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The Role of Religion in Public Conflicts over the Arts in the Philadelphia Area, 1965-1997

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Representatives of organized religion have jostled with artists throughout American history. More than a century ago, the “crazy sensation-preacher preparing his next session’s heroic attacks on the dance, the theater, and other things which can’t strike back,” was a sufficiently recognizable figure for Mark Twain (1896: 110) to recount that gentleman’s demise beneath the hoofs of a giant elephant with evident pleasure.

The resurgence of Evangelical Christianity, and the participation of some Evangelical churchmen and laypersons in faith-based political movements since the 1980s, has brought new vigor and publicity to the off-and-on-again struggle between religion and the arts.¹ Many religious conservatives have expressed horror at artworks like “Piss Christ,” photographer Andres Serrano’s portrait of a crucifix suspended in a pale yellow fluid. Films and theatre pieces such as “The Last Temptation of Christ” and the satirical monologue “Sister Mary Ignatius Explains it All” have also attracted vocal hostility from religious forces. Secular politicians have also criticized artworks on religious grounds, as when New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani attacked the Brooklyn Museum in 1999 for displaying a controversial image of the Virgin Mary (see David Halle’s chapter in this volume).

Much of this controversy has focused on federal support for culture through the National Endowment for the Arts (DiMaggio and Pettit 1998). During the late 1980s and 1990s, such clergy such as Rev. Donald Wildmon of the American Family Association engaged in well-publicized attacks on the NEA for grants to organizations that sponsored sexually explicit or religiously controversial work (Koch 1998). Such criticism reached a crescendo with the election of a Republican Congress in 1994, when the Christian Coalition (1995) placed the NEA's elimination near the top of its "Contract with American Families" (Christian Coalition, 1995). Even after a 1997 compromise saved the NEA from destruction, debate raged on. Conservative Christian organizations have criticized harshly new cases of federal support for organizations that produce work offensive to many religious people (for example, the play *Corpus Christi*, which depicts Jesus as a homosexual). At this writing, eliminating federal government grants to artists and arts organizations remains a cherished objective of such groups as the Christian Coalition (2000), the American Family Association (2000), and the Family Research Council (Jarvik 1999).

There are some fine studies of clashes between religion and the arts (Dubin 1992, Robinson 2000), and much has been written about such celebrated cases as the furors over "Piss Christ" and "Sensation." But even the best case studies and most thoughtful journalistic accounts cannot answer two questions of vital importance to anyone concerned with understanding and perhaps soothing the apparent tensions between the arts and America's faith communities.

- First, are the conflicts that dominate the nation's airwaves from time to time exemplary cases of a much more common phenomenon, the tip of a larger iceberg? Or does the press simply lavish attention on the few controversies that present themselves, so that the infamous controversies pretty much exhaust the genre?
- Second, if there *are* many quieter controversies that pit clergy and other people of faith against artists and arts administrators, then has their prevalence increased over the past fifteen years, or has it reached a plateau or declined?

If there have been many controversies involving religion and the arts, and if their number has been rising, then the situation merits the concern due whenever any of society's major institutions come to loggerheads. If there are only a few such conflicts, and if they are no more frequent (or even less frequent) than in the past, then perhaps we need not be so worried about those that do occur.

To address these two key questions --- how many controversies are there?; and are their numbers rising? --- we needed evidence on the full gamut of controversies about the arts, media and culture over many years. Only with such data could we learn how prominent churches, clergy, and religious lay associations have been among the warriors in such battles, and whether their role has been changing.

We set out to collect this evidence in one large northeastern city. We tracked cultural controversy in the Philadelphia metropolitan area over a thirty-two year span beginning in 1965 and culminating in 1997. We worked hard to

identify and document every case in which Philadelphians were sufficiently at odds (among themselves or with others outside the area) about the content or style of some art work or media presentation to attract the notice of the daily press. We looked especially at the role of religious persons and ideas in these controversies, and at how that role has changed over time.

We found relatively few controversies, approximately one every two years, in which religion and arts faced one another on the barricades. Nor did we find any upward trend in such confrontations. The number of conflicts in which religious interests participated declined in the mid-1970s and rose in the late 1980s. By the 1990s, religious conflicts were as numerous as in the 1960s, but they represented a smaller slice of a larger pie. The number of controversies in which participants used religious language *did* increase after 1986, but not because religion took a more aggressive stance. Rather religion's *critics* were more likely to discuss religion in later years, and religious actors more often intervened in controversies to defend religious symbols or beliefs and less frequently intervened over secular matters.

Although we found no upsurge of conflict between religion and the arts during the "culture war" years, our results help explain why so many people believe there was. Throughout the period we studied, religious actors were more likely to use social-movement tactics of mass protest and persuasion than other actors, and their causes were more likely to be tied to national campaigns. The magnitude of these differences increased dramatically in the late 1980s and 1990s,

rendering religiously inflected controversies more visible and more salient than conflicts from which religious participation was absent.

We begin by explaining how we conducted our research and describing the types of art over which Philadelphians quarreled. Next, we describe and illustrate the role of organized religion in these controversies. Third, we ask how controversies in which clergy, congregations, and religious lay groups were active differed from conflicts of a more secular character. Finally, we examine more closely changes in the extent and nature of religious participation over time.

Data and Methods: What “Public Controversies” Are and How We Found Them

The greatest challenge was to devise a means of recognizing and documenting public conflicts over the arts.² The definition we devised has five important elements.

- *We include only conflicts over the content or style of some “artwork or set of artworks.”* Arguments about whether a cultural organization creates parking problems for its neighbors or compensates its employees fairly or exercises proper stewardship over its collection all fall outside this definition.
- *Our definition requires that a conflict be public --- i.e., that it be covered by the press --- but does not specify that the public part of the conflict entail protests against an artwork.* In some cases, controversy erupted only after an artwork was suppressed (e.g., for example, a grant or performance cancelled) due to decisions that remained private until a protest sought the work’s reinstatement.

- **“Artworks” are defined broadly to include any form of music, visual art, literature, dance, theatre, film, or mixed media work, including technologically reproduced or broadcast works, without reference to the work’s quality.³**
“Artworks” may also refer to genres, as well as specific works: in some cases, conflict involved an entire artistic genre (e.g., rap music) rather than a particular piece or performance.
- ***The airing of a grievance against an artwork (or against its suppression) had to occur in the Philadelphia metropolitan area, but the artwork itself could be exhibited, performed, or broadcast in any location, so long as the protest itself was local. For example, we include mass meetings in support of artists denied grants by the National Endowment for the Arts, as well as reactions by Philadelphia area legislators to controversial arts events outside of Philadelphia.***
- **We define action broadly to *include protests by “collective actors” (citizens’ associations, movement groups, churches, government agencies, businesses or nonprofit organizations) or their representatives. Actions include demonstrations, boycotts, public statements, mass meetings, police raids, lawsuits, bearing witness and legislating.*⁴**

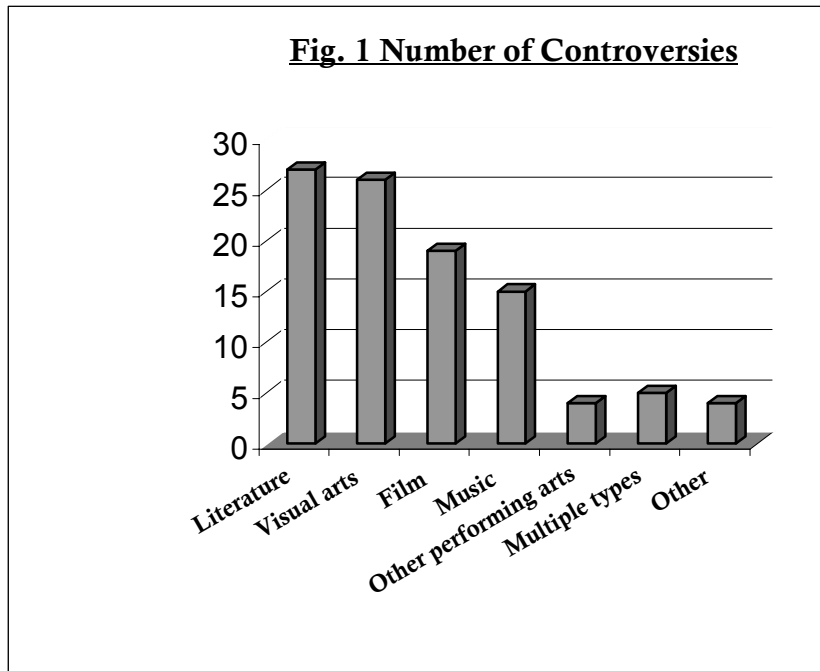
Our goal was to identify as complete as possible a population of public conflicts over the arts in the Philadelphia metropolitan area between 1965 and 1997. We were committed to covering a period long enough to provide some historical perspective. We chose 1965 as a starting year because it represented the dawn (more or less) of the countercultural ferment of the 1960s. 1997 was the most recent calendar year concluded when the research began.

We chose the Philadelphia area for this pilot study because it is convenient to Princeton and because we possessed extensive background knowledge about the area useful for interpreting our results. We are well aware that one cannot generalize from Philadelphia to the rest of the United States, or even to other large metropolitan areas. Compared to many other U.S. cities, Philadelphia is more working-class, more African-American, more Democrat, and more Catholic. It has fewer Latino and Asian residents than most cities on the West Coast, and fewer Evangelical Protestants than most places in the Southeast. Nonetheless, we opted for lighting a candle and believe that our results will prove engaging to readers whose interests extend beyond the Delaware Valley.⁵

What Philadelphians Quarreled Over

We used several strategies to find cases that fit our definition, identifying one hundred public controversies over the arts, or just over three per year.⁶ Only some of these conflicts entailed a religious component. In order to understand the role of religion in cultural controversy, however, we need an overview of the field.

Figure 1 depicts the prominence of different types of artworks in Philadelphia's cultural disputes between 1965 and 1997. The largest number of cases, 27 percent, involved literature. Most of these entailed efforts to remove (or to reinstate, once removed) such controversial books as *Huckleberry Finn* or Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* from school and (more rarely) public libraries (Burruss 1989; Woods 1979). In many of these cases, local newspapers editorialized in



favor of the criticized works and against censorship.

Debates over the visual arts constituted 26 percent of all controversies. In eleven cases, critics found fault with public sculpture. In eleven more, mixed media works (many of which were installations that included sculptural elements) came under attack. Government officials and managers of private organizations found many reasons to object to, and often to remove, particular works of art. Public

officials and private administrators removed artworks from the public view because they thought they were ugly, overtly sexual, blasphemous, or politically offensive. Building managers required artist Jenny Holzer to change phrases on her electric signage that they believed were too political or unsettling. One installation, a whimsical mockup of a real-estate office, was removed when some passers-by believed it was the real thing. Although the vast majority of controversies entailed public objections to an artwork, in three cases the public rallied to the *defense* of public sculptures (for example, a statue of the movie hero “Rocky) that were slated to leave Philadelphia after temporary exhibition.

Feature films also aroused much controversy in the Philadelphia area, accounting for seventeen cases. Catholic organizations objected to films that they found blasphemous or demeaning to the Church. Other groups objected to movies they judged to be offensive to gay men and lesbians (“Basic Instinct”) or African-Americans (“How to Make Love to A Negro Without Getting Tired”), likely to encourage violence (“Fort Apache: The Bronx”), or pornographic (“I am Curious, Yellow,” “Barbarella”).

As striking as the capacity of novels, films, and the visual arts to induce division was the paucity of cases involving the dramatic arts. Three musical-theatre pieces were controversial, two because of nudity and one (in a high school) because its content was deemed too mature for teenagers. University of the Arts officials elicited criticism from some in the arts community when they prevented Ron Athey, a controversial HIV-positive performance artist, from

participating in a series sponsored by the school. There was not one case of controversy over a nonmusical play or a dance or opera performance.

By contrast, music was considerably more controversial. Ten conflicts entailed criticism and defense of rock music, heavy metal, and, especially, rap music, in live, recorded, or broadcast form; six concerned classical music, modern composition, choral music, or jazz. In the 1990s, several rap concerts were prevented from taking place, in one instance when the City of Philadelphia broke the contract, in another when members of a suburban police force on whom presenters relied for security refused at the last minute to provide it.

Philadelphians quarreled over “serious” music as well. On two occasions, audiences walked out on performances by the Philadelphia Orchestra. (Once subscribers disliked a new piece. Once African-American high-school students objected to an in-school presentation because all of the players were white.) On other occasions, parents protested the presentation of religious music in suburban public schools.

A scattering of cases fell into other categories. These included demonstrations against congressional attacks on artworks in multiple genres; actions against convenience stores) selling materials that citizens or police deemed objectionable; complaints about the depiction of Ukrainians as Nazi collaborators in a TV movie; and controversies over tattoo art and mummery (a South Philadelphia tradition involving banjo-playing, parade-dancing, and lavish costumery).

How Large a Role Did Religion Play?

Thus religion did not dominate controversies over the arts in Philadelphia, but religious concerns were a steady if minor undercurrent throughout the period. Religious actors --- a bloodless but concise term we shall use to refer to clergy, congregations, and lay associations --- participated in only eighteen of one hundred controversies. Almost all of the churches, lay associations, and clergy who participated in these controversies were Catholic or Protestant. Jews played a role in only one controversy (supporting Catholics who charged that a film demeaned their faith). Muslims were involved in one other.⁷

Press accounts indicate that at least one side employed religious arguments -- for example, that an artwork was blasphemous, that it offended believers (or disbelievers), or that its suppression (or presentation) violated religious freedom -- in sixteen of one hundred controversies. Surprisingly, in seven of the controversies in which religious actors participated, no religious arguments appeared in the record; but religious discourse was employed in five of the eighty-two cases in which religious actors were *not* involved. Taking all of these cases into account, religion --- in the form of actors or arguments or both --- entered into twenty-three cultural controversies between 1965 and 1997, or about one in four of the total.

What Role Did Religion Play in these Controversies?

In only eleven cases over the thirty-three years we reviewed did the press report both religious participation *and* religious discourse. Of these eleven, four were protests by Catholic groups (in one case supported by Protestant and Jewish

clergy) against films (“Black Mass, “The Last Temptation of Christ,” “Hail Mary” and “Priest”) deemed blasphemous or sacrilegious. “Temptation” aroused a separate controversy when an Evangelical pastor protested its showing in a suburban theatre.

Two conflicts, both from early in the period we reviewed, involved allegedly prurient literature. Some religious leaders supported an extended campaign to suppress Henry Miller’s erotic (and, incidentally, anticlerical) novel *Tropic of Cancer*. And Episcopal church leaders quarreled publicly over the propriety of selling the avant-garde literary magazine *Evergreen Review* in a seminary bookstore.

The most widely publicized national conflicts between artists and religious spokespersons in recent years have involved works of visual art. Of the two most celebrated cases, one – Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographic exhibition – was curated and presented in Philadelphia, but did not attract controversy there. The other – Andres Serrano’s photograph “Piss Christ,” in which a crucifix was photographed suspended in what was believed to be a tube of urine – did enter our list. Five years after the original controversy, Philadelphia’s Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) became the focus of Congressional displeasure when it presented a retrospective exhibition of Serrano’s work that contained the offending image. In 1997, an art student at Penn State University provoked dispute with works included in two local group exhibitions. The first was a construction that depicted a grotto-like vagina with a statue of the Virgin Mary set within it. The second, entitled “Twenty-Five Years of Virginity,” featured

lingerie with red crosses stitched into their crotches. In both cases, opponents viewed the artworks as blasphemous, whereas the artists viewed their art as part of a more complex religious discourse.

The two other conflicts in which religious actors participated and religious language appeared in press accounts were quite different. One entailed the controversial decision by local units of book-retailing chains to stop selling Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, after Islamic fundamentalists threatened violence. In the other, a Methodist minister spoke for a group of area residents who sought to persuade a suburban school board to remove Jamaica Kincaid's novel *Lucy* from the high school's required reading list (Kachin 1994).

Seven cases featured the participation of religious actors who were *not* quoted as employing religious discourse. In all but one of these cases, the religious actors intervened in disputes over public morality, broadly defined. In four of these controversies, religious actors opposed artworks (for example, "Barbarella," sexually explicit cable television programs, and so on) on the grounds of their sexual content without invoking religious motives or justifications. In two others, religious actors participated in conflicts in which political or social issues were at the fore: a 1967 debate over the publication of an anti-Viet Nam-war poem in a Presbyterian Sunday School magazine; and a coalition of Chester, Pennsylvania organizations and residents to oppose rap music that promoted violence or degraded women.

Presumably, the ministers, priests, and laypersons who fought against explicit sexuality, anti-war poetry, and misogynistic or violent lyrics were capable

of explaining their positions in a religious vocabulary. But in statements to the press, they employed language that emphasized values that the secular and religious communities share, such as the well-being of children or respect for women.

Finally, in five cases religious actors did *not* participate, but secular participants used religious language. In two of these, incidental religious discourse was employed to defend a work. (In 1979, for example, the *Inquirer* noted in an editorial critique of a federal judge's removal of objects from a courthouse exhibition that the images were less sexual than those a nun would see on a stroll through the Vatican).

In three other cases, critics of the inclusion of hymns and other religious numbers in public-school choir concerts employed the constitutional language of religious freedom to frame their objections. For example, in 1993, the Philadelphia school district, backed by a federal judge, ordered a high-school gospel choir to broaden its repertoire if it wished to continue to use school facilities; and in 1998 some members of a suburban chorus protested the inclusion of religious songs in a school concert.

The Peculiar Salience of Controversies over the Visual Arts

Nationally, the visual arts have provided the most highly publicized conflicts pitting representatives of organized religion against arts institutions and grantmakers. Therefore we were surprised to find that only two of one hundred cases involved complaints by religious actors against works by photographers,

painters, or mixed-media artists. Indeed, disputes in which religious actors participated were *less likely* than others to entail protests against such artworks.

Closer scrutiny of these two cases, the controversies over the Penn State exhibits and the ICA's 1994 Serrano retrospective, may reveal why conflicts between the visual arts and religion are so often portrayed as pervasive and characteristic of cultural disputation in the contemporary United States. What is striking about these two cases is how quickly they became politicized. The Serrano exhibit was documented by a member of the Christian Action Council, a conservative lay group close to the Catholic Church. The Council shared this documentation with a Republican U.S. Representative, who displayed it as part of the effort to eliminate funding for the National Endowment for the Arts, a long-time supporter of the ICA. Although the offending exhibit drew on no government funds, the NEA Council blocked an additional grant to the ICA, apparently to placate congressional critics.

In the Penn State case, the artist was a young Catholic student whose work dealt with the tension she experienced between her faith and her sexuality. Although she had been in amicable dialogue with the campus Catholic chaplain about her work and the concerns it reflected, controversy erupted when a priest from the Philadelphia Archdiocese and a local layman complained about the "Virginity" piece.⁸ Their charges attracted the attention of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, a lay organization that monitors anti-Catholic prejudice and discrimination, and, eventually, of a state senator from a Philadelphia suburb. The latter inveighed against the artworks so relentlessly

that they became the centerpiece of the University's legislative appropriation hearing (Cheng 1997; Robinson 2000).

In the Philadelphia region, then, conflicts pitting religious interests against visual artists and the galleries that exhibit their work were very rare, even during the years in which Christian conservatives were most actively involved in their campaign to eliminate the NEA (Frohnmeier 1993; Alexander 2000: ch. 11). The conflicts that *did* occur received attention disproportionate to their number, however, especially outside the region.

This was the case, we believe, due to the development of what we might call *social technologies of politicization* over the period we studied. Such technologies consist of three components. The first comprises persons or organizations who devote some energy to monitoring the exhibitions of art museums and galleries. The second entails established relationships between these monitors and political office-holders who use their offices to amplify the attention that grievances against the artworks receive and to threaten, at least symbolically, to deploy the power of government against organizations that mount or support the exhibits in which those artworks appear. The third component includes nationally active social-movement organizations capable of bringing local disputes to nationwide attention.

By the 1990s there existed durable transmission belts that routinely moved issues from the world of the arts to the world of politics. Whereas battles over books in school libraries or abstract sculpture in public places or even films distributed to commercial theatres tended to remain local and bilateral, struggles

against art with disturbing religious themes often attracted political sponsorship. This process increased the risk of losing funding or acquiring legal problems for galleries that exhibited the art. And it often reduced complex and nuanced artistic intentions and critical grievances to ritualized confrontations between artists (stereotyped as eccentric and contemptuous blasphemers) and offended clerics or people of faith (stereotyped as censorious bigots) (Robinson 2000). Such stereotyped encounters tend to attract the attention of the Press. The ICA case received extensive coverage because of its connection to Republican attacks on the NEA. The Associated Press and Knight-Ridder News Service covered the Penn State controversy in stories that appeared in papers throughout the United States.

Why is it that visual artworks, apparently to a greater extent than works of literature or music, are so amenable to these social technologies of politicization? We suspect that is precisely the *visual* aspect of the visual arts that accounts for their centrality. The visual imagery in works that combine sacred religious symbols with sexual or excretory elements has an immediacy that words or even music lack. The images are easier to copy and transmit (for example in direct-mail appeals) than are music or literary works. And verbal descriptions (e.g., “crucifix in urine”) can conjure up images that enable some readers to feel as if they had seen the works themselves.

Do Religious Conflicts Differ from other Controversies over the Arts and Media?

In addition to documenting these controversies, we tried to learn how and why they unfolded as they did. Who initiated the debate, and who joined in once it

became public? Who defended the artwork? What tactics did each side use? What claims were made against the artwork, and what arguments were deployed in its defense? In this section, we ask how controversies in which churches, church associations or clergy played a role differed from those in which they were absent.⁹

Topics of disputation. Disputes in which religious actors participated were more likely than others to involve criticism of films or broadcast media. As already noted, they were *less* likely to be about visual-art exhibits. And they were less likely to be about books in school or public libraries (See Table 1).

Indeed, the public schools seem to rest under a secular canopy, governed by civil rather than sacred norms. Churches, clergy, or church-related associations were with one exception uninvolved in school-based controversies. By contrast, religious actors played roles in more than 20 percent of *non*-school-based events; and more than 25 percent of cases *without* religious participation involved the public schools. Religious *arguments* were deployed in public-school controversies at least as much as

Table 1: Differences between Controversies in which Religious Actors Participate and those from which Religious Actors are Absent

Features of Controversy	Percentage of cases with Religious Actors Participating with feature in left column	Percentage of cases with Religious Actors <i>Not</i> Participating with feature in left column
About film or broadcast media	44.4	18.3
About visual artwork/exhibit	11.1	26.8
Book/performance in public school	5.9	25.3
Blasphemy/denigrates religion	61.1	1.2
Work harms religious people	38.9	3.7

Conservative thrust to public action	88.9	63.0
Elected official join in criticism	33.3	12.2
Public information campaign against artwork	44.4	6.1
Petition drive against artwork	27.8	0.0
Demonstration against artwork	22.2	8.5
Boycott (primary or secondary)	11.1	1.2
Any public mobilization tactic	61.1	19.5
More than 1 mobilization tactic	33.3	0.0
First action against artwork part of national movement	22.2	7.3
Any link to national movement by opponents of artwork	50.0	8.5
Number of cases	18	82

in other cases but with an important difference. Whereas religious arguments supported a traditional religious agenda in 75 percent of the non-school cases, religious discourse in public-school debates was dominated by arguments *against* religious observances and in favor of a strict interpretation of the Constitution's establishment clause. It may be significant that Philadelphia boasts the nation's strongest Catholic school system. Given Catholic actors' important role in other kinds of controversy, their lack of involvement in public education undoubtedly reinforced the secular nature of public-school politics.

Not surprisingly, cases in which religious actors participated were more likely than others to entail complaints that an artwork was blasphemous or otherwise denigrated religion (61 percent compared to just one of eighty-two other cases), or that it was harmful to religious people. In most other respects, participants in such disputes employed arguments similar to those used in other conflicts.

Also consistent with stereotype, controversies in which religious actors participated were characterized by public actions on behalf of what are ordinarily depicted to be conservative rather than liberal goals.¹⁰ The nature of this “conservative” role changed, however, during the period under review. In all six cases before 1975, churches or church groups pursued an unambiguously conservative agenda, taking rightist positions with reference to political or sexual expression. By contrast, in eight of ten cases from the mid-1970s on, religious participants expressed what we might call “identity grievances” (see DiMaggio et al. 2000) against work that they believed denigrated people of faith or desecrated objects or practices they held sacred. It is a curious feature of contemporary U.S. politics that identity grievances on behalf of religious faith communities are viewed as “conservative,” whereas identity grievances on behalf of women, racial, ethnic, or lifestyle minorities are associated with “the left.” If we remove such cases from the “conservative” side of the ledger, we see not persistent conservatism but rather a shift from *religion as guardian of public morality* to *religion as guardian of the specific institutional interests of religion itself*.

Tactics and alliances. Elected officials were more likely to join in making claims against artworks if religious actors were involved, but only when the grievance included charges that the work was pornographic. When a controversy pitted the rights of the religiously observant against the rights of nonbelievers, elected officials were more likely to enter in mediating roles.

Religious actors used techniques of mass persuasion and mobilization to rouse supporters to action and influence the views of the general public to a much

greater extent than did their non-religious counterparts.¹¹ Controversies in which religious actors participated were much more likely to feature public information campaigns, petition drives, public demonstrations, and boycotts. Opponents of artworks in more than three in five controversies with religious participation employed at least one such strategy, compared to activists in fewer than one in five of the rest.

Religious activists employed multiple techniques in six of eighteen cases. (By contrast, activists in cases without religious participation *never* used more than one.) For example, Catholic laypersons protesting the movie “Hail Mary” in 1986 engaged in a public-information campaign, circulated petitions, demonstrated on the streets, and boycotted the theatre chains that booked the film. Conservative Protestants who sought to remove books by Toni Morrison and Jamaica Kincaid from school reading lists distributed information and circulated petitions.

If we look at this phenomenon another way, we can understand why the role of religious actors in cultural controversy is as salient as it is, despite the relatively few cases in which such actors played *any* role during the one third of a century we reviewed. Religious actors participated in more than two of every five controversies that involved efforts at mass mobilization and persuasion, but in fewer than one in ten of those that did not employ such social-movement strategies. There is every reason to believe that the former are more likely to attract press attention than are protests that are either less sustained or that work exclusively through government channels. There is also reason to believe that

such cases are more salient. Strategies of social mobilization and protest better fit the public's understanding of what a genuine social controversy *is*: We are more likely to notice conflicts that involve demonstrations and similar protests, and we are more likely to recall them later on.

National linkages. Controversies in which religious actors were involved were much more likely to be linked to national social movements or campaigns than were controversies from which they were absent. This is true whether the criterion is a direct association of the initial action against the artwork with a national effort; an indirect tie to a national campaign; or intervention by national activists on the critics' side later in the controversy. In sum, where religious actors participated, 50 percent of controversies were connected to national cultural struggles. Where religious actors did *not* participate, just 8.5 percent had ties to events outside of Philadelphia.

American historians have noted that religion produced the first organizations in the United States to transcend locality and act on a national scale (Thomas 1989; Hall 1982). In the 1980s and 1990s, Evangelical Christians, sometimes collaborating with conservatives in other faiths, developed a denser and more inclusive national network, in part to defend themselves from the perceived secularization of a society that they believed had reduced them to the status of an embattled minority (Hunter 1991; Smith 1998). Particularly when identity grievances inflame such passions, religious networks are highly efficient in galvanizing action in different places with relatively limited national coordination. Although Catholicism has been a stronger force than Evangelical Protestantism in Philadel-

phia, the same dynamic was evident as Philadelphia Catholics joined their peers across the country in campaigning against such movies as “Hail Mary, “The Last Temptation of Christ,” and “Priest.”

Catholics were not the only participants in local cultural controversies with ties outside of Philadelphia. Islamic extremists who threatened violence against bookstores that carried *Satanic Verses* coordinated their efforts on an international scale. African-American ministers who stood alongside activist Dolores Tucker when she brought her anti-gangster-rap crusade to Chester, Pennsylvania likewise took part in a national campaign.

We have seen that religious actors tended to be active in conflicts over works like films, books, and recorded music that are distributed nationally. If such cultural products are offensive, they are likely to offend people throughout the land; and to the extent that offense is dispersed, the outcry against them is likely to be organized nationally. Yet this does *not* explain the affinity of religious actors to national social movements. Although seven of the fifteen cases in which religious actors criticized nationally distributed commercial cultural products were connected to national campaigns, only three of thirty-eight cases in which nonreligious actors campaigned against such material were similarly linked to national efforts. The cultural struggles of religious actors, to a far greater extent than those of other Philadelphians, rested on and contributed to a national infrastructure of protest and mobilization.

Has Religion’s Role in Cultural Controversies Increased?

As we have seen, religious actors and religious language played a significant but limited role in Philadelphia-area cultural contention between 1965 and 1997.

Now we

ask whether that role grew over time, especially during what some have called the “culture wars” of the late 1980s and 1990s (Hunter 1991). During this period, organizations and politicians associated with the religious right undertook a political mobilization that culminated in the Republican electoral victory in the 1994 Congressional elections. Part of that mobilization entailed concerted national campaigns against sexual content and violence in the mass media and, especially after 1989, against federal funding for the arts. In addition to noting trends in religious participation and discourse over the entire period, then, we are particularly interested to see to what extent this mobilization echoed in the Philadelphia area.

The answer to this question is evident in Figure 2, which plots a three-year

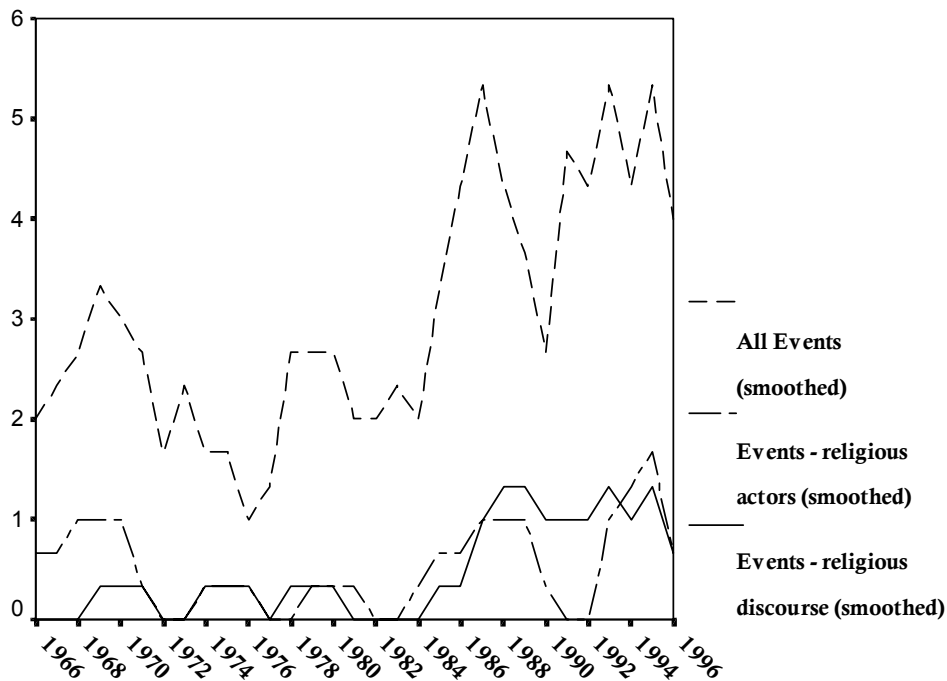


Fig. 2: Trends in Religious Participation and Discourse

running average of the number of new controversies initiated in every year from 1966 through 1996.¹² The top records the total number of events of all kinds. The two lines at the bottom of the graph report, respectively, on controversies that enlisted religious actors and conflicts that featured religious discourse. (Recall that eleven of the twenty-three conflicts with a religious component fall into both of these categories and therefore contribute to the height of both lines.)

This graph illuminates several significant trends. First, the distance between the top line and the two bottom lines illustrates how few controversies, in relative terms, had any religious component throughout the period.

Second, the number of new controversies of all kinds initiated each year rose substantially during the “culture war” period. The number of new events initiated in an average year after 1986 was about twice the number of new events between 1965 and 1986.

Third, religious *actors* were more active in controversies over the arts and media in the 1960s than they were between the early 1970s and the mid-1980s, which constituted a dry spell for religious cultural activism in the Philadelphia area. The number of events with religious participants rose after 1985, but only back to the level of the 1960s. (Moreover, because there were more controversies of all kinds in later years, the *percentage* of events with religious participation remained lower than in the earliest period.) This suggests that if anything the years from 1972 to 1985, not the “culture wars” era, had atypical levels of religious cultural activism.

Fourth, the use of *religious discourse increased significantly* after 1986 in comparison to previous years, even though participation by religious actors did not (Table 2).¹³ Two notable changes between the 1960s and the late 1980s in the kinds of controversies into which religion entered account for this puzzling contrast.

For one thing, as we have seen, whereas in the 1960s and early 1970s religious actors often entered controversies over the arts on behalf of conservative sexual or political mores. In some cases, church groups or clergy joined forces with government in battles against such works as *Tropic of Cancer* that were perceived to be pornographic. Protagonists in these battles used the language of law rather than religion.

After a series of Supreme Court decisions in the 1960s and 1970s restricted government's ability to use the law against sexually explicit material, religious actors less frequently criticized media products and artworks with sexual content. Instead, cases in the later era focused upon work that was offensive because it dealt in irreverent or blasphemous ways with religious themes. Naturally, critics used religious discourse to call attention to such material. Such cases, which invoked a language of religious identity and rights rather than the language of law, account for an increase

Table 2: Religious participation and discourse in controversies over the arts

	Percentage: all years	Percentage: 1965-1975	Percentage: 1976-1986	Percentage: 1987-1997
Religious actors participated	18.0	25.9	11.5	17.0
Defensive religious discourse cited in press	15.0	11.1	7.7	21.3

Critical religious discourse cited in press	5.0	0.0	0.0	14.9
Any religious discourse cited in press	17.0	11.1	7.7	25.5
N	100	27	26	47

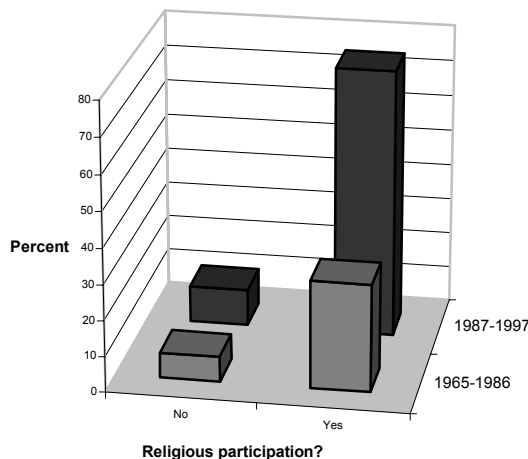
Note: “Defensive religious discourse” includes arguments that an artwork is blasphemous or denigrates religious beliefs; that it harms or places at risk religious people; that it expresses a distinctive religious perspective (if supportive of religious artwork); and that actions against the artwork place religious people at risk. “Critical religious discourse” includes arguments that an artwork imposes views on religious minorities; that it is offensive to or excludes atheists, agnostics, or skeptics; that it places atheists, agnostics or skeptics at risk; that actions against an artwork place such people at risk; or that an artwork expresses a distinctive religious perspective (if the artwork has been attacked as irreligious).

in the proportion of cases using religious language in defense of religious values or symbols from less than 10 percent before 1986 to more than 20 percent thereafter.¹⁴

The other change was that advocates of a strong separation between church and state took a more active stance in challenging the inclusion of Christian content (especially musical numbers) in public-school performances. Such critics used religious discourse to defend the rights of nonbelievers and religious minorities in almost one in six controversies after 1986, as compared to *none* before 1986.

In other words, we see little evidence that the late 1980s and 1990s were witnessed a dramatic increase in religiously inflected controversy over the arts

Figure 3: Adversaries of Artworks in Cases with Religious Participation Became More Often Tied to National Movements



and media in Philadelphia. Religious actors were present in more controversies than in the previous decade, but in about the same number (and in a smaller percentage of the whole) compared to the decade before that one. Religious discourse entered into more debates, but that reflected, first, a rise in the share of such controversies characterized by identity grievances and, second, an increase in references to religion by *opponents of religious observances.*

There *was* a difference, however, in the ways in which religious actors pursued their goals. We have noted that participants in conflicts in which religious actors took part more often used tactics aimed at mobilizing the public to support their cause, and that these tactics contributed to the visibility and salience of religiously inflected controversies. This tendency became more pronounced throughout the period we studied: Before 1987, opponents of artworks in cases with religious participation used such tactics 40 percent of the time. Between 1987 and 1997, they used mobilization tactics in seven of eight cases, or 88 percent of the time.¹⁵

The proportion of controversies with religious involvement in which opponents of the artwork had ties to national campaigns or movement groups also increased in both relative and absolute terms after 1986, rising from 30 percent to 75 percent in the latter period (Figure 3). (The proportion of non-religious controversies with national ties also increased, but far more modestly.) It appears, then, that controversies that pitted religious actors against arts organizations or media companies became more visible during the “culture wars”

period *not* because they were more numerous, but because they were more closely articulated, through ties and tactics, to national social movements associated with conservative Christianity.

Conclusion

How would we characterize the relationship between religion and the arts in the Philadelphia area? During the thirty-three years we reviewed, clergy, congregations, and lay associations struggled against the work of creative artists vigorously enough to attract press attention only eighteen times. By the late 1990s Philadelphia boasted more than 3,000 churches and about 1,200 nonprofit arts and cultural organizations (Stern and Seifert 1999). Given the potential of many of the latter to offend many of the former, the degree of controversy we discovered seems low indeed. Because we came to religion through a broader focus on conflict over the arts, and therefore did not study the many forms of collaboration between the region's cultural and religious institutions, we necessarily must speculate as to what this means. But it does seem more consistent with the wary, mutual disregard between the two sectors that Robert Wuthnow describes in this volume than with the state of war that some have feared.

At the same time, our findings provide insight into why the *perception* of acute conflict between religion and the arts is so widespread. The late 1980s and early 1990s in Philadelphia followed a decade that was unusually free of contention between religion and the arts. In comparison to the 1970s and early

1980s, religious participation in cultural conflict was not particularly high during the “culture-war” era. But people’s impressions are rarely based on such long-term contrasts. Moreover, religious *discourse* as opposed to participation *did* play a role in more controversies during the late 1980s and 1990s. This, too, may have contributed to an impression that relations between the arts and religion were heating up.

More important, however, were changes in kinds of controversies in which religious figures participated, which may have increased the salience of their religious dimension. Controversies in the 1980s and 1990s were more likely to be defensive measures against perceived attacks on religion. There were more controversies in which religious actors enunciated what we might call “identity grievances” against artworks that they believed expressed contempt towards people of faith. The period after 1986 also witnessed more efforts by secular actors to limit religious expression in the public schools. Perhaps most important, after 1986 religious actors and their allies were far more likely --- more likely than antagonists in other controversies and more likely than they had been in the past --- to employ the tools of social-movement mobilization and to connect their own claims to national social movements or campaigns. Such tactics and connections increased the salience and visibility of such conflicts, contributing to the sense that religion and the arts had moved farther apart.

All this occurred in just one metropolitan area, of course. We cannot demonstrate that the same dynamic was present in Sarasota, Cleveland, Dallas, Denver or San Jose. No doubt there are regional differences in the nature of the

players (perhaps a more prominent role for Evangelicals and a less central one for Catholics outside the northeast) and in the artworks over which they have contended.

We would suggest, however, a conclusion of plausible generality. Some artists have always offended some people of faith. Others artists have celebrated religion, and some religious people have patronized the arts. The relationship between the two institutions is, on balance, one of modest disaffinity rather than active antagonism. To the extent that this appears to have changed, the appearance reflects changes in the political order, especially in the forms and technologies of social protest, rather than any transformation of the underlying relationship between these two institutional realms.

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Notes

¹ We refer to religious conservative Protestant activists as “conservative Evangelicals” as shorthand, recognizing that fundamentalist, charismatic, and even “mainline” Protestants have participated in struggles over culture and the arts (see Woodberry and Smith 1998 for an excellent discussion of these distinctions).

² For a detailed account of our method, please see DiMaggio, Cadge, Robinson and Steensland, 2000.

³ Advertising art and architecture were excluded, due to the predominantly functional nature of conflicts over these two forms, and the difficulty of distinguishing conflicts over form, content, or style from conflicts over function. We also excluded products distributed by the sex industry [for example, by XXX-rated movie theaters, nude dancing establishments, or adults-only bookstores], because these appeared to follow different rules than conflicts over the products of mainstream nonprofit cultural institutions and commercial media firms and because their numbers (55 percent of all cases identified) would have overwhelmed our other cases. Note that we exclude sex-industry cases based on the market channels through which works are distributed, not the content of the work (though the two are certainly highly correlated). As we shall see, many of the controversial products of mainstream organizations were accused of being “pornographic” or of having inappropriate sexual content.

⁴We exclude purely individual expressions of discontent – e.g., letters to the newspaper by persons who are *not* representing corporate actors – and conflicts of

opinion induced purely through questioning by reporters and not subsequently expressed independently.

⁵ We are conducting a study of cultural conflict in a second, very different, city over the same period; and our colleague, Steven Tepper, is completing a comparative study of cultural controversies in 50 U.S. cities for five years in the mid-1990s.

⁶ For the years 1965 through 1980, we searched more than 130 headings in the comprehensive clipping files of the Philadelphia *Inquirer*, the newspaper of record for the Philadelphia area during most of this period. For the period 1981 through 1997, we used full-text searchable data bases of the Philadelphia *Inquirer* (*Philadelphia On-Line* for 1981 and 1982 and *Dialog* for 1983 through 1997). We supplemented these sources by interviewing activists in pro-decency and anti-censorship organizations; consulting lists of controversies compiled by People for the American Way; and reviewing page by page 1,584 issues of the *Inquirer* (four randomly selected issues per month from January 1965 through December 1997, a 13.14 percent sample of the whole). For reasons described at length in DiMaggio et al. (2000), we are confident that our data are reasonably comprehensive and, more important, unbiased (if one accepts the premise that controversies that escape press attention are not “public”).

⁷ Catholics and Protestants account for the vast majority of Philadelphia’s churchgoers, so from this perspective their preponderance among the participants in controversies is to be expected. On the other hand, one might expect that

participation in public controversy would be a function of the vitality of communal associations or that religious minorities would employ protest strategies more frequently than religious majorities, in which case the near-absence of Jewish groups is more surprising.

⁸ The artist voluntarily removed the “grotto” piece earlier that year when the priest who serves as director of the Penn State Catholic Community complained that it was offensive. Despite its quick departure, the director of the Catholic League mentioned that piece on CNN’s “Crossfire” program as an example of anti-Catholic prejudice. The same priest who objected to the “grotto” defended “Virginity.”

⁹ We restrict this discussion to differences that reach statistical significance at the level of at least .10. (This means that if one produced one’s data by flipping coins, one would expect to find differences of the observed magnitude in no more than one in ten tries.) Because we have a population of events rather than a sample, significance tests are not technically meaningful; rather they provide a sort of discipline to protect us against the temptation to make mountains from molehills.

¹⁰ In the only two cases with religious participation in which public actions were taken in pursuit of liberal objectives, the religious actors opposed those actions. We assigned 94 of the 100 events a “liberal” or “conservative” political valence, depending on whether those who initiated it pursued agendas generally associated with the left or the right. (Six events defied political classification.) By “liberal valence,” we refer to protest against censorship or against content perceived to be

racist, imperialist, sexist, anti-gay, anti-female, or in violation of the separation of church and state. By “conservative valence” we refer to actions against content perceived to be inappropriately sexual, anti-religious, associated with minority racial or ethnic groups, or modernist in orientation. We realize that this rough-and-ready approach to political classification does a disservice to classical understandings of both conservative and liberal thought, but it fits the way the media uses these labels and most people understand them.

¹¹ Smith (1998:1195) notes that the rank-and-file Evangelicals he interviewed were committed to making their views known through “voting and polite lobbying” and took a dim view of demonstrations and other forms of direct action. It is possible that our results reflect the significant role of Catholics in Philadelphia cultural politics, and that the emphasis on social-movement tactics might be less prominent in a polity in which Evangelicals played the lead role. We suspect, however, that activists differ from regular church members on this dimension and that had Smith interviewed rank-and-file Catholics he might have found a similar indifference or aversion to extra-electoral tactics, despite the proficiency of some Catholic movement groups in using them.

¹²Taking running averages, also known as “smoothing,” serves to minimize reporting error and chance fluctuations so that one can focus on the main trends.

¹³These figures may underestimate the extent of religious participation because it is likely that press accounts of some controversies failed to note the participation

of religious organizations or clergy. But in so far as such bias may have occurred, there is no reason to believe it would affect comparisons across time.

¹⁴ Before 1987, controversial artworks were accused of being pornographic in six of ten cases in which religious actors participated, and in only one of those was the artwork *also* accused of being blasphemous or offensive to religious persons. After 1986, artworks were accused of being pornographic in just two of eight cases in which religious actors participated and in *both* these cases, the works were *also* accused of being blasphemous or denigrating religion.

¹⁵ Critics of artworks in cases from which religious actors were absent also used social-movement tactics more often after 1986 --- in 26 percent of cases as compared to 14 percent – but this growth did not rival that the more dramatic shift to such tactics by religious actors.