"Public Reason and the Christian Right"

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This essay uses an account of the discursive practices of the contemporary Christian right to re-examine the liberal-democratic ideal of public reason. How has political engagement shaped the communicative strategies of the Christian right: what is the relationship between "externally" directed political speech, and internally directed communication aimed at believers? How should we assess the ideal of public reason in light of the political activities of this religious coalition?

We argue that democratic engagement has had moderating effects on the kinds of reasons offered by religious groups in public debate. Rather than expressing "absolutist" religious arguments in the public square, these groups seek to build coalitions and to maximize mainstream influence by translating faith-based arguments into a more public vocabulary. In addition to moderating the content of its political arguments, the Christian right has appropriated a number of traditionally progressive rhetorical tactics. Inspired by the gender and race-based claims of identity politics, these groups often cast themselves as oppressed minorities whose traditions, values, and way of life are under siege by a popular culture that embraces the supremacy of science and permissive norms of sexuality.

What is the impact of these mobilizing and rhetorical strategies on American democracy? First, when religious arguments are "translated" into a more public vocabulary should this be regarded as sincere or merely strategic? Does it reinforce democracy by moderating the actual political aims of Christian Right groups or does it merely undermine the quality of public deliberation by derailing the good faith exchange of reasons in public debate? Does "translation" amount to dissembling? We will discuss this translation in light of the relevant principles of public reason and deliberation. Does the Christian Right talk disingenuously: combining external moderation with internal radicalism?

We plan, finally, to say something about how substantive message and community structure interact. Many of evangelical groups use a vast array of structures and media to create cultural enclaves insulated from direct engagement with alternative modes of living and thinking. How successful is this effort? Do such efforts have corrosive effects on the democratic culture, by encouraging what Sunstein calls "group polarization" and what Putnam calls excessive "in-group loyalty" (too much bonding, not enough bridging). Insofar as groups and individuals on the Christian Right seek to foster a dualist culture capable of both engaging in mainstream politics while also preserving distinctive values through the formation of enclaves, should this culture raise concerns from the standpoint of liberal democratic principles?

We will conclude by discussing institutional or policy reforms that might strengthen public discourse in light of the challenges raised by the Christian Right.