

Highlights of *God in Public: Four Ways American Christianity and Public Life Relate*
by Mark G. Toulouse, Westminster John Knox Press (2006)
for the Faith and Politics Group of the Colorado Democratic Party
Keith Thompson, Co-Pastor, First United Methodist Church, Boulder, CO—August 2007

From the minutes of our June 24, 2007 meeting:

“Meeting attendees agreed that one of the primary and overarching purposes for the committee was to acknowledge that while there is an institutional separation of church and state, there is *a functional interaction* between religion and politics. Further work revolving around this acknowledgement will, ideally, add to the success of the Democratic Party (my italics).”

This is in line with what many leaders in the national party have been saying since the 2004 election, especially trying to counter the Republican-inspired misperception that the vast majority of Democrats are God-less, anti-religious secularists.

Of course, mainstream media is beginning to focus on this. *Time Magazine's* cover story for July 23, 2007 was entitled, “How the Democrats Got Religion.” (Among other things, it featured the good work of our own Becky Vanderslice's daughter, Mara.) It did note, however, that this effort is causing serious concerns for some within the Democratic Party (hereafter DP). It quotes a Democratic values pioneer who said, “One-third gets it. A second third understands that this can help us win. And another third is positively terrified.”

Can the DP in these new efforts to reach out to religious voters avoid the mistakes that the Republican Party made in recent decades by courting the extreme Religious Right that have been so disastrous for the country? How someone answers this question will probably depend on their answer to this one: **Are there legal and healthy ways for religion and politics to relate to each other under the U.S. Constitution?**

I'm sure all of you in the group have been influenced by many of the good resources as you have developed your answer to the last question over the years. As the person who volunteered to help with education on this important topic—for our group, Colorado DP candidates and the people of our state we hope to influence with our actions—I want to share with you some of the highlights this book. I think this is worth the group's time* because it:

- provides an excellent summary of the history of faith and public life (including politics) in the U.S. during the last fifty years and, thus, places the 2008 election in its rich historical context
- helps us grasp the complexity of—and have good tools for evaluating—what we vaguely called the “functional interaction between religion and politics” (in the above quote) by distinguishing four basic ways of relating them, two healthy and two unhealthy
- can help us better understand and appreciate others in our group, the DP and the general public whose way of relating their religion (or non-religion) to politics is different from our own (I think we have already experienced some confusion and tension around this in our initial meetings as has the national party)

Let me place myself a little—I'm a 62-year-old boomer, Euro-American, married, heterosexual male, graduate school educated, INTJ Myers-Briggs personality type, clergy person who identifies myself primarily as a “postmodern, Wesleyan, evangelical, liberal Christian” and secondarily as a life-long, loyal and critical Democrat among many other things.

* I am not recommending that everyone read the book. It's a very detailed academic work with over 40 pages of footnotes. My hope is that everyone will be able to scan these highlights, and that some of us will want to take a little time to discuss it, especially as it relates to our group's interrelationships and goals.

Before getting into the highlights of what Toulouse (hereafter T)[†] has to say, here are a few important comments (given our extremely polarized culture) that Martin Marty, one of the most respected historians of American religion today, makes in the Forward:

- T's "range is astonishing, and his balance is a wonder to behold...he is neither a fire-breathing right-winger nor a predictable left-winger, providing ammunition for the 'culture wars' that he handles with so much care...His fair-mindedness is most evident when he deals with theologians who vehemently disagree. He steps in, as it were, and bids antagonists to lay down their rhetorical arms long enough to listen to one another." (x-xi)[‡]
- While T's distinctions between four ways of relating faith and public life are very useful, Marty values T's understanding that they "can never be neatly drawn with 'walls' or with clearly distinct and permanent lines and definitions." When terms that T likes such as "'muddle,' the 'middle,' the 'muddy,' and the 'messy' get defined or scoured away, legitimate interests of citizens as individuals or in groups will be overlooked or spurned." (xi)
- While the book focuses on the Christian faith and public life, the "issues to which Toulouse points and that he clarifies are far too important to be left to the mere three-fifths of the people who identify with religious groups, most of them Christian. Let the other two-fifths in on what is going on here, and we'll all benefit." (xi)[§]

Introduction

T shares his intentions and previews the book's content:

- He has "spent the last ten years reading independent Protestant and Catholic magazines dating from the mid-1950's to the present." As a result he has come to disagree with the view that we are in the midst of a polarized, two-sided culture war. "The majority of Christians are not purebreds one way or the other. The divisions among the Left and among the Right on any given issue have left a rather wide-ranging group of Christians who have drifted toward, but not solidified around, a somewhat undefined and muddled center." For him, this is not necessarily negative. He uses "the term 'muddle' in somewhat the colloquial sense of 'muddling through' by encouraging continued discussion and debate in order to advance public understanding." (xv-xvi)
- One of his primary historical judgments is that since "the 1950's Protestantism has gone from cultural monopoly to displacement and fragmentation. Pluralism has exploded in this country, not only as the expression of a variety of religions within American culture but also as diversity within Christianity as well." (xiv)
- One of his most significant preview statements is about his last chapter. In it, he "takes seriously both pluralism and insights associated with postmodernism. The postmodern approach to reason and its rejection of universals (foundationalism) can actually place the contribution of theology and Christian faith (or any other religious faith), in our day and context, on an equal footing with contributions offered by those who solely depend on secular reason when it comes to public debate about public life." (xxii) To me, this is a key to justifying a kind of healthy use of faith language in political contexts. More later.

[†] T is Professor of American Religious History at Brite Divinity School, Texas Christian University.

[‡] Page references will be in parentheses () and references in brackets [] are to the cells in the chart in the back of T's book, which I have reformatted and can hand out.

[§] I am very interested to see whether people of other faith communities will see "family resemblances" to T's categories in their faith/public life context, in addition to the secular people Marty refers to here.

Part I: The First Amendment

Chapter 1: The Establishment Clause

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion...”

T lays out the history behind this creation of this clause and the quite diverse interpretations of it since. Here are some important quotes for our purposes:

- “One of first points to recognize in this discussion is the inadequacy of the terms *church* and *state*.” (4)
- “And the adoption of this secular Constitution belies the idea that a majority of Founders supported the notion of a formally Christian nation.” (7)
- “A secular Constitution does not intend to guarantee a secular public square. Rather, by being secular, the Constitution guarantees the opposite, that religion is free to speak in public ways, according to the dictates of the religious conscience.” (8) (I would add that this is not true of modern Turkey, for example, whose establishment was based on the quite different model of the anti-religious secularism of the French Revolution.)
- “When one defends strict separation, where religion is completely privatized and publicly quiet, one is defending a civil order that favors secularity over religion. Strict separation between religion and civil sphere is not merely a neutral policy.” (16)
- **“Religion is not just a private matter. It can be public too, without violating the separation of church and state. Many people possessing a strong religious commitment believe their faith compels them to work for justice in public ways...Secular Americans also speak publicly. They express their commitments by using the best of secular reasoning that stands behind them. These too serve the public good. Together, religious and secular Americans who respect one another’s rights to contribute to our public discourse with both conviction and civility can model what it means to be a pluralistic America, a nation where people of many faiths and no faith can live and work together to better their common lives. This was the hope of the Founders and the wisdom behind the First Amendment. America needs that hope and wisdom more today than every before.”** (24, my emphasis)

Chapter 2: The Free Exercise Clause

“...or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

T covers the Supreme Court’s evolving positions on this clause and concludes:

- “Discussion of the free exercise clause should make it clear that the Founders expected that religion would assume public forms in this country. The one thing the free exercise clause does not do is push religion underground. Religion in America does not have to be merely private...though the institutions of church and state are separate, there is no constitutional separation between religious values and public life in America. Some religions may choose to separate their practices and beliefs from public life. That is their choice, and their religious belief may require it. But the Constitution does not require it.” (38)

The last section of this chapter entitled “The Nature of Public Life and Christian Response to It” (38-47) is really an introduction to the rest of the book. If you have access to the book, I recommend that you read all of it, as is true of “The Conclusion” also (191-194). The key points are:

- In early American history, “Religious wars had dominated public life for centuries. Both rationalists and pietists were tired of them. Each, for their own purposes, wanted to create a public space free of the control of wrong-headed religious commitments. But they also wanted to protect the practice of religion in public ways.” (38)
- However, the two groups had different things at stake and, thus, contrary tendencies are built into our national foundations. “The Enlightenment created and perpetuated the myth of a public life controlled by a neutral and universal discourse, untouched by individual personal or religious biases. Though many of the Founders possessed religious presuppositions and expected that religion would have a place in the public debates of the country, their approach to public life increasingly relegated religion and its language to the private life. As pluralism has increased over these past five decades, the tendency to keep religion private increased as well. As a result, secular language has largely dominated public life in modern America.” (39)
- “Public life in America, therefore, often serves individual gain more than the common good. When this philosophical liberalism that emerged from the Enlightenment is connected to capitalism, the resulting culture places emphasis on individualism, wealth, and consumption.” (40) Quoting Jeffrey Stout, T says, “Even religion has become ‘a competitive item for sale...salvation by succeeding...salvation by consuming.’” (41)
- “A genuine Christian understanding of the word ‘public’ must include a sense of the body of people and things that exist beyond concern for merely personal, private, or individual desires...Christians, in other words, cannot routinely accept, acquiesce to, or contribute to the kind of public life that ignores the stranger, the powerless, or concerns that speak to the common good of the whole community...what role might Christian faith play in revitalizing public life? Christian faith ought, at the very least, to critique the individualistic and consumeristic tendencies of American public life.” (41,42,43)
- “The dark side of religious experience in the world always emerges when it sets itself in the place of God, as if it alone knows or speaks the truth...The truth is, on any given issue, the public church will speak in a great variety of voices...which does not diminish its significance to our common life.” (46)
- **In general, I agree with Parker Palmer’s assertion that public life and politics are not the same thing. Public life is much more than politics. What is at issue in public life is what it means to be fully human. Politics usually turns on the activities of government. However, if Christians are truly concerned with public life, they must also be concerned with politics...they must also be willing to take political actions when necessary.” (46-47, my emphasis) T closes by pointing out that in the Chapters 3 and 4 he will deal with how the relationship between faith and public life have been “mistreated,” and in Chapters 5 and 6 he will describe how they have been “healthfully cultivated and lived out.” (47, my emphasis)**

Part II: Public Life and Faith

Chapter 3: Iconic Faith

Here are some of T’s key points:

- “Iconic confusion is represented in two particular circumstances: (1) where cultural icons are located and affirmed in the sacred spaces of Christian contexts; and (2) where Christians assume the use of Christian images or icons in public life witnesses to Christian faith...” (53)
- T illustrates this with the way the American flag and patriotic hymns are sometimes used in Christian worship. He has major sections dealing with the Bible, prayer in public schools and the pledge of allegiance.

- In conclusion, T says, “When public icons invade Christian life, they dilute the Christian message and fill it with American content...Christian worship intentionally brings Christians into the presence of God, not as Americans, but as children of God concerned with the family of God the world over.” (75)
- T points out that Martin Marty has distinguished between three ways that Protestants have reacted in the face of their loss of cultural influence: (1) “Protestantism without pluralism” by trying to simply ignore it, (2) “Protestantism against pluralism” by trying to win back the privileged place, as the Religious Right has been doing, and (3) “Protestantism in pluralism,” the approach Marty has championed. As T has expressed it, this has helped mainline Protestant to “take intentional steps toward a more inclusive and globally aware church life...Further, the power and influence associated with the church’s voice might actually be more significant when it speaks from the fringes rather than from the center of the culture.” (76)

Chapter 4: Priestly Faith

Here are some of T’s key points:

- “Though often expressed as if the primary concern is God, (priestly faith) is usually an attempt to ‘restore the nation’ to the purity of its ‘Christian origins’ or alternatively, to describe the mission of the nation as somehow directly representing God’s purposes in history. In other words, the primary concern is the nation itself...” (77)
- “Both the conservative at the end of the twentieth century and the liberal new theologian at the beginning of that century represented aspects of priestly faith, but with vastly different content...The priest, therefore perverts not only Christian faith but also the civil religious ideals represented in America’s founding documents.” (82-83)
- T has major sections on examples from the past: Democracy/Capitalism versus Communism, Vietnam and Race. One example from the present is the section on “The Priestly Rhetoric of the President in the War Against Terrorism.” T evaluates President Bush’s priestly pronouncements on terrorism by pointing out the difference “between recognizing certain acts as evil and using the nation as a self-appointed agent to remove all evil from the world...” and then quotes Jim Wallis article on Bush’s “Dangerous Religion.” (100-01)
- “Usually, the generation following an expression of priestly faith is embarrassed by its expression, repents, and tries to recover a more truly Christian perspective...” (102)
- He closes and leads into the next two chapters by noting the deep divisions within politics and Christianity and asking “What will heal these divisions? What will bring the unity that ‘special issue’ theology has lost for the church? This appears to be the major question of our time. If Christians cannot address public life with any degree of unanimity, how can they expect to influence its development toward Christian objectives of peace and justice?” He expresses hope because of some movement of evangelicalism, post-Vatican II Catholicism and mainstream Protestantism toward each other, and says, “Perhaps most importantly, these last twenty to twenty-five years have also witnessed a deep and ecumenical concern among many Christian groups to return to the importance of Christian tradition for ethical reflection.” (103)

Part III: Faith and Public Life

Chapter 5: Public Christian

Chapter 5 and 6 lay out T's two healthy ways of relating faith and public life. They are both centered on the Christian faith first and being an American second. They both have a prophetic stance of being critical of abuses of power in our nation.

T begins Chapter 5 by saying, "The last two chapters chronicle the temptation among Christians to affirm uncritically the nature of their cultural surroundings... This chapter examines a theological perspective that believes a right relationship between the two requires that the church, first of all, must tent to salvation and not to politics. This does not mean, within this theological understanding, that Christian individuals should not be active in the public or political life of the nation." (107-08) If the church gets involved, it will lose its basic identity and purpose.

T goes all the way back to Augustine's ideas about "the two cities" in the 5th century to talk about the long tradition of this theology. For American Christians this means that the church "does not act publicly or politically except as a witness to the truths associated with the faith." Individual Christians join political action groups and political parties, but should always remember that this is "secondary to their love of God and their citizenship in the heavenly city... During the past fifty years, many Christians who identify themselves as 'evangelical' have represented this theological understanding well in relationship to public life." (115-16)

T has a long section on Carl F. H. Henry, the founder of *Christianity Today* magazine and often credited with beginning the modern evangelical movement as distinct from fundamentalism, as a primary example of this view in modern America. "In his view, the church should never act politically but should help educate individual Christians to work conscientiously to fulfill their duties as citizens." (122) For Henry, "Christians cannot become indifferent to the culture that exists outside the church. They also know that they cannot impose Christian ideals on an 'unregenerate humanity... no amount of propaganda, education, or legislation will make it happen. At the end of the day, only redemption in Christ holds the potential to increase true love and righteousness in the world." (125) Readers of *CT* through its history "find strong opposition to the church-sponsored social involvement of both mainstream Protestants and the Religious Right." (127)

T notes, however, that there have been significant evangelical groups since the early '70s that been involved in prophetic movements for social justice—Evangelicals for Social Action, Jim Wallis' *Sojourners* Community and even the National Association of Evangelicals with its recent concern for the environment. T states that these groups as they organize movements and not just educate and inspire individuals "occasionally morph into advocates for a public church." (134)

Chapter 6: Public Church

T begins this chapter by quoting Paul Tillich that "when Christian faith meets public life, it should actively represent the 'principle of prophetic protest... to be expressed in every situation as a contradiction to man's permanent attempts to give absolute validity to his own thinking and acting. It is prophetic judgment against religious pride, ecclesiastical arrogance, and secular sufficiency and their destructive consequences." T says, "In line with classical Christian tradition, the public work of Christians at its best has reminded all sides of an issue that human being are finite and ultimately responsible for their actions in the world... including themselves among those who could be wrong and among those who are to be judged." (135)

In contrast to the public Christian, the public church “expects the church to engage social life in America, especially wherever political realities exploit human beings or deny them justice...the mission of the church includes the use of political wisdom, effective methods, and critical reason to establish a greater degree of relative justice in ‘American public life. The adjective ‘relative’ is important here. Christians recognize that absolute justice is impossible in our world. The best human beings can accomplish is an approximation of justice.” (136)

In contrast with Augustine’s “two cities” approach and Martin Luther’s “two kingdoms” later, T says there is “another theological understanding of the kingdom of God that operated in Christian history. This view has emphasized he need to act within history in light of an eschatological vision, an understanding of the ultimate purposes of God for creation. What does the kingdom of god value and how can human being help the world to move in that direction? This has sometimes led to too much optimism about what human beings can actually accomplish. But that has not always been the case, especially when theologians have maintained an emphasis on the initiative of God.” (139) John Calvin is associated with this approach.

T has a long section where he explains why Jonathan Edwards in the 18th century and Walter Rauschenbusch in the 20th are prime examples of this way. In 1907 Rauschenbusch, the most prominent theologian in the Social Gospel movement, said “In asking for faith in the possibility of a new social order, we ask for no Utopian delusion...We shall never have a perfect social life, yet we must seek it with faith...Imperfect moral insight will work hurt in the best conceivable social order....The kingdom of God is always but coming.” T says, “This theological belief, rightly understood, provides Christian foundation for the public church.” (151)

In his last section, T points to the black church, especially Martin Luther King, Jr., as a recent example of this type.

Part IV: Postmodern Context

Chapter 7: Faith and Public Life in a Postmodern Context

T starts off this chapter with

- “Richard Rorty, a leading philosophical pragmatist, has argued that the nature of contemporary liberal democracy requires a strict separation between the private and the public. And he places religion securely in the private category, that area where ‘idiosyncratic loves’ prevail.” Rorty doesn’t think that religion should have a public voice, as advocated in the last two chapters, because he says, “...in political discussion with those outside the relevant religious community, it is a conversation-stopper.” (167-68)
- T responds that “...Rorty confuses the public church with what I have described as priestly faith. For Rorty, the public church, *essentially*, can only speak in priestly ways...The problem is not one caused by religion entering the public conversation; rather, the damage is done when people or institutions, whether self-identified as religious or not, act absolutely because they claim to know the truth in absolute ways.” (169)
- T says that the term “**postmodern**” is hard to define precisely. This is what he says: “A postmodern context claims that the modernist project, the one shaped by the Enlightenment, was an attempt by thinkers to escape their finitude and to define ‘secure foundations for knowledge.’ Modernism had great confidence in the power of reason to uncover ultimate and universal truth.” T says that this does not mean that everything is

relative. “The relativist says that moral beliefs only apply to one’s own community, and that all communities are equally justified in their own particular moral beliefs.”

(170) Most importantly for our group’s work, T says, **“One of the effects of a postmodern context is to negate the claim that theology and moral philosophy rest in different realities, the former in faith and the latter in reason. An essential aspect of postmodernism is the belief that all claims, whether those made by religion or those made by philosophy, exist within specific communities of discourse.”** (173, my emphasis)

- To clarify how he is using the term **“pluralism,”** T quotes Sheila Greeve Davaney (who teaches at Denver’s Iliff School of Theology). She says that pluralism has led theologians “to acknowledge the particularity of traditions and progressively to forego attempts to reduce various religious or cultural traditions to some common denominator.” (172)
- T has a long section dealing with Christian responses to postmodernism. He distinguishes two kinds of evangelical responses and two kinds of mainline responses. **(Note: T favors the last of these options described here.)** Evangelical traditionalists reject it, maintaining confidence that “...truth is contained within the Bible and the tradition, and that this truth is absolute and reliable.” Evangelical reformers think it has some value, and focus on “the center of evangelical beliefs...recognizing the fallibility of every human tradition and the need for ongoing reformulation of human perceptions of truth.” This group has “some similarities in their approach to those among mainline Christians who refer to themselves as ‘postliberal’” (see next item)(172)
- T describes the positions of three mainline Christian postliberal theologians—George Lindbeck, Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon—focusing mostly on Hauerwas. T says that they are “narrowly focused on the good of the Christian community. They do not exhibit much interest in what God is doing elsewhere or how the church might participate in transforming public life to be more representative of God’s universal community.” T says that for Hauerwas “The church cannot work to effect transformation in American life without becoming just another example of ‘Constantinianism.’”(175)
- T criticizes Hauerwas by saying that he “...believes that what I describe as priestly faith necessarily follows whenever and wherever Christianity, through the work of the church, attempts to play a role in public life in America. I do not agree. These are certainly temptations facing the public church, but they are not the inevitable results of Christian activity in public life.” (176)
- T agrees with **Jeffrey Stout**, who T says **“defines a philosophical posture that answers both sides of the deeply divided debate between antireligious liberalism and the ‘authoritarian version of a new religious traditionalism.’ In one corner of the ring stands Richard Rorty (and others like him); in the other corner stands Stanley Hauerwas (and others like him)...These two opposing forces, however, share more that they might recognize. They both defend the proposition that secular liberalism, with its antipathy toward religion has won the day in creating a democracy that represents a thorough secularization of American culture. One celebrates this fact; the other laments it.”** (1) Stout challenges Rorty by claiming that secular liberalism **“did not build the democratic house,”** rather he sees **“its development as a pragmatic response to the realities of pluralism.”** (2) T says **“Stout’s response to Hauerwas is at least two-fold. The world is not as bent toward secularization as you think it is, and the church does not possess a monopoly on the virtues...Liberals are the wrong enemy, says Stout. The danger posed by the influence of a thinker like Hauerwas, he argues, is found in his reinforcement among Christians of what the Republican Party and Fox News are telling people:**

‘that they are a beleaguered minority in an evil, liberal order.’” (177-78, my emphasis)

- T concludes this important section by saying that “...Hauerwas, in spite of his efforts to keep the church and the world radically separate, fits the mold of the public Christian, one who desires to speak about God in public ways that influence how citizens, not just Christians, think about things...Hauerwas, the postliberal, is, in many ways when it comes to the topic of faith and public life, a late-twentieth- or early-twenty-first-century incarnation of Carl F.H. Henry” (who was highlighted in Chapter 5). **“Like Henry, Hauerwas is neither sectarian nor irrelevant; he is an intelligent, highly visible and public, consistently theological reminder that Christian liberal perspectives can never afford to rest too comfortably. The work of both these public Christians disdains the life of the public church. Though I respect and share their concern for Christian identity, I’d have to agree with Cornel West: ‘To be a prophetic Christian is not be against the world I the name of church purity; it is to be in the world but not of the world’s nihilism, in the name of a loving Christ who proclaims the this-worldly justice of a kingdom to come.’**” (179, my emphasis)
- T favors the second type of mainline Christian response—the Revisionist/ Historical Response. He deals with three theologians here: David Tracy, James Gustafson and Linell Cady. He says, “All these theologians are critical of the postliberals. In their view, postliberals have ‘ghettoized’ Christianity by insulating it from the world.” (180) T says that the “strong sense of human situatedness in history, human finitude” in this type of response “is a strong antidote to falling prey to the temptation of priestly faith.” (184) Cady, for example, argues that “This means that Christian thinkers cannot become public with their reflections in any way that claims privilege for their sources.” (187) As T says “...if public Christian and public church enter public life to dictate to it, their position is no more defensible that that of secular philosophical liberals who want to keep their voices private.” (188)
- In his conclusion, T says, **“Until very recently, both philosophical liberals and mainline Christians agreed that Christian theological expressions did not belong in public life. The philosophical liberal argued that religion is a private affair. The public church, usually associated with mainline Christian churches (both Protestant and Catholic) believed the church should be involved in shaping public life but should do so by using the language everyone shared. Most liberal mainline journals bought hook, line, and sinker the view that theological language was inappropriate for public life...Today, Christians recognize that (quoting Martin Marty) ‘common secular thought patterns of the whole community’ do not exist and never really did. The secular rationality that Christians of yesteryear thought was objective and neutral was as much ‘a time-bound, metaphysically unstable, uncritical faith’ as any other expression of truth...All moral ideals are connected to a particular community of discourse. Those associated with religious communities belong in conversations about public life along with all others.”** (191, my emphasis) T says, “It is true that Christian communities involved in public discussions will have to make compromises...Christians should be contrite about their involvement in tragic situations. But they cannot avoid them if they engage in matters impotent to public. This is why a significant number of Christians want to keep the church out of these affairs. Yet the choice not to become involved, not to play a role, is also a choice. It is a choice with consequences, often tragic consequences. People who could be helped by involvement are also harmed by noninvolvement. This active choice to remain passive must also involve contrition on the part of the Christian community” (192)

- T's last paragraph points to his hope for the future. "American history indicates that religion has always had something to do with the democratic creation of public life. Religious values and public policy are, and can remain, related to one another. Whether as public Christian or public church, the voice of Christian faith has often found its way into public life. Here is nothing in the establishment clause that forbids it, and the free exercise clause clearly supports it. **The question left to consider for the immediate future, I suppose, is what public 'Christians and the public church will do with it? Will they become more reflective about that voice? Will they link it more intentionally to their understandings (these being both self-critical and always in process) of who God is, or who human beings are, and of what serves creation? Will they use their voice to contend for a greater degree of relative justice for all God's children who are trying to discover how to live together and how to listen to and learn from each other, in what seems to be ever closer proximity to one another—or will they use it to echo either the vacuous claims common to iconic faith or the absolute dogmatism and exclusivity associated with priestly faith?** Hope springs eternal, but, as is true about everything in history, only time will tell." (194, my emphasis)
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Keith's list of some discussion questions:

1. Has this book generated some new insights for you?
2. Do you identify with some of the positions described in the book?
3. Has the book helped you to understand better people who differ with you?
4. Do you think this book gives us some important tools to help our group accomplish its goals?