

WORLD RELIGIONS IN AMERICA, FOURTH EDITION  
Democratic Faith Positions as Hurdles to Missio Dei  
Jacob Neusner

*World Religions in America* begins as a compilation of nineteen essays introducing the reader to how the diverse religious landscape came to be in America: from the many Protestant and Catholic denominations to Judaism, Islam, Bahai, Hinduism, Buddhism, and other Eastern religions. Martin Marty observes, “From the time of the First Amendment, Protestants, and eventually Catholics, Jews, and others, were free to compete for the soul of America.”<sup>1</sup> Marty acknowledges how this “free market in religion” actually increased the growth in these faith communities. Not only did a free market of ideas gain traction but Marty cites: “Protestants became far more active in their churches” and “churches set up voluntary organizations to educate, spread their moral vision, and reform America.”<sup>2</sup>

Today many Americans, particularly people belonging to religious communities, are cautious about publicly speaking about faith ideas. As a parish pastor, I have been curious about this development over the last two decades. I grew up in a church that engaged in public witnessing. One night a week, a large percentage of the congregation would gather together and make “evangelism calls.” But, in the churches I have served, this kind of activity is not well received. Publicly and formally engaging in this “free market” of religion and attempting to “persuade” people does not appear to be the popular approach of today.

Marty suggests there is a unique characteristic of the Protestant logic, and that is: “there is always someone who will go further.”<sup>3</sup> This is the logic behind many of the faith groups seeking a home in America. They sought a place where they would have individual freedom and liberty to practice their faith as they sought fit. Marty describes this what gave birth to the Puritans, the Congregationalists, the

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<sup>1</sup> Jacob Neusner, *World Religions in America*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville and Kentucky, 2009, 39.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 35.

Quakers, the Amish, the Baptists and the Methodists. I imagine this fundamental principal, taking a faith position “further” than the prior group is at play in the religions of America today. Individual choice seems a key component in the development, or evolution, of most Protestant religions in America. Marty provided many examples of what he calls the “democratic faith,”<sup>4</sup> which he describes as, “one that appealed to emotions and the desire for community.”<sup>5</sup>

A term used often in the media and on university campuses is “virtue signalling.” The Wikipedia definition is, “Virtue signalling is the conspicuous expression of moral values done primarily with the intent of enhancing standing within a social group.”<sup>6</sup> American culture today places value on belonging to groups which “appear” compassionate. Religions in America contended first with the Enlightenment, then the Great Awakening, and now “Progressivism.” The ideas of progressiveness do not exist only in economics and social advances but also in the community of faith.

In summary, I agree with Martin Marty’s observation that the principle of Protestant logic is “there is always someone who will go further.” In Presidential Elections and debates whichever candidate appears to have the greater amount of sympathy for the largest number of people, or whoever takes the strongest stand for/against a position, tends to be the popular candidate. Politics has become co-mingled with the faith of many religious people. Religious and moral beliefs find a ready platform for formal expression in politics. Hence, America remains a diverse and engaged “religious” society. It may be that mainstream Christian denominations have experienced a decline in membership less because of a cultural shift toward the secular than because of a cultural shift toward moral and emotional expressionism.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virtue\\_signalling](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virtue_signalling), August 4, 2017.

### References

Neusner, Jacob, ed. *World Religions in America, Fourth Edition*. Louisville:  
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"Virtue Signalling." *Wikipedia*. Last edited on 1 August 2017, at 21:03.