

**TWO CENTURIES OF AMERICAN RELIGIOUS ACTIVISM:  
WHAT THE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURIES MAY TELL US ABOUT  
THE 21ST**

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**I. Habermas vs. Wuthnow: Religion as Disintegrative Force or Protean Politics?**

As a point of departure on how to make sense of the recent political resurgence of religion in American political life, the theoretical works of Jurgen Habermas and Robert Wuthnow present somewhat contrasting guides. Habermas' work on the interaction between religion and politics centers on the dynamics and future of the "public sphere" and what he sees as that sphere's progressive promise. In light of resurgent religious political action, Habermas fears the disintegration of the public sphere resulting from the absence of communicative processes between religious fundamentalists and secular citizens. Robert Wuthnow's interest is with the character of religion that makes its relationship with politics complex and protean. At the risk of oversimplifying, Habermas presents the perils posed to the public sphere from the outside by resurgent religious action and Wuthnow the promise of this resurgence as seen from inside the character of religion.

In the main sections of this paper, we discuss a long sweep of religious activism that speaks directly to key aspects of these broad theoretical concerns and allow us to ground the theoretical expectations of Habermas and Wuthnow in the US religious context.

*Habermas: Squaring Religious Discourses with the Rational Public Square*

Habermas' deepest fear is political disintegration resulting from the absence of "learning processes" between fundamentalist and secular citizens, effectively fissuring societies along cultural boundaries. In contemporary Western societies, religio-politics has emerged in what Habermas calls the "public sphere," a third sector of society more or less independent from economic markets and political institutions and coterminous with what other scholars term civil society or the civil sphere. For a half century now, Habermas has theorized the history, structures, and contemporary workings of the public sphere, the presence of which he considers essential to the maintenance and survival of democracy. This work has been as much normative as descriptive in purpose. Charles Tilly's warning that "the concept of the public sphere is morally admirable but analytically useless" is worth recalling here. We disagree, but Tilly's barb serves notice not to forget the normative foundations of Habermas' concept and to question its empirical grounding.

In the early development of the concept, religion was conspicuously absent both as a normative guide and as an empirical referent. In the democratic progress of the public sphere, Habermas saw no place for religion and in chronicling its historical development he ignored religious sources as he privileged secular ones. Consistent with secularization theories predicting religious decline and even demise, Habermas conceived of the communicative processes structuring the public sphere as fundamentally nonreligious. More recently, however, Habermas has turned his attention to religious citizens and "discourses" as increasingly vocal participants and voices in the public spheres of contemporary societies. Habermas' most recent analysis of the relationship between religious action and the public sphere (2006) begins with a note of stunned embarrassment at the stubborn presence of religion in the central political struggles of the day. Modernity, the bureaucratic state, and

instrumental rationality were supposed to have displaced faith and religious institutions. To make matters more baffling, the main social and political theories of the twentieth century cannot explain the reemergence of religion in “advanced” capitalist countries and in “developing” nations around the globe. To paraphrase Casanova, these theories do not shed light on how the paragon of liberal democracy and advanced capitalism (the United States) is also among the world’s most religious nations. Moreover, American religiosity in the modern/post-modern era has not remained vibrant by simply channeling evangelism to the private sphere.

The ongoing pervasiveness of religious forces in the public sphere leads Habermas to conclude that the rise of what Weber termed “Occidental rationalism,” once thought to be the master narrative of modernity, might actually be a Western European anomaly. If faith is a stable feature of the modern world, what then are the implications for democracy and the public sphere? In confronting this central question, Habermas reevaluates his classic formulation of the public sphere. Essential to the satisfactory function of the public sphere is the requirement that all citizens ground their political claims in what Habermas calls “generally accessible reasons” (p. 5). These reasons, he adds, are derived from the common language provided by the secular state, namely its constitutional principles and the universal foundation of human rationality. “All citizens are obliged to provide reasons to one another,” writes Habermas, invoking the vision offered in his theory of communicative action.

Habermas builds on Rawls’ treatment of religion in the public sphere, where he argues that religious doctrine may be introduced into the public sphere, but must in the final instance be translated into the common language of rationality. Habermas takes issue with Rawls’ formulation, observing that the demands of faith may conflict sharply with the

expectations of the secular public sphere, and that the consciences of religious citizens cannot be expected to be divided against themselves, producing an unfair burden relative to secular citizens. Thus, the liberal state, Habermas argues, cannot—without structural contradiction—demand that citizens segregate political reasons from religiously grounded values. As a result, he concludes that religious idioms and statements may be offered in the public sphere, with the proviso that their interlocutors recognize that “only secular reasons matter therein” (p. 10).

The key to the effective maintenance of the universally accessible public sphere, according to Habermas, hinges upon secular and religious participants fulfilling basic communicative obligations to each other. These “complementary learning processes” require each side to modify their discursive stances in light of the other’s particularities. Therefore, religious citizens are obliged to ultimately translate their statements into the language of public reason when entering civic life (though they may be entirely motivated by religious doctrine), while secular citizens are required to acknowledge the limits of instrumental reason and listen with an open mind to arguments inspired by religious faith.

Without these learning processes, Habermas argues that the public sphere as a whole may be jeopardized, which could spill out into generalized societal disintegration. This kind of fragmentation has already appeared as a real threat in many of today’s political tinderboxes, especially where secular institutions have zealously colonized once sacred domains of meaning and practice. Such breaching actions have triggered massive and occasionally violent counter-mobilizations, resulting in bitterly fractured societies occasioned by bloodshed and civil wars. To be fair to Habermas, more hopeful historical examples also inform his new thinking about religion in the public sphere. The religious dimensions of the Civil Rights Movement and the Polish overthrow of communism, for example, point to the

progressive influence of religion in public spheres open to rational arguments and inspirations of faith.

*Wuthnow: Religion as Constitutive Dimension of the Public Sphere*

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Robert Wuthnow pioneered a renewed interest in understanding the *combination of conditions* necessary for episodes of significant social change, including economic development, literacy, technology, and, most importantly in his schema, cultural discourses. Religion, argues Wuthnow, remains an integral and influential source of these discourses. As seen most clearly from the American experience, the historical development and current conditions of nearly all social institutions are shot-through with religion. This unique perspective supplies the second analytical framework for our discussion of religion and politics.

Whereas Habermas' concern centers on the dynamics and future of the public sphere in light of religious action, Wuthnow's interest is squarely with religion itself, in particular with the characteristics of religion that make its relationship with politics complex and creative. Wuthnow criticizes the theoretical toolkit of mainstream social science as woefully unequipped to answer the questions raised by the recent revitalization of faith in political life. The three paradigms once typically used to consider such questions – modernization theory, world system theory, and critical theory –are all ultimately unsatisfactory, according to Wuthnow, even in combination.

As a remedy to the inadequacies of all three paradigms, Wuthnow proposes a thoroughgoing revamping of the theoretical approaches to religion and politics. His recommendation is a final setting aside of the outmoded positivism of Western social science, and a turn to an interpretive-focused “metatheory” that prioritizes *verstehen*,

subjective meanings, and *causal* capacities of cultural expressions themselves. Wuthnow points out that most of the social scientific research into the intersection of religion and politics plainly exposes the epistemic shortcomings of conventional theories. The major approaches, he argues, do not “take religion seriously.” Instead, all three privilege economic and political forces as causally primary.

By changing the objective of social theory to focus on understanding the full complexity of meanings expressed in social phenomena, the terrain of religio-politics becomes comprehensible. As an illustration, Wuthnow offers, “We do not understand why a Muslim leader calls the United States ‘the infidel.’ . . . We do not understand because our theories provide no basis from which to understand . . . They stress cause and effect, but leave no room for meaning and significance” (p.11). It is understandable why conventional social science would be reticent to consider religion and cultural forces at the same level of import as so-called structural forces, he continues. Doing so introduces a near-intolerable amount of indeterminacy and messiness. Wuthnow seems to suggest, however, that such a change only makes sense, as human social interaction itself matches that description.

The cultural turn in sociology, political science, and economics offers new horizons for the metatheory Wuthnow proposes, and he himself has been a key figure in its development. It is not at all clear, however, that symbol and value systems, including but not limited to religion, are being regarded as significant *in their own right*, accorded the same degree of semi-autonomous causal power as economic and political forces. The “shaping power” of religious actors is still rarely recognized, and a central reason for this omission is that social scientists rarely try to understand the meaning of religious action. On this point, Wuthnow is both persuasive and his work most relevant to any discussion of the intersection of religion and politics. For Wuthnow, religion must be viewed as not merely molded by

external forces, but molders of them as well. Culture, of which religion is a prominent component, has a “dual citizenship,” existing both exterior and interior to human beings. Outside human actors, culture is a deeply interwoven feature of the social environment, providing the meanings and symbols for institutions, rituals, and material objects. Culture also develops inside human actors as a set of not entirely coherent habits, beliefs, values, schemas, and worldviews.

Religion, too, is found at both levels. But religion is unique in its capacity to also address itself to concerns that transcend the mundane, temporal social life that other social phenomena (such as law or economic relations) are confined to. Religion can permeate all aspects of human experience: moral, aesthetic, psychological, and socio-cultural. History – even recently -- provides abundant examples in which religion subsumes all human activity under its purview. To understand the power of religion to shape social worlds, the meaning and significance of this wide range of human experience must be confronted. This is only rarely done by social scientists. For example, to ask a person to somehow “translate” or set aside their religious experience when they enter public and political spheres, as Habermas and Rawls recommend, is not properly described as mere inconvenience or burden. It is more akin to amputation.

While Habermas’ model of how the public sphere should operate in terms of religious citizens and reasons may prove unrealistic, he must be credited for attempting to formulate workable procedures for the actual challenges facing democratic states today. His deepest anxiety lies with the possibility of shredded democracies and interminable social conflict between ideological opponents, permanently at loggerheads because they refuse to listen to each other and respect the position and background of the other. His proposals are designed to address this problem head-on. Wuthnow aims his analytical arsenal at academia

itself. Metatheoretical modifications and epistemological reorientations, though important, cannot produce the kind of deeper, rich understandings that Wuthnow wishes to see if they are limited to the scholarly community. Such changes in perspective must be generalized to citizens at large, and most specifically, to religious and political actors.

What is to be learned from these two analyses of religion and politics? Three important themes and points of consensus run through both works. First, Habermas and Wuthnow agree that mainstream social science was left blindsided by the reemergence of religio-politics. Second, both theorists directly or indirectly point to a common source for this resurgent religious activism in modern politics: *the aggressive encroachment of the secular state into valued spheres of intimacy and deep meaning held as inviolable by citizens of diverse backgrounds*, such as family practices, sexuality, education, and faith. Yet in each of their works, the attention to the lifeworld colonization/resistance perspective is minor compared to other explanatory or normative considerations that are of limited practicality. In the empirical section that follows, we foreground this aspect of their theorizing as a perspective of high utility and applicability across many diverse contexts.

Finally, Habermas and Wuthnow are careful to observe, though not initially, that religion in politics means a great deal more than fundamentalism. For an array of institutional and cultural reasons, the greatest share of religious activity in the world, in spite of being vibrant and visible, has failed to register in the consciousnesses of scholars, journalists, and commentators. Fundamentalism<sup>1</sup>, though on the rise, remains the belief and practice of a distinct minority of global believers. The more moderate and “accommodationist” or “adaptive” forms of religio-politics are both more numerous and arguably more significant than those of their fundamentalist kin, yet rarely achieve headline

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<sup>1</sup> According to Almond et al (1995) fundamentalists share at least the following characteristics: reactivity to religious marginalization, absolutism; belief in scriptural inerrancy; and strict rule adherence.

status. Our analysis aims to call attention to the fact that in the face of the secular advance of capitalist markets and bureaucratic states, religious interpretations of this advance and religious reactions to it vary. Religion does not simply set itself up against the secular but takes a full range of prepositional positions vis-à-vis its world environment.

## **II. SECULARIZATION AS A CENTRAL MECHANISM IN RELIGIO-POLITICS**

Although it sounds increasingly defensive to make this claim, theories of secularization have from the beginning been mainly about modern transformations of religion or changes in religion's scope and reach in society and not about religious decline *per se*. It is manifestly not the case that the religious traditions of Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism are disappearing, but their relationships with political institutions have changed, and in many societies dramatically so. These great sacral traditions continue to thrive and grow and that this religious flourishing holds great political significance is now scarcely doubted. But exactly how they mix with politics is still very much a puzzle.

If contemporary politics – both in the US and globally -- is in some sense post-secular, as we argue, it is not because secularization did not happen, but because something subsequent and historic *has* happened. Revisiting theories of secularization helps make sense of this subsequent religious and political change. Much of the political resurgence of religion reviewed below is first grasped at through some variety of secularization theory. As we aim to show, the general significance of this research may be better handled with a post-secular frame that does not junk secularization theories but builds on and beyond them.

Equating secularization theories with a theory of religious decline is a mistake. (Gorski, 2000). Only some secularization theorists argue for the historical decline of religion (Tschannen, 1991). Casanova (1994) usefully distinguishes among three “uneven and

unintegrated” propositions within secularization theories: “secularization as *differentiation* of the secular spheres from religious institutions and norms, secularization as *decline* of religious belief and practices, and secularization as marginalization of religion to a *privatized* sphere” (211). The second of these, according to Casanova, may be indefensible, but the first and the third propositions provide a framework for making sense of the contemporary political resurgence of religion as interactions with varying forms of secularization.

We begin with the first proposition as specified by Casanova—a claim that is as much political sociology as it is sociology of religion. Most secularization theories hold in common a thesis of institutional differentiation (Gorski, 2000; Tschannen, 1991; Smith, 2003; Casanova, 1994; Chavez, 1994; Young and Cherry, 2005). From this common analytical angle, the central question is the impact of social differentiation on religious structures of authority. As Dobbelaere (1981: 31) argued decades ago, “secularization is basically a consequence of a differentiation process that results in a process of specialization of substructures.” In a classic formulation, Berger (1967: 39) argued that processes of differentiation freed “the norms of the various institutional areas from the influence of the originally superordinated ‘religious’ values.” The historical sociologies of Weber and Habermas, bookends of the twentieth-century grand theorizing of modern transformations, contrast “traditional” undifferentiated societies with modern societies structured around multiple institutions with autonomous purposes and logics (Weber 1946; Habermas 1987).

For secularization theorists, the differentiation thesis typically focuses on the institutional separation of political and religious structures of authority. In the familiar sweeping historical perspective, the idealized narrative flows through a series of abstract stages: from an undifferentiated state of kin-based authority, to a loose symbiosis between church and state during the Middle Ages, and to complete separation in the modern era (see

e.g. Bruce, 1996). As Smith (2003) argues, these theories of secularization and their use of differentiation as a central mechanism are overly abstract and completely lacking in human agency. The institutional separation of religious and political authority in societies around the globe can and did take widely different paths, and these different paths help explain the religious politics we see today.

New research, focused on this first proposition of secularization as specified by Casanova, has altered our understanding of religious change with insights about power from political sociology. Secularization seen as a power struggle—either as a kind of social revolution (Smith 2003) or as elite contentious politics (Chaves 1994)—illuminates our understanding of both political and religious change. These studies view secularization as an outcome of conflict between discrete actors with divided interests over the public role of religion. Their findings are revealing. They show that secularization processes are real and where they take hold it is because activists fighting to expel religion from public institutions succeed. But these studies largely ignore immanent religious processes, and more generally, the significance of the third proposition in secularization theory as specified by Casanova. In a move to distance themselves from the secularization thesis of the decline of religious values and practices (Casanova's second proposition), some social scientists now avoid the historically and theoretically thorny issue of longer-term religious changes in meanings and values and their political consequences. This risks missing the changing symbolic force of religion and its political consequences (Young and Cherry, 2005).

Casanova argues that modern transformations involved not just institutional differentiation of authority but marginalization and, more importantly, privatization of religion. These changes altered significantly the social meaning and value of the religious. They did not affect a simple decline or diminishment of the significance of religion but

transvaluations. Moreover, value changes central to modern transformations developed as processes immanent to religion, even as they went beyond religion, transforming or overcoming it (Blumenberg 1983). In many instances and places, the changing significance of religion was pushed intentionally and unintentionally by religious activists and authorities. Marginalization or more precisely privatization of religion often deepened and dispersed religious meanings in ways that are indispensable for understanding processes of secularization *and* religion's current political resurgence. In these contexts of secular transvaluation, religious political resurgence has come largely in the form of "life politics," to use Giddens' term, or new religious social movements defending the "lifeworld" from secularizing "systems rationalization" in Habermas' terms (Giddens, 1991; Habermas, 1987).

The first and third propositions of secularization are linked in important analytical and concrete historical ways. As Phil Gorski's work on European state formation and nationalism shows, this political (and apparently secularizing) history is not marked by religious decline so much as religious change (Gorski 2000). And this change had as much to do with shifts in values or meaning as it did with shifts in power or control over material resources. The "disciplinary revolution" and the rise of the modern state demonstrate how the concentration of (secular) political authority in the state can stem from the internalization of religious values (Gorski 2003). Aspects of the Reformation pushed religion inward, and this privatization or internalization and self-disciplining worked in some cases to augment the power of the state as "engineer of morals and social practice."

In secularization processes across Western Europe (and North America), critical value transformations altered the very conditions of religious belief. These changes are variously described by scholars. Casanova's (1994) account of the privatization of religion is the most prominent and theoretically developed in the social sciences. The recent book on

secularization by the philosopher Charles Taylor (2007) draws heavily on the social sciences and on Casanova's work in particular to specify the interiority of secularization. Taylor argues that a crucial aspect of secularization, linked to but not identical with the separation of political structures from religion, is the changing conditions for religious belief and unbelief, conditions that go beyond the institutional differentiations church and state and delve into personal and societal-level changes in ultimate values. Religious belief now appears in many societies as an option, and in some places as "an embattled option." "Self-sufficing or exclusive humanism" which accepts "no final goals beyond human flourishing" is an increasingly plausible and in some places hegemonic ontology and pre-ontology (taken for granted and rooted in everyday dispositions) and believers and nonbelievers alike confront this secular reality or humanistic purpose when making sense of their own ultimate values. In this sense, secularization has brought a degree of reflexivity to religious belief. "Naïve acknowledgement of the transcendent, or of goals or claims which go beyond human flourishing" is "now unavailable to anyone, believer or unbeliever alike (Taylor 2007: 21). A radical shift in the background, in the framework of the taken-for-granted, effects religious believers as well as nonbelievers. This radical shift marks the political resurgence of religion in characteristic ways. As evidenced in the empirical work we review below, the "reentry" of religion into public life often takes the form of self-reflexive, social movements developing within civil society around very intimate concerns.

### **III. RELIGION AND THE SECULAR IN PARADOX**

#### *19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-Century American Evangelicals, "embattled and thriving"*

The subcultural institutions of evangelical Christians in America have been central to their political influence from the early years of the New Republic (Carwardine 1997; Young 2006) to the present day (Diamond, 1995; Smith et al, 1998; Lindsay 2008). From these sub-

cultural institutions, evangelicals have launched political actions with wide-ranging goals varying from local civic acts such as protecting nativity scenes in town squares or stopping traffic on the Sabbath to forming a national political party or amending the Constitution. Over more than two centuries, the level of intensity, the regional spread, the forms and the popular resonance of evangelical political actions have varied profoundly. Given this great variety, social scientists are hard pressed to find a historical pattern or even a few social processes that might be generalizable across the long U.S. history of evangelical engagement and disengagement in politics. Nonetheless, there appear to be some interactive sequences between evangelical and political institutions that have recurred.

Christian Smith (1998) in his remarkable book on contemporary evangelicals identifies a key interaction:

[American Evangelicalism] possesses and employs the cultural tools needed to create both clear distinction from and significant engagement and tension with other relevant outgroups, short of becoming countercultural. And modern pluralism provides the environment within which that strategy works. By contrast, the classical American fundamentalist strategy of isolationist separatism, and the theologically liberal approach of radical accommodation appear to undermine those traditions' religious strength (218).

As Smith suggests, creative tension with other public institutions including state institution explains much of the persistent political influence of evangelicalism through US history.

The coincidence of major Reformed and especially evangelical Christian movements and political events throughout American history suggest a dynamic relationship between the two. The Puritan errand into the wilderness, to use Perry Miller's famous phrase, started the religious making of European political realities in America. This American beginning was of course a response to an apparent political termination of the Puritan project in England. Never entirely left alone by the English, the Puritan errand nonetheless carved its own particular political-religious standing order. There was in fact more than one standing order

in the American colonies: Rhode Island's anticipation of the country's future disestablishment of religion; a Quaker colony; and Anglican orders in between and further South.

In the mid-eighteenth century, the little theocracies of New England were centers of religious revivals that spread and linked the colonies across the Atlantic seaboard in the first American social movement, the Great Awakening. According to some historians, this evangelical pulse of inter-regional, mass collective action had a key role in the American Revolution. Historians and social scientists debate how cohesive the Great Awakening was and its political impact. And yet, John Murrin's (1983) qualified counterfactual "No Awakening, No Revolution" has its defenders and its plausibility. Murrin's causal claim points to a protean American relationship between political and religious institutions predating the New Republic's innovative separation of church and state.

The secularization of American politics in the wake of the Revolution fueled and furthered the contentious religious differentiation that already existed in the colonies, not just in a pluralism of churches, but also within churches and in their tense engagement with public concerns. Since then, evangelicals have maintained, over more than two centuries, what might be described as a creative contestation of the institutional differentiation between church and state—a contestation leading to innovations in civil and political associations that go well beyond church and state institutions. Niebuhr's mode of *religion in tension and paradox with the secular* approximately describes this dynamic history. Evangelical Christianity's creative contestation has oscillated in its intensity of engagement with political institutions. In some periods, the fight has been overt and verging on collapsing the institutional distance. These periods have been regularly followed by disengagement from politics and withdrawal into civil and religious associations. In this fashion, evangelical

Christians over the more than two centuries have alternated between political engagement and disengagement.

The period during and immediately after the Revolution was one of evangelical Christian declension and political withdrawal (Noll 2002). The upstart sects fought for disestablishment, the Baptists most militantly. Once this was won, they withdrew from the political fray for a period, but they were not inactive. In the aftermath of the disestablishment of religion they had fought for, these dissenting evangelical sects witnessed great gains (Finke and Stark 2005; Finke, Guest, & Stark 1996). Having mobilized politically to be left alone, for the first third of the nineteenth century they thrived religiously at a distance from the state. Baptists, Methodists, Disciples of Christ and other evangelical disestablishmentarians led the religious revivals of the early nineteenth century and what Mark Noll calls the Christianization of America (Noll 2002).

This would not be the last time that evangelicals would find in their distance from the state a popular fountain of faith, but this civic spring often propelled evangelicals right back into politics (Young 2006; Diamond, 1995). Possibly the most important political outcome of the evangelical creative contestation was the special-purpose association: a form of voluntary association or para-church institution with no formal denominational link but closely tied to a network of evangelical churches. When special-purpose societies first emerged in the 1820s, it was an evangelical invention. The focus of these novel voluntary societies was missionary and, at first, not particularly interactive with the state. The American Temperance Society and the American Antislavery Society emerged as a part of a broad network of specialized missionary societies. Only after they worked through evangelical churches, gathering support, did they target political institutions.

In this development of para-church institutions with purposes that were primarily missionary as opposed to lobbyist in nature—political engagement was always potential but not always actual. Starting in the 1820s, evangelicals organized an impressive array of special-purpose, even single-issue, organizations. They did so at first without intent to engage political institutions. At their inception, voluntary associations to protect Sabbath observance, end alcohol consumption, eradicate prostitution, and abolish slavery operated as moral campaigns to persuade individuals and civil and religious institutions not the state. These “special sin” societies, along with fraternal orders, were the most prominent and popular voluntary associations of Tocqueville’s America. Skocpol’s historical survey of American voluntary associations by Skocpol and her colleagues confirms the prominence of special sin societies (Skocpol 1997; Skocpol et al. 2000; Skocpol 2004). This survey shows that special sin societies accounted for half of all associations with membership rolls that included at least 1% of the population before the Civil War (see Table 1).<sup>2</sup> On closer inspection, Skocpol’s survey reveals that all the associations to achieve national status before the Civil War fall into three different associational forms: fraternal orders, special sin societies, and a mix of these two types. The oldest, the fraternal order, was an import from Europe. The special sin society was an American original. A mixture of these two forms emerged later inaugurating a long and influential line of fraternal associations organized around causes for social change (e.g., the Knight of Labor) (Kaufmann 2002).

[Table 1 about here]

By the 1830s, evangelicals trained in missionary societies were taking the lead in the first U.S. national social movements: the temperance movement and the abolitionist movement. These campaigns emerged within civil society and at a conscious distance from

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<sup>2</sup> Gamson’s (1975) sample of voluntary organizations provides further evidence of the centrality of special sin societies to antebellum civil society

institutional politics as evangelicals sought to bear witness to moral, life-style, and identity issues rather than mobilizing for narrower economic and political interests (Young 2002). In many respects, these movements looked like the new social movements or life politics of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Some of these moral reform purposes, however, made political action all but inevitable.

In the 1840s, these movements turned avowedly political in their actions and goals forming political parties and pushing new legislation. These evangelical causes along with Nativist attacks against Catholics would forge a northern political bloc providing the foundation for the Republican Party and a great push toward civil war. Many regional, economic, and political factors having little to do with religion pushed toward the same end. With evangelical re-engagements with politics in the temperance, nativist, and antislavery campaigns of the mid-nineteenth century, American politics became precociously post-secular. Warner (1993: Table 1, p. 1052) makes this point in his paradigm-shifting article on the sociology of religion.

If evangelical Christianity was not mainly to blame for the Civil War or to credit for emancipation, it showed some signs of withdrawing from the political field after the trauma of war and in the face of rapid urbanization and industrialization at the end of the century. The so-called great reversal lasted for decades, but evangelical Christianity was never vanquished from the field. Indeed, for no period in U.S. history have evangelicals completely disengaged from politics. Many historians argue that evangelical Christianity was close to the political establishment in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century before this reversal or “second disestablishment” (Casanova 1994: chapter 6). But it was also cozy with challengers to this establishment. In fact, evangelicalism was itself splitting apart and in so doing it fed countervailing political movements. Liberal evangelicals and the Social Gospel fueled the

politics of progressivism and secular state building. At the same time, an emerging fundamentalism led a pietist withdrawal out of politics and into a religious counterculture.

There were, however, evangelical political engagements that did not follow these routs. In the Populist movement, evangelical techniques of mobilization and moral messages of economic justice buffeted an anti-capitalist movement and serious challenge to the two party system and state centralization. Mirroring a restorationist thrust in evangelicalism, the populist sought to restore a Jeffersonian producerism. As Joe Creech (2006) convincingly argues, the movement did not just borrow evangelical rhetoric and forms of organizing, although it certainly did do this (Williams and Alexander, 1994), in parts of the South it actually fused religion and politics. In the movement for Prohibition, the long-standing evangelical temperance movement merged with progressivists, nativists, and women's rights advocates to pull off a great political win. With the 18th amendment, this moral reform achieved a pyrrhic victory. A few years later, a similar defeat from victory in the Scopes trial sent the fundamentalist wing of evangelical Christianity into years of political exile and religious reorganization in sub-cultural, counter-institutions. With these single-issue victories, prohibition and creationism, evangelical politics neared collapse. It would not revive for over a half century.

Over this half century, secularization theories predicting the political demise of religion seemed to be on target. In the late 1970s, the signs of a great academic reversal in this prognostication followed the lead of another evangelical political resurgence. As it did in the early nineteenth century, evangelical Christianity returned to political prominence with the rise of the New Christian Right. The outcome of this new wave of evangelical politics has yet to be decided, but as in the early nineteenth century this reentry of evangelicalism into public and political life resurgence was triggered by life politics or a defense of a religious

lifeworld—i.e., by perceived state incursions over issues of parental authority, education, sexuality, intoxicants, and gender roles (Casanova 1994: chapter 6). The rise of grassroots movements and power elites within civil society over the past few decades have returned evangelicals and evangelical causes to contentious and institutional politics (Smith 2000; Lindsay 2007, 2008; Diamond, 2000; Green, Rozell, & Wilcox, 2001; Jacobs, 2006; Lienesch, 1993; Guth et al, 2003).

The pattern of evangelical politics since the 18<sup>th</sup> century cannot be explained by a simple or general historical process. What is clear is that there is no linear process of decline. The political surge beginning in the 1970s is not the first time that evangelicals have returned from the political wilderness. Their political exile in the 1920s was not the first time they suffered political decline. In these oscillations of political influence, it is clear that evangelicals have benefited as much as suffered from the institutional differentiation of religion from other public spheres. Evangelical interpretations of the benefits or ills of secular politics have also historically varied. From the late 18<sup>th</sup> century on, evangelical politics has covered the gamut from a kind of pietistic withdrawal characterized by Baptists after disestablishment and the fundamentalist response in the mid-twentieth century to pyrrhic victories like the Scopes trial to fighting to overthrow secular political institutions as in the more contemporary case of Christian militia groups (Juergensmeyer 2000; Williams and Blackburn 1996). In the main, however, evangelical Americans over the centuries have thrived in tension with the world of secular politics. As in the past, today the majority of evangelicals approach political institutions with ambivalence (Smith 2000). There remain pietist strains of withdrawal from secular politics and theocratic strains seeking dominance over political institutions, but these are in the minority. For many generations, evangelicals have engaged in a self-conscious, reflexive way with a secular state and other secular

institutions like academia, the media, and other commercial markets. In this embattled position, evangelical Christianity has pulsed with highly effective pressure politics, movement politics, and elite politics. And there is every reason to believe it will continue to do so. Since the early nineteenth century, American evangelicals have been in their politics post-secular.

#### **IV. ROMAN CATHOLICS IN THE AMERICAN PUBLIC SPHERE:**

##### **SECULARIZATION CREATES STRANGE BEDFELLOWS**

###### **The “Great Catholic Awakening,” 1900-1930**

On May 15, 1891, Pope Leo XIII published *Rerum Novarum*, (English title, *The Condition of Labor*). It was the first major encyclical on social justice ever produced by the Vatican. Mich notes that Pope Leo’s decision to publish *Rerum Novarum* was motivated by, among other reasons, a concern that the faithful would join atheistic social movements to protect their interests (Mich, XXXX, 18). The Church drew disproportionately from the working class and poor during this period, who were also among those most affected by the economic and political changes. Absent defenders and protector from the religious sphere, it was highly likely that the dispossessed and desperate would turn to Marxism and revolutionary groups to fight for their dignity and livelihood. For Leo, publishing *Rerum Novarum* had moral, practical, and political benefits, and given its rather balanced tone, few obvious risks.

Briefly, the themes of *Rerum Novarum* included:

- Private property for all workers should be supported. The Church viewed property as the basis of wealth creation and the foundation of stability, but the accumulation of property for its own sake as sinful;
- The state should have the power to intervene and protect workers or any oppressed class;

- A wage adequate to supply the basics of a dignified human life should be mandated;
- All workers should have the right to organize;
- The Church supports the concept of collaboration instead of class struggle, embodying an ethic of love, rather than discord or hatred. The of violence or revolution to achieve social justice is rejected.

In the words of scholar Stephen Pope, “*Rerum Novarum* provided a doctrinal challenge to the apathy and indifference of middle-class and affluent Catholics” (Pope, 1994). More than this, the letter served as a *master frame* for Catholic social action that would persist for the next century. It provided Roman Catholics around the world with a new and unprecedented tool for their cultural repertoires. Until then, religion was a private matter related to one’s personal salvation and perhaps one’s responsibility to one’s fellow man (such as Weber’s “neighborly ethic”). But with the publication of *Rerum Novarum*, the faithful were urged to see, social, political, and economic life through the lens of the Gospel. Via the encyclical, Catholics were taught how Christ wants them to live and react to events beyond their own immediate sphere of influence and interaction. They learned that their church, to whom they had significant obedience, had a moral stake in and a concern for world affairs, not only the affairs of the individual soul. As urbanization and industrialization created new sources of strain and anxiety, economically, politically, and psychologically, believers found this tactical innovation a welcome addition to the toolboxes with which they manage their world. With this simple letter, the Church advanced a collective action paradigm that would come to play a major role in the discourse and actions of public Catholics from protestors and rioters to journalists and politicians: “structural sin.” It was the innovation of this potent and culturally resonant frame that eventually launched the Catholic activism of the 1930s, and even provided the ideological legacy for its re-surfacing via cycles of protest in the

1960s. It legitimized for the first time “public Catholicism” in the modern world. Never again would American Catholics simply observe social and political life.

*The 1930s: The Golden Age of Social Catholicism*

Worldwide economic collapse and generalized domestic suffering beginning in 1929 provided the external conditions that led to what most Catholic historians call “the Golden Age of ‘social Catholicism.’” (Casanova, 177). The period of the Great Depression through the beginning of World War II represents the high water mark of activism, social criticism, and application of Church social teaching in American life. As John Sharpe remarked, “The 1930s was the last decade to witness a serious movement for Catholic social principles” (Sharpe, XXXX).

More than any other single expression, Catholic social action in the 1930s was led by the laity. Organizations such as the Catholic Worker were joined by similar outreach efforts such as Friendship House and the Grail, all headed by religious activist women. These small communities were deeply influenced by a liturgical movement stressing the idea of the “Mystical Body of Christ,” and a calling to service. This movement placed a high value on communitarian ethics and the emotional aspect of religion, as well as an emphasis on spirituality, hospitality, and solidarity. One could view the phenomenon as a form of liturgical revivalism to counter the blithe 1920s, which reinforces Young’s (2002) findings regarding the role of public confessions as a precursor for movement activity.

The Catholic Worker was undoubtedly the most famous and far-reaching of these communities. Founded by Dorothy Day, a former socialist agnostic, along with Peter

Maurin, a nomadic philosopher and laborer, the Catholic Worker embodied the spirit of revivalism of the period and mixed it with a radicalism appropriate to the times. Day started *The Catholic Worker* newspaper in 1933 as a way of spreading their unique blend of orthodox Catholicism and social critique. The philosophy of the Catholic Worker is famously amorphous, consisting of an uncompromising pacifism, including an opposition to revolution even for just causes, and an acceptance of private property provided that workplaces should be owned by laborers. Most importantly, Day and Maurin taught that all Christians should become poor themselves and join in solidarity with the oppressed, a principle they both lived.

The impact of the Catholic Worker is difficult to estimate. The movement consists to this day in many sub-ministries. Day started lecture groups, hospitality houses, in addition to the editing the newspaper, which had a readership of 200,000 by 1940. In 1941, 41 Catholic Worker houses existed across the U.S., and 12 rural communes had sprung up within a few years. Now the movement boasts 125 houses and farming communes in eight countries ( Mich, 69)

### **Reaping the Harvest: 1960-1975**

By all yardsticks, the period from of the 1960s to mid-1970s exhibited the most diverse, explosive, effective, and enduring social movements in United States history. Faith-based social activism, as a progenitor of many of these debates, found itself center stage, particularly in the fight for African-American civil rights, the protests over the war in Vietnam, and plight of Latin American farm workers. The period also saw a maturing in strategies of religious activism, but at the same time the beginning of a slow decline in

leftist protest and the rise of counter-movements and backlashes from the conservative faith communities. During this time, the Vatican itself experienced unprecedented transformations internally and in its public role, resulting in dramatic social and political changes around the world. Most generally and thematically, though, we see further examples of the delicate dance between religion and society, with faith traditions attempting to keep one foot grounded solidly in the daily struggle of the faithful, attentive to their needs, while also gently pushing them toward what they believe is the will of God and a better society.

#### *Ecclesiastical and Theological Activities of the Period*

The 1960s and 1970s witnessed an apex of Catholic activity in public life, some directly as in the case of the publication of several significant social encyclicals, and some indirect, through the meeting of the Second Vatican Council from 1962-1965 and other major internal changes. All can be traced back to a conscious and strategic initiative by Church leaders to engage itself more fully with the outside world, every feature of which modernity was reshaping at a dramatic pace. The Vatican was especially concerned with the “threat” of growing secularization and the risk of losing its primacy and relevance in moral and spiritual guidance to scientism, humanism, or merely the logic of the market. In response, the Church implemented a new method of discourse with an emphasis on listening and local-driven change, essentially institutionalizing the process that had existed *de facto* for many years (Wilde, XXXX). This process and change in attitude proved to be the ideal tools for the tumultuous times to come, and in

many cases, were the instigators of that turbulence. As a result, this period marks the emergence of the second peak in Catholic social activism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Four influential encyclicals set the tone and agenda of Catholic social thought, criticism, and engagement during the 1960s and 1970s: *Pacem in Terris* (1963); *Gaudium et Spes* (1965); *Populorum Progressio* (1967); and *Octogesimo Adveniens* (1971). Their scope, depth, and number speak to the nature of the social context to which they were addressed; no decade in the 20<sup>th</sup> century exhibited such prolificacy. More importantly, with the possible exception of *Octogesimo Adveniens*, all had noticeable effects on lay activists, which was translated into identifiable social movements, and history-making events.

### *Rise of the Radical Public Catholic*

A combination of historical events, secular social movements, and theological upheavals provided the necessary ingredients for another peak in Catholic protest activity in the late 1960s to mid-1970s, this one in some ways even more radical than that of the 1930s. The Vietnam War had exacted a terrible toll on the psyche of the nation, as did a string of horrifying assassinations. Meanwhile, feminism, the civil rights movement, anti-war activism, and a new counter-culture had emerged, challenging basic assumptions and long-cherished institutions. On the religious front, the post-Vatican II Catholic Church engaged the world with new vigor and a sense of openness. The result was the appearance of a new kind of American Catholic activist. This one has been dubbed by many religion scholars as the “public Catholic,” and is characterized by their visibility,

their political sophistication, their knowledge and usage of Catholic social teaching, and their willingness to use dramatic techniques to make their points and be heard.

According to O'Brien, “. . . in the sixties and seventies, Catholics of this sort seemed to be turning up all the time on the evening news, leading one sort of protest or another . . .” (O'Brien, XXXX). Working on a range of issues from economic justice to race relations and war opposition, this activist segment, though not the majority of Catholics, was as large and high-profile as the Catholic left ever achieved. It was also a diverse group, representing Chicanos, Italian-, and Irish-Americans, among many others. The sentiment that bound them together was indicative of the tradition of social teaching chronicled through encyclicals and pastoral letters over the last decade. “The belief that reform had failed and only systemic structural change, even revolution, would open the way to social justice and world peace became a unifying conviction across the Catholic left,” according to O'Brien (page cite). Because of their ideological consonance, numbers, geographic dispersion, and public character, this incarnation of the Catholic left can be seen as the nearest approximation to a conventional, though decentralized, Catholic social movement seen thus far in U.S history. Indeed, as O'Brien puts it, like the civil rights effort advanced by black Protestants during this period, “it had the character of a national movement” (page cite).

Of all the Catholic anti-war efforts during this period, the Catholic Peace Fellowship was most visible and active. Launched at a spiritual and planning retreat in November 1964, “CPF became the primary outlet for individual Catholic radicalism”(Mich, 298). Daniel and Philip Berrigan, the famous priest/activist brothers, Trappist monk Thomas Merton, and Dorothy Day herself, were among the central planners of CPF

. In many ways, CPF could be seen as the dedicated anti-war branch of the Catholic Worker, as many of the leaders of the organization were CW veterans, using the resources, networks, and expertise of that older organization to establish their initial footing. The Catholic Worker, therefore, operated as a significant “movement midwife” for this and other movements throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Morris, 1984).

With this major organization established, radical public Catholics gained in number and confidence, progressively pushing the envelopes of social protest. Daniel Berrigan, for example, was arrested for pouring blood on draft records in Baltimore. Former Trappist monk and Catholic Worker Roger LaPorte immolated himself in front of the UN building in NY in 1965, effectively ending CW activism for a time. Perhaps most famously, the Catonsville Nine napalmed the Selective Service headquarters in 1968. Symbolic and actual violence was a new innovation in the repertoires of American Catholic activists in this era, clearly borrowed from the toolboxes of secular protesters.

Another significant organization formed in this era was Pax Christi. Founded in 1975 by laity, but always electing a bishop as international president, Pax Christi, made extensive use of Catholic social teaching through its educational efforts. As opposed to its more demonstrative and radical predecessors, PC operated on the principle of “individual conversions to peace” and working with national and international bodies, such as the UN and US government agencies. Significantly, Pax Christi and the Protestant Fellowship for Reconciliation forged a “New Abolitionist Covenant” in 1981 aimed at disarmament. The deliberate invocation of past social movements, scriptural allusions to sacred contracts, and ecumenism, marks this effort as a significant one for research by scholars of faith-based social movements, despite its limited success.

## **The Winds of Change, 1975-2000**

### *From Popular Activism to Elite Discourse: Pastoral Letters:*

Begun in earnest in the late 1960s, the method of addressing social issues through letters published by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops was a mainstay of public Catholicism throughout the last 20 years. In fact, pastoral letters probably represent the most employed tactic of all American Catholic activism, and this period saw their greatest usage through a flurry of controversial and consequential publications. This shift in tactics marks a retreat from traditional organizing, protest, and popular engagement to an embrace of elite discourse; that is, speech acts from Church elites to secular elites, for the most part. Pastoral letters are intended primarily for an audience of the faithful, but in actual practice, few believers are aware of their release or content. Historically, the main impact of such communications has been on other Catholic opinion leaders as well as public officials and industry leaders.

Pastoral letters, such as *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response* (1983) and *Economic Justice For All* (1986) considered together with the creation of the Campaign for Human Development in 1970 as a type of “umbrella faith-based SMO,” suggest a modification of the alleged “vanishing of the Catholic left.” The process is perhaps more accurately portrayed as a transformation rather than a disappearance. It is essentially a change from popular (and populist) engagement organized, led, and staffed by ordinary Catholic faithful to an engagement style by and for professionals. Though CHD’s core mission is the spawning and development of local community organizations, one cannot deny its centralized bureaucratic structure and the dependence of affiliate groups upon it, which inevitably alters their flexibility and tactical

repertoires. This pattern is consistent with that seen more generally in contemporary social movements in the transformation of SMOs into sectors, industries, and markets (Zald & McCarthy, 1980).

### *The Ascendancy of the Conservative Catholic*

While the factors of Church leadership and external cultural changes have no doubt played important roles in shaping Catholic social activism in since the mid-1970s, significant changes in the internal composition of the American church have also been decisive. Specifically, since Vatican II, Catholics in the U.S. have been increasingly difficult to distinguish from mainline Protestants, not only ideologically, politically, and culturally, but socio-economically, which in many ways is a more influential fact. By the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the process of “Americanization,” once decried by the pope and many U.S. bishops, was nearly complete. As opposed to their grandparents who lived in ethnic and religious “ghettos” during much of their lives, American Catholics of this era were largely members of middle-class, suburban, well-educated families who found many appeals to social justice at odds with their current economic interests. O’Brien argues, “If there is a powerful emotional style [in contemporary Catholic activism], it comes not from arguments for shared civic responsibility, but from specifically religious appeals for resistance and countercultural witness against a society and culture deemed even by moderate voices to border on ‘neo-paganism’” (Weaver, 1999, 270). These were “post-scarcity Catholics”; highly motivated by moral and cultural issues such as abortion and public decency, and lacking the self- or group-interest in economic or political rights issues once the centerpiece of Catholic social teaching. As a result, their activism

declined in quantity, but also in kind, shifting to the issues that affected their families and were being stressed by Church leaders during this time. This pattern subsequently affected their voting habits, beginning to erode their long-standing devotion to the Democratic Party. By the mid-1990s, few traits could uniquely distinguish Catholics from Protestants on most social surveys.

Casanova writes that the style of public Catholicism that emerged during this period was different than other styles, and has no precedent in US history. By this he is referring to the ascendancy of “public conservative Catholicism,” with its main exponents found in Michael Novak, Garry Wills, Pat Buchanan, Sister Angelica, and its most effective voice, Pope John Paul II, who arguably single-handedly made cultural values the salient issue for public Catholicism during his 26-year pontificate. Casanova would likely agree that public Catholicism has not disappeared or even declined so much as it has been co-opted and dramatically changed in character. As evidenced in official statements and deeds, U.S. Catholic activism related to political and economic justice is now characterized by small, organic, grassroots organizations that help the poor be self-sufficient. It is not a national movement pointed at political parties or institutions, or even really at the cultural arena. It is on the ground, near the poor, making them leaders of their own movement. More importantly, however, this approach is in stark contrast to the Church’s handling of so-called moral/cultural matters, such as abortion, homosexuality, stem cell research. My analysis of the 2004 USCCB budget and organizational structure reveals a disproportionate allotment of funds to policy-related “respect life” activities, with the budget of the Office of Pro-Life Activities receiving twice as much as the Office of Social Development and World Peace. This figure does

not include the significant dedication of funds to the Campaign for Human Development, which does not have direct domestic policy implications.

The “mainstreaming” of American Catholicism in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with its attendant rise of socio-economic status, created what I have identified as the “post-scarcity Catholic.” The decline of traditional social activism in the Church and in the broader society assisted in the gradual de-radicalization of American Catholics. However, the factor that truly transformed Catholic social movements during this period was a historical event and the Vatican’s swift and dramatic reaction to it. No event galvanized the Catholic Church’s public role as the *Roe v. Wade* decision did, leading to a tradition of activism not seen since the publication of *Rerum Novarum*. As has been witnessed time and again in American politics, the abortion debate has the power to trump all other issues on the public agenda.

Pope John Paul II was elected four years after the *Roe v. Wade* decision, and almost immediately went to work making abortion one of the centerpieces of his agenda for Catholic social activism. Though John Paul is credited with aiding in the fall of communism, his role in shifting the Church’s locus of concern from redistribution to restoration, from economics and politics to culture has not been equally emphasized. This is not to argue that John Paul abandoned the Church’s 200 year-old tradition of prophetic social teaching and engagement. On the contrary, some of the sharpest criticisms of global capitalism and unjust war to ever emanate from the Vatican were his. Instead, John Paul, more than any other pope, made cultural issues the highest priorities on Church’s agenda, placing them above the economic and political concerns that previous popes had emphasized, and even framed issues such as worker exploitation and nuclear arms in

cultural terms. He forcefully criticized Western secular culture, which he termed a “culture of death.” Throughout the mid-1990s, John Paul’s rhetoric took on the trappings of the “culture war” that had been the trademark of American society. Perhaps because of the Pope’s influence, or perhaps due to the overall shift to post-scarcity issues, this era saw an general increase in the recognition among all Christian activists of fighting battles by changing culture. Anti-war activist Sr. Mary Evelyn Jegen wrote in 1991, “Positive peace is above all a cultural enterprise” (Coleman, 1991, 299-301). By extension, this proposition reinforces the structure/culture dichotomy which a segment of sociologists have argued is false and unproductive.

The Pope’s domain of interest throughout the 1990s became increasingly focused on life politics and personal behaviors, such as sexuality and the family. When offering remedies for the problem of inequality in the world, John Paul advocated “adopting a new lifestyle of being over having, the person over things.” This is a marked departure from the tradition of structural analysis and critique offered by the “red popes” of the past. In these ways, John Paul represented well the post-scarcity Catholic found in the U.S., but certainly not the typical Catholic global citizen, who would most likely originate from a developing nation and receptive to a much different message and set of priorities.

Commenting on the growing fervor of the Catholic pro-life movement, even among the faithful normally reticent to join activist efforts, the *New York Times* quoted Prof. Mark Rozell of George Mason University: "Some Vatican officials are pressing for more direct activism in public life and are willing to be more critical of public policy figures who do not take what they consider to be the right positions on policy issues . . .

John Paul had this culture of life vision. And that has sort of radicalized and emboldened some bishops" (Nagourney, 2005). Similarly, stressing the "culturalist" turn in Church rhetoric, Nagourney suggests the political implications of such a move, and the historic bridges built between former adversaries. "Bush borrowed what had been a signature phrase of John Paul, as he talked about guarding 'the culture of life' . . . It is remarkable that a Republican non-Catholic president would be echoing this papal phrase,' Professor McGreevy said" (Nagourney, 4)

### *The Religious Right's Emerging Partnership with Catholics*

The most significant sidebar event to occur during this period involved a historic détente between two historically rival factions of Christianity, Fundamentalist Protestants and Roman Catholics. The issue that made this partnership possible was their common opposition to abortion. From its beginning in the mid-1970s, Catholics had led the pro-life public policy fight. Catholic leaders had testified before House and Senate committees in 1974, 1976, and 1981. In 1975 the Church issued the Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities, a major nationwide right-to-life curriculum to be taught in all parishes. Most significantly, the U.S. Church has always supported a right-to-life constitutional amendment, and even created a lobby group, the National Committee for a Human Life Amendment with this goal as its charge.

In later years, the Church became more directly involved in electoral politics, including "screening" candidates for political office in 1976. Such careful monitoring of one issue is without equivalent across the spectrum of social concerns for Protestants or Catholics. This high level of involvement alerted professional organizers from the

Religious Right who saw a rare opportunity to mobilize what Casanova calls “a trans-denominational religious right” (158). In 1995, the American Catholics would be called to greater levels of action against abortion and other “respect life” issues through the papal encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life). Pope John Paul II's October visit to the United States that year coincided with The Christian Coalition's mailing of over one million invitations for Catholics to join his conservative Catholic Alliance. (Koubek). Around this same time, a group of evangelical and Catholic leaders and theologians released "Evangelicals and Catholics Together." The report underscored that the Religious Right Catholics could join forces on a public policy agenda centered on "pro-life" issues, strengthening the family, and government support for religious schools. Over the last decade, the alliance has grown to be “among the most powerful forces molding American politics,” according to the *New York Times*.(Goodstein, 2005)

More recently, parish priests and bishops have cemented this alliance through even more aggressive political organizing and ecclesiastical configurations. In March, 2005, Fr. Frank Pavone of the Diocese of Amarillo, Texas announced the formation of new order of priests with the sole task of fighting abortion. “The Missionaries of the Gospel of Life” will train its priests to conduct voter registration drives, use the media to publicize the anti-abortion message and lobby lawmakers to restrict abortion rights. Commenting on the relationship between Catholic social doctrine and activism, Pavone said in an interview, “There is a difference between knowing the teachings and knowing how to effectively advance a movement.” The order, blessed by the Vatican, is the first apostolic society for priests concentrating exclusively on abortion and euthanasia. (Gold, 2005)

Though it would be impossible to determine for certain, it is unlikely that the trans-religious pro-life effort would have taken hold had either faith tradition not been able to utilize the strengths of the other. The Catholic Church offered its centuries of theological insight and doctrinal credibility on the issue, in addition to its 60 million-plus members in the U.S. across all races, regions, and classes, a hierarchical structure which promotes message efficiency, and its ready access to funds through the USCCB and Rome. The Religious Right brought their more finely honed political skills, an unmatched communication system, high-profile figureheads, access to domestic funding, Southern support (where the Catholics were weak), and a sense of cultural congruence. Theoretically, this partnership had the ability to claim an incredible 69% of Americans as their own, though certainly religious affiliation does not equal ideological agreement. Perhaps the only fact more remarkable than this hypothetical reach is that despite their resources, legal abortion remains the law of the land, and that American public opinion has been essentially stable over the last 30 years, with a slight plurality indicating a “pro-choice” position (Gallup, 2005).

The partnership forged between Catholics and the Religious Right has begun to be seen in political contests as well, though primarily in one direction. In 2004, for example, President Bush campaigned vigorously for the Catholic pro-life vote, incorporating the “culture of life” language in his rhetoric, and making highly public appearances with Pope John Paul II. Despite the Pope’s harsh rebuke of the U.S.’ involvement in the Iraq war and the nation’s treatment of workers and the poor, Bush’s reliance on the pro-life message worked at the polls. Catholics supported Pres. Bush over Senator Kerry, himself a Catholic, by 52 percent to 47 percent, according to exit polls.

## V. DENOMINATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY RELIGIOUS ACTIVISM: PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Recent results from a comprehensive analysis of all organized Christian activism since 1960s reveal fascinating patterns in the differential public engagement of major Christian denominations (Pieper, forthcoming). Generally, denominational affiliations of Christian activist organizations closely tracked their distribution in the religious population. This is to be expected to a large degree. However, in a minority of cases, unexpected and telling deviations from this pattern emerged. Most significant was the large number of activist groups identifying as simply “Christian” – no other detailing descriptors offered – relative to Americans who self-identify using this generic label. Findings indicate that this type of organization was the second most common denominational descriptor used, yet only approximately nine percent of respondents use “Christian” – and nothing else – to describe their religious tradition.

[Table 2 about here]

Closer reading of these cases finds that most organizations that used the generic “Christian” label did so for two primary reasons. First, the organization represents an umbrella or federation-type structure, comprised of a network of often-diverse and loosely allied smaller groups united around common aims or values. Because of the very general structure of the organization, the relatively non-controversial “Christian” moniker is adopted to speak to the common – though internally varied – religious values of the member groups. Second, and more significantly, the vast majority of organizations featuring the “Christian” generic label in its name or self-description were fiercely

conservative, both theologically and politically. Conservative organizations tended to adopt and prominently feature the “Christian” part of their identity much more frequently than progressive groups. A reasonable surmise, supported by a close reading of the longer descriptions provided by the organizations is that conservative religious activists highlighted this aspect of their character as part of larger “authenticity battles” at play within the American religious sphere. The implication being, of course, that those groups not featuring “Christian” in their titles were in some sense less authentically Christian, less proud of their heritage, or more adrift from the “true” meaning of the label. The choice to include ‘Christian’ within one’s title operates as another subtle cue or framing mechanism to potential recruits and other organizations as to the agenda, mission, and identity of the organization, as well as pointing up the conspicuous absence of the label among competing groups, particularly on the left.

The large percentage of religious activist organizations identified here as “non/multi-denominational” relative to their size in the population is largely explained by the large number of groups with ecumenical or cross-boundary missions. For example, frequently the largest or most successful organizations working on issues such as anti-war, hunger, temperance, or anti-apartheid were those for whom denominational origins were irrelevant. As a result, ecumenism in the social activism sector can safely be assumed as exaggerated, and bears only distal connections with actual religious ecumenism in the experience of American Christians.

Finally, the disproportionately low numbers of activist groups originating from America’s second largest denomination, the Southern Baptists, is somewhat surprising. However, it is important to note, as observed by many previous scholars, that not all

sociopolitical activism by religious groups – or even most recently –emanates strictly from denominational bodies or authorities (Wuthnow, XXXX, *Beyond the Pulpit*, XXXX, other parachurch studies). Therefore, though the Southern Baptists exhibit only modest *official* expressions in this dataset, their actual representation through para-church organizations such as the National Association of Evangelicals and Focus on the Family is likely very significant, though neither group are officially affiliated with any denomination. As a rule, then, these denominational affiliation data likely systematically underestimate actual denomination activism in the religious sphere; the fact that the relative proportions between this dataset and the actual population remain robust is reassuring and even somewhat unexpected.

[Table 3 about here]

The above table rounds out the analysis of denominational affiliation by examining this variable through the lens of ideological orientation. Again, as mentioned above, most organizations that self-identify as generically “Christian” skew strongly toward the right end of the ideological spectrum, with nearly two-thirds of such groups coded as conservative or moderate-conservative. Contrary to recent trends and perhaps popular perception, findings indicate a strong leftward lean among Roman Catholic activist groups, likely due to their several-decade headstart on economic and peace issues. As noted in the peace activist literature, Friends/Quakers exhibited uniformly progressive stances on social issues, most notably their activism against violence and nuclear weapons proliferation.

If conservative Christian groups clung proudly to their faith label, as these data indicate, a near opposite dynamic is observed on the left: a tendency for progressive

groups to eschew such exclusive categories in favor of the all-encompassing, ecumenical descriptions. Thus we find nearly two-thirds of organizations with non- or multid denominational identities clustered around the progressive and moderate-progressive ideological orientations. Closer examination reveals that these organizations are often indistinguishable from secular groups at first glance; it is only after careful reading of the mission and values of the group that one discerns their religious commitments. Also common among this category of organization is the subordination of religious identity (varieties of Protestantism, most often) to the issue objectives of the group. For example, Bread for the World is one of the largest and longest-lived Christian activist organizations working on food security and anti-poverty solutions in the U.S. Its membership represents the full diversity of American Christianity, and it has no denominational affiliation or majority. With no prior knowledge or without considerable research, however, it is difficult to discern that Bread for the World is not one of many *secular* anti-hunger organizations. This difference regarding the degree to which Christian activists publicize their faith identity emerges in several locations with consequence throughout this study.

The remainder of the findings from this table generally aligns with conventional expectations regarding the sociopolitical orientation of American Christian denominations.

## **VI: POST-SECULAR POLITICS: THE SACRALIZATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY**

There is no general historical pattern to the relationship between religion and American politics. Secularization theories predicting the political decline of religion are no

longer credible. If there was any doubt about this, the apparent political resurgence of religion across the globe over the past thirty years has dispelled this myth. The institutional differentiation of political and religious authority, however, is not a myth. To the contrary, in varying forms and at a varying pace, institutional processes distinguishing sacred and political authority have transformed public and private spheres across the globe over the past few centuries. In different settings and times, religious forces have both advocated and resisted these processes of differentiation. Insofar as these secularization processes have taken hold, this has not meant a depoliticization of religion, but it has changed the politics of religion. Across the cases reviewed above, a very broad tendency of religion in post-secular politics can be identified. In historically new secular contexts, religious politics often emerges as a social movement within civil society focused around the defense of a sacred lifeworld. Secularization processes have had the effect of privatizing religion but this has not necessarily marginalized it. To the contrary, in some contexts, it has deepened and dispersed its sacred salience. The political resurgence of religion post-secularization frequently starts with the politicization of the private for sacred reasons. Social movements emerging within civil society over issues confronting the family, sexuality, intoxicants, and similar lifeworld foci have propelled religion back into political prominence in national contexts across the globe.

This has repeatedly been the case in the United States, most dramatically in the 1830s and again in the 1970s. Across the Middle East, as well, defending sacred dimensions of the private sphere has justified the political re-entry of Islam. Islamist bids for political power have centered in no small part on education, gender roles, family law, and other “defenses” of the religious “lifeworld.” The civil society origins to religious politics in post-secular contexts do not necessarily limit religion to social movement activity. As was the case in the

United States in the 1840s and today, evangelicals have moved from contentious to institutional politics quite readily. These institutional transitions are also apparent in the late-20<sup>th</sup> century Latin American and Middle Eastern politics.

Returning to Casanova’s (1994) useful distinction of varying forms of secularization, what the recent history of religion and politics suggests is that the consequences of the third form of secularization—the privatization of religion—will continue to move to reshape the first form—the differentiation of sacred and secular public authority. In short, the institutional differentiation of religious and political authority will continue to be challenged by religious movements empowered by the privatization of the sacred. The form these challenges take will vary according to different modes of religious interaction, including the full range of possible modes specified by Niebuhr. In this sense, we have entered an age of post-secular politics.

TABLE 1. The Three Varieties of Voluntary associations with membership exceeding 1% of all US adult men at any point before the Civil War. Fraternal orders are in **bold**; special sin societies are in *italics*; and the mixed form in ***bold and italics***.

Voluntary Associations	Year Founded	Place Founded	When membership first exceeded 1%
<b>Ancient and Accepted Free Masons</b>	<b>1733</b>	<b>Boston</b>	<b>1810s</b>
<b>Independent Order of Odd Fellows</b>	<b>1819</b>	<b>Baltimore</b>	<b>1840s</b>
<i>American Temperance Society</i>	<i>1826</i>	<i>Boston</i>	<i>1830/1</i>
<i>General Union for Promoting the Observance of the Christian Sabbath</i>	<i>1828</i>	<i>New York</i>	<i>1830†</i>

<i>American Anti-Slavery Society</i>	<i>1833</i>	<i>Philadelphia</i>	<i>1837/8</i>
<b>Washington Temperance Societies †</b>	<i>1840</i>	<i>Baltimore</i>	<i>1840s</i>
<i>The Order of the Sons of Temperance</i>	<i>1842</i>	<i>New York</i>	<i>1840s</i>

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Source: Skocpol 1997; Skocpol et al. 2000.

† The association's popularity peaked in 1830. What percentage of the population it represented is unclear (see text).

‡ The Washington Temperance Societies first emerged in loose affiliation with the American Temperance Society but quickly developed into a separate organization.

TABLE 2  
DISTRIBUTION OF CHRISTIAN ACTIVIST GROUPS  
BY DENOMINATION

	Frequency	Valid Percent	Percent of Population (2005)*	Difference
Non/Multi-Denominational	122	26.5	15.1	11.4
Unspecified 'Christian'	107	23.3	8.8	14.5
Roman Catholic	91	19.8	21.3	-1.5
Unknown	55	12.0	n/a	n/a

Unitarian-Universalist	12	2.6	1.3	1.3
Presbyterian	11	2.4	4.1	-1.7
Methodist	9	2.0	10.1	<b>-8.1</b>
United Church of Christ	9	2.0	3.3	-1.3
Other	9	2.0	2.5	-0.5
Episcopalian	8	1.7	3.5	-1.8
Society of Friends/Quaker	8	1.7	<1	0.8
Lutheran	6	1.3	7.1	<b>-5.8</b>
American Baptist	4	.9	1.1	-0.2
Mennonite/Church of Brethren	3	.7	<1	0
Southern Baptist	3	.7	12	<b>-11.3</b>
Latter Day Saints/Mormon	2	.4	3	-2.6
Pentecostal	1	.2	1.5	-1.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>460</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>94.7</b>	

\* Source: Baylor Religion Survey, 2005

**Green** denotes over-representation. **Red** denotes under-representation.

**TABLE 3**

**DENOMINATION OF ORGANIZATION  
BY IDEOLOGICAL ORIENTATION**

	<b>Conservative</b>	<b>Moderate</b>	<b>Moderate- Conservative</b>	<b>Moderate- Progressive</b>	<b>Progressive</b>
<b>Indeterminate/Unknown</b>	58.2%	1.8%	12.7%	7.3%	20.0%

<b>Roman Catholic</b>	16.5%	4.4%	8.8%	31.9%	38.5%
<b>Lutheran</b>	16.7%	.0%	.0%	50.0%	33.3%
<b>Methodist</b>	11.1%	.0%	.0%	33.3%	55.6%
<b>Presbyterian</b>	9.1%	9.1%	.0%	45.5%	36.4%
<b>Episcopalian</b>	12.5%	12.5%	12.5%	25.0%	37.5%
<b>Latter Day Saints/Mormon</b>	.0%	.0%	.0%	50.0%	50.0%
<b>Society of Friends/Quaker</b>	.0%	.0%	.0%	.0%	100.0%
<b>United Church of Christ</b>	22.2%	.0%	.0%	33.3%	44.4%
<b>Unitarian-Universalist</b>	.0%	8.3%	.0%	16.7%	75.0%
<b>Non/Multi-Denominational</b>	17.2%	4.9%	10.7%	27.9%	39.3%
<b>Mennonite/Church of Brethren</b>	.0%	.0%	.0%	33.3%	66.7%
<b>Unspecified 'Christian'</b>	62.6%	4.7%	11.2%	9.3%	12.1%
<b>American Baptist</b>	.0%	.0%	.0%	25.0%	75.0%
<b>Southern Baptist</b>	66.7%	.0%	33.3%	.0%	.0%
<b>Pentecostal</b>	.0%	.0%	.0%	.0%	100.0%
<b>Other</b>	.0%	11.1%	11.1%	55.6%	22.2%