

Life without labels: Misleading terms

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The words *liberal* and *conservative*, Garry Wills once observed, are the most misleading terms in the world. They have been especially confusing in the U.S., where liberalism (meaning in this case support for a constitutionally limited state accompanied by private ownership of property and a capitalist marketplace) has been the only political tradition we've ever known, which means that everyone is some kind of liberal, and conservatives are the people who have attached themselves to an early stage of liberalism.

The labels get more confusing when issues of cultural expression, aesthetic taste, morality and theology are added to the mix. For example, what is a liberal or conservative in the moral sphere? For some philosophically minded folk, a moral liberal is a rationalist who believes that right and wrong must be stated in universally graspable principles. For other people, a moral liberal is just the opposite—it's someone who thinks that morality is highly dependent on social context. Sometimes *liberal* simply refers to someone with great sympathy for the downtrodden (which, depending on one's point of view, is either noble or sentimental). Or perhaps it simply refers to someone who's tolerant of the latest moral innovation, whatever it is (which, depending again on point of view, may be admirable or deplorable).

Defining a conservative in morality is just as tricky. She could be a libertarian, a "rational-choice" pragmatist, an agrarian traditionalist, an advocate of "family values"—or simply somebody who is intolerant of the latest moral innovation, whatever it is. Sometimes self-proclaimed moral conservatives insist that the views of the community should set the boundaries of public expression (hence the "conservative" attack on morally offensive art). But other self-proclaimed conservatives take just the opposite view (hence the "conservative" attack on the ethos of political correctness). So what is a conservative?

Given these rampant confusions, one is inclined as an editor to try to eliminate the use of these terms. They usually serve only to invoke a preferred stereotype,

thereby nudging the reader to applaud or decry the subject at hand without thinking about it very closely.

In the service of further undermining stereotypes and labels, we cite the results of a recent social survey which revealed that the issues of most concern to most religious people in the U.S. are not prayer in schools or abortion but racial reconciliation, environmental protection and advocacy for the poor. Robert Wuthnow of Princeton finds these data significant, since they refute the notion that religious groups are interested only in “conservative issues.” It turns out, he says, that “progressive issues” are of “enormous importance to people.”

This is indeed interesting news in an era when, we are frequently told, “liberalism” is in widespread retreat and in which the word *liberal* itself is in disfavor (which is no doubt why Wuthnow opts for the term *progressive*). Perhaps the lesson is that the U.S. is not so “conservative” after all.

On the other hand, if there is widespread support among “conservative” America for racial reconciliation, environmental protection and advocacy for the poor, then maybe we can conclude that these are actually “conservative” causes. We’ll wait for the conservatives to tell us otherwise.