

# **Are the Culture Wars Over? Religion, the 2008 Election and the New Quest for Community**

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If you were looking for a presidential election that revolved around religion and "moral values," you wouldn't start with President Bush's victory in 2004 -- nor, indeed, with any recent election. You'd go back to 1928. Now *there* was a culture war.

At that moment of great prosperity, the two central questions, beyond prosperity itself, revolved around whether the United States should continue its experiment with Prohibition and whether it should elect Al Smith, New York's Democratic governor, as the first Roman Catholic president. It wasn't even close. The "drys," who favored the ban on booze, overwhelmed the "wets," who wanted to be rid of it. And the Catholic Smith was clobbered by Republican Herbert Hoover, who carried several Southern, predominantly Protestant states that had been voting Democratic since the aftermath of the Civil War. "We shall soon, with the help of God, be in sight of the day when poverty will be banished from this nation," Hoover declared, and most Americans believed him.

Then, a little more than a year after Hoover's buoyant prediction, came Oct. 29, 1929. After the great stock market crash and four years of rising unemployment, the question of whether Americans could legally consume alcohol seemed rather less pressing. Democrats sought to push aside splits in their party over Catholicism, and Franklin D. Roosevelt, not Smith, was the party's nominee in 1932. Running against Hoover's economic record, FDR swept the country, carrying states that had been reliably Republican since William McKinley's days.

The historian William E. Leuchtenburg cites a correspondent with FDR's political maestro Jim Farley who explained with some brilliance why the cultural warfare over booze had disappeared. The letter writer observed that it was ridiculous "for a jobless wet Democrat to wrangle with a jobless dry Democrat over liquor when neither could afford the price of a drink." By 1936, the year of Franklin D. Roosevelt's landslide election, the culture war was forgotten, replaced by a nonviolent class war against those whom FDR called "economic royalists."

Yes, the lessons of that earlier age seem eerily relevant to the current moment in American politics. When major crises intrude, culture wars can fade awfully quickly. They did so in 1936. There are many signs that they began fading again in 2008 – and, as the economic crisis deepens, are likely to become ever more irrelevant to the day-to-day political debate.

This paper argues that we are at the beginning of a new era in which large, secular problems related to economics, war and peace and the United States' standing in the world will displace culture and religion as the electorate's central concerns. It will also argue that Barack Obama, like Franklin Roosevelt before him, is consciously and shrewdly trying to hasten the decline of cultural and religious warfare. His refrain has asserted his desire to "turn the page of history," and several of those pages have to do with the cultural battles that began in the 1960s and reached a crescendo in 2004.

I do not suggest that election returns from 2008 knocked out all of the cultural and religious underpinnings of American voting patterns. On the contrary, some of those trends continue, notably that religiously observant white voters are more likely to vote Republican than the less religiously observant. But here again, we hear echoes of 1932. Despite Al Smith's defeat in 1928, his candidacy began the process of mobilizing urban Catholics and

Jews into the Democratic Party. Roosevelt pushed this pattern along in 1932. He preserved Smith's gains, but lowered the cost of those gains among other constituencies. Obama performed a comparable feat in 2008: He preserved and in some ways extended Democrats' dominance among more secular voters, but cut their losses among religious white and Latino voters, particularly outside the South.

Divisions on "values" questions will not disappear, but they will be far less important to voters and campaigns. Just four years ago, we were arguing over whether Bush was reelected primarily because of his strong support from voters who told the exit pollsters that "moral values" had guided their decisions. We parsed the political preferences of those who attend religious services frequently and those who never go -- and found the former group rather staunchly Republican, the latter strongly Democratic. It was 1928 all over again. Culture and religion ruled.

In truth, Bush's victory rested both on 9/11 and on enthusiasm from religious voters. But what's most important is that 2004, like 1928, is destined to be the last in a long line of contests in which culture and religion proved central to the outcome.

This shift was already obvious from the results of the 2008 primaries. Focusing relentlessly on national security, John McCain clinched the Republican nomination despite robust opposition from the party's cultural and religious conservatives. On the Democratic side, cultural and religious questions have played almost no role in the battle between Obama and Hillary Rodham Clinton. They spoke instead about economics, health care and the war in Iraq. Strikingly, both were intent on putting an end to religious divisions in the electorate and have sought to welcome the religiously devout to the Democratic Party.

Obama, as I'll explore in more detail later, has been explicit about the need to broker political peace between Democrats and believers. "If we don't reach out to evangelical

Christians and other religious Americans and tell them what we stand for, then the Jerry Falwells and Pat Robertsons and Alan Keyeses will continue to hold sway," he said in an important speech at a 2006 meeting organized by the progressive evangelical Jim Wallis.. "More fundamentally, the discomfort of some progressives with any hint of religion has often prevented us from effectively addressing issues in moral terms." Clinton also spoke movingly of the role of faith in public life. "I'm living by the Scripture that says we are all members of God's household," she told a Baptist convention in Atlanta in January.

It is a human habit to assume that whatever defined the era we have just lived through will necessarily define the next. The rise of the religious right in the late 1970s and early 1980s came as a surprise because most Americans had come to assume that the long, relatively secular political period that followed FDR's electoral revolution was inevitably the way things would be. We had forgotten how often religion proved decisive in the creation of new electoral alignments.

American history offers many examples. In his magisterial history of the antebellum United States, "What Hath God Wrought," Daniel Walker Howe shows that religious divisions and the rise of evangelical Protestantism were defining characteristics of the party system built by the Whigs and the Jacksonian Democrats. But the republic has also had moments in which religion was less important to public life, and it is easy to be blinded when we find ourselves at a turning point.

The last long secular era endured from 1932 to 1980. Presidents throughout that period continued to use religious language in their speeches, declared their devotion to God and invoked faith on behalf of the great causes they pursued. FDR saw Nazism as a "new German pagan religion" and insisted in 1942 that "the world is too small to provide adequate 'living room' for both Hitler and God." Dwight D. Eisenhower assailed "godless communism"

that "strikes at the jugular vein of freedom." John F. Kennedy proclaimed in his 1961 inaugural address: "Here on Earth, God's work must truly be our own."

But Kennedy's line also signaled the distance between politics and specifically religious questions. His emphasis was on the work to be done *here on Earth*. In his famous speech before the Greater Houston Ministerial Association in 1960, designed to reassure Protestants that his Catholicism would play no substantive role in his presidency, Kennedy said, "I believe in a president whose views on religion are his own private affair." Religion was private, not public or political.

But the secular period that Kennedy spoke for ended with Ronald Reagan's election, the rise of the Moral Majority and the emergence of the Christian Coalition. If my theory is right, we will come to see this era of religious polarization as having lasted from 1980 to 2008. The era that is beginning will likely be more religious than the long post-FDR secular period. It's hard to imagine Obama, Clinton or any other Democrat giving a speech quite as relentlessly secular as Kennedy's Houston address. But compared with the period that is just ending, the new period will be more secular, more pluralistic and more focused on issues outside the cultural realm.

Even absent the economic catastrophe that has gripped the nation, Americans had already reached a point of exhaustion with a religious style of politics that was dogmatic, partisan and ideological. It was a style reflecting a spirit far too certain of itself and far too insistent on the moral depravity of its political adversaries. It had the perverse effect of narrowing the range of issues on which religious traditions would speak out and thinning our moral discourse. Precisely because I believe in a strong public role for faith, I would insist that it is a great sellout of those traditions to assert that religion has much to say about

abortion and same-sex marriage but little to teach us about war and peace, social justice and the environment.

With the United States turning its attention again to very large, post-9/11 issues -- as our forebears did during the Depression, World War II and the Cold War -- we will certainly be asking for God's blessing and help. But the questions that will most engage us will be about survival and prosperity, not religion and culture. And no politician understand this better than Barack Obama

--II--

Jeremiah Wright, the preacher who brought Barack Obama to Jesus, also brought him the week from hell in March of 2008. Anyone within reach of even the most primitive forms of media now knows that Wright, the retired pastor of the Trinity United Church of Christ, has preached sermons that veered into the swamp of anti-Americanism and indulged in wild conspiracy theories. So, after being subject to a rumor campaign that pronounced him a stealth Muslim, Obama was suddenly deemed to subscribe to a defective brand of Christianity. What other politician has been so plagued by matters involving God? It would not be surprising if Obama felt a sudden kinship for Job in those days.

He must also have experience the bitter irony of his situation. Few recent presidential candidates had spent more time wrestling with the politics of religion. I have watched him do this from afar for a decade. I first encountered Obama at a Harvard conference on bolstering community, where he befriended Wallis, the progressive evangelical leader. The two have remained in close touch ever since. Well before Obama began running for president, he delivered speeches about the politics of the faithful that were unusually sophisticated by the standards of contemporary politics.

And, on the few occasions I spoke with Obama about his faith, he evinced an understanding of the spiritual lives of Americans and familiarity with Reinhold Niebuhr's theology of skepticism and humility. When I interviewed him about his relationship with Wright in March, he said: "Churches are institutions of men, and, as a result, they are flawed." As I paused to marvel at how this remark could have been plucked from one of Niebuhr's essays, Obama seemed to have the same realization. He quipped, "And that's as Niebuhrian as you can get."

It was typical Obama: using Niebuhr to describe an African American church. During the campaign, Obama set about preaching a different kind of liberal religion, one that included the old social justice faith but was also deeply influenced by the experience of the black church. Like the civil rights preachers of old, he found a religious language that expressed a civic faith sought by secular voters no less than by the religiously inclined. It was and remains a language that could ease the Democrats' estrangement from theologically conservative Christians. In Obama's signature slogan, "Change We Can Believe In," the most important word may not have been "change," but "believe."

Many Democrats discovered God in those 2004 exit polls showing George W. Bush winning big with religiously observant voters and those who said "moral values" were important to them. Even if the Democrats' gestures to the devout often seemed contrived, this openness to faith has been a salutary development: Prejudice is still prejudice, and, if it took exit polls to persuade liberals to extend their multicultural openness to people of faith, Hallelujah.

After Bush's reelection, new organizations such as Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good were formed to battle Karl Rove and the GOP for the hearts of the faithful.

Smart religious consultants began advising Democrats on how not to leave so many religious votes on the table.

Meanwhile, the Republican Party confronted a crisis as voters concluded that the Bush presidency was a failure. In the 2006 midterm elections, religious voters remained more loyal to the Republicans than the less religious. But, in many states, even the godly started turning on the GOP, and, in some, Democrats nominated candidates who could speak of their own faith naturally and with conviction.

This happened as the white evangelical world itself was changing. New leaders and new issues were engaging the faithful, particularly younger evangelicals, who were more open to homosexuals, for example, than their elders had been. More importantly, evangelicals of all stripes developed a larger view of their Christian mission, which came to encompass poverty, aids in Africa, and the environment.

Most prominent among the leaders of this movement is Rick Warren, pastor of the Saddleback Church in California's Orange County and author of the best-selling *The Purpose Driven Life*. Warren is not an ideologue like Pat Robertson or the late Jerry Falwell. As the entire country now knows, Warren is as conservative as they come on core social issues. Obama's selection of Warren to give his Inaugural invocation inspired anger among liberals, and particularly among advocates of gay rights, because of the large role the preacher played in the campaign against gay marriage during California's 2008 referendum campaign.

Yet Obama selected him anyway, in part because Warren has been openly critical of the old religious right. "Jesus' agenda is far bigger than just one or two issues," he said after the 2006 election. "We have to care about poverty, we have to care about disease, we have to care about illiteracy, we have to care about corruption in government, sex trafficking."

As for the leadership of the old religious right, it failed to deliver in this year's Republican primaries, as we have seen. Not only did McCain win the GOP nomination in the face of its opposition. The leadership of much of the old religious conservative movement didn't like Mike Huckabee, either. But, with one foot in the old religious right and one in a new evangelical populism, the former Arkansas Governor won a large share of the evangelical vote. Thoroughly orthodox on abortion and gay marriage, he spoke of those losing out in the economy and addressed health care and education. In discussing abortion, he often turned to a broader definition of "life" by calling for respect for human rights around the globe.

The current fluidity in the evangelical world gives Obama his chance of supplying an alternative that would appeal to some of these Warren-style Christians. Obama has gone out of his way to speak respectfully of abortion's foes, and he spoke strongly during the fall presidential debates in favor of abortion reduction. It's worth recalling Obama's words as a singular example of his effort to ease the old cultural divides:

The last point I want to make [is] on the issue of abortion. This is an issue that -- look, it divides us. And in some ways, it may be difficult to -- to reconcile the two views.

But there surely is some common ground when both those who believe in choice and those who are opposed to abortion can come together and say, "We should try to prevent unintended pregnancies by providing appropriate education to our youth, communicating that sexuality is sacred and that they should not be engaged in cavalier activity, and providing options for adoption, and helping single mothers if they want to choose to keep the baby."

Those are all things that we put in the Democratic platform for the first time this year, and I think that's where we can find some common ground, because nobody's pro-abortion. I think it's always a tragic situation.

Other examples of Obama's determination to broker cultural peace included his oft-repeated argument that social improvement requires not only "changes in government policy" but also "changes in hearts and a change in minds" appeals to the conversion impulse so integral to the evangelical spirit. And in July, 2008, he pledged to continue

partnerships between faith-based organizations and government, but to reform the approach pursued by George W. Bush by being more sensitive to the constitution's demands for religious liberty. Obama moved quickly once he took office to keep that promise, creating his own Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships.

The purpose-driven pastor himself seemed eager to break old molds when he invited Obama in 2006 to join Senator Sam Brownback at Saddleback to discuss the global aids problem, an issue on which both politicians had worked. Right-wingers said Obama's support for abortion rights obligated the pastor to withdraw the invitation. Warren wouldn't budge. "People ask me, 'Rick, are you right-wing or are you left-wing?' " Warren told ABC News. "I'm for the whole bird."

Obama has been preparing many years for Whole Bird Christianity, and his decision to face down his critics and keep Warren on the inaugural program can be explained by that moment.

Of course, to bring his Christian faith to Rick Warren's church, Obama -- raised with no religion at all -- first had to become a Christian. He had to "walk down the aisle of Trinity United Church of Christ one day [in 1987] and be baptized," as he has written. And that's why it was so hard for Obama to cut himself off from Wright altogether, although he eventually had to do so. Wright was central to Obama's Christian narrative. Indeed, the above quotation comes from his book *The Audacity of Hope*, whose title was inspired by a Wright sermon. Obama told me "the essential failure" of Wright's most controversial public statements arose because "they lacked the sense of redemption which is the essence of the Christian faith." Yet Obama, as he put it in a statement on the *Huffington Post*, was also careful to note what he had learned from Wright: "[T]he sermons I heard him preach always

related to our obligation to love God and one another, to work on behalf of the poor, and to seek justice at every turn."

In truth, Wright's statements highlighted by the press ran directly counter to the gospel Obama has been preaching: the message of Civil Rights Christianity, a decidedly multiracial and hopeful creed. Obama's emphasis on hope; his talk of struggle, organizing, and movement-building; his repeated references to "the fierce urgency of now" -- all openly echoed the vocabulary of a civil rights cause steeped in the Scriptures. In particular, he invoked not the side of Martin Luther King Jr. capable of great anger over injustice, but, rather, King's most conciliatory themes.

If Obama's approach is a sincere move (he is plain in his book that he became a Christian in part because he was "drawn to the power of the African-American religious tradition to spur social change"), it is also a shrewd one. In trying to move the religious dialogue forward, Obama is drawing it back to a time when so many pastors were successfully allied with liberalism on the civil rights question that none other than Falwell scolded, "Preachers are not called upon to be politicians, but to be soul-winners."

Civil Rights Christian language has many political advantages. It is resolutely centered not on the defeat of adversaries, but on their conversion. The conversion theme, and Civil Rights Christianity's notion of building a cross-racial "beloved community," fit almost perfectly with Obama's core message of political and racial reconciliation. "We need to take faith seriously," Obama writes in his book, "not simply to block the religious right but to engage all persons of faith in the larger project of American renewal."

Obama's approach made its national debut in that June 2006 speech to Call to Renewal. It was the address of a politician who knew that Democrats need a significant share of the religious vote -- and also knew that Democrats depend on substantial support from

secular voters. According to John Green of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life and the University of Akron, 20 percent of John Kerry's 2004 voters were secular, atheist, agnostic, or unaffiliated with a church or religious group; only 7 percent of Bush's voters fell into one of those categories. And Kerry's religious vote was, typically for the Democrats, thoroughly polyglot: Fourteen percent of Kerry's voters were white evangelical Protestants, 13 percent were black Protestants, 22 percent were Catholics, and 4 percent were Jews.

The question facing post-2004 Democrats was how to hold all these votes -- and add a few more to create a majority. (Here again, the comparison with Roosevelt's 1932 balancing act is obvious.) Obama's recipe has two main ingredients: In the Call to Renewal speech, he asserted that "secularists are wrong when they ask believers to leave their religion at the door before entering into the public square." You could almost hear the cheers at Rick Warren's church and others like it.

At the same time, he argued that religious Americans needed to remember "the critical role that the separation of church and state has played in preserving not only our democracy, but the robustness of our religious practice." There could be no talk of ours as "a Christian nation" since "we are also a Jewish nation, a Muslim nation, a Buddhist nation, a Hindu nation, and a nation of nonbelievers. . . . Democracy demands that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion specific, values."

The Grand Obama Compromise comes down to a call for mutual respect, of believers by unbelievers -- and vice versa.

It should also be said, as we've seen, that while Obama may have given the issue of religion in public life more thought than most Democrats, he was far from alone in seeking religious reconciliation. Hillary Clinton also understood the world of faith far better than most in her party. Her lifelong Methodism is of the classic sort: a combination of the

genuinely spiritual-she speaks of friends who pray for her as "prayer warriors"-and the social and political. "Our faith calls us to do what is hard, to give voice to the voiceless, to lift up the poorest of the poor and the sickest of the sick," Clinton said to a Baptist meeting in January. "We are called, not asked, not urged, not requested, nor ordered, but called to love one another as Jesus has loved us."

The Clinton campaign's top religious adviser, Burns Strider, was a shrewd and cheerful Southern Baptist who has been trying to get Democrats to take religion seriously since the Great Flood. He performed similar chores for House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and played a major role in encouraging Clinton to appear on a 2007 CNN broadcast in which Clinton, Obama, and John Edwards all spoke about their religious lives. Clinton outshined Obama, who was relentlessly intellectual that night.

But, in the end, it was Obama who worked out the most comprehensive approach to faith. Perhaps he did so because he came to faith as an adult and feels called upon to explain his choice, to give testimony. Perhaps he wanted to rebuke those who said falsely that he is a Muslim. Perhaps the constitutional law professor in him found the church-state issue intellectually engaging. Or perhaps this very shrewd politician simply understands how important it is to Democratic and liberal prospects that we return to the promised land of King and Niebuhr.

If Obama can end the culture wars by building a center-left majority that includes the religious and non-religious, then conservative resistance to his "larger project of American renewal," reflected in the remarkably redistributive budget he released at the end of February, might be blunted. He would have the whole bird.

But did this strategy work electorally on Nov. 4, 2008? It worked well enough to give Obama the largest margin of victory for a Democrat since 1964. How did this happen? To understand, it's important to look at the recent history of religious voting.

--III--

As my colleague John Greene and I have observed elsewhere, the last sixty years have seen the rise of at least three tendencies in American religion with potentially important political consequences.

One tendency might be labeled as a “secular” trend. Prime evidence for this trend is the increasing number of individuals who report no affiliation with organized religion in the last two decades. In addition, there is evidence of a decline of traditional religiosity since the 1960s, such as the frequency of worship attendance. This evidence fits well with theories of modernization which posit secularization as an inevitable consequence. The United States is certainly a modern society, and perhaps increasing so, and thus the decline of religious affiliation and traditional religiosity could make American politics more secular.

However, the simple association between modernization and secularization has been challenged by the persistence of traditional forms of religion around the world. In the American context, the growth of Evangelical Protestantism, and the decline of Mainline Protestant churches, is prime evidence of this phenomenon. This tendency might be labeled an “evangelical” trend, witnessed by the fact that the level of traditional religiosity, including frequent worship attendance, has remained largely unchanged in recent decades. It may well be that these patterns are a reaction to modernization (and even secularization), but it also reveals the adaptation of traditional religious groups to modern circumstances.

A third tendency in American religion deserves attention: increased ethnic and religious diversity. In keeping with American history, immigration has continued to bring new religious groups into the country. Most immigrants have been affiliated with the major Christian traditions, but practice their own versions of these faiths. Other immigrants belong to world religions that have been less common on America's shores, including Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism. These developments might be labeled as a "pluralist" trend, which could reinforce or mitigate the secular or evangelical trends. In fact, the secular and evangelical trends could be understood as parts of a broader pluralism in American society.<sup>5</sup> These major trends raise a basic question: how does religion matter in American politics.

The polarization around religion needs to be understood in light of all three trends. If both secularism and religious commitment were rising simultaneously, then it is natural that those at each end of the religious spectrum might feel especially threatened by those at the other. Devoutly religious Americans did not make up the rise of secularism. Secular liberals did not make up the growing militancy of religious conservatives. Growing religious pluralism, welcomed by some and feared by others, was a fact, not a chimera.

The paradox of the rise of religious conservatism is that it became an important factor in American politics primarily because of liberal victories—on abortion, school prayer, the rising power of feminism, the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Jerry Falwell, who, as we've seen, condemned the role of civil rights preachers in politics, wrote in his autobiography that he began changing his mind on the question of evangelical involvement in politics on January 23, 1973, the day the Supreme Court issued the *Roe v. Wade* decision.

We also forget that the past eight decades have seen the steady erosion of Protestant dominance in American politics and culture. Al Smith's presidential candidacy was rejected in 1928 in part because Protestant America decided it could not accept the election of a

Catholic president. But it's important to emphasize again that Smith's losing coalition presaged Franklin Roosevelt's winning coalition that kept the Protestant South in the Democratic camp while bringing in millions of urban Catholics and Jews who had no sympathy for Prohibition and much suspicion of the old Protestant order. John F. Kennedy's election in 1960 signaled the arrival of Catholics as an accepted group in American public life—and also signaled the end of white Protestant hegemony. This hegemony was further undermined by the end of prescribed prayer in public schools (the prayers had been “nondenominational” but Protestant in spirit) and by the growing role of new immigrant groups in American politics. The reemergence of religion (and in particular white evangelical Protestantism) as an organizing and polarizing force in American politics can be seen, in part at least, as a reaction against the marginalization of a once-dominant Protestantism in the American public square.

The 1960s and early 1970s saw the rise of cultural politics—or what political scientist Ronald Inglehart called “post-materialist” politics—at both ends of the political spectrum.<sup>i</sup> The cultural battles of the 1960s redefined not only the right, but also the left. As Peter Steinfels has said, “American political liberalism has shifted its passion from issues of economic deprivation and concentration of power to issues of gender, sexuality, and personal choice. . . . Once trade unionism, regulation of the market, and various welfare measures were the litmus tests of secular liberalism. Later, desegregation and racial justice were the litmus tests. Today the litmus test is abortion.” And, one might add, stem-cell research, gay marriage, and Hollywood culture.

The religious and cultural politics of our time are clearly rooted in the rebellions of the 1960s against 1950s “conformity.” The academy and the mass media mostly noticed what was happening on the New Left. But a New Right shared in the New Left’s reaction

against “the liberal establishment” (or, as the New Left preferred, “establishment liberalism”). And the new conservative religious movements shared roots with the New Age and countercultural reactions against the religious establishment. Peter Clecak has argued that the resurgence of the old-time religion was part of a broader revolt against modernism and scientific rationality that can be traced to the counterculture.<sup>ii</sup> Leonard Sweet, an evangelical church historian, saw both the new religions of the 1960s and 1970s and the new turn to the old ones as part of a “subjectivist search for authority.”

The political parties understood the power of cultural and religious issues and used them to mobilize—and polarize—the electorate. Falwell and the Moral Majority were called into being by long-time Republican organizers and leaders who realized that they could bulk up the conservative vote by appealing to the cultural concerns of whites with moderate incomes and socially conservative views. Democrats realized that wealthier voters, who had traditionally been Republican, had no use for restrictions on abortion. If Republicans were going to gain ground among social conservatives in the middle class, Democrats would gain ground among social liberals in the upper middle class. In politics, it is usually the case that every action encourages an opposite if not always equal reaction.

And the polarization was deepened by the fact that the contours of the religious and cultural battles were defined in significant part by region. Social conservatives loomed especially large in the South and in many (though not all) of the Rocky Mountain and Plains states. Social liberals were important in the Northeast, on the West Coast, and in many states of the Midwest. The shift to the Republicans in the South was thus counterbalanced by a shift toward the Democrats elsewhere. The realignment of the traditionally Democratic South toward the Republican Party—rooted initially in racial politics—did not call forth a sudden counter-realignment in Republican parts of the Northeast, the Midwest, and the

West Coast. But the counter-realignment developed gradually and came to dramatic fruition in the 1996 election.

The *Washington Post's* political reporter Dan Balz was one of the first to notice that large suburban counties—places that had been faithfully Republican for decades and had voted Republican as recently as 1992—turned to Clinton four years later. These included Oakland County outside of Detroit, Bergen and Monmouth Counties in New Jersey, and Lake County east of Cleveland. The one-time Republican bastions of Nassau and Westchester Counties in New York drifted Democratic. So did once Republican counties in California and coastal Oregon, as well as suburban counties outside of Philadelphia. The 1992 and 1996 elections marked the first time that all six New England states voted Democratic two elections in a row, a sign of the new regional polarization. (They all went that way again in 2004, after New Hampshire's brief excursion, albeit by a very narrow margin, into Republican territory in 2000.)

As Seymour Martin Lipset and William Schneider have argued, battles over religion, culture, and values are necessarily more polarizing than fights over the distribution of money and resources. Lipset described the New Deal and post–World War II eras in American politics as entailing a “democratic class struggle” in which less-privileged groups used electoral politics to enhance their living standards and incomes. In battles over money, differences can be split with mathematical certainty if not precision. But in battles over faith and values, the differences cannot be split so easily because the struggle is over fundamentals. This was true at moments in the nineteenth century no less than in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. As James Q. Wilson argued in *The Moral Sense*, “Once the issues were slavery, temperance, religion and prostitution; today the issues are divorce, illegitimacy, crime and entertainment.”

Religion's role as a polarizing force in contemporary politics might be seen to have gone through three stages. The first big shift occurred between 1976 and 1980 with the rise of the Moral Majority, the disillusionment of conservative evangelical Christians with their fellow evangelical Jimmy Carter, and Ronald Reagan's conversion into a strong foe of abortion. (As governor of California, Reagan had signed one of the most liberal abortion laws in the country.) In 1976, Carter ran strongly among evangelicals and seemed to restore the Democratic Party's standing among social conservatives, particularly in the South. His loss to Reagan in the 1980 campaign ended that.

In 1992, Bill Clinton seemed poised to play Jimmy Carter's role by winning back a share of the conservative religious vote. Clinton often used the language of faith. He spoke of covenants, personal responsibility, and community. He appeared often in pulpits, carrying a well-thumbed Bible. He sang the old hymns without forgetting a word and quoted the Scriptures with the authority of a preacher. His administration brokered agreements among a broad range of religious and secular civil liberties groups to protect the rights of religious students in public schools and the religious rights of public employees. Toward the end of Clinton's second term, Adam Meyerson, then a vice president of the conservative Heritage Foundation (and no friend of Clinton's politics), said that "Clinton's greatest legacy may well be his leadership in reducing the bigotry against religion that has been expressed in recent decades by much of the Democratic Party and American liberalism."

That might have been a powerful Clinton legacy absent the Monica Lewinsky sex scandal. The reaction to the scandal among religious conservatives (not to mention other even moderately traditional Americans) wiped out the gains Clinton might have secured for Democrats among the religiously committed and repolarized the electorate along religious lines.

In the 2000 election, George W. Bush took full advantage of the opening. Without dwelling on the Lewinsky scandal, he simply promised to restore “honor and dignity” to the White House. Everyone knew what he was talking about. He let voters know, without sounding the least bit judgmental, that he was a committed evangelical Christian and that his faith was important to him. (Even his political enemies in Texas said this was an authentic assertion.) He signed up the religious right early in his campaign. Ralph Reed, the political consultant who had once been executive director of the Christian Coalition, became a well-paid campaign lieutenant.

Bush had learned the tempos and sensibilities of the Christian conservative movement when he represented his father’s campaigns in church after church after church. In 2000, his experience showed. He told a national audience during an early Republican debate in Iowa that Jesus Christ was his favorite political philosopher. And when Bush ran into trouble after losing the 2000 New Hampshire primary to John McCain, the religious conservatives came to W’s rescue eighteen days later in the South Carolina primary.

Over the course of his administration, Bush’s “God talk” gave secular voters (and not a few religious ones) the willies, even though Bush did not, in fact, invoke the Almighty all that differently from his predecessors (including, notably, the theologically fluent Clinton). The notion of Bush as a wild-eyed religious fanatic undertaking a new Crusade in the Middle East became a widely held view on the left over time. Bush did not help his cause when he told the *Washington Post’s* Bob Woodward that he had not consulted his father about going into Iraq, but did consult “a higher Father.” (Many who had nothing against prayer wished he had called his dad.) And Karl Rove’s open and successful effort to increase the turnout of evangelical Christians in the 2004 election only deepened the ties that bound

them to Bush—and the mistrust and hostility of more secular Americans, along with religious liberals.

Thus was the scene set for what can be seen as one of the three most religiously charged elections in American history. (The other two, 1928 and 1960, involved the first and second Catholic candidates for president.) The returns of 2004 told the story, with Bush overwhelming Kerry among the religiously observant and white evangelical Christians.

Yet it was worth noticing – Barack Obama certainly did – that polarization was only one part of the 2004 story. Bush won in part by downplaying social issues when speaking to the broader electorate (he never explicitly called for overturning *Roe v Wade*) and thus hanging on to enough moderate voters to defeat Kerry. Moreover, the polls made clear that there was a large cultural middle that defied efforts to paint it as either right-wing or left-wing.

Consider these findings from the 2004 network exit polls: about 38 percent of those who thought abortion should be legal in most cases voted for Bush. Bush got 22 percent from voters who favored gay marriage and 52 percent from those who favored same-sex civil unions. Bush even managed 16 percent among voters who thought the president paid more attention to the interests of large corporations than to those of “ordinary Americans.” True, 22 percent of voters said that “moral values” were decisive in their choices. The media pay enormous attention to this group, which voted heavily for Bush. But 71 percent picked some other issue. (The remainder exercised their constitutional right to decline to answer pollsters’ questions.)

All this means that Bush won *not* because religious conservatives were on the march, and not because there is a right-wing majority in the United States, but because the president persuaded just enough of the nonconservative majority to go his way. Even with their

increased numbers, conservatives still constituted only 34 percent of the electorate in 2004. The largest share of the American electorate (45 percent) calls itself moderate. The moderates went 54 to 45 percent for Kerry—good, but not enough.

And polarization around moral issues in the electorate is not a simple story. Consider that even on the most difficult questions, there is a broad middle ground in the electorate. Asked about abortion in the 2004 exit poll, 21 percent of voters said that it should always be legal, 34 percent that it should be legal in most cases, 26 percent that it should be illegal in most cases, and 16 percent that it should always be illegal. Viewed one way, respondents were “pro-choice,” 55 to 42 percent. Viewed another way, 60 percent of them gravitated to a “middle” position on abortion. There is most certainly a conflict akin to a culture war among the 37 percent of Americans—21 percent consistently pro-choice, 16 percent consistently pro-life—who were absolutely certain about where they stood on abortion. And that is a very large group. But a majority of the population, while having leanings on the issue, does not have anything like the degree of engagement or commitment of the true warriors.

On the question of gay marriage, the exit polls found that 25 percent of voters thought homosexuals should be able to marry legally, 35 percent favored civil unions, and 37 percent opposed any legal recognition for gay relationships. These findings could be used mischievously by either side in the argument. It can truthfully be said that 72 percent of voters opposed gay marriage. With equal truthfulness it can be said that 60 percent favored either gay marriage or civil unions.

What the numbers on both abortion and gay marriage suggest is that there is great strength in the moderate middle of American politics—just as there is great strength among the passionate believers at the far reaches of the political spectrum who confront each other every day on blogs, in newspaper columns, and on argumentative radio and television shows.

None of this disproves the importance of religious commitment in influencing voter decisions. But it does suggest that even in the polarized climate of 2004, the possibilities of an end to the wars over culture and religion could be discerned. Further change required a spark that would move other issues to the fore. In the 2006 mid-term elections, that spark was Iraq. In 2008, the spark was the economy. In both cases, a combination of exhaustion with the Bush Administration in some in some parts of the electorate and revulsion in others changed the cultural and political dynamics.

What's important about 2006 is not that religious polarization disappeared – it did not – but that non-cultural and non-religious issues moved large parts of the electorate toward the Democrats. By most measures, religious polarization in the electorate increased between 2004 and 2006 (and between the 2002 and 2006 midterms) because while Republicans lost ground across the entire electorate, they lost *less* ground among religiously observant voters among others.

Comparing the 2002 and 2006 midterm elections, Scott Keeter of the Pew Research Center noted that among those who attended religious services at least once a week, Republicans held onto 55 percent of their ballots in 2006, a loss of only three percentage points. But occasional churchgoers voted 59 percent Democratic, a Democratic gain of eight points, and those who never attended religious services went 67 percent Democratic, a gain of 12 points.

Two especially dramatic election outcomes in 2006 illustrate the shift. In both Ohio and Pennsylvania, Democrats nominated candidates with considerable appeal to religious votes. Congressman Ted Strickland, a Methodist Minister who spoke often of his faith, was the Democratic gubernatorial nominee in Ohio. State Auditor Bob Casey, a pro-life Catholic,

was the party's nominee for the U.S. Senate seat held by incumbent Rick Santorum, a conservative Catholic with broad appeal on the religious right.

Much was made of the fact that both Democrats gained ground among religiously active voters. Indeed, they did. According to the network exit poll, Strickland ran seven points ahead of John Kerry's showing among voters who said they attended religious services more than once a week, and 19 points ahead among weekly attenders. But his greatest strength was among voters who never attended religious services: they gave Strickland an astonishing 81 percent of their ballots, an 18-point gain on Kerry. He also gained ground among occasional attenders, winning 68 percent, an 11 point gain on Kerry.

In Casey's case, he gained seven points on Kerry among weekly attenders, 12 points among occasional attenders and 10 points among those who never attended religious services.

In short: Democrats cut their losses among religious voters in 2006 while extending their gains among the less religious. Like FDR in 1932, they expanded upon past advantages while reducing past deficits.

In 2008, the key for Obama was to make gains across the religious spectrum – one sign that religious issues were simply not as salient as they had been four years earlier. Nationwide, Obama won 43 percent among those who attended religious services at least weekly, a four point gain on Kerry. He won 57 percent among occasional attenders, also a four point gain. And he won 67 percent among those who never attended religious services, a five point gain. The old pattern – of more religiously active voters supporting Republicans – was in tact. But where Republicans could once use overwhelming margins among the very religious to power their way to victory, they found in 2008 that those margins were ebbing

slightly even as the rest of the electorate continued to trend strongly Democratic. The new religious and cultural math favors political progressives.

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But can Obama maintain this alliance? Will he make further breakthroughs among religious and cultural moderates and conservatives?

Much, of course, will depend not on theology or cultural change but on the president's success in healing the nation's broken economy. The old rules of politics certainly apply: If economic growth resumes (and, of course, if the country avoids serious difficulties in the realm of national security), Obama will have an opportunity to expand upon his 2008 political coalition.

But it's also clear that Obama is seeking a larger change in the religious and cultural debate itself. His inaugural address can be seen as an effort to redefine the nation's ideological matrix from a battle between cultural traditionalists and modernists to a choice between radical individualism and a more communitarian approach. He is seeking to reverse the two kinds of extreme individualism that have permeated the American political soul for perhaps four decades.

He has set his face against the expressive individualism of the 1960s that defined "do your own thing" and "if it feels good, do it" as the highest form of freedom. On the contrary, Obama spoke of responsibilities, of doing things for others, even of that classic bourgeois obligation, "a parent's willingness to nurture a child."

But he also rejected the economic individualism that took root in the 1980s. He specifically listed "the greed and irresponsibility on the part of some" as a cause for our economic distress. He discounted "the pleasures of riches and fame." He spoke of

Americans not as consumers but as citizens. His references to freedom were glowing, but he emphasized our "duties" to preserve it far more than the rights it conveys.

This communitarian vision fits poorly with "the stale political arguments" between liberals and conservatives that Obama condemned, because they are really arguments between these two varieties of individualism. Their quarrel has been fierce not only because of how the two sides differ but also because they share so many assumptions. Family feuds and civil wars can be especially brutal.

For now, each side in the old debate can enlist aspects of Obama's rhetoric in their polemics against the other. But in associating our recent past with "childish things," in insisting that greatness is "never a given" and always "must be earned," Obama challenged the very basis of their conflict.

It is a worthy fight. It will also be a hard fight to win because rights are so much easier to talk about than duties, and freedom's gifts are always more prized than its obligations.

Yet Obama may well be going with, not against, the flow of our culture. Despite our economic difficulties, one group has clearly prospered in recent years: those in the business of producing cultural jeremiads. A partial list includes *The Closing of the American Mind*, *The Demoralization of Society*, *The Corrosion of Character*, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah*, *Bowling Alone*, *The Death of Outrage*, *The Great Disruption*, and *Egotopia: Narcissism and the New American Landscape*.

All these books speak, albeit in very different ways, to a sense of cultural and moral unease. It is an unease not bounded by ideological categories. On the contrary, people on the left and on the right are equally forceful in decrying self-centered individualism, consumerism, new pressures on the family, and the decline of community. Analysts left, right, and center are sensitive to how technological and economic changes have altered the

rhythms of family life and lifted up certain virtues and values at the expense of others. In *The Great Disruption*, Francis Fukuyama, a freethinking neo-conservative, argues that the new knowledge-based economy will transform the social world of the twenty-first century—how we raise our children, where we live, what we value—as much as the Industrial Revolution altered the organization of life in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Fukuyama sees the knowledge economy as placing a high premium on radical individualism and a lower value on solidarity.

From the left Richard Sennett argues that the new, highly flexible capitalism has ended the concept of loyalty at work and therefore undermined it in society. "Character is expressed by loyalty and mutual commitment, or through the pursuit of long-term goals, or by the practice of delayed gratification for the sake of a future end," he writes in *The Corrosion of Character*. But in the new economy, he insists, there is no long term. He asks, "How do we decide what is of lasting value in ourselves in a society which is impatient, which focuses on the immediate moment? How can long-term goals be pursued in an economy devoted to the short term? How can mutual loyalties and commitments be sustained in institutions which are constantly breaking apart or continually being redesigned?" How, indeed?

Not all intellectuals attribute cultural and moral unease to social and economic changes. The writings of Gertrude Himmelfarb and William Bennett place a strong emphasis on *individual* virtue and its alleged decline. But Himmelfarb, a sophisticated conservative historian, is alive to how "manners and morals" are embedded in a society (she is partial to the way the Victorians managed to do this), not created out of thin air by individuals. She shrewdly notes the shift away from talk of "virtues" to an analysis of "values." The word "virtue," she writes, "carried with it a sense of gravity and authority, as 'values' does not." Values, Himmelfarb says, "can be beliefs, opinions, attitudes, feelings, habits, conventions,

preferences, prejudices, even idiosyncrasies—whatever any individual, group, or society happens to value, at any time, for any reason." She adds, "One cannot say of virtues, as one can of values, that anyone's virtues are as good as anyone else's, or that everyone has a right to his own virtues."

Sennett and Himmelfarb disagree profoundly about politics, yet they share an unease about the decline of old virtues in a highly individualistic society. Himmelfarb worries about what happens to morality in a world in which values can be picked and chosen as one might buy a peach or a cantaloupe at the supermarket. Sennett wonders how individuals can live meaningful moral lives in an economy that wages constant war against loyalty, commitment, and solidarity.

Beneath the clamor of the politicized and televised culture war, in other words, is a more measured debate between libertarians and communitarians, between individualists (moral or economic or both) and those who would emphasize some version of a common good. This, too, is an old American argument. As Robert Bellah and his colleagues wrote in *Habits of the Heart*, the history of our country might be seen as one long debate over how to balance the joys of individual freedom against the necessity for community and commitment. But this is a hard argument. It's much easier to scream across barricades about abortion, gay marriage, or Terri Schiavo's fate.

It has long been fashionable in American political discussion to separate "social issues" from "economic issues." But the two, as Sennett and Fukuyama would insist, are intertwined. Most Americans, no matter which cultural battle they choose to fight (or avoid), understand this. Family life is powerfully affected by work arrangements—and by the ability to find decently paying jobs. Community life is shaped by how we build our homes and neighborhoods, by how long people's commutes are, and by how much time is left over

from the struggle to make a living. Our culture is shaped in large part by commercial forces that, paradoxically, promote a permissiveness in entertainment and advertising that conservatives who in theory revere the market in fact deplore.

The counterculture has become the over-the-counter culture. Liberals and conservatives alike are vexed by this. Liberals desperately do not want to be bluenosed or judgmental, yet they are uneasy with a consumerist, individualistic culture that often violates their sense of community, decency, and mutual obligation. Conservatives who dread economic regulation and defend capitalism at every turn often find the cultural fruits of capitalism bitter and distasteful. Liberals and conservatives may battle over gay marriage or abortion and yet agree wholeheartedly on what television programs their children shouldn't watch, what Web sites they shouldn't visit, and what video games they shouldn't play. Both are likely to be critical of mall culture, and for some of the same reasons.

Yet everyone tries to cope, and our coping has been remarkably successful. The exurbs, so disliked by opponents of sprawl, produce their own kinds of community through religious congregations, kids' sports leagues, mothers' groups, school organizations, business clubs—and political activities on both sides of the cultural divides.

Fears of moral decay may be pervasive, but crime, teen pregnancy, abortion, and divorce have declined since the early 1990s (although there have been some alarming new trends in crime, and economic difficulties may produce regression in all these areas). Feminism, which conservatives once feared as an assault on family life, has proved its compatibility with updated versions of old-fashioned family arrangements. Every father of a daughter, no matter his politics, is a feminist when it comes to her education and her ambitions. Most conservative parents of gay or lesbian children, however uneasy they may be with homosexuality, will stand up for their kids against bigotry. Most liberal parents,

however open in theory they may be to cultural experimentation and rebellion against accepted norms, lay down the law to their children on homework, dating practices, and the dangers of drunk driving and drugs.

We would be better off if we challenged the culture-war metaphor and, in the process, the self-understandings of liberals and conservatives. In many ways, that is what Obama is doing. It is a little discussed but vital part of his political project.

Indeed, one need not be a cultural pessimist to share the concerns of Sennett, Himmelfarb, and Bellah over the state of our common life. One need not be a wild-eyed optimist to see signs that -- for all the disruptions wrought by the new economy, for all the moral disturbances created by wardrobe and other cultural malfunctions -- Americans, as individuals and in their families, are trying to create new forms of community and new ways of transmitting old values (and, yes, virtues).

The culture war exploits our discontents. The task of politics is to heal them. That is the task Barack Obama has assumed.

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*Note: This paper includes new material and also draws on earlier work published in The Washington Post, The New Republic, The Atlantic, and by the Princeton University Press and the Brookings Institution Press.*