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Two Competing Religions–The Legacy of the 1960s

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Kurtz makes his case in “Culture and Values in the 1960's,” a fascinating essay published in *Never a Matter of Indifference: Sustaining Virtue in a Free Republic*, recently released by the Hoover Institution Press. Edited by Peter Berkowitz, *Never a Matter of Indifference* is a thought-provoking collection of essays on moral character and democratic responsibility. Kurtz's essay adds historical context to the book's central thesis—that moral virtue is an absolute necessity in order for political liberty to flourish.

When Kurtz argues that the 1960's represented “both a fulfillment and a repudiation” of America's founding vision, he offers an important corrective both to those who would celebrate the 1960's as a time of unfettered liberation and to those who would curse the same decade as a time of absolute moral collapse. Kurtz, a research fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution, points to the Civil Rights Movement and the end of legal segregation as great gains for the society. The impetus toward racial equality was an example of what Kurtz labels “classic liberalism,” based in respect for both human dignity and moral structure.

Nevertheless, the legacy of the 1960's is mixed precisely because “classic liberalism” devolved into something very different—an ideology that celebrates liberty without an accompanying respect for moral character. Kurtz wants to understand this exchange of classical liberalism for something far more radical. “If the movements that began in the 1960's have in some significant measure departed from classic liberalism, how are we to understand their inner rationale?” Kurtz asks. “What connects the ecology movement, for example, with movements for Civil Rights? And if classic liberalism suffices for many Americans, what has prompted them to set it aside?”

Very quickly, Kurtz moves to answer his own question. “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.” An illiberal liberalism? Kurtz argues that this new liberalism is no longer based in the concern for ordered liberty that framed the nation's founding.

The children of the 1960's betrayed the American vision by “becoming an illiberal religion,” Kurtz asserts. This happened because “liberalism stopped being a mere political perspective for many people and turned into a religion.”

Is Kurtz using the word “religion” merely as a point of exaggerated argument? “I do not speak metaphorically,” Kurtz insists. “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.”

Classic liberalism was primarily concerned with individual liberty, understood to be both protected and limited by an ordered structure of moral obligation. This view of liberty produced the American concern for freedom of speech,

freedom of association, and religious liberty that has stood at the heart of the American experiment. True liberalism is not intimidated by the presence of competing voices, public debate, and different perspectives. That no longer characterizes today's illiberal liberalism, as best demonstrated in the ethos of political correctness.

As Kurtz explains, "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." As the worldview of left-liberalism is turned into a functional religion for so many people, they now treat any disagreement as heresy to be eradicated. "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," Kurtz explains. "The stigmatization of traditional perspectives can only be effective because so many are primed to respond to it in the first place."

Why do today's liberals respond to conservative arguments with condescension and a dismissal? Kurtz argues that the new liberalism has demonized conservatives and conservative arguments. As a religion, liberalism is "in need of demons," Kurtz observes. "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. 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."

In sum, support of left-liberal causes is now a religious passion for many Americans whose worldviews were shaped by the 1960's. Every political debate becomes "a dire, almost revolutionary, struggle for the very principles of liberalism itself."

Without commitment to a traditional faith, the children of the 1960's sought ultimate meaning in the secular sphere. For many, the Holocaust became the "moral touchstone" for life, Kurtz argues. As such, the Holocaust becomes both a symbol and a moral anchor. Thus, "little Holocausts" are now seen everywhere. These exaggerated conflicts range from Betty Friedan's description of the suburban home as a "comfortable concentration camp," to the radical environmentalists' outrage at "holocausts" such as commercial chicken farming and the lumber industry.

The children of the sixties were, in the main, children of privilege and material prosperity. As such, they had a hard time claiming to be oppressed or disadvantaged. They dealt with this by associating themselves with the real or perceived oppression of others.

As Kurtz explains, "Weighed down by a sense of the banality of their existence, the baby boomer stewards 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."

Stripped of its moral context and obligations, this new form of liberalism functions as a political religion that sees oppression—real or imaginary—as the only important form of sin. In this contorted worldview, meaning is found in associating oneself with the oppressed—whether other human beings, or animals, or even inanimate objects. Kurtz points to the "Lawn Liberation Front," which in 2001 distributed leaflets in Pittsburgh claiming that 12-inch spikes may have been driven into area lawns to prevent the cutting of grass. "Grass is a living entity that deserves as much respect as humans," the group claimed. In so doing, the "LLF" was merely following the liturgy of the new secular religion.

All this is the inevitable result of a shared communal worldview. Beyond that, the very loss of a shared moral worldview can be directly traced to secularism and the eroding influence of the Christian worldview within the culture.

Where does this lead? For Kurtz, it means, "for the foreseeable future, we are in for a long and inconclusive culture war." That much seems abundantly clear and irrefutable. The further value of Kurtz's argument is his insistence that this war is "best understood as a conflict not only between religion and secularism, but between two competing religions."

Those who know the Bible understand this reality all too well. The choice we face is not between religion and secularism, but between Biblical faith and the various paganisms. These are indeed two competing religions. As the Lord instructed Israel, "Choose ye this day whom ye shall serve."

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