

T W O

Culture and Values in the 1960s

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The cultural revolution of the 1960s was both a fulfillment and a repudiation of the vision of America's founders. The Civil Rights Movement of the early 1960s extending the rights of full citizenship to individuals regardless of race, sex, or creed was a culminating and long overdue realization of the principle of human freedom and equality enshrined in the Declaration of Independence. That struggle, in turn, served as a prototype for movements of women's liberation, gay rights, protection of the natural environment, and activities in sympathy with liberation movements in the Third World. Yet the legacies of these latter movements (and even of the post-1960s civil rights movement) are matters of active dispute in contemporary America.

Virtually all Americans now agree that the end of legal segregation, the achievement of legal equality for women, increased social tolerance for homosexuality, concern for the environment, and heightened respect for non-Western cultures are welcome achievements of the 1960s. Each of these achievements can legiti-

mately be seen as an expression of the spirit of individual freedom and human equality at the heart of the founders' liberalism.

Yet it also is arguable (and many have made the argument) that important strands within each of these movements, however apparently liberal in form and intent, have gone well beyond the charter of liberalism as understood by America's founders. Even granting this, a mystery remains. If the movements that began in the 1960s have in some significant measure departed from classic liberalism, how are we to understand their inner rationale? What connects the ecology movement, for example, with movements for civil rights? And if classic liberalism no longer suffices for many Americans, what has prompted them to set it aside?

It is difficult, if not impossible, to offer an answer to these questions without becoming an active disputant in this nation's ongoing and unresolved clash over the cultural legacy of the 1960s. Any characterization or explanation of the sixties revolution tends either to credit or to undermine the self-understanding of the cultural revolutionaries themselves. Certainly the explanation and characterization of the sixties ethos that I offer here implies considerable skepticism about the self-understanding of the bearers of the sixties legacy. I argue that the sixties ethos, and the transformation of liberalism it has produced, is best understood as a secular religion, and in many respects an illiberal religion. That the legacy of the 1960s may be in important respects illiberal is a profoundly troubling fact for those who value the heritage of America's founders and the achievements of the struggle for civil rights in the 1960s.

If there is an element of polemic in this attempt to make sense of the 1960s, therefore, I maintain that it is unavoidable. Perfect neutrality in the human sciences is neither possible nor desirable. When the topic is the fundamental fissure in the culture of the present, that truth is still more applicable, or at least more evident. Nonetheless, it is important (and liberal) to note that the insights

offered here are available to the scrutiny and criticism of those they criticize. In fact, it is in no way difficult to imagine partisans of the sixties ethos enthusiastically embracing my point that the legacy of that era now functions as much as a religion as a political theory. Indeed, as will become evident, insight into the religious significance of a transformed liberalism originates with one of liberalism's great nineteenth-century proponents. Even my point that the sixties ethos disguises a deep illiberalism will be unsurprising, and in some respects unobjectionable, to postmodernists who have consciously criticized and rejected classic liberal thought.

From a perspective different from postmodernism, I shall argue that the liberalism of many children of the 1960s betrayed itself by becoming an illiberal religion. After describing the core symbolic dynamic of this very modern religion, I shall trace the political and intellectual roots of the quasi-religious ethos of the 1960s and offer some thoughts about the sources of this important cultural shift.

Liberalism As Religion

Sometime during the past thirty years, liberalism stopped being a mere political perspective for many people and turned into a religion. I do not speak metaphorically. A certain form of liberalism now functions for substantial numbers of its adherents as a religion: an encompassing world-view that answers the big questions about life, dignifies daily exertions with higher significance, and provides a rationale for meaningful collective action.

It wasn't supposed to be that way. Liberalism arose as a solution to the destructive religious wars of Europe's past and succeeded because it allowed people of differing religious perspectives to live peacefully and productively in the same society. Designed to make the world safe for adherents of differing faiths, liberalism itself was never supposed to *be* a faith. But to a significant extent, that is

what liberalism has become. In this new, transformed mode, it is perhaps more accurate to refer to left-liberalism than to liberalism per se, for classical liberalism—the liberalism of Locke, Montesquieu, Madison, and Mill—remains an accessible and viable alternative. Nevertheless, the transformation of liberalism into a de facto religion for many explains the dynamics of something we have come to call political correctness, that controversial cultural inheritance of the late 1960s.

The central mechanism of political correctness is the stigmatization of perspectives, many of them classically liberal, that run afoul of left-liberalism—a condemnation disproportionate to what might be expected in matters of mere policy disagreement. However balanced, well-reasoned, or rooted in long-established principle objections may be to, say, affirmative action, traditional (indeed, classically liberal) viewpoints on these and other issues are often stigmatized as racist, sexist, and homophobic—that is, as bigotry unfit for reasoned debate. This shift to ostracism in place of intellectual engagement in so many of our cultural debates cannot be explained as a mere conscious tactical maneuver. The stigmatization of traditional perspectives can only be effective because so many are primed to respond to it in the first place.

Why, then, have so many classic objections to left-liberal perspectives been demonized? Possibly because liberalism has become a religion in need of demons. Traditional liberalism emphasized the ground rules for reasoned debate and the peaceful adjudication of political differences. One of the main reasons that politics in a liberal society could be peaceful was that people sought direction about life's ultimate purpose outside of politics itself. But once traditional religion ceased to provide many moderns with either an ultimate life-purpose or a pattern of virtue, liberalism itself was the only belief system remaining that could supply these essential elements of life.

How, then, does liberalism (transformed into post-1960s left-

liberalism) grant meaning to life? How does it do what religion used to do? So long as it serves as a mere set of ground rules for adjudicating day-to-day political differences, liberalism remains too “boring” to serve as a religion. But what if liberals were engaged at every moment in a dire, almost revolutionary, struggle for the very principles of liberalism itself? What if liberals were at war on a daily basis with King George III? with Hitler? with Bull Connor? *That* would supply a purpose to life—a purpose capable of endowing even our daily exertions with a larger significance, and certainly a purpose that would provide a rationale for meaningful collective action.

Consider two important features of contemporary left-liberalism: the continual expansion in meaning of terms like *racism*, *sexism*, and *homophobia* and the tendency to invent or exaggerate instances of oppression. Whereas *racism* once meant the hatred of someone of another race, the term is now freely applied to anyone who opposes affirmative action, or even to anyone who opposes reparations for slavery. Again, this stigmatization of what were once mainstream liberal positions makes a certain amount of tactical sense, but the tactics don’t really explain the phenomenon.

The young students who now live in ethnic/cultural theme houses or who join (or ally themselves with) ethnic/cultural campus political organizations are looking for a home, in the deepest sense of that word. In an earlier time, the always difficult and isolating transition from home to college was eased by membership in a fraternity or by religious fellowship. Nowadays, ethnic/cultural theme houses, political action, and related course work supply what religion and fraternities once did.

Yet if the ethnic/cultural venture is truly to take the place of religion, it must invite a student to insert himself into a battle of profound significance. The fight for slave reparations and the unceasing effort to ferret out examples of subtle racism in contemporary society are techniques for sustaining a crusading spirit by

creating the feeling that Simon Legree is lurking just around the corner. Opponents of affirmative action or slave reparations simply must be imagined as monsters. Otherwise the religious flavor of the multiculturalist enterprise falls flat, and the war of good against evil is converted into difficult balancing of competing political principles and goods in which no one is a saint or a devil.

Consider the tendency of contemporary cultural movements to invent oppression—as, for example, in ongoing (yet long since debunked) feminist statistical claims about campus rape, economic discrimination, and the alleged educational crisis of adolescent girls.¹ These questionable statistics are not incidental, but are critical to the feminist cause. So many of the young women who affiliate themselves with campus women's centers are looking for a world-view, a moral-social home, and a meaningful crusade in which to take part. That is why the horrifying (if often false) statistics of female oppression purveyed by these centers conjure up—and are meant to conjure up—images of slavery and the Holocaust.

Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* was a powerful book because it characterized the suburban home as a "comfortable concentration camp" for women.² Friedan's repeated use of Holocaust metaphors for the alleged oppression of women is of a piece with the contemporary feminist practice of making exaggerated or false statistical claims. The Holocaust imagery and the frightening statistics are meant to endow the feminist crusade with an almost apocalyptic sense of urgency and significance. Statistical accuracy

1. For critiques of these claims, see Diana Furchtgott-Roth and Christine Stolba, *The Feminist Dilemma* (Washington: The AEI Press, 2001); Christina Hoff Sommers, *Who Stole Feminism?* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994); Christina Hoff Sommers, *The War Against Boys* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

2. See Betty Friedan, "Progressive Dehumanization: The Comfortable Concentration Camp," chap. 12 in *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell, 1963).

is less important here than creation of a cause, a fellowship, a reason for being.

Of course, to say that liberalism in the hands of left-liberals has ceased to be a political perspective and has become an intolerant religion is another way of saying that liberalism has betrayed itself and become illiberal. This point is nicely made by Brian C. Anderson in “Illiberal Liberalism.”³ Anderson shows how the persistent attempts to silence and stigmatize conservative views by even mainstream liberal voices betray the commitment to rational and civil debate at the core of genuine liberalism. To the extent that liberalism itself functions as an illiberal religion, the principles that made liberalism what it was—principles like free speech, reasoned debate, and judicial restraint in the face of democratic decision making—are left by the wayside.⁴ The secular religion of a significant share of today’s educated elite is still recognizable as an outgrowth of classic liberalism. Yet underneath talk of “rights” and “oppression,” we are often faced with a very modern way of reproducing the classic religious dichotomies of good versus evil, and us against them.

Many distinguished thinkers have chronicled the story of America’s growing and dangerous tendency toward individual isolation.⁵ That story is largely true, yet it is also incomplete. We cannot

3. Brian C. Anderson, “Illiberal Liberalism,” *City Journal* 11, no. 2 (spring 2001).

4. This should not be taken to imply that religion, as such, is “bad.” Liberalism and religion are, or should be, different things. Liberalism’s attention to fair procedure for those of differing world-views is, by nature, something that depends upon toleration. Moreover, as will become evident below, the religious characteristics of the sixties ethos tend to congeal paradoxically into an orthodoxy while eschewing the ethic of sacrifice that is a characteristic strong point of traditional religion. So the problems with left-liberalism as a political religion in no way imply that religion, in and of itself, is bad or for that matter illiberal.

5. See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1969); Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987); Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon, 1992); *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commit-*

bear our isolation. So in ways sometimes hidden even from ourselves, we strive to overcome it. Left-liberalism as religion is one solution to the problem of life in a lonely secular world. It allows one to appear to be fighting for individual freedom without quite acknowledging to oneself that one has enlisted in a grand, collective, and frequently intolerant religious crusade.

But if classic liberalism transformed into left-liberalism now functions as an intolerant religion, in what sacred iconography is the new creed embodied? Betty Friedan's foundational feminist work, with its attack on the 1950s suburban home as a "comfortable concentration camp," suggests an answer.

The Holocaust Metaphor

The Holocaust has become our moral touchstone—the most important cultural symbol of our era. That is a problem. The Jewish Holocaust of World War II was a human tragedy on a scale that beggars description. Serious study of the Holocaust and meditation upon this terrible event by the general public are most necessary and worthy endeavors. Yet can the Holocaust be made to serve as the chief organizing principle of our moral universe? For many of those influenced by the spirit of left-liberalism, it already does.

In a relativist age, the Holocaust serves for many as a moral anchor. Forty years ago, preoccupation with the Holocaust was still considered morbid, and the moral lesson it taught remained something of a debaters' point. We knew, when pressed, that if nothing else was immoral the Holocaust was. Yet we did not yet know how to turn the Holocaust into an engine of meaning. Many learned. Perhaps because they had to. Human beings crave moral certainty. If the Holocaust had waded us away from moral certainty

ment in American Life, ed. Robert Bellah et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), updated edition; Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

for fear of committing horrors in the name of some higher cause, then for many, the Holocaust would itself, of necessity, become the key to moral certainty. But how? How could a debaters' point become a way of life? It became necessary to learn how to use the Holocaust to actually generate meaning. And having mastered this, many would learn how to recognize "little Holocausts" everywhere. All too frequently, the world would accommodate this need for little Holocausts. When it did not, they could use their imaginations.

Weighed down by a sense of the banality of their existence, the baby boomers were given a life of material comfort but longed instead for a life of exertion in the service of some larger purpose, or at least for the appearance of such a life. The solution hit upon by many was to identify with struggling groups—however temporarily, however superficially, however counterproductively. Student involvement in the early movement for civil rights was the entirely praiseworthy prototype of this moral pattern, but the many later attempts to copy that original crusade were troubling in character.

The post-1960s proliferation of civil rights crusades had the effect of frequently dividing the world into tyrants and victims, and a shallow but ostentatious appropriation of the victim's superior prestige created what was, in effect, a new aristocracy of suffering. Heightened sensitivity to prejudice, or apparent prejudice, would become the keynote of the new identities because, over and above a few affected markers, no belief or way of life actually distinguished American blacks, women, or Jews—or any given ethnic group—from anyone else.

The new ethnicity seemed to operate as a way of associating individuals with some larger community. More deeply, however, the new ethnicity was a form of self-cultivation. Pasting together a series of identities, preferably rebellious and often fleeting, was more a way of distinguishing oneself from the mass than of forging

stable connections to a given community. And yet, more paradoxically still, the gesture of suffering rebellion had itself become obligatory—a required ritual of admission to a society in which everyone became an individual in precisely the same way.⁶

The denial of freedom—or better, life—to an innocent multitude serves as the sacred icon of our time. The new goal is to identify oneself with mass-scale suffering and to strive to prevent it. On the face of it, of course, any such horror rightly calls forth our outrage. The fact that we are stirred to action by collective oppression or mass killing seems transparently to be our obligation, not some novel religion. Christ on the cross, after all, long the West's most potent icon, is the very image of blameless suffering. Yet the crucifixion is more than a picture of innocent agony. It is a paradigm of sacrifice—of a God who so loved the world that he gave to it, and willingly lost to it, his only begotten son. The displacement of the icon of Christ by the Holocaust metaphor marks a cultural shift of considerable significance.

Many are now unable to work within the old paradigm of sacrifice, or even to recognize or comprehend it. This is reflected, for example, in the diminishing ability of young Catholics to find vocations as nuns or priests and in the incomprehension of those who are disinclined to, say, accept marital advice from a celibate priest. For many, the connection between Jesus' sacrifice of his life, the sacrifice entailed in celibacy, and the sacrifice at the heart of marriage has been lost.

We've already seen how feminism constitutes a kind of modern religion built around Holocaust metaphors, broadly construed (not simply Friedan's "comfortable concentration camp" theme, but also, for example, the—unsubstantiated—idea of a vast epidemic of rape). But the purest example of the Holocaust meta-

6. This portion of my account of the sixties ethos draws on Alain Finkielkraut, *The Imaginary Jew* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994 [1980]).

phor's operation in contemporary leftist thinking is found in the eco-terrorism movement.

Concern for the environment, of course, is one of the great positive legacies of the 1960s. Nonetheless, in the extreme form of eco-terrorism, a welcome concern for the environment is transformed into something more problematic. Precisely because of its extremism, eco-terrorism allows us to see, with particular clarity, the operation of the Holocaust metaphor within the religion of left-liberalism.

Eco-terrorism, sponsored by loosely knit groups like the Animal Liberation Front and Earth Liberation Front, began in earnest in 1998, with the burning down of a mountaintop ski resort in Vail, Colorado, the release of 10,000 minks from an Oregon mink farm, and the burning of a slaughterhouse. Eco-terrorism has proliferated since then, although, until recently, fear of provoking further retaliation has prevented targeted businesses from publicizing the problem. Biotechnology projects are the latest targets, with a fire set to the offices of a global biotech project at Michigan State University in Lansing in 1999 and various experimental crop sites elsewhere destroyed.⁷

The attacks are sometimes mistaken (for example, targeting scientists who are not in fact engaged in bioengineering) and often counterproductive, the attacks themselves backfiring politically on the activists (for example, released minks die in the wilderness). But as is characteristic of left-liberalism as religion, it is the feeling of being a rescuer that counts, not the reality.

The iconography of these activists is Holocaust iconography—photos of animals being experimented on or locked away in small cages. The release of the minks and the burning of the slaughterhouse resemble nothing so much as our dream of preventing the

7. "Eco-vandals put a match to 'progress,'" *Christian Science Monitor* (July 5, 2001).

Holocaust. In fact, the Animal Liberation Front explicitly invokes the image of U.S. soldiers liberating Jews from Nazi death camps to justify its actions.

Of course, a great deal depends upon whether we accept the analogy between animals and humans. Yet the question of the moral status of animals actually serves to disguise the underlying religious and illiberal significance of eco-terrorism. The eco-terrorists have a very particular way of equating animals and humans, different from most of us. For example, although vegetarian, many Hindus see animals in an entirely different way than do the eco-terrorists. Hindus worship the cow as the embodiment of motherly sacrifice and the monkey as a symbol of manly self-control and power.

Things are different in the new political religion. Here animals embody no socially authorized pattern of sacrifice. They are, on the contrary, mute victims, whose relative incapacity only serves to ratify the purity of their victimhood. The credibility of any human claim of oppression can always be called into question, but a mass of mute animals is the perfect image of large-scale innocent suffering—a perfect little Holocaust just waiting to be prevented.

What of animals' disturbing tendency to consume one another? This muddying of the moral waters has been nicely circumvented, by the LLF (Lawn Liberation Front), which, in 2001, distributed fliers to homeowners in a Pittsburgh suburb claiming that 12-inch spikes may have been driven into their lawn to stop them from cutting the grass.⁸ "Grass is a living entity that deserves as much respect as humans," said the fliers. So nostalgia for the heroism of World War II can now take the form of action to prevent the genocide of millions of blades of innocent grass. In an ultimate bid to spread the new religion, every man is now offered the

8. *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, "Group's Unkind Cut Targets Mowers," July 5, 2001.

opportunity to prevent a holocaust from taking place, quite literally, in his own backyard.

Few eco-terrorists get caught. The risks are minimal, but the sense of moral superiority substantial. And such sacrifice as is entailed in the risk of criminal prosecution is dramatically different from the sacrifice embodied in the old religious mode. Eco-terrorists operate in isolated cells of individuals around the country, few of whom know one another's identity. This is not the sort of sacrifice that builds families and communities. It is a simulacrum of sacrifice, undertaken to rescue the children of today's suburban affluence from the oppressive sense of being ordinary.

The physical destruction of university research is perhaps the clearest example we have of the implications of political correctness for academic freedom. But the threat of eco-terrorism goes deeper. Intelligence analysts worry that the history of violence combined with the ideology of *deep ecology*, which holds that human civilization has to be rolled back until the earth's natural environment is fully restored, may lead to the use of large-scale weapons of mass destruction (especially biological warfare) by eco-terrorists. Ironically, those who seek to prevent sham holocausts create a rationalization for perpetrating holocausts of their own.

The real significance of eco-terrorism, however, is the clarity with which it reveals the larger tendencies of the contemporary religion of left-liberalism. This religion works by seizing upon, exaggerating, distorting, and inventing images of mass-scale death and oppression. The point of this religion is not to gain salvation or power through self-discipline and sacrifice, but to achieve a feeling of moral superiority through attempts to stave off potential holocausts. The goal, in a sense, is to make every man a Schindler.

The majority of environmental activists eschew violence, and the public at large favors well-lit houses and SUVs. Yet the Holocaust metaphor is alive and well even in mainstream political battles over the environment, such as the dispute over drilling in

the Arctic National Wildlife Reserve (ANWR). The debate over drilling plans is more than a complex effort to balance environmental sensitivity with the nation's evident need and desire for energy. Inevitably, the proposal to drill in the ANWR invokes a kind of collective shudder—a feeling that whatever the safeguards, whatever the need for energy, drilling in the ANWR is like a little Holocaust. The debate over the ANWR may seem to turn on issues of public policy, but it's really a theological skirmish in the ongoing war between two American cultures and their respective religions.

Durkheim and the Origin of the New Religion

How shall we understand the rise of this new and illiberal religion? Our propensity to forge solidarities with the oppressed is an offspring of the world-view conceived by Marx. Yet the new religious sensibility is better understood as an outgrowth of developments first identified by Emile Durkheim, one of the founders of modern sociology. Durkheim was raised in a strictly observant Orthodox Jewish household, son of the district's chief rabbi and scion of a long line of rabbis.⁹ He was expected to follow in his father's footsteps, but he lost his faith, then instead set out to gain admission to the Ecole Normale Supérieure, the premier institution of higher learning in France. Living in Paris, studying to gain admission to the Ecole Normale, Durkheim twice failed his exams. He endured three years of anguished isolation before finally securing a place at the school.

Durkheim's work is a sociological autobiography of sorts. He was preoccupied with the transition of traditional social forms, governed by a comparatively stable consensus on the details of ordinary living, into complex modern societies. For Durkheim,

9. For an excellent account of Durkheim's life and the direction of his thought, see Steven Lukes, *Emile Durkheim: His Life and Work* (New York: Penguin, 1977 [1973])

the increasing differentiation of social roles demanded by modern life had the inevitable effect of weakening moral consensus and highlighting the differences among individuals. What could hold society together under the pressure of such vocational and moral differentiation? Durkheim's initial answer was that the same proliferation of complex tasks that heightens individuality and undermines consensus itself creates a form of interdependence.¹⁰ A contemporary telecommuter, for example, may stay at home, through his computer and modem. Yet the very uniqueness of his task forces him to depend upon an array of computer specialists and, ultimately, upon the government that regulates the electronic infrastructure. The difficulty is that this sort of pragmatic interdependence is hardly a substitute for the sense of shared moral purpose typical of homes and communities suffused by traditional religious belief.

Durkheim understood this, and so was preoccupied with finding a way to recapture, in modern form, the communal spirit that had been lost with the passing of traditional religion. For Durkheim himself, his time at the Ecole Normale Supérieure had achieved that purpose. In the late nineteenth century, the Ecole Normale Supérieure was a tightly regulated institution. Students would be locked inside for days on end, but they would spend this time together in a kind of hothouse of intellectual interchange and fellowship. Here there was both a common purpose and a premium placed on individual innovation—a synthesis of the old and the new. For Durkheim, this was the solution, and in the years following his graduation, he built around himself a circle of collaborators that tended to reproduce the atmosphere of the school. As his thinking developed, Durkheim experimented with proposals for large-scale, occupationally based corporations—mid-range

10. The aspect of Durkheim's thought discussed here is set forth in Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* (New York: The Free Press, 1984).

associations between the individual and government, to be given real legislative responsibility, and out of which some common spirit might emerge to heal the rift between labor and management. Yet little came of this attempt to split the difference between capitalism and socialism.

Throughout his career, Durkheim conceived Europe to be in a state of transition toward a new moral consensus. He saw no reason to believe that societies of the future would be incapable of producing some new moral faith, resembling those of the past, yet better suited to the needs of modern life. Despite his attempts to imagine a resurgence of community centered around occupational corporations, Durkheim continued to believe that the forging of a new morality could not be “improvised in the silence of the study.” On the contrary, it had to grow of its own, out of the unfolding development of society itself—although having thus emerged, it could be recognized and shaped.

At one critical moment of his career, Durkheim came to feel that he had, after all, caught a glimpse of what this religion of the future might be. And much as Durkheim anticipated, this realization emerged, not from the silence of the study, but under the pressure of outside events. At the turn of the century, the infamous Dreyfus affair exposed a rift in French society quite as profound as the conflicts that broke out in America in the 1960s. Alfred Dreyfus, the sole Jewish officer in the upper reaches of the French military, was falsely accused of treason and exiled to Devil’s Island on the basis of forged evidence. As the fabrications began to unravel, the intellectuals of France joined forces with secular liberals and religious minorities in opposition to the conservative monarchists and traditional Catholics who supported the verdict. Emile Zola’s famous “J’accuse” signaled the beginning of the intellectuals’ assault on the conservatives, an offensive that Durkheim himself soon joined—the only time in his career he took active part in an ongoing political controversy.

As a secular Jew who now saw, not the community of his fathers, but France itself as his home, Durkheim identified with Dreyfus. If anti-Semitic suspicions could bar Jews from the army, none could advance within society at large. But what really drew Durkheim out of his study and into the fray was an argument made by the opponents of Dreyfus in answer to the increasingly shrill protests of Zola and his friends. So what if Dreyfus was innocent, went this argument of the conservatives. To admit this would be to embarrass and undermine the Church and the army—institutions that had supported Dreyfus's conviction and whose authority was essential for the proper functioning of society. The plight of a single individual could not be permitted to overbalance the interests of the country as a whole. From this conservative perspective, it was the individualism of the intellectuals, and not the regrettable fate of Dreyfus himself, that posed the true danger to France.¹¹

Durkheim's public answer to this argument provoked a new train in his thought. His initial view had been that the transition to a role-differentiated, and therefore individualistic, society portended an inevitable weakening of moral consensus—the shift to a morally shallow pragmatic interdependence. That meant a weakening of religion as well because for Durkheim, religion was, in essence, the symbolic expression of an underlying moral consensus. But now Durkheim realized that even in modern society, moral consensus (and thus religion of a sort) never completely fades away. In effect, the primacy of the individual, itself the outcome of our shattered social unity, now becomes our religion—the center of our reconstructed moral life. In the absence of relative agreement on the details of everyday living, our belief in the sacred character of the individual constitutes the last remaining basis for

11. Emile Durkheim, "Individualism and the Intellectuals," in *Emile Durkheim: On Morality and Society*, ed. Robert N. Bellah (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973).

our collective moral (and thus religious) life. So Durkheim was able to turn the argument of the conservatives around. According to Durkheim, it was actually the anti-Dreyfus forces that threatened social anarchy. In Durkheim's eyes, the conservatives were undermining the new secular religion of modernity (the religion of individual rights) by sacrificing the rights of Dreyfus to the interests of the Church and the army.

A hundred years ago, this was not obvious. The rights of man, of course, had been the centerpiece of the French Revolution, but the Cult of the Supreme Being, a religion contrived by the revolutionaries as a celebration of those rights, had been something of a flop with the public. So instead of jettisoning traditional religion in favor of a formal religion of rights, the revolutionary tradition entered into a state of protracted struggle with the forces of social and religious tradition. For a very long time, few would have dared to call the belief in human equality and liberty our *de facto* religion. Indeed it is evident that Durkheim himself was far from believing that the idea of universal human rights could, without supplement, evolve into a moral tradition rich enough to alleviate the isolation and alienation characteristic of modernity. To the end of his life, Durkheim continued to anticipate the development of some novel form of moral community—a community that could heal the wounds inflicted by modernity while remaining compatible with modernity's complex vocational structure. Nonetheless, drawing on the tradition of the Revolution itself, Zola, Durkheim, and their compatriots had been present at the creation of the modern intellectual dissident, the social outsider who challenged tradition and authority in the name of liberty, equality, and the society of the future. This politically active intellectual was an early carrier of the new religion of liberalism.

Yet the larger social and moral constellation that Durkheim both expected and longed for never materialized. Or did it? Our modern Communitarians, descended, many of them, from Durk-

heim, continue his attempt to envision and nurture new or reformed communal moralities. In the meantime, something interesting has emerged among the postmodern *critics* of communitarianism. The tradition of the dissident intellectual, with his religion of human rights, has itself taken on far greater moral significance than even Durkheim imagined it would. In the process, this tradition of dissidence has been transformed. In effect, the tradition of the individual (and individualist) dissident has itself become the locus of our hidden communal strivings—with ambiguous results.

Durkheim was looking to re-create the close-knit Jewish community of his youth in a modern context. The tight discipline and common intellectual life of the Ecole Normale Supérieure had done this for him, relieving the alienation of his years of study alone in Paris. By 1968, the number of young people leaving their home communities to attend college had increased enormously—a surefire recipe for Durkheimian alienation (now called identity crisis). Yet, unlike Durkheim, the demonstrators of 1968 were hardly looking to recapture the pleasures of a youth spent in communal religious devotion. Their upbringing had been notably materialistic and free. At college they demanded more of the same. One of the sparks of the big Paris demonstrations, for example, was an attempt by school officials to punish a girl for rooming with her boyfriend. Similar incidents helped spark demonstrations in the United States. Students at the climactic Parisian demonstrations were told that there were to be no marshals—no one to govern the conduct or direction of the marchers. They were to be *their own* marshals—seemingly the antithesis of Durkheim's tightly regulated life at the Ecole Normale Supérieure.

Durkheim was convinced that, appearances to the contrary, no one is ever really his own marshal. To be utterly without socially imposed discipline, to be free of all normative regulation, to be under the authority of oneself alone, is to be plunged into *anomie*—

a crisis of aimless or infinite desire. The ultimate outcome of complete freedom and undirected individual desire is, Durkheim maintained, suicide. To ask incessantly, “What is the meaning of *my* life,” can end only in death. Instead, Durkheim insisted, recognize it or not, we remain in life only insofar as we ask “What is the meaning of *our* life—here, now, in this society?”¹²

So the students who rejected Durkheim’s belief in the need for some collective moral “discipline” would, of necessity, have had to restore it in some subterranean fashion. They did so in several ways. The hothouse of social and intellectual interchange that Durkheim found within the locked gates of the *Ecole Normale Supérieure* was re-created in heated meetings on strategy and ideology, now held within buildings taken over and barred from the inside by the students themselves. And the object of protest was no mere individual denied his rights. Rights were still the keynote, but now the rights to life and liberty of whole peoples were at stake, peoples whose collective identities could thus be vicariously, if temporarily, appropriated. This pattern had been implicit even in the Dreyfus affair, since support for Dreyfus’s individual rights also entailed a kind of solidarity with all oppressed Jews. Yet now this element was brought to the forefront. The *anomie* enkindled by the increasing differentiation and isolation of modern life began to transform overt demands for freedom into vehicles for suppressed communal yearnings. Increasingly, protests on behalf of rights were becoming strategies for the production of identity. The nineteenth-century chorus of idiosyncratic intellectuals gathering their voices to affirm our shared principle of rights had metamorphosed into mass demonstrations and ongoing political associations acting in solidarity with whole peoples.

Of course, it couldn’t hold. The underlying individualism—

12. This part of Durkheim’s argument is set forth in Emile Durkheim, *Suicide* (New York: The Free Press, 1951).

the refusal to be “marshaled”—saw to that. So the mass activism of the 1960s dissipated. Nonetheless, a reformation of the religion of modernity had taken place. Or perhaps we could say that the impulse to communal action in solidarity with whole classes of the oppressed, which had heretofore been concentrated in the European socialist tradition, was now synthesized with a radically individualist version of the dominant liberal political culture of both the United States and Europe. This moral-political synthesis increasingly took the place of traditional religious behavior as the source of meaning in life (when it did not actually reconstitute traditionally religious behavior in its own image). In the decades since, in significant and sometimes hidden ways, the impulse to express solidarity with struggling groups would answer to the need for community within a radically individualist culture.

Why Did the Sixties Happen?

The 1960s grew out of the radical privatization of American life that accompanied suburbanization. Of course, *suburbanization* stands as a kind of shorthand for a complex process, not precisely identical with suburban life. The postwar pattern in which small towns and the old communally organized urban ethnic neighborhoods were broken up into more individualized units has been described by Christopher Lasch and Alan Ehrenhalt.¹³ The change was concentrated in suburbs, but as Ehrenhalt has shown, even old urban ethnic enclaves were transformed by the trend toward privatization.

The rise of the postwar suburbs initiated a fraying of the social fabric that, until that time, had knit together communities through bonds of mutual obligation. Now the texture of daily life would be shaped less by neighbors gathered on front stoops than by life

13. Alan Ehrenhalt, *The Lost City* (New York: Basic Books, 1995); Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1991).

indoors with televisions, transistor radios, records, and the immediate family. And the automobile, that vital suburban accessory (ownership of which increased exponentially after World War II), made it possible for people to shop, attend church, and sustain friendships far outside the confines of their local communities. To be sure, the shift was never total. Neighborhood friendships and local civic organizations never entirely disappeared. Increasingly, however, with the postwar move to the suburbs, friendship and organizational involvement would be shaped by individual choice, not by accidents of geography or birth.

This privatization of postwar American life had a double, and contradictory, effect. On the one hand, we became connoisseurs of freedom, increasingly sensitive to any diminution in our range of choice. On the other hand, the collapse of the old social forms left a yearning to participate in some community of shared moral purpose. Somehow, we would try to square this circle through a pattern of temporary participation in a whole range of moral communities. This *serial communitarianism* would serve as a way of building up a unique personal identity.

But in what sort of community could a connoisseur of freedom feel comfortable? Not a traditional community, structured by long-term networks of sacrifice and support. That sort of community is built around renunciations—limitations on personal choice. But what other sort of community is there? Only the one Durkheim described: a community of individuals collectively taking action to preserve their liberty. So in the 1960, that is what we got—movements of individuals who banded together in order to protect the freedoms cherished by all Americans.

In the process, something was discovered. A collective defense of liberty could provide the rush of shared purpose and identity that was increasingly being drained out of our privatized suburban life. So movements began to coalesce around the theme of resistance to oppression. And as with the early Civil Rights Movement,

there often was much injustice to oppose. Yet now there was a new ingredient. Now the collective defense of liberty and equality would have to shoulder the existential burden once carried by traditional—that is, sacrificial—religion. This invested the process of forming movements of liberation with a special urgency, redoubling the need to find (or create) the all-encompassing threats to life and liberty without which these movements could not survive.

The children of the anomic suburbs reacted convulsively when subjected en masse to the disorienting experience of the move away from home and into college life (the baby boomers entered college in unprecedented numbers). Overtly, these students were asking for more of the same—more of the freedom to which they had been accustomed by suburban living. The rules and restrictions of an old-style education would have to go. The traditional ethic of sacrifice and the practice of sensual self-restraint that went with it was dead—or at least badly wounded. The institutional restraints and sacrificial symbolism of traditional religion made no sense to these kids. To understand Christ on the cross, or Abraham about to kill Isaac, you had to grow up in a family or neighborhood where you regularly relied on others and allowed others to make demands on you. Religious symbolism tells a story about the willingness to give totally of oneself, in trust that the sacrifice will ultimately be redeemed. The kids who still grew up in the neighborhoods based on that sort of mutual obligation and loyalty became the working-class cops who busted the demonstrators' heads for being a bunch of selfish, spoiled brats.

In a sense, the activists of the 1960s simply reproduced, in secular form, the earlier American evangelical movements of social uplift, restoring thereby the sense of collective purpose that had been eroded by suburban life. Yet it would be a mistake to see the crusades of the 1960s as secular in any simple sense. It is not a straightforward question of keeping the social uplift and losing the religious “baggage.” The claims of superiority, the group bound-

aries and rivalries, the determination to impose a monolithic moral narrative on a complex and multivalent world, and even the resolve to govern the most intimate habits and thoughts of the “unreformed” all ended up returning, but this time in a form denuded of the classic, reciprocal ethic of sacrifice. This was, at one and the same time, the oldest story in the book and an honest-to-goodness world-shattering innovation—all the so-called scary concomitants of traditional religious communities, but without the redeeming and unifying sacrificial core. A new core would have to be found.

That new core was to take the form of a collective defense of the individual’s sacred rights. Of course, the notion of individual rights had always been central to democracy, yet it coexisted with (and depended upon) the traditional sacrificial ethic. The rights concept dominated our public life while the ethic of sacrifice was the keynote of private life. But now, with the social basis of the old communal forms undermined by suburban privatization, the collective defense of rights increasingly became the religion of those sectors of society released from traditional patterns of mutual obligation and hierarchy.

The Civil Rights Movement of the early 1960s was perhaps the perfect fulfillment of the religion of rights. In that movement, a defense of the sacred rights of the individual generated a deeply felt sense of shared moral purpose across almost every quarter of the nation. But could even this glorious defense of rights serve as the basis for a new way of life? Given the collapse of the old communal forms, it would have to. So by the late 1960s and early 1970s, the notion of rights was sliding into the background of the protests and themes of collective identity (women, blacks, gays, Third World solidarity) moved to the forefront. Of course, manifestly, the demonstrations were concerned with the rights of these groups, but increasingly these gatherings functioned as a new sort of communal affiliation. The loosely knit associational communities that emerged out of these movements were apparently sec-

ular, but functioned in many (and often unrecognized) ways like religions. But instead of classic sacrifice, the new religion was centered around images of oppression, of holocaust, of the denial of life or liberty on a mass scale.

In an extraordinary study, Louis Bolce and Gerald De Maio, without quite meaning to do so, trace the rise of the new religion and establish its role in our cultural and political wars.¹⁴ The title of Bolce and De Maio's article is "Our Secularist Democratic Party." What Bolce and De Maio show is that the popular identification of conservative Christians with the Republican Party is only half of the story of the contemporary relationship between religion and political life—and the least interesting half of the story at that. The real political change since the 1960s is not the presence of conservative Christians in the Republican Party. It is, on the contrary, the rise of secularists within the Democratic Party.

Secularists began to appear as a major force within the Democratic Party at the 1972 Democratic National Convention. Prior to this, elites in both parties were committed to traditional Judeo-Christian teachings on authority, sexual mores, and the family. In 1972, however, more than a third of the delegates to the Democratic National Convention described themselves as atheists or agnostics who seldom attended religious services—this at a time when only about 5 percent of the total population fit that description. That faction within the party supported a 1960s-inflected agenda on such issues as abortion, alternative life styles, and the organization of the family. In short, Bolce and De Maio show that the outbreak of our culture war has less to do with a political shift within Christianity than with the rise of secular progressivism within the Democratic Party.

That progressivism may be secular by traditional definitions,

14. Louis Bolce and Gerald De Maio, "Our Secularist Democratic Party," *The Public Interest* (fall 2002), 3–21.

but it is best understood as a new and in important ways illiberal religion, derived from a new social setting, which fulfills a social-moral function in the lives of its adherents analogous to that performed by traditional religion for others. Social scientists have long quarreled over how to define religion.¹⁵ So-called essentialist definitions isolate a core characteristic that everywhere indicates the presence of religion. Most essentialist definitions of religion, of course, identify the phenomenon with the belief in a deity, deities, or other spiritual beings. Functionalist definitions of religion, on the other hand, identify religions by the role that they play in society. Functionalists tend to call any scheme of ideas that answers the fundamental questions about life while offering a template for collective moral action, a religion. Durkheim himself was the first great functionalist student of religion, and I have laid out here a version of Durkheim's claim that the religion of modernity is built around the notion of individual rights.

Once individual rights turn into a religion, liberalism is subverted. Eventually, we are presented instead with a series of Holocaust metaphors, images of mass-scale violations of rights that serve as a charter for collective identity and action. Holocaust metaphors restore the traditional religious notion of radical good and evil and produce political correctness where once there was liberal tolerance. The entire process is rooted in a deep, yet incomplete, transformation of our society in the direction of individualism (and the consequent, if often hidden, effort to overcome atomization through collective political action). The inevitably incomplete nature of modern individualism (no society can sur-

15. For an "essentialist" definition of religion, see Melford Spiro, "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation," in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Banton (London: Tavistock, 1966). For a contrasting "functionalist" definition, see Clifford Geertz, "Religion As a Cultural System," in Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

vive in a totally atomized state) means that the new “secular” religion will never gain total cultural control. On the other hand, without a widespread restoration of traditional communal structures, Holocaust metaphors and the religion of rights will remain powerful. All of this means that for the foreseeable future, we are in for a long and inconclusive culture war. And that war is best understood as a conflict not only between religion and secularism, but between two competing religions.