

# Rhetoric and Religion in Contemporary Politics

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*The United States has long grappled with the question of how to maintain an appropriate combination of religion and politics in the public sphere. The current electoral cycle is no different, as Presidential candidates attempt to negotiate both the political and religious landscapes. This essay introduces a special forum on rhetoric and religion in contemporary politics and touches on some recent instances of how religious differences have played out in the current political environment. Some of the issues discussed include the separation of church and state, Mitt Romney's membership in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Rick Santorum's conception of the "war on religion," and the controversy over contraceptives at religious institutions and Rush Limbaugh's attacks on a Georgetown law student.*

**Keywords:** Catholicism, Limbaugh, Mormonism, Religion, Romney, Santorum

Despite the establishment clause in the First Amendment, which states, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion," religion has long been a part of American politics. Alexis de Tocqueville remarked, "It was religion that gave birth to the English colonies in America. One must never forget that. In the United States religion is mingled with all the national customs and all those feelings which the word fatherland evokes."<sup>1</sup> But despite the presence of the First Amendment, which ostensibly grants freedom of religion, Kathleen Flake notes, "Religious liberty did not come naturally to Americans . . . Only gradually did the failure of any one church to dominate convert all churches to the principle of tolerance."<sup>2</sup> William D'Antonio and Dean Hoge likewise argue that the colonists were much less tolerant of other religions and that "after adoption of the First Amendment, disestablishment of denominations proceeded slowly."<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, the establishment clause itself is so broad as to invite differing viewpoints on what it means. Some have tried to trace the thoughts of the original framers of the Constitution, leading to such assertions as those of Teresa Blake, that Jefferson's notion of a "wall of separation between church and State" has been taken out of context when coupled with Locke's notion of natural law.<sup>4</sup> But the law is continually changing and law

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<sup>1</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence (New York: Perennial Classics, 2000), 432.

<sup>2</sup> Kathleen Flake, *The Politics of American Religious Identity: The Seating of Senator Reed Smoot, Mormon Apostle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 15.

<sup>3</sup> William V. D'Antonio and Dean R. Hoge, "The American Experience of Religious Disestablishment and Pluralism," *Social Compass* 53, no. 3 (2006): 346.

<sup>4</sup> Teresa M. Blake, "Were the Framers—and the Writers Who Influenced Them—Unable to Foresee the Extent of Secularization That Could Result from the Separation of Church and State," *Campbell Law Review* 33, no. 3 (2011): 734-35.

textbooks continue to argue that the general rule is that “the overall purpose of the Establishment Clause is to put a *wall between church and state*.”<sup>5</sup> Angela Carmella argues that because of the general agreement in social norms among the various sects, “It was really the incorporation of the Establishment Clause in the Supreme Court’s 1947 decision in *Everson v. Board of Education*, and its sharp emphasis on the wall of separation of church and state, that signaled the beginning of the end of this normative unity.”<sup>6</sup>

In some ways, the notion of Americanism and the idea of religion seem intertwined. As Robert Bellah put it, “Europe is Egypt; America, the promised land. God has led his people to establish a new sort of social order that shall be a light unto all the nations.”<sup>7</sup> Such views of the American continent can be seen in early colonial sermons such as Samuel Danforth’s 1670 sermon, “A Brief Recognition of New England’s Errand in the Wilderness.”<sup>8</sup> What is really at issue here is the question of who gets to claim the identity of “American.” Seymour Lipset observes that “Americans are utopian moralists who press hard to institutionalize virtue, to destroy evil people, and eliminate wicked institutions and practices. A majority even tell pollsters that God is the moral guiding force of American democracy.”<sup>9</sup>

Current events have brought the idea of what it means to be an American and how this intersects with religion to the forefront. For many, defining what it means to be an American requires strict adherence to a kind of orthodoxy that was never present with the founding fathers themselves. As the discourses of American exceptionalism have been told and retold, a kind of revisionism has crept in, framing this exceptionalism in terms of America’s founding as a Christian nation. But Paul Boyer asks, “Precisely what is this ‘Christianity’ that looms so large in American history? Once we have acknowledged its endurance, we are struck with equal force by its *diversity*.”<sup>10</sup> Still, despite this history, the collective belief in the United States as a Christian nation can be a powerful political force. As Michael McGee writes, “Each political myth presupposes a ‘people’ who can legislate reality with their collective belief. So long as ‘the people’ believe basic myths, there is unity and collective identity.”<sup>11</sup> When judgments are made based on political myths, the consequences for those who do not meet the standards of those myths can be drastic. Thomas Hietala argues that “Geographical isolation and a powerful exceptionalist ideology have insulated the United States from the complexities of culture and historical experience affecting other peoples, leaving Americans susceptible to myths and misconceptions at home and abroad. Often unaware of their own history, Americans frequently

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<sup>5</sup> Steven L. Emanuel, *Emanuel Law Outlines: Constitutional Law* (New York: Aspen Publishers, 2006), C-71. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>6</sup> Angela C. Carmella, “Exemptions and the Establishments Clause,” *Cardozo Law Review* 32, no. 5 (2011): 1732.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Neelly Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 175.

<sup>8</sup> Samuel Danforth, “A Brief Recognition of New-England’s Errand into the Wilderness,” in *American Rhetorical Discourse*, ed. Ronald F. Reid, 38-52 (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 63.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Boyer, “Two Centuries of Christianity in America: An Overview,” *Church History* 70, no. 3 (2001): 547.

<sup>11</sup> Michael C. McGee, “In Search Of ‘The People’: A Rhetorical Alternative,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 61, no. 3 (1975): 245.

misunderstand foreign cultures and experiences as well. Myths and misconceptions often fill the void created by ignorance of history.”<sup>12</sup>

In this issue of *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric*, I have asked several scholars of rhetoric and religion to address the current political landscape and to explore how these events relate to religious discourse or practice. In this introductory essay, I will briefly discuss some recent events and attempt to connect them to the essays in this issue.

### Nothing New Under the Sun

When considering the current arguments surrounding politics and religion, one is struck at once by how they seem to continue from one generation to another. One enduring question concerns the kind of individual who should be elected president. Brett Benson and colleagues observe that “for most of American history, the majority of eligible citizens were eliminated from being considered for the presidency. If a qualified individual happened to be African-American, female, Catholic, or Jewish (to name just a few), they had little chance at winning the White House.”<sup>13</sup> They note that although the election of John F. Kennedy and Barack Obama has challenged the stronghold that white, male Protestants have held on the office, biases against candidates from religious minorities, especially Muslims and atheists, remain in force.

Such biases have spawned questions concerning the religious beliefs of candidates from both the Republican and Democratic parties. This issue was especially salient during the 2008 election when a contingency of conspiracy theorists concluded that Barack Obama was really a closet Muslim, despite his well known affiliation with controversial pastor Jeremiah Wright.<sup>14</sup> This suspicion continues, but has been largely discounted by the mainstream populace. Even among those who accept that Obama is not a Muslim, he is still not the “right” kind of Christian. As Lisa Miller writes in the *Washington Post*, “Christian conservatives are playing an ancient game. They are using religion to separate the world into ‘us’ and ‘them. They are saying, ‘The president is not like us.’”<sup>15</sup>

Yet the essay in this issue by Andre Johnson suggests that in the National Prayer Breakfast, Obama provides a “rhetorical theology” through his remarks that is quite con-

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas R. Hietala, *Manifest Design: American Exceptionalism and Empire*, Rev. ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 271. For recent work on the rhetoric of American exceptionalism see Jason A. Edwards and David Weiss, eds., *The Rhetoric of American Exceptionalism: Critical Essays* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Brett V. Benson, Jennifer L. Merolla, and John G. Geer, “Two Steps Forward, One Step Back? Bias in the 2008 Presidential Election,” *Electoral Studies* 30, no. 4 (2011): 607.

<sup>14</sup> See Lisa Barr, “Contradicting an Internet Rumor Via Traditional and Social Media: Campaign Obama’s Anti-Muslim/Pro-Christian Rhetoric,” *International Journal of Technology, Knowledge & Society* 6, no. 4 (2010): 55-65; Barry A. Hollander, “Persistence in the Perception of Barack Obama as a Muslim in the 2008 Presidential Campaign,” *Journal of Media & Religion* 9, no. 2 (2010): 55-66; Spee Kosloff, Jeff Greenberg, Toni Schmader, Mark Dechesne, and David Weise, “Smearing the Opposition: Implicit and Explicit Stigmatization of the 2008 U.S. Presidential Candidates and the Current U.S. President,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 139, no. 3 (2010): 383-98. For more on the issue of Jeremiah Wright, see Thomas L. Dumm, “Barack Obama and the Souls of White Folk,” *Communication & Critical/Cultural Studies* 5, no. 3 (2008): 317-20; Jodi Kantor, “Obama Denounces Statements of His Pastor as ‘Inflammatory,’” *New York Times*, March 15, 2008; Linda F. Selzer, “Barack Obama, the 2008 Presidential Election, and the New Cosmopolitanism: Figuring the Black Body,” *MELUS* 35, no. 4 (2010): 15-37.

<sup>15</sup> Lisa Miller, “The Christianity Police Should Stand Down,” *Washington Post*, February 26, 2012.

sistent with mainstream Christianity. Johnson suggests that rather than take the approach of the jeremiad, Obama “instead launches into personal testimony about his own prayer life.”<sup>16</sup> He then uses this narrative to make policy statements framed within religious discourse. Of course Obama may have more reason than others to share his own faith narrative, with some still believing that he is a Muslim or questioning his Christian credentials.

On the other hand, there was, and still remains, questions concerning current the faith of current Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney. Although the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (commonly referred to as Mormons) is outside of mainstream Christianity, the church has long been involved in political action, most recently in the efforts to support Proposition 8 in California opposing the legalization of same-sex marriage.<sup>17</sup> However, Romney is not the first candidate to cause controversy in running for political office, nor is he actually the first Mormon to run for president. Joseph Smith, the founder of the church, was a candidate for the United States Presidency in 1844, and in 1903, Reed Smoot, who was also a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, was the first Mormon to be elected to the United States Senate and, after a protracted debate, seated in the legislature.<sup>18</sup> There are Mormons currently in office, including Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada, but the concerns about a Mormon president persist.

Romney previously attempted to assuage fears in a speech entitled “Faith in America,” which some compared to John F. Kennedy’s famous speech before the Greater Houston Ministerial Association.<sup>19</sup> However, where there are similarities, there were also stark differences in the campaign. David Campbell, a political scientist at the University of Notre Dame who is also a Mormon, told the *Washington Post* that “it is not surprising that Romney would take a different approach than Kennedy’s. ‘The political environment has changed too much, and his previous statements and the way he’s run his campaign aren’t going to allow him to do what Kennedy did.’”<sup>20</sup> Indeed, Martin Medhurst argues that “Romney found himself in the ironic position of echoing Kennedy in support of a position that was almost diametrically opposed to that set forth by JFK in 1960. Whereas

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<sup>16</sup> Andre E. Johnson, “Avoiding Phony Religiosity: The Rhetorical Theology of Obama’s 2012 National Prayer Breakfast Address,” *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 2, no.2 (2012): 48.

<sup>17</sup> See Jesse McKinley and Kirk Johnson, “Mormons Tipped Scale in Ban on Gay Marriage,” *New York Times*, November 15, 2008; Ashley Surdin, “Protesters Target Supporters of Gay Marriage Ban,” *Washington Post*, November 15, 2008; Alan F.H. Wisdom, “Proposition 8 Judge Attacks Churches; Ruling Would Make Traditional Believers Enemies of the State,” *Washington Times*, August 12, 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Although Joseph Smith was nominated for the presidency, the *History of the Church* observes, “Of course there could be no hope seriously entertained that he would be elected; but, as explained by an editorial in the *Times and Seasons*, if the Saints could not succeed in electing their candidate, they would have the satisfaction of knowing that they had acted conscientiously; they had used their best judgment, under the circumstances, and if they had to throw away their votes, it was better to do so upon a worthy than upon an unworthy individual who might use the weapon they put into his hand to destroy them.” Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret News, 1948), 6:xxxiv; see also, 6:214-17. For more on the election of Reed Smoot, see Flake, *The Politics of American Religious Identity*. The Quorum of the Twelve Apostles is one of the main governing bodies of the church. This group would be roughly analogous to the Cardinals in the Catholic Church.

<sup>19</sup> David Jackson, “Observers Offer Insight into Romney’s Speech,” *USA TODAY*, December 6, 2007; David Jackson and Matt Kelley, “Romney Speech to Address Religion; Parallels Drawn between Mormon and Catholic JFK,” *USA TODAY*, December 3, 2007; Michael D. Shear and Alec MacGillis, “Romney Hopes to Ease Qualms on His Faith,” *Washington Post*, December 4, 2007.

<sup>20</sup> Shear and MacGillis, “Romney Hopes to Ease Qualms on His Faith.”

Kennedy argued for a complete separation of religion from government, the thrust of Romney's speech is that government requires a religious foundation."<sup>21</sup> Brian Kaylor likewise points out significant differences between Romney and Kennedy, including timing and the status of their candidacy.<sup>22</sup>

The question is whether or not Romney has learned any lessons from his first run for the Republican nomination. In this issue, Larry Powell explores the media depictions of Romney, tracing the evolution of his candidacy as the Republican base vacillated between candidates in a vain attempt to prevent Romney's perceived inevitability.<sup>23</sup> Yet Powell's discussion suggests that Romney had learned something from his first failed run—the power of silence. Rather than engaging in discussion of his religion, Romney has largely sidestepped the issue by focusing on the economy and President Obama's policies. Indeed, Powell notes that by attacking Romney's record at Bain Capital, the other GOP candidates unwittingly assisted him in this strategy.

Continuing the theme that the eternal return continues in contemporary politics, is the essay by Joseph Valenzano and Jason Edwards that examines how presidential candidate Newt Gingrich deflected concerns over his alleged (and actual) marital infidelities. They argue that "Gingrich combined three strategies of image repair rhetoric to deflect attention from his own personal failings, encourage forgiveness for his transgressions, and shift the focus of the issue from him to the conduct of national news organizations."<sup>24</sup> Although this strategy allowed Gingrich to surge forward in the South Carolina primary, he has been unable to regain this momentum, suggesting that the strategies of attack and minimization of transgression can only take a candidate so far. This, of course, is not the only time apologia has come into play in this election cycle. David Dewberry and Rebekah Fox have also examined then presidential nominee Rick Perry's use of self-deprecating humor as a means of image restoration.<sup>25</sup> Although this was done more in response to his legendary memory lapse in the debates, the strategy remains similar.

### **Santorum and the Separation of Church and State**

Romney isn't the only candidate to invoke JFK's famous speech concerning religion. The *New York Times* reported that Santorum had made a "remark, which he has sought to take back, that President John F. Kennedy's speech on the separation of church and state had made him want to vomit."<sup>26</sup> *USA TODAY* reports that Santorum argues that "the speech was a kind of initial salvo in a state-sponsored war on religion."<sup>27</sup> The *Washington Post* noted, however, that "That remark may have especially hurt Santorum with Catholic vot-

<sup>21</sup> Martin J. Medhurst, "Mitt Romney, 'Faith in America,' and the Dance of Religion and Politics in American Culture," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 12, no. 2 (2009): 201.

<sup>22</sup> See Brian T. Kaylor, "No Jack Kennedy: Mitt Romney's 'Faith in America' Speech and the Changing Religious-Political Environment," *Communication Studies* 62, no. 5 (2011): 496-98.

<sup>23</sup> See Larry Powell, "Will Mormonism Keep Mitt Romney Out of the White House?" *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric*, 2, no. 2 (2012): 39-43.

<sup>24</sup> Joseph M. Valenzano, III and Jason A. Edwards, "The Debate Confessional: Newt Gingrich, John King and Atoning for Past Sins," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric*, 2, no. 2 (2012): 38.

<sup>25</sup> David R. Dewberry and Rebekah Fox, "Easy as 1, 2, 3: Rick Perry and Self-Deprecation as Image Restoration," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric*, 2, no.1 (2012): 1-10.

<sup>26</sup> Richard A. Opiel, Jr., Trip Gabriel, and Jeremy W. Peters, "To Forge a Comeback, Santorum Focuses on Ohio," *New York Times*, March 1, 2012.

<sup>27</sup> "Santorum Distorts Calls for Church-State Separation," *USA TODAY*, February 29, 2012.

ers, more of whom backed Romney than Santorum, according to exit-polling data, even though Santorum, like Kennedy, is Catholic.”<sup>28</sup> In response to Santorum’s comments, Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, JFK’s niece, observed, “Either Santorum doesn’t know his American history or he is purposefully rewriting it. How can he seriously imagine that Kennedy, a person who got down on his knees each night to pray, who gave his time and money to win tough primaries in states with strong anti-Catholic traditions, who challenged us to live our Christianity by ending racial hatred, somehow lacked the courage of faith or tried to exclude people of faith from government and politics?”<sup>29</sup> It was not lost on Townsend that Santorum shares Kennedy’s Catholic faith, and by extension, a history of enduring strong anti-Catholic sentiment.<sup>30</sup>

If Santorum has forgotten the persecution of his faith, he is still in good company with conservatives who see a kind of persecution from the left. Richard Hofstadter describes such a sentiment in his description of a “paranoid style” with the “central image” of “a vast and sinister conspiracy, a gigantic and yet subtle machinery of influence set in motion to undermine and destroy a way of life.”<sup>31</sup> One can readily see such machinations in the purported “war on religion,” described by conservatives. The author of this war, of course, is Satan. Santorum stated in 2008 that “Satan is attacking the great institutions of America, using those great vices of pride, vanity and sensuality as the root to attack all of the strong plants that has so deeply rooted in the American tradition.”<sup>32</sup> Or perhaps it is simply the left wing; the *New York Times* notes that “last year Mr. Santorum made a point of defending the medieval Crusades against the ‘American left who hates Christendom.’”<sup>33</sup> At any rate, such concerns call to mind Eric Hoffer’s assertion that “Mass movements can rise and spread without belief in a God, but never without belief in a devil.”<sup>34</sup>

There is significant rhetorical power in demonizing the opposition. As Richard Gregg notes, “By painting the enemy in dark hued imagery of vice, corruption, evil, and weakness, one may more easily convince himself of his own superior virtue and thereby gain a symbolic victory of ego-enhancement.”<sup>35</sup> Here we have the self-directed benefits of such rhetoric. But the consequences of such rhetoric also spill over into the relationship between the opposing sides. Jeremy Engels explains that “Naming—or identifying—the

<sup>28</sup> Rosalind S. Helderan, “Is Santorum Succeeding? Hard to Tell,” *Washington Post*, February 29, 2012.

<sup>29</sup> Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, “JFK’s Message Is Lost on Santorum,” *Washington Post*, March 4, 2012.

<sup>30</sup> For more on the anti-Catholic movements in the United States, see Ray A. Billington, “Anti-Catholic Propaganda and the Home Missionary Movement, 1800-1860,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 22, no. 3 (1935): 361-84; Michael Ian Borer and Adam Murphree, “Framing Catholicism: Jack Chick’s Anti-Catholic Cartoons and the Flexible Boundaries of the Culture Wars,” *Religion & American Culture* 18, no. 1 (2008): 95-112; David Brion Davis, “Some Themes of Counter-Subversion: An Analysis of Anti-Masonic, Anti-Catholic, and Anti-Mormon Literature,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 47, no. 2 (1960): 205-24; James Martin, “The Last Acceptable Prejudice?” *America* 182, no. 10 (2000): 8-16; Carol Mattingly, “Uncovering Forgotten Habits: Anti-Catholic Rhetoric and Nineteenth-Century American Women’s Literacy,” *College Composition and Communication* 58, no. 2 (2006): 160-81.

<sup>31</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 29.

<sup>32</sup> Maureen Dowd, “Rick’s Religious Fanaticism,” *New York Times*, February 22, 2012.

<sup>33</sup> Paul Krugman, “Severe Conservative Syndrome,” *New York Times*, February 13, 2012.

<sup>34</sup> Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements* (New York: Harper, 1951), 91.

<sup>35</sup> Richard B. Gregg, “The Ego-Function of the Rhetoric of Protest,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 4, no. 2 (1971): 82.

enemy is a prerequisite for the political. Yet identifying the enemy seems both to open and close the space for identification as consubstantiality. Labeling someone an enemy is at once an act of disidentification, for it targets someone for destruction.”<sup>36</sup> Elsewhere, Engels notes that conservatives have used what he calls the “rhetoric of resentment” to diminish the interaction between opposing viewpoints rather than to enrich the public sphere. He traces this line of discourse to Richard Nixon whose goal, he says, “was not to solve the problems that created resentment, but instead to continually stoke the righteous anger of the silent majority for ‘revolutionaries’ who spit on democracy, thereby keeping Americans angry, resentful, and in need of his leadership.”<sup>37</sup>

Defining the left as enemies that “hate Christianity” seems congruent with the metaphor of a war on religion. Defining this conflict as “war” creates the illusion of a *holy war*. One is not fighting for political aims, but rather for God. War metaphors have been used to combat everything from inflation and poverty to drugs and terrorism.<sup>38</sup> What makes war metaphors so powerful is that it invokes a kind of urgency and a need to win at almost any cost. War “requires all of us to respond and to contribute. War forges the bond of community and acceptance of (political) leadership like nothing else (or very little: mainly a major natural disaster) does.”<sup>39</sup> Moreover, the goal of war is the destruction of the enemy. It is one of the few instances in which killing another human being is acceptable, even desirable. Those who are waging war on religion must be stopped at any cost, because to be against religion is to also be against America. Those who invoke the metaphorical war on religion depict themselves as on the defensive, holding the barbarians at bay. Once again, we see a kind of victimage rhetoric here, where the righteous silent majority is under attack by satanic forces.

Engels seems to be on to something when he suggests that such rhetoric serves only to stoke the flames of anger rather than to apply the healing balm of discourse that leads to understanding. When even jurists cannot completely account for the level of division between church and state called for by the establishment clause, perhaps it would behoove politicians and common citizens to consider other views as at least plausible. Demonizing those who desire more separation between church and state does little to increase dialogue with the other side. But why would one want to engage the opposition? Why make a deal with the devil? To reconcile this, both sides must realize that neither side is actually the devil. There are people of faith—especially those who hold minority beliefs—that recognize the dangers of allowing religious orthodoxy to encroach too far into the political realm. This is why the framers of the Constitution wisely decreed that there should be no religious test applied to those who seek public office and declared that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion.” As a religious minority, John F. Kennedy seemed to clearly understand this.

<sup>36</sup> Jeremy Engels, “Friend or Foe? Naming the Enemy,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 12, no. 1 (2009): 56.

<sup>37</sup> Jeremy Engels, “The Politics of Resentment and the Tyranny of the Minority: Rethinking Victimage for Resentful Times,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (2010): 317.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, William N. Elwood, “Declaring War on the Home Front: Metaphor, Presidents, and the War on Drugs,” *Metaphor & Symbolic Activity* 10, no. 2 (1995): 93-114; Nora S. Gustavsson, “The War Metaphor: A Threat to Vulnerable Populations,” *Social Work* 36, no. 4 (1991): 277-78; Lori Hartmann-Mahmud, “War as Metaphor,” *Peace Review* 14, no. 4 (2002): 327-32; Hermann G. Stelzner, “Ford’s War on Inflation: A Metaphor That Did Not Cross,” *Communication Monographs* 44, no. 4 (1977): 284-97.

<sup>39</sup> Heinz Steinert, “The Indispensable Metaphor of War: On Populist Politics and the Contradictions of the State’s Monopoly of Force,” *Theoretical Criminology* 7, no. 3 (2003): 266-67.

## Of Contraceptives, Catholicism, and Sluts

The Obama administration made a controversial move when it required that religious institutions cover the cost of contraception in their health insurance plans. Such a mandate was opposed by the Catholic church, which does not condone the use of birth control. In the midst of all of this, one Georgetown law student—Sandra Fluke—became a household name in the debates, largely because Rush Limbaugh singled her out for ridicule, stating that she “goes before a Congressional committee and essentially says that she must be paid to have sex, what does that make her? . . . It makes her a slut, right? It makes her a prostitute. She wants to be paid to have sex. She’s having so much sex she can’t afford the contraception. She wants you and me and the taxpayers to pay her to have sex. What does that make us? We’re the pimps. The johns.”<sup>40</sup> Later on, he suggested that she should provide sex videos for the taxpayers’ subsidy of her sex life: “We want you to post the videos online so we can all watch.”<sup>41</sup>

In denigrating Fluke, Limbaugh was drawing on a long tradition of denigrating enemies. Haig Bosmajian suggests that “One of the first important acts of an oppressor is to redefine the oppressed victims he intends to jail or eradicate so that they will be looked upon as creatures warranting suppression and annihilation. I say ‘creatures’ because the redefinition usually implies a de-humanization of the individual.”<sup>42</sup> However, in this case it seemed that Limbaugh had gone too far. The backlash was swift from all sides. *USA TODAY* reported that “Republicans including House Speaker John Boehner, Majority Leader Eric Cantor and GOP presidential candidate Newt Gingrich all said Limbaugh owed the woman an apology. Conservative pundit David Frum called Limbaugh’s conduct ‘a new kind of low.’”<sup>43</sup> Even President Obama called to issue an apology.<sup>44</sup> Maureen Dowd of the *New York Times* observes that the president of Georgetown, John DeGioia, also defended Fluke, stating, “She provided a model of civil discourse . . . This expression of conscience was in the tradition of the deepest values we share as a people. One need not agree with her substantive position to support her right to respectful free expression,” and described Limbaugh’s comments as “misogynistic, vitriolic and a misrepresentation of the position of our student.”<sup>45</sup>

It is clear that Limbaugh’s behavior is reprehensible and seems to amount to slander. Certainly, there is a case to be made for greater civility in the public sphere. As Thomas Benson argues, “Our shared concern with civility as a communicative practice also carries with it an implicit sense that talk has consequences and that uncivil speech is not merely rude but that it has effects.”<sup>46</sup> However, Limbaugh’s incendiary comments likely did more harm to his cause than good, as it made the issue more about Fluke and Limbaugh, overshadowing some important elements in the contraception debate. Walter Fisher suggests

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Maureen Dowd, “Have You No Shame, Rush?” *New York Times*, March 4, 2012.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Haig A. Bosmajian, “Defining the ‘American Indian’: A Case Study in the Language of Suppression,” *Speech Teacher* 22, no. 2 (1973): 89.

<sup>43</sup> Martha T. Moore, “Limbaugh Apologizes for Comments; but It Hasn’t Been Accepted by Everyone, Including Advertisers,” *USA TODAY*, March 6, 2012.

<sup>44</sup> Jackie Calmes, “Obama’s Call Was a Lesson for His Girls,” *New York Times*, March 7, 2012.

<sup>45</sup> Dowd, “Have You No Shame, Rush?”

<sup>46</sup> See Thomas W. Benson, “The Rhetoric of Civility: Power, Authenticity, and Democracy,” *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 1, no. 1 (2011): 23.

that when people hear stories in the public sphere, they determine their plausibility based on such issues as narrative fidelity and whether the stories ring true.<sup>47</sup> Unfortunately, some aspects of Fluke's narrative fail to elicit sympathy.

First, there are the facts of the case. Although Fluke testified that birth control pills could cost over \$3000 over the course of a three year law degree, the *Weekly Standard* reported that this amount is quite misleading. "Birth control pills can be purchased for as low as \$9 per month at a pharmacy near Georgetown's campus. According to an employee at the pharmacy in Washington, D.C.'s Target store, the pharmacy sells birth control pills—the generic versions of Ortho Tri-Cyclen and Ortho-Cyclen—for \$9 per month. 'That's the price without insurance,' the Target employee said."<sup>48</sup>

Second, there is the question of choice. Fluke testified that "We refuse to pick between a quality education and our health."<sup>49</sup> This is certainly her choice to make, but it is a choice that she made recognizing the consequences of the choice. Cathy Cleaver Ruse, who also notes that she is a Georgetown grad who is Protestant, argues,

Ms. Fluke's crusade for reproductive justice is simply a demand that a Catholic institution pay for drugs that make it possible for her to have sex without getting pregnant. It's nothing grander or nobler than that. Georgetown's refusal to do so does not mean she has to have less sex, only that she has to take financial responsibility for it herself. Should Ms. Fluke give up a cup or two of coffee at Starbucks each month to pay for her birth control, or should Georgetown give up its religion? Even a first-year law student should know where the Constitution comes down on that.<sup>50</sup>

Many religious colleges have codes of conduct that one must follow or risk expulsion or some other sanction. For example, Brigham Young University took a star basketball player off the team when he admitted that he had violated the honor code forbidding premarital sex.<sup>51</sup> The student was later readmitted, but on "certain, unspecified requirements set forth by school officials and the school's honor-code office."<sup>52</sup> When one chooses to go to a religious institution, there are expectations that seem reasonable, especially when one has other options (as would be likely with a Georgetown law student).

Third, there is the question of role. Fluke was often portrayed as a student who would simply represent other women who were denied access to contraceptives. However, Ruse points out that "During her law school years she was a president of 'Students for Reproductive Justice' and made it her mission to get the school to give up one of the last rem-

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<sup>47</sup> See Walter R. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1987).

<sup>48</sup> John McCormack, "Georgetown Students Go Broke to Buy Birth Control? Target Sells Pills for \$9 Per Month: There Is No Birth Control Crisis," *The Weekly Standard*, [http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/dc-target-sells-birth-control-9-month-georgetown-student-tells-congress-friends-are-going-broke-pay-pills\\_632955.html](http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/dc-target-sells-birth-control-9-month-georgetown-student-tells-congress-friends-are-going-broke-pay-pills_632955.html).

<sup>49</sup> Jenna Johnson, "Student Expected Criticism, Not Attacks," *Washington Post*, March 4, 2012.

<sup>50</sup> Cathy Cleaver Ruse, "Limbaugh and Our Phony Contraception Debate; a Student Demands That a Catholic School Give up Its Religion to Pay for Her Birth-Control Pills," *Wall Street Journal (Online)*, March 6, 2012.

<sup>51</sup> Jay Drew, "Davies Will Be on BYU's Bench for MWC Tournament," *Salt Lake Tribune*, March 9, 2011.

<sup>52</sup> Jay Drew, "BYU Readmits Brandon Davies to School, Reinstates Him on Basketball Team," *Salt Lake Tribune*, August 28, 2011.

nants of its Catholicism. Ms. Fluke is not the ‘everywoman’ portrayed in the media.”<sup>53</sup> One expects attacks on activists, but not common citizens.

Finally, there is the question of religion. If Georgetown did not specifically forbid contraception among their students, there seems to be little recourse to a discourse of rights. There are quite a few ways that contraception can occur beyond prescription birth control pills. Condoms and spermicides are available at any grocery store, and condoms have the added benefit of preventing sexually transmitted infections as well. From a public health perspective, there are significant benefits to preventing unwanted pregnancies. This is why birth control is often easily accessible at departments of public health. If the problem is economic hardship, there are programs for low-income individuals to receive such contraceptives. Thus, to couch the debate over birth control pills in the language of “justice,” and “rights” is to short-circuit the conversation. Such terms function as “ideographs,” or terms laden with ideology. The problem with ideographs is that one cannot question “the fundamental logic of ideographs.”<sup>54</sup> As such, “religious freedom” clashes with “rights.”

### **The Role of Religion in a Secular Society**

At the opening of this essay, I explained that politics and religion have long been entangled in the United States, and there is little reason to believe that this state of affairs will change in the foreseeable future. However, there is no reason that people of faith cannot act together in the public sphere for the good of all. Indeed, this was the public sphere romanticized by Jürgen Habermas in his study of the eighteenth century bourgeois public sphere, where individuals attempted to bracket out their differences in arguments.<sup>55</sup> Richard Sennett likewise suggests that “the extent to which people can learn to pursue aggressively their interests in society is the extent to which they learn to act impersonally.”<sup>56</sup> One need not be defined solely by his or her faith, and one can share a faith and come to quite different conclusions concerning matters of public policy. Indeed, one can see this in the differences between Romney and Reid, who are both Mormon, or between Santorum and Kennedy, who shared Catholicism.

Religion, for better or worse, is a part of the public sphere. Despite Habermas’s assertion that “moral questions can in principle be decided rationally, i.e., in terms of *justice* or the generalizability of interests,” in practice people may rely on religious tenets to inform their decision-making.<sup>57</sup> As such, religion cannot be easily removed from public deliberations that require citizens to deliberate concerning matters of virtue or ethics. What is needed is more discussion, rather than less. Gerard Hauser argues that public spheres are “discursive spaces where society deliberates about normative standards and even devel-

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<sup>53</sup> Ruse, “Limbaugh and Our Phony Contraception Debate.”

<sup>54</sup> Michael Calvin McGee, “The ‘Ideograph’: A Link between Rhetoric and Ideology,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66, no. 1 (1980): 7.

<sup>55</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 36. Habermas acknowledges that although this ideal public sphere was never actually realized, it was, nevertheless, the ideal.

<sup>56</sup> Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 349.

<sup>57</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 108.

ops new frameworks for expressing and evaluating social reality.”<sup>58</sup> Indeed, Michael Warner suggests that “a public is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than the discourse itself.”<sup>59</sup> It will not do to hide the premises from which one operates, and religion, for many, helps shape these fundamental beliefs. The great hope of democracy is that despite their differences, people can come together and work for a common good. However, this is unlikely to happen if different factions retreat into their enclaves and refuse to find common ground. Religion is not going away any time soon. Theological differences can be enormous. Secular people may wish for freedom *from* religion rather than freedom *of* religion. There will certainly be differences, but these differences should encourage citizens to make stronger arguments, rather than try to shout down everyone else. The important thing is to keep the conversation going.

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<sup>58</sup> Gerard A. Hauser, “Features of the Public Sphere,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 4, no. 4 (1987): 439.

<sup>59</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 67.