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The American Culture Wars: What's Christ Got to Do with It?

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Drawn from, and based upon the sermon series, *Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White*, by the Rev. Adam Hamilton

In my mind, my parents had saved for ages, in order that I might be able to take the annual school trip to Washington, D.C. I was one of only two seventh-graders who had been allowed to go, and I was giddy. It meant a plane ride – my first – and three whole days visiting all the monuments and government buildings.

It also meant, according to my mother, that it was time for a new outfit or two. Then again, she thought just about *everything* was an opportunity for new clothes. My mother, the once-upon-a-time cheerleader, could never understand the way I dressed, and was continuously on the lookout for ways to rid me of what I had come to think of as my uniform: nondescript, off-brand jeans, and plain-color, baggy t-shirts without any graphics or logos.

I'm not sure *I* understood it, really, until it came time to go jeans shopping for this particular trip. Sitting in the third dressing room of the day – I had refused all the jeans at the other places as too expensive – my mother, exasperated, held up the last pair I had tried on (*Z Cavaricis*, the hot brand of the day), and implored me “don't you *want* these jeans?”

The words flowed up just as quickly as the tears flowed down. Before I had time to catch them, much less analyze them they were out: “*Of course I do!*” I sobbed.

I had just spent the better part of a day dragging us all over town to try on different iterations of these same jeans – so this was news to me.

“Why, then?” was all my mother could say.

“Because \$20 is too much to spend on jeans that I will outgrow, and if I get these, Emily will be the only one without them.”

This part wasn't news to me. Emily was the scholarship girl on the trip – which wasn't supposed to be public knowledge, of course, but everyone knows. And I also happened to know her parents regularly showed up at the Food Shelf. Name-brand jeans were far out of their budget.

She stuck, as I did, to a very simple wardrobe that was, inconspicuously, we hoped, free of graphics or even off-brand logos that would draw attention to themselves, and therefore us. It was the 90s, so it worked pretty well. It was a good strategy, and I had never once been teased or bullied.

But I was also a bit addicted to my self-righteousness, I had always proclaimed my disdain for all things branded or moneyed. **I** didn't need them, and Jesus certainly wouldn't have approved of me spending very much time on what I looked like, or much money on how I dressed. At least not when there were hungry people in the world.

All these things I knew.

But what I didn't know was how *badly* I had wanted to wear the same things as everyone else.

How much time I spent actively “not caring”.

Just how hard it was to do the “right” thing.

Until that morning in J.C. Penney's.

We didn't get the jeans.

(And I don't remember my mother ever commenting on my clothing again.)

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This might seem like an odd place to start a sermon about Jesus, and our relationship with him, and the culture around us. Particularly in 2020, when the discussions around immigration, abortion rights, civil rights, and voting rights have reached a fever pitch.

But I started here because I don't want us to lose sight of the fact that it's hard to *be* in the world, even during the best of times. It is hard to make the decisions about how we spend our energy and time.

The "culture wars" – just like our relationship with and understanding of Jesus – cannot be divorced from these daily decisions each of us make. Where each of us put our stake in the ground to say, "here I stand and I can do no other."

There are two primary things at issue here. The first is one's understanding of American culture, and the values we hold dear. The second is the way one understands the life of Jesus, and the life of a Christian, to interact with the world around them.

The Rev. Adam Hamilton – on whose 2008 sermon series on which we are patterning our own – started his own sermon with Pat Buchanan's 1992 Republican National Convention Speech, the one where he declared that there was a culture war, "a war for the soul of America," that was "as critical to the kind of nation we will one day be as was the Cold War itself."

Tracing the past 60 years of history, Hamilton goes with a pendulum theory of culture, and concludes that the conservatism of the 80s and 90s were a reaction to the turbulence of the 60s and 70s, pinpointing the 1979 *Roe v. Wade* decision as a flashpoint in the creation of the culture wars. After the upheaval of the Civil Rights and Women's Liberation movements, along with the prolonged war in Vietnam, the decision that a woman had an unrestricted right to abortion until the second trimester was the tipping point for conservatives, who felt the ground shifting too quickly under their feet.

But what Hamilton is citing is actually, I believe, the more "conservative" understanding of American history – what is known sometimes as the "de Tocqueville" approach to understanding our politics and political system. Under this theory (and here, please excuse me, I am giving truly broad strokes) what drives us is our understanding of American moral exceptionalism. This is summed up nicely in a Newt Gingrich quote from his book, *To Renew America*, "From the arrival of English-speaking colonists in 1607 until 1965," Gingrich wrote, "there was one continuous civilization built around commonly accepted legal and cultural principles."

As scholar Andrew Hartman writes in his book on the culture wars, "For conservatives like [...] Gingrich, the America they loved was in distress. Returning to the values that animated the nation in the 1950s was the only way to save it."¹

The moralism-based understanding is actually *not* without its merits. As Hartman writes, the post-WWII, cold-war years of the 1950s *actually did* create a type of middle-class cultural uniformity that stretched across social and racial divisions in a way that was heretofore unheard of in the United States. In this timeline there "was widespread adherence to the middle-class values of 'hard work, personal responsibility, individual merit, delayed gratification, [and] social mobility'"².

And it was, indeed, the *Roe v. Wade* decision that led to the formation and organizational power of the conservative, evangelical political action campaigns that we now know as the Religious Right, organizations such as Falwell's Moral Majority and Robertson's Christian Coalition. And it was *certainly* these coalitions that allowed the more political, judgment-oriented evangelical movement to overtake the racially-integrated, personal-sin-and-sanctification evangelism of the 50s and 60s. In other words, for Franklin "there's a speck in your eye" Graham to push out his father, Billy Graham, who was always of the more "there's a log in my eye" Christian variety.

But perhaps herein lies a large part of our cultural problem: what is known colloquially as “the left” usually has a completely different perception of history. Rather than understanding America as being unified and then fractured, the Left understands America to have always been built *upon* fracture. Rather than understanding history as the progress of American moral exceptionalism, this viewpoint understands history in terms of the battles between powerful majorities and underserved minorities – rich and poor, white and black, men and women, religious and atheist, straight and queer.

This understanding sees the 60s as nothing more than another period in a long list of times when American society began to recognize the fractured grounds upon which it was formed. Slavery, prohibition, the great depression, suffrage – all of these were periods where America was forced to reckon with its understanding of itself.

This is essential to understand because it means that, **even when we agree that there is a type of cultural war going on, we do not agree on the terms.* Is it a recent battle, or one that was built into our foundation? Is it a battle *for* personal responsibility, or *against* structural sin? *For* morality, or *against* oppression? To *preserve* what is good, or to *create* something better?

Of course it is both.
It must always be both.

The American political system has always been fractured, but we have also always held ideals that ask us to build something otherwise.

In his book on the topic, James Davison Hunter writes that what emerged from the post-war period was a secularism that changed one thing, in particular: “the symbols of moral discourse.” Secularism, changed “the ‘organizing principle’ of American pluralism.” “The major rift is no longer born out of theological and doctrinal disagreements – as between Protestants and Catholics and Jews. Rather the rift emerges out of a more fundamental disagreement over the sources of moral truth.”³

The system has always been fractured, but until recently we often called upon the same moral imagery to talk across those fissures. The language of our debates changed... and now we talk past each other.

From the standpoint of a particular issue, take the free love movement of the sixties. It had much to teach us about bodies as God-given vehicles for joy. But so, too, did institutions of committed, loving relationships have much to teach us about the sanctity and worth of those same bodies, and the conditions necessary for their flourishing. The language, however, of bodies as sacred, was intentionally absent from the free love movement.

And here I hope you see echoes of what we discussed last week, when we thought about how what are known as more conservative, evangelical churches have emphasized the personal relationship with Jesus, and personal salvation, (you should not sin), to the detriment of understanding Jesus’ more cutting critiques of structural sin, (this structure is oppressive to women). More liberal or progressive churches have emphasized social sin, without having an understanding of God to hold them when the world and the work is too hard.

Whether you see Jesus as critiquing society or sinners has a lot to say about where or whether you’ll end up in church.

In 1951 H. Richard Niebuhr published his seminal work, *Christ and Culture*, outlining the ways Christians have traditionally understood their relationship to Christ to influence their relationship to the world around them.

The first are those who understand Christ as being against the culture around them. These have been folks like the Amish, or the monks, or desert ascetics, who view the culture around as requiring too much compromise, and they withdraw from the world around them in order to live a wholly obedient life. There is beauty in this, and

simplicity. But as the Rev. Hamilton concludes, Jesus himself did not withdraw from the world around him. He engaged it at every turn.

So we move to the second understanding, who are those who understand Christ as being present in the culture around them. Every church has this tendency, to some extent -to see one's own beliefs as those of Christ himself, rather than shaped by the world around them. For more conservative churches, this looks like understanding one's own moral dictums - about the role of women, for example, or skin color - as ordained by God, rather than culture. For more social-gospel churches, I prefer to use Niebuhr's own words about the ways we elevate our own understandings, which is that we tend to preach "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."⁴

Which means, and I hope I've mostly brought you along here, that we are back where we started: a teenage girl struggling to figure out what to wear.

No? Well, let's put it this way:

To conform to the culture, would be to wear brand name without regret, or thought to the lives it impacts. Without an understanding of my own complicity in the structures of systemic violence.

To withdraw from the world, with its fabric sweat-shops, brand-name labels, and impossible ideals for women, would be almost impossible - to place my own moral purity at a premium I would need to spin my own thread, to make my own fabric, to sew my own clothes without even the machinery that uses the fuel that pollutes the earth.

Well, that is a limiting choice, to say the least, and one Jesus did not, himself make, because it would have taken his time away from the struggling, the oppressed, and the poor.

The only option, then, as I understand it, for those of us gathered here today is to understand our relationship with Jesus as helping us transform the culture around us. This, Niebuhr calls "Christ above Culture" - or the ethics and ideals of Jesus, calling us into our own best selves, transforming, redeeming, the world around us as we do.

And here we see where de Tocquevillian idealism meets fractured reality: in truth, and the building of a new reality. Again and again.

Just as Jesus sought to do.

He preached prophetically, judgmentally, even harshly against the abuses of his time. He overturned tables in the temple, and railed against the hypocrites who wore their designer labels and preached holiness. Who had no scraps for the poor in the streets or kindness for the stranger.

When it came to adultery, even, he proclaimed clearly that we are to rip out our own eye rather than commit such a sin.

But when it came to the person in front of him, his ethic was always love. Always Mercy. "Forgive them, God, they know not what they do," he pleaded, for the ones nailing his hands to the cross.

To the woman who had been caught in adultery he whispered, "neither do I condemn you."

But *also* to the scribes, the Pharisees, the hypocrites who brought the woman to him, hoping to trap him and her - he did not condemn them, only pointed out that their focus - our focus - should never be on the faults of another before the faults of our own.

And here, then, is perhaps where we begin to find our answer to how to engage our faith and our political life:

The spiritual equivalent of “think globally, act locally” – we must think prophetically, and act personally. Listening more than we speak and loving above all else.

In 2020, perhaps we would be wise to begin with lament, rather than condemnation, with listening – real listening, instead of blame, hope rather than answers.

As Matthew Potts wrote in a recent article in the Harvard Divinity Review, “We tend, I think, to associate prophecy with prediction, with the articulation of a world restored, but to [lament] the world, to declare that it should be other than it is, is already an act of prophecy, even if we have no words yet to describe how things might change. To declare, ‘it should not be thus,’ is to imply ‘it should be otherwise,’ and so already to embark upon a work of prophetic imagining.”⁵

To begin with lament is, in itself, a political act – revolutionary, even.

And it is one with which we can all *actually* agree.

¹ <https://www.alternet.org/books/how-culture-wars-swallowed-american-political-and-intellectual-life-two-decades>

² Ibid.

³ Hunter, James Davison, *Culture Wars : The Struggle to Define America*, p.77

⁴ *The Kingdom of God in America*, New York: Harper & Row, 1959 [1937], p. 193

⁵ Matthew Potts, “The Politics of Preaching”, Harvard Divinity School Review, Autumn/Winter 2017, pp. 24-5