Religious liberty is becoming increasingly politicized in American politics, as recent controversies such as the Supreme Court cases *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby* (2014) and *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission* (2018) demonstrate. Across academic fields ranging from history to law to sociology, scholars are attempting to make sense of these changes. The volume *The Rhetoric of Religious Freedom in the United States*, edited by Eric C. Miller, provides insight on the topic from scholars in the fields of Communication and Rhetoric. Together, the volume’s twelve substantive chapters present a wide-ranging look at the changing ways individuals and groups use religious freedom rhetoric in American public life. The volume introduces important concepts and questions that should be of interest to social scientists no matter their discipline or preferred methodological approach.

The diversity of the volume’s approaches to religious freedom is one of the primary strengths of the collection. Several of the chapters present a more historical account, including Cody Hawley’s study of Reinhold Niebuhr’s rhetoric on religious freedom (chapter 1) as well as Michael Strawser, Matthew Hawkins, and Joe Martin’s analysis of changes in the Southern Baptist Convention’s approach to religious freedom (chapter 2). Other chapters are focused on contemporary policy debates, including Adam Smidi and Laura Lengel’s study of how religious freedom rhetoric has been applied to and used by Muslim Americans (chapter 5), Eric Miller’s look at the newest wave of Religious Freedom Restoration Acts (RFRAs, chapter 6), and Elizabeth Petre’s examination of how Native Americans used religious freedom rhetoric during their opposition to the
Dakota Access Pipeline (chapter 10). Finally, two timely chapters consider Donald Trump’s use of religious freedom rhetoric. In chapter 11, Andre Johnson explores how Trump used religious freedom rhetoric to appeal to African Americans. In chapter 12, Jonathan J. Edwards shows how Trump used a promise to repeal the Johnson Amendment, which threatens the tax-exempt status of churches and other charities that explicitly support political candidates, in order to appeal to fundamentalists. Given the breadth of the issues and groups covered, a concluding essay discussing common themes and future directions would have been a welcome addition. In particular, one can easily imagine reflection on how each of these groups seems to be using religious freedom rhetoric as an instrument to achieve their policy goals, as well as discussion of how the apparent politicization of religious liberty may impact American politics in the future.

While the collection consists entirely of textual analysis, the chapters introduce a number of concepts that may be of interest to scholars of political behavior and other empirical researchers. For example, in “Negotiating Religious Freedom in US Catholic Vaccine Science” (chapter 4), Miles C. Coleman argues that the Catholic church’s response to vaccines created using aborted stem-cell lines is “post-secular” (72) in the sense that it attempts to reconcile the scientific necessity of vaccination with the moral concern over abortion. In its response, the church distinguishes between “formal cooperation,” in which one shares intent with evil forces, and “material cooperation,” in which one possesses intent that is markedly different than evil forces (78). Thus, in the Catholic Church’s view, using vaccines that were produced with aborted stem-cell lines only constitutes material cooperation with the perceived evil of abortion, and is therefore permissible. As a survey researcher, I immediately wondered whether the public is actually aware of the Catholic Church’s nuanced stance on this issue, as well as whether the public actually recognizes and utilizes these concepts, especially since the mass public’s awareness of religious advocacy organizations is low. This is just one of many examples of how quantitatively-minded researchers will likely find interesting new research ideas within the volume that could be fruitfully analyzed using discipline-specific tools.

One of the most thought-provoking chapters, “Kim Davis Versus the Gay(ze): A Problematic Response to Religious Freedom Advocates” by Sarah Walker (chapter 8), analyzes a series of internet memes targeting Kim Davis, the Kentucky clerk who made headlines for refusing to sign marriage licenses for same-sex couples. Walker argues that the LGBTQ community’s use of memes to criticize Davis’ appearance, fashion,
marriage history, and other personal traits is both driven by and perpetuating of hegemonic masculinity. While we should be careful not to blame the LGBTQ community as a whole for the actions of a few meme creators, Walker’s analysis convinced me that the memes criticizing Davis were problematic. Walker’s conclusion is that this episode is a reminder of the limitations of identity politics, and the need for groups that espouse values like tolerance and equality to make sure that they live those values in their interactions with others. She writes, “As a group familiar with abstraction, ridicule, and isolation, the LGBTQ community and its supporters should recognize in opponents like Davis a challenge to look beyond pettiness and ad hominem attacks to the underlying structures which inform our assumptions and prejudices, lest the next meme aiming to marginalize, discipline, and silence, be directed back at us” (43). This chapter is a must read for anyone studying identity politics, and would be a helpful classroom tool for showing the extent of masculine power structures.

While its coverage of the range of rhetoric on religious freedom is impressive, there are at least a few notable groups missing from the analysis that may have yielded additional insights. First, chapters on the religious freedom rhetoric of Black Protestants and Latter-Day Saints (Mormons) may have reinforced the implicit thesis that religious groups of all sorts rely on religious freedom rhetoric to achieve their policy goals. Second, given the growing importance of seculars and the recent emergence of critics of religious freedom, a few chapters examining the rhetoric of secular elites or groups may have further demonstrated both the diversity and the politicization of religious freedom rhetoric in the United States by providing examples of groups that challenge the validity of religious freedom arguments (at least in certain contexts). Overall, though, these are minor criticisms of what is, in sum, a good volume.

The Rhetoric of Religious Freedom in the United States is a timely collection of essays that together highlight the diversity of ways that religious traditions and political actors speak about religious freedom. The volume should be of interest to a wide variety of audiences, including both qualitatively and quantitatively minded scholars. In a scholarly world in which the deluge of research makes it all too easy to only pay attention to one’s own field, this collection of essays by Communication and Rhetoric scholars serves as a reminder of the importance and benefits of engaging scholarship from other disciplines.
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Do the religious convictions of Americans explain the so-called “God gap,” the sorting that leads the devout and the unaffiliated to their separate homes in the Republican and Democratic parties, respectively? A great deal of religion-and-politics research, not to mention most conventional wisdom, assumes a direction of influence from religious faith to political behavior. But that narrative has come under increasing challenge in recent years, especially as political scientists and others have examined the role of political backlash in eroding rates of affiliation. Could it be that the direction of influence runs the other way – that partisanship and political environment shape religion?

Michele Margolis’s From Politics to the Pews is the leading edge of this way of thinking about the intersection of religion and politics in the United States. Her analysis is not only theoretically compelling, but also path-breaking in its research design and deeply profound in its implications. The basic argument is that the religiosity of Americans reflects their partisan attachments more than the other way around. Democrats are less religious because they are Democrats; they are not Democrats because they are less religious. And the same goes for Republicans, who do not necessarily gravitate to the GOP because of their religiosity, but “update” their level of religiosity because religion is associated with