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Article

The Culture War and Secularized Theological Concepts: A Voegelinian Perspective

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Abstract: This article explores the dynamic interplay between theological and secular paradigms in shaping contemporary political movements and social justice discourse, with a particular focus on the Culture War surrounding reproductive rights and gender identity. It examines the historical transition from the Judeo-Christian tradition to modern secular frameworks, highlighting how core theological concepts—such as *imago Dei*, the sanctity of life, and divine sovereignty—have been reinterpreted and secularized. In the context of an increasingly secular world and the resurgence of religion in a post-secular society, the article leverages Eric Voegelin's philosophical framework to deepen the dialogue on the Culture War and secularization. The analysis argues that modern social justice ideology can be seen as the "immanentization of the eschaton", where transcendent values are reconfigured as temporal, political constructs for ultimate justice and redemption. By tracing modern concepts of social justice back to their theological roots, this article aims to enrich debates on secularization and the ideological divisions fueling the Culture War, fostering pathways toward a more cohesive and less polarized political landscape.

Keywords: Culture War; Christian theology; Social Justice; Gender rights; Voegelin

Introduction

In the shadow of the Second World War, the world stood at a crossroads. The devastation left behind by totalitarian regimes and global conflict compelled Western societies to seek a new path, one marked by the promise of liberal democracy, pluralism (Minkenberg, 2022), and an unprecedented embrace of diverse religious and non-religious convictions. This transformation brought with it a profound shift in public life: the language of politics, morality, and justice began to shed its overt religious roots. Secular discourse took center stage, as exemplified by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Drafted in 1948, the UDHR articulated a vision of human dignity and equality that, on the surface, avoided religious language. Yet, beneath its secular veneer lay the enduring influence of theological principles. Jacques Maritain, a Catholic philosopher and key contributor to the document, captured this duality when he acknowledged the Judeo-Christian spiritual heritage that quietly shaped the UDHR's moral framework. Scholars have long argued that the Bible has been a foundational source for teachings on human rights and dignity (Witte & Latterell, 2015). The theological concept of *imago Dei*—the belief that humans are created in the image of God—provided the ontological basis for the inherent worth and dignity of every individual. Figures such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu (2015) echoed this idea, linking human rights to divine creation. Scriptural affirmations, such as Saint Paul's declaration in Galatians 3:28— "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female; for you are all one"—challenged the rigid hierarchies of the ancient world. These theological doctrines resonated deeply within the UDHR, even as they were reframed to fit the secular ideals of a rapidly modernizing world.

The body of literature on secularization and the Culture War and the radical right stance towards gender and sexual rights are deemed important for this research. Secularization in one hand, has played a pivotal role in elucidating the complex interplay between modernity, secularization and religiosity. Early articulations of secularization theory emerged in tandem with the broader

intellectual currents of the Enlightenment, later crystallized in the sociological frameworks of thinkers such as Auguste Comte, Émile Durkheim, and Max Weber. Scholars such as Peter Van der Veer (1995), who argue that religious discourse is often regarded as disruptive and consequently relegated to the private sphere, rather than being afforded a legitimate place within the public domain. José Casanova (1994) argues: “from Karl Marx to John Stuart Mill, from Auguste Comte to Herbert Spencer, from E.B. Tylor to James Frazer, from Ferdinand Tönnies to Georg Simmel, from Émile Durkheim to Max Weber, from Wilhelm Wundt to Sigmund Freud, from Lester Ward to William G. Sumner, from Robert Park to George H. Mead. Indeed, the consensus was such that not only did the theory remain uncontested but apparently it was not even necessary to test it, since everybody took it for granted”. Casanova proposed a differentiation model, arguing that while modernity often results in the separation of religious and secular spheres, it does not necessarily eliminate the public presence or political significance of religion.

By the mid-20th century, the theory of secularization was further refined and systematized by scholars such as Bryan Wilson and Peter Berger. Berger revisited his earlier assertions, famously declaring the “desecularization of the world” in the late 1990s. Rather than the persistence of traditional religiosity, he highlighted how religious institutions have evolved to remain relevant within contemporary societies. Jürgen Habermas’s concept of the “post-secular society” further nuanced the secularization debate. Habermas argued that globalization and increasing cultural pluralism necessitate moving beyond secularist frameworks that marginalize religion. He underscored the continued relevance of religious traditions as sources of moral insight and communal identity, particularly within deliberative democracies. Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* (2007) provided a complementary perspective by focusing on the shifting “conditions of belief” in Western modernity. For Taylor, secularization signifies not merely the decline of religious institutions but a transformation in the cultural frameworks that render religious belief viable.

Literature Review

In the realm of scholarly work in political science, this discourse intersects with the “silent cultural revolution,” a concept introduced by Ronald Inglehart (1977) to describe the rise of secular and post-materialist values in Western democracies. This cultural shift fostered modern social justice rights movements emphasizing individual autonomy, equality, and social justice. Ulrich Beck’s concept of “The Other Modernity” (1986) captures this tension. David Harvey (1990) framed this evolution as a secular movement aimed at liberating knowledge and social organization from traditional constraints, though he acknowledged its potential to alienate conservative worldviews. While many secularization theorists predicted that religion would lose its public influence as the forces of modernity gained momentum (Schewel, 2018), the Judeo-Christian theological and metaphysical tradition did not simply vanish as classical secularization models had suggested (Casanova, 1994; Schewel, 2018). Instead, it adapted and re-imagined itself, leading to the emergence of what Berger and Habermas describe as a post-secular society, where religion’s influence did not fade but reasserted itself with renewed strength. James Hunter (1991) coined the term “Culture War” to describe the resulting ideological clash, which has since become a defining feature of Western democracies.

Recent scholarship highlights the increasing mobilization and rhetorical focus on “gender” in European politics, often directed against sexual and gender rights (Verloo, 2018; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Segers, 2024). These cultural tensions between secular and religious groups have become a defining feature of contemporary politics. Much of the literature contends that the radical right advances an illiberal agenda targeting gender rights and “gender ideology” (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018), or frames this opposition as rooted in religious motivations (Batista, 2024; Resende & Hennig, 2022; Zuk & Zuk, 2020). Scholars frequently utilize the term “anti-gender mobilization” to characterize the opposition by Christian and radical right movements to reproductive rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and the broader concept of gender ideology (Kuhar & Zobec, 2017; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018; Verloo, 2018; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). Additionally, some literature

highlights how conservative groups frame their critique of secular progressive ideologies using terms such as “cultural Marxism” (Davis & MacRae, 2023) or by invoking narratives like the “war on woke” (Cammaerts, 2022; Ergas et al., 2022). These critiques are often accompanied by claims that “cancel culture” serves to silence conservative perspectives and marginalize their arguments (Segers, 2024).

While the extensive literature on the “Culture War” and secularization provides valuable insights into contemporary ideological conflicts, political science has largely overlooked the theological dimensions underpinning these disputes. Existing scholarship predominantly emphasizes secular explanations, frequently framing these tensions as manifestations of cultural intolerance, extremism, or illiberalism. This prevailing focus on secular perspectives has contributed to a gap in understanding the role of theological arguments and their implications for these conflicts.

This article seeks to address this gap by exploring the theological underpinnings of ideological disputes within the “Culture War.” Specifically, it applies Eric Voegelin’s critique of “immanentizing the eschaton” as a framework for understanding these conflicts. In doing so, it proposes a novel approach to reducing polarization by emphasizing shared theological roots between secular and religious ideologies, which are often overlooked in favor of secularized interpretations. The central argument advanced in this article is that recognizing the theological dimensions of these disputes can enhance our understanding of the drivers of polarization. Moreover, it posits that the neglect of religious arguments and the prioritization of secular narratives—often characterized by accusations of intolerance and extremism toward conservative religious groups—may itself contribute to the origins and perpetuation of the Culture War. By fostering dialogue that incorporates both secular and theological perspectives, this article offers a constructive framework for mitigating these tensions and enriching the broader discourse on secularization and ideological conflict.

For example, Giorgio Agamben’s (2011) work on secularization provides a similar contribution to this debate. Agamben, like Voegelin, argues that modern concepts of historical progress and justice are secularized forms of theological Heilsgeschichte (“salvation history”), which interprets history through divine intervention and redemption rather than human agency. Building on this premise, this article seeks to answer: How can Eric Voegelin’s critique of “immanentizing the eschaton” offer new insights into reducing polarization in the Culture War over human rights?

The article argues that contemporary ideological divisions, exemplified in the Culture War, stem from the secularization and reinterpretation of theological concepts. It contends that a Voegelinian framework can provide a valuable lens for understanding and potentially mitigating these divisions. By uncovering shared theological roots between secular and religious ideologies, the article advocates for a more inclusive and dialogical approach to ideological conflicts, challenging the dominance of secular perspectives in political science discourse.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative methodology grounded in Eric Voegelin’s philosophical framework critique of secular modernity. By tracing the transformation of theological concepts such as *imago Dei* and divine sovereignty into secular ideals like human sovereignty, this research examines the ideological and cultural implications of these shifts in the context of contemporary human rights debates. Eric Voegelin’s framework is central to this analysis as it uniquely captures the ideological underpinnings of secular modernity. His concept of ‘immanentizing the eschaton’ provides a critical lens for understanding how transcendent theological principles are reconfigured into temporal, political constructs. This approach enables a nuanced examination of the cultural and ideological conflicts at the heart of the Culture War. To ground this theoretical inquiry, the study integrates a historical-contextual analysis. This method traces the evolution of theological concepts such as *imago Dei* from their origins in Judeo-Christian traditions to their reinterpretation within secular human rights frameworks. Nevertheless, the study incorporates counterarguments from feminist ethics, utilitarian perspectives, and post-Marxist critiques. These frameworks challenge Voegelin’s eschatological lens, arguing for secular autonomy and inclusivity as essential for human rights in pluralistic societies.

The article argues that secularization and the “Culture War” is not merely a departure from theology but a reinterpretation of sacred values. The concept of *imago Dei* has evolved into the principle of universal human rights, while divine sovereignty has been reframed as human sovereignty, particularly in debates over reproductive rights and gender identity. These transformations, while advancing inclusivity and equality, have also created profound ideological conflicts between secular and religious worldviews, the implications: the creation of the ongoing ‘Culture War’. While this research centers on Voegelin’s theological critique, it acknowledges the potential limitations of applying this framework universally. The focus on Western hemisphere reflects the geographical scope of the Culture War but can invite further exploration into non-Western secularization processes.

Voegelin’s Framework: Secular Modernity

This research adopts Eric Voegelin’s philosophical framework, which critiques modern political ideologies as symptomatic of an underlying spiritual crisis. According to Voegelin, the secularization of theological concepts represents a profound deformation of cosmic and transcendent truths. These distortions have led to the emergence of ideological systems that, while promising liberation and salvation within the bounds of history. Voegelin’s analysis highlights events such as the Bolshevik Revolution, the Soviet regime, the World Wars, and China’s Cultural Revolution as illustrative of this crisis, wherein ideological pursuits resulted in the enslavement, famine, suffering, and death of millions. These conflicts, marked by oppression and systemic destruction, starkly contradicted the utopian visions of freedom and liberation espoused by Marxist doctrines (Raeder, 2007).

Central to Voegelin’s critique is the concept of “immanentizing the eschaton”, which refers to the perilous attempt to realize ultimate salvation or perfection within temporal, political frameworks. By divorcing theological principles from their transcendent origins, these ideologies reduced profound truths to immanent constructs, repurposed as instruments of political power. This spiritual crisis, Voegelin argues, not only deforms the moral foundations of society but also accelerates its descent into chaos and suffering.

Despite their distinct theoretical frameworks, ideological political movements of the past centuries—such as Marxism, liberalism, progressivism, positivism, and others—share a common characteristic: the drive toward what Raeder describes as “immanentization.” This concept refers to the attempt to bring a transcendent dimension of human experience into a temporal and political context, effectively seeking ultimate salvation through governmental and societal systems. These ideologies converge in their ambition to “transfigure” human nature, asserting that historical human action has the capacity to create an earthly utopia, which parallels the Christian eschatological vision of the “Kingdom of God” at the culmination of history. Philosophers and scholars such as Eric Voegelin, Karl Löwith (1949), and Nikolai Berdyaev (1937) have critically engaged with this notion. They argue that such ideological pursuits distort theological concepts, repurposing them for secular frameworks, and ultimately fail to address the deeper spiritual dimensions of human existence. This critique underscores the tension between the aspirations of political ideologies and the transcendent moral and spiritual order traditionally articulated by religious thought.

Voegelin’s framework offers invaluable insights for understanding the ideological underpinnings of secular modernity and its implications in Western liberal democracies. His critique provides a foundational lens for analyzing contemporary issues, such as reproductive rights, within the broader context of secularized theological concepts. The ongoing discourse surrounding human rights, particularly the emphasis on human dignity, reflects this secularization process and its embedded tensions between autonomy and the sacred.

Imago Dei and Divine Sovereignty

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948 marked a pivotal moment in the evolution of human dignity and equality as foundational principles of global governance. Drafted in the aftermath of World War II, the UDHR sought to establish a universal framework for human rights

to prevent the atrocities that had marred the first half of the 20th century. Its preamble proclaims that “the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family” are the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace.

While the UDHR avoids overtly religious language, its moral vision is unmistakably shaped by the Judeo-Christian tradition. Jacques Maritain, a Catholic philosopher and a key figure in the drafting process, explicitly acknowledged this influence. Maritain argued that the principles of the UDHR were rooted in a shared spiritual heritage, even if articulated in secular terms. This pragmatic approach reflected the necessity of inclusivity in a world increasingly defined by religious and ideological diversity. As a result, the UDHR represents a synthesis of theological concepts, such as *imago Dei*, and secular ideals, offering a universal articulation of human dignity that transcends specific religious traditions.

In the decades since its adoption, the principles of the UDHR have undergone significant reinterpretation. In modern human rights discourse, the sanctity of life and divine sovereignty have been secularized into principles of human dignity from reproductive rights and gender identity ideology. This evolution is particularly evident in debates surrounding reproductive rights. Several international organizations advocate for reproductive rights as fundamental to gender equality and personal autonomy and liberation. For instance, the European Parliament’s 2021 Resolution on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) declares reproductive rights access as a basic human right, framing it as essential for safeguarding women’s health and freedom.

This shift reframes life’s sacredness in terms of individual choice and autonomy, placing the decision to terminate a pregnancy within the realm of personal moral agency rather than divine ordinance. Such reinterpretation generates profound ideological tensions. Religious groups grounded in *imago Dei* argue that life begins at conception and is inherently sacred, irrespective of individual circumstances. In contrast, proponents of reproductive rights emphasize the pregnant individual’s autonomy and the right to make decisions about their own body, asserting that this autonomy is critical to achieving gender equality and social justice.

These opposing views underscore the complex interplay between theological traditions and secular human rights frameworks. While secularized human rights discourse seeks to universalize principles of equality and dignity, its roots in *imago Dei* reveal the enduring influence of theological heritage. The secular emphasis on human sovereignty, however, represents a significant departure from the divine-centered understanding of human life, leading to ongoing debates over the nature and scope of human dignity, and a conflict between religious and secular in contemporary society. Religious perspectives grounded in *imago Dei* uphold the sanctity of life as beginning at conception and tied to divine sovereignty. In contrast, secular frameworks emphasize human autonomy or sovereignty, which can challenge traditional theological perspectives which frames the ongoing Culture War in the Western world.

The sovereignty of God, a cornerstone of Christian theology, asserts that ultimate authority over life and death belongs to the divine. This belief underpins many religious objections to practices like abortion and euthanasia, viewing them as encroachments upon divine jurisdiction. In this framework, human beings are stewards, not owners, of their lives and bodies, accountable to a higher moral law. This perspective is deeply originated from Christian theology and the Bible itself. Contemporary religious and conservative political parties still continue their strict positions regarding reproductive rights, and other contemporary movements from human rights such as gender identity. These parties vary from traditional center-right parties to more recently including the radical right in Western countries.

In the secularization process, divine sovereignty has been reimagined as human sovereignty, where individuals are seen as the ultimate arbiters of their own lives. Reproductive rights movements champion the idea that moral authority resides within the individual, emphasizing bodily autonomy and the right to choose. This shift is exemplified in legal frameworks that prioritize access to safe and legal abortion services as a matter of personal freedom and health. For instance, the United Nations’

Sustainable Development Goal 5 includes universal access to sexual and reproductive health as a critical component of achieving gender equality and empowering women.

However, this human-centered framework raises significant ethical and philosophical questions. Religious perspectives contend that by prioritizing individual choice over divine authority, society risks undermining the universal moral principles that historically safeguarded the sanctity of life.

Secularized Theological Concepts in Modern Human Rights

The argument that contemporary human rights frameworks—particularly those related to reproductive rights and gender identity—are secularized versions of theological concepts is rooted in the idea that these movements, while articulated in secular terms, often reflect theological foundations. This secularization process is not a neutral shift, but a transformation of sacred religious concepts into secular frameworks. The theological concept of the “sanctity of life” has its roots in religious traditions, especially Christianity, where human life is viewed as sacred because it is believed to be divinely created. This belief asserts that life possesses inherent value and dignity and, therefore, should not be harmed or taken arbitrarily. Within Christian theology, this idea is closely linked to divine sovereignty—the belief that God holds ultimate authority over life and death, and that human beings are stewards of life rather than its masters.

In this framework, Eric Voegelin’s concept of “immanentizing the eschaton” provides a useful lens for understanding how contemporary political movements have secularized theological ideas. Voegelin suggests that modern ideologies, in their quest for ultimate justice and salvation, attempt to construct human-made systems that replicate or replace transcendent, divine sovereignty. This shift fosters a kind of secularized vision of salvation, which plays a significant role in the development of the contemporary Culture War in Western societies. Yet, this narrative is not without its counterpoints. Secular philosophical traditions—most notably utilitarianism and feminist ethics—offer a compelling defense of reproductive rights that challenges Voegelin’s theological critique. These frameworks argue that prioritizing autonomy and well-being is not an erosion of moral order but a pragmatic and ethical response to the complexities of human existence.

This chapter explores the increasing legal recognition of reproductive rights and gender identity rights in both international and national legal systems. By examining these policies, we will demonstrate how they represent a secularized version of the theological principles of divine sovereignty and the sanctity of life.

The Secularization of Theological Concepts in Reproductive Rights Legislation

Abortion has long been a controversial issue in human rights discussions, often framed as a conflict between individual sovereignty and the sanctity of life, which is deeply tied to religious belief in divine sovereignty. Legalizing abortion is framed by proponents as a fundamental human right, central to gender equality and women’s autonomy. This argument is reflected in international treaties such as the United Nations’ Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which advocates for access to reproductive health services as a human right (United Nations, 1979). Similarly, the European Union’s Resolution on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (2021) emphasizes reproductive rights access as essential for gender equality and autonomy.

Here, we witness the secularization of the theological concept of the sanctity of life. In religious contexts, life is valued because it is divinely created, but in the secular realm, this concept evolves into the legal principle of bodily autonomy and sovereignty. Bodily sovereignty asserts that individuals have the right to govern their own bodies and make personal decisions without interference from external authorities, including religious institutions or the state. This transformation does not discard the underlying value of life but reframes it within a legal and moral context that prioritizes individual rights. Instead of being grounded in divine sovereignty, the moral

imperative becomes centered on the right of individuals to make autonomous decisions about their own bodies, which are seen as sacred in their own right.

This philosophical transition—from viewing life as a divine gift to understanding it through the lens of individual autonomy—illustrates how theological concepts evolve into secular legal principles. A step-by-step breakdown of this process might begin by recognizing the theological idea that human life has inherent value because it is divinely created. As societies became more secular, this divine grounding was replaced by the principle of individual sovereignty and autonomy. This principle, which emphasizes personal self-determination, was then incorporated into legal frameworks, such as the right to privacy in the U.S. *Roe v. Wade* decision (1973). This evolution reflects a shift from religious conceptions of moral order to secular legal systems rooted in human agency and rights. Through this process, the divine commandment to preserve life transforms into the secular principle of personal sovereignty over one's own body.

The legal and moral imperatives surrounding reproductive rights, therefore, represent a secularized version of theological ideas. This shift is particularly evident in the legal arguments put forth in the landmark decisions of various national courts. For instance, in the United States, the *Roe v. Wade* decision (1973) enshrined a woman's right to an abortion based on the constitutional right to privacy. In recent years, the U.S. has seen growing tension around abortion laws, culminating in the 2022 *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* ruling, which overturned *Roe v. Wade* and allowed individual states to regulate or ban abortion, highlighting the ongoing ideological and cultural conflicts surrounding reproductive rights. Similarly, the more recent legal battles in other countries.

Ireland, a historically Catholic country, witnessed a historic referendum that repealed the Eighth Amendment to the Irish Constitution, which had granted equal rights to both the unborn and the mother, effectively prohibiting abortion. The repeal was seen as a significant step toward aligning Ireland's laws with modern human rights ideals, particularly reproductive rights. This change framed abortion as a matter of individual choice, gender equality, and human dignity, reflecting secular values that prioritize personal autonomy and bodily integrity over religious conceptions of life's sanctity.

In 2024, Norway embarked on a momentous expansion of abortion access, extending the permissible window for self-determined abortion from 12 to 18 weeks. This legislative milestone, championed by Marian Hussein of the Socialist Left Party (SV), marked a profound affirmation of individual autonomy and gender equality. Hussein declared, "We've been part of securing and strengthening one of the most fundamental rights in a society based on equality, the right to decide for herself whether a woman wants an abortion. It's about time" (NewsInEnglish.no, 2024). Her words resonated as a clarion call for modern progressivism, emphasizing the primacy of personal choice and social justice over traditional theological or moral doctrines. This legislative shift reflects a broader secularization of the moral discourse surrounding reproductive rights, reframing it as a matter of autonomy, dignity, and equality rather than sacred imperatives tied to divine sovereignty. Norway's legislative evolution aligns with a discernible pattern across Scandinavian and Western European nations. Most Western European countries permit abortion within the first trimester, typically up to 10–12 weeks, while allowing exceptions for specific circumstances in later terms. Norway's move, therefore, not only situates it within this progressive framework but also signals an intensification of this trend, further loosening constraints and embedding abortion rights within the fabric of social equity.

In contrast, the narrative of abortion legislation in Portugal unfolds with a distinctive interplay of cultural conservatism and incremental reform. As one of the most historically Catholic nations, Portugal's trajectory reflects the enduring influence of its Christian heritage, from the establishment of its monarchy in the 12th century to the authoritarian conservatism of Salazar's regime. This deeply ingrained cultural ethos manifested in the nation's cautious approach to abortion laws. In 1984, merely a decade after the dawn of democracy, Portugal legalized abortion in limited circumstances: to safeguard the health of the woman, address fetal abnormalities, or respond to cases of rape. The

turning point arrived in 2007, when a pivotal referendum legalized voluntary abortion up to the tenth week of pregnancy (Batista, 2024). This shift was not without controversy. The Portuguese Episcopal Conference, reflecting the steadfast moral convictions of the Church, expressed its opposition, asserting that “human life constitutes an absolute value” and should remain beyond the purview of legislative or referential adjudication (Sousa and Silva, 2023). This tension between the sacred and the secular encapsulates Portugal’s nuanced struggle, where democratic reforms seek to harmonize modern values of autonomy and equality with the enduring moral weight of its religious heritage. Thus, the stories of Norway and Portugal illuminate a broader philosophical and societal shift across Europe. They reveal a cultural dialectic: one between the enduring echoes of religious tradition and the rising tide of secular values that champion autonomy and self-determination as cornerstones of human dignity. The debate over abortion, as both a legal and moral construct, becomes a canvas upon which these forces converge, painting a complex picture of societal transformation in the modern era.

From a Voegelinian perspective, this secularized conception of reproductive rights reflects the “immanentization of the eschaton,” as the ultimate moral and legal framework is framed not by divine authority but by human-made ideologies that attempt to achieve justice within the temporal realm. The shift from viewing life as a divine gift to treating it as a matter of individual choice represents an immanentization of moral order, moving the focus from the transcendent to the temporal.

Religious communities, particularly Christians, view this secularization with increasing concern. For these groups, the sanctity of life remains a divine command, rooted in biblical principles such as the *imago Dei* (the image of God in every person). From this perspective, abortion is not just a political issue but a violation of the divine order, one that defies God’s sovereignty over life and death. The legal framework for abortion, as framed by secular governments, can thus be seen as a form of spiritual crisis, as it disregards divine sovereignty in favor of individual autonomy, which, according to Voegelin, leads to spiritual chaos rather than order.

Counter-Arguments

Viewing societal and political developments, particularly in relation to reproductive rights, through the lens of Voegelinian philosophy or traditional Christian theology is naturally aligned with those groups, scholars, and political entities that espouse and uphold Christian doctrinal tenets. However, such perspectives are contested by a variety of scholars and intellectual traditions that challenge this vision of human rights, including reproductive rights. Secular humanism, legal theory, and feminist post-Marxist philosophers present alternative frameworks that offer differing interpretations of how issues such as abortion and gender identity should be addressed within the context of human rights.

For instance, Ronald Dworkin frames reproductive rights as grounded in moral principles of dignity and equality, principles that are not exclusively religious but also form part of a broader rights-based legal framework. In his seminal work, *Life’s Dominion* (1993), Dworkin asserts that decisions concerning abortion should be evaluated in the light of respect for individual moral judgment, free from governmental interference. For Dworkin, reproductive rights are not merely reflections of individual autonomy but are also intrinsically tied to a broader moral imperative to uphold human dignity. This framework challenges the notion that such rights ought to be constrained by religious or state-sanctioned morality. Instead, it posits autonomy as a core value that justifies legal protections for reproductive choices, emphasizing individual moral responsibility and the necessity of safeguarding personal freedoms within a rights-based society.

Consider the utilitarian perspective, which assesses moral actions based on their consequences. Philosophers like Peter Singer assert that the permissibility of abortion must be evaluated in terms of its impact on the well-being of the pregnant individual and society at large. Within this framework, the question of life’s sanctity is reframed: what matters is not merely the existence of life but the quality and circumstances of that life. Singer, a secular humanist, advocates for reproductive rights based on the utilitarian principle of maximizing well-being and minimizing harm.

In contrast to religious or traditional moral arguments centered on the sanctity of life, Singer argues that the ethical justification for abortion rests not only on personal autonomy but also on the societal consequences of restricting reproductive choices. His position underscores the importance of considering the well-being of the mother, her capacity for self-determination, and the broader social implications of limiting reproductive rights. For Singer, the ethical calculation surrounding abortion is rooted in the practical consequences for individual lives, rather than abstract religious or moral prohibitions. For instance, denying access to abortion can lead to significant harm, both physical and psychological, for pregnant individuals, particularly those in vulnerable circumstances. Unintended pregnancies may exacerbate cycles of poverty, restrict access to education, and diminish overall societal well-being. A utilitarian might argue that prioritizing the immediate needs and autonomy of the pregnant individual maximizes overall happiness and minimizes suffering, aligning moral imperatives with the realities of human experience.

Moreover, utilitarian reasoning challenges the theological claim that life's sanctity is diminished by abortion. Singer, for example, distinguishes between potential life and actual life. He contends that a fetus's moral status increases with its capacity for sentience, suggesting that early-stage abortions carry minimal ethical weight compared to the profound consequences of forcing a pregnancy to term against someone's will. From this vantage point, secular moral frameworks seek not to undermine life's value but to contextualize it within broader considerations of human flourishing.

Additionally, John Rawls introduces the concept of *public reason*, which advocates for a form of public discourse that is accessible and justifiable to all citizens, regardless of their particular religious or philosophical commitments. Rawls's theory emphasizes the necessity of grounding political decisions in principles that can be universally accepted by individuals with diverse moral frameworks. While Rawlsian theory insists on inclusivity and fairness in the deliberation of public matters, it also acknowledges the potential for such a model to oversimplify deeply held convictions, potentially exacerbating tensions within a pluralistic society. His perspective thus highlights both the potential of secular arguments to create a more inclusive public discourse and the risks inherent in attempting to navigate such complex issues without fully accommodating the variety of deeply rooted values and beliefs that individuals hold.

Equally transformative are critiques from post-Marxist feminist perspectives, which center bodily autonomy and gender equality as core elements of reproductive rights. Judith Jarvis Thomson's influential thought experiment, *The Violinist*, offers a powerful analogy: being forcibly connected to a violinist to sustain their life would violate one's autonomy, even if the violinist has a right to life. Similarly, Thomson argues that a pregnant individual retains sovereignty over their body, even if that body sustains another potential life.

This perspective reframes abortion not as a breach of moral or divine law but as an assertion of basic human rights. Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach deepens this argument by asserting that the ability to make autonomous reproductive choices is essential for human flourishing. Without control over reproductive decisions, individuals—particularly women—are denied the full realization of their potential, both personally and socio-economically. For Nussbaum, reproductive rights are not abstract legal claims but fundamental to achieving gender equality and ensuring that individuals can lead lives of dignity and purpose, free from patriarchal oppression.

These secular defenses bring to light a larger philosophical tension: is the moral order best understood as transcendent and immutable, as Voegelin suggests, or is it contingent, shaped by human agency? Utilitarian and feminist perspectives offer a counter-narrative that challenges Voegelin's eschatological critique. By prioritizing autonomy, well-being, and equality, these frameworks argue that secular modernity does not diminish the sacred but redefines it in ways that align with the pluralistic values of contemporary society. Feminist arguments, in particular, challenge Voegelin's critique by suggesting that secular frameworks are not distorting moral truths but expanding them. In shifting the focus from divine sovereignty to individual autonomy, feminist ethics assert that the sacred is found in the lived experiences of individuals and their capacity to shape

their own futures. Rather than a spiritual crisis, the feminist defense positions the secularization of reproductive rights as a moral evolution, one that seeks justice in the temporal realm.

However, this does not entirely dismiss Voegelin's concerns. The utilitarian focus on maximizing well-being raises complex questions about where to draw moral lines, particularly regarding late-term abortion. Additionally, feminist arguments, though compelling, must address the theological critique that autonomy without accountability could lead to moral relativism. These tensions highlight the complexity of the Culture War over reproductive rights.

Secularized Theological Concepts in Gender Identity Rights Legislation

The recognition and protection of gender identity rights have undergone profound transformations in recent decades, signaling a marked shift from traditional theological perspectives toward a secular framework for understanding human identity and dignity. This evolution reflects the increasing secularization of concepts that were once grounded in religious doctrines, particularly those stemming from the sovereignty of God. The transition from a binary, divinely ordained understanding of gender—rooted in the Genesis narrative of “male and female”—to more fluid and socially constructed interpretations underscores the broader reconfiguration of the relationship between theology and contemporary human rights discourse.

Gender identity ideology draws heavily from contemporary philosophical frameworks, particularly queer theory, post-structuralism, and post-Marxism. These schools of thought intersect in their critique of Western culture, arguing that it has long been structured by hegemonic and oppressive norms. Central to this critique is the assertion that Western and Christian traditions, with their binary understanding of gender, perpetuate systems of inequality and marginalization. Queer theory, in particular, challenges the normative frameworks that define gender along strict male/female lines, positioning them as socially constructed and rooted in an historically oppressive cultural narrative. According to these theories, this binary system is not merely a cultural artifact but is embedded in the very foundation of Western thought, informed by Judeo-Christian beliefs that limit individual autonomy and deny sovereignty over one's body. By emphasizing self-determination and bodily autonomy, these theories argue that individuals who identify outside of traditional gender binaries—such as non-binary, transgender, or gender-fluid individuals—are unjustly oppressed by societal norms that reject their identities.

The intellectual contributions of queer theory, post-structuralism, and post-Marxism coalesce to form a critical theoretical foundation for contemporary social justice movements advocating for gender identity rights, reproductive autonomy, and the recognition of gender pronouns. These movements, in their quest for justice and equality, seek to challenge the entrenched theological and conservative doctrines that permeate Western, Christian-centric cultures. At the heart of this challenge lies a profound secularization of concepts traditionally rooted in divine sovereignty. In place of these divine mandates, they affirm the primacy of human sovereignty, empowering individuals to assert control over their own identities and bodies. By doing so, they reject the moral and legal authority historically bestowed upon religious institutions and the societal norms they propagate, norms which have long denied equal dignity to those who transgress the rigid boundaries of traditional gender roles.

Thus, the theoretical framework underpinning the burgeoning legal recognition of gender identity rights is not merely a progressive political development, but a philosophical commitment to the principles of autonomy and self-determination. This commitment aims to dismantle the oppressive systems that have structured Western social and political life, systems whose authority has been grounded in religious and hegemonic ideologies. Within this context, these movements can be seen through the lens of Eric Voegelin's concept of the “immanentization of the eschaton.” Modern secular ideologies, in their reworking of theological concepts, seek to fulfill human aspirations of justice and equality without reference to divine or transcendental authority, imbuing the secular realm with the promise of an idealized future. Legislative action, public policy, and societal debates

thus become the arenas in which this transformation is not only realized but continually contested and is currently vividly manifested in several Western nations.

In 2018, Germany became one of the first European nations to pass a law permitting individuals to designate “diverse” as their gender on official documents, thereby formally recognizing a third gender category. This legal recognition is emblematic of the growing societal acceptance of non-binary gender identities, marking a significant departure from the Judeo-Christian understanding of gender as explicitly binary—where humankind is created in two distinct sexes, “male and female,” as articulated in Genesis. This shift signifies not only a challenge to theological authority over gender but also a movement towards human sovereignty in determining one’s identity. Similarly, in 2014, Australia’s legal recognition of a third gender category further exemplifies this trend. The High Court of Australia’s decision to introduce a “non-binary” gender option on passports is a notable legal affirmation of the principles of inclusivity and equality, reinforcing the secular notion that gender identity is primarily a matter of personal self-determination, rather than divinely prescribed order. From a religious perspective, however, such developments are often seen as undermining the moral and natural order, wherein gender is regarded as a fixed, God-given attribute that should not be altered according to social trends or individual preferences.

This secularization of gender identity is further evident in ongoing debates surrounding gender-affirming healthcare, particularly in the context of medical transitions for minors. In the United States, gender-affirming healthcare has become a flashpoint in the broader Culture War between secular human rights advocates and religious groups. Gender-affirming care—including hormone therapy and surgeries for transgender individuals—has gained widespread recognition within medical and psychological communities as a necessary intervention for many individuals, as it enables them to align their physical bodies with their gender identities. Proponents argue that such care upholds the dignity and autonomy of individuals, supporting their right to live authentically in accordance with their gender identity. This stance is grounded in secular principles of individual autonomy and self-determination. In contrast, many conservative religious groups view these medical practices as a violation of theological principles regarding the sanctity of the human body and divine creation. For these critics, gender fluidity represents a moral transgression that disrupts the natural order as designed by God, presenting a direct challenge to religious teachings about the unchangeable nature of human identity.

In Canada, the secularization of gender identity rights is reflected in the 2017 amendments to the Canadian Human Rights Act, which explicitly included gender identity and gender expression as protected grounds against discrimination. This change signified a legal commitment to upholding the dignity of individuals whose gender identity does not conform to traditional binary norms. Moreover, Canada’s introduction of an “X” option for gender on passports in 2017 allowed individuals identifying as non-binary to have their gender identity reflected in official documentation, further cementing the country’s secular approach to gender recognition. Canadian workplaces are legally required to accommodate employees’ gender identities, including the right to be addressed by their correct gender pronouns. Failure to respect this right may result in legal consequences under the Canadian Human Rights Act, which serves as a powerful tool in safeguarding individual autonomy. Similarly, educational institutions, including schools and universities, are expected to respect students’ preferred gender pronouns and to foster an inclusive environment where individuals’ gender identities are recognized and supported. These policies have led to significant societal shifts, although they have also provoked controversy, most notably embodied in the rise of figures such as psychologist and professor Jordan Peterson. Peterson became internationally known for his vocal opposition to laws that mandate the use of gender-neutral pronouns, framing these legal requirements as part of a broader ideological movement that challenges traditional, conservative values regarding gender and identity.

In Portugal, the “Cidadania e Desenvolvimento” (Citizenship and Development) curriculum in secondary schools has stimulated substantial public discourse, particularly regarding the rights of gender-diverse individuals. A pivotal moment in this ongoing debate occurred with the enactment

of the 2011 Gender Identity Law (Law No. 7/2011), which granted transgender individuals the legal right to alter their gender status, contingent upon a medical diagnosis. However, this law was met with staunch opposition from more conservative factions, reflecting broader ideological tensions over gender and identity. Subsequently, in 2018, Law No. 38/2018 introduced a more progressive shift by recognizing gender self-determination, permitting individuals over the age of 18 to amend their gender on official records without the necessity of medical validation. This legislative progression culminated in April 2023, when the Socialist Party, in a bold move, proposed Bill No. 332/XV/1st (Projeto de Lei n.º 332/XV/1.) in the Portuguese Parliament, advocating for the right of children to determine their gender identity within public schools and public spaces, such as restrooms. This bill posits that children should be empowered to express their gender identity as they personally understand it, independent of their biological sex at birth.

This ongoing transformation in gender identity legislation in Portugal is emblematic of a broader global trend: the secularization of human rights discourse, in which theological underpinnings related to divine sovereignty and the moral imperatives surrounding gender are increasingly supplanted by secular principles emphasizing personal autonomy and bodily sovereignty. The shift toward recognizing and protecting gender identity rights aligns with a larger movement that prioritizes individual self-determination over religiously derived conceptions of gender as divinely fixed and immutable. Central to this ideological shift is the slogan “My Body, My Choice,” which has resonated in various political and social contexts. For instance, during her 2024 campaign, Kamala Harris invoked this rhetoric, declaring, “This is a fight for freedom. The fundamental freedom. To make decisions about one’s body and not have their government tell them what they are supposed to do” (YouTube, 2024). In this framing, the advocacy for reproductive rights and healthcare, as well as the affirmation of gender identity, is grounded not in divine sovereignty but in human sovereignty—a commitment to the autonomy of the individual in making decisions regarding their body and identity.

This secularization of identity politics, however, has provoked a vigorous backlash, particularly from religious conservatives who see these developments as a direct challenge to both theological authority and moral order. Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church, for example, has articulated a vehement critique of the LGBTQ+ rights movement, viewing it as an ideological weapon that promotes sin and undermines the moral fabric of society. He argues that the secularization of gender identity issues represents a profound assault on Christian principles and divine sovereignty (Church Times, 2022). Such criticisms echo broader concerns among religious groups, particularly within Orthodox Christian, Catholic, and evangelical circles, where gender is often understood as divinely ordained and immutable.

This tension between secular human rights and religious doctrines is further exemplified in the political climate of Hungary, where the government under Viktor Orbán enacted Act XXXI of 2020, which prohibits the legal recognition of gender changes on official documents. This law defines “sex” strictly as the biological sex assigned at birth, grounded in primary sex characteristics and chromosomal analysis. The Hungarian government’s actions underscore the persistence of a conservative, theologically informed approach to gender, in stark contrast to the secular and progressive movements advocating for gender self-determination. This actions in Hungary is considered by some scholars as “churchification” (Fodor, 2022; Neumann, 2024), that describes unfolding political project through which state services have been increasingly out-sourced to politically and ideologically loyal religious organisations, taking strong take-over in public schools and education.

In the United States, the ideological divide has been particularly pronounced during the tenure of Donald Trump, whose administration implemented several measures that significantly impacted gender identity and civil rights. Among the most contentious of these was the transgender military ban, which prevented transgender individuals from serving openly in the armed forces. Moreover, the Trump administration rolled back crucial protections for transgender students, allowing educational institutions to bypass Title IX mandates requiring the recognition of students’ gender

identities. Trump's vocal criticisms of "woke culture" and identity politics positioned these movements as expressions of a leftist, secular ideology that he sought to resist, further deepening the ideological rift over gender rights and personal autonomy and sovereignty over their bodies

Synthesis and Future Directions: Reframing the Culture War

At the heart of the Culture War lies a breakdown of dialogue. Both progressive and conservative factions often engage in ad hominem attacks, dismissing one another as irredeemably flawed. The progressive side sometimes employs pejorative language, caricaturing traditionalists as backward or oppressive. Similarly, conservative groups frequently attack progressives as morally bankrupt or destructive to societal values. This toxic rhetoric fuels division, making reconciliation appear unattainable.

However, the central argument of this article asserts that these divisions are not insurmountable. Theology and secularism share foundational commitments to justice, dignity, and equality—values that can serve as starting points for dialogue. The key is to create a framework where these shared principles are prioritized over ideological dominance. At the heart of the Culture War lies a breakdown of dialogue. Both progressive and conservative factions often engage in ad hominem attacks, dismissing one another as irredeemably flawed. The progressive side sometimes employs pejorative language, caricaturing traditionalists as backward or oppressive. Similarly, conservative groups frequently attack progressives as morally bankrupt or destructive to societal values. This toxic rhetoric fuels division, making reconciliation appear unattainable.

The Role of Deliberative Democracy

Jürgen Habermas's concept of deliberative democracy provides a practical and theoretical model for navigating the complexities of the Culture War. Unlike confrontational debates aimed at victory, deliberative democracy emphasizes:

1. **Inclusivity:** All stakeholders, regardless of ideological or theological alignment, must have a voice in the conversation.
2. **Rational Discourse:** Arguments should be presented in terms that are accessible and compelling across ideological divides.
3. **Consensus-Building:** The goal is not to "win" but to reach agreements that reflect shared values and mutual respect.
4. **Counter to Authoritarian Tendencies:** By prioritizing participatory discourse, deliberative democracy prevents the concentration of power in the hands of a few. It strengthens democratic values by ensuring that decisions are based on collective reasoning rather than unilateral action. This is especially significant, as the progressive side often portrays the radical right as extremist and authoritarian, while the opposing side tends to depict progressives as pushing an authoritarian "woke agenda" from the hands of a few "the globalists".

In practice, this model invites both secular and religious participants to articulate their perspectives in ways that resonate universally. For example, a conservative theologian advocating for the sanctity of life might frame their argument as a call to protect vulnerable populations, a principle that aligns with secular human rights discourses. Similarly, a progressive advocate for autonomy might emphasize the shared commitment to dignity and self-determination as central to human flourishing.

Moving Beyond Marginalization

One of the most pressing challenges is overcoming the "cancel culture" mentality that has become prevalent on both sides of the ideological spectrum. Cancel culture—the practice of dismissing or ostracizing individuals or groups for their beliefs—deepens divisions and stifles meaningful dialogue. Instead, society must foster spaces where opposing views can coexist without fear of retribution.

Practical pathways forward to operationalize these principles, the following steps are proposed:

1. Interfaith and Inter-Ideological Forums: These forums should bring together theologians, secular humanists, policymakers, and citizens to address contentious issues collaboratively.
2. Educational Initiatives: Schools and universities can promote curricula that emphasize critical thinking and respect for diverse perspectives, equipping future generations to engage constructively in the Culture War.
3. Media Responsibility: Journalists and content creators play a crucial role in framing debates. Avoiding sensationalism and fostering balanced reporting can help reduce polarization.

The Culture War need not be a zero-sum game. By embracing deliberative democracy and rejecting the marginalization of any group or ideology, society can move toward a more respectful discourse. This chapter has argued that the shared values underlying theological and secular traditions provide a foundation for reconciliation. The way forward is not through domination or exclusion but through dialogue that honors the complexity of human beliefs and aspirations. In this spirit, the Culture War can transform from a battleground into a forum for mutual enrichment, paving the way for a more cohesive society.

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