

## The Shared Fate of the Evangelical and “Cancel Culture” Movements

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The evangelical and “cancel culture” movements deeply inform today’s cultural landscape. Evangelicalism, an offshoot of Protestantism, has transformed the American religious and political landscape. Through a focus on personal, community, and political reform, the religious group exerts tremendous power despite declining religiosity.<sup>1</sup> “Cancel culture,” a movement associated with America’s political left, plays into the human need to associate meaning with one’s life. By “canceling” or “culturally block[ing]”<sup>2</sup> an individual, a person believes they made the world a better place. Essentially, by depriving the “canceled” individual of their opportunity to leave a positive mark on the world, the “canceler” leaves their positive mark on the world. While evangelicals wield their power on the political right, “cancel culture” members act within the progressive left. Evangelicals are, above all else, a religious group, while “cancel culture” does not associate with a religion. Although the movements disagree on almost every contemporary issue, the groups create, sustain, and exert power in the same ways. Both use controversial issues to sustain tension with outgroups and distinguish their identities. By seeking out groups with both similar and directly opposing views, the movements take culturally relevant positions. In addition, the flat hierarchy of both movements puts individual members in decisive roles, giving them the sense that they are part of something bigger than themselves.

These processes have ensured the success and influence of both groups, allowing them to take dominant positions within the cultural context. Interestingly, however, these same processes are likely to undermine the movements in the long run.

### **Evangelicalism**

The evangelical faith rests on four core values. First, evangelicals believe in the authority of the Bible and see it as “the inspired, the only infallible, authoritative Word of God.”<sup>3</sup> Second,

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<sup>1</sup> Smith, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace.”

<sup>2</sup> Romano, “Why we can’t stop fighting about cancel culture.”

<sup>3</sup> “Statement of Faith,” *The National Association of Evangelicals*.

they believe in the unique power of Christ to perform “personal salvation and social transformation.”<sup>4</sup> Third, to evangelicals, conversion is possible as long as you always have faith.<sup>5</sup> Finally, evangelicals are committed to an “active lifestyle that reflects Christian values.”<sup>6</sup> To evangelicals, “there is no higher calling than to live out and share...the truth of God’s love.”<sup>7</sup>

Evangelicals successfully promote these values and beliefs by taking controversial positions on current issues, choosing their reference groups deliberately, and relying on the active involvement of individual members. However, the processes also work against the movement. Meddling in controversial issues blurs the line between political issues and timeless religious values. Deliberately choosing which groups to associate with means evangelicalism will eventually lose cultural relevance. Moreover, by relying on individuals to promote the values, the movement risks diluting those same values.

### *Distinguishing Evangelicalism within the Social Context*

To begin making distinctions, evangelicals must first recognize that some people do not want to uphold the core evangelical values.<sup>8</sup> After drawing this binary distinction, evangelicals can begin defining their identity by identifying specific tensions with relevant outgroups. For example, evangelicals believe in the unique power of Christ, while most Hindus and Buddhists worship many Gods. Emphasizing this difference clarifies the evangelical belief. With a clarified belief, members are more likely to promote the value effectively and consistently. Similarly, while evangelicals refer only to the Bible, Catholics refer to a variety of scriptures.<sup>9</sup> By identifying and displaying this difference, belief in the authority of the Bible becomes a

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<sup>4</sup> Unruh, et al., “Evangelical Strategies,” 10.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> “What is Evangelicalism?,” *Got Questions Ministries*.

<sup>8</sup> Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, 124.

<sup>9</sup> “Difference Between Evangelical and Catholic,” *Ask Any Difference*.

distinguishing factor between evangelicals and Catholics. By seeking out this point of tension with Catholics, evangelicals strengthen their ingroup identity and clarify their values.

Evangelicals then sustain these points of tension by using controversial issues and questions to illustrate the differences in core values. Hot-button, current, and moral issues work best.<sup>10</sup> Abortion is a prime example. While “83 percent of American Jews say that abortion should be legal in all or most cases,” evangelicals are uncompromisingly pro-life.<sup>11</sup> As a Jew, you are likely pro-choice. As an evangelical, you support life from conception. Although neither groups’ core values regard abortion, the tension concerning the abortion question creates a moral barrier between the two groups. This moral barrier extends beyond the abortion issue. It extends to a separation of the core beliefs. In turn, if an evangelical communicates their pro-life stance, they affirm the evangelical values and sustain tension with a relevant outgroup.

However, relying on a controversial issue to distinguish its identity means that controversial issue inevitably becomes a defining part of the identity. Once evangelicals identify abortion as a moral barrier between them and those who practice Judaism, the abortion question becomes a critical distinguisher between the evangelical and Jewish faith. When this distinction is repeatedly emphasized, that barrier is reinforced until eventually the difference in their stance on abortion becomes more important than the difference in their core values. Thus, the issue that affirms the evangelical values is the very issue that threatens to “override” the core values of the faith.<sup>12</sup>

Evangelical support for Donald Trump illustrates this phenomenon. Trump is a “thrice-married, swindling, profane, materialistic, self-styled playboy”<sup>13</sup> who does not engage in

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<sup>10</sup> Green, “‘Evangelical’ Is Not a Religious Identity.”

<sup>11</sup> Langowitz, “Abortion and Reproductive Justice.”

<sup>12</sup> Wehner, “The Evangelical Church is Breaking Apart.”

<sup>13</sup> Morris, “False Idol.”

an “active lifestyle that reflects Christian values.”<sup>14</sup> In voting for him, aren’t evangelicals failing to uphold the Christian values? Not from their perspective. Evangelicals turned out for Trump because he promised to fight for their position on contemporary issues. On the topic of abortion, Trump assured his voters that he would “end the contraception mandate of Obamacare” and “select only anti-choice judges.”<sup>15</sup> On Israel, Trump promised to uphold policies that defend the Jewish State.<sup>16</sup> On religious liberties, Trump promised to “support prayer in school” and “keep transgender people from using the ‘wrong’ bathrooms.”<sup>17</sup> To evangelicals, Trump’s position on these contemporary political issues was more important than his immorality and lack of Christian values. Although the contemporary issues mostly align with the evangelical values, in voting for Trump, evangelicals also align their identity and values with Trump. By prioritizing temporary political gain, evangelicals undermine the longevity of the core values.

### *Finding Reference Groups that Affirm Core Values*

Evangelicals affirm their identity and “sustain the plausibility of their beliefs”<sup>18</sup> by associating with groups who hold both similar and opposing values. Associating with “positive reference groups,” or those with similar values, confirms the viability and legitimacy of the evangelical values. At the same time, the values can also be affirmed by “negative reference groups” or “people who are unlike them.”<sup>19</sup> These groups “actively serve...as models for what they do *not* believe, what they do *not* want to become, and how they do *not* want to act.”<sup>20</sup> Only when evangelicals know who they are *not* can they begin to know who they are. In turn, the evangelical movement defines itself based on its relationships with other groups. Even as the

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<sup>14</sup> Unruh, 10.

<sup>15</sup> Morris.

<sup>16</sup> Green, “‘Evangelical’ Is Not a Religious Identity.”

<sup>17</sup> Morris.

<sup>18</sup> Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, 107.

<sup>19</sup> Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, 105.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 105.

religious and cultural landscape changes, evangelicalism maintains “most people’s religious beliefs” because the movement carefully “construct[s] their reference groups”<sup>21</sup> and controls the way they affirm their values. This ability to pick and choose which reference groups to associate with provides a sort of buffer from a changing sociocultural environment and preserves the core values.

However, this ability to select reference groups also separates evangelicalism from its cultural context, weakening the movement’s ability to advocate for the core beliefs in a relevant and persuasive way. Since “we all tend to prefer the comfort of bubbles and echo chambers,”<sup>22</sup> evangelicals instinctively choose reference groups that foster that sense of “comfort.” As described above, those reference groups overwhelmingly tend to be groups whose values strongly agree or disagree with the evangelical values. Therefore, the group lacks exposure to the opinions of a large swath of people whose beliefs fall somewhere in the middle. By associating with and listening to groups whose values either strictly agree or oppose them, evangelicals endanger the adaptability of their movement. Moreover, since culture and religion are practically inseparable, religion must adapt when culture changes. In turn, since an autonomous selection process threatens adaptability, it ultimately compromises the longevity of the evangelical movement.

#### *Active Involvement of Individuals*

Evangelicalism, more than other religions, emphasizes an individual’s personal journey to God. This focus on the personal journey enables members to play an influential role in spreading the religion.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> McCracken, “Exit the Echo Chamber.”

Consider Melissa, an evangelical blogger whose journey to God incorporates all four evangelical values. In her blog post, Melissa writes about the “crippling anxiety” of her childhood, her substance abuse during her early adult years, and her marital infidelity.<sup>23</sup> After a friend intervened and encouraged her to attend a women’s Bible study group, Melissa “felt the Holy Spirit moving [her] towards her husband,” allowing her to create “a whole new foundation” for their relationship. Thus, her story affirms that the Bible is the guide to a meaningful life.<sup>24</sup> As she and her husband began “putting God first,” they underwent true change and began seeing “one another just as God saw [them].”<sup>25</sup> First, by assuring her readers that she was a “sinner” and then by showing how God’s grace saved her,” Melissa demonstrates the “unique power of Christ” and shows that anyone can convert as long as they have faith.<sup>26</sup> Accepting “His Word and the Holy Spirit”<sup>27</sup> and blogging about that acceptance empowered Melissa to live “an active lifestyle that reflects Christian values.”<sup>28</sup> She ends her blog post by stating: “Just as God has a plan for me, He has a plan for you too.”<sup>29</sup> In this way, Melissa’s testimony serves as a call-to-action for women in similar situations.

Melissa’s story is not unique. Her blog post about God’s entrance into her life is just one in a sea of others. Every member’s conversion story spreads and enforces the values, in turn encouraging others to share their story. They can fight and advocate for the values not just in their church, but in the home, at schools, and in their communities. Every member can inspire conversion and enforce the evangelical values by sharing their own stories. In this way,

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<sup>23</sup> Ling, “Melissa’s Testimony.”

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Unruh, 10.

<sup>27</sup> Ling.

<sup>28</sup> Unruh, 10.

<sup>29</sup> Ling.

evangelicals are “culture warriors,” moving through their lives “[actively] trying to protect [their] particular culture or set of values” through their every interaction.<sup>30</sup>

However, when members become “culture warriors,” they are less likely to listen to and consider dissenting opinions. By not addressing the opinions of outgroups, evangelicalism cannot have productive intra-group discussions, in turn endangering the group’s understanding of their “war.” Since evangelicalism emphasizes every individual’s unique journey to God, as more and more people share their unique experiences, the evangelical values take on new and changed expressions. And although this variety might initially draw more people in, the range of expressions ultimately dilutes the core evangelical values.

For the time being, however, evangelicalism remains a major religious, political, and social player, just like its counterpart on the political left.

### **Cancel Culture**

At its core, “cancel culture” aims to safeguard and expand the rights of the marginalized by ostracising and publicly shaming those who stand in their way. The movement sees constant activism and a commitment to “canceling” as the vehicle for achieving their goals. Because of its deep roots in culture, politics, and national questions, it is hard to confine “cancel culture” to a specific group of people. Broadly speaking, however, the movement has energized all kinds of people to “cancel” others and has, therefore, created a successful model for removing those who obstruct their goals.

While evangelicalism is a religious group, the “cancel culture” movement is a political one, specifically a left-leaning one. By embracing this inherently political position, “cancel culture” has gained significant cultural relevance. By using current issues to “cancel,” the movement sustains tension with relevant outgroups. By standing with and against more

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<sup>30</sup> “Definition: culture warrior,” *Oxford Learner’s Dictionary*.



established organizations, the core goals of “cancel culture” become more relevant. By encouraging every member to become an active “canceler,” the movement finds breadth across various communities and channels. However, like evangelicalism, these very processes undermine the longevity of the movement. By searching for increasingly more specific issues to take a decisive position on, the “cancel culture” movement risks giving its opponents a platform. By interacting with specifically selected reference groups, the movement risks becoming ignorant and culturally detached. Lastly, relying on members to enforce the core values compromises the future integrity of the core values.

### *Distinguishing “Cancel Culture” within the Social Context*

To begin distinguishing the movement, “cancel culture” members must first identify what groups are actively working against their values. This step is crucial because “social groups know who they are...by knowing who they are not.”<sup>31</sup> Only when the “cancelers” identify who discriminates against the marginalized can they begin protecting the marginalized. Only when members identify who is perpetuating inequality can they begin dismantling inequality. Only when they identify who is undermining their activism can they use their activism to promote their agenda effectively. Since “unnamed things are temporarily immune to rejection,”<sup>32</sup> cancelers cannot uphold their core beliefs and “cancel” those who undermine their core beliefs without identifying who opposes them and the differences between the opposers and themselves.

Like evangelicalism, “cancel culture” clarifies these identified differences by using controversial topics as a vehicle for communicating their beliefs. As mentioned, “cancel culture” exists within the political sphere, and the left has become its breeding ground. Resultantly, a polarizing political issue is a requirement for a successful “cancelation.” First, the polarizing

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<sup>31</sup> Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, 91.

<sup>32</sup> Cooper, “Emerging, Emergent, Emergence,” 411.

issue allows the “cancelers” to identify a specific individual within the relevant outgroups who consistently acts against “cancel culture’s” core values. The “cancelers” then use the issue to first “cancel” the individual and then to highlight that the “canceled” individual is on the wrong side of the issue. The polarizing issue justifies the “cancellation” and the subsequent withdrawal of support to the “canceled” person. The “cancellation” is then broadcast through various channels, which encourages others within the “cancel culture” movement to withdraw their support and continue to broadcast the “cancellation.” In this way, contemporary issues are necessary to “cancel” someone.

At the same time, this reliance on polarizing issues has a significant weakening effect on the movement’s core values. Ironically, “cancel culture” is directly responsible for giving a platform to the groups they so vehemently oppose. When they identify who is discriminating against the marginalized or perpetuating inequality, they give that individual a platform.<sup>33</sup> In this way, while the “call-out” unites the “cancelers,” the “call-out” also unites the supporters of the “canceled” individual. Therefore, the canceling process gives the “wrong” a platform. By aggressively seeking out more and more controversial issues, they strengthen their adversaries and, therefore, indirectly perpetuate the marginalization and inequality that those groups stand for. When “cancel culture” members aggressively seek out new issues to sustain tension, they begin drawing lines between increasingly more nuanced parts of a person’s identity. If a falls on the wrong side of this line, they are essentially excluded from the movement. Thus, a polarizing issue also decreases group membership. Decreasing group membership weakens the promotion of the core values.

### *Finding Reference Groups that Affirm the Core Values*

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<sup>33</sup> “What it Means to Get ‘Canceled,’” *Merriam-Webster*.

By interacting with organizations with similar core values, the “cancel culture” movement affirms its core values. In the last couple of years, “cancel culture” has aligned itself with BLM, mainly because their core beliefs and visions of “right” and “wrong” align. BLM aims to “eradicate white supremacy”<sup>34</sup> and “cancel culture” seeks to dismantle unequal power structures. BLM “intervene[s] in violence inflicted on Black communities”<sup>35</sup> and “cancel culture” values constant activism to safeguard the marginalized. As the sociocultural landscape changes, “cancel culture” must attach to concrete organizations whose core values fall within “cancel culture’s” values. In this way, the BLM becomes the institutional and organizational expression of “cancel culture.”

Like evangelicals, members of “cancel culture” also affirm their core values by interacting with groups who hold opposing values. When “cancel culture” creates and sustains tension with “people who are unlike them” and who “actively serve...as models for what they do *not* believe, what they do *not* want to become, and how they do *not* want to act,” they are creating “negative reference groups.”<sup>36</sup> Take the example of #AllLivesMatter, a negative reference group for the “cancel culture” movement. The All Lives Matter movement emerged as a counter to BLM because conservatives “interpreted the phrase [‘black lives matter’] as confrontational and divisive.”<sup>37</sup> From BLM’s perspective, the phrase “all lives matter” is seen as “dismiss[ing], ignor[ing], [and] deny[ing]” the goals of the BLM. As mentioned, “cancel culture” has attached itself to the BLM due to their similar core values. Therefore, when the BLM determines that ALM undermines their goals, members of “cancel culture” take that same opposing position against ALM. Members begin “canceling” those who subscribe to ALM,

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<sup>34</sup> “About,” *Black Lives Matter*.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, 105.

<sup>37</sup> Tsikas, “Why is it so offensive to say ‘all lives matter’?”

illustrating the stark differences in the core values. This public distinction affirms the core beliefs of “cancel culture.”

At the same time, this reliance on positive and negative reference groups weakens “cancel culture’s” ability to advocate for their core beliefs in a relevant and persuasive way. This reliance on extreme positive or negative reference groups creates echo chambers, environments “where a person only encounters information or opinions that reflect and reinforce their own.”<sup>38</sup> Within the movement, members “shut down those who disagree” and therefore “rarely view opposing content.”<sup>39</sup> Within this echo chamber, the action of positive reference groups is seen as heroic, while the action of negative reference groups is seen as destructive. In this way, the echo chamber “is a bounded and enclosed group that magnifies the internal voices and insulates them from rebuttal.”<sup>40</sup> By “insulat[ing]” its members from rebuttal, “cancel culture” loses their cultural awareness. When culture shifts and opposing groups adapt their positions accordingly, “cancel culture’s” relative lack of cultural awareness threatens the movement’s cultural relevance. Lessened cultural relevance jeopardizes the group’s ability to promote the core values.

#### *Active Involvement of Individuals*

“Cancel culture” forces all its members to become “culture warriors” in their environments. Like evangelicalism, the “cancelation” process allows every member to advocate for the movement’s values within their respective physical and digital communities. Essentially, the process allows for more personalized ways of “canceling” people, which expands the breadth and depth of the movement. Because such emphasis is placed on *always* promoting and protecting the core values, the promotion process of the core values is never questioned. In the

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<sup>38</sup> “What is an echo chamber?” *Goodwill Community Foundation*.

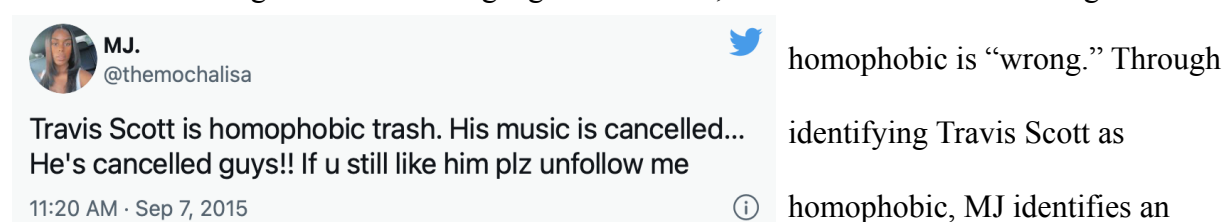
<sup>39</sup> Ranganathan, “Dangers of echo chambers.”

<sup>40</sup> Nguyen, “Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles.”

short run, this unquestioned support strengthens the movement because its members are fully committed to the values.

In the long run, however, this steadfast commitment to the values weakens the members' understanding of their "war." They become "warriors" fighting a war without a defined purpose. If they do not periodically stop and question the process by which they promote the values, "cancellations" become less personalized and meaningful. There is tremendous pressure to constantly "cancel" people, leading members to begin canceling for the wrong reasons. Rather than "canceling" someone for going against the core values, a member cancels to remain a member of "cancel culture." As a result, while "cancel culture" relies on the blind activism of its members to dismantle inequality and protect the marginalized, this reliance endangers the promotion of values and, therefore, the movement itself. The short-term commitment to promoting the values undermines the promotion of the values in the long run.

Additionally, "cancel culture" has begun relying on "canceling" its own members to strengthen and more strictly enforce its third core value: the *constant* commitment to activism. This tweet by MJ<sup>41</sup> exemplifies the "cancellation" process and the move towards internal cancellation. Through their use of language in the tweet, MJ communicates that being



individual who promotes that "wrong." MJ also deplatforms Scott by no longer listening to his music. Finally, by broadcasting the "cancellation" on Twitter and by urging their followers to "unfollow" if they still support Scott, MJ is communicating to their Twitter followers that they will no longer be welcome within MJ's Twitter if they do not "cancel" Travis Scott. Although

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<sup>41</sup> Romano.

their followers likely agree with most of MJ's views, Travis Scott becomes a decisive matter for MJ. Since homophobia is wrong and Travis Scott stands for homophobia, MJ isolates anyone who supports Scott. Within their Twitter community, MJ has, therefore, affirmed "cancel culture's" core values. Like Melissa, the evangelical who blogged about her salvation, MJ's tweet is not unique. There are thousands upon thousands of other Twitter users who believe their tweets effectively promote the core values.

However, while ingroup "cancellation" ensures only the devoted members remain, the technique ultimately splinters the movement, threatening the core beliefs. These increasingly isolating distinctions create increasingly defined sub-groups. The sub-groups of the movement are fueled by canceling each other, which divides the movement. And since a divided group struggles to define and uphold the core values, if the group continues to draw dramatic identity lines, its core values will eventually break apart.

### **Conclusion**

This paper describes how evangelicalism and "cancel culture" rely on fundamentally self-destructive processes to exert influence and maintain cultural relevance. Although the movements disagree on almost every contemporary issue, might they have more in common beyond their shared fates? Dangerously, it appears that each plays a significant role in escalating the others' self-destruction. Since the two movements function on opposite sides of the political spectrum, when one movement refines its identity and moves toward an extreme, the other movement must also refine its identity, which moves it toward the other extreme. When evangelicalism takes a stance on a controversial issue, "cancel culture" must also take a stance on that issue. A group that serves as a positive reference group for "cancel culture" must become a negative reference group for evangelicals. In this way, the more evangelicalism and the

religious right rely on the processes outlined above, the more “cancel culture” must rely on the same processes.

Evangelicalism and “cancel culture” are already fraying at the edges. Evangelicals are throwing their support behind leaders who reflect their political goals but not their religious values. The more the group dissociates from their values, the harder it will be to unite under those core values in the future. Meanwhile, the “cancel culture” movement is gathering criticism. In July 2020, 153 celebrities, scholars, and writers signed and published “Harper’s Letter,” which “[called] for greater equality and inclusion across our society.”<sup>42</sup> Although “cancel culture’s” vision of equality aligns with the vision laid out in “Harper’s Letter,” the signatories point to the “cancel culture” movement as the creators of today’s “intolerant climate”<sup>43</sup> According to the letter, “cancel culture” has fostered “an intolerance of opposing views,” by giving “public shaming and ostracism” a platform and by “[dissolving] complex policy issues in a binding moral certainty.”<sup>44</sup> When debate is restricted, “whether by a repressive government or an intolerant society,” it overwhelmingly “hurts those who lack power” and “harm[s] the most vital causes of our time.”<sup>45</sup> Although the letter sparked controversy, primarily due to the timing of its release, the letter is a troubling sign for the “cancel culture” movement.

What, then, does the future hold for the two movements? Can they reinvent themselves and escape their inevitable destruction? The movements are endlessly intertwined, and the more extreme they both get, the less likely they are to compromise and meet in the middle. They have relied on the processes because they are effective. Ultimately, it seems that both movements are permanently locked in their sociocultural positions and are unable to escape their shared fates.

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<sup>42</sup> “A Letter on Justice and Open Debate,” *Harper’s Magazine Foundation*.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

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