

Fighting for Freedom: Liberal Argumentation in Culture War Rhetoric

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ABSTRACT: This essay analyzes the deployment of *freedom* and *liberty* as premises in orthodox culture war argumentation. Specifically, it suggests that recent decades have been host to a marked shift in social issue debates, whereby formerly religious arguments have adopted an increasingly secular, liberal tenor. Though ostensibly concerned with moral questions, activists and interest groups have sought to appropriate the mantle of American *freedom*, thus fortifying their positions amid the shared ideals of liberal democracy. A timely case study is found in contemporary opposition to same-sex marriage. Here as elsewhere, religious elites who had formerly framed their public statements in accusatory moral-religious terms now increasingly claim to stand in defense of free speech and free religious expression. Though at times justified, this position indicates a sort of rhetorical backpedaling whereby religious speakers defend the right to hold unpopular views rather than attempting to defend the views themselves. I conclude by suggesting a religious politics in the broad sense of the term, advising religious advocates to return to a public practice of their faith that rejects political ambition.

In October 2011, during an interview with the conservative blog *Caffeinated Thoughts*, then-long-shot-presidential candidate Rick Santorum offered his unsolicited view on “the dangers of contraception.” Regretting its growing acceptance among Christians, Santorum insisted that birth control is “not okay.” “It’s not okay,” he explained, “because it’s a license to do things in the sexual realm that is counter to how things are supposed to be. They’re supposed to be within marriage, they are supposed to be for purposes that are, yes, conjugal, but also [inaudible], but also procreative. That’s the perfect way that a sexual union should happen. We take any part of that out, we diminish the act” (Santorum, 2011). These comments, made candidly and before a sympathetic audience, were perfectly consistent with the speaker’s orthodox Catholicism, and thus represented a legitimate religious view. Though Santorum was criticized for the remarks, his sincerity was not called into question and his critics made no attempt to strip him of the right to hold this opinion.

By the following February, however, Santorum’s stance on the “danger” of contraception had softened as his poll numbers rose. During his remarks to the 2012 Conservative Political Action Convention, a revitalized Santorum mentioned contraception almost in passing, dismissing his previous concerns and replacing them with a series of *freedom* arguments. Amid a litany of other complaints about the controversial Affordable Care Act (ACA), Santorum cited the ACA’s “contraception

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mandate” as an unjust imposition on citizens. “Ladies and Gentlemen,” he said, “this is the kind of coercion that we can expect. It’s not about contraception. It’s about economic liberty. It’s about freedom of speech. It’s about freedom of religion. It’s about government control of your lives and it’s gotta stop!” (Santorum, 2012). Clearly, Santorum’s risk-averse campaign had decided that the dangers-of-contraception fight was not worth having. Adapting to circumstance, his highly touted religious conservatism was quietly recast in the ideographs of liberal democracy.

Understood as a simple instance of focus-grouped campaign mind-changing, Santorum’s rhetorical turn is not particularly noteworthy. But if we understand it as symptomatic of a larger trend—indeed, as a rather common rhetorical practice—we may draw some satisfactory conclusions about the status of religious rhetoric in public life.

Though the question of public religiosity is older than America itself, its contemporary iteration is largely traceable to the rise of the New Christian Right—the ideological precursors to Rick Santorum. In his important book *The Naked Public Square*, Richard John Neuhaus (1984) cites the rise of “politicized fundamentalism” as the exigence for renewed interest in issues surrounding religious politics (p. 19). Persistently critical of the substance of this movement, Neuhaus vigorously counters those who would have it relegated to the private sphere. “Christian truth,” he writes, “if it is true, is public truth. It is accessible to public reason. It impinges upon public space. At some critical points of morality and ethics it speaks to public policy” (p. 19). For Neuhaus, the *publicity* of religious belief disqualifies it from purely private practice. Those who subscribe to religious truths are obligated to advance those truths in the public square, and citizens of a liberal society are obligated to let them. All too often, Neuhaus worries, religious participation is unjustly stanchied. At best, religious arguments must be “‘translated’ into more general terms in order to be admitted to the public arena” (p. 107).

About a decade later, Stephen L. Carter followed up on Neuhaus’s work in his own book, *The Culture of Disbelief*. In it, Carter (1993) suggests that the threat to religious expression comes less from public hostility than from triviality, since public institutions tend to treat religion like a “hobby” rather than an issue of import to serious citizens. “In our sensible zeal to keep religion from dominating our politics,” he writes, “we have created a political and legal culture that presses the religiously faithful to be other than themselves, to act publicly, and sometimes privately as well, as though their faith does not matter to them” (p. 3). Ascribing this change to a “burgeoning strand in American political theory,” Carter argues that calls for inclusivity have morphed into demands for *secularity*.

[W]hatever grounds might lead citizens to their political views, the views must be justified in secular terms—that is, without regard to religion—when they enter the public square and urge other citizens to act. This, in turn, is part of a larger effort

by the contemporary liberal philosophers to create a conversational space in which individuals of very different viewpoints can join dialogic battle, in accord with a set of dialogic conventions that all can accept. The philosophical idea is that even though all of us have differing personal backgrounds and biases, we nevertheless share certain moral premises in common. If we then exclude what we do not have in common, what remains can be the basis for a conversation (p. 54–55).

As exemplary of this idea, Carter cites political scientist Stephen Holmes, who argues that, in a liberal social order, “the basic normative framework must be able to command the loyalty of individuals and groups with widely differing self-understandings and conceptions of personal fulfillment.” (p. 55). Also mentioned are Bruce Ackerman, who sees in dialogue an effort to “locate normative premises both sides find reasonable,” and Thomas Nagel, who similarly privileges “the exercise of a common critical rationality” (p. 55).¹ All agree that productive discourse is predicated on the identification and cultivation of common ground. But unfortunately, Carter concludes, such dedication to shared premises is almost certain to exclude unshared religious beliefs.

Recent scholarly work in communication studies has sought to address this problem through rhetorical prescriptions. Dave Tell (2007) has argued for an Augustinian approach to religious speech, one that emphasizes the “ambiguity” of the public square rather than its “neutrality.” Such an approach privileges good-faith efforts that work toward important political ends, advanced in a spirit of “epistemic humility” that refuses to assert a “final vocabulary” (p. 228). Similarly, Mark Allen Steiner (2009) has proposed a “faithful witness” model dedicated to a series of “corrective features,” each aimed at fixing the well-documented problems of political religiosity. Among these is a commitment to “epistemological modesty” that echoes Tell (p. 295). Though both approaches are commendable—even *inspiring*—they both rely on virtues that tend to wither in the heat of politics. Election and legislation are competitive processes, meaning that candidates and advocates trade in an economy of certainty. The quality that makes these approaches attractive is thus also the primary obstacle to their implementation. Even religious people like to back winners, and winners are not often known for being humble.

This essay seeks to contribute to the above conversation by analyzing how so-called “culture war” arguments—particularly those associated with the so-called Christian Right—navigate the pitfalls confronting religious speech in public. Rick Santorum’s decision to downplay his religious view in favor of a broader commitment to *freedoms* and *liberties* is exemplary of a larger trend in which conservative Christian activists and politicians consistently recast their religious

¹ See Holmes, Stephen. (1988). “Gag Rules or the Politics of Omission.” In Jon Elster and Rune Slagstad, Eds., *Constitutionalism and Democracy*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 19–21; Ackerman, Bruce. (1989). “Why Dialogue?” *Journal of Philosophy*, 86, 5, 17–18; and Nagel, Thomas. (1987). “Moral Conflict and Political Legitimacy.” *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 16, 215.

positions in a secular, liberal idiom.² Though this trend does validate arguments made by Neuhaus and Carter, their correct identification of *effect* nonetheless fails to pin down the right *cause*. I will argue that the secularization and liberalization of religious-political argument owes less to coercion from liberal theorists and hostile institutions than to the rigorous demands of coalition-building in public advocacy. In other words, it is not that religious advocates are forced to soften their religiosity in order to enter the public square. It is rather that they are forced to soften their religiosity if they want to appeal to a broad, politically influential audience. The alignment with *freedom* further serves to assuage the concerns many citizens have about religious figures in positions of power.

The argument proceeds in three parts. First, I provide some background on culture war rhetoric since the rise of the New Christian Right in the 1970s. Here I situate the question of public religiosity within the appropriate historical and theoretical contexts. Second, I consider a case study of secular, liberal argumentation in action. By analyzing conservative rejoinders to the growing acceptance of same-sex marriage—particularly those of National Organization for Marriage co-founder Maggie Gallagher—I show how conservative rhetors have come to routinely distance themselves from religious motivation, attempting instead to capture the high ground of liberal democracy. This demonstration justifies the title of the essay, establishing how conservative culture warriors are “fighting for freedom” in at least two senses: first, in the general, ideographic sense to which all American causes lay claim, and, second, for the power to define how freedom is understood in American life. Finally, I conclude by proposing an alternative approach to religious-political action, one that remains distinctly religious by deprioritizing the push for political power.

The Culture War Hypothesis and Its Discontents

Though the culture war frame is generally applied to social issue activism in the decades following the licentious 1960s, the frame itself was only developed and popularized in the 1990s. In 1991, sociologist James Davison Hunter published *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, a book that formally introduced and extrapolated the concept for a general readership. The definitive work on its subject, this text offers an important historical-theoretical starting point for any scholarly discussion of culture war rhetoric. Hunter’s classifications and categories have been so influential, in fact, that virtually every subsequent treatment of culture war discourse has seen fit to respond to them in some way.

Noting the fundamentally religious nature of culture war issues, Hunter suggests that contemporary struggles have been born out of an important

² “Liberal” is a promiscuous word, and may prove confusing in an essay that often invokes it alongside “conservative.” For the sake of clarity, readers may expect the term to designate liberalism in the sense of the political philosophy in which freedom is the primary value.

realignment of old oppositions. In the 19th century, he argues, American religious strife was mostly defined by resentment between Protestants and Catholics, or Christians and Jews, or Mormons and everyone else. But the early years of the 20th century marked a pluralistic shift, in which a broad biblical theism helped to unify the competing factions along lines of agreement and common interest. Former rivals became tentative friends over a shared commitment to symbols of national identity, particularly those drawn from the book of Exodus, through which America was linked to the coming Kingdom of God. But though pluralism enabled a loose religious consensus in the first half of the century, its expansion in the postwar years stretched that consensus at the seams. The gradual inclusion of Islamic, Hindu, and Buddhist traditions—among others—displaced the emergent “Judeo-Christian” hegemony. In this increasingly complex religious environment, the locus of impartiality increasingly fell upon secular premises. On the forward edge of religious pluralism, Hunter argues, the “major rift” moved from theology and doctrine to “a more fundamental disagreement over the sources of moral truth” (p. 77).

To diagnose this rift, Hunter cautiously adopts a pair of “polarizing impulses” that resemble but are not always as coherent as distinctive worldviews. These he terms the “orthodox” and the “progressive.” Orthodoxy is defined by “the commitment on the part of adherents to an external, definable, and transcendent authority” (p. 44). It views truth as absolute, revealed in sacred texts and determinative of moral codes that are unchanging and non-negotiable. Those who embrace the orthodox impulse tend to be traditionalists, placing value on the certainty and order that accompany objective standards of right and wrong. Progressivism, by contrast, demonstrates a “tendency to resymbolize historic faiths according to the prevailing assumptions of contemporary life” (p. 45). It views truth as an evolving human construction, subject to rationality and situation. Those who adhere to the progressivist impulse are skeptical of absolutes, preferring to read sacred texts and traditions in light of contemporary theories. Whereas an orthodox reader accepts scripture as the literal and divinely inspired word of God, a progressivist reader considers its human authorship, preferring to place sacred texts in conversation with personal experience and rational argument. It is these impulses, operating within and across religious traditions, that draw the discursive battle lines of the culture war. They help explain how devotees of disparate faiths may band together to form alliances against dissenters in their own respective ranks. As constitutive of a fundamental “realignment,” Hunter concludes, these impulses are ubiquitous in the United States: they are “there in San Francisco, there in Hartford, there in Cleveland, there in Boise, there in Birmingham, there in towns and cities all across America” (p. 48).

In the years following the publication of *Culture Wars*, however, Hunter’s work yielded a cottage industry of critics, many of whom argued that his

conclusions were not supported by the available data. These include Steven Brint (1992), who declared that “there is no culture war in America” (p. 440); Christian Smith and his colleagues (1996), who concurred that “the culture war is a myth” (p. 10); and Nancy Davis and Robert Robinson (1996), who dismissed Hunter’s construction as “simply false” (p. 243). Alan Wolfe (1998) concluded that there “is little truth to the charge that middle-class Americans, divided by a culture war, have split into two hostile camps” (p. 320). Morris Fiorina (2005) was likewise emphatic. “The culture war script embraced by journalists and politicians lies somewhere between simple exaggeration and sheer nonsense,” he wrote. “There is no culture war in the U.S.—no battle for the soul of America rages, at least none that most Americans are aware of” (p. A14).³ For over a decade, these scholars joined others in rejecting the narrative of separation and polarization envisioned in Hunter’s work.⁴

But if the volume of public opinion polling touted by Hunter’s critics belied the image of a deeply divided America, it could not easily dispense with the powerful and vitriolic forces he had so carefully documented. Hunter knew that the anger and disagreement surrounding controversial social issues were not simply mythical. In a 2006 essay, he defended his work by suggesting that his critics have misunderstood the central contention of his argument. Rather than claiming to diagnose the collective psyche of the American people, Hunter (2006) explains that his was a more specific interest in cultural forces and their propagation:

Collective psychology is fine as far as it goes; it can teach much about the patterns and trends of opinion and belief. But the argument about a culture war in America was based upon a different understanding of culture, one that was strongly influenced by the structural turn in cultural analysis. This turn viewed culture not as the norms and values residing in people’s heads and hearts but rather as systems of symbols and other cultural artifacts, institutions that produce and promulgate those symbols, discourses that articulate and legitimate particular interests, and competing fields where culture is contested. For my own part, the heart of the culture war hypothesis was the contention that there had been a realignment in American public culture that had been and still is institutionalized chiefly through special interest organizations, denominations, political parties, foundations, competing media outlets, professional associations, and the elites whose ideals, interests, and actions give all of these organizations direction and leadership. (p. 20)

Hunter goes on to explain that, in distinguishing between the orthodox and the progressive in American political life, he was primarily interested in the dynamics of “collective identity formation,” defined as “the necessity for an ‘other’ to clarify the moral boundaries of the group and reinforce the moral authority of its elites” (p. 21). By considering the “structural developments and processes” that generate collective identities, he hoped to demonstrate that the competing moral visions

³ See also Fiorina, Morris. (2010). *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*. 3rd ed. New York: Pearson Longman.

⁴ These dissents are drawn from a more exhaustive review in Hunter, 2006, 17.

represented in culture war debates had become a reality *sui generis*, “larger than—indeed autonomous from—the sum total of individuals and organizations that give expression to the conflict” (p. 21). This demonstration would ultimately explain, in a manner agreeable to his critics, “how public discourse becomes more polarized than Americans as a people are” (p. 21). For Hunter, in other words, the culture war hypothesis was—and is—primarily applicable to social movements and their leaders. If special interest groups and politicians have not yet succeeded in polarizing and mobilizing the majority of American citizens, their failure has not been for lack of trying.

The polarization that occupies the “common ground” of this debate—namely, that which is kindled and stoked by movement elites—is vital to understanding the broader discussion surrounding religious participation in public. The emergence of the New Christian Right marked the beginning of an organized and orthodox politics unapologetically demanding policy adherence to the absolute truths of the Christian faith. One notable component of this project was the *otherizing* of political foes, a process that necessarily condemned opponents in moral-religious terms. For a time, the movement was very successful, influencing elections and representing constituencies that had felt excluded from the political process. But it also inspired a fierce backlash, one that often cited the stern religiosity of Christian activists as a clear and present threat to the freedoms of those they would govern. Consequently, perceptions of religious citizenship quickly became tied up with perceptions of Jerry Falwell, whose most distinctive public quality was a blustering, accusatory intolerance. Christians who today labor under the weight of negative stereotypes are thus the victims—at least in part—of past success. They are left insisting, to mixed effect, that they are *not like that*. Indeed, the scholarly consensus testifies that almost no one is actually as intense as culture war rhetoric would suggest. If American political discourse is burdened with division and distrust, the origins of these problems are themselves largely discursive.

This is not to argue, of course, that the threats associated with religious politics are imaginary or benign. Historian David Sehat (2011) has clearly documented the troublesome history of the “moral establishment” in America, and there is ample reason to oppose its resurrection (p. 4). In fact, much of the “political and legal culture” critiqued by Carter was at one time constructed in direct response to the excesses of the 19th-century church-state. Rather, I am suggesting that those who would bring their religious beliefs to bear on public matters must adapt their rhetorical practices to the realities of history and public perception.

For the remainder of this essay, that *must* will perform a sort of double-duty. In the first sense, it acknowledges the simple fact that rhetorical decisions are not made in a vacuum. If orthodox culture warriors want to stay in the ever-evolving fight, they have to strategize accordingly. As Neuhaus and Carter observe,

this often means recasting religious views in secular terms. And as Rick Santorum demonstrates, those secular terms might emphasize a commitment to freedom, thereby (over)compensating for the danger religious speakers are widely believed to pose. This, in short, is simply to evaluate the situation as it stands. In the second sense, to be explored at greater length in the conclusion, I will suggest that the failures of culture war politics demand a revised public Christianity, one that prioritizes faithful service ahead of political influence. First, though, I turn to a timely case study to analyze this rhetorical adaptation in action.

Same-Sex Marriage and the Contested Nature of Freedom

Approximately one month before his swearing in, then President-elect Barack Obama selected Pastor Rick Warren of the Lake Forest, California, Saddleback Church to deliver the inaugural invocation. Though Obama and Warren had cooperated on several public forums in the past, their strong ideological differences gave the pick an unusual character. Asked by reporters to explain the decision, Obama framed it as an exercise in inclusion. “We’re not going to agree on every single issue,” he said, “but what we have to do is to be able to create an atmosphere where we can disagree without being disagreeable, and then focus on those things that we hold in common as Americans” (Madden, 2008). This explanation, however, proved unsatisfactory to many of Obama’s supporters and left-leaning writers in the blogosphere as well as the mainstream press debated the selection right up to inauguration day.

Specifically, the controversy stemmed from comments Warren had made in support of California’s Proposition 8, which amended the state Constitution to specify that only marriage between a man and a woman is valid or recognized in California. In December 2008, shortly after the election, Warren told Beliefnet.com editor Steven Waldman that same-sex marriage was the moral equivalent to a list of non-normative sexual arrangements that most consider deviant. “I’m opposed to having a brother and sister being together and calling that marriage,” he said. “I’m opposed to an older guy marrying a child and calling that marriage. I’m opposed to one guy having multiple wives and calling that marriage.” Pressed by Waldman to explain this equivalency, Warren changed directions, framing his position in terms of freedom. “The reason I supported Proposition 8,” he said, “is really a free speech issue. Because first the court overrode the will of the people, but second there were all kinds of threats that if that did not pass then any pastor could be considered doing hate speech if he shared his views that he didn’t think homosexuality was the most natural way for relationships, and that would be hate speech. We should have freedom of speech, ok?” (Warren, 2008). Charged with defending an increasingly unpopular religious view, Warren retreated into the language of liberty.

Around the turn of the millennium, same-sex marriage emerged as one of the most urgent and controversial culture war issues under discussion in America. In

one respect, this prominence is striking. A majority of Americans opposed same-sex marriage in 2000 and had been opposing it for as long as anyone could remember (Newport, 2011). As recently as ten years previous, the prospect was simply inconceivable. Though author and activist Andrew Sullivan made a “conservative case” for gay marriage in 1989, few of his readers—and neither of the major political parties—took the idea seriously. But public opinion changed rapidly in the first decade of the new century, effectively turning an about-face in the direction of approval. This placed opponents of same-sex marriage—many of whom had been confidently outspoken on all “gay rights” issues for several decades—in an awkward position. When lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) individuals were marginalized and stigmatized, religious activists routinely condemned them in the language of sin and deviance. But as LGBT citizens became increasingly accepted, leading conservatives—including Rick Santorum—pulled a Rick Santorum. They developed new arguments, this time in defense of their own freedoms. Before analyzing these arguments, some background is necessary.

Gay Rights—and Freedoms—in the Culture War Era

The contemporary “gay rights” movement—like the contemporary culture war—is largely a product of the 1970s. Though many trace the movement to the “Stonewall Riots” of 1969, it is also attributable to an array of events shortly before and after. As media scholar Fred Fejes (2008) has noted, homosexual activists faced two serious hurdles around this time. The first was legal, and the second was medical. In the first case, activists had to address the problem that homosexuality was barred by sodomy laws nationwide. Encouraged and aided by the successes of the Civil Rights movement, gay rights activists witnessed changing attitudes both in the legal community and in public opinion. In 1955, the American Law Institute voted to decriminalize consensual sodomy in its Model Penal Code. Illinois became the first state to adopt the revision in 1961, followed by other states during the 1970s. Britain repealed its sodomy law in 1966, and Canada followed in 1969. In 1971, the U.S. National Commission on Reform of Federal Criminal Laws endorsed the repeal of all federal laws pertaining to homosexual acts. Consistent with the broader social upheavals of the 1960s, the discourse surrounding gay rights became increasingly critical of the repressive, unjust nature of sodomy laws. While such laws would persist in many states until the Supreme Court’s 2003 ruling in *Lawrence v. Texas*, the 1970s hosted the beginnings of an obvious trend.

On the medical front, homosexuals continued to be marginalized by doctor’s orders. Fejes has noted that, “just as homosexuals were viewed as criminals, they were also viewed as psychologically sick” (p. 29). When the American Psychiatric Association (APA) published its first *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 1952, homosexuality was officially listed as a disorder. During that decade, this characterization was challenged by research from Alfred Kinsey,

anthropologists Cleland Ford and Frank Beach, and notably, psychologist Evelyn Hooker, whose 1957 paper, “The Adjustment of the Male Overt Homosexual,” offered a direct and compelling challenge to the APA’s premises. Additional work in the 1960s by radical psychiatrist Thomas Szasz highlighted the often repressive nature of the mental illness designation. In 1968, when the APA revised their manual into the *DSM-II*, homosexuality was removed from the disorder category and listed as a minor sexual deviation. In 1973, the term was dropped from the *DSM* entirely.

Given these successes, the gay rights movement had reason for optimism as the nation celebrated its bicentennial. The middle years of the 1970s played host to further victories at the local level, as anti-discrimination statutes passed in cities such as Minneapolis, Seattle, Boston, New York, and Washington, D.C. And despite the rise of conservative backlash movements such as those opposing the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and legalized abortion, anti-gay energies had not yet coalesced around any particular cause. This changed in 1977. Following the passage of a broad anti-discrimination law in Dade County, Florida, a local repeal initiative blossomed into what sociologist Tina Fetner (2008) has called “the first formal anti-gay movement organization” (p. 24). Headed by Anita Bryant, a former Miss Oklahoma and then-spokesperson for Florida Orange Juice, this organization was founded as Save Our Children, Inc., an intentionally provocative title based on Bryant’s claim that adult homosexuals actively sought to “recruit” children to their way of life.⁵ After successfully repealing the Dade County law, Bryant took the organization national, hoping to inspire and assist similar efforts around the country. One notable follower of Bryant’s was California State Senator John Briggs, author of that state’s Proposition 6, often referred to simply as “the Briggs Initiative.” Proposed in 1978 after a meeting between its author and Bryant, the Briggs Initiative sought to bar homosexuals and their supporters from employment in California public schools. Following Bryant’s example, Briggs maligned homosexuals as predatory threats to children. California’s gay community organized frantically in opposition, famously led by San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk. Though the Briggs Initiative went down in defeat on November 7, 1978, it was representative of the hostility faced by gays and lesbians nationwide.

The construction of the homosexual-as-threat, which has enjoyed a remarkable shelf life since the 1970s, was born out of what historian Philip Jenkins (2006) terms “the politics of children” (p. 108). As the country experienced rapid changes in gender and sexual norms, many issues experienced a shift in framing, such that political positions were adopted and defended based not on their implications for individual, autonomous adults, but on their implications for

⁵ Save Our Children was later renamed Save America’s Children, after a legal dispute with the London-based charity, Save the Children.

defenseless children. Jenkins cites anti-ERA and anti-abortion activism as primary exemplars of this trend, along with fresh concerns about child abuse, molestation, sex rings, drugs, and cult activity. Fueled by sensationalist media attention, the public discourse of the late 1970s became fertile ground for a variety of moral panics, creating and sustaining the widespread perception that American children were in desperate need of new protections. In each case, given the maliciousness of the threats and the heart-rending pathos of the targets, deliberation and compromise were promptly subordinated to decisive action. "The answer to such threats lay not in social reform nor in legal liberalization," Jenkins writes, "it was a matter of war" (p. 133).

In the 1980s, the homosexual casualties of that war took on a new and increasingly marginal identity through their association with a mysterious and deadly disease. Initially coined "gay-related immune deficiency," this condition entered the public eye as the "acquired immune deficiency syndrome" (AIDS). Though not relegated exclusively to homosexual acts, the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) was quickly transmitted throughout gay communities, with deadly results. First identified in June 1981, AIDS had infected 634 individuals in the United States by October 1982, already resulting in over 200 deaths. Despite the gravity of this situation, state and federal governments failed to act, leading to costly delays in research, education, and medical response. This failure, which has drawn sharp criticism in the decades since, has been widely attributed to the Reagan administration's callous disregard for gay citizens, and a corresponding lack of public empathy. Michael Bronski (2011) offers a representative take when he characterizes the lack of response as "willful negligence," lamenting the fact that "ignorance, misunderstanding, dislike, fear, and hatred of homosexuals could escalate to such an extent that large numbers of Americans could simply not care about the deaths of their fellow citizens" (p. 225). Bronski also cites reaction from prominent members of the Religious Right, such as Pat Buchanan, who wrote in 1990 that "AIDS is nature's retribution for violating the laws of nature," and Jerry Falwell, who declared that "AIDS is not just God's punishment for homosexuals. It is God's punishment for the society that tolerates homosexuals" (p. 226). A funding letter from the American Family Association advised that the quarantine of "all homosexual establishments is crucial to your family's health and security," since such "disease carrying deviants wander the streets unconcerned, possibly making you their next victim." After all, the letter concluded, "what else can you expect from sex-crazed degenerates but selfishness?" (p. 226). Despite the rise of advocacy organizations such as the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), the gay community struggled to respond to the AIDS crisis in a way that would effectively cure the problem on both medical and discursive fronts. By the closing days of the

1980s, the early successes of the gay-rights movement had been painfully eclipsed by a vicious backlash from conservative forces in both the government and the church.

Events in the 1990s began to signal another important shift, this time in the tentative direction of equality. In 1992, for instance, then-Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton campaigned for the presidency with a promise to revoke the military's long-standing ban on homosexual service. Though Republican opposition prevented Clinton from fulfilling his pledge, a compromise did emerge in 1993 when he issued a defense directive that service members and recruits not be asked about their sexuality. Also in that year, the Supreme Court of Hawaii ruled in the case of *Baehr v. Levin* that the state could not ban same-sex marriages without violating its own equal protection statutes. The state legislature promptly amended its constitution to nullify the ruling, but not before the issue of same-sex marriage had entered the national conversation. In 1996, President Clinton signed the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), a piece of legislation intended to preempt recognition of same-sex marriage at the federal level. Clinton's checkered relationship with the gay community took another turn in 1998, when he authored an executive order banning discrimination based on sexual orientation in federal hiring decisions. California adopted a statewide "Domestic Partnership Ordinance" in 1999, and Vermont became the first state to recognize "civil unions" in 2000. Though obviously separate from marriage, these controversial measures represented clear steps toward equality. Massachusetts legalized same-sex marriage in 2004, shortly after the Supreme Court struck down the nation's remaining sodomy laws.

From the discrimination law battles of the 70s, to the AIDS crisis of the 80s, to the struggle over open military service in the 90s, and finally to the same-sex marriage controversy of the new millennium, the story of gay rights activism in the era of culture war lends itself to a very American narrative—that of the struggle for freedom. At each turn, a marginalized group labors against oppressive forces to achieve independence and equality. Indeed, public opinion polling shows that Americans have increasingly come to accept it as such.⁶ This growing openness to

⁶ Gallup polling data shows national support for same-sex marriage increasing from 27 percent in 1996 to over 50 percent in 2013. In reviewing the recent history that hosted this change of heart, I have focused mostly on the challenges posed by institutional constraints and orthodox rhetors. These are vitally important to this history—and to my argument. But as Michael J. Klarman notes, high-profile controversies and legal battles—though important to influencing public opinion—may ultimately have been less important than personal interactions and relationships. "Despite the fierce *political* backlash ignited by gay-marriage rulings in the 1990s and 2000s," Klarman writes, "*public* backing for gay rights continued to grow, bolstered by sociological, demographic, and cultural factors. Perhaps the most important was that the proportion of Americans who reported knowing someone gay increased from 25 percent in 1985 to 74 percent in 2000. Knowing gay people strongly predicts support for gay rights; a 2004 study found that 65 percent of those who reported knowing someone gay favored gay marriage or civil unions, versus just 35 percent of those who reported not knowing any gays." As Americans began to accept homosexuality as a biological reality—rather than a choice—many came to accept the gay people in their own lives. The practice of "coming out"—by friends, family members, colleagues,

homosexuality has created remarkable changes in the discursive environment, prompting those opposed to such lifestyles to adapt their arguments. Unwilling to be cast as aggressors, conservative activists and politicians began asserting that it was *they*—not same-sex couples—who were besieged, that *their* basic liberties stood imperiled. By the time California began to consider Proposition 8, the nature of the debate had changed significantly from previous iterations. Arguments that had depended upon moral or religious premises in the past would now contend for control of the secular middle—the high ground of liberalism.

The Fight for Freedom

Rick Warren was not the only public figure to oppose same-sex marriage on freedom grounds. Nor was he the first to do so. In fact, Warren's clumsy transition from incest comparison to religious freedom stands as a representative anecdote for the broader orthodox position around this time. In one sense, the tenor of opposition to gay rights had not changed. Just as in previous years, opponents identified gays as *threatening* figures. But the emphasis was shifting from overt condemnation of acts to a more general concern over legal changes. If a straightforward religious argument would no longer do, a secular claim about free speech might make the case from a safer vantage. In other words, orthodox religious figures became less likely to condemn homosexuality. At the same time, they became more likely to defend condemnation as an American right.

In December 2005, the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty sponsored a conference on same-sex marriage and religious freedom. Featuring ten scholars from various political persuasions, the conference sought to explore the potential for conflict in the coming years. Covering the conference for the *Weekly Standard*, conservative author and activist Maggie Gallagher (2006a) quoted a variety of figures, emphasizing the broad-based agreement that problems may arise. Of these, the most temperate opinion may have come from Georgetown University law professor Chai Feldblum, who stated that, when religious liberty and sexual liberty conflict, "I'm having a hard time coming up with any case in which religious liberty should win" (pg. 21). For Gallagher—who would co-found the National Organization for Marriage (NOM) one year later—the moral of the story was *not* that same-sex marriage presented new challenges in need of deliberative resolution, but rather that its very existence constituted a tangible threat to religious critics. Noting the tendency of proponents to frame same-sex marriage as a civil rights issue, she predicted that supporters of "traditional" marriage would become increasingly marginalized over time, their opposition written off as bigotry akin to

pop stars, and public figures—has thus been instrumental in building support. See Saad, Lydia. (2013). "In U.S., 52% Back Law to Legalize Gay Marriage in 50 States." *Gallup Politics*. Retrieved from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/163730/back-law-legalize-gay-marriage-states.aspx>; Klarman, Michael J. (2013). "How Same-Sex Marriage Came to Be." *Harvard Magazine*. Retrieved from: <http://harvardmagazine.com/2013/03/how-same-sex-marriage-came-to-be>.

racism. Though the discouraging effects of such an atmosphere may amount only to “soft coercion,” in Gallagher’s view, they would still be “highly effective in chilling the speech of ordinary people” (pg. 21). Though this quickly became a corporate concern among orthodox elites, Gallagher was perhaps its earliest and most influential advocate.

The concern expressed by the Becket panelists—and amplified by Gallagher—was not merely theoretical. Even as the conference was underway in Washington, a dramatic situation was unfolding in Boston. It concerned the adoption practices of the Boston Catholic Charities. In October, the Boston *Globe* had reported that, of the 720 children placed by the organization since 1986, 13 had gone to same-sex couples. Shortly after, the Vatican responded to this news with a declaration that children from Catholic adoption agencies were to go *exclusively* to heterosexual parents (Wen, 2005). Since Massachusetts law prohibited discrimination based on sexual orientation, Catholic Charities found itself in a bind. Unable to reconcile church with state, the organization ceased adoptions entirely (Wen, 2006). In a statement released on March 10, 2006, Boston Archbishop Sean O’Malley cited an irrevocable conflict between Church doctrine and state law as the cause of the decision, and the decision itself as an exercise in religious freedom. “Sadly,” he wrote, “we have come to a moment when Catholic Charities in the Archdiocese of Boston must withdraw from the work of adoptions, in order to exercise the religious freedom that was the prompting for having begun adoptions many years ago” (O’Malley, 2006). The decision to suspend adoptions was indeed a sad one, and the outcome yielded no obvious winners. But for movement leaders like Gallagher, a silver lining emerged in the form of a winning argument.

If the traction it gained in 2006 was new, the argument itself was not. As early as 2001, Gallagher was defending opposition to same-sex marriage with recourse to speech codes. In August of that year, she published an article defending Rev. Walter Fauntroy, a black civil rights leader who had promoted the Federal Marriage Amendment and been subsequently criticized for his “alliance with anti-gay bigots” (Gallagher, 2001). Characterizing the complaints as “uncivil, name-calling, harassment tactics,” Gallagher argued that gay activists were guilty of “hate speech:”

The quiet, back-door demonization and harassment of Fauntroy is consistent with the ongoing attempt by certain gay organizations to shut down debate over this dangerous transformation that the courts are wreaking on our marriage laws. Increasingly, gay activists are the self-righteous zealots, stigmatizing any disagreement with their point of view, no matter how reasoned and civil, as bigotry, hate speech and discrimination. (Gallagher, 2001)

In adopting the charge of hate speech, Gallagher further appropriated the mantle of civil rights, an association that gay rights organizations had long cherished for themselves. “In the civil rights movement,” Gallagher wrote, “it was the racial

bigots who engaged in such name-calling. In the gay marriage movement, it is increasingly the advocates of gay marriage who claim the right to hate and stigmatize Americans who have a different point of view.” This chain of reasoning is fascinating in that, over the course of three paragraphs, Gallagher manages to capture and rechristen the central thrust of the gay rights argument. It is gays—not social conservatives—who are guilty of hate, and social conservatives—not gays—who are victims of stigmatization.

Gallagher carried this argument further in 2003, while defending then-Senator Rick Santorum from those who had criticized his support for Texas sodomy laws. Arguing that Santorum’s critics were trying to “shut down” the discussion, Gallagher dismissed their complaints by drawing a distinction between reasoned opposition and bigotry—and further, between “disagreements about homosexuality” and racism:

Disagreements about homosexuality are not going to go away because (unlike racism) they are not based primarily on prejudices, fear or animus but on profound disagreements about the meaning, purpose and function of human sexuality. I believe that men and women are made for each other, that we are a two-sex species designed for sexual, not unisexual, reproduction. You may disagree. That is fine. I am surrounded by people who disagree with me on sexual matters. We can live together in civil society without hating or oppressing one another. (Gallagher, 2003)

Gallagher’s claim to speak on behalf of civil discourse serves to capture the moral high ground for herself while simultaneously relegating her foes to the depths of incivility. That opposition to same-sex marriage is “not based primarily on prejudices, fear or animus” is presented as a given, and, in the final line, gay activists are cast as the oppressors. Gallagher defused the urgent call for marriage equality by suggesting that things were fine the way they were—that oppression was not a *de facto* reality for any of the concerned parties—and that intelligent people could disagree without becoming overly aggressive. By resorting to accusations of insensitivity and impropriety, Gallagher wrote, Santorum’s critics were suggesting that “we have to choose between tolerating gays and lesbians and tolerating common sense (not to mention Catholicism) in public life” (Gallagher, 2003). While the opposition of gays and lesbians to common sense is significant in this construction, a more ominous conflict would be the opposition to Catholicism, and with it, religious freedom.

By 2006, the Boston Catholic Charities case had prompted Gallagher (2006a) to make “the coming conflict between same-sex marriage and religious liberty” a centerpiece of her opposition (p. 20). The question in that case, she wrote, was “not whether gays are going to be allowed legally to adopt. It is whether religious people who morally object to gay adoption will be allowed to help children find homes. This is not about gay adoption—it is about our fundamental commitment to religious liberty in this country” (Gallagher, 2006b). When Senators

Ted Kennedy and Harry Reid made statements critical of the proposed “Marriage Protection Amendment,” Gallagher attacked them both as enemies of religious liberty, dubbing Kennedy “the Senator who cried ‘bigot’” (Gallagher, 2006c).

The issue became front-page news nationwide in 2008, when the California Supreme Court ruled that marriage rights could not be denied to homosexual couples. Calling the ruling “outrageous and sweeping,” Gallagher announced that her National Organization for Marriage had quickly raised \$1 million “to get a state marriage amendment overturning this ruling on the ballot in November” (Gallagher, 2008). The organization had collected 1,122,000 signatures to support the initiative (well over the 690,000 required by the state), and Gallagher stated her intention to raise an additional \$10 million “to get the message out” (Gallagher, 2008). That message produced Proposition 8, a measure that would amend the California Constitution to declare that “only marriage between a man and a woman is valid or recognized in California.” As the election drew near, NOM was joined by other socially conservative organizations that considered the initiative of vital importance to the nation’s future. In October, Laurie Goodstein (2008) wrote in the *New York Times* that conservative religious leaders from across the country were “pouring time, talent, and millions of dollars into the state in support of Proposition 8,” with the understanding that California “sets the cultural trends for the rest of the country and even the world” (p. A12). Prison Fellowship Ministries founder and former Nixon advisor Charles Colson told reporters, “This vote on whether we stop the gay-marriage juggernaut in California is Armageddon. We lose this, we are going to lose in a lot of other ways, including freedom of religion” (p. A12). Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council, told an interviewer that the Proposition 8 vote was “more important than the presidential election,” adding “we’ve picked bad presidents before, and we’ve survived as a nation. But we will not survive if we lose the institution of marriage” (p. A12). Donald Wildmon, founder of the American Family Association, said that the failure of Proposition 8 would mean that “the culture war is over and Christians have lost.” Further, “California is a big dam, holding back the flood, and if you take down the dam in California, it’s going to flood 49 other states” (Wildermuth, 2008). Clearly, religious liberty had resonance, as did the threat posed by same-sex marriage.

On November 4, 2008, voters in California passed Proposition 8 with 52% of the vote. California joined Florida and Arizona as the only states to consider a same-sex marriage ban that year—down from eight in 2006 and eleven in 2004—and it passed in all three. The *New York Times* reported that a total of \$73 million had been spent on the race, setting a record for “a ballot measure on a social issue” (Archibold and Goodnough, 2008). Of that total, approximately \$40 million was spent by the measure’s proponents, much of it donated by religious organizations. In fact, upwards of \$20 million was drawn from fund-raising in the Church of Jesus

Christ of Latter-Day Saints alone, solidifying an alliance between Catholics, Protestants, and Mormons on the issue (McKinley and Johnson, 2008). While it is difficult to identify causation between an argument and an effect, the overwhelming support offered by orthodox religious organizations, particularly in the closing days of the campaign, suggests that the freedom argument was widely successful.⁷

Apparently satisfied with the result, Gallagher continued to push the religious liberty line in subsequent cases, after Proposition 8 was left to the province of the courts. In April of 2009, she directed her attention to developments in Iowa and Vermont, both of which approved same-sex marriage rights in the wake of Prop 8.⁸ In this article Gallagher argued that same-sex marriage is antithetical to religious liberty, because it “asks religious Americans to surrender a core belief—no, not Leviticus (disapproval of gay sexual acts), but Genesis—the idea that God himself made male and female and commanded men and women to come together in a special way to image the fruitfulness of God” (Gallagher, 2009a). One month later, in an article decrying the “redefinition” of marriage, Gallagher suggested that flexibility with the meaning of one public institution may drift dangerously into the redefinition of others. “Take ‘religious liberty,’” she wrote, “Religious liberty is a deeply American solution to a perennial problem. It means that every individual has a right to pursue ultimate meaning without coercion from the government. Totalitarian governments repress religion because they recognize faith communities as competitors with the state’s power to define—and redefine—human rights” (Gallagher, 2009b). In doing so, Gallagher completed an important chain of thought: the redefinition of marriage leads to the redefinition of freedom, in a way that empowers a totalitarian state.

If it had not already become conservative orthodoxy in the years before Prop 8, the freedom argument became ubiquitous by the time that fight had ended. A few months afterward, *Christianity Today* columnist Mollie Ziegler Hemmingway (2009) carefully turned the rhetorical tables on Prop 8 opponents, dismissing them as “obnoxious, bigoted mobs” and lamenting that “same-sex marriage and religious freedom are on a collision course.” Writing about the issue for the *Dallas Morning*

⁷ Though the deployment of religious liberty arguments by “pro-family” advocacy groups and their leaders was undoubtedly influential during the Prop 8 fight, most voters probably encountered the “threat” of same-sex marriage in their living rooms. NOM invested millions of dollars in television ads that played upon a variety of potential insecurities. One of these, known as the “Gathering Storm” ad, depicted a diverse collection of individuals standing beneath storm clouds and expressing their fears about the various ways advocates of same-sex marriage were trying to impose upon them. The ad’s melodramatic quality quickly inspired a host of YouTube parodies and was further lampooned on Comedy Central’s *The Colbert Report*.

⁸ Notably, Vermont was the first state to approve same-sex marriage through the legislature, as opposed to the courts. Unable to charge judicial activism in this case, Gallagher focused on the Vermont legislature’s attention to religious liberty protections, offering lukewarm approval. She also noted that proponents of the bill approved of such protections, but she did not consider this space grounds for deliberative resolution.

News in December 2012, quoting Cardinal Francis George of Chicago, conservative columnist Rod Dreher wrote “while he expects to die in his bed, ‘my successor will die in prison and his successor will die a martyr in the public square.’” “When people deny that religious liberty is not a meaningful issue in the gay marriage debate,” Dreher went on, “do not believe them.” In June 2013, when the Supreme Court invalidated Prop 8 and the Defense of Marriage Act, Kim Daniels (2013) declared in the *National Review*, “If same-sex marriage continues to gain ground in our law and culture, we’ll see an increased erosion of religious believers’ freedom to witness to their faith. And if that happens, we all lose out. A robust pluralism of diverse views will give way to an increasingly homogenized public life.”⁹

Opposition to same-sex marriage in the early 21st century has thus assumed the form of a defense of liberal rights, especially the rights of free speech and free religious expression. This defense is predicated on a series of role reversals between social conservatives and the gay community. Homosexuals are viewed as threatening to heterosexuals—rather than vice-versa—and are positioned to strip heterosexuals of their liberties—rather than vice versa. As an evolved amalgam of older arguments, this position also casts gay lifestyles as threats to marriage and threats to (adopted) children. Adapting to the greater acceptance of gays in American culture, it carefully critiques social arrangements and (potential) speech codes without condemning homosexuals as a deviant class. As such, the religious freedom argument is not entirely dissimilar from the more vitriolic claims of gay-rights opponents from years past. It is merely adapted to the changed rhetorical environment.

Conclusion

This essay began with the suggestion that orthodox culture war rhetors have increasingly turned from a prophetic religious stance, instead embracing freedom arguments better suited to a liberal public square. They have done this, I argued, not because public religiosity is forbidden, but because they want to appeal to a broad, politically influential audience. By melding the religious ethos with a strong defense

⁹ A more circumspect view of the threat posed by same-sex marriage is offered by Ross Douthat in a March 31, 2013 op-ed for the *New York Times*. In this piece, Douthat grants the seeming inevitability of same-sex marriage while calling on proponents to concede certain “social costs” it will likely incur. Douthat writes, “A more honest, less triumphalist case for gay marriage would be willing to concede that, yes, there might be some social costs to redefining marriage. It would simply argue that those costs are too diffuse and hard to quantify to outweigh the immediate benefits of recognizing gay couples’ love and commitment. Such honesty would make social liberals more magnanimous in what looks increasingly like victory, and less likely to hound and harass religious institutions that still want to elevate and defend the older marital ideal.” Here Douthat steps away from the movement-driven alarmism associated with his position and invites his opponents to do the same. In this space, disputants may have a frank discussion about the effects of redefinition in an age of technological advancements that have in many ways devalued traditional gender norms within marital relationships. See Douthat, Ross. (2013). “Marriage Looks Different Now.” *The New York Times*. Retrieved from: http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/31/opinion/sunday/douthat-marriage-looks-different-now.html?_r=0.

of freedom, these rhetors stake a claim on the meaning of freedom, asserting the right to deploy it toward religious-political ends. This tactic has the added bonus of allaying widespread public fears regarding the coercive potential of religious politics. A timely case study was found in orthodox opposition to same-sex marriage. With help from Maggie Gallagher and other conservative movement leaders, I have demonstrated how opponents of gay rights have transitioned from a religious, condemnatory rhetoric to a liberal, defensive posture based on the protection of threatened American rights. The subtext of this shift is that the most threatened right is that of religious, condemnatory rhetoric.

Still, the claim that this tactic is representative of a larger rhetorical shift has perhaps not been fully proven. This omission may provide an avenue for further research, as there is certainly a wealth of anecdotal evidence to guide the way. As far back as the 1970s, Phyllis Schlafly was fighting the Equal Rights Amendment on grounds that “women’s liberation” actually made women less free. Around the same time, Christian philosopher Francis Schaeffer was inspiring a generation of revisionist historians with the suggestion that American freedom is dependent upon American Christianity. For all of its prophecy and accusation, Randall Terry’s anti-abortion activism has always framed itself as a liberal defense of the “right to life.” More recently, Philip E. Johnson has advanced Intelligent Design theory in the secular name of academic freedom. And as a pair of quotations from presidential candidate Rick Santorum demonstrated early on, religious opposition to contraception has become a contentious freedom issue, too. In each case, the liabilities of religious speech have been subsumed and insulated by an accessible, familiar liberality.

This rhetorical adaptation is dependent on a certain degree of misdirection. Though religious rhetors may be every bit as committed to liberty as other American citizens, there is something underhanded in the way that commitment is commonly touted ahead of an otherwise conspicuous orthodoxy. Impartial observers must concede, for instance, that Maggie Gallagher’s passion for freedom is considerably less fervent where the freedoms of gays and lesbians are concerned. Less impartial observers might suggest that, for Gallagher, freedom serves as a sort of Trojan Horse secreting a coercive moralism. As this essay indicates, I have my suspicions. But it is possible that, even if religious speech is not explicitly forbidden in public, it has too often found itself in a double bind. In order to expand their influence in the political realm, religious speakers seem to fashion their arguments in secular terms. Once admitted, these arguments have been rigorously scrutinized for religious intent, and at times exposed as tools of subversion. Thus Carter’s prophecy fulfills itself in the end. The appropriation of purely secular, liberal terminologies by religious interests, undertaken in the hope of rallying a broad coalition, is ultimately rejected, less for its religiosity than for its duplicity. If it is true that liberal

philosophers prefer a discursive environment founded upon shared values, it is then incumbent upon them to theorize a space for honest religious participation in such an environment.

The difficulty of this task is clear. Defenders of religious politics necessarily tread upon fine lines, careful to justify participation while disclaiming imposition. Their arguments are in some ways reflective of the culture war tendency this project has sought to identify. Namely, writers such as Neuhaus and Carter advocate a public religiosity that is accessible but not alienating, conciliatory but not colonizing. For some liberal thinkers, this effort is suspect in itself. John Gray's (2000) critique flatly denies liberalism's ability to facilitate deliberation across religious difference, citing the illiberality of much religious belief as a primary obstacle. He writes:

In the USA there is virtually no group that does not invoke liberal principles. Yet America is no different from the rest of the world in being riven by conflicts between ways of life. The quarter of the American population that espouses creationism, 'the right to life,' and other fundamentalist causes does not repudiate liberal values explicitly – as people with similar beliefs do elsewhere in the world. It appropriates them for its own purposes. The strategic deployment of liberal discourse for fundamentalist ends by a large segment of the population is not a consensus on liberal values. It is practically the opposite. Like other modern societies, the United States is not hegemonically liberal but morally pluralist. (p. 14)

Here Gray represents the most prominent critique of the liberalizing tendency in religious activism. Essentially, he suggests that the liberal values touted by “fundamentalist” forces are purely decorative, masking the distinctly illiberal values being advanced in disguise. There is much to commend this argument, but it is not ultimately damning. To suggest, as Gray does, that illiberal intentions are detrimental to the deployment of liberal arguments is to underestimate the viability of the system. Fundamentalist participation in liberal dialogue cannot be offered as evidence against liberal hegemony, if only because such participation *proves* that liberal hegemony is alive and well. This is because, regardless of intent, liberal arguments must necessarily succeed or fail according to their embodiment of liberal ideals. If anything, the appropriation of liberalism by fundamentalism is itself counter-subversive, allowing the former to quietly co-opt the latter. This point is made eloquently by Kwame Anthony Appiah (2005), who writes that the appropriation of liberal values—even by liberalism's most vehement adversaries—is the precise end to which those values were created, resulting in “not the subversion of liberal language so much as its vindication” (p. 45). If liberalism is able to domesticate and embrace even the most illiberal of voices, it may yet achieve the goal of the religious-political apologists—that of safely “clothing” the public square.

But it is also possible that subversion is a layered phenomenon, crossing and double-crossing those who deploy it. Some have argued that culture warriors are the court jesters of American political life, providing well-publicized cover for more cynical and powerful interests. Thomas Frank (2004), for instance, has argued

that culture war issues mobilize poor and working class voters to support politicians and policies inimical to their own well-being. Warning against what he calls “managed democracy,” Sheldon Wolin (2008) agrees, arguing that the primary function of social issue discourse is more *economic* than social. He writes:

The point about disputes on such topics as the value of sexual abstinence, the role of religious charities in state-funded activities, the question of gay marriage, and the like, is that they are not framed to be resolved. Their political function is to divide the citizenry while obscuring class differences and diverting the voters’ attention from the social and economic concerns of the general populace. Culture wars might seem an indication of strong political involvements. Actually they are a substitute. The notoriety they receive from the media and from politicians eager to take firm stands on nonsubstantive issues serves to distract attention and contribute to a cant politics of the inconsequential. (pp. 111–112)

No solid conclusions may be drawn about the political value of culture war discourse without first considering these points. If it is true that the passion and vitriol that drive social issue movements are merely the product of ginned up controversy and class warfare from above, then those who participate truly are an even mix of knaves and fools. But values come in a variety of forms, and there is nothing inherently illogical about a citizen who prioritizes his view of the moral good ahead of his own financial interest. The wealthy man who calls for higher capital gains taxes does as much, without subjecting himself to judgment. Further, the extension of marriage rights to same-sex couples can hardly constitute a “cant politics” to those who find their unions freshly recognized—or to those who feel passionately that they should not be. If nothing else, culture war issues have kept millions of people connected to politics in its broadest sense, that of social life in the polis.

Perhaps the foremost lesson of culture war study is also the simplest and most obvious. As Gregory Boyd (2005) notes, religious figures who seek political rule reveal a desire to exercise *power over others*, perhaps toward ends that those others have not endorsed and do not condone. Boyd offers Christ as the exemplar of a *power under* model, by which influence is won through humility, generosity, and submission rather than pride, acquisitiveness, and domination. Consistent with the rhetorical tracks marked by scholars like Tell (2006) and Steiner (2009), this model of religious engagement values influence through persuasion, and persuasion through lived example. It achieves power by relinquishing power, and builds strength upon weakness. In making public statements and defending positions, the *power under* model submits itself to criticism rather than using criticism as a means to mobilization. And in a warring atmosphere dominated by shouts and venom, this model reveals itself in serenity and compassion. Though culture war treaties are

admittedly hard to come by, perhaps one means to peace may be found in widespread desertion.¹⁰

If conscientious objection seems an impractical tactic for dealing with the rhetorical violence of the culture war, it is not any more so than active enlistment. After forty years of conflict over social policy, new methods warrant some experimentation. Emphatic religious condemnations have not worked, and veiled liberal appeals—though in many ways better—have obvious problems as well. Perhaps it is time to return to purely religious modes of public participation, expressed through philanthropic work and public witness rather than the accumulation of political power. Once orthodox rhetors liberate themselves from the tyranny of political ambition, they may find that, paradoxically, they will join the rest of the nation in being uniquely and contentedly free.

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¹⁰ As this essay underwent review, Pope Francis emerged as the world's foremost spokesman for the type of advocacy the essay seeks to promote. In a September, 2013 interview with *America Magazine*, the Pope called upon Catholics to reorient themselves politically, deemphasizing controversial social issues and stressing service to the poor. Then, in November, 2013, he issued his first Apostolic Exhortation, further clarifying his positions while advancing a critique of global economic inequality. Though criticized by many conservatives, the Pope's positions quickly won him immense popularity, and in December *Time* named him 2013 Person of the Year.

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