As I write, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama are struggling for the Democratic Party’s presidential nomination, with bitter partisans from both camps threatening to vote for the presumptive Republican nominee, John McCain, if their favored candidate is not the victor. Virtually all concede that the policy differences between the two Democrats are negligible, while the distance between their positions and McCain’s is vast. Regardless, the arguments between the two Democratic campaigns are increasingly fierce and personal, running the risk of so vilifying both candidates that the contest will strengthen the Republican Party’s otherwise uphill chances of holding onto the White House in November. If the fundamental disagreements between the two Democrats are really so slight, why the deep antagonism among many of their supporters? Part of the heat is, of course, turned up by the media and blogosphere for entertainment value—politics as blood sport. But there is something else going on that seems more significant—a way in which American political contests become moral battles, struggles over the soul and character of the nation—even within the ranks of a single party.

Sheila Kennedy, Associate Professor of Law and Public Policy at the Indiana University School of Public and Environmental Affairs, suggests one explanation for the divisiveness of American politics. Kennedy argues that there are essentially two competing and religiously-rooted paradigms that influence the ways in which Americans see the world and understand the proper roles of individuals, community and the government. Her central point is that the conflicts between Red and Blue states, conservatives and liberals, Republicans and Democrats do not boil down to arguments between the religious and the secular. Rather, she asserts, even those who think of themselves as secular have mental frameworks, views of the nature of reality that have been shaped in significant part by religious cultures. . . . Theologically shaped worldviews—whether or not recognized as religious by those who hold them—frame our individual and communal approaches to issues of race, economic behavior, poverty, social justice, education, crime and punishment,
philanthropy, bioethics and just about everything else. (4) She characterizes the adherents of the two competing American paradigms, one rooted in Calvinism and the other in the Enlightenment, as “Puritans” (religious conservatives who “tend to focus more on individual character and universal moral values”) and “modernists” (secular and religious liberals who “emphasize the importance of culture and social structure”). (6) The purpose of her book is to understand the differences in worldview of the two groups (though she acknowledges that most of us hold at least some beliefs that straddle the two poles) and to articulate ways in which conservatives and liberals might find enough common ground to move beyond the divisiveness that she believes has produced a “paralyzing inability to forge effective policies or elect leaders that most citizens can accept as legitimate...” (211)

The first section of the book attempts to summarize, in terms of rather startling generality, the history of religious belief in America from colonization onward, as a way of explaining the emergence of the late twentieth-century “culture wars” that Kennedy fears are “seriously threatening our ability to govern ourselves.” (4) In her quick overview of such a complex and multivalent history, Kennedy unavoidably paints with a very broad brush:

Between the Scopes Trial in 1925 and America’s entry into World War II in 1941, . . . the major fact of American life was the Depression, an experience which profoundly challenged American optimism. It also called into question the Calvinist insistence upon personal responsibility for one’s fate. (75)

Things get more interesting once Kennedy settles into a discussion of contemporary policy debates and what she sees as the inherently religious—and so nearly irreconcilable—assumptions that underlie differing positions. She considers several issues—the role of the judiciary, poverty and social welfare, environmental regulation, criminal justice, and foreign affairs, particularly concerning Israel and the Middle East. Her central argument, reduced to its starkest formulation, is that “Puritans” “view government as a mechanism through which a moral, chosen community builds a ‘City on the Hill,’” while “modernists” “believe the primary task of government is to ensure a civic order within which individual liberty can thrive.” (117) Kennedy believes that this conflict over the meaning of values—such as liberty—that both groups claim to hold dear leads to an inability to comprehend, much less engage, the other side’s position. She asks:

Is liberty the right to do what is morally correct? If so, who gets to decide which behaviors are morally correct? Or is liberty the right
to act in accordance with one’s individual conscience, free of state interference, so long as one does no harm to the person or property of a non-consenting other? If that is the proper understanding of liberty, how shall harm to others be defined and by whom? (117)

Applied to public policy debates, these differing paradigms can make compromise nearly impossible: if, for instance, one side believes that the judiciary must enforce collective morality—say by supporting prayer in schools or the teaching of intelligent design—while the other side believes the courts’ role is to protect strict church-state separation and freedom of expression, it is difficult to imagine the grounds for reconciliation.

*God and Country* closes with Kennedy’s prescription for achieving that reconciliation. Here, she largely drops the guise of neutrality in the culture wars and argues—echoing John Rawls, Robert Nozick and many other liberal theorists—for a liberal democratic solution to the Puritan/modernist dilemma, one that rests on a “*thin* liberal consensus about a . . . limited set of values” and procedural rights, rather than a “*thick* common morality enforced by the state . . .” (215) Those values, which Kennedy argues most Americans share regardless of their political, religious or teleological perspective, include fairness, tolerance, individual responsibility, equal treatment under the law, and a kind of pragmatic, commonsense empiricism.

A more detailed examination of particular cases and the controversies surrounding them would have strengthened Kennedy’s book and, more importantly, captured the nuances and ambiguities that make the chasm between the two sides not as huge as she portrays it. For example, a fuller discussion of the debate over Terry Schiavo’s fate (mentioned just in passing in the introduction) would have provided an illuminating opportunity to examine how those “Puritans” and “modernists” wrestled with questions of medical versus religious definitions of life and death, state versus federal and judicial versus legislative authority, parental (biological) versus marital (contractual) rights, and a host of related and fraught questions about which many Americans of all allegiances are profoundly ambivalent. While Kennedy repeatedly cautions that the lines she is drawing oversimplify the situation (and they do), the underlying rationale for her argument—that we truly *are* at an impasse as a nation and literally do not comprehend one another’s most deeply held beliefs about the nature of the world—belieces those caveats. In a sense, *God and Country* already feels a little dated. After all, the fierce battle for the Democratic nomination is not a Red state, Blue state fight—indeed, the map of
primary and caucus results, as well as both Obama’s and McCain’s evident ability to attract new, independent and crossover voters, suggests that those boundaries may have to be redrawn after 2008, no matter who wins. It is hard to imagine that a presidential election featuring any of the currently leading candidates for either party will break down on the stark Red/Blue lines of the 2000 and 2004 electoral maps. Perhaps, in 2008, faced with a faltering economy across the country and an interminable war that two-thirds of recently polled Americans say was not worth fighting, the “Puritans” and the “modernists” will find that their differences are not so insurmountable as God and Country makes them appear. As others have suggested, perhaps George W. Bush will prove to have been something of a “uniter” after all.

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