

# Cultural War – Concept, Myth and Reality: A Clash of Ideas in “Post-Secular” American Society at the Turn of the Millennium

David Václavík

## ABSTRACT

*The idea of culture war has been used in various analyses focused on the transformation of modern society in general and especially regarding America since the 1980's. This concept underlies the “ideological schism” demonstrated by the polarizing debates in the American public sphere. These disputes have involved a wide spectrum of disagreements about for example the relationship between church and state, multiculturalism, abortion and gay marriage. This paper will analyze the concept of cultural war and the usage of the term in the ideological struggle between liberal and conservative streams in contemporary American politics. It will also consider the sustainability of this concept for scientific reflection, especially with regards to the description and interpretation of the religious situation in American society.*

## KEYWORDS

Cultural war; ideology; fundamentalism; liberalism; religion; politics; American society

Becky Fisher, children's pastor and the main character of the documentary film *Jesus Camp*<sup>1</sup>, argues that *we are at war*. She is not referring to any of the conventional wars in which the United States is involved, but instead to a specific phenomenon which is widely used to describe “the inner ideological conflict in contemporary American society” in order to “underline the exceptionality of the contemporary historical situation.” Her conception of the conflict in American society is not a mere hysterical exaggeration of one of the American evangelicals who moan that the United States is a nation of Indian people (which are regarded in the same movie as the most religious nation in the world) ruled by few Swedes (which are considered the most secular nation in the world). The term *cultural war* is not only broadly employed by dozens of journalists and politicians, but also by sociologists, political scientists and students of religion.

Between 1980 and 2000, for instance, this term was used in almost 450 magazine articles representing the mainstream of the political spectrum, ranging from the *National Review* on the right to *The Nation* on the left.<sup>2</sup> Yet how should we understand this expression *cultural war(s)*? How do different groups understand the term?

## Anatomy of a Metaphor

The term cultural war has not been in wide use for a long time, only since the 1990s. One of the earliest occurrences of this term is found in the work of James Davidson Hunter, Distinguished Professor of Religion, Culture, and Social Theory at the University of Virginia and Executive Director of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture. He used

1 *Jesus Camp*, dir. Rachel Grady, 2006.

2 See Irene Taviss Thomson, *Culture Wars and Enduring American Dilemmas* (Ann Arbor: Michigan of University Press, 2010), 2.

it for the first time in his well-known book *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*<sup>3</sup> as a useful tool for describing the fundamental split between orthodox and progressive views of morality, suggesting that this divide cuts across class, religious, racial, ethnic, political, and sexual lines. According to Hunter such a cultural conflict based on different value systems is not new in American history. We can see it for example in the roots of all the great religious awakenings or in the “life story” of the American enlightenment. But what is new or specific in the contemporary cultural war is the way in which this conflict has exploded both within and outside of the dominant “biblical” culture. As Gertrude Himmelfarb aptly mentions, culture war is apparent in the simultaneous emergence of “moral disarray” and “moral revival” symbolized by the success of both gangsta rap and gospel rock.<sup>4</sup> Her remarks also show some of the ideological and historical context in which the term culture war has emerged.

This context has emerged in reaction to the unanswered high hopes during the Reagan years, when many religious conservatives thought of themselves as the new leaders of American politics and as a newly mobilized voice of the mainstream. Groups like the Moral Majority<sup>5</sup> mobilized their audiences by calling for spiritual and moral renewal, which was regarded as the only path towards the rectification of American politics and society. It also brought a new attitude and strategy in the criticism of contemporary secular society, which was based on “bridging of sectarian division and emphasizing the common moral principles that seemed so much under attack in the 1960s and 1970s.”<sup>6</sup>

Rallying behind these issues, the aims of different religious groups were gathered under one political umbrella and were very cleverly declared as the wishes and the voice of the latent majority, which was depicted as resisting the policies imposed by judicial edicts at the behest of the liberal elites. Exponents of this movement as well as thousands of its supporters took an active part in Presidential and Congressional elections on behalf of Ronald Reagan and Republican candidates in 1980. Candidates supported by the Moral Majority achieved great victories and this success was interpreted as sign of God’s will: “The election was proof that God was on our side [...] Victory and success, money and access to the White House, to Congress, and to the media – this was all proof we needed of God’s approval and blessing.”<sup>7</sup> The disillusionment came after the “victorious” elections, because neither the Reagan administration nor Congress, which was controlled by a Republican majority, invested much energy in the Moral Majority agenda. Simultaneously the Moral Majority was sharply blamed as an agitator of intolerance and divisiveness by its political and ideological opponents. The religious conservatives gathered in the Moral Majority began to lose their influence and by the mid-80s found themselves in political isolation, a trend which was confirmed by the 1988 presidential elections. Ralph Reed, the new executive director of the Christian Coalition, the successor organization of the Moral Majority, summed up this experience when he conceded that: “We know that we are not the majority.”

3 James Davidson Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America. Making Sense of the Battles over the Family, Art, Education, Laws and Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

4 Thomson, *Culture Wars and Enduring American Dilemmas*, 4.

5 The Moral Majority was a right-wing and very conservative organization founded in 1979 by fundamentalist Baptist Rev. Jerry Falwell and Catholic political thinker Paul Weyrich. Its principal goal was the active support of conservative groups in American politics. The group showed a new level of participation and influence in American politics on the part of traditional and conservative religious (mostly Christian) people.

6 Jeremy Rabkin, “The Cultural War That Isn’t,” *Policy Review* 96 (August/September 1999): 4.

7 Thomas Cal and Ed Dobson, *Blinded by Might. Can the Religious Right Save America?* (New York: Zondervan, 2000), 43.

From the recognition that religious conservatives were a minority, it was only a small step to the conclusion that they were a hopelessly besieged minority engaged in struggle for survival against implacable foes.<sup>8</sup> Maybe a bit paradoxically, this same feeling was typical in some circles of liberal secularists, who also saw themselves as lonely fighters in a struggle with intolerant and reactionary fundamentalists, who denied gender equality, freedom in scientific research as well as the ethnic and religious plurality of American society by trying to abolish the first amendment of the US Constitution.

These feelings are according to James Hunter expressions of a deep cultural schism which has divided major religious traditions and bifurcated the United States into two camps. On one side of the battlefield are Evangelical Christians and traditional Catholics through the *Christian Coalition* and the *National Right to Life Committee* as well as conservative Jews and other political allies; in other words, all groups and movements which are committed to “an external, definable and transcendent authority.”<sup>9</sup> Hunter labels this contingent the “orthodox camp.” The opposite side consists of those who share the “tendency to resymbolize historic faiths according to the prevailing assumptions of contemporary life.” This group, who Hunter calls “progressivists,” includes a wide spectrum of ideological and social movements – from mainline churches (for example the Episcopal and the Congregational Church) organized in the World Council of Churches to secular organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union and the National Organization of Women.<sup>10</sup>

According to Hunter, the ideological divide between the orthodox and progressivist camps runs deeper than political and even religious allegiances. Consequently, both camps stress a wide spectrum of problems which are projected as important for future of the American nation. This spectrum contains for example the role of traditional “Christian values” in modern society, but also the tension between morality and pragmatism, i.e. how much individualism should be sacrificed for larger community goals. Other conflict points include the meaning of pluralism in a “nation of immigrants” as well as how to reconcile the will of the people with the standards enunciated by elites.<sup>11</sup> These “general questions” are presented through concrete controversial issues such as social and political respect for homosexual relationships along with attitudes toward abortion as well as the general concept of multiculturalism. These issues are often interpreted as symbolizing important aspects of the so called American way of life, which is viewed as being based on liberty and individualism. In this view the cultural war is regarded as a key concept in understanding the identity of the American nation and its future. This is the reason the concept of cultural war has since its introduction has contained an eschatological dimension as well.

In addition to in other ways, this view is also confirmed by the widespread use of this concept in political rhetoric. One year after Hunter put “cultural war” on the social scientific map, Patrick Buchanan, an American conservative politician and political commentator, popularized the idea in his speech to the Republican National Convention in Houston in 1992 in which he mentioned that a cultural war was raging for the soul of America: There is a religious war going on in our country for the soul of America. It is a cultural war, as critical to kind of nation we will one day be as the Cold War

8 Rabkin, “The Cultural War That Isn’t,” 5.

9 Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, 44.

10 Dale McConkey, “Whither Hunter’s Culture War? Shift in Evangelical Morality, 1988-1998,” *Sociology of Religion* 62.2 (2001): 150.

11 Thomson, *Culture Wars and Enduring American Dilemmas*, 2.

itself. Buchanan also explicitly connected this cultural war to issues such as abortion, homosexuality, school choice and “radical feminism.”

It is also necessary to stress that the contemporary cultural war brings simultaneously a new type of a spiritual, political and cultural alliance among religious groups and communities, as it dissolves many traditional animosities among them which had been common up until the 1970's, with one prominent example being the strict refusal of the majority of Evangelicals to accept the election of President John F. Kennedy in 1960 because of his Catholic background.

### A Useful Tool or an Oversimplification?

The popularization of the figure of cultural war in the 1990s led both to changes in the way it was used as well as to passionate criticism and rejection of the concept altogether. A group of social scientists who supported the metaphor argued that there was a great deal of concrete and verifiable evidence in favor of the usefulness of the term. John Green and James Guth for example tried to show that “traditionally religious activists are moving towards the political right and less traditional activists are moving left and, that this shift overrides previous denominational and ethno-cultural alignments.<sup>12</sup> In addition, authors like Corwin Smidt, Geoffrey Layman and Phil Hammond argued that religious polarization among rank-and-file citizens resembles the schism found among political and religious elites. Their statements rely primarily on the analysis of political documents, public statements and speeches.

The polarization of the public opinion during the second presidential term of George W. Bush and especially the accession of so-called Tea Party movement supported claims that the cultural war was getting worse, with dire consequences for public life within American society. A favorite slogan of the conservatives and the supporters of the Tea Party movement, “I want my country back” is a direct expression of this tendency toward extreme polarization. The orthodox camp, in Hunter's terminology, is calling for radical change, ultimately leading to what they see as the re-establishment of the United States as a Christian Nation based on covenant with God. Such an interpretation of American history is closely connected with the strong revival of a number of tropes and mythical-symbolic concepts such as the concept of America as a “shining city upon a hill,” a metaphor originally taken from Matthew 5:14. This figure was reiterated in the final presidential speech of Ronald Reagan:

I've spoken of the shining city all my political life, but I don't know if I ever quite communicated what I saw when I said it. But in my mind it was a tall proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind-swept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace, a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity, and if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. That's how I saw it and see it still [...].<sup>13</sup>

12 John Green and James Guth, “A Look at an Invisible Army: Pat Robertson's 1988 activist corps,” in *Religion and the Culture Wars*, ed. John C. Green, James L. Guth, Corwin E. Smidt and Lyman A. Kellstedt (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers 1996), 137.

13 Ronald Reagan, “Farewell Address to the Nation, January 11, 1989,” *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum*. Accessed September 23, 2014. <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1989/011189i.htm>.

It is not surprising that in this context, even natural catastrophes such as the hurricane Katrina are interpreted by religious fundamentalists as "God's response to the moral corruption of the American society": "In my belief, God judged New Orleans for the sin of shedding innocent blood through abortion [...] Providence punishes national sins by national calamities. Greater divine judgment is coming upon America unless we repent of the national sin of abortion."<sup>14</sup>

Such declarations are a continuation of the eschatological logic of exponents of orthodox religion like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, the latter of which commented after September 11: "We have insulted God at the highest level of our government. Then, we say, 'Why does this happen?' It is happening because God Almighty is lifting His protection from us. Once that protection is gone, we are vulnerable because we are a free society."<sup>15</sup> The call for the renewal of an imagined "original" America uses "old arguments and rhetoric" taken from the vocabulary of the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition and supplements them with Islamophobia and a strong emphasis on traditional American individualism. From this angle President Obama can easily be viewed as simultaneously seeking to establish conservative Islamic Sharia law (his middle name is Hussein) as well as a communist leftist.

Current events and attitudes seem to be clear proof in favor of the thesis about cultural war as constitutive and one of the most important aspects of contemporary American society. Despite this, the culture war thesis is not without detractors. Some argue that the religious divide in the United States is limited to the family-related issues like abortion, birth control, homosexuality, pornography and gender divisions in the labor market. In this view, other issues such as the question of multiculturalism are rather irrelevant.<sup>16</sup>

Other critics of the cultural war thesis point to the fact that the majority of the American people refrain from taking a radical stand, be it orthodox or progressive.<sup>17</sup> Still other scholars criticize the bipolar model of the cultural war thesis as too simplistic. Rhys Williams, professor of sociology at Southern Illinois University, for example, shows that the moral continuum is more subtly structured and also includes such attitudes as liberal collectivism and libertarian individualism. He is convinced that the dualism of orthodox-progressive is not able to explain the attitudes of the American people on the role of religion in the public sphere.<sup>18</sup> However, the most conclusive arguments supporting this mitigating view are based on sociological surveys, which clearly show that the cultural war thesis could be rather exaggerated.

One of these surveys is presented by Dale McConkey, who shows in a study<sup>19</sup> based on precise quantitative research that in 1998 an unequivocal majority of the

14 Steve Lefemine, "Columbia Christians for Life," in Alan Cooperman, "Where most see a weather system, some see divine retribution," *Washington Post* September 04, 2005. Accessed September 23, 2014. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/09/03/AR2005090301408.html>.

15 "Pat Robertson's statement regarding terrorist attack," *Christian Broadcasting Network* September 14, 2001. Accessed September 23, 2014. <http://www.cbn.com/>.

16 Nancy Davis and Robert Robinson, "Are the Rumors of War Exaggerated? Religious Orthodoxy and Moral Progressivism in America," *American Journal of Sociology* 102.3 (1996): 780.

17 One of these is Alan Wolfe, who argues that in spite of some disagreements (e.g. about the acceptability of homosexuality) Americans are basically "one nation, after all." Cf. Wolfe, Alan *One Nation After All: What Middle-Class Americans Really Think About God, Country, Family, Racism, Welfare, Immigration, Homosexuality, Work, the Right, the Left, and Each Other* (New York: Viking 1998).

18 For more see Williams Rhys, "Culture Wars, Social Movements, and Institutional Politics," in *Cultural Wars in American Politics*, ed. Rhys Williams (New York: de Gruyter 1997), 283 – 297.

19 McConkey, "Whither Hunter's Culture War?", 149 – 174.

American people identified itself with a moderate form of Christianity (65%), only 23% with some progressive movement and 12% with an evangelical form of Christianity. Moreover, attitudes towards the main concerns of the cultural war debate such as non-marital sexuality and the engagement of women in public and political life show a slightly different picture than supporters of the usefulness of the concept argue. As can be seen in McConkey's examination of attitudes toward another issue, homosexuality, a perspicuous shift has taken place not only among so-called moderate Christians but also among Evangelicals:

**Table 1:** *Attitudes toward homosexuality, 1988 and 1998*<sup>20</sup>

Survey Statement	Year	Progressive	Moderate	Evangelical
<b>Sexual relations between two adults of the same sex is not wrong</b>	1988	30.2	9.5	1.4
	1998	51.6	26.0	4.2
<b>An admitted homosexual should be allowed to make a speech in your community</b>	1988	91.9	72.1	48.1
	1998	92.7	83.5	60.0
<b>An admitted homosexual should be allowed to teach in a college or university</b>	1988	81.1	60.1	28.6
	1998	86.3	77.3	52.7

The presented figure clearly demonstrates the liberalization in evangelical attitudes toward homosexuality as well as a trend towards closing the gap between progressivists and orthodox camp. The same trend can be observed in attitudes toward pornography or the role of women in public life. However, there are still significant differences when it comes to the question of abortion.

McConkey concludes on the bases of this data that evangelical attitudes vary along a lengthy continuum rather than cloistering at the extreme ends of political spectrum, and for this reason he prefers the metaphor of a "cultural stand-off" rather than a cultural war. He is deeply convinced that evangelical moral positions are not necessarily grounded in some unchanging understanding of orthodox beliefs. Instead, evangelical morality can be interpreted in a contextual sense in relation to the larger culture.<sup>21</sup> We can find very similar arguments in the works of other scholars. Morris Fiora, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, for instance, argues that since the survey data fail to show a significant cultural gap within the American electorate, from which it stands to reason that any cultural war, if it exists at all, is merely a dispute among elites.<sup>22</sup> Irene Taviss Thomson is another scholar who is quite skeptical about usefulness of the concept of cultural war.<sup>23</sup> She has argued that it is oversimplifying and very often in contradiction with verifiable reality as well. It is also possible to say that the cultural,

20 McConkey, "Whither Hunter's Culture War?", 164.

21 McConkey, "Whither Hunter's Culture War?", 170n.

22 Cf., P. Fiorina Morris, *Culture War? The Myth of Polarized America* (New York: Longman 2004).

23 Cf. Thomson, *Culture Wars and Enduring American Dilemmas*.

social and even political reality has undergone tremendous changes since the 1990s and the polarization that cultural war theorists imagined has not materialized. I think that we can close this article with her words:

The culture wars are fueled by images – of “tenured radicals” in academe, of “secular humanists,” “Christian fundamentalists,” of the sway of “modernity” or “postmodernity” and the vanquishing of “traditional.” Awareness of the role of such symbols leads interest groups and scholar alike to try disentangle “reality” from imagery.<sup>24</sup>

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**David Václavík** studied Philosophy and the History of religion at Masaryk University, gaining his Ph.D. in 2004 and habilitation (doc.) in 2010. He has lectured at the Faculty of Education of Technical University in Liberec since 1998 and at the Faculty of Arts of Masaryk University in Brno since 2002. He was a head of the Department of the Study of Religions at the Faculty of Arts of Masaryk University between 2005 and 2011. His research interests include new religious movements, religious situation in Central Europe and in the United States and the methodology of the scientific study of religions. He is the author of six books and textbooks and more than thirty articles, including for example *Deepening Secularization? How to Read Official Statistics. A Case of the Czech Republic* (2014); *Changes of an American Religiosity* (2013); *Religion and Modern Czech Society* (2011); *New Religious Movements and Their Perception as Conflict Religious Groups. The Case of the Czech Republic* (2006); *Limits and Possibilities of Using the Terms Sect, Cult and Church in the Scientific Study of Religions* (2005); *New Religious Movements from the Perspective of Historical and Genealogical Classifications* (2003); *Secularized and De-secularized Modernity. The Position of Religion in Contemporary Society* (2003).

24 Thomson, *Culture Wars and Enduring American Dilemmas*, 219.