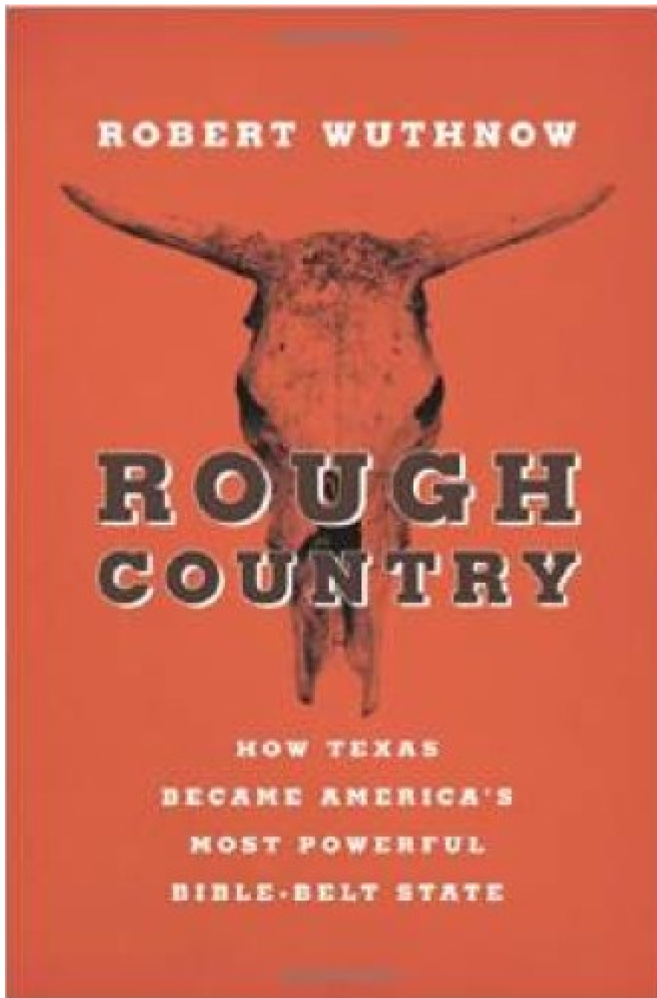
Texas tough

by Kyle Childress in the January 7, 2015 issue

In Review



Rough Country

By Robert Wuthnow
Princeton University Press

Outside the large First Baptist Church in the small West Texas town where I grew up, a handful of men gathered every Sunday morning to smoke one last cigarette before going in to worship. They were ranchers and farmers mostly, and their conversation

consisted of three things: how dry it was, the prospects of the high school football team, and how dry it was.

Before going inside, one of them loved to repeat an old Texas saying: “It’s 250 miles to the nearest post office, 100 miles to wood, 20 miles to water, six inches to hell.”

Sociologist Robert Wuthnow seeks to show how living in such an unforgiving and challenging land has shaped the perspective of its people and especially its religion. This rough country has been observed and experienced and often written about in letters and diaries by the settlers of the Texas frontier; in it, Wuthnow says, “nearly everything is rough: the land is rough, earning a living is rough, the people are rough, even the preachers are rough.” He goes on, “What to make of this roughness, and how to overcome it, are the most basic questions of everyday life.”

Mixing historical anecdotes gleaned from newspaper accounts, memoirs, and diaries with demographic studies and sociological analysis and using historical narrative as a framework, Wuthnow shows how this rough state with its rough religion and its rough relationship with race became such a powerful force in Bible Belt politics.

During the formative history of the state, people living “at the margins of civilization existed in daily fear of attack from hostile Indians, outlaws, and renegades.” One person wrote about life in the city of Galveston, “Nobody who cares for his life ventures out after dark.” Men there “shoot and cut up each other on the least provocation” and “bowie knives and pistols are conspicuous ornaments.”

At the same time, there was fear of slave insurrection and fear of Mexico with its threatening Catholic religion. Slaves were treated roughly and Texans of Mexican descent were mistreated. With so much “evil” out there, efforts at resisting it, restraining it, changing it, and even destroying it were paramount. Either attack it or convert it and civilize it through the building of towns, roads, schools, businesses, churches, and other institutions.

According to Wuthnow, religion was preeminent in affirming the social order and combating evil. Texas seemed to have more Baptists than people and, as one Roman Catholic said, the place seemed to be “crawling with Methodists and ants.” Wuthnow says that a heavily Baptist and Methodist version of Christianity provided a language to express worries and fears, gave strength and solace in the face of enormous difficulties, and offered hope for a better future both in this life and the life to come.

And because Baptists were such a powerful force in Texas, religious liberty of conscience with its concomitant emphasis on separation of church and state was a major aspect of religious and political life. “In practice, liberty of conscience deterred clergy and lay leaders from bringing their faith in an official or organized way into the political arena.”

All of that was fine and dandy, especially with Texas’s own version of civil religion. As Texas writer Robert Flynn remembers, it was hard to keep all those Texas heroes separate when he was a boy: Sam Houston, King David, Davy Crockett, Robert E. Lee, Moses, Samson, and Stonewall Jackson. These martyrs and founding figures combined with a minimalist understanding of God formed Texas’s civil religion, says Wuthnow.

Alongside and mixed in with the generalized civil religion were the more particular Baptist and Methodist types with emphasis on the spiritual: individual sin and salvation, personal morality and regeneration. And as long as all this religion along with other social institutions were all going in the same direction of civilizing the rough world and fighting evil, liberty of conscience was carefully observed. Clergy kept to preaching on the spiritual life which undergirded the schools, organizations, and institutions that built society. The problem arose when society and the churches felt threatened.

What is interesting is what was considered threatening and what was not. Racism was not. Wuthnow says that from the black perspective, religion gave hope and courage in the face of extraordinary hardship and indescribable violence, but for whites, religion supported the racist status quo. Wuthnow tells shocking stories of lynchings, often witnessed by hundreds, sometimes thousands of local townsfolk, most of whom were active churchgoers. Often the lynchings were privately criticized by clergy, who rarely condemned the actions publicly. Indeed, many white clergy felt that though lynching was regrettable, it served the interest of law and order.

Since racism and violence did not seem to challenge white religion and society’s view of combating evil and spreading civilization, what did? Wuthnow says that white clergy’s first real challenge to the social status quo was the fight for Prohibition. About the same time, evolution also threatened the social order, and with Democrat Al Smith’s nomination for president in 1928, the assumed social order was further upset since Smith was Roman Catholic and was for the repeal of Prohibition. All this served as precedent for political activism on the part of churches

and clergy.

Wuthnow continues his story through the Depression and Dust Bowl and the clergy’s response to the New Deal, which though greatly needed, raised many people’s fears of federal government’s intrusion into areas of charity and service perceived to be the exclusive responsibility of churches and civic organizations. In 1930s Texas, memory stretched back to the frontier when there was little or no federal government close enough to do any good and to Reconstruction, in which the federal government was perceived by whites as the villain. By the 1950s these old habits and doubts coalesced into outright fear; social order was threatened again and again—by communism in the 1950s, civil rights in the 1960s, the role of women and the debate over abortion in the 1970s and 1980s, and on to today’s battles over homosexuality, immigration, and taxes. Wuthnow brings this story up to date through the governorships of George W. Bush and Rick Perry, the rise of the Tea Party, and the election of Ted Cruz to the U.S. Senate.

Wuthnow touches also on the rough dissenting and reforming stream in politics, religion, and race. For example, during the height of Jim Crow and the Progressive Era the figure of Jessie Daniel Ames emerged. She was a Methodist woman who, because of her faith, became involved in suffrage and active in the anti-lynching movement—mostly led by women. There was also the East Texas judge “Cyclone” Davis, a Populist one-term member of Congress who, in old age during the Depression, denounced social injustices and plutocrats, quoting scripture. And there were others, tough and scrappy and as unrelenting as the powerful figures they opposed.

So what makes Texas different from any other Bible Belt state? Other states have more Baptists than people, are suspicious of the federal government, have a history of racism and violence, and more than enough rough people to go around. What makes Texas different?

Oil. And the money that comes from oil. Wuthnow says the greater resources of Texas, along with its large size and population, have given it a power beyond other states. For example, with more school districts than any other state, Texas is highly influential in the textbook publishing industry.

During the Depression a few Texans grew wealthy from oil and its related industries. Some of those Texans used much of their wealth in supporting churches and

evangelists, their organizations, and their use of media such as publishing, radio, and television. Oil wealth was also used to support politicians with the same goals in mind.

I found myself wishing throughout the book for more on one or another aspect of Wuthnow's story, and he confesses that there is much beyond the scope of his study. Wuthnow is a careful sociologist and his research is meticulous; he is a master of telling what happened and how it happened. The why is for others to explain.

Why is much Texas religion heartfelt and at the same time racist, hostile to difference, and at ease with violence? Why the affinity between corporate money and religion? Why does such a religious state have so much inequality? Why does this Texas version of Christendom—the intertwining of religion, politics, and culture—persist?

Why should anyone in another part of the country read this book about Texas? Wuthnow says that while "it was never possible to regard Texas as a microcosm of America—or indeed any way of being small," there is a great deal that parallels with America. This Texas story is America's story, albeit refracted through a specific locale. And with so much conflict and division in American politics and religion, perhaps we can better understand the whole while looking at the particular.

Molly Ivins, a longtime Texas journalist, used to refer to Dallas as a city with "Big Buildings, Big Hair, and a Big Jesus" (she also said Dallas would have pulled for Goliath in the contest with David). The same can be said for Texas if you add Big Oil, Big Money, and Big Influence.

Texan Bill Moyers tells the story of a fellow who saw a fight out in the street. He ran over and shouted, "Is this a private fight or can anyone join in?" Maybe we Texans just like to fight. I don't know. I used to think that the fights of our past were clearly defined. *Rough Country* reminds me that most of the fights were more complex than I thought. The one thing that hasn't changed is that there are some things worth fighting for.