

Where is the Other Side? Explanations for the Failure of Liberal Religious "Moral Values."

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Despite recent accession to media star status by progressive evangelical Jim Wallis, liberal religious voices have been largely absent from the national debate about religiously inspired "values," leaving the definition of these values solely in the hands of religious conservatives. This of course has not always been the case as before the 1980s the liberal to moderate religious voices dominated the public sphere, and were evident in liberal movements such as the civil rights movement, the movement for legal abortion and the anti-Vietnam War movement. The relative size of conservative and liberal institutions is not an explanation of this lack of a voice, because while liberal religious institutions and denominations are smaller than their conservative counterparts, they are not of qualitatively different magnitude. Moreover, they have in principle greater cultural power in that elected officials and other societal elites are still disproportionately from these liberal traditions.

This paper will begin with defining who is a religious liberal, and the institutions they inhabit. I will continue with descriptions of the "moral values" and the policy positions those lead to of the liberal religious communities on both the institutional and individual level. For example, I will briefly cover the positions of the justice ministries of the mainline denominations, and use public opinion data to show the views of the average member of these religious groups. For data on the positions of these institutions I will use the publications of these ministries, as well as the few special purpose groups on the liberal side, such as the Interfaith Alliance, the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, the National Council of Churches and Americans United for the Separation of Church and State. For public opinion data I will use the General Social Survey as well as the survey conducted for use in The Quiet Hand of God: Faith Based Activism and the Public Role of Mainline Protestantism.

The bulk of the paper will examine various explanations for the inability of the religious left to have much of any influence on the "moral values" debate. A definitive answer to this question is probably beyond the abilities of social science, and to come close would require a multi-year research effort. That effort is therefore beyond the scope of this essay, although existing data can be used at some junctures. What I will do is to clarify the question by first discussing who would be the entity or persons to act for the liberal religious communities. Subsequent to this effort I will lay out the contending explanations and review the existing research that can help us understand which of these contending explanations are worthy of further review.

As a first step toward clarifying the issue, I will discuss research that shows that the religious liberals are effective on their moral value issues, it is simply that the media does not call their issues "moral values," but rather something like "political issues." For example, the mainline was an effective advocate of third world debt relief, which forwarded progressive versions of moral values. We then have a choice in our examination: is the question why religious liberals cannot have their policy stances defined as being driven by "moral values," or is it why their "moral values" of the right's policy stances (e.g. pro-choice) do not have influence?

With this brush-clearing, I will proceed to examine explanations found in the social science literature, such as:

- Liberal institutions are too liberal in that they allow for unhealthy breadth of opinion about moral values, and liberal theology lacks the certainty needed for cut-throat politics
- The public is not supportive of the liberal positions of the liberal religious community
- The religious liberals are doing a good job but are systematically ignored by the media because they and their issues are uninteresting

- The religious left has a larger clergy-laity gap than the religious right does.
- Religious liberals are actually more active than the religious right, but due to their accommodation with secular institutions, they also act through secular institutions, masking the religiosity of their "moral value" motivations
- Liberal religious groups are made up of older members and are declining in numbers