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It's Not Business, It's Personal: Implicit Religion in the Corporate Personhood Debate

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Abstract

Debate surrounding the United States Supreme Court's 2010 decision in *Citizens United v. FEC* is ostensibly about the legal rights of corporations. However, I argue that the debate about corporate personhood is infused with religious concerns, rooted in the Protestant Reformation, about the proper identification of agentive subjects and the consequences of *misidentification* for human personhood. Focusing on the language used by opponents and defenders in the popular media, I show how both sides are animated by Protestant notions of human agency and share similar anxieties about the threats to that agency posed by abstract corporate or governmental entities. Attending to this fundamentally religious dimension not only improves our understanding of the moral stakes in the debate over corporations' legal rights but it also illuminates the implicit religious underpinnings of American political discourse.

'Corporations are people, my friend...of course they are. Everything corporations earn ultimately goes to people.'

Mitt Romney, 2011

'I'll believe corporations are people when Texas executes one.'

Sign held by an Occupy Wall Street protester, 2011

In 2010, the United States Supreme Court overturned nearly one hundred years of campaign finance law and ruled that corporations were now free to use their profits to directly finance political advertisements and communications. The Court framed the decision as being about free speech (in the form of money), arguing that corporations, just like natural persons, fall under the protection of the 1st Amendment. The decision sparked a vigorous debate over the role of money in American elections and the proper limits that the government should be allowed to set on what many see as corporations' outsized influence in politics.

Yet, as the above quotes by then-Republican-presidential candidate Mitt Romney and Occupy Wall Street protesters illustrate, this debate is also characterized, strangely, by ontological discourse that is typically confined to more religiously motivated stand-offs concerning abortion rights and contraceptive access. At face-value, the question appears to be not just whether corporations should be treated *like* persons, in a purely legal sense, but also whether corporations *are* persons and, perhaps most importantly, what that might mean for our *own* personhood. How should we account for this aspect of the *Citizens United* debate? Is this a case of a legal metaphor run amok or are Governor Romney and Occupy Wall Street protesters actually making ontological claims about the fundamental nature of

corporations? And if the latter might be the case, what is at the root of these concerns and does the lens of religious studies—specifically, the concept of ‘implicit religion’—offer any insight?

My argument is that the *Citizens United* debate shines light on real but often implicit anxieties about the nature of our own human personhood *vis-à-vis* corporate and governmental entities—concerns that are triggered by the legal terminology of ‘personhood’ and the linguistic boundaries it complicates. While ideas about ontology and personhood share roots in secular philosophical traditions and are not by default ‘religious,’ I argue and demonstrate that much of the discursive framework employed by American pundits and opinion-makers in the debate surrounding *Citizens United* relies implicitly on religious formulations of the individual and (what were once) explicitly Protestant concerns over fetishism—that is, about incorrectly ascribing agency to non-human entities. Taking seriously this aspect of the *Citizens United* debate turns attention to the often hidden ways in which religious sensibilities and discourses remain relevant in contemporary American politics, even in what are ostensibly ‘secular’ legal debates.

2.1 Legal Background and Talk of ‘Personhood’

Disputes over the legal status of corporations have a long history in the United States that begins more than a century before the *Citizens United* decision. Both British Common Law and the US Constitution make a distinction between ‘natural’ persons—human beings—and ‘artificial’ or ‘legal’ persons, such as groups or organizations. While ‘natural’ persons are endowed with all the rights and protections under the Constitution, artificial persons must be granted certain legal privileges and protections (Block 2011). However, the 14th Amendment’s ‘equal protection’ clause introduced ambiguity into this otherwise straightforward distinction, stating that ‘No State shall... deny to any *person* within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws’ (emphasis added) (U.S. Const. amend. XIV, §1).

The lack of specificity as to *which type* of persons—natural or legal—the 14th Amendment applies allowed the lawyers for Southern Pacific Railroad in *Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad Company* (1886) to argue that corporations, in addition to natural persons, should be protected from discriminatory laws and policies by the state and federal governments. Although the Court ruled narrowly on the case and arguably did not intend to grant corporations legal personhood, the headnote for the decision written by the court reporter stated boldly that the Court had determined ‘the defendant Corporations are persons.’ This decision served as the legal foundation for corporate personhood and made it possible for corporations to win the right to free speech—in the form of unlimited spending on campaign advertising—in *Citizens United v. FEC*.

However, it is clear in the various reactions to the decision that calling corporations ‘persons’ not only has legal and political consequences but it also has moral ramifications. Why should language and, in particular, giving words new and disputed meanings pose such problems? Webb Keane (2007) argues that this is one of language’s defining features. Linguistic practices, as well as material ones, are never value-neutral; they carry with them

deeply held beliefs about how the world works and the agency of its inhabitants—what Keane calls a ‘semiotic ideology’ (2007, 18). For instance, all language systems rely on key assumptions about the authority and agency of the speaker, the person/object spoken to, and the person/object spoken about. As Keane puts it, these assumptions have ‘implications for what one expects of other persons, including oneself, and what these others expect themselves’ (2007, 18). In a very real way, then, we are ideologically and morally invested in our language and the ways in which we and others use it.

In this article, I argue that ‘personhood’ is a uniquely powerful term in contemporary American politics, behind which stands a host of deeply held ideas and sacred assumptions about human beings and the rights, responsibilities, and agency afforded to them. As a consequence, disputes over the boundaries and limits of ‘personhood’ rarely elicit dispassionate debate and instead bring to the surface otherwise implicit beliefs about the kinds of beings we are and the relationship(s) we share with non-human entities. In what follows, I examine the various reactions to the *Citizens United* decision by politicians, pundits, and comedians in the media, focusing not only on the assumptions they make about human agency but also on the particular discursive frameworks and oppositions on which their arguments rest. Along the way, I trace the historical roots of this discourse back to ideas and concerns that were at the core of the Protestant Reformation. Doing so allows us to see how religion is present—albeit implicitly—in modern American political debate.

3.1 Contesting Corporate Personhood

Maybe it won't be this bad. Maybe the corporations, legally defined as human beings, but without the occasionally pesky human attributes of conscience and compassion, maybe when handed the only keys to the electoral machine they will simply not design America in their own corporate image. But let me leave you with this final question: after today, who's gonna stop 'em? (Olbermann, 21 January, 2010)

It would be easy to dismiss Keith Olbermann's doomsday vision of a post-apocalyptic corporate takeover as mere theater designed to appeal to the fears of liberal viewers and drum up higher ratings. But I suggest we take his words and those of pundits like him more seriously, treating them as expressions of real anxieties and concerns—ones that I want to argue are, at their root, religious. For these opponents, the Supreme Court's decision to redefine the linguistic boundaries of ‘personhood’ and grant corporations the rights associated with it represents a historic shift in political power: corporations don't just hold *more* power than they previously held—they have also *taken away* power from private citizens.

This charge rests on a modern understanding of personhood, with a rich tradition in the West, which prizes autonomy and agency as its defining features. Persons are and *should be* autonomous agents in the world, free of coercive forces that constrain their abilities and limit their decisions. This kind of personhood requires individuals to not only be capable of but also engage in rational thinking, self-reflection, and self-expression (Taylor 1989). In this

way, persons can be said to be acting on their own accord—from internally derived motivations—and can therefore be held accountable for their actions.

As Charles Taylor (1989) notes in *Sources of the Self*, this particular formulation of personhood is characterized by an emphasis on ‘inwardness’; that is, by a focus on qualities and capabilities that have less to do with bodies and physicality than with internal thoughts and states confined to the mind, or what more religious thinkers would describe as the soul. From this perspective, the mind/soul is superior and deserving of more personal (and spiritual) attention than the limited, irrational, and ephemeral body. Taylor traces the intellectual origins of this idea all the way back to Plato—who defined ‘self-mastery’ as the conquering of reason over bodily desires—but argues that it is with Augustine that we begin to see a more recognizably Western understanding of the human person. For Augustine, the turn inward—towards the immaterial soul and away from the material flesh—is the only pathway to God (who is also immaterial and transcendent) and to greater spiritual development. Centuries later, Protestant reformers emphasized the importance of spiritual self-reflection for all Christian believers. Calvinists, in particular, believed this kind of introspection was crucial for determining one’s salvation status. Taylor argues that these religious formulations of the person as an internalized, self-reflective, spiritual being were foundational for thinkers like Descartes and Locke as they developed more fully the model of the disengaged, rational individual that was central to the rise of both the Scientific Revolution and Western democracy.

We see this understanding of personhood in the differences that opponents of the *Citizens United* decision draw between human persons and corporations. During an episode of *The Colbert Report* following the *Citizens United* case, host Stephen Colbert ironically calls attention to these differences:

So corporations are legally people. And it makes sense, folks. They do everything people do except breathe, die, and go to jail for dumping 1.3 million lbs. of PCBs in the Hudson River. And as people, corporations have certain inalienable rights... (they are) entitled to free speech. But they can't speak like you and me. They don't have mouths or hands. Instead, they must speak the only way they can: through billions and billions of dollars.

Colbert’s joke relies on clear ontological boundaries between persons and corporations. Persons have bodies that allow them to interact with the world and that make them mortal; corporations, lacking bodies and a clear ‘lifespan,’ enjoy faceless immortality. But beyond these obvious corporeal distinctions (but also *because* of them), lies a more pressing point: corporations, unlike people, cannot truly be held accountable for their actions, i.e. they do not possess the kind of agency assumed by the term ‘personhood.’ John Oliver of *The Daily Show* echoes this sentiment when he remarks that the only true ‘face’ of a corporation is its logo or mascot. He mockingly conjures an image of a ‘Million Logo March’ on Washington, with corporate mascots demanding rights and protections from the federal government (2010). This begs the question: who or what can be truly ‘responsible’ for corporate malfeasance? Individual CEOs within corporations can certainly be charged with crimes but the government cannot arrest or, as Occupy Wall Street protesters point out, execute the Pillsbury Doughboy. Corporations can and usually do ‘outlive’ their human caretakers.

Another important difference that opponents highlight is that corporations and human beings do not share similar motivations for action. As then Attorney General Elena Kagan, arguing against corporate personhood in *Citizens United*, put it, ‘Few of us are only our economic interests...We have beliefs. We have convictions’ (*Citizens United v. FEC* 2010, 53). Human persons also have, according to Keith Olbermann, the ‘pesky human attributes of conscience and compassion’ (2010). It is these inward, immaterial characteristics of the self—responsibilities and motivations that extend beyond the narrow limits of economic self-interest—that are the most important features differentiating human persons from corporate entities. Corporations simply do not and cannot have the kind of rich, Augustine-like inner-life that is capable of self-reflection or spiritual contemplation—and it is this lack, according to opponents, that renders corporations unfit for full participation in democratic politics.

However, the main issue for critics is not simply that the Supreme Court is wrong to equate humans and corporations. Rather, there is a fear that calling corporations ‘people’ also diminishes *our* agency and autonomy as persons. This framing of problem of corporate personhood has a uniquely Protestant character. Webb Keane (2007) argues that routing out fetishism—of ensuring that others properly distinguish (and respect) the boundaries between agentive subjects and non-agentive objects—was a central project of the Protestant Reformation (see also Latour 1993). For Protestant reformers, the individual was and should be solely responsible for his or her own salvation. By inserting priestly intermediaries between the believer and his or her salvation, for instance, the Church not only falsely ascribed spiritual agency to priests but it robbed lay believers of their autonomy and agency (a similar rational applies to Protestants’ denial of saints and the doctrine of transubstantiation). Likewise, Protestant missionaries charged that the magical rites of non-Western peoples relied on incorrect beliefs about who or what has agency in the world. They saw it as their Christian duty to correct those beliefs through conversion and thus free non-Western converts from the bondage of fetishism.

As Keane notes, what was unique about the Protestant missional project of purification was its emphasis on linking ‘moral progress to practices of detachment from and reevaluation of materiality’—what Max Weber called ‘disenchantment’ (Keane 2007, 6; Weber 2008). Because of this, merely adopting new rites and practices that conformed to Protestant doctrines was not sufficient for conversion. True conversion was ultimately about an *internal* reformulation of a convert’s basic assumptions about what has and does not have agency. But what evidence could be used to determine if this reformulation had taken place? Keane argues that missionaries relied on converts’ use of language—or more precisely, their ‘semiotic ideology’—as a key test of conversion. Violations of linguistic boundaries indicated that true conversion had not yet occurred. For Protestant reformers and missionaries, the realization and exercise of real freedom, autonomy, and agency—in other words, ‘personhood’—was contingent upon this fundamental reformulation.

It is this focus and concern that is at the heart of the opposition to *Citizens United*. The Protestant framework of fetishism and purification is the primary prism through which critics make sense of corporate personhood and its implications. As fetishism, calling corporations people misidentifies the true *human* source of corporate power and, in doing so, reifies a financial abstraction. Chief Justice John Marshall recognized this in 1819, writing

that a corporation is ‘an artificial being, invisible, intangible... Being the mere creature of law, it possesses only those properties which the charter of its creation confers upon it, either expressly, or as incidental to its very existence’ (*Trustees of Dartmouth College v. Woodward*) We are the creators and the source of corporations’ power. *Citizens United* puts this dependency in comically high relief by granting corporations political rights that individuals do not even enjoy. Again, Stephen Colbert (2009b), interviewing CNN’s Jeffrey Toobin about *Citizens United* later in the same episode:

[Colbert]: A corporation, as a person, gets to give any amount of money but I, as a person, can only give \$2500.

[Toobin]: Right. That’s potentially the next legal challenge because if giving money is a form of speech, as the court has held at various times, you can’t prohibit a company from giving money and, then, presumably, the next step would be you can’t have limits on how much individuals could give either. That’s the potential implication of this decision.

[Colbert]: So, right, corporations will actually have more power as people than people until people catch up with corporations.

[Toobin]: That’s exactly right. That would be the rule.

[Colbert]: So, that actually kind of confuses me how corporations are more people than people. Could we settle that by ruling that people aren’t people?

The sheer absurdity of that final statement calls attention to the fetishism in which the Supreme Court and advocates for corporate personhood are engaged. By calling corporations ‘persons,’ the Supreme Court not only misuses the term, they diminish human agency in the process. For opponents of corporate personhood, this threatens the modern democratic experiment and the very nature of human freedom. In order for modern individuals to exercise and maintain their agency, elected government officials must be freely chosen by and beholden to the citizens they represent. In contemplating whether America’s founders intended corporations to have the personhood rights afforded to them by *Citizens United*, Stephen Colbert (2009a) quips, ‘They were obviously dreaming of a future where instead of serving a king, our leaders could serve Burger King.’ Keith Olbermann (2010) paints a slightly darker picture:

There are now no checks on the ability of corporations or unions or other giant aggregations of power to decide our elections. None... And if senators and congressman and mayors and councilmen and everyone in between are entirely beholden to the corporations for election and reelection to office, soon... almost any political science fiction nightmare you can dream up... is now legal.

Thus, the *Citizens United* decision is plunging America back into the primitive darkness of pre-modernity. Calling out the corporate fetishists, Keith Olbermann (2010) warns, ‘The Right wing won’t even tell their constituents that they’re being sold into bondage alongside the rest of us. Why should they? ...They are specially discounted old favorites for their corporate masters.’ Like the Protestant reformers before them, opponents of *Citizens United* have a moral obligation to protect the boundaries of true ‘personhood’ and thereby protect the agency afforded to human beings.

4.1 Defending *Citizens United*

The following exchange comes from a campaign rally at the 2011 Iowa straw poll for the Republican presidential nomination in which Mitt Romney is speaking to a small crowd:

[Romney]: Over the coming decades...we have to make sure that the promises we make in Social Security, Medicaid, and Medicare are promises we can keep. And there are various ways of doing that. One is that we could raise taxes on people. That's not the way...

[Crowd]: Corporations!

[Romney]: Corporations are people, my friend. We can raise taxes on...<crowd scoffs> of course they are. Everything corporations earn ultimately goes to people.

[Crowd laughs]

[Romney]: 'Where do you think it goes?'

[Crowd]: 'In their pockets!'

[Romney]: 'Whose pockets? People's pockets. OK, human beings, my friend.'

Even though supporters of the *Citizens United* decision strongly disagree with their opponents on the issue of corporate personhood, this does not stem from a radically different notion of personhood *per se*. Proponents of corporate personhood actually hold a slightly stronger view of the human person as an autonomous, rational, *economic* actor—persons are seen as citizen consumers who cannot be easily manipulated by political advertisements, corporately sponsored or otherwise. As a result, proponents argue that the *Citizens United* decision, and corporate personhood more generally, poses no threat to individual autonomy or American democracy. In fact, they accuse their opponents of fetishism—of masking the very real humanity of corporations and denying the individuals that make up a corporation their full personhood rights.

Fox News commentator Chris Wallace weighed in on the political controversy surrounding Mitt Romney's assertion that 'corporations are people' on Fox's *Your World with Neil Cavuto* (2011):

I think this is one of the dumbest controversies I've ever heard. I was thinking about it during the commercial. Who hires people? Corporations. What do people invest in? Corporations. Where do they get their dividends? Corporations. Who builds America? Corporations. The idea that corporations are somehow alien life forms and they don't have a direct impact on people's lives is silly. It's a dumb controversy. I don't think there was anything wrong with what Mitt Romney said and people can try to... people try to make it sound like corporations are Transformers, from the movies.

Wallace is confused by the liberal outcry against corporate personhood. Corporations may be abstract entities in some sense, yes, but their presence is felt in real ways in our lives. Treating corporations as if they were complete human constructions—as if they were some

sort of totem gods—that have no measurable impact on the world is, in Wallace's view, preposterous. Neil Cavuto concurs with Wallace:

I agree with you. It is right. We do know that factually that's the case. But when I talk to CEOs about this, they don't like be lumped in with hedge fund managers and selfish, no-good moguls, as they all tend to be these days. And they just think, 'Well, look, ya know, we hire people. We employ people. We keep the economic engine running. They don't like the way they're treated.

Just like Mitt Romney, Cavuto points out that the corporate boogey-man held up by liberal opponents is actually made of flesh-and-blood people. He also puts a human face to corporate power: the CEO. In this view, CEOs are the paternal, benevolent human conscience of an otherwise rational entity. Cavuto concedes that the pure pursuit of money can be 'selfish' and 'no-good,' but this is not what corporations do. Yes, CEOs must make a profit—but their pursuit of profit serves a larger social good by employing American workers. In this sense, corporations and people actually share similar interests. Wallace agrees, and adds:

Listen, I think that's one of the problems, frankly, with what's been going on in Washington, is that somehow the wealth creators—and corporations are the biggest wealth creators—are treated as the enemy or the adversary... America can't succeed if corporations don't succeed. There is no American free enterprise system without big business. And that doesn't mean that in some cases they shouldn't be taxed and regulated and all of those things. But if they don't succeed, we don't succeed.

Corporations provide private citizens with the economic means to be self-sufficient, autonomous agents. The implication, here, is that by doing so, corporations help push back against the rise of the welfare state and reduce dependency on the government. The real threat to human agency comes from the government and not big business. Although this strain of anti-government populism has always been present in American politics, Bethany Moreton argues in *To Serve God And Wal-Mart* (2009) that the entrepreneur has now replaced Jefferson's yeoman farmer as the paragon of American citizenship. In order for the American economy to succeed (and by extension the American democratic experiment), the entrepreneur must be free to operate without excessive government interference.

According to this logic, the greater threat in *Citizens United* is that the government might become the arbiter of political speech. David Bossie, president of Citizens United, speaking on CSPAN's *Q&A*, characterized the other side's position this way:

They want less speech. They want fewer people to be able to participate in the process. I feel I fight for the 1st amendment. I'm fighting for your average person, including Common Cause, including the ACLU, including Planned Parenthood to be able to say their piece without Big Brother, without the government being able to participate in telling them what they can and cannot say and when they can and cannot say it. (12 February, 2010)

Bossie's accusation is that *opponents* of the Citizens United decision, not its supporters, are engaging in fetishism. By denying corporations their rights, opponents are granting the government powers that should properly be in the hands of citizens and the corporations of

which they are a part. Advocates like Bossie argue that, instead, we should think about the political system as we do the free market: the more open the political arena is for the exchange of ideas, the more informed citizen-consumers can be in their selection of candidates. Talking with historian Thom Hartmann, David Bossie defended the Supreme Court's decision this way:

I believe in more speech. I believe that the American people are smart enough to understand and I give the American people credit for being smart enough to know when they're trying to be bought. So I am not afraid of some big 'evil' corporation who's going to run a bunch of thirty-second ads before an election. (18 February, 2010)

For Bossie and other advocates of corporate personhood, opponents of *Citizens United* fundamentally misunderstand the true nature of corporations and their vital role in American democracy. Opponents dramatize corporate power and overestimate its influence over the American electorate. Corporations are not monolithic entities with nefarious intentions; they are made up of individual persons. Those individuals should not have their rights restricted by the government merely because they belong to a corporate entity. Stephen Colbert—in spite of his true intent—summed up the call for corporate personhood best: 'Because if we give corporations all the rights of people, our government can truly claim it's by the people, for the people, and of the people' (2009a).

5.1 Implicit Religion and the *Citizens United* Debate

For their part, average Americans appear either ambivalent or deeply ignorant about the issue of corporate personhood. An ABC poll conducted in February 2010, a month after *Citizens United*, found that 80% of Americans opposed allowing corporations and unions to 'spend as much money as they want to help political candidates win elections.' And yet, when the more conservative group Center for Competitive Politics separated the issue from *Citizens United* and asked whether voters thought that 'the *government* should have the power to limit how much some people speak about politics in order to enhance the voice of others,' only 16% agreed (emphasis added) (Patch 2010).

However, these polls may also reflect the fact that Americans are suspicious of any consolidation of power that threatens to restrict individual freedom. Treating *any* collective entity—whether it is a corporation or the government—as if it were equivalent to a human being, i.e. fetishism, relinquishes the agency that should properly be in the hands of individuals. This kind of fetishism is an affront to deeply held beliefs about autonomy, agency, and personhood and represents a dangerous step backward in the modern vision of progress espoused by both conservatives and liberals.

Throughout this article I have traced the historical, religious roots of certain assumptions and anxieties exhibited by critics and advocates in the *Citizens United* debate and argued that they share a strong genealogical connection with concerns and discourses present in the Protestant Reformation. This link gives the debate over corporate personhood a uniquely Protestant character. However, a serious skeptic might still wonder, 'Is this debate *really* religious? Do the actors arguing for and against *Citizens United* intend to invoke Protestant

concerns about the threats to citizens' autonomy as spiritual beings?' To the latter question, the answer is most assuredly: 'No.' The pundits and comedians I have quoted would most likely not recognize their statements as being about religious concerns or even as being inspired by Protestant notions of personhood and fetishism.

However, if we see the *Citizens United* debate as an instance of 'implicit religion,' there is an important sense in which we can and should think of it as being 'religious.' In his explication of 'implicit religion,' Edward Bailey provides a guiding question for researchers interested in locating the 'religious' in the 'secular': he urges us to consider, 'Can our understanding of apparently secular behaviors be enhanced by asking whether they contain within themselves (in addition to all their other characteristics, that are the concern of other approaches), any element of some kind of religiosity that may be inherent to themselves?' (2010, 275). Importantly, this dimension can exist and be analyzed by researchers even though, as Bailey points out, the behavior 'will probably not be perceived by its actors as religious' (2010, 272). I believe that our understanding of the *Citizens United* debate *can* be enhanced by a consideration of its implicitly religious aspects. To be sure, Protestant Christianity is not the only source for our modern concept of personhood and concern about its boundaries—but it is no doubt a *key* source, woven deeply into the fabric of America's political and religious patchwork. The Protestant discourse on fetishism—which attaches religious and moral significance to linguistic boundaries regarding agency and to ensuring that others adhere to those boundaries—acts as a kind of 'inescapable framework,' to borrow Charles Taylor's (1989) term, through which both sides of the *Citizens United* debate make sense of corporate personhood and its implications for American democracy. This framework is wedded to once-explicit religious ideas and motivations that are now implicitly part of political discourse.

Viewing the debate over *Citizens United* in this way helps broaden the possibilities of what can and should be considered 'religion' in studies of American politics. As Justice Sonia Sotomayor recently reflected in an interview with the Wall Street Journal, judges 'created corporations as persons, gave birth to corporations as persons... There could be an argument made that that was the court's error to start with...[imbuing] a creature of state law with human characteristics' (Bravin 2009). I would agree and add that the Court also created a *debate* that was necessarily infused with religious discourses. We could be arguing about 'privileges' rather than the 'person' rights afforded to corporations, but the 14th Amendment and the 1886 *Santa Clara County* decision began a conversation about *personhood*—a term that has not only legal but also ontological and religious meanings. Outside of *Citizens United*, we can see other challenges to 'personhood' from across the political spectrum: from new 'personhood' amendments put forward by pro-life groups that define fetuses as persons, to calls by environmentalists to extend personhood rights to animals and natural resources (Eckholm 2011; Francione 2008; Fairbrother 2012). Attending to the implicit religious dimensions of these disputes over the linguistic limits of personhood will yield greater insight into the historical roots of our political discourses and draw attention to the ways in which religion, in its more implicit form, continues to be present.

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