

Introduction

Religion and Progressive Activism—Introducing and Mapping the Field

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Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land! And so I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!

—Martin Luther King, Jr., April 3, 1968¹

When Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered the above address at the Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee, on the eve of his assassination, he prophetically cast himself as an American Moses, leading a long-suffering chosen people to a land of freedom promised to them by a just God (see Gutterman 2005). The civil rights movement, of which King was a prominent figure, forever changed the way our nation thinks about public morality. This movement—like many movements before it and many that would follow—did so in part by linking its claims with religious rhetoric, symbols, and meaning.

King repurposes language from the Biblical narrative of Exodus, in which Hebrew slaves escaped from bondage only to face forty years as sojourners in the wilderness, to narrate the history of slavery and racism faced by African Americans. Aligning their experience with the Biblical narrative, King promises a future time, after “difficult days ahead,” when African Americans will see “the glory of the coming of the Lord,” just as the ancient Israelites in the story of Exodus eventually reached the Promised Land.

King remains a powerful symbol of how religious values and language can be marshaled toward progressive political goals. In the decades since his death, however, the well-organized forces of the religious Right have overshadowed progressive religious voices in the public sphere. Using the politics of gender and sexuality as a nonnegotiable wedge, the religious Right has been highly successful in persuading Americans that religion and social progress are at odds (see Williams 2002). Traditionally religious people have fled the Democratic Party in droves; in turn, progressive stalwarts have left the churches of their youth. Taking stock of these trends, many observers have seen two warring camps: religious conservatives concerned with the nation’s moral decay pitted against secular progressives championing civil liberties. Through the lens of this “culture wars” narrative (Hunter 1991), the topography of U.S. politics resembles the Grand Canyon: a great moral chasm allegedly divides the American people.

Forty years after King’s speech, however, a charismatic young political figure turned heads by powerfully integrating progressive and religious languages on the public stage. During his first presidential campaign, Barack Obama spoke of working together toward a more perfect union, drawing on the themes of Scripture:

This was one of the tasks we set forth at the beginning of this campaign—to continue the long march of those who came before us, a march for a more just, more equal, more free, more caring and more prosperous America. I chose to run for the presidency at this moment in history because I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together—unless we perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same

place, but we all want to move in the same direction—towards a better future for our children and our grandchildren. . . . In the end, then, what is called for is nothing more, and nothing less, than what all the world’s great religions demand—that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us. Let us be our brother’s keeper, Scripture tells us. Let us be our sister’s keeper. Let us find that common stake we all have in one another, and let our politics reflect that spirit as well. (March 18, 2008)²

Obama repeatedly reminded the American people that “the world’s great religions demand” that they pursue justice, equality, freedom, and the common good. By forcefully arguing that these progressive goals were not just right, but also *good*, he disrupted the religious Right’s monopoly on public morality. In the process, he became a highly visible reminder to Americans that progressive religion, focused on justice and equality, was possible.

Of course, progressive religion had never truly disappeared. Obama must be understood not as the *cause* of a progressive religious resurgence, but as the *product* of progressive religious efforts that have been operating in the background of U.S. politics throughout the country’s history. It is true that there have been periods when progressive religious voices were drowned out by louder and more visible actors. At other times, though, such as at the height of the civil rights movement, progressive religion has been impossible to ignore, and millions have mobilized in answer to its call to action.

During the four years before Obama emerged on the national stage, there was a marked increase in attention to progressive religion within Washington, D.C. Following the religiously tone-deaf performance of Senator John Kerry during the 2004 election, and in light of perceptions that the Democratic Party was “anti-religious,” a group of Democrats began discussing how to close the “God gap” between the two parties (Sullivan 2008; see also Dionne 2008 and Sager’s chapter in this volume). In this context, Obama’s artful merging of prophetic and civil religious rhetoric was music to many Democrats’ ears. He was not just trying to make the Democratic Party palatable to conservative religious voters; he was presenting a renewed, progressive religious vision.

Obama’s progressive religious rhetoric was forged both through his immersion in the prophetic tradition of the Black Church as well as in

his foray into the world of congregation-based community organizing. As a young community organizer in Chicago, he worked with the Gamaliel Foundation, one of a handful of national faith-based community organizing networks—including the PICO National Network, the Industrial Areas Foundation, and the DART Center—that bring congregations and other local institutions together to address political and economic inequalities within their communities.³ Taken as a whole, the national field of faith-based community organizing coalitions represents one of the largest and most diverse grassroots movements for social justice today.

Although many Americans may not have taken note of groups like these until President Obama raised awareness of them, contributors to this volume have been on the ground studying progressive religious activism for years. They have observed local faith-based community organizing coalitions from New York to Chicago and from Oakland to Los Angeles, including efforts that organize low-income and middle-class Americans to solve problems related to healthcare, immigration, the financial crisis, affordable housing, and education.

Although two of our most prominent progressive religious voices—King and Obama—are African American, and their activism and rhetoric were forged in the traditions of the Black Church, this broader field of progressive religious activity comprises a surprisingly diverse collection of people—racially, ethnically, socioeconomically, and religiously. And while much attention has been paid to, and many books written about, the role of the Black Church in the civil rights movement (e.g., Morris 1984), less is known about this broader field of progressive religious actors, including how they work together, across myriad social divides and multiple issue areas, to achieve shared goals.

While these efforts are often quite localized, they are also connected in a variety of ways to national activist campaigns and social movements. For example, many congregations that participate in local faith-based community organizing (FBCO) coalitions have also, in recent years, been involved in the New Sanctuary Movement, an immigrant rights movement that, using specifically Biblical language, emphasizes the faith community's obligation to embrace the "strangers" among us and to keep families at risk of deportation together. The New Sanctuary Movement is one part of a larger immigrant rights and border justice