

## **The Effects of Politicization and Moralism in Religion and Public Thought**

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### **Introduction**

There has been a striking historical feature of American politics concerning religion. In 2006 Andrew Kohut and Bruce Stokes asserted that by any measure, "...the United States is the most religious rich nation in the world. Indeed, it is the only religious rich nation in the world," (Kohut and Stokes, 2006, 103). This conclusion was based on survey research conducted by the Pew Research Forum, and was evidence of not only something unusual in world politics, but also a factor in what the authors identified as a growing split between America and the rest of the world. Meanwhile, six years later we learn from Pew Research that Americans claiming to be *not affiliated* to any religion has risen from 15% to nearly 20%. A third of adults under thirty years of age, and one-fifth of the entire US public claim to be "Nones," meaning no religious affiliation (Pew Research Center, 2012). As fast as the un-churched are growing in the US one would think that religion would have a diminished role in national politics, but even in the face of vast demographic and attitudinal changes, a political culture permeated by religion remains.

"At home and abroad, the United States is popularly regarded as one of the most religious countries in the world. The 'nation with the soul of a church,' as G.K. Chesterton once described it, has managed to progress economically and scientifically without abandoning its houses of worship," (Wuthnow, 2008, 275).

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this condition, but there is a darker element. Within this complex religious heritage and culture there has emerged intolerance and division bred of politicization and moralism in America's recent history. It arrives as a matter of discourse and the national narrative.

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The stories we tell about ourselves have a way of shaping our identities and compelling political attitudes, and this can be corrosive to democratic values. A consequence of politicized religion has been a derangement of both faith and politics in American life, in which both are undermined and transformed into shadows of propaganda and ideological fears.

According to Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, propaganda as a process is socially determined. As they say, "The social-historical context provides a heritage that gives a propagandist motivation and even a 'style' of communication," (p. 361). The subject of religious speech in American public discourse requires that we carefully examine the social-historical context of the propaganda and to understand its effects in light of the social context. After all, the very concept of propaganda was originally as a form of transmission of religious doctrine. Religion has been injected into public life and civil affairs since the dawn of human civilization. How have modern propaganda techniques combined with the special elements of American history, culture and politics to manipulate religious beliefs for political effects? What are the consequences to the polity in terms of not only politics and policy, but the role of religion and the meaning of spiritual faith?

In The New Religious Intolerance, (2012) Martha Nussbaum addresses the reality of a new period of division and hatred driven by fear, anxiety and suspicion. Although more far-reaching in Europe, the United States is witnessing an "upsurge in religious fear," (Nussbaum, 19). For example, Nussbaum details a host of anti-Muslim laws in Illinois, Tennessee, Oklahoma and across the country, that show how fear and anxiety have merged into politics. Fear, in Nussbaum's analysis, is a narcissistic and primitive emotion that allows people to turn real problems that create anxiety, into opportunities for displacement onto surrogates who are targeted as disguised enemies. In the process the targets of this fear are viewed as vile animals, and as outsiders; a surreptitious force bent on destruction. The irony is that driven by the most animalistic of emotions, fear itself, people begin to identify the "enemy" as inhuman creatures possessing disgusting and dangerous habits and beliefs.

Nussbaum describes how America is enduring just such a wave aimed primarily at Muslims. In Europe the intolerance lines up with historically antiquated ideas about national identity, but recent American politics is not immune. Nussbaum asserts a moral calling to provide principles for democratic practice.

Through the lens of science, classic philosophy, and constitutional law, Nussbaum argues that the role of political philosophy is essential and practical, "offering insight" to society so that people can think more carefully. Fear is central to intolerance, and although fear is natural and necessary for human survival, fear is equally base and thoughtless, unleashing dynamics of hypocrisy and persecution of minorities. In times of fear and anxiety, people make rules that are self-serving and arrogant, applying to others but not oneself. Like Socrates, Nussbaum seeks the ultimate goal of living an "examined life" on principles essential to a good life: inclusiveness, respect for diversity, seeing through the eyes of others, and developing the creative imagination (Nussbaum). Nothing underscores the need for this kind of thinking more than the experience of the 2012 election cycle in the United States.

In politics and life there are always the deep and serious questions we must ask ourselves about meaning and purpose. In the search for meaning people have called upon faith in the transcendent for centuries. People have long contended with a fragile mortality. Century after century, humanity struggled in a dangerous and finite natural world we sought to control, while searching to pierce the veil to eternity. Regardless of our faiths there always remains one vital question: will our lives be judged by the commandments we have kept, or by the extent to which we have lived good and meaningful lives? (Kleinman, 2006) The proposition appears simple at first glance. A closer look invites us into the history of how human beings find their way toward the ultimate answers, the meaning of life, and the role of religion in our daily lives. Are the moral and ethical territories we choose to inhabit laid down for us in orthodoxy, law and practice, or is all of that only a guide toward choosing for ourselves the life of the good? Will our lives be judged by the laws we kept, or the way we have lived? Because the proposed question is simple and serious, and because it is a part of American political culture today, it serves as the theme behind the quest to evaluate the role of religion in public thought.

The political distemper has ramifications for our spiritual lives. For example, The Bible itself is a collection of books, each part conditioned by the human experience at any given time.

Ultimate "truth" always contends with the "text" of belief. Yet truth is not an object just as God and faith are not objects.

In our modern context religion has too often become identified with certain behaviors, belief patterns or parties, elites and public figures. How can religion prefer one political ideology over another? In the end, these beliefs, or elites, may not be moral at all, and certainly push people further away from the "ultimate truth." The human search for spirit is perverted as religion becomes enmeshed in political tactics or strategies aimed at winning elections and power. Reducing the quest for transcendent meaning and understanding to a cynical political calculus is a blight on the human spirit as well as the polis.

### **Propaganda, Wedge Issues and Political Discourse**

In the hands of clever political tacticians religious beliefs have been repeatedly manipulated to move voters to win American elections. Otherwise known as wedge issues, propagandists (e.g. Karl Rove, Lee Atwater, etc.) have found ways over the past 30 years to create an alliance between fundamentalist and evangelical Christian believers and the powers of corporate capital. This alliance has been effective. The question is this: does success and effectiveness justify the use of any technique in propaganda? In the American case, the use of religion in politics has had toxic consequences. The practice goes to the borders of moral and ethical accountability; our civil discourse becomes polluted. It is a political conundrum: what do middle and working class white Christians actually have in common with Wall Street and the elites of corporate America? In terms of their personal interests, very little. In terms of their ideological patterns of beliefs, hardly much more, but herein a connection has been conjured to create a certain vision of what it means to be a "real American." The effects of this effective political propaganda tool on that dimension are far-reaching.

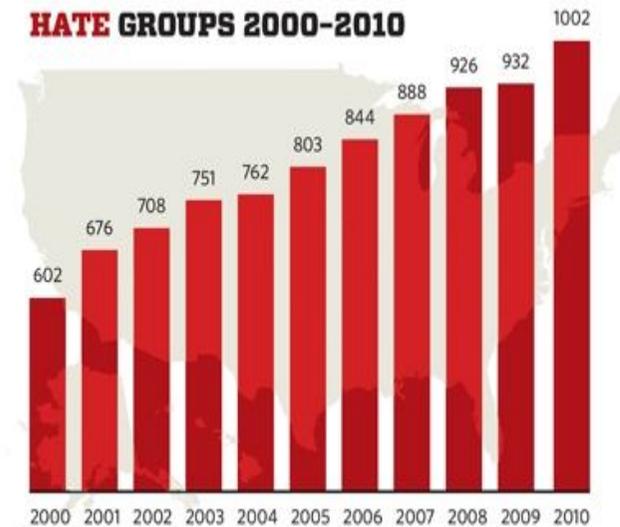
Propaganda as a concept has its roots in religion. The word propaganda is based on the word propagation, as in the propagation of the faith; it means to propagate an idea. The propagation of ideas by means of propaganda is the deliberate "systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist," (Jowett & O'Donnell, 7). In alliance with the formation and nurturance of ideologies, there has been a marriage of belief systems with technique, forging a political machine that combines the passions of conservative fundamentalist Christians with corporate capital.

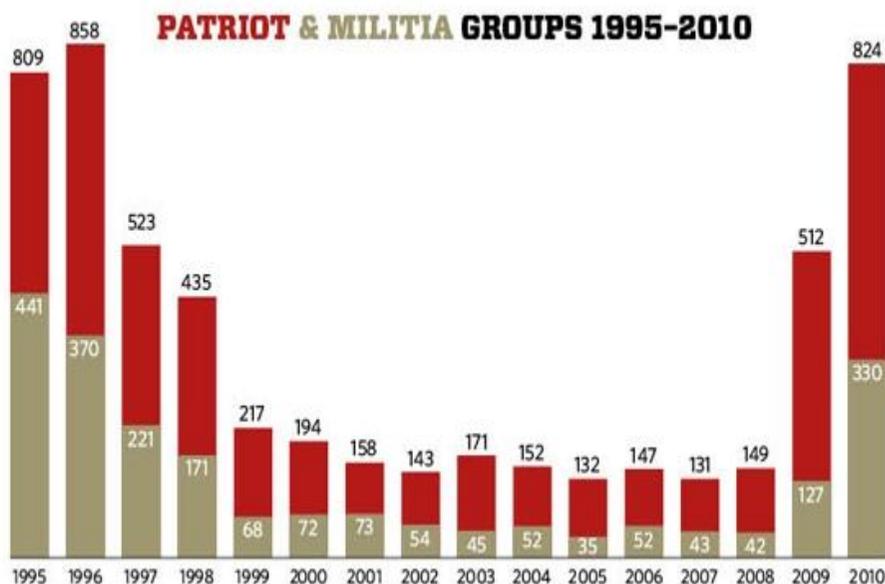
Both propaganda and ideology seek to integrate patterns of beliefs toward a goal. Both narrow the range of discourse, and whether through deception or manipulation, control the framing visions of others for calculated interests, for power, for wealth or to give sustained life to whole dominant social paradigms. Ultimately, claiming that one's ideology has the force of God behind it is ideal for inciting action and demanding exclusive legitimacy.

The fear of religious intolerance had a profound impact on early Americans and the framers of the U.S. Constitution. The modern American ideology asserts that Americans benefit from an enlightened reason that fostered a separation of church and state. In fact, it has become a common-place for Americans to view American society and culture as secular and this common sense world view holds that America is a land where faith does not intrude deeply into politics. It is the belief in that common sense notion of the separation that is perhaps most deceptive. For example, Americans often compare themselves favorably in contrast with Muslim nations, because of a perceived religious tolerance and diversity. The false faith in religious tolerance that most Americans see as a central part of the American heritage opened the door for propaganda to ally with ideology in more advanced and subtle ways. In reality, the separation is under siege at the intersections between ideology and propaganda. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, certain propagandists found a set of cultural tools; wedges that move people. But the wedges moved people away from each other and have reshaped political discourse and the manner that religion enters the public sphere. Ultimately, these propagandists exposed and manipulated the deeply religious culture that is a part of the American political landscape.

One of the results of this kind of political strategy in these times of fear has been the rise of hate groups, especially those with religious overtones. According to a November 2011 posting on the [Huffington Post](#), anti-Muslim hate crimes increased by fifty percent between 2009 and 2010. Recent FBI Hate Crime data showed an increase from 107 anti-Muslim crimes in 2009 to 160 in 2010, (Potok, 2011). Charted since September 11, 2001, when they began to emerge, anti-Muslim activities and hate groups proliferated. According to the *Southern Poverty Law Center* (SPLC) there were thirty anti-Muslim organizations operating in eleven states and the District of Columbia in 2012. According to the SPLC, anti-Muslim hate groups "exhibit extreme hostility" toward Muslims, viewing them as aliens and constituting a "fifth column intent on undermining and even replacing American democracy," (SPLC).

Anti-Muslim groups see Islam as an evil religion, “fundamentally alien” and “irrational, intolerant and violent, and their faith is frequently depicted as sanctioning pedophilia, marital rape and child marriage,” (SPLC). It is difficult to categorize all their effects, but another way to see this is in the rise of militia and patriot groups over time. Below see the following charts from the SPLC which may suggest the tenor of the last decade. It also does not seem coincidental that a spike is demonstrated around the time of the election of President Obama in 2008, often characterized by opponents in terms that suggest he is somehow alien, Muslim and un-American. Three groups highlighted by the SPLC include the *Family Research Council* which leads in opposing LGBT rights on behalf of religious values, the *American Family Association* which claims to promote traditional moral values but has a largely anti-Gay agenda, and Frank Gaffney Jr., who has called upon Congress to recall the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) to investigate Islamist operatives he believes are attempting to replace American democracy with an authoritarian caliphate based on Sharia law. What began in the 1980s as the use of wedge issues to unite the religious-right against Gays, pro-choice policies, Roe v. Wade, “welfare queens,” illegal immigrants and government regulations, has evolved into a growing period of anger, fear and intolerance. Propaganda was employed to manipulate religious values in order to win elections. Today we reap the harvest.





**Some Select Hate Groups; USA, 2012**

Hate Group Name*	Ideology
American Family Association	Anti-LGBT; far-right religious values
American Renaissance	White Nationalist
Aryan Nations	Neo-Nazi
Blood & Honor	Skinhead—racist
Brotherhood of Klans; Ku Klux Klans; etc	KKK—dozens of these across America
California Coalition for Immigration Reform	Anti-Immigrant; racist; anti-Hispanic
Church of the Creator	Neo-Nazi
EURO	White Nationalist
Family Research Council	Anti-LGBT
Federation for Immigration Reform	Anti-Immigrant
Kingdom Identity Ministries	Christian Identity; Racist
Keystone United	Racist Skinhead
National Alliance	Neo-Nazi
<b>*List selected from among 37 known hate groups identified by the SPLC</b>	<b>*List includes anti-Muslim, anti-Semitic, anti-white; and all manner of white supremacist organizations</b>

Source: The Southern Poverty Law Center, 2012; [www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-files](http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-files).

In 1846 Abraham Lincoln once wrote: "That I am not a member of any Christian Church, is true; but I have never denied the truth of the Scripture; and I have never spoken with intentional disrespect of religion in general, or any denomination of Christians in particular," (CWAL 1:382). Lincoln, although a believer, held unorthodox views and never committed to any particular denomination of Christian faith. It has been said that in his youth Lincoln was persuaded by the Deistic views of Thomas Paine. Certainly, Lincoln would have found the misuse and interplay of religion and politics in the political arena over the past 40 years appalling and familiar. Lincoln knew that Holy Scripture and the words of God had been politicized in his times to justify slavery, war, and a kind of barbarity against our fellow human beings that measures well against the worst in human history. In his Meditation on Divine Will, in 1862, Lincoln reflected that, "The will of God prevails. In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both *may* be, and one *must* be wrong. God cannot be *for* and *against* the same thing at the same time," (CWAL 5:403). Even in dark times Lincoln would, in all humility, not allow himself to indulge in the politicization of faith.

The justification for the domination of white races over the Native American, African and Asian races carried forward well into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Each form of domination and oppression was always supported in the eyes of true believers by the Holy Scripture, Christian values and the words of the Prophets found in the Bible itself. The politicization of religion in the public arena has almost never had a decent influence on any society. It is for these reasons that the Founders of the American political system and its constitution erected as Thomas Jefferson famously called it, "a wall of separation" between church and state (1802, letter to the Danbury Baptist Association). In fact, Jefferson wrote in a letter to his nephew in 1787 the following about religious belief:

"Shake off all fears of servile prejudices, under which weak minds are servilely crouched. Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call on her tribunal for every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of God; because if there be one, he must **more** approve of the homage of reason **than** that of blindfolded fear." (Jefferson, August 10, 1787).

Such words from a President stand in sharp contrast to the world view and manipulation of the twin demons of religion infused politics—*Faith and Fear*—frequently employed in Modern America.

The rise of Republican Party power and modern conservatism since 1979 was built on a cynical electoral strategy, energizing the fears and desires of conservative and evangelical Christian radicalism. This politicization of religion as a mode of winning elections may be among the more calculated misuses of spiritual faith in American history. Although nothing new in human affairs, it has had an astounding effect on the policy, direction and the environment in which public discourse takes place. And—even if one should argue that its consequences have been less violent and oppressive, and more moderated by the power of globalizing and secular forces, than in earlier centuries, the bloodshed and the contraction of civil liberties that are associated with its influence, stand on their own as potentially as depraved as its previous manifestations.

In an article by Debra Merskin in 2005, entitled “Construction of Arabs as Enemies: Post 9/11 Discourse of George W. Bush,” the author analyzed the way in which the war in Iraq was shaped by rhetoric, metaphor and propaganda. Merskin cites a September 16, 2001 speech by President Bush given on the South Lawn of the White House where terms like “evildoers” and “barbarism” had entered public discourse. Images of Arabs as evil began to surface in the news media. Here is an excerpt from President Bush’s speech:

“We’re a nation that can’t be cowed by evildoers....We will rid the world of evildoers....There are evil people in this world...Evil folks still lurk out there, never did anybody’s thought process about how to protect America did we think that the evildoers would fly not one, but four commercial aircraft into precious US targets. That’s why I say to the American people we’ve never seen this kind of evil before. But the evildoers have never seen the American people in action before either---and they are about to find out,” (Merskin, 2005, p.130).

Merskin showed that in this speech the President contrasted evil with goodness, frequently expressed in Christian terms. In the speech faith was used six times, referring to Sunday as the Lord’s Day, and the morning on the South Lawn as “this day of faith.” The President proclaimed the “great faith of the American people” and also “faith in our military” and “great faith in the resiliency of our economy.” The President finally summed the dehumanization of the enemy up into a proclamation where he said, “my administration is determined to (sic) find ‘em, to get ‘em running, and to hunt ‘em down, those who did this to America,” (p. 130).

Like animals to be hunted, fired by faith and American righteousness, evil will be conquered by war. Religion becomes political through metaphor.

### **Forty Years of Politicization**

*Politicization* is a concept of particular importance in propaganda and politics. In studies of modern political systems in the 20th century, one of the clearest pieces of evidence that a society was unfree would be found in the *politicization* taking place among its institutions of governance and social organizations. For example, a system in which the judiciary always represented the wishes of corporate elites or the designs of the dictator, or perhaps the platforms and policies of a single political party in power, this judiciary would be said to be politicized. There would be no judicial independence, no sense of citizen equality before the law. The law would serve narrow and carefully defined political or economic interests of great power. Or for example: If we said that the military leadership in a regime had seized or proclaimed military rule, we would conclude that the military had become politicized—that it had now ceased to be professional and autonomous from the manipulation and control of powerful special interests, elites or oligarchic wealth. When civilian political authority has ceased to govern, the military has crossed the barrier between its professional role into the service of exclusive political interests.

Similarly, if certain churches or faiths become the only legitimate churches, overwhelmingly supported by a single party, or dictator, or the military, or its most powerful economic elite classes, we might say that the religion had become a part of the Corporatist Regime, and thus it had become politicized. This would mean that a Church had ceased to operate as an autonomous social organization, and now existed to pursue the narrow interests of established wealth and powerful elite classes or totalitarian political parties and their regimes. The pattern was often seen in Latin America throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century where the institutional Catholic Church became the active captive of dictatorships in Chile, Peru, Brazil and Argentina. To be sure, elements such as liberation theologians resisted those regimes, but such resistance could be deadly, as Archbishop Romero's assassination in El Salvador (March 24, 1980) exemplified. Franco's Spain and Fascist Italy also saw versions of a politicized Church under authoritarian rule. Ironically, this is a common criticism made by Westerners about Islamic regimes, but in reality, this can happen anywhere in many ways.

Politicization as a process means that groups, government institutions, industries, trade unions, or social movements and organizations have become *politicized*, when they have lost their political autonomy and now serve only the narrow power interests of an exclusive political caste or groups within society. When this happens, whatever meaning these human associations may have had, or aspired to, has been drained from them in pursuit of power, or wealth, or both, for select and exclusive interests. In particular, the politicization of religion in a democracy is a special danger to civil freedom and public discourse. Politicized religion in democracy is a serious threat to pluralism, the comity of public good, and is certainly a sign that personal and intellectual freedom is under siege. It has always resulted in a distortion of the public realm, and this is why it has been so feared and resisted by the supporters of separation of church and state since before the American Revolution.

On August 22<sup>th</sup> of 2006, Republican Rep. Katherine Harris told interviewers from the *Florida Baptist Witness*, the weekly journal of the Florida Baptist Convention, that God did not intend for the United States to be a "nation of secular laws," and that the separation of church and state is a "lie we have been told" to keep religious people out of politics. Harris went on to say that "If you're not electing Christians, then in essence you are going to legislate sin," (FBW, 2006). Of course, these remarks were so apocryphal that even Christians within her own Party expressed dismay, especially when she said that our Founding Fathers never intended for this to be a nation of "secular laws." Her Party distanced themselves from these remarks, and perhaps Rep. Harris helped the Republican Party gain some credibility in this debate by giving them an internal target for some public revulsion. Even so, how far away were the remarks of Harris from the powerful league of the Religious Right who have been absolutely essential to the electoral strength of the Republican candidates all across this nation? Candidate Rick Santorum said in early March 2012: "I don't believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute. The idea that the church can have no influence or no involvement in the operation of the state is absolutely antithetical to the objectives and vision of our country." Clearly, even in 2012, there remained an opportunity to politicize religion, and to employ it as propaganda as well as persuasion.

Over the past 40 years there has emerged a Religious Right led by some notable voices and organizations: Pat Robertson (*the 700 Club*), James Dobson's Focus on the Family, The Rev. James D. Kennedy, the Alliance Defense Fund, American Family Association led by Donald Wildmon, the American Center for Law and Justice (also founded by Pat Robertson), James Dobson's Family Research Council, the late Rev. Jerry Falwell, Concerned Women for America led by Beverley and Tim LaHaye, and the Rev. Louis Sheldon's Traditional Values Coalition, among a host of others deeply involved in U.S. elections. These organizations and religious leaders have developed budgets in the hundreds of millions of dollars, and their money, campaign fundraising and influence have been integral to the electoral calculus of the Republican Party. It is a power that may dismay, but cannot be opposed, by even moderate Republicans over the last 30 years. In 2012 Governor Romney as presidential candidate struggled to convince these groups of his loyalty. More important, these groups have benefitted directly from the largesse of the government when they have been in power, and if dissatisfied, easily gain access to the highest regions of government. The words of Katherine Harris in 2006 easily complemented the goals of these groups.

### A Select Group of Influential Religious Right Organizations: The Dynamics of Faith—USA—2012

Organization	Leadership Goals	Estimated Annual Revenue
Jerry Falwell Ministries (dec.); President Jerry Falwell Jr. (2013)	Against separation of church and state; pro-life; anti-gay; etc.	\$522,784,095
Pat Robertson—Christian Broadcasting Network, etc.	Far-right religious and political views; calls separation of church and state the “lie of theft.”	\$434, 971, 231
Focus on the Family (Political organization called <i>Citizen Link</i> ); founder James Dobson	Anti-gay, pro-life; powerful Washington insider; Air Force Academy links; Jim Daly President	\$104,463,950
Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF); Ed Meese and Alan Sears	Attacks Church-State separation; far-right agenda especially geared to public schools; TV-Radio; partisan elections	\$35,145,644
American Family Association; Rev. Donald Wildmon	Anti-gay; promotes religion in public schools; boycott actions; over 200 radio stations; etc.	\$17,955,438
Concerned Women for America (CWA); Tim and Beverly LaHaye	Opposes equal rights for women while claiming to be largest women’s public policy organization; targets public schools for teaching secular humanism; extremely anti-LGBT	\$10,352,628
Faith and Freedom Coalition; Ralph Reed	500,000members in 30 states; active in election politics for GOP—raised est. \$10million dollars; far-right religious values; <i>SPLC</i> Hate Group	\$5,494,640
Family Research Council (associated with Focus on	Values Voter Summit; far-right politics and	\$14,840,036

the Family); Tony Perkins, GOP operative	religion; seeks alliance with Tea-Party; extremely anti-LGBT; electoral machine	
Council for National Policy (CNP); founder Tim Lahaye; Heritage Foundation VP Becky Norton Dunlop is current CNP President; Tony Perkins and Phyllis Schafley in leadership roles	GOP leadership recruitment [e.g. US Rep. Todd Akin (R-MO)]; plans strategy with GOP candidates for presidency all the way to local levels. Membership by invitation only. Far-right religious values; avoids media.	\$1,976,747

Source: Simon Brown, *Church and State Magazine*, October 2, 2012; and *Southern Poverty Law Center*, 2013; [www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-files](http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-files).

More interesting has been the buildup of interlocking and expanding far-right religious organizations across the country, that can find their way into institutions that should by principle and even law remain secular. For example, James Dobson, hailing from Colorado Springs, has created a network that has worked its way right into the officer echelons of the US Air force and its Academy in Colorado Springs. Franklin Graham, son of the famed evangelist Billy Graham and head of one of the most powerful evangelical Christian organizations in the world recently questioned Mormonism as true Christianity, casting a shadow on Mitt Romney. But even worse, at the same time Graham suggested that President Obama has Muslim leanings, is claimed by Islam, and is a Christian more in word than in deed. In her book, *The Tenth Parallel*, Eliza Griswold describes the efforts Graham has made to take his mission global. Griswold had many extraordinary encounters with Graham, including a trip to Sudan, where he was delivering a message to vitalize the conflict between his brand of Christianity and Islam around the world. According to Graham, the confrontation with Muslims is “sharpening the Christian faith, giving it moral fortitude,” (Griswold, p. 118). The goals of the evangelicals and the mutterings of Rep. Harris in 2006 are in fact, very much the same. And yet, when you look at the millions, perhaps billions of dollars these “Dynamos of Faith” can accumulate and generate, it is hard not to conclude that power and wealth are the ultimate goal—despite the ardent nature of the beliefs of their followers.

In the end, politicizing God for power and money is the ultimate hypocrisy, but more, its toxic effect on American public discourse is to trade in fear, division, racism, homophobia, discrimination and xenophobia of a type we could easily find in the hearts and minds of our “enemies” we have called terrorists, or the Axis of Evil, once identified by former President George Bush.

The successful encroachments on the principles of Separation of Church and State over the last 40 years truly began with a revolution in American public discourse, communications technology and partisan politics. Campaign propaganda evolved into the permanent campaign of talk shows, televangelism, cable TV, the internet, and etc., to such an extent that the very images we use to engage in public discourse have been altered. The press media are tempted into establishing the credibility of these organizations, making them to appear as conventional and ideologically “middle of the road.” The Center stepped to the Right. One of the gravest of its political consequences has been its ability to change the way Americans speak—and thus—to influence the cognitions and symbols that define how we think. Thirsty for access to power and stories, the press media builds a frame, and thereafter, a lens to view inside the frame that makes the powerful credible and reasonable. The public “myth” of a “liberal press” cowed journalists into becoming passive, cynical, and less objective as the story always overwhelms critical analysis. When people ask why the Bush Administration received a “free-pass” to invade Iraq, we must always look to the collusion of many forces, not least of which was a press industry seeking to be seen as on the inside and providing stories that attracted audiences. In the process, the commercial interests of networks as media platforms meshed with the inclinations of the press themselves, and the powers-that-be.

According to Robert Jensen, in an essay entitled, “*The Problem with Patriotism: Steps toward the Redemption of American Journalism and Democracy*,” (2005, p. 68), patriotic journalism (as he called it) was dominant after the events of 9/11. Here is what he said in 2005:

“The basic claim that journalists make about their role in society is simple: In a democracy predicated on the notion that the people—not leaders—are sovereign, the people need information independent of the centers of power, especially the government. The larger and more complex the society, the more difficult it is for individuals to gather for themselves that information.

Enter journalists, who offer themselves as the independent watchdogs on power who don't take sides in partisan struggles. In the contemporary United States, journalists claim to be neutral sources of information.

Since 9/11, it has been painfully clear that the mainstream commercial news media have not been, on the whole, that much-needed critical, independent voice and are far from neutral politically. Just as important, the current posture of journalism shows that such simplistic claims to political neutrality tend to undermine the ability to be critical and independent; nowhere is that more evident than in a discussion of patriotism," (Jensen, p. 68).

In the time since September 11, 2001, journalism has been moved significantly such that the issue is no longer whether the press is simply patriotic, but that *patriotism* was symbolically captured by the right and entangled with conservative Christian values and anti-government rhetoric. The claim of press objectivity today is generally false, but with the public not knowing otherwise, discourse patriotism stepped rightward as if alternative policy initiatives were "anti-American." The problem is the closing down of the range of the discourse, which may well be a goal of a clever propagandist, but is harmful to the health of an open society. In 2013 we are watching a reorientation in the wake of Barack Obama's re-election and recognition of changing demographics in the American electorate. To what extent will the press media evolve along with new electoral strategies and world views?

### **Plato, Socrates and Piety**

The problem has ancient roots. In The Republic, Plato presented a discussion about the proper kinds of gods suitable to a good and just city. (Plato--b. 429 BC--d. 347 BC) This part of the ancient dialogue can be, and has been, variously interpreted and misinterpreted—but let's understand it in relation to our subject. Plato's great friend and teacher Socrates was accused of corrupting the youth of Athens, and most important, for impiety, in 399 BC. What had Socrates done? He had engaged in discussions that questioned the validity of gods who engaged in evil, vain and selfish acts, and even in immoral and cruel behaviors, that no one would ever describe as good or just. In fact Socrates wondered in his teachings how a good or just people could ever evolve when their gods were so deceitful and amoral. Here is what Socrates said in Book II of The Republic:

“The proposition that a god, who is good, should cause evil to anyone is something we must strenuously deny. In a well governed city it is something neither young nor old will assent or listen to. It must not be said or sung in verse or prose. It is contradictory, profitless, and impious fiction.... (and) let this be one of the laws and principles in our city concerning the gods to which our speakers and poets must conform: a god is not author of all things, but only of good things” (Plato, Republic, p. 77).

Basically, Socrates asserted that a just society would have gods that are also just, and that the teaching of false stories about the gods, especially to children, is dangerous and malevolent. This was a challenging assertion. Following the great thirty year failure of Athens in the Peloponnesian Wars, Athens struggled through a period of oligarchy, followed by an attempt to restore democracy toward the end of Socrates’ life. This restorationist regime was reactionary, and although ostensibly democratic, its leaders sought to restore old Athenian greatness as in the age of Pericles by some rather familiar methods. They hearkened back to a time where, in their imaginations, Athens was the Glory of Greece. Ironically, in doing so they insisted on the kind of destructive intellectual and religious controls that challenged independent thought. They wanted the old gods back, the great ghosts of the past to be returned, and Athens would be restored on the basis of a return to the Establishment’s definitions of proper tradition and ritual. This was truly ironic because it helped lead not to the restoration, but to the ultimate destruction of the Athenian democracy. Socrates and Plato saw this coming—they were philosophers, social critics and civic rebels. In a particularly telling dialogue, Euythyphro, Socrates’ persistent questions to the man Euythyphro makes him doubtful and confused, when at first he felt so confident in his moral high ground and understanding of *piety*. Plato shows here that the line between self interest and justice is easily crossed when one justifies their actions in the name of piety and the gods. Euythyphro is unable to distinguish between his application of piety to the gods in his own legal case, and an authentic definition of piety in terms of actually doing justice in your life. He is not only self-serving; people will get hurt (Plato, Euythyphro).

Plato puts an interesting slant of light on contemporary American politics. The stakes are as high today as they were for ancient Athens. Americans should be wary of movements or policies which claim to “restore the glory” of America, or to “rediscover the original intent” of the Constitution.

The propagandist in this arena may, or may not have any religious or patriotic convictions. Being a true believer is not required. However, their charm has been to find ways to link Christian faith to ideological patterns that strengthen the hold of corporate and private power in the markets, that foster de-regulation, that undermine labor unions and government employees, that seek to cut corporate taxes while slashing at government everywhere but the military. These propagandists have no real interest in things like environmental sustainability, and ultimately, would sell out the souls of their followers to line the pockets of the mega-rich and powerful. What has happened? Religion has been used to create wedges that help people to vote their most unreasonable fears. The enemy has become "big government," "illegal aliens," the "threat from China," abortion doctors and family planning clinics, atheistic communists and socialists, Black Americans, or Islam and Muslims, or Homosexuals and single-sex marriages, and on and on. It does not matter if the propagandist fears or even believes that any of these forces are evil.

But: the propagandist discovered that religion can be introduced to public life to energize these fears and hatreds, plowing the frightened and ill-informed to the polling stations at election time. The real sad trick is that when their followers say they hate or fear big government, what they are really saying is that they hate democracy, diversity and tolerance. Take a good look at what propagandists want to accomplish with their tactics. In looking back over the career of Karl Rove, for example, we see how manipulation of the Young Republicans as a youth led to a career based on little more than tactical calculations about winning elections. Even so, Rove found that homophobia could be used in Texas to control judicial elections, and the wedge had wider applications, all the way to the governor of the state. As time went on, he was perfectly happy to exploit social issues among Christian fundamentalists, in tightly targeted geographic zones, to wedge voters into narrow electoral victories. This not only led to

Republican success, especially in the Prairie states, Mountain-west, Southwest and Southern states, but it also strengthened the hand of powerful right-wing Christian organizations.

Back in Athens, Socrates refused to celebrate gods that were unwise and vulgar, and he challenged the received religion unto his death. Plato, in exploring this in The Republic, has ever since been accused by his critics of censorship and hostility to free speech.

Such criticisms are unfair. Plato was arguing that a just society must be governed by reason, and it is dangerous to believe that only religious figures may describe for a society its political principles. When Plato invented a new social myth in *The Republic*, to replace the old, he called those who govern for the benefit of the whole society, and not for narrow self-interest, power or greed, “golden men.” Reason, Plato argued, must learn how to enlist the resources of spirit in the business of governing appetite, passion, blind belief and material allurements. Self government fails, Plato argued, when people give in to their appetites and fears. Under these conditions, Reason degenerates into cunning, and the spirit becomes savage and ignorant.

In his day, Socrates’ crime was that he asked difficult questions that challenged the power of the establishment and leading elites—and he did this in their homes, eating their food, while talking to their leading sons. Socrates was dangerous because he urged skepticism at the rampant fundamentalism that he sensed was hypocritical and unfree. Ultimately it was the charge of impiety to the gods that brought him to *the Trial*, where he defended himself with the famous proclamation that “the life which is unexamined is not worth living,” (Plato, *Apology*, p. 49). Socrates was sentenced to put himself to death by drinking poison. Martha Nussbaum centers on this precise problem in the *New Religious Intolerance* (2012). The problem is not just the politics of intolerance, but what it can do to our public realm, dialogue and the framing cognitions by which we view our world. Intolerance requires that we lead “unexamined lives.”

Plato laid out a critique of the kinds of leaders and society that kill free speech, intellectual curiosity and wisdom. Socrates exposed the foul misuse of religion and the gods to support oligarchic power in quest of an imaginary version of the great Athenian past. Plato learned to his dismay that politicization of the gods in public discourse is so powerful that it could condemn and take from him his greatest of friends, his mentor and his teacher. This issue is prominent in *The Republic* for precisely these reasons. God, according to Socrates, would not be changeable and manipulable in the hands of the clever and powerful. God could not be the foundation of an unfree ideology and as he called it in Book II of *The Republic*, the **true lie** that can possess the souls of men without their knowledge. No—God can only be the *author of all good things* in a city that is truly just, and capable of seeking the ultimate truths about the universe and the human experience.

It is a very old story, but it is a cautionary tale for our times. *Politicized religion* in the public square distorts and perverts the conditions under which free speech and ideas evolve. These influences are commonly geared to the manipulation of people's fears and weaknesses, and thus, can only serve to undermine the authentic faith and spiritual journey that belongs to people as individuals—and not as manipulated by politicians, political parties and elites. Their interests cannot serve the interests of an authentic quest for spiritual meaning. The art of the propagandist and the ideologue is to shrink the minds of the audience and to see their enemies as godless and to appropriate the audience's religious faith for narrow political purpose.

### **Moralism in Public Life**

In her great work, *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt said the following:

"Without ...transcendence into a potential earthly immortality, no politics, strictly speaking, no common world and no public realm, is possible. For unlike the common good as Christianity understood it—the salvation of one's soul as a concern common to all—the common world is what we enter when we are born and what we leave behind when we die. It transcends our life span into past and future alike; it was there before we came and will outlast our brief sojourn in it. It is what we have in common not only with those who live with us, but also those who were here before and will come after us. But such a common world can survive the coming and going of the generations only to the extent that it appears in public. It is the publicity of the public realm which can absorb and make shine through the centuries whatever men may want to save from the natural ruin of time," (Arendt, p. 55)

Arendt was convinced that human beings yearn for transcendence—a life that is remembered and meaningful in the common world of public life. The consequence of politicized religion and its encroachments into public discourse is that it distorts the open nature of the *common world* and the *public realm*. This distortion confuses a human form of the eternal and immortal that is (according to Hannah Arendt) a part of free political life. The immortality of our souls, and the faiths we hold in the Transcendent Being, are separate and independent, and in fact, have meaning because they are distinct from the political and public realm. By contrast, in public life we create a world in common for the good of all.

The public arena is where we have the opportunity to engage in political action without being driven by our narrow self interests, religions, gender, race, ethnicity or sexuality. This possibility is what Arendt argued was a path to an *earthly immortality*.

In *On Liberty*, (1859) John Stuart Mill presented the concept of the “tyranny of the majority.” This form of tyranny is among the most dangerous because it is based on the conformance and the will of a majority in society that can exclude by its sheer size and the force of convention, minorities and alternative voices. According to Mill, this tyranny is most difficult to resist without the liberty of thought. As he argued, even the tiniest of minorities, no matter how extreme, must be heard because they may be closer to the truth than those blinded by conformity. Suppressed ideas may possibly be true, and from the liberal standpoint, this means that a democratic political system relies on a free society and education for liberty to be present. Liberty must be built into the customs and world view of a society, so a free culture is even more important than laws or institutions (Mill). The American season of religious intolerance has managed, in a twist, to suppress diverse ideas and speech, and because of the tactical manipulations of propagandists from the right, erected a modern version of the “tyranny of the majority.” Mill argued that to define “appropriate region” of liberty requires that we look inwardly at the human being operating in a system of proper constraints. Politicization of religion distorts the inward view of human beings, and this might be its gravest crime.

Will our lives be judged by which commandments we followed, or by the manner in which we lived our lives in our treatment of our fellow human beings and communities? Will we be judged by how well we kept our religious orthodoxies, or by whether or not we lived as decent people? A republic can be healthy where there is no exclusion, no *tyranny of the majority*, to harden our hearts and narrow our minds. Arendt attempted to address this central question by arguing that when we engage in public life, serving others while sacrificing our personal interests, then our lives become eternal---in this world (if not the next).

The public arena is at times messy, and filled with conflict, but we must not allow it to become distorted by the *True Lie*, or the twist of fear and hate, imaginary monsters, Armageddon, end times, or false prophets out to gain power and wealth.

In Plato's Republic, there may be no concept more powerful than the idea of the *True Lie*. People fear and hate the prospect that we might unconsciously be living out lives based on lies—a reality where we cannot envision the truth. This Socrates called the *True Lie* that can command our souls without our knowledge. The state of religious incursion into our public realm has threatened to undermine the actual virtue of a public arena that allows us to do things that make our lives meaningful *in this world*—that allow us *to define what it is we want to save from the natural ruin of time*. Public, earthly immortality is destroyed when confused by the power seekers who use religion in the quest for political and economic power. Worse—it leads to the greatest trap of all for the public good—the trap of *moralism*.

### **A City on a Hill**

*Moralism* is the belief that what I do is correct and right, because I am morally and spiritually right—and hence superior to my competitors whom I fear and despise as immoral. In politics these justifications often lead to war, genocide, ethnic-cleansing, oppression and tyranny—they always have and they always will. The perversions *moralism* has brought to foreign policy and the beliefs of citizens and voters are the most profound of the *True Lies* that Socrates said men fear above all things. For example, Thomas Jefferson looked at *moralism* from this perspective:

“Say nothing of my religion. It is known to god and myself alone. Its evidence before the world is to be sought in my life; if it has been honest and dutiful to society, the religion which has regulated it cannot be a bad one.” (Jefferson, 1817, p 509).

Jefferson asked to be judged not by his religious affiliations or attendance to the commandments (perhaps for good reasons) but on the basis of a life lived well and in service to others. It is reminiscent of Abraham Lincoln's response to an aide during a period of crisis in the Civil War, when the aide said, “Mr. President, we cannot lose, for God is on our side.” Lincoln responded, “Sir, my greatest concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God's side...” Imagine a President in our contemporary environment showing this much humility and doubt about the place and position of God?

Few images in the American myth system are as powerful as the image of the “shining city on a hill.” This reference dates to 1630, when Reverend, and Governor of Massachusetts, John Winthrop gave his great speech (or sermon), entitled “*A Model of Christian Charity*.” The reference comes from the part of the sermon where Winthrop, describing a community built on faith, hope, love and charity, said:

...(W)e shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies, when he shall make us a praise and glory, that men shall say of succeeding plantations: the Lord make it like a New England; for we must consider that we shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us,” (Holland, p. 72).

Winthrop lived in a time when Massachusetts had an establishment of religion, but the irony is that this establishment was a sign of religious freedom, breaking away and seeking in the New World the freedom to exercise their Puritan beliefs independent of the British Crown and Anglican persecution. Puritan public life maintained control over civil and criminal law as well as spiritual. Even so, Winthrop was already moving toward a philosophy of rule which set a course toward separation of the Church and state, maintaining that the spiritual kingdom left ecclesiastical laws to the Church, but the temporal kingdom was a place where governmental affairs should be the province of civil authority alone. Perhaps even more interesting to us today, were Winthrop’s ideal of the community and his “model of charity.” Hear, as follows. Winthrop’s characterization of our calling as citizens:

...(W)e must bear one another’s burdens, we must not look only on our own things, but also on the things of our brethren, neither must we think that the Lord will bear with such failings at our hands as he doth from those among whom we have lived.....we must be knit together in this work as one man, we must entertain each other in brotherly Affection, we must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of our necessities, we must uphold a familiar Commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality, we must delight in each other, make each others’ Conditions our own,” (Holland, p.79).

Modern American Conservatism has appropriated the iconic image of the “City on a Hill” to justify individualistic capitalism, free markets and American military superiority.

The image has been used as a moralistic device and metaphor for American policies to move unilaterally into the affairs of other nations, and to stand apart from international organization. Ronald Reagan used the image to justify many things, including attacks on welfare, government regulation of the environment, and criticism of the United Nations. One look at Winthrop's sermon, in its entirety, given 140 years before the American Revolution, rejects all of those applications of the image. Instead, Winthrop described a community in which we must make "each others' Conditions our own." To be like a *city on a hill*, America needed to be a place where we shared not only our burdens, but our needs, our wealth and our love for one another. Winthrop's model was certainly not intended to justify the wedge issues of our times, or religious intolerance. Few were as concerned with morality as John Winthrop, and yet his call for "meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality" would be a certain antidote to the effects of Political Moralism. Winthrop expressed a Puritan vision that a life well lived is as important as pursuit of the commandments.

### **The Politics of Moralism: Tea Parties and Propaganda**

Hans Morgenthau, the international relations theorist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who is considered the architect of realism in foreign affairs decried *moralism* and its tendency to make one value supreme over all others. Moralism, he argued, had distorted American policy in Vietnam, and ultimately came to the defense of free fire zones, napalm, agent orange, the strategic hamlet program, the Phoenix Program, carpet bombing, and much more.....and yet, also led to the ultimate failure of the policy. Moralism distorts spiritual faith, and as it has frequently with the Christian experience, had the ability to lead to delusion and violence.

Thomas Hart Benton (in 1846) was a US Senator and a champion of Manifest Destiny and Western expansion in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In a remarkable speech, Benton once expressed the American moralistic vision in his day as follows:

"Since the dispersion of man upon earth, I know of no human event, past or present, which promises a greater, and more beneficent change upon earth than the arrival of the van of the Caucasian race upon the border of the sea which washes eastern Asia. The Mongolian or Yellow race is there, 400 million in number, spreading almost to Europe; a race once the foremost of the human family in the arts of civilization, but torpid and stationary for thousands of years.

It is a race far above the Ethiopian or Black—above the Malay or Brown—and above the American Indian, or Red; it is a race far above all these, but still, far below the White; and like all the rest, must receive an impression from the superior race whenever they come into contact. It would seem the White race alone received the divine command, to subdue and replenish the earth! For it is the only race that has obeyed it..." (Thomas Hart Benton, May 1846)

Far from being the ravings of a lunatic fringe, these beliefs were avidly employed to fire the great westward movement across this continent. Moralism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century justified the subjugation of non-white Races to the civilizing influences of the divinely selected White races. In fact, one might credibly ask, to what extent in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century has moralism induced us to succumb through fear, or desire, to similar beliefs about Muslims, Arabs and those we see as enemies in league with Evil? To what degree has a new version of moralism allowed our leaders to demonize our foes? Does moralism incite us to accept the contraction of civil liberties for a false sense of national security? To what degree has religious moralism influenced our belief that we can, or even have the right, to democratize the world through force of arms? Lee Artz, in *"Political Legitimacy, Cultural Leadership and Public Action"* argued the following:

"Our commercial culture encourages reflection for about three seconds, the average duration of an image in a televised ad. Our political culture relegates decision making to a choice between two similarities every four years. Consumer citizens expect quick answers, quick fixes, 'do-overs,' and super-sized McNuggets of information for easy digestion. In this land of everything for sale, the distracting mantra of immediate individual gratification drowns out the background hum of debt and despair. But this popular culture is a very unstable support for capitalist hegemony, because consent is less about free choice and more about suppressed contradiction and conflict. We may get information about the Iraq war and other topics without any insight, analysis, or explanation of context or relationships, but reality has a way of revealing contradiction, hypocrisy and deceit. Tacit agreement often hides underlying irrational rage, and without sufficient material benefit, consent is fragile. Ignorance may be bliss. Faith in authority may be reassuring. Infantilism may be comforting. But childlike dissatisfaction often ends with temper tantrums, never conscious, constructive solutions, (Artz, p. 19)

The Tea Party Movement and the current political landscape reflect just such a thoughtless temper tantrum as described by Lee Artz in 2005. Should we wave the ultimate finger of blame for toxic politics today at the propagandists, the press media and journalists, American culture or....at the audience? Perhaps the people, the citizens themselves, are as much to blame as the forces that work to control their view of the world. Goaded by politicized faith and a moralistic belief that one is always right, any sort of foolishness is always possible and this, of course, makes those who control the wealth and power of the nation, all the more powerful. The citizens of a democracy cannot afford to be thoughtless (Robbins, 2012).

Back in 1990, a British Political Science journal published an article I had written entitled: "Neither Moral, Nor Majority: American Politics and the Rise of Religious Fundamentalism in the 1980s," (Brunello, 1990). Knowing what I know today, I would amend the title, for the evangelicals I studied back then managed to become a part of a vast political machine, and integral to the political success of a single political party. I wrote back in 1990 that the power of the Christian Fundamentalist organizations would decline, because they could only, "have real impact on American politics... (if)...powerful elites and popular figures in the secular political arena are willing to support their issues" (Brunello, 1990, p. 123). At that time, I considered the long term possibility of such an alliance remote. I grossly miscalculated. The real long range problem is the effect of politicized religious speech evolving a public agenda driven by "moralism." A season of religious intolerance inspired by fear and anxiety is a serious problem, but it goes much deeper. The dynamics of the politicization of religion, evolving into moralism has had an enormous effect on public dialogue and the balance in the political system; it has altered the American political story and the way Americans see the world. The "moral majority" became a powerful minority frequently within a majority and it pulled the nation against the tide of history and demographic change. The Christian right were encouraged and financed by some among the wealthiest elites in America who shared neither their economic interests nor necessarily their social values. The result is a public dialogue filled with toxic anger, mistrust of government and impulses that have slowed the pace of diversity, tolerance and openness. America will be years reimagining a new discourse, despite the fact that there are signs that in time, history will move the nation beyond the religious extremists.

Propaganda and ideology reach their most dangerous liaison when infused with religion. Iconic images and powerful forces that touch our most personal identities are wound tightly around religious faith. Politicized religion and moralism can control wealth, power, elections and public policy, but most terribly it induces blindness, where the faith that ought to inspire love and friendship, instead inspires hatred, fear and anger. It is an ancient problem, but ours is an American problem in a time when the technology and the art of the propagandist is at its fullest flower. We will likely never be free of the calculated and strategic use of religious speech, beliefs and organizations in the public arena, but its misuse and manipulation is something that must be challenged in the public square. Civil liberties, discourse, the republic and even a world of common decency depend on a democratic ability to engage in dialogue liberated from fear, anxiety and distortion. A republic thrives where authentic faith coexists, in tolerance and diversity, with the public realm.

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