

Between Jesus and Wall Street:  
Overcoming the Great Displacement in the American  
Cultural War

by

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Class of 2015

A thesis submitted to the  
faculty of Wesleyan University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Bachelor of Arts  
with Departmental Honors from the College of Social Studies

*For my parents*

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all those who contributed to the materialization of my undergraduate thesis. Professor Stephen Angle, whom I know since my freshman year as my faculty advisor, graciously accepted me as his thesis advisee and offered me his genuine support even after my research started to head towards a completely new direction unfamiliar to him. Without his patience and open-mindedness, I would never have the opportunity and courage to pursue a project that is infamously known as a dangerous topic to bring up during a dinner conversation. I feel especially grateful for the amount of freedom he gave me for seeking creative solutions to the great religious-political problem in this nation and beyond. His philosophical mind and theoretical expertise helped me tremendously when I attempted to construct my own discourse theory. I will definitely miss all the fun and intellectually stimulating conversations we had during this amazing yearlong journey.

I must also thank Professor Richard Elphick – my dearest professor, major advisor, spiritual mentor, and thought partner who have given me so much academic and emotional support throughout my CSS years. My gratitude and respect for him are simply beyond words. I cannot imagine completing or even getting started with this project without his selfless support from the very beginning. I can never forget the moment when he walked into the CSS lounge during my thesis workshop with a stack of his personal books from home highly relevant to my research. Whenever I went to your office to chat for hours about my thesis or life, I felt more optimistic and hopeful. Your kindness and

your faith in me played a big role in keeping me energized during my research and writing process. I would also like to thank Professor Moon and Professor Fay – who offered two most exciting and helpful intellectual roller coaster rides (CSS colloquia) that shaped my thinking significantly. I sincerely adore you both.

Special thanks to Sammy Rosh -- a great friend and housemate of mine with whom I shared many valuable memories as fellow CSSers. His kindness and enthusiasm for my topic led him to find me many valuable sources. I can't imagine going through this journey without your constant support and encouragement. In addition, I'd also like to thank my writing mentor Theodora and the writing program for providing me helpful writing feedback. Lastly, I dedicate this thesis to my dear parents. Without your tremendous sacrifice and loving support, I would never be able to write this thesis or even study at Wesleyan in the first place. I look forward to reuniting with both of you very soon.

## INTRODUCTION

From the brutal advance of the Islamic State (ISIS) in the Middle East to the militant confrontations between Christian Fundamentalists and their secular counterparts in the United States, religion is often presented as an irrational, backward social phenomenon that always attempts to disrupt the “good liberal order” in the “secular age.” Contrary to the Secularization Narrative, which predicts the “withering away” of religions in a “disenchanted world,” the world today is hardly free of religious influences as enormous particle accelerators keep making mind-blowing scientific discoveries in Western Europe -- the former Christendom. The global religious landscape shows that 31.5% of the world identify as Christians, 23.2% as Muslims, and 15% as Hindus, leaving only 16.3% as religiously unaffiliated.<sup>1</sup> The persistence and pervasiveness of religion today have crystallized in some of the major clashes of civilizations and ideologies the world has ever seen: Islamic extremist groups kidnapping and beheading religious minorities in the name of Allah; Buddhist monks attacking Muslims in Myanmar; Christians murdering their neighbors right after attending religious service in Rwanda. These disturbing events have painted religious faiths in a negative light – destroying their ideal impression as forces for peace.

In the United States, Christian fundamentalists and evangelicals have been at the forefront of cultural wars against liberal and progressive values. In a democratic society where most citizens identify as Christians, the evangelicals appear to be the most vocal religious voices receiving a disproportional amount of media attention.

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<sup>1</sup> “The Global Religious Landscape.” Pew Research Center. December 18, 2012. <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec>.

Politically, the evangelicals constitute a powerful conservative bloc capable of swaying national election results. In the most recent 2014 mid-term election for the House of Representatives, 26% of the entire American electorate identified as “white evangelicals/born-again Christians,” who voted 78% Republican. In contrast, Roman Catholics, a religious group also known as socially conservative, only gave 54% of their votes to Republican candidates.<sup>2</sup> How do we account for the overwhelming evangelical support for GOP candidates and their political agenda? In a society torn by persistent cultural wars, we seem to have already taken the evangelical-conservative alignment for granted. Of course the evangelicals support the conservative political agenda! How can they possibly rally for liberal causes such as same-sex marriage when they believe that the Bible is literally the word of God?

Before examining the political positions of evangelicals, let’s first clarify what the term “evangelical” means. According to the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), evangelicalism encompasses four other “-isms” below:

*Conversionism: the belief that lives need to be transformed through a "born-again" experience and a life long process of following Jesus.*

*Activism: the expression and demonstration of the gospel in missionary and social reform efforts*

*Biblicism: a high regard for and obedience to the Bible as the ultimate authority*

*Crucicentrism: a stress on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as making possible the redemption of humanity<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> "How the Faithful Voted: 2014 Preliminary Analysis." Pew Research Centers Religion Public Life Project RSS. November 05, 2014. <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/11/05/how-the-faithful-voted-2014-preliminary-analysis/>.

<sup>3</sup> "What Is an Evangelical?" National Association of Evangelicals. <http://www.nae.net/church-and-faith-partners/what-is-an-evangelical>.

Out of the four characteristics, “Activism” and “Biblicism” are directly relevant to political activities. The evangelicals are called to express and demonstrate the Christian gospel in missionary and social reform efforts, and their ultimate guidance is the Bible. In other words, Christian scriptures and the teachings of Jesus must serve as the primary guidebook for their political actions. Therefore, a person identified as an evangelical should strive to conduct political activities in accordance with his or her faith as expressed in the Bible.

With that in mind, let’s examine the following thought experiment:

*25 CSS students (CSSers) sit behind John Rawls’ Veil of Ignorance to critically examine the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth presented in the Christian New Testament and their corresponding social implications. Which social/economic system would the CSSers most likely identify as most compatible/consistent to Jesus’ teachings?*

*a) Anarchy or a state of nature in which atomized individuals are desperately in need of accepting a Leviathan as their Messiah*

*b) A free-market capitalist system supported by individual self-interests and corporate greed, also marked by a small government indifferent to the demands of social welfare programs*

*c) A socialist democracy in which citizens offer up a significant portion of their income as taxation to support social welfare programs to aid the poor, the weak, and the destitute in their society and beyond*

I can reasonably predict that the most popular answer would be c). However, consider what the person describe below is most likely to choose from the same list (outside of the Veil):

*A politically active Christian Evangelical/Fundamentalist in the United States who identifies as a heterosexual white male, owns guns, proudly married, upper-middle class, with an American flag waving outside of his house.*

According to voting behaviors and political polls, this person is most likely to vote Republican, which favors b) over c). Looking at the demographics of American voters, the Christian evangelicals have been increasingly aligned with the GOP while secular voters strongly identify as Democrats. What caused this strange phenomenon in which a person's political behaviors seemingly contradict his/her religious views? Historically speaking, many liberal causes, such as human rights, universal health care, civil rights, and social welfare programs had been strongly backed up by devout Christians and Christian organizations. Some of which even bear strong religious origins and inspirations (i.e. human rights). For instance, some of the most influential civil rights activists such as Martin Luther King were deeply religious. Nevertheless, the liberal political camp today has become more and more hostile to religious influences and less willing to accept religious-grounded reasoning in public discourse.

This phenomenon is what I call the "Great Displacement": for the secular camp, Christian inspirations and languages are being denied or displaced, while in the religious camp, a practical love for all (i.e. social welfare) has been displaced and replaced by a rigid emphasis on evangelization (i.e. beliefs, converts, and biblical literalism). My idea of the Great Displacement was originally inspired by my study of Jacques Maritain, an influential French Catholic philosopher who played an important role during the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Here is the original quote that inspired my idea:

*“[W]e saw for a century the motivating forces in the modern democracies repudiating the Gospel and Christianity in the name of human liberty, while motivating forces in the Christian social strata were combating the democratic aspirations in the name of religion.”<sup>4</sup>*

-- Jacques Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy* (1943)

As a philosopher from France, Maritain was well aware of the anti-clerical sentiments emanating from the French Revolution in the name of liberty, equality, and fraternity. He also understood that these three liberal values could also find a home in the Christian intellectual history. Unfortunately, certain Christian social forces have historically become hostile to democratic and liberal values in many European societies; while activists for democracy and liberalism have become cautious of religious contributions and inspirations. It is true that not all secular liberals are actively hostile to religious voices even in the United States today. For example, John Rawls, one of the most influential secular philosophers in modernity, was deeply religious during his undergraduate years at Princeton as shown in his senior thesis titled: “A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith” (1942), where he probes into Christian theologies in relation to social ills as an “Episcopal Christian.” In a later essay titled “On My Religion,” the younger Rawls claims: “Yet God’s reason, I believe, is the same as ours in that it recognizes the same inferences as valid and the same facts as true that we recognize as valid and true.”<sup>5</sup> Apparently, he did not believe that a faith in God is incompatible with a liberal desire for reason and justice. In recent years, even Jürgen Habermas has started to value the importance

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<sup>4</sup> Jacques Maritain and Doris C. Anson, *The Rights of Man and Natural Law* (New York: Scribner, 1943), 27.

<sup>5</sup> John Rawls and Thomas Nagel, *A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith: With "on My Religion"* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), loc 1043.

of religious contributions to the secular discourse as he gave a talk on “An Awareness of What is Missing” (2010).

Despite the fact that many intellectuals in the secular camp are not openly opposed to religious contributions, the increasingly polarized confrontations between secular and evangelical citizens have become more real than ever in our society today. According to Stephen Carter, author of the *Cultural of Disbelief* (1993), the problem of the Great Displacement has taken shape deeply in American politics. He observes that “whereas the left, which once gloried in the idea that God stands for social progress, has more and more shed sway from it,” and “more and more religiously devout people have come to see their natural home as the Republican Party.”<sup>6</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, the most influential Christian realist in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, points out that it is dangerous to assume that secular arenas of social life are more tolerant than religious ones, since no one can maintain perfect toleration. What our society needs is “political mechanisms that would facilitate perpetual self-reflection: a politicized public sphere perpetually engaged in vibrant critique.”<sup>7</sup>

The ultimate purpose of this senior thesis is, therefore, to envision and design a political and discourse mechanism that could potentially mitigate the polarized oppositions between secular liberals and religious conservatives in the United States. In order to achieve this aim, I need to explore the ideological, cultural, and theological factors that have contributed to Great Displacement today. I want to

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<sup>6</sup> Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York, NY: BasicBooks, 1993), 19.

<sup>7</sup> Vibeke S. Tjalve, "Rights, Religion, Security: A Christian Realist Perspective," in *Civil Religion, Human Rights and International Relations: Connecting People across Cultures and Traditions* (Cheltenham, U.K.: Edward Elgar, 2012), 87.

deconstruct the seemingly irreconcilable polarization in American politics by pointing out its strangeness and irrationality and by showing that the two sides have much more in common than they might otherwise imagine. However, it is necessary to point out that given the purpose and the limited scope of this inquiry, I will *not* attempt to give a comprehensive historical or political analysis of the Religious Right. It is simply not feasible to attempt such an endeavor *while* offering a theoretical contribution in an undergraduate thesis. There are, however, a great many of secondary literatures on political theologies and the American religious history that provide in-depth analyses from a variety of different angles and in nuanced ways. As a newly naturalized Chinese immigrant myself, I will approach American religious and political culture from an outside yet fresh perspective. With the aid of primary sources and these secondary literatures, I will focus more on the theoretical dimension of the issue, since my ultimate purpose is to construct a discourse theory and mechanism conducive to a more productive dialogue between the two opposing camps.

The first two chapters of my thesis focus on the historical and theological reasons that have engendered the Displacement problem. In chapter one, I revisit and analyze the ways in which modern evangelicalism in the United States has evolved to become a core political force hostile to liberal values, including a number of humanitarian social concerns arguably compatible to the teachings of Christ that most evangelical churches rarely emphasize. The focus is on important Christian texts such as Francis Schaeffer's *Christian Manifesto*. In chapter two, I continue to examine the central tension in the Great Displacement by focusing on the other side of the struggle

– secular humanism. I start by analyzing the “Humanist Manifesto I & II” to which Schaeffer responded with his “Christian Manifesto,” so that I can show how secular humanists imagine what the roots of the tension have become. I then move on to discuss the decline of liberal mainline churches and how the tendency of accommodating new cultural norms fed into their invisibility in the public square as well as their indirect impact on the overall polarization in the United States.

After examining the major factors causing the Great Displacement, the second half of my thesis shifts to theoretical explorations based on my previous findings. Chapter three is an examination of the writings of several political theorists on the role of religious languages and contributions in the public realm. Given the findings from my first two chapters, I analyze Rawls, Habermas, and others’ theories by applying them to the complex realities of the Great Displacement. I spent many pages critiquing Rawls’ ineffective solution about the comprehensive doctrine and comparing his theory with the newer enlightening attitude that Habermas has adopted recently to rethink the role of religious contributions in public. I also study a less commonly known theorist who might provide an alternative approach to Rawls -- Agonistic Democracy according to William Connolly. In the last chapter, I offer my own synthesized and original theory that might be useful for building a more effective discourse platform between the two opposing sides. Building upon other theorists, I envision and develop a new practical theory that might be more effective in solving the problem of the Great Displacement, such as providing extra incentives for government initiatives conducive to healthy competitions among ideologies with

impartiality. Increasing religious literacy for both secular and the religious citizens can become an important component of my comprehensive solution.

Overall, I argue that the polarized struggle between secular humanism and evangelicalism, two ideologies with a *potential* for overlapping interests, have unfortunately become diametrically opposed to each other due to a number of factors such as a fundamental disagreement over the issue of sovereignty, the anti-socialism political climate during the Cold War, and the competitive nature of the religious marketplace in the United States. These factors, through a complex web of visceral registers and symbolic connections, have manifested in the evangelical-capitalist alignment manifested in a deep distrust of the federal government and its welfare programs. Due to the multivalent nature of Christian scriptures and the malleable characteristic of the evangelical-capitalist resonance machine, the Great Displacement can be overcome through a reconstructive discourse mechanism built upon an increase in religious literacy among the general public with an ethos of critical engagement. Ultimately, the effectiveness of such a discourse is contingent upon a successful mobilization of liberal Christians who are willing to profoundly explore their traditions in order to offer some unique contributions in the marketplace of ideas – bridging the two opposing camps and challenging them to discover creative solutions for solving some of the most pressing political, social, and economic problems of our time.

## **CHAPTER ONE:**

### **THE CHRISTIAN MANIFESTO AND THE DISPLACEMENT OF PROGRESSIVE SOCIAL CONCERNS**

#### **The Compassionate Conservatism of a Southern Religious Professor**

In summer 2014, I had a rare opportunity to visit the Mississippi Delta, a region also known as “the most southern place on Earth.” Formerly regarded as the promised land for newly liberated southern blacks in late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Delta has since suffered extreme economic hardships and racism, but somehow managed to produce some of the most treasured cultural icons in America such as B.B. King and Morgan Freeman. Its water is full of lively catfish and its air is filled with magnetic rhythms of the Blues – echoing across abandoned cottages and half-built mansions in the midst of plantation sites that often bring back the darkest and the most painful memories in American history. Today, Mississippi has a reputation of being one of the most religious and conservative states in America. Despite its severe poverty, many of its residents seem to have strong sentiments against government programs for the poor. The most recent Gallup poll indicates that 48.9% of Mississippians self-identify as political conservatives – marking Mississippi the most conservative state in the union.<sup>8</sup>

Before I packed for my first trip ever to the American South, a friend warned me that I should be expecting to encounter “a lot of really religious people.” As someone used to living on an ultra-liberal college campus, my mind was suddenly

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<sup>8</sup> Frank Newport, "Mississippi, Alabama and Louisiana Most Conservative States," GALLUP, February 6, 2015, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/181505/mississippi-alabama-louisiana-conservative-states.aspx>.

flooded with images of Westboro Baptist Church members chanting hellfire and offensive remarks at me. It was a forgivable subconscious reaction, given that I had never met a hardcore religious conservative from the American South besides the generalizations and stereotypes I heard from mainstream medias. Fortunately, my strong curiosity trumped my initial fears, leading me to meet and get to know an interesting religious conservative in depth. In as little as seven weeks, I learned valuable lessons from him that could potentially shed fresh light upon the paradoxical problem examined in my thesis.

Dr. James Robinson is a senior professor of history at Delta State University, the university site used to host summer training institutes for Teach For America in Mississippi. A railroad track divides up the university town in half, with the west side being exclusively white and the east side being mostly black. The *de facto* racial segregation is striking: if you walk in the hallways of East Side High School and observe the yearbook photos from all graduates in the past, you might not find even one white face. If you go to a well-attended Presbyterian church, you might not see a single black person attending service. The university is less segregated in comparison, with the school faculty members and administrators being predominately white. The campus even has a certain degree of southern charm reflected by beautiful buildings and a central quad as large as a football field. Dr. Robinson is a well-dressed southern white gentleman in his late academic career. He drives a luxury car to school each morning, but enjoys walking around campus quite frequently between classes to meet people and to pick up any trash others carelessly dropped on his way. He loves his

campus, especially the building where his office is located. He calls that building his second home and cherishes it like a protective parent.

As a key liaison between Teach For America's Delta Institute and Delta State, I was responsible for upholding the public image of this teaching organization, which means I had to please the locals when hundreds of corps members in training flooded into their beloved campus. I knew from my supervisor that TFA suffered from a relationship crisis with Delta State in the year before due to bad stewardship, and I later found out that Dr. Robinson was the one who was most upset and complained the most. With a cautious mindset meshed with strong curiosity, I finally encountered him in his most cherished building – tearing down the preliminary signs I had just put up for the upcoming corps member training sessions. Intimidated at first, I challenged myself to break the ice by introducing myself in the friendliest manner possible. To my surprise, the moment he began speaking in his heavy southern accent, I suddenly felt welcomed as he insisted on offering me a tour of the building. There were many fine pieces of furniture throughout this place, including larger paintings and expensive sofas in the first floor lobby. I learned that he in fact purchased most of those furniture pieces himself as decorations, and he was incredibly proud of the fact that his second home was aesthetically unmatched when compared with all other buildings on campus.

Given the economic disparities for which Mississippi Delta is known, my initial impression of him was a wealthy upper class and seemingly narcissistic white man indulging in consumerism while being indifferent to the sufferings around him. But when I gradually got to know him better in the following weeks, I began to

appreciate and respect this religious conservative as a person. I learned that he had a sister suffering from dementia at home and needed 24-hour nursing care. Instead of sending her to a nursing home like many Americans would do, he chose to keep her at his house instead. He hired a professional sitter who routinely took care of her during daytime when he was at work, and he would come back to take care of her sister himself for the rest of the day after he returned home. He seemed to have no other relatives around, so he willingly took up the responsibility of keeping her company at the expense of the freedom to pursue a social life outside of the small and isolated town in the Delta. I then became interested in knowing how he felt about government-run nursing homes, since they tend to be an easy option for many people who see their aging parents as burdens.

Dr. Robinson said he was not against nursing home *per se*, but as a strong conservative, he preferred to see fewer government-run programs and institutions. We once sat down and discussed his political views. He told me that he felt that the liberals are mistaken in believing that the government welfare programs are the better options for aiding the poor. He expressed his fascination over how some private entrepreneurs could be able to give back to their communities creatively out of sheer good will. He even took me to a private nursing home in a nearby town known as one of the poorest towns in the Delta and showed me how good-hearted private, religiously motivated individuals could manage to build this amazing facility full of high quality equipment with an impressive environment unmatched even by a nursing home in the wealthy Silicon Valley, where my grandma spent her last few years of her life. I was simply dumbfounded.

When TFA's summer training was drawing to a close, I paid my last visit to Dr. Robinson in his building and received my most surprising revelation. As I entered, I saw him giving instructions to a worker who was renovating a room on the first floor. "It's almost done!" He excitedly told me. The room looked like a dressing room backstage on Broadway, with mirrors and soft lightings and delicate furniture. The worker was installing a newly purchased sink with high quality marble finishing. "It's first-class material. I can't wait to complete this project!" Out of curiosity, I asked him why he kept purchasing these high-end materials to decorate and renovate the building. He turned to me and gently said: "All of my students are very poor, so all I wish is for them to walk into this building and feel motivated to make a difference in their lives. When they see these beautiful furniture pieces and study in this comfortable environment, they can get a taste of success and work harder to achieve it for themselves."

After seven weeks, I finally understood the more profound reason why he had been so obsessed with and protective of every tiny detail of his building. For him, spending his own money on renovating the space was not for personal gratification at all, but for the poor black students walking in and out of his classroom every day. He only wanted the very best for his students, and used his teaching salary to create the best learning environment possible in order to inspire and change their lives. This revelation deepened my respect for him as a religious conservative. Although I may personally have different political and theological views than him, I have no reason to dislike him or to even regard his views as unreasonable. After many genuine encounters, our differences seemed to be transcended already.

From the perspective of Dr. Robinson, there seems to be no conflict between the Christian faith and the free market. Perhaps, the religious conservatives do have a point to make: that is, welfare programs are not the only way to help the poor. Instead, we can rely on private individuals and organizations to do the job. Maybe, it is not “un-Christian” to oppose welfare programs for the poor, for it is up to each individual to take on the responsibility to help the poor and needy personally. Months later, after I set out the direction of my thesis, I had a chance to interview him on the phone and asked him more direct questions regarding his conservative views. When asked why he was opposed to the idea of using taxpayers’ money to aid the poor through governmental programs, he said: “that would diminish individual incentives to help the poor,” and also “they [the needy] would grow dependent on the programs, which reward people who choose not to work or those who are single.” His logic goes like this: if we impose higher taxes, the more well off populace would have less money to help the worse off individuals, for whom welfare programs have become a source of dependency. He also emphasized a connection between family values and welfare programs. Married couples wouldn’t benefit from as much from the social safety net as those who “choose” to be single with children. Thus, by broadcasting the benefits of getting a divorce, people would have less incentive to maintain a healthy heterosexual nuclear family.

Undoubtedly, there are many potential problems with his logic, and it is imaginable that a fellow Christian could easily draw out evidence from the New Testament to counter his views. To be as generous as I could, I asked him to what extent his conservative views were influenced by his religious faith. He said of course

his religious beliefs played an important role in shaping his political beliefs. For him, religion is supposed to make their adherents “better people,” and his vision of the “good,” in this context, is the desire to work hard to uphold “family values” without relying on anyone else. It is notable that he cited no religious content from the Bible to back up his views besides casually referring to a vague notion of being good. I started to find his views at odds with the loving person I knew him to be. How could he adopt a harsh view on poverty and demand the poor to take care of their own lives while criticizing them for growing dependent on food stamps or welfare in general? Had I not previously gotten the chance to know him as a loving person, I would most likely regard his views as unreasonable and hypocritical. Although I can find a number of biblical passages to point out potential contradictions between his religious beliefs and his conservatism, I could not find any sharp contradictions between his political beliefs and his personal actions: as a brother, he chose not to send his own sister to a government-run nursing home and chose the more expensive way to take care of her to maintain family bonds. As a teacher, he spent his own money renovating his building to inspire his poor students to work harder and to succeed ultimately.

Compassionate Conservatism, at least revealed from the story of Dr. Robinson, can be compared to a harsh but loving parent who is suspicious of “free lunch” from others. Don’t spoil the children! Let them find happiness through their own hard work! The goodwill from the government, in their opinion, only exacerbates poverty and diminishes incentives for individuals to help in their own ways. Nonetheless, I was suspicious of the claim that Christianity supports and

reinforces compassionate (yet harsh) conservatism. Is such a view unique to the southern Bible-Belt states like Mississippi? Or is it a prevalent belief among most conservative Christians throughout the United States? In other words: Does an *evangelical* allegiance to God necessarily make one more likely to form an allegiance to the Republican Party? If so, what might be a logical connection capable of explaining this perplexing phenomenon?

I personally know evangelicals from places like the Midwest or as far as Korea who have little to no connections to the Southern Bible-Belt states. To my knowledge, they tend to be conservative and find the political platform of the G.O.P to be much more appealing (not only on the pro-life and anti-gay positions). Some of them are working-class young people who can benefit from the welfare programs for the poor. Is religion really powerful enough to make believers seemingly vote against their own economic interests without feeling any cognitive dissonance? In order to better understand this phenomenon, we need to revisit the 20<sup>th</sup> century America to learn about the interesting marriage between conservatism and evangelicalism.

### **The Scopes Trial and the Cultural Defeat of Fundamentalist Christians**

It might have become a general assumption that most American evangelicals identify as conservative Republicans in the increasingly polarized political climate today. Before the Great Displacement, one's party affiliation had no strong connection with one's religious faith. Even President Jimmy Carter, a serious born-again evangelical Christian, belonged to the Democratic Party. It was not until the 1980s when Ronald Regan was elected president that we began to see more clearly

the alliance between evangelicalism and small-government conservatism. Despite being less openly religious than Carter the Democrat, Reagan the Republican adopted the political platform of the newly emerged Moral Majority forged by Jerry Falwell – a smart move that helped him defeat a faithful incumbent president.

Before the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was hardly imaginable that one person or a selective vanguard of religious leaders could emerge out of America’s long-celebrated pluralist tradition and claim to represent American Christianity in the public sphere. In a pre-secular America, similar to the Christendom in Western Europe, being a Christian was simply the cultural norm, and the line drawn between one’s political activities and religious convictions was more blurred and ambivalent than in a secular society, where there exists a sharp contrast between “believers” and “unbelievers.” In the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, Martin Luther King Jr., despite his strong religious motivations to combat racism, could not claim to be advancing the interests of the “Moral Majority,” the political coalition that claimed to represent the interests of the majority of religious citizens in the United States. But shortly after this honeymoon period between religion and liberalism, the evangelicals and fundamentalists decided to reenter the political arena to “reclaim America for Christ” after nearly half of a century of self-segregation since their humiliating cultural defeat during the Scopes Trial of 1925.<sup>9</sup> As more and more white evangelicals flooding into the political right followed by the drastic decline of traditional Protestant mainline churches (more liberal theologically), a new era of political theology arrived in the United States, marked by the leadership of Jerry

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<sup>9</sup> Susan Friend. Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 65.

Falwell, Francis Schaeffer, Billy Graham, and Pat Robertson *et al* as the “faces” of American Christianity.

It is indeed puzzling for a non-American observer to comprehend how “American Christianity” could ever strongly support capitalist free market, gun rights, a hawkish foreign policy, or an insistence on capital punishment, while deemphasizing or even rejecting the need for a welfare state marked by social programs for the poor and universal health care. Isn’t Christianity supposed to be all about “loving thy neighbor” and “giving up earthly possessions?” How could religious conservatives seemingly prefer doing the contrary? The answer to these questions cannot be simple, but I will offer at least two methods of inquiry to analyze this social paradox, knowing that there might be other approaches out there that are also legitimate and productive.

I will first focus on the ideological tension between American evangelicalism and secular humanism and show how the abortion issue serves as a powerful and effective symbol to embody this tension in political activism of evangelicals. Later on, I will explain the dialectical relationship between progressive social forces and religion in order to highlight the mechanism through which social manifestations of religion gradually evolve and unveil themselves out of a fixed set of scriptures over time across social-historical contexts. In addition, I will also emphasize the importance of bringing the visceral elements when analyzing the Displacement problem. Overall, I will argue that American evangelicalism in its political form is a fairly new social-political movement that has not gone through a thorough and rigorous internal discourse to channel their religious beliefs into social-political

values on par with those of other traditional sects of Christianity. And the issue of abortion, while serving as an effective symbol that motivated evangelicals to regain political momentum, has blocked the meaningful progress of internal discourse on the comprehensive social manifestations of Christianity among American evangelicals.

### **The Tension Between Evangelical Christianity and Secular Humanism**

It is true that almost every successful social movement in history had an ideological framer who set out the basic framework of the movement. For modern American evangelicalism, the intellectual guru was clearly Francis Schaeffer. Unlike Jerry Falwell, who acted as the commander of the evangelical political fleet in real life battles, Schaeffer provided the intellectual backbone to evangelicalism in order to combat secular humanism on the same intellectual level. For half a century, fundamentalists and conservative Christians suffered from a lack of intellectual legitimacy. The Scopes Trial of 1925 put the intellectual weakness of fundamentalism on national display over the issue of evolution and biblical inerrancy. During the trial, Darrow, the defender of teaching evolution in schools, interrogated Bryan, the lawyer defending creationism and biblical literalism. To the disappointment of the “most literal” fundamentalists, Bryan failed to defend creationism in the most literal terms. Thus, Darrow succeeded in showing that Bryan’s public testimony was inconsistent with his own literalist tradition of six-day creation, and “used the rules of fundamentalist rhetorical combat to impugn Bryan’s status as a strict Bible believer.”<sup>10</sup> Bryan, as the spokesperson of fundamentalist during the public trial,

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 73.

loosened his stance on biblical inerrancy, thus essentially demonstrated that even the spokesperson didn't really believe in the "non-sense" he professed, making fundamentalist positions look weak and even culturally irrelevant. The cultural defeat of the Scopes Trial was followed by the withdrawal of fundamentalists from the political sphere. And when the fundamentalists finally reemerged along with evangelicals, they were in desperate need of an intellectual fundamentalist like Francis Schaeffer.

Soon after Falwell and Schaeffer formed their public alliance, Schaeffer published "A Christian Manifesto," calling all evangelicals to political activism. It mimics the style of the "Communist Manifesto of 1848," the "Humanist Manifesto I of 1933," and the "Humanist Manifesto II of 1973." By and large, it is an attempt to respond to these previous "manifestos" issued by influential secularist thinkers who shifted the concerns of humanity from God to man. It was published seven years after the *Roe v. Wade*, the Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion in all 50 states. Although evangelical leaders did not respond strongly right after the release of this court ruling since they perceived it as a "Catholic issue," they soon mobilized under the influence of the Schaeffer family to fight back the liberal advances of "reproductive rights."

Under this historical context, this Manifesto provides a historical and theological basis for evangelical resistance as well as quasi-intellectual support. Schaeffer's intention was not to only justify anti-abortion causes, but was in fact what he perceived as a much larger problem of cultural degeneration in the American and Western society. He clarifies the scope of his concern in the very beginning of this

book by illustrating the substantive difference between “pieces or bits of problems” vs. “totality.”<sup>11</sup> For him, the abortion issue cannot be viewed in isolation, and it must be placed in a much larger context of social ills, where there is a dangerous trajectory of the society toward an increasingly humanistic future devoid of God. Thus, he quickly sets up a framework for the entire book, that the central tension is the struggle between Christian tradition and the secular humanist agenda – two diametrically opposed worldviews.

After summarizing the intellectual history of humanism, he sums up the central problem as “the humanists push for ‘freedom.’” For Schaeffer, when there is no Christian consensus to contain that ‘freedom,’ it leads to chaos or to slavery under the state (or under an elite). Humanism, “with its lack of *any* final base for values or law, always leads to chaos.”<sup>12</sup> To say that secular humanism *always* leads to chaos is such an absolute statement, yet it is important for Schaeffer to warn his audience about the dangers of removing God from the center of one’s worldview. His goal was to demonstrate an inherent connection between humanism and chaos, and for a fundamentalist leader, most issues are black and white, with no place for shades of grey. He also criticizes “liberal theology” for attempting to mix these two worldviews -- humanism and Christianity -- since he believes that they are naturally incompatible.<sup>13</sup> For him, issues such as abortion, euthanasia, and pornography are not only bad in themselves; they also reflect a fundamental shift in worldview that is displacing God from America.

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<sup>11</sup> Francis A. Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1981), 17.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

He was also consistent in his preaching on this central tension. As seen from his widely viewed TV series “*How Should We Then Live?*,” Schaeffer links strong, graphic video clips of violence in an attempt to link violence to these ideologies. We see tanks rolling over city streets, dictators chanting authoritarian remarks, protestors being brutally suppressed, etc. By showing the extreme examples of communism, Schaeffer makes the point that Marxism-Leninism always meant oppression. Then, the camera shifts to focus on the face of an innocent-looking female student who is said to have been hung by the communists in an East European country.<sup>14</sup> Released years before *A Christian Manifesto* (1981), Schaeffer recognized the central tension between his understanding of Christianity and secular humanism. Note that secular humanism encompasses a variety of ideological manifestations, including socialism, communism, or the “arbitrary legalism” that legalized abortion in the U.S. Essentially, he used humanism as a powerful symbol in his publications.

In light of Clifford Geertz’s theory of religion as a cultural system, the image of humanism serves as both a model of reality and a model for reality. Geertz famously defines religion in anthropological terms as “(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.”<sup>15</sup> In a nutshell, Geertz is underscoring the role of religion to affirm reality through the use of symbols that give rise to long-lasting moods and

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<sup>14</sup> *How Should We Then Live?*, dir. Francis Schaeffer and Franky Schaeffer (Muskegon, MI: Gospel Films, 1976).

<sup>15</sup> Clifford Geertz and Michael Banton, *Religion as a Cultural System* (London: Tavistock, 1966), 4.

motivations in men. Like science and philosophy, religion is another way of forming worldviews and it deserves to be treated seriously as an important way for people to comprehend reality. Religious symbols not only serve as *models of* reality, but also as *models for* reality. Therefore, the portrayal of humanism in Schaeffer's film provides a model that humanism always produces violence, chaos, and the loss of liberty in this world; wherever humanism flourishes, coercion and tyranny follow – this is how the world really works. It also provides a model for reality, in the sense that evangelicals should actively watch out for the infiltration of humanism in our society and do their best to stop it from taking roots and oppose everything that humanism stands for. Nonetheless, humanism as an ideology has serious limitations to serve as a symbol that motivates actions. Not only is it an abstract idea that can't be touched or seen except its negative social consequences displaced in Schaeffer's videos. It needs a more powerful symbol to embody its complex meaning to be more effective and accessible. That symbol is abortion, manifested in the effective ideological tension it represents as well as in the powerful visual imagery of abortion.

Most episodes of *How Should We Then Live* focused on the intellectual history of Christianity in relation to other schools of thoughts in the West, and it did not even address the issue of abortion until the last two episodes. When watching the 9<sup>th</sup> episode: "The Age of Personal Peace and Affluence," I felt that the content did a disservice to the title as there was only a very limited discussion of what Schaeffer means by "personal peace" and "affluence," though I could sense a mood of anti-materialism. Instead, the video suddenly took a seemingly disjointed leap into the issue of abortion. By showing more graphic images of unborn children and

illustrating the arbitrariness of the Supreme Court as the new elite, Schaeffer connects the American humanist trend to the terror of oppressions shown at the first half of the episode, potentially to generate fear among evangelicals who watched it. According to Frank Schaeffer, the son of the evangelical guru, his dad did not originally intend to include abortion in the series. In fact, when confronted by his son about the importance of abortion, Schaeffer shouted: “what does abortion have to do with art and culture? I’m known as an intellectual, not for this sort of political thing!”<sup>16</sup> It is important to note that the overarching argument of this TV series is to show how western culture moved from Christian-based worldview back to Thomas Aquinas to the relativistic and secular humanism of the late 1900s.<sup>17</sup> Of course, he eventually listened to his son and included abortion in the final stage of production. The episode starts by linking humanism to chaos, and then identifies abortion as a manifestation of godless humanism in America. Graphic images of fetuses are shown that mirror the violence seen on the first half of the video. It might be possible that Schaeffer changed its script to fit abortion into the same episode, but regardless of his intention, the whole video works well to persuade the viewers that abortion symbolizes the central tension between Christianity and godless humanism.

Similarly, in *Jesus Camp*, a more recent documentary on the early indoctrination of evangelical children in America, the issue of abortion also shows up. Toward the end of the film, a pro-life worker takes the stage and starts preaching the

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<sup>16</sup> Frank Schaeffer, *Crazy for God: How I Grew up as One of the Elect, Helped Found the Religious Right, and Lived to Take All (or Almost All) of It Back* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2007), 266.

<sup>17</sup> Barry Hankins, *Francis Schaeffer and the Shaping of Evangelical America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2008), 167.

evils of abortion to children at the camp. He passes around tiny display boxes of plastic fetus miniatures and lets everyone to touch them and feel them with their hands. Many children cry out of sympathy. Although abortion in this case could not symbolize the tension between Christianity and secular humanism for young children, it achieves a symbolic effect through arousing emotions. The sensory qualities of abortion give meaning to the tangible symbol through emotion. Later, the film shows the same group of children standing before the U.S. Supreme Court in Washington D.C. with their mouths covered with “X” shaped tapes while holding the plastic fetuses. The children essentially merged themselves into the symbolic nature of abortion and became part of it, making it even more effective.

### **The Lack of Progressive Social Concerns and a Thorough Internal Discourse**

Both *Christian Manifesto* and *How We Should Then Live* call Christians to real world actions against secular humanism. Once the link between the “pieces and bits” of moral issues and the overarching “totality” of the evil of secular humanism is well argued and established, it is time to fight back on political ground. By showing that humanism had manifested itself in communist regimes in many parts of the world and in the Supreme Court’s decision to legalize abortion in the United States, Schaeffer succeeded in taking an abstract idea and turning it into a tangible materialization that seemed real to his concerned viewers.

Indeed, there is a strong sense of embattled minority in Schaeffer’s presentation of this tension: Christians, the minority in a world being infiltrated by a humanist conspiracy, must fight back while there was still time. He devoted a large

portion of *Christian Manifesto* to instructing evangelicals the principles of activism. He talks about the good social actions motivated by Christianity in history. When citing examples of Christians fighting for the poor in England, he underscores that Christianity is “not only of individual salvation, but also social action.”<sup>18</sup> He then draws a parallel between the issue of slavery and the issue of abortion. Unlike many Christian figures like Jonathan Blanchard and Charles Finney who fought against slavery, American evangelicals seldom involved in the movement against abortion (in parallel to slavery) and left this important issue to the Catholics.<sup>19</sup> He seems to be disappointed at the evangelical communities before they mobilized to adopt anti-adoption stances and further asserts that abortion reflects a worldview shift on the intrinsic value of human life, not just one bit and piece of some decentralized social problem. In terms of how to combat this major worldview shift threatening to the Christian one, Schaeffer offers “two tracks ahead of us” evangelicals could pursue. The first track is to participate in the elections in American politics when there is still time and liberty in America. But if it is too late and the “window closes,” then other means might become appropriate, including the use of force during civil disobedience as a last resort.<sup>20</sup>

Most importantly, Schaeffer calls for a non-partisan approach for evangelicals to engage in politics. He warns: “although there are tremendous discrepancies between conservatives and liberals in the political arena, if they are both operating on a humanistic base there will really be no final difference between them” (Schaeffer,

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<sup>18</sup> Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto*, 65.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 117-130.

1981, 77). He further clarifies: “as Christians we must stand absolutely and totally opposed to the whole humanist system, whether it is controlled by conservative or liberal elements,” and “thus, Christians must not become officially aligned with either group just on the basis of the name it uses.”<sup>21</sup> What a surprising statement made by the Godfather of the Christian Right! Schaeffer clearly understands the distinction between the partisanship and religious identification. He warns that his evangelical faith by itself should not land neatly into a preexisting political category. Thus, he reveals a deep sense of distrust of American politics or politics in general. Either political camp was qualified to serve as a safe haven for his evangelical passion, for they could both be corrupted. In retrospect, the son of Francis Schaeffer concluded after his father’s death, “if Dad had been allied with the left, it would have ultimately been a much better fit for him – and for me.”<sup>22</sup>

However, when comparing to the amount of ink used on humanism and abortion, other important features of Christian activism, such as fighting for the worlds’ poor, global peace, anti-racism are strikingly virtually nowhere to be found in a Christian manifesto. Although Schaeffer briefly points out that a Christian duty of “making and using our possession with compassion has often not emphasized by the church, his point is more about not to “make the mistake of equating the Kingdom of God with a state program.”<sup>23</sup> For Schaeffer, a state program too closely resembles the socialist practices in other parts of the world where oppression often follows. Even Liberation Theology, a Catholic ideology to liberate the poor in developing countries,

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>22</sup> Schaeffer, *Crazy for God*, 349.

<sup>23</sup> Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto*, 126.

shall not be supported. Schaeffer's rationale is that liberation theology is "built on the concept of Man being basically good, linked with the idea that all people need is to be released from their economic chains."<sup>24</sup> Therefore, as long as an effort of man to relieve poverty reflects a humanist character that "man is good," it must be subject under scrutiny and most likely rejection by evangelicals.

### **The Theological Logic of an Evangelical Pastor**

To confirm Schaeffer's theological suspicion of state-sponsored programs and to understand the conservative social logic more deeply, I interviewed Pastor Rick McKinniss from the Wellspring Church in Berlin, Connecticut. Pastor Rick describes himself as a self-guided intellectual on American history and is fascinated by America as a great "political experiment in the history of the world." He is a strong religious conservative whose family belonged to a fundamentalist strand of Christianity. He loved party politics all his life and now identifies as a Republican. As the senior pastor at Wellspring, he runs a successful 500-member church that even attracts a sizable group of Wesleyan students who attend his service regularly. Upon hearing my interest in interviewing him, he generously accepted my request and we sat down for more than 90 minutes.

When asked about the relationship between evangelicalism and conservatism, Pastor Rick made the following statement:

*"The key common theme between American conservatism and evangelicalism is an emphasis upon the reality of evil in the fallen world. In one sense (for me), this is the essence of conservatism. I*

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 125.

*am conservative in terms of my estimate of human moral potential (absent the work of Christ and the guidelines of Scripture). I think the entirety of the 20th century is empirical evidence enough of the great engine for evil the state invariably becomes when wed to the pursuit of the highest ideals, when the lurking reality of human fallibility is not factored in and guarded against.”*

For Pastor Rick, his conservatism is rooted in his “estimate of human moral potential,” or “human fallibility.” From a Christian perspective, the world is a fallen place due to the original sins of Adam and Eve. After the universal fall, no human is born good and must be saved by the grace of God through Jesus Christ. Since evil is ever-present in this sinful, fallen world, the institutions humans established can be fatally flawed and evil. Even when they want to pursue “highest ideals” through the state, evil follows and results in the mass atrocities occurred in many communist regimes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Using Schaeffer’s language, I asked him “how should we then live” if we abandoned government programs? Would we rely on private individuals and churches to do the work instead of the government? Would that decentralized welfare system be a better alternative? Pastor Rick responded by saying that that decentralized system was the norm in America up to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. He said everything has changed since then after the Social Gospel emerged and the New Deals became popular. After hearing a historical lecture from him, I managed to bring him back to my concern over human fallibility. I asked him to imagine if we abolish or significantly cut the federal welfare programs and rely on Christian churches and private individuals to aid the poor? Wouldn’t we be shifting the hope unto another set of equally fallible humans? He answered: “power distributed is less dangerous than

power concentrated.” He paused briefly and then added: “and the distribution of power is a hallmark of conservatism.”

His views strike me as very similar to those of Francis Schaeffer. Both Pastor Rick and Schaeffer understand the great evils that socialist “do good” machines can create. They both rest their theological convictions on a fallen state of human nature incapable of saving the world without the help of God. For them, the state is dangerous and must be guarded against. Since humans are helplessly fallible, the institutions they create, no matter how good the intentions might be, are subject to fallibility and corruption. Therefore, we should not place our trust on some bureaucrats running a government program, since they could be corrupted at any time. Both of them brought up the terrors of authoritarian regimes that adopted secular socialism or communism, bringing back painful Cold War memories of countless Americans who can readily relate to that historical era when our national leaders frequently invoked the language of God to counteract the advances of “godless communism.”

### **The Imperfections and Improvability of Conservative Logic of Evangelicals**

Based on my analysis of the internal conservative logic of Francis Schaeffer, Dr. Robinson, and Pastor Rick, it is safe to grant them the benefit of the doubt that many religious conservatives do indeed have theologically justifiable reasons to support the idea of limited government and free market capitalism. At least seen from the materials included in this chapter, the concerns of these religious proponents of conservative ideals seem to be genuine. They are genuine in the sense that they

probably believe in what they preach and do not feel anything wrong with their beliefs, no matter how strongly secular or religious liberals feel about them otherwise. Of course, there are always religious fanatics and hypocrites out there who pronounce similar beliefs yet behave purely out of their selfish and hateful desires or sometimes act against their actual beliefs. But for people like Schaeffer and Pastor Rick who are capable of offering intellectual and theological reasons to justify their political positions, cognitive dissonance is rare and they remain as compassionate and loving people to others around them. Recall the way Dr. Robinson expressed his love for the black students in poverty and his sick sister. It is unthinkable that anyone could blatantly deride people like him or label them as hypocrites.

It is also noteworthy to point out that deeply conservative and religious states tend to give much more to charities than liberal or more secular states in America. According to the Chronicle of Philanthropy's most recent report, more religious states like Utah and Mississippi consistently occupied the top two spots on the chart – with residents in Mississippi (the poorest state in America) giving out an average of 4.99% of their income to charity.<sup>25</sup> It is also revealing that the top 17 states all voted for Mitt Romney during the 2012 presidential election. In comparison, a much more secular state like Connecticut ranked 45<sup>th</sup> on the chart – with only a 2.34% giving rate. This strong contrast can be partially explained by the habitual donations churchgoers make during their Sunday services. While it is not entirely clear how much their donations are used to support their own churches, we cannot ignore the more prevalent spirit of

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<sup>25</sup> "How States Compare and How They Voted in the 2012 Election," The Chronicle of Philanthropy, October 05, 2014, <https://philanthropy.com/article/How-States-CompareHow/152501>.

giving one's income away for charitable causes in the country's most conservative areas. Even if the money were donated directly to church operations, the many evangelical churches also redirect their financial resources to aid the foreign countries suffering from poverty, violence, and natural disasters through missionary and charitable works.<sup>26</sup> With these strong pieces of evidence, it is simply not reasonable to criticize evangelicals for not caring for the poor and the needy due to their oppositions to welfare programs from the state.

*If a conservative person seeks to do good works, who are we to judge?*

Nonetheless, there are numerous flaws or potential areas of improbability within the logic of evangelical conservatism. If human nature is indeed fallible and cannot be trusted, how can we then trust the goodwill of private individuals, such as evangelical Christians, to donate consistently to charities and to help the poor themselves? If Christians believe in the original sin, then they themselves are just as fallible as anyone else by being born into this world. Without laws and an impartial distributor of welfare benefits, how can we ensure that all the needs of the underprivileged be addressed by private entities? Imagine the numerous "religious freedom" laws being passed and considered in some of the most conservative state today that allow Christian business owners to decline service to LGBT customers. If we "abolish the IRS" and return the philanthropic responsibilities to churches and private organizations, we would have to put the wellbeing of a large section of citizens at the mercy of another set of fallible human beings. To be clear, many

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<sup>26</sup> Nicholas Kristof, "A Little Respect for Dr. Foster," The New York Times, March 28, 2015, section goes here, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/29/opinion/sunday/nicholas-kristof-a-little-respect-for-dr-foster.html?smid=tw-share&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/29/opinion/sunday/nicholas-kristof-a-little-respect-for-dr-foster.html?smid=tw-share&_r=0).

religious conservatives do not approve abolishing the state programs completely and they do think there is a role for the state to play. Pastor Rich explicitly made this clear in his interview and the nursing home Dr. Robinson showed me, though born out of private entrepreneurial efforts, was partially funded by the government.

Still, racism and other forms of discriminations are real challenges facing day-to-day operations of private entities. If Christian bakery owners can refuse to make cakes for same-sex couples, what could stop an evangelical charitable organization from being biased against those outside of their belief system? Even if evangelicals could manage to stay loving, even to those with whom they share a different worldview, their numbers are not large enough to provide comprehensive welfare services to the entire nation. It is anachronistic to attempt to “return to the old ways of before the 1920s” when almost every American belonged to a church. We must stay grounded in our increasingly secularized social reality today.

Another dangerous strand within religious conservatism is its tendency to blame the poor for laziness and dependency. Similar to Dr. Robinson who suspected that some poor people deliberately choose not to work or maintain a healthy family structure in order to keep receiving aid from government programs, Pastor Rick said, “Hunger is a great motivator. But if you clear the playing field and give people opportunities, and they know that at the end of the day it is up them and their efforts whether they eat or feed their family or don’t.” This line of thinking, unlike the one concerning human fallibility, is less theologically justifiable. In the New Testament, one of the most famous miracles was Jesus feeding 5000 people at once. He did *not* say to the poor people at his time: “Truly, truly, I tell you, it is good for the poor to

starve, for they will work harder to feed themselves and their families.” Instead, he performed the miracle generously and unconditionally in order to show them the love of God and the advent of the good news of the kingdom of God.

Although I never had time to ask Pastor Rick to use his scriptures to justify his “hunger comment,” I can see that the Bible does contain verses that could be used or abused to back up his view. For instance, 2 Thessalonians 3-10 has been occasionally used by Republican lawmakers to justify their opposition to food stamps: “For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that *if any would not work, neither shall he eat.*” Yes, apostle Paul said if you do not work, there is no bread for you. This is supposed to be the word of God! However, when we look at the passage holistically and take the historical context into consideration, we can offer some strong rebuttals against such interpretations. For instance, some biblical scholars have pointed out that the early church in Thessalonian had an apocalyptic belief that their savior’s return was imminent, so many of them felt no need to keep work to provide for themselves anymore. Therefore, Paul’s remarks were addressed specifically to that population under a particular circumstance and cannot be casually used to justify the modern conservative sentiments against food stamps for the poor.

The question about whether it is biblically sound to feed the poor reveals the multivalent nature of biblical interpretations in regard to social implications. That is, two people can look at the same biblical passage and reach different understandings that might lead to very different real applications of that passage. It is plausible that the eventual implication is a function of one’s personal *a priori* political views. If I were a liberal politically, I would be more likely to favor a liberal interpretation of

certain ambiguous verses in the Bible. If I were raised in a conservative heterosexual nuclear family, I might interpret the same passage through the lens of compassionate conservatism. Nonetheless, both Dr. Robinson and Pastor Rick claim that their conservatism was motivated by their religious faith. I can accept the fact that they probably genuinely believe so, but it does not mean that other factors played no role in shaping their interpretations and political views. For instance, Calvinism remains popular in many evangelical churches today. As Max Weber explains in the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), the concept of predestination in the Calvinist doctrine led believers to accumulate as much wealth as possible through a strong work ethics in order to prove to themselves that they were among the elect chosen by God before their birth. Even if modern religious conservatives today no longer adhere to a rigid set of Calvinist doctrines, they may still be affected subconsciously by a conservative culture initially influenced by multitude of ideological and religious ideals, which may include Calvinism.

### **The Idea of a Resonance Machine**

One way to conceptualize the complex alliance between religious beliefs and political beliefs is through a “resonance machine.” In “Capitalism and Christianity, American Style,” William Connolly offers the idea of the “evangelical-capitalist resonance machine,” which illustrates how “the spirit of evangelical and corporate leaders resonates together across a set of doctrinal differences.”<sup>27</sup> So far, we have examined how evangelicalism and free market capitalism aligned *ideologically* by

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<sup>27</sup> William E. Connolly, *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 41.

aiming at a common enemy – godless communism. This fear of the loss of liberty is shared among churches that want to thrive and grow, and corporate leaders who are afraid of socialist control over the means of production. Due to this common fear, certain (potential) doctrinal differences are transcended. Since Christianity contains passages that could either support the socialist ideas or the capitalist model, the historical ethos during the Cold War drove evangelicals to strongly favor a biblical interpretation compatible with free market capitalism.

In addition, since American evangelical churches were considered a religious minority after the cultural defeat in the Scopes Trial, they were not able to broadcast their more extreme views to the broader American audience. In fact, the mainline churches succeeded in blocking their access to public radio networks, forcing them to create their own networks via private means. Without public funding, they needed to rely on corporate donations to fulfill their evangelizing missions. Thus, it is not hard to imagine the symbiotic relationship between corporate self-interests and evangelicalism. But for Connolly, this is only a part of the whole resonance machine.

As I will address in a chapter 3, Connolly emphasizes the visceral dimension in any form of public ethos. The evangelical-capitalism machine involves an “ethos of existential revenge.” Facing the advances of “godless socialism,” evangelical and corporate leaders both face a serious challenge from this ideology. Thus, they experienced an existential crisis. To cope with it, they chose to devise an enemy to put their blames on. For corporate leaders, liberals are advocating for higher corporate taxes and environmental controls that could hurt profits. For evangelicals, many

liberals are obviously rejecting the authority of the Bible by doing good works without a belief in God.

This visceral sentiment of revenge became widespread among evangelicals through a popular book and movie genre called the “Left Behind series,” which imagines what the world would look like during the apocalypse when Jesus returns, bringing all the believers to heaven while leaving all unbelievers behind. The setting for this form entertainment almost always involves a sudden disappearance of millions of “true believers in Jesus” all over the world. The bodies of true believers were beamed into heaven, leaving their clothes behind and their unfaithful loved ones in shock. The remaining population on earth consists of atheists, homosexuals, people of other faiths, and even some pastors who didn’t actually believe in what they preached. After some dramatic overturns in the plot, some “enlightened ones” on Earth finally realize that they must convert to Christianity in order to survive, and many do so out of fear.

This genre has substantially contributed to a reinforcement of Dispensational Premillennialism, a literalist interpretation of the Book of Revelations that Jesus will come again to establish a millennial kingdom that is preceded by a 7-year period of “tribulation,” when the world will be punished by the wrath of God. Those who hold such views have no reason to feel attached to this world, since Jesus will soon come again to save them and punish all those who don’t share their vision of the “truth.” It fosters a clear mentality between “us” and “them;” it probes believers into the in-group vs. out-group psychological trap that can potentially defeat the whole purpose of the most important Christian commandment “loving thy neighbor as thyself.”

When most of the world is destined to be punished and destroyed, why bother doing anything similar to what the liberals have already been fighting for: economic equality, world peace, or environmental protection? In contrast, it is much more worthwhile to prove to yourself that you're a true Christian and focus on personal salvation. And again, a good way to check if one is in the elected few is to adopt a strong work ethic and see one's bank account increase as fast as possible day by day. Or, they can always rally behind oppositions to LGBT rights, abortions, and other items on the Democrat's political platform in order to demonstrate their commitment to the "causes of God."

I have painted so far a rather bleak picture of the evangelical resonance machine. But since the end products coming out of the resonance machine are contingent upon both rational and visceral inputs, there is certainly a chance to modify the frequency of the resonance machine, leading to a new ethos less antagonistic to others' worldviews. Let's explore this possibility in a different political issue: military invasions and how conservative Christians could not only condone war efforts but, even in some cases, participate in torturing war prisoners. In "The Babylon Complex," Erin Runions discusses how Psalm 137 from the Old Testament could be used by military personals stationed abroad to justify revenge and torture. According to Runions, Psalm 137 "provides a means of articulating grief and loss...a means to hope and reparation," and it contains some "disturbing sentiments that feed into a tradition that culminates with desire for revenge on the Whore of

Babylon.”<sup>28</sup> The passage is known for its ambiguous references. Babylon can be understood as the current day Iraq or many other possible meanings. It seems to be telling a story of Jewish elites lamenting over becoming captives in a foreign land called Babylon. It ends with some disturbing languages:

*“O daughter Babylon, you devastator!  
Happy shall they be who pay you back  
What you have done to us!  
Happy shall they be who take your little ones  
And dash them against the rocks!”*

One can easily perceive a parallel between the author of this biblical passage and the soldiers fighting in Iraq. However, Runions notes that “the possible meanings for the song produce ironies and contradictory resonances that surely go beyond the straightforward intent of the soldiers”.<sup>29</sup> On the one hand, the “Rivers of Babylon” is meant to remind the U.S. soldiers that they are actually the captors oppressing the author of the Psalm or the Iraqi captives. However, since the song is frequently used to “pump up” the soldiers, they tend to view themselves as captives in a strong foreign land. There are reports indicating that many soldiers in Iraq “felt trapped, meaningless, and unsupported,” sentiments that resonate with the concept that one is being trapped in enemy’s land. In other words, when a passage from religious scripture is fluid or ambiguous, its interpretation can also be subject to the psychological and emotional conditions of the readers. If we manage to find a way to work on these visceral registers, we may find a way to build another resonance

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<sup>28</sup> Erin Runions, *The Babylon Complex: Theopolitical Fantasies of War, Sex, and Sovereignty*, 159.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

machine that reinforces the identity of the guilty oppressor, giving soldiers less confidence to participate in torture.

### **A Dialectical Relationship**

If the personal implications of Christian scriptures are contingent upon individual moods and conditions, how does this multivalent nature apply to a broader social-historical context? I would like to offer a seemingly bold idea that there is a dialectical relationship between Christianity and the secular worlds of meanings. I argue that Christianity evolves along with historical social changes in Western history and has adapted different modes of existence in relation to the specific cultural and historical conditions of the times. Note that I am not in favor of a complete relativist-historicist approach to understand the social manifestations of Christianity. My speculative argument is more Hegelian in the sense that there is a traceable progress in the dialectics between the Christian tradition and social progressive movements. In the American evangelical Christianity case, the progress was hindered by its own isolation; unlike other mainline denominations that evolved alongside with modernity, evangelical Christianity voluntarily withdrew itself from the dialectics mechanism and therefore suffered from an incomplete internal discourse on important social issues.

E.J. Dionner Jr. summarizes his deeply examined observation in *Souled Out* that the “movement of white evangelical southerners into Republican ranks was fueled initially by civil rights and a reaction against liberalism on nonreligious

grounds, not by religious fervor itself.”<sup>30</sup> Let’s not forget the largest constituency of American evangelicalism – white evangelical southerners. If the Civil Rights movement took place during the evangelical isolation, it is then not that surprising that the evangelical southerners’ objections against this movement were not strongly religious. Jerry Falwell talks about his early experiences as a young man living in the segregated south in his autobiography *Strength for the Journey*. He confesses, “I must admit that in all those years it didn’t cross my mind that segregation and its consequences for the human family were evil. I was blind to that reality. I didn’t realize it then, but if the church had done its job from the beginning of this nation’s history, there would have been no need for the civil rights movement.”<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Schaffer admits in “Race and Economics” published in *Christianity Today* (January 4, 1974) that he would make one change if he was to write his early books on Christianity again, because he would like to point out that before secularization took shape in the West, “certain things were definitely sub-Christian.” In retrospect, he identifies the “sub-Christianess” as racism and “the lack of emphasis on the proper use of accumulated wealth.”<sup>32</sup> In a context in which the cultural norm was being a Christian, there was similarly a lack of reflection on the social applications of Christianity. To uphold tradition and status-quo was to uphold Christianity, since the two were so deeply and historically intertwined. Therefore, Christianity needed new

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<sup>30</sup> E. J. Dionne, *Souled Out: Reclaiming Faith and Politics after the Religious Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 56.

<sup>31</sup> Jerry Falwell, *Strength for the Journey: An Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 286.

<sup>32</sup> Francis Schaeffer, "Race and Economics," *Christianity Today*, January 4, 1974.

forces of challenges in order to reexamine itself and form new relationships in a rapidly changing world in modernity.

Recall that evangelical Christianity did not formulate a clear stance against abortion until years after the Supreme Court decision and Schaeffer's construction of abortion as a powerful symbol. It has not come to full terms with many other important social evils facing humanity in the modern world: wars, nationalist struggles, global hunger, and global warming, etc. The evangelical leaders had very little time between their decision to reenter the realm of politics and the formation of the Moral Majority to carefully reflect upon every single issue. Thus, besides the issue of abortion that generated intense internal discourse, other issues received far less attention and careful theological reasoning than they arguably deserved. However, this is not to claim that evangelicals are completely blind to these social issues or fundamentally opposed to the positions adopted by the secular left. Rather, their different opinions or the lack thereof may indicate a different way of looking at the world (through the lens of an embattled minority fighting godless humanism with a strong sense of urgency) and/or a premature engagement with these issues due to their priority on touchstone issues like abortion.

Toward the end of *The Fundamentalist Phenomenon – the Resurgence of Conservative Christianity*,” Jerry Falwell briefly articulates the Moral Majority's positions on a number of political issues. For instance, he justifies America's conservative national defense against “godless communism” by reminding the readers of their fear toward communist invasion. He writes that we should not proactively reduce our nuclear warheads and hope that God will stop the Soviets' advances for us

because Jesus himself never tempted God. However, the Christian concepts of “turning the other cheek” or “loving your enemy” are never mentioned in his political justifications.<sup>33</sup> Falwell’s cursory use of the “don’t tempt God” Christian principle is not sufficient to justify a hawkish approach to foreign policy, since he failed or avoided engaging meaningfully with other Christian principles that might suggest a very different approach to foreign affairs. His hasty conclusions may reflect a lack of intense discourse regarding political positions within evangelical circles. In addition, before joining Falwell to establish the religious right, Schaeffer was also a Christian environmentalist concerned with pollution as shown in his book on the environment. However, concerns for the environment are nowhere to be found in the political agenda of the Moral Majority.

Nonetheless, we have to be careful not to attribute the evangelical political positions *entirely* to a lack of engaging internal discourse, for the sheer fact that they *did* form these views on a number of social issues shows that some opinion-formation mechanism, though likely to be underdeveloped, might be underway. On the issue of social welfare, Falwell does mention in *Fundamentalist Phenomenon* that we should rely on free-market capitalism to create its own job opportunities, that “we must help free minority groups from the virtual ‘prison’ of the welfare system, which threatens to strangle their life and hope from generation to generation.”<sup>34</sup> Falwell describes the “welfare system” as a prison for the poor, a federal system desired to keep the poor from improving their conditions themselves. His reasoning clearly reflects a negative

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<sup>33</sup> Ed Dobson, Jerry Falwell, and Edward E. Hindson, *The Fundamentalist Phenomenon: The Resurgence of Conservative Christianity* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 207.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

view towards government interventions, not toward the poor *per se*. As for world hunger, Falwell cites the generosity of American religious organizations that send aid abroad, indicating that while liberal theologians talked, we have acted. He is well aware that “great debates are raging among sociologists about the interrelationship of evangelism and social concern. But there is no time for debate. We must do both and we must do it now.”<sup>35</sup> This reasoning also reflects his lack of trust in the government and the liberals who love to talk but are slow to act. He highlights that evangelical communities and organizations can do a better job than the government in relieving world hunger, implying that their private approach is superior to a top-down federal approach.

This consistent evangelical mistrust of the government and its centralization is one of the major manifestations of the central tension between secularist humanism and evangelicalism. Schaeffer argues that “the humanist worldview with inevitable certainly leads in the direction of statism,” and this is because “humanists, having no god, must put something at the center, and it is inevitably society, government, or the state.”<sup>36</sup> He then contrasts the French Revolution, which he believes to be motivated by secular humanist ideals and the American Revolution, which was arguably influenced by Christian ideals. He spells out how the French people had to spend generations dealing with the negative effects of their revolution due to the overly centralized government the Revolution put in place, which led to chaos, authoritarian rule, and a network of administrative bureaucracy. The founding of America, in contrast, intentionally limited the scope of the federal government by resting more

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

<sup>36</sup> Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto*, 114.

power on the individual states. Nevertheless, due to the decline of a Judeo-Christian consensus, the U.S. federal government “has continually taken over the very power the original government of the United States did its best to curtail, limit, and resist.”<sup>37</sup>

### **Conclusions:**

Therefore, for Francis Schaeffer, the issue of sovereignty, or where power lies, is an important question both on the level of federal-state relations and the God-man relations. A strong centralized federal government resembles too much of authoritarian regimes inspired by godless humanism in other parts of the world. And a major shift in worldview from a “Christian consensus” to “secular humanism” necessarily displaces God from the center and therefore redefines sovereignty centered on the humankind. This concern for human fallibility and the fear of government power have culminated in an alliance between evangelicalism and political conservatism. As seen from the testimonies of Dr. Robinson and Pastor Rick, the Schaeffer’ theological justifications for limited government are still shaping the evangelical consciousness today. We learned that despite religious conservatives tend to be anti-welfare, a great number of them seek alternative ways to assist the needy in more personal ways, sometimes through private charities.

While we should respect the theological reasons that evangelicals have against state-run welfare programs, we cannot forget the other less legitimate factors (racism, cooperate interests, personal jealousy, etc.) that also helped to shape religious conservatism. Due to decades of separation, the evangelical communities suffered

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 115.

from a lack of power that magnified itself in relation to shift in power in the secular society at large. Abortion, serving as both an effective visual symbol and a symbol that represents an ideological tension between secular humanism and evangelicalism, successfully captured the fundamental question of sovereignty in the post-*Roe vs. Wade* American society.

Nonetheless, the evangelical communities suffered from a lack of careful engagement of other important social issues that unfortunately fell under the category of secular humanism due to the prioritization of the issue of abortion. With the leadership of evangelical leaders such as Falwell and Schaeffer, controversies over abortion successfully persuaded evangelicals to reenter the political realm. All the factors combined helped to build an evangelical-capitalist resonance machine that works on the symbolic, visceral, and ideological registers. Thus, any solution that attempts to address the problem of the religious-political polarization must be able to affect the moods and motivations (emotional dimension) of American evangelicals. Given the multivalent nature of Christian scriptures, it is hopeful that new social conditions by encourage them to internalize other social causes through careful internal discourse that reexamines the fundamental issue of sovereignty, power, and what it means to be an evangelical in a political setting.

## **CHAPTER TWO:**

### **THE HUMANIST MANIFESTO AND THE NAKED PUBLIC SQUARE**

In the last chapter, I explored the fundamental causes of the American cultural wars that culminated in the rise of the Religious Right, a moral majoritarian movement upon which Francis Schaeffer reluctantly bestowed his intellectual support. I argued that behind hot-button issues like abortion laid the brutal fight between Christianity and secular humanism – a central tension that is virtually impossible to reconcile. This tension can be reduced to the different locus of sovereignty that each worldview endorses. On the liberal side, humanity should be the center of gravity, but for evangelicals, the center is unequivocally God. The two sides view each other as polar opposites, with little to no possibility of any peaceful coexistence in a country that supposedly celebrates pluralism. In this chapter, I will continue examining this central tension -- this time focusing on the other side of this tension – secular humanism.

I will start by analyzing the “Humanist Manifesto I & II,” the documents to which Schaeffer responded with his “Christian Manifesto,” so I can show how secular humanists imagine what the roots of the tension are. I will then move on to discuss the relevance of the “humanist mentality” to the American society at large by examining the tolerance of religious voices in the public square. Overall, I will argue that the humanists, as Schaeffer correctly reveals, place sovereignty on man instead of God; however, such efforts of removing God from the picture are, to a great extent, driven by the failures of American Christianity to actively combat evils in the world – a passive isolationist tendency that has only been reinforced by the decline of liberal

mainline Protestant churches that had been historically the driving forces behind liberal courses such as Social Gospel and the Civil Rights Movement.

### **Dissecting the Humanist Manifestos**

It is not arbitrary that the United States has become the central battleground between Christianity and Secular Humanism – two ideologies and seemingly opposing worldviews that never saw each other eye to eye in a supposedly pluralistic liberal democracy. The secularization theory predicts the withering away of religion from the course of human history as societies evolve to embrace reason and science rather than the supernatural as guidance. The theory has so far failed to manifest itself in most human societies, especially in the developing global South, but it has basically succeeded in the industrial “West,” with the confounding exception of the United States. This unique secularization status made the United States the perfect place for developing and precipitating competing ideologies regarding the role of religion in law and public policy, in the public square, and in everyday life. The two humanist manifestos were published 40 years apart from each other – Humanist Manifesto I was published in 1933, during the transient peace between the two World Wars; Humanist Manifesto II started to circulate in 1973 – many years after WWII but during the same year as *Roe vs. Wade*, the Supreme Court decision that gave rise to the culmination of the cultural wars and arguably the reemergence of the religious right in the public realm.

Only four pages long, Humanist I has a few religious undertones that might surprise many devout secular humanists today. Rather than calling for unequivocal

*secular* humanism, it calls for a new religion based on humanist values. In fact, the short text frequently refers to the term “religious humanism” in many of its affirmations and principles. In the seventh clause, it states that “nothing human is alien to the religious...and the distinction between the sacred and the secular can no longer be maintained.”<sup>38</sup> Thus, in a document that is supposedly against religious doctrines and dogmas, there is a subtle appreciation of religious traditions and an acceptance that religion is an inescapable part of human experience. When outlining the directions for a new religion that is “shaped for the needs of this age,” the author recognizes that this age “does owe a vast debt to traditional religions.”<sup>39</sup> This is implying that early 20<sup>th</sup> century American humanists did not regard religious contributions as irrelevant. In fact, the first humanist manifesto was drafted by Raymond Bragg, a minister in the Universalist Unitarian tradition. The religious roots of humanism can be found in the Unitarian tradition, which emerged as a Christian sect that rejects the doctrine of Trinity and the idea of a God that sends people to Hell. The 1933 Manifesto was largely issued by Unitarians, who were calling for a world based on liberal and secular values.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, it is plausible that the humanist movement in America was not at all as militantly secular as it was perceived to be in later decades. Though a significant portion of the document calls for a more rational, scientific approach to religion or the formation of a reasonable universal religion itself, it clearly recognizes the religious roots and motivations of the humanist

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<sup>38</sup> Paul Kurtz, *Humanist Manifestos, I and II* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1973), 9.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>40</sup> R. Cimino and C. Smith, "Secular Humanism and Atheism beyond Progressive Secularism\*," *Sociology of Religion* 68, no. 4 (2007): pg. 408, doi:10.1093/socrel/68.4.407.

movement – a positive sign for people who wish to embrace both Christianity and humanism.

The new “humanist religion” aimed at saving the world through practical means such as the redistribution of wealth for the sake of the common good. In the 14<sup>th</sup> clause, the humanists argue that “a socialized and cooperative economic order must be established to the end that the equitable distribution of the means of life be possible. The goal of humanism is a free and universal society in which people voluntarily and intelligently cooperate for the common good. Humanists demand a shared life in a shared world.”<sup>41</sup> The clause contains a strong socialist message that certainly would alarm the likes of Francis Schaeffer, who framed “secular socialism” as the major enemy facing American evangelicals at his time. Nevertheless, it also stresses that the goal of humanism is to establish a “free and universal society” in which people voluntarily unite to achieve the common good. The brutal images of government tyranny and coercion that Schaeffer warns us about in the Christian Manifesto do not seem plausible according to this text. Moreover, the notion of the “common good” can certainly be the focus of many Christian theologians and philosophers who also wish bring practical good to Earth. Prominent Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain, who originally inspired my thesis, is certainly one of them.

In contrast, the humanist manifesto of 1973 took humanism to a whole new level, with strong secular language and a sense of realism. The main drafters, Paul Kurtz and Edwin H. Wilson, recognized that the earlier humanist statement in 1933

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<sup>41</sup> Kurtz, *Humanist Manifestos*, 10.

seems too optimistic in light of the major world event happened in the 40-year period.<sup>42</sup> The rise of Nazism and totalitarian regimes showed how much the world still needed a “savior,” whether God or humanity itself. Hence, the 1973 manifesto not only reasserts humanism’s secular nature, it is also far more detailed in finding practical solutions to the world’s problems, essentially developing a comprehensive doctrine for the ways in which we can restructure the world based on secular and humanist values. The document is divided into multiple sections that focus on important topics such as religion, ethics, democratic society, and even humanity as a whole. At the end of the preface, the authors acknowledge there are different varieties of naturalistic humanism ranging from “religious” to “Marxist.” They claim that humanism can trace its roots not only from the Western intellectual history, but also in Ancient China. By narrating a universal humanist heritage, the authors are able to affirm a set of humanist principles as the basis for united actions that transcend divisive particulars and dogmatic creeds (to a large extent left by religion). The authors also made clear that humanism is not just about renouncing the legitimacy of religious traditions, and views that “merely reject theism are not equivalent to humanism.”<sup>43</sup>

In Manifesto II, the section on religion reveals an important aspect of humanists’ attitude toward religion, which can be summed up in the widely quoted line: “no deity will save us; we must save ourselves.”<sup>44</sup> While the section addresses the most obvious and common humanist objections towards religion, including the

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 16.

neglect of reason and the rejection of science, it offers other compelling statements regarding religion as well. First, it states that some humanists still believe that they should give traditional religions a chance and reinvest them with new meanings that serve the present age of reason. These humanists sympathetic to religion are likely to have close links to the Unitarian Universalist or the Mainline Protestant traditions that tend to accommodate modernity at a much faster rate than evangelical churches. However, the document ultimately rejects such efforts of redefinition due to the danger of perpetuating “old dependencies and escapisms” that impede the “free use of the intellect.”

As in Manifesto I, the humanists, 40 years later, still recognized that religion has given a lot to humanity. However, even while appreciating the need to preserve the ethical teachings that world religions and humanists often share in common, they reject features in religion that deny human’s full potentialities and responsibilities. They argue that traditional religions too often “inhibit humans from helping themselves or experiencing their full potentialities” by encouraging “dependence rather than independence, obedience rather than affirmation, fear rather than courage.”<sup>45</sup> This is a powerful statement that speaks to the weaknesses of many religious traditions.

The overall impression that Manifesto II leaves us with is a feeling of urgency to fight against social evils such as tyranny and oppression, a goal that both humanists and evangelicals could agree on. Instead of merely rejecting the relevance of religion in the modern age it makes sense for the drafters to criticize the otherworldliness of

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

religion. In light of great atrocities in recent human history, the drafters saw religion as being too indifferent to the world's problems. Most vocal religious groups withdrew from the American public sphere in the early 70s. Christian writer Carl Henry had recognized the passive withdraw attitudes in his 1947 *The Unease Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, in which he spells out his discomfort with fundamentalists' indifference to social evils. This religious landscape probably contributed to the humanists' negative impression of the role of religion in the world at large. The function that religious groups served was predominantly in the realm of the private – or “salvationism” in the words of the humanists. The lack of active engagement with societal ills left the secular humanists a precious opportunity to crown themselves as the new saviors of mankind.

### **Carl Henry and The Call to Civic Responsibility**

It is then not surprising that when Carl Henry, the founding editor of *Christianity Today*, voiced his priorities of advocating for cooperation in the relief of the world's poor, hungry, and destitute during his meeting with Schaeffer and Falwell, the discussion quickly eclipsed these concerns and instead focused on their issues.<sup>46</sup> These humanitarian social concerns must have sounded too much like the agenda of the secular humanists to Schaeffer and Falwell, for the anti-communist tide at their time blinded them the fact that there could be great parallels between the Christian and the humanist agendas.

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<sup>46</sup> Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell*, 149.

Cary Henry, a strong evangelical Christian himself, recognized this lack of social concerns in fundamentalism decades before the rise of the religious right. In his 1947 *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, Henry spells out his discomfort with the fundamentalists' indifference to social evils. Written during the isolationist period, this classic text yields valuable insight into this great social paradox. Henry argues that evangelical Christianity "views the non-evangelical movements which vigorously promote world social uplift as competitors for ideological loyalty of the masses."<sup>47</sup> This interpretation is consistent with Schaeffer's resistance against secular humanism as a competing dangerous worldview. And in protesting against these non-evangelical competing ideologies, fundamentalism also came to react against the social programs manifested in these movements, for these "desirable ends" were being pursued in an "undesirable or ineffective context."<sup>48</sup> The fundamentalists, though in favor of having less violence in the world, would not be content with a world peace established without any reference to Christ. Therefore, no matter how promising the liberal agenda may sound in terms of bettering the world, it cannot be desirable since the method to achieve these goals belongs to the secular humanist worldview and operates under a framework where God is no longer part of the picture.

Henry also points out that by cautiously avoiding any alignment with non-evangelical groups, evangelical Christianity "has failed to develop the broad social

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<sup>47</sup> Carl F. H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub., 1947), 27.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

implications of its message.”<sup>49</sup> This is an important insight that must be further examined. Taking the long decades of self-isolation into consideration, American fundamentalism and evangelicalism have not been active in translating their religious convictions into practical social implications. Their long tradition of being indifferent to social evils (include abortion) of this world essentially hindered their internal discourse on the outward manifestations of their faith. When they decided to enter the political realm again after so many decades of isolation, they must restart their internal discourse and reconstruct their unique webs of meanings in a society used to their invisibility. The evangelicals, as I will examine below, did not begin to realize the importance of Henry’s concerns until many decades later.

A more recent document from the National Association of Evangelicals comes to everyone’s surprise by urging evangelicals to adopt a more socially responsible position. During a 2004 conference, the biggest evangelical organization presented a detailed resolution “For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility.” The resolution presents an interesting position different from the narrow focus of social concerns of evangelical social passions in the last few decades. Hoping to move from a narrow scope of abortion and gay marriage, the article seeks to encourage debates on a comprehensive set of social concerns, including poverty, peace, and environmentalism – issues that the Democratic Left claims to care. Dan Wakefield, the author of *Hijacking Jesus* (2006), jokes that the document was as if written by liberals who succeeded in infiltrating the religious right.<sup>50</sup> For both liberals

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>50</sup> Dan Wakefield, *The Hijacking of Jesus: How the Religious Right Distorts Christianity and Promotes Violence and Hate* (New York: Nation Books, 2006).

and evangelicals, its sheer existence is unbelievable. But before casting our judgment on its merit, we should examine the document further to see what it actually says.

In the preamble, the Call acknowledges that evangelicals now “made up fully one quarter of all voters in the most powerful nation in history,” giving American evangelicals “such an awesome opportunity to shape public policy in ways that could contribute to the well-being of the entire world.”<sup>51</sup> This vision seems to transcend the narrow national interests of the proponents of a “Christian America.” It encourages evangelicals to extend their love to other nations while not specifying what particular policies to are best to achieve these goals. The authors also remind the readers that Carl Henry “picked our uneasy consciences and spurred us toward responsible social and political engagement” as early as 1947 and that the NAE has since then worked on educating its member churches. Yet, evangelicals “have failed to engage with the breadth, depth, and consistency to which we are called.”<sup>52</sup> A lack of breadth, depth, and consistency also indicates a lack of internal discourse. The evangelical churches have not fully engaged with a variety of social issues related to Christian teachings. As they train new leaders in evangelical seminaries and colleges decade after decade, the new generation of leaders finally began to realize what have been missing from their political engagement.

The document spells out a number of social concerns alien to the usual political platform of the religious right. First, it seeks to transcend nationalism by reminding Christians that their primary allegiance is to “Christ, his kingdom, and

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<sup>51</sup> "For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility," editorial, *National Association of Evangelicals*, 2004, 1.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

Christ's worldwide body of believers, not to any nation."<sup>53</sup> This is an important statement given that the Christian faith has been historically conflated with national or ethnic identities in places such as Ireland, post-Reformation principalities, and some regions within the United States where the belief in "America as a Christian nation" prevails. Sometimes, conflicts between two Christian nations led to violence, which directly violates the central Christian teaching of "loving thy neighbor as thyself." If evangelical leaders could differentiate between their love for Christ and their loyalty to America, then it would be possible for them to endorse a less hostile and more inclusive foreign policy. In a later section on peace and violence, the authors urge "governments to pursue thoroughly nonviolent paths to peace before resorting to military force;" and if the use of force is inevitable, they must "use it in the service of peace and not merely in their national interests."<sup>54</sup> Since the document was produced shortly after the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, the emphasis on nonviolence can be seen as a call for reexamining the evangelical support for a Republican-led war.

Second, the Call stresses the importance of justice and compassion for the poor and the vulnerable. It reminds evangelicals that Jesus cares for the poor and all vulnerable groups in our society, and "God measures societies by how they treat the people at the bottom."<sup>55</sup> To support its argument, it cites a number of biblical verses to show that a biblical conception of a fair legal system does not favor either the rich or the poor, and a fair economic system does not tolerate perpetual poverty. Although

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 9.

a call for economic *equality* is absent from the Bible, the scripture “condemns gross disparities in opportunity and outcome” and it “calls us to work toward equality of opportunity.”<sup>56</sup> Note that the authors are not necessarily advocating for more social welfare programs to address “gross disparities.” The word “opportunity” appears multiple times in their argument, indicating that they may not only value opportunities created through government intervention, but also those naturally created by the free market itself. By not specifying policy solutions, the authors manage to leave room for further debates.

Third, the document also includes a section on environmentalism. Acknowledging the fact that Christians “worship only the Creator and not the creation,” the authors affirm: “God-given dominion is a sacred responsibility to steward the earth and not a license to abuse the creation of which we are a part.”<sup>57</sup> This call to stewardship is, in my opinion, a much stronger theological argument than “we shall not worship the environment (creation),” or a dispensational premillennial view that *anticipates* dramatic environmental disasters as signs of Jesus’ imminent second coming.

Nonetheless, the document was not well received by a number of evangelical leaders gathered at the conference. While many evangelicals present voiced their support for resisting a two-issue political approach, some voiced their concerns. As the New York Time reported, Tom Minnery from the influential organization Focus on Family stood up and said "Do not make this about global warming." He also added, "the issues of marriage, the issues of pro-life are the issues that define us to

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 11.

this day.”<sup>58</sup> A. James Reichley, a senior fellow from a D.C. conservative think tank also warned that “the National Association of Evangelicals not to travel the same route as mainline Protestant denominations that adopt resolutions at their national meetings on a wide range of questions, from foreign policy to budget cuts.”<sup>59</sup> These voices represent some important concerns facing the religious right. How can evangelicals maintain their focus on fighting abortion and gay marriage while spreading their energy combating other social evils and inequalities? The comprehensive nature of this document indeed resembles the Mainline Protestant churches that attempted full reforms in the past. It is obviously true that they have been in sharp decline since then. Due to these concerns, it is unlikely that the document would have any substantial impact on the political alignment between the GOP and evangelicals in the foreseeable future. The discourse cannot stay in the minds of “enlightened evangelicals” on the top, and it must be actualized in a full-scale discourse in the evangelical camp.

### **The Humanist Success in the Naked Public Square**

The rest of the Humanist Manifesto II contains some radical visions for the world that might actually resonate with a Christian perspective. As seen from the more recent NAE document calling for more social responsibilities, the two sides could potentially agree on a number of social issues. Besides the stress on the common good, the humanists envision a world community free of nationalistic

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<sup>58</sup> Laurie Goodstein, "Evangelicals Open Debate on Widening Policy Questions," The New York Times, March 10, 2005.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

sentiments – a vision shared by at least a number of evangelical leaders today. It calls for a transcendence of national allegiances and for a commitment to all mankind that “transcends the narrow allegiances of church, state, party, class, or race in moving toward a wide vision of human potentiality.”<sup>60</sup> This highly universalistic message echoes with universal languages and tendencies within many Christian traditions that aim for a similar transcendence. Though other goals enumerated in the Manifesto reveal certain deep strands of individualism that celebrate sexual liberty and other ideas that might not be considered traditionally Christian, the overarching message relates back to Christian principles of caring for the poor, the weak, the marginalized. These charitable callings are difficult for Christian to dispute; some liberal denominations may even support the social manifestations of humanism completely, including the controversial rights to indulge in consensual sexual desires.

### **The Great Displacement Simplified**

| Evangelical Christians                  | Secular Humanists            |
|---|------------------------------|
| God                                     | <del>God</del>               |
| <del>Humanitarian/Social Passions</del> | Humanitarian/Social Passions |

The diagram above shows the simplified version of the Great Displacement explored in this thesis. It is simplified in the sense that the nature of the problem or conflict goes beyond the written manifestos from the two ideologies I have examined so far. The Displacement is ubiquitous in the American society as a whole, but manifests itself in different degrees within particular social groupings. Nonetheless, it is important to narrow down such a massive problem of polarization into its core

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<sup>60</sup> Kurtz, *Humanist Manifestos*, 21.

conflicts, or what I have been calling as the central tension between evangelicalism and secular humanism. Although not all conservative Christians identify as evangelical or fundamentalist, and not all humanists in America identify with secularism, the two most vocal, extreme, and influential types represent the central tension that my argument explores decently well. If we succeed in resolving the conflicts between the two most heated ideologies in America, other less intense conflicts along the same lines (i.e. the friction between secular liberals and religious conservatives) would become much easier to deal with in the future.

Also, just as the teachings of Jesus in the New Testament are not a reliable indicator of how Christian churches have behaved in human history, these influential written manifestos might not accurately reflect the nature of social and political behaviors of their actual adherents. As shown in chapter I, the Christian Manifesto did not endorse any single-minded alliance with any major political party, and yet the Evangelical movement has aligned itself with the conservative right. On the humanist side, the manifestos did not mandate that humanists deconstruct religion militantly, just that they put greater focus on the realm of practical humanitarian concerns in the world. However, in reality, the “secular” seems to outweigh the “humanitarian.” I will examine this potential irony later. Nonetheless, the documents from both camps remain as valuable resources for us to examine as long as they serve as intellectual backbones of the two movements, just like the way neo-Marxists still refer back to the Communist Manifestos of 1848.

In the previous chapter, I have argued that the central tension, at least from the evangelical perspective, was between the ideologies of secular humanism and

evangelical Christianity, which advocate for the sovereignty of Man and in the sovereignty of God respectively. For evangelical leaders like Schaeffer, the main problem of secular humanists is that they place Man at the center of gravity for everything there is, and consequently, humanism will ultimately lead to tyranny and oppression as seen in Soviet Russia. In this chapter, thanks to the Humanist Manifestos, we now know that from the humanist perspective, the problem of the religious right is not only that it places hope in the supernatural but also its indifferent and ineffective attitudes towards addressing humanitarian concerns. The Humanists want to focus on the “now,” rather than the kingdom to come in the afterlife. Without any scientific proof that an afterlife indeed exists, humanity should cherish the only life they ever live and make this world a better place in the shortest amount of time possible. Religion, as represented by the isolated evangelical and fundamental churches in America during its great withdrawal, becomes a roadblock to making the world we live in a better place. Therefore, the central tension here, as seen from the humanist perspective, is subtly different from central tension as seen by the evangelicals. Humanists are less concerned about whether mankind is the righteous sovereign. Instead of focusing exclusively on possible arguments for mankind’s sovereignty—that the species successfully made it through brutal phases of evolution, that humanity has the right to do whatever it wants to maximize uncontrolled human ambitions—it also asks the practical question of “who saves? Is God doing the saving for us? If we don’t know, we’d better start saving ourselves through human efforts: such as helping the poor through government-run welfare programs.

Below is a chart that illustrates some of the notable features of the two opposing camps:

|                                | Evangelical Christians     | Secular Humanists           |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Central Tension                | Sovereignty – who reigns   | Practicality – who saves    |
| Accusations against each other | Impede reason and progress | Idolatry – worship humanity |
| False/exaggerated accusations  | Danger of theocracy        | Danger of tyranny           |
| Winning ground in the U.S.     | The private realm          | The public realm            |
| Intellectual guru              | Francis Schaeffer          | Paul Kurtz                  |

In a nutshell, the two sides made unrealistic and exaggerated accusations against each other – a practice that is doomed to engender more polarization but is good for “membership rise.” Evangelicals warn Christians that the rise of the secular humanist worldview is correlated with more un-freedom led by godless socialists and tyrannical governments. But such accusations are not strong since the Humanist Manifestos emphasize the importance of democratic principles, freedom, and the need to fight off tyranny and oppression still in the world. On the other hand, secular humanists exaggerate the extent to which traditional religions impedes reason and human progress. Today, most Americans remain religious, while the public and intellectual realms have become more secular.

Nonetheless, is the scenario illustrated above an inevitable fate for these two competing ideologies? Could things turn out different and reduce the degree of conflict in America? Recall that the humanists in Manifesto I called themselves “religious humanists,” and evangelical leaders like Carl Henry attempted to awaken

American evangelicals from their dormant escapism mentality and fight against great social ills again. I will argue that the status quo we see today is not the only plausible outcome. Up to this point, we have neglected another important player– Mainline Protestant Churches. This somehow neglected tradition has undergone rapid declines over recent decades, but it suggests the potential compatibility of Christianity and Humanist goals and principles.

### **The Church-Sect Formation and the Decline of Mainline Protestant Churches**

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Christian churches became a powerful cultural and political force for social change in America. Walter Rauschenbusch, the theologian who provided the theological backbone of the liberal Protestant movement, understood the need to adapt the old Christian messages to the challenging new age. In his *Theology for the Social Gospel*, published in 1917 (years before the first humanist manifesto), Rauschenbusch sets out to bridge the disturbing conflict between the newly emerging social gospel and the individualistic salvation narrative from previous generations.

The traditional church teaching at his time created a theological consciousness that objected to “any efforts to change the social order before the coming of the Lord.” When a minister started to talk about the evil of child labor and capitalist exploitation in general, he often moved his audience, but there were at once doubting and dissenting voices claiming that we do not live for this world, or it is not the job of

the church to deal with these economic questions.<sup>61</sup> Rauschenbusch articulates that the church was in desperate need of mature theological support to meet the emerging societal needs. It is implied that the churches at that time was nothing like the liberal Protestant churches we see in later decades. The Christian community in America was still moving slowly outside of its conservative shells; some remained conservatives and broke off from the church to become fundamentalists or evangelicals, and some lost their faith. Rauschenbusch traces the conservative wings of the church to the problem of “doctrinal theology,” which differed significantly than exegesis and church history that were pressured to engage and reflect on historical and societal facts. Every church demanded its systematic/doctrinal theologians to “formulate clearly and persuasively what that church has always held and taught,” thus perpetuating “an esoteric stream of tradition.”<sup>62</sup> An old system of dogma reinforcement was a major obstacle facing progressive voices in Christian churches.

For our purpose, it might be helpful to divide Christian practices into two realms like Rauschenbusch did – the “ethical realm” that deals with the marriage between ethical concerns and religious relevance and the “non-ethical realm” that deals with winning souls and immortality. The purpose of social theologians like Rauschenbusch was to convince Christians that they needed to develop a more balanced approach to theology by spending more time and efforts on the ethical realm. A clear, widely acknowledged link between social passion and theology had not been firmly established in 1917. The secular humanists were correct to express

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<sup>61</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1917), 8.

<sup>62</sup> Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 12.

their distaste for the social indifference of churches that focused mostly on individualistic salvation. Perhaps, they could wait no more and had to step in to spread the social gospel through secular means. In his work, Rauschenbusch cries multiple times that the “Kingdom of God can be established by nothing except righteous life and action,” countering the humanist claim that Christianity always breeds or reinforces superstition.<sup>63</sup> His critiques on the narrowness of personal salvation are powerful. By arguing that “salvation is the voluntary socializing of the soul,” Rauschenbusch calls Christians to consider that salvation, in its rudimentary form, is about “turning us from a life centered on ourselves toward a life going out toward God and men.”<sup>64</sup> He presents a version of Christianity where investment in the social concerns is actually key to salvation and to living a fulfilling Christian life.

The mission of Rauschenbusch was closely linked to the movement toward the establishment of the Federal Council of Churches (later the National Council of Churches), an ecumenical organization that united a great number of Protestant denominations to foster Christian-inspired social movements. The decades-long effort to bring socially concerned churches together started as early as 1933, the same year that the humanist manifesto was published. By January 1950, all interdenominational agencies involved officially approved the formation of the National Council of Churches.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>65</sup> Samuel Cavert, *Christian Faith in Action; Commemorative Volume: The Founding of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America* (New York?: Central Dept. of Publication and Distribution, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, 1951), 28.

As expressed in the Council's official publications, the mission of this important ecumenical body of churches aligns closely with many humanist values. The general secretary of the World Council of Churches, responding to challenges from humanist voices at the time, argued that the church has become the chief guardian of human values. Society at large tended to assume that the church was the enemy of human values, for it did not allow "uncontrolled and unrestrained self-expression which seemed the greatest good of human existence." The address clarifies these "human values" are truth, freedom, justice, and the dignity of man – values which "so many humanists and secularists sought to defend apart from the church" and have "suddenly proven to be homeless and rootless."<sup>66</sup> The speaker is essentially calling for the return of these human values to the church. Another official piece of publication, a talk given by an American ambassador about "The Christian Witness in the National Life," addresses the escapism critique from the humanists or the secular public at large. He wonders whether Christianity is truly a religion of escapism – detached from the real sufferings of the world by being indifferent. He argues that Christ was definitely not an escapist. Instead, he taught Christians to "heal the sick, to feed the hungry, to live more vividly;" and also that "men and women should meet life realistically, seeing and fighting its evil without flinching."<sup>67</sup> If I were a humanist in the audience, I would have no reason to disagree with him on this point that stresses practicality.

Therefore, the question now becomes how has everything turned out this way given that there seems to have been a great potential for humanists to align with

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 122.

Christians? Why did the “third player,” the Mainline Protestant church that synthesized both “God” and “humanitarian passions” from the two sides, eventually become less influential and even begin to struggle? To better understand the problem, we have to pay a closer look at the religious landscape of the United States at large.

During the early colonial era in the United States, the major churches were the Congregationalist Church, the Presbyterian Church, and the Episcopal Church. Due to the unique lifestyle in the colonial frontiers, most early populations did not have church affiliations. The mainline churches at this time enjoyed monopoly in the North East New England area where they had official approval of the Crown and the Church of England to minister in this region. This is before major schisms happened and new sects entered into the American religious scene. Since the churches enjoyed the comfortable ministry life secured by their assignments, they had little incentive to reach out to other parts of the new world to expand. Most residents in New England were officially registered as members of their churches. They also had gentlemen’s agreement that there would be little to no competitions among these major churches. Any pastors who transgressed the norm to preach to the frontier population or compete in a region where a mainline church had already established a parish were not welcome and were even sometimes punishable by church hierarchies. Due to these restrictions, even members who had the tendency to accommodate to the new conditions at the frontiers were not actively doing so, leading to low level of conversions and limiting the growth of the religious market.

I have benefited tremendously from studying Roger Finke and Rodney Stark’s economic analysis of America’s religious scene *The Churching of America 1776-*

2005: *Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (1992). They provide a highly insightful and convincing argument that explains why mainline churches declined and failed while evangelical churches grew and thrived. They argue that since the colonial era, there has been a *cyclical church-sect process* going on in the religious economy. According to their theory, churches break into sects to reduce tensions with the surroundings/society at large, and the successful sects eventually transform into churches again by reducing tensions with the surroundings.

According to Finke and Stark, a sect is a minority religious group that breaks away from a church that tries to reduce tensions with the surroundings. Members formerly belonged to a church and became dissatisfied with how the church was handling its relations with modernity by making less strict demands on its clergy and members on issue of doctrines or practices. They complain that the church leadership is getting too hierarchical and is no longer receptive to the needs of the people below. Traditionally, new sects or to-be-sects would engage in “camp meetings,” unofficial gatherings of church members who wanted to revive the church themselves. These meetings are known to be charismatic, passionate, emotional, and less formalistic. Finke and Stark use the history of the Methodist Church as their primary example. The Methodists was essentially a very successful sect that was similar to the Baptists in early church history. They were active in preaching the Gospel to people in the frontiers and expanding their membership through horseback preachers who were not professionally trained in the mainline traditions. They enjoyed tremendous growth

and quickly dominated the religious scene, growing from only 3% in 1778 to 32% of the religious market share.<sup>68</sup>

As sects grow and flourish, they gradually become complacent and lazy, as they inevitably transition into churches. Finke and Stark notice that “when successful sects are transformed into churches, that is, when their tensions with surrounding culture is greatly reduced, they soon cease to grow and eventually begin to decline.”<sup>69</sup> The sects become rich and more educated, making them more susceptible to secular influences. The Methodists founded numerous seminaries and colleges around the country that trained the clergy more professionally and liberally. Nowadays, the Methodist Church is undoubtedly a church in decline. With education and affluence, it is getting more costly to struggle with the surroundings and reject the claims of the secular society at large. When former sects transform into new churches, they face more pressures to accommodate the secular trends in society, thus less able to satisfy the spiritual needs of their most traditional members.

From this new understanding, it might be helpful to study secular humanism as a player in the American religious marketplace. Despite refusing to identify as a religious group, secular humanists have already been viewed as such by legitimate voices in American society. The U.S. Supreme Court in 1961 declared humanism to be a religion, and as a religion, it should not receive privileged status in the public realm.<sup>70</sup> As a minority religion, it is subject to Finke and Stark’s church-sect formation and has to adapt to the competitions in the religious free market. In order to

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<sup>68</sup> Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>70</sup> Smith, "Secular Humanism and Atheism beyond Progressive Secularism\*," 417.

attract followers from America's overwhelmingly religious population, secular humanist must develop new strategies in order to even get a chance. Smith argues that they eventually "borrowed" strategies from the evangelicals. Secular humanists have "assumed a position in American society that stresses maintaining boundaries and reinforcing group identities in the face of a larger external threat."<sup>71</sup> This is indeed a very similar to the type of mentality the evangelicals have had as shown in my last chapter.

Therefore, it is plausible that the accusations from American evangelicals might have helped secular humanists' to consolidate its group identify as militantly secular. Evangelicals (Schaffer et al) identified them as their major enemy along with the atheists. Instead of resisting the label of "secular humanism" that evangelicals used against humanism, Paul Kurtz chose to embrace it.<sup>72</sup> Recent research suggests that the politicization of churches in the last two decades has alienated a segment of the liberal mainline Protestant churches, causing them to retreat into the ranks of the unchurched – adding to potential pool of secular humanists.<sup>73</sup> Ultimately, the Mainline Churches are the biggest losers in the religious free market. Once a safe haven proud of hosting both God and Humanitarian passion under its roof, it is never immune from the destructive forces of the Great Displacement.

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 411.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 418.

<sup>73</sup> Michael Hout and Claude S. Fischer, "Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Politics and Generations," *American Sociological Review* 67, no. 2 (2002): doi:10.2307/3088891.

## **Mainliners as the Invisible Majority**

On the other hand, the success of a denomination in the religious market is not only measured by its market share -- i.e. membership level. The other important measure is its cultural and political influence. A vocal minority religious group, with the help of the media, could reach tens of millions and become successful despite having fewer churches. The National Council of Churches, known for its liberal social actions, claims to represent 37 Christian faith groups with over 45 million members. However, how often do we hear in the news that a liberal church is supporting liberal causes -- such as fighting for economic and environmental justice along with secular liberals? Yes, we occasionally hear that a liberal denomination decides to ordain gay bishops or bless same-sex marriages. But how strong can these policies influence our culture? Most LGBT people have already given up on Christianity and could get married before a judge in a court instead of a priest in a church. As Richard Neuhaus points out in the *Naked Public Square*, "media attention is likely to skew our perception of the continuing strength of the mainline, since the media of course assume that 'news' is the new and, frequently, the bizarre."<sup>74</sup> Due to the anti-culture stances, evangelical churches tend to get much more media attention than liberal churches that tend to go with the "trend."

Facing with pressures from society to modernize, Mainline Protestantism has embraced "cultural accommodation." Neuhaus concisely summarizes the mainline mentality as: "intellectually, they were inclined to accommodate; socially, they were

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<sup>74</sup> Richard John. Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1984), 202.

eager to contribute.”<sup>75</sup> The advances of science created motivations for churches to reconcile their faith with reason. And when debates around race and economic justice emerged in national discourse, mainline churches quickly jumped onto the liberal political platform and contributed their support. They wanted to remain relevant and useful in a society that has been constantly reforming itself. Gradually, mainline churches began developing a more liberal interpretation of scriptures to accommodate scientific and social justice concerns. Ivy League Divinity Schools and liberal seminaries have contributed creatively to reconcile faith with reason. For instance, the Union Theological Seminary in New York became the center of liberal Christianity in the world, and throughout the seminary’s history, attracted and produced influential liberal theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr, Cornel West, and James Cone (the father of Black liberation theology).

Nonetheless, such “trendiness” has not been immune from suspicions from other religious leaders other than evangelicals. In winter 1974, an ecumenical group of religious thinkers and theologians convened to publish a document called “An Appeal for Theological Affirmation” in response to the cultural accommodationism. They discussed the state of American religion and were interested in discovering the “‘pervasive, false, and debilitating’ notions which they believed were undermining contemporary Christianity and its influence in society.”<sup>76</sup> It was a major theological event at that time, and the thirteen notions were circulated and examined by many theologians. One of the major drafters of the document, Peter Berger, pointed that

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>76</sup> Peter L. Berger and Richard John. Neuhaus, *Against the World for the World: The Hartford Appeal and the Future of American Religion* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), viii.

there is a lack of transcendence in the pursuit of accommodations, and “a secular definition of reality is posited as normative and the religious tradition is translated in such a way as to conform to this norm.”<sup>77</sup> These critics of the mainline churches understood an important connection between “losing influence” and “accommodating new cultural norms.” If Christian churches always follow the trend of a society in order to “fit in,” without contributing something substantially different, they might lose their cultural significance. Why go to a liberal church when it encourages the same set of practices that are consistent with the secular world.

In contrast, the evangelical-fundamentalist churches offer drastically anti-cultural theological positions and social practices that would serve as direct oppositional forces to Christians who still want their faith to mean something or have a special transcendent status. Religion necessarily loses some of its appeal when being reduced to an institution endorsing whatever the popular trends are in a society at any moment. Thus, in order to make them relevant to our society, we must help the liberal churches to explore ways to stay independent to the background culture at large and present a unique voice that is worthy of the attention from the rest of the society through the media.

Rev. Tracy has been the Protestant Chaplain at Wesleyan for 2 years. She belongs to the Presbyterian Church U.S.A., a leading mainline church that very recently passed a theological amendment redefining marriage. Unlike ultra-liberal Christians who embrace almost every liberal cause in the Democratic camp, Rev. Tracy finds herself to be an independent voter who is not willing to conform to the

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 13.

rigid 2-party political system. Despite her total support for LGBT communities, Rev. Tracy is known as pro-life. And when asked whether there is a major difference between her support for gay marriage and the secular liberals' support for gay marriage, she was able to articulate that, unlike many secular proponents of same sex marriage using one's individual rights as their reason, she cares more about "commitment" in a relationship. That is, marriage is not only about the right to obtain marital benefits, but also the responsibilities of committing to one other. Of course, there is much more potential for liberal churches and Christians to come up with more creative solutions to modern problems in order to maintain its distinctiveness through a deeper self-exploration. I will mention more about the "how" in future chapters. For now, it is imperative to at least understand that the worst that could happen to the already dwindling mainline churches is to require them to put aside their faith content when entering public discourse, since that can be their last chance to make a real contribution that might be absent from a secular perspective.

Hence, the complex competitions and interrelationships among religious and secular ideologies have engendered a semi-naked public square juxtaposed with a quasi-clothed private sphere in the American society. The public square has not reached full nakedness by requiring all political actors to strip off their comprehensive doctrines as Rawls might be pleased to see. Religious voices are still tolerable as long as they merely reaffirm the popular opinions at a given time and say nothing else controversial to cause any further trouble. In the private realm, the evangelicals have been largely successful in evangelizing their constituency, mostly concentrated in the Bible-Belt states. The mainliners, knowing that their opinions will

not matter that much in the end of the day, have lost their fervent social passion from the early half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and have been relying on kinship reproduction in order to pass down their faith to the next generation. Regardless of how religious the America private sphere still appears to be according to survey results, it is not dressing very conservatively at all. God and faith have become a mere semblance in many parts of both private and public realms. In the next chapter and compare different discourse theories that might shed new lights on making the public square a more productive, harmonious space for a multitude of social groups.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **FROM RAWLS' VEIL OF IGNORANCE TO CONNOLLY'S VISCERAL REGISTER**

In the first two chapters, I have examined the problem of the Great Displacement from a historical and theological perspective in order to understand the multivalent reasons that gave rise to the uneasy marriage between American evangelicalism and conservative ideals. I also probed the other side of the issue -- outlining the tragic decline of Protestant mainline churches as the good news of the Social Gospel fading away from our public consciousness and being simultaneously reborn as practical ideals in the secular camp. I have shown that the Displacement is not merely a historical accident or a product of elite manipulations. Rather, there is a social and historical logic behind it that must be acknowledged so that we may be able to study ways to construct a new logic conducive to less polarization and more collaboration between the two opposing camps. Hopefully, I have convinced my readers that it is unreasonable to label most evangelicals as hypocrites based on their political stance against welfare for the poor, for they have managed to develop a theological-political reason to aid the poor through more private means instead of state interventions. Nonetheless, the problem of the Displacement remains unresolved if we cannot break through the ice barrier built between disagreements over controversial issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage. In order to create an effective platform for the two sides to listen and learn about their shared sentiments as well as their differences, we need a suitable method of discourse to foster such optimistic possibility by focusing on the normative side of the debate.

This chapter examines some of the major philosophical and political theories on the role of religion in the public square. Referring back to my historical findings from previous chapters, I will evaluate the relevance, strengths, and limitations of these lines of approaches. I will start with Rawls' revisiting of the idea of "Public Reason" and end with a discussion of the less well-known but highly interesting school of thought – agonistic democracy. While exploring the views of these political theorists, we need to keep a few things in mind. The scope of my analysis must be restricted to the particular issue of the role of religion in the public sphere, and I limit my examination to the particularities of the problem of the Great Displacement. We know that the nature of this issue does not follow the normative discussion framework of Rawls and Habermas, who have a comprehensive theory on the role of religion in the public sphere broadly defined. Instead, we must honor the fact that the central problem in this thesis is not about the generalities of the relationship between church and state, but about the multivalent and malleable expression of religious faith in the public and political spheres. I have pointed out that the problem facing the United States is rooted in a strange social paradox, manifested in the alignment between American Libertarian conservatism and evangelical Christianity. The Christian evangelicals not only express their most vocal moral concerns regarding women's reproductive rights, same-sex marriages, and euthanasia, but also economic conservatism that can be inherently unstable given their demographics and the religious teachings they adhere to. Still, evangelicals voted predominately Republican in the most recent mid-term election, and this is unlikely to change in the near future.

A comprehensive approach or theory must be developed in order to help the polarized social groups in America to reconcile their internal contradictions.

Therefore, my criterion when evaluating these theorists is the following:

- (1) Is the author addressing internal contradictions within “comprehensive doctrines?”
- (2) Can such theory be helpful to lessen the degree of tension between the two camps?
- (3) Does it address the problem of sovereignty? If so, how?

### **Rawls and the Idea of Public Reason**

John Rawls, one of the greatest contemporary political philosophers, devoted a substantial amount of his lifetime attempting to address the issue of justice and fairness in pluralistic democratic societies. Due to the secular nature of his work, religion is not explicitly emphasized in his writing, though the role of religion in the public square is undoubtedly one of his greatest concerns. I will not attempt to provide a comprehensive analysis of Rawls; instead, I will outline some of his key ideas that are highly relevant to the topic of the Great Displacement. I will do so by drawing mainly from the following works of Rawls: *Justice as Fairness – A Restatement* (2001), and *The Idea of Public Reason Revisited* (1997).

Rawls’ *Justice as Fairness* is relevant to my research in two ways. First, I am interested in learning how to adapt his “veil of ignorance” to the internal discourse of evangelicalism. Second, Rawls claims that it is possible for political actors from diverse political value systems to cooperate in a democratic framework—a claim directly related to one of the main goals of my thesis, that is, to reconcile the

seemingly fundamentally opposed “secular left” and the “religious right.” I will therefore examine some of the relevant key concepts in relation to the role of religion in the public sphere.

“Reasonable pluralism” is a characteristic of a modern constitutional democratic society that Rawls views as inevitable. Given the freedom of speech generally protected by liberal societies and a degree of toleration of opposing beliefs and worldviews, different religious, philosophical, and moral voices can coexist in the same society. Due to the fact of reasonable pluralism, the society is no longer dominated by one single comprehensive doctrine, and any official endorsement from the state becomes rare and unacceptable. Therefore, Rawls articulates an important distinction between political society and political association. He believes that “a democratic society is not and cannot be a community...united in affirming the same comprehensive, or partially comprehensive doctrine.”<sup>78</sup> A community, in Rawls’ term, consists of citizens upholding the same comprehensive doctrine and therefore belongs in the nonpublic sphere. The Evangelical community can be easily understood as such, and each political association also upholds its own distinct political doctrine. An important characteristic of such nonpublic social groups is the relative ease and freedom for one to enter or to exit. However, in a political society, where consensus on a single doctrine is practically impossible, citizens cannot freely exit without unbearable costs (Rawls purposefully avoided the possibility of emigration). Therefore, a major role of political philosophy, as Rawls identifies, is

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<sup>78</sup> John Rawls and Erin Kelly, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 3.

reconciliation between opposing worldviews and beliefs.<sup>79</sup> Thus, it is reasonable and natural for a society to be highly pluralist, and assuming a society to be homogeneous is unreasonable.

It might be helpful to clarify what Rawls means by reasonableness and rationality. For him, it is entirely possible for a person or action to be “reasonable and not rational” and vice versa. It is rational for me to take advantage of my social position to make others less well-off, but to do so is unreasonable. Similarly, it is irrational for me to help a stranger financially, but it is reasonable to do so out of empathy and compassion. For democracy to function successfully in a pluralistic society, a spirit of social cooperation is both desirable and necessary. Rawls’ “justice as fairness” is an attempt to promote such productive social cooperation in which society is organized around reasonable political values that might not be necessarily optimal or beneficial for each individual political actor in every circumstance. Under such political conception of justice, reasonable persons are asked to honor mutually agreed upon political principles, “even at the expense of their own interests as circumstances may require, provided others likewise may be expected to honor them.”<sup>80</sup> To illustrate the cognitive process of reaching such ideal political conception, Rawls introduces the idea of the “original position” that specifies the fair terms of social cooperation between free and equal citizens. Since citizens cannot possibly agree on any moral authority or a moral order of values, justice as fairness, which specifies the “fair terms of social cooperation” given by “an agreement entered into by those engaged in it,” seems to be the best alternative available for Rawls. The

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 7.

parties in the original position are “not allowed to know the social positions or the particular comprehensive doctrines of the persons they represent,” as if they are sitting behind a “veil of ignorance.”<sup>81</sup> For instance, an evangelical leader behind the veil should imagine the possibility of not being born into his particular religious tradition, that is, he could be raised in a Muslim family or brought up by parents who were secular humanists.

Nevertheless, is Rawls’ political conception truly workable in reconciling the opposing worldviews that has caused so much polarization in the United States? The veil of ignorance is indeed a highly demanding cognitive task that requires one to disassociate oneself from one’s own social position, which inevitably involves a “forgetting” of one’s comprehensive doctrine. Rawls believes that it is indeed possible for reasonable comprehensive doctrines to work together to generate an “overlapping consensus” regarding constitutional essentials concerning the basic structure of a society. This ideal consensus occurs when the “political conception is supported by the reasonable though opposing religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines that gain a significant body of adherents and endure over time from one generation to the next.”<sup>82</sup> Despite diverging worldviews and beliefs, an overlapping agreement over general political principles and procedures could arrive regardless of the reasons supporting it.

For example, the drafters of the United Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 came from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, yet they could, as Jacques Maritain famously said, “agree about the rights but on condition that no one asks

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 32.

[them] why.”<sup>83</sup> This historical example shows, at the minimum, that an overlapping consensus regarding universal human rights is possible, and each *reasonable* comprehensive doctrine can uphold the universalistic rights language found in the Declaration. Unfortunately, Rawls never considered such achievement to be possible for comprehensive doctrines that are *unreasonable*. As he clearly states, “many doctrines are plainly incompatible with the values of democracy.”<sup>84</sup> Thus, the creation of an overlapping consensus could never involve engagements with comprehensive doctrines that have rejected or been hostile to democratic values. He provides a list of scenarios under which reasonable doctrines could disagree on questions regarding the basic structures, but none of them touches upon the issue of dealing with the unreasonable doctrines. In the United States, the religious voices that fully embrace liberal democratic values are the ones that have been rapidly declining, whereas religious forces skeptical of political liberalism are gaining stronger political influences.<sup>85</sup> Rejecting them from the discussion is both unfeasible and unhelpful. Outside of the United States, certain Islamic extremist groups certainly do not respect democratic values; however, they have been posing the most challenging and pressing problems to the West.

Even if we put the concerns for the lack of engagement with extremist religious or secular groups, Rawls only allows for a very limited involvement of the reasonable comprehensive doctrines on matters of political essentials. The “idea of public reason” greatly prevents reasonable doctrines from exerting a strong influence

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<sup>83</sup> *Human Rights, Comments and Interpretations* (London: A. Wingate, 1949), 9.

<sup>84</sup> Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, 37.

<sup>85</sup> See discussions in Rawls’ *Political Liberalism* (1993) Sec. 6.2

on political discourse. It dictates that in the context of reasonable pluralism and on matters of constitutional essentials, “basic institutions and public policies should be justifiable to all citizens” in forms of reasoning found in the common sense or science.<sup>86</sup> Comprehensive doctrines of course cannot be specified as public reason, but this does not mean that reasonable doctrines could not be discussed and introduced in the public reason itself.<sup>87</sup> Nevertheless, the “duty of civility” requires people who adhere to a comprehensive doctrine to in due course “make our case for the legislation and public policies we support in terms of public reasons, or the political values covered by the political conception of justice.”<sup>88</sup> That is, although justice as fairness allows us to introduce our comprehensive doctrines in public discussion, it is never a part of the public reason itself; and our duty as free and equal citizens requires us ultimately to justify our political behaviors using commonly accepted political values, such as reciprocity.

Rawls’ position on the role of nonpublic reasons is most clearly articulated in *The Idea of Public Reason Revisited* (1997). He cites the famous biblical Good Samaritan example in which he allows for the introduction of such religious stories or values in public discourse: “While the *wide* view of public political culture allows us, in making a proposal, to introduce the Gospel story, public reason requires us to justify our proposal in terms of proper political values.”<sup>89</sup> In other words, citizens are free to introduce a political problem using their own comprehensive doctrines, but

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<sup>86</sup> Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, 90.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> John Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," *The University of Chicago Law Review* 64, no. 3 (1997): pg. 778.

they cannot use them to justify their political positions. One important feature of Rawls' political liberalism is that it approaches religious and secular doctrines indiscriminately and therefore even "secular philosophical doctrines do not provide public reasons."<sup>90</sup> For Rawls, even secular humanists need to justify their political positions using political values. For instance, claiming that reason is superior to faith is not enough to justify removing all religious content from public education.

So what are these political values to which all political actors have to appeal? Reciprocity certainly emerges as an essential one for Rawls. He explains that the criterion of reciprocity says: "Our exercise of political power is proper only when we sincerely believe that the reasons we would offer for our actions...are sufficient, and we also reasonably think that other citizens might also reasonably accept those reasons."<sup>91</sup> The criterion concerns especially the basic liberties of free and equal citizens, and it is violated when certain fundamental rights such as voting, life, and religion are denied or violated. If I don't find the idea of being sold as a slave reasonable, I would not therefore sell anyone into slavery. Such criterion is by no means unique to Rawls, since it bears a strong resemblance to Kant's categorical imperatives. Similar conceptions could also be found in many religious teachings including Christianity, Islam, and even Confucianism. To elevate such universal value as a central political value in political liberalism, Rawls essentially celebrates the inclusiveness of reciprocity as universally applicable across different cultures and comprehensive doctrines. Karen Armstrong, a leading public intellectual on inter-faith dialogue, also discovered reciprocity as a universal principle expressed in the

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 780.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 771.

Golden Rule across many major world religions. “Do unto others as you would have done unto you” might just as well be the common thread linking all reasonable doctrines together.<sup>92</sup> This is not a surprise given that Rawls believes that many religious principles can be translated into or expressed in terms of political values. For instance, he even concedes that political liberalism also “admits Habermas’ discourses conception of legitimacy, as well as Catholic views of the common good and solidarity when they are expressed in terms of political values.”<sup>93</sup> Since it is impossible to tell whether “reciprocity” or any other so-called political values are purely political or religious, we should not myopically label them as one way or the other, for there are all human values. If we are open-minded about potential resemblances between the political and the religious, we may actually enrich our public discourse in new and creative ways.

Rawls also expresses his concern that adherents of certain comprehensive doctrines might be worse off under a reasonable democratic framework and therefore refuse to accommodate democratic principles. He asks: “How is it possible—or is it—for those of faith, as well as the nonreligious (secular), to endorse a constitutional regime even when their comprehensive doctrines may not prosper under it, and indeed may decline?”<sup>94</sup> Why would a state-church that formerly enjoyed a monopoly in a country’s religious market give up its privileged status by embracing democratic principles and face all the attendant dangers? Rawls does not fully answer this question. But he points out that the churches after Reformation eventually adopted the

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<sup>92</sup>[http://www.ted.com/talks/karen\\_armstrong\\_makes\\_her\\_ted\\_prize\\_wish\\_the\\_charter\\_for\\_compassion?language=en](http://www.ted.com/talks/karen_armstrong_makes_her_ted_prize_wish_the_charter_for_compassion?language=en)

<sup>93</sup> Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," 774-5.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 781.

principle of toleration, but only as a *modus vivendi*, a form of coexistence that is only conditionally accepted and not for the right reason.<sup>95</sup> In this state of mere coexistence, political cooperation, which is crucial for political liberalism, is likely to be extremely limited, since they have not truly embraced democratic principles. Therefore, Rawls also offers some alternative discourse methods, one of which might be highly useful for mitigating the problem of the great displacement. In “*reasoning from conjecture*,” we reason from what we understand as the basic religious or philosophical doctrines, and suggest, “despite what they think, they can still endorse a reasonable political conception of justice.”<sup>96</sup> Hence, Rawls is positing a scenario in which we can potentially influence the hearts and minds of people who believe that their doctrines are incompatible with political liberalism -- by arguing that, from what we understand as their basic doctrines, their comprehensive doctrine is indeed compatible. I will come back to the idea of “reasoning from conjecture” later, since it has a powerful discourse potential waiting to be further developed.

### **Habermas and an Awareness of What’s Missing**

In contrast to Rawls, Habermas has recently adopted a more positive view towards the role of religion in the modern public sphere. On one level, he reminds us that religion might not be so metaphysically apart from reason as he defends “Hegel’s thesis that the major world religions belong to the history of reason itself,” that the

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 781-2.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 783.

post-metaphysical thinking has forgotten that religion is part of its genealogy.<sup>97</sup>

According to Habermas, religious traditions “perform the function of articulating an awareness of what is lacking or absent,” and “who is to say that they do not contain encoded semantic potentialities that could provide inspiration if only their message were translated into rational discourse and their profane truth contents were set free?”

On another level, Habermas recognizes the potential unfairness in Rawls’ discourse model, which requires both the religious and non-religious citizens to cognitively separate themselves from their comprehensive doctrine when entering the public sphere. For religious citizens, this means leaving their faith in the private sphere and self-censoring their speech to avoid using faith as public justifications. It is a common criticism that secular citizens enjoy a relatively easier time fulfilling Rawls’ requirement, for their secular identity is not substantially different from their public identity. Habermas addresses this “split identity” concern by requiring the nonreligious citizens to apply the same level of effort that religious citizens have when applying self-critical reasons in the public sphere. As shown in the abortion systems in place in many liberal societies, “the burdens of tolerance are not shared equally by believers and unbelievers,” and thus the secular consciousness is expected to “adopt a self-reflective critical stance toward the limits of enlightenment.”<sup>98</sup> In the end, Habermas does not believe a strict separation between what constitutes secular

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<sup>97</sup> Jürgen Habermas and Ciaran Cronin, *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2008), 6.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

and religious reasons, as he states that “the boundary between secular and religious reasons are fluid” in any event.<sup>99</sup>

One of the unique religious values missing from many secular societies is solidarity. Religious faiths played a significant role in holding civilizations and tribes together for centuries, and until recently, due to the downfall in legitimacy of organizing nation-states according to religion, the modern state has been facing a problem of what constitutes the new source of unity besides religion. In replying to a commentator after his Peace Prize speech, Habermas says “Secular morality is not inherently embedded in communal practices. Religious consciousness, by contrast, preserves an essential connection to the ongoing practice of life within a community and, in the case of the major world religions, to the observances of united global communities of all of the faithful. The religious consciousness of the individual can derive stronger impulses towards action in solidarity, even from a purely moral point of view, from this universalistic communitarianism.”<sup>100</sup> Habermas is articulating a rather unique religious value that might be absent in the secular reason. Why should strangers in the same country be friendly towards each other or help each other? What might be the source of motivation for strangers to open up to another person he or she just met? Religious identities can often transcend national boundaries and unite people of different backgrounds in a common thread of faith. For Christianity, Christ’s universal message adds to the already solidarity-boosting effects of religious faith, especially when one religious adherent follows the maxim of treating one’s

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<sup>99</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "Faith and Knowledge," in *The Frankfurt School on Religion -- Key Writings by the Major Thinkers* (New York & London: Routledge, 2004), 332.

<sup>100</sup> Jürgen Habermas et al., *An Awareness of What Is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-secular Age* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity, 2010), 75.

neighbor as oneself, or simply emulates the footsteps of the Good Samaritan. Similarly, religious faith fills the void created by the insurmountable grief over death of the innocent. Secular reason cannot satisfactorily deal with such innocent, unjustifiable loss, where religious faiths could provide hope, comfort, and forgiveness.

Although it is easy to echo Habermas' friendlier approach to religious faiths in the public sphere, it is necessary to point out that Habermas also urges religious citizens to engage along with secular citizens in a "complementary learning process" that imposes modernizing requirements. Due to the pressures and challenges inevitably arising from secularization and scientific discoveries, many religious traditions have tried to self-modernize in order to keep up with the new demands of modernity. This can be seen from the modernizing efforts many Protestant Mainline churches in the United States and most churches in Europe have. In a modern constitutional state, according to Habermas, religious citizens are required to develop (1) "an epistemic stance toward other religions and worldviews," (2) toward the "internal logic of secular knowledge" and the "institutionalized monopoly on knowledge of modern scientific experts," and (3) toward "the priority that secular reasons also enjoy in the political arena."<sup>101</sup> It is reasonable that a discourse between faith and reason requires such a mutual learning process through which each side comes to understand each other better in a constitutional state.

Unfortunately, these requirements might be simply too arduous for the evangelicals in the United States. Habermas, coming from a European background

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<sup>101</sup> Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 137.

and a German culture that enjoys a long tradition of integration between philosophy and theology, may not be readily familiar with the persistent anti-intellectualism in American evangelical churches. Even Habermas himself acknowledges the possibility that assuming that citizens in a constitutional state can acquire such mutual understanding through the “complementary processes” might be problematic, since how can we really tell whether “the fragmentation caused by a collision of fundamentalist and secularist convictions is the result of ‘learning deficits’?”<sup>102</sup> Ultimately, a healthy relationship between the opposing camps requires a gradual development of a public ethos conducive to genuine mutual learning in a modern setting.

Thus, the problem with Habermas is that, despite his more open attitude towards religious contributions, he fails to account for the realities of religious phenomena that feed into the problem of the displacement. The “missing” virtues of forgiveness and solidarity that Christianity can provide to the secular reasons are often blocked by the polarization of a harsh political environment. Instead of invoking the sense of universal brotherhood embedded in the Christian theology, evangelicals chose to draw a sharp divide between “us” versus “them” – or an “ethos of revenge”. Instead of forgiving those who made mistakes in the past and promote a spirit of reconciliation, many evangelical leaders invoke the language of hellfire and eternal damnation. Meanwhile, the “reasonable faiths” that indeed promote unique religious values have diminished their influences both in the U.S. and in Continental Europe. In order to truly make substantial changes in the religious status quo in

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 145.

America, we have to work on a more realistic ground that addresses this tragic manifestation of religion in the public sphere.

### **Connolly and the Ethos of Critical Engagement**

One interesting shared tendency between Rawls and Habermas is their post-metaphysical assumption that it is dangerous to engage controversial metaphysical questions in the public sphere. The agonistic school, which advocates for an ethos of critical engagement in the public sphere, actually values such controversial debates taking place in public. For William Connolly, such worries hinder a positive progress on hot-button issues such as abortion, gay marriage, and euthanasia. He reveals that “academic secularists are almost the only partisans today who consistently purport to leave their religious and metaphysical baggage at home” and “the claim to being post-metaphysical opens you to charges of hypocrisy or false consciousness.”<sup>103</sup> Most other citizens in a constitutional state evoke their metaphysical beliefs in these heated debates, and many do so passionately. To hide these beliefs, which are a large part of many people’s being, is not only unrealistic but also hypocritical. Instead, Connolly advocates for a radical over-pouring of metaphysical and religious traditions into the public sphere in order to foster an ethos of engagement in the public realm. He identifies the need today is rather to “rewrite secularism to pursue an ethos of engagement in public life among a plurality of controversial metaphysical perspectives, including, for starters, Christian and other monotheistic perspectives,

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<sup>103</sup> William E. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 37.

secular thought, and asecular, nontheistic perspectives.”<sup>104</sup> Connolly evokes such provocative ideas in his *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (1999) in which he adopts a middle position between “secularist” thinkers like Rawls and Habermas and non-secular ones who favor a conception of state built upon one common conception of the good. His purpose to open up the public sphere to the multiplicity of metaphysical perspectives is to “encourage more people to adjust more positively to the inevitable bouts of uncertainty, disruption, and surprise to which their own faiths are periodically subjected.”<sup>105</sup> If people are already using their comprehensive doctrines as justifications for public reason, but may not admit it, why don’t we allow them to do so more openly with a spirit of critical engagement? For Connolly, a modern society must honor the diverse variety of moral sources in a multidimensional pluralism in the public square.

It may appear that Connolly’s model allows for more free expression and less cognitive demands (i.e. “split identify”) from free and equal citizens than the Rawlsian and Habermasian views. However, he also understands that a successful cultivation of an ethos of engagement is contingent upon a localized individual practice of engagement. In describing “relational arts and micropolitics,” Connolly gives an example of how a person initially opposed to doctor-assisted suicide works through the personal critical reflection of the issue and reach new understandings. This leap of thinking requires one to jump back and forth between one’s subjective initial feelings towards an issue and “intersubjective registers” of others in order to get a multilayered understanding of an issue. In doing so, he or she may better

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 15.

understand his or her own religious or metaphysical beliefs with new information. This is by no means less cognitively demanding than Rawls' veil of ignorance or Habermas' deliberative communications. However, it at least expands the horizon of controversial debates and encourages a more organic development of a productive public ethos supported by individual micropolitics.

It is noteworthy that Connolly adopts a fundamentally different mindset when theorizing the role of religion in the public square than Rawls and Habermas by realistically situating the central tension within the realm of real lived experiences of contemporary citizens in pluralistic societies. Unlike Rawls and Habermas who imagine their respective idealized democratic discourses in which religious doctrines and traditions must surrender themselves to the preeminence of secular reason and modern sciences, Connolly works *within* the problematic liberal societies through a "rewriting" of existing secular predominance without demanding either the secular reason or religious convictions to adhere to any authoritarian discourse procedure. His criticism of Rawls involves a powerful insight according to which we can never naïvely assume that "reasonableness," a crucial requirement of the Rawlsian model, has already been embedded into the cultural fabrics of liberal societies among "free and equal" citizens.<sup>106</sup> Connolly wonders what exactly could be the source of the *appeal* for citizens to participate in Rawls' public discourse that requires them to give up their comprehensive doctrines against their own self-interests or to undergo the cognitively demanding game called the "veil of ignorance?" The zealous religious believers could simply ignore or withdraw from this game as free citizens, leaving

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 64.

political liberals frustrated and powerless in keeping them in these games. Moreover, not everyone is capable of playing the Rawlsian games. Certain constituencies such as the mentally challenged, the elderly, and even the uneducated are not on equal footing with other citizens who enjoy more functional cognitive capabilities. Connolly points out that Rawls “treats the mentally retarded as something less than full persons because they cannot participate fully in the practice of ‘fair cooperation’ upon which his scheme of justice rests.”<sup>107</sup>

Instead of making unrealistic demands from citizens, Connolly aims at fostering an ethos of engagement in the society at large through a “politics of becoming” and “critical responsiveness.” Stephen White, a fellow theorist of agonistic democracy, points out that one valuable contribution of Connolly is the way he “distinguishes between the ontological relation of identity/difference that is constitutive for human being, on the one hand, and the psychological-political relations between them, on the other hand.”<sup>108</sup> For Connolly, it is imperative to understand the volatile nature of multi-dimensional pluralist societies in which identity formation serves as a key point of contestability between progressive citizens and those who wish to maintain the old traditions. A Fukuyamaian “end of history” in which the liberal democratic state finally reaches its full manifestation characterized by a mundane political life is unlikely. Rawls might envision an ideal society in which the rights and liberties of all free and equal citizens are respected while a stable overlapping consensus keeps the society going harmoniously.

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>108</sup> Stephen K. White, *The Ethos of a Late-modern Citizen* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 50.

For Connolly, however, such a picture is based on a myopic understanding of the “politics of becoming.” Identity shifts all the time, and this applies both to rigid categories of race, sex, and age and to more flexible identities of sexuality, religion, and creed. His insight, as White points out, lies in his ability to distinguish the ontological category of identity and its relationship with one’s psychology and the political culture at large. For instance, a Black civil rights activist, after achieving the victories he wished for, gradually realized he had deeper emotional bonds with his fellow male activists than with his own wife, but due to the hetero-normative culture in his religious black community, he did not realize he was gay until years later, when the LGBT banner became active and after he had fathered several children through “obligatory intercoursures.” After such profound self-realization, he also discovered that his wife has cheated on him many times. Out of shame and anger, he divorced his wife and found a boyfriend instead. He had high-idealized hopes for this relationship. But unfortunately, his boyfriend had a much higher sex drive than him. Unable to satisfy his sexual partner, our poor protagonist tried to express his love through other non-sexual means, but eventually lost his boyfriend to someone else. Desperately, he realized his new identity as a homo-romantic asexual black Democrat.

As Connolly states, “when a dialectical rendering of the politics of becoming suggests that the most recent identities are also the most true, natural, or advanced, it discourages proponents from cultivating that partial, comparative sense of contingency in their own identities from which responsiveness to new claims of difference might proceed.”<sup>109</sup> His politics of becoming might also be extended into

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<sup>109</sup> Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, 71.

the realm of religious identity or comprehensive doctrines in general. While the doctrines themselves might not change easily, an adherent's identity in relation to it might change, which might ultimately lead to a change in the doctrine itself if other constituencies engage with it with critical responsiveness. Rawls' exclusion of comprehensive metaphysical-religious doctrines from the public sphere deprives citizens the invaluable opportunity to provide such critical responsiveness to each other in a fruitful manner. By rejecting the doctrines, Rawls essentially assumes their immutable nature and prevents them from critical mutual reforms.

Another interesting feature of Connolly's theory is his emphasis on the "visceral registers of subjectivity and intersubjectivity" instead of reason alone. If reason and "reasonableness" are not enough to keep hardcore religious adherents from imposing their religious beliefs onto others in the realm of politics, why can't we try to appeal to them emotionally by mastering the science of "visceral registers?" For Connolly, every individual has multiple registers of being that can have many different combinations. To evoke desired combination in a constituency, one has to manipulate the science of visceral registers. He thinks that the Right has been much more successful in doing so while creating the realities of the "culture wars." He uses the Bill Bennett example to show how he succeeded in dividing a pluralistic society into a polarizing one in which constituencies had to pick sides. Bennett knows how to "work on the visceral register" since he places "potent masculine symbols of strength, will, and national power on one side of the culture war and traditional feminine signs of weakness, ineptness, and lack of will on the other."<sup>110</sup> The image of a "nation"

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 104.

being lost was repeatedly broadcasted across a variety of mediums through which the liberal academics, minority populations, sexual non-conformists were framed as the betrayal of the old, stable, traditional sense of nation. The objective was to “mobilize an angry cultural coalition out of a diverse, opaque section of the populace.”<sup>111</sup>

Similarly, in *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style* (2008), he probes into the paradoxical existence of the “evangelical-capitalist resonance machine” – a term closely related to the central problem of this thesis. Acknowledging that “no political economy or religious practice is self-contained,” he is interested in “what happens when the spirit of evangelical and corporate leaders resonates together across a set of doctrinal differences.”<sup>112</sup> In examining this complex problem, he uses the example of the “Left Behind” book and film series by evangelicals who worked on the visceral register to create an “ethos of entitlement and revenge.” In short, the series exploits the image of a revengeful Christ portrayed in the Book of Revelations through creating catastrophic scenes in which millions of believers suddenly disappeared from Earth, leaving all unbelievers behind.

Overall, Connolly’s solution to the problem of the great displacement is to call the Democratic left to also work on the visceral register in order to critically respond to an ethos of revenge from the Republican right. There are two potential problems with his approach. First, his claim that the Right has been better at manipulating the visceral register is put to doubt when new identity formations, or “politics of becoming” in his own words, keep emerging from the Democratic left. Also, according to Luca Mavelli, Connolly “overlooks the possibility that the

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>112</sup> Connolly, *Capitalism and Christianity*, 41.

transcendental may also be an important dimension that may not be entirely subsumed in immanence.”<sup>113</sup> By “the transcendental” and the “immanence” Mavelli is roughly referring to “the metaphysical foundations” and the “visceral register of body and emotions.” Connolly spends much more time discussing how the politics of becoming is advanced through the appeal to the physical and psychological conditions (suffering included) of the body and emotions in general, than talking about changing the metaphysical and religious moral sources through a similar mechanism. It might not be sufficient for evangelicals to become less “revengeful” by emotional appeals alone. A reformed *textual* reinterpretation of their moral scriptures should not be overlooked, lest any success in emotional appeal fails to be sustainable. This could be a critical analysis of a part of scriptures that have not been thoroughly explored before and relating it to the reality the religious faith faces today. I will address this aspect of engagement in further details in the next chapter.

## **Conclusion**

A comprehensive solution addressing the paradoxical alliance between evangelicalism and conservatism must target its internal contradictions situated in a problematic background culture at large. It might seem unfair to criticize Rawls by contrasting his idealized normative political liberalism against Connolly’s extensive account of pluralism grounded in historical reality, for an ideal vision, no matter how unrealistic it seems today, may become more viable in the future. Some may even label Connolly’s discourse model as a mere *modus vivendi* – a decent solution to a

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<sup>113</sup> William E. Connolly and Alan Finlayson, *Democracy and Pluralism: The Political Thought of William E. Connolly* (London: Routledge, 2010), 158.

population refusing to follow the provisos of reciprocity and self-modernization that Rawls and Habermas strongly value. While it is true that Connolly's theory rests on a realist vantage point, he does not view the inherent unreasonableness in a multi-dimensional pluralist society as intrinsically bad. As a matter of unfortunate fact, people can be unreasonable and unwilling to cooperate, and we should shift the blame to the background culture and change its operative logic through an ethos of critical engagement. But would producing an ethos be sufficient? I highly doubt it. When emotions and other visceral registers are working towards shaping a new ethos, this transformative chance must proceed towards reforming the substantive foundations of moral sources themselves, or at least their interpretations for a long-lasting new landscape to emerge. In this respect, Rawls' veil of ignorance can be creatively introduced to contribute to this engineering project. The goal, then, becomes the following: (1) rediscovering "lost" meanings and values within religious traditions acknowledged by Habermas, (2) bringing them out behind the "religious veil of ignorance," and (3) embedding them into the background culture with an ethos of critical engagement.

## **CHAPTER FOUR:**

### **TOWARDS A THEORY OF RECONSTRUCTION DISCOURSE**

#### **The Idea of Reconstructive Discourse**

The idea of reconstructive discourse, as I understand it, carries with it a belief in the *improvability* of religious traditions. It presupposes the *imperfections* of practical manifestations of a religion at a given historical moment, and challenges it to make progress towards a more profound self-understanding that often involves reshaping its relationship with its social environment and other religious groups. It is imperative to understand that the reconstructive discourse is reciprocal and symmetrical in nature, for it also challenges and reshapes the secular worldview with which a religion engages in a dialogue. The religious and the secular must reshape and progress in tandem during this agonistic yet respectful discourse process and bring the best thinking, potentials, and values out of each camp that are not apparently present today. Such discourse would lose its significance if one side merely assimilates into the other without bringing meaningful changes to the other camp. For instance, many liberal churches in the American society today, fueled with social passion shared with the secular camp, often find themselves powerless in sending out their voice to compete with the evangelical-fundamentalist voices to which the media pays their exclusive attention.

From a reconstructive perspective, this sense of powerlessness could be remedied through a profound self-exploration in the tradition of liberal Christianity and a differentiation of their theological and political positions from the more

dominant secular camp. Without putting such nuanced positions onto the discourse platform, the liberal religious voices would gradually fade away since they merely assimilate into the secular way of thinking. Under such circumstances, a society either becomes more susceptible to the polarizing effects of the centuries-long struggle between the secular versus the religious. Or, it falls into the illusion of false harmony, in which one worldview asymmetrically dominates the discourse platform. Therefore, we need a comprehensive discourse theory to prevent and revert the damaging potentials of seemingly irreconcilable divisions.

### **Understanding the Improvable and Progressive Potentials of Religious Ethics**

Before discussing the ways in which religious manifestations can be improved, we need to contemplate whether that such improvability is indeed possible. For many religious leaders and scholars, the idea that the current form of a given religion is imperfect seems to be scandalous and unorthodox. Who am I and by what standards to judge whether a religion is perfect or imperfect? In the religious camp, the overlapping consensus might be – “our holy scriptures are direct revelations from God, so they must be infallible.” For the secular camp, more specifically for many secular academics, religion is a social phenomenon and can be constructed and deconstructed as virtually anything. They would also say that it makes no sense and it is politically incorrect to label Abrahamic religions as more perfect and developed than religions found in aboriginal tribes, partly because morality is relativistic and fluid. However, the reconstructive view only judges a religion by its social manifestations, not by its religious content or rituals. It makes no attempt to rewrite

religious scriptures and it makes no premature normative evaluations on the truth contents of any religious traditions, albeit a successful reconstructive discourse often involves an active engagement with the *interpretations* and *manifestations* of truth contents.

Just as we cannot condone the cruel genocidal actions of the Islamic State (ISIS) for the sake of moral relativism and political correctness, we cannot live in peace with many other dangerous manifestations of religious traditions in our world today – be it militant nationalism or profit maximization and economic exploitation done in the name of religion. The Islamic State claims to be the true heir of the Islamic faith and ideals, but we can challenge its actions without necessarily challenging the truth contents of Islam. Nonetheless, it is entirely possible to engage with the religious content in the form of reinterpretation through a productive discourse procedure. A major purpose of such engagement is, in short, an attempt to learn and speak the same (religious) language as Islamic extremists, and to illegitimatize their actions from within. Hence, the reconstructive discourse contains not only an engagement of outward manifestations of a religious tradition, but also their relationships with different interpretations of the same set of religious contents.

Unlike Habermas, who views modernizing efforts (merge faith with reason and science) of religious traditions as signs of improvement, the theory of reconstructive discourse aims at improving the ethical dimensions of religious practices without recourse to debates over theological claims such as creationism or papal infallibility. Personally, I would rather prefer seeing a Young Earth Creationist loving his neighbor as himself as Jesus commanded than watching a nominal,

evolution-believing heterosexual Christian indulging in promiscuous sexual exchanges with the opposite sex against his own professed beliefs. I will use the term enlightenment to capture a renewed sense of ethical realization stemming from one's religious faith. When Kant attempts to define enlightenment in his "What is Enlightenment," he spells out that "only a few, by cultivating their own minds, have succeeded in freeing themselves from immaturity and in continuing boldly on their way."<sup>114</sup> His emphasis on "immaturity" as a major sense of un-enlightened masses highlights his disdain of those who are too lazy or cowardly to think for themselves without the guidance of others. Throughout this essay, Kant makes little reference to scientific truth, but ties a lack of enlightenment to the oppression of free thoughts. Frustrated by the fact that "a public can only achieve enlightenment slowly," and even a revolution "will never produce a true reform in ways of thinking." Instead, he recognizes that "the *public* use of man's reason must always be free, and it alone can bring about enlightenment among men."<sup>115</sup> Remember that the Protestant churches in Kant's time were still organized hierarchically, and despite the *private* enlightenment of many members of the clergy, they could not profess their enlightened understanding of their faith to their congregations. Hence, Kant encourages them to proclaim their real beliefs outside of their commissioned duties for the sake of bringing enlightenment to the masses. Such hierarchical structures are still prevalent in many churches in America today. The religious adherents, whom might be

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<sup>114</sup> Immanuel Kant and Hans Siegbert. Reiss, *Kant: Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 55.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

enlightened in sciences and their professions, are sadly not encouraged to think for themselves by their religious leaders regarding their faith.

Contrast to Kant and Rawls, who favor a clear distinction between the public and the private, I advocate for a reconstruction of this separation. This means that a religious group is encouraged to debate the social implications of its truth content within its own tradition, for any evaluation is relative to the tradition itself. However, the authorities in the tradition itself do not have the final say on the moral soundness of any practices stemming out of faith or beliefs. For instance, the Southern Baptists can discuss among themselves whether it is ethical and biblical sound for them to continue silencing women in church based on a literal interpretation of a saying from Apostle Paul that “women should remain silent in church.” The church leaders can have the final authority over this internal church matter through a limited discourse inside their church. However, if the question becomes whether it is good to endorse a worldview in which women are not encouraged to attend college or seek leadership roles at work, then the question becomes subject to outside examinations. Since such a worldview may translate into political positions affecting the future of all women including those outside of their church, the discourse platform must be open to contributions from other religious groups as well as the secular realm. A clear-cut Rawlsian public vs. private distinction is not helpful in this context given that religious political actors are simply not willing to leave their religious reasons at home. If we cannot force them to use only public reasons for political discourse, we must make an effort to engage with any relevant religious content.

Further, as Habermas succinctly points out that the boundary between faith and reason is blurred, it makes little sense to acknowledging the perfectibility of human reason while rejecting the perfectibility of religious faiths. Not even mentioning the fact that the religious reformation proceeded hand-in-hand with enlightenment ideals and scientific discoveries in late Christendom, the complimentary relationship between faith and reason is evident crossing many historical contexts. In the United States, slavery was practiced among Bible-believing Christians, as it was practice by people of other faiths or no faiths. In South Africa, the Dutch Reformed Church had trouble understanding that the “whiteness” of colonial settlers was not necessarily a “Christian attribute,” that other races, including the dark-skinned indigenous people could also become children of God. And even after such misconception was corrected, many church leaders were not sure whether the newly baptized natives deserve the same rights as their white “brothers and sisters in Christ.” Today, after contemporary theologians reinterpreted Christian scriptures along with the aid of reason and empathy, few Christian churches dare to make such racist, superficial remarks towards other believers. However, this does not mean that Christianity has finally discovered its true meanings in relation to the human conditions of this world. From a reconstructive perspective, this is only the very beginning.

### **Replace the Middleman – Creating a Platform for Reconstructive Discourse**

The idea of reconstructive discourse demands an open exchange between metaphysical and religious comprehensive doctrines on the discourse platform.

Similar to Connolly's ethos of critical engagement, the reconstructive discourse honors a multitude of moral sources in the public sphere. It acknowledges the prevalent nature of "unreasonableness" in the Rawlsian sense amongst opposing factions of a given society that hinders a formation of a highly developed "reasonable pluralism" that John Rawls envisions. Regarding "political values" as limited, exclusive, but compatible with many religious values (reciprocity), the discourse platform is open to all values, no matter religious or secular. Critics, however, may argue that such public sphere is essentially the same as the antagonistic political environment we see in the polarized American society today. But contrary to the notion of antagonism, the platform also demands a respectful and collaborative mindset from opposing political and religious camps in the discourse process. This inclusive platform not only welcomes values Rawlsians regard as reasonable, but also the "unreasonable" ones, for it believes not in the equality of all human values, but in their inherent malleability and improvability. It rejects the idea of a fixed comprehensive doctrine shared by virtually everyone who organized his or her life around it. It is plainly obvious that not all Marxists adhere fully to the doctrine of Marxism and not all biblical literalists do literally whatever the Bible tells them to do. Even the guardians of truth contents of a comprehensive doctrine (the Pope, the philosopher, etc.) may one day alter the content of their doctrine or emphasis certain parts of it while ignoring other parts due to a change in the social or spiritual condition of the adherents.

Given the fact of "antagonistic pluralism" and the improvable nature of political and religious values, the major task facing reconstructive discourse becomes

this -- facilitating a healthy discourse platform in which antagonism and unreasonableness are gradually reduced. The secular liberals and religious conservatives suffer the most divisive gap in the United States, while the gap between secular liberals and religious liberals are much smaller. From previous chapters, we learned that the evangelical-fundamentalist camp was only a vocal minority in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century: they lost the cultural battle of the Scopes Trial, withdrew into isolation, and reemerged again to become the most influential constituency within a major political party. They were the stubborn religious minority who refused to embrace modernity and embedded themselves in a collective feeling of victimhood. Marginalized from the mainstream American society for half a century, they had built up enough determinations to “retake America for Christ” when they finally got the chance. Not only do they maintain their distaste of secular liberals and liberal Christians, they have also been suspicious of the government, fearing its invasive power on their truth claims. Under these historical circumstances, they never felt welcome in the public sphere, let alone in the political sphere. The secular realm demands them to leave their religious reasons at home – a condition that they have no reason to accept.

Therefore, one possible justification for the reconstructive platform is that both the secular and the religious camp could be better off. For the religious citizens, a more practical reconstructive discourse platform will tolerate the existence of religious voices in the public sphere. If the aim of a discourse is tension reduction and reconciliation, it makes no sense for one side to demand the other to leave their comprehensive doctrines behind. For the secular citizens, it is in their interest to

engage with religious contents because it gives them the opportunity to directly challenge their opponents using their internal logic. Then, the question becomes: what could the reconstructive discourse platform do differently than the Rawlsian and Habermasian models to facilitate a more effective dialogue between the two polarized camps each having its distinct worldview? In the following sections, I will discuss components of my theory that involve tangible strategic and policy suggestions essential for a successful implementation of a nation-wide reconstructive dialogue.

### **The Importance of Mutually Intelligible Languages:**

The Reconstructive Discourse stresses the importance of mutually intelligible languages between secular and religious camps. In a nutshell, it encourages secular liberals to learn about the religious reasons of evangelicals, and pleads evangelicals to interact more with liberal churches and even to study the doctrine of secular humanism. Mutual learning is foundational to a functioning reconstructive discourse. The two sides need to understand their languages in order to understand their corresponding reasons used in the public realm.

Intelligibility also matters to the theories of Rawls and Habermas. Rawls wants to have each side to speak in the same language of “political values,” instead of their own comprehensive doctrines. For Habermas, religious reasons are valuable, but they must be “translated” into secular reasons for them to be fully recognized and accepted. Instead, quite often, the religious citizens are either not willing to or not capable of doing such cognitive task of translation. The result is that they continue to speak in religious languages while the secular citizens reject them as irrelevant and

irrational. They speak their religious reasons as if they are directly from God. Essentially, the religious citizens enjoy a *monopoly* over interpreting “what God wants.” This monopoly is detrimental to a fruitful dialogue, since the religious leaders face little or no competition over the meaning of their truth contents. Remember that America has a long history of “speaking for God” as Stephen Carter points out. Before the Great Displacement matured, Americans had been fighting over what “God truly wants,” whether it is about slavery or the segregation. Whether you were an abolitionist or a Southern slaveholder, an advocate for American exceptionalism or a Universalist, it rarely hurt to claim, “God is on our side!” In contrast, the Left today has banished God from their camp, making the Right the default winner of the “God talks.”

To be clear, I am not urging secular liberals to consider becoming religious again in order to challenge the truth claims from religious conservatives. They are free to remain irreligious while still speaking the religious language. This task for them is not to become assimilated into another camp, but to reexamine their differences and resemblances through mutual learning. Rawls even invented a term to capture a similar style of engagement called “reasoning from conjecture” which I discussed in the last chapter. In his case, the secular citizen wishes to sway the religious citizen that his/her comprehensive doctrine can actually be reasonably compatible with the demands of a constitutional democracy. To achieve this, the secular citizen must articulate, based on his/her own understanding of the other side’s comprehensive doctrine, that such compatibility is indeed plausible. Similarly, I advocate for a mutual learning progress in which both side agree to learn more about

their doctrines from an outside perspective, hoping to bring a fresh insight to the table for further discourse. My theory makes greater demand on the breadth and depth of such engagement, for “reasoning from conjecture” only touches upon the basic questions over constitutional essentials. It has to encompass a range of topics and not to be afraid to talk about controversial issues, such as abortion and homosexuality, which a minimalist political approach has a much harder time resolving.

Then the question becomes why would the secular liberals be willing to learn more about religious traditions? What can serve as their sources of motivation? My answer is that it is *in their interest* to do so. Tired of endless political gridlock over controversial issues, many of them may find the idea of conflict reduction appealing, and being able to better articulate and criticize the other sides’ reasons and possibly reveal certain inconsistencies, internal contradictions, or hypocritical positions in order to de-legitimize some of religious reasons on religious terms. A simple example can illustrate this type of exchange. If a Christian banker on Wall Street relocates his investment from a charity foundation to a hedge fund to maximize his profits, he can justify his exploitative tactic using Psalm 28: “*Ask of Me, and I will give You the nations for Your inheritance, and the ends of the Earth for Your possession.*” He also shamelessly claims that he has asked of his God to give him more possessions and this is what God has instructed him to do. And if you are a secular humanist occupying Wall Street and saw this person walking across the street to pray in a church, without knowing enough about Christianity, you might not have the means to point out his hypocrisy. Instead, you probably have read Max Weber’s *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) and remind yourself that: “Of course a

Christian like him would do such a thing!” However, if you had the chance to read the Bible critically for the sake of more effective engagement, you may discover biblical arguments against his greedy actions. So when he walks out of the church in the afternoon, you can approach him by citing Mark 10: 25 *“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.”*

The broker is likely to be embarrassed or even enraged, for he would have to deal with the shame of struggling to further justify his action in front of you. In this event, it shows that he has an insufficient understanding of his own faith. Such embarrassment may push him to read his Bible more to avoid future challenges. On the other hand, is also possible that the Christian banker would offer a religious rebuttal by citing another verse from the Bible to counter your criticism. In this case, you can further challenge him citing more evidence from the scriptures to counter his counterarguments – essentially inviting him to a deeper dialogue that might be productive. If both sides are able to remain respectful to each other and clarify the ground rules for the debate (i.e. scriptures only), it is likely that they may make piecemeal improvements on the issue being discussed and find an overlapping consensus one step at a time.

### **The Idea of the Mediating Party**

No matter how effective the reconstructive platform sounds in theory, it cannot be functional without some practical solutions to foster an ethos of critical engagement. A strong background culture open to mutual learning does not happen on its own – it must first rely on creative solutions to initiate such an engaging

dialogue. Connolly suggests that since the Right has been effective in mobilizing their constituency into the culture war and the evangelical-capitalist resonance machine, the Left must consider taking advantage of the visceral register as well. But my suspicion, as indicated in the last chapter, is that such “balancing act” may be subject to more emotional manipulations not genuine for a fruitful dialogue.

Instead, I intend to explore ways in which a genuine ethos marked by a desire for mutual learning would occur. Knowing that there might be multiple approaches to achieve this aim, I propose the idea of a *mediating party*. The third party serves as a neutral player on the reconstructive discourse platform. It favors no one and is of course neither religious nor secular. It serves as a fair distributor of moral sources to make sure they are accessible to all constituencies. The government is a great candidate to perform such a role, for it has access to the educational content of public schools in the United States. It fulfills the responsibilities of the mediating party by introducing metaphysical and religious moral sources into the classroom in an *impartial* manner. The topic of religion in public school has been a hot-button issue between secular liberals and religious conservative for decades. Facing these controversial debates, the government decided to remove all religious content from school curricula, thus essentially removing a great amount of moral sources – leaving the public schools with very limited options for character formation.

My suggestion, however, differentiates itself from both camps in content distribution. A good first step is for schools to add one elective class on religion. The purpose of this class is not to indoctrinate school children; rather, it is to expose them to the pluralistic nature of different religious traditions, which may include that of the

secular humanism. One can imagine dividing the school year into multiple sections, with each section devoted to focus on one particular religious tradition. This survey course only objectively enumerates the facts and truth claims that each comprehensive doctrine makes. And it is imperative to ensure that the majority of a given religious tradition/denomination must approve the knowledge ultimately put onto religious textbooks. The authors of these textbooks must make no personal judgment on the truth claims for the sake of fairness.

Of course, some religious parents may oppose such classes and opt their children out of these electives for the fear of exposing their own children to other faiths. (And consequently “losing” them from the grace of Jesus) Nonetheless, even the children whose parents prohibit them from taking such classes would inevitably interact with fellow classmates who benefited from surveying different religious traditions. As a result, we may expect to see our next generation debating metaphysical issues among each other at an early age, thus preparing themselves for becoming effective builders of an ethos of critical engagement under the context of reconstructive discourse. In addition, the benefits go beyond the purpose of generating such an ethos, since discussing metaphysical viewpoints also helps young citizens to develop their critical thinking skills essential for their future academic and professional success.

### **The Concept of the Great Realignment**

Once religious classes are introduced in schools and information of a multitude of moral sources becomes easily accessible and desirable for politically

engaged citizens, we may expect to witness a revolutionary effect called the “Great Realignment.” When engaging with the opposing side using the other side’s moral language, the “learning” side is essentially performing such a cognitive task: *discovering evidence and reasons from the enemy camp in order to back up and justify our own political positions.* This mental challenge, if successfully executed and overcome, necessarily leads to an understanding that it is indeed possible for our two seemingly distinct comprehensive doctrines to converge or overlap on certain issues, if we look carefully enough. A secular humanist, after studying the Christian scriptures with the goal of persuading his evangelical friend that capitalism is evil, discovers that some teachings of Jesus actually support the socialist ideals he upholds. This profound realization then motivates him to read more into the New Testament, making him less hostile toward Christianity, for he becomes convinced that Jesus, whether really existed historically or as a fictional character, must be on his side. This person might become a secular follower of Jesus in the sense of loving his moral philosophy. Or, there is also a small chance that he might become religious – or a Christian humanist. The evangelical friend, upon reflecting on the biblical evidence against his love for profit-maximization and materialism, has at least following options for realignment: (1) Joining the Democratic Party against his parents’ wishes; (2) Staying the same after he stopped calling himself a Christian in order to avoid future cognitive dissonances; (3) Becoming an atheist or secular humanist; (4) Remain as a Christian but more attuned to evidence-based religious arguments.

In short, under the reconstructive discourse, some members of the opposing camps might in fact trade places with each other after mutual learning, engagement,

and individual reflections. Since completely switching to the other side is not as likely as achieving piecemeal changes, the new political and religious landscape is likely to become more pluralistic and less polarizing. The ones whose engagement efforts led them to a middle ground of mutual understanding have the potential to become pioneers of producing the “third way” of understanding and solving controversial political, social, and economic problems that might not be apparent if they chose to remain in their polarized political camp. We should expect a more harmonious, productive, and creative discourse to gradually emerge, leaving endless political gridlocks and animosities behind historical curtains.

### **Building an Ethos of Cognitive Understanding – (Difference Appreciation)**

An ethos of cognitive understanding is another precondition conducive to successful reconstructive dialogues. As seen from the high cognitive and emotional demands from Rawls, Habermas, and Connolly in the previous chapter, the reconstructive discourse inevitably involves a certain level of cognitive-emotional demands from its participants. Not all citizens are born with the same level of mental faculties to complete the cognitive tasks necessary, and not all naturally gifted citizens grow up in ideal environments to develop their gifts. Therefore, the reconstructive discourse must take the realistic cognitive disparity into consideration and must incorporate a solution to such disparities into its theory.

A common concern regarding effective dialogue is that one side will likely view the other side as irrational, unreasonable, or ridiculous, and instead of fostering a healthy and fruitful conversation, the engagement becomes antagonistic, with the

prime purpose of demeaning and sometimes even demonizing the opposing camp. In reconstructive discourse, however, mutual respect and toleration are the most basic expectations. But unfortunately, the reality often fails to uphold these fundamental expectations, as seen in the paradox of the great displacement. Therefore, it is not enough to merely demand the two sides to respect each other. The reconstructive theory also includes one important cognitive tool that may help to make it easier for them to appreciate their current set of differences.

### **The Power of Imagining**

A person becomes who s/he is today as a result of his/her natural endowments, family backgrounds, and past actions. When I sit on the other the table, ready to engage in a heated conversation with you, I might most likely only think about our differences and how to make you think they way I think. Such narrow emphasis on our differences will most likely reinforce themselves as we speak, leaving the possibility of reaching an agreement slight. Some theorists, in contrast, may ask the two sides to focus on the few things that they can agree on, so a *compromise* might merge. The Reconstructive Theory, however, views most compromises as negative signs of another *modus vivendi*. Instead of allowing freestyle antagonistic conversations or compromises to happen, it encourages the two sides to focus on neither on the differences nor similarities, but on the *origin or cause of these differences*. No matter how unreasonable or ridiculous you find the views from the opposing camp are, you can always choose to *imagine the possible life scenarios and*

*conditions that have shaped the person* in front of you to be the person who he or she is today.

If you are a secular liberal looking at a religious conservative who *sincerely* [I need to emphasize sincerity – replacing reasonableness] believes homosexuality is a choice and an abomination, you can imagine factors that have shaped her negative views on this issue. There are many potential factors: (1) She was born into a Christian-conservative household, and that’s what her parents raised her to believe since her childhood. (2) Her community discouraged its members to pursue freethinking and higher education, so she went to a Christian college that excluded liberal voices. (3) She might be a nice person in so many other ways inspired by her faith, but she cannot comprehend the option of reading the Bible selectively enough to weed out passages criticizing homosexuality. (4) She has had romantic attractions toward several men who turned out to be gay. This list goes on as proportionate to your imagining capacity and willingness. It is imperative to know that these imagined scenarios *do not* need to be true or verifiable at all, for they only serve as means for you to connect with the other person by imagining seeing the world from her perspective. At the end of the imagining process, you must remind yourself that there is a chance that none of above is true about her, but at least you can now understand her position on homosexuality as a product of her past experiences, or, as a *means to cope with the challenges of being human*. This realization would allow you to better appreciate her as a full person before participating in the reconstructive dialogue either selectively using the expanded version of Rawls’ “reasoning from conjecture” or appealing to Connolly’s “visceral registers.”

Of course, it is indeed plausible that many people may not be capable of performing such cognitive and empathetic task of relating to the opposing camp. Some are not used to imagine the lives of others, and some simply lack the mental faculties to think for themselves due to factors such as educational inequity. Thus, we need to keep in mind the disparities in cognitive and emotional capabilities across both camps when conducting reconstructive dialogues. Fortunately, since the theory stresses the importance of both cognitive engagement and visceral appeals, free and equal citizens in a constitutional state should be free to use their different talents to compliment each other in order to overcome individual insufficiencies. And just as we may introduce a religious survey course to the public school curriculum, we may also develop electives designed to foster children's empathetic abilities.

I hope I have at least articulated the basic framework and components of the reconstructive discourse model. This theory is designed to address the seemingly irreconcilable conflicts between secular liberals and the vocal religious conservatives in a polarized democratic society. It serves two major functions: (1) addressing the opposing arguments by encouraging an open and respectful exchange between the two antagonistic camps; (2) overcoming cognitive-empathetic insufficiencies through a spirit of difference appreciation. Instead of merely making theoretical demands, it also proposes ideas of creating the necessary conditions to give rise to an ethos of a critical yet fruitful engagement by means of fair content distribution of multiple moral sources across all constituencies. In the final section of my thesis, I will discuss ways to apply this discourse model to address more specific religious-political problems

described in the first two chapters, with an emphasis on the most difficult issue of sexuality in our political environment today.

### **Applying the Reconstructive Discourse Model**

The reconstructive discourse theory provides a general engagement model tailored to reconciling secular-religious conflicts in a (preferably democratic) modern society. How does it pertain to questions specific to the Great Displacement in the United States? Recall that the displacement problem encompasses two levels of conflict: the ideological conflict between secular socialist-humanism and capitalist-evangelicalism; and issue-specific and seemingly irreconcilable conflicts such as abortion and same-sex marriage. These two levels of conflict are often interwoven with each other through a web of visceral registers and symbolic connections, manifesting in the evangelical-capitalist alignment we previously discussed. Thus, a reconstructive solution must not only address one level of conflict and neglect the other. It must strive to be comprehensive in the sense of pertaining to both types of conflicts.

Recall from earlier chapters that even if we accepted the humanism vs. evangelicalism tension as important and legitimate, there could also a number of other non-antagonistic alternative relations between the two ideologies that might be potentially harmonious and mutually reinforcing. This ideological alignment is particular to mostly white evangelicals who could as well be exposed to a different set of rhetoric other than that of “small government” or “seven years of tribulation.” On the other side of the aisle, liberal Christianity has apparently adopted a different view

of the role of governments and socialism since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and developed theologies connecting the two in compatible ways. Given the possibility of ideological realignment based on the multivalent nature of interpreting Christian scriptures and their relations to society at large, it is imperative for us to identify the visceral registers and rationales that have given rise to the status-quo alignment we see in the constituency of white evangelicals today; and work out corresponding strategies either to trigger an alternative alignment among evangelicals or to at least improve their understanding of the social and theological logic of their Christian cousins in the liberal camp.

The first step in achieving such aims is to assist white evangelicals weeding out their *more* individualistic self-interests from their *more* genuine desires to speak the “truth” as manifested in sacred scriptures. I am using relativistic terms to distinguish between self-interests and the desires to speak for God because I do not believe that anyone is qualified to serve as the final arbiter on this matter. What appears to be a selfish behavior may instead be a genuine one from the perspective of the particular person being judged. However, we should be free to use cognitive tools to assist such efforts, hoping that we would make piecemeal improvements if we really tried. Again, Rawls’ veil of ignorance is indeed a highly useful tool that could be modified to fit the scenarios pertaining to the Great Displacement. Instead of renouncing one’s religion along with other social positions in public discourse, we imagine the topic of such public discourse to be a debate over the social manifestations of religious scriptures. In this context, the participants can identify as members of any faith or non-faith, but they must all accept the condition that only the

Christian scriptures can be used as the source of argument. This discourse platform also prohibits preexisting theologies, whether liberal or conservative, from influencing the debate. Participants are required to “forget” about their gender, race, sexuality, income-level, occupation, age, political affiliations, favorite TV shows and so forth just as they are required to do so in the Rawlsian model.

Going back to the Christian banker example, we should strive to weed out his personal financial interests from his desire to stay true to his religious identity. If he is equipped with some general knowledge of his own faith, he should be able to offer a religious rebuttal based on the scriptures if he wills in response to a scripturally grounded criticism from the secular humanist. So what happens after he succeeds in building a counter argument stressing the biblical significance of private property and work ethics (for profit maximization)? What if both sides could offer equally plausible evidence from biblical texts in support of their conflicting political positions? This is the reason why we must encourage them to temporarily suspend their preexisting social positions and participate in the debate as if they could be anyone with any social position. In this scenario, the Christian banker is expected to forget that he is a banker on Wall Street and to think from the perspective of any constituency group, such as the children in the African country from which he withdrew his investment. Likewise, the secular humanist can imagine herself to be an immigrant child from that African nation who suffered from poverty and violence during throughout her childhood. As a refugee from Africa, she managed to become rich through years of hard work and tenacity in order to change her fate and prove to others that she is among the elected ones destined for heaven.

It is also important to note that the effectiveness of any reconstructive discourse is contingent upon the degree of religious literary and empathetic abilities of the populace. Hence, the religious veil of ignorance, by itself, cannot sufficiently provide a feasible solution for our purposes. It offers a powerful cognitive tool by restricting the arguments to a specific source that disregards personal interests or identities, but fails to deliver a solution to increase the power of imagining among participants so that an effective debate could occur. Therefore, the comprehensive reconstructive discourse also equips multiple constituencies with opportunities to develop their empathetic abilities as well as their literacy on religious moral sources. These educational elements cannot be ignored, since they are essentially in raising the visceral and empathetic consciousness as a whole while promoting an ethos of critical responsiveness and an ethos of cognitive understanding.

This does not mean, however, that the long-term educational solutions are prerequisites for a reconstructive discourse to take place. The adult citizens today, without a firm foundation on religious literary or empathetic training, can at least attempt to apply the visceral tool of mutual understanding and respect previously stated in order to appreciate the persons with who they strongly disagree as real human beings deserving to be treated seriously no matter how ridiculous their views sound at first. My encounter with Dr. Robinson made me realize the importance of refraining from judging someone's political views prematurely without understanding the person's particular circumstances that helped to create such views. Even if it turns out that a person is motivated primarily by selfish desires, we could also continue the

dialogue strategically by leveraging the person's proclaimed beliefs or comprehensive doctrines.

Once we have made progress on weeding out the less genuine self-interests from a debate over the social manifestation of the Christian faith, we could then move on to discuss the specific ways to reconcile the central tension between secular humanism and capitalist evangelicalism. At this point, we should have already identified certain members of the religious camp who are more driven by selfish motives than the faith they belonged to. They can be corporate leaders who are primarily concerned with maximizing profit and minimizing corporate tax; televangelists who have benefited tremendously from unregulated private broadcasting channels to monopolize religious voices while taking in large sums of revenue for themselves; or individual evangelicals who chose to support lower taxes because of their envy and hatred of their poorer neighbors on food stamps. But unlike the rules of the Rawls model, these people are welcome to remain on the discourse platform as long as they still acknowledge faith as a significant driving force behind their actions. The point in identifying these interests, then, is to contrast them with the more genuine, unadulterated concerns from people like Francis Schaeffer – the original modern evangelical guru who did not initially believe in an alliance between evangelicals and right-wing politics and never really liked Jerry Falwell and Pat Robinson in private. His concerns over socialism are understandable, given the Cold War background culture during his time. However, other evangelical leaders have exploited Schaeffer's contribution for less genuine motives by exaggerating the possibility of American government oppressing its own people on American soil

decades after the Cold War has ended. All the desires and interests, whether genuine or not, helped to create the evangelical-capitalist resonance machine marked by the current alliance between white evangelicals and libertarian ideals.

When addressing the central tension, the reconstructive approach should be able to reconstruct the existing evangelical-capitalist resonance machine to make it more attuned to challenges coming from religious left to foster creative solutions. These liberal religious voices have been coming from liberal denominations since the time of the Social Gospel, but they have not been able to infiltrate the religious right to construct a more balanced resonance machine. This is why we need the secular voices to make the religious left more visible to the general public. The secular voices, once equipped with a general understanding of Christian scriptures, would be able to join force with the liberal churches to challenge the assumptions and theologies from the religious right. The humanist vs. banker debate is an example of micropolitics between two people. If more and more members from the secular left have acquired a solid scriptural knowledge, the debate could be taking place on a much larger scale – enough to threaten the monopolistic status of the religious right on “how Christians should view the free market.” Once we have diversified the religious voices on economic issues and assisted leaders of the evangelical left such as Jim Wallis, we can then envision ways in which new creative insights emerge out of the secular-assisted clash of religious voices.

One potential achievement of such a discourse is a more balanced view on individual responsibility and state responsibility. Before the discourse takes place, each side holds polarized positions on how to best alleviate poverty: the left favors

state intervention and government welfare programs, and the right favors individual and private incentives. We have already discussed how the religious conservatives endorse compassionate conservatism that is not indifferent to the sufferings of the poor. However, the sufferings of the poor cannot be effectively alleviated through personal goodwill that is subject to human fallibility. Likewise, the secular left also needs to reexamine their status-quo position on economic issues. The guiding question in this mutual examination and self-exploration is: What could a *neglected alternative* be if we were more attuned to and open to religious contributions? One possible answer is that due to the state welfare programs, private individuals no longer feel the need to reach out to those in need themselves. The state programs, in this understanding, took away some of the incentives for each better-off citizen to reach out to the less well-off citizens and experience first-hand charitable works. Of course, there are countless secular individuals and organizations doing charitable works each day. The purpose of the discourse is to envision a more institutionalized system of combining the private and the public incentives in aiding the needy in the society. For example, we can well imagine a more decentralized hybrid model in which the government issues more funding for eligible private organizations to carry out welfare incentives.

### **Reconstructing the Understanding of Human Sexuality**

On the issue of sexuality, we can follow a similar pattern of discourse that focuses on the neglected alternative. Instead of choosing between supporting and opposing to same-sex marriage, liberal churches should be more open to creative

solutions outside the normal bound of marriage. The status quo regarding the sexuality debate today is mostly black and white: you either support gay marriage or you are against it completely. Evangelical churches rally against all gay-marriage legislations and mobilize their members to defend “family values” framed as if they are the most important biblical values. A more recent ballot initiative called *Sodomite Suppression Act* was introduced by an evangelical lawyer in California to allow executions of gays and lesbians. It shamelessly advocates that due to the fear of God, “any person who willingly touches another person of the same gender for purposes of sexual gratification to be put to death by bullets to the head or by any other convenient method.”<sup>116</sup> The fact that such atrocious hatred and ignorance can still exist in a constitutional civil society is deeply disturbing. On the other hand, liberal churches, initially hesitant to rewrite their theology to accommodate another cultural trend, have begun changing their official doctrines to bless same-sex marriages one by one. One may predict that such gestures of cultural accommodation would make these churches more popular and influential. In actuality, we have seen detrimental schisms in those churches following their decisions to redefine marriage or ordain an openly gay bishop. The Episcopal Church has been suffering from the most divisive schisms over disagreements on sexuality, and the Methodists and Presbyterians are quickly following suit. If these schisms continue to occur in liberal churches, they would only be feeding members into evangelical groups and further weakening their already dwindling influence in the American society.

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<sup>116</sup> Sieczkowski, Cavan. "Lawyer In California Proposes Killing Gays With 'Sodomite Suppression Act'" The Huffington Post. March 2, 2015. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/02/lawyer-killing-gays-sodomite-suppression\\_n\\_6786776.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/02/lawyer-killing-gays-sodomite-suppression_n_6786776.html).

It is interesting to think about why the mainline churches have to put their own prosperity at risk for a cause that is not so different from what popular secular consciousness already has. Surely it would be nice that a number of gays and lesbians still loyal to Jesus could finally get married in their church; but what about the high cost of losing members to right-wing churches and feeding more resources into the powerful evangelical-capitalist resonance machine? Some may say that these liberal churches are not agents of rational utility theories and therefore do not care about the risks for the sake of doing what they believe as a call from God. But they need to care about the larger picture and not to ignore the precious treasures hidden within their own religious traditions that might shed more fresh lights into the polarized debate. The reconstructive discourse model is designed to encourage such profound self-explorations.

In recent centuries, the institutional of marriage has become more and more important and sacred in Christian societies. The idea of the nuclear family defined by an exclusive social contract between one man and one woman is more of a modern invention. Early Christians did not view marriage in the same light as evangelicals do today. If we look into the canonized scriptures, we might find certain messages from Apostle Paul explicitly against the idolatry of marriage. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul outlines certain principles of marriage by responding to the Corinthians' question whether "it is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman." Paul responds by saying that "because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband." Note that Paul's approval of the heterosexual marriage is more of a temporary solution for those who

lack self-control over their sexual desires. He further states that he wishes that everyone could ideally be like him and “it is good for them to remain single as I am,” but if they cannot exercise self-control, then they should marry, for “it is better to marry than to burn with passion.” According to Paul’s logic, marriage is the solution for those who are bound by the desires of the flesh and susceptible to sins of fornication, for is only the lesser of the two evils. As a *modus vivendi*, they should get married. However, it is more ideal for them to have the gift of celibacy and only serve their Lord with all their heart. For Paul, celibacy is certainly superior to heterosexual marriage.

According to Dale B. Martin, a professor of religion at Yale, Apostle Paul is against all sexual desires regardless of the object of such desires. He argues that the real problem for Paul “had to do not with a disoriented desire, but with inordinate desire,” and the defining factor of desire was “degree of passion, rather than object choice.”<sup>117</sup> As we discussed that Paul illustrated a range of sexual desires in terms of the degree of passion. On one side of the desire spectrum stands the passion-free celibacy, a gift few Christians had besides Paul. The other side of the spectrum stands excessive passions for women, men, young boys, or even beasts. Homosexuality as an identity had not been constructed in Paul’s time, so his understanding of sexual sins only involved behaviors, not identities. According to Martin, there is no such thing as “honorable passion” or “dishonorable passion,” for all sexual desires are bad for Paul, who showed “no concerns for procreation whatsoever.”<sup>118</sup> Therefore, when

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<sup>117</sup> Dale B. Marin, "Heterosexism and the Interpretation of Romans 1:18 -- 32," *Biblical Interpretation* 3, no. 3 (1995): 342.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 346.

evangelicals begin condemning homosexuality and celebrating heterosexuality, there are not following Paul's logic. Since passages against same-sex sexual relations in Pauline letters have been frequently cited by evangelicals against gay marriage, they should follow Paul's logic consistently. In short, Martin is saying that if you're using Paul to cite against gay marriage, you should also be aware of his opposition to heterosexual desires and the lower status of the heterosexual marriage as a choice for early Christians.

If marriage itself is viewed as a way to contain excessive desires, then gay marriage can be viewed as a way to contain homosexual desires. According to Paul's logic, marriage is the compromise between promiscuous sex and celibacy. It follows that it would be preferable for two males to commit to each other in marriage than for them to indulge in their excessive desires outside of marriage – or to “burn with passion” in Paul's terms. Nonetheless, for serious Christians like Paul, marriage as an arrangement is ultimately inferior to a single-minded way of living to God and God's people. Jesus himself praised those who willingly “become eunuchs” for the sake of the Kingdom of God in Matthew 19-11. He also expresses radical positions against traditional family values in multiple New Testament passages. In Mark 3, when being told that his own mother and brothers are outside, Jesus replies, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” Pointing to his disciples, he continues: “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother.” And in Luke 14 when discussing the cost of discipleship, Jesus says “If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.” Without

doing complicated biblical exegesis, we can at least see that Jesus might not be a big fan of traditional nuclear family values and demands a great sacrifices from those who want to follow him. Instead of focusing on the natural familial bonds, the teachings of Jesus tend to encourage his followers to transcend the worldly family in order to embrace a heavenly family in a spirit of universal brotherhood.

There are, of course, many other sources of Christian texts that point to a call for the reconstruction of traditional family values. After analyzing a number of these fascinating texts, Martin admits that he is “deeply ambivalent about pursuing same-sex marriage as a solution to the injustices of homophobia.”<sup>119</sup> Why should Christians attracted to members of the same sex conform to the institution of marriage that might not even be biblically sound? Why should they limit their gifted love for the same sex to one person confined in a nuclear family structure for the rest of their lives, when they can use their gift more creatively to serve a greater purpose? Martin urges that gay Christians “should use their imaginations to allow Scripture and tradition to inspire new visions of Christian community free from the constraints of the modern, heterosexual, nuclear family.” He then gives a list of potential alternatives:

*“We could imagine traveling bands of erotic followers of Jesus, or spirit-filled ‘town meetings’ sharing things in common, or lively communities of men or women living together, or lively communities of men and women living together. We could imagine ‘households’ of new construction, representing in their own adventuresome lives together hopes for new communities of the future. Eschatological communities. Communities in which single people are not second-*

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<sup>119</sup> Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 122.

*class citizens, in which there are no ‘bastards,’ in which sexual orientation does not in itself stigmatize, in which varieties of households are nurtured. Alternative models to the traditional family are ready-to-hand in rich Christian Scripture and tradition.”<sup>120</sup>*

The list goes on. The possibilities are infinite. The treasures hidden within a religious tradition are limitless. When liberal churches look at the cultural trend of today and think about whether to follow suit, they are not looking at the right place. Instead of supporting whatever the secular society is advocating for, liberal Christianity should take advantage of its creative potentials made possible by their rejection of biblical literalism and search within itself. What can we offer to the world that no one else can? How can we fight for social justice while staying true to our beliefs? These guiding questions should help liberal churches and theologians to make progress in reconstructing their theologies and the relationship between secular trends and religious content productively. With such ambitious self-exploration, we may discover ways to reconstruct the rigid nuclear family structure by incorporating single people into the family life through a spirit of hospitality. We may fight for the rights of non-family members to visit their loved ones in hospitals. We can probe into the distinctions between sexual orientation and romantic orientation and potentially forge a powerful weapon to deconstruct sex-based arguments from the religious right. At the end of the day, we may even realize that the loving-sickness experienced among members of the same sex is not fundamentally different from the universal brotherly love that Jesus wants all of his followers to have. Sexual desires, no matter

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 123.

directed towards what person or object, are not equivalent to the genuine love we share with each other – the most powerful non-corporal love that can either sustain a couple to the end of their journey on Earth or enable one man to sacrifice himself on a Roman cross for the sake of everyone he loves.

Imagine a future in which we have succeeded in deconstructing sex from love: there will be no more socially constructed labels dividing people into homosexuals and heterosexuals; there will be no more cultural taboos hindering the expression of affections between the members of the same sex; there will be no more jealousy and hard choices between serving one's spouse and serving one's community; and there will be less and less pressure for citizens to choose a political party based on their different views on sexuality. But for that reality to manifest, we need to construct a new resonance machine and a new ethos of critical engagement that is inclusive, respectful, and fruitful. There are already physical and online communities being formed for sexual minorities who want to seek a third way to deal with the problem of sexuality. They are Catholics and Protestants who refuse to choose between their faith and their sexual orientation. Instead of choosing the easier way of forming a family and accepting societal expectations, they are striving to construct a community based on a burning desire for deep spiritual friendships. However, there are the minorities within the minorities. They need the endorsement from their church leaders – who are either just too busy with pleasing the general public and adjusting their doctrines or too invested in strengthening the rhetoric of the religious right.

In order to bring out these unique voices under the spotlights in the public square, we need the help of both the secular left and the mainline liberal churches to

actively involve in a reconstructive discourse. Liberal churches should take the initiative to conduct self-explorations by paying attention to nuanced voices within their own traditions. The secular citizens, with an increasing rate of religious literacy, could contribute to these efforts in numerous ways. One possibility is for liberal theologians to study secular knowledge on issues pertaining to economic and sexuality studies. Secular thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Hannah Arendt can provide useful resources to inspire religious thinkers in creative ways. Once the nuanced positions are matured within mainline churches, they can begin competing with the Religious Right and inspire further debates and reconstructions. At this more matured stage, the liberal churches would be advocating for changes unique to themselves, and therefore stand a better chance of getting the attention of the national media that would regard such interesting positions as ideal news materials. While attention getting is not the end goal for liberal Christians engaging in reconstructive discourse, it serves as an effective means to challenge the evangelical-capitalist resonance machine.

### **Conclusion:**

Facing the complex phenomenon of the Great Displacement, the reconstructive discourse model must be capable of translating its theory into practice. It challenges the Rawlsian separation between the public and the private realm by encouraging an open exchange among different moral sources in a constitutional pluralist society. It remains attuned to the intersubjectivity and multiple visceral registers that Connolly regards as important for building a new ethos of critical

engagement. The theory advocates for a more open access of secular and religious moral sources and suggests the introduction of metaphysical traditions in public school curricula to prepare citizens for the reconstructive discourse at an early age. By equipping secular citizens with religious literacy and inviting them to join the internal discourse within religious traditions, we can prevent one or few religious voices to speak for an entire religious tradition that is actually diverse in nature. Although it is plausible that it may take an entire generation or more for the discourse to fully develop and come to fruition, the resulting harmony and innovative solutions are likely to benefit our society for generations to come.

Perhaps, the reconstructive discourse can be better understood as a strategy to deal with the secular-religious animosity in a democratic constitutional society. While the strategic dimension of this discourse model can be most easily seen throughout this chapter, its theoretical significance may be harder to be recognized. To connect the strategic back to the theoretical, I should clarify that the strategies I articulated here are stemming from a theoretical understanding of the Great Displacement as argued in chapter one and two. We learned that a religious minority previously excluded from mainstream discourse, after remerged as a powerful political force, often lacks a thorough internal discourse on a wide range of social issues. We also learned that due to the anti-cultural positions, such a religious group is likely to get more attention from the media and gradually overshadow other religious voices from the same tradition. These findings are useful for helping us see more clearly where the problems lie so that we may prescribe appropriate strategic solutions. In another sense, the strategic is the theoretical. Both Rawls and Habermas' theories prescribe

and outline how much deliberative power a society should grant to religious voices. I also share a similar purpose, though I try to provide examples to show how my theory and strategies may manifest in reality. It is true that some of my examples, such as the number of new ways to think about and reconstruct our approach to sexuality, may appear as unrealistic and unforeseeable. Nonetheless, they are useful in the sense of provoking us to think outside of our normal frameworks in order to encourage creative solutions conducive to solving the complex problem of the Great Displacement. I am, however, deeply interested in exploring relevant literatures on sexuality to back up my suggestions, but that could be the topic of another project in the future.

## CONCLUSION

At the end of a year-long journey of studying the Religious Right and discourse theories, I want to share a few words about my initial inspirations that gave rise to the project that has become a part of my personal “resonance machine.” I was originally interested in exploring the religious dimension of the modern human rights discourse. In Professor Smolkin-Rothrock’s class on “Morality in a Secular World,” I discovered that religious leaders played a major role in pushing for the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. I became immensely interested in understanding the philosophical and religious foundations of human rights. Given the secular background culture in which we discuss human rights today, it has become more and more difficult to bring a religious perspective onto the discourse platform. Therefore, I wanted to postulate how the human rights discourse would look like if we never “banished” religious voices in the first place. What might be a “neglected alternative”? In what ways could we enrich the scope of modern human rights? Over the summer, I had already developed certain “neglected attributes” of rights including a set of self-sacrificial responsibilities corresponding to the degrees of rights one demands to have. I was eager to examine the insufficiencies of the secular rights discourse.

At the end of the summer, the unbelievably disturbing news of the brutal killings of the Islamic State (ISIS) dragged me back to the saddened reality from which humanity has not yet escaped. Why bother expanding the scope of human rights when we cannot even protect and guarantee the basic right to life in many regions of the world? As a Christian myself, I immediately became interested in

learning about the Islamic faith and the history of the Middle East. As I read the words in the Qur'an, I learned that there are great religious values and spiritual powers within this religion, if wielded by the right people, could transform humanity from narrow nationalist atomized individuals into peaceful communities ruled only by universal and unconditional love. The same can be said about the New Testament and many Christian intellectual works that have contributed greatly to the development of the western democratic ideals and the message of tolerance and love. Nevertheless, the role of religious forces today in both traditions are often times doing the exact opposite.

Hence, I developed a theory of the Great Displacement to capture this paradoxical social phenomenon: why are some of the loudest and most influential religious forces today often characterized by a lack of love – manifested in hatred, violence, and intolerance when there are an abundance of moral sources within their own traditions asking the believers to live in peace, love, and self-sacrifice for the greater good? Connecting back to my interests in the human rights discourse, I also found it strange that the secular liberals are often blind to these valuable religious contributions that could enrich their discourse in meaningful ways.

Since I knew too little about Islam and Islamic politics, I chose to narrow my focus to the Displacement problem in the United States alone. However, my theory is potentially applicable to many countries in which a vocal religious extremist group fighting against secular (and religious) moral values such as democracy, tolerance, and peace. I hope I have shown in my thesis that the religious groups causing the most “trouble” tend to be the ones that have been excluded from the mainstream

society due to the advances of secularization and other liberal values. Unwilling to compromise and accommodate the new secular culture, they chose to form their own isolated communities to exclude themselves from the mainstream discourse, only to come back again in radically conservative and sometimes violent ways. The fundamentalist Christians in the United States followed this pattern of withdrawal and reemergence, and we need to be cautious of similar religious groups that might cause more unrest in other parts of the world.

It is with a good faith that I believe these religious groups, despite their unpleasant or controversial messages, are at least somewhat genuine in their beliefs. I have argued that we should not continue to ridicule their religious beliefs and should instead focus on their social practices shaped by their beliefs. As discussed in chapter one, even the universally disliked Jerry Falwell admitted, in retrospect, that he had to overcome racism in order to become a better Christian leader. By using “reasoning from conjecture,” secular citizens can serve as powerful agents for bringing positive, loving, and transformative values to light through the strategy of reconstructive discourse. Meanwhile, we should remain open-minded that there might be plausible internal logic within some seemingly unreasonable religious groups. For white evangelicals in the United States, the ideological distrust of the government was amplified and originated during the Cold War era at the time when Francis Schaeffer framed Christianity against the influence of secular and socialist humanism. The logic then became intertwined with symbolic and visceral registers during the debate over abortion. By actively engaging their internal logic, we may discover new ways of

thinking that are helpful for reconstructing the secular-religious discourse in the years to come.

Another reason that my thesis is relatable to other parts of the world is that evangelicalism is transnational in nature. We know that American evangelical groups are well known for their charitable missions in developing nations. I have argued that these philanthropic works are indicative of their shared social concerns with secular humanists. Nevertheless, certain more extreme evangelical groups have infiltrated the political systems in East African nations like Uganda to promote their failed political agenda from home. Due to the lobbying of evangelical Christians from the United States, Uganda passed an anti-gay legislation that could put homosexuals to death. According to Roger Ross Williams, a documentary director on the influence of conservative U.S. Christians in Uganda, said, this hateful bill “would never have come about without the involvement of American fundamentalist evangelicals.”<sup>121</sup> How could evangelicals penetrate the cultural fabrics of the East African nation so powerfully? Although homophobia was imported to Uganda during the early colonial era,<sup>122</sup> the country has been predominately Roman Catholic and Anglican – two mainstream religious traditions that would not endorse killing homosexuals despite their conservative positions on this social issue. Thus, it might be worthwhile to study how the resonance machine works in Uganda and how to use the reconstructive

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<sup>121</sup> Tim Walker, "How Uganda Was Seduced by Anti-gay Conservative Evangelicals," *The Independent*, March 14, 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/how-uganda-was-seduced-by-antigay-conservative-evangelicals-9193593.html>.

<sup>122</sup> Donald L. Boisvert and Jay Emerson. Johnson, *Queer Religion* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012), 128.

discourse model to promote a more effective dialogue between the most conservative or extreme voices and LGBT communities.

Finally, we should acknowledge that no matter how optimistic and determined we are to combat political polarization and religious conflicts at home or abroad, we will be facing great challenges, setbacks, and misunderstandings along the way. Let us begin the journey with a heightened sense of hope and a bold vision in a future when the religious is no longer diametrically opposed to the secular; when religious traditions continue to enrich the secular consciousness in meaningful and unexpected ways; and when creative solutions to the world's biggest problems are made possible through a renewed discourse platform that welcomes all metaphysical moral sources. With such a goal in mind, I will end my undergraduate thesis with a quote from Jacques Maritain, an old friend from France who inspired me to look at our world through the lens of the Great Displacement:

*“We don’t believe Paradise is set for tomorrow.  
But the task to which we are summoned,  
The task we have to pursue with all the more courage and hope  
Because at each moment it will be betrayed by human weakness,  
This task will have to have for objective,  
If we want civilization to survive,  
A world of free men imbued in its secular substance  
By a genuine and living Christianity,  
A world in which the inspiration of the Gospel  
Will orient common life toward an heroic humanism.”*

-- Jacques Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy* (1944)

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