

# Justification and the Health of the Nation

Religious and Secular Language in the NAE's "Call to Civic Responsibility"

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*Truth cannot contradict truth.*

Pope John Paul II, in his 1996 address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences

# 1 Introduction

Since the late 1970s, evangelical Christian groups have become increasingly vocal in American politics. Nominally represented in Washington by the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), the evangelical community now finds itself in a more powerful position than ever. In an interview with the *New York Times Magazine*, NAE leader Richard Cizik claimed, “If evangelicals can’t convince the president, then no one can.”<sup>1</sup> This movement, which grew alongside an evolving concept and practice of cultural secularization, has led to heated disputes over the place of religious language in public debate and political process in the theological community. These discussions tend to embrace the categories of secularism outright; the discourse separates “religious” reasons and motivations from “secular” ones, building a universal epistemological barrier between them.

Theologically, I argue, this dividing line is not so clear as many have taken it to be. It is a construction of secularity itself, and has an epistemologically different meaning for theological interpretation. I begin with an examination of a document released by the NAE in October 2004 entitled, “For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility.” In this I am aided by its companion book, *Toward an Evangelical Public Policy: Political Strategies for the Health of the Nation*, in which leading evangelical thinkers explore the document’s position statements more thoroughly.<sup>2</sup> Next I will attempt to place the texts within the debate about justification in political participation, drawing especially on insights from Robert Audi and Christopher Eberle. Finally, I will attempt to reframe the debate somewhat in terms of a theological interpretive community. As such, the theological idea of the “secular” becomes somewhat other than what either Audi or Eberle account for.

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<sup>1</sup>Deborah Solomon, “Earthy Evangelist,” *New York Times Magazine*, 3 April 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/03/magazine/03QUESTIONS.html?ex=1116388800&en=ea2c45cae9ee95d3&ei=5070> (16 May 2005).

<sup>2</sup>“For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility,” National Association of Evangelicals, 8 November 2004, [www.nae.net/images/civic\\_responsibility2.pdf](http://www.nae.net/images/civic_responsibility2.pdf); *Toward an Evangelical Public Policy: Political Strategies for the Health of the Nation*, ed. Ronald J. Sider and Diane Knippers (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005). I will henceforward refer to these as *NAE 2004* and *NAE 2005*, respectively.

## 2 The Document

The evangelical movement has never been easy to define precisely. The NAE alone is composed of different fifty-two different member denominations, and even so cannot be said to speak unequivocally for all who might self-identify as “evangelical.” John C. Green defines the movement both by circumstance, in terms of certain historically ethnic and regional denominations, as well as by the reaction against Protestant modernism.<sup>3</sup> Gushee and Hollinger contrast evangelicals to the “rigidity, separatism, and anti-intellectualism” that characterizes fundamentalism. Nevertheless, they admit to deep theological ties between the two American Protestant movements.<sup>4</sup> Such resistance to definition probably underlies the concern with creating a cohesive public image in the “Call to Civic Responsibility.” It notes the failure of “secular media outlets” to recognize evangelical voices outside of family issues, such as in global relief and human rights work.<sup>5</sup> A cohesive public face might serve several purposes. First, it facilitates positioning within political partnerships, strengthening trust and defining boundaries among allies. Second, it employs public service in the larger mission of evangelism. “When Christians do justice,” the document explains, “it speaks loudly about God.”<sup>6</sup> In the NAE’s vision, therefore, participation and religion are intertwined and require a robust community vision. Now, as the “Call” articulates it, the task is to develop a unified platform of “breadth, depth, and consistency” both politically and theologically.<sup>7</sup>

The “Call to Civic Responsibility” locates itself in the Preamble within an awareness of “historic opportunity.”<sup>8</sup> Recognizing the tremendous ballot-box potential of the evangelical community, it challenges evangelicals to even more involvement in public life. Participation has not always come easy to American evangelicals; Green traces evangelical

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<sup>3</sup>John C. Green, “Seeking a Place: Evangelical Protestants and Public Engagement in the Twentieth Century,” in *NAE 2005*, 16.

<sup>4</sup>David P. Gushee and Dennis P. Hollinger, “Toward an Evangelical Ethical Methodology,” in *NAE 2005*, 118-119.

<sup>5</sup>*NAE 2004*, 1.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>8</sup>*NAE 2004*, 1.

politics in the twentieth century from the “quiescent,” to the cohesive movements especially in the seventies and eighties, to the increasingly “regularized politics” of the present day.<sup>9</sup> Especially since the *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973, and through the Reagan administration with the reign of Falwell’s Moral Majority, evangelicals have shifted from disengagement to highly visible activity both on the local level nationwide and in Washington. Accompanying this political transition has been a corresponding theological one. National politics, once dismissed as a bastion of irreligion, has since been reconsidered as a vehicle for the improvement of society along Christian principles.

Given the historical unease with politics in the evangelical movement, the reasons for engagement are thickly grounded in the authority of scripture. The “Call” describes a vision of the Christian polity throughout the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. It emphasizes divine lordship over “every area of life,” the mandate to justice, and the “power of the Holy Spirit” that makes transformed communities possible.<sup>10</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff’s article in the accompanying volume emphasizes along similar lines the Christian relationship to rulers drawn largely from Paul’s letter to the Romans. These texts set a theological, sacred foundation for involvement in government and public life. Politics no longer acts as opposed to the sacred but instead as enclosed within it. In this way, even secular success is understood theologically; justice and skillful governing, the “Call” explains, “can show those who are not believers how the Christian vision can contribute to the common good and help alleviate the ills of society.” This language also alludes to a basic relationship between the theological and the natural themselves, for it assumes that the one knows what is best for the other. I will return to this link in section 4 after further exploration into the text.

At the core of the “Call to Civic Responsibility” lie a series of position statements on the seven key areas of the NAE’s platform. In contrast to the thoroughly scriptural introductory sections, each of these positions cites both what might be called religious and secular justificatory language. The discussions in *Toward and Evangelical Public Policy*

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<sup>9</sup>Green, 15.

<sup>10</sup>*NAE 2004*, 2-3.

make this appear to be a conscious choice. Drawing from the success of secular language in the Catholic political tradition, evangelical thinkers recognize the practical usefulness of a “reasoned and easy-to-grasp defense of our goals.”<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the NAE texts also show an articulated unease with such justifications, grounded in concern that by them the true evangelical beliefs might erode. In my analysis, I will work mainly within these two categories that have been defined by the discourse of religious participation in the public square. For brevity, I will pick only two among the seven position statements to closely examine, those concerning family life and human rights. I have provided summaries of the arguments for all seven, however, in the Appendix.

The discussion of family life and children,<sup>12</sup> like many of the others, does not enter deeply into specific policy measures. Instead, it defines broad values, general methodologies, and most of all, justifications. The document defines the family, centered around traditional, lifelong marriage, as the true and necessary basic unit of stable society. Read in light of the most audible contemporary public debates, this position takes a principled stand in opposition to recognition of same-sex unions and taxes on married couples, and in support of school choice. The main character of the policy recommendations is opposition to unnecessary interference in the biblical idea of family. The first justification given is wholly scriptural; it understands family to be the vision of both God’s relationship with humanity and “the inner life of the Trinity.” This notion of the family then is contrasted with the “hypermodern” culture, which rejects family for the sake of the individual. Such a tendency, the document insists, is inimical to both the biblical vision and the “organic functioning” of society. Theological and natural law concerns merge here, their agendas coinciding in the fact of marriage-centered family for the good of all. Next, the syncretism is completed in the common category of “social evils,” which combine what might be thought of as both secular and religious wrongs: “alcohol, drug, gambling, or credit-card abuse, pornography,

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<sup>11</sup>Kristen E. Heyer, “Insights from Catholic Social Ethics and Political Participation,” in *NAE 2005*, 110-111; *NAE 2004*, 4.

<sup>12</sup>*NAE 2004*, 7-8.

sexual libertinism, spousal or child sexual abuse, easy divorce, [and] abortion on demand.” With it, the text constructs a unified secular and religious agenda. Rather than any act of translation or mere “easy-to-grasp defense,” public justifications intermingle with religious ones. Its positions, the “Call to Civic Responsibility” insists, while necessarily guided by and founded in revelation, are in the pragmatic interest of all society.

In the area of human rights, which itself has enjoyed a history of intermixing between religious and secular reason, the “Call” recognizes certain rights that all people share.<sup>13</sup> The rights themselves are common to many secular formulations, including food, shelter, care, family, property, and nondiscrimination. However, rather than being entirely intrinsic to the individual, they rest contingent upon the responsibilities implied by God’s gift of life. This reformulation repositions the arguably free-standing secular conception of human rights in dependency on the divine. The religious framework proceeds to encompass the traditional social contract theory similarly in terms of the responsibilities of governments to the common good, and further on to the constitutional obligations that enunciate them. In particular, the text cites the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights within this framework and urges the United States to commit to enforcing it at home and abroad. All of this, as the discussion frames it, depends upon the religious foundation. Despite the appearance of a secular appeal, even the secular hinges on God-given responsibilities. Finally, the document dismisses the “rights talk” of modern discourse, which is used in defense of non-evangelical positions such as same-sex marriage and the right to euthanasia.<sup>14</sup> By doing, it carefully excludes the use of human rights outside the purview of religious mandate.

In both position statements, the relationship between the secular and the religious cannot be rightly called parallel or pluralist, as many, and even the NAE’s texts themselves, have been apt to do. Instead, they represent two sources of authority deeply intertwined. With regard to family life, the religious good of the biblically-inspired family leads to the

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 10-11.

<sup>14</sup>There is a very strong discussion of the use of “rights talk” in: Paul Marshall, “Human Rights,” in *NAE 2005*, 307-322.

common, secular good of an organic and well-functioning society. In terms of human rights, the secular good of the social contract and international human rights law depend directly on the religious good. So-called “rights” that lie outside of the religious framework are denied status as rights at all, instead attributed to the errancy of modernity. Initially, this rejection is representative of a general trend in the NAE’s position statements. Throughout, the evangelical position defines itself as opposed to some popular trend, and sees itself thereby in resistance. This is also evident in the rejection of “hypermodern” ideas about family. The position of resistance is significant; I argue that it motions toward the theological community that this text understands evangelicals to be, which contributes to an explanation of its consistent use of secular reasoning. For convenience, I have summarized other examples of resistance in the Appendix, alongside the sets of religious and secular justifications.

### **3 Dialectical Politics**

As an overt platform for political action in American politics, the “Call to Civic Responsibility” engages directly in the debate about religious reasons in public decision-making. Abstracted and generalized, the debate asks whether policy arguments founded in religious reasons and motivations should be admissible in the public square. It especially concerns policies that might be coercive or restrictive in the lives of citizens who may not adhere to the religious frameworks on which they are based. To those who argue that public policy must have “public” reasons, independent of the necessary existence of God or revelation, a religious community must provide non-theological reasons, and even motivations, founded in a common set of shared principles. Without these, the argument goes, religious interests could become an oppressive force and undermine the central tenets of liberal government that all parties in American politics, both religious and not, claim to uphold.

In many of its recommendations, including opposition to abortion and same-sex marriage, as well as aspects of environmental stewardship, the NAE’s position includes policies

of coercion and restriction. At first glance, the document defends these positions with both religious and secular language. In their articles included in the accompanying text, several evangelical thinkers address the need to, at least in part, do “ethics for the world” rather than the theological community alone.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, in his arguments against solely religious justifications, Robert Audi suggests that building secular justifications might have cause within religious communities themselves. He first of all argues from an abstract theistic view that the protection of non-religious people’s freedom is a religious duty aligned with the notion of freedom of conscience.<sup>16</sup> Audi furthermore argues, through a framework that he calls the “theo-ethical equilibrium,” that reason must be understood as supplementary to revelation, a gift of God, and that it should be relied upon as a check against theological mistakes. A secular common ground also positions religious communities more feasibly in the world; it facilitates communication between and within them when conflicts arise, as well as providing a strengthened motivating foundation for action.<sup>17</sup> Combining the dual motivations of reason and faith makes religious principles stronger in the minds of believers, strengthening both their resolve and the necessary support of outsiders.

The NAE’s position, which draws on the work of Nicholas Wolterstorff, rejects any such internal need within the community for secular reasons; religious ones suffice. The texts clearly defend the right of religious communities to use religious reasons in public debate. Defining the position on religious freedom and liberty of conscience, the “Call to Civic Responsibility” asserts,

Participating in the public square does not require people to put aside their beliefs or suspend the practice of their religion. All persons should have equal access of public forums, regardless of the religious content or viewpoint of their speech.

Likewise, judicial standards should protect and respect not only religiously com-

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<sup>15</sup>The strongest example of this is: Heyer, 107-114; my quotation comes from: Gushee and Hollinger, 132.

<sup>16</sup>Robert Audi and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Religion in the Public Square* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), 10-23.

<sup>17</sup>Robert Audi, *Religious Commitment and Secular Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 96-113.

pelled practices, but also religiously motivated behavior.<sup>18</sup>

As such, the NAE decisively and carefully opposes the textitobligation to speak “for the world.” When they do provide secular justifications, seemingly, it is out of noncompulsory respect, a “language of civility” meant “to avoid denigrating those with whom we disagree.”<sup>19</sup> By making their reasoning more accessible, evangelicals may open practical doors in the spirit of coalition-building and meaningful exchange. Still, the question of obligation is decisively neutralized.

Against such obligation, Christopher Eberle offers a direct critique to Audi’s claims for the benefits of necessary secular reasons alongside religious ones. Most especially, he deals with what he calls the “theistic case for restraint”: theists should expect religious truth to agree with secular reason, and when reason does not corroborate a religious claim, they may have grounds to doubt its truth.<sup>20</sup> To this logic, which he attributes to Audi’s project, Eberle builds a distinction between the existence and discovery of secular corroboration. God cannot be assumed to provide easy or guaranteed means for discovering moral truths outside of revelation, and there is no clear way to know when the search for secular reasons has exhausted itself and can be considered untenable.<sup>21</sup> A theist, by Eberle’s account, is therefore better justified in relying on religious justification when secular reasons are not available, and has good theistic grounds for doing so. His argument cripples the necessary and universal obligation that Audi seeks to place on the theist to provide secular reasoning. With revelation in hand, a believer need not expect to find justification in order to validate religious moral claims. On the other hand, Eberle’s argument does not necessarily threaten Audi’s recommendation to the theist that providing secular reasons might strengthen both the community’s ability to work cooperatively with others and to cultivate its own motivation for action.

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<sup>18</sup>NAE 2004, 6.

<sup>19</sup>NAE 2004, 4.

<sup>20</sup>Christopher J. Eberle, *Religious Conviction in Liberal Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 295.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 308.

Ultimately, by approaching these justifications as either strictly religious or strictly secular, that the texts even describe themselves, attempts to locate the “Call to Civic Responsibility” in the debate about religious reasons prove misleading. I argue above that where secular language is used in the NAE’s positions, it tends to operate dependently on the religious, and is therefore inadequate as free-standing justification. This reading destabilizes the arguments of both Audi and Eberle. If a secular justification lacks autonomy, it fails to satisfy Audi’s requirement that “one would act on it even if, other things being equal, one’s other reasons were eliminated.”<sup>22</sup> If religious reasons were eliminated from the NAE’s positions, their secular reasons have little on which to stand or motivate, so far as they are used in the “Call to Civic Responsibility.” Nevertheless, to the extent that secular reasons are given and serve to corroborate revelation in the text, which is certainly extensive, they do construct a limited justification. The manner in which this is so may be informed directly by Eberle’s arguments; secular justification is not necessary to the epistemology of the theist, though it may be helpful. Of course, this says nothing about the usefulness of religious justification to a nonbeliever, who might be prepared to thoroughly dismiss these arguments because of their biblical foundation. This does not appear to be a concern in the text which, while admitting the possibility of common goals and alliances with nonbelievers, remains anxious to begin with about sharing in compromise with the “fallen, broken world.”<sup>23</sup>

The question that the document faces, despite how the justification debate might have it, is not one of obligation. Audi’s discussion about motivation, however, is far more useful in this context. After all, this is a “Call,” meant to take advantage of a “historic opportunity” in which “disengagement is not an option.”<sup>24</sup> This purpose is key, and with it in hand, the question of secular language turns more directly to the theological motivation of the evangelical community itself.

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<sup>22</sup>Audi, 96.

<sup>23</sup>There is a good discussion of this anxiety in: Stephen Monsma and Mark Rodgers, “In the Arena: Practical Issues in Concrete Political Engagement,” in *NAE 2005*, 325-341.

<sup>24</sup>*NAE 2004*, 1.

## 4 Dialectical Theology

In this section, I take the “theistic case” of Audi and Eberle and attempt to develop it further in order to better explain the use of secular language in the “Call to Civic Responsibility.” The notion of a theological community is key in this discussion. Tracing the history of Christian theological ethics, Stanley Hauerwas defines the unifying structure of this community around an idea of the good that is found, not in abstracts or any so-called secular construction, but in the narratives and teachings that make up the community’s revealed truth.<sup>25</sup> Under such a particular foundation, ethics must be done always in recollection of revelation, and as such is something unique to the specific theological community.

The NAE’s texts are well aware of separateness and seek to cultivate it, or the idea of it, even as evangelicals enter the public square vocally. Amidst the new pattern of “regularized politics,” Green emphasizes the preservation of a “distinctive voice”: “If it is problematic to be ‘conformed to the world,’ it is surely worse to be ‘conformed to politics as usual.’”<sup>26</sup> Gushee and Hollinger similarly seek to ensure that evangelicals do ethics as “a body of disciples that is faithful, distinctive, and visibly different from the world.”<sup>27</sup> Monsma and Rodgers cling to the same supposition as they warn against straying from foundational beliefs in political praxis.<sup>28</sup> The “Call” itself reflects this in the tendency to what I have described as “resistance” in its policy statements. Repeatedly, the evangelical position consciously opposes itself to what is otherwise prevailing in society, which is associated theologically with the “fallen, broken world.”

In the context of a community that seeks to separate its ethics from what is external to belief, it is at first unclear why appeals to secular, extra-revelatory reasoning are so interwoven among justifications founded in religious narratives. I argue here that the language of hermeneutics offers a plausible account of the “theistic case” for secular reasoning, as it

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<sup>25</sup>Stanley Hauerwas, “How ‘Christian Ethics’ Came to Be,” in *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 49.

<sup>26</sup>Green, 32.

<sup>27</sup>Gushee and Hollinger, 138.

<sup>28</sup>Monsma and Rodgers, 336.

pertains particularly to the text at hand. Beginning with Hans-Georg Gadamer's primacy of the question, a dialogue emerges in the theological community between revealed scripture and modern secularism. Though sometimes thought of by either side as wholly oppositional, I argue that through the dialectical model at work in the "Call to Civic Responsibility," this conversation is ultimately constructive and motivating in the theological community.

Following Gadamer, every statement can be understood as the answer to a question, and this question defines its meaning to the speaker.<sup>29</sup> As such, statements of universals must be interpreted primarily on the grounds of their presentness, their applicability to "the readers' concrete solution to the problem of living."<sup>30</sup> For evangelicals, the question begins with perceived problems of the present day, contradictions between the teachings of tradition, and circumstances of the earth. With these it turns to the narratives of revelation, which fail to speak directly to the question; there is no clear biblical position, for example, on constitutional religious freedom, abortion, or modern environmentalism. What the theological community has instead is a series of narratives whose themes and teachings may offer guidance in the situation at hand. This guidance, however, calls for additional aid to interpretation. There are of course a variety of influences, including especially tradition and interpretive history. But in the dialectics of much Protestant thought, clinging to John Calvin's motto, "The church reformed, ever reforming,"<sup>31</sup> tradition can only play a limited interpretive role. Instead, by the accounts of both David Little and Hauerwas, Protestant ethics has historically "sought to secure the ongoing meaningfulness of Christian convictions" through the language of post-Enlightenment scientific ideas of the natural.<sup>32</sup> Appeals to the secular, therefore, become themselves theological. The NAE's use of the American Constitution, social contract theory, and secular "social ills" all serve to confirm the interpretation of theological narrative, not simply offer an independent justification.

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<sup>29</sup>Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), 333.

<sup>30</sup>Fred Lawrence, "Gadamer, the hermeneutic Revolution, and Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion of Gadamer*, ed. Robert J. Dostal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 183.

<sup>31</sup>*ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*. Quoted from: David Little, "Religion and Human Rights: A Personal Testament," in *Journal of Law and Religion* Vol. XVIII (2002-2003): 57.

<sup>32</sup>Little, *Ibid.*; Hauerwas, 45.

In this process, “every conversation presupposes a common language, or, it creates a common language.”<sup>33</sup> Rather than developing two separate, free-standing systems of justification, the hermeneutics of the theistic case more likely builds a single structure of the two. The explicit methodology of the “Call to Civic Responsibility” recommends “both a normative vision and factual analysis:”

Every normative vision has some understanding of persons, creation, history, justice, life, family, and peace. As Christians committed to the full authority of Scripture, our normative vision must flow from the Bible and from the moral order that God has embedded in his creation.<sup>34</sup>

Certainly, debates like that over evolution call into question the “seamless” nature of this normative vision. Repeatedly in the NAE texts, writers warn of the need to avoid a dangerous “language of dualism” in evangelical ethics.<sup>35</sup> No conversation, however, is without tension. The insight that Gadamer’s vocabulary offers is that this conflict is primarily constructive rather than confrontational. The words of resistance may be reconsidered, not as an actual rejection of secular reasoning, but as a means to define a “distinctive” theological community that is in dialogue with it.

In his idea of hermeneutic conversation, Gadamer argues for a notion of the “fore-conception of completion.” Because only a perceived cohesive unity is intelligible and motivating, the fundamentally incomplete ideas at play in dialogue are conceived as an anticipated fullness that allows the actors to function.<sup>36</sup> By this effect, the state of tension evangelicals experience with the secular can meaningfully be felt and further constructively built upon. Even a contentious debate, by the mere fact of exchange, offers a glimpse of reconciliation. Such a fore-conception also speaks to Eberle’s dismissal of the theistic case for secular reasons that I discussed in the previous section. If secular reasons can be meaningful without neces-

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<sup>33</sup>Gadamer, 341.

<sup>34</sup>*NAE 2004*, 3.

<sup>35</sup>Gushee and Hollinger, 132; see also Heyer, 114.

<sup>36</sup>Gadamer, 274.

sarily providing corroboration with such completeness as Eberle’s standards expect, which Gadamer’s notion suggests, there is in fact some good reason for a theological community to use them alongside religious ones. This does not affect Eberle’s result that the obligation to use secular reasons does not function in the theistic perspective. Recall also the apparent lack of independence of the secular reasons I have considered; Eberle is concerned mainly with free-standing justifications. Nevertheless, it does serve to explain perhaps why, despite his result together with the NAE’s confidence in religious justification alone, the “Call to Civic Responsibility” makes so much use of secular reasoning.

## **5 Conclusion: the Secular as Religious**

It may be that the failure to frame the NAE texts in terms of the justification debate is an unfair imposition of a question of categories concerned with the public square on a conversation that is in fact private within the evangelical community. The question of audience is a problematic one, which I have so far left unaddressed. After all, the stated intent of the “Call to Civic Responsibility” is to ground a specifically evangelical political engagement; it expects nothing outright from non-evangelicals. Nevertheless, this is a line that cannot be easily drawn. In today’s political rhetoric, the religious porously blends into the public square without distinction. The “Call” notes from the outset that evangelicals “make up fully one quarter of all voters” in America. In such numbers, and with such a presence in the democratic process, nothing can remain truly private by any reasonable measure. Even so, I have emphasized the “theistic case” in my discussion of the justification debate, which speaks to the private insofar as it may exist.

From the perspective of this private/public evangelical theological community, I argue that the secular has become religious in a significant sense. Conceived as it is in a firmly post-Enlightenment dialectic, the conflicts that the “Call to Civic Responsibility” has with secular reason are outweighed by the confluences. The reasoning that modern science and

natural law theory offers only serves to support biblical interpretation within an epistemic “fore-conception of completion” that integrates the revealed with the natural.

The authors of this document and the justification debate together are in a hermeneutic dialogue of their own, and I suggest that this can be a misleading one. Each tries to separate the secular from the religious for particular purposes; the evangelical community seeks to protect the integrity of its theology, while thinkers like Audi and Eberle seek to make claims that distinguish clearly between secular and religious reasons. Neither, however, recognizes outright the intricacy of the relationship between the two. What is better understood as a hermeneutic dialogue within the theological community becomes masqueraded after the fact as translation from religious to secular or as parallel, free-standing justification. Instead an alliance between two sources of authority in the modern world is at work, strengthened by a coherence of truth in the theological community. Through it, the secular is subsumed by the religious. Even so, the masquerade can have practical significance in public debate. By expressing their conclusions in secular terms, referencing natural law principles and legal codes, the NAE opens itself to productive alliances with other groups that might support the same principles and codes. In such a case, however, it is not a motivating public justification that the two groups share but instead a convergence of conclusions. This may be the best that a ethically pluralist society can hope for. In the context of democratic process, common conclusions are perfectly effective at the ballot box even when common foundations are lacking.

The final implications this document has in the justification debate are not clear-cut. Audi’s “theo-ethical equilibrium” holds—the “rational integration” of religious insights and secular reasoning.<sup>37</sup> The document capitalizes on the strengthened motivation that he predicts for such a structure as well. This does not mean that Audi’s obligation on the part of the theological community holds; to the question of obligation, Eberle’s objection stands. For both thinkers, the area of most relevance to the “Call,” and indeed to the

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<sup>37</sup>Audi and Wolterstorff, 21.

whole religious project within the idea of secularism, lies particularly in the “theistic case.” As such, the hermeneutical significance of the justification debate is, like other questions *about* theology, “itself theological.”<sup>38</sup> It consists finally in the internal theistic dialogue with reasoning founded outside revealed narratives. Audi’s attempts to build the obligation externally therefore is likely to fail. Whether a case for providing secular reasons can be made within a theistic community depends on the theological conversation within the community itself.

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<sup>38</sup>Gadamer, 296.

## Appendix: Justification in the “Principles of Christian Political Engagement”

The following table summarizes the position statements given in “For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility.” For each of the “Principles of Christian Political Engagement,” I divide the justifications between **Religious Reasons** and **Secular Reasons**, respectively. Where applicable, I also include elements of **Resistance**, which speak to evangelicals’ tradition of self-understanding as a radical community in opposition to the prevailing culture..

<b>Principle</b>	<b>Religious Reasons</b>	<b>Secular Reasons</b>	<b>Resistance</b>
<i>religious freedom and liberty of conscience</i>	“gospel pluralism” of separated church and state	the First Amendment	against exclusion of religious communal traditions and sincere concern
<i>nurture family life and protect children</i>	centrality of family in God’s vision of society and image of Godhead	family life as natural remedy for social ills	against “hypermodern” culture and government interference
<i>sanctity of human life</i>	human beings in God’s image, sharing in His dignity	dangers of new biotechnologies and threat to uniqueness of human nature	against trend of public opinion and permissive laws
<i>justice and compassion for vulnerable</i>	ministry of Jesus to poor and the call of Hebrew prophets	building a healthy society of “wholeness”	n/a
<i>human rights</i>	fulfillment of God’s design of human flourishing for all	social contract theory and UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights	against the “rights talk” that furthers individualist causes
<i>peace and restraining violence</i>	the hope for peace of Jesus and Hebrew prophets	classical just-war principles	n/a
<i>protecting God’s creation</i>	call to stewardship of earth in Genesis	clean resources for public health and civic order	n/a