

RELIGION AND PROGRESSIVE ACTIVISM

NEW STORIES ABOUT
FAITH AND POLITICS

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Religion

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New Stories about Faith and Politics

Instructor's Guide

This volume focuses on an important, if often overlooked, way that religion and politics intersect in the United States. Within almost every community, and involved with almost every possible issue or area of public concern, progressive religious activists are a driving force in American public life. Their presence complicates the prevailing wisdom that religion is necessarily conservative and political progressivism is necessarily secular. Yet little is known about these activists, either among the public or within academia. This book brings together a group of leading experts who describe and analyze the inner worlds and public activities of the progressive religious activist field, including chapters on faith-based community organizing, immigrant rights activism, the Plowshares movement, the New Left, and the Nuns on the Bus, among others. Other chapters consider the political engagement of various religious communities, including Mainline Protestants, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and Catholics. Finally, authors consider connections between these activists and the Democratic Party, examine what factors lead congregations to mobilize for progressive causes, and trace the revival of civil religious rhetoric. Taken together, this book challenges common perceptions of religiously motivated social action, and offers new ways of thinking about the American religio-political landscape as a whole.

INTRODUCTION: RELIGION AND PROGRESSIVE ACTIVISM— INTRODUCING AND MAPPING THE FIELD

This chapter, from Todd Nicholas Fuist, Ruth Braunstein and Rhys H. Williams, introduces readers to the often-overlooked field of progressive religious activism in the United States, and maps its contours. First, it traces the history and continued relevance of progressive religious activism in American political life. Second, it argues that progressive religion should not be conceptualized as a category of social actors, but rather as a field of action defined by participants' commitment to progressive action, progressive values, progressive identities, and/or progressive theology, as well as through participants' efforts to distinguish themselves from the activities of religious conservatives and/or secular progressives. Finally, it assesses the varied ways that attention to progressive religion challenges common political binaries (like Right/Left and progress/tradition), and prompts a reconsideration of long accepted theories of religion and social movements as well as the role of faith in democratic politics and civic life.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why have progressive religious voices often been hard to hear in our nation's history? Where do the authors suggest we can best find them, both historically and contemporarily?
2. What are the four dimensions of progressive religion proposed by the authors?
3. What do the authors mean when they call progressive religion a "field of action?"
4. How does examining progressive religion complicate our stereotypical notions of the left/right political axis in the U.S.?

CHAPTER ONE: ACHIEVING AND LEVERAGING DIVERSITY THROUGH FAITH-BASED ORGANIZING

Brad R. Fulton and Richard L. Wood's chapter uses a national dataset of faith-based community organizing (FBCO) coalitions to provide an overview of an organizational field that is central to the progressive religious activist field as a whole. The chapter focuses on the high levels of religious diversity, racial/ethnic diversity, and socioeconomic diversity of the FBCO field, and argues that these groups draw on shared religious commitments to bridge their racial/ethnic and socioeconomic divides. Finally, they argue that in addition to the sheer scale of mobilization enabled by the FBCO infrastructure, this diversity constitutes faith-based organizing's most significant source of power and most important credential for legitimacy in the public arena.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How many FBCO coalitions are there in the U.S.? Who are the members of these coalitions?
2. What kinds of issues do FBCO coalitions focus on?
3. How does the fact that FBCO coalitions are socially diverse enhance their public power and legitimacy?
4. How do shared religious commitments help these groups to bridge their racial/ethnic and socioeconomic divides?

**CHAPTER TWO:
PROGRESSIVE RELIGIOUS ACTIVISTS AND
DEMOCRATIC PARTY POLITICS**

Rebecca Sager's chapter focuses on a broader ecology of progressive religious organizations and actors working at the national level, and their relationship to Democratic Party politics. Drawing on participant observation of the 2008 and 2010 political campaigns of Democratic candidate Tom Perriello of Virginia for Congress, she demonstrates how Democratic Party activists used this campaign as means of exploring how a progressive candidate could reach out to religious voters. She also shows how the group of activists who led this effort were connected to a variety of new progressive religious movement organizations that had emerged as a loosely coordinated force to offset the power of the religious Right in the public sphere.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What was the nature of the relationship between religious activists and the Democratic Party prior to 2008?
2. What tactics did Tom Perriello's campaign use to highlight his identity as a person of faith during his first campaign for Congress?
3. What challenges did progressive religious activists face in their efforts to gain traction within the Democratic Party?

CHAPTER THREE: WHY CONGREGATIONS MOBILIZE FOR PROGRESSIVE CAUSES

Kraig Beyerlein and A. Joseph West's chapter examines what qualities congregations that mobilize for progressive causes share. Generally speaking, progressive political mobilization out of congregations is rare, but Beyerlein and West identify several "causal recipes" that suggest which congregations are most likely to engage in progressive politics. In particular, they focus on combinations of variables including the presence of a liberal ideology and social justice orientation in the congregation, and the presence of educated clergy and laity. In so doing, Beyerlein and West provide broad templates of the kind of congregations that we may see engage in progressive action.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How common is progressive political mobilization by congregations in the U.S.?
2. What kinds of progressive political activities do active congregations tend to engage in?
3. What are the different combinations of qualities of congregations that are likely to engage in progressive politics?
4. Why might the presence of educated clergy and laity make congregations more likely to engage in progressive political action?

**CHAPTER FOUR:
COLLECTIVE IDENTITY AND MOVEMENT SOLIDARITY
AMONG RELIGIOUS LEFT ACTIVISTS IN THE U.S.**

Drawing on datasets that examine ideas and attitudes of religious activists on both the Left and the Right, Laura R. Olson's chapter asks whether religious progressives share a collective identity as activists and whether they are committed to specific social movement organizations within their fields of action. She finds that when compared to religious conservatives, progressive religious activists are less committed to specific organizations and are less mobilized behind a coherent public agenda. Finally, Olson discusses the extent to which this difference may affect movement efficacy in political arenas.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do religious progressives share a collective identity as activists? How does this compare to religious conservatives?
2. To what extent do religious progressives share a coherent public agenda? How does this compare to religious conservatives?
3. How might these distinctive features of religious left activists impact their political efficacy, positively or negatively?

CHAPTER FIVE: CULTURAL CHALLENGES FOR MAINLINE PROTESTANT POLITICAL PROGRESSIVES

Paul Lichterman and Rhys H. Williams's chapter focuses on theologically liberal Mainline Protestants, who have historically been at the forefront of many progressive religious actions. First, the chapter outlines some of the distinctive cultural challenges Mainliners face when they try to bring a specifically religious voice to progressive political advocacy. It then shows how Mainline Protestant identity and communication style, as well as the larger reputation of vocal conservative Christianity in public, all create cultural gaps that politically progressive Protestants must confront and engage.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Who are the "Mainline Protestants" that Lichterman and Williams are concerned with in this chapter?
2. What are the three main "cultural challenges" the authors discuss that Mainline Protestants must deal with to be politically effective?
3. Several times the authors point out that progressive Protestants do not engage in some of the same types of political and religious activities that conservative Protestants do? Why do they avoid them? Does this work to their benefit, and if so, in what ways? Is this sometimes a problem, and if so, in what ways?
4. How would you describe differences in conservative and progressive Protestants' communication styles?

CHAPTER SIX: ACTIVIST ETIQUETTE IN THE MULTICULTURAL IMMIGRANT RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Mia Diaz-Edelman's chapter sheds light on the challenges associated with cultivating cultural diversity within the Immigrant Rights Movement. Asking how this movement maintains solidarity across immigrant and non-immigrant activists from faith-based, interfaith, and secular organizations, the chapter demonstrates that the movement has developed a "multicultural activist etiquette," a unifying mechanism within activist meeting spaces rooted in the common values of equality and the physical and emotional security of all persons.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the "multicultural activist etiquette" the author describes? What does that mean? And how does it work in practice?
2. Why is maintaining solidarity within immigrant-rights activist organizations a challenge? Why is it important?
3. Why is it not enough for the groups studied here to simply make religious arguments for their political ideas?
4. Is the Immigrant Rights Movement a special case in that it must develop a "multicultural activist etiquette"? Would you expect to find a similar "etiquette" within other social movements? What kinds of movements would be most likely to develop these kinds of group practices?

CHAPTER SEVEN: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF COMMUNITY ORGANIZING IN SUBURBAN CONGREGATIONS

Kristin Geraty's chapter focuses on a faith-based community organizing coalition that mobilizes congregations for progressive action around issues of fair housing, education, and workforce development, but in which many participants are registered Republicans and consider themselves theological conservatives. The chapter shows how the coalition struggles to construct a call to action that resonates with members, and to negotiate how their religious identity is communicated and interpreted in an affluent, suburban environment where the intersection of religion and politics is almost always conservative.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the differences between the setting that Geraty studies compared to those discussed in the other chapters in this section?
2. How do the activists studied here think about the appeals they are making to religious congregations? How does that thinking influence the kinds of arguments they make?
3. Does the setting in which these activists work influence what issues they decide to focus on?
4. How does whether one is *theologically* liberal or conservative affect whether one is *politically* liberal or conservative?

CHAPTER EIGHT: RELIGIOUS ROOTS OF NEW LEFT RADICALISM

Joshua Z. Gahr and Michael P. Young's chapter provides a historical analysis of the somewhat counterintuitive, yet central, role that Protestant institutions played in the emergence of the new Left, which is typically considered a secular movement. Through a case study of the Christian Faith-and-Life Community at the University of Texas at Austin from 1955 to 1962, the chapter documents how a group of liberal Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist clergy pushed university students to reconceive the Church's "mission-in-the-world" and their personal witness to this mission in ways that unleashed a moral "breakthrough."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What trends and events in the 1950s inspired the progressive religious outlook of the Christian Faith-and-Life Community (CFLC)?
2. How does this demonstrate the importance of beliefs in generating social movement activism?
3. How did members of the CFLC view "mainstream Protestantism" in the 1950s? How does this account challenge depictions of this era as a highly religious time?
4. What sorts of personal experiences were important for participants in the CFLC to help them connect their politics and their faith?

CHAPTER NINE: RELIGIOUS CULTURE AND IMMIGRANT CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Juan R. Martinez's chapter argues that religious institutions today offer unique resources that encourage civic participation among non-citizens. Drawing on five years of ethnographic fieldwork, the chapter shows that social movement organizations apply and customize recognizable aspects of religious culture to promote progressive values and action among undocumented immigrants. By using religion to cast undocumented immigrants as deserving citizens, these organizations generate religious meaning that encourages calls for citizenship and civic engagement among marginalized populations.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does religious culture help immigrants to promote themselves as citizens?
2. What religious practices and narratives were central to the mobilization efforts of the immigrant-rights activists observed in this chapter?
3. What were some of the ways that the activists in this chapter presented progressive understandings of specific religious rituals or narratives?

**CHAPTER TEN:
PROGRESSIVE ACTIVISM AMONG BUDDHISTS, HINDUS,
AND MUSLIMS IN THE U.S.**

Grace Yukich's chapter observes that most of the research in the field (including in this volume) focuses on activism emerging out of Christian congregations, and on the ways their efforts are positioned in relation to the religious Right and/or secular progressives. Yukich argues that this focus limits the field's understanding of progressive political action by Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim groups. The chapter further notes that these faith traditions may be overlooked in part because they are not necessarily "congregational" in form and do not orient themselves toward these U.S.-centric political reference points. Drawing on in-depth interviews with Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims in the U.S., the chapter discusses alternative paths through which members of these groups understand and engage in social change.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is there a "blind spot" with regard to studying the political engagement of non-Judeo-Christian religious communities in the U.S.?
2. How does expanding our study of progressive religious activism to examine non-Judeo-Christian traditions both challenge and enrich our understanding of the topic?
3. What barriers might recent immigrants, particularly those from non-Judeo-Christian traditions, have to identifying with the label of "progressive religion"?

CHAPTER ELEVEN: RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PERCEPTIONS OF REPRESSION IN THE U.S. AND SWEDISH PLOWSHARES MOVEMENTS

Sharon Erickson Nepstad's chapter hones our understanding of how religion can shape activists' interpretations of repression. Through a comparative analysis of the Plowshares movements in the United States and Sweden, this chapter argues that long prison sentences did not harm the U.S. Plowshares movement in part because activists' Catholic beliefs and identity led them to view repression in religious terms that deepened their commitment, motivation, and unity. The chapter contrasts the U.S. case to the experience of the secular Swedish Plowshares activists, who interpreted their repression in ways that made them susceptible to internal disputes, waning commitment, and co-optation.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the Plowshares movement and how did they actualize their peace-oriented mission through collective action?
2. What were some of the differences between the Swedish and U.S. Plowshares movements depicted in the chapter?
3. How does the case of the Plowshares movement demonstrate that the way a movement interprets repression is important for how it responds to that repression?

**CHAPTER TWELVE:
REVIVING THE CIVIL RELIGIOUS TRADITION**

Philip S. Gorski's chapter provides historical context for progressive religious groups' use of civil religious rhetoric. Through an analysis of Barack Obama's efforts to resurrect the civil religious tradition during his two campaigns and terms as president, this chapter revisits and reconstructs the vision of American civil religion that was originally advanced by Robert Bellah in 1967. The chapter shows that the American civil religion is woven out of two main threads: the prophetic religion of the Hebrew Bible and an Anglo-American version of civic republicanism. It also distinguishes the civil religious tradition from its two main rivals: religious nationalism and radical secularism.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is American civil religion (ACR) and how does it differ from both religious nationalism and radical secularism?
2. How does Gorski suggest that a renewed attention to ACR could help revitalize meaningful debate in American society?
3. What are some of the potential barriers and pitfalls to reviving the ACR tradition?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: STRATEGIC STORYTELLING BY NUNS ON THE BUS

Ruth Braunstein's chapter examines the Nuns on the Bus campaign, launched by a group of Catholic Sisters in 2012 to raise awareness of the harm that federal budget cuts would cause struggling American families. The chapter focuses on the Nuns' use of storytelling during this campaign. Through their storytelling performances, the Nuns framed religious communities as morally superior carriers of knowledge about the effects of cuts in government spending; framed vulnerable people and the programs that serve them as morally worthy beneficiaries of government spending; and asserted the moral necessity of taking stories seriously alongside other forms of more abstract and impersonal data that inform the policymaking process. Overall, the chapter argues that this communications strategy helped the Nuns overcome challenges they faced as progressive religious actors seeking to influence public policy debates.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does storytelling help progressive religious activists overcome unique challenges they face in their efforts to influence public policy debates?
2. How did the Nuns on the Bus use stories to reframe the federal budget debate in moral terms?
3. What supported Catholic Sisters' credibility as storytellers? How did the Nuns frame their credibility in relation to that of Republican elites like Paul Ryan?
4. What kinds of qualities made some people morally worthy beneficiaries of government spending, according to the stories that the Nuns told?
5. What does it mean to say that policymakers have a moral responsibility to take stories seriously?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: “NEUTRAL” TALK IN EDUCATING FOR ACTIVISM

Gary J. Adler, Jr.’s chapter argues that in discussions about undocumented immigration, progressive religious organizations and actors employ a style of “formal neutrality,” which allows them to represent “all sides” of this contentious debate and protect their “non-partisan” status. Based on participant observation with BorderLinks, a transnational organization that leads weeklong immersion trips across the U.S.-Mexico border as part of its strategy of “raising awareness, inspiring action” against the injustices done to undocumented migrants, immigrant communities, and border cities, the chapter finds that this “neutral” style of talk may not generate the activism that its practitioners hope, since it fails to fully connect the experiences of participants with narratives of injustice or pathways to potential action.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does Adler mean by an “organizational culture of formal neutrality?” How does BorderLinks demonstrate this organizational culture in their practices?
2. How did BorderLinks’ mission arise out of particular streams of liberal Christian theology of the 1980s?
3. What were some of the influences on BorderLinks that pressured them to enact practices of formal neutrality?
4. What were the problems and pitfalls of formal neutrality? In other words, why did the practice not always produce the results BorderLinks workers hoped for?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: HOW MORAL TALK CONNECTS FAITH AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Todd Nicholas Fuist's chapter examines the complicated ways in which participants in progressive religious communities use religious language to talk about politics. The chapter shows that the communities Fuist studies use three models for understanding the connection between faith and politics: the Teacher Model, where religious exemplars are understood as promoting progressive action; the Community Model, where groups promote specific, progressive understandings of what it means to be a community; and the Theological Model, where existing beliefs are creatively applied to contemporary politics. Through the combination of these three models, these communities create pathways to understanding and action by sacralizing progressive ideologies and practices about social justice.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is an example of each of the three models provided by Fuist through which progressive politics and faith were integrated?
2. How did the Theological Model underpin both the Teacher Model and the Community Model of integrating faith and politics?
3. How might a *conservative* religious group integrate faith and politics in a different way using these three models?

CONCLUSION: WHAT PROGRESSIVE EFFORTS TELL US ABOUT FAITH AND POLITICS

In a concluding chapter, Rhys H. Williams assesses the ways in which attention to the complexities of progressive religion in the United States forces us to reassess longstanding theoretical understandings of religion, social movements, civic life, and political action. Drawing out key themes and questions that emerged from the volume, the conclusion examines the factors that have led to the low visibility of progressive religious social action in the media and academic research, and points to several conceptual and empirical benefits of taking progressive religion into account when studying American political life.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the reasons that progressive religious activism has received less media and scholarly attention than conservative religious activism?
2. How does the lack of progressive groups' connections to political parties affect whether they are considered "successful"?
3. If scholars pay less attention to "organizations" and more to "organizing" how will that shift the attention paid to progressive activism?
4. Why does the author argue that progressive religious activists are harder to organize than conservative religious activists?
5. What are some of the conceptual and empirical benefits of taking progressive religion into account when studying American political life?