

Between the Lines+

The Civilians' THIS Beautiful CITY

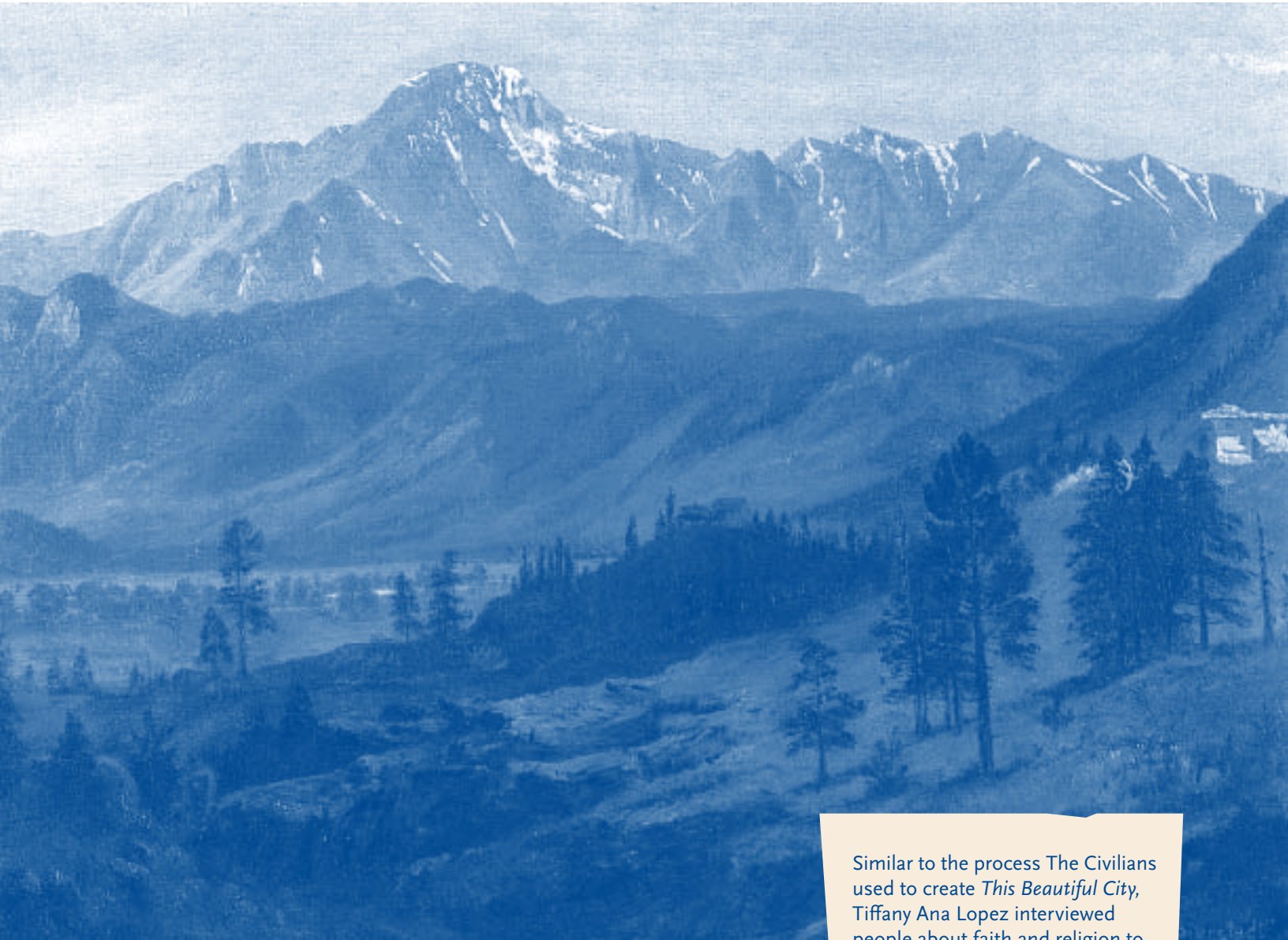
Written by Steven Cosson and Jim Lewis
Music and lyrics by Michael Friedman
Directed by Steven Cosson
From interviews conducted by Emily Ackerman,
Marsha Stephanie Blake, Brad Heberlee,
Stephen Plunkett, Alison Weller and the authors
Commissioned and developed by The Civilians
Co-produced with New York's Vineyard Theatre
Kirk Douglas Theatre
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 Center
Theatre
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L.A.'s Theatre Company



If our show can get people talking together
who would never talk except on opposite sides
of a picket line, well, then, that's good preaching.

— *Emily Ackerman*, company member, The Civilians



Pike's Peak, PAINTING BY ALBERT BIERSTADT

Similar to the process The Civilians used to create *This Beautiful City*, Tiffany Ana Lopez interviewed people about faith and religion to write this audience guide. Quotes from these interviews are found throughout *Between the Lines + This Beautiful City*.

The Players and Their World

THIS BEAUTIFUL CITY was created from interviews conducted in 2006 with several hundred residents of Colorado Springs, Colorado, including members of New Life Church, a megachurch established in 1984 by a preacher named Ted Haggard, with the goal of seeing Colorado Springs become the capital of Evangelical Christian faith in America. The play explores the impact of New Life Church on the greater community, the tensions that evolved as a result of the church's mission to convert everyone to its vision of Christianity, and the community's grappling with Haggard's fall after allegations of drug use and homosexuality. On one hand, we see Evangelicals besieged by a secular world that opposes their belief system. On the other hand, we see those who perceive Evangelicals as a monolithic, unthinking, unreasoning, unstoppable force threatening democracy in America.

The play addresses two subjects that are historically taboo in public conversation: religion and politics. People now talk freely with one another about a range of subjects, from celebrity gossip to presidential primaries. While politics has become a more acceptable topic for public discussion and debate, religion is still highly charged. This reticence is grounded in a history of religious persecution and an unwillingness to listen to opposing beliefs. The play invites us to look at the complicated ways religion shapes people's lives, both by choice and by imposition.

The most difficult subjects can be explained to the most slow-witted man if he has not formed any idea of them already; but the simplest thing cannot be made clear to the most intelligent man if he is firmly persuaded that he knows already, without a shadow of doubt, what is laid before him.

— Leo Tolstoy

In the process, it raises pressing questions about religious freedom. The play's dialogue is drawn from transcripts of personal interviews, media reports and local texts, such as 'zines and the Colorado Springs Trails Guide, and woven together with original songs and music to represent various perspectives of the community. Both the events and the people are real. The play works to explore different ends of the spectrum of religion and politics in Colorado Springs by presenting polarizing positions. It gives audiences a focused portrait of a community grappling with several issues currently at the forefront of national debate, such as the increasingly blurred boundaries between church and state.

Questions:

Being and Doing, On and Off the Stage

- How do labels shape who we are as well as the kind of people we think we can—or can't – become?
- What labels do you affix to people around you? Can you think of a time when you labeled someone and you were wrong?

After the play:

- What does the play reveal about religion? What does it reveal about politics?
- What perspectives are missing from the play?
- In the play, what are the various factors that motivate people to become politically active?
- What motivates you to be politically involved?

Find Out More

Jay Bakker, *Son of a Preacher Man: My Search for Grace in the Shadow of the Gospel of Prosperity*

Ted Haggard, *Foolish No More! Seizing a Life Beyond Belief*

Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus but Not the Church: Insights from Emerging Generations*

John Marks, *Reasons to Believe: One Man's Journey Among the Evangelicals and the Faith He Left Behind*

Frank Schaeffer, *Crazy for God: How I Grew Up as One of the Elect, Helped Found the Religious Right, and Lived to Take All (or Almost All) of It Back*

The Civilians and *This Beautiful City*

THE CIVILIANS WRITE AND PRODUCE original theatre that creatively addresses questions about current events, history and human behavior, especially the relationship between the personal and the social. They employ various techniques (research, interview, playwriting) and styles (cabaret, multi-character drama) to create work that reflects their intense curiosity about shared connections across what appear to be vastly different histories, cultures and/or peoples.

Is there a particular slant that you would like to put on... the reason I ask is ... I try to avoid conversation [with strangers] because people have their ideas: “right wing fundamental evangelical” and I want to say if you’re whole belief of who we are is, is formed through the media then let me buy you lunch.

— *Evangelical Woman in This Beautiful City*

Many in the company studied Joint Stock technique together at UC San Diego. While Joint Stock does not generally include the recording of interviews (instead, the actor furiously writes down all s/he can remember after the interview is over), for *This Beautiful City*, The Civilians realized that the specificity of the topic, as well as the company members’ unfamiliarity with it, required a more accurate record, so they did record their interviews. Eight members of the company spent a total of 10 weeks over seven months talking with the people of Colorado Springs. The actors are trained not to insert themselves into the interview and not to make value statements. Interviews are driven by curiosity and tempered with empathy, respect and neutrality. They aim to capture the human scale of a story, something more personal than a news report. To maintain their intimacy with the material, most actors portray the people they interviewed.

The Civilians see music as a “design choice,” which serves, in part, to add structure and heighten the emotional experience. But further, it serves to remind the audience that although the play is built on interviews with real people, it is still an entertainment synthesized by artists – it is not “truth.” For *This Beautiful City*, composer Michael Friedman was inspired by the music he heard in the churches of Colorado Springs and by the cowboy songs native to the region. He waited until the play started to take shape before determining where to put the songs, either because there was an idea that needed emphasizing or a point of view that couldn’t be conveyed any other way.

The Civilians select subjects about which they feel a sense of urgency. Following the 2004 presidential election, they saw that “something was happening in the U.S. and it seemed to have something to do with Evangelical Christians,” according to composer Michael Friedman. “It was the most important story in America that we knew nothing about.” The goal of the “investigative theatre” process is breaking down preconceptions, in this case, of religion in public life. That the Ted Haggard story broke during their time in Colorado Springs was purely coincidental and allowed The Civilians to explore the scandal’s effects on the community. In blasting apart their own beliefs, The Civilians also intend for the audience to leave the theatre thinking differently.

Friedman and writer/director Steven Cosson had preconceptions about Colorado Springs. They were both surprised by the sophistication of the churches, which are media savvy, image-aware and even “a little corporate – like an advertising agency in New York.” Friedman and Cosson were also impressed by the state-of-the-art technical equipment inside the New Life Church itself; they marveled at the theatrical feats they could achieve with such tools. Friedman joked – quite seriously – that they were “yokels from New York”; he had never felt so provincial.



Marsha Stephanie Blake in *This Beautiful City*. PHOTO BY HARLAN TAYLOR

The point of our work is to throw ourselves into something totally different that we may not know too much about.

— Steven Cosson, Founding Director, *The Civilians*

Questions:

What We Say, Who We Are, How We Act

- How does knowing that the play and the characters are based on real people and events affect your reception of the play?
- How are the methods used to create this play similar to and/or different from reality TV? How do the results compare?
- Do you think the authors have effectively presented a neutral perspective on the subjects in the play? How was this achieved? Where do you feel any bias might show through?

What's an Evangelical? You mean how are they different from any other kind of Christian? Wow. That's not an easy question.

— Associate Pastor in *This Beautiful City*

Terms for Understanding Evangelical Faith

GIVEN THAT THE PLAY FOCUSES on a religious group with a specific sense of faith, culture and politics, it is important to understand the vocabulary that defines its members' sense of the world. Evangelicals come from a variety of denominations, but historically are drawn from Methodist and Baptist traditions.

Generally, Evangelicals are people who have confessed their sins, accepted Jesus Christ as their savior and believe they are going to heaven as a result. This new spiritual opportunity is termed being "born again." Evangelicals believe they are connected to a God who is wonderfully all-knowing of everything that happens in their lives. This level of intimacy is what prompts the phrase "having a personal relationship with God." It allows the believer to feel that s/he is in touch with something more powerful than the individual self. They believe that Satan exists and that eternal salvation is possible only through grace.

The love and support they give one another is understood as crucial to living in God's grace and honoring His plan. God's love is perceived as a precious gift that must be shared. The practice of speaking out about this experience of unconditional love is termed "giving testimony." An important byproduct of this is building fellow believers and saving others. It is seen as a generous act to testify to others about the power and teachings of Jesus Christ and the event of being born again. Testimony is therefore not focused on the self nor is it associated with casting judgment on others.

more...

Public confessions or pleas for forgiveness are viewed as self-indulgent. Public declarations of personal repentance imply one is seeking the judgment of others when accountability to God should be first and foremost. The logic here is, why ask forgiveness from someone who has no control over your salvation? Additionally, admission of behaviors deemed morally wrong, such as living with a boyfriend or girlfriend before marriage, can be viewed as deliberately disrespectful to the moral values that provide the bedrock of evangelical faith.

Megachurches are super-sized congregations that report 2,000 – 36,000 in average attendance. Many offer childcare, play centers, youth fellowship groups and 12-step programs, as well as restaurants, cafes and live entertainment arenas. They tend to follow a highly corporate model that includes CEOs and charismatic leaders whose preaching inspires the extremely large congregations needed to support these massive churches.

This coffeeshop is inside the World Prayer Center. Next door is New Life's main worship center, and the building past that is the Theater which is mostly used by the twentysomething ministry. ... Well sure I guess New Life is a megachurch. But it doesn't feel big. It feels like you know everybody.

— Associate Pastor in This Beautiful City

According to the National Association of Evangelicals, there are nine criteria of belief and commitment that define Evangelicals:

- They believe they will go to heaven because they have confessed their sins and accepted Jesus as their savior.
- They have made a personal commitment to Jesus that is still important to them.
- Their commitment to Jesus is very important in their life today.
- They have a personal responsibility to share their religious beliefs about Christ with non-Christians.
- They believe that Satan exists.
- They believe that eternal salvation is possible only through grace, not works.
- They believe that Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth.
- They believe that the Bible is accurate in all that it teaches.
- They believe that God is an all-knowing, all-powerful, perfect deity who created the universe and still rules it today.

From Christine Wicker, *The Fall of the Evangelical Nation* (Harper One, 2008)

Emily Ackerman and Alison Weller in *This Beautiful City*. PHOTO BY HARLAN TAYLOR



TOLERANCE AND ACCEPTANCE

I am so grateful that my church is the way it is: open, welcoming, supportive and inclusive, with a contemporary female pastor who embraces new approaches. Members of our congregation are incredibly diverse and include people of color as well as gay, lesbian, and transgender followers. I like to focus on what it really means when we open the doors of the church and say “welcome.”

— *Cassandra Villa, graduate student and born-again Christian*

[Pastor Reynolds] tells us that he's homosexual ... I read it in the paper. With his picture on the front page. Front page. I WILL NOT REPENT. Okay. See ya. Hello Satan. Cause if you do not repent, oh, you goin' to hell, homeboy.

— *Emmanuel Choir Member in This Beautiful City*

These conservative people are renegades, and they have hijacked the ship of Christianity and they are heading it towards the rocks!

— *T-Girl Christian in This Beautiful City*

RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

Basically having a relationship with God is just bending your life around Christ and what he did for you. And just loving Him, just serving Him. That's what it's about.

— *Cadet A in This Beautiful City*

GIVING TESTIMONY

If I genuinely love somebody, how can I not tell them news that will save their soul?

— *Cadet B in This Beautiful City*

But then I told my cousin I wanted to get saved. I didn't want to go down to the altar. I was still a little (*gesture meaning uncomfortable*). So she got two friends and we went to Baskin Robbins—ordered ice cream and stood in a circle and prayed. And I asked Jesus Christ to come into my life. (*Pause.*) And then we ate ice cream.

— *Jews for Jesus in This Beautiful City*

HYPOCRISY

With my dad I think what happened was he had this kind of performance going on, you know, trying to be like, “I've got it all together,” when he didn't. He didn't have it together. None of us have it together. ... God is unconditional love, He's the only one who can love us completely for who we are, and heal us. So I think he's being healed.

— *Marcus Haggard in This Beautiful City*

I like your Christ; I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.

— *Mahatma Gandhi*

Questions:

Christian and Christianity, Person and Politics

After the play:

- What is the range of personalities in the play's portrait of Evangelical Christians? What is the range of those who do not identify as Evangelicals? What do these groups have in common? Who represents a middle ground?
- What appear to be the greatest sources of conflict between the church, its members and the citizens who do not affiliate themselves with the church?
- In the play, how does the church most seek to influence the workings of the public culture, what we term “the state”?
- How might the very existence of the megachurch threaten the separation of church and state?

Find Out More

Theodore Gabriel and Ronald Geaves, *...Isms: Understanding Religion*

David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity ... And Why It Matters*

C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

Leo Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*

Media and Religion

DOCUMENTARY THEATRE is created much the same way as documentary film or even a news story. An individual or, in this case, a group, records interviews with people about a particular issue or idea. These people usually have differing points of view and perspectives on the issue. A news report ostensibly presents interviews in an unbiased way, offering additional documentation to support or challenge the ideas presented. Unlike a news story, a documentary often has a point of view. The interviews and documentation are pieced together to support the director's message.

I feel my generation is more exposed to a critical dialogue about identity and that we can imagine ourselves outside what we see in the media. Who you appear to be in the context of a photo or reality television show and who you actually are as a practicing person of faith might be two different things altogether.

— Joelle Guzman, graduate student and member of a non-denominational church

In creating *This Beautiful City*, The Civilians have joined a recent cavalcade of media outlets exploring the force of religion in America, from theatrically released documentaries (*The Eyes of Tammy Faye*, *Jesus Camp*) to reality cable television shows (*30 Days*, *One Punk Under God*). While religion has always been a crucial part of American culture – the Puritans sought New England as a refuge from religious intolerance – within the last quarter of a century, it has taken center stage with a steady trend in religious leaders' use of both the pulpit and media to promote politics, ensuing heated public debates about morality and values (including attempts at legislation), and growing concerns about what appears to be a quickly crumbling wall of separation between the church and the state.

Historically, as part of their religious mission, Evangelicals have sought to spread their message to a broader public, from early pamphlet distribution to revival tent preaching. As media evolved, evangelists found a way to capitalize on new technologies, from radio (Father Charles Coughlin, Samuel Parkes Cadman) and television (Oral Roberts, Billy Graham) to the Internet (church websites, online evangelists, religious blogs). Beginning in the late 1960s, the deregulation of public television made access available to those who could pay for time. Evangelists quickly moved from the fringes of American religious culture to center stage. Televangelism also brought visibility to Evangelical Christians and offered a new avenue for spiritual practice during a time of great social upheaval (Vietnam War, Civil Rights struggles, Watergate), in which church attendance went on the decline as people wrestled with matters of faith.

Media now view religious conservatives as a major consumer and marketing force, evidenced by the promoting of such faith-based shows as the VeggieTales series, which encourages moral behavior based on Christian and Biblical principles and was aired on NBC in the most prized slot of children's programming, Saturday mornings. Notably, in its engagement with the visual and commercial language of mainstream media to appeal to its young audiences, VeggieTales has its own line of books, games and other branded items, including toys and clothing. The financial success of such films as the Biblical epic, *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), which grossed over \$370 million, and the Christian-themed *Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* (2005), which grossed over 292 million, recently prompted 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment to create FoxFaith, a company devoted to the release of faith-based films.



Brad Heberlee in *This Beautiful City*. PHOTO BY HARLAN TAYLOR

IN THE MEDIA

Barbara Walters is working on a story about heaven and will interview me and get some supporting shots from the church.

Since we believe in heaven, we are, in fact, a good source.

Okay, tomorrow we have a meeting in Washington, then on Friday we'll fly to New York to appear on the O'Reilly Factor. Then we'll zip home to be with you on Sunday.

Saints, I need your strength.

— From the song "An email from Ted" in *This Beautiful City*

The portraits of Christians in the media create perspectives that focus more on politics than matters of faith. If I tell people I am Christian, the kind of people portrayed in this play are what immediately come to mind. While these people do exist, they don't represent who I see myself to be as a Christian.

—Ian Ross, graduate student and Presbyterian

Today, Christians are known as scary, angry, judgmental, right-wing finger-pointers with political agendas. Hopefully you aren't angry, judgmental and pointing fingers at people, and probably other Christians you know aren't either. But we need to view ourselves the way others on the outside see us.

—Dan Kimball, Pastor, Vintage Faith Church

Questions:

The Media and the Message

- What is the role of the media in national debates concerning religion and politics?
- What trends or events in the last quarter of the 20th century might have contributed to the increased visibility of religious groups in the media?
- Do you think a religious group's use of public media raises any concerns about the need for separation between church and state? Why or why not?

Find Out More

School Prayer: A Community at War (1999)

The Eyes of Tammy Faye (2000)

With God on Our Side: George W. Bush and the Rise of the Religious Right in America (2004)

30 Days, "Straight Man in a Gay World" and "Muslims in America" (Season One, 2005); "Atheist/Christian" and "Pro-Life/Pro-Choice" (Season Two, 2006)

Comic Evangelists (2006)

For the Bible Tells Me So (2007)

Jesus Camp (2007)

The Jesus Guy (2007)

What Would Jesus Buy (2007)

One Punk Under God (2007)



Emily Ackerman in *This Beautiful City*. PHOTO BY HARLAN TAYLOR

Church and State in American History

THE PILGRIMS WERE A GROUP of religious separatists from the Church of England who left their country in search of a place to practice their religion in peace. John Winthrop was a Puritan settler whose thoughts about God became integral to the social, political and religious growth of the colony. A preacher turned governor, he viewed England as a “sinful land” intolerant of religious freedom and envisioned creating in the new world “a city of God” where Puritans would practice Christian ideals in their daily living. Ironically, within just 30 years, the Puritans engaged in acts of persecution against a newly formed religious group, the Quakers, many of whom they arrested and imprisoned, even executed, because of their rejection of particular religious creeds and civil obligations, such as military service.

In thinking about their own history, framers of the Constitution, such as Thomas Jefferson, saw tremendous risks in not having clear separation between church and state. The First Amendment to the Constitution reads, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” This clause prohibits the government from establishing any religion as an official religion and privileges the authority of the government over the authority of churches, church leaders or spokespersons for any gods.

The concept of separation is not a form of hostility toward religion. Rather, the framers did not want religion to be an official part of government because they saw it as something private to be actively protected and kept out of the realm of state interference. Separation ensures that government officials cannot impose any aspect of their private beliefs on others and that government is not involved in promoting particular religious doctrines. Too, private religious groups cannot act through the government to have their own doctrines and beliefs made into law or policy. Separation of church and state is what guarantees the existence of religious liberty. While the phrase “separation of church and state” is not in the Constitution, this absence does not mean that it is not a central legal concept.

In a letter to the Danbury Baptist Church regarding their concern about their right to religious freedom, Thomas Jefferson used the phrase, “a wall of separation between church and state.” In his autobiography, Jefferson wrote that a proposed addition to the First Amendment referring to Jesus Christ as the source of religious liberty was “rejected by the great majority, in proof that they meant to comprehend, within the mantle of its protection, the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and Mohammedan, the Hindoo and Infidel of every denomination.”

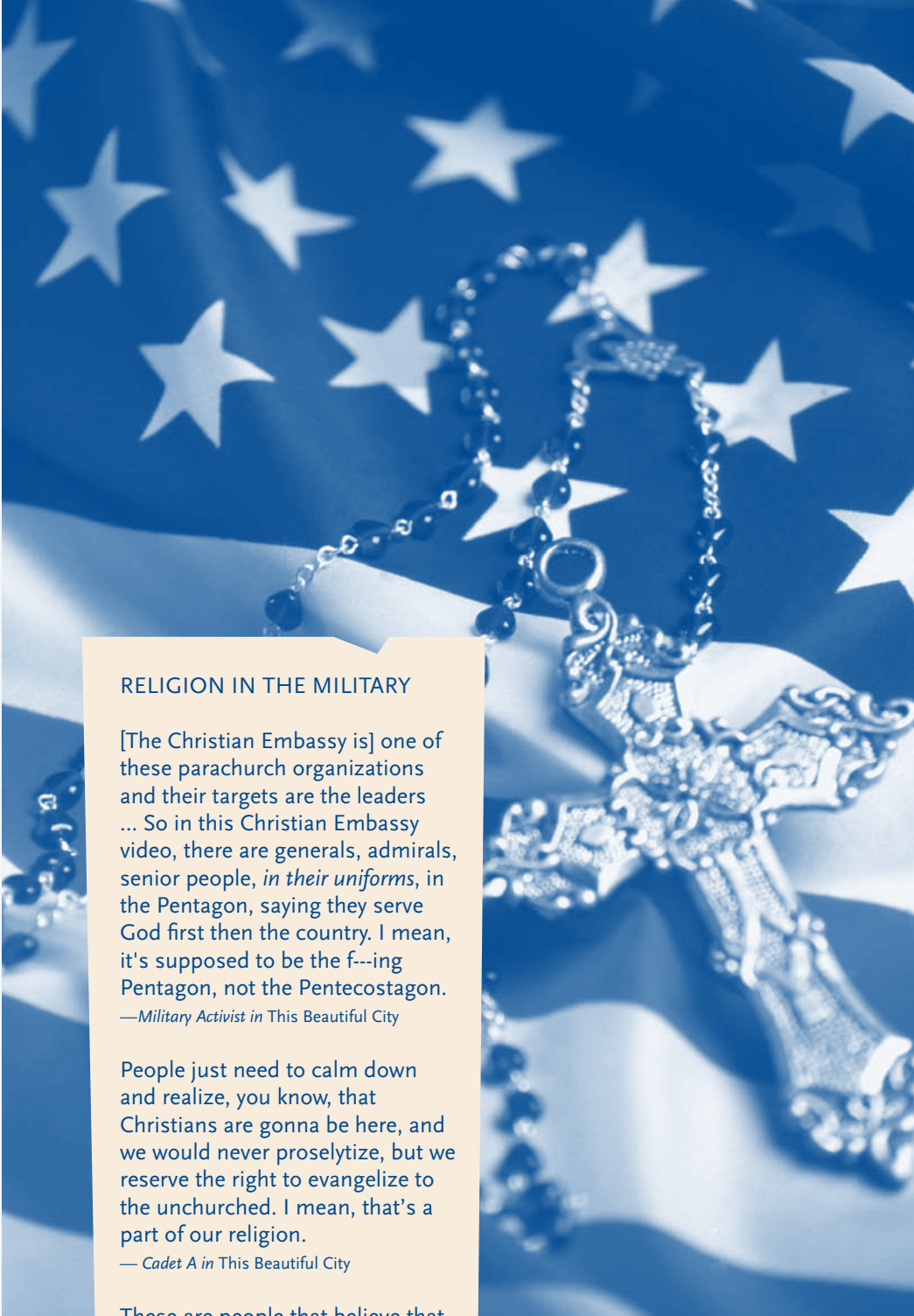
Sure, people want religious freedom. But usually they mean only for themselves.

— *Ian Ross, student*

The phrase “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance is viewed by many as an expression of religious piety and often cited as evidence that the United States government is founded on the religious principles of Christianity. In fact, it was only inserted in 1954 to distinguish Americans from the enemy of the day, the “godless” communists.

A recent case that illustrates the controversy over the separation of church and state is the mandated removal of a Ten Commandments monument from the rotunda of the Alabama state judicial building. Justice Rory Moore, who fought to keep the monument in place, remarked upon being ordered to remove it: “It is a sad day in our country when the moral foundation of our law and the acknowledgment of God has to be hidden from public view to appease a federal judge.”

Moore claimed the Commandments are the foundation of the U.S. legal system and that forbidding the acknowledgment of the Judeo-Christian God violates the First Amendment guarantee of freedom of religion. The court judged that he was abusing his position as a public government servant to impose his private views of religion on those required to enter his courtroom.



RELIGION IN THE MILITARY

[The Christian Embassy is] one of these parachurch organizations and their targets are the leaders ... So in this Christian Embassy video, there are generals, admirals, senior people, *in their uniforms*, in the Pentagon, saying they serve God first then the country. I mean, it's supposed to be the f---ing Pentagon, not the Pentecostagon.

—*Military Activist in This Beautiful City*

People just need to calm down and realize, you know, that Christians are gonna be here, and we would never proselytize, but we reserve the right to evangelize to the unchurched. I mean, that's a part of our religion.

—*Cadet A in This Beautiful City*

These are people that believe that Jack Benny, Dr. Seuss, Gandhi and Anne Frank are burning in an eternal fiery lake of hell. ... If you want to believe that little girl is roasting in hell, I'll support with my last fiber of my being under our social contract your right to believe that. But if you try to engage in the power of the state, and in the armed forces, and have my government tell me who are the children of the greater God and who are the children of the lesser God, I will f---ing kill you or I will go down trying.

—*Military Activist in This Beautiful City*

Questions:

One Nation

- How does a secular society grow and develop? How does growth of a religious society differ? What are the roles of faith and reason in the patterns of evolution for each? Are faith and reason mutually exclusive?
- Is the separation of church and state only about monitoring the use of religion to advance or control government in the larger public culture? What about when politicians allow religious institutions to perform community and social services, usually the responsibilities of government?

After the play

- Religious freedom includes the right to express oneself both publicly and privately, the freedom to worship as one chooses and the freedom not to practice religion. What viewpoints does the play demonstrate about religious freedom?
- In the play, certain geographic locations are said to be either blessed by God or cursed by Satan. What other places in America are put into these paradigms?
- What do you make of the play ending with a movement to extend the church to a new city?

Find Out More

Michelle Goldberg, *Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism*

Jeff Sharlet, *The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power*

Jim Wallis, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*

Christine Wicker, *The Fall of the Evangelical Nation: The Surprising Crisis Inside the Church*

Garry Wills, *Head and Heart: American Christianities*

Between the Lines+

BETWEEN THE LINES + is an expanded version of Center Theatre Group's online magazine, *Between the Lines*. This more comprehensive audience guide was designed for college classes seeing *This Beautiful City*. We hope individuals and groups engaging in an in-depth discussion of the play will also find that *Between the Lines +* enriches their theatre experience. For more play guides, visit CenterTheatreGroup.org/BTL.

BETWEEN THE LINES

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