

INTRODUCTION



MODERNIST, ORTHODOX, OR FLEXIDOX?

WHY THE CULTURE WAR DEBATE ENDURES

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ON AUGUST 17, 1992, conservative writer and former presidential candidate Pat Buchanan roused the faithful at the Republican National Convention in Houston by declaring war—a very particular kind of war. “There is a religious war going on in our country for the soul of America,” Buchanan declared. “It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we will one day be as was the Cold War itself.”¹

With that speech Buchanan might have rallied the socially conservative faithful to President George H. W. Bush’s reelection campaign against Bill Clinton. But many voters in the year of “it’s the economy, stupid” were not longing for the cultural struggle to which Buchanan was inviting them to repair. Not only liberal Democrats but also many Republicans disliked the imposition of a martial metaphor on America’s cultural and moral disputes. As the *Washington Post* reported, an uneasy Senator Richard G. Lugar told reporters the next morning that Buchanan’s “was not an appealing message at all, not a winning message.” The Indiana Republican added, “I hope we can focus on the economic issues, rather than cultural wars.”²

It was probably unknown to Lugar—or, for that matter, to most who heard Buchanan’s speech—that the fiery conservative writer was not the person who first put the culture war metaphor into wide American circulation. A year earlier a soft-spoken, tough-minded sociologist from the

University of Virginia named James Davison Hunter published a book destined to change the American discussion of cultural politics. *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* argued that there was a battle raging between the orthodox, committed to “an external, definable and transcendent authority,” and the progressives, “defined by the spirit of the modern age, a spirit of rationalism and subjectivism.”³

The traditionalists attracted to orthodoxy, Hunter has always insisted, cannot be dismissed simply as reactionary or backward looking. The “order of life sustained by this vision is, at its best, one that seeks deliberate continuity with the ordering principles inherited from the past.” Traditionalists, again at their best, longed for “the reinvigoration and realization of what are considered to be the very noblest ideals and achievements of civilization.”⁴

Progressivists, as Hunter called them, had noble ideals of their own, holding a view that “idealizes experimentation and thus adaptation to and innovation with the changing circumstances of our time.” Their goal was “the further emancipation of the human spirit and the creation of an inclusive and tolerant world.”⁵

Writing before talk radio, cable television, and the Internet became the forces they are today, Hunter described the future (and may have given many clues to Karl Rove and other political maestros in their organization of political campaigns). Hunter wrote that the culture war

is rooted in an ongoing realignment of American public culture and has been institutionalized chiefly through special purpose organizations, denominations, political parties, and branches of government. The fundamental disagreements that characterize the culture war . . . have become even further aggravated by virtue of the technology of public discourse, the means by which disagreements are voiced in public. In the end, however, the opposing moral visions become, as one would say in the jargon of social science, a reality *sui generis*: a reality much larger than, and indeed autonomous from, the sum total of individuals and organizations that give expression to the conflict. These competing visions, and the rhetoric that sustains them, become the defining forces of public life.⁶

Hunter also made a point that has since become conventional wisdom in the study of religion's relationship to politics. He was one of the first to observe, as Father Andrew Greeley pointed out in his review of *Culture Wars* in the *New York Times Book Review*, "that differences across denominational lines are now less important than differences within denominations." The new religious alignment Hunter described, Greeley noted, is one in which "the orthodox within each tradition are more likely to share values and causes with the orthodox from other traditions than with the progressives within their own traditions."⁷

This means, as recent election results have shown, that conservative Catholics tend to vote with conservative Protestants, while liberal Protestants, liberal Catholics, and liberal Jews are similarly inclined to vote the same way. In a sympathetic account of Hunter's argument, Thomas Byrne Edsall noted that "past splits often pitted upper-class Protestants against working class, ethnic Catholics, placing Elliot Richardson and Tip O'Neill on opposite sides of the fence." But in "today's culture wars," Edsall wrote, "the orthodox Jew may well discover he shares more common ground on critical issues with the evangelical fundamentalist than with the reform Jew or the mainline Episcopalian."⁸

Some years after Hunter's book appeared, Grant Wacker, a professor of religious history at Duke University Divinity School, observed that "one of the most remarkable changes of the twentieth century is the virtual evaporation of hostility between Protestants and Catholics." Wacker was right, and one key to the shift was the new cultural politics described by Hunter. As Wacker noted dryly, the change in Protestant attitudes toward Catholics came in response to social and political issues, and not "because Baptists have come to have a great respect for Tridentine theology."⁹

In one sense the thesis of Hunter's book came to be accepted as the conventional wisdom. Having watched the rise of religious conservatism in the late 1970s and 1980s, many journalists and political activists were prepared to accept that the orthodox-versus-progressive battle was the defining struggle in American politics, and that it had come to replace the economic class alignments of the New Deal era.

But in another sense, the Hunter thesis was contested from the beginning. Yes, there were big cultural battles in America. Yes, members of the

American Civil Liberties Union and members of the Christian Coalition disagreed fundamentally, were in fierce contention, and basically could not stand each other. But wasn't the United States a fundamentally moderate country with a great big middle? Were not most Americans constantly seeking a balance between rights and obligations, between social concern and self-reliance? Were we not best described, in the richly evocative phrase offered by the political philosopher William Galston, as "tolerant traditionalists?"¹⁰ One of the authors of this introduction once suggested that America's cultural values are "a rich and not necessarily contradictory mix of liberal instincts and conservative values."¹¹ Aren't most of us complicated, somewhat conflicted moderates of that sort, more inclined to avoid culture wars than to fight them?

It is a mark of Hunter's importance that he has called forth so many admirers and so many challengers. But the most powerful alternative to the Hunter thesis—although not directly presented as such—was Alan Wolfe's *One Nation, After All*. Published in 1998, Wolfe's book actually was, as its epic subtitle suggested, a quest to find out "what middle class Americans really think about God, country, family, racism, welfare, immigration, homosexuality, work, the right, the left, and each other."¹²

By no means did Wolfe disagree with Hunter on everything. On the contrary, his description of the politics of culture was similar to Hunter's. He saw, as Hunter did, that contemporary American conservatism could

literally be defined as the defense of middle-class morality, an effort to protect the traditional neighborhoods, family beliefs, work ethic, schools, love of country, and security concerns of the lower middle class, no matter how impolitically expressed, from the welfare state on the one hand and the liberal defense of modernity on the other. From such a perspective, middle-class morality is good; the only thing that is bad is its continual decline.

By contrast, Wolfe wrote, liberals saw "a world without fixed moral guidelines" as "one that offers individuals greater choice." He continued:

As conservatives rallied to a defense of the middle-class morality they associated with hardworking sobriety, liberals responded by finding traditional neighborhoods hostile to excluded racial minori-

ties, traditional religiosity hostile to non-believers, and traditional families first oppressive to women and later to homosexuals. Because they identify so strongly with those who are outsiders in the world of tradition, American intellectuals and activists on the left have never had much sympathy for the middle-class morality praised by the right. The left tends to believe that middle-class morality is bad, and the only good thing is that it might become obsolete.

That is a pretty fair description of a culture war. But when Wolfe started interviewing middle-class people, he discovered something interesting. He posed the question directly: “Should we therefore conclude that America is experiencing a culture war?” He replied, “My answer is yes—but it is one that is being fought primarily by intellectuals, not by most Americans themselves.” (The emphasis is Wolfe’s.) After interviewing middle-class Americans in eight localities across the United States, he concluded that the bulk of the middle class would be inclined to rebuke conservatives and liberals alike. At a Pew Forum conference organized in advance of the release of this book, Wolfe noted “that it is not a division between red state and blue state America; it’s a division inside every person.”¹³ Middle-class Americans can worry about moral decline without being intolerant. They “want the moral scales balanced without being loaded down to one side.” They believe, as William Galston wrote in summarizing Wolfe’s argument—not surprisingly, Galston found it congenial—in “a morality based on personal experience rather than abstract norms,” a morality that is “resolutely modest and unheroic,” more “pacific” than “martial.”¹⁴ As Wolfe concludes in *One Nation*,

the single most important difference between the practitioners of the morality writ small so prevalent in middle-class America and the morality writ large so characteristic of ideological politics is this: the former want to believe that we can become one nation, after all. And they worry that the ideological proclivities of extremists of left and right will make us two nations—or more—in spite of ourselves. . . . The people who have spoken in this book have no monopoly on virtue. But they do understand that what makes us one nation morally is an insistence on a set of values capacious enough to be

inclusive but demanding enough to uphold standards of personal responsibility.

So which is it, a culture war or one nation, after all? In trying to understand what is happening in the United States, should our emphasis be on the sharp disputes that regularly arise in local and national public squares on abortion, gay marriage, and end-of-life issues, on matters of how our children should be educated and the role of religion in public life? Or should we instead pay heed primarily to the vast American middle and its temperamental and spiritual desire for moderation?

The dialogue presented here is designed to shed light on these questions. The editors of the series are deeply grateful that two of the most important thinkers in this debate have agreed to join forces under one book cover to share their insights, their areas of agreement, and their disagreements. Both editors of this volume have had the pleasure of working with Hunter and Wolfe over the years in projects related to religion, community, and public life. For many years we had hoped to bring together two thinkers whom we greatly admired in an extended conversation because each of us thinks that there is considerable truth in the assertions that both Wolfe and Hunter make. We believed that inviting Hunter and Wolfe to sharpen their dialogue would do a great deal to move the nation's conversation on politics, culture, and religion forward. In discussions of morality, values, and virtue, it is often very difficult for the competing sides to hear each other above the din of their own (understandable) passion. Wolfe and Hunter have many virtues, one of which is a capacity to listen closely to what competing parties in the debate have to say and to pay attention. They are both models of the engaged social scientist: they care profoundly about the direction of their country's civic and political life, but they are also able to step back to analyze fairly and insightfully the views of those with whom they disagree. That spirit—of passion and engagement but also of detachment and fairness—is reflected in these pages.

We are also grateful that two other brilliant voices in the culture war debate, historian Gertrude Himmelfarb and political scientist Morris Fiorina, have joined this discussion. They, too, reflect competing points of view.

Himmelfarb, the author of many widely acclaimed books, including *One Nation, Two Cultures*, is not afraid to defend ideas that others might

condemn as “prudish, old-fogyish, and—horrors!—judgmental.”¹⁵ Interestingly, she challenges not only liberals (and Wolfe) but also her own conservative allies for their eagerness to declare an end to a cultural battle that she believes continues to rage. As she comments here, “Conservatives (or as James Hunter puts it, ‘traditionalists’) may be winning the war over one sense of the culture, that measured by indices of crime, violence, illegitimacy, and the like. But they are losing the other war, the war over the popular culture—losing it by default, by sheer, willful inattention.”

Fiorina comes at the discussion from a very different angle of vision. The lead author of *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*, an important recent contribution to this debate, Fiorina insists that the culture war really is an elite phenomenon and “never had much of a mass base.”¹⁶ And he worries that this elite obsession distorts politics and discourages participation. Voters, he says, “are presented with polar alternatives—outlaw abortion or abortion on demand—when they would prefer something in between.”¹⁷ Elites, he says, “indulge in cultural battles—abortion, gay rights, gun control, the flag, the pledge, Terri Schiavo, stem cells—as if these were the most important problems facing the country, when polls consistently show that voters consider these minor issues.” At the same time, Fiorina argues strongly for more research and more serious thinking about the importance of religion in American politics. “The ratio of casual generalization about religion and politics to grounded research findings,” he writes, “is higher than it should be in an academic discipline.”

That last thought explains one of the central purposes of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life and the inspiration behind its dialogue series, of which this is the fifth volume. In the first volume, *Lifting Up the Poor: A Dialogue on Religion, Poverty, and Welfare Reform*, Mary Jo Bane and Lawrence M. Mead brought together their deep expertise on public policy questions with their profound and reflective faith commitments. That volume was followed by *Is the Market Moral?: A Dialogue on Religion, Economics and Justice* by Rebecca M. Blank and William McGurn, on the obligations to bring moral judgments to our commercial endeavors. *One Electorate under God?: A Dialogue on Religion and American Politics* took on the broad question of faith’s relationship to political engagement. Anchored in a discussion between former New York governor Mario

Cuomo and Representative Marc Souder of Indiana, the volume brought together a wide array of voices on a subject that is, if anything, even more vital to the public debate now than it was when the book was first published. And in *Liberty and Power: A Dialogue on Religion and U.S. Foreign Policy in an Unjust World*, six distinguished authors—Father J. Bryan Hehir, Michael Walzer, Louise Richardson, Shibley Telhami, Charles Krauthammer, and James Lindsay—grapple with the new moral imperatives of foreign policy since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.¹⁸ Both of us wish to express profound gratitude to two wonderful colleagues, Jean Bethke Elshtain and Kayla Drogosz, who worked on those earlier books.

The editors of this volume have their own views of the culture war that we have expressed elsewhere. (As would be expected of friends who find themselves on opposite sides in politics, we agree on some things and disagree on others.) But we have worked together for many years in the belief that discussions of religion, politics, and culture can be carried out in the spirit captured well by a writer we both admire, Glenn Tinder. Tinder argued that advocates of freedom, whatever their philosophies or ideologies, should join together to build what he called “the attentive society,” a place “in which people listen seriously to those with whom they fundamentally disagree.” An attentive society, Tinder insisted, “would provide room for strong convictions, but its defining characteristic would be a widespread willingness to give and receive assistance on the road to truth.”¹⁹

In no area is that injunction more appropriate or necessary than in our discussion of the culture war—assuming, of course, that there is a culture war.

Notes

1. Patrick J. Buchanan, “1992 Republican National Convention Speech,” Houston, Texas, August 17, 1992 (www.buchanan.org/pa-92-0817-rnc.html [July 2006]).

2. David S. Broder, “Coherent Message Elusive; At Halftime, GOP Hunts for Theme,” *Washington Post*, August 18, 1992, p. A1.

3. James D. Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), p. 44.

4. See Hunter’s essay in this volume, p. 14.

5. Ibid, p. 15.
6. Hunter, *Culture Wars*, pp. 290–91.
7. Andrew M. Greeley, “With God on Their Sides,” *New York Times Book Review*, November 24, 1991.
8. Thomas Byrne Edsall, “Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America. Review,” *Washington Monthly* 23, no. 12 (1991): 51.
9. As quoted in E. J. Dionne Jr., “A Shift Looms; The President Sees Consensus, While Religious Leaders Disagree about the Church-State Divide,” *Washington Post*, October 3, 1999, p. B1.
10. William A. Galston, “Home of the Tolerant,” *Public Interest* 133 (1998): 116.
11. E. J. Dionne Jr., *Why Americans Hate Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991).
12. For this and subsequent quotes from Wolfe, see Alan Wolfe, *One Nation, After All: What Middle Class Americans Really Think about God, Country, Family, Racism, Welfare, Immigration, Homosexuality, Work, the Right, the Left, and Each Other* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1998).
13. For a full text of the Hunter and Wolfe dialogue, see Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “Event Transcript: Is There a Culture War?” May 23, 2006 (www.pewforum.org/culture-war [July 2006]).
14. Galston, p. 116.
15. Quotes here are from Himmelfarb’s comments in this volume. See also Gertrude Himmelfarb, *One Nation, Two Cultures* (New York: Knopf, 1999).
16. Morris Fiorina, Samuel J. Abrams, and Jeremy C. Pope, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2005).
17. This and subsequent quotes are from Fiorina’s comments in this volume.
18. See Mary Jo Bane and Lawrence M. Mead, *Lifting Up the Poor: A Dialogue on Religion, Poverty, and Welfare Reform* (Brookings, 2003); Rebecca M. Blank and William McGurn, *Is the Market Moral?: A Dialogue on Religion, Economics, and Justice* (Brookings, 2004); E. J. Dionne Jr., Jean Bethke Elshtain, and Kayla Meltzer Drogosz, eds., *One Electorate under God?: A Dialogue on Religion and American Politics* (Brookings, 2004); and J. Bryan Hehir and others, *Liberty and Power: A Dialogue on Religion and U.S. Foreign Policy in an Unjust World* (Brookings, 2004).
19. Glenn Tinder, “The Spirit of Freedom: To Live Attentively,” in *Being Christian Today*, edited by Richard John Neuhaus and George Weigel (Washington: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1992), pp. 152–53.