Strategies for Religiously Minded Activists

Kara Kaminski
August 31, 2011

Abstract

Religiously minded activists, drawing heavily from both secular and parochial concepts, have employed multiple strategies over the past century to motivate social change. The pertinent question for activists today is how the calculated combination of these concepts increases their impact. To determine this, I conducted twelve interviews with prominent environmentally minded religious leaders acting against climate change. I compared their strategies to strategies of past religious activist who addressed the issues of evolution, civil rights, gay marriage, and abortion. My conclusions consist of five strategy points which distill the optimal strategic approach for today's religiously minded activist to further their cause by learning from both the past and present.

The Evolution Debate

The debate over teaching evolution in schools was the first modern involvement of religion in politics. The evolution debate began in 1925 with the Butler Act in Tennessee, and arguably ended with Kitzmiller, et al. vs. Dover in 2005. The strategies employed by religiously minded activists in defense of evolution changed from 1925 to 2005 and consisted of three phases; creationism, creation science, and intelligent design. Each subsequent stage of the evolution debate built upon knowledge gained from past victories and defeats. Ultimately, as in the case Kitzmiller, et al. vs. Dover, anti-evolutionists failed to keep the teaching of evolution in line with their religious beliefs as a result of ignoring the careful of rhetoric and political sensitivities of the time.

The Tennessee Butler Act of 1925 made it unlawful to teach evolution on the grounds that it conflicted with the Bible. The case of The State of Tennessee v. John Thomas Scopes ("The Scopes Trial") accused Scopes, a high school Biology teacher, of violating this act. The case closed with a guilty verdict (thought it was later overturned on a technicality). (Linder) The Butler Act remained a firm law in Tennessee until it was repealed in 1967. Until then it provided an example for many states to follow suit and develop similar acts throughout the coming years. (UMKC School of Law)

It was not until the 1960s, after states invalidated their bans on evolution education, that anti-evolutionists saw the need to update the anti-evolution arguments. It was no longer enough to evoke the tenants of Christianity; anti-evolutionists needed to compromise. (UMKC School of Law)

In 1969, a sub-committee of the California State Board of Education presented their recommendations for science education to the Board of Education. The committee's recommendation included a statement from Vernon Grose, an aerospace engineer and Pentecostal, discussing how creation theory is applicable to evolutionary theory as it fills in gaps such as the regular absence of transitional forms, while evolution better explains creation theory with data on subjects such as the transmutation of species. (Nelkin 1982, 110) By being aware of his audience, Grose was able to frame his argument as a scientific one, and was able to successfully recommend creation science for science education. Grose compromised to further the anti-evolutionist agenda without alienating those he was trying to persuade. He did not demand abolishing the teaching of evolution as a theory, but instead requested that creation theory share the curriculum. This strategy worked for six years until the U.S. Supreme Court ruled it unconstitutional in 1987, stating creation science was the same as creationism in Edwards v. Aguillard. This decision guaranteed there would be no mention of religion allowed in the education system. (Singham 2009, 2)

Intelligent design theorists implemented careful strategy to remove any wording that may indicate its possible religious underpinnings. It is possible that the theorists' keen strategy is why books such as *Of People and Pandas,* the first book specifically on the subject of intelligent design, remained uncontested in courts until 2005. (Matzke) In the case Kitzmiler, et.al. vs. Dover Area School District, the Dover

school board was not able to uphold this strategy. In 2005, eleven parents in Dover, Pennsylvania sued the school district for teaching intelligent design as science to its students. (Singham 2009, 123) This was the first evolution case brought to the U.S. federal courts. Many testimonies made it apparent that the teaching of Intelligent Design either had religious reasoning behind it or was not a scientific theory to be presented in a classroom.

The phases of creationism, creation science, and intelligent design show the incredible adaptability and perseverance of anti-evolutionists. Though anti-evolutionists won cases within each phase, continuous legal changes forced them to alter their argument and start again after courts overturned their decisions years later. The way in which the religious community was able to adapt so quickly is evident in the fact that the evolution debate lasted from 1925 until 2005. The strategy of the debate was lost in the last Kitzmiller, et al. vs. Dover Area School District, et al. when the same meticulous detail was not presented in this argument.

Civil Rights

When compiling the book *Rhetoric, Religion, and the Civil Rights Movement*, Davis Houck and David Dixon state that, "civil rights was fundamentally a religious affair." (Houk 2006, 2) The success of civil rights was due to strong religious support and its frame in equality and forgiveness. In addition to this, the awareness caused by media coverage also significantly influenced its success, intentional or not.

Faith leaders of the civil rights movement framed their speech as one for freedom for everyone, black or white, from racism and inequality. These individuals include Dr. Martin Luther King as well as significant but lesser known individuals, including Lawrence Campbell, Reverend Edwin King, and Fannie Lou Hamer. The success achieved by these civil rights leaders from framing their speeches in similar peaceful words is evidenced by passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Advancements in television media significantly aided faith leaders during the civil rights movement. During the civil rights era, new technical advancements allowed the peaceful demonstrations of the civil rights movement and the violent responses of the Southern law enforcement to be publicized to the entire nation. (The Museum of Broadcast Communications) Social movement specialist, Sidney Tarrow describes the impact of television on civil rights in three ways. "First, television brought long-ignored grievances to the attention of the nation and particularly to viewers in the North; second, it visually contrasted the peaceful goals of the movement with the viciousness of the police; third, television was a medium of communication for those inside the movement." (Tarrow 1998, 115) Tarrow explains how television helped to reinforce the power of the movement itself because portions of the movement in other areas were able to witness their comrades in action. (Tarrow 1998, 115) It was not necessary to televise opinions supporting the civil rights movement; the images were enough for America to be convinced of the crimes against African Americans.

The success of the civil rights movement was greatly due to the publicized perseverance of demonstrators inspired by the words of religious leaders and the vicious response to their actions. These events occurred at a time when television became increasingly popular and news coverage grew with it. Civil rights was not a movement of racist Southern states, but instead a movement that pervaded the home of any news watching American. The message of activists and the utilization of technology created an unbeatable force that resulted in the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The Sanctity of Life and Marriage

The sanctity of life and marriage movements built upon the use of rhetoric and modern media and brought the new focus of unprecedented funding. The most effective forms of rhetoric (beginning in the 1980s), continued on the path of creating an "us versus them" frame, but began to effectively utilize strategic framing to gain the upper hand. In the past, news networks and newspaper editors held greater control of interpreting the intentions of religious activists. With the issues of the sanctity of life and

marriage, religious groups gained increasing control of traditional media such as television, newspapers, and radio, and also brought in new media such as interactive websites.

The definitive difference between past movements and the new era was funding. Powerhouse organizations such as Focus on the Family, The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints, the Christian Coalition of America, and the Knights of Columbus brought unprecedented financial support for political lobbying by tapping into their donor base. These renovated repertoires of contention within this area culminate in the success of religious lobbying against Proposition 8, a ballot proposition to restrict the definition of marriage to opposite sex couples, on the November 2008 Californian ballot.

Advocates of legal abortion were at the forefront of framing and defining the debate for some time. The terms pro-choice and pro-life were common, but pro-choice was able to root their side in American values, while making the word life be defined scientifically, overshadowing religious group's biblical definition. (Vinz 1997, 178) Religious groups then focused too hard on rhetoric and too little on framing the issue, thus losing more supporters than they gained and ultimately the abortion debate. (Vinz 1997, 178)

Robert F. Drinan's "Strategies on Abortion" discussed several concepts that religious groups should have taken into account based on empirical data of the National Opinion Research Center. The survey asked six different questions on the subject of: "Do you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion?" (Jersild 1971, 171) The data implied that opponents of legalized abortion should have taken a more positive stand and focused the debate on cases of rape, incest, and predictably deformed infants. Drinan states that the isolation of the debate to these rare cases would prevent the possibility of a broadly written bill that would legalize all abortion. (Jersild 1971, 171) Religious groups and their leaders did not utilize such data when debating their position; instead emotional and over the top rhetoric filled their side of the debate. This is likely the reason the anti-abortion movement did not succeed. One can extrapolate this fact because the movement is no longer at the forefront of debate and Roe v. Wade was never overturned.

Proposition 8 campaign, the California Marriage Protection Act of November 2008, was the single most expensive social ballot issue in U.S. history, totaling over $83 million, $40 million of which was from proponents of the proposition and $43 million from opponents, according to the California secretary of state. (Campaign Finance) It is clear that religious organizations had a heavy hand in funding the several forms of advocacy for Proposition 8.

The battle for voters when Proposition 8 was on the ballot in California also shows the pinnacle of the multimedia capability of religiously motivated activists. Preservingmarriage.org was well formatted, clean cut, and simple. The message was defensive and described something the church is trying to protect. Before the website even posed its argument the viewer saw this frame. The website videos then featured common citizens who sought more information about the issue. Each video began with a spoken question stated in colloquial language with the pauses and phrasing of a curious individual. This form of entry allowed the listener and visitor of the site to feel as though they were sitting in the same room as "RJ from Huntington Beach, CA," asking a thoughtful, important question and being open to the answer to come. The initial posing of the question as the voice came while the text of the question appeared; the video did not show the individual who was asking. By not showing the individual asking the question, this made the question itself exist and relate to the viewer, but not the questioning person.

The use of new media, via website and video, reached all audiences and fit the attention span and minds of the average American. The website also reached beyond only sermons which would not leave the church or existed only on a church website where only parishioners or possible parishioners would visit. The combination of intelligently worded debate and use of new media is the reason behind the success of the Prop 8 movement.

Over the past 30 years, contentious religious based politics have learned from the secular side of debate. In any argument, one needs to know one's audience and how to persuade them. While the debate of abortion was poorly framed and too polarized, the debate of gay-marriage was increasingly less so and utilized media and fundraising which culminated in the success of Proposition 8 in California. The ability

of religious groups to mobilize and work in conjunction with professional campaigners shows a new era of religious politics moving past emotional rhetoric.

The Environment: The Next Big Issue

Moving into the 21st century, climate change is the upcoming movement for religiously minded activists. However, in order to apply past strategies used in religiously-led social movements, the first step is to discover how climate change differs from past issues. There are several important areas for analysis, including climate change as a matter of action and rights, the time limit for action, the issue of climate change being a global versus a domestic issue, and the involvement of corporations which brings up the question of whether or not this is an issue that can be achieved by one law.

When comparing the movement for the right to a clean environment with the political movements mentioned previously in this paper, this agenda seems to lack a tangible goal. There is no exact definition for "clean". The ability to have a clean environment is also a long-term process. It requires mass action to create a clean environment. Individual choices like water use, light bulb choice, or frequency of car use can all contribute to a better environment. In a democracy, the government cannot micromanage citizens' lives. Real environmental improvements are in the mentality of every citizen.

Previous religious movements were working to see a certain progression in society. Though religious activists feel a certain sense of urgency, progression innately does not have a time limit, as exemplified in the 80-year quest for creationism in schools. While the civil rights movement succeeded in the 1960's, there are still activists working toward even greater equal rights. The sanctity of life and marriage movements may have settled down, but they are not over. However, climate change activists do not have the timeframe for being part of an ongoing historical progression.

While the U.S. has domestic environmental issues, climate change is a global problem. Any country will have the same difficulty motivating their citizens to make more environmentally conscious choices. Making the issue even more difficult, "global" does not only refer to countries anymore. Both domestic and multinational corporations are part of the global environmental problem.

Climate change has many more intricate parts when compared to movements previously taken on by religious activists. Activists have to expand their previous repertoires of convention to encompass a new realm of problems, but still not lose sight of the wealth of knowledge their previous engagements have given them. Religious environmental groups must also learn how to consolidate and make their actions more efficient and significant.

Interview Analysis and Strategy Recommendations

To gain insight into current strategies employed by religiously minded environmental activists, I interviewed twelve leaders from different religious affiliations and geographical areas on what strategies they are using to mitigate the planet's current climate crisis. These activists represent a wide array of ideals and each provided anecdotes on their experiences implementing their own strategies. After comparing the historical efficiency of religious activists' past strategies with current strategies of religious environmentalists, I found several integral strategic themes. I carefully considered each of these strategies as a direct result of comparing the interviews against both one another and against historical accounts. Each of the below strategies addresses a reoccurring theme mentioned by many interviewees, was a poignant note mentioned by one which applied to all, or in the case of feedback, was a stumbling question for all interviewees.

1. Clarify and hone the message.
Have a clear, straightforward message that does not tend toward either extreme hope or extreme fear. When attempting to engage an audience, many religious leaders tend to list frightening statistics or use apocalyptic imagery to catch the attention of their audience.

To be effective, the religious environmental movement must stay the middle ground between two messages. The key is to not trumpet a "gloom and doom" message that will frighten the audience, causing them to leave depressed and believing no amount of action could help the environmental cause. Conversely, if the message is too optimistic, the audience will leave feeling that, while the environment may be an important issue, it is not in need of their immediate action. They will feel the problem is under control.

An example of a topic that needs this middle ground message is that of sacrifice. The word sacrifice evokes an image of drastically bringing down one's quality of life for a cause. Yet, the concept of sacrifice and doing with less is integral to the environmental movement. One interviewee has her audience consider better utilizing what they already have. She often frames the concept of sacrifice as a money-saving technique. (Marzouk) Instead of collecting clutter, an activist can advise their audience imagine themselves using a product before they buy it, portion out the cost to the use. Is the product worth the expense? In this way, sensible life choices that will both help the environment and save money are framed as sacrifice instead of being part of an unsavory ascetic ideal.

2. Know the audience.

A packaged speech is not effective when speaking to different audience on the topic of climate change and the environment. It is important to know the vocabulary of those one wishes to work with.

One interviewee discussed the five step progression individuals fall in to that can tell a speaker how to frame their discussion. Her first category consists of individuals that have no concept of the issue at hand, or those that do not care. Her next category is those that care little, but don't know very much about an issue. The next is those who know and care, but do not act. It is best to ask the audience members or a collaborating organizer what their opinion is on the environment and climate change. (Marzouk) After the initial assessment, one can determine where in the five steps a population is. When the category is determined, one can have a set number of examples to intrigue an individual with that specific mindset. Even further, the speaker must pay attention to the audience's reaction when they speak. If one example that usually works is boring a given audience, use another. The speaker must be able to be flexible with their words whether the audience is one individual, a small group, or an entire mega-church.

When deciding upon effective examples, it is often helpful to use imagery and metaphors. Keeping an audience's attention is much easier when you can explain complex concepts through real life examples anyone can understand. One interviewee uses a metaphor that compares climate change to a human body with a fever. While an audience may not believe the planet changing a few degrees is significant, they will understand how their child is sick with a fever of a few degrees and how the child becomes in danger of death after a few degrees beyond that. (Abdul-Matin) Metaphors like this can make the difference between a listener who is starting to understand but walks away from a speech and forgets, and someone that has a speech resonate with them and shares their epiphany with friends.

Flexibility in explaining one's message is necessary for being able to deliver the message to the audience properly. The skill of creating intriguing prose that makes the audience want to listen is necessary to deliver.

3. Always ask for feedback.

One theme through every interview was that no one seemed to have concrete feedback on what portions of their programs were and weren't effective. If a religious organization has an online resource an option would be to have users sign in and comment. Occasionally, the organization at hand could send an email out requesting feedback on how helpful the resource was and what improvements there could be. If there are several online resources, it is possible that one is not beneficial and another has potential but no one knows to develop it. For organizations that provide academic resources for faith leaders and their congregations, once each leader completes a certain portion or level of resources, request feedback. There is always room for improvement, no matter how effective the materials may be. For courses, request feedback from students during and after the completion of the course. If during, presentations can be

tapered to what educates them best. After the completion of a course, feedback can be used to modify the curriculum for the next session. Without feedback, it is impossible to spend resources properly.

4. Organize according to a business model

The business model takes much guesswork out of organizing. One interviewee's organization effectively notices their failures and pictures how to learn from their experiences and effectively applies these findings to their organization's project in question. (Wyman)

Every organization, non-profit or not, will benefit from thinking of their organization as a business. Instead of the goal being profit, it is change; measure change with feedback, not dollars. If the organization is small, compare it to a small business instead of a corporation. There needs to be someone to handle communications both within the organization and outside, a president, someone to handle finances- all the way down to the secretary that in charge of email correspondence and meeting minutes. As with any business, heads of the organization should have solid roles while the lower ranked "workers" have flexibility in their positions to fill changing needs. This is the same as a volunteer base.

A business model will not only increase the efficacy of the organization, it will also empower members with a sense of responsibility. Volunteers feel that they are part of something and working to make a difference only when the organization they are part of actually makes progress. While I say this, it is still important to consider message and knowing the volunteer (the audience in this case) to see what motivates them and modify the speech accordingly. If one compares an organization to a factory business, volunteers are the factory workers. Without them, there is no product to sell, in other words, no pamphlets created, no classes taught, no tables manned, etc.

5. Don't fear advocacy.

Many organizations fear advocacy because they do not fully understand their rights and do not want to risk their 501(c)(3) tax exemption. When reading the Internal Revenue Code, one can see that many advocacy programs are legal. The code states that tax-exempt organizations and churches cannot promote a single candidate. This fact is common knowledge. However, it is legal to have campaigns educate voters on what they are supporting. As long as their materials do not vie for one side or another, the organizations are simply making voters aware. Encouraging individuals to write to their local representative is protected under law, while telling them what to write is illegal for an organization with tax-exempt status. Education is prevalent throughout the religious environmental movement in generalities. People are educated on how their religious texts relate to care for the environment. Organizations should not fear going a step further and educating their audience on more specific problems in their own areas. If the group is concerned about their tax-exempt status, they should talk to another organization that is knowledgeable of the legal ways to educate people on how to act in their area. If there is still concern, they should feel comfortable contacting their local representative on whether or not their specific idea would put them at risk.

Closing Remark

With time and funds consistently limited, it is of the upmost importance that religiously minded activists focus their strategies to increase impact for their cause. Historic results should never be ignored because of age and should instead be put into context. One's message and its implementation must consistently evolve as part of a positive feedback loop. While my study focused on religiously minded environmentalists, these suggestions would apply to any religiously minded group.

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