

**An Oral review of *Getting Religion: Faith, Culture & Politics from the Age of Eisenhower to the Era of Obama*, by Kenneth L. Woodward  
(Convergent / Random House, 2016)**

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Sometime during the first Iraq war, I remember seeing a photo with a caption on the front page of my home town newspaper. The photo showed an American sailor in the galley of a naval vessel, sitting at a table with a food tray in front of him. His elbows were resting on the table, hands clasped under his chin, head bowed, eyes closed. The caption read: “Weary Sailor Rests Head on Hands Before Eating.”

This humble anecdote rightly suggests that there is a disconnect between the press and grass roots Americans. As the religion editor of *Newsweek* for nearly four decades, Kenneth L. Woodward invested some one-thousand articles, essays, book reviews, and seventy-plus cover stories trying to repair it. One gains a sense that his senior editors were supportive but often baffled by the religious culture and leaders he tracked down west of the Hudson and described with determined empathy.

For most of the post-war period, *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *USN&WR* were the news magazines of record. Each week they told millions of Americans what the most important events were and, more important, what they meant. Woodward’s stories shaped readers’ perception of what was going on in the religious world, especially in religious traditions not their own.

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“Four Decades as a Worldwide Religion Reporter: Observations and Lessons Learned”

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Woodward’s newest book, *Getting Religion: Faith, Culture & Politics from the Age of Eisenhower to the Era of Obama*, published by Convergent/Random House in September 2016, is a social history of the second half of the 20th century that puts religion at the center of the narrative. This volume, which won the *Christianity Today* Award of Merit for 2017, uses personal memoir as well as portraits of key figures to make the history come alive. There are good reasons to believe that being there, on the scene, personally interacting with the protagonists, offered an immediacy that more distanced academic studies often missed.

Ken’s main argument is that the conditions in which people “get religion” strongly influence the kinds of religion they “get.” Faith cannot be reduced to those settings, but it cannot be divorced from them either. For example, one chapter connects the decline of the family with the sudden appearance of more than 300 new religious cults most of which take the form of sacred families. These emerged in the late 1970s, a time when a million kids, mostly from white, middle-class or better families, ran away from home. Another chapter, on entrepreneurial religion, shows how evangelicalism rose with its embrace of free enterprise capitalism—or put another way, how evangelical religion *was* free enterprise religion.

And so it was that the extraordinary pace and intensity of social change running from the Eisenhower to the Obama eras released two forms of religion: *embedded* and *movement*. These two forms, broadly conceived, might be imaged as a double helix, winding around each other for six decades.

Embedded religion was tied to churches and synagogues, schools, regions, ethnic and racial groups, and families--nuclear and extended. Ken uses his own Catholic boyhood in the 1950s in Rocky River, Ohio, a few miles west of Cleveland, as a case study of how embedded religion emerged from its social setting, what it looked like, and how it shaped believers’ lives. Though his father had come to Christ in a Billy Sunday revival, his mother and her extended family were devoutly Catholic, and that is how he was reared. Catholic schools and friends and priests and nuns formed his world--a

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cultural ecosphere capped off with four years at Notre Dame, where he met his wife, a student at the neighboring St. Mary’s College. This was embedded religion, a cultural universe separated from mainstream Protestant culture by a real yet porous membrane.

The other strand of the helix is the extraordinary and unexpected sunburst of religious enthusiasm—like the middle third of the 19th century—that “paralleled” the first strand. This was movement religion, powered by a coalition of co-believers, or at least co-belligerents, in a common cause. Its members *happened* to be from Detroit or *happened* to be Methodist or *happened* to be Irish, but their main bond lay in the pursuit of a shared goal. They were, in effect, special interest groups animated with religious fervor, spiritual commitment, collegial intimacy, and, often enough, a legitimating sense of the ultimate.

In a succession of fast-paced chapters, Woodward sketches, in roughly chronological order, the parade of movements that marked the age. One by one they advanced civil rights, anti-war protest, women’s rights, Liberation Theology; evangelical entrepreneurialism, new forms of sacred families, counterculture and Asian religions, therapeutic religion, Republicans and the Religious Right, and Democrats and politicized religion, among others.

The stories Ken tells reveal worlds within worlds. Ken’s evocation of the drama and pathos of the historic civil rights trek from Selma to Montgomery in 1965 is worth the price of the book. Like a television photojournalist, he takes us back to that day when the Reverend Martin Luther King strode with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel at the head of the march. “[Heschel] was, he said, ‘praying with my legs.’”

Ken does not argue that movement religion “won” and embedded religion “lost,” but by my reading of the evidence he details, it does look like embedded religion came up short. In the 1950s, for example, 98 percent of Americans said they believed in God. Baptists and Catholics alone counted for 40 per cent of the population. A half century later, 25 percent of Americans claimed no religious identification, and another 50 percent acknowledged “only moderate or intermittent concern for religion.” Movement

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religion certainly was not a-theistic, but the foundations of the powerful culture/religion symbiosis of the 1950s had fragmented and reconfigured in dramatically new and unpredictable ways.

Ken is not a polemicist, but *Getting Religion* leaves little doubt that one of his highest concerns about the way things have turned out is abortion on demand. At one time, he explains, Father Richard John Neuhaus had distinguished himself as a leading liberal and civil rights activist. But things changed. For Neuhaus, as for Woodward himself, *Roe vs. Wade* “represented the utter repudiation of liberal values, not to mention the fundamental right to life. For me—as for him,” Ken writes, “the protection of the unborn was the new civil rights movement. When Richard declared, as he often did, that ‘I did not leave the Democratic Party, it left me,’ he primarily meant the party’s rapid embrace of abortion on demand paid with federal funds.”

Woodward can say more in a single sentence than many journalists or historians can say in an entire article. For me, as Protestant as Ken is Catholic, the line that sticks best stings most. “If the Protestant Reformation was built on a trinity of ‘alones’—Christ alone, faith alone, the Bible alone—revivalism added a fourth and a fifth: the voice alone, addressed to the listener as an isolated ‘Me alone.’” To be sure, even the most flamboyant of the revivalists—Billy Sunday, Aimee Semple McPherson, Kathryn Kuhlman—knew perfectly well that Christ, faith, and the Bible, not the “voice alone” and “me alone,” formed the “solid rock” of evangelical Christianity. But Ken is basically right: much of the time, maybe most of the time, they didn’t act like it.

Then too Woodward is a witty guide to all these matters. Growing up Catholic, he remembers, “we imagined the public school girls were ‘looser’ than the academy girls, [while] my pals in public schools were convinced that Catholic academy girls were lustier because they were more ‘repressed.’ We all talked more than we knew.” So too as a graduate student in English at the University of Iowa, Woodward soon found that “graduate school is a place to study literature, not enjoy it.”

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Sometimes his wit targets individuals. The “handsome and expansive [Hans] Küng loved the microphone.” “Bill Bright was a short, somber, rather unctuous undertaker kind of man.” Paul Tillich “inspired his former student [James Pike] to live ‘on the boundary’” of Christian faith—including the boundary of Christian marriage. Both were notorious philanderers, and neither went to church unless he was the preacher.” Yet other individuals come out looking pretty good. For Martin Marty, evangelical religion was “the religion you get when you get religion.” The “mature [Billy] Graham had the gift of making the simplest sentence sound like Sacred Scripture.”

Woodward knows how to poke fun at himself, too. When “an aging Reinhold Niebuhr agreed to sit down with me and talk,” he admits, “I asked him every question I could think of. Afterward, Niebuhr advised through intermediaries that if I listened more and talked less, I’d get better interviews.” The lesson is clear. If brevity is the soul of wit, self-criticism is the soul of effective journalism.

Ken is not above exaggerating a point in order to make a point. Billy Graham’s “evangelism,” he argues with a straight face, “leaped over millennia of Christian history...to promote an individualized ‘biblical’ Christianity that was, in effect, born yesterday.” This claim is true as far as it goes, but there is more to it than he allows. To take one example, the letters that the faithful posted to Graham over the years rarely suggest that they were writing Graham to plumb his knowledge of the Bible, or the fine points of Christian theology. They wrote because they saw him as a pastor who might help them deal with their private pain and find a path to a second chance.

It is the rare book that brings so many virtues to the table, including the potential for stirring frank discussion about our culture and where we are headed. *Getting Religion* is a major achievement, a fitting capstone for a long and distinguished career.

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# THE FAITHANGLEFORUM

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