

# Inquiring Minds Topic – 14 August 2015

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## The Next Culture War

David Brooks – *The New York Times* – 30 June 2015

Christianity is in decline in the United States. The share of Americans who describe themselves as Christians and attend church is dropping. Evangelical voters make up a smaller share of the electorate. Members of the millennial generation are detaching themselves from religious institutions in droves.

Christianity's gravest setbacks are in the realm of values. American culture is shifting away from orthodox Christian positions on homosexuality, premarital sex, contraception, out-of-wedlock childbearing, divorce and a range of other social issues. More and more Christians feel estranged from mainstream culture. They fear they will soon be treated as social pariahs, the moral equivalent of segregationists because of their adherence to scriptural teaching on gay marriage. They fear their colleges will be decertified, their religious institutions will lose their tax-exempt status, their religious liberty will come under greater assault.

The Supreme Court's gay marriage decision landed like some sort of culminating body blow onto this beleaguered climate. Rod Dreher, author of the truly outstanding book "How Dante Can Save Your Life," wrote an essay in Time in which he argued that it was time for Christians to strategically retreat into their own communities, where they could keep "the light of faith burning through the surrounding cultural darkness."

He continued: "We have to accept that we really are living in a culturally post-Christian nation. The fundamental norms Christians have long been able to depend on no longer exist."

Most Christian commentary has opted for another strategy: fight on. Several contributors to a symposium in the journal First Things about the court's Obergefell decision last week called the ruling the Roe v. Wade of marriage. It must be resisted and resisted again. Robert P. George, probably the most brilliant social conservative theorist in the country, argued that just as Lincoln persistently rejected the Dred Scott decision, so "we must reject and resist an egregious act of judicial usurpation."

These conservatives are enmeshed in a decades-long culture war that has been fought over issues arising from the sexual revolution. Most of the conservative commentators I've read over the past few days are resolved to keep fighting that war.

**I am to the left of the people I have been describing on almost all of these social issues. But I hope they regard me as a friend and admirer. And from that vantage point, I would just ask them to consider a change in course.**

**Consider putting aside, in the current climate, the culture war oriented around the sexual revolution.**

**Put aside a culture war that has alienated large parts of three generations from any consideration of religion or belief. Put aside an effort that has been a communications disaster, reducing a rich, complex and beautiful faith into a public obsession with sex. Put aside a culture war that, at least over the near term, you are destined to lose.**

**Consider a different culture war, one just as central to your faith and far more powerful in its persuasive witness.**

**We live in a society plagued by formlessness and radical flux, in which bonds, social structures and commitments are strained and frayed. Millions of kids live in stressed and fluid living arrangements. Many communities have suffered a loss of social capital. Many young people grow up in a sexual and social environment rendered barbaric because there are no common norms. Many adults hunger for meaning and goodness, but lack a spiritual vocabulary to think things through.**

**Social conservatives could be the people who help reweave the sinews of society. They already subscribe to a faith built on selfless love. They can serve as examples of commitment. They are equipped with a vocabulary to distinguish right from wrong, what dignifies and what demeans. They already, but in private, tithe to the poor and nurture the lonely.**

**The defining face of social conservatism could be this: Those are the people who go into underprivileged areas and form organizations to help nurture stable families. Those are the people who build community institutions in places where they are sparse. Those are the people who can help us think about how economic joblessness and spiritual poverty reinforce each other. Those are the people who converse with us about the transcendent in everyday life.**

**This culture war is more Albert Schweitzer and Dorothy Day than Jerry Falwell and Franklin Graham; more Salvation Army than Moral Majority. It's doing purposefully in public what social conservatives already do in private.**

**I don't expect social conservatives to change their positions on sex, and of course fights about the definition of marriage are meant as efforts to reweave society. But the sexual revolution will not be undone anytime soon. The more practical struggle is to repair a society rendered atomized, unforgiving and inhospitable. Social conservatives are well equipped to repair this fabric, and to serve as messengers of love, dignity, commitment, communion and grace.**