God-Talk in a Secular World


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INTRODUCTION

For many cultures, religion is imperceptibly woven into the fabric of life. To talk of a transcendent spiritual realm separate from temporal human strivings for justice and freedom is to embrace an intellectual dualism with disastrous consequences for both the individual and the community. In such cultures, religion gives life meaning, gathering experiences into a frame of understanding without which God’s purpose would be unknown.1 To ask individuals in such cultures to privatize their faith or to act on it only when it has been properly sanitized by secular discourse is to misunderstand the role and importance of religious devotion.2

Thus, a secular culture that decries or disparages the holistic relationship between religion and the rest of life is particularly troubling for those who attempt to take religious devotion seriously, that is, for those who think it essential to work out the implications of religious faith for one’s life and relationship to others.3 Steven Carter’s most recent book, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivializes Religious Devotion*,

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2. See KENT GREENAWALT, *RELIGIOUS CONVictions AND POLITICAL CHOICE* (1988) (elaborating a theory that admits moral propositions based on religious conviction, but only when justified in secular terms).

3. According to recent Gallup research, over 80% of all Americans say they pray to God regularly. Eighty-two percent of those polled describe themselves as Christian (56% Protestant, 25% Roman Catholic) and 2% as Jewish. See *Talking to God*, NEWSWEEK, Jan. 6, 1992, at 39.
is extremely enlightening because it reflects the anxiety and frustration experienced by many religious believers in a secular world.

Carter provides two overlapping explanations for why contemporary American culture trivializes religious faith: the first is conceptual and the second is political. Conceptually, liberalism—given its emphasis on the rational, empirical, and factual—sees questions of religious faith as a set of speculative assertions incapable of rational verification or disproof. Liberalism has, then, a structural bias against religious knowledge. The empirical orientation of the former has deemed the transempirical faith of the latter irrational from the start. This raises an important question that is ultimately left unanswered by Carter’s work. What is the compatibility, if any, between religious and democratic discourses, given the constraints of liberal ideology? To answer this question one must examine where and why the conversation between religionists and secularists breaks down and assess how that breakdown might be repaired.

This inquiry is important because it can facilitate what I like to call spiritual communication, or a spiritual movement towards understanding. That is, analyzing what happens when conversations about meaning break down could bring us into a better understanding of ourselves and others. Words are never a satisfactory proxy for that understanding which is, at its core, transrational and transverbal. The focus on communication, however, can set the conditions for understanding, for allowing the spirit to have its way. To that end, I suggest that both democrats and religionists cultivate sensibilities latent in their traditions, sensibilities capable of moving them beyond the typical sticking points that destroy the possibilities of understanding, even when reconciliation is unlikely.

The conceptual explanation for the rift between liberalism and religion is ultimately unsatisfactory. It does not fully explain why religious justification, “God-talk,” has long been used and accepted in American political discourse, notwithstanding the theoretical limits of liberalism. Thus, Carter needs a political explanation as well to account for the more contemporary trivialization of religious devotion. According to Carter, the religious right’s condemnation of Roe v. Wade in 1973 and the subsequent mobilization against abortion rights frightened many liberals into a reactionary resistance to religious justifications in public deliberation and policy.

I argue that the rift between religious and progressive politics originated in two related historical developments. The first was the disintegration of the old Civil Rights coalition in the mid-1960s, prompted primarily by an unwillingness on the part of white liberals to address the unfinished business of the Black Freedom struggle. The second was the rise of a

conservative white backlash that started in the 1950s after Brown v. Board of Education\(^5\) in 1954 and was consummated by the election of Ronald Reagan as president in 1980. This rising reactionary force exploited the breakdown of the left-liberal coalition. Roe, I argue, was merely a steppingstone for this conservative white backlash, which struggled at first but surged to prominence when conservative Republicans joined forces with conservative white Southerners, many of whom were Christian fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals, to support a national platform that was anti-civil-rights, anticommunism, and anti-civil-disobedience.

The history of the relationship among religion, politics, and civil rights over the last forty years therefore shows that a rapprochement between religion and liberalism will require a fresh look at the role of race in the split between religious and liberal discourse. I conclude that if there is to be a reunification of progressive politics and religion in particular and a greater acceptance of religion in public space in general, liberals will have to recommit themselves to the unfinished business of racial equality. Disagreement over this issue prompted the splintering of the liberal coalition that created the political vacuum exploited by the reactionary forces of the Christian and Republican right.

Thus, my objective in this essay is to explain why both of Carter’s accounts of how American culture has trivialized religious devotion are incomplete. His explanations do not reach deeply enough either into the problems and possibilities of liberalism, in the first case, or the history of the late 1960s and early 1970s, in the second, to be fully accurate. This essay is an attempt to enhance these accounts and to thereby provide a more complete account of the causes and cures of the problem with which Carter grapples.

I. THE CONCEPTUAL LIMITS OF LIBERALISM

The first problem is that liberalism may have conceptual limits that prevent it from taking religious conviction seriously. One might argue that the political theory of liberalism trivializes religious devotion by implying, in countless subtle and not so subtle ways, that religion is irrational and dogmatic and thus poses a threat to enlightened democracy. The increasing secularism of the modern age, founded on a faith in the capacity of human reason and rooted in empiricism, rejects systems of knowledge grounded in faith as superstitious nonsense on stilts, unreceptive to human veriﬁcation or disproof. Liberalism marginalizes religious epistemologies, sequestering them within the narrow confines of private life in the hope

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that the havoc they might engender, if let loose in the public square of democratic deliberation, will be prevented.  

Even this description does not fully reflect the depth of the crisis. Religious devotion is not merely marginalized in the public square, but in private interactions as well. When liberal theory makes "God a hobby" by relegating the implications of one's most important beliefs to strictly private affairs, it not only impoverishes public discourse but private discourse as well. Such a result is unavoidable, since the liberal curse on God-talk informs the sensibilities of an entire culture. Thus, William F. Buckley, Jr. has observed that in his experience the first invocation of God at a dinner party is sufficient to draw undue attention, the second, "sufficient never to be invited again." In such a culture, the person guided by religious faith is like a house divided against itself, a troubled soul suffused with the anxiety of repressing his or her identity, someone compelled to wear masks to escape recognition and disparagement as "one of those religious fanatics." Carter rightly bemoans this splintering of human consciousness and identity, but, as I will later argue, mischaracterizes the genesis of its contemporary development.

Some commentators take issue with Carter's contention that religious devotion is trivialized and maligned by an alleged culture of disbelief. Michael Kinsley, in discussing Carter's book in The New Republic, inquires whether anyone could seriously believe that in America it is easier to be a public figure and atheist than to be a public figure and religious. Kinsley suggests that the so-called "culture of disbelief" would reject in short order a politician who dared to proclaim his atheism. But this observation utterly supports Carter's thesis. While public officials invoke God in speeches, ceremonies, and rituals, the invocation is superficial, more an indication of good public relations than of serious personal convictions. Such a superficial use of God, as a nice bow to wrap around the public official's package of promises, belittles the role of religion all the more. This is safe, acceptable, and totally useless God-talk that undermines the efforts of those who see God as more than a pretty bow to tie around their otherwise secular dialogue and decisions.

Carter laments this development because religion can and should play an important role in any vibrant democracy. As he sees it, the role of religion in democracy is to mediate the relationship between the individual and the state, standing between the two on behalf of the religiously devout, articulating a vision that reflects the deep convictions of a community of

6. This is particularly troubling in light of recent Gallup polls that cite 96% of Americans as saying they believe in God. See Talking to God, supra note 3, at 38. See also Ari L. Goldman, Religion Notes, N.Y. TIMES, Feb. 27, 1993, at A9.
faith—a vision often rightfully in conflict with the vision of the state. Such conflict and tension lead to the best kind of democracy, one in which ossified understandings of the common good are perennially challenged and reshaped by outsiders who apprehend truth differently and who project different visions of society based on their understandings. Nothing is as deadly to democracy as the homogeneity of opinion. This is why, according to Carter, authoritarian communist states make the suppression of religious liberty their first order of business. Religion troubles authoritarian leaders because it threatens to disrupt the existing order; its kingdom is not of this world, and its organizing principles are always ill-at-ease with the conventions and norms of secular culture. At least this is ideally the case.

For Carter, the Civil Rights movement provides a notable example of the kind of cutting-edge and potentially unsettling role religion can play—requiring us to rethink our positions, demanding political accountability, and, most importantly, necessitating a discourse on substantive values and ends in a culture often too instrumentalist for its own good. Too often, Carter reminds us, this is not the role religion plays in society. Far too frequently, religion is uncritical and accommodationist in its relationship to the state. Carter attributes this accommodationist relationship to two developments in liberalism, one judicial and the other legislative.

The first development, the Supreme Court’s interpretation of the First Amendment’s Establishment and Free Exercise Clauses, has failed, on the whole, to take religious liberty seriously. The upshot of the Supreme Court’s jurisprudence is a vindication of the separation of church and self that is the cornerstone of the culture of disbelief. “The vision of the Free Exercise Clause as protecting communicative acts rather than acts of worship or public acts carries with it precisely the message that the separation of church and self entails: you are free to believe as you like, but, for goodness sake, don’t act on it!”

For instance, in the 1990 case of Employment Division v. Smith, the Supreme Court upheld the dismissal of two state employees who had violated state law by using a controlled substance, peyote. While the employees argued that the Free Exercise Clause protected them from prosecution, because the drug was traditionally used as part of a religious ritual, the majority of the Court rejected the claim. As long as the state law was not “an attempt to regulate religious beliefs, the communication of religious beliefs, or the raising of one’s children in those beliefs,” the

11. Id. at 882.
law did not violate the Free Exercise Clause. The Court engaged here, according to Carter and other First Amendment scholars, in a crude reduction of the status of religious practice to that of any other practice, equally subject to state regulation rationally related to appropriate state goals. The Court failed to appreciate how, for many religions, worship and public acts of devotion are indistinguishable from belief, how a Native American religionist's smoking of peyote is synonymous with a Christian's taking the sacrament. The religious practice is inseparable from the religious belief. It would not be satisfactory to tell Catholics, for instance, that while they were free to believe and communicate to others that the wine drunk in Holy Communion is the blood of their crucified Lord, that they were, nonetheless, prohibited from consuming wine as part of the ritual. A regulation of the behavior in such as case is a regulation of the belief. Carter would modify the legal standards to provide that "the state, in trying to enforce a law impinging on the religion's ability to sustain itself, be required to demonstrate a compelling state interest in enforcing the questioned statute."12 Thus, the state would be required to demonstrate the importance of its goal and the absence of less intrusive ways of reaching that goal.

The second development in liberalism that encourages the accommodationist role of religion is the advent of the modern welfare state. The welfare state has cast its regulatory net over almost every dimension of private life, influencing behavior through regulations on tax, bankruptcy, welfare, health, education, and agriculture. Religion, too, is influenced by the growth and pervasiveness of regulatory bureaucracy. While Carter sees the regulatory welfare state as essential to the ordered development of American society since the turn-of-the-century, he wonders whether the balance struck between religions and the state might not have unduly compromised the valuable role religions should play in a democratic culture.

Carter points out, for instance, how the state's regulation of discrimination through antidiscrimination laws might conflict with serious religious beliefs. Suppose a state's human rights law prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual preference. A devoutly religious couple renting out an apartment refuses to rent the apartment to a homosexual couple on the grounds that their complicity in the sin destines them to Hell. Should secular law so easily trump religious freedom?

Suppose religious organizers of the St. Patrick's Day parade refuse to permit gay and lesbian couples to march in the parade. The state refuses to grant a permit unless the ban is lifted, in order to avoid violating laws

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12. Carter, supra note 9, at 132.
prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Should secular law so easily trump religious freedom?

Suppose, finally, a private religious school prohibits, under penalty of expulsion, interracial dating and marriage on the grounds that it is sin, and subjects those who sanction it to eternal damnation. In response, the Internal Revenue Service threatens to take away the school’s favored tax status permitting tax-deductible contributions. Lacking this tax structure would significantly impede the school’s efforts to raise funds. Should secular law so easily trump religious freedom?

Carter is prepared to say that religious liberty should give way in each of these cases, but sees the inquiry as decidedly more complex than the knee-jerk response that welfare state liberalism would provide. That response is something like the following: if you avail yourself, religious believer, of public markets and benefits, like it or not you must abide by our conception of morality. For Carter, the question is one of orientation and approach. The cavalier attitude that reckons these as easy cases, that fails to see how a little piece of democracy is lost every time we fail to take religious devotion seriously, comes back to haunt us in those cases that should not be easy at all, cases like Smith.

Even if one agrees that the liberal morality of the welfare state should override the religious liberty claimed in these three illustrations, there is still the question of how we should think and talk about this process. Judicial opinions and lay conversations about these issues too often nurture an atmosphere of utter skepticism that encourages us to see religious ideals as the antiquated and irrational beliefs of unenlightened drones. Such an orientation blinds us to those dimensions of religious conviction that tell us important things about who we are and who we are capable of becoming.

As Carter realizes, however, religious bodies are often the last to decry such interventions by judicial and legislative liberalism, because they have been largely co-opted by the largess of the welfare state. Religion has grown increasingly dependent on the tax-related funding enticements of the state. Churches and many other intermediate institutions have become “addicted to government aid,”13 Carter tells us, through the funding of government programs and indirectly through a dependency on tax exemptions and charitable deductions. “But addictions carry costs, not the least of which is the sad fact that, in the end, the supplier always controls the addict—something to ponder, surely, as one contemplates how to avoid the trivialization of religious faith in America.”14 The Faustian deal struck between religion and the state is religion’s willingness to abide by the secular standards and expectations of the state in exchange for favored tax

13. Id. at 152.
14. Id.
status, treatment, and access to government largess. Thus, when religions complain of laws that do not regulate on the basis of religious beliefs but that seriously challenge and, many times, undermine those beliefs, the cry falls on deaf ears. The tragedy of the Faustian deal, Carter points out, is that "when one makes a deal with the devil, one must be prepared to hold up one's end when the debt comes due." 15

Liberalism has thus played the role of cultural imperialist. Waving the banner of value neutrality, it has imposed, through judicial and legislative coercion, its own set of values on religious communities whose value systems are often informed by different traditions and experiences. Why is the value system embraced by the liberal state superior to that embraced by the various communities outside the state? The first step in remediating the conceptual limits of liberalism must be an admission that liberalism is a value system competing against other, equally plausible attempts to give life meaning. The second step is to work out a set of sensibilities that enhance the possibility that competing conceptions of community, that is, competing value systems, can communicate, modulate, and collaborate on the collective construction of social order.

A. The God of Liberalism

How do we get around the dilemma posed by the conceptual limits of liberalism? The first strategy is to deconstruct the false liberal dichotomies that deem the values of religious faith irrational and outside the boundaries of the objectively superior values of liberal rationalism. In other words, liberalism must be exposed as but a different kind of religion, with its own presuppositions of faith, presuppositions that are themselves incapable of the kinds of empirical verifications required of competing value systems. If liberalism is seen as a different kind of religious faith, the inherent bias against religion is destroyed, because to sustain it would undermine the civic religion of liberal culture as well. In this way we can establish a conceptual bulwark against the trivialization of religious faith and devotion. How, then, can we describe liberalism in religious terms?

Liberalism conceives of the individual as its own god, an autonomous rational being pursuing its own conception of the good rather than some presupposed common good reflecting the will of a transcendent God. At a theoretical level, then, liberalism holds that there is no common good, only individual goods. Yet, if there is no objective common good commanded by God, how does one objectively and neutrally arbitrate the conflicts that arise from competing conceptions of the good?

A central function of the conception of God for any community of believers is to communicate a set of limits within which human life is

15. Id.
permitted to flourish. The religious limits establish the outer boundaries of acceptable community, prohibiting certain forms of behavior and modes of interaction as sinful and contrary to the will of God. Whenever there is a conflict between the desires of believers, the conflict is arbitrated by the community’s conception of God’s will, understood through its sacred scriptures, spiritual intermediaries, and religious literature. Understood as such, liberalism does not so much reject the need for a conception of God as it does replace the God of religion with its own conception. For liberalism, the arbiter of clashing desires is human reason rather than God’s will. Human reason, however, only has instrumental capacity. That is, it is no more than a tool for elaborating our value commitments. It might permit us to explain the implications of certain values or conceptions of the Good, but it cannot determine what that Good should be.

For example, when Hobbes and Locke deduced their classical conceptions of the liberal community from the individual’s natural right of self-preservation and the natural right to accumulate private property, reason did not command them to focus on these attributes of human nature to the exclusion of others. That was a value-laden and political choice. Had they selected different attributes of human nature, they undoubtedly could have deduced extraordinarily different conceptions of liberal community. Indeed, they could have deduced different conceptions of the liberal community from the attributes they did choose.

Hobbes and Locke were struggling with questions that were fundamentally religious—what is the essence of human existence? What gives life meaning? Reason cannot provide answers to these questions, only a belief system that is willing to take certain leaps of faith can do that. The question of why we as humans should value some things like self-preservation and the accumulation of property more than others is ultimately left unanswered by liberalism’s glorification of reason as an arbiter of clashing desires. Yet even contemporary liberalism, having travelled great distances since the theories of Hobbes and Locke, takes that leap of faith by valuing certain visions of community and certain ways of living over others, often reversing the will of majorities in order to sustain its own conception of the Good. In other words, despite its theoretical protestations, liberalism is not a relativist philosophy that accepts all conceptions of community as equally viable. It clearly values the autonomy of the individual and all that is thought to entail for the individual’s political and civil liberties, as well as the resulting distributions of power and wealth in society.

Within the contemporary American context, for example, the relativist impulses of liberalism are hidden beneath the sacred scriptures of the American Constitution, the spiritual intermediaries of judges, and the religious literature of constitutional decisions. In a sense these become the ultimate arbiters of conflicting desires among those in the secular
community, just as God's will is the ultimate arbiter for those in religious communities. The institutionalized reason of contemporary liberalism becomes its own God, transcending the mundane clashes of subjective desires as it points the way to enlightenment and truth.

Deconstruction demystifies the liberal faith, however, exposing its vulnerability to the same critique it makes of more traditional forms of religious faith. The sacred scripture, the Constitution, is indeterminate. The spiritual intermediaries, judges, are tainted by personal bias, and the body of religious literature, constitutional decisions, protects the status quo. Deconstructing the liberal faith is not an argument for rejecting it. Deconstruction permits us to see liberalism as but another way of understanding the world, an understanding that like other faiths has its own conception of God that imposes a set of limits on human behavior through its sacred scriptures, spiritual intermediaries, and religious literature. The hope is that by deflating liberalism of its pretensions of superiority to religious discourse, the playing field is leveled and the way prepared for a more genuine dialogue between these competing attempts to discern life's purpose and to imbue our lives with meaning.

B. God-Talk in a Secular Culture

Because religious faith is belittled as irrational dogma that must be suppressed by reason, when it does surface, either on the political left or right, it too often speaks with the resentment and hostility engendered by repression and disrespect. The voice is often caustic, uncompromising, and conclusory—a self-fulfilling prophecy of its liberal caricature. In this environment politicians on the left and right, pandering to the repressed hostility and hopes of believers, all too frequently rush to "turn God into a supporter, and with the connivance of religious leaders contribute to the further trivialization of religion"[16] as a legitimate way of knowing the world, of reflecting on, reckoning with, and responding to problems of public concern.

Given the dynamics of liberalism's treatment of religion, we might plausibly inquire whether there is too much historical baggage to ever work out a satisfying relationship between religionists and secularists. While the argument exposing the God of liberalism might answer the theoretical question of incompatibility, the practical question is still very much informed by the realities of history. In a practical sense, then, is God-talk incompatible with democratic discourse? When the believer's answer to why the policy or vision he supports should be preferred over the competing visions of others is because God commands it, most would say there is little room for dialogue. I believe that this is the response, whether

[16] Id. at 16.
real or imagined, that most skeptics hear religionists making to the complex problems of democratic governance. If there is any hope for mutual appreciation and substantive dialogue, this hurdle must be cleared. I will argue that it can only be cleared by cultivating certain sensibilities—in both the believer and the skeptic, the religionist and the democrat—that focus our attention on how different interpretive communities answer the primordial call to give life meaning.\textsuperscript{17}

Let us imagine a conversation between a Christian who strongly believes that abortion is sinful, that \textit{Roe} was immoral, and that abortion should be prohibited, and a skeptic of religion who is just as convinced that abortion should be protected as a fundamental element of personal freedom.

"Why do you favor the prohibition of abortion?" the skeptic inquires of the Christian.

"Because," the Christian replies, "abortion is against the will of God."

What happens next is crucial to the prospects of religious discourse in a secular culture. If our skeptic recoils at this point, repulsed by the invocation of God, perhaps because she sees it as a dogmatic conclusion that can never be defeated or altered, the conversation is over. But if the skeptic refuses to be saddled with the preconceived notions of the irrationality of God-talk and the uncrossable chasm between religious and secular epistemologies, there is hope for the dialogue. Rejecting the temptation to dismiss the religionist's vision because she does not believe in the existence of a God whose will we can definitively know, the skeptic ventures yet another inquiry, "How do you know abortion is contrary to the will of God?"

Now the burden shifts to the believer. If the believer gives in to the temptation to dismiss the skeptic as a lost soul blind to the truth of God, the conversation may be over, or, if continued, proceed with a tone and temper that negates the possibility of understanding and modulation. "I know abortion to be contrary to the will of God," the Christian responds, "because God has revealed through Holy Scripture that the taking of innocent life is murder. He has commanded 'Thou shall not kill,' and thus to support abortion is to be in complicity with the murder of over a million humans a year, a crime against God and humanity."

"But certainly," our skeptic responds, "even if I agree with you, just for the sake of the argument, that an unborn fetus is human life, that, indeed, human life begins at conception, surely not all taking of life is contrary to

God’s will. What of war, capital punishment, and self-defense, all condoned by God in your scriptures?"

At this point the conversation runs the risk of turning into an exercise in biblical hermeneutics. The believer attempts to distinguish, scripturally, the cases given by the skeptic from the case of abortion, or defends an understanding of God’s will that deems all such cases contrary to God’s will and, more or less, equally problematic. Such a conversation is sometimes liberating, fostering a greater degree of understanding. But too often it deteriorates into an analytic and legalistic exercise that further alienates the two interlocutors and widens the chasm separating their divergent conceptions of truth.

What is needed here is an orientation, a predisposition, a set of sensibilities capable of enhancing the possibility of those moments when we see into the soul of another and, to our surprise, see ourselves, not as we imagine ourselves to be but as we really are—finite creatures yearning and struggling to give life meaning. These sensibilities become the means through which spirit speaks to spirit, the means through which disparate experiences and understandings are translated into the language of others. Not that the right sensibilities will produce consensus on such issues as abortion, but the cultivation of such sensibilities creates different people in the process and different possibilities for us all.

As finite creatures in search of meaning, we find or create our God(s)—the values in our lives that we accept—consciously or unconsciously, as fundamental. These values provide the first principle, the uncaused Cause accepted as an article of faith beyond which there is no need of justification, from which the interpretive enterprise is launched and to which it returns. This is no less true of the skeptic than of the believer, and if both could but realize it, God-talk and democracy would find many convergences indeed.

Realizing, then, that both are working with a conception of God and are engaged in a hermeneutic quest for meaning, the skeptic and the believer might see in each other’s positions meaning to which they were previously blind or, at least, unreceptive. The skeptic might acquire a new appreciation for the spiritual implications of a decision to have an abortion for both the woman and the society that approves it. A thoughtful and feeling skeptic might very well continue to support a woman’s right to have an abortion, but with the stipulation that she first participate in some form of counselling. If this makes a difficult situation more difficult, that is the objective, for it helps assure that the decision is a spiritual struggle filled with the kind of angst characteristic of tragic choices.

On the other hand, the believer might develop a greater appreciation for the tragedy of certain choices, how individuals often find themselves in situations not of their own making, hurled into the maelstrom of life by the caustic winds of poverty and despair. Thus, while the believer may
continue to support the legal prohibition of abortion, she may become even more committed to the elimination of the poverty and despair that often necessitate such tragic choices and to the amelioration of the consequences of the choice itself through financial assistance and adoption. The concern for unborn life might expand into a concern for life in general that provides greater common ground between the believer and the skeptic, if not on this issue, then on others.

The particular believer and skeptic I have envisioned here are constructed by the narrative in a particular way. They can, of course, be constructed differently. The important point is not whether the believer is pro-life or pro-choice or whether the skeptic is pro-choice or pro-life; either combination is plausible, and many different variations on the combination are possible. The important point is that we can envision scenarios in which God-talk and democratic talk are not only compatible with but essential to each other. Indeed, not only is it possible to talk, but, when that talk is informed by certain sensibilities, it is possible to modulate one’s position as well, actually learning from the voice once heard only as a foreign tongue.

The possibilities for democratic and religious discourse, thus, hinge on the development of a spiritual orientation that is often missing in religious and secular discourses. This spirituality is, fundamentally, an admission of our finiteness as human creatures. For democratic secularists it is an admission of the limits of rationality. For democratic religionists it is an admission of our alienation from God and of our sinfulness as fallen creatures redeemed by grace. The awareness of our finitude fosters a temperament of humility that often takes us beyond our self-imposed limitations to grasp understanding previously denied us by the arrogance of our self-contained worlds. Movement and change will not always result, nor should they, but different people are created in the process. That, we should remember, is not for naught.

As Carter points out, however, God-talk was not always so foreign to the ear of American liberals. There is a long tradition of left-liberal politics and religion dating back to the abolitionists and progressing through the New Deal and Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. The liberals that supported civil rights for Blacks certainly did not find religious discourse antithetical to the ends of democracy. The chasm between left-liberals and the religious community that seems so natural now is, Carter reminds us, of recent vintage. Thus, Carter provides us with a second explanation, a political one, for why the trivialization of religious devotion in American culture has occurred at this historical juncture.
II. THE IMPACT OF ROE V. WADE ON POLITICS AND RELIGION

"What is going on here in America," Carter asks, "where religion was once thought to be so important that the Constitution was amended to protect its free exercise?"\textsuperscript{18} His answer—abortion. "In 1973," Carter tells us, "the Supreme Court decided in Roe that the right to privacy was broad enough to encompass a pregnant woman’s decision on whether to carry the pregnancy to term."\textsuperscript{19} The decision was like "a cold shower" for many religious conservatives, awakening them to a renewed commitment to civic responsibility:

Christian fundamentalists who had preached for decades that their followers should ignore the secular world, perhaps not even vote, looked around and decided that the secular world was on the verge of destroying the tight religious cocoons in which they had bound their communities. . . . And so the public rhetoric of religion, which from the time of the abolitionist movement through the era of the "social gospel" and well into the 1960s and early 1970s had largely been the property of liberalism, was all at once—and quite thunderously, too—the special province of people fighting for a cause that the left considered an affront. Since the 1970s, liberals have been shedding religious rhetoric like a useless second skin, while conservatives have been turning it to one issue after another, so that by the time of the 1992 Republican Convention, one had the eerie sense that the right was asserting ownership in God—but that the left had yielded its rights.\textsuperscript{20}

I want to argue that Carter is correct to focus our attention on the impact of Roe; it truly was an important factor in the mobilization of the Christian right. Perhaps it was even the proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back. But the shift of which Carter writes actually has its roots in a more fundamental schism created by the conservative white backlash against the gains of the Civil Rights era and the concomitant splintering of the Civil Rights coalition in the mid-1960s. I contend that the hostility engendered by the Civil Rights movement among white Southern fundamentalists and political conservatives around the country needed an acceptable political conduit through which to vent its anger and frustration.

That political conduit was not sufficiently in place to elect Barry Goldwater in 1964, but was by the time Richard Nixon won the White House in 1968. The conservative backlash reached its heights when Ronald Reagan was elected in 1980 and when the political mouthpiece of the Christian right, the Moral Majority, challenged and defeated a long list of

\textsuperscript{18} Carter, supra note 9, at 58.
\textsuperscript{19} Id.
\textsuperscript{20} Id.
senators, congressmen, and state officials in 1984. Roe was a mere rallying point in this wave of counterrevolutionary resistance, a refueling station on the new conservative coalition's march to power. This political conduit was the result of the skillful shaping of a new Republican party that brought together political and religious conservatives in the South and, ultimately, throughout the country. This is an important point, because if the rise of the religious right to power is rooted in the splintering of the old Civil Rights coalition and the conservative white backlash to the movement's achievements, any successful rapprochement between left-liberals and religionists would have to take this history into account. The implications are, as we shall see, quite serious for the future direction of left-liberal politics in America.

A. **The Splintering of the Liberal Coalition**

My basic argument is that when the liberal Civil Rights coalition splintered in the mid-1960s, the political/moral vacuum it left in its wake was filled by powerful and savvy counterrevolutionary forces. These forces were energized by Roe, to be sure, just as they had been energized by the 1962 decision of *Engel v. Vitale*, which held unconstitutional the recitation of school prayers. But the shaping and channeling of these forces had long been underway.

*Roe* cannot fully explain the shift in religious rhetoric from left to right for one simple reason: religious justifications of the decision were readily available to liberals in the abortion debate. The left had always competed against the right for divine sanction. Why did they cave in on this issue? During the abolitionist movement, for example, there were conservative religionists who believed and acted on the premise that slavery was a divinely ordained institution. This did not deter the left from constructing its own religious justifications. During the period of the anti-lynching crusade and the social gospel, there was no shortage of conservative clergy who saw God as a political conservative mandating believers to

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24. For a more complete account of how the slaveowners used religion to justify slavery, see Stanley Morrison, *The Religious Defense of American Slavery Before 1830, 1800-81* J. Religious Thought, Fall-Winter, at 16; Kenneth Stampp, *To Make Them Stand in Fear: In the Black Church in America* 54 (1971). See also Anne Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals and the Southern Order* 1800-1860, at 202-03 (1980) (Noting that evangelicals argued that because "slavery was not a sin [according to the Word of God], the church had no reason to take cognizance of it, and since it was established and protected by civil law, the church had no right to interfere with it.")
embrace the political and economic ideologies of states’ rights and laissez-faire. 25 Nevertheless, many on the left continued to stamp their progressive and radical programs with the blessings of God. Finally, during the 1960s, King battled conservative and liberal clergy who joined in the chorus of detractors contending that his campaign of nonviolent direct action was either against God’s will altogether or at least untimely. 26 This did not dissuade King, however, as his letter from the Birmingham jail makes clear. 

No, something else has to account for why liberals did not construct a religious justification to counter the right’s religious condemnation of Roe. The answer becomes more apparent when we realize that the liberal coalition of the Civil Rights movement consisted of a precarious alliance of Blacks, Jewish and Christian progressives, and the progressive wings of labor, white women’s groups, young white college students, and intellectuals. After the victory of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, all of these groups were posing the pressing question, “Where Do We Go From Here?” 27 The answer was not apparent, and even some Blacks in the Movement, considering the era of protest over, looked to ordinary electoral politics for the answer. 28 Meanwhile, other answers were offered: white students had joined the antiwar protests on their college campuses; white women had become increasingly absorbed by a women’s movement that would be catapulted to new heights by the pro-woman decision of Roe; workers were concerned about job security in an economy of highly mobile multinational corporations; Jewish leaders had turned inward, fearful of the implications

25. See Louis Gasper, The Fundamentalist Movement (1963). Gasper discusses the relationship between the influence of Calvinist theology on Southern fundamentalism and the laissez-faire conception of politics and economy so prevalent throughout the region: Calvin’s ideals for all Christians were “thrift, industry and sobriety, which permitted men to prosper economically without fear of being regarded as tainted by the sin of avarice.” Id. at 4.

26. One white clergyman admonished King for his “untimely” Birmingham demonstrations by pointing out that “all Christians know that the colored people will receive equal rights eventually, but it is possible that you are in too great a religious hurry. It has taken Christianity almost two thousand years to accomplish what it has. The teachings of Christ take time to come to earth.” Martin Luther King, Jr., Letter from Birmingham City Jail (1963), reprinted in A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr. (James M. Washington ed., 1986).

27. The splintering of the liberal consensus in the mid-sixties resulted from several factors, including the dissatisfaction of white liberals from the movement as the campaign shifted its focus to class-based oppression in the North; the radicalization of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and its adoption of a more militant stance calling for Black Power; the shift in the federal government’s attention from the domestic problems of race relations and the war on poverty to cold war concerns; the mounting white backlash against what appeared to be rapid Black gains; and finally, the belief among many of King’s own associates that with the attainment of the franchise in 1963, use of the democratic processes of the political system would secure the balance of the Movement’s agenda.


The split within the African-American ranks of the movement over the viability of nonviolence as a strategy was of major importance. See Louis Lomax, The Negro Revolt 246-47 (1962) (warning of impending violence unless whites responded to African-American demands for reform); Piven & Cloward, supra, at 248 (describing Black masses joining the protest by rioting in the ghettos of several major cities).

28. Martin Luther King, Jr., Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community? (1969).
for their own struggles of the race-conscious rhetoric of the young militant Black groups; intellectuals had returned to their universities to write their histories, thereby certifying the Movement's Dead on Arrival status in 1965. In other words, the liberal Civil Rights coalition was fracturing, even disintegrating, and in its weakened state stood little chance of surviving the conservative forces preparing to take it by storm. By 1973 the coalition was truly dead. There was no response from the left, because there was no cohesive left to respond.

One might argue, in other words, that the liberal coalition reached its philosophical limits with the signing of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. The left-liberal coalition was held together by a core belief that Blacks should be, as King captured it in his most revered public address, "judged not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character." 29 In other words, most whites, and many Blacks, saw the Movement as a means of securing the formal rights of equality for Blacks, their right to be treated like anyone else in the American democracy. 30

Thus, when on August 6, 1965 President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law, many thought they had witnessed the culmination of a second Reconstruction. It had started in 1954 with Brown, a case which tacitly repudiated the fundamental assumption that the Thirteenth Amendment abolition of slavery had meant little, had continued through the 1964 Civil Rights legislation that restored Black citizenship rights under the Fourteenth Amendment, and was thought to be complete when Congress passed a law restoring Black voting rights under the Fifteenth Amendment. What more was there to be done? At least formally, Blacks had all the rights of whites. Wasn't the agenda complete? Wasn't that all they wanted? 31

"No!" came the defiant answer of Blacks in Watts, Los Angeles, five days after the signing of the Act. The uprising left 35 dead, 28 of whom were Black. Invariably, many whites in the coalition found this reaction difficult to understand. Some were confused and others intimidated by the subsequent cries of Blacks who claimed unfinished business. Still others rejected the cries on the grounds that Blacks were being unreasonable and should channel their grievances through the proper political channels to which they now all had access. 32 The response failed to account for the

29. Martin Luther King, Jr., I Have a Dream (Aug. 28, 1963) reprinted in A TESTAMENT OF HOPE, supra note 26, at 219.
30. For an excellent discussion of the limits of liberalism in addressing issues of racial domination, see Gary Peller, Race Consciousness, 1990 DUKE L.J. 758-83.
31. For an extensive historical treatment of the legal dimensions of the Second Reconstruction, see CARL M. BROWN, JOHN F. KENNEDY AND THE SECOND RECONSTRUCTION (1977); KLUGER, supra note 27.
32. A newspaper column by Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, one week after the Watts uprising put the problem this way: "The implied message of the Moynihan report is that ending discrimination is not nearly enough for the negro. But what is enough? The phrase 'preferential treatment' implies
one thing that Blacks in Watts who had always had the right to vote knew all too well—the right to vote did not necessarily include the right to be heard or the right to power and control.

King, of course, never thought that the attainment of formal rights was the end of the struggle. He properly understood formal liberal rights as an important step towards America's socio-economic restructuring and spiritual regeneration. To that end, in February of 1966, he rented an apartment in a Black ghetto of Chicago to draw attention to the nature of this unfinished business, and, in May of that year, he protested against America's involvement in Vietnam at a large antiwar rally in Washington D.C. This shift to a multiple front strategy represented King's attempt to answer the nagging question, "Where do we go from here?" His answer was to link the struggle against the evils of racism, symbolized by the Civil Rights movement, to the struggle against the evils of classism, symbolized by his move into a Chicago slum, to the struggle against military imperialism, symbolized by his increasing militancy against the Johnson Administration's war in Vietnam. This was a brilliant political move. Had it worked, it would have brought back into one fold students in the antiwar movement, white workers in the labor movement, moderate Blacks in voter registration movements, and radical Blacks in various forms of Black nationalist movements.

Why did King's vision of a new coalition not work? One is tempted to state the obvious. It did not have time to work, given the brevity of his life. I believe this accounts for much of the answer. If anybody in American history could have pulled it off, it was King and the Black Church that supported him. Given his untimely assassination, this is, of course, quite speculative. There are arguments on the other side, particularly given the increasing ability of conservatives to discredit progressive leadership through smear campaigns. Indeed, Hoover had

a solution far afield from the American dream. The white majority would never accept it." Hodgson, supra note 22, at 267.

33. If King ever saw the achievement of formal rights as the end of his struggle, he did not see it this way for long. The realities of de facto segregation and the countless permutations of systematic disempowerment made it clear that the subordination of African-Americans was inextricably connected to the American class structure. Thus, true liberation was inseparable from a fundamental redistribution of wealth and power—inseparable, that is, from a sustained social struggle to transform the very foundations of the American capitalist system.

34. For King's analysis of these three evils, see Martin Luther King, Jr., The Three Evils of Society, Speech at the New Politics Convention (Aug. 31, 1967), at 7.

35. For a reading of the influence of the Black Church on King's vision, see Lewis Baldwin, Martin Luther King, Jr., The Black Church and the Black Messianic Vision, in 1 MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., CIVIL RIGHTS LEADER, THEOLOGIAN, ORATOR (David Garrow ed., 1989). Baldwin observes:

It was King's conviction that what black people have to offer this country and the world in terms of values and a worldview is grounded in their experience of suffering—a fresh and genuine spirituality, humanitarian spirit, a prophetic vision of democracy, an incurable optimism, and a way of viewing humanity as a whole.

Id. at 15.
launched the first stage of such a campaign—the selective leaking of surveillance information—before King’s assassination.  

The more immediate answer to why the new coalition did not congeal is found in the events of late-1966 and early-1967. In June of 1966 James Meredith was shot soon after he began his 220-mile “March Against Fear” from Memphis, Tennessee to Jackson, Mississippi. King, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and other segments of the interracial coalition decided to resume Meredith’s march. Near Greenwood, Mississippi, SNCC leaders Stokely Carmichael and Willie Ricks used the slogan "Black Power" for the first time in public, in the presence of reporters who made it front page news the next day.

The controversy between King and SNCC represented some fundamental differences in the Movement’s ideology and programmatic objectives. Black Power raised questions about whether the nonviolent commitment of the SCLC-dominated Movement was justified in an atmosphere fraught with violence against Blacks, a dilemma whose stark reality was typified by the assassination of Medgar Evers and current reports of snipers lying in wait for marchers on their way to Jackson.

Black Power advocates raised unsettling questions about the role of whites in the Movement, contending that white liberal funding and activism had co-opted much of the Movement’s potential to bring about real shifts in political and economic power for Blacks. Many in SNCC found it impossible to continue to preach a gospel of nonviolence and racial harmony. They had been, for too long, on the front line of the white South’s violence, suffering the pain of cattle prods and other abuses in Southern jails during the Freedom Rides, and bearing the burden of verbal and physical abuse during the early sit-ins. Their bruised bodies and heavy hearts now resonated to a different beat—Black Power—the only

37. For an explanation of the meaning of Black Power and SNCC’s involvement with the Black Power Movement, see Charles Hamilton, Black Power: An Alternative, in Seven on Black: Reflections on the Negro Experience in America 134 (William G. Shade & Roy C. Harrenkohl eds., 1969). A great deal of attention was given to the leadership of Black college students who shifted the emphasis of the movement from civil rights to individual dignity. See Lomax, supra note 27, at 42-43 (referring to the psychological “dues” all Blacks pay for being black). For a detailed discussion of the history of the Civil Rights movement and the role of SNCC and Black college students, see Seth Cagin & Philip Dray, We Are Not Afraid (1988).
thing they could see as effectively battling White Power in White America. The rebellions of 1967 sent a clear and unequivocal message that, at least as far as many Blacks in urban areas were concerned, the social-justice agenda was not completed by the signing of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Twenty-three deaths and 725 injuries in Newark, New Jersey on July 12-17 and 43 deaths and 324 injuries in Detroit, Michigan on July 23-30 sent that message. There were other uprisings as well in 1967 that seemed to carry the same message: Jackson State, Mississippi on May 10; the Roxbury district of Boston, Massachusetts on June 2; Tampa, Florida on June 11; Cincinnati, Ohio on June 12; Buffalo, New York on June 27; Cairo, Illinois on July 17; Durham, North Carolina on July 19; Memphis, Tennessee on July 20; Cambridge, Maryland on July 24; and Milwaukee, Wisconsin on July 30. According to a report of the Senate Permanent Investigating Committee, there were 75 major uprisings in 1967, killing 83 people, compared to 36 killed in uprisings in 1965 and 11 in 1966. The Republican candidate, Richard Nixon, was elected president the following year in 1968 on a platform which promised, among other things, to restore law and order to America.

The frustrations and anxieties vented during these uprisings prompted Congressional investigation. In February of 1968 the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorder (the Kerner Commission) said that white racism was the primary cause of the riots in American cities. In prophetic language not unlike Daniel of the Old Testament, who prophesied against Babylonian exploitation and corruption, the Commission read the handwriting on the American wall. The message was clear: America was "moving toward two societies, one Black, one white—separate and unequal." Four days later in Washington D.C., King announced plans for the Poor People's Campaign, a multiracial movement designed to engage in massive civil disobedience to demand jobs and income for all poor people. Meanwhile, the more radical H. Rap Brown had replaced Stokely Carmichael as chairman of SNCC and was developing alternative understandings of the events of 1967. The remedy was couched in race-conscious language and focused on the attainment of Black Power, increasingly defined in separatist terms that called for independent political, economic, and cultural self-determination for Blacks.

The understandable anger and justifiable rage that carried the cry of Black Power to white ears was misunderstood, even resented, by many

40. Black Power was understood differently by different groups using the term. For helpful evaluations of the term, see STOKELY CARMICHAEL & CHARLES HAMILTON, BLACK POWER: THE POLITICS OF LIBERATION IN AMERICA (1967); EDWARD PECKS, THE LONG STRUGGLE FOR BLACK POWER (1971); THE RHETORIC OF BLACK POWER (Robert Scott & Wayne Brockriede eds., 1969).
41. REPORT OF THE NATIONAL ADVISORY COMMISSION ON CIVIL DISORDERS (1968).
42. Id. at 236-50.
liberal allies in the Movement.\textsuperscript{43} King’s genius was that he understood these dynamics and tried, with great love and dexterity, to mediate the rift between Black Power advocates and others in order to hold together his coalition.\textsuperscript{44} The Poor People’s Campaign that King spearheaded in 1968 was a last ditch effort at accomplishing this realignment. As I stated earlier, this was part of a larger design to galvanize a broadly based, multiracial coalition against the triple evils of racism, classism, and imperialism. But King was assassinated before his labor could bear fruit, and his death set off a wave of Black unrest in inner cities that brought the era of the Black-led movement for social justice to an end. The coalition that appeared dead in 1965 certainly died in 1968 with the assassination of the one person on the American scene whose vision, determination, and charismatic genius might have resuscitated it and saved it from its demise.

Finally, the liberal left was in no position to present a religious counter to the Christian right when \textit{Roe} was decided, primarily, because the liberal left was in a state of utter disarray. Its ideological cohesiveness was dissipated and its politics splintered by the three interrelated dynamics discussed above. First, many believed that the Movement’s struggle for Black equality before the law had been won and that liberalism had delivered its promise. They were prepared to go no further for Blacks. Second, groups comprising the coalition turned inward to their own concerns and became absorbed by their own separate causes. Finally, the Black Power movement and violent uprisings throughout the North and West, confused, intimidated, and repulsed many onlookers, creating ever-deepening rifts among former Movement supporters. King attempted to bridge these chasms at the end of his life, but had he lived, they might have proved too formidable even for a man of his temperament and vision.

\textbf{B. The New Conservative Coalition}

I want to argue here that the conservative and counterrevolutionary forces that filled the vacuum created by the disintegration of the liberal coalition were in play and flexing their political muscle long before the

\textsuperscript{43} In a poll of whites who were asked what the term “Black Power” meant to them, the vast majority of whites stated that it meant “Black rules white” while 65\% of Blacks said the words meant “nothing” or “a fair share for Black people” or “racial unity.” See Joel D. Aberbach & Jack L. Walker, \textit{The Meanings of Black Power: A Comparison of White and Black Interpretations of a Political Slogan}, 64 AM. POL. SCI. REV. 367, 370 (1970).

For examples of the reaction to Black Power, see Martin Duberman, \textit{Black Power in America}, 1968 PARTISAN REV., Winter, at 34 (contending that the dangers of Black racism in Black Power are real and not the frightened response of white liberals) and Peter Feldman, \textit{How the Cry for Black Power Began}, 13 DISSENT 472 (1966) (suggesting that those using the term Black Power were engaging in reverse racism and planned to engage in racial war).

\textsuperscript{44} See KING, supra note 28.
1973 decision of *Roe*. More importantly, the same political and cultural developments that precipitated the disintegration of the liberal coalition provided favorable conditions for the rise of the new conservative coalition. When the liberal coalition was divided over the issues of America’s involvement in Vietnam, urban unrest, and allegations of continued racism, conservative Christians and Republicans showed great unity. Playing off each other in impromptu fashion, conservative Christians and Republicans eventually harmonized on certain themes. The tune was anti-Black, anti-civil-rights, anti-Jewish, anti-women’s-rights, anti-student-protest, and anti-intellectual. It was the anti-Black/anti-civil-rights chord, however, that resonated most powerfully with conservative Southerners and largely accounts for the strength of the conservative coalition in the South. Thus, racial fear and antagonism not only explain the breakdown of the liberal coalition but the formation of a conservative coalition as well. This is best understood by briefly examining the dynamics of race and politics in the American South, and the ways Republicans masterfully exploited these dynamics to their advantage.

To begin with, it is important to remember that as Blacks were registering to vote by the thousands in the late-1960s, they overwhelmingly joined the party whose leaders had supported their cause—the party of Roosevelt, Truman, Johnson, and the Kennedy boys—just as they had joined, during the first Reconstruction of the 1860s, the party of Lincoln, Sumner, and Stevens. This prompted a major political realignment among the Southern white population from the Democratic party to the Republican party. The Old South had been, on the whole, a one-party region. It turned Democrat in the nineteenth century as a show of resistance, defiance, and determination never to forget that shameful period where white men stood with Negroes against other white men in what Radical Republicans called a Reconstruction. Indications that Democratic presidents like Roosevelt and Truman were responding to Northern Black concerns prompted many Southern white Democrats to continue to vote Democratic at the state and local levels, where their party could be kept lily white, but not at the national level, where Blacks played a greater role in politics. Meanwhile, millions of Blacks who had left the South between the first and second Reconstructions to escape persecution and had settled in Northern


46. See Numan Bartley, *The South and Sectionalism in American Politics*, 3 J. Pol. 38, at 239-57 (1976) (arguing that the presence and struggles of Blacks in the South have profoundly shaped Southern white identity).

and Midwestern cities, voted and even played a pivotal part in elections at the national level.

As the Democratic Party got Blacker, then, the Republican Party got whiter. Throughout a region often referred to as the Bible Belt, many of these converts to the Republican Party were also religious conservatives who possessed the kind of evangelical zeal which, if harnessed by politicians, could put the South even more firmly in the Republican back pocket. The creation by conservative whites in the South of their own racially exclusive parties to oppose an increasingly integrated Democratic party sent a clear message to the politically ambitious hoping to displace Democrats from power. Republicans heard this message loud and clear in the late-1950s and capitalized on it to their great benefit, controlling the White House for five of the next seven presidential terms. They realized the potential of controlling the House and Senate as well. As early as 1964, a year after the Birmingham civil rights demonstrations, Birmingham's congressional district elected John Buchanan to the House of Representatives as part of the Goldwater faction of Republicans seeking office throughout the country.

Buchanan was thought to be part of an "emerging new Republican majority sweeping the Old South in the mid-1960s . . . white, conservative, and part of the backlash against the civil rights movement."

Buchanan was a Baptist minister who had a consistently conservative record. He voted to remove the restrictions on bombing targets in North Vietnam, proposed a constitutional amendment to permit voluntary prayers in school, and stood by Nixon to the very end. By 1980 he showed some signs of changing with the times, moderating his views on women by supporting the E.R.A., and on Blacks, who comprised a third of his district and who demanded accountability. In 1980, however, he lost the primary to a candidate backed by the Moral Majority. Ironically, the Goldwater conservative was too liberal to pass the litmus test of the Moral Majority, now a key player in the new conservative coalition of conservative Christians and conservative Republicans.

48. See Paul A. Beck, Partisan Dealignment in the Postwar South, 71 AMER. POL. SCI. REV. 477 (1977) (attributing realignment to tendency of young native whites to bring partisan loyalties and racial attitudes in alignment under the National Republican banner); Bruce A. Campbell, Patterns of Change in the Partisan Loyalties of Native Southerners: 1952-1972, 3 J. POL. 39, at 730-61 (1977) (showing how Southern whites in the 1960s moved toward the Republican Party because that party more accurately reflected their attitudes on integration and the expanding power of the federal government in the area of race relations).

49. See Susan Welch & Buster Brown, Correlates of Southern Republican Success at the Congressional District Level, 59 SOC. SCI. Q. 732 (1979) (showing that Republican victories and other political developments in Mississippi were taking place throughout the South during the period, 1950-1976).

At the same time that Buchanan was campaigning for office in 1964 in the deep South, as part of the anti-civil-rights backlash, there were political developments taking shape out West that were of no less consequence for the imminent merger of the Republican and Christian right. In 1966, only one year after the passage of the Voting Rights Act and the Black uprising in Watts, Los Angeles, a retired Hollywood actor was elected governor of California. His masterful use of the media had made him a star first in the world of entertainment, then in the world of corporate promotions, and finally in the world of politics. Ronald Wilson Reagan campaigned on a political platform that was anti-busing, antitax, anticommunism, and pro-law-and-order, positions that resonated with significant segments of the voting public in the wake of the Watts uprising and the antiwar protests of students at Berkeley. California would be Reagan’s experimental laboratory for putting together a package of reactionary programs neatly wrapped in God, Country, and Family. With the guidance of his image-making consultants, Spencer-Roberts and Associates, he would make a reactionary agenda appear moderate and a liberal agenda appear radical. Reagan’s apparently affable, genteel, grandfatherly manner was the perfect bow to sit atop the package that would in November, 1980 be triumphantly presented to the American public, just in time for Christmas.

The emerging conservative backlash was thus evident everywhere by the time King was assassinated in 1968. Two months later, while the nation was still mourning his death, Bobby Kennedy was gunned down during his Presidential campaign. Vice President Hubert Humphrey went on to lose to Nixon, who had quickly shed his old skin of moderate Republicanism in order to appease conservative Southerners, without whom Republicans stood little chance of recapturing the White House. Nixon’s opposition to forced busing, forced integration, quotas, welfare recipients, and rioters, sent a clear message that the counterrevolution was in full stride.\(^{51}\)

So then, by 1973, the racial backlash against the gains of the Civil Rights movement was in place, the lines drawn, and the Republican road map to success on the national political front well established. Much of the Southern religious right had already crossed over to the Southern political right, the Republican Party, by the time Roe was decided in 1973. When conservative Christians reacted to the case, the Republican Party gladly supported the position, lest they lose a pivotal region of voters they needed to reclaim the White House after the disaster of Watergate. It is important

\(^{51}\) Hodgson, supra note 22, at 423-24 contends:

Nixon and Mitchell believed that . . . few average Americans would base their political choice on desire to improve their economic lot. Instead, they were betting that, for the majority of the voters, the highest priority was to save the nation from hippies and black power militants, from drug addicts and welfare mothers. . . . The Nixon administration made campaigning against those four categories of people its highest policy priority.
to note that conservative Christians were on the whole anti-Roe, anti-civil-rights and, by implication, anti-Black-progress as well. After all, they started voting for Republicans like Buchanan, Goldwater, and Nixon for that very reason.

In summary, the merger between conservative Republicans and conservative Christians was already underway before the 1973 decision of Roe. Given the sentiment against Blacks, civil rights, and federal government among conservative whites in the South, the merger made perfect sense. Republicans needed a strong South to inaugurate a counterrevolution against the redistributive agenda of the Democratic Party. Religion was merely a way of mobilizing those needed voters who had given up on politics and were patiently awaiting Jesus’s return. They did not get Jesus, but they got what many considered the next best thing, a long succession of Republican candidates and officials who pampered them and quoted their manifesto, the Bible. These politicians reflected and invented a Republican identity that gave Southern conservatives a political home and tapped their human yearning to belong to a community, a group that respects and validates one’s existence. Unfortunately, the conception of community manufactured by Republican image-makers was a far cry from the “Beloved Community” King had envisioned. Like all reactionary community rhetorics and ideologies, it reflected the hopes, fears, and phobias of the community to the outside world.

The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 must have seemed like the Second Coming, the Kingdom of God brought finally to earth by a counterrevolutionary movement that had been steadily building since the Supreme Court’s decision in Brown twenty-six years earlier. Ironically, the kingdom turned out to be a Calvinistic kingdom of the elect, excluding many who had, with great faith, labored in the vineyard and believed they too would be saved. These outcasts were the conservative white supporters of low and moderate income who had helped bring Reagan into office but who were hurt by a counterrevolutionary agenda that took money from the poor and gave it to the rich through the overhaul of New Deal social programs, the deregulation of the economy, and the tripling of the federal debt.

III. RACE, RELIGION, AND LIBERALISM IN AMERICAN POLITICS

The history of the relationship among religion, politics, and civil rights over the last forty years thus demonstrates that Carter’s emphasis on Roe is overstated. This same history also reveals his inability to see that the reunion of religion and liberalism will necessitate a fresh look at the role of race in the historic split between religious and liberal discourse. Such a fresh look requires a reconceptualization of liberalism’s understanding of race as much as its understanding of religion.
Given Carter's earlier critique of affirmative action, this reconceptualization does not seem likely. In the case of affirmative action, Carter accepts the traditional liberal position that forbids us from acting publicly on "irrational" beliefs based on racial distinctions. To so act would be irrational because liberalism conceives of the individual not as a racial or ethnic being but as a rationally self-interested and autonomous being abstracted from any historical and cultural context. To think of individuals in racial or ethnic terms, ascribing to them attributes of groups, is to display irrational thinking.

If liberals are to negotiate a rapprochement with religion, they must admit two crucial points. First, the relationship between politics and religion among the liberals of which Carter is so enamored, was, at least in the Civil Rights era, almost the exclusive province of Black religious leaders and their followers. As Black Civil Rights leaders continued to come out of the Black Church, they, like King, continued to bring with them the rhythms, verse, and vision, the prophetic hope, and the faith and love engendered by this rich religious tradition. In a sense, then, conservative Christians did not take religion from the left. Instead, the white liberal left encountered the limits of liberal ideology and was unwilling to struggle beyond those limits to secure a radically different conception of community—such as those envisioned by either Black Power advocates or King.

The liberal ideology that accommodated the freedom struggle up to the signing of the Voting Rights Act could not accommodate, for many white liberals, some of the answers that Black Power advocates were giving to the question of "Where do we go from here? Black consciousness, as opposed to colorblind consciousness; violence, as opposed to nonviolent protest and reasoned deliberation; and agendas of cultural, political, and economic independence, as opposed to integration, struck many white and Black liberals as retrograde and illiberal. Nor could these liberals support the direction in which King was moving at the end of his life. Many of these liberals were faithful supporters of Johnson, and thus King's stand against Vietnam alienated them. Many were pro-capitalism, and thus his stand on wealth redistribution and democratic control over the means of production alienated them. Finally, while many liberals would fight for a colorblind society, they abhorred race-conscious remedies—such as racial quotas and preferential treatment—to the unfinished agenda of poverty and lack of opportunity. Thus, King's concessions to the demands of Black Power advocates alienated white liberals.

This argument shows the central weakness in Carter's analysis. The real problem is not the schism between liberals and religionists engendered by

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the Supreme Court’s abortion decision in 1973 or even the schism between religious discourse and philosophical liberalism. Rather, it is an ideological and racial schism engendered by the counterrevolution inaugurated with the merger of conservative Christians and conservative Republicans determined to repeal the gains of the 1950s and 1960s. If liberals desire a reconciliation with those who take religion seriously, they will need to recommit to a struggle of completing the unfinished work of the Freedom Movement of the 1960s. Otherwise, the use of religion in public space is likely to continue to be no more than rhetorical tokenism.

Religion is taken seriously by those who see evil in the world and are determined to eradicate it. The marriage of conservative Republicans and conservative Christians was a lasting one because they were committed to a counterrevolutionary political agenda that brought people together, gave them something for which to live and for which to fight. King attempted to do the same toward the end of his life by creating a broader coalition that specifically addressed the problems of continued racism, the uneven distribution of wealth and power, and American imperialism’s drain on economic and spiritual resources.

The trivialization of religion in American culture is not so much, then, a problem of the ideological limits of liberalism as it is a problem of the limits of moral conviction and political will to face the unfinished work ahead. If that work is ever taken seriously, the integrity of the struggle will build a bridge between secularists and religionists, who, while they may speak different languages, will experience those rarest of moments when one sees into the soul of another and knows Truth.