

The Religio-Political Estuary

Michael Sean Winters | Jan. 3, 2014 Distinctly Catholic

In recent days, we have looked at the year just past, and the year just beginning, in the life of the Church and in the world of politics. Today, to close out the series, let's look at the estuary where politics and religion come together.

The other day, [Dana Milbank had a column](#) [1] about a recent Pew survey that showed that 48 percent of Republicans do not hold to the theory of evolution against 43 percent who do. He writes, "That's an 11-percentage-point swing from just four years ago when 54 percent believed in evolution." Meanwhile, among the population at large, the numbers of those who credit or deny Darwin's theory have remained relatively stable.

Before proceeding, let me chastise Mr. Milbank, who is a wonderful wordsmith, for an improper word choice, one that is no less misguided because it is so common. No one, repeat no one, "believes" in evolution. Evolution is a scientific theory, and when one accepts a scientific theory, that acceptance is based on an assessment of facts, brought together into a theory, and the ability of the theory to explain those facts. It is not based, as belief is, on things unseen. The distinction is not a semantic one. But, let us proceed.

What to make of this finding? Here is Milbank's take:

Given the stability of views on evolution ([Gallup polling](#)[2] has found responses essentially the same over the past quarter-century), it's unlikely that large numbers of Republicans actually changed their beliefs. More likely is that the type of people willing to identify themselves as Republicans increasingly tend to be a narrow group of conservatives who believe in a literal interpretation of the Bible ? or partisans who regard evolution as a political question rather than one of science.

This is exactly right. The Republican Party today is increasingly the evangelical church at the polling place, to flip a phrase about the Anglican Church being the Tory party at prayer.

In the introduction to my biography of the Rev. Jerry Falwell, I noted that he achieved many things. He galvanized a new group of voters, white evangelicals, who had previously stayed away from politics and got them registered to vote, tapped into his existing religious networks to inform them, and organized and encouraged them to become a political force. Whether you think the results of evangelical political involvement good or bad, there is no denying Falwell's achievement. But, in so doing, he did something else. Falwell and the voters he energized brought with them a world view, a mindset, a weltanschauung, that we know as fundamentalism. That mindset, allergic to ambiguity, distrustful of scientific methods and conclusions, and most of all, seized with the psychological and theological sense that they were embattled. That fundamentalist cast of mind was extended from theological questions to political ones. Now, for many Republicans, it is not an article of political commitment, still less of sociological data, but an article of faith that if you raise the minimum

wage, you will increase unemployment, or that welfare programs encourage dependency, or that taxes should always be cut.

It is difficult for younger Americans to recognize what a sea change in the religio-political estuary Falwell engineered. He was everywhere, not only in his own vast communications empire, but on *Nightline* and *The Phil Donohue Show* and he was on these shows all the time. Falwell was a great guest, blunt, controversial, engaging. He became the face of religion in America. My young friends at the online journal *Millennial* tell me that for their generation, George W. Bush was the face of religion. Yikes! Of course, one measure of the success of Falwell was that by 2000, when Bush ran for president, the line between politician and preacher was pretty blurry.

Falwell was not the first minister of the Gospel to blur the line. The Rev. Robert Drinan, S.J. was a member of Congress, after all, and he was wrong to run and wrong to serve. The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. had been the most prominent religious leader in the public sphere, but majority white America pigeon-holed him as a civil rights leader, failing to grapple with the fact that he was not only freeing black Americans from the chains of Jim Crow, he was freeing white segregationists from Jim Crow too. William Jennings Bryan was as much preacher as politician in his day. The line between politics and religion has never been a line at all, certainly not a bright one.

Causality is a difficult thing to prove, but it is a fact that the first appreciable rise in the number of people who decline to identify themselves with any religious preference, the "nones," began in the wake of Falwell's Moral Majority. If he was the face of religion, many people, especially many young people, preferred not to join his club.

Sadly, many conservative Catholics picked up the fundamentalist narrative, or large chunks of it, and imported that narrative into the Catholic tradition. They, too, began to evidence a sense of being threatened by the forces of secularism. They, like Falwell, agreed to slide halfway down the secularist slope, allowing religion to be reduced to ethics in the public square. (For Catholics, this did not require reducing every issue to biblical fundamentalism but to a Natural Law syllogism, equally impervious to experience.) They, too, became intellectually sloppy, condemning secularism, but not the materialist impulses of capitalism that made secularism the default attitude of so many millions of Americans. The "collapse of the culture," and there were signs of collapse to be sure, were always somebody else's fault, usually the "elites" in the media and the academy. This gloomy worldview evidenced, among other things, an utter lack of hope and, ultimately, a want of faith, at least a want of Christian faith. As C. J. Reid pointed out, in what was the best meme of 2013, Catholic conservatives, especially in their response to Pope Francis, seem locked in the role of the older son in the Parable of the Prodigal. The older son was not a bad person. His understanding of justice was not wrong. But, he did not grasp the Gospel.

Which brings me to [the article I mentioned yesterday by Rabbi Eric Yoffie](#) [3]. Unlike our Natural Law experts, Yoffie recognizes a deep truth in the American character and, I would suggest, a universal attribute of the human species: People are always hungry for the transcendent. The "Francis Phenomenon" is not merely the result of the new pope's engaging personality or his ability to turn a phrase, it is the result of a latent yearning in the human breast, especially among the young. Pope Francis has tapped into that yearning in a way previous religious leaders have not in large part because of his authenticity, and authenticity is something young people value enormously, perhaps excessively in my estimation but that is an argument for another day.

This authenticity is seen in the way the pope lives his life, and how that coheres with what he preaches, to be sure. But, there is something else at work, the pope's willingness, in word and deed, to confront the materialism of the age head-on and comprehensively. Falwell was no materialist, but he would never condemn the materialism of modern capitalism or, for that matter, anything about his idealized understanding of America.

Too many Catholic prelates were ? and are ? too fond of their limos and their nice houses and their cufflinks to make the case against materialism with the clarity and authenticity that the pope has demonstrated.

It is true, as conservatives never tire of pointing out, that ours is a secular age. It is true, too, that sometimes secularism is hostile to religion although, for most people, I think it is neglect not hostility that is the root of the matter. But, what conservative Christians fail to note is that it is the unprecedented materialism of our era that has made secularism, a forgetfulness of God, the default worldview in our time.

The other day, my washing machine broke. The thought occurred that when my mother was born, no one had a washing machine in their home. Or a vacuum. Or a host of other amenities to which we have become attached and upon which we have become dependent. In the last half of the 20th century, there was an unprecedented onslaught of stuff, really the first time in history that the average family could expect to enjoy such amenities. I grew up in a world of plenty.

Mind you, I like my washing machine and am delighted it was fixed yesterday. But, I do not believe my washing machine yields happiness. It yields clean clothes, no less and no more. But, we have just passed through the season of Advent, corrupted into the season of commercialized Christmas, in which any and all manner of stuff was proffered to us on the television set and in the pages of our newspapers and everywhere, promising that happiness awaited anyone who bought this trinket or that bauble. The materialism of our age was not oppressive because of Ivy League atheists. It was oppressive because it was, and is, everywhere and because we teach our children at a very early age that happiness can be found amidst the stuff.

We Catholics are not Gnostics. We do not begrudge or devalue the mundane and material world. But, what Pope Francis has done, in full continuity with his predecessors but with a simplicity and accessibility we have not seen before, is to remind us that real freedom and genuine happiness await us when we get past the stuff, re-orient our values and our desires to what endures, not what requires a repairman, or, better, to see in the Church and in Christ who dwells therein, the repairman for those things in our lives that are fractured in spiritual ways, those things in our lives that are stained by sin, those things in our lives that are filled with ego and, just so, impervious to grace. Jesus Christ is the Maytag repairman for the human heart. The Church is, as Pope Francis memorably said, a field hospital. And, by becoming the new face of Christianity in our culture, Pope Francis is overturning the Falwell image and the conservative Catholic image, the ?angry God? obsessed with ?small-minded rules? and preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the mercy and love of the Father, the surprise of the Prodigal. And, guess what? Young people love it.

This is the dominant change in the estuary this year. Pope Francis has, without even trying, destroyed the dominant narrative of the most prominent Christian voices in America, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, the gloom and doom narrative that told us we Christians were embattled in a secular age and, really, without hope, and that we should start preparing for martyrdom. In nine months, Pope Francis has shown us the deeper truth: The materialism of the world is easily conquered whenever we encounter a broken heart with the love of Jesus Christ. And, nowhere will we find this truth more obvious and more en fleshed than when we reach out to the poor and encounter them and their lives. This is the new face of Christianity in America, and around the world, not the Becket Fund litigation or the sermons of Falwell?s heirs or the grumpiness at EWTN. And, with Francis leading the way, I do not think secularism stands a prayer.

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[1] http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/dana-milbank-the-gops-darwinism/2013/12/31/60c86524-7264-11e3-8def-a33011492df2_story.html

[2] <http://www.gallup.com/poll/21814/evolution-creationism-intelligent-design.aspx>

[3] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rabbi-eric-h-yoffie/the-frances-phenomenon-and-americas-yearning-for-values-leadership-and-god_b_4521504.html