stenographer -- because he places the whole controversy in context -- Weinstein comes across as a true patriot while Klingenschmitt appears not as the defender of free speech he claims to be but as the sectarian he really is.

Suarez has roughly the same feelings about education that he does about the military: Schools belong to all of us; in them we pass on our values to the next generation, so they ought to be treated with respect. It drives Suarez to distraction that our schools instead are subject to "a junior-varsity version of the adult division of the culture war." Here, he argues, there is blame aplenty to go around. Discussing sex education, he points out that liberals are as reluctant to tell young teens that chastity is worth preserving as religious conservatives are to acknowledge that, despite their strictures against it, sex is going to happen anyway. The results are tragic: "Instead of a group of unified voices and broadly shared messages, American teenagers hear a cacophony of voices in the culture pulling them every which way and leaving them unsure, conflicted, and often ashamed." The shame, Suarez makes clear, belongs to us adults. Our kids need our love, and we respond by fighting holy wars in their name.

Serial abusers of religion do more than make Suarez angry; they turn him sarcastic. When the former House majority leader Tom DeLay announced that he was resigning from Congress, he said God no longer wanted him to represent Sugar Land, Texas. Suarez is not impressed. "I would hope," he writes, "that any politician insisting that God is deciding the makeup of the Texas House delegation would not stop there. . . . If you believe God is deciding the field in a suburban Houston district, he must also be helping Democrat Barney Frank of Massachusetts win reelection like clockwork every two years."

One should not mistake *The Holy Vote* for one of the host of recent books warning about a theocratic takeover of the United States. Consider the case of Roy Moore, the former Alabama judge who insisted on placing a 5,300-pound version of the Ten Commandments outside his courtroom. Moore is what bloggers are increasingly calling a "Christianist," a man who turns his religion into a political ideology. But the truth is that even in Alabama, one of the most religious states in the country, he was (so to speak) laughed out of court. For all the talk of an impending American theocracy, Suarez concludes, "a state with powerful business interests aligned with conservative Christian groups still has no 2.6-ton granite Ten Commandments monument in its court rotunda, can't figure out a way to get a Christian Bible study curriculum approved for its schools or rewrite a tax code along biblical principles."

The Holy Vote is not without its problems. Suarez includes a chapter about Catholics, but it fits awkwardly because Catholicism, unlike most versions of American Protestantism, has historically been sympathetic to a close alliance between faith and politics. For a book dealing with conflicts over religion, Suarez has little to say about Muslims, Sikhs and members of other faiths outside the Judeo-Christian tradition who are increasingly visible in American neighborhoods. At least one important question -- should the same critique of conservative Christian involvement in Republican politics apply to African-American Christian involvement in Democratic politics? -- is not addressed.

Still, there can never be enough voices of reasonableness on questions as divisive as the ones tackled by Suarez. American politics has enshrined an odd convention; call it the Walter Cronkite moment. Sometimes, as happened when Cronkite questioned the war in Vietnam, we need journalists to tell us what our leaders and even our religious figures have difficulty saying. Separation of church and state has served this country well. It benefits those who believe as well as those who do not. It stands above our party divisions. It puts us in touch with the greatness of our past. But now its principles are violated by all too many of our leaders. By writing with passion and clarity about our holy wars, Suarez, one of our best journalists, may have given us a Cronkite moment of his own. ·

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Father Andrei Coshel fingered the heavy gold cross that lay on his long black robes, and thought carefully. Yes, he was concerned about what might happen if the Communists took over the Kremlin. But it was "dangerous" when any politicians began using the Orthodox Church for political ends. And that, quite clearly, was what they were now doing. "I have been to Orthodox churches and heard the priests telling people to vote for Mr Yeltsin. But the congregation is mostly old women and members of the KGB." In *The Holy Vote*, Ray Suarez explores the advent of this polarization and how it is profoundly changing the way we live our lives. With hands-on reporting, Suarez explores the attitudes and beliefs of the people behind the voting numbers and how the political divide is manifesting itself across the country. The reader will come to a greater understanding of what Americans believe, and how this belief structure fuels the debates that dominate the issues on our evening news broadcasts. Includes bibliographical references (p. [301]-310) and index. *Credo I believe: love note to a lost America and a look at the current predicament -- How did we get here?: the fall of secularism and the march toward a new politics -- Demolishing the wall of separation: winners and losers in the battle over church and state -- Onward Christian soldiers: theology, politics, and the Christian art.*