

**Religion in the Statehouse:
Negotiating Prophetic Demands and Political Realities**

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THE GOVERNOR AND THE ARCHBISHOP

In August 1995, after nearly a decade of state tinkering with various welfare reforms, Wisconsin Governor Tommy G. Thompson introduced a comprehensive plan known as “Wisconsin Works” or “W-2” which would, to borrow Bill Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign mantra, “end welfare as we know it.” The Wisconsin State Assembly passed the plan by a margin of 73 to 25, the State Senate concurred by a similarly wide margin (27 to 6) in March 1996, and the Governor signed the bill into law that April. By now, the main provisions of this variety of welfare reform are familiar, but at the time they were a radical departure from the existing policy. Eliminating the “entitlement” aspect of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) by putting time limits on receipt of benefits and requiring work or job training was expected to have dramatic consequences for the lives of those it touched.

Among the most consistent and outspoken critics of certain aspects of W-2 was the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church. Wisconsin’s Catholic bishops reacted to the Governor’s welfare reform plan by issuing a twelve page statement, *Reforming Welfare by Valuing Families*, and holding a press conference in the heart of Milwaukee’s central city. Subsequently, the bishops’ public policy arm, the Wisconsin Catholic Conference, was actively involved in the debates over W-2 in the legislature. The most dramatic direct conflict between the Governor and the Church, however, came in the summer of 1996 when Wisconsin was seeking the federal waivers necessary to implement the program. Although the W-2 legislation

had already been signed into law in Wisconsin, this administrative process gave opponents another opportunity for critique. In July, Milwaukee Archbishop Rembert Weakland, well-known for his involvement in the United States Catholic Conference's pastoral letter on the economy, *Economic Justice for All*, wrote an editorial that was published in the *Washington Post*. Weakland called W-2's failure to protect children and its repeal of the "safety net" for the poor "not morally justifiable."¹ In response, at a public news conference, Governor Thompson demeaned the archbishop, calling him "Weakling" (rather than Weakland) and suggesting that he "should apologize to the people of the state of Wisconsin." Thompson's most widely-quoted line mocked Weakland by reference to the fact that the archbishop was completing his dissertation on Ambrosian chant at Columbia University. The Governor declared to the assembled media: "*The archbishop should come back to Wisconsin and read his Bible instead of playing the piano in New York.*"

This face-off between the governor and the archbishop caused quite a stir in Wisconsin, and provoked a range of public responses. For some observers, it was an example of religion overstepping its bounds to become politically involved. In a letter to the editor in Madison's *Capitol Times*, Douglas Schewe maintained, "I believe Milwaukee Archbishop Rembert Weakland is out of line using the prestige and title of his office to write the *Washington Post* on a public issue."² An unsigned editorial in Madison's *Wisconsin State Journal* argued, "On this issue, the Catholic Church in Wisconsin has clearly moved beyond its mission—and duty—to speak out on moral concerns. The church has taken a political role in this debate, with representatives of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference issuing position papers, writing newspaper opinion columns, and engaging in what appears to be old-fashioned lobbying."³

Others found Thompson's criticism of the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Milwaukee out of line. The *Sheboygan Press* commented in an unsigned editorial, "We would hope the governor would confine his remarks to a reasoned response on the issues and leave Bible interpretation to the clergy."⁴ State Senate Majority Leader Chuck Chvala called Thompson's demand that Weakland apologize "outrageous" and charged that he had reached "a new level of arrogance" in criticizing Weakland for standing up for the poor.⁵ An unsigned editorial in the *Capitol Times* compared Thompson to England's King Henry II, who said of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, "Who will free me from this turbulent priest?" The editorial reminded readers that Becket was soon murdered by King Henry's knights and concluded, "When a moral leader steps forward to remind the governor of his duties, Thompson resorts to insults. We are thankful that Tommy Thompson does not have the authority his predecessors did to silence a critic. But we could not help but hear the regal echo of King Henry II in our governor's pronouncements of recent days."⁶

A third view was that the whole episode was surreal or silly, if not both. And there is evidence in support of this view. One newspaper characterized the governor as turning "into an unguided missile when the talk on welfare became biblical." A reporter at the news conference asked Thompson, "Wasn't Jesus a socialist?" To which Thompson responded, "I thought he was a free enterpriser. He was a carpenter's son and I thought he was doing well. He was able to change water into wine. Now that to me is the classic definition of a guy in the entrepreneurial spirit."⁷

I would like to suggest that these three perspectives provide only partial views of the complex relationship between religion and politics in contemporary America. The point is not

simply that the archbishop or the governor had overstepped his bounds, nor that the event was just silly. Rather, this episode highlights the inherent tension involved when religion and politics meet. In drawing attention to this tension, I am working in a terrain familiar to those seeking to understand the relationship between religion and society more generally, from Max Weber to Ernst Troeltsch to H. Richard Niebuhr. As Niebuhr put it, “Christianity, whether defined as church, creed, ethics, or movement of thought, itself moves between the poles of Christ and culture. The relation of these two authorities constitutes its problem.”⁸ The relationship between Christ and culture as competing authorities represents what Niebuhr correctly calls an “enduring problem.”

Like *Christ and Culture*, this work also concerns itself with an enduring problem in the relationship between religion and society. Unlike *Christ and Culture* it engages that problem from a sociological rather than a theological perspective. Where Niebuhr asks about the relation of “Christ and culture,” I ask about the relation of religion and public life. As I set about answering this question, I adapt Niebuhr’s insights in two related movements. I first *generalize* Niebuhr’s specifically Christian language so as to make the framework applicable to all religious traditions (at least potentially). I then *concretize* the analysis by focusing on the way religion is used in a specific public square (as opposed to the fictive “The Public Square” about which so much has been written). The “problem” of relating Christ and culture becomes a more general problem of relating religion and culture, a problem that is worked out not in theory but in specific practices in particular organizational contexts. Specifically, this paper examines the lobbying practices of religious advocacy organizations in the Wisconsin state legislature to understand how they negotiate the tension between the prophetic demands of faith and the political realities

of this secular political institution.

NEGOTIATING THE PROPHETIC AND POLITICAL IN THE LEGISLATIVE ARENA

If political advocacy is understood as “any organized effort to influence the direction of public policy,” *religious advocacy* refers to such efforts by religious groups.⁹ This study of religious advocacy builds on the pioneering work of political scientists Allen Hertzke and Daniel Hofrenning, both of whom conducted comprehensive studies of religious lobbying in Washington, DC. Religious lobbyists in the nation’s capitol, according to Hofrenning, “offer a principled and moralistic vision. Unlike most other lobbyists, they seek nothing less than the transformation of American politics to a higher moral plane.” Obviously, religious lobbyists in contemporary America are not themselves prophets, but they share with the Old Testament prophets a proclivity for moral exhortations critiquing the status quo and advancing a vision of a new society.¹⁰ Michael Blumenfeld, a lobbyist and Executive Director of the Wisconsin Jewish Conference exemplifies this view when he maintains, “In my view it’s not only appropriate, it’s a responsibility for some religious organizations to be involved in political discourse and to be involved in advocacy. In the Jewish tradition there is the concept of *tikkun olam*. The idea of a responsibility, literally some people say, for perfecting the world, repairing the world. It’s an obligation to make it a better place for everybody. That sounds corny, but I think that’s a driving factor in a lot of this.” Central to the prophetic mode of engagement is the projection of a religious voice into the public arena.¹¹

In his work, Hertzke notes the downside of this prophetic motivation, what he calls the

“prophetic temptation.” Hertzke observed that religious advocacy groups are often reluctant or ill-equipped to engage in the “detail work,” the “micro-process,” the “legislative sausage-making,” which is central to the legislative process. The prophetic pull toward purity and away from strategy and mundanity in the legislative arena serves to undermine the effectiveness of religious advocacy. Hertzke concludes that “insider lobbying is mundane, technical, incremental, and does not lend itself to prophetic stands.”¹² Not surprisingly, one trend among religious groups in Washington, DC in the years since Hertzke’s analysis is toward playing more by the secular rules of the political game. This is true both of groups on the religious “left” and the religious “right.” As Brian Steensland has written, Mainline Protestant political advocacy on their bread and butter issue of social welfare over the period 1964 to 2000 “seemed to be at the mercy of broad oppositional forces. . . . [T]he mainline’s unique moral voice became weaker as more technical, ‘pie-chart’ advocacy came to be prominent. . . . Most of the mainline community’s writings on poverty was virtually indistinguishable from that found in secular publications such as the *New Republic* or *The Nation*.” Similarly, Matthew Moen has chronicled the changing nature of the Christian Right as it has accommodated the secular political system, for example, by employing “the more familiar and widely accepted language of liberalism, with its focus on rights, equality, and opportunity. Virtually all of its issues have been recast in that rhetoric.”¹³

The tension between the prophetic demands of faith and the realities of secular political institutions can easily become horns of dilemma for religious groups active in legislative politics. I argue that there are three *ideal-typical* ways religious groups negotiate the tension between their prophetic calling and political reality: *separation*, *subsumption*, and *combination* (see Figure 1).¹⁴

–Figure 1 about here–

The first two strategies—what I call the “prophetic strategy” (separation) and the “pragmatic strategy” (subsumption)—release the tension by moving the group into a wholly prophetic role or a wholly political role. There are clear benefits to these moves: separation allows moral purity and subsumption facilitates political effectiveness. Of course, these benefits come at a price. By pragmatically moving into an exclusively political role, the groups may achieve more legislative victories, but at the cost of bringing their distinctively religious vision into the public square. By moving into an exclusively prophetic role, they may maintain their principles inviolate, but at the expense of advancing public policy in concrete ways. But there is a third way: what I call “ongoing negotiation” of the competing demands of the prophetic and political so as to maintain the tension between them. The benefit of this strategy is faithful engagement, though the cost can be political loneliness.

Given this analytical framework, the contributions of this paper are twofold. First, I document the existence of three distinct strategies of political engagement by religious advocacy organizations in the Wisconsin state legislative arena. Second, I explore the key differences between the groups which pursue these different strategies, focusing in particular on the interaction between theological tradition and institutional context.¹⁵

**THE PROPHETIC STRATEGY:
RELIGION STANDS OUTSIDE POLITICS**

Hofrenning’s characterization of the outlook of religious lobbyists in the nation’s capital

as “prophetic” applies to many religious advocates in Wisconsin as well.¹⁶ From the prophetic perspective, religious advocacy does not exist solely to achieve political victories, narrowly understood (e.g., the passage of a particular piece of legislation). Involvement in the public sphere must be aimed at elevating political discourse to a moral level and challenging legislators to consider the moral foundations and implications of their decisions.

The comments of Rev. Dr. Jerry Folk, the Executive Director of the Wisconsin Council of Churches, are typical of this view:

The goal that we have is to contribute to the renewal of society, to the renewal of democratic society, to contribute to the well being of all the members of society, and to contribute to a healthy relationship between the human species and the rest of the environment on which human well-being is dependent. There is a saying by a 2nd century bishop by the name of Irenaeus of Lyon. He said that the glory of God is a human being fully alive. And so our purpose in working in what many people call politics—that is, broadly speaking, on an agenda to try to make the world a better place, the polis—our goal is to create the conditions, to help create the conditions, that enable every human being to be full alive. I don’t think that when you are starving you can be full alive as God wants you to be. Or when you are suffering from ignorance and disease, and don’t have access to healing or knowledge you can’t be as fully alive as God wants you to be. So our whole goal is to say, if you're going to change this, change it in a way that allows more people to be fully alive.

Rev. Folk's reluctance even to characterize the Council of Churches's activity as "political" is indicative of the prophetic aversion to any narrow, instrumental understanding of politics. Jonalu Johnstone, the minister at James Reeb Unitarian-Universalist congregation in Madison who was involved in the "Coming Out Coming Together" coalition, even volunteered the word "prophetic" without prompting:

Yamane: Now, in terms of your own background, do you feel like you were sort of a political person from the start?

Johnstone: Well, yeah, that's probably true. And I don't know if I'd use the word political. I think I would probably tend more toward using the word *prophetic*. I think that the prophetic part of the mystery is a very important one. I think the prophetic voice is an important one. I think that when we have a strong sense of what is right and wrong, it needs to be said and it needs to be said publicly and strongly.

Whereas politics has been defined as "the art of the possible," the prophetic mode is fundamentally concerned with the ultimate morality of issues under consideration, of "what is right and wrong."

Rev. Johnstone's view resonates strongly with other religious advocates who adopt a prophetic stance, such as Rev. Joseph Ellwanger. Rev. Ellwanger is a Lutheran minister (ELCA) and president of Milwaukee Inncity Congregations Allied for Hope (MICAH), a group that was

actively critical of certain elements of Governor Tommy Thompson's effort to reform the welfare system. His testimony on "W-2" called attention to the sacred nature of work and giving glory to God through work. He explained this attention to God in his testimony: "It's true that state legislators do not think in God terms very often, although probably 90 percent of them claim to be people of faith. And I think they need to be reminded of their faith and reminded that if we're talking justice, we're talking morality. One of the main points morality assumes is that there is a higher power to whom we are responsible and therefore there is such a thing as a moral right and wrong. So I think it's important to call legislators to the foundations of their own faith." Rev. Ellwanger summarizes his approach to religious advocacy as "calling all governmental bodies to accountability on justice issues."

This impulse to make strong public stands on behalf of what is "right," to hold government accountable, to foster the renewal of society, and the like, can also become a temptation among these groups to stand outside the political process. The Wisconsin Council of Churches, for example, spends only about one percent of its time and energy in direct communication with the legislature. And even when appearing to speak to the legislature—as when the Council of Churches adopted a statement on welfare reform in Wisconsin and sent it to all state legislators—Rev. Folk maintains, "it was certainly shared with the legislators, but it's most important function was to be a teaching implement for the Christian community. The Church and its people were our primary audience. The legislators and society in general were invited to listen in." From the prophetic perspective, involvement in politics is dangerous. Rev. Folk cautions, "What we need is an agency that is a leaven in the body of society calling people to what is best in them. If we get totally sucked up in the political dynamic it really reduces our

perspective and we become too easily pigeon-holed. We have to constantly come back to our roots in the Prophets and in Jesus, to remember that power comes from God and we need to trust that and speak out for what is right.”

The idea that religion and politics are separate spheres of expertise was held by Rev. Charles Wolfe. Rev. Wolfe is a United Church of Christ minister who appeared before the legislature on the issue of same sex marriage. He was encouraged to testify by opponents of a bill that would define “marriage” in Wisconsin as involving one man and one woman because of his involvement with “Coming Out Coming Together,” a coalition of churches that are “open and affirming” of gay-lesbian-bisexual individuals. During his testimony, he proclaimed, “We worship the living God whom the Bible proclaims and who is revealed to us in a crucified and risen Lord from whom we have received the Great Commandment that we love God with all our being and our neighbors as ourselves. We don’t turn our backs on money lenders and bankers. We don’t execute homosexuals.” Of his strong religious language, Rev. Wolfe later told me, “I think for me it is important that my testimony used the perspective from which I come. I’m not a politician. I’m not a sociologist. I’m not a biologist. I’m a clergy person, a Christian clergy person, and that is my area of expertise. And therefore it is from that perspective that I offer a few points on this legislation. That is who I am as the pastor of this church, which is a theological body and not a political body primarily.”

This strategy of separating the two spheres effectively reduces the tension between the prophetic and political. The groups that adopt the prophetic strategy are less interested in gaining concrete political victories than in witnessing to their faith. They are compelled to take a moral stand on issues even when they have no realistic hope of affecting outcomes. When Rev.

Johnstone testified before the legislature on a bill which would effectively ban same sex marriage in Wisconsin, “I went up there feeling like we weren’t going to make any difference at all, to be perfectly honest. I went up there feeling like it was something that we had to say simply because a voice needed to be raised that said, ‘This is wrong.’ I thought we had no chance of changing anybody’s mind, but it simply had to be said.” In the end, this prophetic strategy allows religious advocates to be *morally pure* in their critiques, but this prophetic purity comes at the cost of political ineffectiveness and, at times, *irrelevance*.

THE PRAGMATIC STRATEGY: POLITICS SUBSUMES RELIGION

In contrast to the “prophetic temptation” of standing outside the political process, another approach to the religion-politics tension is the “pragmatic strategy.” In this strategy of engagement the tension is eliminated by subsuming religion under politics. These religious groups adopt secular political strategies in the interest of legislative effectiveness. Perhaps the most extreme response is that adopted by Wisconsin Right-to-Life, a group whose staff and membership is overwhelmingly Christian, but which pursues a wholly secular strategy in its lobbying activities. According to Susan Armacost, Legislative Director of Right-to-Life, “as an individual I believe firmly that babies are created by God and all the [medical] technology [e.g., ultrasound] comes from minds that have been created by God. But in terms of how we argue that out in the public, we believe that the best way to reach the minds and hearts of the majority of the people—which is what we’re try to aim for, to save the babies’ lives—is to look at the objective scientific facts, which we think speak for themselves. We don’t argue on religious grounds in

public. That's not our *public* position."

In contrast, the other major pro-life organization in the state, Pro-Life Wisconsin, claims to remain true to its Evangelical Christian roots and prophetic mandate publicly as well as privately. Its literature includes the following statement: "Our principles are founded in God's Word, not what the public opinion polls say or the current political mood. Our mission is to be obedient and faithful in proclaiming the Truth." But when it came to their concrete political actions, God's Word became very quiet indeed. In its public testimony on partial birth abortion in the 1997-98 biennium, Pro-Life Wisconsin favored the *exclusive* use of secular over religious arguments. This was by design, according to Pro-Life Wisconsin Director of Communication Greg Chesmore. As he put it, "Obviously you want to make sure that you have good sources, that you have documentation of the things that you say, specifics. When you're dealing with public policy you can't just look at it from a faith perspective. You've got to be able to present other perspectives and that includes specifically on these issues the medical, the ethical, the personal testimony." Although Chesmore says "you can't *just* look at it from a faith perspective," in their testimony they did not articulate their position *at all* from a faith perspective. There was no prophetic voice to be heard from Pro-Life Wisconsin.

Conservative Christians have been criticized often for pursuing an uncompromising approach to politics and for an alleged tendency toward "Bible-thumping" in public. Marvin Munyon, a born-again Christian and head of the evangelical Family Research Institute (formerly the *Christian* Research Institute) is painfully aware not only of this stereotype, but of the ineffectiveness of forceful invocations of Biblical authority before the legislature. As he put it when asked why his materials on same sex marriage included definitions of marriage from

dictionaries and state statutes but not from religious sources: “I’m not ashamed of anything in the Bible. I come from a very strong Christian background, but I find that in the public policy arena, that isn’t always the argument that is most effective. I think we need to be factual. I try not to be highly emotional and that type of thing, but put things out there that are clear that people can understand and I think those things [dictionary definitions of marriage] are pretty easy for people to understand regardless of where they are in the issue.” Again, though not as extreme as Wisconsin Right-to-Life in denying religious arguments, Munyon still prefers to argue his case in secular rather than religious terms—terms which he believes will be broadly appealing rather than divisive.

Despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of legislators in Wisconsin profess to be Christian, Munyon recognizes that the presentation of issues in public before the legislature is different than the way an issue might be treated in a more private setting, such as a church. The failure of some of his colleagues and constituents in the Evangelical Christian community to recognize this is a source of some frustration to Munyon:

Unfortunately, the religious community has a difficult time, I believe, of expressing themselves in the public arena. Because we have people, for instance, at these hearings. You know legislators are not there to have somebody come in and open the Bible and start reading Bible verses to them. They’re dealing with a specific issue and they want to know something about that issue. I try to tell people that a public hearing is not the podium of your church, it’s not a place to preach to these people. We need to approach them, and certainly you can use your

Christian background to where you're coming from, but it's not a Sunday morning church service. And I've heard people, sad to say, tell legislators if you vote for this bill you're going to go to hell or whatever. That is unfortunate because that's counterproductive in my way of thinking.

This strategy of translating religious motives into secular arguments reduces the tension between religion and politics by meeting politics on its own terms. It conforms to the belief that, when religious groups get involved in the political sphere, if they are to be taken seriously, they must adhere to the political rules of the game. According to Billings and Scott, "such 'rules' include procedural rationality" and "recourse to knowledge and evidence, each of which encourages accommodation to secular norms of rationality and the eventual moderation of demands."¹⁷

In order to secure legislative outcomes, religious groups must engage in the practical affairs of insider lobbying. *Effectiveness* is the primary benefit of the pragmatic strategy. However, adhering too closely to the rules of the political game has costs. One interviewee characterized it as a "Faustian bargain": "I worry that we win occasional legislative victories at the cost of forgoing our ability to criticize the political process itself. It's nice to be and be seen as an insider, a political operative, but there are times when I just want to step back and tell a legislator: 'God damn you if you vote for that.' But I don't feel I can without losing my status." The principal cost of this strategy, then, is *cooptation*.

ONGOING NEGOTIATION:

RELIGION-POLITICS TENSION MAINTAINED

“Ongoing negotiation” offers a third way, a *via media* between the prophetic and pragmatic strategies. As this is a “road less traveled” in the Wisconsin state legislative arena, in this final section, I will pay extended attention to the Wisconsin Catholic Conference, exploring how its staff balances the prophetic and the political missions it is equally mandated to carry out in such a way as to maintain its effectiveness in the legislative arena yet not lose sight of its broader purpose.

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, many Catholics were drawn to one or another of two poles, both of which maintained there was no tension between the Catholic religion and secular politics. As Jose Casanova has written, “Catholic liberals like John F. Kennedy and conservative Catholics like Cardinal Spellman both shared the conviction that there could be no conflict between the Catholic church and the American republic—for President Kennedy because there was a wall of separation between private faith and the modern secular world, for Cardinal Spellman because Catholicism and American patriotism had become undistinguishably fused in the American civil religion. These were the two minds of American Catholicism at the beginning of the Vatican Council.” But, Casanova continues, Vatican II offered an alternative to the collapse or complete separation of the two spheres. “As the Roman *aggiornamento* reached American shores, it became obvious that both types of Catholicism were being challenged by a new understanding of the relation between religion and the world. Both the liberal wall of separation and the civil religion fusion were put into question. . . . A new tension, this time voluntary and purposeful, between Catholicism and Americanism emerged. For the first time, the Catholic faith dared to challenge American public affairs.”¹⁸

Casanova points to three council documents as particularly crucial to the emerging

Catholic understanding of role of the church in the modern world. *Dignitatis humanae* (the Declaration on Religious Freedom) recognizes the fundamental human right to freedom of conscience and in doing so accepts the disestablishment of religion and separation of church and state. *Gaudium et spes* (the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World) “represents the lifting of the Catholic *anathema* that was hanging over modernity and the final acceptance of the legitimacy of the modern *saeculum*, of the modern age and of the modern world.” Finally, *Christus dominus* (the Decree on the Bishops’ Pastoral Office in the Church) “stresses the collective, collegial nature of the episcopate as successors to the college of the Apostles, who in communion with the pope exercise jointly the pastoral and magisterial office of the entire church. The decree also recommends that the institution of synods and councils of the early church be renewed, and it mandates the establishment of national and regional episcopal conferences.”¹⁹

The call for regional episcopal conferences in *Christus dominus* had an immediate impact in the United States. Prior to the close of Vatican II in 1965, only five states—Michigan, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Texas—had formally established conferences of Catholic bishops. Twenty-nine more states established conferences in the years since then, with the majority (17) being founded between 1966 and 1970.²⁰ The Wisconsin Catholic Conference (WCC), which brings together the five dioceses in the state, is a product of this post-Council milieu. It was founded in 1969 by the bishops of Wisconsin as a means of fulfilling the vision of Vatican Council II that the church be more involved in the world. As the WCC’s literature states, “With the message of the Gospel and the social teachings of the Church as its foundation, the WCC offers a specifically Catholic contribution to state and federal public policy debates.” During the

time frame of this study, the four person staff included two registered lobbyists, Executive Director John Huebscher and Associate Director Sharon Schmeling.

Huebscher has considerable experience working in Wisconsin state government. Legislative sausage-making does not turn his stomach, and in fact he sees it as necessary to establish the legitimacy of WCC in the legislature. Huebscher repeatedly stressed in our interview, “I think there is a temptation or tendency to view religious groups as idealistic do-gooders who don't understand the ‘real world.’ Which is why being thoughtful and informed and being able to come in with data and analysis is so important to me. To quickly disabuse them of the fact that we don't know what we're talking about.” Providing quality information to legislators is a vehicle for the Catholic Conference to achieve its ends by solidifying its legitimacy as a political actor in the eyes of legislators. As Huebscher put it, “When I meet with a legislator, [the strategic objective] is to either establish or continue to cement their view of the Conference as an agency that provides thoughtful, useful information, so that even if they're disinclined to go with us on the issue of the moment that they will see in us someone that they would want to hear from again. And that they would find it useful to hear from again because what we say would be thoughtful, informed, and helpful to them as they make a decision on an issue.” At the same time, political legitimacy (and the effectiveness that can fall from it) is not an end in itself. Were this the bottom line for the WCC, we would say they have opted for the pragmatic strategy in the same way some other religious groups in Wisconsin have.

Despite their concern for political legitimacy, the WCC staff also privileges the particular authoritative tradition that provides the foundation for their policy work. For Sharon Schmeling, the Associate Director of the WCC from 1992 to 1999, how to negotiate representing the

Catholic tradition in a pluralistic public square is a source of, as she described it, *tension*:

I do sometimes wonder and I struggled early on with a kind of a dual tension of on the one hand, feeling like we're always quoting the Pope and a lot of people don't give a rip what the Pope says. Not only because they're not Catholic, but because they're anti-Catholic. And we are arguing from an authority that's not one these people recognize. So is that a useless argument? That tension exists alongside the idea that we need to articulate our values in a very clear religious focus because that's who we are. I'm not afraid of that, I'm not shy of that, because I believe in those things. But for me it was a tension of what kind of argumentation do you want to use? Do you want to use an argument from authority, which is then the Pope and the bishops? Or do you want to argue more from a religiously-based sense of logic and use some moral persuasion [saying] here is a real logical answer to this problem? So there's a tension I think I still struggle with.

Schmeling and Huebscher do not attempt to resolve the tension, but continue to live with it and struggle with it from issue to issue and session to session.

In practice, one way the Conference lives with this tension is by articulating the authoritative tradition of the Church (e.g., Papal encyclicals, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, pastoral letters of the Bishops), then using secular policy analysis in the service of prudential judgements on particular policy issues in its legislative testimony. For example, the WCC testimony on a bill which would require certain employers receiving state grants to pay

their employees a “living wage” began by explaining the position of the Catholic Church on a living wage, mentioning in turn Pope John Paul II’s encyclical letter on work (*Laborem exercens*) and the US Catholic bishops’ longstanding support of a living wage. It then invokes data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics that highlight the large number of Wisconsinites who make less than a living wage but would not benefit from the legislation in order to argue for stronger living wage legislation. Another example comes from a proposal to expand the ability of employers to discriminate in hiring a worker on the basis of the worker’s conviction record. Again, the WCC testimony on the issue begins by noting the rootedness of the WCC’s opposition to the legislation in Catholic social teaching. Then the testimony presents data culled from the Department of Corrections and the Uniform Crime Reporting Program which document the potentially adverse impact of the legislation. In both cases, it was not deemed sufficient for the WCC to argue its position solely on the basis of Catholic social teaching. Some analysis of the impact of the legislation needed to be presented, as well. But for the most part, the WCC staff has not allowed itself to focus solely on the effects of legislation without regard to its normative perspective. In this way, the WCC is able to “witness” to the Catholic faith at the same time it engages in “lobbying” on issues.²¹ These two phases come together in what I call “*faithful engagement.*”

Being involved in the detail work of legislation also makes the WCC staff more at ease with the necessity of *compromise* and the reality of *incrementalism* in the policy-making process than many prophetic religious lobbyists seem to be. This is true particularly with regard to the politics of abortion, where unwillingness to compromise is rampant among activists on both sides of the issue.²² Schmeling, who was primarily responsible for advocacy on abortion, characterizes the WCC perspective as follows:

It's a question of political realities. What are the political realities of the moment that are going to make what we want to happen possible? And so within that, there's deviation. But you're never deviating on your absolute principle. You're never saying, "Oh okay, abortion is alright." You're saying, "Well, abortion is not alright, but on this day in this moment in history this is the best thing we can achieve for unborn children, so we're going to go after it. But we're going to do it in a way that legislators know that we think that it's not enough." Some people might view that as compromise, but the Holy Father's guidelines on imperfect legislation in *Evangelium vitae* [The Gospel of Life] are helpful, to help people understand why that's not compromising. That sometimes in an imperfect world on this side of the cross, given the fact that we're all tainted by original sin, getting a ban on partial birth abortion might be the best you can get. Would it be better to ban all abortion? You bet. But that's not politically feasible. So instead you go for what is politically feasible and we work on that and we take it one step at a time. All the while articulating our preferred position that all unborn life should be protected.

Huebscher argued similarly, noting that Catholicism as a religious tradition itself provides resources to negotiate the situation. In theological language similar to Schmeling's, Huebscher explains:

I think it's an application of the way the Catholic tradition looks at life. We're

called to do the best we can, and we're called to hold up the ideal. You know, the Gospel says, "Be perfect as your Father is perfect." Some interpret that to mean you have to be as good as God is. Other people think the correct interpretation is [that] you value everybody, everybody's important, realizing that you yourself are flawed. The perfection is in your commitment to the good, realizing that you're never going to get there. So you hold up the ideal, and you say, this is where we ought to go, and then you make your peace with the fact that we're all made of clay and we're not going to get there in this life.

Here we see the theological resources of Catholicism helping the staff to negotiate the prophetic and the political.

In the end, we arrive once again at the intersection of religion and politics and find the tension of representing a religious tradition in a pluralistic and secularized political institution. In maintaining this tension, rather than seeking its release through prophetic separation or pragmatic subsumption, there is no simple resolution for the staff of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference. There is only an ongoing struggle to balance the competing demands of a prophetic outlook and the realities of the policy-making process. If the benefit of this is *faithful engagement*, the cost is the *loneliness* entailed in being neither the pure prophetic outsider nor the pure political insider. As is often the case in the Catholic tradition, political advocacy is not a matter of choosing to be "either/or" but of being simultaneously "both/and."

THEOLOGICAL TRADITION, INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT,

AND POLITICAL STRATEGY

Having described the contours of three strategies for negotiating the tension between the prophetic demands of faith and the political realities of secular institutions, and documented their existence in the Wisconsin state legislative arena, I turn now to an explanation of the systematic relationship between these strategies and the types of groups that pursue them. The attentive reader will have noticed—and Table 1 makes explicit—the correlation between theological tradition and political strategy in the Wisconsin State Legislature during the years under consideration here. The prophetic strategy was primarily pursued by Mainline Protestant or theologically liberal groups (e.g., Wisconsin Council of Churches), the pragmatic strategy by Evangelical Protestant or theologically conservative groups (e.g., Wisconsin Christian Coalition), and ongoing negotiation by Roman Catholic groups (e.g., Wisconsin Catholic Conference).

–Table 1 about here–

Clearly, there is nothing inherent in any biblical religious tradition that *determines* the shape of their advocacy. As Hertzke put it, “the tension between a vision of religious purity and a desire for political efficacy characterizes most religious groups.”²³ All have the capacity for prophetic critique and all can adopt pragmatic modes of political engagement as well. For example, in one chapter of *The Quiet Hand of God: Faith-Based Activism and the Public Role of Mainline Protestantism*, Steensland documents that Mainline advocacy on welfare policy has become increasingly indistinguishable from secular lobbying, and in the next chapter Moody finds Mainline advocacy on the environment robustly prophetic. Similarly, Moen has traced the

changing political strategy of the Religious Right in the legislative arena “from revolution to evolution.” And Yamane’s research on state Catholic conferences reveals considerable diversity in Catholic advocacy from state to state.²⁴

Given this diversity, it is important to consider how the context of advocacy conditions a group’s engagement. The broad cultural context affecting the work of religious advocacy organizations was a rightward shift in the public mood in the United States over the past three decades. The immediate institutional context in the Wisconsin State Legislature during the 1995-96 and 1997-98 biennia, reflecting and reinforcing the broader cultural movement, was the reign of Governor Tommy Thompson. During his unprecedented four terms as governor (from 1987 until his appointment as Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services in 2001), Thompson pursued an ambitious conservative policy agenda he called the “new progressivism,” rhetorically playing off the historically liberal Progressive political tradition in Wisconsin.²⁵

Thompson’s effectiveness in pursuing this agenda was considerable. In addition to welfare reform and pro-life legislation on abortion, the agenda included: a revision of the juvenile justice code to lower the age of delinquency to 10 and eliminate the right of juveniles to have a jury trial; tort reform legislation to limit the amount someone can recover in a medical malpractice case for non-economic damages caused by the negligence of a health care provider; legislation authorizing the Department of Corrections to implement a “secure work program” (i.e., chain gangs); and on down the list. Under these political conditions, conservatives were on the offensive and liberals were on the defensive. To the extent that theological traditions map onto the liberal-conservative political divide, theological conservatives would be politically “in” and theological liberals would be politically “out.” With respect to Mainline Protestants and

Evangelicals, this alignment is clear. As individuals, Mainline Protestants may be political centrists, as Wuthnow and Evans suggest, but in her study Laura Olson finds their national political advocacy offices “have long advocated liberal political agendas.”²⁶ Similarly, the orientation of individual Evangelicals to social change may stress the importance of personal influence over systematic engagement with the political system, as Smith and his colleagues argue, but in their political advocacy Evangelical organizations do not shy away from seeking social reform geared at reasserting the conservative values of a “Christian America.”²⁷ In stark partisan terms, the agenda of Mainline Protestant organizations aligns with the Democratic Party and the agenda of Evangelical Protestant organizations aligns with the Republican Party.

Conferences of Catholic bishops do not fit as easily into these dichotomies.²⁸ They alone cross-cut the boundaries established by the partisan political system, taking conservative positions on issues of life (abortion, euthanasia, cloning) and liberal positions on issues of social justice (welfare, capital punishment, health care). Of course, the bishops will immediately respond that their issue positions are neither conservative nor liberal but represent a “Consistent Ethic of Life”—what Chicago Cardinal Joseph Bernardin called a “seamless garment”—across all of these issues. Whatever language we use to characterize them, the fact is that the bishops are at times with the Democratic Party politically and at times with the Republican Party.²⁹

The close articulation between theological and political liberalism/conservatism is evident when we consider the four issues at the center of this analysis (see Table 2). To the extent that they were involved, Mainline groups were *opposed* to the main thrust of the legislation and Evangelical groups were *supportive* of the legislation. Catholic groups, in contrast, were mixed, supporting the conservative side on abortion and same sex marriage, and

the liberal side on capital punishment and welfare reform. This helps explain the particular strategy of engagement each pursued.

–Table 2 about here–

Evangelicals may have an oppositional identity with respect to mainstream American culture, but they were right at home in the right-leaning state public policy arena in Wisconsin under Tommy Thompson. Easier, then, for them to assume the role of political insiders capitalizing on the conducive conditions to achieve legislative victories. Mainline Protestants, by contrast, are comfortable in the American culture their tradition profoundly shaped,³⁰ but the political winds sweeping across the country, and through the heart of Wisconsin, surely left them out in the cold. Easier, then, for them to act as prophetic voices crying out in the wilderness.

In conclusion, there is nothing inherent in these groups' theological traditions that determines their strategies of engagement; rather, theological tradition and sociocultural-institutional contexts interact to produce distinctive patterns of outcomes. Documenting and explaining these patterns has been a central task of this paper. It is important to reiterate that the continuum of strategies of political engagement I articulate and apply is an ideal-type. Like Niebuhr's models of Christ and culture, it is an heuristic device. As such, it should be judged not as right or wrong (in the sense of correctly or incorrectly mirroring reality) but as *more or less useful*. This article represents just one attempt to establish the usefulness of this model. I hope that it will stimulate further attempts at specification, elaboration, and application.

NOTES

In bringing this article to fruition, I have benefitted from the advice and encouragement of individuals too numerous to list by name. Corporately, I thank everyone associated with my dissertation research at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, the Pew Seminars in Christian Scholarship at Calvin College, the Center on Religion and Democracy at the University of Virginia, and the Young Scholars in American Religion Seminar at IUPUI. If this work remains problematic, it is due to my own incompetence.

1. Rembert Weakland, “Wisconsin Works: Breaking a Covenant,” *Washington Post*, 4 July 1996.
2. *Capitol Times*, 10 July 1996.
3. “Church, state clash over roles,” *Wisconsin State Journal*, 10 July 1996.
4. “Governor shouldn’t ‘stick it’ to archbishop,” *The Sheboygan Press*, 10 July 1996.
5. Mike Flaherty, “Thompson lashes out at archbishop,” *Wisconsin State Journal*, 9 July 1996.
6. “King Tommy and the turbulent priest,” *Capitol Times*, 14 July 1996.
7. “Holy Terror,” *Capitol Times*, 10 July 1996.
8. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 11.
9. Robert Booth Fowler and Allen Hertzke, *Religion and Politics in America: Faith, Culture, and Strategic Choices* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 53.
10. Daniel Hofrenning, *In Washington But Not of It: The Prophetic Politics of Religious Lobbyists* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 6, 93.
11. Michael Moody, “Caring for Creation: Environmental Advocacy by Mainline

Protestant Organizations,” in *The Quiet Hand of God*, ed. Robert Wuthnow and John Evans (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 259.

12. Allen Hertzke, Allen, *Representing God in Washington: The Role of Religious Lobbies in the American Polity* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), 69-70, 75-76. Hofrenning, too, cites as a weakness of religious lobbying the fact that “religious lobbyists spend much of their time articulating broad moral principles; they usually leave the details to others” (*In Washington*, 181).

13. Brian Steensland, “The Hydra and the Swords: Social Welfare and Mainline Advocacy, 1964-2000.” in *The Quiet Hand of God*, ed. Wuthnow and Evans, 231; Matthew Moen, “From Revolution to Evolution: The Changing Nature of the Christian Right,” *Sociology of Religion* 55 (1994): 352.

14. I am employing these “ideal-types” in the tradition of Max Weber. In Weber’s view, “the way in which life confronts us in immediate concrete situations” is characterized by “an infinite multiplicity of successively and coexistently emerging and disappearing events.” The way social scientists handle the “absolute infinitude of this multiplicity” is by elaborating general concepts and formulations known as ideal-types (Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* [New York: Free Press, 1949], 72). The “testing” of ideal-types—i.e., the determination of how closely the constructs reproduce or mirror reality—should not be taken as the *ends* of investigations; rather, applying ideal-typical constructs to concrete individual phenomena are a *means* of shedding light on certain aspects of infinitely complex phenomena.

Note also that these three ideal-types are actually points on a continuum, with separation and subsumption as the two poles and combination positioned in the middle. I am grateful to

Doug Winiarski for helping me to see this point more clearly.

15. Empirically, this paper draws primarily on interviews with 20 religious advocates and secondarily on analysis of documentary material produced by the religious advocates and the 13 organizations they represent (principally legislative testimony, brochures, and statements). See Table 1 for a list of the 13 organizations. Given the ethnic and religious demography of Wisconsin, there are no groups in this study from outside the Jewish and Christian traditions. Also, the political activism of racial minorities was channeled largely through the multiracial coalition, Milwaukee Innerscity Congregations Allied for Hope (MICAHA). For more on Wisconsin as a context for faith-based political advocacy, see [identifying reference removed].

This study concerns itself only with those religious advocacy organizations which are “consequential actors” in the Wisconsin state legislative arena. Consequential actors were identified using a two-stage inclusion rule. First, I included those organizations which (a) were identified by legislators in a survey I fielded; (b) were identified by a panel of experts from the University of Wisconsin at Madison and journalists accredited to cover the Wisconsin State Legislature; (c) were registered to lobby; or (d) had testified or registered positions at legislative committee meetings and public hearings. Second, only those organizations which were identified by at least two of these four methods were included in the sample of “consequential actors” to be studied.

While Edward Laumann and David Knoke have previously used a sampling methodology similar to this one to identify core political actors (*The Organizational State* [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987]), it without question has two biases. First, elites are more likely to be identified than non-elites (i.e., grass roots groups). Second, groups primarily

involved in “conventional” political activities are more likely to be identified than groups primarily engaged in “unconventional” politics. (These two biases are, of course, related.) Unfortunately, these selection biases in my sample reflect the biases of our political system as presently constituted. I do not doubt that these procedures successfully identified the core religious advocacy organizations in the state legislative arena in Wisconsin.

For more methodological details, including a list of interviewees, see [identifying reference removed].

16. Which is not to say that *all* religious advocates in Wisconsin have a prophetic outlook motivating their political work. The Christian Science Committee on Publication, an effective lobby considering that it is a religious super-minority in terms of numbers, exists largely to protect the religious freedom of its members, leaving more radical goals of social transformation to other groups.

17. Dwight Billings and Shaunna Scott, “Religion and Political Legitimation,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 20 (1994): 178.

18. Casanova, *Public Religions*, 183.

19. *Ibid.*, 72-73.

20. David Yamane, *The Catholic Church in State Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, forthcoming).

21. Allen Hertzke distinguishes between advocacy which consists for the most part of “*witnessing*”—that is, groups “making known their positions without really engaging the legislative process in a specific way”—and “*classic insider lobbying*”—that is, “activities designed to affect precise policy outcomes, including: drafting bill language, offering amendments, forging

coalitions behind the scenes, negotiating with opponents over compromise provisions, and providing useful facts and arguments to members during legislative debates” (*Representing God*, 70). For the Wisconsin Catholic Conference, these are not two separate enterprises, but two phases of their single enterprise.

22. James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

23. Hertzke, *Representing God*, 76.

24. Steensland, “The Hydra and the Sword,” 214; Moody, “Caring for Creation,” 259; Moen, “From Revolution to Evolution”; Yamane, *The Catholic Church in State Politics*.

25. Tommy Thompson, *Power to the People: An American State at Work* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996).

26. Robert Wuthnow and John Evans, introduction to *The Quiet Hand of God*, 21; Laura Olson, “Mainline Protestant Washington Offices and the Political Lives of Clergy,” in *The Quiet Hand of God*, 55.

27. Christian Smith, et al., *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 187; Ralph Reed, “What Do Religious Conservatives Really Want?” in *Disciples and Democracy: Religious Conservatives and the Future of American Politics*, ed. Michael Cromartie (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1994), 1-15.

28. Here I purposely limit my comments to conferences of Catholic bishops in recognition of the many Catholic groups whose political agendas are less comprehensive and hence more partisan. For example, NETWORK is a social justice lobby that focuses exclusively on liberal issues that are the province of the Democratic Party, and Priests for Life works

exclusively on those conservative positions on abortion issues that are the province of the Republican Party under the current political configuration in the United States.

29. Clarke Cochran and David Cochran, *Catholics, Politics, and Public Policy: Beyond Left and Right* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2003).

30. N.J. Demerath, III, "Cultural Victory and Organizational Defeat in the Paradoxical Decline of Liberal Protestantism," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 34 (1994): 458-69.

Figure 1. Summary of Strategies for Negotiating the Religion-Politics Tension, Including Benefits and Costs

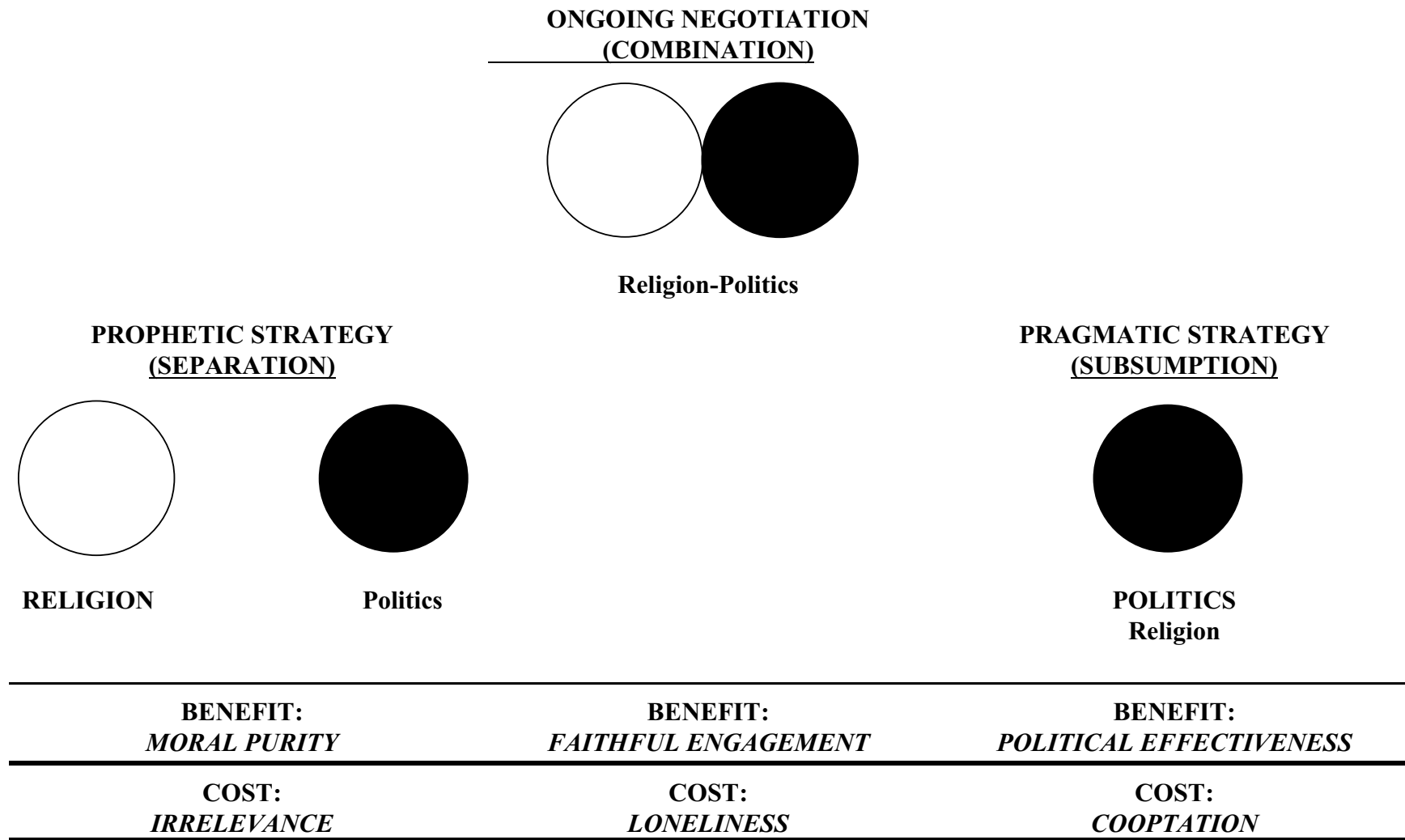


Table 1. Religious Advocacy Organization Solutions to Religion-Politics Tension, by Theological Tradition

PROPHETIC SOLUTION	NEGOTIATED SOLUTION	POLITICAL SOLUTION
MAINLINE PROTESTANTS:	ROMAN CATHOLICS:	EVANGELICAL PROTESTANTS:
Wisconsin Council of Churches (capital punishment, welfare reform)	Wisconsin Catholic Conference (abortion, capital punishment, same sex marriage, welfare reform)	Family Research Council (abortion, same sex marriage)
Coming Out, Coming Together Coalition (same sex marriage)	Archdiocese of Milwaukee (capital punishment, welfare reform)	Pro-Life Wisconsin (abortion)
Wisconsin IMPACT (death capital punishment, welfare reform)		Wisconsin Right-to-Life (abortion)
Milwaukee Innerscity Congregations Allied for Hope (MICAH) (welfare reform)		Wisconsin Christian Coalition (abortion, same sex marriage)
EXCEPT:	EXCEPT:	EXCEPT:
Wisconsin Christians United (abortion, same sex marriage)	Wisconsin Jewish Conference (capital punishment, welfare reform)	Lutheran Office for Public Policy (capital punishment, welfare reform)

Table 2. Positions of Religious Advocacy Organizations on Legislation, by Issue and Theological Tradition

ISSUE	EFFECT OF LEGISLATION	MAINLINE GROUPS	CATHOLIC GROUPS	EVANGELICAL GROUPS
Abortion	Ban “partial birth” abortion		SUPPORT	SUPPORT
Same Sex Marriage	Define marriage as between one man and one woman	OPPOSE	SUPPORT	SUPPORT
Capital Punishment	Allow the use of the death penalty	OPPOSE	OPPOSE	
Welfare Reform	Implement “W-2”, a work-based, time-limited AFDC-replacement program	OPPOSE	OPPOSE	

Note: Empty cell indicates that these groups were not actively involved in legislative efforts on the issue in the 1995-96 and 1997-98 biennial sessions.