

Dear Reader,

This issue of the Newsletter every four years has been devoted to the place that religion played in the presidential election. Surprisingly, this year there was not much direct talk about religion in comparison to recent elections. Nonetheless, as in previous elections Evangelical Christians and Roman Catholics were key voting blocs. There are innumerable explanations for Trump's victory, but a case can be made that the votes of Roman Catholics and Evangelicals were decisive. Underneath that vote was mainly the issue of abortion.

The country is split into two passionate lobbies on the question of abortion. Sadly, the majority of the population does not fit in either camp, that is, most people consider abortion a serious moral issue that deserves some regulation. But the majority also thinks that abortion should not be criminalized.

One organization in the cross hairs of the new political arrangement is Planned Parenthood. The irony is that a defunding of Planned Parenthood would, among other things, certainly increase the number of abortions in the country. By far the chief characteristic of women who have abortions is a lack of access to effective birth control.

This campaign as every campaign was dominated by the religion "America" but it is all but impossible to get at this religion because it envelops all conversation in the United States. To the extent that the nation is called America, then discussion takes place in a mythical world where statements are not judged to be true or false but whether they help to make America great. One columnist wrote that the elites took Trump literally but not seriously while his followers took him seriously but not literally. For liberal commentators who fail to distinguish between the nation and a myth about the nation, all their fact checking is irrelevant. The country has always been vulnerable to a showman who could manipulate peoples' feelings of a gap between their present experience and 'America' as it is imagined to have once been and can be again. All that is needed is for one man who will expose the conspiracy that is preventing America from being great.

The essays that follow are especially concerned with Roman Catholics and Evangelical Christians. Gabriel Moran presents an overview of these two groups for their influence on the election. Ross Douthat of the *New York Times* offers a defense of the "religious right," a term used almost interchangeably with Evangelicals. John Gehring presents a criticism of conservative Catholics for their support of Donald Trump.

RELIGIOUS SILENCE

By Gabriel Moran

In the presidential campaign of 2016 religion of the Catholic, Protestant, Jewish variety was almost absent. Perhaps this indicates a decline in religion's influence. In religious surveys the biggest jump and now the second biggest group is people classified as "none." The Catholic Church has suffered dramatic losses in the last eight years. The increase of the Hispanic population hides the fact of the millions who have ceased to be church members. Nonetheless, Catholics made up one-fourth of the electorate and the Clinton campaign badly underestimated the influence of the Catholic vote. Mainline Protestant churches have been slowly losing members for many years. Evangelical Protestants have not had a big loss of membership but they have had an internal division. Jews are generally not addressed because they are so steadfastly Democratic; only 14% are registered as Republican.

One religion, however, played a significant role for the first time in a U.S. presidential campaign. The religion of Islam was a main player in fears of terrorism at home and abroad. There was a continuing complaint by Trump and others that the current administration refuses to use the phrase "radical Islamic terrorism." When President Obama finally spoke to that criticism his defense of the position was surprisingly weak. He said that using the phrase does not solve any problems. Surely he knows that the phrase is unacceptable because it has the effect of drawing a direct line between terrorism and Islam. What would be the response if the news media referred to many of the mass killings in this country as the work of radical Christian terrorism? There would be quick denial that the shooter in a black church or a gay nightclub was a "radical Christian" even though he protested that he was defending "Christian America."

For much of the world, particularly countries predominantly Muslim, America and Christian are inseparable. There is actually good historical reason for this association. America was a term coined in the 16th century with strongly Christian connotations ("the promised land"). The British colonies that called themselves the United States of America imported this meaning. Protestant Christianity until the middle of the twentieth century was the unofficial religion of the country. To the extent that U.S. leaders talk about what America is doing in the world, Muslims understand such things as bombing by U.S. planes and drones as the work of radical Christian terrorism.

Islam quickly became a key part of Donald Trump's campaign. He solemnly proclaimed that all Muslims should be banned from entry into the country (this was removed from his website within hours of his election). Such a policy would be impossible to enforce and is a blatant violation of the Constitution. He later softened the position by planning to ban immigrants from countries where there is terrorism. Although the policy could never be put into practice the rhetoric has already done incalculable harm to the lives of ordinary Muslims in the United States and the needed cooperation with countries predominantly Muslim.

One reason for the absence of religion might be that neither candidate was a particularly religious person. Hillary Clinton is apparently a Methodist in good standing but she is not comfortable talking about her own religious life or religious issues generally. Donald Trump is almost the definition of an irreligious person. In both his personal life and his business dealings

he showed none of the qualities associated with religious belief and religious practice. When he tried to engage religious groups at Liberty University and at a black church in Detroit his remarks were embarrassingly ignorant. When asked what his favorite biblical passage is he said he did not have a special one. On a later occasion, he did come up with one passage: “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.”

In contrast to the presidential candidates, the two men running for vice-president made no secret of the importance of their Christian belief. Mike Pence repeatedly described himself as “Christian, American and Republican in that order.” Tim Kaine, though not as ostentatious about his Catholicism, made no secret of the importance of his religious belief throughout his political career. In contrast to Donald Trump, when Kaine was asked by Stephen Colbert about his favorite biblical verse he recited a long passage from one of Paul’s Epistles. (Not to be outdone Colbert said he too liked that passage but went on to quote from the same Epistle a long passage which he said was his favorite).

It was the vice presidential debate that surfaced the religious question. At the end of their debate, they were asked whether they had experienced any conflict between their religious faith and the exercise of political office. Kaine went first and said that he indeed had had to wrestle with conflict between Catholic Church teaching and his responsibility as governor. Almost everyone expected him to talk about upholding the laws of the United States on abortion. Instead, Kaine described carrying out the state law of executing prisoners. Pence had no hesitation to talk about abortion and his “defense of life.”

In the third presidential debate each candidate brought up abortion in response to a question about Supreme Court appointments. Hillary Clinton spoke passionately about the right of women to the control of their bodies. Donald Trump seems to have no thought-out position on abortion. When he was asked about so called “partial birth abortions,” he passionately condemned them although he did not seem to understand anything about late term abortions (1.3% of abortions are performed after the 21st week of pregnancy). Most of the country disagrees with the position Clinton took, that is, a strong majority think women should have control of their own bodies but they consider abortion a serious moral issue that is not resolved by simply saying “right to choose.” At the least, they expect a different tone to the discussion than defenders of the legality of abortion use.

During the first half of the twentieth century neither Catholics nor Evangelicals made a big deal about abortion even though abortion was common. No one knows what the abortion rate was but there is plenty of evidence that women performed self-abortions when they could not find a physician to approve an abortion. Many physicians were willing to skirt the law and approve abortion for a variety of reasons. There was a physician in Chicago who was willing to approve a woman for “therapeutic abortion” if she asked. He wrote prescriptions that said a woman’s health was in danger from being suicidal even if he had never met the woman.

After the 1973 Supreme Court legalization of abortion, Catholic Church officials decided to take their stand on this issue because they recognized that the 1968 encyclical, *Humani Vitae*, condemning “artificial birth control,” had been rejected by numerous theologians and, more importantly, by ordinary Catholics who had not previously challenged church teaching. The

authority of the Catholic bishops was under threat as never before. Abortion seemed like the perfect place for an absolute condemnation. The issue could be formulated as one that is about “life” rather than sex. There was and is insistence that every abortion is a murder, a position that runs counter to at least fifteen centuries of Catholic Church teaching.

Evangelicals were slow to get on board. If abortion was a Catholic issue, Evangelicals did not want to be closely identified with it. In 1971 – two years before the Supreme Court decision – the Southern Baptists had passed a resolution to support “legislation that will allow the possibility of abortion” for a variety of reasons. It was not until the end of the 1970s that the political right wing convinced newly empowered Evangelical leaders to join with them in opposing abortion. The Catholics were showing that there was a population ready to take to the streets on this issue. Not without suspicion the Evangelical leaders joined what had been a Catholic cause.

The Catholic bishops in 2016 seemed to hold back on public statements. The few who did speak out worked the theme that nothing is as important as abortion. When Tim Kaine was nominated he was immediately condemned by Bishop Thomas Tobin of Providence because of Kaine’s stance on abortion. Cardinal Raymond Burke gave a speech in August saying that although poverty, immigration, and inequality are significant issues, nothing is as important as abortion and euthanasia. He could have finished the speech by saying get out there and vote for Donald Trump. The Archbishop of Philadelphia, Charles Chaput, named Tim Kaine, along with Joe Biden, and Nancy Pelosi, as part of the “silent apostasy,” people who are Catholic in name only. For Catholic politicians, such as Kaine, it is not enough to say they are personally opposed to abortion; they have to profess that they will work to change the law. If they say it is their duty to uphold the law they are condemned as violating church teaching.

Since Ronald Reagan’s time the Catholics almost always voted Republican until in both 2008 and 2012 Barack Obama won the Catholic vote. But in 2016 Catholics, led by white Catholics, voted 52- 45 for Donald Trump. What was most surprising is that the Latino vote was higher for Trump than it had been for Romney. Although they still voted 65% - 29% for Clinton, that was 6% higher than for Romney in 2012.

The Evangelical movement has an authority problem that bears some similarity to the Catholic Church. Of course, evangelical leaders do not lay claim to the power that bishops assume by their office. But there is a generation of older Evangelical leaders who are regularly cited for their views on religious matters. A split was evident between these spokesmen and some younger Evangelicals over support for Donald Trump. Liberty University, led by its president Jerry Falwell, Jr., welcomed Trump and gave him strong support. Many of the Liberty students publically protested this stand while pointing out the obvious conflict between Trump’s personal morality and what the Evangelical movement has always preached.

There have always been some grounds for suspicion about Falwell. His father, Jerry Falwell Sr., was one of the main forces in the rise of the religious right with his organization the Moral Majority. There was little doubt that Falwell, Sr., believed what he preached about morality. The son inherited a nice gig as president of the university. Other leaders, such as Ralph Reed and Tony Perkins, have been preaching “family values” for forty years and bemoaning the lack of

personal virtue in the country. Suddenly these Evangelicals decided that personal virtue was not especially needed for the office of president. In 2012, 28% of Evangelicals thought that a candidate's private life was not relevant for political life; in 2016, 62% held this view. In fairness, there was a shift on this matter in the country as a whole although Evangelicals were the most pronounced in the change; Catholics the least.

Trump counted on Evangelical voters as the basis of his support. It was widely predicted that the Evangelical vote for the Republican candidate would be lower than in recent elections. In the end, however, Evangelicals voted for Trump by a margin of 81% to 16%. As the campaign progressed, it became more and more difficult to justify support for Trump. Appointments to the Supreme Court became the one reason to stay with Trump.

There perhaps was a still a crack that opened in the union of Evangelicals and the political right wing. It has been so customary for the news media to equate Evangelical Protestants and right wing politics that it is necessary to say their union is not a logical or an obvious match. The progressive movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was led by Evangelical Protestants.

Why should the inspiration of the New Testament lead to the right wing's "social agenda" of condemning homosexuality and abortion (not to mention supporting lower tax rates and few gun restrictions). Those are not the prominent issues in the Christian gospel. Jim Wallis, an Evangelical writer who may have seemed a lone voice at times, has long pointed out that the bible has far more to say about care for the poor and suffering than all the sexual issues together. Wallis found some late support from R. Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, who wrote: "How could 'family values voters' support a man who had, among other things, stated openly that no man's wife was safe with him in the room"?

The news media have neglected distinctions within the Evangelical community. The greatest neglect in the stereotyping of Evangelical Christianity is the neglect of black churches. Black evangelicals are usually conservative in sexual morality. Late in the presidential campaign Donald Trump, speaking to audiences almost entirely white, made a show of concern for the plight of blacks in the inner cities. He did not fool many people but he did increase the black vote from Romney's 7 to 8 % and, more importantly, the Democratic vote dropped from 93 to 88 %. The unexpected increases for Trump among blacks and Latinos is difficult to explain except as a reaction against the Democratic position on abortion and "religious liberty."

IN DEFENSE OF THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT

By Ross Douthat

I rise to offer a defense — not a full-throated defense, more of a limited one — of the beleaguered, battered, all-but-broken religious right. We've watched various paladins of traditional values twist and squirm as they try to square their Christian conservatism with Donald Trump's sexual attitudes and conduct. They sought a remoralized politics, a less licentious culture, and at the end they were making lesser-of-two-evil arguments to protect a pagan demagogue from the consequences of his own unbridled lust.

This is a grim endgame for a movement that just a little over a decade ago had liberals fearing its electoral strength and allegedly-theocratic ambitions. And for those liberals today, the religious right's crisis tastes like victory and vindication both: *Those theocrats are finally cracking up, and Trump has proved that all their talk about virtue and character was just partisanship, with no real moral substance underneath.* In this year of general political misery, I don't begrudge anyone their share of schadenfreude. But here are four points to keep in mind.

First, *serious religious conservatives didn't want Trump.* Yes, he had hacks and heretics on his side from early on: Jerry Falwell Jr., Mike Huckabee, various prosperity preachers. But most churchgoing Republicans preferred other candidates; only 15 percent of weekly churchgoers were steady Trump supporters from the start.

The older culture warriors favored Ted Cruz; younger Christians wanted Marco Rubio (Falwell Jr.'s Liberty University voted decisively for the Florida senator); the naïve wanted Ben Carson. Iowa, the evangelical stronghold whose first-in-the-nation status makes every sophisticated G.O.P consultant groan, gave Trump one of his worst early-state showings, while more secular Northeastern states handed him landslide wins. And the Mormons — well, you know about the Mormons. The bottom line is that if it weren't for the religious right, the Trump takeover would have been far easier, the G.O.P.'s surrender that much more abject.

Second, *religious conservatives had stronger reasons than other right-wing constituencies to fear a Clinton presidency.* Tax rates go up and down, regulations come and go, but every abortion is a unique human life snuffed out forever. Hillary Clinton supported legal abortion at every stage of pregnancy; it may not have been a sufficient reason to hand the Oval Office to a man like Donald Trump. But given pro-life premises, it was a far more compelling reason than the candidates' differences on tax policy or education or family leave.

And that's without getting into the legal and regulatory pressure that a Clinton administration would have brought to bear on conservative religious institutions, the various means that liberal legal minds are entertaining to clamp down on religious dissent from social liberalism's orthodoxies. Asking Christian conservatives to accept a Clinton presidency was asking them to cooperate not only with pro-abortion policy-making, but also their own legal-cultural isolation. If you can't see why some people in that situation might persuade themselves that Trump was the lesser evil, you need to work harder to imagine yourself in someone else's shoes.

Third, *religious conservatives were as divided as any other conservative faction over Trump.* Yes, evangelical voters supported Trump at the rate you would expect for a normal Republican nominee. But the religious right is an ecumenical movement: It includes Latter-day Saints rebelling against the Republican nominee, Catholic voters drifting toward Clinton and Catholic bishops who advised the faithful that they need not vote for either Hillary or Trump.

Moreover, within evangelicalism's complicated leadership, anti-Trump sentiment abounded. For every Carson murmuring on cable about how "sometimes you put your Christian values on pause to get the work done," there is a Russell Moore or an Erik Erickson or a Beth Moore attacking their co-religionists for making a fatal moral compromise. Trump exposed the folly of certain old-guard evangelicals, but he also exposed a major generational struggle over what the religious

right should be — one that matters to the country and not just the participants, because *America needs a religious right*. Maybe not the religious right it has; certainly not the religious right of Carson and Falwell Jr. But the Trump era has revealed what you get when you leach the Christianity out of conservatism: A right-of-center politics that cares less about marriage and abortion, just as some liberals would wish, but one that’s ultimately far *more* divisive than the evangelical politics of George W. Bush.

When religious conservatives were ascendant, the G.O.P. actually tried minority outreach, it sent billions to fight AIDS in Africa, it pursued criminal justice reform in the states. That ascendance crumbled because of the religious right’s own faults (which certain of Trump’s Christian supporters amply displayed), and because of trends toward secularization and individualism that no politics can master; it cannot and should not be restored. But some kind of religious conservatism must be rebuilt, because without the pull of transcendence, the future of the right promises to be tribal, cruel, and very dark indeed.

CATHOLIC CONSERVATIVES AND DONALD TRUMP

By John Gehring

Conservative Catholics on Donald Trump’s Catholic advisory committee faced a test of conscience and failed. The revelation that Trump used crude and demeaning language to boast about sexual assault in 2005 wasn’t enough to convince a Catholic priest and others advising Trump to step away from a campaign wading in the fetid waters of misogyny and xenophobia and playing on white resentment. The rationale for sticking with Trump made for painful reading, but it also illuminates how Catholics who worship the idol of single-issue politics damage the credibility of a prolife movement they want to serve.

Joseph Cellar, Trump’s top liaison to Catholics, issued a statement deploring Trump’s “repulsive” comments, but still pledged loyalty to a candidate he argued would protect religious freedom and appoint anti-abortion Supreme Court judges. Fr. Frank Paving of Priests for Life, also on Trump’s Catholic advisory committee, made the same case as Cellar. After describing Trump’s behavior as “repulsive”—at least conservative Catholics are on message with the same adjective—Paving told the Catholic News Agency that he would still vote for Trump and encourage others to do so.

“What an incredible reparation Mr. Trump is making now for any past faults, by the very fact that he is running as the Republican nominee for president, and is ready to nominate the right kind of judges and sign the right kinds of legislation, which will steer our nation away from so many morally corrupt public policies,” said Paving, who advised George W. Bush during the 2000 election and remained an ally through his two terms as president. “It takes a great deal of moral courage, actually, to take the step Mr. Trump is taking by running for public office. He knows his past and knows what will be brought up about it. Yet he is willing to move forward both personally and professionally for the good of the country.”

I will pause as you let that remarkable bit of self-delusion sink in.

Most Catholics across the ideological spectrum would likely agree that priests shouldn’t be endorsing political candidates in the first place. Praising the “moral courage” of someone who

boasted about grabbing women’s genitals and claimed Pope Francis has been used as a pawn by Mexican officials, and who used Twitter to make *ad hominem* attacks, is more than simply tone deaf. It’s the willful blindness required when putting politics and narrow ideologies before the common good.

It’s more than a little awkward that the person who led Trump’s Catholic outreach was on record as describing his candidacy as “offensive to any genuinely Catholic sensibility.” After the late revelations, some other prominent conservative Catholics either changed course or expressed regret for embracing Trump. *First Things* editor R. R. Reno, who had endorsed Trump in his personal capacity, told the *Washington Post* he could not finish an op-ed he was writing about his decision to back the candidate. “It’s not just that I’m jammed up with deadlines, but Trump has hit new moral lows (who thought that possible???) and I’m beginning to regret signaling any public support, as you can imagine,” he said. CatholicVote.org, a lay group, released a statement calling on Trump to drop out. During the primaries, the group argued that Catholics should not vote for Trump, but said he was a better choice for Catholic voters than Hillary Clinton.

Abortion, marriage, and religious liberty—all raised by Catholic Trump-backers in their support of the candidate—are essential issues that deserve a civil debate in the public square. As I’ve argued before, navigating this complicated terrain will require a stronger commitment to finding common ground and lowering the rhetorical temperature on both the right and left. But too many leading conservative Catholics, especially in election years, treat the Catholic social tradition as a formula rather than a centuries-old moral and intellectual framework that helps us discern what a political situation requires with prudence and proportionality.

Trump’s Catholic advisors and influential figures in the church—Carl Anderson of the Knights of Columbus is another—would have had you believe that inequality, the plight of refugees, war, racism, the use of torture in interrogations, and the way climate change hurts the most vulnerable might be important considerations, but that they ultimately take a back seat to abortion and defending traditional marriage.

A certain strain of conservative Catholicism in the United States, shaped by the marriage of political convenience between Catholics and evangelicals during the formation of the religious right in the 1980s and ’90s, is now on life support. The idea that only a narrow set of “non-negotiable” issues define Catholic identity and require Catholics to vote a certain way is challenged by centuries of Catholic social thought. It’s also anathema to a pope who insists that “an economy of exclusion” and responding to the “cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” are not liberal causes, but essential to building a culture of life. They are fundamental demands of Christian discipleship that come from the heart of the Gospel.

Alternative Religious Education, Inc.,
235 East 13th St, 4D, New York, NY 10003

This issue and previous issues of the Newsletter are available at <http://www.gabrielmoran.net>