

Where is the Counter-weight?

Explorations of the Decline in Mainline Protestant Participation in Public Debates over Values

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Charles Taylor defines the public sphere as “a common space in which the members of society are deemed to meet through a variety of media: print, electronic, and also face-to-face encounters; to discuss matters of common interest; and thus to be able to form a common mind about these” (Taylor, 1995: 185-86). The public sphere in liberal democratic societies exists to promulgate the values of the public, which can be communicated to the elites who lead us. That is, we have public debates about our values, and about the policies that might flow from such values. For example, as this essay is being drafted there is a fairly vigorous public debate about the Iraq war. It is partly about policies, such as whether having more soldiers in Iraq would lessen sectarian violence. The debate is also, and often implicitly, about values that support or lead to various strategies or policies. For example, the “pottery barn rule,” famously articulated by Colin Powell in his concern about invading Iraq, is essentially a values statement: people who break something are obligated to fix it. Certain policies probabilistically flow from this value.

In America, religion is a major influence on this public sphere debate about both values and policies, both through religious institutions of various sorts, but also through individual religious citizens who express their religiously derived values and policy proposals through their participation in the public sphere. The consensus view of scholars is that one particular religious tradition – mainline Protestantism – dominated the debate in the public sphere from the colonial era until the 1960s at the expense of Catholics, evangelicals and religious minorities like Jews (Thuesen, 2002; Demerath, 1995). Jay Demerath, in describing the “de facto establishment of the major liberal Protestant groups for another 150 years after the First Amendment’s passage,” says the mainline championed “a set of liberal values central to American culture more generally . . . such as individualism, freedom, pluralism, tolerance, democracy, and intellectual inquiry”

(Demerath, 1995: 460). One scholar went so far as to say, speaking of the 1950s, that “so wedded were the liberal, mainline churches to the dominant culture that their beliefs, values, and behavior were virtually indistinguishable from the culture” (Roof and McKinney, 1987: 22). Exemplary of the peak of mainline dominance was mainline theologian Reinhold Niebuhr was an incredibly influential figure in the public sphere, with his ideas having influence on domestic and international policy. Symbolic of his influence was his portrait on the cover of Time Magazine in 1948 and a story about his ideas. Niebuhr would die in 1971, and no similar mainline figure has arisen to take his place.

Nobody would say that mainline Protestants dominate the public sphere in the current era. This two-volume edited volume set in which this very essay sits is evidence to the fact that the academic perception is that it is conservative Protestantism that is now the dominant religious group in the public sphere. I would argue that this perception of conservative Protestant dominance is not new, but that by the mid-1980s, after only a few years of the focus on the “New Religious Right,” scholars had concluded that mainline dominance had collapsed. (I use the term conservative Protestant as a general term that includes both fundamentalists and evangelicals (Woodberry and Smith, 1998)).¹

In this essay I will examine the relative decline in the number of explicitly mainline voices in the public sphere. It is important to note what this essay will not do. I cannot examine relative success of the mainline in supporting its policies or whether the mainline voices in the public sphere changed anyone’s values. Like trying to measure the successfulness of social

¹ Most scholars would also place conservative Catholics beside these conservative Protestants in the contemporary public sphere. When I want to refer to conservative Protestants and Catholics in the public sphere, I will call them the religious right.

movements (Earl, 2004: 509), this is probably beyond the abilities of social science. Again, I will focus on what appears to be a differential decline in the amount of mainline discourse in the public sphere compared to the amount of conservative Protestant discourse. Put simply, nobody talks about the moral values of the mainline, even though they represent 25% of the population, while everyone talks about the moral values of conservative Protestants, even though they represent a similar number of people. How did this happen?

WHAT IS THE MAINLINE?

By this point in this volume, I am certain that the features of conservative Protestantism have been well discussed. Mainline Protestantism has probably also been briefly discussed in that in many ways evangelicalism defines itself as not being the mainline. But, to expand on this, mainline Protestantism is both a cultural and institutional phenomena. Culturally, it refers to theological and social beliefs which, compared to the Conservative Protestants, are generally more liberal. For example, whereas mainliners adhere to basic Christian beliefs – with 92% believing that the Bible is the inspired word of God and 88% believing that God has been fully revealed to humans in Jesus Christ – only 28% think the Bible should be read literally. While believing in their own religion, 81% of mainliners think that all religions contain some truth about God (Wuthnow and Evans, 2002: 8-9). As has been shown in probably hundreds of studies, mainliners are more liberal than conservative Protestants on social issues. (For more information on mainline belief, see (Wuthnow and Evans, 2002; Roof and McKinney, 1987).) Demographically, mainliners are older, wealthier, whiter, more educated and more likely to be social elites than other Christians.

Unlike Conservative Protestants, mainline Protestants have a fairly bounded institutional form as well. While fundamentalists eschew centrally controlled denominations, and evangelicals are divided among many dozens of smaller denominations – often with weak centralized control – the mainline is generally thought to be synonymous with a small handful of strongly bureaucratized denominations whose origins largely lie in the colonial era.

While people with a mainline cultural orientation can be found in most Protestant denominations, usually they are thought of as clustering within a number of historically mainline denominations. It is these institutions which have the machinery to produce the mainline cultural orientation. This generalization is embedded in social scientists' coding schemes, for example, where preference for one of these few denominations labels a respondent as a mainliner. The six largest mainline denominations are the United Methodist Church, the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the United Church of Christ, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the American Baptist Churches (Wuthnow and Evans, 2002: 4). There are other, smaller denominations that would be considered by most scholars to be institutionally part of the mainline, such as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the Church of the Brethren, the Reformed Church in America and the tiny 157 congregation Moravian Church which, despite its size, has the motto which I consider the best concise summary of the mainline theological orientation: "In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, love."²

WHAT WOULD BE AN EVEN DISTRIBUTION OF VOICES IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE?

My purpose in this essay is to explain what scholars perceive to be the relative under-

² <http://www.moravian.org/>

representation of the mainline in the debate over values. I take proper representation to be an amount that matches the mainline's representation among Americans. With that as the standard, we should of course briefly note that the mainline did not deserve its hegemonic power in the public sphere, as mainliners have not been the majority religion in the U.S. since at least the mid-19th century, or even the colonial era, depending on how we categorize groups from centuries ago (Finke and Stark, 1992).

There are many ways to try to calculate the relative numbers of different religious traditions in the U.S., each of which produces a slightly different result. One way would be to conduct a survey and ask people whether they identify with a particular tradition. A 2000 survey found that 26% of the population identify with a denomination classified as evangelical (using the classification of Steensland et al. (2000)), 14% as identifying with a mainline denomination, 26% with Catholicism, 5% with a black Protestant denomination, 13% "other" and 15% non-affiliated.³ Using a slightly different way of dividing denominations, Greeley and Hout, using the cumulative General Social Survey from 2000-2004, calculated that 26% of people had a religious preference for conservative Protestant denominations, 23% for mainline Protestant denominations, 25% for Catholicism, 6% for African-American Protestant denominations (Greeley and Hout, 2006: 7).

Another approach is to ask about the percentage of the population who actually attend religious services attend congregations in which tradition (obviously, these percentages exclude the non-religious). Examining Chaves' data from a representative sample of congregations in the

³Religion and Politics Survey. January 2000. Robert Wuthnow, Principal Investigator. Available at:

U.S., we find that 24% of attenders are mainline, 41% conservative Protestant and 29% Catholic (Chaves, 2004: 222-23).⁴ There is no objective way to adjudicate between these approaches, but a safe statement would be that a fair distribution in the public sphere would be for conservative Protestants to have a slightly greater representation than mainline Protestants.

IS THIS ONLY ABOUT LABELING?

Before I get to explanations for the mainline decline in the public sphere, we must start with some brush-clearing. If we were to keep this analysis on a simple level about the “values debate,” we would conclude that it is obvious that mainliners are almost totally gone from the public sphere because they are not involved with “values debates.” This conclusion would flow from the observation that on issues that the media have determined to be “values” issues, the mainline is not present.

The confusion lies in whether public discourse has to be either self-labeled – or labeled by the gatekeepers in the public sphere such as the media – as being about “values” for the discourse to be about “values.” This question builds from an obvious observation: evangelicals tend to publicly say that their positions on abortion, homosexuality and so on derive from their “values,” while mainliners don’t say that their positions derive from their “values.” This doesn’t mean that mainliners do not have values, nor does it mean that mainliners are not advocating values in the public sphere. They just don’t use the term. The most obvious example of this is the evangelical discourse about “family values:” which encompass debates about abortion,

⁴ Chaves broke these data down by denomination and denominational family, and I aggregated them into these three broader traditions. Thus, these numbers are ultimately my interpretation of Chaves’ data.

homosexuality, gender roles, pornography and so on. But, if we look at the top web page of the (mainline dominated) National Council of Churches⁵ as an example, we see the top link for “resources for ministry and mission” is titled “reducing poverty” with 10 links below it, without the term “values,” even though it is obviously mainline values that lead to the desire to reduce poverty.

This avoidance of the term “values” is probably a reflection of what a recent essay called the “quiet influence” of the mainline (Wuthnow, 2002). Mainliners are famously pluralistic, not wanting to push their moral values on others. When I was a high school student, when Jerry Falwell was the public personification of “Baptist,” I remember the senior pastor of my liberal Protestant American Baptist congregation saying that he wanted to put “not the kind of Baptist you are thinking of” on the sign in front of the church building. He wanted to say: we are not the type of “intolerant” Baptists who are going to push our values on you. Twenty-five years later this congregation places on its modern version of the placard in front of the church – its’ website – the following description of the congregation:

First Baptist is a warm and welcoming community that strives to live the Christian faith with an open heart, an open mind, and an open spirit. We are a family of faith who is not afraid to ask tough questions as we seek to be wise and intelligent Christians in the modern world. We are a family who seeks to freely embrace people of diverse backgrounds and experiences, welcoming them into our lives. We are a people who strive to faithfully engage the great issues of our day by reaching out into our world with God’s love, justice, and mercy. We are a people who would love to have you share with us in

⁵ [Http://nccusa.org/](http://nccusa.org/)

our life together as we join in following Jesus Christ into our future.

The one conclusion you can reach from this statement is that this congregation is not going to explicitly push their values onto you, but rather you explore your own values yourself.⁶ This is of course more in tune with the enlightenment philosophy that the mainline is more attuned to than are other Protestants.

This reticence is also evident in my interviews with mainliners for my forthcoming book on religious discourses about reproductive genetic technologies. As part of the interviews for that project, I asked the respondent about scenarios, such as: “how about if you had friends, Mark and Mary, both of whom carried the gene for cystic fibrosis. They were trying to decide whether they should use pre-implantation genetic diagnosis to avoiding having a baby with this disease. What should they do?” In response to that question, the conservative Protestants would usually just say what they should do. The mainline respondents tended to start by saying that “they of course would never tell Mark and Mary what to do, but they have the following concerns.” The few people who refused to even respond to scenarios like this on these grounds were mainliners.

But, this linguistic issue is not what the reader is interested in. The reader does not want to know whether the term “values” is more used by conservative Protestants than mainline Protestants. I suspect upon reflection, it is non-controversial that this is the case. We therefore have to be more accurate and define an expression of religious values more carefully. This of course makes empirical examination more difficult than just looking for the term “values,” but it makes the analysis more accurate.

⁶ Of course, this is a bit of a liberal myth, in that all communities have values that they are pushing on each other. Some just like to pretend that they are not. One value that is sacrosanct in this congregation is, for example, that you shall not push values on others.

Therefore, a contribution to a debate about values in the public sphere is made whenever someone gives a reason for their support or opposition to some policy. It is often implicit, but if you reflect on your own participation in the public sphere, you can see that much of your cognitive machinery in these discussions is dedicated to figuring out peoples “reasons” for their positions so that you can evaluate whether their values are correct. There is no reason for people to debate the means to the end with someone if they don’t share the same end, so people try to identify the end (the values) that people are working toward. For example, if I say that I am opposed to the invasion of Iraq, this is only the first step of a conversation. My interlocutor will want to know why. If I say that I don’t want to spend my hard earned tax dollars on foreigners or if I say that I am opposed to all violence, I am expressing two different values, even if I do not label them as such. Therefore, to further hone in on the question before us, I am interested in explanations of the decline in the amount of mainline discourse about values, as defined above, compared to conservative Protestants.

POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS

Social science aspires for an explanation for phenomena. I think that a decline in the voice of the mainline in the debates about values in the public sphere does not have one explanation, but rather many different explanations are all partially correct, and cumulatively they explain the relative decline of the mainline voice in the public sphere. Many explanations are also clarifications of the preceding claim that the mainline discourse about values has receded at all. I will discuss each of these explanations, and try to identify some as being more important than others.

1) The Declining Size of the Mainline Relative to Conservative Protestants

What is undoubtedly the dominant explanation in the field is the declensionist narrative of the mainline. The mainline denominations reached their peak in terms of raw numbers of members in the 1960s, plummeted in the 1970s, and continued a slower but continued decline since that time (Wuthnow and Evans, 2002: 6). During the period of 1965 to 1990, three of the dominant mainline denominations lost 25% of their members while the rest lost less (Wuthnow and Evans, 2002: 7). Contrary to the polemical use of mainline decline among evangelicals – that mainline decline is due to liberal theology – it appears that the primary cause of mainline decline is demographic. Mainline women do not have nearly as many babies as do conservative Protestant women due to their educational and professional status (Hout, Greeley and Wilde, 2001).

The decline in members is real. There is then an easy answer to the decline in the amount of mainline discourse about values in the public sphere: there are fewer mainliners. There are not only fewer mainliners, there are then also fewer mainline seminaries that produce public discourse, fewer seminary professors, fewer publishing houses, smaller budgets for the national church and society ministries, fewer campus ministries and on and on. Quantifying the amount of declined effort in speaking mainline values in the public sphere is probably impossible, but there is no question that there was a sizable decline. If it matched membership decline, we could roughly estimate it at 25% since the 1950s.

During this same time, the number of Conservative Protestants has grown in terms of raw numbers of members. One study of fifteen evangelical denominations found a 47% increase in members between 1968 and 2003. In terms of representative percentage of the population, this

was an increase of 2% of the U.S. population during that time. The study also found that in these denominations the membership rate as a proportion of the number of people in the country peaked in the mid-1980s and began to slowly decline through 2003.⁷

These changes in size of the two traditions would, all else equal, mean a decline in access to the public sphere for the mainline as there are more Conservative Protestants already in the public sphere. However, having more members of a tradition only matters if they are going to enter the public sphere, and this has also changed for conservative Protestants. In the standard historical narrative, conservative Protestants withdrew from the public arena after the embarrassment of the Scopes Monkey trial in the 1920s and turned inward toward saving individual souls (Reichley, 1985: 311-27). Wuthnow reports that between 1953 and 1974 more than a dozen studies were conducted on the relationship between conservative theology and political activity and that “without exception, these studies indicated that evangelicals were less inclined toward political participation than were their less evangelical counterparts” (Wuthnow, 1983: 167-68).

Rejecting their previously isolationist orientation, by the late 1970s conservative Protestants decided to re-enter the public sphere, with the emergence of what we now call the Religious Right. It is hard to say how many millions of dollars have been spent by the religious right on values discourse in the public sphere, but we know it has been substantial. So, relative mainline decline is of course axiomatic in that another large religious group joined the public sphere, by definition lowering the relative mainline representation.

Of course, a subtle qualifier is whether each conservative Protestant has the same amount

⁷ Empty Tomb study: <http://www.emptytomb.org/Chap5hlites03.html>

of access to the public sphere as each mainline Protestant. One of the themes in Wuthnow and Evans' study of the mainline in the public sphere is that mainliners are more powerful people than conservative Protestants, and therefore have larger soapboxes in the public square (Wuthnow and Evans, 2002). They are more white in a society that values whiteness, they have more education than other religious groups, and nearly half are professionals, managers, or owners of businesses compared to 26% of the labor force that fits into this category (Wuthnow and Evans, 2002: 11). When asked if they had "close personal friends who were public officials, corporation executives, scientists, or wealthy individuals, two-thirds of mainline members (66 percent) said they did, compared with only 42% in the general population" (Wuthnow and Evans, 2002: 13). There is also an advantage to having institutions that began in the colonial era in that many mainline institutions have a lot of money, despite having fewer members to spend it on. To take but one example, Trinity Episcopal Church in Manhattan was once the owner of much of what is today lower Manhattan, having received a land grant from Queen Anne in 1705. It currently owns 27 commercial buildings in Manhattan, making it one of the largest commercial landlords in New York City (Wuthnow and Evans, 2002: 14). While conservative Protestants give a greater percentage of their income to benevolences, since the mainliners have more income, their lower percentage of income given does not translate into less money per capita [Check with Empty Tomb data].

On balance, I think that mainline decline has led to a degree of a lessened voice for the mainline in the public sphere. However, it is not the only answer. The thought experiment is this. If the mainline suddenly retrieved all of its lost members, would it have regained the voice it had lost? Or, more importantly, would we perceive that the mainline was equally as influential

in the public sphere as the conservative Protestants? The answer to both is no, because there are other factors working against the mainline voice in values debates.

2) A Lack of Mainline Interest in Contemporary “Religious” Debates

This next section is part explanation and part clarification of the question at hand. Let me start with an example from a religious group not under examination here. People who create public events about religion and reproductive genetic technologies try to be inclusive. They invite a Catholic, an evangelical, a mainliner, a Jew and a Muslim if they can find one. They often try to identify someone from the African American Church to come speak, but they usually cannot find such a person. The reason is that this is not a priority issue for African American religious leaders compared to drugs, unemployment, poverty and family dissolution. It is not their priority to engage in this particular values debate in the public sphere.

Similarly, it is possible that the mainline is not interested in the contemporary debates in the public sphere that have been constructed as “religious” by the Conservative Protestants, and therefore do not participate. This points to the clarification component of this section. As you can see from the introduction to this book, the motivation for this volume is the rise of evangelicals and their issues in the public sphere. This essay was solicited for the general question of: “why no values from the mainliners.” But perhaps the question is actually: “why are the mainliners not countering the values of the evangelicals on these issues raised by the evangelicals.” And, the answer could be that, like the example of the African American Church above, mainliners are not interested in the debates that have recently been constructed in the public sphere by the Conservative Protestants. (And, to the extent these conservative Protestant

issues dominate the public sphere, mainliners are inherently less interested in the public sphere.)

For example, one of the sources of this trope about “values voters” was in the Ohio 2004 presidential election where exit polls showed that a quarter of the voters “cast their votes on the basis of an evaluation of the candidate’s moral values,” and that a great majority of these votes went to Bush <<Brint proposal, p.1 - Not Found>>. On the ballot at the same time was a proposition that banned gay marriage in Ohio, which passed overwhelmingly, and supposedly brought out these “values voters.” This is definitely a “values issue” that is promoted by conservative Protestants in the public square. While the institutions of conservative Protestantism, such as allied social movement organizations, magazines and denominational agencies have spent a great deal of resources on promoting their values behind banning gay marriage, I think it is safe to say that the institutions of the mainline have spent nothing, on one side or the other of this issue.

This is not because they lack the ability, which is the implication of the numerical declension explanation. Rather, I think that they do not want to. This is not their issue. Now, we could all be amateur theologians and say that it should be their issue, that it is more consistent with mainline notions of justice and so on to support gay marriage, and we can identify prominent mainliners who think so, but I do not think the mainline sees it that way. They do not adhere to one of the extremes in the debate that the media allows to speak, but rather they inhabit the “mushy middle.”

The same could be said about abortion. The conservatives have spent many hundreds of millions of dollars on this debate, and while the mainline Protestant denominations are generally officially in favor of defending the Roe decision (Evans, 1997), and mainliners are more

supportive of legal abortion than are members of other religious traditions (Evans, 2002), institutionally the mainline spends essentially nothing on the defense of abortion rights. There is one social movement organization titled the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice that, while having mainline denominational agencies as members, has traditionally received essentially no money from the mainline institutions and survives like many other Washington interest groups: through direct mail fund-raising not necessarily to the members of the member groups in the coalition. In sum, abortion rights is not a priority. The mainline is somewhere in the “mushy middle” on that issue.

To determine what the institutional priorities of the mainline in the public sphere actually are, let's look at one way they try to speak of their values in the public sphere: press releases.⁸ I examined the press releases of the six largest mainline denominations. The releases of the United Methodist Church can provide an example. On the top of their website they have a box that scrolls through the top news stories that the communications division of the church is trying to promote. On the day I wrote this passage, there were five stories that the UMC was trying to get into the public sphere.

The first story was titled “United Methodists lead dialogue at global health summit” which discussed how Bishops and other leaders in the UMC were advocating for health care for

⁸ On 1/4/07 I downloaded the lists of news releases from the news services of the UMC, ELCA, Episcopal Church, ABC, PC(USA), UCC. These varied in number, depending on how often the denomination made press releases and how far back their on-line archives went. As one would expect, many of these releases are on internal housekeeping matters pertinent to the denomination, such as the appointment of a new director an agency. Also, as those who study the mainline denominations and political involvement would expect, some of these denominations are more internally focused than others, most notably the Lutherans and the American Baptists.

poor people in the third world. ““This is a conversation among leaders about a potential major initiative to invite the people of the United Methodist Church to help end the diseases of poverty,’ said the Rev. Larry Hollon, chief executive of United Methodist Communications.”

While largely not talking about values, probably because people do not need to be convinced that saving poor people from dying is a good thing, the release did end with a values statement of a Bishop who said: ““It's about justice and equality and hearing the call of Jesus to that.””

The second press release, titled ““Last Minute Toy Store' blesses families”” was about a congregation that gives out Christmas toys to poor families before Christmas. The third, titled ““Movie spotlights church's role in saga of homeless man”” discusses a new movie starring actor Will Smith, based on a real story that took place in Glide Memorial UMC in San Francisco, where a man who briefly stayed in Glide’s homeless shelter with his baby son goes on to a successful career in the finance industry. “The work that Methodists do makes so much of a difference in someone making it or breaking it,” said the man. The fourth is about a change in the UMC website and communications strategy. The fifth was titled ““Senator gives little hope to interfaith coalition on Darfur”” and reported on a senator’s discussion with Methodists and other religious groups on their efforts to end the genocide in Darfur.

The point here is that the UMC is promoting issues and their associated values in the public sphere, and policies that flow from these values, but they are generally not the issues and policies that the Conservative Protestants are discussing. Or, more accurately, they are not the ones that Conservative Protestants have gotten attention for promoting (the culture wars ones), given that the conservative Protestants are also interested in issues like Darfur and international poverty.

This institutional effort at promoting particular values in the public sphere is generally matched by individual mainliners. The sociology literature, and public opinion data gathering, is geared toward the debates that concern the conservative Protestants in that they are what is most controversial. In my own work I am of course guilty of this, having spent much effort to evaluating claims that America is engaged in a “culture war.” But, what if we asked about debates that more match what the mainline institutions are trying to promote in the public sphere? In a 2000 survey, respondents were asked their level of “interest” in “social issues facing our country today,” with each issue described with a liberal conclusion. For example, they were asked about “legislation to protect the environment,” not their interest in not protecting the environment.

Table 1 contains a column of the percentage of mainline respondents who are either “quite” or “fairly” interested in the issues listed in the left column.⁹ Note that helping the poor, protecting the environment, promoting international peace are supported by 90% or more of mainline respondents. This matches the UMC interests in that helping the poor is the story about the homeless man at Glide Memorial and international peace is represented by the story about Darfur. Barely below this is overcoming discrimination against women, which could be construed as a culture wars issue, except that there is almost nobody in the public square officially in favor of discrimination against women. Note that the one clear culture wars issue on this list, about reducing intolerance toward homosexuals, has the least support from mainliners.

⁹ This analysis was conducted by using the self-identification method of assigning respondents to a particular religious tradition. For more details, see Evans (2006). I combined the “fundamentalist” and “evangelical” self-identifiers into a “conservative Protestant” category and the “mainline” and “liberal” Protestant self-identifiers into a “mainline Protestant” category.

Insert Table 1 Here

The above analysis suggests that it is plausible that the mainline is a representative force in the public sphere, but people do not notice it because they are looking to other debates in the public sphere over “culture wars” types of issues.

3) Possible Media Bias

This is then a good point at which to raise a related explanation. Another possible explanation is that there actually is no difference in the amount of mainline discourse about values that enters the public sphere, but that the media as gatekeeper is only amplifying and repeating the discourse on the issues of primary interest to the conservative Protestants, resulting in an under-representation of mainline voices. “The calling card for entering the news is conflict, and any group that is able to create such situations typically gains access to media through the reports of hungry journalists” writes Quentin Schultze (cited in Dart and Allen 1993: 15). The media do not report upon the everyday activity of religious groups, such as feeding the hungry, holding worship services or ordaining clergy. Rather, they only report when there is conflict, particularly between or within religious groups (Dart and Allen, 1993: 15). As one religion writer put it in a meeting about how mainline Protestants are covered in the media: “mainline Protestants are boring.”¹⁰ And, in recent decades, most of that conflict has surrounded issues that, not coincidentally, the “culture wars” issues that conservative Protestants have promoted in the public sphere where, at least institutionally, mainline Protestants have pretty much been silent

¹⁰ Public statement of anonymous religion writer at meeting described in Wuthnow and Evans 2002: x.

on. Studies show that mainline churches engage in much more social service provision than do conservative Protestant churches (Chaves, 2004: 53), but this is the sort of values-based act that the media is not interested in.

While there has not been a formal content analysis of the coverage of religious groups in the media, an examination of the annual Religion Newswriters Association poll of the top ten religion stories of the year is instructive. This shows that what the media gravitate to are the “culture wars” issues that are now synonymous with conservative Protestant discourse in the public sphere. If we look at the stories on the 2002 list, some are not about American religious groups, such as the ninth top story in 2002, that Palestinian gunmen took refuge in Bethlehem’s Church of the Nativity. But, the first, second, fourth and fifth top stories were aspects of the sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic church, the third was evangelical Franklin Graham’s remarks about Islam, the sixth concerning school vouchers for religious schools, the seventh about “under God” in the pledge of allegiance, and eight about American religious groups’ opposition to war (Houston Chronicle, 2002). The eighth topic here might give the mainline a chance to exercise its voice, but not the others.

The 2001 poll was dominated by stories not focused on American religious groups per se, but primarily on the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 2001. Examining these polls back to 1996, the 2000 poll is more representative of the group. The top story is the Pope’s extensive travels, the third was on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the latter may be an issue that the mainline has focused upon. The second was about vice-presidential candidate Joseph Lieberman’s Jewish practice. However, the fourth top story was about debates within mainline denominations over homosexuality, the fifth about the Southern Baptist Convention’s ban on

women pastors and requiring women to submit to their husbands, the sixth the Catholic Church's teaching that "only Jesus Christ saves souls," the seventh was struggles within the Southern Baptist Convention on gender issues, resulting in former President Carter's renouncing ties to the Convention, the eighth was the Pope's apology for the sins of Catholics committed against "Jews, women, indigenous peoples, immigrants, the poor and the unborn." The ninth – on the near merger of the Episcopalians and the Lutherans – had no obvious message for public debates. Finally, the tenth was about gender roles – the story of the first woman bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church (Dooley, 2000). The overwhelming conclusion about media coverage of American religious groups is that when a story can be thought of as expressing information about the "culture wars" it is reported upon. Even the mainline story above, on mainline debates about homosexuality, is on an "culture wars" issue. The only mainline debates that enter are the ones that actually fit with the culture wars evangelical narrative, like debates over homosexuality.

4) The Mainline and Consensual Values

Reporters find the issues of the mainline boring. Another way of putting it is that the values of the conservative Protestants that they do like to talk about – the culture wars issues – are not consensually held by the public. Therefore, they are controversial and of interest to the media. The issues that mainliners are promoting in the public sphere are less interesting because they are less controversial – there is a higher societal consensus about the values that drive them. Everybody wants to keep people from starving to death, the only debate is over how to do it.

To see if these issues are consensual, let's compare the mainliners to the conservative

Protestants. The third column in Table 1 shows the percent of conservative Protestants who are “quite” or “fairly” interested in these issues. While there are a few statistically significant differences, by and large these statistically significant differences are not substantively significant. 92% of mainliners are interested in policies that would help the poor, and 91% of conservative Protestants are. 91% of mainliners are interested in legislation to help the environment, 86% of conservative Protestants are. We go down the list and see general agreement except on one issue. There is a somewhat substantive difference between mainliners and conservative Protestants on reducing intolerance toward homosexuals. Here there is a difference, a conflict that the media can write about. But, it is on an issue that the mainline doesn’t promote, at least partly because there is a lack of consensus within the mainline itself (see below).

There is a more subtle issue about values. To the extent debate in the public square appears on these issues that implicate more consensual values, the values beneath those policies might not be discussed. That is, even on the issues that the mainline seems to be focusing on, like Darfur, universal health care, reducing poverty and so on, perhaps mainliners don’t talk about their values, but only their policy proposals. In Weberian language, they may only talk about their means and not their ends.

This is because if people agree with you on the values issue, the only debate is how to achieve your values. I suspect that all people of good will want to help the poor, the question is how to do it. The following experiment could be conducted. If you took the policy statements on social issues by all of the mainline denominations, the ones on issues that implicated less consensual values would be longer than those that implicated more consensual values. For

example, the statement on abortion rights would be longer than the statement on avoiding genocide in Darfur. This is because on an issue with controversial values you have to first defend your values. So, if mainline issues in the public sphere are more consensual, it is likely that there is less discussion about the values of the mainline. Of course, this is not necessarily bad for the mainline, in that if everyone already agrees with your values, you have already won the debate in the public sphere, so there is no harm in not talking about your values. Or, to use the language from Taylor's definition of the public sphere, the "common mind" is already formed about these values, so debate about values is not necessary.

5) Internal Polarization

A related issue is why the mainline seems to be interested in higher consensus issues. It enters debates in the public sphere on issues of which at least there is high consensus on the underlying values among mainliners. For example, there are probably no mainliners who question the values behind the effort to save Darfuris from genocide (although many probably debate how to do this.) However, on other issues, the mainline has a problem with internal consensus, and an even bigger problem with consensus than do other religious traditions in the U.S.

One of the theological features of the mainline is that it is "liberal" in a Lockean sense, and not just in a political sense. That is, it is open to many competing views of theology. This is evident in the survey data. 81% of Mainliners agreed that "all religions contain some truth about God" and 70% agreed that "all religions are equally good ways of knowing about God" (Wuthnow and Evans, 2002: 10). This is not an orientation that is going to lead to members

trying to suppress each other for divergent theological views and values.

Therefore, one reason that the mainline may focus on the more consensual issues in the public sphere, and thus have less visibility because of both media bias and the lack of need to talk about values on consensual issues, is that the mainliners who control the institutions that communicate with the public sphere are not willing to promote issues that are internally polarizing within the tradition. And, most critically, since a claim of mainline lack of visibility is a direct function of conservative Protestant visibility, conservative Protestant leaders are willing to promote issues on which there is not consensus in the conservative Protestant community.

Evidence for this can be found in the literature on the clergy-laity gap. Scholars of the mainline have often heard the claim that it is the mainline elite that is out of touch with their masses, not the evangelicals. It is said that it is the mainline leadership that promotes their agenda despite the beliefs of the people in the pews (Hadden, 1969). I see no evidence for this claim in the current era. Part of the confusion comes from looking at the denominational position statements passed at annual meetings to examine how liberal the elites are, compared to the masses. But, what are these statements? Does it mean that the institution is then instructed to spread this view to the public sphere? Perhaps, in theory, but the reality is different. Audrey Chapman, a former employee of mainline social action agencies, says these policy statements:

assign the denominations a comprehensive role responsible for virtually every facet of society, for which they have neither membership commitment nor staff resources. . . there is little basis within the statement on which to set priorities or develop a focus. Often written serially, they reflect the American penchant for discovering issues with an evangelical zeal but retaining only short-term interest. Each new problem, each new

issue clamors for denominational commitment, with the result that few can be pursued effectively (Chapman, 1991: 86-87).

Given the number of these statements that are made, if the mainline elites are really picking the most liberal ones to focus upon – being “prophetic” in mainline parlance – then we should see the denominational agencies focusing on these “prophetic” issues. There is no doubt that what the institutions promote is somewhat more liberal than what the laity would want. But, evidence suggests that the agencies and other elites lean toward promoting the more consensual issues.

Olson quotes the director of the Washington office of the Episcopal Church, who says “I’ve tried to take into account the [church’s] diversity . . . when taking positions on issues and setting priorities . . . Those issues that have passed 51 to 49 percent are probably not the ones we’re going to be on the bleeding edge of at this point. We’re trying to find those issues that [have] a little wider support in the church.” (Olson, 2002: 65).

So, if the mainline institutions are promoting issues and values with higher consensus within the denomination, what about conservative Protestants? Here I would argue, contrary to commonly held opinion, that conservative Protestants have a larger clergy-laity gap than the mainliners, and the leaders are willing to take controversial positions in the public sphere despite these issues having equal levels of internal dissensus as the mainline has. This willingness to promote controversial issues allows them more visibility in the public sphere for the reasons articulated above.

First, studies of public opinion show that conservative Protestants have similar amounts of internal polarization as mainliners. For example, Hoffmann and Miller find using GSS data from 1993 and 1994 that the variance within what they call “conservative Protestants” on

abortion is .206. The variance within moderate Protestants and liberal Protestants are .249 and .245, respectively (Hoffmann and Miller, 1997: 65). By the classification in this paper, their moderate and liberal would be called mainline. On the abortion issue, conservative Protestants do seem to have slightly more consensus. Examination of the constant in the models in Evans (2002: 412) suggests something similar, albeit with a different method. However, on views of women's roles, Hoffmann and Miller find that conservatives, moderates and liberals have variance scores of .168, .124 and .106 respectively. Here, conservatives have the least consensus. The data on attitudes toward premarital sex are similar, where the scores are .246, .236 and .218. On the other issues they examine, school prayer and marijuana use, it is the mainliners who have more variance. (Hoffmann and Miller, 1997: 65).¹¹

Gay, Ellison and Powers, using the 1982-1991 GSS, examine the variance in attitudes within religious groups. They show that on the issue of homosexuality and extramarital sex, denominations they call "other conservative" and the Southern Baptists have more consensus than the mainline Protestant denominations. However, on the issues of gender roles, abortion and premarital sex, the situation is reversed (Gay, Ellison and Powers, 1996: 11).

Yet, the leaders within conservative Protestantism ignore the dissenting views in the tradition and promote their favored position. The gap between what the elites say and do and what the masses believe is then very large within the Conservative Protestant tradition. How do we know this? We can look at some of the recent books concerning what "evangelicals really think," which share the theme that evangelicals are not as conservative as you would think from

¹¹ Note that their statistical test was not designed to determine statistical significance between groups.

their leaders.

In their conclusion to their book titled The Truth about Conservative Christians (by which they mean Conservative Protestants), the general theme is that Conservative Protestants are not as conservative as you would think from their leaders. For example, the authors find that conservative Protestants are “somewhat different from the rest of Americans, but even on issues like abortion and homosexuality and voting behavior not all that different from [mainline] Protestants. There is a whiff of fact behind some stereotypes but no basis for the venomous denunciations that one hears so often” (Greeley and Hout, 2006: 180). They conclude by saying that:

a sensible observer will always wonder how well those one observes on the television screen actually represent the various ascending minorities [conservative Protestants]. It is part of the American political game for the person in the spotlight to claim the largest possible constituency. However, the aforementioned sensible observer will resist the impulse to attribute to a large group of fellow Americans the claims being made by the self-anointed spokesperson. . . .

So, those zealous Conservative Christians who try to use their smoke and mirrors to enforce their convictions on the media, school districts, courts, and local governments have very right to create whatever illusions they find useful. If others, such as many American liberals buy into these illusions it’s their own fault (Greeley and Hout, 2006: 181-82).

Also in this genre is Christian Smith’s Christian America? What Evangelicals Really Want. The answer to the question in the title is that they do not want what the elites say they want. Smith

writes that “most ordinary American evangelicals are not very fairly represented by many of the single-minded and often self-appointed conservative Christian leaders who claim to speak for them” (Smith, 2000: 194). This willingness to ignore diversity within one’s own ranks allows for more exposure in the public sphere than the mainliners – more attuned to diversity of opinion – can achieve.

Why do conservative Protestant elites ignore the people in the pews who disagree with them? Well, first, remember that unlike the mainline, these people are not liberal in a Lockean sense. They are not inclined to think that everybody could be right in their interpretation, but rather that there is one right position. Biblical interpretation is a good example of this. Conservative Protestant elite versions of Biblical interpretation tend toward a claim of one true plain surface reading of the text, whereas mainline Protestant Biblical interpretation is much more diffuse. This belief in one true value or position results in a more authoritarian style of leadership compared to the mainline.

6) Mainline Values Not Supposed to be as Distinct from Secular Values

Another reason for why the mainline values do not appear in the public sphere is that the mainliners who are speaking in the public sphere are less likely to use explicitly religious values, and thus the connection to the mainline is not made. In the mainline, religion is not supposed to have a specific answer for everything. Conservative Protestants, more than mainline Protestants, believe that one’s religion is relevant to many more contemporary decisions. This takes its extreme case with some fundamentalists who believe that the answer to any question can be found in the Bible. It is unlikely one could find a mainliner who believes that the Bible has an

answer for everything.

Another way of putting this in the terms of an existing literature is that mainliners are more privatized than are members of other religions (Regnerus and Smith, 1998). The idea of privatization is related to a type of secularization – institutional differentiation. In the institutional differentiation explanation for secularization, religion, which was at one time the legitimator of an entire host of institutions such as the family, education, and the state, becomes a separate institution alongside these others. Religion stops legitimating other forms of action. In colloquial terms, religion becomes something you definitely do only in your private life, and probably something you only do on Sunday morning. Religions differ in the extent to which they accept this privatization, but recent studies suggest that among Protestants, mainliners are the most privatized and conservative Protestants the least (Regnerus and Smith, 1998). So, while mainline values about war, for example, may ultimately derive in some deep sense from the pacifist teachings of Jesus, mainliners are unlikely to think there is some exact religious commandment about war that they explicitly bring to the public sphere.

Contributing to this problem is that mainliners are involved with more civic organizations than are evangelicals or Catholics (Smidt, 1999: 185). Religion does not then have as central a place in the lives of mainliners as it does for conservative Protestants. Mainliners are exposed to the arguments of more organizations and institutions – not all of them religious. Therefore, even though they may have a religious reason for their pro-choice policy stance, a mainliner may well articulate the reasoning given by Planned Parenthood.

As an example of this, I analyzed a 2001 survey on Religion and Public Life conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. I created variables for conservative

Protestants and mainline Protestants.¹² Respondents were asked their positions on a number of social issues. More critically for our purposes, after being asked about each social issue they were also asked “which one of the following has had the biggest influence on your thinking on this issue?” The reasons were “a personal experience,” “the views of your friends and family,” “What you have seen or read in the media,” “Your education,” “Something else,” and “your religious beliefs.” Table 2 shows the issues asked about, and the first column is the percent of conservative Protestants who selected “your religious beliefs” as the biggest influence on their thinking on the issue. The second column is the percent of mainline Protestants. The general point here is that conservative Protestants see every issue as more religious than do mainline Protestants. They are less privatized and less exposed to other influences.

Insert Table 2 Here

So, mainliners may be in the public sphere, but they may not be identifiable as mainliners per se because they do not think of their values as deriving from their religion. This then raises the unanswerable question of whether a mainliner’s values are “really” derived from their religion even if they do not claim it is so. Are they opposed to war because they heard the beatitudes in church their whole life or because they get emails from moveon.org? On this we will never know. I would argue that at least in the limited instance of debates in the public sphere which are based upon people’s utterances, what someone “really” believes is not

¹² Conservative Protestants were those who claimed to be Protestant either a “born again/evangelical Christian,” a “fundamentalist Christian” or a “Pentecostal or charismatic Christian.” Mainliners were the remainder of the Protestants. I only analyzed those who claimed to attend services once or twice a month or more because I wanted to be a comparison among people who actually participate in the religions instead of just identifying with it.

important. If mainliners don't use religious values in their arguments, then there is less mainline discourse in the public sphere, even if people are "really" motivated by religious beliefs.

7) Self-Immolation Thesis

Jay Demerath, in an under-appreciated essay, explains the organizational decline of the mainline denominations described above as due to their cultural triumph. If we go back to the reformation, we see that Protestantism itself brought with it a "new religious relativism. To the extent that pluralism became increasingly valued in its own right, no single doctrine or polity could be taken absolutely," writes Demerath (1995: 460). Moreover, in the U.S. the mainline came to advocate "liberal values central to American culture" such as "individualism, freedom, pluralism, tolerance, democracy, and intellectual inquiry" (Demerath, 1995: 460). In a typically wonderful Demerathian metaphor, he writes that "liberal values may represent a dagger aimed at the institutional jugular." (Demerath, 1995: 461) He then goes on to describe how these liberal values erode organizational life. For example, individualism and freedom in a institutional context are "basically centrifugal organizational forces, leading away from obedience and commitment" need to sustain any institution (Demerath, 1995: 461).

Demerath was concerned with explaining the decline in the number of mainliners described above. I want to tweak his thesis to explain the decline of the mainline voice in the public sphere. I want to argue that the mainline retreated from the public sphere to paradoxically fulfill its own values. One of the common explanations for the rise of the religious right is that religious conservatives thought that America shared their values, and then a series of events in the 1960s and 1970s showed that this was wrong. They then entered the public sphere to fight

back and change the values of America back to their liking.

This is Luker's explanation for the rise of the anti-abortion movement. The conservatives thought that America agreed with them that abortion was always wrong, and then the 1973 Roe decision shocked them into realizing that a good portion of the country disagreed with them. (Luker, 1984). Wuthnow explains the rise of the religious right in similar terms. Shocked by the events of Watergate and other events which showed a deep corruption in public culture, and the nation's turn to concern with public morality, conservative Protestants began to fight back in the public sphere (Wuthnow, 1983).

I would like to propose an analog for what happened to the mainline. The mainliners also thought that everyone in America agreed with them. Then, in the early 1980s the emergence of the religious right taught them that mainline Protestant values were not held by everyone in the country. Here was this group of citizens – the conservative Protestants – who clearly wanted to challenge the public sphere that the mainliners had created and had dominated to that point. Unlike the response to the shock by the conservatives, which was to fight back, the mainline response to the shock was to retreat in general, or at least retreat to what they perceived to be consensual issues.

The mainline cultural form, that first and foremost believed in individualism, freedom, pluralism, tolerance and democracy – to use most of Demerath's list – could not justify trying to make its other values normative for everyone else in the public sphere now that they knew they were not consensual. They slowly pulled back to consensual issues.

CONCLUSION

As noted above, it is not possible to adjudicate these various explanations, and all contain a bit of truth. But, considering them all in concert creates a more nuanced picture of mainline involvement in the public sphere and, therefore, perceptions of conservative Protestant dominance of the public sphere.

I examined seven explanations. First, that numerical decline in the mainline and growth in conservative Protestantism has simply resulted in less mainline voices compared to conservative Protestant voices. Second, that the issues defined as “religious” by conservative Protestants – and the press – are not of strong interest to the mainline so the mainline has become less involved. Third, that even if the mainline speaks on issues the press only amplifies the culture wars issues of the conservative Protestants because they are more interesting. Fourth, that the values of the mainline are more consensual, and thus underlying values are not used in public debates, only competing policy prescriptions. Fifth, while conservative Protestants and mainline Protestants are similarly internally polarized on culture wars issues, the conservative elites are more likely to take positions at odds with their membership. This allows them to take more controversial stands, and thus earns them a bigger soap-box in the public sphere. Sixth, the mainline does not express its underlying values due to it being a more privatized tradition. Seventh, and finally, that the mainline willingly pulled back from participation in the public sphere to fulfill their own cultural orientation of tolerance, democracy and pluralism.

The above discussion opens the question of whether mainline participation in values debates has actually declined. If we combined the first, third and fourth explanation, it is possible to conclude that the mainline voice has simply reverted to its representative size, and that the gatekeepers of the public sphere are simply not amplifying the mainline voices that are

trying to speak in the public sphere. That is, we may perceive a decline of mainline voice in the public sphere because the way we encounter the public sphere is through the media, where religious groups are allowed soap-boxes to talk about culture war issues but not global poverty.

I think that on balance, the mainline is probably somewhat under-represented in values debates in the public sphere due to explanations two, five, six and seven. However, I suspect that if the culture wars fascination plays itself out, and we enter a more consensual period of our collective life, we will soon be writing papers about the “re-emergence” of the mainline voice in political life.

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