Are Christians really divided primarily by our views of sex?

By Steve Thorngate
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Interesting exchange last week between Rod Dreher and Andrew Sullivan, two fine bloggers often at odds with both major parties and sometimes with each other, too.

First Dreher posited that the major difference between traditional and progressive American Christians basically comes down to one thing: sex. That is, traditional vs. progressive beliefs about it. When it comes to the public square, argues Dreher—as distinct from various philosophical and theological debates with less immediate public relevance—the sex-related stuff pretty much says it all.

Sullivan countered that the big difference is *how much*, not *what*, we think about (other people's) sex. "The trads see sex as the critical issue," he said, "and we moderns see a whole host of other issues."

A bit of truth in each of these views perhaps, but I'm not so sure they're very different from each other. Dreher often disapprovingly highlights examples of progressive political and ethical talk around sex, examples notable for their *laissez-faire* attitude. That is: the difference between the sort of progressive sexual ethics Dreher has in mind and the sort of de-emphasis Sullivan does may be mostly semantic, a view that one needn't take a view.

In any case, I'm not sold on either one as a compelling framework for the difference between conservative and liberal American Christianity. I think if you want to boil this down to a single question, it has to be about **how we feel about the demise of Christian cultural hegemony**.

Not that the answers are simple. Some conservative Christians think the U.S. is or should be a nation defined by Christian values; needless to say, they aren't always thrilled by the suggestion that ours is just one of many religions here. Others are more realistic about this reality and perhaps less troubled by it; they tend to accept minority status and focus on the specific terms of their surrender to the pluralistic majority, as with the shift from actively opposing gay marriage itself to defending the conscience rights of its dissenters. A few have even tried to take both of these positions at once, scorning the establishment clause even as they stake their claim on the free exercise clause, as if the two were unrelated ideas the framers just happened to put in the same sentence. But whether you take the attitude of an evangelical activist or a holy remnant, the general theme is that the culture leaves Christianity behind to its own detriment.

Some progressive Christians aren't so sure. Yes, we mourn crumbling churches and institutions and the real ministry that happened in and through them. A lot of us even maintain that it would be a good thing if more people believed in Jesus! But we tend to see the faith's historical coziness with cultural and political power as mostly a bad thing. A smaller, humbler church can be a more faithful one; a marginal institution can be more serious about existing for marginal people. This is why we aren't generally moved by the argument that people leaving our churches proves we never should have gone soft on the gay thing. Better to be small and faithful than beholden to the dominant culture.

Dreher might object that these examples demonstrate his point: the philosophical difference may be about Christendom or authority or whatever, but the public, concrete result is about LGBT inclusion—that is, about sexuality. The problem is that it's about so many other public things, too. Different views of our post-Christian cultural moment suggest different views of (among other things) the classic First Amendment conflicts, from ceremonial prayer to public monuments to proselytizing military chaplains. These things may not be in the news as much as same-sex marriage and abortion and contraception, but they've hardly gone away. And while Dreher appeals to Terry Mattingly's three-question test for a conservative-vs.-liberal Christian typology—in which one's view of sex outside marriage is the only question related to the public square—I'm less convinced than ever that such a question is the most reliable way to categorize American Christians as left and right.

Especially since the live-and-let-live attitude about other people's sex lives is currently ascendant among *conservatives,* in particular as it relates to gays and lesbians. If conservative Christians change their views on this while staying otherwise more or less the same, does this mean they don't get to be conservative Christians any more? Meanwhile, in progressive faith circles I for one am hopeful that simple tolerance is more of a starting point than an endpoint, that the near future will find more and more of us talking about sexual ethics positively, in a way that refuses to choose between the "traditional" view and no view at all. Key to this is the willingess of those of us the old ways were kindest to—straight men—to shut up and mostly listen, to work quietly on unlearning the privilege we've internalized in even the most ostensibly progressive circles.

But your reaction to the sentence immediately prior to this one likely has as much to do with your views of privilege generally as with anything about sex or gender in particular. Lots of (overlapping) groups have enjoyed their share of privilege in this country over the years; Christians are one of them. Today, it's clearer than ever that American religious pluralism is a fact, not just an ideal. I'm convinced that how we Christians feel about this loss of privilege is as big a dividing line as any.