The Wisdom of Serpents: Why Religious Groups Use Secular Language

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“I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves.” Matthew 10:16

Civil religion, the use of religious symbolism and ceremony to promote secular political ends, has long been a field of serious inquiry, dating at least to Plato’s The Laws. However, its opposite, the promotion of religiously inspired agendas through secular means has not received much attention. Two recent developments, however, make addressing this scholarly neglect more urgent. The first is the articulation of liberal theories of public reason that forbid the use of religious language in public discourse. The second is the shift of strategy in recent decades of religious groups, most notably the Moral Majority and Christian Coalition, of abandoning explicitly religious language in favor of secular language to advance their goals.

The main body of this essay is empirical in nature, an attempt to chart and document the reasons why religious groups have employed secular language in promoting religiously inspired political ends. Indeed, I argue that religious groups employ secular language to promote their political ends for four broad reasons: theological, prudential, legal, and liberal. As I hope to show in a brief examination of the Religious Right, these motivations are difficult to distinguish in practice and more than one motivation may be at work simultaneously. However, I hope to take the discussion beyond a mere description of events and reflect upon the dilemma of simultaneously encouraging secular politi-

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2. These four reasons may be thought of constituting a continuum of deference to the norms of liberal democracy viewed independently of religious belief. “Theological” reasons mark the low end of the spectrum and “liberal” reasons mark the high end.
cal discourse without unduly alienating religious sensibilities. The need to conduct politics in secular terms reflects the profound difficulty of governing in a pluralistic regime. I contend that an institutional rather than an ideological approach to liberalism—one that appeals to prudence as much as an ethic of liberal citizenship—holds more promise for effectively encouraging secular talk without alienating religious citizens.

**Theological Reasons**

Despite the U.S. Constitution’s Establishment Clause, religion remains a powerful force in American politics. Not only do religious convictions influence the attitudes of millions of people toward public officials and public policy, but countless religious groups and churches become involved, at least occasionally, in politics. In Washington, D.C. alone there are over one hundred religious lobbies that behave very much like “secular” lobbying groups—advising, drafting legislation, providing information, raising funds, and getting out the vote.

Curiously, many religious groups do not feel it appropriate to ground their political ideologies, far less their stances on the minutiae of law, on specific references to Scripture or revealed religion. Though many religious groups are involved in environmental issues, rarely does one hear Scripture quoted either on behalf of or against the latest decisions of the Department of Interior. While groups like theonomic reconstructionists openly attempt to create “maximum continuity between the Old Testament’s penal sanctions and present-day criminal laws,” many other religiously-based lobbies seek to ground their political beliefs in a non-faith based framework that is accessible and acceptable to persons beyond any specific religious tradition. For some religious groups, the commitment to inclusive political reasoning is not

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WHY RELIGIOUS GROUPS USE SECULAR LANGUAGE

a sign of tepid faith or an unwillingness to disclose one's beliefs to others but instead reflects a principled point of theology.

Secular, in this approach, does not mean ungodly. Rather, it means that the virtues and truths suitable for politics are apprehended by reason and experienced by all of humanity, though surely in various degrees of manifestation. Such a perspective frequently holds that political authority was instituted for the good of all persons, not merely the elect. The domain of politics, both as to goals and practices, is known independently of revealed truths. Evidence of the universal nature of political reasoning is found in the workable and tolerably happy political arrangements found among a variety of religious groups throughout history, as well as in the fact that no religious culture has ever held a monopoly on wise political leaders. Further evidence is reflected in the cross-pollination of political ideas between various religious cultures. Medieval Christian Europe, for instance, looked to pagan Roman civilization as a standard for politics, and much of the East has borrowed from Western political concepts and principles.

In the American setting, several religious approaches to a secular political framework have been especially prominent. The Baptist tradition of separationism, the Catholic tradition of natural law, the Reformed emphasis upon creation and Common Grace, and the Lutheran distinction of interior and exterior worlds have each advanced secular discourse in the political arena in important but distinct ways. Less prominent examples but equally influential in some intellectual circles are liberation theology and feminist theology, both of which characteristically employ secular, if prophetic, standards in politics.

It goes almost without saying that the connection between politics, reason, and God's revealed truths in these theological frameworks is frighteningly complex. Part of this complexity reflects the fact that for each of these traditions, the secular realm is part of God's unified plan for the world. Therefore the secular realm cannot be adequately understood apart from its relation to God's revealed truths.

Thus, the political currency of theologically inspired secular doctrine in a liberal democracy will be a function, at least in part, of the ability to minimize or even cloak the theological underpinnings of the secular doctrine. When circumstances force the believer to reveal her underlying assumptions, the secular language of "good," "advantageous," "useful," or "right" can be quickly coupled with words like "virtuous," "worthy," "righteous," "true," "holy," or "biblical." Scratch the secular surface, and one finds a religious worldview. But it is precisely because the two realms are connected in these constructions that theology occasionally shifts from the background to the foreground, thereby threatening the "secularity" of the secular world. This shift becomes
most visible when an allegedly "secular" or "strictly reasonable" framework, such as natural law, is rejected or perceived as excessively religious by outsiders to the group. As illustration, consider the proposition that innocent human life is to be respected. One can plausibly call this proposition an edict of reason and acceptable to a near unanimity of persons, whether religious or non-religious. However, what constitutes "respect" and "human" is contestable, and definitions can vary considerably according to religious perspective. What begins as a secular activity—that of choosing, say, whether to use the death penalty, or deciding a penal code for abortion—may easily become explicitly informed by revealed religious truths and thus become controversial.7

None of this is to suggest that religious believers who cast their political opinions in secular thought out of theological conviction are acting in bad faith. Usually no good reason exists to view theologically driven secular political constructions as anything but sincere attempts to describe how things truly stand. That being said, the very attempt to discern and impose universally true comprehensive moral principles on society is itself rejected by many contemporary liberal theorists as unduly disruptive of the social order. From the standpoint of a purely secular liberalism, neither the legitimacy of one's fundamental political beliefs nor the mode of expressing those beliefs ought to be contingent upon one's religious beliefs. To allow theological views to shape the content and process of politics is to hold liberal democracy hostage to the religious temperament of a nation's majority.

Prudential Reasons

Prudential motives for using secular language reflect the desire to be politically persuasive and influential, to be able to convince citizens who are not members of the religious community to nonetheless accept the policy prescriptions advocated by the group. Persuasive communication requires taking into account one's audience, so when a political speaker does not share the worldview of her audience, she faces a choice between advancing her cause in her terms or in terms acceptable to her audience. This choice may force important trade-offs between satisfying her conscience and persuading her audience. For example, imagine that the citizens of a city are voting on a referendum requiring all large businesses to provide health insurance for the same-

sex partners of employees. If a religious group was against this measure on grounds that it implicitly condones a violation of God's law, it could advance its position in a number of ways. One approach might include quoting from its scriptures (for example, Jews and Christians might cite Leviticus or other pertinent biblical passages). Another approach might leave scripture out of the picture and instead argue from the perspective of a "generic" morality, discussing, for instance, how same-sex relations disorder nature and promote social ills. Perhaps the group might discuss the issue of fairness by noting how unmarried heterosexual partners would not receive the same benefit, thereby privileging same-sex arrangements. Or, the group could avoid moral issues altogether and discuss instead the financial burdens the measure places on businesses.

Each of these approaches poses political difficulties for the group, forcing hard choices between prudence and conscience. The first approach (quoting scripture) may anger audiences that reject the assumptions of the group. The third and fourth approaches, which appeal to standards of fairness and self-interest respectively, are here essentially disingenuous ad hoc appeals that require the group to set aside the very convictions that sparked it to political involvement. The second approach, the moralist argument stripped of theological baggage, initially appears the most promising blend of inclusion and principle. This approach attempts to engage the whole community on grounds of moral reason in terms acceptable to the group itself. Still, if recent scholarship is correct, this approach is not without political risks. Alan Wolfe's book *One Nation, After All*, an interesting combination of survey and ethnographic inquiries, throws into question the prudential wisdom of ever appealing to universal moral standards in politics. Wolfe notes ambivalence in the American citizenry regarding moral truth claims. Many Americans, Wolfe demonstrates, make a sharp distinction between moral truths held privately and moral truth claims made publicly. This ambivalence, it turns out, makes enormous differences for the kinds of religiously inspired political appeals that can be made effectively.

Wolfe discovered that many middle-class Americans are acutely sensitive to the potential dangers of a full-throated culture war over the hearts and souls of citizens. Competing cultural standards of the good, when amplified and dwelled upon, threaten to make civil society unworkable by accenting differences, making politics more vicious, and

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demonizing the “other.” Just as importantly, such battles are inwardly threatening, and Wolfe demonstrates how many citizens feel the tug and logic of both traditional and modernist worldviews. People believe in traditional norms of citizenship and family life, but they also believe in the freedom to choose the kind of life one wants to live. This moral schizophrenia leads to the adoption of what Wolfe calls “morality writ small.” Characteristic of this ethic is the personal adoption of a code of right and wrong. Also characteristic of this thinking is the attitude that right and wrong are private paths of making sense of life’s riddles for a particular person, not universal propositions true for everyone at all times and places. Many citizens are, in short, decidedly pro-choice on most matters of morality.

This understanding of morality as a private matter suggests that the danger of poor moral choices by individual citizens is outweighed by the dangers of universalizing a single, controversial ethical standard. Politics and public dialogue more generally should therefore be free of contentious moral claims. A pluralistic society, according to this view, means having to live with and respect moral differences among one’s neighbors (and not to publicly judge between various “morals” put forth). Therefore a political speech that appears to uphold one type of morality (at the expense of others) is socially disruptive and rude—and bad political strategy. When Pat Buchanan and Dan Quayle made speeches in the early 1990s that implied some cultural choices are wrong or immoral, they were pilloried not only in the media but also more generally by liberal political groups.

If religious or even moral rhetoric offers limited appeal in pluralistic society, then secular rhetoric becomes increasingly attractive. Arguments made on grounds of economics, liberty, rights, and self-interest may not only appeal to a broader audience than do discussions of morality, virtue, and truth, but they fit easily into the liberal tradition of the United States. Not surprisingly, then, religious groups, for even their most pressing moral issues, oftentimes adopt the language of liberalism—rights, liberty, and interests, rather than relying upon revealed truth and doctrine. For example, the Christian Coalition has recently presented its case against abortion in rhetoric that appeals to liberal sensibilities. On its web page, the Christian Coalition argues against abortion by drawing upon the authority not of the Bible but of the Declaration of Independence, claiming that unborn children have a “right to life.”

It also calls for a “just society” and criticizes the argument in Roe v. Wade for being “pseudoscientific.” Nowhere in the pas-

9. Ibid., ch. 7.
sage is scripture quoted, the name of Christ invoked, or abortion referred to as murder. While it describes inalienable rights as "God-given" and mentions a "Creator," nowhere does it mention "God" as a noun. It is no more religious than the Declaration of Independence.

A secular rhetoric may not only avoid hostility from a broader outside audience, but it may also help hold some religious political coalitions together. Consider how this plays out in public education. While different religious groups do not agree on pedagogy or discipline, they often agree that present public schools create a hostile environment for the religiously devoted. James Skillen, a proponent of the neo-Calvinistic philosophy of sphere sovereignty, and Francis Canavan, Catholic advocate of subsidiarity, may disagree theologically, but they both argue skillfully for school choice by championing its fit with a pluralistic society. They also argue that vouchers provide parents—whether Jewish, Christian, secular and so on—with greater freedom to raise their children as they see fit. Note the rhetorical emphases: pluralism, family, and freedom. Canavan and Skillen attempt to persuade both a general audience as well as provide diverse religious groups with a vocabulary to do common battle.

LEGAL REASONS

Legal restraints on religious discourse in politics may, of course, be either liberal or illiberal, but in the United States they typically reflect a liberal understanding of politics. In general, the few existing legal restraints on religiously motivated political activity in the United States fall into two broad categories: (1) restraints on state led religious activity, and (2) limits on political activity from tax-exempt religious groups. Restraints on state sponsored religious activity stem from the Supreme Court's interpretation of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. This essay is not the forum to detail the Court's complex rulings on this matter, but a few words are appropriate. Since World War II, the Court has taken from time to time a separationist interpretive stance of the Establishment Clause. Many religious people have sharply disagreed with the Court's separationist impulses, claiming that it is not only bad constitutional law but it also unduly burdens the freedom of religious persons to present their ideas in the public arena as

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they see fit. Such uneasiness towards the Supreme Court is evident in the following passage from "We Hold These Truths: A Statement of Christian Conscience and Citizenship," a tract signed by over forty prominent Christians across the nation.

In *Lee v. Weisman* (1992), the Court seemed to suggest that an ethic and morality that "transcend human invention" is what is meant by religion that is constitutionally forbidden ground for law. In *Romer v. Evans* (1996), thousands of years of moral teaching regarding the right ordering of human sexuality was cavalierly dismissed as an irrational "animus." It is exceedingly hard to avoid the conclusion that the Court is declaring that laws or policies informed by religion or religiously based morality are unconstitutional for that reason alone. In this view, religion is simply a bias, and therefore inadmissible in law.¹²

Whether or not the fear of the Court expressed above is warranted—and by no means has the Court been consistently separationist—the Court has in fact legally limited the role of religion in shaping public policy. Though individuals, including public officials, may still make religiously inspired arguments on behalf of political issues, the Court has signaled that such arguments cannot be determinative in making public policy. This means that even though a law does not prejudicially support a religion or enforce worship of a particular creed, the Court may still ban it if only religious arguments are given on its behalf. Michael Perry explains: "The nonestablishment norm does forbid government to base political choices on religious arguments in this sense: government may not base any action—therefore, it may not base any choice, including one about the morality of human conduct—on the view that a religious belief is closer to the truth or otherwise better than the one or more competing religious or nonreligious beliefs."¹³ Therefore, for public policy to be legitimate, it must be justifiable with secular arguments generated independently of religious creed. To do otherwise, the Court seems to reason, is to impose a religion on others, even if no one is forced to worship a particular creed.¹⁴

The Court's separationist impulse is also reflected in a second, looser, restraint on religious groups. Churches and other religious groups can lose their tax-exempt status when they engage in what the state believes to be too much political activity. For instance, churches are subject to IRS penalties if they allow candidates to solicit funds at a church service or distribute political materials endorsing a candidate or political party. Here the state does not directly prohibit political activity in churches, but it does penalize them for it. In effect, this imposi-

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¹⁴ Ibid., 36.
tion makes clear that there are appropriately secular places or settings for doing politics, and a house of worship is not that place or setting. It forces the religious believer, in other words, to leave the place of worship to politic elsewhere.

**Liberal Reasons**

The last constraint on the use of religiously inspired reasons reflects an understanding of the moral obligations of citizenship in a liberal democracy. In general, this understanding holds that religious argumentation should be refrained from in politics because parochial, biased, and esoteric arguments undermine a fair and well-organized public arena. For most liberal theorists, the demands of secular discourse are demands of propriety, not legality. Though only recently articulated in this way, the underlying liberal distrust of religion in politics has widespread democratic appeal—as Alan Wolfe's study proves—as well as a proud intellectual lineage. Liberalism is a soup cooked in the kettle of religious strife in the seventeenth century, and over the centuries liberal doctrine has almost always held religion to be a threat to political justice. Though Anabaptist and Puritan thinking contributed to the founding of a more secular state, the development of a purely secular political order was chiefly driven by the liberal attempt to make religion less socially disruptive.15 The best way to make civil society more peaceful, argued liberals, was to limit the scope of state activity to the “secular.”

Several centuries later, religion has been effectively “tamed” and the most deadly kind of belief systems in the twentieth century—fascism, communism, and materialist capitalism—have been decidedly secular. Nonetheless, the impulse to remove from the public arena controversies stemming from religion has, if anything, intensified. Recently, the chief liberal method of removing deeply contestable and dangerous ideas from the public sphere is to demand that political debate not violate the norms of transparent public reason. Public reason here means “the visible and transparent device that reconciles claims originating in political differences among persons who may have nothing in common except membership in the political system.”16 All justifications of policy must depend upon only those kinds of claims that are in principle open to anyone's assent, not just those who hold particular

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16. Quote is from Fred M. Frohock, "The Boundaries of Public Reason," presented at the Southern Political Science Association Annual Meeting, 2-5 November 1994, Atlanta, Georgia. This is essentially the same view of public reason as held by Rawls.
or controversial belief systems. All religious justifications in politics violate this norm because they depend upon untestable premises of revealed truth. This liberalism is an ideological liberalism because it stresses that all citizens adopt certain beliefs of legitimacy that are independent of their religious beliefs.

There are virtually as many variants of contemporary ideological liberalism as there are contemporary liberals, but the most elegant and influential one is that of John Rawls in his book *Political Liberalism*. Rawls argues that the political construction of society must flow from shared principles of justice if it is to be a fair and attractive social ordering of citizens. The essence of political legitimacy for Rawls, then, is that the state refrains from exercising coercion against reasonable citizens who cannot endorse the principles informing that coercion. It is for this reason that the grounding of justice must be made independent of the truth of any given comprehensive view of the good, for no comprehensive life view will ever be universally accepted. It follows from this general restriction that any religious subset of comprehensive doctrines of the good is forbidden to order the political community.

Interwoven with this restriction is the requirement that public discourse be consistent with transparent public reason. Public reason is the mechanism by which persons attempt to persuade other persons through shared political belief. To bring to the discussion positions (such as religious positions) that some reasonable persons are sure to reject as irrational is to do violence to one’s audience as free and equal partners in a liberal regime. “The ideal of citizenship imposes a moral, not a legal, duty—the duty of civility—to be able to explain to one another on those fundamental questions how the principles and policies they advocate and vote for can be supported by the political values of public reason.” According to Rawls, to justify public policy through what is essentially a nonpublic rationale is effectively to exclude many citizens from the political table.

Rawls’s conception of public reason is not to be confused with the older conception of natural law which many Jews, Catholics, and Protestants acknowledge as authoritative. One difference between the two concepts is that public reason is far “thinner” substantively than the older conception of natural law. More than a stock of moral knowledge, public reason is the extension into discourse of a moral sensibility, specifically the capacity and inclination to seek a just basis for social cooperation. Another contrast with natural law is that whatever moral


18. Ibid., 217.
claims public reason allows are not to be viewed as universal truths applicable to all cultures but as fundamental norms of a particular political culture. In the culture to which Rawls refers, presumably the United States, public reason views public life as a well-ordered society of free and equal citizens.

**Secular Language and the Religious Right**

Before evaluating the meaning and implications of the secularization of public discourse, it may be helpful to examine how these reasons play out in practice. Apart from the civil rights movement, the most interesting recent example of a politically active religious movement involves the Religious Right.19 Its story is particularly interesting precisely because the several groups who compose the Religious Right, especially fundamentalists and, to a lesser degree evangelicals, have traditionally removed themselves from politics. Self-described fundamentalist Jerry Falwell, for instance, declared in 1965 that “I would find it impossible to stop preaching the pure saving gospel of Jesus Christ, and begin doing anything else—including fighting communism, or participating in civil rights reforms... Preachers are not called to be politicians but to be soul winners.”20 Many factors led to the politicization of the Religious Right, but of particular importance were the sexual revolution, the political mobilization of gays, and Supreme Court rulings on abortion, prayer in school, and busing. By the late 1970s, conservative religious groups were entering an era of burgeoning growth, mobilization, and organization. More than a few distinct conservative religious groups formed to do battle in the political arena—belying the notion of a monolithic movement—but the two most important organizations were the Moral Majority and later the Christian Coalition.

As Matthew Moen and Justin Watson have persuasively chronicled in independent studies, the narrative of the Religious Right is one of gradual secularization in the political arena.21 Though it described itself as a political, not a religious movement, in actuality the Moral Ma-

19. Religious Right is far from a perfect term. Not only is it somewhat out of fashion, it implies more of a monolithic movement than ever existed among the diversity of evangelical and fundamentalist conservative believers. Still, I think it conveys a commonly understood meaning of the groups under consideration here.


orthodoxy began its existence as a religious crusade, a holy war to restore America by rescuing it from the corruptive forces of secular humanism and moral relativity. Rarely did the Moral Majority shy away from invoking religious language or citing Scripture when discussing contemporary cultural and political problems. Led by Jerry Falwell, the Moral Majority used its moral fervor successfully to mobilize millions of conservative voters, and it was relatively successful in placing moral social problems front and center of the Republican cultural agenda. In the Reagan era especially, abortion, prayer in school, and affirmative action were particularly visible social issues that derived their prominence from the steady and vocal pressure of the Religious Right on the Republican Party. Even into the late 1980s there was a widespread perception that the Religious Right was still a group who used their appeal to traditional American values "as a mask for its hostility toward some of our most basic political institutions."22

Many fundamentalists did in fact recognize that to be politically effective they would have to stop sounding like what the public expected fundamentalists to sound like. And over the course of the 1980s, the Moral Majority adopted increasingly secular stances and gradually muted the religious overtones of their message, especially at the national level. Rhetoric of Christian morality was minimized, while emphasis on secular issues such as military preparedness and taxation increased. Moen attributes several underlying factors for this shift. One important factor for the Christian Right's secularization was its devotion to Ronald Reagan. Reagan was never successful in translating into reality his rhetoric that championed the themes of the Religious Right, and most evidence indicates he never made much of an effort to do so. While it is widely acknowledged that Reagan threw the Religious Right political scraps on occasion by adopting their language in his speeches, his efforts almost always focused on taxes, spending, military preparedness, and foreign policy. Despite his half-hearted efforts to win passage of his social agenda, Reagan was very successful in winning the hearts of the Religious Right. In little time, many conservative religious leaders began to champion almost all of Reagan's policies, whether they addressed their original concerns or not. In other words, the Religious Right was co-opted by the Republican Party.

Also critical to the secularization process was the Moral Majority's desire to expand its influence and membership beyond its original core of true believers. The Moral Majority's early jihad alienated and frightened many voters, including many Republicans, and it soon became

WHY RELIGIOUS GROUPS USE SECULAR LANGUAGE

clear that continuing its aggressively Christian approach would sharply limit its appeal and influence. As a result, prayer in school was repackaged in terms of students' rights, childcare issues were wrapped in the rhetoric of parental choice, and Christian groups did not shy from playing the "victimization" card.23 Moen's most interesting insight is that the secularization process was inseparable from the Religious Right's growing political sophistication. This sophistication process took various guises. For one, new leaders with political experience and Washington connections began to slowly replace the politically naive initial leaders of the program. Moreover, as the political organization of these groups became increasingly far-flung and complex, fund raising became as important a goal as actually getting out the message. Most important, however, was the learning curve of effective democratic political action—an important theme that will be addressed later. Still, this curve was perhaps too steep, and the Moral Majority folded in 1989.

The Christian Coalition began its journey with a decidedly more secular emphasis. The Christian Coalition grew out of Pat Robertson's 1988 campaign for the presidency. Robertson, who once led a rally in the early 1980s called "Washington for Jesus," worked hard to learn from his own tactical mistakes and the mistakes of the Moral Majority, and he attempted from the outset to embrace more than just religious fundamentalists. Whereas the Moral Majority footnoted its political stances with biblical passages, the Christian Coalition recast its positions in terms of rights, contract, and freedom. Instead of calling for the restoration of traditional Christian values, the group called for "restoring religious equality."24 Ralph Reed, the group's leader for a number of years, explicitly rejected the idea that the United States is an officially Christian nation, and he embraced a pluralism informed by an underlying agreement about the importance of human life. Reed called his agenda "quite unremarkable," meaning it was well within the mainstream of secular conservative thought.25 Accordingly, he claimed in January 1993 that Christian Coalition members "must emphasize inclusion, not exclusion. We must adopt strategies of persuasion, not domination. We must be tolerant of diverse views and respectful of those who express them."26

The sincerity of Reed's liberal tolerance was questioned when the Christian Coalition ran "stealth campaigns" in which candidates hid their association with the Christian Coalition and kept their social agenda virtually hidden. On the other hand, even its critics acknowledged that the Christian Coalition welcomed more voices, including "Jewish involvement," into its camp. As far as political strategy is concerned, Reed's ecumenical or liberal stance was exemplified by the Christian Coalition's 1995 "Contract with the American Family," which mirrored in form and language the secular and classically liberal themes of the Republican "Contract with America." The text of the "Contract with the American Family" did not cite the Bible at all; instead, it cited public opinion polls, government documents, journalists, social scientific literature, and statistical information. The Christian Coalition made a good effort to put forth what Kent Greenawalt calls "a ceremony of justification in terms that are available to all."

It is difficult to judge, however, the extent to which the Religious Right sincerely endorsed the liberal ethic of citizenship and its attendant obligations of secular talk. Most likely, a combination of legal concerns, theological beliefs, and a keen sense of political prudence explain much of the Religious Right's hesitation to advance their agenda in more explicitly religious tones. Some evidence suggests that they never fully adopted the liberal ethic of citizenship. For instance, both Robertson and Reed, but especially Robertson, have called for the inclusion of a distinct "Christian Voice" in "the conversation we call democracy." Robertson has argued repeatedly that the Establishment Clause does not mean "religious ideals and ideas are to be excluded from the political and lawmaking processes." All the same, there seemed to be a genuine shift toward tolerance for much of the evangelical movement. As one study points out, "important changes" in political attitudes occurred for evangelicals, as majorities of leaders across the evangelical spectrum believe that "Christians ought to cooperate in politics, even if they differ in theology." Christian Smith's detailed

31. Ibid., 106.
interviews with self-described evangelicals confirm this shift, showing an "almost unanimous attitude" of "civility, tolerance, and voluntary persuasion."33

This brief narrative illustrates that religious groups are often caught between the proverbial political rock and a hard place. America's democracy is pluralistic, and political success in that setting depends in large measure upon being able to compromise, negotiate, and join forces with less than ideally attractive bedfellows. To the true believer, however, the moral crusader, compromise is nothing less than capitulation to the devil.34 To join hands with other groups, therefore, is to risk losing the core of true believers who started the organization. Indeed, there is considerable risk that engaging in secular practices can make a group inwardly more secular, whether intended or not. The recent decisions of Paul Weyrich and Pat Robertson to focus their labor on evangelizing rather than politics may in fact indicate that, by and large, the Religious Right fought the good fight—and lost to the secular world.

**Evaluation: Secular Discourse, Competing Liberalisms, and Pluralism**

I said at the outset that the use of secular language to promote religiously inspired ends is the mirror image of civil religion, the use of religious symbols by the state to promote secular ends. Both strategies are ways of coping with political and cultural pluralism. Whereas the state uses civil religion to smooth over political conflict resulting from religious differences, religious believers often employ secular language to preserve their beliefs and identities in the face of difference. Both practices reveal the astounding difficulty of governing in a pluralist political arena.

Pluralism poses the question of whether a culturally and religiously diverse nation can simultaneously allow for religious worldviews in public life while maintaining a civil and informed public discourse. The prevailing thrust of what I call ideological liberalism has been to abandon the former goal in favor of the latter. To preserve some cultural diversity in the *private* arena, contemporary liberals stress a uniformity of *public* ideology, namely a liberal ethic of citizenship that excludes religious beliefs from the public arena. This perspective has tremendous merit for the political peace that it promises, but that peace is gained at the cost of alienating religious sensibilities. Some

34. Ralph Reed was in fact severely criticized by some on the right for his calls for civility. See, Watson, *The Christian Coalition: Dreams of Restoration, Demands for Recognition*, 80.
scholars claim that cost is too great, calling an exclusively secular public discourse fundamentally unfair. They suggest that any argument about justice is bound to be contested by some groups, so to reject out of hand religiously inspired views of justice is to abandon the standard of impartiality. Liberal justice requires giving citizens the freedom to advance any argument as they see fit, subject only to the rules of civility, rebuttal, and criticism. Limiting the free exercise of religion and speech should require a compelling reason, and the possibility that a religious argument may offend a listener is hardly sufficient grounds to gag that voice. Indeed, this view holds that it dishonors one's audience for a speaker to appeal to what he or she believes to be false or trivial, even if that falsehood or triviality is accepted or comforting to the audience.

Another argument against ideological liberalism questions the sense of demanding an entirely secular discourse. It is far from obvious, for instance, that secular public reason can adequately answer with sufficient agreement troubling political questions about the environment, the moral claims of animals, bioethical issues, abortion, and what existing generations owe to future generations. And as Kent Greenawalt, a friendly critic of contemporary liberalism, has argued, "If judgments cannot be made on the basis of shared premises and common reasons, then it is not unfair to make them partly on some other grounds." Yet other scholars dismiss the notion of neutral discourse altogether, contending that every conception of justice promotes in practice some comprehensive conceptions of the good and their attendant ways of life over others.

With these and other considerations in mind, some voices call for more, not less, inclusion of religious voices in the public square. Stephen Carter argues that when religion becomes exclusively private, it is trivialized and loses its currency even at the private level. An entirely tamed religion is too uninspiring to bring about the cultural benefits that it promises, such as self-control, concern for the disadvantaged,

36. This is Wolterstorff's position; ibid., 111-13.
moderation, and obedience to the laws. Others have argued that without religious values in the public square, politics is little more than a battleground for competing claims of self-interest.40 Democracy unchallenged by “outside” perspectives grows ever more selfish, petty, and paternalistic. Moreover, liberalism without challengers (and therefore without need of justification) is a flabby, uninspiring, and intolerant ideology, at times hysterical in the face of perceived threats, real or imaginary.41 By allowing religious voices to challenge the authority of liberalism in the public arena, liberalism is forced to defend itself and sharpen its claims.42

My point here is not to discredit the goal of creating a healthy, peaceful, and largely secular civic discourse. This is a laudable goal championed by all variants of liberalism, older and contemporary. The problem I am highlighting is that contemporary ideological liberalism has the tendency to undermine its own goals by appearing to be hostile to religion. By implying that bringing one’s deepest convictions into the public arena is an act of bad citizenship, contemporary liberalism unnecessarily sparks religious fury aimed at a political system that is, in reality, quite accommodating to religion. It is more than a little ironic that prophetic voices like Stephen Carter are, in fact, reacting in part to the very liberals who think their theorizing is paving the way for greater secular discourse. It is well to remember that the Religious Right’s initial involvement in politics was in large measure a reaction to a perceived attack on religion.

I contend that an older liberalism exemplified by David Hume and the American framers—a liberalism that stressed institutional design rather than civic exhortation—is superior to the contemporary approach in reconciling the tensions of pluralism. Rather than proclaiming the importance of secular discourse, Hume and later the framers encouraged it by appealing to the self-interest of citizens to do so. This older liberalism understood profoundly that one could not solve the problem of governing in a pluralistic society by fiat.

40. Richard John Neuhaus makes this argument in The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America, 2nd ed.
41. This was Louis Hartz’s concern, expressed eloquently in The Liberal Tradition in America (San Diego, Calif.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1955).
42. For some liberals this is simply too risky. David McKenzie argues that allowing religious discourse into the public arena is often tolerated because no threat is seen from giving minority religious groups a voice. When one takes seriously the threat of an intolerant religious group actually winning a majority, however, the threat to decent public discourse becomes immediately evident. Therefore both for the sake of fairness as well as for instilling a culture of respect, McKenzie advocates secular discourse, subject to well-circumscribed exceptions. See McKenzie’s “Stephen Carter, The Christian Coalition, and the Civil Rights Analogy,” Journal of Church and State 38 (Spring 96): 297-319.
It is instructive here to look at the early American framers, whose fear of religious involvement in politics was as strong as our own but whose methods for dealing with that possibility were more indirect. The framers attempted to secure justice for religious minorities and nonbelievers through institutional design, chiefly through the institutions of federalism, representative government, and the separation of powers. They believed a free, large, and diverse people would inevitably be pluralistic religiously as well as economically, and therefore politics would be a struggle between a large number of minority interests and perspectives. As Professor John S. Baker, Jr., claims, "religious pluralism developed not by accident but by design." In an environment of minority group struggle, religious groups would have to appeal to broader interests in advancing their own agenda. Given the right institutional environment, the secularization of the Religious Right is predictable from a Madisonian perspective.

One sees this institutional strategy to tame religion most clearly spelled out in The Federalist, especially its famous tenth paper. James Madison, the author of that paper, could not openly say that he believes religion to be dangerous, but every time he mentions religion in Federalist 10, he puts it in a negative light. Madison argues that "neither moral nor religious motives can be relied on as an adequate control" to factions. Religion is inadequate because its pull is at times too weak and at other times it is overwhelming—the very cause of faction. Madison believed that immoderate commitment to principle in politics not only makes perfection the (disastrous) standard for politics, it makes people crazy.

Here Madison follows the teaching of David Hume. Hume earlier had made a distinction between factions based on principles and those based on interest. Of these two kinds of factions, Hume says, factions of interest are by far "the most reasonable, and the most excus-
able.47 Because of "the degree of selfishness implanted in human nature," we should expect that where there are distinct interests, people will organize to protect those interests.48 These interests are amenable to regulation, however, because they can be balanced against one another and can be arranged by the government such to force compromise between them. In contrast, factions generated from abstract principle, especially religious principles (and most especially Christianity), lead to "madness," "fury," "poison," a "spirit of persecution," and "fatal divisions" of society.49 Factions of principle "have been the origin of all religious wars and divisions," which are by far the most brutal of all wars.50

Yet despite the dangers of religion to a republican regime, Madison makes the curious claim that under the Constitution (even prior to the Establishment Clause), "the variety of sects dispersed over the entire face of it must secure the national council against any danger from that source."51 How could this be? In good Humean fashion, Madison argues in Federalist 10 that factions are the "mortal diseases" of popular governments everywhere and that they come in the varieties that Hume described.52 Some factions are based on the "zeal for different opinions" concerning religion and government, while others are based on the "the various and unequal distribution of property."53 Then he demonstrates that the key to controlling their effects is to multiply them over the sweep of a large nation, thereby rendering the strength of any single faction susceptible to the republican principle. While Madison's argument for a plurality of interests is well acknowledged, his attempt to transform the kinds of factions represented in politics is less so. Madison hoped that politics under the Constitution would be about interests and property, not religion, and so he and his fellow framers made every effort to encourage a commercial republic.54 If unwilling to compromise and too small to win victory, religious sects soon realize that their efforts in national politics are unprofitable. With that recognition, they would either put aside their partial (minority)

48. Ibid., 36.
49. Ibid., 37-38.
50. Ibid., 37.
51. Hamilton, Madison and Jay, The Federalist, No. 10, ed. Rossiter, 84. Similarly, in Federalist, No. 51, Madison says that "In a free government the security for civil rights must be the same as that for religious rights. It consists in the one case in the multiplicity of interests, and in the other in the multiplicity of sects," 324.
53. Ibid., 79.
perspective to speak in a more public-regarding voice or simply retreat back to the pleasures of private life. The most remarkable fact of all is that this transformation would be done through political expediency, not moral exhortation.

Though this strategy runs terrible risks, it accurately reflects the fact that the politics of pluralism is inherently a politics of tensions, second-best solutions, and risky trade-offs. And, by and large, their gamble has been remarkably successful. As Madison predicted it would be, "the principal task of modern legislation" today is indeed the regulation of interest-based, not religious, factions. 55 Today political scientists are demonstrating just how effective our bargain-driven politics is at creating a civic culture of decency. Clarke Cochran has recently advanced a Madisonian argument that "politics can teach religion how to live with pluralism." 56 Likewise, Allen Hertzke claims "those who fear most the country cousins—those barefoot fundamentalist populists, with their 'paranoia,' their evangelical fervor, their emotional militancy—should welcome their entrance into the mainstream of American politics and society. For the congressional milieu, in particular, exercises a profound influence on those who attempt to shape public policy." 57 Hertzke's research demonstrates that Congress, that "model of Madisonian wizardry . . . clearly molds the activity of religious leaders and does so in a way that makes their lobby efforts more broadly palatable." 58

Just to get heard in politics, groups must learn how to play the game. Cochran stresses that in democracies an important "warrant" for entry into the policy making community is that groups, including religious groups, "must do their homework. They must learn the lingo and the empirical data pertinent to the policy arenas they wish to address." 59 Over time, most political groups learn this and those that do not are forced out of the game. And as groups exercise tolerance and live within pluralism effectively over time, very often "the message" of pluralism "becomes the goal, and a tactical posture of reasonableness translates into an accommodation with the system." 60 One author critical of the Moral Majority concluded, "if the fundamentalists are to have

58. Ibid., 200.
any prospect of long-term political success, they will have to cease being fundamentalists." And, as described above, this is roughly what happened. Full of fire and brimstone at the outset of their political involvement, the Religious Right was slowly absorbed into a mainstream political party, where it lost its specifically religious potency. Disgusted by this co-optation, the remaining firebrands left politics to return to the world of religion.

None of this is to suggest that institutional design makes the politics of pluralism easy. Madison warns us that a politics of minority pluralism may yet "clog the administration" and "convulse the society." But it is to suggest that a renewed commitment to liberal institutionalism may be well worth the effort. Attentiveness to the tensional and competing obligations of a pluralist system may in fact be the political precondition to prevent tyranny from any corner. Institutionalized tensions between federal and state governments, between the branches of government, between long and short-term perspectives, between various claims of justice, and even between the competing impulses of the Establishment and Free Exercise Clauses, might be the proper insurance for maintaining a plurality of perspectives in the public arena. The tensions that these competing perspectives generate lead to profound political untidiness, true, but such untidiness accurately mirrors the disorder of cultural pluralism itself.

In sum, pluralism poses special problems in a liberal democracy, both for religion and for politics. In response to pluralism, some religious groups adopt secular language out of theological, prudential, legal, and liberal reasons. Though we cannot guarantee that every citizen adopt a liberal ethic of secular discourse, political institutions ought to be designed to encourage the widespread and prudential public pretense of such a conviction.

61. Averill, Religious Right, Religious Wrong, 125.