

Quo Vadis USA? – der Podcast des Heidelberg Center for American Studies

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“Religion and Politics Beyond the Culture Wars – A Book Talk with Darren Dochuk”

Darren Dochuk, University of Notre Dame

Anja Schüler: Hello and welcome to a new episode of Quo Vadis USA? the podcast of the Heidelberg Center for American Studies at Heidelberg University, my name is Anja Schüler. In the 2020 election, Democratic candidate Joe Biden secured the White House not the least because of his promise that he could get Democrats and Republicans talking again – the politics of his administration would reach across the aisle. Many consider this naive and unrealistic and indeed, one year into his Presidency, American politics remain starkly divided. Democrats and Republicans not only seem to hold different views on almost everything: abortion, school curricula, tax rates or what causes climate change; at times, they seem to inhabit different political universes. Today we will be talking about a new book whose contributors argue that such a strictly partisan narrative does not tell the whole story of American politics in the modern age. I will be talking about a different perspective on the American Culture Wars with Darren Dochuk, the editor of *Religion and Politics Beyond the Culture Wars: New Directions for a Divided America*. Darren Dochuk is the Andrew Takes College Professor of History and Director of Graduate Studies at Notre Dame University, and he is joining me today from South Bend, Indiana. Welcome to the HCA podcast.

Darren Dochuk: Thank you Anja, good to be with you.

Anja Schüler: I hear there's a lot of snow out there.

Darren Dochuk: A lot of snow. Yes, hopefully you won't hear too many snow clearings going on outside.

Anja Schüler: I'm sure we can edit that out. So let's begin by talking about the origins of the book. How did this idea of looking beyond the Culture Wars transpire, and what audience did you have in mind?

Darren Dochuk: Sure well, this book has been in the making for quite a while, and, as you noted, it is actually a volume consisting of several different authors, thirteen or fourteen total, and that is always a challenge in its own right. The volume itself grows out of a conference, too, which was a major undertaking, and that took place actually in 2014 at the John Dampier Centre on Religion and Politics at Washington University in St. Louis, which was a pretty new institute at that time. I happened to be on faculty there for a few years and really embraced the opportunity to have a more public-

facing scholarly endeavor as a focal point, trying to do good writing and research in the history of religion and politics, and make it accessible to a wider public. So it was with that in mind that we organized this conference in 2014 that was titled “Beyond the Culture Wars,” and it had a couple of different audiences in mind. There’s no doubt it was scholarly in focus, and in that regard I invited several prominent historians of American political history and American religious history. My goal in conceptualizing was to bring these two really vibrant fields together, to discuss and dialogue with one another. You know up to that point I would say there are really no other fields of American history that were more rigorous environs and successful than political history and religious history. So I wanted to bring them together, and we had a great conversation with several panels planned. The comments were provided by other prominent historians, either in religious history or political history. So this was a really exciting event for scholars at Washington University, and in St. Louis as a whole, and many came from outside St. Louis as well. Secondly, though, the audience again, as I mentioned earlier, is also a wider public and we had dozens, I would say hundreds perhaps, on some occasions join us from the community to listen to these panels and to think about what revisiting of recent American history can tell us about the present moment of religion and politics. So it was, I think, a really successful event, and then in subsequent years my own career trajectory changed. Unexpectedly I ended up coming back to the university team, but through all those twists and turns we are still able to bring those papers together and package them in one volume which I think, looking back on this now, still reads with a lot of relevant and a lot of attraction where we are both in terms of scholarship but also where we are as a society today.

Anja Schüler: So let’s stay with that conference for a minute then. What would you say were the most important insights that emerged at that conference and now emerge in the book because of the conversations between scholars in different fields?

Darren Dochuk: Right, well again, the title of the conference was “Beyond the Culture Wars,” and that makes its way into the title of the book. But it’s a little less prominent, and that’s on purpose. That very title of the conference created not problems per se, but questioning. I mean how do we actually get beyond the Culture Wars? So, as an organizer of the conference and of the volume, I certainly didn’t mean for us to, as scholars, try to anticipate next steps or to try to figure out just exactly where we can go to get out of the binaries of this really rigid and very frustrating divide in American politics. So the target, the goals of the conference and of the volume itself and the different insights and angles had to do with more modest claims. One was methodological, how do we ask political historians to strategize the ways we research and write about American politics in the twentieth century? And how does that compare to what we do as religious historians? Are there other ways in which we can cross fertilize? Can we share methods of research and also in terms of how we reach a wider audience? How do we, as historians or religious historians, have a responsibility to disseminate our ideas and our findings? Secondly, I had hoped

that this conference and this volume would allow us to get beyond some of the usual suspects in American religious history; for instance, we know about Billy Graham. There's nothing wrong with that. We know about Jerry Falwell and the Religious Right. Well, what if we talk about other, maybe less prominent individuals in American religious and political history? Labor organizers, for instance, in the nineteenth century. How did they shape the American landscape of religion and politics? Also, just trying to get beyond the binaries of recent politics, we can talk about when the Culture Wars actually started or their origins. But suffice it to say that when we're talking about post-1970 America, for sure, as historians, even we tend to still write in regard to these two sides, whether it be liberal or conservative, Democrat or Republican, and or left versus right wing. That makes sense to do, but we're also as historians and public intellectuals losing a lot of texture in middle ground when we just focus and write about those two sides, as if they are given, as if they were kind of inevitable and unnatural. Then, finally, the goal of the book was, in light of that, just to revisit a very recent period of American history, from the nineteenth-century to our present moment. Just to underscore contingency ironies. Some of the papers that excited me most in the chapters in this book are those that reveal the intersectionality of identity, whether it's religious and racial, or across denominational lines, and the ways in which as individuals are all very complex. We have many different allegiances, and those cross faith, lines of faith and lines of politics. And to write our history in that way, I think, is illuminating as well.

Anja Schüler: So tell me a little bit more about the contributors to this project. You already said that there were religious historians, political historians, many other disciplines that were represented at the conference or in the book?

Darren Dochuk: Well, good question, and perhaps, and I won't say to a fault, you always have certain limits, whether it's planning a conference or a volume of this sort where you are inviting many different scholars. I am a historian and so was prejudiced in that way in organizing this and was also deliberate, saying: let's make this really a history focus. So whether they were political historians or religious historians, the focus still tended to be on the history side of things. That said, we had scholars who commented on panels, for instance, who were more comfortable in religious studies, those who were doing more heavy lifting theoretically or were from political science as well, and so there was some interdisciplinarity involved, but by and large, we were all most comfortable in working within the methods and the expectations and standards of the historical discipline itself.

Anja Schüler: My final question about the book is: Are there chapters that you find particularly thought-provoking, maybe timely or representative of the project as a whole?

Darren Dochuk: You know, having picked up the volume again just the other day – this has been out for just a couple of months, and it's receiving some good attention and I'm very proud of it. To pick out a couple of chapters is almost not to do justice to

the whole thing, which is very, very solid from beginning to end. We have thirteen to fourteen chapters that take us from labor activism in the early twentieth century through rural agricultural reform movements of the 1930s to Mormon ideas of environmentalism in the 1950s, to more recent times, dealing with the rise of Latino megachurches, for instance, and the importance of Latinos in American politics. So I think they're all really exciting because my own interests perhaps are drawn to the chapters that deal with religion and environment. There's three chapters that walk us through significant periods in the twentieth century. One that I've already alluded to is by Joseph Kip Kosek, and he looks at an agrarian populism in the 1930s. That is neither left nor right, necessarily. It's both liberal and conservative, it's a movement of Catholics and Protestants that are trying to bring an awareness of rural life and once again recently in the life of the American political imagination. It also suggests to us today, some eighty, ninety years later, the possibilities of a politics of environment that can be inclusive and that can perhaps speak to some of the more pressing issues that we face today across religious denominational lines. There's others we could talk about, but I don't want to focus.

Anja Schüler: I will say in that vain that I of course focused in first on Michelle Nickerson's article on the Camden 28 because, if I may shamelessly promote this on the pod cast. Michelle was my dear colleague here. In summer semester she came over as a Fulbright scholar, and we of course did a podcast on Camden 28, which is very interesting, really; it illustrates what you just said because it crosses those partisan lines. You don't necessarily expect an anti-Vietnam protest group from within the Catholic Church. So just to illustrate to our listeners how really interesting that stuff is. It really presents a lot of unexpected insights, I would say.

Darren Dochuk: I would just echo that. The third section of our book really brings the Catholic historical experience into the center, I would say what Michelle is doing with radical Catholic activism in the sixties, early seventies. Kathy Cummings works on Catholic feminists. Benjamin Francis Fallon is wrestling with how the Catholic voter becomes a concern for the Republican Party in the 1970s. So these are exciting chapters, too, in the way that they are integrating what I haven't seen up to this point, the Catholic story within a more mainstream American history of recent religion and politics.

Anja Schüler: So it really seems, if we're looking at those historical developments, the lines, if you will, of the Culture Wars are really softening a little bit. But I would like to open our lens a little bit and look at the Culture Wars in the United States. That's something everybody is talking about. But I think that the concept itself is hard to grasp – what do we really mean when we talk about the Culture Wars. Can we maybe pinpoint their origin? And sometimes I also get the feeling they have developed into something like a stereotype? Or how real are they?

Darren Dochuk: Well, that is the million dollar question

Anja Schüler: The big question.

Darren Dochuk : Now this is where I part, and certainly I'm not going to deflect here. But these are difficult questions related to pressing concerns, and as a historian it's easy for me to put on the hat of an academic and try to perhaps avoid some of these tough questions. The Culture Wars, I think is, is a motif that's a little bit too simple, too easy, to describe longstanding divides in American society. So yes, I think you're right to say it's become almost a little too casual, to stereotypical to apply that to American political culture. I can maybe return to that in a minute. I will just say, however simplistic it might be, it really does speak to, I think, some substantial, real divides in American religious and political culture that are deep-seated. If we want to go all the way back, to the concluding essay in this chapter by James Kloppenberg, Harvard University professor, who is very well known for his studies of democracy in America, not just in the American transatlantic context. He offers us a really brilliant and compelling look at the divide within the Catholic church, within the American landscape. Context especially, that goes all the way back to the reformation, so again transatlantic, but coming back to the Obama moment, for instance. He looks at Obama and the way in which social justice Catholicism informed Obama during his presidency. But the other point that Kloppenberg makes is that within Catholicism there's always been this divide between *caritas*, this sensibility of charity, community love, and benevolence, and *logos*, which is that desire to shore up rooted understandings of absolute truth and authority – of dogma. And so the tension between those two sensibilities within the Catholic church is deep-seated. So for us to anticipate moving beyond the Culture Wars is pretty daunting, if not impossible. And, in fact, Professor Kloppenberg was one of those who questioned the use of my title, "Beyond the Culture Wars," because in his estimation we were just never going to get beyond the Culture Wars. Others, of course, and I mentioned this in the introduction, James Davison Hunter, a very important sociologist of religion in the early nineties, introduced the term Culture Wars as a way to describe the kind of the existential divide within American society between what he called a "progressive worldview," one that was open to adjusting truths to change, changing circumstances, and "conservatives," those who privileged an objective and a commitment to external, definable, transcendent truths and authority. And so he is one who articulated that in scholarly terms. So, all that is to say is there is something real about this and that the term Culture Wars gets us to think about these systemic divides in American life. Now back to your earlier point. Yes, it has become too simplistic and stereotypical, and that is because it was weaponized. This very term, Culture Wars, was weaponized by conservative activists in the late eighties, early nineties, Pat Buchanan being one of them, who, famously or infamously, at the 1992 Republican National Convention, really made a stark divide: It's us, Christian Americans, against the enemy, and the enemy is the Russians, it's Communism, it's also liberals like the Clintons. So the term itself became weaponized, and we see that today, with the use of media to degrees never fathomed before. And that's where the term perhaps loses some of its substance and has become more of a politicized rallying cry.

Anja Schüler: Yes, you just mentioned the Obama administration, and getting back to that conference, the conference that launched this project took place during the Obama administration. Have the Culture Wars since then changed in any pronounced way since your conference convened?

Darren Dochuk: Yes, so it is interesting to look back. This volume, again, grew out of this coming together of dozens of scholars and dozens of engaged citizens. At a moment when it seemed like pluralism once again was robust, there was opportunity in American society to think and engage across partisan lines. Now, of course, the Obama administration did not necessarily mark any pure and unobscured escape from the Culture Wars itself. But at least in that moment there seemed to be a possibility that whether it be race and ethnicity, immigration, whether it be issues of social welfare, social justice, there were some possibilities of conversation at the very least. Those who were writing for this volume took part in that, and in many ways their historical essays reveal their own spirit of engagement with this robust pluralism that once operated more at the forefront of American society than it did today. But for the moment at least in that early 2000s and 2010s it seemed to be possible again. So we know what happens after that. In retrospect, of course, the Obama administration stirred up a lot of resentment and a certain opportunity for those on the right to galvanize and to use the culture wars motif really as a more powerful weapon than imagined before. Donald Trump, of course, was aware of the leverage that term and that concept gave him. So you look at his inaugural speech. You look at his speech at the Republican National Convention before his first term, very much generating the fears and anxieties that something like the culture wars motif speaks to as a way to rally his followers. And so, yes, I would say the Culture Wars have intensified as a result, and we can talk about other reasons why that might be too. I'll leave it at that for now.

Anja Schüler: So if you were to convene another conference, it would discuss different things than the 2014 conference, right?

Darren Dochuk: Yes, for sure. We see this both in scholarship but also in books that have been released in the last three or four years. You know, in terms of fears of democracy's decline in the U.S., also fears and anxieties of declining religious pluralism as well. So you know, there are things I would include; I would revisit the role of media, for instance, in American religious and political and public life. I think we've underestimated the degree to which, since the 1960s, at the very least, the divided media has provided opportunities for a groundswell of support for conservatism, especially in American life, and today that has reached exaggerated levels. Where it is that if you are leaning to the conservative side of the spectrum, be it political or religious, or both, you can operate in your own little kind of secluded realm and get your information and such from that. And that's something I don't think we realized in 2014 that that we certainly have to recognize. I'll just add, having written about conservatism in my first few books, my first book especially looked at the rise of Reagan conservatism at that moment, this is ten and 15 years ago, my goal,

as it was for other scholars of conservatism, including Michelle Nickerson, was to look at it as a viable movement, a legitimate movement that was based on consistency of thought and action and principles. In the process we tried to say: look, it's not just about racial backlash, it's not just about class resentment. I think we need to bring that part of the equation back in, and historians are now again bringing back in these factors as essential to the rise of global populism, and that, too, finally, would be the third addition to this all, and that is more of an awareness of American political and religious development and global context, a small thing that we didn't really touch on enough, I think, but there are other things as well, in retrospect. Even still, I think the volume still offers us some good insights for today.

Anja Schüler: So the research that you just described, that you know happened, especially maybe during the Trump years, beckons the question for me: What can academic research contribute to these debates around the Culture Wars, or, in other words, how can we best engage with the public as academics?

Darren Dochuk: Well, I'll turn it back on you real quick, but what do you mean? In terms of a podcast, in terms of using media, it seems to me that this has great potential. I've had the opportunity to share my thoughts on several programs.

Anja Schüler: Of course that's our goal here at the HCA, to really make sure our research gets out there and gets out to the non-academic public. And of course we've been doing this, I hope, somewhat successfully with in-person events, when we could, and different kinds of formats in the last couple of years. It's hard to measure, though, what you actually contribute to debates. That's why I wanted your opinion on it.

Darren Dochuk: Right, well, I mean keep doing what you're doing. I'm confident it is having an impact and, cumulatively, I think this forum does provide the opportunities for those kinds of connections across partisan lines. I remain somewhat hopeful that now more than ever there is a critical mass in terms of a citizenry that is now wanting an engagement across partisan lines and is looking for a healthy center again, and so this kind of media, I think, provides that opportunity. There's other ways. I mean the Danforth Center was an example of this, using institutions of higher learning to be epicenters of this kind of engagement. We need to be welcoming on our state campuses, in our private educational institutions this kind of dialogue, not just welcoming it but facilitating it. Of course, in doing that it also has its own journal and so forth, and I would say finally, this is an example of how this is on the radar of historians and academics. The National Endowment of Humanities just recently instituted this new program, called the Public Scholars Program, where they're really looking to fund projects of scholarship that can reach a wider public, and it's quite an application process. In fact, they read your material to see if you can write in a way that that is accessible. All of these are examples, I think, of how scholars are seeking that wider public and how there is a growing institutional awareness and infrastructure for that. That said, I also think you know, in the age of twitter and social media, I don't know how much actually lands, and I think as academics, as scholars, we also

need to protect ourselves in some way and go quietly about the work of the monastery, in some ways of doing the heavy lifting of research and writing, in hopes that what we kind of dig up in the archives, for instance, is going to first resonate with students in the classroom and other scholars and then hopefully kind of trickle up to the public realm or to at least those who can be comfortable in disseminating our findings to the wider public. I think if every scholar is wanting to be the social media, public intellectual, I'm not sure that's healthy either. So I hope that kind of resonates with you in some way.

Anja Schüler: I totally appreciate that we can end this broadcast on a hopeful note, and I think my final question also has something to do with that, or at least I hope you can give me a hopeful answer. I was going to ask about the subtitle of your book, "New Directions in a Divided America." So what type of directions seem promising to you? Or is this once more merely an academic aspiration?

Darren Dochuk: Well, if you haven't picked up one already, I'm certainly cautious. I would echo Professor James Cloppenburg in this way and see just how deeply rooted this Culture Wars reality is. It's not going to go away any time soon, for sure. But I would hope that through some of the initiatives we just highlighted, the academics we're doing, that we can build a dialogue across the stark divides and recenter our society in a way that allows for more generous civility and a more generous, honest engagement with one another about the ideas and bring ideas back to the forefront too, as if they do matter because they should matter in policy. They should matter in our political initiatives at home and abroad and just in the sense of our citizenship as a whole. So beyond that I think you know, I think there are possibilities of moving in new directions beyond the academy. You know, if you look back at some of again the topics covered by the essays in this volume and we already highlighted those that stress social justice issues or economics. And you know, I think, so much of the divide in recent years has been driven by this sense of dislocation, economic dislocation, whether you're in industry or your in farming regions of the country, and so grass roots awareness of those needs and the way in which citizens coming from places of faith or of political sincerity can go in to reevaluate how we as a country are dealing with these hardships and forming new agencies at the grassroots level, at the institutional level to address these. So the grassroots matters, community activism, and education and institution building, I think, is where we need to refocus our energies and hopefully, by doing that, Washington itself will be changed in the not so distant future.

Anja Schüler: Well, thank you for this thoughtful and thought-provoking conversation, Darren. You have been listening to the HCA Podcast. My name is Anja Schüler and I have been talking to Darren Dochuk of the University of Notre Dame about a new book he edited entitled: "Religion and Politics Beyond the Culture Wars." It's hot off the press, and I've found it a captivating read because of its interdisciplinary perspectives that challenge us to look beyond the partisan divide that

we usually associate with the term Culture Wars. So thanks again, Darren, and take care in that storm out there.

Darren Dochuk: Thank you very much. I know you take care as well.

Anja Schüler: This concludes today's episode of Que Vadis USA? Our podcast is produced at Heidelberg University with support from the Jacob Gould Schurman Foundation. As always, I would like to thank Julian Kramer for technical support and I would like to thank you for listening. We will be back with a new episode in two weeks, when I will be talking to Seth Johnson of the Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University about the future of NATO. So stay tuned, and please stay healthy.