“The Moral Equivalent of Rosa Parks?” The New Christian Right’s Framing Strategy in the Latest Chapter of the Culture Wars

asjournal.org/68-2019/the-moral-equivalent-of-rosa-parks-the-new-christian-rights-framing-strategy-in-the-latest-chapter-of-the-culture-wars/

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In evaluating recent developments in the New Christian Right (NCR), this paper uses the social movement theory approach of framing. Social movement organizations try to gain advantages with authorities and the public by framing their demands in ways intended to persuade people that their cause is valid. The most effective way of doing this is to align their specific issues rhetorically with larger cultural themes and values, which makes the frame accessible to larger audiences. After debating as to whether a conservative religious crusade can be considered a social movement, this paper examines the NCR as a collective movement whose influence on society and capacity to mobilize are heightened by resorting to the ‘discriminated minority’ framing strategy. I argue that viewing the NCR as a social movement allows us to deepen our understanding of both religious conservatism and of the culture wars.

1 When observing from overseas the rhetoric used by religious conservatives in the United States today, one gets the impression that they now constitute a minority group that is being targeted and discriminated against, not unlike African Americans until the 1960s.[1] This alleged persecution, in addition to bringing up echoes of the Civil Rights Movement, also points toward a violation of a right that Americans hold dear and that is enshrined in the First Amendment to the Constitution: the free exercise of religion. Being a non-American scholar allows one to study this phenomenon with the benefit of cultural distance, and in particular without being bound to an overly strong attachment to the Constitution. This critical distance can be helpful since conservative Christians, who previously used this persecution victim’s discourse in a limited way, are now massively resorting to what is first and foremost a framing strategy—a way of presenting their struggle that resonates with a wide audience, even beyond that of religious Americans. While allowing the movement to find an echo with the American public, it has also become the rallying point for a wider-based social movement which includes not only white evangelical Protestants, but also conservative Catholics and Mormons. So far, the existing scholarship has tended to view the conservative side of the culture wars mainly in terms of political and electoral strategy and has focused its study of social movements on the progressive side. I argue that viewing the New Christian Right

(NCR) as a social movement allows us to deepen our understanding of both religious conservatism and of the culture wars. After debating as to whether a conservative religious crusade can be considered a social movement, this paper examines the NCR as a collective movement whose influence on society and capacity to mobilize are heightened by resorting to the 'discriminated minority' framing strategy.

Historical Overview of the New Christian Right

2 The New Christian Right (hereafter NCR) is, according to Clyde Wilcox and Carin Robinson's classic work *Onward Christian Soldiers?*, "a social movement that attempts to mobilize evangelical Protestants and other orthodox Christians into conservative political action" (Wilcox and Robinson 8). This movement, originally formed of organizations that emerged in the late 1970s, such as Moral Majority, Christian Voice, Religious Roundtable and the National Christian Action Coalition, consists primarily of theologically motivated Christian reactionaries. Working usually within the electoral system to impose their religious views on morality and culture as binding for secular society, these conservative groups aim "at the restoration of traditional values in public policy through the mobilization of evangelical Protestants and other conservative religious communities for political action" (Erdmann 5–6).

3 The movement was born in response to the societal changes of the 1960s and a general sense of a secularization of American society. Particularly the Supreme Court's 1962 ban on prayer in public schools in *Engel v Vitale* and the 1973 legalization of abortion in *Roe v Wade*, the growing presence of pornography in the media, the alleged reversal of gender roles (which the passage by Congress of the Equal Rights Amendment in 1972 seemed to enshrine), and the threat of removing tax-exempt status from white students-only Christian schools in the South, mobilized Christian conservatives. The adjective 'new' is used to contrast the NCR with the historical Christian Right, which usually refers to the reactionary movement of the early 20th century formed in response to the advances of science and modernization, including in Christian theology. This led to an increase in fundamentalist evangelism and its mobilization on a number of fronts, including the fight against teaching Darwin's theory of evolution in public schools, and for the prohibition of the manufacture, transportation, and sale of alcohol. After suffering a number of reversals, the Christian Right gradually withdrew from the public sphere from the late 1920s on, focusing solely on religious and doctrinal issues. It made a limited comeback in the 1950s, motivated by what it saw as the threat of atheistic communism in the early days of the Cold War (McVicar).

4 Since its return to the public stage in the late 1970s, the movement has been through various incarnations, and its alleged control over US politics and final demise have alternatively been announced by scholars and pundits. Far from being a united movement, it is a complex network of more or less linked organizations

representing the interests of conservative white Protestant evangelical—and sometimes Catholic and Mormon—organizations whose focus ranges from abortion to education and the defense of the 'traditional family.' These organizations are all engaged in fending off the attacks of what they consider to be an aggressively secular society and believe they are engaged in a genuine culture war. The term culture wars, coined by sociologist James Davison Hunter in his 1991 book *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, refers to the growing polarization within American society on such issues as gun control, abortion, gay rights—or, in a catchier, widely disseminated phrase, the '3 G's: God, Guns, and Gays.' This polarization went hand in hand with a process, studied by Robert Wuthnow in his 1988 *Restructuring of American Religion*, which saw the more devout white Americans increasingly casting their ballot for the Republican Party, regardless of their specific religious denomination, and religious African Americans and the more secular and religiously progressive members of society siding with the Democrats.

5 The Christian Right's strategy has changed over time: from a top-down approach initially focusing on national politics and trying to elect a President amenable to their grievances into the White House, to a more grassroots approach focusing on local elections of all types to try to change—or to resist change—from the bottom up.

The New Christian Right, a Social Movement?

6 Scholars from many disciplines have studied the NCR and have long debated its nature, asking whether it should be called a social movement. Religion has often been a resource for many of the social movements that have transformed American politics and society, but mostly in the context of progressive struggles, such as women's right or civil rights for African Americans (Wilcox and Fortelny 266–69). While some have called it a creation of the Republican Party or a cultivated collection of interest groups (Lugg 49–50), there is a fairly large consensus that it constitutes "a textbook example of a social movement: a set of activists dedicated to mobilizing an aggrieved but previously inactive group of citizens into mainstream politics by tapping resources and deploying them to best advantage" (Green, Guth, and Wilcox 103).

7 Social movement scholars have applied various approaches to analyze the NCR. Studying collective grievances is one of them; it highlights demand factors, inasmuch as unfulfilled political demands of particular populations give rise to social movements. This paradigm emphasizes "some change in traditional social arrangements [...] often tied to modernization" (Green, Guth, and Wilcox 120). Others have turned to resource mobilization. This theory highlights pre-existing organizational resources and the role of social movement entrepreneurs—in this precise instance, the institutions and members in evangelical, Mormon or Catholic churches—in mobilizing such resources and redirecting them into political

mobilization. The third approach often employed is political process theory, which "highlights the political opportunities that permit the movement some prospect of success" (120).

8 This paper focuses on yet another social movement theory approach to study recent developments within the NCR: framing, that is, "the conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action" (McCarthy 244). Social movement organizations try to gain advantages with authorities and the public by framing their demands in ways intended to persuade people that their cause is valid. The most effective way of doing this is to align their specific issues rhetorically with larger cultural themes and values, which makes the frame accessible to larger audiences because it will "resonate" with their established cultural understandings (Miceli 590–95).

A Historical Overview of the New Christian Right's Framing Strategies

9 The history of the NCR's framing strategies has witnessed many changes, reflecting Sara Diamond's observation that such strategies are continually readjusted because social movements do not operate in a vacuum and therefore need to factor in the general mood in the US when elaborating their discourse (5). When the movement first emerged in the late 1970s, it garnered considerable media attention, especially as a *liberal* evangelical Christian, Jimmy Carter, was making his way to the White House. *Newsweek* dubbed 1976 "the Year of the Evangelical," and the rhetoric on the part of constituent movement echoed this triumphal tone. It is no coincidence that Jerry Falwell called the organization he founded to rally religious conservatives behind political goals Moral Majority. At the time, movement leaders promoted the idea that evangelicals were a powerful conservative majority battling a small group of liberal elites, echoing Richard Nixon's silent majority rhetoric (Marley 346). Another movement of the period, Christian Voice, presented itself as an organization dedicated to making a "Christian majority in a Christian democracy" (348). This framing strategy, while reflecting the evangelicals' sense of their new-found assertiveness, may also have reflected the fact that they did represent, if not a majority, at least a sizable share of the US population—according to estimates between a third and half of the population (Dickerson). The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 seemed to confirm this majority status, as Falwell claimed his movement could be credited with the Republican candidate's victory, which presupposed it represented a majority, or at least a significant proportion of voters, not an embattled minority whose voice was being silenced (Marley 347–48).

10 The Christian Right did not have much to show in return for its support of candidate Reagan. The school prayer and antiabortion amendments—both dear to white

evangelicals—that candidate Reagan had promised to support either failed in Congress or never made it there, partly as a result of Reagan's reluctance to invest much political capital in them (Williams 141–43). This led to a change of strategy: Instead of focusing on achieving their goals through the national political scale, movement leaders now started to build a grassroots movement fighting for change at the local level. At the same time, the movement undertook a change in its framing strategy. Instead of presenting themselves as a majority battling a small group of liberal elites, the new leaders of the 1990s, presented themselves and their followers as a minority persecuted by legal and political institutions (Marley 348). Leaders, such as Pat Robertson, Ralph Reed, and Randall Terry, not only claimed to be members of an oppressed minority, they also adopted the rhetoric—and even some of the tactics—of the 1950s–1960s African American Civil Rights Movement.

11 Chief among these organizations was the Christian Coalition, founded by televangelist Pat Robertson after his failed 1988 bid for the Republican nomination. On his late 1980s' flagship show, "The 700 Club" on CBN, he began to draw analogies between Evangelicals and African Americans under segregation. Christians were being "forced to the back of the bus," "hunted, a persecuted minority" in the nation they, white Christians, had founded, with "seculars" now in charge of the nation and media and evangelicals in "submission" (Marley 349). In *Turning Tide* (1993), Robertson urged Christians to resort to two weapons used by African Americans in the 1950s and 1960s: civil disobedience and legal action. He also started to fill his speeches with Civil Rights rhetoric (352). The very name of the organization he set up to mobilize conservative Christians, Christian Coalition, was deliberately chosen in reference to Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and to avoid the overconfidence transpiring from a name such as Moral Majority (Baldwin 15).

12 Ralph Reed, the organization's first executive director, was instrumental in implementing this shift toward minority framing strategies and referencing the African American Civil Rights Movement. Ironically, when first joining the movement, he had used majority rhetoric and even military metaphors in his training sessions but had subsequently come under attack. He was probably the one who saw most clearly the advantages of framing the Christian Right as an embattled minority. In his 1994 book, *Politically Incorrect*, he argued that a minority group can appeal for public sympathy, while a majority always runs the risk of looking like a bully (Marley 352). He thus changed the movement's rhetoric and urged organization members to adopt the Civil Rights Movement's inclusive, non-threatening language and peaceful mode of action, which he saw as key to its success. At a 1995 movement conference, he handed out a seven-point pledge card inspired, he claimed, by the SCLC's one, which urged members to "refrain from violence of fist, tongue, or heart" (Baldwin 15). Meanwhile, he presented Christian conservatives as both oppressed in politics and popular culture and viewed as "less than full citizens." In a chapter of his 1994 book,

entitled *To the Back of the Bus*, he drew a long list of ways in which evangelical Christians were being marginalized by lawmakers and judges, comparing them to segregation-time blacks and to Victorian-age women: "like the separate spheres once assigned to women, religious people are now relegated to their churches and homes where their faith poses no threat to the social order" (Marley 353).

13 Similarly, the head of the extremely controversial anti-abortion Christian Right organization Operation Rescue, Randall Terry, claimed he was influenced by Martin Luther and Coretta King's books in organizing his movement and deciding on his tactics, which he said relied on non-violence. Organization members could therefore be seen picketing abortion clinics while singing "We Shall Overcome" and going limp when police came to arrest them. Like the Christian Coalition, Terry asked members to sign SCLC-inspired pledge cards and insisted that abortion protesters were the moral equivalent of blacks under segregation (Marley 356). The movement overwhelmed small abortion clinics with dozens of protesters and soon became associated with acts of violence and the murders of a number of prominent doctors perpetrated by non-members. These actions caused the movement's influence to decline sharply.

14 By the late 1980s, even Moral Majority had tested the minority framing strategy. On the issue of compulsory prayer in public schools, which had been banned by the 1962 Supreme Court ruling *Engel v Vitale* and which the movement was trying to restore through a constitutional amendment, the organization stopped highlighting school prayer's moral and religious benefits. As the legislative director of the organization explained, many people no longer saw school prayer as a good thing. Therefore, they "learned to frame the issue in terms of student's [sic] rights, so it became a constitutional issue" (Klemp 91). Indeed, while for a long time public opinion remained favorable to school prayer, Gallup noted in 2002: "in the last few decades consensus appears to have shifted away from the view that government should be able to require such expressions," and "a majority of Americans say they would be opposed to prayer in their schools if they knew it offended a large proportion of parents" (Lyons). The organization also undertook a similar shift on abortion: Instead of discussing religious reasons to oppose it, the movement recast opposition to abortion as a rights issue, depriving the unborn of the right to life (Klemp 91). This move was probably justified by the fact that since the 1973 *Roe v Wade* Supreme Court ruling legalizing abortion, a majority of Americans has consistently supported abortion's legality "under certain circumstances" (Gallup). In 1989, Family Research Council president Gary Bauer gave evidence of how conscious he was of the need to choose an adequate framing strategy. He confided that "[t]oday the [Christian right] movement realizes that it must employ the language that the American people feel comfortable with. If one doesn't use the words and phrases that people are used to, one runs the risk of alienating them" (Klemp 95). He noted there was no point in referencing the Bible with people who have different

value perspectives. The movement, he added, “has come to see that fact, realizing that it must address policymakers with words and phrases to which they are attuned” (95).

The New Christian Right in the 2010s: A Renewed and Intensified Embrace of the ‘Persecuted Minority’ Framing Approach

15 For almost a decade now, the New Christian Right has been using an updated version of its ‘embattled religious minority oppressed by an aggressive secular majority bent on depriving it of its rights’ framing strategy (cf. Stone 12–15). Coinciding with the beginnings of the Obama Administration and with major social changes, such as growing acceptance of same-sex marriage by US public opinion, the vast majority of conservative religious organizations, from the Family Research Council to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) and the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference (whose name clearly echoes Martin Luther King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference) have been vocal about attempts by the federal government to allegedly violate the religious freedom of Christian conservatives (Audi and Gershman; Posner). In this context, the NCR has increasingly returned to the imagery of the African American civil rights movement and has also positioned itself in the footsteps of historical martyrs who suffered or died because of their faith.

16 On the specific issue of gay rights, the movement has shifted away from emphasizing homosexuality’s ‘immoral nature’ to embracing the ‘discriminated Christian minority’ approach first tested by Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition in the 1980s and early 1990s. Faced with advances for LGBTQ rights—such as the 1996 Supreme Court ruling *Romer v Evans*, which overturned a 1992 Colorado state constitutional amendment banning the future passage of any antigay antidiscrimination legislation, Amendment 2—the Christian Right had initially turned to a framing strategy political philosopher Nathaniel Klemp termed “humanist” and that centered on being “all about the kids” and the “unhealthy nature of homosexuality” (92–97). For sociologist Melinda Miceli, however, it was still situated within the context of “morality politics” (591). According to Miceli, framing the fight against gay rights as a fight against immorality was possible because framing strategies generally do not redefine cultural norms or social understanding, but rather work within pre-existing ones that “resonate with existing cultural beliefs and values generally” (591). Despite deep cultural and political changes, the morality frame still resonated with a fairly large audience in the first decade of the 21st century. According to Miceli, public opinion research about homosexuality and rights had indeed shown that, while Americans’ support for gay rights tended to edge upwards, opinions on the morality of homosexual behavior had kept growing more

negative from 1973 to 1990 (596–98). And although this opinion had begun to move in a positive direction since 1990, it had done so at a very slow pace. More than half of the population still felt that homosexual behavior was "always wrong," according to a 2001 survey (601).

17 The "homosexuality as immoral" strategy, however, started becoming counterproductive given more recent developments in US public opinion. Indeed, Gallup noted a sharp increase in the percentage of Americans who see gay and lesbian relations as morally acceptable, from 38% in 2002 to 56% in 2011 (Saad). Similarly, all opinion surveys concurred in saying that the years 2011–2012 were turning points in American public support for gay marriage, as the 50% mark of support was reached and exceeded, never to go back down ever since (Newport "Half"; Pew Research Center "Growing"). In addition, recent decisions in favor of LGBTQ rights have accumulated since the early 2010s, although, as recently as 2008, the Religious Right's successful Proposition 8 campaign to make same-sex marriage unconstitutional in California seemed to indicate it was still able to keep change in the area of gay rights at bay: From the 2010 repeal of the "Don't Ask Don't Tell" rule targeting gays in the military; to the Obama Administration's decision to stop defending the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act and the subsequent 2013 *US v. Windsor* Supreme Court ruling cancelling section 3 of the aforementioned act; to President Obama's 2012 support for same-sex marriage; to the 2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* Supreme Court ruling legalizing it nationwide, it is the struggle for gay rights with its sudden achievements which has made the Christian Right feel most keenly it was on the losing side of the culture wars (Right Wing Watch).

18 On the other main battlefront of the culture wars, the 2010 Affordable Care Act (ACA) and its contraception mandate, the "morality" framing strategy has long been a non-starter since an overwhelming percentage of American women see contraception as a matter of individual choice and find it to be morally acceptable, with figures standing at 90% for a long time (Newport "Americans"). Asked about the issue in the midst of the fight over the mandate, only 8% of Catholics, whose church bans artificial birth control, found contraception morally wrong, while 42% said it was morally acceptable and 43% said it was not a moral issue to begin with (Pew Research Center "Public").

19 These reversals in the culture wars—especially those pertaining to gay rights, given their unexpected nature—created a sense of urgency among NCR leaders and gave further momentum to the 'violation of the religious rights of a minority' framing strategy, all the more so as growing support for progressive causes went hand in hand with a decline in the actual share of religious Americans in the population. According to the Pew Research Center's report on the US religious landscape published in 2015, the share of Christians in the US population went down from 78.4% to 70.6% from 2007 to 2014. Evangelical Protestants, even though they do not

suffer the most from this precipitous decline, saw their share go down from 26.3% to 25.4% over the same period. In addition, the proportion of Americans who claim no religious affiliation or who call themselves agnostic or atheist has undergone an unprecedented rise, going from 16.1% to 22.8% between 2007 and 2014. Further, those who form this growing "unaffiliated" category are growing more secular and less likely to be religious (Pew Research Center "America's").

20 In this context, the 'defense of religious rights and minority rights' rhetoric has been employed with even greater stridency over the past decade. Examples of this abound and are too numerous to be listed in comprehensive fashion in this paper. Famous California megachurch pastor Rick Warren—whose unaffiliated California's Saddleback Church boasts 20,000 members (Laura)—compared religious freedom defenders to activists of the Montgomery bus boycott (Michaelson). Tony Perkins, the director of the evangelical Family Research Council, presented the Kentucky clerk Kim Davis, who had been jailed for six days in September 2015 for refusing to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples, with an award, on which occasion he compared her to Martin Luther King, Jr, and Rosa Parks (Weigel and Delreal). NCR activists even went as far as comparing themselves to German Christians holding their ground against Nazi oppression, speaking of going through a 'Bonhoeffer moment' in reference to Lutheran pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was executed by hanging at Flossenbürg concentration camp in 1945 (Clarkson). In this context of rights violation targeting a minority, one particular right is singled out as suffering especially heinous attacks: that of religious freedom which, according to James Dobson's Focus on the Family, is "in danger" (Hausknecht).

21 Whether it be the photographer or the baker sued over their declined service at same-sex weddings, or the doctors threatened with losing the conscience clause allowing them to avoid performing abortions, or the religious adoption agencies losing their license for refusing to place children with same-sex couples, various bodies were established to reference these episodes, raise the alarm, and mobilize troops on behalf of 'religious freedom,' all adopting the new violation-of-religious-rights frame. Thus, in November 2011, the USCCB set up an Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty, whose mission is to "counter the offensive aimed at neutralizing religion in the public sphere" (Goodstein). In April 2012, the committee published a statement entitled "Our First Most Cherished Liberty" in which violations of religious freedom were listed and a "Fortnight for Freedom" was announced to conclude on July 4th, a date deliberately chosen to highlight concerns that a fundamental right for which Americans had fought against the British was under attack (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops). It set up a website called "firstamericanfreedom.com" to publicize alleged religious freedom violations and mobilize the laity. The evangelical organization Family Research Council also established a Center for Religious Liberty in 2012 and started publishing an annual report called "Survey of Religious Hostility in America" (Brown). The evangelical

American Family Association launched its Action Alert listing all instances of religious freedom violation and urging readers to take action (American Family Association).

22 Old and new NCR groups have all turned to this framing strategy: thus Focus on the Family's website has its own section devoted to religious freedom, which includes reference publications and articles with titles such as "Persecuting Believers Does not Protect Anyone's Civil Rights," "Can Churches and Pastors Be Forced to Perform Same-Sex Marriages?" or "Hostility to Religion: The Growing Threat to Religious Liberty in the United States" (Family Research Council). Concerned Women for America, one of the founding organizations of the NCR, created in 1979 to counter the feminist National Organization for Women, lists among its "concerns" about religious liberty "[t]he trend of government to diminish and disregard the God-given inalienable rights of individuals, the erosion of religious liberty and the legal and cultural imposition of anti-Judeo-Christian philosophies upon our society," including "the left's agenda requiring taxpayer-funding of contraception and abortion which forces many American citizens, businesses and organizations to violate their deeply-held religious convictions." It vows to fight to get the "government [to] strengthen and renew its commitment to respect and protect each individual's exercise of his God-given inalienable rights" and to protect and preserve "religious liberty as provided in the United States Constitution" (Concerned Women for America). Several recently created organizations' names refer to the Anti-Defamation League, an organization that fights antisemitism. Arguing that "[a]cross the country pro-marriage Americans are being harassed and discriminated against for their heartfelt beliefs on marriage," the National Organization for Marriage, founded in 2007, established a Marriage Anti-Defamation Alliance "dedicated to protecting and defending the right of these Americans to exercise their rights and share their pro-marriage convictions by telling their stories and lending them aid." On the Alliance website, visitors can "thank a hero" by sending a note expressing gratitude "to a fellow citizen defamed for standing for marriage" (National Organization for Marriage). In 2007 the Christian Anti-Defamation Commission was revived, with a focus on opposition to gay marriage and attempts to push religion from the public sphere (such as efforts to have the motto "In God We Trust" removed from the US currency), claiming its goal is to serve as a "first line of response to anti-Christian defamation, bigotry and discrimination" (Schlatter).

23 In all these fora, NRC organizations defend an understanding of religious freedom which goes beyond mere freedom of worship as expressed in the First Amendment's free exercise clause. The Family Research Council believes that "religious liberty is more than the right to attend a private worship service. Religious observance has a distinctly positive effect on community and national life," implying that these movements want their religious beliefs to weigh on public policy (Family Research Council). In this context, many evangelical leaders, such as Rick Warren or Chuck Colson, lament what they see as the growing use of the 'freedom of worship' rhetoric

to the detriment of 'freedom of religion.' They see it as one more attempt to relegate Christians to the margins of society and public life (Stone 13). To defend their understanding of religious freedom in the courts and in federal and state offices, NCR organizations have established a number of legal offices whose very names reflect this framing strategy, such as the Catholic Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, aptly named after the 12th-century English Catholic martyr Thomas Becket, or the evangelical Alliance Defense Fund, renamed in 2012 Alliance Defending Freedom.

24 By using a defense-of-rights framing strategy while trying to deny others access to their own rights in the context of its fight against reproductive and LGBTQ rights, the NCR stands to accrue a number of advantages. This strategy enables NCR leaders to target various audiences at the same time, including some which had not been sensitive to its concerns up until then: Besides conservative Christians, the cause is likely to resonate with libertarians who are suspicious of any government intervention in society, and even with moderates who hold the Constitution in high reverence (Michaelson).

A Framing Strategy that Promotes a More "Ecumenical" Mobilization

25 The rise of same-sex marriage as a central issue for the NCR has also precipitated the long-awaited emergence of new coalitions within the NCR, with Catholics, evangelical Protestants and, to a lesser degree, Mormons uniting forces in common campaigns to fight gay marriage or to protect, for instance, those who want to discriminate against same-sex couples in the name of their religious beliefs (Wilcox, Merolla, and Beer 58; Berkowitz; Clarkson). Despite many efforts—and declarations—to the contrary, previous attempts to rally not only evangelical Protestants, but also other religious conservatives behind common NCR campaigns, had hitherto failed, these churches being unable to see beyond their theological differences, suspicions of proselytism, and historical mistrust (Young 5). The *Manhattan Declaration*, published with great fanfare in 2009, is the turning point in this new ecumenical moment. The document, drafted by evangelical leader Charles (Chuck) Colson, Catholic academic and activist Robert George, and Timothy George, dean of a Southern Baptist divinity school, was initially signed by 150 evangelical and Catholic leaders. To fight on behalf of their common areas of concern, namely "the sanctity of human life, the dignity of marriage as a union of husband and wife, and the freedom of religion," the declaration called for resistance to government and cultural attacks on religious liberty, and urged its signers to engage in "civil disobedience" against "unjust laws," such as those "forcing religious people to recognize same-sex union as marriage" or "forcing them to take part in abortion or euthanasia" (*Manhattan Declaration*). In line with the NCR's framing strategy, the document's drafters quoted in the declaration Martin Luther King, Jr's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" and its

"eloquent defense of the rights and the duties of religious freedom" (*Manhattan Declaration*). This conservative ecumenism around the defense of religious rights has received the Vatican's imprimatur, as shown when the Holy See hosted a conference on the complementarity between man and woman in marriage that many evangelical NCR leaders, including Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council and Alan Spears of the Alliance Defending Freedom (Clermont) attended.

26 While opposition to same-sex marriage has energized this new-fangled ecumenism, finding a common message on gay marriage among the various groups in the movement was not without posing problems. Demonizing gays and lesbians, a strategy used in appeals to movement members, was offensive to some partners in the new coalition, particularly Catholics, who, though vocal in their opposition, had clear teachings about respect and dignity for gays and lesbians (Wilcox, Merolla, and Beer 59). Thus, while many evangelical NCR groups still used rhetoric equating homosexuality with pedophilia and other forms of criminal behavior in the late 2000s, the Catholic-founded National Organization for Marriage had already shifted its tone, emphasizing its respect for homosexuals by saying that "Gays and Lesbians have a right to live as they choose, [but] they don't have the right to redefine marriage for all of us" (Schlatter).

A Strategy That Is Bearing Fruit?

27 The NCR's new religious minority rights framing strategy has been in use for about a decade: here is a preliminary assessment of its fortunes so far. As evoked earlier, framing strategies draw on popular cultural themes to legitimize collective action. Whether the NCR picked up on the mood of the nation or helped shape it through its many campaigns alleging that the rights of Christians were under attack, the Pew Research Center reveals that toward the end of Obama's presidency, a growing number of Americans saw his administration as hostile to religion. While only 17% saw it as unfriendly toward religion in 2009, that figure had risen to 29% by 2014. The rise reached 19 percentage points for white evangelical Protestants and white Catholics, from 38% to 57% and from 17% to 36% respectively (Pew Research Center "Nearly"). From 2014 to 2016, in a little less than two years, the share of evangelical Protestants claiming that "it is becoming harder to be evangelical Christians in the US" rose by 7 points from 34% to 41% (Lipka). Even more telling in connection with the NCR's framing strategy, according to a 2016 PPRI/Brookings Institution survey, 49% of respondents agreed with the statement that "[i]n America today, discrimination against Christians has become as big a problem as discrimination against other groups," with the figure reaching 53% for white Catholics, and as high as 77% for white evangelical Protestants (Jones et al.).

28 This rhetorical strategy has also been put to use in very concrete settings. First of all, it has been brandished to justify court action against the ACA's contraception

mandate and gay rights, in the hope of taking the case all the way to the Supreme Court (Smith). Many religious orders, religious charities, and churches have taken legal action, alleging their religious freedom was violated by the obligation to provide contraception to their employees or to hire LGBT employees. They received legal counsel from the Becket Fund or the Alliance Defending Freedom, which, though respectively Catholic and evangelical Protestant, now counsel Catholic and evangelical plaintiffs in the new 'ecumenical' spirit described earlier. Thus, it was the Catholic Becket Fund for Religious Libterty which litigated against the EOOC on behalf of the evangelical Lutheran Hosanna-Tabor Church, resulting in a 2012 ruling protecting churches from antidiscrimination laws, with Catholic bishops filing an amicus curiae brief (Michaelson; Pulliam Bailey). As to the 2014 case brought forward by the evangelical-owned chain of arts and craft stores Hobby Lobby, it also relied on the services of the Becket Fund in its challenge against the healthcare reform's contraception mandate. The Supreme Court was sensitive to its religious liberty argument when it ruled in *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby* that even private companies could exonerate themselves from legislation that violated their freedom of religion. This ruling relies in large part on the 1993 federal Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA), whose passage by state legislatures has also become one of the objectives of the NCR, which hopes that such legislation will allow organizations and companies to discriminate against same-sex couples, for instance, on the basis of their religious beliefs. As of this writing, 21 states have enacted an RFRA, the latest being Arkansas and Indiana in 2015, and ten more are considering doing it (National Conference of State Legislatures). The Becket Fund, the Alliance Defending Freedom and other NCR groups have been very active in lobbying in favor of such legislation, sometimes even drafting the bills themselves.

29 The 'embattled minority' framing strategy therefore proves to resonate not only with public opinion, but also at the policy level. It has also been embraced by Republican candidate, now President, Donald Trump. The New York billionaire was slow to address the concerns of conservative religious voters, long-time supporters of the Republican Party who may have initially been put off by Trump's lack of Christian credentials and morally questionable lifestyle. When he did begin to court this constituency, he resorted to the embattled minority rhetoric with gusto. At Dordt College in January 2016, he insisted that Christianity is "under tremendous siege," that Christians are "getting [...] less and less and less powerful in terms of a religion, and in terms of a force," but that "[if he got] elected president, Christianity [would] have power," and that people would be able to say "Merry Christmas," and not just "Happy Holidays," a detail that many conservative Christians see as one more attempt by secularists to remove religion from the public sphere (Campbell).

30 In terms of concrete actions, candidate Trump promised to repeal the Johnson Amendment, which threatens churches with losing their tax-exempt status if they endorse candidates. He also promised to back the First Amendment Defense Act, a

2015 bill which would protect those who discriminate against LGBT people for religious reasons (Goldberg). Ever since his inauguration, President Trump has sent clear signals concerning religious freedom grievances. After promising at the February 2017 National Prayer Breakfast to "totally destroy" the Johnson Amendment, declaring that "[f]reedom of religion is a sacred right, but it is also a right under threat all around us," and that "[his] administration [would] do everything in its power to defend and protect religious liberty in our land" (Trump "National Prayer"), in May 2017 he signed a three-pronged executive order "promoting free speech and religious liberty." The order stated among other things that "[i]t shall be the policy of the executive branch to vigorously enforce Federal law's robust protections for religious freedom," meaning that "[t]he executive branch will honor and enforce [...] the fundamental right to religious liberty as Americans' first freedom, [...] the freedom of Americans and their organizations to exercise religion and participate fully in civic life without undue interference by the Federal Government," or "without fear of discrimination or retaliation by the Federal Government," a clear reference to the Obama administration's alleged violation of religious freedom with the contraception mandate. The executive order stopped short of repealing the Johnson Amendment, since only Congress can do it; it nevertheless ordered that "[a]ll executive departments and agencies shall, to the greatest extent practicable and to the extent permitted by law, respect and protect the freedom of persons and organizations to engage in religious and political speech" without the Department of the Treasury taking "adverse action," meaning in this context a tax, or the removal of tax deduction. Finally, the executive order announced new regulation to come to enforce conscience protections regarding the contraception mandate of the Affordable Care Act (Trump "Presidential"). While presenting the order, Donald trump told his audience that "[f]or too long, the federal government has used the power of the state as a weapon against people of faith, bullying and even pushing Americans for following their religious beliefs," and signaled that "their ordeal was over" (Goodstein and Shear).

31 The signing ceremony was attended by many key figures of the New Christian Right, including Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council, who called the executive order "a 'significant first step to defending religious liberty' which 'starts the process' of ending the way organizations and individuals have been punished 'simply for living according to their faith'" (Ford). While the executive order is certainly not as far-reaching as expected by Christian conservatives (Liptak), it still represents an embrace of the "rights deprivation—and restoration" framing strategy. This was once again on full display at the June 2017 evangelical Faith and Freedom Coalition's annual conference and addressed there by both Donald Trump and Vice-President Mike Pencee. The annual event is hosted by Ralph Reed, the organization's founder and director; Reed was also the Christian Coalition's executive director in the 1990s and one of the first movement leaders to advocate a minority rights framing

strategy. In his remarks, President Trump vowed to “end the discrimination against people of faith” and “once again celebrate and protect religious freedom” (Trump “Faith and Freedom”).

32 This policy conference, which has been held once a year since 2009, bears the name “Road to Majority,” which is quite revealing of the aim the movement wants to reach through its use of the minority framing strategy: imposing its vision of family and marriage on the rest of American society, something which has been central to the movement since Ralph Reed began using the minority rhetoric early on in the NCR’s 1990s revival.
Read Marion Douzou Response to “The New Christian Right’s Framing Strategy in the Latest Chapter of the Culture Wars”

Notes

[1] This is how Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council, called Kim Davis, the Kentucky clerk who was briefly jailed in September 2015 for refusing to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples following the Supreme Court ruling having legalized it in June 2015 (Weigel and Delreal).

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Suggested Citation

Gayte, Marie. "'The Moral Equivalent of Rosa Parks?' The New Christian Right's Framing Strategy in the Latest Chapter of the Culture Wars." *American Studies Journal* 68 (2019). Web. 25 May. 2020. DOI 10.18422/68-04.