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RELIGION AND RELIGIOSITY IN THE UNITED STATES

Considering the lack of attention paid to religious topics in European popular journalism and scholarly magazines, the noticeable interest in religiosity and passionate discussions on the issue in the United States is an interesting phenomenon. An inquiring observer of American religious life will easily notice that new publications on the topic are issued with an extraordinary frequency. This indicates that religion is an important part of various aspects of the American past and present reality. It constituted one of the fundamentals upon which the United States was built, determined the mentality of the first settlers and their descendants and was an influential factor in the social and cultural changes in the country. Moreover, religion has always interwoven with politics, from the period of the first colonial authorities up to today. An interesting characteristic of American religion is also its symbiosis with popular culture. It seems that church leaders are experts in benefiting from modern technologies, both in performing religious services and in attracting new members. All these issues make American religiosity an intriguing phenomenon from a sociological point of view. Therefore, I will investigate it in this paper. Nevertheless, there are numerous difficulties which come along with all the fascinating observations, mainly caused by the fact that there is simply no one dominant American faith. The times when Protestantism did not have rivals and shaped American culture are gone. Nowadays, the American religious scene is so diverse that it cannot be easily organised or classified. Bearing this fact in mind, I will attempt to sketch a general and to some degree simplified image of American religiosity which will, however, provide an insight into this absorbing topic.

An outline of American religious history

Faith has been a driving force from the very beginning of the existence of the North American colonies. It was the search for religious freedom which, together with more prosaic reasons, brought the Pilgrim Fathers to the North American coast in 1620. The first settlers were mainly Puritans running away from England, where an intolerant religious climate was not favourable to dissenters. Thus, when they found asylum in the New World, they considered it as their promised land, comparing themselves to “the Chosen Nation”, which was clearly expressed by John Winthrop in his famous sermon titled “A Model of Christian Charity” (commonly known as “City upon a Hill”)¹. This Messianism has become an indispensable element of American religiosity and, in a broader sense, American ideology, and would manifest itself on many occasions throughout the centuries.

Although the first religion on the American land was Anglicanism, which appeared together with the founders of the Jamestown colony in 1607, it was Congregationalism, Presbyterianism and Baptism which played the dominant role in shaping American culture in colonial times². The abovementioned Pilgrim Fathers, after arriving in the New Land and founding the city of Boston (which later grew into the colony called Massachusetts), created the first congregational community. Their faith and philosophy was based on Calvinism and was thoroughly Puritan. It implied belief in predestination, which had an immense influence on people’s mentality and behaviour. The predestination dogma consists in the conviction that God has divided people into those who will be saved and those who will be condemned. Since worldly prosperity was considered as a sign of being classified in the first group, the Puritans worked hard in order to achieve success and to convince themselves and others about their positive destiny. The whole life of the Massachusetts colony was determined by fervent religiosity and solemn customs. It soon turned into a theocracy which eradicated any dissent. The most famous heretic in Massachusetts was Roger Williams, who, being a Baptist, opted for the separation of religion and government and for freedom of religion. He was expelled from the colony, leading him to create a new settlement called Rhode Island and start the first Baptist community there³.

Apart from Congregationalism and Baptism, early American Protestantism was also represented by Presbyterians and Quakers. Presbyterians established enduring communities in Long Island, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland and South Carolina, and were strengthened significantly by a wave of Scottish and Irish

¹ Vincent Ferraro’s Home Page, Resources for the Study of International Relations and Foreign Policy, www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/winthrop.htm.

² W. S. Hudson, *American Protestantism*, Chicago 1961, s. 18–20.

³ H. Katz, *Historia Stanów Zjednoczonych Ameryki*, Wrocław 1971, s. 45–50; T. J. Zieliński, *Roger Williams – twórca nowoczesnych stosunków państwo-kościół*, Warszawa 1997.

immigration⁴. The second religious denomination, initiated in England by George Fox, was concentrated in New Jersey and Philadelphia (for William Penn, one of the Quakers, owned these lands and guaranteed his fellow believers freedom of religion on his possessions). Quakers rejected priesthood and rituals, as they had faith in personal contemplation and achieving illumination in this way⁵.

The mosaic of the first American churches was much more colourful, consisting also of Mennonites, Moravians, Lutherans and the Dutch Reformed Church among others. Nevertheless, American colonial religiosity was shaped to one dominant pattern. It was mostly of British provenance and Calvinist doctrine. First of all, the predestination doctrine constituted a source of strong faith, persistence and acceptance of the hard living conditions in the New World. Furthermore, American reality forced ministers to learn to run their parishes independently from superior ecclesial institutions, relying on their personal qualities, such as charisma and ability, to attract both public attention and financial support⁶. Generally, American Protestantism from its beginnings implied individualism. Due to denying the necessity of church institutions and priestly order on the way to salvation and considering the Bible as the sole source of faith, Protestants attached importance to individual prayer and personal contact with God. This attitude had a significant impact on the moral consequences of faith, as each person had to distinguish the good from the bad in his conscience, producing a sense of moral responsibility of each individual⁷.

Several decades after the founding of the first colonies and churches, religious enthusiasm started to fade away. And it was not until the 1730s that the First Great Awakening took place and turned New England's life towards God again. Spiritual passion was heated up by zealous sermons given by priests like Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield⁸. Their efforts not only resulted in mass conversions among listeners, but they also initiated a new type of religiosity which stood in opposition to severe Calvinism. This is called Evangelicalism. It emphasizes the role of personal contact with God and the need for religious experience and conversion⁹.

On this new spiritual and revivalistic soil a new denomination took root. This was Methodism, created in England by John Wesley and transported to America. It postulated to replace cold rationalism with "religion of the heart" and a special "method" of piety, and to accept the idea of human free will instead of the predestination dogma¹⁰.

⁴ W. S. Hudson, *American Protestantism*, Chicago 1961, s. 21–22.

⁵ S. Markiewicz, *Protestantyzm*, Warszawa 1982, s. 96–101.

⁶ W. S. Hudson, *American Protestantism*, p. 22–26.

⁷ S. E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, New Haven–London 1973, p. 118–119.

⁸ C. Whittaker, *Great Revivals*, Basingstoke 1990, p. 23–26.

⁹ W. S. Hudson, *American Protestantism*, p. 30–32.

¹⁰ A. Tokarczyk, *Protestantyzm*, Warszawa 1980, p. 196–197; W. S. Hudson, *American Protestantism*, p. 32–33.

An important feature in American religiosity was evoked by the Constitution, which was the fruit of the American Revolution and Independence from the British monarchy. The First Amendment to the Constitution guaranteed that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof”¹¹. This short regulation deprived churches of any support from the government and forced them to assure self-sufficiency. From then on, American churches adopted techniques to win financial support and became income-generating enterprises. This business-like approach has remained a characteristic trait of American religious groups to this day.

Victory in the war of independence gave the Americans a strong belief in their special status as being chosen by God. They were convinced of their mission to convert all of mankind to Christianity, starting with the “barbarian” people of the frontiers being integrated into the Union. Evangelisation of the western and southern frontiers, as well as the efforts to suppress deistic and rational attitudes promoted in urban environments by enlightened intellectuals, became the core of the Second Great Awakening. This dates back to the period between the last decade of the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century. Typical traits of this new revival were the activity of circuit riders and farmer-preachers, organising camp meetings, and departure from the Calvinist ideology in favour of conviction about human free will¹².

Some sources claim that the Second Great Awakening resulted in a tenfold growth in numbers of the members of Protestant churches (between 1800 and 1850). Nevertheless, its most meaningful fruit was the triumph of the popular Evangelicalism and emergence of new Protestant denominations. Popular Evangelicalism was represented mainly by Methodism and Baptism – the two denominations which became dominant after the second revival. Their strength consisted in scant importance being attached to the doctrine and a focus on individual spiritual experience and conversion. In the middle of the nineteenth century new tendencies almost entirely replaced traditional Puritan ideology¹³. Moreover, the rise of religious enthusiasm led to the appearance of new sects and churches, such as Perfectionists (who believed in “Christian Perfection”), millennial sects (for example Millerism and Adventism, which focused on the anticipation of Christ’s second coming), Universalists (who claimed that Jesus died for all human beings, not solely for the chosen ones) and Spiritualists (who were close to various forms of occultism)¹⁴.

The first half of the nineteenth century also brought completely new types of spiritual communities. The most noticeable and enduring one was Mormonism, which was inaugurated by Joseph Smith after his revelation from the Angel cal-

¹¹ The United States Constitution Online. USConstitution.net, www.usconstitution.net/const.html.

¹² W. S. Hudson, *American Protestantism*, p. 74–78, 81–84, 90–95; National Humanities Center, www.nationalhumanitiescenter.org.

¹³ W. S. Hudson, *American Protestantism*, p. 90–101.

¹⁴ S. E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, New Haven–London 1973, p. 474–476.

led Moroni. Inspired by this vision, Smith wrote the Mormon Book and organised the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Mormons believed in Christ's thousand-year reign on Earth and the necessity of baptism, even of dead people. Mormons also kept faith in the necessity of polygamy in order to win salvation, which drew severe persecution on them and forced the group to migrate through the country. Finally, Mormons found their asylum in the State of Utah, where they set up Salt Lake City and which is still the residence of this controversial religious community¹⁵.

Another spiritual form which appeared on the American lands was Pentecostalism. It derived from the notion of "Christian Perfection" and the Holiness Movement. The inauguration of Pentecostalism dates back to the first decade of the twentieth century, when two famous cases of glossolalia ("speaking in tongues") occurred (Topeka, Kansas in 1901 and Azusa Street, Los Angeles in 1906). Witnesses to these events described an impression of being filled with the Holy Spirit and claimed they were given one of the spiritual gifts (so-called "charismatas", therefore Pentecostalism is ranked among Charismatic Movements). Pentecostals give weight to self-perfectioning and developing spiritual gifts. Expression of their beliefs created an attractive form of cult, with ecstatic singing, dancing and crying. Pentecostalism was born in the bosom of Protestantism, but it spread out and influenced other religions, with Roman Catholicism inter alia. The reason for its popularity is its simplicity and emotionality, which stand in opposition to intellectual Christianity and meet natural human needs¹⁶.

The turn of the century is described as a period of the hegemony of Protestantism in the United States. Everyday life was soaked up with the Protestant spirit – churches were brimming, pastors were considered the biggest authorities and most of the schools had a religious provenance and orientation. What is more, churches turned towards social issues and combined evangelisation with social service (as an example we can take the YMCA, which not only promoted Christianity in urban environments, but also provided assistance in matters of employment and accommodation). This time of social activity is known by the term Social Gospel, which is used in relation to an intellectual current that postulated bringing into effect Christian teaching through combating poverty, crime, social disparities, racism or illiteracy¹⁷.

Stepping into the new century changed the American religious scene to a degree. It became evidently plural. The high immigration rate of non-Protestant European people and establishment of Catholic, Jewish and Orthodox churches constituted competition to Protestant congregations. Moreover, around the middle of the twentieth century the historical Protestant denominations weakened, giving

¹⁵ A. Tokarczyk, *Protestantyzm*, p. 222–228.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 256–258, 262.

¹⁷ W. S. Hudson, *American Protestantism*, p. 109–113, 124–127; G. M. Mardsen, *Religion and American Culture*, Fort Worth 1990, p. 118–120.

way to hitherto marginal communities. The most significant increase in strength was observed in the Lutheran church, due to the considerable immigration rate from Europe. In the 1960s, new spiritual movements connected with New Age also started to appear. They were an appealing and intriguing phenomenon, but did not manage to challenge traditional Churches. Furthermore, numerous divisions occurred in the bosom of Protestantism, creating a mosaic which now consists of thousands of religious groups. Thus, although Protestantism still remains the dominant religion in the United States, it can no longer be called the “national religion” and identified with American culture as a whole.

In order to have a comprehensive view of American religious landscape, it is worth examining the tables and listings placed below. Table 1 presents the main religious traditions in the United States, Table 2 indicates leading Protestant denominations, and Table 3 enumerates the top twenty religions, whereas the map depicts the geographical distribution of the denominations.

Table 1. Main religious traditions

Protestant	51.9%
Catholic	24.8%
Jewish	1.7%
None	16.5%
Other	5.0%

Table 2. Main Protestant denominations

Baptist	32.4%
Methodist	12.2%
Lutheran	7.5%
Presbyterian	5.1%
Episcopal	3.2%
Other	24.1%
No denomination	15.3%

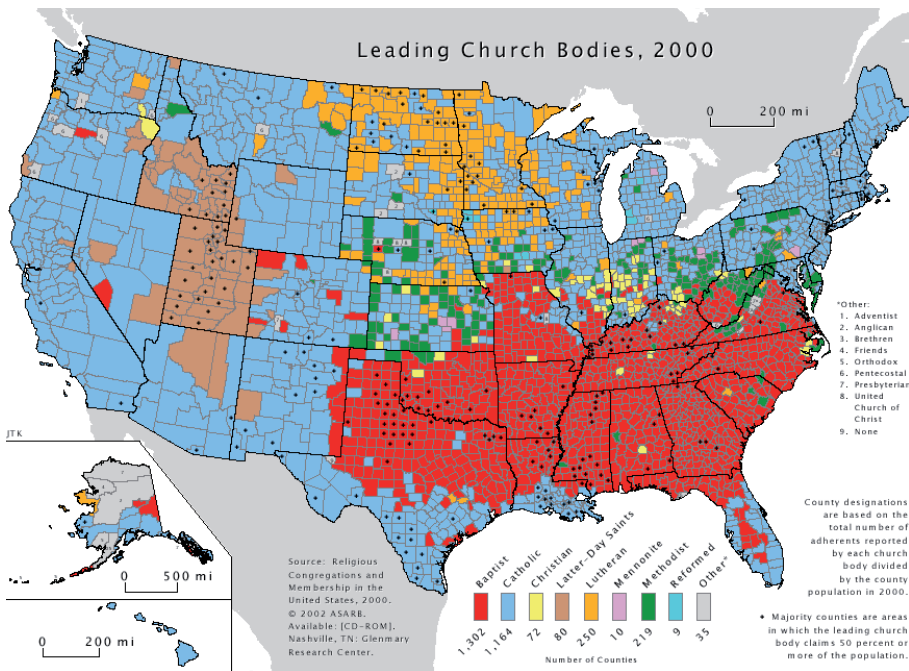
Source: General Social Survey 2006, http://www.thearda.com/quickstats/qs_101.asp.

Table 3. Top Twenty Religions in the United States (self-identification)

Religion	% of U.S. Pop., 2000	Religion	% of U.S. Pop., 2000
Christianity	76.5%	Spiritualist	0.05%
Nonreligious/Secular	13.2%	Native American Religion	0.05%
Judaism	1.3%	Baha'i	0.04%
Islam	0.5%	New Age	0.03%
Buddhism	0.5%	Sikhism	0.03%
Agnostic	0.5%	Scientology	0.02%
Atheist	0.4%	Humanism	0.02%
Hinduism	0.4%	Deity (Deism)	0.02%
Unitarian Universalism	0.3%	Taoism	0.02%
Wiccan/Pagan/Druid	0.1%	Eckankar	0.01%

Source: American Religious Identification Survey, 2001 http://www.adherents.com/rel_USA.htm#religions

Map 1. Leading Church Bodies, 2000



Source: Religious Congregations and Membership in the United States, 2000; Associations of Statisticians and American Religious Bodies (ASARB), www.strangemaps.wordpress.com/2008/01/27/237-regionalism-and-religiosity

American modern religion. Televangelists and megachurches

Apart from changes in the American religious scene, the twentieth century also brought a significant change of another kind. This was an enormous modernisation of religion in the United States, connected with huge technological progress in general. American church leaders very quickly learned to benefit from all the inventions and novelties. Early in the twentieth century, American preachers discovered the freshly invented radio as a low-cost tool to reach out to a mass audience, as well as to evangelize in countries where propagating Christianity was prohibited. In the United States the progenitor of radio priesthood was S. Parkes Cadman. He started his career in 1923, and until 1928 was broadcasting a weekly programme on NBC which gathered together 5 million listeners by their radio sets. In the 1920s and 1930s Charles Coughlin, Bob Jones, Ralph W. Sockman and Charles E. Fuller also all succeeded as radio presenters. In 1946 the number of listeners to their broadcasts was estimated at 10 million¹⁸.

Radio turned out to be only a prologue to the real career of charismatic evangelists, which was made possible for them by television. Clergymen quickly took advantage of the instant development of this medium after the Second World War. The first televangelist was a Roman-Catholic archbishop, Fulton J. Sheen, who successfully transferred his teaching from radio to television in 1951¹⁹. Another pioneer of televangelism was Rex Humbard; nevertheless in those days nobody could compete with Oral Roberts, who dominated national religious TV channels.

In the 1960s and 1970s television ultimately won its rivalry with radio in the competition for priority in transmitting Christian teaching. At that time, the most famous of the evangelists was Billy Graham (on both radio and TV) but future stars such as Joel Osteen or Robert Shuller were already starting their careers. Nonetheless, the greatest triumph of televangelists did not come until the eighties. The most modest assessments indicated thirteen million regular viewers, others reported up to sixty million. The majority of the audience came from the South and Mid-East and was of average or low income²⁰.

The most popular in the 1980s were Oral Roberts, Pat Robertson, Jim Bakker with his wife Tammy Faye Messner, Jimmy Swaggart and Jerry Falwell. Most of the TV religious services were rooted in the Charismatic-Pentecostal tradition, which consisted in faith in obtaining the gift of the Holy Spirit, manifested by speaking in tongues and receiving healing power. Especially the latter effect was eagerly used by the televangelists. They promised to cure audience's diseases, foreshadowing coming wealth and success to them.

¹⁸ *Radio Religion*, "Time Magazine", January 21, 1946, [online], www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,934406,00.html.

¹⁹ Fulton J. Sheen's Official Web Site, www.fultonsheen.com/Archbishop_Fulton_Sheen_biography.cfm.

²⁰ G. M. Marsden, *Religion and American Culture*, p. 270.

Nevertheless, not all of the TV preachers can be identified with Pentecostalism. The second powerful trend is Fundamentalism and a return to moral and spiritual purity. This message was communicated by Jimmy Swaggart and Jerry Falwell. Their cases also demonstrate accurately the close relationship between conservative Christianity (Protestantism particularly) and the political Right. It is especially important to mention Jerry Falwell, who in 1979 founded a religious organisation called Moral Majority, that united political conservatives. It reported some important deserts, such as an impact in the election of Ronald Reagan as President in 1980. Apart from Falwell, Pat Robertson was also deeply involved in politics. In the years 1987/88 he took part in Republican primaries for the presidential office, but after receiving 10% of votes in most of the states he dropped out of the race²¹.

Thus, as can be seen, televangelists are very influential figures in American public life. Their activities arouse emotions and, as a result, numerous disputes. The first and main source of controversy is their efforts to raise funds from the audience. It is not rare to watch a TV preacher persuading people to buy books, CDs, DVDs or trinkets with, allegedly, wonderful properties. Moreover, they can skilfully convince spectators to pay money for the maintenance and development of religious programmes gratuitously. And they do not hesitate to claim God's support or to threaten with Heaven's punishment to strengthen their message! Let us mention merely Oral Roberts case from 1987, when he announced that God would "call him home" unless he raised 8 million dollars by March that year. He ended raising \$9.1 million²².

A scandal of this kind is nothing uncommon among televangelists. An even more unequivocal example is that of Jim Bakker, who was sentenced to prison for embezzlement. On the other hand, Jimmy Swaggart became infamous for another discrediting story. He admitted, in public, having had sexual intercourse with a prostitute. He was forced to leave his office. Nevertheless, later he came back to the pulpit and TV scene begging forgiveness and shedding crocodile tears²³.

Controversies over TV preachers do not refer only to outrageous scandals, but also to the nature of the message they convey. Many critics accuse them of spreading heresy by claiming healing skills and other miracles. Furthermore, the cult of richness and success created in the TV shows is considered by some observers as contradictory to the Christian doctrine. The same charge is stated in regard to the personal cult of these TV "stars", whose luxurious way of life, including impressive residences and private jets, cannot be associated with the commandment to follow Jesus.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 270–271.

²² D. Van Biema, *Oral Roberts to the Rescue?*, [online], <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1677098,00.html>.

²³ BBC On This Day, 1988: *TV evangelist quits over sex scandal*, [online], www.news.bbc.co.uk/on-thisday/hi/dates/stories/february/21/newsid_2565000/2565197.stm.

The sole content of televangelists' sermons is another debatable topic. For instance, storms were unleashed by Pat Robertson's and Jerry Falwell's statements in which they described the terrorist attacks of September 11th as God's punishment for Americans' sexual immorality. Robertson also provoked discussions in 2005, when he called Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez an enemy of the United States and said he should be "taken out", which was interpreted by some circles as a suggestion to assassinate Chavez²⁴. Moreover, many TV evangelists' public statements are rebutted as false prophecies.

The pageantry and modernity of American religiosity can be experienced not only by watching religious broadcasts, but also by attending one of the American megachurches. These institutions were first founded after 1955, but their fast growth did not start until the 1980s. Nowadays, the number of megachurches is estimated at 1200. Their main distinctive feature is an immense audience – a place of worship can be called a megachurch if it gathers two thousand attendees in a week. However, this number is usually much higher. Moreover, these temples are characterised by their location in the suburbs of big metropolises, noticeable denominational, social, racial and ethnical diversity, and a combination of conservative doctrine with a modern form of expression. As a result, services conducted in megachurches resemble more a great theatre performance or a mass concert than a traditional mass²⁵.

To recapitulate the topic of televangelists and megachurches, it must be admitted that it is a perfect example of combining traditional Christian values with modern media and marketing techniques. Secondly, the popularity of such religious shows and celebrities uncovers the need to fill the spiritual emptiness which tends to appear in developed, consumptive countries. Religious shows could also be treated as a microcosmos of America – on the one side glistening with lights and giant screens, drowned in luxury and with a Hollywood smile, and on the other, deeply rooted in austere Puritan rules and shaking in God's presence. Nevertheless, one needs to realise that tools are matched to given material, therefore this kind of religiosity in the most modern and commercialised country in the world does not surprise.

Religiosity of the American people

To learn more about the typical features of American religiosity, apart from those already mentioned in the paper, it is worth investigating social surveys related to religious feelings and behaviours. These have been conducted by several American

²⁴ CNN.com, *Robertson: U.S. should assassinate Venezuela's Chavez*, [online], www.cnn.com/2005/US/08/23/robertson.chavez.1534/index.html.

²⁵ Hartford Institute for Religious Research, [online], www.hirr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/megachurches.html.

opinion research centres, such as the Gallup Organization and National Opinion Research Centre. First of all, it is appropriate to examine what Americans think of their religion and religious affiliation. A Gallup poll from May 2007 proved that religion is very important to 56% of American citizens, fairly important to 26% and not very important to 17%²⁶. Another survey, from 2006, proved that 36.2% of respondents claimed strong religious affiliation, 10.8% somewhat strong, and 36.5% not very strong. Against this background, Protestants manifest the strongest devotion to their religion – 48.5% declared a strong affiliation, compared to 39.7% of Jews and 30.4% of Catholics²⁷.

A further investigation of the nature of American religiosity needs to be structured into several areas – ideology, experience, behaviour and knowledge. An insight into the religious ideology of Americans delivers fundamental information about their faith, as it answers the question what they actually believe in. The first and most important matter is faith in God. A Gallup poll from May 2008 showed that 78% of Americans believed in God, 15% claimed they believed in a higher power and only 6% did not believe in either²⁸. Another survey (Baylor Religion Survey) asked about belief in Satan. In this case 55% gave a positive unwavering answer²⁹. A comparable difference in percentage between belief in God and Satan occurs in the case of angels and demons (61.3% have no doubt that angels exist and 43.6% say the same about demons³⁰), as well as Heaven and Hell (64.3% were certain of the existence of Heaven and 52.9% expressed that certainty about Hell³¹). As this shows, Americans tend to keep faith above all in positive and rewarding aspects of religion.

Among other noteworthy beliefs of Americans, it is interesting to indicate that most of them deny the idea of man's evolution from earlier animal species, and instead claim that God created man in his present form or, at least, guided the process of evolution (Protestants are especially orthodox in holding this conviction)³². A considerable proportion expresses credence in life after death (72.9%, and 81.8% of Protestants³³). To sum up these ideological parameters, it needs to be mentioned that the majority of the American population derive their beliefs from the Bible, which they consider to be very important in everyday life. What is more, a third of them think of it as the actual word of God that needs to be taken literally, word for

²⁶ The Gallup Organization website – video report “Religious America”, www.gallup.com/video/28054/Religious-America.aspx.

²⁷ General Social Survey 2006, www.thearda.com/quickstats/qs_103.asp.

²⁸ George Bishop, *What Americans Really Believe and Why Faith isn't as Universal as They Think*, “Free Inquiry” 1999, Vol. 19, No. 3, [online], http://www.secularhumanism.org/library/fi/bishop_19_3.html.

²⁹ Baylor Religion Survey, 2005, www.thearda.com/quickstats/qs_70.asp.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, www.thearda.com/quickstats/qs_71.asp, www.thearda.com/quickstats/qs_75.asp.

³¹ *Ibidem*, www.thearda.com/quickstats/qs_71.asp, http://www.thearda.com/quickstats/qs_72.asp.

³² General Social Survey, 2004, www.thearda.com/quickstats/qs_22.asp, http://www.thearda.com/quickstats/qs_23.asp.

³³ General Social Survey, 2006, www.thearda.com/quickStats/qs_106_p.asp.

word. Among Protestants, who rely doctrinally solely on the Bible, this proportion scores almost 50%³⁴.

Another important sphere of religious life is outer expression in the form of behaviours and rituals. The most common indicator of religious involvement is church attendance. The survey from 2006 proved that about 30% of people attended services once a week or more and about 47% declared attendance at least once a month (again, Protestants turned out to be the most conscientious church-goers)³⁵. Other indicators are the frequency of prayer, which amounts to 60% for those who pray at least once a day (70% of Protestants)³⁶, and the frequency of reading sacred texts, which comes to 37% for respondents who read the Bible, Koran, Torah or other once a month or more³⁷. An interesting factor which can be taken into consideration when studying the behavioural aspect of religiosity is the eagerness to evangelize others. Surveys show that during the month preceding the investigation 35% had at least once attempted to share their faith with friends (among Protestants the result was the highest – 48%) and 21% had attempted to evangelize strangers (29% of Protestants)³⁸. This indicator is undoubtedly worth mentioning, as evangelizing seems to be something typical of American Christians and rather uncommon in European countries, and the data confirms this phenomenon.

Less measurable but equally important indicators of religiosity are religious experience and feelings. The data concerning this aspect supports the thesis about the close personal contact of American people of faith with God. More than 42% feel guided by God every day or many times a day (another 14% feel it most days), 50% feel God's love directly at least once a day (another 14% – most days) and 37% feel God's love through others at least once a day (another 20% – most days). More than half of the respondents expressed a desire to be closer to God once a day or many times a day, and 55% claimed the impression of being spiritually touched by the beauty of creation with the same frequency. The most appealing among the spiritual feelings is the experience of being "born again". Generally 37% of Americans admitted to experiencing a turning point in their life when they committed themselves to Christ, but among Protestants this percentage reaches as much as 57%. Therefore, it can be stated without hesitation that this unique feature is typical of American Protestants.

The last parameter of the religiosity of Americans is their religious knowledge. A good source of information on this issue is the book of Stephen Prothero entitled "Religious Literacy: What every American needs to know – and doesn't"³⁹.

³⁴ Exploring Religious America, 2002, www.thearda.com/quickstats/qs_27.asp; General Social Survey, 2006; www.thearda.com/quickstats/qs_107.asp.

³⁵ General Social Survey, 2006, www.thearda.com/quickstats/qs_105.asp.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, www.thearda.com/quickstats/qs_104.asp.

³⁷ Baylor Religious Survey, 2005, www.thearda.com/quickstats/qs_56.asp.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, www.thearda.com/quickstats/qs_66.asp; www.thearda.com/quickstats/qs_67.asp.

³⁹ S. Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What every American needs to know – and doesn't*, San Francisco 2007.

This uncovers huge ignorance in relation to religious facts in the American nation. They are unable to present knowledge not only about world religions, but also about the principles of their own creed. To mention just the most glaring evidence of religious illiteracy, it can be indicated that 60% of American adults cannot name five out of the Ten Commandments, only 50% can name one of the four Gospels, less than 50% know that the first book of the Bible is the Book of Genesis, and 50% of high school seniors are convinced that Sodom and Gomorrah were a biblical married couple. Such ignorance can be attributed to the tendency to focus on individual experience and contact with God rather than on the doctrine, which has been a common approach in American Christianity since the Second Great Awakening. These results are truly appalling, especially in light of the fact that Americans are commonly considered to be such a Godly nation.

The image drawn above reveals the nature of the American religiosity, both in its outer, behavioural aspect and its deeper, emotional and psychological basis. However, this picture must be completed with examination of the interrelations between religion and other spheres of the American culture. A symbiosis which cannot be omitted in this context is the one between religion and politics, since the mutual influence of both domains is immense. This fact raises controversy especially in the secularised Old Continent, where politics and religion are considered as two separate spheres, leading Europeans to expect the same from a country where the separation between church and state is guaranteed by the Constitution. Nevertheless, complicated relations between church and state are deeply rooted in the ideology on which the United States was founded.

Religion and politics in the USA

The first expression of the symbiosis between religion and the public sphere was the Mayflower Compact – a document elaborated in 1620 by the Pilgrim Fathers before they landed on the new continent. It became the foundation of the political organisation of the Massachusetts colony. The Mayflower Compact constituted a covenant with God and included numerous invocations to Him. Religious zeal soon led to theocracy and intolerance towards dissenters from the Puritan faith. The apogee of Massachusetts religious orthodoxy occurred in 1692, when the trials of Salem took place. They ended with the execution of 13 women and 7 men accused of witchcraft. This event evoked common indignation among the people of New England and resulted in the ousting of the Puritans from government.

In the course of time, the overwhelming influence of religion on political life was mitigated and the country headed towards gradual separation of church and state, culminating with constitutional regulations. The Constitution itself did not refer to matters of religion; nonetheless, these issues were raised in the Bill of Rights (added in 1791). The First Amendment to the Constitution guaranteed that none of

the churches could be supported or discriminated against by the government. This record, though short (or because of that), has been a source of multiple controversies and disputes as it has been interpreted in different ways. Thomas Jefferson, who was a man of deep faith and was convinced that religion is a personal matter in which the government should not get involved, strived to enforce a strict separation of church and state. In 1802, he wrote a letter to the Danbury Baptist Association in which he included the famous phrase about “the wall of separation between church and state”⁴⁰. An alternative attitude was represented by James Madison. As the historian Sydney Mead has indicated, Madison spoke not about the “wall” but about the “line” between these two domains⁴¹.

Although there were significant differences in approach to the relationship between religion and politics, most of the Founding Fathers tended to root the country’s ideology in Christian morality. John Adams claimed that “a Republic can only be supported by pure religion or austere morals”, and George Washington agreed with him, saying that “reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principles”. The first president expressed the same confidence in his Farewell Address (1796): “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and Morality are indispensable supports”. This conviction was also reflected in the Declaration of Independence, where four references to God can be found⁴². The close relationship between Christian principles and public life in the young American republic could not pass unnoticed, especially by a European visitor. Alexis de Tocqueville, a French political thinker, pointed out that on arriving in the United States his attention was struck by the importance of religion to Americans, and he considered religion to be “the first of their political institutions”⁴³.

Treating religion as a political institution or political instrument has been the source of numerous debates. One of the most heated controversies concerns the Pledge of Allegiance – namely, the words “under God” which were added to the Pledge in 1954. Though most Americans do not see anything violating in the inclusion of this phrase and deem it correspondent to the intentions of the Founding Fathers, there is always a minority group which signals its unconstitutionality and brings this issue to the court⁴⁴.

Even though reference to God is omnipresent in the American public sphere, it does not indicate any particular God, neither the Christian one nor that of

⁴⁰ The US Constitution Online, Jefferson’s Wall of Separation Letter, [online], www.usconstitution.net/jeffwall.html.

⁴¹ S. Huntington, *Who we are: The Challenges to America’s National Identity*, New York 2005.

⁴² R. N. Bellah, *Civil Religion in America*, [online], www.robertbellah.com/articles_5.htm.

⁴³ S. Huntington, *Who we are*.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*; Further on church-state relations in: S. Filipowicz, *Pochwała rozumu i cnoty: republikańskie credo Ameryki*, Kraków 1997; R. M. Małajny, “Mur separacji” – państwo a kościół w Stanach Zjednoczonych Ameryki, Katowice 1992; M. Potz, *Granice wolności religijnej: kwestie wolności sumienia i wyznania oraz stosunku państwa do religii w Stanach Zjednoczonych Ameryki*, Wrocław 2008.

other religions. The American God is undefined and is part of the so-called “civil religion”. This term was formulated by Rousseau, but it was Robert Bellah who applied it successfully to the American social reality. His famous essay “Civil Religion in America”, published in 1967, accurately described the American national ideology and its connection to religion. Bellah assumed the existence of a “common religion” in the United States which integrates all citizens in a specific form of sanctified patriotism, regardless of their particular denomination. American civil religion is also regarded as another version of the “American Creed” or “American Way of Life”. It is a set of beliefs, values and rituals referring to the American country and cultivated in a purely religious manner. For example, national holidays are considered both patriotic and religious, and symbols such as the flag, the Constitution or the Pledge of Allegiance are given a sacred dimension. Nevertheless, the core of civil religion is made up of the presumptions of being a nation chosen by God and of the divine right to the president’s authority⁴⁵. Especially the first conviction is very firm and deeply ingrained. The expression of this idea appeared as early as when the Pilgrim Fathers arrived in the New World in the form of John Winthrop’s sermon; however, its best reflection came with the conception of the Manifest Destiny. This was formulated in 1845 by the journalist John L. O’Sullivan in an article entitled “Annexation”, which sanctified the territorial growth of the United States with a divine mission to spread freedom, democracy and civilisation across the continent. This theory was later enriched with new elements and adapted to new circumstances as the New Manifest Destiny. It served as a justification of further expansion – economic, territorial, naval and cultural⁴⁶. Even though the Manifest Destiny concept is not used these days in public life directly, the conviction hidden beneath it can still be found in American foreign policy and the rhetoric of politicians.

Civil religion, in general, is manifested in politicians’ speeches. This long tradition of using religious rhetoric in public discourse was inaugurated by George Washington, who is acknowledged to have added the phrase “So help me God” to the presidential oath. And he was also the first American President who said, in his 1789 inaugural address, the following words: “It would be peculiarly improper to omit in this first official Act, my fervent supplications to that Almighty Being who rules over the Universe, who presides in the Councils of Nations, and whose providential aids can supply every human defect, that his benediction may consecrate to the liberties and happiness of the People of the United States, a Government instituted by themselves for these essential purposes: and may enable every instrument employed in its administration to execute with success, the functions allotted to his

⁴⁵ R. N. Bellah, *Civil Religion in America*.

⁴⁶ The New Manifest Destiny consisted of the theories of Brooks Adams, Frederick Jackson Turner (*Frontier Theory*), Alfred T. Mahan (*navalism*) and Josiah Strong; R. Kłosowicz, *Documents and readings in American history: from the colonies to the end of the nineteenth century*, Kraków 2005.

charge⁴⁷. From that time, every president and every candidate to the presidential office is expected to believe in God and to invoke to God's grace⁴⁸. This assumption is confirmed by a survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life which indicated that in 2008 72% of Americans were convinced it was important that the president have strong religious beliefs⁴⁹. It is often said that Americans will sooner elect a President who does not belong to the Christian mainstream than an atheist.

Just how important religion and religious rhetoric is can easily be seen during the presidential campaign. While it is astonishing for European observers to see nominees giving speeches from church pulpits or participating in a TV debate that takes place in one of the country's biggest megachurches and is moderated by a prominent pastor, it is nothing rare for Americans⁵⁰. Every candidate intends to communicate his religious devotion, and special religion advisers responsible for assuring sufficient coverage on religiosity are employed to achieve this goal. The survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life on media coverage of religion in the primary phase of the last campaign showed the comparison between coverage on religion and other topics, such as race, gender, domestic issues or foreign policy. It turned out that, when so-called "horse-race topics" were eliminated (which refers to those about political strategy), religion played a fairly important role in media stories. From January 2007 to April 2008 it constituted almost 10% of all the campaign news, rivalling race and gender stories combined (11.1%)⁵¹. The significance of this result becomes clear when we consider the fact that race and gender had been exceptionally highlighted in the 2008 campaign due to Hillary Clinton's and Barack Obama's candidacies.

The master of "God talk" was undoubtedly the previous president – George W. Bush. As a "new-born" Christian, he enjoyed repeating the story of his conversion, which took place in 1985 thanks to a meeting with Billy Graham, which, as he claims, helped him to overcome alcoholism and start a new life. Further, he mentioned several times that his presidency was a mission sent to him by God, and cited Jesus when asked about his greatest political authority⁵². He even claimed that the war with Iraq was inspired by God, as He had told him to end Saddam Hussein's tyranny. Many similar examples of George W. Bush's religious rhetoric can be given. A good source of information about the previous president's religiosity is the book *La religion de la Maison-Blanche* [The religion of the White House] by the

⁴⁷ National Archives and Records Administration, Transcription of Washington's Inaugural Address, [online], www.archives.gov/exhibits/american_originals/inaugtxt.html.

⁴⁸ R. N. Bellah, *Civil Religion in America*.

⁴⁹ The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life Surveys, *More Americans Question Religion's Role in Politics*; The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, www.pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=337.

⁵⁰ The meeting in question took place between Barack Obama and John McCain on 16th August 2008 in the Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California, and was moderated by Reverend Rick Warren.

⁵¹ The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, *Study Finds Media Coverage of Religion in Primary Campaign Rivalled That of Race and Gender Combined*, www.pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=312.

⁵² S. Buttry, *Des Moines Register: Candidates Focus on Christian Beliefs*, [online], www.archives.cnn.com/1999/ALLPOLITICS/stories/12/15/religion.register.

French author Sebastien Fath. It is interesting not only because of the vast number of speeches and examples of behaviour confirming Bush's deep faith, but mainly with regard to the evidence of Bush's inconsistency in this field and hidden motives (such as the coincidence that the turning point in the life of an ex-alcoholic occurred more or less at the same time that his father, at the time in the presidential office, commissioned him to reach out to religious groups). However, putting aside all the concrete cases, it is sufficient to concede on this basis that religion is a powerful instrument that is eagerly used in all sorts of political games⁵³.

The importance of the religious factor was also acknowledged by Bush's rival in the 2004 campaign, John Kerry. Three years after his defeat he said he "could have done a better job explaining his faith"⁵⁴. This negligence was a lesson to the next Democratic candidate and present president, Barack Obama. In January 2008, during the CNN debate in Myrtle Beach, he expressed his intention to change the Democrats' policy towards religiously observant groups: "There have been times where our Democratic Party did not reach out as aggressively as we could to evangelicals, for example, because the assumption was, well, they don't agree with us on choice, or they don't agree with us on gay rights, and so we just shouldn't show up." And later he added: "(...) I think we can go after those folks and get them"⁵⁵. To achieve this ambitious goal Obama does not shun laying stress on his Christian affiliation, for example by releasing brochures entitled "Committed Christian", which showed Obama's picture at the pulpit in front of a big cross.

Obama has also managed to inscribe himself on a list of the most important speeches on religion and politics in 40 years (since John F. Kennedy's Houston speech declaring his independence from the Vatican). In his "Call to Renewal" speech, given on 28th June 2006, he expressed his views on using religious rhetoric in politics. He said "the discomfort of some progressives without any hint of religion has often prevented us from effectively addressing issues in moral terms. Some of the problem here is rhetorical – if we scrub language of all religious content, we forfeit the imagery and terminology through which millions of Americans understand both their personal morality and social justice"⁵⁶. In an address at the United Church of Christ General Synod in 2007 he developed this topic by referring to the age-long presence of religion in American political history and mentioning famous politicians like Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King and John F. Kennedy, who used to seek inspiration in God in their speeches.

⁵³ S. Fath, *Religia w Białym Domu*, Warszawa 2007.

⁵⁴ The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life Transcripts, *Faith and the Public Dialogue: A Conversation with Sen. John Kerry*, November 1, 2007; The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, www.pewforum.org/events/?EventID=159.

⁵⁵ Marc Memmott, Jill Lawrence, comment on *Obama focus in South Carolina: 'Committed Christian'*, The USA Today blog, comment posted January 22, 2008, www.blogs.usatoday.com/onpolitics/2008/01/obama-focus-in.html.

⁵⁶ The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, *Obama Religious Biography*, The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, www.pewforum.org/religion08/profile.php?CandidateID=4.

Nevertheless, using religion in his campaign did not bring Barack Obama solely benefits. It was the same man that opened his eyes to God more than 20 years ago who was the reason for a dangerous controversy over Obama's past. Rev. Jeremiah Wright Jr. is the pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ on Chicago's South Side, where Obama belonged for over 20 years, where he and Michelle Obama got married and where their children were baptized. But in March 2008 Rev. Wright became famous for other reasons. Some of his controversial sermons were posted online, which caused Obama a lot of trouble. Initially, the presidential candidate did not want to disown his "faith guide", but he had no alternative when Wright continued to consolidate racial divisions in American society and spread outrageous theories, such as the US government's responsibility for the 9/11 attacks. Obama ultimately condemned Wright's views and left his church. This example shows perfectly how religion turned out to be a double-edged sword.

Obama's focus on creating an image of a man of faith was described as part of the process of "closing the God gap", as the Democrats have traditionally tended to restrain from religious involvement. The party considered to be more "religion-friendly" has been the Republicans, since their conservative views on moral issues such as abortion and homosexual marriages go hand in hand with Christian teaching. This has invariably delivered them white evangelical Protestants' votes, which constitute about one-quarter of the electorate. Nevertheless, along with the increase of the Democratic candidate's religious involvement, the Republican demonstrated less interest in the topic of faith. John McCain, unlike the previous Republican leader, was rather reticent to talk about religion during the campaign. His biographer, Paul Alexander, explains that McCain's family background together with his military experience made him uneasy to express religious feelings⁵⁷.

Even though "John McCain has never been a religious exhibitionist", as Doug Koopman, a professor at Calvin College says, the presidential candidate was aware he could not avoid the topic completely. Usually, when asked about his faith, he referred to Judeo-Christian values, which he treated as his moral basis, and told a story about an experience in Vietnam which reinforced his faith (when imprisoned and tortured he was relieved in his pain by a Vietnamese guard who was a discreet Christian believer). Apart from this story McCain used religious rhetoric rather seldom. On McCain's official website a video entitled "Faith" could be seen, in which he explained his reticence on religion: "I don't advertise it [faith], and maybe I should, but the fact is the reason, the only reason why I'm here today is because I believe that a higher being has a mission for me in my life – a reason for me to be here"⁵⁸.

⁵⁷ The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, Religion News Service, *McCain's faith journey largely unspoken*, August 20, 2008; The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, <http://pewforum.org/news/display.php?NewsID=16302>.

⁵⁸ John McCain Official website www.johnmccain.com.

The last Republican presidential candidate, in contrast to his predecessor, was not white evangelicals' favourite man, and this was not only due to his discomfort in talking about God and religion. McCain's rocky relationship with conservative Christian activists has been far more harmful. It is significant that in 2000, when George W. Bush and John McCain both fought for the GOP nomination, the attitude towards religious groups played a decisive role. Bush's artistry in religious talk brought him powerful supporters such as the Revs. Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell. At the same time, McCain not only avoided using religious rhetoric, but even risked criticising both of these church leaders. In a speech given in Virginia Beach (the headquarters of Robertson's broadcast empire) he described them as "agents of intolerance" and condemned their influence on politics⁵⁹. After that, McCain lost the primaries in Virginia and withdrew his national candidacy. It seems that this defeat taught him a lesson about the importance of "religious correctness" in the 2008 campaign.

In the recent campaign McCain tried to improve his relations with religious conservatives and gain their support. In 2006 he delivered a commencement address at Falwell's Liberty University, which was an act of reconciliation between McCain and Rev. Falwell after the 2000 incident⁶⁰. During the 2008 primaries McCain tried to use the support of two evangelical leaders – John Hagee from Texas and Rod Parsley from Ohio – but he decided to reject their endorsement after they were discredited by the media because of controversial sermons from the past (the first said that the Holocaust was part of God's plan for the Jews, and the second described the Muslim Prophet Muhammad as "the mouthpiece of a conspiracy of spiritual evil")⁶¹. Later on, in July, McCain went to see religious leaders in Ohio and made a much publicized pilgrimage to meet Billy Graham⁶².

The information and data presented above prove that religion is an inseparable part of the race to the White House and, therefore, of American public life. It can be discussed if talking about one's faith is, as John Kerry described it, the way to introduce oneself to the public (to inform about one's values and philosophy of life)⁶³ or if it is just a cleverly used instrument to reach out to religious people. From what I have investigated, it seems that using religion in campaigns is rather a hard-headed endeavour, precisely planned by groups of experts and carefully adapted to the time, place and target group.

⁵⁹ J. Connelly, E. Offley, *McCain and Bush clash over Revs. Robertson, Falwell*, "Seattle Post-Intelligencer Reporters", February 29, 2000 [online], www.seattlepi.nwsource.com/national/gops29.shtml.

⁶⁰ D. Balz, *McCain Reconnects with Liberty University*, "The Washington Post", May 14, 2006, [online], www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/05/13/AR2006051300647.html.

⁶¹ The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, *McCain Religious Biography*, [online]; The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, www.pewforum.org/religion08/profile.php?CandidateID=3.

⁶² S. Wayne, *McCain steps up efforts to woo religious voters*, "Dallas Morning News", July 6, 2008, [online], The Dallas Morning News, www.dallasnews.com.

⁶³ The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life Transcripts, *Faith and the Public Dialogue: A Conversation with Sen. John Kerry*, November 1, 2007, [online], The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, www.pewforum.org/events/?EventID=159.

The image of American religiosity sketched in this paper was intended to be multi-dimensional, and I hope it meets this presupposition. It depicts the long history of the evolution of religions in the United States, indicating its changes and the characteristic spiritual traits of Americans shaped by various experiences. It presents an analysis of social surveys which provides information on different aspects of religiosity – ideology, feelings, behaviours and knowledge. Although some of the data may be surprising, many of the features emerging from the sociological data are understandable if one considers the historical background of American religiosity. Therefore, these two parts (historical and analytical) complement one another to a large extent. Further sections unveil other aspects of the American religiosity – its innate ties to public life and politics, and its modernness and spectacular nature. Recognizing these diverse perspectives is indispensable in order to make the study more comprehensive as well as more attractive.