The Importance of Morality for Religious Liberal and Political Progressives

M. Christian Green

July 12, 2017

"We don't want to sound like self-righteous @$$holes!" an audience member implored at a recent public forum, arguing that the question of abortion should be addressed in economic rather than moral terms. As an ethicist with professional training in law and religion–two fields deeply intertwined with issues of rights, justice, and morality–I am acutely aware of the peril of self-righteousness. It is an occupational hazard.

I remember the panicked look of two attorneys who quickly struck me from the a list of possible jurors when I told them what I did for a living. No attorney wants an ethicist on their jury, it seems! I think, as well, as that friend of my parents, who when he learned what I was studying in graduate school pronounced what may be the only law-and-religion joke in existence, quipping, "What are they teaching you–how to sue the hell out of people?"

And yet, in response to the question of whether abortion should be framed in terms of economics or morality, I was struck by the powerful response of Amy Irvin, head of the New Orleans Abortion Fund, in support of framing abortion as a moral issue. In fact, Irvin recommended framing abortion in a holistic way as an issue of economics, racial justice, AND morality–specifically, the ability of women to make moral decisions about their bodies, their lives, and their families. Far from avoiding or eschewing morality, Irvin recommended taking back the language of morality and taking the moral high ground.

Even so, framing abortion as a moral issue has been hard for liberals and progressives for a long time. I remember speaking to the Harvard Medical School chapter of Medical Students for Choice about a decade ago. There, too, the students seemed uncomfortable with the language of morality–until I reminded them that Etienne-Emile Baulieu, the French doctor who invented the medical abortion pill RU-486, described his creation as the "moral property of women." Baulieu's phrase "moral property" has since been used in books, articles, and other venues to chronicle and support the struggle for reproductive rights–a struggle that has resurfaced in recent years, with some religious and political conservatives opposing not only abortion, but contraception, as well.

For liberals and progressives in religion and politics, the concern about the language of morality emerged in strong form in in the run-up to and aftermath of the presidential election of 2004. Powerful memes emerged in political writing to the effect that liberals and progressives, and especially the Democratic Party did not understand "values voters" and needed to "get religion." Teaching ethics at Harvard Divinity School that year, I quickly devised a course on the topic,

titled "Religion, Liberalism, and Virtue," intended to locate resources within liberal political and religious traditions for the pursuit of virtue, right, good, justice–in short, the stuff of morality.

One of the introductory texts for the course was an article by the Christian political scientist Glenn Tinder, titled "Can We Be Good Without God?: The Political Meaning of Christianity." The question of how to integrate one's faith, religion, philosophy or other system of belief with politics in addressing what Christian theologian Paul Tillich called "matters of ultimate concern" may seem to be the unique province–or problem–of theists or, even more pointedly, of Christians these days.

This is particularly true in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election that has caused so much consternation on the political and religious left and around the world. The relevant statistic: 80% of self-described white, born-again/evangelical Christians (which in the relevant Pew Research Center poll included Catholics and Mormons alongside the more familiar evangelical Protestants), voted for Donald Trump. From the perspective of many liberal religious and politically progressive people, Christians who voted this way may, in the vernacular, have some 'splaining to do about why they voted for a candidate whose character, history, and actions and office seem to violate many of the values of their Christian faith.

For his part, Tinder asks his "Can We Be Good Without God?" question not just of the "religious," but of the "spiritual," as well. In the opening lines of his essay, he writes:

We are so used to thinking of spirituality as withdrawal from the world and human affairs that it is hard to think of it as political. Spirituality is personal and private, we assume, while politics is public. But such a dichotomy drastically diminishes spirituality construing it as a relationship to God without implications for one's relationship to the surrounding world. . . . The notion that we can be related to God and not to the world—that we can practice a spirituality that is not political—is in conflict with the Christian understanding of God.

Indeed, Tinder goes on to argue:

Only in modern times has it come to be taken for granted that politics is entirely secular. The inevitable result is the demoralization of politics. Politics loses its moral structure and purpose, and turns into an affair of group interest and personal ambition. Government comes to the aid of only the well organized and influential, and it is limited only where it is checked by countervailing forces. Politics ceases to be understood as a pre-eminently human activity and is left to those who find it profitable, pleasurable, or in some other way useful to themselves. Political action thus comes to be carried out purely for the sake of power and privilege.

For purposes of considering the importance of morality, it is Tinder's specter of DEMORALIZATION of politics that is important–particularly in a time in which the religious and political conservatives have largely claimed the language of morality, family, nation, patriotism, and other terms that define our morals, norms, and values–what we're willing to die for, as a former professor memorably put it.

But before we pressed to die for morality, we might want to rise to defend it–even it means risking self-righteousness. Religious and political conservatives are certainly not shying away from morality. In one area in which I work, the defense of religious freedom or freedom of religion or belief (the term FoRB increasingly being used around the world to include non-religious perspectives), religious conservatives and traditionalists have been arguing recently for "religious liberty" and asserting claims on the basis of their "conscience" to seek exemptions from compliance with some laws. The most hotly disputed of these laws have been the ones mandating that health care plans under the Affordable Care Act (a.k.a. "Obamacare") provide access to contraception and requiring that commercial vendors of goods and services (especially those related to weddings) not deny these to people on the basis of sexual orientation, gender, or relationship status.

These new conscience claims can be interpreted as an especially strong assertion of personal morality against the mores of the surrounding community. After all, another recent Pew Research Center poll showed that most religious groups in the U.S. think employers should be required to provide access to contraception in employee health places and that majorities of Catholic, Jewish, and religiously non-affiliated people (but significantly not evangelical or even mainline Protestants) reject denial of goods and services to LGBT people. It may be the case that the proclamation of one leading religion researcher, Robert P. Jones, of the "End of White Christian America" applies primarily to Protestant Christians.

Amid these prognostications of conservative Christian demise, there appear to be signs of revitalization on the liberal and progressive religious left. One of the challenges for liberal and progressive religious groups, as well as those who are religiously unaffiliated or non-religious, will be to take back the language of morality and values, alongside the more familiar language of justice and civil rights. As one observer puts it, drawing specifically from the Christian tradition:

The Kingdom of Heaven was a political theory as much as it was the way to redemption. As a political theory, it should be familiar to liberals. It is in keeping with their principles of tolerance, individual freedom and equality. Liberals need not be religious to talk like Jesus and to create a more perfect union for everyone. They need only to understand his politics. In relearning Jesus-speak, liberals will replace the right's now-barren moral authority.

And another observes, more strategically, with respect to the Trump Administration's repeal of the the Johnson Amendment imposing tax penalties for politicking in churches and other religious bodies:

Progressives make moral claims on the basis of reason, simply, often at the exclusion of a religious ethic that might have secular implications. Progressive candidates can cultivate champions for issues they support within the congregational halls of churches around the country.

In this light, the task for religious liberals and progressives and their partners and allies in secular, humanist, pagan and other traditions–as well as the religiously unaffiliated and non-religious–may be to reclaim the language of morality in concepts of human dignity, equality, tolerance, and justice.