

Miniseries traces religion's U.S. impact across 400 years

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(RNS) A new six-part PBS series explores how deeply religion has influenced and informed American public life, from Catholic missionaries' first encounter with Native Americans to the political marriage between the GOP and religious conservatives.

"God in America," a presentation from the PBS "American Experience" and "Frontline" series, will air over three consecutive nights starting Monday (Oct. 11). The series is an intense exploration of the complex dynamics that animate a nation that is both deeply religious yet without an official religion.

The series interweaves interviews with experts, documentary and dramatization to tell a compelling story that stretches from John Winthrop to Jerry Falwell.

"God in America" is the latest in a succession of studies that examine the role of religion in American public life. The recent Religious Knowledge Survey, released last month by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life found that atheists and agnostics, Jews and Mormons, scored higher than the two groups that have had a profound impact on American religion, evangelicals and Catholics.

In addition, an upcoming book, "American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us" by scholars Robert Putnam and David Campbell, finds "a new religious fault line" in American culture. Putnam and Campbell argue that Americans' increasing tolerance of diversity -- religious and otherwise -- presents a unique opportunity and challenge for the nation.

Rather than offering a case study in history, "God in America" quickly ties the past to the present. Director David Belton, a British native, says the series prompted a significant shift in his own view of American life.

"It affected me quite a lot," Belton said in an interview. "I'd studied American politics in college. I think I suddenly realized how little I did understand about America.

"There's a view in Europe and in Britain that American religion is a bit odd. In England, we don't talk about religion. ... We're sort of reluctant to discuss it. Now a lot of things in America make sense."

A central component of the series is the use of dramatic reenactments to help make history come alive through the spirituality and struggles of key historical figures. Viewers walk alongside Franciscan friars in New Mexico, sit in on a debate between Puritan John Winthrop and dissident Anne Hutchinson and pack a suitcase with fundamentalist politician William Jennings Bryan on his way to argue against evolution.

Other re-imagined figures include abolitionist Frederick Douglass, Reform Rabbi Isaac Meyer Wise, civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. and evangelist Billy Graham, among others.

Belton says every word of dialogue in the reenactments was actually said or written.

"We needed to tell the proper narrative story of what had happened. We also had to reflect that there were new battles going on in people's minds, new questions. Would they be able to live and exist in a new country? Would they find that they had a religious place here?"

The series intricately considers the roots of religious liberty and its development in America's courts and politics. It also probes how religious ideas shaped later reform movements and created a competitive religious marketplace.

"That's what America really needs to understand about itself," Belton said. "It has this extraordinary religious heritage that informs

everything it does and why it thinks the way it does. It's not just a series of religious documents that make people feel free, that were written by Jefferson and Madison. America feels a need to be transformational."