# Beyond Liberalism and the Culture Wars: A More Inclusive Pluralism

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I've been asked to speak about my book *The Twilight of the American Enlightenment: The 1950s and the Crisis in Liberal Belief.* The book is a recounting of the mainstream popular—what at the time were called "middle-brow"-- cultural outlook of the post-war era. I was fascinated with this subject because I graduated from college in the late 1950s and these outlooks were my first introductions to trying to understand American culture, which I have been trying to do ever since. So I wanted to see how those outlooks—which looked very impressive at the time-- looked a half century later. So most of the book is simply a narrative trying to depict such outlooks for today's readers. I see it as like visiting a lost era—maybe like visiting Cuba before the Communist revolution. However wise were the cultural observers of the time, they were writing just before the cultural revolution precipitated in the 1960s. So we know a lot of things that they could not know.

Some people look back to the 1950s with a good bit of nostalgia. It was an era of family values, lots of religion in public and in private, America was strong, we were undergoing unprecedented prosperity we had won a great and just war, and there was widespread consensus that America an democracy stood for what was right and that the totalitarian Soviet stood for what was wrong. There were injustices, to be sure, most especially racial injustices, but we were at least working on that. In many ways the American world of the 1950s seemed to make sense.

But the 1950s was also a time of high anxieties. The greatest anxiety was over the bomb and the Cold War. The Korean conflict was contained and left at a standoff, but it

did seem almost inevitable that sometime before too long the Cold War would erupt into World War III. I put in a New Yorker cartoon from the spring of 1960 in which a woman is saying to her neighbor: “The state the world’s in, Polly, all I’m planting is annuals.”

The anxiety, however, ran deeper than just world affairs and politics, so my narrative concentrates on more basic cultural commentary. Many of the best cultural observers thought that Americans were becoming too much spoiled by material things. “If I wanted to destroy a nation,” wrote John Stienbeck to his friend Adlai Stevenson in 1959, “I would give it too much and I would have it on its knees, miserable, greedy, and sick.” Too much technology was a major worry, most especially television. In 1949 television was rare. But by about 1953 almost every family had one and almost all were watching the same mindless or mind-numbing programs. That sparked fascinating debates, that I recount, on the relationship of mass culture to high culture and whether mass culture would inevitably drive the edifying high culture to the fringes.

Even before television became universal, commenters typically worried about how modern culture was producing alienated “mass man.” The classic was Erich Fromm’s *Escape from Freedom,* first published in 1941 and still widely read in the 1950s. Fromm explained the rise of Nazism in terms of the rise of modernity that had destroyed traditional values and given “modern man” freedom. But freedom created new anxieties, and a sense of alienation isolation and powerlessness, and led to “new dependencies” on totalitarian authorities that promise to provide meaning and purpose. Even without totalitarianism, moderns such as Americas give up freedom in conformity to group expectations and “become exactly as all others are and expect them to be.”

"Conformity" became the great worry of the 1950s. Concerns such as Fromm's were popularized by Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* in which Willie Loman just wants to be "well-liked." Or when I went to college in the mid-1950s the culminating book in our Freshman English course was *Catcher in the Rye* and we all talked about non-conformity and getting away from the phoniness of mainstream culture. David Riesman's 1951 study *The Lonely Crowd* was discussed throughout the decade. Or in 1955 *The Organization Man,* lamenting businessman conformity, became a best seller. At almost the same time the title of the novel and film *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* because a catchword for the phenomenon. Or *Rebel without a Cause*, was another exploration of modern alienation—as was much of contemporary art.

So thoughtful people were deeply worried that Americans who were the most modern of "modern men" had lost their way. But the problem was, what values could they turn to in order to put people on the right course and to overcome alienation? American social commentators and leading educators would have agreed that contemporary people needed to draw on the best of Western heritage and particularly on the best of the American democratic heritage. That still left the problem though of providing moral criteria for judging what was "the best in the West"—as for instance when Ideals such as liberty and equality conflicted. I call the era "the twilight of the American enlightenment" because its spokespersons saw themselves as heirs to America's founding ideals, but they no longer shared the philosophical assumptions of the eighteenth-century founders. Particularly Darwinism, historicism, and cultural relativism had destroyed faith in inbuilt natural law on which the founders had hoped to build consensus. Walter Lippmann, who had been brilliantly commenting on the crisis of

modern morals for decades proposed in his last book, published in 1955, that the shapers of America's public philosophy had to somehow return to faith in natural moral law. One of the most revealing parts of my narrative, I think, describes how Lippmann was shouted down by the younger mid-century public intellectuals, people like Arthur Schlesinger Jr. for instance. They were essentially pragmatists who believed that consensus could be built by intelligent problem-solving that yielded incremental improvements, rather than being driven by any global ideology. Daniel Bell's title *The End of Ideology* captured the mood. The anti-dote to modern totalitarianism was American pragmatism that tackled one needed reform at a time. The problem was, though , that pragmatism, while it is often preferable to ideologically driven alternatives, works when it has shared moral capital to build on. But as Walter Lippmann—himself a student of William James--- was trying to point out, it does not provide a good way of generate moral criteria for adjudicating among conflicting values. And there was little that pragmatism could do to address the roots of the alienation of modern people. (The irony of this story is that the greatest reform of the era, the civil rights movement under Martin Luther King, Jr., was based not on pragmatism, but explicitly on an appeal to higher natural moral law, as King explained in his "Letter from the Birmingham Jail." )

But for the mainstream liberal pragmatists of the 1950s themselves, what were the prescriptions for the alienation of "mass man" in modern America? Two basically: First, since the common diagnosis was that modern people were conformists, the solution that one heard everywhere was that people they needed to be non-conformists who thought for themselves. Second, in doing that they also needed to be guided by the dictates of modern science and the experts. They were setting the standards

for what Chistopher Lasch later described as *The Culture of Narcissism* in which the modern people design their own "lifestyles' guided alternatively by two sorts of experts, the bureaucrat and the therapist.

At the same time that mid-century American public culture was dominated by these ideals of trust in science and the individual, the 1950s was a time of religious revival and renewal at just about every level. There was plenty of religion in public life, particularly in what we have come to call the "civil religion" of the Eisenhower era. American piety was often contrasted to Soviet godlessness. Congress added "under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance. Not only that, but this was the last era of the prominence in public life of the mainline Protestant establishment. At the beginning of the decade many mainline Protestants were still strongly hostile to Roman Catholicism, which they saw as undermining ideals of true freedom. You may recall Paul Blanshard's very popular 1949 book, *American Freedom and Catholic Power*. But as the decade progressed, there was growing acceptance of Catholics as well as Jews mainstream life. The liberal Protestant establishment could be expanded into the "tri-faith" religion of Protestant, Catholic, Jew," emphasizing what these traditions held in common, rather than their differences. People talked more of the "Judeo-Christian" heritage as a root for American values. The election of JFK, a Catholic who thought like a liberal Protestant, was the culmination of this trend.

That brings me to the topic of the role of particular religious faiths in a diverse society. We can ask first what "pluralism" meant in the 1950s and how that meaning has evolved until today. "Pluralism" was a very important ideal for the mainstream cultural leaders of mid-century. They recognized America's wide diversity and their hope was to

build a healthy consensus. So "pluralism" meant bringing more and more people from diverse backgrounds into the mainstream. That involved avoiding ideological dogmatism and instead cultivating openness and empiricism. Since irrational ideologies or dogmas could hurt the growth of a healthy society, the accumulating knowledge of scientific thinking was the best way to weed out folk beliefs and other nonsense.

One should note that the message that this outlook sent to people from more traditional religious communities. While the mainstream outlook could be congenial to liberal Protestants, Catholics, or Jews, its major messages to young people from more conservative religious heritages was that they should leave those and join the mainstream. The first message was "be autonomous and think for yourself." And the accompanying message was don't trust dogmatic authorities. Trust modern science and rationality. Either way, in the name of pluralism, the message was to get away the conservative community of one's origins.

As I said, in many ways the 1950s seems like a lost era, America as it was before the cultural revolution of the 1960s and the 1970s. In many respects that revolution would seem to obliterate this consensus thinking about pluralism and diversity. Perhaps no theme is more prominent after about 1965 than the embrace of diversity. Yet with respect to religion the story is a little more complex.

One of the most momentous results of the upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s was the dramatic weakening of the role of the old Protestant establishment in public life. The problem was that it was unfair that traditionally one sort of religion—Protestantism—had been privileged in the public domain. So, for instance, in the early 1960s the Supreme Court, banned mandated prayers in public schools. And in the later 1960s, in the face of

countercultural outcries against the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant Establishment, progressive minded Protestants often took the point to heart, as for instance in voluntarily diversifying and secularizing their church related colleges.

With the voices thus muted of the group that traditionally had most effectively represented religious interests in public life, the prevailing outlook became that the public domain—whether in education, politics, or public discourse—ought to aim at operating without reference to specific religious viewpoints. The most common means to promote such neutrality was by way of more consistent privatization of religious belief. That approach had considerable appeal. All religious views could be treated equally. They could be respected as personal choices, so long as they did not get in the way of the public business of society. So even though the 1960s and 70s was an era when many emphasized the value of recognizing diversity in American public life, few people were applying that principle toward including religious diversity.

Instead, when it came to matters of religion, most champions of cultural diversity still thought like liberal consensus thinkers of the 1950s. They assumed an idea of progress based on scientific advance and shared rationality. Religions would either adjust to modernity or die. So, according to this "secularization thesis," which persisted into the later decades of the century, traditional religions would fade away as society inexorably secularized. Having inherited such outlooks, neither secularists nor champions of progressive religion had much interest either in protecting parochial religious communities or in thinking about how their distinctive voices might best be heard in American public life.

Then in response, by the late 1970s the religious right emerged with its demands to put Christianity back into the mainstream of American public life. That movement helped sound the alarm regarding some vitally important matters associated with the growing secularization of American life. But its solutions tended to be simplistic. Often its fundamentalist Protestant leaders spoke of returning America to its original Christian heritage. In effect, they were proposing a return to the days of the old Protestant religious establishment in which Christianity or "the Judeo-Christian heritage" was widely recognized as the basis for the civilization, but in a much more conservative form than had prevailed in the 1950s.

So as the era of the culture wars emerged by about 1980, none of the major parties had a well-developed heritage of thinking about how to accommodate religious diversity as it related to the public domain. Secularists and religious liberals were emphasizing multiculturalism of other sorts. Yet their progressive views of culture left them with little interest in protecting the interests of conservative religious sub-cultures. Meanwhile the instinct of many conservatives was to rebuild something like the old informal Protestant establishment even if now including conservative Catholics and a few others. The result has been the unconstructive standoffs of the culture wars.

In my book I conclude very briefly with an argument for "a more inclusive pluralism" that as a matter of principle includes religious pluralism. So basically I think that whenever there is affirmation of the importance of honoring differences regarding race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and the like, religion would automatically be included in the listing.

In the book I rely—too much I think—on reasons from my own Protestant religious heritage for such pluralism. But here I want to suggest in conclusion on more general public grounds why such a more inclusive pluralism should a matter of principle? First and most importantly, it is a matter of justice. Religious communities should not be discriminated against just because of the peculiarity of their religiously based views. Catholic and other parochial schools that serve their sub communities should receive tax support. That they do not is a heritage of Protestant prejudice succeeded by secular prejudice. Church based colleges and universities should not be regarded as second rate or even be denied accreditation as some would have it. The scruples of religious groups, as regarding birth control or abortion, should be accommodated by the law. That does not mean, of course, anything goes regarding religious practice—and there are hard cases. But it does mean that religious differences should be honored equally with other differences in promoting diversity.

Such principles of justice are, furthermore, consistent with the Constitutional protections of religious liberty. Sometimes that is recognized by the courts and it is found in the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. Yet in the mainstream culture that principle is much assailed by those who would like uniform standards---standards that would fail to take into account the value of religious diversity as a matter of principle.

Furthermore, in addition to being a matter of justice that is consistent with the Constitution, there is a pragmatic argument for honoring and even cultivating religious diversity. The fact is that a history of the United States from almost any point of view would show that religious communities have contributed tremendously to the health of the nation. These sub-communities have typically been important training grounds for

producing countless morally responsible public-spirited citizens. These communities are one of the most important sources of shared moral capital for the nation. Even if one thinks traditional religions are totally delusional, one ought to be able to see appreciate the vast numbers of national leaders have been reared in conservative religious communities. Many of these leaders have given up the exact teachings of their upbringing, yet they nevertheless have served the nation with a moral zeal cultivated in those settings. And religious communities have been responsible for a host of charitable works and educational institutions that have benefited the whole nation. So there is simply a good practical secular argument for continuing to support such communities and their institutions and to honor they differences.

It will be objected that religion is also a major sources of conflict. That certainly has been true in the past and is much a legitimate matter of concern today. But what is the best way to defuse religious conflict in a society. It is to be as open and tolerance of difference and to give the benefit of the doubt as much as possible. That is a first step toward encouraging dialogue and fostering understanding.

Despite the American tradition of religious tolerance there has been a strong impulse toward assimilation into a melting pot. For a long time that melting pot had a strong Protestant dimension. By the 1950s efforts for consensus were based mostly on liberal pragmatism. In recent generations such ideals have broadened into secular multi-culturalism. Yet when it comes to more traditional religious faith the multiculturalists would like to melt them into their own common ideology.

So in sum, my message is that if we are to get beyond liberalism's impulse to think that one set of beliefs should fit all and the culture wars impulse to try to rebuild

some sort of religious establishment, we need consciousness raising that whenever we speak of pluralism and diversity that we include all sorts of religious diversity.