

Illiberal Lefties

Michael Sean Winters | Dec. 9, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

[An interesting debate](#), [1] or almost debate, began a new chapter within the Left last week. Jon Cowan and Jim Kessler of the centrist Democratic group Third Way published an article attacking Sen. Elizabeth Warren for her populist economic positions. But, what followed illustrated yet another example of how some on the left have abandoned basic liberalism.

On the substantive issue, I am entirely with Sen. Warren: The "rules of the road" in our legal and social landscape heavily favor the wealthy, creating increasing income inequality and destabilizing the social fabric. It is necessary to use the power of government to re-write the rules. This touches on a quote with which I began this blog almost four years ago. In his "Age of Jackson," Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. wrote, *"American democracy has come to accept the struggle among competing groups for the control of the state as a positive virtue? indeed, as the only foundation for liberty. The business community has been ordinarily the most powerful of these groups, and liberalism in America has been ordinarily the movement on the part of the other sections of society to restrain the power of the business community."* The two principal avenues of restraint have been government power and organized labor and it is difficult to see any other social actors emerging that could exercise such restraint.

Third Way is an entirely worthwhile project, to be sure. They were formed to moderate the Democratic Party and help it win elections by stopping its habit of alienating centrist voters. Today's Republican Party could benefit from a similar group on its side of the aisle. Unfortunately, Third Way, like the Democratic Leadership Council before it, tended to focus on shedding the Democrats' economic populism and embracing the business community, instead of moderating the party's increasingly extreme stances on abortion and other social issues. Now that income inequality appears to be finally emerging as a salient issue, I hope Third Way will recalibrate their stance. If they don't, I hope Warren and her allies win this fight for the soul of the Democratic Party.

But, some of Warren's allies, most prominently Moveon.org which is not really moving on these days but stuck in January 2004, did not respond with a fight for the soul of the party. They responded by calling on politicians who are affiliated with Third Way to disassociate themselves from the organization. Warren herself urged major banks to disclose how much they give to groups like Third Way. I am all for full disclosure of contributions, but the aim here was to discredit Third Way and to curtail the debate. Liberalism, real liberalism does not curtail debate, it seeks to win the debate. Questioning other people's affiliations is a form of smear unworthy of Warren and her allies.

Another instance of the left having lost its liberalism is [an editorial in the New York Times](#) [2] this morning, supporting a suit against the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops because their ethical directives prevented a woman from receiving an abortion at a Catholic hospital. The ACLU is leading the charge against the USCCB. I especially like the concern stated by the Times that in some areas, a Catholic hospital is the only

hospital around. Okay. Let the Times, or the ACLU or NARAL build some hospitals if they don't like out hospitals.

The editors of the Times might want to study a bit of history. More than 200 years ago, liberals embraced the separation of Church & State and the Church originally fought it, stuck in a Metternich mode of seeking to unite throne and altar. In 1990, in the famous *Employment Division v. Smith* case, it was the conservatives on the court, led by Antonin Scalia, the diminished religious liberty and the liberals on the court that championed it. Now, here we are in 2013, and the editors of the left's in-house journal see no problem with the government forcing a Catholic hospital to perform an abortion. Really? And, they link this issue with the USCCB's opposition to the HHS contraception mandate.

I wish to remind readers of an argument I have made in these pages previously. Many who oppose the mandate have cited their concerns about a slippery slope, that if the government can force a religious institution to purchase insurance that covers contraception, what is to prevent the government from coercing us to perform abortions. Slippery slope arguments are always dangerous, but not always wrong. But, in this case, the slippery slope argument actually works against the Church's pro-life agenda. Our opposition to any attempt to force our Catholic institutions or Catholic workers at other institutions to perform an abortion does not rely primarily on the depths of our conscience, an argument for religious liberty. Our opposition rests on the violence of the act itself. No one should be forced to kill a defenseless child in the womb. Yet, by engaging in all manner of histrionics the past couple of years about the mandate, I fear the USCCB has unintentionally left us less able to combat the cultural winds in which the Times and the ACLU dare not stand up to NARAL or Planned Parenthood, even if it means sacrificing the historic commitments of liberalism on Church-State issues.

There are other examples, of course. Speech codes on college campuses are a direct assault on freedom of speech, a freedom that liberals historically champion. But, heaven forbid if someone somewhere says something that is hurtful to another. Universities, like political parties and newspapers, exist to debate ideas, not to keep people's feelings from being hurt. Liberalism, and here I mean the liberalism that characterizes all American political discourse, the sense in which the Constitution is a foundational expression of liberal ideals, is principled, not sentimental, it engages politics, not psychology, and it is for people who champion human rights and dignity, not people who resort to smears in politics and speech codes in universities and who blithely ignore the First Amendment. One has come to expect such foolishness from Moveon.org. Sadly, the modern academy has been dabbling in such foolishness for decades. And, now, such foolishness is ensconced at the Times. This is a sad time for a true liberal.

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[1] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2013/12/05/what-you-missed-in-the-elizabeth-warren-vs-third-way-battle/>

[2] http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/09/opinion/when-bishops-direct-medical-care.html?nl=todaysheadlines&emc=edit_th_20131209&_r=0