6-2008

Religion and the Political Sphere: The Limitations of Public Reason

Joshua Allen Turner
College of William and Mary

Religion and the Political Sphere: The Limitations of Public Reason

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in Government from
The College of William and Mary

by

Joshua Allen Turner

Accepted for _____
(Honors)

_____
Professor Joel Schwartz, Director

_____
Professor John Baltes

_____
Professor Alan Meese

Williamsburg, VA
April 9, 2008

Table of Contents

In contemporary discourse, religion is frequently seen as a threat to democratic institutions and norms. This perception is manifest in ongoing (though perhaps weakening) judicial philosophies of strict separation, along with demands from the left and right that religion be excluded from the public square due to the divisiveness that many fear it brings. This fear appears to be fueled by a basic belief in the inherent divisiveness of religion, and specific concern about the dogmatism of some groups on the "Christian right."

Many argue that in a deeply pluralistic society, individuals and groups should base their argumentation on principles that can be accepted by all members of the democratic community. Philosophers such as John Rawls and Robert Audi base their support for this position on the idea that foundational beliefs or "comprehensive doctrines" are ultimately irreconcilable with one another and will thus generate interminable division.

The idea of public reason has met with a great deal of criticism. Many philosophers, for instance, call into question the idea that there is a universally-shared framework to which all individuals within a pluralistic society can appeal. Additionally, they suggest that even if such a framework did exist, it would rule out a number of legitimate contributions to political discourse.

Rawls's notion of public reason is contingent upon an understanding of comprehensive doctrines as ideological structures which polarize rather than facilitate meaningful dialogue. I argue that this understanding of comprehensive doctrines is unnecessarily monolithic and does not take into account the idea of a comprehensive doctrine that functions as a "tradition of inquiry." In such a tradition, overarching principles facilitate dialogue by virtue of the hermeneutical relationship of principles both to one another and to specific circumstances, issues and cases in the world. Such a tradition would therefore be very different from the divisive forms of comprehensive doctrine that Rawls fears. In this section, I develop the idea of a tradition of inquiry, referencing the work of Alasdair MacIntyre.

The idea of a religious tradition is not a purely theoretical one. In this section, I lay out the definitions of a "faith-based advocacy organization" and a "faith tradition," which will in the two subsequent sections be represented, respectively, by Focus on the Family and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. While the members of faith-based advocacy organizations unite around a specific policy agenda and tend to be dogmatic and inflexible, faith traditions, by embedding the evaluation of policies in a thick texture of overarching principles and practice, can incorporate civility, humility and deliberation.

Faith-based organizations pull out one particular principle or set of principles from a broader tradition and posit that the principle(s) they have chosen indicates inescapable policy outcomes. Even when they choose a form of argument that conforms to the standard of public reason, they remain unwilling to compromise or participate in constructive dialogue. Focus on the Family's history and expressed policy positions illustrate this inflexibility.

Faith traditions, because they refuse to reify particular applications of their historically constituted principles and practices, promote a hermeneutical ethic that is conducive to political compromise and positive dialogue. I employ the history of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, coupled with its "Social Statements" and "Messages," to illustrate the ELCA's commitment to honest deliberation, compromise and humility.

I contend that a conventional understanding of religion, fueled by a political philosophy oriented around public reason, fails to comprehend the different roles that faith-based participants can play in the public realm of liberal democracies. Though some forms of religious organization ("faith-based advocacy organizations") appear to make democratic deliberation difficult, others ("faith traditions") have the ability to make positive contributions to discourse in the political sphere. Finally, I suggest that an overly simplistic understanding of religion fails to comprehend the significant theological and political changes that are taking place within the modern evangelical community, a phenomenon worth future study.

I.   Introduction

I guess this is just another lost cause, Mr. Paine. All you people don't know about lost causes. Mr. Paine does. He said once they were the only causes worth fighting for. And he fought for them once, for the only reason any man ever fights for them. Because of just one plain, simple rule: "Love thy neighbor."

-        Senator Jefferson Smith, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939)

The interaction between religion and politics remains contentious in liberal democracies. The meaningful role that religion plays in informing people's lives is difficult to reconcile with the depth of religious diversity that exists in plural society. Indeed, for many the prospect of religion entering the public sphere evokes images of leaders who refuse to compromise regardless of the legitimate concerns of others.

Concerns about religion's involvement in the public sphere are particularly salient now. Some believe, rightly or wrongly, that actors in the current administration pursued policies based not upon a pragmatic evaluation of the international setting, but rather upon perceived divine mandates that admitted neither challenge nor compromise. Such concerns continue to play a role in the upcoming election as voters question the influence that a candidate's religion will have on his or her decision-making as President. Though it appears that candidates are beginning to examine seriously the role that religion should play in the work of a democratically-elected official, uncertainty remains.

Despite legitimate concerns about a fusion of religion and politics, there is something fundamentally problematic with the exclusion, whether coerced or self-imposed, of religious ideas from the public square. Religious individuals and organizations, like other actors within society, argue from potentially irreducible premises to conclusions with which many may

ultimately disagree. Just as other groups are accepted as legitimate contributors to the public dialogue despite the potentially exclusive and controversial nature of their claims, religious individuals and organizations should not be precluded from expressing their unique perspectives on the public good.

I aim to go further than this, however. I mean to suggest that not only are religious institutions fully justified in participating in the democratic process, but also that they can make a positive contribution to a democratic society. More precisely, I intend to argue that certain types or manifestations of religion have a positive role to play within a democratic society.

First, I will engage the ongoing debate about whether religion should be kept strictly separate from politics. A strand of thought within democratic theory, grounded in "public reason," contends that the assertion of "comprehensive doctrines" (including overarching religious and secular commitments) in public dialogue is antithetical to liberal democracy. In subsequent sections, I intend to not only question the strict notion of public reason that underlies this position, but also to maintain that it depends on a relatively monolithic picture of religion for its persuasive force.

Second, I intend to show that this monolithic picture of religion is problematic, and that specific forms or manifestations of religion can have a positive impact on a democratic society. I have no doubt that such a view will be seen as controversial, especially since liberal theory is quite properly reluctant to elevate some religions over others. By no means do I mean to suggest that some religions are somehow inherently superior to or more worthwhile than others; the distinctions that I draw will not be between the commitments or beliefs of different religious traditions, but rather between different ways that faith-based participants relate to their own traditions.

In making this argument, I will draw on a particular notion of a "tradition" as analyzed by thinkers such as Alasdair MacIntyre. I will argue that religious institutions have the capacity to contribute to democracy when they understand themselves as traditions and act accordingly. A tradition, as I defend it here, is a "historically extended, socially embodied argument" (MacIntyre 1981, p.222) that has been perpetuated over time, and that provides the context for arguments made in the status quo. [1] For example, many of the arguments made by libertarians and socialists alike emerge from a liberal tradition, an ongoing discussion about the rights of individuals within society that presupposes particular conceptions about human beings and their relationship to government, and that is significantly affected by historical trends and developments.

Traditions are significant because they can foster dialogue between their participants. Those participants, in turn, can see themselves as contributors to an ongoing discussion, and to a dialogic process that includes compromise and a willingness to engage with those who disagree with them. As a result, traditions have the capacity to foster important democratic habits and promote the peculiar virtues that vivify democratic society. In examining the nature and statements of religious groups, I argue that particular types of organized activity uniquely facilitate the types of traditions and practices that allow democracy to flourish.

Through this theoretical lens, I argue that religious organizations and institutions have the capacity to make a positive contribution to a democracy. In order to make this argument, I draw upon a concept of "ideal types," contrasting a form of religious organization that can be extremely dogmatic and uncompromising with "faith traditions" that need not be. I will ground these ideal types in reality by reference to an empirical example of each; I will use Focus on the Family as an example of an uncompromising religious organization, and the Evangelical

---

[1] See also MacIntyre, Alasdair. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, Ch. 17-19 for more in-depth analysis of MacIntyre's view of traditions.

Lutheran Church in America as an example of a faith tradition. Naturally, neither of these examples will correspond perfectly to the ideal type with which it is fitted, as is practically always the case. However, I contend that their resemblance is sufficient to vindicate my argument against the easy conflation of religion with dogmatism.

II.   **The Idea of Public Reason**

Our exercise of political power is fully proper only when it is exercised in accordance with a constitution the essentials of which all citizens as free and equal may reasonably be expected to endorse in the light of principles and ideals acceptable to their common human reason.

-      John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (1993), p. 137

In order to assess the relationship between religion and politics, it is necessary to analyze and confront the popular notion of public reason. This idea continues to be influential within democratic theory, and has influenced society both in popular discourse and in constitutional case law.

Even before John Rawls popularized the term "public reason" in 1993, a significant tenet of public reason, that any convergence between religion and the political sphere is dangerous to a democracy, manifested itself in the constitutional principle of "strict separation." This principle held that the entanglement of religion with the public square breeds conflict and inhibit effective pluralism. Its influence (whether subtle or direct) on Supreme Court understandings of the Constitution's religion clauses is evident, for instance, in *Everson v. Board of Education*, where dissenting justices argued that the devotion of public money to any religious purpose could "bring the struggle of sect against sect" (Lockhart 1976, p. 1212) and the opinion of the Court gave favorable reference to a "wall of separation between church and state" (Lockhart, p. 1212).

The dominant philosophical underpinning for the argument that religiously-grounded advocacies do not belong in the public sphere gains considerable strength from John Rawls's formulation of public reason. In his analysis of justice, Rawls reconciles the necessity of political discourse with the pluralism manifest in modern democratic society. On the one hand, deliberation is essential for the health of any democracy. In order for society to function

coherently, citizens with different viewpoints must deliberate. Simultaneously, however, it is evident that a great deal of diversity exists. It is not simply that people have varying conceptions of what policies or actions are most efficacious; society is also characterized by different conceptions of the goals themselves. That is, disagreement is thus not purely about means, a matter that could theoretically be resolved with sufficient empirical study or observation, but reaches as well to ends. Given this, Rawls suggests at least two problems.

First, he insists that disagreements are functionally incommensurable. No amount of public debate, he feels, could resolve the differences in first principles that people affirm. An atheist and a Hindu, for example, might not be able to adequately adjudicate between their two points of view no matter how long they were locked in a room together. Second, Rawls maintains that these disagreements in first principles generate disagreements on practical applications. That is, disagreements about the ends to which policy should be directed lead to fundamentally different and mutually exclusive policy positions (Rawls 1993, p. 56-7). In such cases, compromise may be possible, but the compromise itself cannot be justified in terms of either set of first principles, and must, to a degree, abandon those principles.

Due to these difficulties, he insists that democratic discourse cannot function at the intersection of first principles. In order for a democracy to function, citizens excise their particular comprehensive doctrines from public debate, and instead engage their fellow citizens on grounds more favorable to general agreement. When arguing for policy, justifications should not be couched in divisive first principles; instead, such arguments must be grounded in what Rawls terms an "overlapping consensus" of the society (Rawls 1993, p. 137).

The implications for religious discourse are profound. Religious convictions, almost by necessity, are among the first principles or "comprehensive doctrines" that divide people.

Though it could legitimately be argued that there are common threads underlying many different religions, different religious traditions (to say nothing of those traditions that reject religion altogether) affirm very different understandings of the world and how human beings ought to act. In addition, Rawls argues, religious traditions are often unwilling to compromise (Rawls 1993, p. 4; see also Rawls 1997, p. 781-3) Though religious groups will sometimes seek ecumenical dialogue, they may brook little to no negotiation on stances that they see as emerging directly out of their holy texts. Many arguing for a marriage amendment, for example, use specific biblical texts to argue for a policy stance about which they refuse negotiation. As a result, an approach like Rawls's suggests that religious groups that refuse to ground their political argumentation in terms of public reason undermine the legitimacy of the democratic process by impeding effective discourse.

It is worthwhile to note that Rawls's position appears to have changed slightly over time. In his earlier work he maintains that individuals and institutions should use exclusively public-reason-based arguments within the public sphere. However, in his later essay "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," he allows that religious institutions may be justified in supplying reasons based in their own comprehensive doctrine, so long as they are also willing and able to produce sufficient argumentation grounded in public reason (Rawls 1997, p. 776). For example, in his later writings Rawls would theoretically allow a religiously-based critique of the death penalty, but only if, for instance, this was accompanied by an argument that the death penalty has no deterrent effect. It is not clear, though, that this actually constitutes a substantive difference. If his argument remains that policies should not derive their persuasive power from the principles of a comprehensive doctrine, Rawls appears to accept religious arguments only if they are

superfluous, i.e. if they do not provide any additional persuasive force to the obligatory secular justification.

Robert Audi does not entirely agree with Rawls's idea of public reason, but opts instead for an approach oriented around "secular reason." Instead of the integrity of a democratic system, Audi argues from the principle of good democratic citizenship. Primarily, he contends that a democratic society is only justified in employing coercion when it can justify that coercion in terms that are at least minimally acceptable to the one being coerced (Audi, p. 65-7). If an agnostic wants to know why he is being sent to war, a government cannot justly answer that the war is being fought "for the glory of God in the name of Jesus Christ." Rather, the government must base its actions upon justifications that theists and atheists alike could accept, such as the basic security of the nation. Thus, for Audi, it is wrong for religious groups to argue for any form of coercive policy based on religious reasons because in doing so, they would not be good democratic citizens (Audi, p. 86-7). They would be seeking to coerce their fellow citizens for reasons that those citizens could not accept.

Audi appears to follow Rawls in not completely excluding religious reasons, and even contends that religious reasons combined with secular reasons might legitimately enhance a policy's persuasive appeal. However, this argument confronts the same problem as Rawls's; if good democratic citizenship precludes the use of reasons that many rational citizens could not accept, it is difficult to see why it is acceptable for religiously-grounded reasons to be *partially* persuasive, but unacceptable for them to be *wholly* persuasive.

We have seen that Rawlsian liberal philosophy insists that arguments in a liberal democracy must be grounded on public reasons rooted in an overlapping consensus of

comprehensive doctrines. What I will argue, however, is that this framework of public reason

relies on a number of mistaken assumptions about the nature of comprehensive doctrines.

III.   **Criticisms of Public Reason**

Our agreement on some policy need not be based on some set of principles agreed on *by all present and future citizens and* rich enough *to settle all important political issues.*

- Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Religion in the Public Square* (1997), p. 114

The public reason-centered approach contends that democratic citizens must be able to justify their policy advocacy in terms of reasons that other citizens could accept irrespective of their philosophical or religious backgrounds. However, this approach has faced considerable criticism, due at least in part to its reliance on an unrealistic portrayal of the public sphere and of the comprehensive doctrines within it. Authors critical of public reason, such as Nicholas Wolterstorff, point out that public-reason-based liberal philosophy rests on one crucial premise: individuals in a democratic society can find a basis for argument that is independent of any one particular comprehensive doctrine or collection of comprehensive doctrines. However, Wolterstorff contends, this ideal is inconsistent with reality; arguments in the political sphere are continually (and necessarily) based on particular overarching premises (Audi and Wolterstorff 1997, p. 162).

For instance, disagreements between liberal and conservative politicians regularly spring from differing theories of human nature (Greenawalt 1988, p. 174), which, while secular in origin and formulation, nevertheless rest on foundational assumptions to which not everyone would assent. For example, those advocating more expansive government programs will often defend them by reference to comparatively optimistic theories of human nature, while opponents of such programs will often derive much of their opposition from more realistic (as a technical, not pejorative term) understandings. Lacking any indisputable empirical proof to vindicate one understanding of human nature over its competitors (see, for instance, MacIntyre 1981, p. 88),

questions of basic human nature that have their roots in competing comprehensive doctrines will inevitably influence the positions citizens take in the public realm. Since neither side of the debate will be able to claim anything approaching a monopoly on rationality or rational supporters, the persistence of these competing human-nature-based premises seems inevitable even though this state of affairs clearly violates Rawls's position.

Similarly, the policy views of a staunch pacifist will often be informed by either a religiously-grounded view, as it is for many Quakers, or a philosophically-grounded view, as it could be for some Kantians, that we may never intentionally take a life. This places the advocate of public reason in a difficult position. It seems readily apparent that this pacifist should be able to justify her stances on particular policies with reference to his or her pacifist framework. However, this appears to violate the criterion of public reason because fully rational individuals can and often do reject pacifism as a compelling moral framework. According to Audi, a policy rooted in this framework would also be an unjustified form of coercion. However, it is not at all clear why this would be true, any more than the imposition of conservative or liberal economic policies, often grounded in hotly disputed assumptions about human nature, unjustifiably coerces those who disagree with those policies. Since there is no manifest ground for the existence of a true overlapping consensus, it is not clear why adherents to comprehensive doctrines (including religious ones) have an obligation as good democratic citizens to justify their political positions in terms of public reason rather than their own overarching frameworks.

In addition, the philosophy of public reason hinges on the fear that including comprehensive doctrines in public discussion will generate intractable conflict and hinder effective dialogue. Absent these destructive tendencies, defenders of public reason are left with the problematic contention that citizens of a democratic society unjustifiably coerce or disrespect

one another if they advance arguments that other fully rational citizens could find objectionable.

Correspondingly, advocates of public reason continually express concerns about the intrusion of

comprehensive doctrines (or, from Audi's perspective, specifically religious reasons) into public

discourse. Audi, for instance, writes that:

> Where religious convictions are a basis of disagreement, it is, other things equal,
> less likely that the disputants will achieve resolution or even peacefully agree to
> disagree. If God's will is felt to be clear, there is likely to seem only one way to
> view the issue. This can apply as much to prima facie non-religious problems
> such as health care as it does to specifically religious practices. (Audi, p. 69)

He later elaborates on these fears, arguing that religious reasons tend to be characterized by

(among other things) a sense of infallibility and a specter of religious domination (Audi, p. 100-

2). Though Audi seems to admit that religion is not *necessarily* this way (Audi, p. 100, 102), he

seems to understand these particular pernicious characteristics as generally descriptive of

religion. Likewise, Rawls contends that:

> The most intractable struggles, political liberalism assumes, are confessedly for
> the sake of the highest things: for religion, for philosophical views of the world,
> and for different moral conceptions of the good. We should find it remarkable
> that, so deeply opposed in these ways, just cooperation among free and equal
> citizens is possible at all. In fact, historical experience suggests that it rarely is. If
> the problem addressed is all too familiar, political liberalism proposes…a
> somewhat unfamiliar resolution of it. (Rawls 1993, p. 4)

The resolution to which Rawls refers, of course, is his theory of political liberalism, which

includes as a fundamental part the idea that arguments must derive from public reasons that have

their origins in an overlapping consensus. This line of argument runs through much of the public

reason tradition, and turns on the further claim that comprehensive doctrines are by their nature

divisive, rigid and uncompromising.

Many would suggest that this claim it is peculiarly ironic. For instance, McWilliams argues that liberal individualism can be just as divisive due to its tendencies to value the desires and integrity of the individual to the exclusion of a common good (McWilliams, p.150-1). Religion, he suggests, can actually promote the opposite, by encouraging individuals to participate in a good that transcends their immediate desires (McWilliams, p. 145-6).

In addition, as I will later argue, the monolithic description of religious comprehensive doctrines is flawed because it disregards the multiplicity of forms that such doctrines can take. More precisely, it fails to recognize the existence of comprehensive doctrines that are open to respectful dialogue and ongoing deliberation. It is to that subject that I now turn.

IV.   The Concept of a Tradition

The individual's search for his or her good is generally and characteristically conducted within a context defined by those traditions of which the individual's life is a part.

- Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (1981), p. 222

Rawls's conception of an overlapping consensus grounded in public reason relies on the assumption that the inclusion of comprehensive doctrines in public debate on political issues will engender dogmatism and undermine the important political virtues of reasoned and respectful deliberation. In this section, I will argue that Rawls's understanding is flawed because it fails to consider that a comprehensive doctrine's argumentation within the public sphere can be anything but dogmatic and extremist.

One philosopher who strongly criticizes the conflation of comprehensive doctrines with dogmatism and extremism is Alasdair MacIntyre. MacIntyre defends a model of discourse that is distinct from the standard liberal conception. He refers to this model as a "tradition of enquiry," or more simply, a "tradition." A tradition, he argues, is an "historically extended, socially embodied argument" (MacIntyre 1981, p. 222) that has been perpetuated over time, and that provides the context for arguments made in the status quo. For example, the British common law embodies a hermeneutical tradition in which principles are developed over time and applied to particular cases, and particular cases in turn influence the evolution of overarching principles. To use another example, some argue that both Marxism and modern capitalism are to some degree rooted in the philosophy of John Locke, and as such, both are part of a "Lockean" tradition of inquiry (very roughly speaking). They both argue from assumptions derived from Locke's views on the origin of property rights, although they draw different conclusions from those common premises.

This paper will employ MacIntyre's conceptual framework of a tradition because it is useful to understand how comprehensive doctrines (particularly religious ones) function in society. Two caveats are worth noting, however. First, my use of MacIntyre's conceptual framework does not mean that I endorse every attribute which MacIntyre ascribes either to particular traditions or to traditions as such. Instead, I aim to draw from those aspects of traditions that bear most directly and meaningfully upon the issue(s) in question. Second, and relatedly, I use the concept of a tradition as an ideal type, much as MacIntyre himself appears to do at times. The neat criteria assigned to the definition of a tradition rarely correspond perfectly to particular traditions, and they will certainly not correspond flawlessly to observed faith traditions. Despite this imperfect correspondence, however, the category of a tradition is often a useful way to understand faith communities.

A word on terminology is also important here. I will use the phrase "faith communities" or "faith traditions" interchangeably to refer to those forms of religious organization that correspond to a tradition as understood by Macintyre. As such, my use of these terms should not be taken to imply any particular meaning that sociological or theological inquiry may have ascribed to the terms.

According to MacIntyre, traditions have a number of unique characteristics, three of which are particularly important for this paper. First, traditions are in some way self-sufficient; they contain various assumptions internal to them that drive the conclusions they reach. This will have important implications for inter-tradition discourse because it means that dialogue across traditions is often difficult, and those operating within different traditions often embrace incommensurable premises. Second, despite the difficulty of inter-tradition dialogue, distinct traditions have some capacity, though limited, to engage one another. Although there is not, per

se, a common framework to which both traditions can appeal for adjudication, traditions can still criticize and complement one another. One tradition can criticize another by pointing out that its opponent's premises create significant problems that only *its* alternative framework can both identify and solve. MacIntyre believes, for example, that Aristotelian philosophy can be shown to be superior to its Enlightenment counterpart by virtue of its ability to identify and correct what MacIntyre sees as incoherence in the Enlightenment accounts of morality.[2] Through this interaction, traditions have the ability, to the extent that it is possible, to alter their claims in a way that resolves internal problems. MacIntyre explains:

> A second stage [of controversy between traditions] is reached if and when the protagonists of each tradition, having considered in what ways their own tradition has by its own standards of achievement in enquiry found it difficult to develop its enquiries beyond a certain point, or has produced in some areas insoluble antinomies, ask whether the alternative and rival tradition might not be able to provide resources to characterize and to explain the defects and failings of their own tradition than they, using the resources of that tradition, have been able to do. (MacIntyre 1988, p. 166-7)

Thus, MacIntyre argues that traditions can, at least to some extent, engage other traditions in an ongoing quest for truth.

In addition to the self-sufficiency and limited capacity for mutual engagement that characterizes traditions, traditions possess a third attribute that is especially important for this thesis. A tradition involves an ongoing hermeneutical dialogue within itself through which its ideas are improved and clarified as internal problems are detected and resolved. Individuals do not simply presuppose that the broad principles they defend provide immediately-evident

---

[2] MacIntyre also argues that two different traditions can sometimes join into one larger tradition, as he believes happened with the Aristotelian and Augustinian traditions through the work of Thomas Aquinas (see MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), p. 166.

answers for particular problems or questions in the real world.[3] Instead, participants within a tradition engage in an ongoing constructive dialogue debating how the multiplicity of overarching principles within the tradition are to be applied in particular cases that the tradition confronts.

The aforementioned Lockean tradition, or more precisely, the British tradition the tensions of which are captured in Locke, is a perfect example. A great deal of debate takes place within this tradition between its free-market and socialist wings, both of which claim to be heirs to the British tradition with which Locke identifies himself. In his *Second Treatise*, Locke contends that individual property rights are contingent on leaving "enough, and as good" for others (Locke, p. 112). Different schools of thought have employed this caveat to justify both extensive government intervention into the economy and a minimalist form of government. For instance, both John Rawls and Robert Nozick arguably employ a modified Lockean framework to justify their own philosophical positions.[4] Rawls utilizes Locke's limitations on the right to property to justify substantial governmental action on the grounds that government must secure equal opportunity for all individuals in society. He contends that this equal opportunity is frequently lacking due to a lottery of birth which endows some with greater resources than others, and therefore Rawls defends substantial government action to level the playing field (Rawls 1971, p. 72-3). In contrast, Nozick uses the very same principles to argue that the government should only interfere with individual decisions if they actively deprive someone of

---

[3] This is not to be confused with the distinction, which some traditions reject, between practical reasons and actual actions. As MacIntyre (1988) points out, at least some traditions have suggested that when one has identified both what the good is and what promotes the good in one's particular situation, that one can immediately discern the correct course of action without any further questions (18-9). This is distinct from the argument I am making here, namely that a tradition does not presuppose that its overarching premises self-evidently entail one particular course of action.

[4] The characterization that follow will, admittedly, not take full stock of the nuance within both Rawls' and Nozick's philosophical system, but serves nonetheless to illustrate the connection of two very different philosophical arguments to one particular tradition of thought which MacIntyre himself identifies as "liberal" (see MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?*, p. 345).

resources without that individual's consent. (Nozick 1974, p. 175-82). Both philosophers draw

from a common tradition, but they form very different conclusions about what that tradition

entails for a good society.

MacIntyre himself uses the example of Thomist philosophy. This philosophical tradition

admits that there are no categorical rules for ascertaining the "relevance of the precepts of natural

law to any particular situation" (MacIntyre 1988, p. 195). Despite the presence of overarching

principles which Aquinas believed to be virtually infallible, there remains a significant role for

intra-tradition dialogue. As Aquinas (quoted by MacIntyre) puts it:

> Since discourse on moral matters even in their universal aspects is subject to
> uncertainty and variation, it is all the more uncertain if one wishes to descend to
> bringing doctrine to bear on individual cases in specific detail, for this cannot be
> dealt with by either art or precedent, because the factors in individual cases are
> indeterminately variable. Therefore, judgment concerning individual cases must
> be left to the *prudentia* of each person… (MacIntyre 1988, 196)[5]

Both of these examples illustrate a distinction between the overarching principles that are

fundamental to a tradition and the particular applications of those principles in the world. As

such, the diverse principles that a tradition affirms facilitate dialogue in two ways. First, ongoing

debate exists as to how any given principle can best be applied within the constraints of the real

world. If a religious tradition believes that God commands human beings to be "good stewards of

the Earth," there can still be meaningful debate and dialogue as to what specific kinds of action

would accomplish this overarching goal.

This ongoing debate can be particularly significant within a faith tradition, since many

faith traditions may have independent theological justifications for this dialogue. Faith traditions

often argue, for instance, that the perfect will of God cannot be flawlessly embedded in a world

---

[5] Aquinas appears to hold a curiously individualistic conception of inquiry in this excerpt. However, MacIntyre's
later analysis suggests that Aquinas still defends an ethic centered around a discursive community, as MacIntyre
illustrates on p. 197.

of fallible and corruptible human beings. Instead, they suggest, the overarching divine commands may serve a dialogic function with the world. They stand both as perfect principles that can be adapted to the world only in limited ways, and as ideals that judge our finite systems of morality and push us to a more moral and just order.[6]

Second, the *multiplicity* of principles within a tradition forces adherents to balance potentially conflicting claims. Suppose that the aforementioned religious tradition, in addition to its expectation of good stewardship, also commands its followers to "love their neighbor." If adherents face a situation where protecting the environment ("the Earth") may somehow require impeding the development of an agricultural society, participants within the tradition must engage in constructive dialogue to adjudicate the conflict.

It is important to emphasize that the virtue of constructive dialogue is *itself* embedded within the very notion of a tradition. Participants thus internalize the value of positive dialogue, and (particularly in the case of many faith traditions) may justify this norm of dialogue from within the tradition itself. As Macintyre writes:

> The concept of rational justification which is at home in that form of enquiry is essentially historical. To justify is to narrate how the argument has gone so far. Those who construct theories within such a tradition of enquiry and justification often provide those theories with a structure in terms of which certain of these have the status of first principles; other claims within such a theory will be justified by derivation from these first principles. But what justifies the first principles themselves, or rather the whole structure of theory of which they are a part, is the rational superiority of that particular structure to all previous attempts within that particular tradition to formulate such theories and principles. (MacIntyre 1988, p.8)

Because the character of tradition-oriented discussion involves an ongoing process, participants within an authentic tradition derive their positions through critical engagements with one another.

---

[6] See, for instance, the philosophical and theological analysis of Reinhold Niebuhr, who orients a significant amount of his analysis around a dynamic relationship between perfect divine love and its fallible earthly imitations.

In his discussion of traditions, MacIntyre also discusses the idea of a "practice." A practice, according to him, is any kind of "coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity" (MacIntyre 1981, p. 187). It is focused, according to MacIntyre, on goods that are internal rather than external to the activity. In contrast with "external" goods (such as money, power or fame) that may or may not be gained from the activity, "internal" goods are those that can only be achieved through active participation. Politics, I will argue, is such a practice. Within a democratic society, the political sphere is a domain in which dialogue occurs. As a result, participation in the political sphere has the capacity to promote the "internal" goods (such as compromise and a willingness to at least see the positions of one's opponents as legitimate) that are essential to meaningful dialogue. Though it is evident that politics is far from a *perfect* forum of dialogue, it nonetheless serves that function to a significant degree.

Politics, however, is not simply a forum in which *intra*-traditional discussions take place. Rather, I mean to suggest that politics is a forum in which differing traditions, *in their entirety*, can engage with one another and partake in the dialogic virtues. As such, religious traditions are fully justified in putting their opinions into the public square *as they are*, without being obligated to couch their positions in terms of liberal theory. Rawls explicitly rejects this position, arguing that in the political sphere, individuals should eschew discussion of excessively divisive issues in favor of a common ground based in public reason. (Rawls 1993, p. 204).

When religious traditions willingly engage in the public sphere without being bound by the strictures of public reason, both the religious traditions and the dialogue benefit. Religious traditions benefit because they must reconcile two very distinct and often interacting roles that religious groups play. Religious organizations often have a vested interest in appealing to "secular reasons" for policies with which they would agree. Catholic groups arguing against

particular immigration policies, for example, will often gain more traction citing statistics and referencing the United States' own ideals than simply quoting the Bible. In doing so, they criticize current applications of a liberal tradition based on the basic principles of that tradition.

At the same time, however, they also perceive an obligation to play what is referred to as a *prophetic* role over and against the current establishment. During the Civil Rights Movement, for example, King's appeal was not based solely on pointing out incoherencies within the contemporary application of liberal principles. In addition to his use of liberal principles, he utilized his theologically-grounded appeal to justice and love for one's neighbor to call the state to account (Sturm 316). Similarly, many religious groups advocate concern for the poor on the basis that human societies are obligated to protect the "least among them." In doing so, they understand themselves to be fulfilling a divine mandate to challenge the state when it acts unjustly (towards either its own citizens or to people in other countries). This dual role of persuading from the inside and critiquing from the outside can often be an outgrowth of the dialogic nature of divine commandments.

However, religious institutions are not the only entities that benefit from the inclusion of religiously-grounded positions in political dialogue. The political sphere benefits as well. The diversity of input offered by the "prophetic" role that religious groups can play not only provides for a richer marketplace of ideas, but can also serve as a check on the excesses of the state (as the previous King example illustrates). Additionally, and where the empirical dimension of this thesis will be concentrated, the inclusion of religious voices in the political sphere can have a moderating influence. One aspect of this is that the willing inclusion of religious voices can moderate extremist religious rhetoric by fostering a sense of inclusion within the political process. When groups feel that they are excluded from the democratic process, they often

become radicalized and feel less of an incentive to abide fully by democratic norms of civility and deliberation. In the latter half of the 20th century, when many religious groups felt marginalized and excluded from the democratic process, they rallied behind groups such as the Christian Coalition whose specific policy aims were explicitly articulated in biblical terms, and whose rhetoric tended to demonize those who opposed them (Capps, 185-217). As such, the free incorporation of religiously-grounded advocacies in the public sphere may give religious institutions a greater perceived stake in the system.

More fundamentally, though, the incorporation of religious traditions into the public sphere could improve a democratic society by embedding religiously-inspired argumentation within a proper context. As I will later argue in more detail, the arguments supplied by faith-based advocacy organizations select particular principles embedded within faith traditions and contend that those principles require one specific, indisputable policy stance. For instance, many faith-based groups have taken specific verses that they see as condemning homosexuality out of a broader Christian tradition, and on the basis of those specific verses, demand that a state must ban gay marriage in order to possess any kind of moral legitimacy. In doing so, they reason in a way that is directly contrary to the way a tradition would; they both elevate one single principle over all others, and insist that this principle has indisputable policy outcomes.

These groups stand in sharp contrast with many mainline religious organizations grounded in faith traditions that have evolved and have functioned in the political sphere for some time. Rather than embrace positions that are both uncompromising and rooted solely in references to their own scripture, mainline Protestant and Catholic groups tend to balance argumentation grounded in "public reason" with analysis derived primarily from their own scriptural foundations. As such, they are able to fulfill their prophetic role without compromising

the ability to conduct public discourse. They maintain the capability to accept a wide range of

positions, and encourage a process of deliberation.

V.   **A Tale of Two Religious Forms**

The best contribution of religion is precisely not to be ideologically predictable nor loyally partisan.

- Jim Wallis, *God's Politics* (2005), p. xviii

Alasdair MacIntyre's concept of a tradition provides a model of a comprehensive doctrine that would reject the dogmatism that advocates of public reason fear. What the next two sections will illustrate, however, is that the concept of a *religious* tradition is not a hypothetical one. A great deal of my analysis to demonstrate this comes from the online public statements that my two "case study" organizations have made. Through these statements, they represent themselves to public audiences. My attention to these statements is due in large part to my interest in how these organizations would function as democratic citizens talking to the public.

In order to make this argument, I distinguish "faith-based advocacy organizations" from "faith traditions." Though the term "faith tradition" certainly exists both in philosophy and in common usage,[7] the distinction between a "faith tradition" as I define it and a "faith-based advocacy organization" is not, as far as I can tell, currently made in the literature, or at least not in political philosophy. But I believe that it is extremely important. These two forms, or "ideal types," of organization, represent two very different ways of interpreting religious principles and applying them to the world. Having made the distinction between these two "ideal types," I will discuss an individual case study of each to illustrate how these ideal types are embodied in the world. In these "case studies," I will discuss three primary issues that each of the two institutions confronts. I will analyze each organization's response to abortion, homosexuality and

---

[7] Stanley Hauerwas, for instance, argues for a Christian ethic grounded in the idea of tradition rather than a liberal philosophy. See, for instance, Hauerwas, Stanley and Charles Pinches (1997). *Christians Among the Virtues*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

poverty, and based on the very different positions that the two institutions take on these issues, I argue that they constitute meaningfully distinct forms of religious association.

A faith-based advocacy organization is a group of individuals formed almost exclusively around a common political ideology. In keeping with the name, a faith-based advocacy organization exists to advocate for specific kinds of policy measures. It devotes exclusive attention to select issues drawn from a range of theologically-grounded alternatives, and as a result, elevates a small subset of issues into controversies. When it advocates for these policies, it is likely to be dogmatic, perhaps at least in part because disagreement is not built into its structure. My central contention is that faith-based advocacy groups uproot policy positions from the faith traditions in which they have been embedded. In so doing they gain dogmatic certainty at the expense of ignoring the hermeneutical context from which their policy agenda has been wrenched.

To illustrate the concept of a faith-based advocacy organization, I will provide analysis of a group known as Focus on the Family. It has been fairly influential on the national scene and at times has featured prominently in the ongoing presidential election process. I will argue that Focus on the Family, as a fair (albeit imperfect) representation of a faith-based advocacy organization, represents the kind of religious involvement in the public sphere that advocates of public reason are legitimately concerned about.

A faith tradition, on the other hand, would be the religious instantiation of a MacIntyrean tradition. In contrast with a faith-based advocacy organization, members of a faith tradition would come together and associate with one another based upon a broad common set of foundational theological beliefs. Like the common law principles, these foundational beliefs are at one and the same time the arbiters of specific cases and themselves subtly reshaped by the

cases they are arbitrating. Disagreement about the meaning and application of principles would exist, but it would be regarded as wholly acceptable. This is partly because the tradition doesn't want to be torn apart. But a faith tradition may find *theological grounds* for encouraging open and honest deliberation about issues that they admit are difficult and controversial, just as the common law tradition finds legal grounds for accepting, indeed encouraging, adversarial exchange over common law rules and their application. Due to its practically- and theologically-grounded norms of deliberation, such a tradition could certainly be a positive influence on political discourse.

To represent the concept of a faith tradition, I have chosen to analyze the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. I will combine evidence from its past actions and current statements to argue that the ELCA represents a community where respectful dialogue is actively encouraged, and as a result, calls upon its members to advocate for causes which advance principles that the ELCA understands as fundamental. It makes no presumption as to what particular policy positions that those principles entail but rather encourages its members to enter into respectful dialogue as to what those policies might be.

If the ELCA truly does represent the "ideal type" of a faith tradition, it follows that the theory of public reason is based on an unwarranted generalization regarding comprehensive doctrines. This is the contribution that I offer to the literature: I maintain that because faith traditions like the ELCA represent a form of comprehensive religious doctrine that does *not* give rise to the dogmatism that advocates of public reason fear, arguments made from these traditions should be treated as completely acceptable in political dialogue.

Table 1.1: Faith Traditions and Faith-Based Advocacy Organizations

	Faith Tradition:	**Faith-Based Advocacy Organization:**
	Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	**Focus on the Family**
Overarching Approach:	Dialogic approach that recognizes the possible tensions between overarching principles and the diversity of ways in which principles could be applied to policy questions	Faith-based policies taken from inflexible rules without evaluating them in the context of relevant overarching principles
Social Action	"This church shall…be a community where open, passionate, and respectful deliberation on challenging and controversial issues of contemporary society is expected and encouraged;…address through deliberative processes the issues faced by the people of God in order to equip them in their discipleship and citizenship in the world." ("Church and Society")	"If we capture and embrace more of God's worldview and trust it with unwavering faith, then we begin to make the **right decisions** and form the **appropriate responses** to questions on abortion, same-sex marriage, cloning, stem-cell research and even media choices." (emphasis mine)(Tackett 2008)
Abortion	"This church encourages its members to participate in the public debate on abortion in a spirit of respect for those with whom they differ. Committed to a process of raising and deliberating the difficult and unresolved questions, this church encourages its members, informed by faith understandings and by their conscience, to decide and act on this issue in ways that are responsive to God and to the needs of the neighbor." ("Abortion")	"For those who wish to consider a faith perspective in their abortion position, the sanctity and value of preborn human life is affirmed in the Holy Bible." (Earll 2008a)
Homosexual Marriage	On some matters of sexuality, there are strong and continuing differences among us... We pray for the grace to avoid unfair judgment of those with whom we differ, the patience to listen to those with whom we disagree, and the love to reach out to those from whom we may be divided." ("Sexuality")	"This public meaning of marriage is not something that each new generation is free to redefine. Marriage is defined by the God of nature and nature's God—and a wise society will protect marriage as it has always been understood." (Stanton 2008)
Poverty and Homelessness	"The Gospel does not provide ready-made solutions to homelessness. God's love in Jesus Christ does, however, move us to care for homeless people as God cares for all...While as Christians we may differ in our views on what policies will be most effective, we ought not overlook the need for new and sustained initiatives by government, businesses, and non-profit organizations, including church groups. " ("Homelessness")	No real mention, except for the following: "When it comes to preventing poverty, social science research clearly shows that an intact, two-parent home is a strong predictor of who will escape poverty." (Minnery 2008)

VI.   **Faith-Based Advocacy Organization: Focus on the Family**

Did you know that the Bible takes a very clear position on capital gains tax? It takes a very clear position on income tax. The Bible takes a clear position on the estate tax, and takes a position on minimum wage. All these are economic issues we should be able to shape citizens' thinking on because of what the Bible says.

- Dan Barton, 2004

Focus on the Family was founded in 1977 by an evangelical psychologist named James Dobson to counter what he perceived as dangerously permissive tendencies within American culture (Buss, p. 67-8, cited in Gilgoff, p. 24). Dobson initially envisioned Focus as an organization that could provide theologically conservative advice to families that sought it, and as a result, anchored the group's resources around a radio program to promote his views of the family and to provide people with an alternative to the liberal paradigm he perceived as dominant in the psychological establishment (Gilgoff, p. 7-8; see also Buss, p. 79).

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Dobson grew dissatisfied with the direction of American politics. From his perspective, predecessor organizations such as Christian Coalition and Moral Majority had both grown too attached to the Republican Party. As a result, the Republicans had taken them for granted and saw little need to give serious attention to their demands. In a series of speeches both before groups of Congressmen and in other forums, Dobson harshly criticized both for making compromises at the expense of what he saw as a fundamental conservative agenda (Gilgoff, p. 108-9).

In the late1980s, as Tim Stafford points out in *Christianity Today*, Dobson gradually began shifting Focus's resources into the political sphere, though a majority of the organization's money and personnel would remain in the radio show (as cited in Gilgoff, 2007, p. 30). This may

have helped both his organization's effectiveness and the perception of his viewers that he was

not owned by any politician or party. Initially, he did not endorse any particular political

candidates, but rather put pressure on politicians (primarily Republicans) to embrace his desired

agenda (banning abortion and rolling back gay rights). He asked churches to support

conservative candidates and in so doing attached religion to his conservatism (Gilgoff, p. 14-5).

To those who began to argue that Focus was becoming too political, and in doing so was

abandoning its mission of helping families, Dobson argued that the culture itself was a source of

many of the problems people experienced. Political advocacy was thus an extension of Focus'

mission, he contended, because cultural and political issues were to an extent intertwined

(Gilgoff, p. 36-7). In 1988 Focus on the Family established state-level Family Policy Councils to

lobby state legislatures for favorable legislation (Diamond, p. 34, cited in Gilgoff, p. 32).

In 2003, Dobson stepped down from the chairmanship of Focus, though he remains

president. While he no longer has the same leadership role that he possessed before, his specific

ideology has been effectively inscribed upon the organization (Buss, p. 325-6, cited in Gilgoff, p.

65). Dobson himself has served a dual role: he is the founder of Focus and thus closely

connected to it, but to an extent acts as a free agent (Gilgoff, p. 64-5). When proposals for a

Federal Marriage Amendment surfaced in 2004, Dobson referred to it as his "D-Day," indicating

that he perceived its passage as a pivotal and essential victory. Accordingly, he devoted

substantial political capital to ensure its support (Gilgoff, p. 140). Though there was initial

hostility on the issue between Family Research Council president Connor (who opposed the

amendment due to concerns about its practicality) and Dobson, the issue ended when Connor

resigned and Dobson replaced him with the far more Amendment-friendly Tony Perkins

(Gilgoff, p. 155).

Focus on the Family is an organization focused primarily on providing advice to individuals and families, but it also exerts energy defending and promoting particular agendas that it sees as fundamental to its religious mission. These agendas are grouped into issue areas, which generally appear to have three components: advice for parents or relevant family members, Biblical quotations on the issue, and a policy analysis that adopts a particular stance. Though its official policy statements employ primarily secular (understood as "adhering to the standard of public reason") argumentation, many of the adjoined articles on the issue area will cite specific biblical texts whose meaning and policy implications are seen as relatively unambiguous.

It is worth noting that Focus' official policy statements deal almost exclusively with specific policies. Unlike the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (as will be explored in more detail later), Focus on the Family does not make any sustained analysis of its role in the broader society, except as a theme interwoven throughout its analyses that individual adherents need to advocate what is understood to be an explicit and incontrovertible Biblical morality. To illustrate Focus' approach, I have chosen to examine statements that the organization has issued on three particular issue areas: abortion, homosexual marriage, and poverty. These will later be contrasted with the ELCA's analyses on these issues, as they are visually in Table 1.1.

Focus's analysis on abortion is an example of its overall approach to social questions. Its article "What the Bible says about the Beginning of Life" lays out what is understood to be a clear, decisive case for the full and equal presence of the fetus within the human moral community. Numerous verses are said to speak to this presence, and are drawn from various parts of the Hebrew and Greek Bible. The article also seeks to confront specific questions of whether there can be incest or rape exceptions, or whether fetuses with disabilities can justifiably

be aborted. In each case, one or two verses are used to support definitive answers to these questions, employing one specific Biblically-related principle which is argued to lead to a dogmatic policy conclusion. For instance, one of the questions Focus's website asks is: "Are the preborn human beings?" In response, they cite a pair of verses from Luke, one of which states: "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit… [saying] 'As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy'" (Luke 1:41, 44, NIV)" (Earll 2008a). Significantly, these two verses are never really placed in a broader context of a Christian faith tradition, implying that the ongoing discourse within these faith communities is essentially superfluous.

In another article, "What's the Debate About?" two important considerations stand out. First, the article examines one specific dimension of the debate: the moral status of the fetus. The difficult nature of the situation and the practical questions accompanying any policy issue are not given consideration. Second, though the article appears to acknowledge that disagreement exists, it does not admit any particular legitimacy to those views that disagree with its own. In essence, Focus on the Family's position effectively dismisses debate both on whether the verses in question can really be understood to imply that the fetus is a person, and on what that means for the laws that a society should embrace. There is, indeed, no debate to be had about a government policy which "exclude[s] small, vulnerable, defenseless, and dependent unborn human beings from its protection for no other reason than because others consider the unborn's destruction vital to their well-being" (Beckwith 2008) Similarly, as indicated in Table 1.1, the article "What's Wrong with Abortion" declares that the only legitimate "faith-based" perspective is pro-life (both morally and legally) (Earll 2008b). This form of argument not only disagrees with, but in

fact denies any legitimacy to, a position that abortion should be made (as many have argued) "safe, rare and legal."

This approach is even more manifest with regard to questions on homosexuality. From Focus's considerable work on behalf of the Marriage Amendment, it is not particularly surprising that they argue for a clear inconsistency between Christianity and homosexuality. What is interesting about this issue is that unlike their analysis on abortion, Focus on the Family's opinion pieces on homosexuality are strongly rooted in Biblical texts. For instance, they cite commands from Leviticus that "thou shalt not lie with a man as with a woman," and some verses from Paul that have been argued to convey the same message (Dallas, 2008). In doing so, however, the organization virtually ignores the debate that takes place regarding the significance of these verses in the overall tradition. They devote a great deal of energy to criticizing what they refer to as "pro-gay theology," and contend (as referenced in Table 1.1.) that "To confront the pro-gay theology, then, is to confront a deceptive element of our time -- the tendency to subjugate objective truth to subjective experience." (Dallas, 2008) By demonizing "pro-gay theology," and thereby refusing to consider it as a legitimate position in an ongoing dialogue, Focus again manifests its unwillingness to engage in the form of deliberative discourse that a democracy requires.

Focus's analysis on poverty is most conspicuous in its absence. At no point on its website or external analysis does the organization appear to give significant attention to questions of poverty. This appears to be due to the organization's focus around what it perceives as fundamental family-oriented questions that the United States is currently confronting. Its analysis centers on a particular set of issues and raises those issues to a high level of importance. Indeed, the one statement that makes slight efforts to address the issue of poverty argues that the family

values defended by Focus are a prerequisite for the elimination of poverty (Minnery, 2008). As such, poverty is engaged as an ancillary injury to poor family values rather than as a situation containing separate issues with which to engage. In this too, they expose their dissonance with the robust idea of tradition. Focus on the Family places their understanding of family values on a pedestal, and contends that other moral and social questions matter only insofar as they affect the family. In doing so, they neglect both the central concern for the poor within the Christian tradition and the numerous ways that poverty can influence the ability of a family to remain durable. By focusing exclusively on family values, rather than locating those values in the context of a tradition that examines the complex relationships between them, Focus exposes its preoccupation with a narrow, exclusive set of issues with regard to which deliberation and compromise are generally not welcome.

While this criticism more or less implies that Focus on the Family functions as an interest group where political deliberation is concerned, I want to make my meaning plain. I do not mean to suggest, by any means, that Focus' advocacy of particular issues renders it a poor contributor to democratic dialogue. Many individuals and organizations argue passionately in the political sphere for positions that they find important, and quite rightly so. They often bring to the table ideas and approaches that might not otherwise have entered discussion. What is problematic about Focus on the Family is the narrowness and inflexibility that characterize the positions it espouses.

Indeed, what is striking about Focus's statements, particularly the statement on homosexuality, is the tone by which the statements are communicated. Though they do not tend to use the explicit metaphors of combat and defeating an enemy that Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority would often employ (Capps 1990, p. 30-1), they often impute malicious or

conspiratorial motives to those that disagree with them. At the very least, they certainly refuse to acknowledge the legitimacy of those whose viewpoints differ from their own, and as a result, refuse to enter into honest deliberation with them. Though they appear to draw some of their theological resources from a rich Calvinist tradition (Capps, p. 60; Speer, p. 40), their positions remain uncompromising both in their essentials and in their specific applications. In short, the form that Focus on the Family's advocacy tends to take is precisely that about which Rawls and Audi express legitimate concern: narrow, dogmatic claims which admit of no legitimate disagreement, and which, by demonizing their opposition, make it difficult for those who disagree with them to regard the policies motivated by their beliefs as acceptable.

Moreover, Focus on the Family is a problem case for Rawls and Audi. Though biblical arguments abound and are undoubtedly the primary underpinning for Focus's positions, the organization also seeks to make arguments based on what they believe to be shared human moral intuitions (as they do, for instance, in the case of abortion). Because these appear to represent an appeal that both meets the standards of public reason *and* is fairly dogmatic, Rawls's conflation of public reason with moderation and comprehensive doctrines with dogmatism appears very much misplaced.

VII.   **Faith Tradition: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**

Because of the diversity in Scripture, and because of the contemporary world's distance from the biblical world, it is necessary to scrutinize the texts carefully in their own setting and to interpret them faithfully in the context of today. In their witness to God's Word, the ecumenical creeds and the Lutheran confessions guide this church's approach to Scripture, and the church's history and traditions instruct it in its deliberation.

-       Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Social Statement on Church and Society

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, like all Lutheran denominations, derives a great deal of its inspiration from the works of a 14th century monk named Martin Luther. Luther strongly criticized contemporary policies of the Catholic Church that he perceived as antithetical to biblical Christianity. He believed that the Catholic tradition had been corrupted over time and initially aimed to reform the Church from within. When his efforts failed, he and those who supported him broke away from the Catholic Church entirely and formed what is now loosely referred to as Protestantism. The Lutheran church in particular is so named because it not only understands itself as separate from the Catholic tradition, but also gives great significance to Luther's theological understanding of Christianity.

The American Lutheran community in particular originated primarily from immigrant populations. Groups of individuals along the Rhine River established Lutheran communities within the colonies (later states), oriented primarily around shared ethnic and geographical identities (Gilbert, p. 1-9). As these communities integrated themselves into a broader American identity, many Lutheran congregations congealed into larger, more diverse entities. Over time, many of these entities grew to transcend any particular ethnic or geographical affiliation.

From this process, a number of larger church bodies formed. Some of them remained independent, such as the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. However, three of these large organizations would eventually coalesce into the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The American Lutheran Church, based in Minnesota, was a fairly conservative organization that placed great emphasis on individual piety. In contrast, the Lutheran Church in America was theologically liberal and relatively centralized. The third body, the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, was a more moderate body that broke off from the more conservative Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. After a substantial amount of dialogue, the three aforementioned organizations came together to form the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 1988 (Gilbert, p. 67-9).

As a general principle, the ELCA has incorporated reasoned dialogue into its processes of deliberation, due at least in part to its theology of "Two Kingdoms," and of human sinfulness. The "kingdom of the right," or "City of God" in the terminology of Augustine, is what the church aspires to become, a perfect reflection of Jesus's commandments. At the same time, the church recognizes that it will always fall short of this ideal. The "kingdom of the left," or "City of Man," in contrast, is the larger society in which the church resides (Braaten, 132). The ELCA, along with prominent theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr,[8] contend that the principles embedded within the Gospel texts (such as "turn the other cheek") cannot be perfectly applied to any human institutions (including the church). This is true both because society relies upon the law to maintain some level of order in society, and because imperfect human beings are incapable of instituting a perfect order. As such, they argue, it will instead be necessary to accept

---

[8] It is worth noting here that Niebuhr was known for objecting vociferously to Luther's Two Kingdoms idea, because he felt that it isolated the church too much from the world and detached it too significantly from its broader obligations to humanity. (Gritsch and Jenson, p. 179)

limited, partial substitutes. [9] Because basic Biblical mandates such as a love for one's neighbor and a concern for the poor cannot be perfectly realized in any specific policy, Lutheran theology promotes an emphasis on deliberation to find the means by which these mandates can best be fulfilled in the world.

Moreover, precisely because of the enduring moral and intellectual fallibility of human beings, the idea of the Two Kingdoms encourages a sense of humility. It cautions against any one individual's pretensions that he or she possesses the full truth on an issue, and thus encourages people who embrace it to pursue open and respectful dialogue with those who disagree with them rather than assuming that their opponents must be either intellectually or morally deficient.

This theological mandate appears to play a significant role in influencing the ELCA's approach to social issues. Though it does not refrain from taking particular positions on some issues, it commits itself to an ongoing process of respectful dialogue between those of different opinions within the church, as its "ancestor churches" often did. For instance, in the late 1950s and 1960s there was a substantial "Lutheran left." Many Lutheran pastors and lay people protested the Vietnam War, and some were involved in civil rights work. Due to their more liberal philosophy, many of them also expressed concerns about what they saw as deficiencies within the church. They argued for a fuller integration of homosexuals, for instance, and called for more liberal stances on social issues. Rather than splitting off from the church body, their views were incorporated into an ongoing process of dialogue within the community (Erling 2003, p. 57-9).

---

[9] For an elaboration of this position, see Luther's "Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed." The original social statements of the Lutheran Church in America affirm this position (see W. Kent Gilbert, *Commitment to Unity: A History of the Lutheran Church in America)*, as does the current ELCA Statement on Church and Society.

The incorporation of varying views is manifested especially in the statements that the ELCA issues. As a matter of policy, two different kinds of statements are issued. Social Statements, issued by the ELCA's Churchwide Assembly, are broader descriptions of the church's approach to an enduring issue, such as abortion or the environment. Messages, on the other hand, are adopted by the ELCA Church Council and apply the principles in these Social Statements to more particular issues such as the changing face of Europe. Importantly, however, these messages generally do not defend any particular policy approach. In many cases, they mention a current event or set of events and reference different principles that could be applied to that event. While Focus on the Family removes biblical verses and policy positions from their traditional contexts, the ELCA seeks precisely to embed policy controversies in the hermeneutical tradition within which they can be evaluated.

These statements are the product of discussion within the ELCA, and reflect the church's approach to a variety of social issues (Gilbert 1988, p. 134-5).[10] As such, they reflect the discussion that takes place within the ELCA and indicate the ELCA's recognition of and strong support for a substantial diversity of specific policy stances. In its "Social Statement on Church and Society," the ELCA states that the church should be "a community where open, passionate, and respectful deliberation on challenging and controversial issues of contemporary society is expected and encouraged," and "address through deliberative processes the issues faced by the people of God in order to equip them in their discipleship and citizenship in the world." Correspondingly, in many of its statements regarding controversial issues, the church emphasizes that the multiplicity of reason- and faith-derived foundational principles applied to a particular case can and does generate reasonable disagreement.

---

[10] Gilbert discusses social statements in the context of the then-newly-formed Lutheran Church in America. These social statements continued to exist once the ELCA was formed, fulfilling the same function. The ELCA's Social Statements can be found at: <http://www.elca.org/SocialStatements/>

In addition to its broad statement on the church and society, I have chosen to highlight four particular statements from the ELCA: Abortion, Sexuality, Homelessness and Economic Life. These statements express the church's convictions with regard to abortion, homosexuality and poverty. I use these statements in order to emphasize how the ELCA's approach differs strongly from the approach taken by Focus. Significant excerpts from these statements can be found in Table 1.1, on page 30.

In its Social Statement on Abortion, the ELCA demonstrates its deliberative emphasis. Though it contends that the fetus does possess some form of moral agency, the statement does not move from this claim to a definitive policy resolution. Instead, it affirms two principles. First, it cautions against what it perceives as absolutist rhetoric emerging from the pro-life and pro-choice movements, instead contending that the principles utilized by both pro-life and pro-choice individuals deserve respect and consideration. It states, for instance, that "the language used in discussing abortion should ignore neither the value of unborn life nor the value of the woman and her other relationships." Similarly, "this church encourages its members to participate in the public debate on abortion in a spirit of respect for those with whom they differ" ("Abortion," 1991).

Second, the Social Statement on Abortion devotes attention to practical issues that it believes both movements tend to ignore, such as caring for pregnant women and offering various forms of aid that diminish the perceived need for abortions. They write: "Our ministry of hospitality to all people ought to include women who have had abortions, women who are considering abortions, children, families, and those who bear and raise children under all kinds of circumstances." The church appears to take no stand on the legal status of abortion ("Abortion," 1991).

It is interesting, and perhaps telling, that there is no ELCA Social Statement or Message devoted specifically to homosexuality. Homosexuality is mentioned only in passing, and its mention occurs in the context of a broader Message on Sexuality ("Sexuality," 1996). In direct contrast with Focus on the Family, questions regarding homosexuality are not uprooted from the context of sexuality in which they belong, but are instead firmly anchored within a broader discussion of what human sexuality ought to be ("Sexuality," 1996). Though the Message explicitly defines marriage as a relationship between a man and a woman, there are three significant differences between the ELCA's analysis and that of Focus.

First of all, there is no explicit mention anywhere in the document of policy implications. Therefore, even to the extent that the statement takes a kind of definitive position, it makes no assumption that its position translates unquestionably into particular policies for a democratic state to enact. Second, the document explicitly acknowledges the "strong and legitimate disagreements" between Lutherans on issues of sexuality, and admits that "differences and disagreements [over homosexuality] were at times sharp" ("Sexuality," 1996). Importantly, the Message does not explicitly take either side in these disagreements. This represents a huge change from Focus' approach, because it acknowledges that not only are there are legitimate differences of opinion to be had, but that there are legitimate differences *within the church itself*. This further illustrates the idea that the ELCA embraces the notion of a community in which participants acknowledge disagreements without demonizing or dismissing the viewpoints of those who disagree with them.

With regard to poverty and homelessness, the church's approach is slightly different in that it is willing to take a more definitive stance. Its statements in this regard (Economic Life and Homelessness) are derived from the Greek Bible and from prophetic texts in the Hebrew Bible,

and those statements begin from the premise that individuals, communities, and states have a strong obligation to "care for homeless people as God cares for all" ("Homelessness," 1990) and to carry out "acts of justice for the sake of the most vulnerable" ("Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All," 1999). Admittedly, there is some diversity of approaches when it comes to policy implications. Both statements contend that the government needs to be involved in some way, though the two statements part ways in their levels of specificity. The Message on Homelessness neglects to specify any particular policy that the government ought to adopt, as the "Gospel does not provide ready-made solutions to homelessness."

The Statement on Economic Life, in contrast, gets slightly more specific in its advocacy, expressing explicit support for "investments, loan funds, hiring practices, skill training, and funding of micro-enterprises," along with "correction of regressive tax systems, so that people are taxed progressively in relation to their ability to pay" ("Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All," 1999). Two points are worth making here, however. First, the ELCA refuses to embrace a consistently conservative or consistently liberal approach to poverty. To the extent that it supports policy positions, those positions appear to be a synthesis of liberalism and conservatism, such that neither conservatives nor liberals can claim a monopoly on truth with regard to poverty. Second, as is consistent with their Social Statement on Church and Society, the ELCA never presupposes that the particular policies they allude to follow incontestably and inescapably from the foundational premises that the community embraces. Though the committee does mention particular policies that they support, they ultimately aim at defending policies that keep the needs of the poor in mind, whatever those policies may be. In this regard, the ELCA seems no more dogmatic than any group which embraces any advocacy. Because the statement never claims that the policies in question follow inescapably from a desire to aid the

poor (and the statement on Homelessness explicitly *denies* any such inescapable link), it appears that the ELCA would be entirely willing to alter its position if the policies that it referenced would be unsuccessful in fighting poverty.

In direct contrast with Focus on the Family, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America appears to correspond fairly closely to MacIntyre's understanding of a tradition, in two critical ways. First, it embeds discussion of particular issues within a broader context. Instead of justifying positions through use of isolated biblical verses, it derives positions on issues through a kind of dialectical process which attempts to glean overarching principles from a variety of different texts, and which attempts to place overarching principles into dialogue with the observed world. Second, throughout that dialectical process, the ELCA recognizes and even celebrates the reasonable disagreements which foster an ongoing process of honest deliberation. This, in turn, means that Rawls's and Audi's concerns regarding comprehensive doctrines are at least partially misplaced. Contrary to the broad stereotypes on which the philosophy of public reason relies, religious comprehensive doctrines have the capacity to promote democratic virtues of deliberation, humility and compromise, and in doing so, make a positive contribution to the democratic process. Finally, an attachment to humility and skepticism that perfection can be achieved in this world, two theologically-grounded principles, lead Lutherans to challenge the certainty that can lead to political dogmatism.

VIII.   Conclusion/Further Research

The evangelical social agenda is now much wider and deeper, engaging issues such as poverty and social justice, global warming, HIV/AIDS, sex trafficking, genocide in Darfur and the ethics of the war in Iraq.

-    Jim Wallis, *The Great Awakening* (2008), p. 5

The philosophy of public reason wields substantial influence in modern American political philosophy. However, the idea that a citizen of a liberal democracy should always have a sufficient reason grounded either in secular reason specifically, or an overlapping consensus of the society generally, rests on deeply problematic premises. One of these, as critics have frequently argued, is the practical and moral impossibility of eliminating particular comprehensive doctrines from political dialogue.

Additionally, however, I have argued that proponents of public reason and secular reason alike rest their case on an unnecessarily uncharitable understanding of religion. They fail to distinguish between faith-based advocacy organizations, whose influences can indeed be destructive, and faith traditions, which have the capability to satisfy and promote important democratic values of deliberation and compromise. As a result, liberal theory is mistaken when it argues against the presence of religious arguments in the political sphere.

The fatal flaw in many liberal treatments of religion is that they fail to comprehend the complexity and creativity that often characterizes religion. Many of these complexities merit further research, and though there regrettably was not adequate space to give these newfound complexities the treatment they deserve, I find it worthwhile to highlight directions that future research should take.

Many traditionally-dismissed religious groups deserve (and are beginning to get) a second look. Significant sections of the evangelical community, a group frequently depicted as a narrowly conservative population, are beginning to reclaim some of their trans-partisan roots. Pastor Jim Wallis' book *God's Politics*, in which he urges Christian believers to speak out against poverty and oppression as well as broken families and communities, has been extremely popular among evangelicals, and may be critical in defining a new direction for evangelical Christianity. Some evangelical groups have spoken out in favor of environmental protection, and evangelical support was essential to the passing of the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act.

Simultaneously, there exists evidence to suggest that evangelicals as a group are not inherently as extreme or uncompromising as they are typically believed to be, even though they are influenced by vocal extremist voices (many of them from the very faith-based advocacy organizations which I have discussed) (Smith 2000; Wolfe 2003). Moreover, some even argue that the organizations *themselves* have begun to moderate in some ways (Lester 2008, p. 27, 30). Though it is far from clear that (for instance) the supplementing of biblical language with ethical analysis on Focus' website signals a greater willingness for evangelical groups to engage with those who disagree with them, this possibility should be explored.

As observers dating back to Tocqueville have noted, religion plays an extremely significant role in American society. Tragically, however, liberal political theorists often argue that religion should not play a significant role in political argumentation. In so doing, they reveal a profound misunderstanding of the diversity within religion and miss the positive contribution that religious faith traditions can make to political discourse.

References

Audi, Robert. (2000). *Religious Commitment and Secular Reason*. New York,

NY: Cambridge University Press.

Audi, Robert and Nicholas Wolterstorff. (1997). *Religion in the Public Square:*

The Place of Religious Convictions in Political Debate. Lanham,

Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc.

Beckwith, Francis J (2008). "What's the Debate About?" Focus on the Family,

Retrieved April 10, 2008 from <http://www.family.org/lifechallenges/A000000130.cfm>

Buss, Dale. (2005). *Family Man: The Biography of Dr. James Dobson*. Wheaton,

IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

Braaten, Carl E (1983). *Principles of Lutheran Theology*. Philadelphia, PA:

Fortress Press.

Capps, Walter H. (1990). *The New Religious Right*. Columbia, SC: University of

South Carolina Press.

*"*Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective," *Social Statements and Messages of*

the ELCA (1991). Retrieved 4/10/08 from

<http://www.elca.org/SocialStatements/churchinsociety/>

Dallas, Joe (2008). "Pro-Gay Theology: Scriptural and Cultural Arguments,"

Focus on the Family, Retrieved April 10, 2008 from

<http://www.family.org/socialissues/A000000781.cfm>

Diamond, Sara. (1998). *Not by Politics Alone: The Enduring Influence of the*

Christian Right. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Earll, Carrie Gordon (2008a). "What the Bible Says About the Beginning of

Life," Focus on the Family, Retrieved April 10, 2008 from

<http://www.family.org/lifechallenges/A000002199.cfm>

Earll, Carrie Gordon (2008b). "What's Wrong With Abortion?" Focus on the

Family, Retrieved April 10, 2008 from

<http://www.citizenlink.org/FOSI/bioethics/abortion/A000001340.cfm

"ELCA Social Statement on Abortion," *Social Statements and Messages of the*

ELCA (1991). Retrieved April 10, 2008 from

<http://www.elca.org/SocialStatements/abortion/>

"ELCA Message on Homelessness," *Social Statements and Messages of the*

ELCA (1990). Retrieved April 10, 2008 from

<http://www.elca.org/SocialStatements/homelessness/>

"ELCA Social Statement on Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All," *Social*

Statements and Messages of the ELCA (1999). Retrieved April 10, 2008 from

<http://www.elca.org/SocialStatements/economiclife/>

Erling, Maria. (2003). "The Lutheran Left: From Movement to Church

Commitment." In *Lutherans Today: American Lutheran Identity in the 21st Century*, ed.

Richard Cimino. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Gilbert, Kent. (1988). *Commitment to Unity*: *A History of the Lutheran Church in*

America. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press.

Gilgoff, Dan (2007). *The Jesus Machine: How James Dobson, Focus on the*

Family and Evangelical America are Winning the Culture War. New

York, NY: St. Martin's Press.

Greenawalt, Kent. (1988). *Religious Convictions and Political Choice*. New York,

NY: Oxford University Press.

Gritsch, Eric W. and Robert Jenson (1976). *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press.

Lester, Emile (2008). "Teaching Good Faith: The Role of Public Schools in Promoting Civil Discourse About Religion." Unpublished manuscript

Locke, John. "Second Treatise: Of Civil Government." In *Two Treatises of Government and a Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. Ian Shapiro. New Haven: Yale University Press, 100-210.

Lockhart, William, Yale Kamisar and Jesse Choper (1976). *Constitutional Law: Cases, Comments, Questions*. St Paul, MN: West Publishing Company.

MacIntyre, Alasdair (1981). *After Virtue*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

MacIntyre, Alasdair (1988). *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

Minnery, Tom (2008). "Staying Focused: Why We Don't Address All the Issues," Focus on the Family, Retrieved April 10, 2008 from <http://www.focusonthefamily.com/focusmagazine/publicpolicy/A000000927.cfm >

McWilliams, Wilson Carey (2003). "American Democracy and the Politics of Faith." In *Religion Returns to the Public Square: Faith, Politics and Policy in America*, ed. Hugh Heclo and Wilfred McClay. Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 143-162.

Nozick, Robert (1974). *Anarchy, State and Utopia*. New York, NY: Basic Books Inc.

Rawls, John (1971). *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: The President and

    Fellows of Harvard College.

Rawls, John (1993). *Political Liberalism*. New York, NY: Columbia University

    Press.

Rawls, John (1997). "The Idea of Public Reason Reconsidered." *University of*

    Chicago Law Review: 765-807.

"Sexuality: Some Common Convictions" (1996), *Social Statements and Messages*

    of the ELCA, Accessed April 10, 2008 from

        <http://www.elca.org/SocialStatements/sexuality/>

Smith, Christian. 2000. *Christian America? What Evangelicals Really Want*.

    Berkeley, University of California Press.

Speer, James (1984). "The New Christian Right and Its Parent Company: A Study

    in Contrasts." In *New Christian Politics*, ed. David Bromley and Anson

    Shupe. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press.

Stanton, Glenn T (2008). "Is Marriage in Jeopardy? Part I," *Focus on the Family*,

    Retrieved April 10, 2008 from

        <http://www.family.org/socialissues/A000000646.cfm>

Sturm, Douglas. 1984. "Crisis in the American Republic: The Legal and Political

    Significance of Martin Luther King's 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail.'"

    Journal of Law and Religion 2 (309-24).

Tackett, Del (2008). "What's a Christian Worldview?" Focus on the Family,

    Retrieved April 10, 2008 from

        <http://www.family.org/faith/A000000404.cfm>

Wallis, Jim. 2008. *The Great Awakening: Reviving Faith and Politics in a Post-Religious Right America*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Wallis, Jim. 2005. *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Wolfe, Alan. 2003. *The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith*. New York: Free Press.