

Analysis of the Influence of Christianity on Current American Culture Wars

Suyan Wang^{1,a,*}

¹*Hillcrest Christian School, Thousand Oaks, CA, the United States, 91360*

a. susanwang0913@gmail.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Although many who live in the United States may conclude the overturn of progressive policies as a representation of the cultural war, few can really specify the origin of the conflict. This paper focuses on the historical and sociological reasons behind the current American culture war. It can be concluded that the origin of the current culture war is heavily attributed to the influence of Christian, or specifically, Protestant ideology on the construction of American collective consciousness. Through analysis of research databases from the past, this research proposes that (a) the American state has never been separated from its church and (b) Protestantism is a result of old collective consciousness and a root for democracy, the new collective consciousness. Thus, (c) the cultural war in current American society is between two sets of collective consciousness—between Protestantism and universal democracy. In addition to research on the origin of the cultural war, this research also seeks to suggest the importance of understanding the context of a situation.

Keywords: Sociology, religion, politics, Christianity, democracy

1. Introduction

With the overturn of *Roe v. Wade* by the Supreme Court on June 24th, 2022, American society has gone into massive debates regarding the right to abortion on either the conservative or progressive side. As the term “conservative” came to be defined as individuals who tend to promote or maintain traditional values, the question of whether these traditional values are beneficial for American society became the center of the debate. What, then, are the real “traditional values”, and where did they come from? Who are the real opponents of this war? Rather than struggling with the confusion caused by the current social war, it is important for citizens to be informed of the real social context in order to orient themselves with the quality of mind defined as sociological imagination [1].

This research seeks to discover the origins of the two opposite forces from a particular socio-religious perspective, or, more specifically, from the perspective of discovering the relationship between Protestant Christianity and the American state. By comparing the data of religious demographics with political demographics, conclusions are achieved through careful analysis. Rather than simply employing overgeneralized terms such as “conservative” or “progressives,” the research provides guidance to a certain extent for readers to better understand the current situation in order to make true beneficial decisions for society.

2. Analysis of the Religious Reasons Behind the American Culture Wars

The following content first defines the concept of the culture war, then analyzes the reason behind it. It is important for terms such as “conservative” and “progressive” to be carefully defined based on the different historical and social contexts in order to facilitate further discussions. This research defines culture war as a conflict between two different collective consciousnesses, in which people who hold different collective consciousness will utilize social movements or laws to push for changes. In the case of the United States of America, one side of the war is those who do not support the separation of church and state, and the other side is those who support the separation of church and state.

Some may question the legitimacy of this definition using the First Amendment, which expresses America’s stance on freedom of religion. Then the question is, what is the real relationship between the American church and state? Surprisingly or not, evidence has proved one fact: the American state has never been separated from the church.

Historically and politically speaking, the United States of America is a country founded and to this day influenced by Protestants. When the Puritans first arrived in North America to seek religious freedom, John Winthrop, a leading Puritan figure, quoted the Bible in his sermon, expressing the expectation that the colony they established would be a “city on the hill”. Of all the American presidents till the present day, the majority of them have publicly stated their Christian faith. The first president of the United States, George Washington, stated in his First Inaugural Address that no one can deny the influence of God in leading America [2]; another one of the greatest presidents, Abraham Lincoln, mentioned in his Second Inaugural Address God 14 times, and quoted Scripture four times [3]. Research in 2021 states that 88.1% of the American Congress identify themselves as Christians, with a dominating 55.4% percentage of Protestants [4]. It is important to realize that the First Amendment only specifies freedom of religion, yet nothing about banning government officials from any religion. Therefore, the close combination between church and state provided the foundation for future culture wars, and Protestant Christianity became a great force in the war.

The presence of Protestant Christian leaders in the political field of America fundamentally prevented the separation of church and state. Despite other religions, Protestant Christianity is the dominating religion of most of the U.S. citizens since the founding of the country. With the original massive Christian population of the U.S., the relationship between the citizens and the policymakers is a closed-loop because of the fundamental ideology of social contract: the governed have the power to decide the governor. Therefore, the governed seek to vote for those who share the same faith, and the governor, therefore, seeks to make policies based on the ones who vote based on their shared faith. According to a survey conducted in 2020, “one-in-five U.S. adults state that it is ‘very important’ for the presidents to have strong religious beliefs” [5], which implies Christian faith because of the large Christian population. This expectation from American general society reinforced the presidents in office to claim to belong to popular religion, and most likely, Christianity. In this case, these Christian political leaders are not just representing their own religious beliefs, but their choice of faith and political action also represents the social majority of the United States: the Protestant Christians. Thus, as long as government officials claim to be a certain religion, this separation is ultimately impossible.

Data gathered from recent presidential elections also proved the influence of religion on public voting. In 2020, research shows that among white evangelical Protestants, 85% of those who attend religious services monthly or more often voted for Donald Trump [6]. Though it can be argued that this is a result of information sharing during church gatherings, other research in 2016 points out that half of American adults are less supportive of an atheist for president [7]. That is, if analyzed carefully, revealing a fact of the American political system—public votes are likely to be shaped by religion, thus the ones that got voted into office will again make policies that are shaped by and in favor of

religion. In this case, the church of America, which is predominantly the Protestant Christian church, is not only not separated from the state of America, but rather extremely tightly connected to each other. It is reasonable to conclude that they are tightly connected because religion consciously bound itself to the state.

If taking a closer look into American history, the influence of Christian, or specifically, Protestant doctrines, are also parallel to the construction of American democracy. Furthermore, it could almost be argued that the doctrine of American democracy was born from the Protestant doctrine. This could be explained by the idea of religion as a result of social collective consciousness. The term collective consciousness was first proposed by Emile Durkheim [8], which is a definition of “the totality of beliefs and sentiments common to average citizens of the same society”. In the context of Durkheim’s Religion’s origin in society, religions were born and became a collective consciousness because individuals felt the unexplainable forces collectively while living in society. Therefore, religion is produced to explain the origin of the forces. These forces, however, came directly from society rather than imagined supernatural power. If employing this definition, the mass population of Protestant Christians in the U.S. could be explained well: Protestantism, especially the ones that influenced the present U.S., was a result of the collective consciousness of the people escaping from Anglican persecution—everyone arriving in the colony had the same goal of building a Protestant land.

This collective consciousness of Protestantism is deeply rooted in basically all American doctrines. The famous American ideology, Manifest Destiny, could be found in parallel to the scripture Jeremiah 29:11 [9]. The American idea of being “chosen” corresponds perfectly to the scripture reading “for I know the plans I have for you”. The idea of natural rights included in both the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence corresponds to Psalm 139:14 [9], which emphasizes the rights of man. Most importantly, the idea of spreading democracy, which has dominated most American diplomatic decisions in recent years, corresponds to the Protestant doctrine of spreading the gospel through missionaries. Matthew 5:13-16 reads, “you are the salt of the earth...you are the light of the world” [9]. This scripture was quoted by John Winthrop on the Puritan’s way to reach America, and by that time, their collective consciousness was Protestantism. However, the 21st century is the turning point of culture: As its construction is parallel to the path of Protestantism, democracy has become its own form of collective consciousness and a new American identity. Building a nation based on Protestantism is not only the sole goal of American citizens today, it is also building a nation founded on democracy. The spread of Protestantism is not only the sole goal of American citizens today, it is also the sole goal of the spread of democracy. While religious collective consciousness often requires high-level dominance, there is a gap between the two collective consciousnesses, and it is growing rapidly.

As democracy became the new collective consciousness of America, it gave all Americans a new faith and identity. This substitution of old Protestantism as collective consciousness could be explained for several reasons. First, in recent years, scientific developments have undermined the impact and authority of religion. Second, the increasing immigration and diversity brought into America reshaped the religious atmosphere in the country. Though the Protestants are not willing to lose their dominance, the doctrine of democracy, according to its nature, has to tolerate the split and cease of religious power. Thus, for the first time in American history, the two collective consciousness became in opposition to each other. As more people came to admit the new collective consciousness—democracy—as their national identity, the old collective consciousness—Protestantism—is getting abandoned. Research reveals that not only did the rate of the Christian population in the U.S. drop by 15% from 2007 to 2021, but the rate of atheists also rose by 13% [10]. This change led many people to think that this ongoing Cultural War in the U.S. is a war between the Christians and the Atheist, meanwhile, it really is between people who still claim the old collective consciousness of Protestantism and the new collective consciousness of democracy.

Can these two collective consciousness coexist at the same time? Democracy would certainly tolerate Protestantism, but due to its religious nature, Protestantism could not possibly tolerate one thing that democracy tends to achieve: the actual separation of church and state. Protestants had the collective consciousness of transforming the entire nation into a Protestant land. Thus policies that challenged the authority of scripture would be tolerated by democracy but not by Protestantism. An example of this would be the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*. Though the judges claim to have made the decision according to the amendments, research in 2022 states that 77% of White evangelical Protestants believe it “should be illegal in all or most cases” [11]. Thus, this summarizes the war. These two collective consciousness could not possibly coexist, thus people who held the old collective conscience of Protestantism are backlashing against the transformations and wanting to shift back to a church-state combined society, yet people who held the new collective conscience of democracy argue for complete separation.

3. Conclusion

After careful research and analysis, the following conclusions are made regarding the true opponents and reasons behind the current American culture war. The “traditional values” conserved by current American “conservatives” are mainly Protestant values that result directly from the Protestant doctrine. In this case, the real opponents are indeed conservatives and progressives, but conservatives should be defined as “individuals who want to remain the combination of church and state according to the collective consciousness of Protestantism”, and progressives should be defined as “individuals who want to separate the church and the state according to the collective consciousness of democracy”.

As long as the freedom of speech and religion still exists, the separation of the American church and state is hardly possible in the present, for people who self-identify as Protestant Christians still are the majority and mostly still remain loyal to their old collective consciousness. However, it is important to understand one fact about society: society can be deconstructed and reconstructed. The trend of decreasing the Christian population proved the possibility of change in mind and thus collective ideologies. People who live in the same society at the same time are the ones who have the right and power to decide their collective destiny.

Certainly, there is no absolute right or wrong because there is no scale to measure and compare different collective consciences. No matter how the two sides of this cultural war judge and debate, however, it is undeniable that human society would not have come this far without progression and transformation, and culture should adapt to these changes. With the attempt to truly separate the church and the state, America is not losing its identity, but rather reaching the completion form of its real identity as a nation of democracy. It may be hardly possible to achieve this form at the moment, but if the cycle of Protestant domination ceases to a point where it is no longer representing the majority of Americans, the hope is ultimately reachable.

This research has no intention of defining the situation or persuading in favor of one side, but rather, with the analysis of data, serves the purpose of providing a reference for readers to develop a mind of sociological imagination. This research also intends to raise awareness of the importance of information sorting. Though data related to Protestant Christianity employed in this research is carefully chosen and valid, this research did not specify the different denominations of Christianity for it might obscure the focus of the argument. Further research can be done on the different influences of specific Christian denominations such as evangelical Christians.

References

[1] Mills, C. Wright, and Todd Gitlin. *The Sociological Imagination*. Oxford University Press, 2000.

- [2] "President George Washington's First Inaugural Speech (1789)." National Archives and Records Administration, National Archives and Records Administration, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/president-george-washingtons-first-inaugural-speech>.
- [3] Response: The Seattle Pacific University Magazine, <https://spu.edu/depts/uc/response/summer2k6/features/lincoln.asp#:~:text=ABRAHAM%20LINCOLN'S%20SECOND%20INAUGURAL%20DRESS,and%20invoked%20prayer%20three%20times>.
- [4] "Faith on the Hill." Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, Pew Research Center, 1 July 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/01/04/faith-on-the-hill-2021/>.
- [5] Sandstrom, Aleksandra. "Biden Is Only the Second Catholic President, but Nearly All Have Been Christians." Pew Research Center, Pew Research Center, 20 Jan. 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/20/biden-only-second-catholic-president-but-nearly-all-have-been-christians-2/>.
- [6] Nortey, Justin. "Most White Americans Who Regularly Attend Worship Services Voted for Trump in 2020." Pew Research Center, Pew Research Center, 30 Aug. 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/08/30/most-white-americans-who-regularly-attend-worship-services-voted-for-trump-in-2020/>.
- [7] "Faith and the 2016 Campaign." Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, Pew Research Center, 26 Apr. 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2016/01/27/faith-and-the-2016-campaign/>.
- [8] Durkheim, Emile, and George Simpson. *The Division of Labor in Society*. Digireads, 2018.
- [9] *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (ESV), Containing the Old and New Testaments*. Crossway Books, 2011.
- [10] Smith, Gregory A. "About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated." Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, Pew Research Center, 14 Apr. 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/>.
- [11] Blazina, Carrie, et al. "Key Facts about the Abortion Debate in America." Pew Research Center, Pew Research Center, 24 May 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/06/17/key-facts-about-the-abortion-debate-in-america/>.