

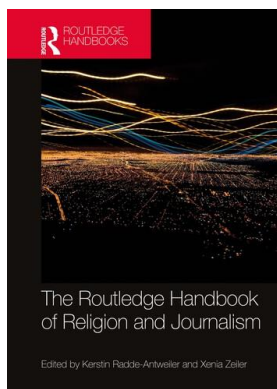
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12

REPORTING THE DIVIDED SOUL
OF THE NATION

Religion and politics in American news media

*D. Ashley Campbell***Introduction**

Observers of US presidential politics are not strangers to electoral coverage focusing on the *religious vote*. Since the 1980s, the broadly defined group of the Christian Right has dominated examinations of conservative victories. In 2004, headlines following the election of President Bush announced religion as a key factor in his victory (Campbell 2007, Vinson and Guth 2009). Mitt Romney's Mormonism came under scrutiny in 2012 as journalists investigated a religion that had not made significant national news since the polygamy debates of the 1800s (Gordon 2002, Haws 2013). The most recent presidential election of Donald Trump proved confusing to many observers, as news media confronted the evangelical divide. The evangelical voting bloc's differing opinions on Trump resulted in numerous headlines and segments about how a group formerly represented as unified by the news media could hold opposing views on a candidate. News media in this chapter is understood as the digital, broadcast and print communications of major networks (*CNN, Fox News, NPR*, etc.), legacy papers and magazines (*The Washington Post, The New York Times, The Atlantic*, etc.) and online outlets (*Vox, Huffington Post, Slate*, etc.).

Media coverage of religion in American politics, however, extends beyond presidential campaigns. Journalists have been required to attend to intricacies of religious practice, theology and institutions for decades, from the 1925 Scopes Trial over the teaching of evolution to debates over social issues, or the *culture wars*, such as abortion and gay marriage. Lately, news media wrestle with conversations about Islam and the growing NONE population, as both influence issues of foreign policy, domestic bigotry and the changing moral landscape of the USA. Yet, journalism's coverage of the role of religion in socio-political debates may not always lead to a better-informed civil society, but instead can participate in exacerbating reported conflict. Conflict, in this case, refers to public debates that occur on various platforms (personal relationships, social media, news media, etc.) and perpetuate the inability of two or more opinion camps to reconcile their differences, leading to polarization within civil society.

This chapter examines the relationship between religion and politics in the US news media and its participation in fueling and sustaining conflict. Building on past studies about religion, politics and journalism, this chapter focuses on the coverage of two case studies – the

evangelical vote in the 2016 election and the National Football League's (NFL) #TakeAKnee protest. In particular, these cases illuminate how some misconceptions about religion in the news media and the media's overlooking of a particular marriage of religion and politics – *American civil religion* – lead to a lack of nuance in public discussion of socio-political issues in the USA. Prior to examining the two case studies, this chapter outlines some of the past research on religion and politics in US journalism.

Media and scholarly understandings of religion

Religion and news have an intimate past in the history of the USA. Among Puritan communities in New England, religious events served as news, and the news was interpreted with an eye toward religion (Underwood 2002, Winston 2012). In fact, Underwood (2002) sees religion as key to the emergence of today's secular press, arguing that the biblical prophetic tradition and religious calls for social reform are the undergirding morality of journalism. Thus, from the beginning of the colonies to the Revolutionary War, news media have discussed religion with a concern for the nation's and its residents' place in a divine order.

What qualifies as religion, however, remains contested. News media often focus their coverage of religion by highlighting institutions outlined by organized traditions – the Roman Catholic Church, Reform Judaism, etc. – or religious leaders – reverends, priests, imams, etc. (Vinson and Guth 2009, Winston 2012). In the case of stories about religion and politics, religious organizations and celebrity leaders, such as the *Moral Majority* or Billy Graham, take center stage. More recent stories expand this journalistic definition of religion to lay people and the religiously unaffiliated. The *Religion News Association* defines religion as “a general term referring to religious practice” in its stylebook, suggesting a broader understanding by which to cover religion (Religion News Association 2019). However, news media continue to center stories around a conception of religion outlined by institutions, organizations and denominational affiliation, leading many practitioners and scholars to comment that the media does not “get religion” (Hoover 1998, Gerson 2009, Mattingly 2009, Winston 2012, Mattingly 2014).

In the past, the academic study of religion also took an institutional approach to defining religion, focusing on authority figures and the collective morality bestowed by these regulating bodies (Durkheim 1912, Hoover 2006). However, religious studies has shifted its understanding of religion as social norms and organizations have realigned, leading to the “lived religion” methodological movement (Hall 1997, vii). In fact, the label *religion* serves as a term to be defined by the scholar to classify observed beliefs and actions (Smith 1998). For the purposes of this chapter, I follow Geertz's (1973) definition of religion as a cultural system of symbols that outline a social reality of beliefs, actions and myths. This definition allows for the media's institutional approach, the contemporary disaffiliation movement and interrogations into practices and beliefs as understood by participants.

Such a definition provides for the presence of religion outside the church news pages in early newspapers, given that concerns about religion were (and are) also closely connected to politics. As stated previously, events in society were sometimes read according to religious thinking. For instance, the defeat of Britain in the Revolutionary War was understood as divine victory and George Washington seen as a saintly father (Cherry 1998). Reading American history and events in terms of divine providence continues today in a secularized format that is often called American exceptionalism. We hear this belief reflected in the phrase *city on a hill*, which suggests that the USA serves as a light and example of democracy for the world. Sociologist Robert Bellah (1967) observed this phenomenon and referred to

it as *American civil religion*. Civil religion functions as one cultural system of symbols that reinforces national understandings of beliefs (liberty, equality and freedom), rituals (4th of July, inaugurations, etc.) and myths (history). *American civil religion* adds another layer of complexity to religious and political narratives in the US media, as it is so embedded within the US imaginary and understandings of national reality that journalists, editors and readers may not notice it (Bellah 1967, Silk 2012). The presence of civil religion in media coverage of religion and politics will be discussed in the second case study. Before undertaking this examination, however, it is necessary to outline the media portrayal of religion in American politics and how a conflict over the place of religion in the public sphere unfolds in the press.

Reporting on religion and politics

Alexis de Tocqueville observed the relationship between religion and politics in the USA in his 1835 tome *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville finds religion to be an extension of the political institution as it reinforces notions of freedom in the country and maintains “republican institutions” (Tocqueville 1835, 329). Yet, without the press, this affinity between religion and politics would not be supported. News media, according to Tocqueville (1835), place religion as the standard by which democracy is judged (Winston 2012). Religion serves as the moral compass for democratic ideals and the guarantor of freedom (Tocqueville 1835, 29). The press also reinforces the participation of volunteer associations, including religious organizations, in political mobilization (Tocqueville, 1835 cited in Winston 2012, 11), integrating religion into the democratic process. Yet, this mutually beneficial relationship between democratic ideals and religion, as portrayed by the press, does not extend to all religions.

We can see the presence of religion in the US political process from the 1700s until today. Mark Silk (2012) observes how press coverage of the 1796 presidential election between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson highlights the influence of religious beliefs in politics. The allegiances of Jefferson to France, an anti-clerical nation by then, and his support of the separation of church and state¹ were spread through the press, leading to his loss to Adams (Silk 2012). The focus of media coverage on the religious affiliation of candidates continues in the 20th and 21st centuries, amplifying a perceived conflict between a candidate’s beliefs and either the opposing candidate or the job of the president. John F. Kennedy’s Roman Catholicism, in the 1960s, was seen as a possible threat to representative democracy due to the perceived monarchical position of the Pope (Silk 2012). News media covered Mitt Romney’s Mormonism as a strange and exotic religion full of secrets that concerned voters (Ayers 2012, Turner 2012, Younge 2012). Most recently, the vague Christianity of Donald J. Trump was portrayed as a political ploy and antithetical to his lifestyle (Taylor 2015, Burke 2016, Gabriel and Luo 2016, Summers 2016). Media coverage of religion in US politics extends beyond presidential elections to debates about social norms and practices, including marriage, sexuality, patriotism and immigration. Yet, the conflict between religion and politics in journalism operates on a larger, philosophical level, too – the place of religion in politics from the beginning.

Modern assumptions about the relegation of religion to the private sphere leave news media with little room to cover religion in politics except as an uninvited guest that promotes the beliefs of individuals instead of the democratic public good. One cause for the consigning of religion to the private sphere and out of public discourse emerges in the 20th century in the USA with the development of the secularization theory and the privileging of a *secular* public space. Secularization theory claimed that religion was losing its foothold in society and that the public sphere and its political processes should be devoid of religious beliefs and practices

(Berger 1967, 1996, Casanova 1994). From this social norm, debates about the presence of nativity scenes in front of public buildings and court cases on the use of prayer in legislative meetings emerge (Markoe and Grossman 2014, Masci 2014a, 2014b, Wolf 2014), providing fodder for stories about disharmony between religion and US democratic principles.

News media facilitated this dichotomous organizing of society as a result of its foundation in serving as a *watchdog*, pointing out perceived contradictions to democracy and its pluralistic ideals (Hoover 1998). The Scopes Trial of 1925 serves as a watershed moment for the contemporary coverage of religion in politics and the perceived conflict between religion and US politics. As one of the first trials broadcasted live via radio, the Scopes Trial, which addressed the teaching of evolution versus creationism in schools, shaped national opinion about the place of religion in modern society (Larson 1997, Moran 2002). News media portrayed the trial as a victory for rational, secular thinking in contradiction to a backwards, unintelligent religious belief even though the jury ruled in favor of teaching creationism (Moran 2002). Therefore, public opinion, as shaped by media, affirmed the growing belief that religion had no place in public discourse, especially politics.

The Scopes Trial revealed that not all religions were deemed unacceptable in the public sphere – just those that advocate for a fundamentalist understanding of the Bible and an ultra-conservative society. This fundamentalist-modernist debate structures the media's coverage of religion and politics to this day, revealing why the Christian Right, violent interpretations of Islam and other non-liberal and progressive traditions dominate conversations about religion and politics in the USA. From this debate, we receive press coverage of religion that incorrectly characterizes the so-called *evangelical vote* as unified, exaggerates the role of Islam in the Iranian hostage crisis, and constructs a narrative about a never-ending *culture war* occurring in the USA between the right-left, conservative-liberal and the religious-unreligious (Winston 2007, Hoover 2012, Silk 2012). In effect, the fundamentalist-modernist approach to covering religion emphasizes conflict and reveals that Tocqueville's comments about religion contributing to the democratic process does not extend to all religions (Tocqueville 1835, Winston 2012).

The following case studies serve to illustrate two ways in which news media's coverage of religion and politics reinforce conflict, by overlooking the underlying nuances of a situation. These nuances provide a different angle from which to examine socio-political issues involving religion, possibly leading to better understanding rather than polarization.

The first case study examines a narrative of schism among the *evangelical vote* in the 2016 presidential election. What I refer to as the *evangelical versus evangelical* story frame flattened and minimized difference among the *evangelical vote* as a result of the fundamentalist-modernist mindset. Such a framing reinforces division and polarization as the norm within the US political imaginary. The second case study focuses on the antagonistic and emotional #TakeAKnee protest in the NFL and how news coverage of this story requires an understanding of a narrative infused within society – *American civil religion*. By framing the opposing views of the #TakeAKnee protests in terms of politics, nationalism or race, a key unifying narrative is lost. *American civil religion* allows for political, patriotic and racial differences within the protest, while also providing context for the extreme division caused by the events.

Evangelical versus Evangelical

Election coverage of the 2016 presidential campaign quickly discovered that the religious vote in the Republican Party did not follow past narratives. The evangelical vote was split with notable leaders, such as Jerry Falwell, Jr. and Robert Jeffress, supporting Trump and others denouncing him, including Russell Moore, the president of the Ethics and Religious

Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention (Cornish 2016, Taylor 2016a). Such a divide within what has been seen as a consistent voting bloc over the past four decades baffled the media and upended the narrative of a unified religious and political conservative front. This case study examines the 2016 coverage of the evangelical vote (a total of 115 articles) to highlight how news media's investment in particular narratives about religion – fundamentalist-modernist, the evangelical vote, culture wars, etc. – leads to essentialized treatments of religion's place in politics and overlooks important historical nuances. Before analyzing news stories about the *evangelical vote* from *The Washington Post*, *Vox*, and *National Public Radio* (NPR), a brief history of the perceived evangelical voting bloc is necessary.

The background to this chapter pointed to the Scopes Trial of 1925 as a turning point for the place of conservative religion, or fundamentalism, in the US public mentality (Larson 1997, Harding 2000, Moran 2002). With the rise of the fundamentalist-modernist debate in the USA, conservative Protestants appeared to retreat from the public relinquishing their voice in socio-political issues. The traditional narrative frames this shift in public persona among conservative traditions as a victory for reason and modernity. However, the story about the apparent retreat of conservative Protestants, now called *evangelicals*, is far more complicated.

Following the Scopes Trial, secular and modern media portrayed conservative Protestants as a minority group who had lost their say in public discourse and their interest in engaging in culture. In reality, evangelicals remained politically active between the 1920s and 1980s (Williams 2010). Although, one group, who publicly became known as the fundamentalists, retreated while another group, the neo-evangelicals, continued to engage with modern society (Brint and Schroedel 2009). The fundamentalist/neo-evangelical divide, however, was not an immediate repercussion of the Scopes Trial. Sutton (2013) places the division in the 1940s, as two competing organizations developed to address the role of religious conservatives in the public square. Carl McIntire, a staunch fundamentalist, founded the American Council of Churches (ACC) in 1941. This organization “called for strict separation from mainstream culture” and could be characterized as “militantly pro-Gospel and anti-modernist” (Diamond 1995, 95). In 1942, the neo-evangelicals responded to McIntire's separationist focus with the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE). The NAE's purpose, as described by its founder Ralph T. Davis, was “to find some common meeting ground for representation to government where legal matters may be handled as they concern one endeavor or another of the evangelical forces” (Sutton 2013, 7). Interestingly, the NAE admitted Charismatic Protestants, a previously ostracized group who believe in the gifts of the Holy Spirit such as speaking in tongues (Anderson 1979, Manuel 1980). This inclusive spirit set the stage for the emergent *evangelical vote* in 1980.

Although neo-evangelicals and fundamentalists took different stances on engagement with society, other distinctions between the two groups were minimal. In a 1957 document entitled *The New Evangelicalism*, Harold John Ockenga explained that neo-evangelicals “believe that fundamentalism is right in as far as doctrine is concerned” (Sutton 2013, 33). Even Jerry Falwell, a self-identified fundamentalist, recognized “there is little difference theologically between Fundamentalists and Evangelicals” (Falwell 1987, 121). This doctrine includes (1) the inerrancy of the Bible, (2) experiential faith and the salvation of the individual and (3) the literal return of Jesus to earth (Harding 2000, Sutton 2013).² From the beginning, then, the conservative Protestant population was divided, wrestling with their own internal conflicts of politics and engagement. Common theology, however, did set the stage for the media narrative that would become the *evangelical vote*.

By the late-1970s, Falwell left the fundamentalist camp and found the political activism organization *Moral Majority* in 1979. Falwell also began referring to himself as an evangelical

rather than a fundamentalist, making it easier for the media to mistakenly see all conservative Protestants as the same kind of *evangelical* rather than as a diverse population with varied political views (Harding 2000, Sutton 2013). The end of the 1970s also proved to be the moment of coalition among the various conservative Protestant groups. Jimmy Carter, a born-again Christian, lost the faith of the evangelical population as his administration had failed to support the stances of conservative Protestants in favor of maintaining Democratic Party policies on abortion and school prayer (Williams 2010). Yet, the appeal of Carter's administration to the evangelical base reaffirmed a growing suspicion – conservative Protestants held considerable voting power and could form a coalition in support of a chosen candidate (Williams 2010).

The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 with significant support from the newly minted *evangelical vote* solidified the media narrative the USA continues to hear today about the Republican voting base. In particular, Reagan's overtures to evangelicals vocalized issues that contribute to the idea of *culture wars* – pro-life, halting of gay rights, and restoring morality to the United States (Williams 2010).³ From Reagan onward, the *evangelical vote* has been a key story in almost every Republican presidential campaign.

Media stories from the 2016 election demonstrate surprise at the division within what, since 1980, has been considered a homogenous voting bloc. This headlined surprise emerges from (1) a focus on enduring media narratives such as the fundamentalist-modernist divide and culture wars and (2) the lack of historical interrogation within stories. These two themes emerge in the framing of the 2016 *evangelical vote*, as seen in one legacy print paper, an online platform aimed at younger readers and public radio.

In order to have headlines that read, "Why Donald Trump is tearing evangelicals apart" (Boorstein 2016c) and "Trump Election Reveals Fractures Among Diverse Evangelicals" (Martin 2016), a presupposition of homogeneity must exist. News media have perpetuated the notion that the *evangelical vote* exists as a homogenous bloc, since its dominance in the 1980 Reagan election, by framing election stories through polling numbers and categorized voting populations. Stories from 2016 projected how the *evangelical vote* would swing in each primary election state-by-state, stating that 57% of Republicans participating in the Iowa primary in 2012 were "evangelical or born-again" (Prokop 2016). The emphasis on polling numbers and the percentage of *evangelical voters* reinforces the idea that evangelicals can be categorized together. The polling practice of placing *evangelical voters* into a single category participates in the on-going fundamentalist-modernist divide that sees US American society as split between biblical fundamentalists, understood as the *evangelical vote*, and those willing to embrace modern, pluralistic and progressive society.

Blocking off evangelical also happens in the various phrases used to describe the importance of the *evangelical vote* "for any Republican seeking the White House" (Booker 2016) and the anxiety around its division. Wilkinson, in an article for *Vox*, writes, "it's become increasingly clear that Donald Trump's candidacy has created rifts that may keep the group from ever 'banding back together'" (Wilkinson 2016). Media framing continues to support the idea of a coherent voting bloc that has always existed and is now threatened by their sudden and possibly irreversible breaking. Thus, by highlighting a seemingly new divide within the *evangelical vote*, news media perpetuate a narrative of a unified *fundamentalist* voting bloc positioned against a *modernist* vote.

Some stories, however, do gesture to the fact that divisions among evangelicals have previously existed. These moments of historical contextualization often come from interviewees or guests rather than the reporters. For instance, in an *NPR* interview with Jerry Falwell, Jr., the host, Steve Inskeep, attempts to figure out why divisions are happening. Falwell responds

by pointing out that evangelicals have always been divided referencing his father's time in the 1970s and 1980s (Inskip 2016). Russell Moore, an opponent to voting for Trump, highlights in an interview that "evangelicalism is far more diverse politically than some people assume" (Neary 2016). Other examples abound of self-identifying evangelicals pointing out to the press that their politics and beliefs are not as homogenous as the media portrays them to be (Bailey 2016b, Bever 2016, Kurtzleben 2016a). One pastor goes so far as to distinguish between a "true evangelical" and one "defined by the media" (McCammon 2016).

In spite of these corrections on behalf of evangelicals, media coverage of the homogenous *evangelical vote* persisted. On occasion a reporter would write, "evangelicals, who have no formal leadership or hierarchy" (Bailey 2016b) or state that the evangelical "voting bloc isn't monolithic" (Taylor 2016b). Sometimes stories would distinguish between evangelicals who regularly go to church and those who do not (Chang 2016, Zauzmer 2016a) or make references to the racial diversity of evangelicals in the USA (Bailey 2016b, Boorstein 2016b, Echavarri 2016, Martin 2016, Golshan 2016). However, the majority of coverage continued to frame evangelicals as one unified group to be counted, analyzed and understood in relation to their support for Republican candidates over the last four decades without ever fully outlining who is and is not an evangelical in media usage of the term.

News media employed the culture war narrative to also depict the *evangelical vote* as homogenous. Within this narrative, evangelicals vote unanimously for candidates who uphold their values of morality, most often depicted in culture war terms – pro-life, marriage is between a man and woman, traditional gender roles, religious freedom, and a religiously informed lifestyle. Evangelical support of Trump in 2016 confused the media because his life seemed to contradict everything the supposed *values voter* wanted. The *Washington Post*, *Vox* and *NPR* repeatedly expressed this surprise by placing the following introductory phrase in multiple stories about the *evangelical vote*: "Trump, a twice-divorced, casino mogul" (Boorstein 2016a, Lehmann 2016, Zauzmer 2016b), placing his lifestyle as counter to that of his religious supporters. This idea of the *values voter* not actually voting for a candidate with morals shows up in various stories throughout 2016. A few headlines highlight that evangelicals appear to now be willing to elect someone who has committed "immoral acts" (Bailey 2016a, Kurtzleben 2016a), implying that this has never been the case before. It was beyond comprehension, according to media framing, that religious individuals could support a seemingly immoral man.

Yet, sound bites and quotations from self-identifying evangelicals reveal that *values voters* do not necessarily vote the same way. Russell Moore, Pastor Max Lucado and others do reinforce the media's narrative by agreeing that Trump "is without a moral core," and they will not vote for him (Gjelten 2016). Other evangelicals challenge the media frame. Falwell told reporters, "We're not electing a pastor; we're electing a president" (Kurtzleben 2016b). Robert Jeffress, a Texan pastor, pointed out that evangelicals voted for Reagan who was a Hollywood divorcé, saying, "by voting for a candidate, they're not endorsing a particular lifestyle" (Young 2016). What mattered to these evangelical voters were the policy promises that Trump made. Ralph Reed, co-founder of the Christian Coalition in 1980, stated:

But the reality is...that the roughly one out of every four voters that are conservative people of faith are voting on issues like who will protect unborn life, who's going to defend religious freedom, who's going to appoint conservative judges.

(Simon 2016)

The issues that Reed highlights support the media's culture war narrative, but also correct the commonly held notion that these values must also be a part of a candidate's lifestyle.

Once again, though, the news coverage of the *evangelical vote* takes explanations of long-existing political differences from self-identifying evangelicals and places them in a dominant narrative – evangelicals, a once unified group, now divided over Trump. Just as with evangelical corrections of history, the media would nod to the non-monolithic state of the *evangelical vote*, but continue to depict the 2016 election in terms of evangelical conflict.

By the end of the election, news media did begin to qualify their use of evangelical by referring to the *white evangelical vote* and noting the political differences of Latino and African American evangelicals (Bailey 2016b, 2016c, Boorstein 2016b, Echavarri 2016, Martin 2016). However, employing the term evangelical and reporting on an *evangelical vote*, white or not, overlooks the history and divisions that have always been within the population. Covering an *evangelical vote*, especially after the 2016 election, reinforces old narratives about religion and politics that have not necessarily been true and definitely do not apply to the current US evangelical landscape. Rather than interrogate the ever-existing differences among US evangelicals, news media stuck with a narrative begun in 1980 about a homogenous evangelical voting bloc situated within the context of a fundamentalist-modernist culture war. Reiterating the fundamentalist-modernist narrative reproduces cultural and political divides as binary when, in fact, they are multifaceted. Providing a more historically contextualized and nuanced approach to the *evangelical vote* ensures that news media live up to their role as educating and protecting democratic society.

#TakeAKnee

In the NFL pre-season games of August 2016, quarterback Colin Kaepernick took a knee during the national anthem to protest police violence and racial inequality in the USA. This silent protest evaded the attention of the public for a few games, but eventually became headline news on sports pages and beyond. When the nation did take notice, emotional cries of support and disgust circulated in opinion columns, social media and news broadcasts. Kaepernick was either a “voice for the voiceless” (Maaddi 2017) and using the platform of football for social justice or he was “anti-American” (Staff Writer 2016b) and disrespectful (Davis 2017). Kaepernick’s protest in the hands of news media and the opinions of the public quickly spun into a debate about the US flag, patriotism and respect for the nation. Comments from President Trump in fall of 2017 fueled the polarized stances on what has become known as the #TakeAKnee protests. Trump’s tweets declaring the protest disrespectful to the country, flag, and national anthem, while calling for kneeling players to be fired, reinvigorated public discussion in the news (Staff Writer 2016a, Davis 2017, Zeller 2017). Was kneeling disrespectful? Could a black athlete be patriotic *and* draw attention to national sins? Moreover, why were opinions over the flag and national anthem so polarized?

Based on the analysis of 33 articles, this case study examines news stories and opinion columns about the #TakeAKnee protests from *Fox News*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Religion Dispatches* and *Religion News Service*. Studying the language used in these pieces demonstrates: first, how media coverage of the opposing views struggled to find *the* reason for the nation’s division over the protests and second, how *American civil religion* can provide journalists with a more nuanced reading of the situation that positions the conflict as one of religious expression and within the context of a larger conversation about US identity.

News coverage attempted to explain why the act of kneeling during the national anthem brought out such emotionally heightened responses from NFL fans, the president and the football-illiterate alike. *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* positioned #TakeAKnee in terms of on-going racial politics, highlighting that Martin Luther King, Jr. and other

Civil Rights activists kneeled in the 1960s (Wang 2017). News outlets also noted that football and politics, especially racial politics, have long been intertwined, referencing the delayed desegregation of the sport in the 1970s (Freedman 2017a, 2017b). Other news media, including *Fox News*, noted that there exists a long history of athletes protesting during the national anthem, such as on the Olympic medal podium in 1968 (Carbone 2017).

Supporters of #TakeAKnee looked to religion and the role of faith in social justice to explain and defend Kaepernick's and other players' actions. Quiros, writing for *The Washington Post*, called kneeling "a protest steeped in religion," tying #TakeAKnee to the religiously motivated Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's (SNCC) protests aimed at desegregating churches (Quiros 2017). A few authors noted that kneeling is a religious act in the USA and, therefore, could not be disrespectful (Denker 2017, Maaddi 2017). Frost (2017) also called out the hypocrisy around the act of kneeling in the NFL, since Tim Tebow's famous kneel to pray on the field has been deemed acceptable practice, while Kaepernick's similar, silent kneeling pose is referred to as disrespectful and out of place in football.

However, another form of religion can actually clarify the on-going debate about the respect and patriotism of #TakeAKnee – *American civil religion*. As a national system of symbols that inform the nation's understanding of itself and its citizens, *American civil religion* fuels nationalistic and patriotic attachment to the USA. In fact, the reason Trump's comments resonated so well with a part of the US population is because the protest touches upon a conflict over the appropriate way to partake in civil-religious rituals. Civil religion's "beliefs, symbols, [myths], and rituals," inform proper behavior toward and treatment of sacred objects (Bellah 1967, 42).

Most news media were unable to appropriately integrate this precipitating source of conflict in #TakeAKnee because they may be unaware of *American civil religion* since it has primarily been a scholastic term. Multiple outlets do discuss nationalism or patriotism, but do not interrogate the underlying cause for such divergent opinions about national love and pride. For instance, some understood Kaepernick kneeling as "boldly thumbing his nose" at the American flag (Erickson 2016), while others recognized that #TakeAKnee is patriotic because it exemplifies free speech and calls the nation to live up to its principles (Hauser 2016, Robinson 2016, Winters 2016, Denker 2017). Yet, such views are never contextualized within the larger metanarrative about how we understand the place of the USA in history as outlined in *American civil religion*.

In a rare exception, a *New York Times* forum entitled "Americans and Their Flag" (Jones 2016, Leepson 2016, Miller-Idriss 2016, Robinson 2016) alluded to the idea of *American civil religion* without ever naming it. Each respondent noted the sacred nature of the US flag and the national anthem, explaining that these national symbols convey "meaning about the nation's history, myths and ideals" (Miller-Idriss 2016). Yet, the meaning of the symbols and how they should be treated is, like the larger #TakeAKnee debate, disputed. Jones, a veteran, writes, "The flag is sacred to me – not because it represents the service members I know who died, but because it represents the values they died to defend" (Jones 2016). Leepson sees the protest as disrespectful because it challenges the "near religious fervor" (Leepson 2016) accorded to the flag. Miller-Idriss (2016), on the other hand, believes that true respect of the symbols emerges from engaging in debate and discussion. She explains,

It is precisely because they carry meaning, values and ideals that national symbols are important spaces for debate and transformation...so the best way to respect a national symbol is to embrace the moments when symbols force us to re-evaluate the meaning of being American.

(Miller-Idriss 2016).

While numerous folks recognize the religious emotion attached to American symbols, as the forum demonstrates, the implications are less clear in news media. Borden rightly observes that “the United States was not created on a common platform of religion or ancestry” (Borden 2016) and requires some other overarching idea to unify the nation. Bellah proposed *American civil religion* as the unifying belief system given that it provides a system of “beliefs, symbols, [myths], and rituals” (Bellah 1967, 42) and situates American history and destiny “in the light of ultimate and universal reality” (Bellah 1967, 54). What *American civil religion* implies, then, is that nationalism, patriotism and religious fervor for national symbols are embedded within a larger belief system than we realize. To treat nationalism and patriotism as expressions of *American civil religion* reveals another layer to the #TakeAKnee controversy.

Zeller (2016) and Campbell (2016) both recognize this missing piece of the #TakeAKnee debate. As demonstrated, journalists and news media attempted to address the religious sentiment affiliated with national symbols through the language of nationalism and patriotism. However, these stories only use the language of religion to explain the emotions in what is framed as a secular debate, but fail to fully engage with the religious layer. In engaging the civil-religious nuances of #TakeAKnee, we can better understand that the emotions of the debate are a response to different notions of sacrality by reading the protests as transgressions of the sacred.

Those commentators who find #TakeAKnee disrespectful and upsetting view the objects of the flag and the national anthem as sacred unto themselves. As the holder of the past, present and future of the USA, the material object needs to be respected. To protest against the objects is transgressive of their sacrality. For those who support #TakeAKnee, the principles and the ideals behind the objects are what is sacred. The objects serve as physical reminders of the sacred ideas, but do not always convey the sacred meaning. Kaepernick states as much in his justification for kneeling, targeting what he thinks the flag is supposed to symbolize, such as freedom, liberty, and justice: “When I feel like the flag is representing what it’s supposed to represent, I’ll stand” (Smith 2018). Thus, the protest does not transgress the objects to violate them, but to illuminate the sacred meaning that they should hold has been lost.

The underlying conflict to the #TakeAKnee debate, then, is not who is and is not a patriot, but the very definition of patriotism as the faithful expression of *American civil religion*. In emotionally arguing over the meaning and treatment of national symbols, residents of the US debate the foundation of the religious sentiment that aims to unify a diverse nation. Instead of reading #TakeAKnee protests as a threat to US identity or as disrespectful, *American civil religion* allows for journalism to analyze the debate in the context of any other religion – the (re)reading of scripture and (re)formulating of ritual. Incorporating an *American civil religion* lens in the media, therefore, provides journalists with another layer of analysis and allows them to further inform the public about itself, its nation, and its ideals – furthering journalism’s aim to uphold a well-informed democracy. The addition of *American civil religion* into the media, especially in the case of #TakeAKnee, could minimize conflict by revealing the underlying motivations for divergent opinions. Rather than fuel conflict, news media could progress public understanding.

Conclusion

The two case studies presented in this chapter demonstrate how news media in the USA perpetuate conflict by reinforcing narratives about religion in politics that highlight divisions and overlook underlying causes. By contextualizing observations about religion and politics within historical precedent and ideological trends, journalism can reveal how seemingly large and society shifting changes in US religion are not actually cause for conflict and polarization. Instead, examples like the split in the evangelical vote or the #TakeAKnee protests are events

informed by metanarratives like the fundamentalist-modernist culture wars and *American civil religion* that either create conflict where it need not exist or provide clarity to the primary issue.

Journalism's treatment of religion does aim to illuminate and to clarify the on-going power of religion in American society in spite of beliefs about secularization. Hopefully, continued attention will be given to religion in politics in the USA, but in order for it to not perpetuate misunderstandings that fuel conflict, news media need a more nuanced treatment. Religion and politics in the USA are not just about one religious group's views about the culture wars, and it is not possible to treat similarly voting believers as monolith. Similarly, attention needs to be given to the religious dimensions of nationalism and patriotism to illuminate the motivating factors in the emotionally driven debates over the state of the nation, especially in the *Make America Great Again* era.

However, the current state of journalism in the USA makes such practices unlikely. Newspaper staffs continue to be reduced, local news programming is disappearing and digital-native news platforms, such as *Vox*, wrestle with similar revenue issues as legacy media (Lynch 2014). The rocky transition to a digital-first approach to journalism appears to be bearing fruit. Legacy papers have increased digital subscriptions, broadcast media appears to be doing well, and digital-native platforms are expanding (Daly 2018). State of the News Media reports from Pew Forum (2017) however, suggest audience numbers may be dropping. One explanation – US trust in the media is at a low.

Recent polls reveal that trust in news media has eroded significantly since 2003. A Gallup study in 2016 showed that only 32% of US residents have a “great deal or a fair amount of trust in the media” (Swift 2016). Although this percentage rose to 41% in 2017 (Ingram 2018, Knight Foundation 2018), less than half the US public believe news media to be accurate coverage of socio-political issues and events. These findings do not come as a surprise at a time when leaders perpetuate distrust by calling journalism *fake news* and social media users learn their information has been employed to manipulate them, such as in the Cambridge Analytica case (Granville 2018, Ingram 2018).

Between the financial troubles of news media and the unending efforts to try and restore trust in journalism, religion coverage is not a priority. Reporting on religion and politics will most likely shift to political desks with journalists who may not have detailed knowledge of religions such as *God Beat* reporters possess. The future of religion journalism in the USA possibly lies with niche, non-profit outlets, such as *Religion Dispatches* and *Religion News Service*. However, these media are not without their own funding, editorial and staffing concerns.

At a time when the media horizon continues to seem bleak, it may seem overwhelming to ask religion coverage to be more aware of problematic framing and detailed in contextualizing events. Yet, reporting on religion in US politics remains crucial, whether it is increasing awareness about religion's role in current racial tensions, unmasking the prosperity gospel or exploring the disaffiliation movement. As *The Washington Post's* masthead reads, “Democracy Dies in Darkness” and when polarization in the USA seems to be at a high, it is important to understand how the media can shift narratives that shape awareness about issues and events to not perpetuate conflict.

Notes

- 1 It should be noted that the separation of Church and State does not equal the separation of religion and politics. Jefferson's letter to the Danbury Baptist Church, in which he spoke of a “wall of separation,” refers to the institutions of religion and government rather than their ideologies and moralities. Religion, as such, is not excluded from the political realm as long as the institutional powers of faith systems do not inform governmental rule – “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion” (Constitution of the United States).

- 2 This chapter exclusively uses the terms ‘evangelical’ and ‘conservative Protestant’ instead of the Christian Right, because the Christian Right also includes conservative Catholics to form a larger coalition. Given that this chapter focuses on the internal divides within the evangelical Protestant population, it would be misleading to use Christian Right terminology. It is also important to note that not all those who identify as evangelical will also self-identify as conservative. Williams (2010) notes that some evangelicals, such as Jim Wallis of *Sojourners*, position themselves as “left leaning” (269).
- 3 At the time, the evangelical vote was also concerned about encroaching atheistic Communism, school prayer, and the sexual revolution’s upending of traditional gender roles (Williams 2010). Historians of the Christian Right now also include desegregation as a motivating factor for the emerging coalition particularly among Southern evangelicals (Miller 2009).

Further readings

- Bellah, R., 1967. Civil Religion in America. *Daedalus*, 134(4), 40–55.
Reading Bellah’s seminal work needs to be the starting point for anyone interested in *American civil religion*. In this article, Bellah outlines that *American civil religion* is a universal tradition of beliefs, symbols, myths, and rituals that unify a pluralistic US. This article is cited in almost every other work on *American civil religion*.
- Gorski, P., 2017. *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Gorski’s book is the latest monograph in the literature on *American civil religion*. *American Covenant* provides a historical overview of different national imaginaries in the US and how they compete and also merge to form the diverse landscape of US religio-political beliefs. Gorski seeks to rein-vigorate Bellah’s *American civil religion* to demonstrate it is “a dynamic and living tradition” (ix).
- Harding, S. F., 2000. *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Harding provides a cultural analysis of the rhetoric of fundamentalist Christians in the US political sphere during the 1970s and 1980s. By focusing on a key pastor, Jerry Falwell, Harding examines how fundamentalist Christians became *evangelical* and garnered a large following that influences US politics until today.
- Williams, D. K., 2010. *God’s Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Williams’ *God’s Own Party* challenges traditional narratives about the emergence of the Christian Right in US politics. By tracing the origins of the Christian Right back to the 1920s, Williams provides a detailed history of a religious population often discussed in the USA.
- Winston, D., ed., 2012. *The Oxford Handbook on Religion and the American News Media*. New York: Oxford University Press.
This edited volume of essays covers the place of religion in US news media from colonial times to present. Other essays cover the difference between news media that cover religion and religiously affiliated presses, revealing a vast media landscape of religion news in the US. This handbook also addresses questions of representation and how various religions are portrayed in the US news.

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