

The Culture Wars in American Religions at the End of the 20th Century

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Abstract

The American culture wars at the end of the 20th century was characterized by deep divisions over the role of religion in public life and a range of social issues. Great divergences occurred in mainline religions, leading to the occurrence of the religious progressives and religious conservatives. Both sides got aligned with their counterparts across traditional religious traditions, and launched the culture wars. These conflicts had a long-lasting impact on American society and politics, setting the stage for the ongoing debates and shaping the cultural landscape in the 21st century.

Keywords: Social Conflicts, Religious Realignment, Culture War, Moral Issues.

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In America, the second half of the 20th century witnessed a series of hot-debated social and moral issues, like abortion, gay rights, feminism and so on. As to the above issues, great divergences occurred in mainline religions, leading to the occurrence of the religious progressives and religious conservatives within different religious denominations. Both sides got aligned with their counterparts across traditional religious traditions, and launched the culture wars concerning on the above social and moral issues at the end of the 20th century.

1. THE NEW RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS

1.1 The Conflicts in Protestantism

At the end of the 19th century, American Protestants had been divided into modernists and traditionalists under the impact of modern science and technology. In 1925, the Scopes Monkey Trial worsened the culture conflicts between fundamentalists and modernists on the teaching of evolution at school. During the second World War and the Great Depression, their tensions got relieved in the turbulent domestic and external environments. However, abortion, gay rights and feminism in the 1960s once again triggered their controversies. The progressives, mainly from the well-educated baby-boomers, gave up the traditional theology, freely interpreted the Bible and supported the legality of abortion, gay marriage and Equal Rights Amendments (ERA). As the unwavering conservatives, evangelicals and fundamentalists united together and developed into the Christian Right.

To support their cultural and political stances, they found truth from the Bible, such as, God created Adam and Eve (a male and a female) rather than Adam and Steve (two males) to live in the Garden of Eden (Genesis,1:27), and thou shalt not murder (Exodus, 20:13) or whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed for in his own image God made man (Genesis, 9:6). Therefore, abortion is equal to murder in disguise of individualism, and gay marriage is against the traditional morality, both of which would be disciplined by God, and it is only Christianity that could give redemption to Americans. In the 1960s and 1970s, evangelicals launched Jesus Movement to counter hippies' alternative lifestyles, like drug addiction and homosexuality. In the 1980s, they established Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition, and took actions to fight against abortion, gay marriage and feminism. Therefore, secular humanism quickly became the code word for enemy forces in the dichotomized world of the emerging mentality of culture wars (Marden,1990: 245), and the revivalists of mainstream evangelical Protestantism militantly opposed modernist theology and the cultural change associated with it (Marden,1977: 215-232).

1.2 The Conflicts in Catholicism

Since the 1960s, American Catholics turned to be more liberal in religion and paid more attention to social justice and moral issues, especially after they experienced the Second Vatican Council and the turbulent riots. Most of the leaders in the post-Vatican II Catholic churches were young enough to have absorbed

the liberalism of the 1960s and more familiar with secular environments, and they imparted a much more liberal cast to Catholic social and political thought (Wald & Allison, 2011: 246). The Catholic progressives struggled for democracy and social justice and wanted to freely interpret catholic doctrines. Besides, they extended tolerance towards abortion, gay marriage and ordination to women etc.

In 1968, Pope Paul VI ratified *Humanae Vitae*, which triggered reactionary riots and fierce debate on theology within Catholics. As to abortion, a huge gulf on the definition of life came into being after *Roe vs. Wade* decision in 1973. To support their stances, the pro-life group evidenced their views from the perspectives of medicine and theology. For example, it has been medically proofed that a fetus of 6 weeks was recorded brain waves, and a premature infant of 19 weeks could survive in health. Besides, Pope Pius IX in 1869 declared that a fetus, although not ensured, is directed to the forming of man. Therefore, abortion is anticipated homicide. Consequently, they prohibited abortion under all circumstances. The pro-choice group insisted that abortion is a personal choice, a symbol of women's individualism and their control of physical bodies.

With regard to homosexuality, warring opinions also could not diminish on two sides. The conservative Catholics asserted that homosexuality, in violation of the catholic traditions, is a threat to American traditional marriage and family with husband and wife and their children, and could erode American traditional ethics and moralities. The progressives, mainly from the secularists and multiculturalists, held that everybody has the right to choose their way of life, so they endorse moral relativism and multiculturalism. In sum, the uncompromising conflicts on two sides contributed to the two cultures of American Catholicism, with conservative Catholics stressing obedience to church authority and liberal Catholics stressing the primacy of an individual's conscience (Kennedy, 1988).

1.3 The Conflicts in Judaism

In Judaism, the progressives had initiated its reform since the 19th century. In the 1980s, the controversies over moral issues intensified among American Jews. America's six million Jews pulled toward the extremes to form the orthodox and non-orthodox groups. Issues like patrilineal descent, the ordination of openly gay rabbis, the sanctioning of same-sex marriages, and the ordination of women fed the "culture wars" within American Judaism (Rubel, 2010: 372).

The orthodox adhered to the Five Books of Moses and the patriarchy, fought against gay marriage, interreligious marriage and the ordination of women. The progressives, mainly from the reformists or reconstructionist, wanted to adapt Judaism to modern life

and modernize Judaism with secularism and liberalism. Therefore, they endorsed new lifestyles, such as, same-sex marriage, and believed that abortion should be encouraged when mother was in danger of life or in unwanted pregnancy by rape or the family could not feed the new-born infant. In all, the core confrontation lies in the fundamental questions: what is the definition of Jewish identity? and who decides what is authentic and legitimate Judaism? (Freedman,2000:23).

2. THE INTERRELIGIOUS REALIGNMENT

2.1 The Factors Influencing the Religious Realignment

With the rising public concern on moral issues, traditional religious gulf among Protestants, Catholics and Jews gradually became weak, and the interreligious progressives and conservatives appeared on some social and moral issues. In fact, several factors contributed to the external disappearance of the traditional conflicts among Protestants, Catholics and Jews. 1). The wide-range expansion of higher education favorably raised Catholic and Jewish literacy, consequentially reducing the educational gap and traditional religious conflicts. 2). The Protestants' antagonism to non-Christians and secularists proliferated in intensity, partly diluting the gulf between different denominations in American mainline religions. In 1965, the government officially revised The Immigration Law, giving preference to southeast Asia, Latin America and Africa, etc. Therefore, immigrants from those nations outnumbered those from Europe. Some non-Judeo-Christian denominations, such as Islam and Buddhism, were introduced into the U. S. and further diversified American religious landscape. 3). Since the 1960s, a growing number of moral issues bitterly hit American Judeo-Christian tradition and came to be under the spotlight of national attention.

Deists boomed in number with the rapid advancement of higher education and secularization, and they endorsed abortion, feminist movement, gay/lesbian rights, which are harmful to traditional morality. The gulf between the liberal and the conservative views on some basic principles of morality was widening to an extent that made many of the traditional divisions seem even less relevant (Marden,1990:238). Therefore, the opportunities of interreligious communication, cooperation and even intermarriage increased under great leadership of Protestants, Catholics and Jews. Fruitful achievement hadn't been gained, yet the new way had been paved for their consensus on some controversial social issues.

2.2 The Interreligious Consensus

The progressives held that religion was supposed to be living, vibrant, cultural relevant, not as a crystallization of the past. Traditions were important, but required constant revision (Wuthnow,1991:31). The moral authority was derived from personal experiences and scientific rationalism, therefore, the traditional

sources of moral authority, whether scripture, papal pronouncements, or Jewish law, no longer have an exclusive or even a predominant binding power over their lives (Hunter,1991:45). From the standpoint of the progressives, abortion was rightful to American women, and it's a personal matter between doctor and pregnant, so any intervention in disguise of morality and religion should be deemed as an invasion of their privacy and freedom of choice. In 1994, Bill Clinton approved the regulation of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" in military, so the progressives were greatly satisfied and considered gay marriage as a new lifestyle, indicating social progress.

However, the conservatives held the totally different viewpoints, asserting that American culture and society was on the edge of cleavage, caused by the internal threat from the secularists and liberalists and the external menace from the communists backed by the Soviet Union. It is only the traditional Judeo-Christianity that could prevent the United States from breakdown. In order to keep the Judeo-Christian tradition, various resurgent conservatives, tended to talk more of finding ethical absolutes, which reflected long-standing Christian and Jewish teachings concerning on family, sexuality, discipline, and the importance of moral laws (Marden, 1990:239). The social consensus is the prerequisite for being a society or nation, so the Judeo-Christianity apparently is American social consensus which prevent it from being apart or anarchical. In the second half of the 20th century, American social consensus was bitterly hit in the process of secularization and modernization, ushering in the culture wars cutting across multiple denominations in history.

3. SPECIAL PURPOSE GROUPS: THE MEANS FOR CULTURE WARS

As an effective way to renewal, special purpose groups within religious denominations are not new, nor can they be considered unique to America. They have their leadership, organizations and resources, however, they do not endeavor to create religious sects or produce new denominations. Many special purpose groups are committed to addressing issues either specific to the churches or of general concern to the society. Special purpose groups were firstly organized for preaching the Gospel towards Indians and some other dissents, one of which was American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (founded in 1810). In the second half of the 20th century, a large number of special purpose groups were established. At the end of the Civil War, for example, no more than several dozen such groups were known to have been in existence. At the turn of the 20th century, fewer than 150 were in operation. And at the end of World War II, the number totaled only about 400 (Wuthnow, 1988:111-113). To be more specific, over rough four decades (1945-1987), more groups were founded than those in the previous century. Several reasons actually contributed to the thriving growth of special purpose groups (Wuthnow, 1988:113-114): 1).

They drew lessons and experiences from secular associations, and a growing professionalism among religious workers appeared to be beneficial to a variety of religious groups; 2). People in affluence could spend more time and money to voluntary activities, and public awareness were raised through education, television, other sources of mass communication; 3) The state endorsement was also responsible for the growth of special purpose groups.

3.1 The Progressive Special Purpose Groups

Most of the progressive special purpose groups were located on American east or west coast and endorsed humanism and multiculturalism. They established different groups for different social or religious purposes. After the *Roe V. Wade* decision in 1973, progressive Protestants, such as the Presbyterian and United Methodist churches, reformed Jewish synagogues, and a splinter group of Catholics joined the pro-choice cause.

Gay rights are promoted by such group as Integrity, a gay and lesbian organization for Episcopalians founded in 1975. With 2,500 members and around twenty-five local or regional affiliates, it is a relatively small organization but it is vocal. Special purpose groups of Catholics also have evolved to press the progressive agenda, for example, on the issue of abortion. Catholics for a Free Choice (founded in 1972) and the Committee of Concerned Catholics (founded in 1986) defend women's rights on both childbearing and childrearing. As to homosexuality, Dignity and New Ways Ministry (founded in 1977) maintains that gay and lesbian Catholics are members of Christ's mystical body, therefore, they could freely participate in the sacramental life in the church. Some special purpose groups of Judaism on the progressive side are such general interest organizations as the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism (founded in 1961) and New Jewish Agenda (founded in 1980). More focused associations include the World Congress of Gay and Lesbian Jewish Organizations (founded in 1980), the Jewish Peace Fellowship (founded in 1941), and the Task Force on Equality of Women in Judaism (founded in 1972).

Not only did the progressive denominations respectively organize many special purpose groups within religious communities, they also established some interreligious special purpose groups to deal with some specific issues. For example, abortion lead some of the Catholics, fundamentalist and evangelicals to form a big alliance, including more than 20 religious sects and about 14 religious denominations (Peele,1984:13). When the Civil Rights Restoration Act was being decided in early 1988, for example, it generated organized and coordinated support from the National Organization for Women, the National Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers, the U.S. Conference of Bishops, the National Abortion Rights Action League,

the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, and a host of mainline Protestant organizations (Hunter, 1991: 98). The progressives also proclaimed and supported a new vision of family life, and at least fifteen denominations or official organizations within denominations representing Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish faiths, for example, have formally endorsed the liberal reform of sodomy laws (Hunter, 1991: 190, 193). The progressives thought abortion rights, gay/lesbian rights as American unalienable rights of freedom, just as the freedom of religion. If the basic rights were deprived by some forceful organizations or government in disguise of morality, it would violate the first amendment of American Constitution. What's more, the progressives focused on other social issues as poverty, human rights and environmental pollution, and asserted that much more attention was supposed to be paid to the above mentioned issues.

3.2 The Conservative Special Purpose Groups

Along with the erosion of social morality, many conservative special purpose groups were also founded to fight against their opponent counterparts. In Protestantism, the traditional organizations as Moral Majority, Christian Voice and Religious Roundtable, enjoyed a widespread reputation in the 1980s, and the American Coalition for Traditional Values, founded in 1984, committed to counterattack abortion, affirmative action, and gay rights. In Catholicism, the American Catholic Committee (founded in 1982), the Society of Traditional Roman Catholics (founded in 1984), and, perhaps most important, the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights (founded in 1973) with its approximately 30,000 members (mostly lay people) and fourteen local affiliates are representatives of Catholic orthodoxy. Several important periodicals, *Crisis*, *National Catholic Register*, *The Interim*, *Challenge*, *Fidelity*, and *The Wanderer*, all stand in general opposition to women's rights, gay rights, a revised sexual ethics, theological modernism of any kind, and every other major progressive interests. In Judaism, there is a strong voice of opposition within the Orthodox Jewish community against abortion rights such as Orthodox Jews for Life.

The progressives, across the faith tradition, got interreligious realignment, so did the conservatives. The Center for Pastoral Renewal actively seeks to draw together theologically conservative Catholics, Evangelical Protestants, and Eastern Orthodox leaders for the purposes of forging a new orthodox ecumenism. The independent periodical *Touchstone: A journal of Ecumenical Orthodoxy* works toward the same goals. In the 1980s, the National Pro-Family Coalition was active: it's a coalition of numerous pro-family, pro-decency, pro-morality, and pro-life organizations all committed to achieving a just and humane society functioning in accordance with the moral imperatives of the Judeo-Christian ethics (Hunter, 1991: 90-97).

The Moral Majority, founded by Baptist minister Jerry Falwell, flourished in the 1980s and targeted to raise American awareness on some social issues. It extensively absorbed Jews and other conservative non-Christians and intended to establish a Pan-Christian organization, including evangelicals, fundamentalists, Catholics and Jews. They feared that the religious roots died out slowly, giving way to utilitarian worldliness (Weber, 2005: 119), so the conservative Protestants, Catholics and Jews got together to jointly defend the Judeo-Christian tradition.

The conservatives highlighted American traditional values and morality, and were inclined to cooperate with those of similar faiths. The progressives were distinguished in social backgrounds and religious faiths, so they were flexible in affiliation and always reflected disagreements on some religious agendas. Besides, many progressives didn't really espouse the feminists' rights, abortion or same-sex marriage, but they wanted to maintain the basic rights stipulated by the Constitution. So they got realigned and initiated the culture wars to define America. Actually there were a large number of special purpose groups in America, but a majority of them were short-lived after the concerned issues solved. There were also some groups that became thriving and influential, with the expansion in population and resources.

4. IMPLICATIONS OF THE CULTURE WARS ON AMERICAN POLITICS AND CULTURE

In the late 20th century, American religions manifested polarization and pluralism. The political similarities between orthodox Jews, conservative Catholics, and fundamentalist Protestants on the one hand and their more progressive counterparts on the other hand may be growing, and traditionalist-modernist political divisions within traditions may be expanding (Layman, 2001: 67). Each side actually became stronger after realignment, however, they have resulted more in polarization between the right and left rather than a clear victory for either side, along with some members joining and some others dropping out. Based on Judeo-Christian tradition, the progressives and the conservatives could not utterly break from each other. The progressives wanted to ideally pursue their future in a liberal manner, while the conservatives desired to improve and protect their cherished tradition. No matter how fiercely they fought with each other, they never hit the foundation of American civilization, and both wanted to advance American civilization in their own way.

In the 2016 presidential election, Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton gave a public performance of the culture wars and Trump was regarded as "the culture war president". What's more, as the president of the Divided States of America, Trump was promoted as the most influential man in 2016 by the Times magazine. In recent years, the tensions between the conservatives and

the progressives turned to be more radical, and the culture wars in popular culture occurred one after another. There is no denying that the impact of the culture wars in mainline religions in the late 20th century could not be ignored, and it will further exert influence on American culture and society.

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