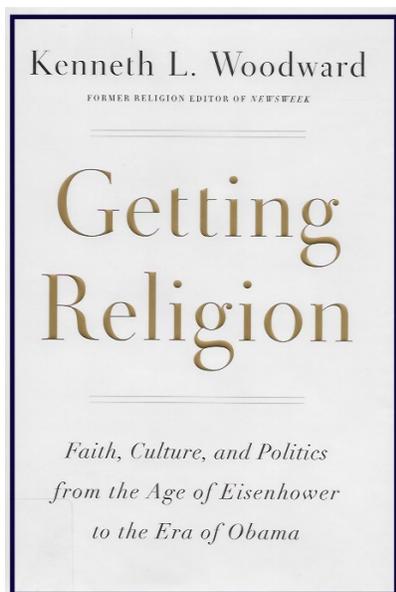


Keith Watkins

## Requiem for a Lost America

Responding to Kenneth L. Woodward's *Getting Religion: Faith, Culture, and Politics from the Age of Eisenhower to the Era of Obama* (New York: Convergent, 2016)



Few people have had the opportunity that has come to Kenneth L. Woodward who devoted most of his career to writing about American religion. His base was one of the most favored journalistic posts of the half century during which he worked: religion editor for *Newsweek*. This position provided financial support and entrée so that he could go places, watch from the inside, and talk extensively with people who were central to what was going on. He wrote extensively and frequently in disciplined and lively, readable language. In later years, institutional archives have made this backlog of material available for him to draw upon when needed. Among the strengths of Woodward's reporting is that he writes as a Christian believer and as a self-aware old man, conditions he affirms in the final paragraph of the book.

One of the blessings of old age is the clarity with which diminishing energy of mind and body allows us to see what has been our human lot all along – namely, contingency, transience, and finitude. We cannot control what may happen to us. Nothing lasts forever. We must die. These hold true for believer and nonbeliever alike. They are the existential facts of life that all religions in different ways address. In reply, Christians like myself are called to abide in Faith, Hope, and Love. What matters is that God's grace is everywhere (413).

Everyone interested in the life of our nation during this half century can benefit from this book of "lived history" that Woodward has written. It is clear, articulate, vivid, and filled with insight concerning the central topic, which is the interaction of religion, culture, and politics during this period.

As soon as I started reading the book, I liked it. Perhaps the most important reason is that we are close to the same age (I was born in 1931, Woodward in 1935). We grew up in an era when the United States was characterized by what he calls embedded religion, marked by a fusion of

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faith, culture, and politics. He grew up in a Catholic culture in Cleveland, Ohio, whereas I grew up in a low-church Protestant culture in Portland, Oregon. Although the details of church life and education differed dramatically, there was an undergirding system of values, especially as focused on family structure, transmitted by church and school, that was much the same.

The first half of the book held my attention as Woodward describes the traditional patterns and then reports on the rapid changes that occurred, especially during the fifties and sixties. He describes the entrepreneurial religion of people like Billy Graham, basing his accounts on frequent interaction with leaders of these religious responses to changes in American life. He gives careful attention to major changes in his own church, pushed in part by the Vatican Council, and describes the dismantling of the embeddedness that had been so important in his growing up years. Changes in Catholic liturgy and debates over birth control are carefully chronicled, and Woodward's ambivalence about what was happening is clear. He quotes from his feature essay in a 1971 issue of *Newsweek* to describe why he and other Catholics of the time could remain steady in their faith.

When the Catholic faith runs deep, it establishes a certain sensuous rhythm in the soul, a sacramental sensibility that suffuses ordinary things—bread, water, wine, the marriage bed—and transforms them into vehicles of grace. In these spiritual depths, doctrine and church laws fade in importance" (92).

At this point in his book, Woodward turns in a new direction. He describes the civil rights movement, as led by Martin Luther King, Jr., in which religious faith and zeal led to public engagement and the vigorous efforts to realize religious aspirations in public life by transforming a racist society. He emphasizes the restructuring of American religion, as described by writers like Richard John Neuhaus and Robert Wuthnow. Woodward quotes from James Davison Hunter's book *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* in order to state the central feature of the change that was occurring. "The great polarity in American religion, he argued, was between 'orthodox' believers who appealed to an external, definable, and transcendent authority and 'progressives' who tended to resymbolize the contents of historic faith according to the presuppositions of contemporary life" (179).

A major development in this transformation was liberation theology, both in Latin America and the United States. Here Woodward necessarily brings his own Catholic Church back to the center of attention. He traveled to locations throughout Mexico and Central America to experience the movement personally and to talk with many of its leaders. He traces the conflict within the Catholic Church concerning this secularization of the gospel and describes the increasing secularization of liberation theology and action in the United States.

It should be no surprise that Woodward's chapter, "Women's Liberation and the Feminization of Religion," comes next. In telling this story, he refers his own family's experience, and it is appropriate that do the same. My wife I reared five children, all of whom continue to be active members of protestant congregations. Two of our daughters and a granddaughter studied in liberal protestant seminaries, were ordained, and are devoting their working years to parish ministry and church leadership. I spent most of my working years on the faculty of a seminary during

which time the number of women on the faculty increased slightly and the percentage of women in the student body increased dramatically. I advocated the overcoming of gender bias in language, including the language of the liturgy, even writing a book on this subject. As Woodward documents for seminaries in general, my seminary also participated in the rise of the counseling movement. Many congregations in my denomination and others similar to mine illustrate the increased prominence of women in congregational and other levels of ecclesial life, and in these churches, too, issues increasingly are defined according to women's experiences in the world.

As I read Woodward's chapter, however, I found myself increasingly distressed by his exposition. Is it because he tells the truth that I have refused to acknowledge all these years? Is it because he tries to expound too many topics, with too little understanding? Is it because he lets his own biases shape his understanding and color his rhetoric? Perhaps, my discomfort is prompted by some of the headings he uses in this chapter: *The Protestant Domestication of Religion*; *The Minister as Mom*; *The Bible as Androcentric Text*; *Matriarchal Muscle*. If this chapter stood alone, I could easily conclude that my defensiveness is the primary cause for this negative response to the chapter.

But the chapter does not stand alone. Other portions of the book exude a similar sense of distress over what was taking place. Especially surprising is the way Woodward refers to the social policies of the United Methodist Church. Through most of my adult years, it has often been asserted that the Methodist Church's principles for a just society have guided major improvements in public policy and social well-being. In his references to George W. Bush, however, Woodward notes that the president "joined the church of his wife's choice and became a Methodist, even though the United Methodist Church's official positions on public policy were the obverse of his own conservative politics" (359). A few pages later, Woodward describes Hillary Clinton's life-long formation in the Methodist Church and the deep influence it made upon her. In an interview during her husband's presidency, she told Woodward that "upstairs in the family area of the White House she kept the latest edition of the Methodist Book of Resolutions, which records the denomination's consistently liberal stands on a wide range of moral, social, and political issues. Piety plus politics was her message" (365).

Two pages later, Woodward discredits this religious basis for Hillary Clinton's aggressive, self-assured role in public life. He had interviewed her former youth minister in Park Ridge, Illinois, and included an excerpt from that interview in his *Newsweek* article about Clinton: "We Methodists know what's good for you." This statement, Woodward continues (367), "captured not only the righteous ethos of American Methodism but also the politics of moral righteousness that had characterized the Democratic Party since its transformation under another prominent Methodist politician." His reference is unclear, especially since his description a few pages earlier of George W. Bush. Anyone who understands the tradition of Protestantism's historic role in American life has to acknowledge serious faults, including the support of slavery and segregation. Yet to ignore, as Woodward does, the integrity and impact of a tradition that had characterized the Methodist tradition for more than half a century trivializes the seriousness of the religious context that had shaped Hillary Clinton's purposes and public life.

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Insight into Woodward's understanding of American politics in our time can be gained from a statement in his discussion of the Moral Majority that included Richard Viguerie, Paul Weyrich, and Jerry Fallwell.

Actually, I'd always felt a certain sympathy for Fundamentalist Protestants. Like them, we Catholics have always had problems with any form of humanism that sought to sequester religious faith from public thought and practice. The core Fundamentalist doctrine – that the Bible is literally true and without error – functioned, I've always thought, much like the infallibility of the pope has: as an anchor of authority that in practice adds nothing to the content of Christian faith. The difference is that papal authority has been formally invoked only once, and then after wide consultation with his fellow bishops, while with each sermon Fundamentalist preachers invoke a Bible presumed to be inerrant (344).

Abortion is a topic that necessarily comes up in a book dealing with faith, culture, and politics in our time. It cuts across religious, denominational, political, and cultural lines, drawing people highly different from one another into coalitions. It is hard to believe that there are people who think that terminating life in the womb is a trivial matter like having a wart removed from one's nose. Almost as hard to believe is that there are people who are convinced that terminations of pregnancy are always wrong and necessarily prohibited, no matter what the circumstances. In current debates, however, the moral and religious issues related to the termination of pregnancy are only part of the reason for the prominence of the topic. It functions as the dividing line between two systems of governance. One was shaped and continues to be upheld by a societal system that was created and continues to be controlled by white men and in which women are kept in subordinate positions. The other is breaking open this traditional system and developing ways for women to become equals in the religious, cultural, and political system. As a result, many people who believe that abortion should be exceedingly rare find themselves necessarily supporting pro-choice principles.

Woodward's committed life in the Catholic Church means that he opposes abortion. By remembering his personal commitments on this subject, readers of this book will be better able to work their way through sections in the later chapters, especially those in which he discusses the difficulties that Catholic politicians have faced as they have dealt with this subject.

Two-thirds of the way through this book, I almost closed it down unfinished, but instead jumped to the Epilogue. In fourteen pages, Woodward reports his retirement in 2002 and briefly characterizes radical changes in journalism and journalistic publishing in the opening years of the new century. He reports on similar changes in other longstanding institutions of American life, including family and neighborhood structures, schools and schooling at every level, and almost unimaginable changes in the way that people in their twenties move from childhood and youth into adulthood. He cites recent studies focused on these changes, including a series of books in which Christian Smith is one of the authors and another by Richard Arum. I am not familiar with these books and intend to begin reading in this body of social commentary later in

the year. I am especially interested in Woodward's description of a "new de facto religion: moralistic, therapeutic deism" (411). His assessment: "It's religion with a shrug."

First, a God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth. Second, God wants people to be good, nice and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and other world religions. Third, the central goal in life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself. Fourth, God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem. Fifth, good people go to heaven when they die (quoted from *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*, by Christian Smith, with Patricia Snell, p. 154).

After briefly summarizing the new religious landscape, Woodward writes a further conclusion, which is one of the few sentences in the entire book important enough to him that he prints it in italics: *But the more encompassing fact is that most young Americans between the ages of eighteen and thirty do not readily identify with any institutions – political, civic, academic, or religious.* He then states what I too know from my own family life: "You don't have to be a social scientist to recognize the difference. It's enough to be a grandparent" (403).

Woodward's somber recitation of what has been happening brings to mind a short list of authors whom I have read over the years who alerted me to these changes as they were emerging. Thomas Luckmann's 1967 book *The Invisible Religion* described how the transition from small, unformed child to full human being had always taken place in institutions such as church and school, but increasingly was happening individually. In a lecture that I heard about this same time, British social critic Brian Wicker described the way that universities had ceased being places where adolescents became adults by learning the wisdom and values of western society. Instead they were becoming vocational training schools. In a lecture I heard in a conference at Notre Dame and in her 1970 book *Culture and Commitment: A Study of the Generation Gap*, Margaret Mead helped me understand how around the world the educational roles were being reversed, as the young began to teach their elders rather than receiving from parents and grandparents the basic patterns and wisdom of life. Another author, whose name I cannot recall, gave a detailed case study of the growing cleavage between parents and their adolescent children in an American suburb that fills in the detail of Woodward's characterization.

Most observers of American life in the early years of the new century are willing to acknowledge that once stable institutions and social patterns have changed significantly. Much seems to be in disarray, and some observers rush to cast blame on liberal religion or conservative economic theory, on the linking of fundamentalist theology and right-wing politicians, or some other scape goat. Woodward, however, offers a more compelling narrative and despite the length and far-reaching scope of the book it is one that many people, old and young, should read.

"The social history of the next half century," Woodward writes, "will depend in part on how – and how many – young Americans overcome the limitations of their protracted coming-of-age. Can they build for their own children more responsible social institutions than those they themselves experienced? The future of American faith, culture, and politics may not be all that hangs in the balance" (412).

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Citing Erik Erikson as authority, Woodward writes that people in their old age (the stage of life that he and I have reached) must struggle against the “temptation to terminal self-absorption” and instead “exercise continued care and concern for those generations moving behind us. Which may be the real reason I have written this book.”

It is the reason why I went back and finished reading the book; and the reason why I encourage others to take time to read Woodward’s requiem for an America that used to be.