

# The Imperative of Christian Cultural Engagement: Christians Did Not Start the Culture Wars, But We Cannot Evade Them

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Are we or are we not in the midst of what's described as a culture war? I'm just going to say simply straightforwardly, undeniably we are. Culture war explains much of what is going on in the world around us. It doesn't explain everything, but it explains why at the most fundamental level of our civilizational life, there is a war over what is true, what is beautiful, what is good, what should be moral, what is marriage, what does it mean to be male and female, or does it mean anything that's subjectively true.

Now, we need to recognize at first, that the term culture war is originally descriptive. That is, it describes a fundamental struggle over the future of the culture. A fundamental struggle over the future of the civilization. A struggle that is not merely the engagement of partisan politics, it's not merely an argument over national policy, it's an argument over reality. Now, the term wasn't even originally English, it was originally German. It comes from 19th century Germany where the term was *Kulturkampf*, meaning culture war, or struggle for the culture. It goes back to the 19th century and the unification of Germany as a modern nation.

Even as that was taking place under the leadership of the man known to history as the iron chancellor Otto von Bismarck. The reality is that there were fundamental differences about how the new German society should be arranged. What should be the laws, what should be the customs, even what should be the holidays, who should run the schools. One of the major distinctions was between the Protestant states of Germany and the Catholic states of Germany. So it was a Protestant/Catholic struggle over the future of the culture.

Would it be a culture as defined by Protestantism or would it be a culture defined by Catholicism? Now, in one sense, looking back at the *Kulturkampf*, the culture war in the 19th century in Germany, it looks almost quaint because they weren't arguing over whether or not boys were boys and girls were girls. They weren't arguing over whether marriage could include something like so-called same-sex marriage. They weren't arguing over whether there is any such reality as objective truth. So if anything, the culture war in the 19th century in Germany was a far more superficial affair, politically real, and very culturally significant, but just a far less fundamental affair than the culture war that defines modern America.

Now, the term culture war in English goes back, particularly in say evangelical conversation to the 1990s, and to the contribution of a sociologist at the University of Virginia, whose name is **James Davison Hunter**. It was James Davison Hunter who actually published a book on the culture war in which he made very clear that descriptively, what's going on in America is such a conflict over fundamental issues. That it's not just say an argument over abortion, it's not just an

argument over sexuality, it's not just an argument over the sides of government or taxation or foreign policy, it is a fundamental struggle to define the future of the civilization on its most basic terms.

Now, there's another interesting dimension to this, which is when you are talking about modern electoral politics, you're talking about constitutional self-government, you're talking about a struggle over who's going to decide what is and isn't marriage. Who's going to decide the prevailing moral structure of the civilization, but there have been literal wars over the culture over civilization in times past, thinking of Western history, perhaps the most important of those were the military encounters between the Western European nations and the Ottoman Empire.

There you were looking at a civilization is defined by Islam under the Quran, and a civilization that had very serious and obvious Christian commitments. Let's just say that life under those two different civilizations would be remarkably different. Thus, this was a battle between two civilizations. It was a culture war between two cultures. The point of the culture war right now is that the most interesting battles are inside a single civilization, inside a culture. In the case of the United States, inside one nation, and you see that right now, it's all over the headlines. It's beneath and above, it's throughout, just about everything.

You think about the issue of abortion, you think about the headlines, you recognize that just on the issue of abortion. On the issue of whether the fundamental moral reality is supposedly a woman's right to choose or to control her own body on the one hand, and the preservation of human life on the other hand, in this case, an unborn human life in the defense of the sanctity of life, you look at those two different arguments, one or the other will gain supremacy in our society. That's just the way it works. One or the other. This is not like a war between two different empires, one pro-life and one pro-abortion, this is

a battle within one culture, or at least what right now appears to be one culture.

The danger is, of course, that the culture war points out there isn't a unitary culture, you end up with two different cultures, and one's going to win and one's going to lose. One of the most interesting conversations or debates right now is found among Christians, and that would include at least some evangelicals arguing or debating over whether or not, or to what extent faithful Christians should be engaged in a culture war. There have been articles written by figures suggesting that it's wrong for evangelicals to become cultural warriors or culture warriors. But in other point I want to make is that we are in a culture war, whether or not we want to be. It's not something that we have declared, it was declared on us.

Furthermore, it's a struggle over the society that no one in a participatory democracy can actually evade. This is not a war that say conservative Christians declared upon a supposedly secular and liberal state. For that matter, it is not so much that you had the left declare a culture war. The left tried to gain supremacy in the culture and has largely won in many sectors of our society. They've done so under their own fundamental vision of human flourishing and their idea of the human good. We believe that it's fundamentally wrong, fundamentally flawed, that it will lead to the opposite of human flourishing, and that it actually represents the opposite of human good.

So you have two rival understandings of what is good for humanity, over what kind of policies and laws should be put in place. The culture war explains why, when you look at the division right now among Americans, it's not uneven. It's not like, okay, over here, you have a division over abortion, over here, you have a division over same-sex marriage. Those are completely different pictures. No, they're not. They're largely the same people. In other words, you have pro-lifers who are also pro-marriage, is the union

of a man and a woman. That’s because there’s a theological worldview structure behind that commitment, that explains the commonality on these issues. On the left, again, you have largely, if not uniformly, a consistency on the left.

In other words, you have very few people on the left, you’re going to find out who say, I am absolutely for same-sex marriage, but I’m against this transgender revolution. There just aren’t that many people, because if you feel free to redefine human morality, sexual behavior, marriage, and all the rest, it’s really difficult to say, well, I’ll go for A and B, but not for C. This is where, as you think about conversations with neighbors, as you think about reading the headlines, increasingly, we really aren’t looking at Americans looking over a vast cultural divide of contested terrain. The point I want to make is this, there is no way to go AWOL in the culture war. There is simply no way to avoid it.

One thing to think about here, is what I have often described as the evangelical voters’ dilemma. A vote is a moral choice. A vote, thus is an exercise of moral responsibility. But in an electoral system, not voting is no less a moral choice and a moral responsibility. In other words, if you have the power or the vote, if you vote for candidate A or candidate B, or you don’t vote, they are all moral choices. They all come with political consequences, and not one of them is actually less ethically fraught than any other. This issue recently erupted in our conversation, at least partly prompted by an article that appeared in the *New York Times* by Tish Harrison Warren entitled, “The God I Know Is Not a Culture Warrior.”

Now, let me be clear, that’s an interesting statement in and of itself. I need to specify that sometimes writers of columns in newspapers, and this also includes the online world, don’t write the headlines for their articles. Those headlines are often produced by copy editors or by others. So as you look at a headline like this, it’s not necessarily honest, fair, or accurate to say that’s

what the author or the columnist determined would be the headline. But nonetheless, this headline does not mislead about the content of this article. Tish Harrison Warren warns that Christian should not use God as a tool, or as a weapon in political warfare, should not reduce faithful Christianity to a cultural conflict.

Again, the headline of the article is, “The God I Know Is Not a Culture Warrior.” Those words are not found within the article, but she does use similar language. She says this, “The God I often hear about in American politics, in the news, and on Twitter is one of cultural division and bickering.” She went on to contrast that with a recent worship service in her church, she said, “The God in our cultural discourse seems impotent and irrelevant, a mostly sociological phenomenon related to political posturing and power plays.” Later in the article, she says, “It’s not that I think God has no place in politics or public discussions, faith touches all areas of life and issues such as abortion, religious liberty, and the relationship between church and state are important.”

But she says, “When we primarily talk about God in the context of political or ideological debate, believers’ actual experience of God, worship and faith, not to mention spiritual virtues like humility, gratitude, and kindness often gets lost. God becomes merely another pawn in the culture wars. A means to a political end. A mean to our own opponents online, or an accessory dawned like a power tie.” Now, the fact is that you can look all across the political spectrum and see God misused, God misquoted, God misattributed. You can look all across the political spectrum and you can see people making bad theological arguments or frankly political arguments that don’t even meet the slightest theological muster. But nonetheless, the point I want to make is that Christians didn’t declare the culture war. Conservative Christians didn’t decide that there would be a fundamental struggle over our society and civilization.

I want to make the point Christians can't avoid it. We can't evade it. Like it or not, someone's going to decide what's taught in school, in the public schools. Like it or not, someone's going to decide what the laws are. Like it or not, someone in this representative democracy of constitutional self-government's going to decide what the definition of marriage is. Someone, like it or not, is going to decide what parental rights are. Just how far parents are understood to have the rights to raise their own children. Someone's going to decide just how far religious liberty is to extend. Someone's going to decide fundamental issues of reality. It's not just speed limits we're talking about here, it's not just the IRS and taxation, it is the fact that in our times, the state has taken on a claim of power and authority. That means the state is largely invading the life of every single family, the life of every single home, the life of every single community.

Someone's going to decide what the policies are, who's going to lead, what reality is. Again, what marriage is, whether or not a boy is recognized as a boy, and a girl is a girl, whether or not you have forced conformity with a new ideology of sexual expressivism and progressivism, all that's going to be decided, there's no way around it. Now, honestly, the right kind of argument, I think to be found among Christians is how we are to engage these issues in the public square, and how we are to engage those with whom we disagree. The fact is that Christians owe the society at large and every single human being made in God's image, we owe to our neighbor love of neighbor, but we also owe to our neighbor the truth. We also owe to our neighbor righteous laws and a just system of government, and a system of laws and policies that is consistent with creation itself and the Creator's plan in making us, for example, human beings in his image, and making us male and female, and establishing marriage as the very fundamental institution of our society.

Love of neighbor is not just being sweet and polite. Love of neighbor also means we have an inherent responsibility to seek that the laws are righteous, that the laws comport with reality, that the policies and governing structures and reigning ideologies of our time are as consistent with biblical truth as is possible. One of the patterns I see, especially on the left wing of evangelicalism, if it can be rightly described as that is the fact that the culture warrior label is often attached to people who just hold to a different political understanding. Now, there are those who misuse God in just about every conceivable way, and that's on both sides of the spectrum.

But the reality is that I see this criticism often thrown at conservative Christians who after all, right now are in a position of having to fight for the most fundamental issues from religious liberty, and the right to pray in public, all the way to the sanctity of human life. These aren't uncomplicated. Frankly, we do have a responsibility to engage these issues while demonstrating civic respect, and for that matter, love of neighbor, which is even more fundamental. But again, love of neighbor doesn't end with just being respectful, it also extends to defending the truth that is essential for the flourishing of humanity.

