
In The Myth of American Religious Freedom, historian David Sehat seeks to address a pair of questions with obvious implications for scholars of religious communication. First, how should religious freedom be understood in the context of American history? Second, and consequently, how should it be understood in the context of 21st-century politics? Though answers to these questions abound, few escape the service of activism. Policymakers and interest groups routinely claim American traditions as their own, embracing the assumption that control of the past is requisite for directing the future. But Sehat is having none of it. Citing basic commitments to both secularity and religiosity, he has crafted a rigorous and disinterested account that defies comfortable partisanship.

For Sehat, the contested nature of religious freedom is of more than tangential concern. Indeed, his project finds its exigency in several decades of left-right polemics. “This is a work of history,” he declares early on, “but it is not only that. I have written it in the belief that our current discussion about religion in public life trades on a series of fables about the American past. These fables make it difficult, if not impossible, to understand the religious politics of the present” (2). By challenging such “fables,” Sehat hopes to improve the way we think—and accordingly, the way we speak—about such issues. This is important and timely work. Like the historical opportunists he critiques, Sehat remains consciously grounded in the here-and-now.

As the book’s title indicates, the central argument is founded upon the “myth” of American religious freedom. There are actually three myths under consideration here, but Sehat binds them together like strands in a rope, understanding the “threefold myth” as a unified body of contested knowledge (4). Attributing each strand to a different interest, he succinctly explains what he terms the myth of separation, the myth of religious decline, and the myth of exceptional liberty (4-6).

The first myth, cherished by liberals, states that unrestricted religious freedom—as per the First Amendment—has always been a core American value. On the contrary, Sehat argues, the absolutist vision of Jefferson and Madison was hardly reflective of mainstream thought in the 18th century. The not uncommon prosecution of blasphemy, for instance, demonstrates that religious transgressions often were punishable under the law. The second myth, conceding the reality of early Protestant dominance, suggests that religious practice in the United States
began in earnest with the Puritans, but has been in decline ever since, appropriately ceding ground to the forces of modernity. Sehat rejects this understanding as well. Instead, he traces church membership rates to observe that revolutionary America was relatively un-churched, while the 19th century saw increases in membership. Since then, religious practice has continued to grow and flourish, though not always in specifically Christian contexts. The final myth, regularly embraced by conservatives, suggests that religious freedom in America is exceptional, and that it forms the cornerstone of all other American freedoms. To this Sehat responds that, historically, proponents of religious governance have often sought to encroach upon the liberties of their neighbors. In fact, partnerships between religious and political leaders have tended toward state-sponsored coercion. Calls for religious influence in the political realm should thus be viewed with deserved suspicion.

On this foundation Sehat constructs a nuanced historical narrative situating religious freedom within a matrix of varied and contentious meanings. If there is a dichotomous struggle at work here, it is not specific to liberals and conservatives or Democrats and Republicans. Rather, the contest unfolds with proponents of the “moral establishment” on one side, and those who oppose such an establishment on the other (5). What follows is a long, often bitter debate between those who understand religious freedom to be Christian-specific (usually Protestant-specific), and those who do not; between those who would inscribe Christianity into law and those who would not. At the conceptual level, this debate seeks to define religious freedom as either the freedom of the powerful to impose their religious will or the freedom of all people to practice (or not practice) without fear of imposition. At this writing, the question remains somewhat undecided.

Sehat’s book is comprised of twelve chapters, split into four parts that proceed chronologically. Part One (Chapters One through Three) considers the founding era, with attention to the views and disputes of the vaunted “Founding Fathers.” Dismissing those who claim to represent the opinions of these men, Sehat notes that early American deliberation over religious questions was better defined by disagreement than unanimity of opinion. He takes his cues from important early debates, noting for instance how the Founders struggled to reconcile the Roman ideal of civic republicanism with the conflicting sectarian views of their own members. Despite broad agreement that a strong citizenry must necessarily be virtuous, there was broad disagreement about which virtues mattered most, and many prominent voices took the position that religious freedom meant little more than “full protection of Protestant church prerogatives” (19). In this context, Jeffersonian freedom emerges as a truly radical idea. Sehat explores early debates over the moral establishment at length, considering their implications for federalism, the Bill of Rights, and the judiciary, among others.

Part Two (Chapters Three and Four) changes course, introducing a pair of 19th-century movements working within and against elements of the moral establishment. First, noting that slavery was often justified by the “non-Christian status” of Africans (73), Sehat explores the evangelical energies that quickly
infused the abolitionist movement. Arthur and Lewis Tappan are the prime exemplars. Their collaboration—and subsequent break—with William Lloyd Garrison provides valuable insights into the specific problems and applications of religious thought in the context of abolition. The second case, that of the emerging women’s movement, profiles Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her belief that “the severe legal liabilities women faced” were attributable to “the untoward influence of Christianity in law” (98). Among other themes, this chapter examines the strenuous efforts of early women’s rights activists to overcome popular, biblically-proscribed notions of women’s subordination (104).

In Part Three (Chapters Six through Eight), Sehat pursues these movements through the decades, examining parallels and intersections as they struggled against the restrictions of the white, male establishment. Citing overtly religious justifications for the developing legal apparatus of Jim Crow, Sehat argues that segregation found a distinctly moral footing. By restricting the rights of African Americans, he notes, whites hoped to “limit the damage done by black immorality” (129). The establishment response to women was similar. Hoping to protect women’s “purity” and spare the nation from “moral degradation,” governing bodies worked to “reformulate the legal mechanisms to keep women under control” (143). In both cases, Sehat writes, the method was consistent. Moral advocates claimed to “support religious liberty while in fact promoting religious control” (155).

By the turn of the 20th century, the success of the “moral establishmentarians” in defining and driving public debates was near total. For Sehat’s case studies—as for many others—this meant subjugation and widespread denial of basic rights. Their struggles had been hard fought, but they had not, as yet, been won. Part Four (Chapters Nine through Twelve) thus turns to the rise of liberal jurisprudence. Sehat notes that, following several decades of Gilded Age excess, the American power structure was shaken by a pair of challenges—one “economic,” the other “intellectual” (183). The first was largely attributable to labor organization. Hoping to counter the growing influence of large—and recently personified—corporations, workers developed unions, which were in turn met by condemnation from certain religious leaders. Henry Ward Beecher, for example, took the position that “God has intended the great to be great and the little to be little,” placing him squarely on the side of management (184). The second challenge came largely from legal responses to such issues, as judicial figures including Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. and Louis Brandeis increasingly relied on logic and social science rather than moral tradition in crafting their legal opinions (201–204). The result was an undeniable break with precedent, but a break that helped expand rights for millions.

In the end, the value of Sehat’s book for communication scholars is at least twofold. First, it maps a compelling historical trajectory that acknowledges both the ubiquity of religious influence in American political history and the problems such influence has been prone to create. In doing so, it also challenges readers to engage the contemporary conversation about religious freedom in America, including the now-common use of religious freedom arguments in
political debates. Too often history is deployed selectively, as a weapon, to cast political actors as betrayers of a simple and stable tradition. But Sehat demonstrates persuasively that our religious-political tradition has been stable only in the persistence of its conflict. In that sense, the tumult of our own times is merely variation on a theme. By acknowledging this reality—and so rising to challenge the convenient historical myths that work to deny it—we may inform a stronger public conversation that lauds the importance of religious freedom while recognizing the dangers of religious imposition. If history serves, that distinction will be valuable for generations to come.

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