Spring 2013

Review of *Red State Religion: Faith and Politics in America's Heartland* by Robert Wuthnow

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Robert Wuthnow, who directs the Center for the Study of Religion at Princeton University, has a distinguished publishing record in the field of American religion and culture. A Kansas native, he has an unmistakable soft spot for the state. He opposes Thomas Frank’s view that Kansans have consistently espoused Republican-centered moral issues at odds with their economic well-being. His central argument, as he clearly states, is that the “Republican Party and the centrist conservatism of the state’s two dominant religions—Methodism and Catholicism—actually deterred radical religious and political movements from gaining much ground during most of the state’s history.” He claims it was President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal policies that eventually laid the groundwork for the emergence of a radical right-wing, religiously conservative movement in Kansas.

In general, Wuthnow does an excellent job tracing the development of religious institutions in the state. He draws upon census records, both state and federal, in illustrating the dominance of Methodism and Catholicism and the post-World War II fast-paced growth of Southern Baptists and Evangelical dominations. He accurately portrays the importance of prohibition in Kansas, and how Protestants and Catholics lined up on the issue. In later chapters he reveals how the issues of gay rights, abortion, and teaching evolution in the public school system have shaped the state’s recent politics—trends, he believes, that are effective at the state level but much less so on the national.

Unquestionably, Wuthnow compiles an impressive array of evidence to illustrate his interpretation. Sometimes, however, it feels as if he stacks the deck. As an example, Jeff Sharlet’s The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power (2008) details the rise of perhaps the most influential Christian fundamental political movement in the country. According to Sharlet, Kansas Senator Frank Carlson, who served for over a decade in the House of Representatives and another 20 years in the Senate by 1969, became an important member of the Family, actively embraced its fundamentalist Christian views, and formulated important national policy along the Family’s theological lines. Reading Wuthnow, one would hardly know that Senator Carlson had much of a role in this regard.

Recently at the state level, the social and economic policies of Governor Sam Brownback (whom Jeff Sharlet once labeled “God’s Senator”) and a conservative Republican state legislature have garnered national attention. Large-scale corporate income tax reductions, new abortion bans, voter ID laws, abolishing the state Arts Commission, and opposition to implementing the national Affordable Care Act all bear testimony to the mixing of religion and politics.

Other states in the Great Plains have similar political histories, but Kansas seems to shine in the spotlight. Undoubtedly, Wuthnow sums it up well in saying that “on many occasions, Kansas did lead the way.”

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