

Party conventions reveal new lines in culture wars

by [David Gibson](#) in the [August 31, 2016](#) issue

Since the late 1970s, the political battle lines in the culture wars have been clearly drawn and easily understood.

On one side, Republicans have claimed a moral high ground built on appeals to patriotism, family values, personal character, and traditional standards of sexuality.

Democrats, on the other side, have shunned anything that smacked of moralism, sticking to general principles about tolerance and respect for personal choices. Their bully pulpit was reserved for wonky arguments that Democrats were better at economic policies and running the government. Patriotism was often equated with militarism.

But by the time the closing gavel came down on July 28 at the Democratic National Convention, the battlefield in the culture wars had shifted.

A week earlier in Cleveland, the Republican convention had nominated Donald Trump, a New York real estate magnate and reality TV personality who has been married three times.

In Trump's speech accepting the nomination, which the political neophyte had wrested from the establishment by riding a wave of economic anxiety and stoking populist resentment, he said: "Any politician who does not grasp this danger is not fit to lead our country." He added, "I alone can fix it."

God went unmentioned and virtually unrecognized in Trump's speech, which made a passing reference to evangelicals who had supported him in the primaries.

Throughout the campaign Trump has struggled to speak convincingly or with any fluency about faith and his own beliefs, and he made no attempt to elevate his God-talk game in Cleveland.

Nor was Trump, or any of the other speakers over the four days of the Republican convention, much interested in traditional culture war topics.

Abortion was never cited in Trump's 75-minute speech, the first time since 1980 that a nominee has passed over the topic, and few others at the convention raised what is a premier issue for Christian conservatives—a fact widely noted by antiabortion groups.

Religious freedom, also a prominent agenda item for the religious right, was given short shrift, and Trump went out of his way to vow to protect “our LGBT citizens.” Silicon Valley tech mogul Peter Thiel even delivered a prime-time speech in which he said he was “proud to be gay” and declared that “fake culture wars only distract us from our economic decline.”

Then came the Democratic convention, meeting in the birthplace of the American Revolution to choose Hillary Clinton as the first woman to head a presidential ticket.

But after the first day, the convention's speakers increasingly spoke with the vocabulary of faith and moral righteousness.

President Obama gave an oration on Wednesday night, declaring that Trump was neither very Republican nor especially conservative, with some commenters comparing parts of Obama's speech to Ronald Reagan's rhetoric.

Promoting the common good, defending the weak, providing good jobs, and working for equal rights for all were recast in biblical terms, peaking with an address by William Barber, an African-American pastor from North Carolina known for leading Moral Mondays protests.

“I know it may sound strange,” Barber told the cheering crowd, “but I'm a conservative because I worked to conserve a divine tradition that teaches us to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.”

A retired four-star general, John Allen, flanked by other military leaders, gave a full-throated defense of the U.S. military and an endorsement of Clinton as commander-in-chief.

“The free peoples of the world look to America as the last best hope for peace and for liberty for all humanity, for we are the greatest country on this planet!” he said.

He was accompanied by regular chants of “USA! USA!” from the raucous crowd.

When Clinton herself took the stage, she hit all those themes and made sure to mention God, her Methodist faith, her love of country, and praise for the military and law enforcement.

This effort went beyond the idea of creating a religious left to counter the old religious right. In this new-old vision, LGBTQ families are to be valued as much as any other families, helping single and working mothers is a holy duty, and defending one's nation in the armed forces is an honorable calling—for women, LGBTQ people, and minorities, as much as anyone.

In perhaps the most controversial reworking, abortion got far more play in Philadelphia than in Cleveland, though as a culture war motif of the left in which the right to abortion is almost sacred. Unlike past conventions, abortion opponents were effectively shut out.

“Democrats are learning to present conservative cultural arguments for positions that used to be perceived as subversive,” wrote *Slate*'s William Saletan. “Liberals aren't always comfortable with this kind of talk. They're skittish about religion, lifestyle norms, or anything that smacks of judgment. But judgment, like sex, is something we all do, even if we don't admit it. We might as well do it right.”

—Religion News Service

*This article was edited on August 18, 2016.*