



FAITH IN EQUALITY

Economic Justice and the
Future of Religious Progressives

OUT OF THE MOUNTAIN OF DESPAIR,
A STONE OF HOPE

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout American history, religious voices have been raised, forcefully and often bravely, on behalf of social reform. The movement against slavery was animated by the witness of Americans who were inspired by their faith. In the late 19th Century, young men and women witnessing on behalf of the Gospel's call for service to the poor entered the nation's slums and began work in Settlement Houses. Many of them sparked the rise of the Progressive movement. "We stand at Armageddon and we battle for the Lord," Theodore Roosevelt declared at the 1912 Progressive Party convention. The Lord was presumed to be a Progressive.

On February 12, 1919—appropriately, the anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's birth—America's Catholic Bishops issued their "Program for Social Reconstruction," a bold initiative that the scholar Lew Daly has seen as a precursor to Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal.¹ More recently, the African-American Church served as the focal point of a civil rights movement inspired simultaneously by the Declaration of Independence, the Old Testament prophets, and the New Testament's insistence on brotherhood. Catholics, Protestants and Jews joined in solidarity behind Martin Luther King's call for a land in which, as the prophet Amos foretold, "justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." And it is impossible to imagine the social progress of the last century absent the commitment of the American Jewish community.

The work of religious advocates continues, albeit with less fanfare and less notice in the media. Religious organizations, pastors, rabbis, bishops and lay people across a broad political and theological spectrum have been central to the battle for immigration reform - and the role of religious groups is often cited, along with the advocacy of business leaders, as an important counterweight within the Republican Party to those in the Tea Party and elsewhere strongly opposed to legislation opening a path to citizenship. Crisscrossing predictable ideological lines, a broad spectrum of religious leaders joined to form a "Circle of Protection" in an effort to insulate programs for the neediest Americans from budget cuts. The "Nuns on the Bus" who preached on behalf of the poor and the marginalized played a central role in the 2012 presidential election.

1. Lew Daly, "In Search of the Common Good: The Catholic roots of American Liberalism," *Boston Review*, May 1, 2007.

The array of religious organizations dedicated to progressive concerns is broad, and we mention just some of them here. They include Sojourners, the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, Faith in Public Life, Evangelicals for Social Action, the New Evangelical Partnership for the Common Good, the Evangelical Climate Initiative, the National Latino Evangelical Coalition, and Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good. Community organizers from groups such as Inter-faith Worker Justice, PICO National Network and the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) are deeply engaged with local congregations across the country. And given the strong views on economic justice issues held by African-Americans and Latinos, their religious leaders regularly find themselves at the heart of mobilizations on behalf of working class Americans and greater assistance to the poor.

This work of witness and organization building has, to some degree, altered the popular understanding of religion's role in politics and renewed the public presence of progressive and moderate religious opinion. Nonetheless, popular narratives about religion's role in public life continue to focus on the influence of religious conservatives in campaign and policy debates. For many Americans, the words "religious" and "right" have been inextricably linked ever since the mobilization of religious conservatives began in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Organizations such as the Moral Majority and, more recently, the Christian Coalition have had a substantial impact not only at the grass roots of conservative politics but also in the consciousness of reporters, editors and producers.

Some of this is understandable. Religious conservatives are now an integral part of the Republican Party and are key figures in the party organization in many states. Religious progressives have not played a comparable role in the Democratic Party. Because religious conservatives are especially important in early GOP caucuses and primaries—notably in Iowa and South Carolina—reporters and commentators are understandably interested in their thinking and their attitudes toward presidential candidates. While the African-American Church plays an essential part in Democratic politics and is critical to Democratic voter turnout efforts, its role is usually viewed through the lens of civil rights rather than faith.

A July 2013 study by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) and the Brookings Institution underscored the difference between the two parties. While a majority of Republicans—56 percent—could be classified as religious conservatives, only 28 percent of Democrats could be classified as religious progressives. The study found that while nearly one Democrat in five (17 percent) could be classified as non-religious, only 6 percent of Republicans were non-religious.²

2. Robert P. Jones, Daniel Cox, Juhem Navarro-Rivera, E.J. Dionne Jr., and William A. Galston, "Do Americans Believe Capitalism and Government Are Working? Religious Left, Religious Right and the Future of the Economic Debate," Public Religion Research Institute and The Brookings Institution, July 18, 2013.

The focus of religious conservatives on a limited number of central concerns—abortion, gay marriage, the rights of religious expression and, for many in their ranks, home schooling—makes for more straightforward story-telling and substantial movement solidarity. Religious conservatives have also received substantial support from other conservative movement leaders and significant funding, allowing them to develop sophisticated communications strategies and substantial organizational infrastructure. And because the rank-and-file Republican primary electorate is predominantly white, conservative and also older than the American population as a whole, many of the themes of the religious right resonate broadly across the party.

Religious leaders in social justice movements, on the other hand, sometimes find themselves divided on issues such as abortion. Rank-and-file religious progressives often belong to politically diverse congregations which are less easy to organize than members of relatively homogenous white evangelical churches. Religious progressives are sometimes viewed with mistrust or suspicion by their secular allies. Because of the high profile mobilization of the religious right and the prominent public engagement of the more conservative Roman Catholic Bishops, many secular liberals continue to see religion as a fundamentally conservative force.

There are, in short, tensions over religion in the Democratic Party that are (or, at least, have been up to now) largely absent in the Republican Party.

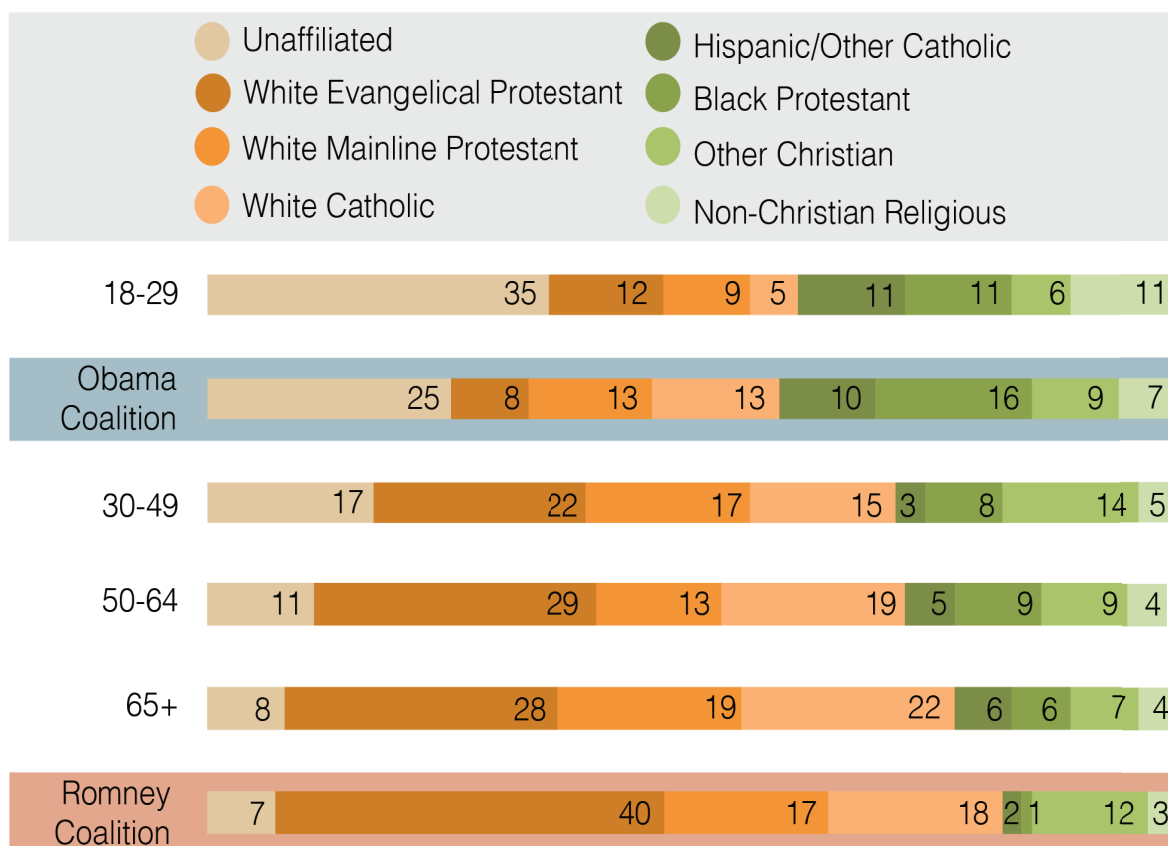
The result is an ambivalence among Democrats about the role of religious progressives. When it comes to religion, the party has a complicated coalition-management problem. This is obvious from the religious profiles of Obama and Romney supporters in 2012. Among Romney voters, only 7 percent were religiously unaffiliated while 75 percent were white Christians—40 percent of whom were white evangelicals, 18 percent were white Catholics and 17 percent were white mainline Protestants. By contrast, fully 25 percent of Obama's voters were religiously unaffiliated, 34 percent were white Christians while the rest were a diverse array of African-American and Latino Christians and followers of other faiths.³

At times, Democratic politicians have spoken fluently about faith and paid close attention to the opinions of religious leaders. An understanding of religion was one of the keys to President Bill Clinton's political success, and he was as comfortable preaching in a church as he was speaking in a union hall. But Democrats were often tongue-tied about faith and uneasy about discussing it in public—until this brought them political difficulties. They then developed an almost born-again interest in the subject, discovering God in the exit polls.

3. Robert P. Jones, Daniel Cox, and Juhem Navarro-Rivera, "The 2012 Post-election American Values Survey," Public Religion Research Institute, November 16, 2012.

THE END OF A WHITE CHRISTIAN STRATEGY AMONG VOTERS

Obama's religious coalition resembles younger voters, while Romney's religious coalition resembles seniors.



Source: Public Religion Research Institute, Post-election American Values Survey, November 2012 (N=1,410).
Graphic by Public Religion Research Institute

Thus, after the 2004 elections in which George W. Bush's victory over John Kerry was seen as having been propelled by religious conservatives (matters were actually more complicated), there was an outpouring of interest in the religious sphere. Jim Wallis, the longtime evangelical progressive leader, suddenly found his book *God's Politics* on the best-seller list as liberals were eager to learn what they did not know about religion—or had forgotten. Donors made financing available for new faith-based organizations, and in 2008, both Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton were open and eloquent about their ties to the world of faith. Both, for example, participated in the "Compassion Forum" organized by Faith in Public Life and sponsored by CNN, which broadcast the Forum three times because of its popularity.

One of Obama's most important speeches in the period before he announced his presidential candidacy was his 2006 address to the "Call to Renewal Conference" organized by Wallis. Obama offered a carefully balanced argument about religion's political role but was pointed about the failure of many progressives to grasp the power of faith. He specifically criticized "some liberals who dismiss religion in the public square as inherently irrational or intolerant, insisting on a caricature of religious Americans that paints them as fanatical, or thinking that the very word 'Christian' describes one's political opponents, not people of faith." He added: "Imagine Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address without reference to 'the judgments of the Lord,'" he said, "Or King's I Have a Dream speech without references to 'all of God's children'. Their summoning of a higher truth helped inspire what had seemed impossible, and move the nation to embrace a common destiny."⁴

Yet the success of Obama and the Democrats in 2008 led not to a redoubling of interest on the progressive side in religion, but quite the opposite. With electoral victory won, many Democrats—as well as progressive funders and organizers—turned their interests elsewhere. Engagement with religion atrophied, and with it a variety of organizing efforts. The controversy over the mandate on contraception coverage under the new healthcare law arose in part because the administration initially resisted advice—particularly from progressive Catholics sympathetic to the new law—that it seek a compromise with religious organizations on how to provide such coverage. The administration eventually pursued an accommodation, but only after its initial position hardened opinion on the right. As the 2012 election approached, some on the left and within Democratic circles realized the need to renew religious outreach. The "Nuns on the Bus" campaign organized by the Catholic social justice group NETWORK was a particularly successful venture that attracted wide attention and its leader, Sister Simone Campbell, addressed the 2012 Democratic National Convention.

But on the whole, interest in religious progressivism among those engaged in electoral politics has waxed and waned largely on the basis of immediate practical imperatives. It was a hard, if useful, lesson for religious progressives: they could not count on the political winds to continue to blow their way, and they could not count on politics itself to maintain their movement. It was, in a sense, a Biblical lesson on the dangers of being too much "of the world." And for this very reason, religious progressives have had ambivalences of their own. Some (and at times many) in their ranks have found themselves to the left of Democratic administrations on issues ranging from war and peace to welfare reform. Others married firmly progressive positions on social justice questions to more "conservative" views on abortion or stem cell research. Left and center alike have worried about compromising their obligations to witness, dissent and prophesy.

What is the future of progressive religious activism? That is the central question this paper tries to answer. The authors bring to the subject two presumptions: First, that religious progressivism,

4. Barack Obama, keynote address at the Sojourners/*Call to Renewal* "Building a Covenant for a New America" conference in Washington, D.C., June 26, 2006.

precisely because of its diversity, will never constitute the same cohesive and relatively homogeneous force that religious conservatism represents. But second, that despite growing secularization, particularly among the young, religious voices will remain essential to movements on behalf of the poor, the marginalized and middle-class Americans who are under increasing pressure at a time of rising inequality.

Our findings here are rooted largely in three forms of research. In December of 2012, the Brookings Institution hosted a convening of progressive religious leaders to discuss the current state of religious progressivism and evaluate the political prospects for a faith-based movement for economic justice. In the subsequent months, Brookings and PRRI collaborated on a number of surveys analyzing the religious landscape of the United States and measuring the ways in which values, including religious commitments, influence Americans' attitudes on a number of issues, including government, capitalism, and specific policy. Then, in late fall of 2013, we circulated a draft of this paper among participants in the original meeting asking for reactions, further comments and suggestions. This paper combines the perspectives shared at the December convening and the later consultations with data from the surveys and other relevant research. We also draw upon conversations with other scholars and social justice activists as well as earlier work done at Brookings in this area, notably a series of conferences on faith-based problem solving that led to the 2001 volume, *Sacred Places, Civic Purposes*.⁵ Our hope is to shed light on a movement that we continue to believe is as vital to American life now as it was in the days of the abolitionist movement, the Progressive movement and the civil rights years.

We should say at the outset that the authors write with great respect for the work of faith-based organizations among the needy, and with sympathy for religious people who are engaged in struggles for justice and inclusion. At the same time, we have tried to be analytical in our approach, and to report carefully on what we have learned from those in the progressive religious movement who shared their perspectives with us. We thus include here accounts by participants in our roundtable of their own initiatives and experiences. This paper thus reflects not only areas of agreement within the movement we describe, but also differences in perspective and understanding.

It should be noted that this project began before the election of Pope Francis, but it now reflects the immense influence he has already exerted on how the questions raised here are engaged in the United States and around the world. Francis has certainly altered the public voice of Roman Catholicism and, to some degree at least, has changed the tenor of Catholic engagement in American public life. In calling for "a poor church for the poor,"⁶ he has made the Church's social mission the centerpiece of his Pontificate. As the first leader of the Catholic Church from the Southern

5. E.J. Dionne Jr. and Ming Hsu Chen, editors, *Sacred Places, Civic Purposes: Should Government Help Faith-Based Charity?* (Brookings Institution Press, 2001).

6. Pope Francis, Vigil of Pentecost with the Ecclesial Movements, Saint Peter's Square, Vatican City, May 18, 2013.

Hemisphere, he is especially mindful of the ways in which unregulated capitalism has failed the poor and left them “waiting.”⁷ His language is direct, and often radical. “While the income of a minority is increasing exponentially, that of the majority is crumbling,”⁸ he has said. He has condemned “an economic system centered on an idol called ‘money’” and “the dictatorship of an economy which is faceless and lacking any truly humane goal.”⁹

At the same time, he has suggested that issues linked to the politics of culture wars have been allowed to displace other concerns. “We cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage, and the use of contraceptive methods,” he has said. “This is not possible.”¹⁰ If those named as Bishops by Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI helped move the American church in a more conservative direction, the appointments by Francis could alter that trajectory.

And through his openness to non-Catholics and non-believers, he has enjoyed an influence on those outside the Church of a sort not seen since Pope John XXIII. He has reinforced this appeal by lifting up Pope John and speaking regularly in praise of the work of the Second Vatican Council.

Perhaps most importantly for the explorations that follow, Francis has reidentified the contemporary religious voice with a long tradition of witness on behalf of justice for the marginalized and the poor. These were never ancillary religious questions, but they were sometimes cast that way. Now, they have moved back to the heart of the religious debate.

7. Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation “*Evangelii Gaudium*,” November 24, 2013.

8. Pope Francis, Address to the New Non-Resident Ambassadors to the Holy See: Kyrgyzstan, Antigua and Barbuda, Luxembourg and Botswana, Vatican City, May 16, 2013.

9. Pope Francis, Meeting with Workers, Cagliari, Sardinia, September 22, 2013.

10. Antonio Spadaro, S.J., “A Big Heart Open to God: The exclusive interview with Pope Francis,” *America*, September 30, 2013.

PART ONE:

WHAT IS ECONOMIC JUSTICE?

We began our convening in December with a discussion of economic justice: what does it mean; where are the tensions in the concept; and how do we move through the practical difficulties of achieving it?

We chose this topic in the belief that the ground is shifting in our society and our politics. There is a widespread sense that the postwar social contract has collapsed and that the persistence of poverty, the decline of social mobility and rising inequality all demand new departures in policy and politics. A Pew Research Center survey in late January of 2014 found that 65 percent of Americans believed that the gap “between the rich and everyone else” had grown in the last decade, and 69 percent said government should do something about the gap (including 43 percent who said it should do “a lot.”) Even more striking, 82 percent said government should do something to reduce poverty, and a majority of 53 percent said it should do “a lot.” The survey found that 60 percent saw the economic system as “unfairly favoring the wealthy.” But Americans remained closely divided on whether government aid to the poor does more harm than good.¹¹ There is wide room for social action but also a need to build consensus on what form new approaches to poverty, mobility and opportunity should take. In our time, these are the tasks a religious movement for economic justice must embrace.

Our initial focus was on the challenge of building a cohesive and sustainable religious movement for economic justice, given sharply divergent definitions of its purposes. Some participants argued for a focus on alleviating poverty and lifting up the poor. Others urged a broader emphasis on fairness and equality and a conversation that encompassed the middle class.

The group agreed that the faith community must necessarily embrace, as Rev. Jim Wallis put it, “the principle of protecting the poorest and most vulnerable.” Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, insisted that the moral test of any society lay

11. Pew Research Center, “Most See Inequality Growing, but Partisans Differ over Solutions: 54% Favor Taxing the Wealthy to Expand Aid to Poor,” A Pew Research Center/USA TODAY Survey, January 23, 2014.

in how it treated the weak and the most in need, “that economic justice cannot happen without those who are the poor, those who are the weak, those who are the ill, the elderly, and the children being taken care of in the system.” A few participants argued that the religious community should not concern itself primarily with debates about wealth, inequality, and fair taxation. The religious community, said John Carr, director of the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life at Georgetown University, had a primary obligation to ask “how you lift up the people at the bottom.”

THE PERSISTENCE OF POVERTY, THE DECLINE OF SOCIAL MOBILITY AND RISING INEQUALITY ALL DEMAND NEW DEPARTURES IN POLICY AND POLITICS.

Others in the group maintained that economic justice encompasses more than caring for the poorest. Sr. Campbell cited Pope Benedict’s dictum that there could be no charity without justice. “If we just combat poverty,” she argued, “we are only going to be focusing on a symptom.” This is certainly the view Pope Francis has taken—highlighting his Church’s long-standing

“preferential option for the poor,”¹² but also criticizing the larger failures of the economic system. Gordon Whitman, with PICO National Network, urged a movement whose goal would be to “drive out the structures that are creating greater and greater inequality.”

Yet even participants who called for the broader focus on inequality and injustice spoke of the imperative to move the struggles of the poor from the margins to the center of the political debate—and to battle portrayals of recipients of government support as “lazy” and “undeserving.”

“We need to talk about the poor in a way that they can be seen,” said Rev. Jennifer Butler, CEO of Faith in Public Life. “In a way that people really know who they are—that they are us, that we’re all in this together, that we’re all that one paycheck away or that one health crisis away from being in that situation, and that many of the poor are the working poor.”

Empathy is built from connection, and creating empathy for the poor requires broader public attention to the daily realities of life in poverty. “One of the things we’ve learned from sociological data is that we transform people on gay rights when they know gays or they’re in their extended family,” said Saperstein. “We transform people who are religiously different than us when we intermarry in our families or they become our friends down the block. Well, the same is true with poverty. When we recognize a vast majority of people who are poor in this country are people working and struggling to make it here and they’re part of our lives, we close the gap. ...There’s an encounter which is at the core of the community organizing model of what we do—this relationship-based approach to social justice. It really makes a difference. Those are the people in our pews. We must put a human face on it, and we won’t win the political battle unless we have done that.”

12. Pope Francis, “*Evangelii Gaudium*,” November 24, 2013.

Because persistent affronts to the poor so often go unreported and un-debated in the halls of Congress, participants agreed that the religious community must serve as a vocal champion of a dramatically underrepresented group. “The whole country has been consumed by a war on who gets free contraception,” said Carr, referring to the HHS ruling that employer healthcare plans cover birth control. “Meanwhile, five million poor people may lose health care because the Supreme Court, in a very modestly commented upon part of the ruling [on the Affordable Care Act], said states can opt out of the Medicaid expansion and you’re on your own. And no one is manning the barricades for that except a few of us.”

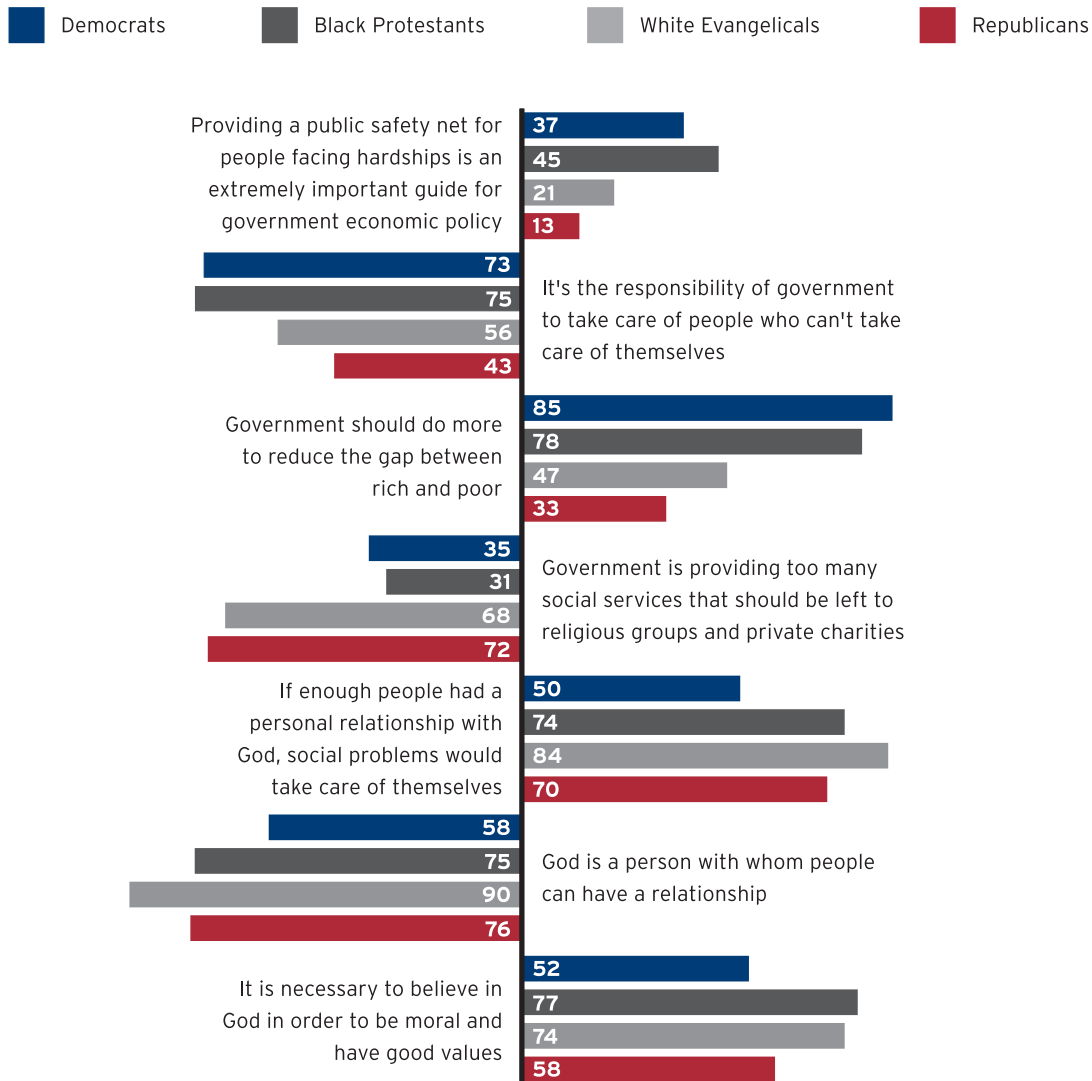
People of faith are themselves torn by the competing, if also overlapping, principles of individual and social responsibility. The July, 2013 survey by PRRI and Brookings asked whether “one of the big problems in this country is that we don’t give everyone an equal chance in life.” A majority of white mainline Protestants (50 percent), Black Protestants (75 percent), Catholics (53 percent) and those of non-Christians faiths (54 percent) agree that it is, while white evangelicals were closely divided (42 percent agreeing it is a problem and 47 percent saying it’s not). Similarly, “promoting equality and fairness” was affirmed across religions as an important moral principle that should guide the government’s economic policies: 76 percent of white evangelicals thought it was a very or extremely important guide, along with 71 percent of white mainline Protestants, 94 percent of Black Protestants, 79 percent of Catholics, and 73 percent of those of non-Christian faiths.

At the same time, people of faith overwhelmingly endorse “encouraging people to live more responsible lives” as a key moral goal for government. 96 percent of white evangelicals, 83 percent of white mainline Protestants, 89 percent of Black Protestants, 86 percent of Catholics, and 76 percent of those from non-Christian traditions say this is a very or extremely important guide for government policy about the economy. Americans affirm individual and social responsibility simultaneously.¹³

This dual affirmation can complicate addressing structural inequalities, protecting safety net programs, or building support for other broadly progressive economic policies. As Rev. Gabriel Salguero pointed out, “people think that the wealthiest one percent have earned their wealth. Unfortunately they also believe that the people on the bottom, they, too, earned that.” The Biblical narratives of individual responsibility and good stewardship are pervasive, he noted, and have great power in his own evangelical Latino community. Burns Strider, founding partner of Eleison, LLC, added that progressives often engage in wrongheaded and ultimately doomed efforts to lecture Americans whom the activists believe are voting against their economic interests. “They don’t think they are voting against their interest or they wouldn’t be voting that way. ... Part of our mission is to engage their voices and bring the strength of their narratives to the cause.” For many, defending what they see as their deepest values is a way of defending their interests.

13. PRRI/Brookings, July, 2013.

BLACK PROTESTANTS AND WHITE EVANGELICALS: POLITICAL DISCORD, THEOLOGICAL ACCORD



Source: PRRI/Brookings Economic Values Survey, July 2013 (N=2,002).

Other participants pointed to the Catholic Church's emphasis on the virtue of prudence. Carr noted that prudence can often be misused "as an escape from our responsibility to the poor." Religious progressives, Carr argued, must see prudence differently. "On a budget that takes money away from food stamps to give to farm subsidies, prudence requires that you oppose that budget. Prudence is not an escape, it's a needed exercise of responsibility."

The religious community is also divided on the question of whether society best fulfills its responsibility to the poor through government programs or through the work of churches and other private charities. The PRRI/Brookings survey asked respondents if “government is providing too many social services that should be left to religious groups and private charities.” Among white evangelicals, 68 percent mostly or completely agreed with this statement, but agreement reached only 50 percent of white mainline Protestants and 53 percent of Catholics. Among the religiously unaffiliated (perhaps unsurprisingly), just 37 percent agreed.¹⁴ The survey question did not seek to account for the fact that many religious charities and social service agencies are supported in part—sometimes in large part—by government funds. Nonetheless, it did capture an important line of discord among religious Americans who broadly agree that assistance to the needy is an obligation, but differ over the relative role of government and private or religious institutions in providing it.

The question of dependency plays into this tension. Many evangelical faiths preach that redemption and dignity must come from within, from the individual, and cannot be provided by the government or charity. Similarly, there is a broad debate within the religious community over whether government programs can be seen as providing a bridge away from poverty and dependency, or in fact promote dependency itself. Shrewd politicians have often defended social programs with this debate in mind. Bill Clinton, for example, regularly spoke of providing the poor with a “leg up” rather than a “handout.” Again, it needs to be said that all these debates—over individual versus social responsibility, government responsibility versus private charity, and the broad question of “dependency”—divide a religious community that is united in sensing an obligation to the poor and marginalized but differs as to how this obligation should be met.

In his important book *The Big Sort*, Bill Bishop traced a related difference between more liberal mainline denominations and more conservative evangelical churches. Where the more theologically liberal denominations spoke of the primary purpose of the church as being “mission,” they tended to define this mission as making the world more just and hospitable. By contrast, he said, evangelicals “believe that the world would be a better place if more people became Christian disciples.”¹⁵ In one view, Christians transform the world by taking action, in society and in politics, because they are motivated by their faith. In the other, Christians transform the world by preaching and sharing their faith.

Of course, these two can overlap and reinforce each other, as they do in Francis’ vision, but our surveys found that for many, they are distinctive approaches. When respondents were asked, “If enough people had a personal relationship with God, social problems would take care of themselves,” 84 percent of white evangelicals mostly or completely agreed. A much smaller percent-

14. Ibid.

15. Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort* (Houghton Mifflin, 2008). (pp 168-169)

age of Catholics (56 percent) and white mainline Protestants (53 percent) agreed. It was notable that 74 percent of black Protestants, most of whom belong to evangelical denominations, agreed with this statement.¹⁶ This finding points to an important challenge to a religious movement for economic justice. On issues related to economic equality and government assistance to the poor, black Protestants share the commitments of more theologically liberal Christians. But on theological questions, the views of African-Americans are quite close to those of white evangelical conservatives. This is a fact to which liberals need to pay attention, since African-Americans are at the heart of progressive political coalitions.

16. PRRI/Brookings, July, 2013.

PART TWO:

CHALLENGES

Congregational Decline

The last several decades have seen a sharp decline in the proportion of Americans who affiliate with religious traditions. The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life's "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey" found that every major religious group in America is losing members. The one growing group consists of those who are religiously unaffiliated.¹⁷ This decline in religious allegiance did not happen overnight, nor was it linear. The first exodus came with the cultural revolution of the 1960s. In 1958, weekly church attendance nationwide was 49 percent. By 1969, it stood at 42 percent, "by far the largest decline on this measure ever recorded in such a brief period."¹⁸ The counterrevolution, which we'll discuss in more detail in the next section, as well as the aging of the baby boomers, drew Americans back to religion to a degree, so the 1970s and 1980s saw a moderate increase in religiosity. But the 1990s reversed any momentum that the counterrevolution and demographic change may have sparked.

Even after the dramatic cultural shifts wrought by the 1960s, the percentage of Americans reporting that they had no religious affiliation increased only about 2 percentage points, from 5 percent in the early 1970s to 7 percent in the late 1980s. In the early 1990s, however, a second exodus from religious institutions began, this one much larger than the first. The percentage of unaffiliated Americans ranged from 10 to 15 percent in that period,¹⁹ and it stands at 19 percent today.²⁰ Even more striking, this generation of young Americans is less affiliated than any previous youth cohort in history: PRRI has found that 35 percent of Americans under 30 were unaffiliated religiously.²¹ It is true that many who have no religious attachments when they are in their 20s join congregations later in life. However, no earlier cohort of young Americans—or, at least, none since the dawn of survey research—has started life with such a high level of disaffiliation.

17. Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey," 2008 (Chapter 2).

18. Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (Simon & Schuster, 2010). (p 98)

19. Ibid., see Figure 4.10 (p 122)

20. Robert P. Jones, Daniel Cox, Juhem Navarro-Rivera, E.J. Dionne Jr., and William A. Galston, "The 2012 American Values Survey: How Catholics and the Religiously Unaffiliated Will Shape the 2012 Election and Beyond," Public Religion Research Institute, October 23, 2012. (p 1)

21. Ibid., see chart "Unaffiliated Subgroups by Demographics and Religiosity" (p 17)

It is important to note, however, that the loss of congregants has not affected all religions equally. Indeed, about half of American adults have changed religious affiliation at least once during their lives, and many do so more than once, testifying to the fluidity of American religious allegiances.²² Catholics have suffered the largest loss, although mainline Protestant denominations have not been spared. And while evangelical Protestant denominations and those calling themselves simply “Christian” have higher retention rates, they, too, are losing followers.

That evangelical Christians are a group on the decline may be of some surprise, so a brief look back is worthwhile. The ‘70s’ uptick in religiosity was not an across-the-board phenomenon. As Robert Putnam and David Campbell explain, the increase in religiosity

was not best measured by how often people went to church, but by which church they went to. Just as in politics, many Americans of all ages were deeply troubled by the moral and religious developments of the Sixties. For the next two decades, these people—conservative in both religion and politics—swelled the ranks both of evangelical Protestant denominations and of the rapidly growing evangelical megachurches that disavowed denominations and termed themselves simply “Christian.”²³

They go on to point out that the *“evangelical boom that began in the 1970s was over by the early 1990s, nearly two decades ago.* In twenty-first century America expansive evangelicalism is a feature of the past, not the present.”²⁴ (original emphasis).

The growth of evangelical Protestantism and non-denominational Christian churches in the 1970s and ‘80s was especially strong in comparison to the sharp declines of mainline Protestant denominations. In the early 1970s, mainline Protestants, whose share was consistently 28 to 29 percent in the early 1970s, plummeted to 13 percent by 2008.²⁵ Mainline Protestant churches continue to play a vital role in local communities. But having once enjoyed broad national influence on policy (and a subtle but powerful cultural influence across society), mainline organization now confront both a loss of internal solidarity and a decline in their social presence. “We had such a powerful voice in the 1970’s, in the 1980’s, and at various points in our history,” said Butler. “We lost faith in ourselves, and we lost faith in our voice.”

The situation of Catholics is more complicated. The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life found that one-in-ten American adults is a former Catholic,²⁶ but this may actually underestimate the loss of

22. Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, “Faith in Flux: Changes in Religious Affiliation in the U.S.,” April, 2009.

23. Putnam and Campbell (p 102)

24. Ibid. (p 105)

25. Ibid. (pp 103-104)

26. Pew Forum, April, 2009.

congregants that the Church has experienced. “In terms of people in pews, the Catholic Church has lost roughly one quarter of its strength over the last thirty-five years,”²⁷ Putnam and Campbell write. The Catholic share of the population has remained high, in significant part because the departure of white Catholics has been offset by Latino immigration. The dramatic defection rate can be ascribed to many factors, not the least being the pedophilia scandal. Many among younger Catholic women bridled over issues related to their role in the Church. But sociological changes independent of the Church itself also had a dramatic impact as millions of Catholics left ethnic working class enclaves in the big cities that had once reinforced loyalties of class, nationality and faith.

As the pews began to empty, the nature and style of Catholic leadership also underwent a transformation. As we’ve seen already, Bishops appointed by Popes John Paul and Benedict were more conservative than the leadership generation in the Paul VI era, a generation typified and led by the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin. Bernardin saw opposition to abortion as part of a “seamless garment” that also included a strong commitment to the poor, opposition to the death penalty and a skepticism about war. Now, many Bishops argue that abortion itself is the church’s “foundational” issue, which has the effect of subordinating concerns more central to liberal and “social justice” Catholics. Pope Francis’ statement, cited earlier, that the church “cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage, and the use of contraceptive methods” suggests a move back toward Bernardin’s approach. This, in turn, could lead to a rebalancing of the American hierarchy’s priorities.

Carr saw a sociological change in the backgrounds of American Bishops that overlapped with and may have reinforced the philosophical shift in the John Paul and Benedict years. In the past, Carr said, Catholic Bishops tended to have roots in the working class, while the new generation—reflecting the upward mobility of Catholics generally—were often raised in better-off families with management or professional backgrounds. The past work histories of this era’s Bishops are also different from those of an earlier generation. Today, he said, “they’re rarely from Catholic Charities or former school superintendents. ... They’re often canon lawyers, seminary professors and people who have served as bishops’ secretaries in the dioceses.” The early generation of clergy, Carr argued, felt the call to social justice “in their gut,” whereas for the current generation, it is more a “matter of their head.” In the past, he said, “it wasn’t that bishops read the encyclicals and were converted. It was that they came from union households. They came from low-income or working class families. Their stance on social justice issues was a part of who they were.” Under the current leadership, “their priorities ... do not start with defending the SNAP program.”

The Catholic school system has also suffered. “One of the proudest things for the Church is its inner city school system. It’s collapsing before our eyes in central cities. The sisters are fewer, folks can’t pay enough tuition. Probably the best thing we do against poverty is collapsing,” said Carr.

27. Putnam and Campbell (p 107)

The institutional challenges facing organized religion should not be taken to point to some inevitable long-term disappearance of faith's influence in the United States. Even in the wake of these difficulties, religious organizations in the United States continue to play a more vibrant role in social service provision, in the public argument and in politics than in any other advanced democracy. The widespread fascination with Pope Francis points to a persistent interest within and outside the congregations in religious leadership and witness.

Moreover, the decline in religious affiliation, particularly among the young, is a complex process. Seen one way, young Americans are pointing to a kind of "Europeanization" of American life as the United States finally embraces forms of secularism that it resisted for many decades. This is certainly a possibility. But seen another way, young Americans are disaffected with religion's current institutional forms but still harbor spiritual interests—and, in many cases, even yearnings. For example, research by PRRI has found that nearly a quarter (23 percent) of the unaffiliated describe themselves as religious despite having no formal religious identity.²⁸ And research by Putnam and Campbell suggests that many young Americans whose political views are more progressive than those of their elders are turned off not by faith itself but by the rightward trend they perceive among religious leaders. To young adults, Campbell and Putnam wrote, "'religion' means 'Republican,' 'intolerant,' and 'homophobic.' Since those traits do not represent their views, they do not see themselves—or wish to be seen by their peers—as religious."²⁹ A turn by religious traditions toward a greater engagement with social justice concerns might thus be (as Francis seems to perceive) an opportunity for evangelization and for reinvigorating congregations and traditions.

Accompanying the declining membership in religious institutions has been a drop in the esteem in which Americans hold them. The public's overall view of religion is less favorable than it once was, but there has been a particular decline among liberals. The counterrevolution attracted many socially and ideologically conservative Americans to evangelical faiths. This also meant that the

religious leaders best known to the public held very conservative social positions. Their views were increasingly at odds with those of the majority, and were particularly out of sync with the attitudes of the young. This contrasts with an earlier era when the best known religious figures were either culturally

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28. PRRI, October, 2012.

29. David E. Campbell and Robert Putnam, "God and Caesar in America: Why Mixing Religion and Politics Is Bad for Both," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 91, Issue 2 (March/April 2012).

unifying or neutral—Billy Graham and Fulton J. Sheen come to mind—or prominent (and often liberal) intellectuals such as Reinhold Niebuhr or Paul Tillich, both of whom appeared on the cover of *Time*.

Because the counterrevolution itself arose from a sense of embattlement among traditional Christians over the social changes associated with the 1960s, particularly in sexual norms and gender roles, Christian religious leaders became leading figures in culture war battles over issues such as abortion and gay marriage. Such questions increasingly defined the political role of religion—and this association became even more pronounced as an increasingly conservative Catholic leadership gave these causes priority over the Church's long-standing commitments to social justice and the alleviation of poverty.

The alignment of religion with conservative social issues was problematic for Americans of faith who did not identify with the religious right or hold socially conservative views. And debates over such matters as the role of women and gay clergy further divided the already beleaguered Protestant mainline.

Years ago, “people didn’t think you could be evangelical and be a Democrat,” said Amy Sullivan, author of *The Party Faithful*. “Then it became if you said you were a Christian, people assumed you were conservative. Now if you just tell people you’re religious, they think you’re a conservative.” The cultural linkage between religious fundamentalism and religious authenticity has severely damaged the way religious progressives are received by their non-religious fellow citizens. Thus, one of religious progressives’ central tasks is to alter the narrative of religion that has developed over decades of dominance by the religious right.

The religious right’s prominence was not only problematic for progressive people of faith. It became problematic for religion as a whole. By the early 1990s, Americans were telling pollsters of their increasing discomfort over religious leaders’ political influence. Again, this discomfort was especially pronounced among the young. As Michael Wear notes in a recent *Atlantic* piece, “The melding of Christianity and partisan politics has been 40 years in the making, but the costs of that entanglement have only become clear to Christians over the last decade.”³⁰

The disaffection with religion went beyond politics, however, even if political questions aggravated other forms of alienation from church leaders. A 2009 study by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life found that “across all religious upbringings, roughly three-quarters of those who have become unaffiliated say religious people tend to be hypocritical and judgmental rather than sincere and forgiving. And most of these ... cite this as one of the reasons they became unaffiliated.”³¹

30. Michael Wear, “The Changing Face of Christian Politics,” *The Atlantic*, February, 2014.

31. Pew Forum, April, 2009 (p 12)

The Pew study also found that a plurality of those who were raised Catholic, evangelical Protestant or mainline Protestant became unaffiliated, at least in part because they saw religious leaders as having a primarily worldly agenda. Asked if “religious leaders are more concerned with money and power than they are with truth and spirituality,” 69 percent of former evangelicals agreed, as did 66 percent of former Catholics, and 61 percent of former mainline Protestants. Forty-five percent of those who had been raised evangelical, 43 percent of those raised Catholic, and 31 percent of those raised in a mainline Protestant denomination said the focus on “money and power” was an important reason they no longer associated with a Church.³² Mainline Protestants were less likely to cite this as a concern than either evangelicals or Catholics, but the staying power of this negative stereotype speaks to the difficulty all religious figures face in addressing public issues.

The Challenge of Coalition Building: The Religious/Secular Divide

If the decline in religion’s public standing hinders the Christian conservative movement, it also makes it difficult for progressive religious leaders to win the hearing they are seeking. It therefore hinders the creation of potentially fruitful secular/religious alliances on behalf of economic justice. This is a serious loss for justice advocates. For while people of faith are generally supportive of government programs to help the poor and provide equal opportunity, the religiously unaffiliated support such policies even more strongly. The July, 2013 PRRI/Brookings survey found that the unaffiliated strongly favored raising taxes on those with incomes of over \$250,000 per year—more so than white evangelicals, white mainline Protestants and Catholics. Only black Protestants are more supportive. Similarly, better than three-quarters of both the unaffiliated and black Protestants said government should do more to reduce the gap between rich and poor. This view was held by 68 percent of Catholics but only 47 percent of white evangelical Protestants and 49 percent of white mainline Protestants. Fully 70 percent of the unaffiliated agreed that the best way to promote economic growth was to spend more on education and infrastructure and to raise taxes to pay for that spending. The unaffiliated overwhelmingly rejected the alternative strategy involving tax and spending cuts.³³

Yet despite broad agreement on economic issues between religious and secular progressives, religious activists speak of regularly encountering suspicion and even hostility from their potential secular allies. Differences on social issues are almost always at the root of this secular mistrust, but there is also a larger suspicion of faith itself. In *The Left Hand of God*, Michael Lerner argues that the secular left “often sees religion not merely as mistaken but as fundamentally irrational, and it gives the impression that one of the most important elements in the lives of ordinary Americans is actually deserving of ridicule.”³⁴ The association of religion with the religious right has exacerbated this tendency.

32. Ibid. (p 13)

33. PRRI/Brookings, July, 2013.

34. Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God: Healing America's Political and Spiritual Crisis* (HarperCollins, 2006). (p 115)

Many (though not all) of the religious leaders at our convening saw the 2012 election as deepening rather than bridging this divide, since secular progressives could point to Obama's success in turning socially liberal positions on matters such as abortion, contraception and gay rights to his political advantage. Gov. Terry McAuliffe's 2013 victory over Republican Ken Cuccinelli, an ardent social conservative, further reinforced the power of social liberalism, since McAuliffe used issues such as abortion to paint his opponent as extreme.

"We just left a campaign in which secular progressives feel very emboldened by how things turned out," said Michael Wear, National Faith Vote Director for President Obama's re-election campaign, speaking of 2012. Wear expressed concern that while Democrats are a party that "speaks so much of inclusivity and diversity," they are "finding it increasingly difficult to include a diverse array of faith voices, particularly those who hold traditional positions on social issues. Some religious leaders who were able to be engaged four or eight years ago are now off the table for holding the same views that they have always held."

Religious progressives reported finding themselves under increasing pressure to persuade secular allies that a hostile stance toward religion could still have high political costs and weaken potential alliances for more progressive economic policies. "One of our jobs post-election is to provide a strong counter-narrative to this 'Thank God we're done with God' sentiment," said Sally Steenland, Director of the Center for American Progress' Faith & Progressive Policy Initiative. She noted that the Democratic coalition includes many Latinos and African-Americans and that those communities have very high levels of religious commitment. "So the idea that this is going to become a more secular party and still be able to win elections is crazy."

The strengthening of conservative evangelicals on the right and secular liberals on the left has seriously weakened both religious moderates and religious progressives. Referring to the "nones," those who express no religious affiliation, Putnam and Campbell noted: "In 1973 evangelicals plus nones comprised 30 percent of the American population, but by 2008 these two extremes comprised 41 percent."³⁵

Such religious polarization has resulted in American's religious affiliation aligning with their political inclinations.³⁶ In *The Big Sort*, Bishop explains how the growth of the evangelical movement in the 1970s was enabled in part by savvy ministers looking to grow their flocks:

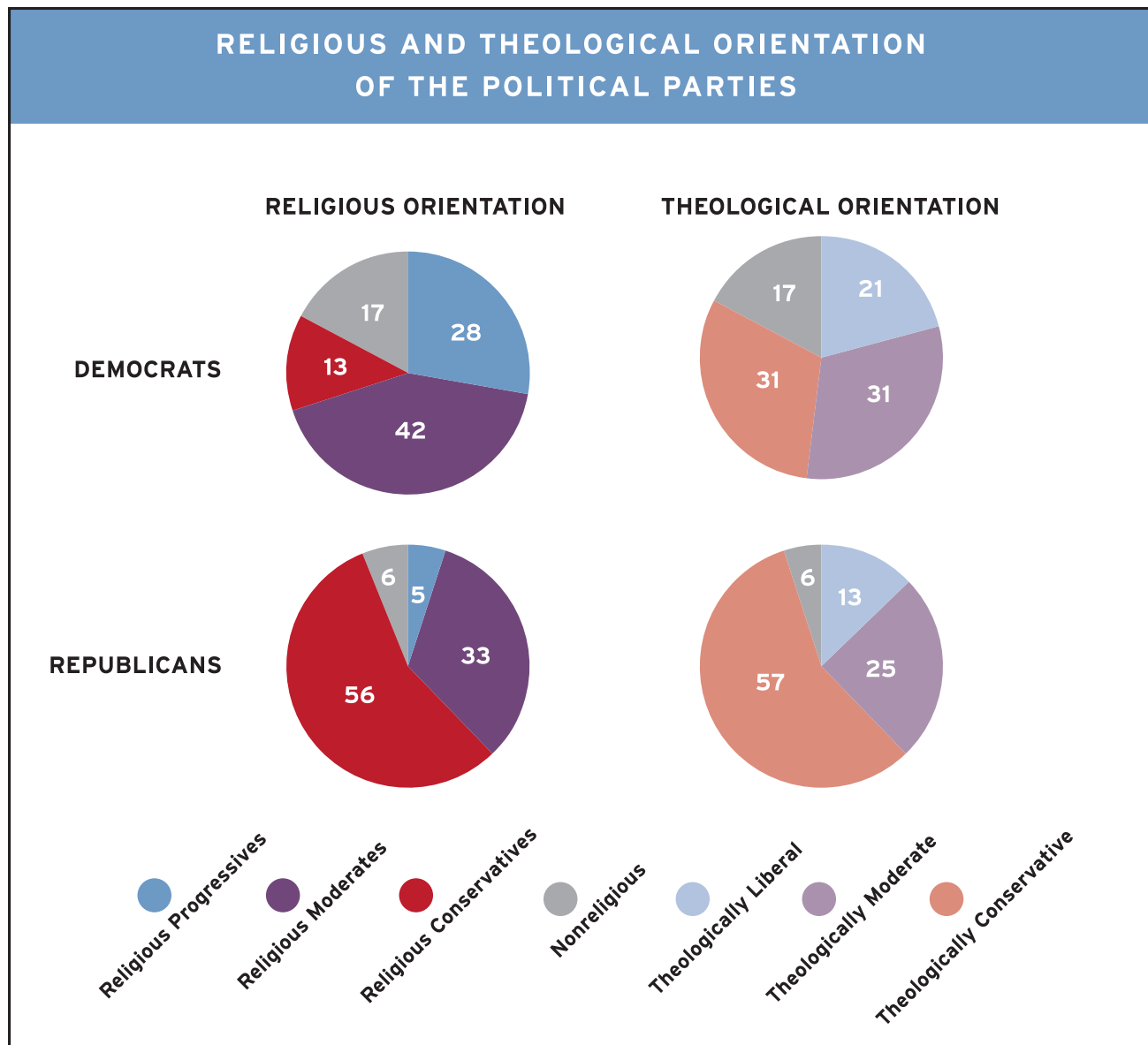
The ministers who formed the vanguard of what became known as the church growth movement studied the Old Testament and the census. They conducted market research. They took an anthropological interest in their communities... . They designed their churches to appeal to targeted groups, demographic types.³⁷

35. Putnam and Campbell (pp 105-106)

36. Ibid. (p 132)

37. Bishop (pp 170-171)

As American politics has polarized, religious people have often opted to join congregations with a political orientation close to their own. “American churches today are more culturally and politically segregated than our neighborhoods,” says Bishop. “This happened partially because we prefer to worship in like-minded congregations.”³⁸ He cites what political scientist John Green calls the “real religious divide”—“the more traditional a person’s religious beliefs, the more Republican his or her political beliefs.”³⁹



Source: PRRI/Brookings Economic Values Survey, July 2013 (N=2,002).

38. Ibid. (p 159)

39. Ibid. (p 177)

The July, 2013 PRRI/Brookings survey created scales to categorize Americans as religious conservatives, religious moderates, and religious progressives. This “religious orientation” scale was based on a combination of theological, social, and economic variables, which classified people as conservative, moderate or liberal along each of these three dimensions. Among Republicans, as one might expect, a majority (56 percent) are religious conservatives. A third are religious moderates, just 5 percent are religious progressives, and only 6 percent are nonreligious.

Republicans of faith, however, are more likely than Republicans as a whole to be sympathetic to policies supporting economic justice. Nearly half (47 percent) of white evangelicals think the government should do more to reduce the gap between rich and poor, while only a third of Republicans think this. On a range of economic issues, including increasing the minimum wage, raising taxes on the highest earners, and upholding the government’s role in taking care of those who cannot take care of themselves, white evangelicals are more supportive of such policies, by margins of 10 percentage points or more, than are Republicans overall.⁴⁰ It therefore seems plausible that a religious movement on behalf of economic justice could attract support from a significant number of theologically conservative Americans, not only among African-Americans and Latinos but also among whites, many of whom identify with the Republican Party.

Democrats, as we saw at the outset, are more religiously heterogeneous than Republicans: 28 percent are religious progressives, 42 percent are religious moderates, 13 percent are religious conservatives, and 17 percent are nonreligious. The portrait of the Democrats is even more complicated when the focus is on theological orientation. Two groups that vote Democratic or typically lean to the Democrats—African-Americans and women—are, broadly speaking, theologically conservative. Indeed, African-Americans are more theologically conservative than any other racial group (49 percent of African-Americans are in this category, compared with 40 percent of whites and 28 percent of Hispanics); and 41 percent of women, compared to 35 percent of men, are theologically conservative.

Yet some participants in our convening warned that the tensions between secular and religious progressives can be exaggerated. Jen Butler, for example, argued that the lessons from the 2004 campaign are more than a distant memory and pointed to coalitions built not only across religious lines but also between the religious and nonreligious on a wide range of issues, including immigration reform and budget battles on behalf of the needy. “I feel we are winning allies among our secular colleagues,” she said. Sr. Campbell could point to the welcome she received at the 2012 Democratic National Convention and, more generally, to the receptiveness of secular progressives to the “Nuns on the Bus” effort. The strength of the religious/secular divide, she said, “is not my experience or history.” And the warm response to Pope Francis has extended far outside traditional religious circles, suggesting the possibility of new departures in the dialogue between believers and nonbelievers.

40. PRRI/Brookings, July, 2013.

Nonetheless, the divergent attitudes toward faith itself within movements for economic justice and differences over social issues pose a running challenge to religious progressives and complicate the creation of a sustainable movement.

Principles versus Politics

Political polarization has been compounded by the trend of self-selection among houses of worship, which has imparted to many congregations across the country a distinctly partisan character. At the moment, it is difficult not to choose sides. “Our strengths as a faith community have often been building bridges, finding common ground, bringing both parties together and getting them to talk. We pride ourselves on that,” Butler said. “But we live in a climate that has put us in a difficult situation. How do we deal with an environment where we often do this false equivalency with the Republican and Democratic Party?” Today’s polarized climate has made for “two very starkly different choices in the two parties right now,” she said. “And that’s tough for us because we are not partisan and we don’t want to look partisan. But to be effective we will have to be pointed in our criticism.”

The staunchly conservative views of the religious right and its unabashed support for the Republican Party has created an expectation in both parties that the faith-based constituencies supporting them on certain issues will act as uncritical supporters of their platforms as a whole. Faith leaders—and this is not unique to either side—often feel they risk losing access to policymakers if they refuse to support the party line on specific issues. “In both parties, the false expectation is that the faith community is supposed to be cheerleaders or chaplains,” Carr said. As a result, he continued, “to have both agreements and disagreements” comes to be seen as “unnatural activity.”

Carr continued: “When the right goes up to meet with [House Speaker John Boehner], they’re not allowed to say ‘good for you on school choice and not good for you on immigration.’ That probably means there won’t be another meeting. If you go into the White House and say, ‘We’ll work with you on immigration, but the HHS thing is a disaster,’ that means you’re a big problem for us, not you’re a partner.”

There is palpable tension within the progressive religious community on how best to interact with the political system. Some faith leaders are very uncomfortable with the “quid pro quo” nature of political deal-making. For many progressives, this discomfort is exacerbated by their perception that the religious right engaged in exactly such activity. Many participants in our roundtable insisted that faith communities should be able to retain their political independence while still advocating for positions that reflect their moral beliefs.

**SOME FAITH LEADERS ARE VERY
UNCOMFORTABLE WITH THE “QUID PRO QUO”
NATURE OF POLITICAL DEAL-MAKING.**

It is a complex calculus. Wear noted that while faith communities are often averse to bartering votes for legislative action, politicians face a delicate task in balancing diverse constituencies. “We’re uncomfortable with the political give and take that is required,” he said. “We’re willing to make demands, but not willing to speak in the language that politicians understand—if they do something, they want a political benefit to derive from that. ...That’s something that’s very difficult for us to grapple with. We’re in this for our moral convictions and we take for granted a lot of what we think are simple things for politicians to do.” Tensions have been especially high during the Obama years between Catholic Bishops and liberal politicians who embrace the Church’s positions on a wide range of economic, social welfare and foreign policy issues but find themselves under attack because of their support for abortion rights.

When politicians do take principled stands or vote on contentious issues, “they have to have some cover and they have to know that there’s grassroots there behind them,” said former Congresswoman Kathy Dahlkemper. She continued: “We’re talking about some issues that are very risky for a lot of politicians, particularly in areas like where I’m from—the Midwest and other fairly conservative areas. As a politician, if you’re supporting initiatives and it’s politically risky, you need to have the cover, the air cover, the grassroots cover, and not just up until you make that vote but afterwards, particularly when you’re talking about people who are in the House who are going to run every two years.” Since the rise of the Tea Party, any endorsement of government-sponsored social safety net programs can be fatal for those holding office in conservative areas. “We have to defend the programs that work and are in place,” Carr said. “I think we are enormously vulnerable on the family tax credits and the EITC, which are essential for the things we care about,” he said. Ironically, “those were Republican ideas. But they are now under fire.”

Advocacy necessarily involves grappling with the moral ambiguity of political life, something that comes more easily to precinct captains and conventional lobbyists than to religious activists. Nonetheless, Wear insisted: “We have to be willing to engage in politics and rewards in terms of offering support for politicians—support for the decisions politicians make that support us,” said Wear.

But in the hard, practical sense that matters to politicians, what is their support actually worth? “Mainline denominations have lost a lot of their capacity to deliver a political benefit to politicians to meet their demands,” Wear said. Nonetheless, in places where they do retain influence, it’s important that politicians know that “we are not just leaders in the community, not just members of faith communities, but that we are active voters. That we actually show up,” said Rev. Michael-Ray Mathews, director of clergy organizing at PICO National Network. The electoral connection has been essential to the engagement of the African-American churches and their “Souls to the Polls” campaigns (which in some ways provided a model for the Christian Coalition and similar groups). Still, such mobilization is more natural (and practical) in politically homogeneous churches than in the politically mixed congregations to which many religious progressives belong. And for many in the social justice movement, electoral and partisan activity remains a morally vexing choice.

Indeed, several of the participants also emphasized the imperative of disentangling their witness rooted in faith from narrow partisanship. The close association of the religious right with the Republican Party, as we have seen, endowed the movement with both political influence and a strong public and media presence. But for many, it also undercut the notion that religious people base political and policy decisions on an ethical sense that grows from faith rather than party affiliation.

The existence of a powerful ambivalence toward electoral and party politics within the broader religious social justice movement is essential to understanding how the religious progressive movement differs from much of the religious right. Maintaining independence from partisanship remains an imperative for many faith-based justice activists. As Mathews put it, “Economic justice isn’t just a sentimental response to need that we see around the world. It’s a reflection of how God created the world to be. It’s a reflection of a reality that existed before and ought to exist again. We’re reflecting a truth, not a political program. That’s what separates us from the special interest groups that are on the Hill every day.” Policy objectives must flow from faith. But in order for people to have faith in the policy objectives, they must first have faith in the faithfulness of the messenger.

Infrastructure and Funding

As the ranks of mainline Protestant and Catholic denominations have declined, their capacity for advocacy and action has diminished for the most basic of reasons: Fewer congregants means fewer people to rally in support of specific causes, fewer volunteers, diminished funding, and a weakened voice in the public sphere. The decline of unions has also weakened the ability of a faith-based progressive movement to mobilize financing and infrastructure. In the 1950s, about a third of the total labor force was unionized. Today, that figure stands at just one-tenth of the total labor force and less than 7 percent of the private sector workforce.⁴¹ With the weakening of unions, said several participants in our discussions, there is no “special interest group” representing the poor in current policy debates.

THE WEAKENING OF THE LABOR MOVEMENT ALSO MEANS THAT RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE HAVE LOST A PARTNER.

As a result, Carr said, the religious community at times finds itself nearly alone in “manning the barricades” to protect programs for the most vulnerable.

Although unions have developed increasingly sophisticated electoral strategies to offset their declining memberships, the sheer loss of numbers has had a direct impact on mobilizing. Voter-participation rates of union members are about 5 percentage points higher than those of otherwise

41. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Economic News Release “Union Members Survey,” January 24, 2014.

similar nonunion members, making unions “among the few organizations that have been able to mobilize the less advantaged on such a large scale.”⁴²

The weakening of the labor movement also means that religious movements for social justice have lost a partner. In the civil rights era, the freedom movement drew substantial support from union treasuries. The United Auto Workers were singularly important in financing the March on Washington. They paid for the sound system that allowed the speeches to project along the length of the Mall, produced thousands of signs, and even reserved an entire hotel for union members who travelled to Washington for the March.⁴³ UAW President Walter Reuther was one of the official leaders of the march and among its speakers. Dozens of other labor organizations helped to make the March on Washington a success. Mobilizers worked out of union halls, chartered buses and trains to get members to Washington, and provided the initial money to do the organizing. With union membership and resources now only a fraction of what they once were, this scale of union backing is inconceivable.

Where is the funding and organizational capacity for advocacy on behalf of poor and disadvantaged people now? Often overlooked is the Catholic Church's major financial support. Barack Obama was only one of many community organizers whose positions were financed by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD). “It's important to remember that the Catholic Church still is the leading source of resources for grassroots, faith-based work,” Whitman said. “CCHD has been, is now, and perhaps will be the only outfit that pumps millions of dollars a year into faith-based community organizing,” Carr added. In 2013, CCHD gave support to 214 organizations in the U.S. with over \$9 million in grants.⁴⁴

But divisions within the Catholic Church have hampered its ability to cooperate with many social justice groups. In 2009, a coalition of Catholic pro-life organizations was founded to place new limits on the CCHD. Its purpose, according to its website, is “to shine the light on the problem of Catholic funds going to organizations that promote abortion, birth control, homosexuality, and even Marxism.” The website accused the CCHD of funding organizations that support such practices “either directly or through coalitions.”⁴⁵

A report from Faith in Public Life based on interviews with community development experts, non-profit directors and national philanthropic leaders concluded that the “Reform CCHD Now” coali-

42. Bruce Western and Jake Rosenfeld, “Workers of the World Divide: The Decline of Labor and the Future of the Middle Class,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June, 2012.

43. William P. Jones, *The March on Washington: Jobs, Freedom, and the Forgotten History of Civil Rights* (W.W. Norton, 2013).

44. John Gehring, “Be Not Afraid? Guilt by Association, Catholic McCarthyism and Growing Threats to the U.S. Bishops’ Anti-Poverty Mission,” *Faith in Public Life*, June, 2013. (p 2)

45. Reform CCHD Now!, available at <http://reformcchdnow.com> (last accessed 01/18/2014).

tion has created a “culture of fear around community organizing.”⁴⁶ In 1972, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops issued funding guidelines that allowed CCHD grants to go to organizations whose primary purpose was in line with church teaching, even if a tangential project was not. Responding in part to pressure from Reform CCHD Now and its allies, the Bishops Conference issued stricter guidelines that entail closer scrutiny of organizational relationships and coalitions.

This has led to the de-funding of some groups working on behalf of the needy. The Faith in Public Life report cites the case of a Minnesota nonprofit, the Land Stewardship Project, which lost a CCHD grant to help immigrant farmers because of its association with two groups, both of which work on social justice issues supported by Catholic teaching, but who had also supported marriage equality for same-sex couples. Although the Land Stewardship Project does not work on marriage issues, the CCHD said it would withdraw its funding unless the project resigned its membership from the two coalitions that had supported same-sex marriage. The Project decided to forgo the funding rather than disassociate from coalitions they saw as “valued allies” in its work for “racial and economic justice and stewardship of farmland.”⁴⁷ Many in the Catholic social justice community asked the obvious question: If Catholic right-to-lifers can make alliances with groups that reject much of the church’s social teaching, shouldn’t Catholic social justice activists be expected to make alliances with groups that might reject aspects of the church’s teaching on abortion or gay marriage? Pressure on the CCHD has abated to some degree, but its experience speaks to important changes in the Catholic Church’s leadership between the papacy of John Paul II and the ascendancy of Francis that had the effect of weakening the broader social justice movement.

Beyond the decline of unions and tensions within the Catholic Church, participants in our convening also pointed to the proliferation of single-issue groups as challenging to religious organizing on behalf of social justice. “One of the lessons of the ‘60s was how effective single-issue groups could be,” Saperstein said. “We splintered into a myriad of hundreds and hundreds of different single-issue groups.” Perhaps unsurprisingly, “the board members, volunteers, donors, and staff of these organizations are disproportionately people who grew up in our churches and synagogues. They just don’t do the work through us anymore. ... The work they’re doing has a paradoxical role sometimes of weakening the ability of the church to do that very work,” he said.

As nonprofits secularized and decoupled from religious institutions, competition has intensified among groups with similar aims. Nonprofits working for progressive causes often find themselves vying against each other for the same financial backers. “If we go into it thinking there will be no competition and we can just sit around a table and all collaborate, then we’re not being real,” said Whitman. “But if we don’t structure ourselves to shrink the amount of competition and increase the amount of collaboration, we end up working at cross purposes.”

46. Gehring (p 2)

47. As quoted in Gehring (p 12)

As a further complicating factor, progressive religious organizations have found themselves forced to rely increasingly on secular foundations to support their work. “Among some large secular foundations there has been a move towards the increased funding of a lesser number of large, national organizations and a decrease in support for smaller, grassroots groups,” said Sheila Davaney, visiting senior fellow at the Center for American Progress. “Along with this is a tendency to ‘choose the winners’ rather than to fund the building up of a broad sector. While funding well-run, effective and successful organizations is important, it is also imperative to build the sector and to support the ecology of the movements. This is especially the case in the progressive faith movement as it emerges as a newly revitalized sector characterized by many new organizations,” she noted. Secular funders and foundations, in the view of several members of our convening, have also shown a tendency, at least until very recently, to gear their support more toward opposing the religious right than to bolstering the progressive religious movement from within.

Our convening also surfaced worries that African-American and Latino organizations might be excluded from streams of financing that privilege older, established organizations. “All the pollsters are talking about this new and broader coalition, this new America,” said Salguero. “My concern is, as we move forward on economic justice, are the progressive, white, good brothers and sisters who have old relationships with funders going to open those doors to fund new and emerging coalitions?”

The Decline of Trust in Government

A final obstacle that progressives of all stripes—secular and religious—must face is the decline of trust in government’s capacity to achieve important public goals. Many young adults who believe in economic justice have more confidence in social networks they can create than in public institutions that seem resistant to change, slow to act, and all too often in thrall to powerful interests. Among Americans of all ages and persuasions, trust in government stands at near-record lows.

Religious institutions who have worked for decades to help the poor and expand opportunities for all members of the community know all too well that their capacities and those of their congregants are unequal to the task. Without assistance from the public sector, essential needs will go unmet. And religious leaders concerned about economic justice believe that without structural changes that only the public sector can carry out, true equality of opportunity will never be achieved.

Some Americans have principled objections to a larger role for government in any sphere. But many others who believe in economic justice doubt the capacity of modern government to translate good intentions into real results. Religious progressives who advocate public programs to promote economic justice must be aware of the skepticism they will encounter at the threshold, and they will have to think harder about strategies of advocacy that can surmount this wall of doubt.

PART THREE:

OPPORTUNITIES

Religious activists on behalf of social justice have, in recent years, witnessed organizational flourishing, even as they have also faced new tests to their endurance and their capacities. This combination has called forth both intellectual and structural innovation and a broad sense of a movement in need of renewal. What follows draws upon ideas and proposals that emerged during our convening and in subsequent consultations.

Creating a New Narrative

For a community with many strands, the religious social justice movement is surprisingly united around the idea of the “common good” as a core principle that can both encompass shared goals and serve as a broad rallying cry for efforts, as Carr put it, “to lift people up who are left behind.”

“Middle class people of faith believe the common good is a principle of their faith,” said Wallis. “This principle requires you to protect the poorest and the most vulnerable. But without an organized effort, this widely held sentiment will remain underutilized.”

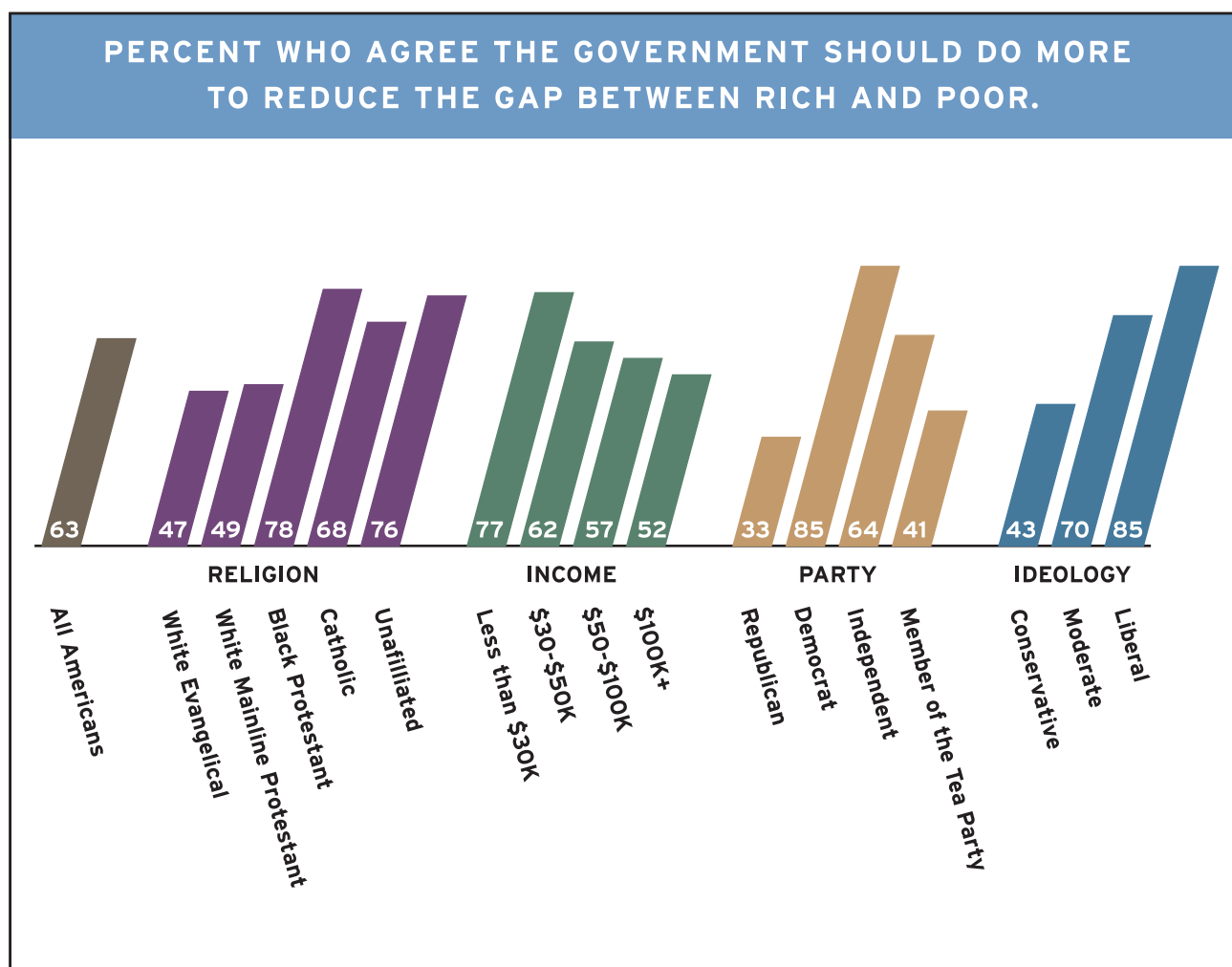
Carr added: “We’ve got to give people who believe in the importance of promoting the common good the kind of leadership that encourages them to act on that instead of their own narrow definition of self-interest.”

Both Wallis and Sr. Campbell argued that the debate over safety net programs should be cast as a matter of justice rather than charity. Drawing on his experience as an organizer among the young, Wallis observed: “They’re not being called to charity. They’re being drawn to justice. Justice must be our principle. Then they engage in fights over things like civil rights law or a living wage campaign.”

Sr. Campbell took a similar view, suggesting that programs to lift up the poor should be seen through the prism of the larger economy. “Employers are benefiting from food stamps. We have got to see that the EITC and the Child Tax Credit are as much business subsidies as they are handouts to those who need it,” she insisted. “Until you have justice, you can’t have charity.”

The imperative of viewing safety net programs in this light drew broad support at our convening. “Is it fair for Wal-Mart to pay such low wages that its full-time workers have to rely on government assistance to put food on the table?” Steenland asked. “Why should everyday Americans subsidize Walmart?”

Survey evidence points to the power of justice-based arguments. The July, 2013 PRRI/Brookings survey found agreement across the income scale on the proposition that “government should do more to reduce the gap between rich and poor.” Well over half of the middle class (62 percent of those making \$30,000-\$50,000 per year and 57 percent of those making \$50,000-\$100,000 per year) agreed that government should address growing income inequality.⁴⁸



Source: PRRI/Brookings Economic Values Survey, July 2013 (N=2,002).

48. PRRI/Brookings, July, 2013.

There is also great promise in approaching economic justice as a means of strengthening families. Changing the tone of the economic conversation and drawing attention to “the lack of work that you can bring up a family on and what that means for communities in terms of their health, their values, and the sustainability of family and community,” could appeal to a broad array of Americans, said Sullivan. Whitman argued that such a discussion would also encompass “the future of work” and how to “create real careers for people that can sustain a family and community.”

“We need to talk about the family and how economic justice is about economic security for families,” said Carr. “There is a particular vacuum for this when we have a Republican Party that has undergone a significant transformation over the last 30 years. They were a party that emphasized ‘family values,’ but increasingly they’re a party that focuses more on individual rights than family and community values. ... The family lens that we can bring is important to expanding our reach and enlisting a broader set of Americans in this economic vision. And the family is central to our faith and values, challenging excessive individualism on all sides.”

This perspective has taken on greater importance in light of a new engagement by many conservatives in the arguments over poverty and inequality. Many on the right have pointed to marriage and the two-parent family as barriers against rising inequality.

From the perspective of religious progressives, the danger is that a focus on the family could be used to move attention away from the economic and structural causes of poverty, including the decline of well-paying blue collar work, falling unionization, and income transfers to the wealthy through regressive tax policies. The opportunity is to foster a conversation that might break through polarization by acknowledging family breakup as a genuine social problem while also recognizing how families have been ravaged by economic insecurity and declining opportunity. In this view, economic justice and healthy family lives are indeed linked, but in two directions. Stronger families can promote economic justice. Economic justice is essential to promoting stronger families.

Religious Progressives as Bridge-Builders

The progressive religious community is in an unusual position in both American politics and the world of faith. It has a capacity to bridge divides that often seem insurmountable—even as it can be viewed with mistrust in the secular world and in more conservative faith traditions alike. For religious activists on behalf of social justice, this creates a calling and an opportunity but also a set of challenges.

It’s certainly true that religious progressives call into question current stereotypes about what it means to be religious, images created by the culture wars of the last four decades. Groups such as Nuns on the Bus, the religious leaders who were involved with the Occupy Movement, the broad array of traditions that have joined coalitions on behalf of immigration reform—all present a face of faith that defies widespread understandings, particularly among more secular Americans, about what it means to be religious.

“Things that resonate with these groups are actions,” said Rebecca Sager, assistant professor of sociology at Loyola Marymount University. “When they see religious leaders act differently than what they expect—when they see Sister Simone with her Nuns on the Bus; when they see Reverend Ellick from Judson Memorial Church getting arrested with them at Occupy Wall Street, when they see these people doing something different than Jerry Falwell or Pat Robertson—which is all the religion they have grown up with and seen in their lives—it makes a real difference. There is something about the act of being out there in the public space and showing your faith through action that’s really going to bring these people in and create a way to have a dialogue with them.”

But the religious social justice movement can fight other forms of stereotyping, too. The breadth of the religious movement for immigration reform has pointed to a different kind of engagement by Americans of faith. It includes not only traditionally progressive religious denominations and a Catholic Church broadly united on

the issue but also a large number of evangelical groups and churches. Similarly, the “Circle of Protection” organized by Sojourners and Jim Wallis to protect programs for the needy in the recent budget battles reached far into the theologically conservative religious community.

THEOLOGICAL CONSERVATISM CAN LEAD IN SOCIALLY AND POLITICALLY UNPREDICTABLE DIRECTIONS.

At a time of deep division in politics, social justice may be the most unifying cause within the religious community. Brie Loskota, the managing director of the Center for Religion and Civic Culture at the University of Southern California, points to a wide array of initiatives in which traditionally conservative churches have invested enormous energy. These include campaigns against human trafficking, a deep engagement with the problems of poverty in the Global South, particularly Africa, and the battle against AIDS in many poor nations.

“The moral compass of the evangelical world is set in the Global South,” she adds. “Taking on complex issues like AIDS in Africa or sex trafficking in the Philippines, evangelicals have brought billions of dollars, enormous global infrastructure, and a nearly endless supply of human capital to fights against injustice.”

“Evangelicals, especially those in the Global South, see the realities of inequality, environmental devastation, corruption, and exploitation as calls to act,” Loskota said. “The organizations they have created are often quite sophisticated both in their structural analysis of the source of the problems they are tackling, and also in the methodologies employed to address them.”

Loskota argues that these engagements are transforming individual evangelical Christians and evangelicalism itself. “The work of evangelicals does not simply stay in the Global South,” she says, “but over time begins to reshape the worldview, lives, and activism of evangelicals in the United States.”

These ministries and initiatives are a reminder that while evangelicalism has taken on a conservative cast over the last four decades because of cultural battles, the longer evangelical tradition has been marked by a strong commitment to economic justice and the alleviation of poverty. “[T]he political issues that draw Christian concern go beyond what the political system has suggested,” Wear wrote in the *Atlantic*. “Christian organizations have supported issues like prisoner rehabilitation, international development, immigrant services, and healthcare for literally centuries in this country. ... To Christian leaders, and many Christians themselves, it was incomprehensible that they came to occupy such a small space of our political discourse.”⁴⁹ William Jennings Bryan, one of best-known fundamentalists in American history, was also one of the nation’s most important social reformers. His life and mission are a reminder that theological conservatism can lead in socially and politically unpredictable directions.

“People motivated by faith do not fall neatly into the current obsession with the red/blue mapping of the American political landscape,” Loskota concludes. “The mixture of faith and politics can produce people who look quite purple. These people bring the moral imperatives of their traditions to issues of common concern that may fall outside the culture war frame.”⁵⁰

Expanding Alliances

The success of any movement depends in part on its size and strength. A modest group in terms of numbers and organization, the progressive religious movement will greatly increase its opportunities and impact by collaborating with secular partners. As we’ve already noted, religious and secular progressives share very similar views on economic questions.

“We need to remain committed to pursuing economic justice in a way that is consistently grounded in an unabashedly moral vision of what ought to be,” said Mathews. “There is a broader justice movement in Washington, D.C. and around the country that views itself as separate and apart from faith. ... Where there are common goals, we should partner. And there are likely things that we can learn from these folks.”

The participants proposed what amounted to confidence-building measures across religious and secular lines. The activism of faith-based organizations around economic justice questions is itself a demonstration to secular progressives of the commitment of their religious partners. Secular organizations, in turn, must accept that alliances with religious groups on economic campaigns not be derailed by conflicting views on social issues when they arise. It is important for secular progressives to remember that replacing religious prejudice with a prejudice against religion itself is not a form of progress. At the same time, as the example of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development showed, coalition building around economic justice questions can involve alliances with groups that do not share all of the commitments of particular religious traditions.

49. Wear, February, 2014.

50. Brie Loskota, interview with E.J. Dionne, Jr., January 22, 2014.

Effective coalitions build on their members' complementary strengths. "I think if we could shrink the amount of competition and increase the amount of collaboration in a long-term way that we would be delivering a big advance to the broader movement around economic justice," Whitman said. When funding is tight, existing infrastructure stretched, and the ranks of progressive religious people thinned, faith-based organizations must work strategically with secular groups if they hope to succeed.

Building on Past Success: The Witness of "first responders"

Religious progressives have tended to mobilize on behalf of particular causes, often working in concert with other groups in organizing at the local and congregational level. Such activities tend to receive less media coverage and attention than voter mobilization at election time. Yet religious groups have been central to the success of a variety of economic justice initiatives, from the movement for debt relief in the developing world to the Circle of Protection, mentioned earlier, to resist cuts in essential programs for the needy. These groups have modeled an approach to government policy that casts civil society groups, including religious congregations and faith-based organizations, as partners with public programs. Their criticisms of the government's efforts focus not on the "big" versus "small" government shibboleths that dominate so much of the public debate, but on how to make programs more effective and inclusive.

Bread for the World, an organization rooted in religious congregations, has organized to expand food assistance to the needy in the United States and around the world. It was central to the debt relief battle, has organized on behalf of more generous foreign assistance, and has offered perspectives on farm legislation quite distinct from those of the agricultural lobbies. Its close ties to congregations have allowed it to provide information about (and criticisms of) traditional farm programs to a broad range of citizens. Bread for the World played an important role in fighting food stamp cuts in the recent farm bill and has launched a campaign to reform international food assistance.

Community organizing groups such as PICO and the Industrial Areas Foundation, as we have seen, have long engaged with religious congregations in their mobilization efforts. In Texas, for example, the IAF established the Alliance schools initiative to battle for reform and better funding for public schools serving low-income communities. As Ernesto Cortes Jr., vice-chair of the IAF, noted, the effort showed "how faith-based institutions can organize to serve public institutions." Cortes, who spoke at a Brookings conference on faith-based problem solving, argued that "one of the troublesome things about the debate on participation of faith-based organizations in public programs is that the government and churches, synagogues and mosques are often cast as enemies or competitors." In fact, he said, "the successful working of public institutions depends on the successful working of civil society, including religious institutions."⁵¹

51. Dionne and Chen, *Sacred Places, Civic Purposes* (p 202)

Cortes pointed to a distinctive contribution of progressive religious activists to the debate over government's role in lifting up the poor.

In contrast to conservative critics of government programs, religious progressives defend a strong governmental role in social insurance and the provision of public assistance. They do so on the grounds that the private and religious sectors on their own lack the resources for the task of social uplift. William Bennett and John J. Dilulio Jr. underscored this fact in a still important 1997 article in *Commentary* magazine, "What Good is Government?" They wrote: "If all of America's grant-making private foundations gave away all of their income and all of their assets, they could cover only a year's worth of current government expenditures on social welfare." What would happen the next year? Their conclusion is inescapable: "It is unlikely that Americans will donate much more than their present 2 percent of annual household income, or that corporate giving will take up any significant proportion of the slack in the event of future government reductions."⁵²

But if religious social justice advocates argue for government's essential role, they are also alive to the indispensable contribution of civil society institutions to public life, including their own congregations, charitable organizations and civic groups. In a debate that is dominated by "either/or" arguments, religious social justice advocates stress the "both/and" dimensions of public policy discussions.

In many areas, as contributors to the *Sacred Places, Civic Purposes* volume emphasized, religious institutions serve as catalysts for public action—serving as vouching agents for groups undertaking community development projects, for example. They also work closely with public institutions to provide child care and pre-Kindergarten opportunities for low-income children, recruit mentors for children with parents in prison, and engage daily with the homeless. The support of clergy and laity for new gun safety measures grew directly out of their work against violence in troubled urban neighborhoods. The energy on behalf of sentencing reform among religious leaders arises from intimate knowledge of the burdens borne by the children of those who are in prison for long periods.

The single greatest asset of the faith-based movement for economic justice is the work religious people do every day in serving the poor. Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow has found that low-income families actively seek help from faith-based service providers and congregations—and would have more difficulty finding assistance if these organizations did not exist. Those seeking assistance, Wuthnow found, are more likely to trust the people providing services at a local congregation (84 percent said they could trust the people they dealt with "a lot") or faith-based organization (58 percent) than those at the public welfare department (34 percent). Similarly, "when asked if they would prefer dealing with an organization sponsored by a coalition of churches or an

52. William Bennett and John J. Dilulio, Jr., "What Good is Government?" *Commentary* (November 1997). (p 25)

organization not sponsored by such a coalition, nearly five-to-one opted for the church-sponsored organization.”⁵³

It's worth noting that while religious and secular progressives are often divided on the particulars of how closely government should be engaged with religious charities, research by John Dilulio, the first director of the White House faith-based office under President George W. Bush, found that the amount of government aid flowing to these groups has been higher under the Obama Administration than it was during the Bush years.⁵⁴ This is another area of opportunity for a thaw in the secular-religious cold war. It will require attentiveness on the religious side to the legitimate apprehensions of those concerned about the separation of church and state. And it will require more secular progressives to acknowledge the essential role religious groups play in battling poverty and injustice.

The dual role of faith-based activists as advocates who are also deeply engaged in the lives of our neediest citizens gives them standing and credibility in our most contentious legislative battles.

This was certainly the case in the debate over health care reform that engaged a wide range of religious progressives, including Faith in Public Life, PICO, Catholics United, Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, NETWORK, and Sojourners. Their witness involved traditional tactics, such as lobbying members of Congress and organizing church vigils. But they also took on new tasks that including advertising campaigns on cable television and Christian radio. A live webcast featuring influential faith leaders and President Obama attracted significant attention. Such activities served as a counter-weight to the work of more conservative religious groups that were opposing the bill.

To keep health care moving through Congress, they organized “Health Care Sundays” in hundreds of congregations nationwide and “40 Days for Health Reform,” a campaign that highlighted the

moral and human consequences of a troubled healthcare system that left tens of millions without insurance. Some efforts were targeted to undecided legislators. In Nebraska, dozens of prominent clergy signed a letter to Sen. Ben Nelson to assure him that the restrictions on

THE ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT OF RELIGIOUS PEOPLE AND ORGANIZATIONS DIRECTLY INVOLVED IN PROVIDING SERVICES MADE THEIR ADVOCACY PARTICULARLY POWERFUL.

53. Robert Wuthnow, *Saving America? Faith-Based Services and the Future of Civil Society* (Princeton University Press, 2004). See especially chapters 6, “The Recipients of Social Services” and 7, “Promoting Social Trust.”

54. John Dilulio in remarks at The Brookings Institution, “Four More Years for the White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships,” December 17, 2012. Transcript available at <http://www.brookings.edu/events/2012/12/17-faith-based-partnerships> (p 58)

abortion funding in the act were satisfactory to them. Sen. Nelson eventually voted in favor of the bill, providing the critical 60th vote. Support for the Affordable Care Act from the Catholic Health Association and a broad coalition of women religious may well have been decisive in shifting and shoring up votes at the end of a long battle. Here again, the active engagement of religious people and organizations directly involved in providing services made their advocacy particularly powerful.

Christian conservatives are often seen as better organized than progressive-leaning faith groups. This view, as we have seen, not only fails to account for comparable efforts by African-American churches but also ignores the work of community organizing groups, including the IAF and PICO. Butler, for example, pointed to the establishment of PICO's National Policy Office, which used voter contact tools created by Faith in Public Life to reach over 1.5 million voters in 2012. Organizers are aware of the religious commitments of those they contact "so that we can really communicate with them and mobilize them based on their values, not just their self-interest. That is incredibly powerful," Butler noted.

Progressive faith groups have also become more sophisticated in approaching the national media. "We have infrastructure we didn't have ten years ago," said PICO's Whitman, who noted that Faith in Public Life had helped his organizers to nurture relationships with journalists to "tell a bigger story about the role of religion as an engine for economic and social justice in the United States."

"It's been a symbiotic relationship between organizers and communications strategists," he added, "that's helped us build political will for progress on issues that a decade ago were not seen as being on the agenda of people of faith."

The social justice faith community continues to be outspoken in budget battles and on the effort to pass comprehensive immigration reform. NETWORK's 2012 "Nuns on the Bus" tour was organized to defeat the budget proposed by House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan by drawing attention to its cuts in programs for the needy. The tour received even wider attention when Ryan became the Republican Vice Presidential candidate, including notice from Comedy Central's "The Colbert Report." The Nuns on the Bus took to the road again in 2013 for a 6,800 mile coast-to-coast trip calling for reform of the nation's broken immigration system. Their emphasis is on how the system violates deeply-held national values by tearing families apart.

Fast for Families, another effort to push Congress on immigration reform, was a national collaboration of faith groups with unions, nonprofit organizations, civil rights groups, advocacy organizations, direct service providers, and business leaders. In November and December, 2013, activists gathered in tents on the National Mall and abstained from all food except water to "move the hearts and compassion of members of Congress to pass immigration reform with a path to

citizenship.”⁵⁵ President Obama and the First Lady both visited the tents, as did many members of Congress, Catholic Bishops and prominent evangelical clergy. The fast drew national attention, including an editorial in the New York Times. Religious groups were important to the passage of a comprehensive bill in the Senate. And while the immigration reform cause has received on-again, off-again signals from the Republican House leadership, religious groups, along with business leaders, are seen as having far more capacity to influence the House than more traditional liberal organizations. The power of the religious voice has been amplified on the immigration issue precisely because the cause has drawn support from more conservative Catholic and Protestant leaders as well as progressives.

The immigration reform alliance gives substance to Loskota’s hopes for new partnerships between more conservative and more progressive religious activists and brings us back to one of our central themes. Religious progressives should explore other opportunities for bridge-building. If conservatives and progressives find themselves divided on the religious liberty implications of the contraception mandate, they are united in the cause of international religious liberty. The struggle against human trafficking brings together advocates of the rights of women with some of the most conservative religious organizations.

At times, the ideological animosities among religious believers have been among the fiercest in our politics. Yet if those committed to a higher calling cannot break down the divides of red and blue, it is hard to expect that others will.

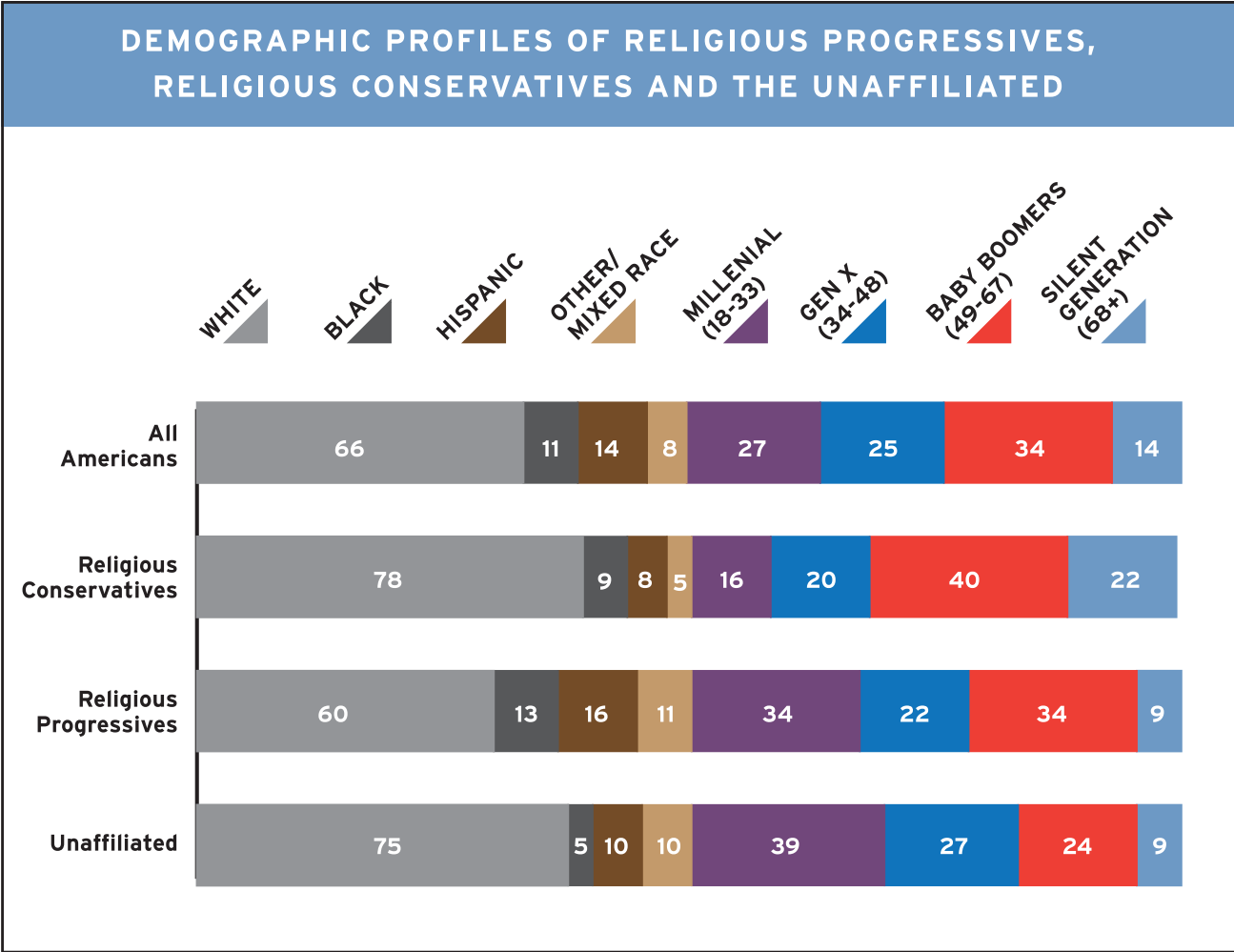
Religious Progressives and the Next Wave of Faith-Based Activism

There have been times when religious advocates for social justice have been tempted by what might be called ‘religious right envy.’ It’s an understandable temptation in light of the almost automatic media attention that seems to accrue to religious conservative leaders and the deference so many on the right end of politics accord the movement.

It is both reasonable and necessary for faith-based leaders engaged in social justice work to demand of the media that attention be paid to their sector of the religious community and that religion itself not be presented as a wholly-owned subsidiary of conservatism. As we have seen, it’s also essential that the progressive movement generally recognize the importance of religious voices and faith-inspired energy in movements for social change.

But the religious progressive movement, as should be obvious at this point, will never be comparable to the religious right. It will never fit in as neatly in the Democratic Party as religious conservatives do in the Republican Party. Many of the religious groups that mobilize on behalf of economic justice and the poor differ with each other on social issues—and some resist electoral engagement altogether.

55. Fast for Families: A Call for Immigration Reform & Citizenship, available at <http://fast4families.org/> (last accessed 01/08/2014).



Source: PRRI/Brookings Economic Values Survey, July 2013 (N=2,002).

The religious progressive movement is different in another respect that complicates its witness: religion as such appears to play a less powerful role in the public engagement of religious progressives than it does for religious conservatives. At a July, 2013 Brookings event where the PRRI/Brookings data were discussed, Peter Steinfels, University Professor Emeritus at Fordham University, spoke of his doubts about the “specifically religious character” of the religious progressive movement and whether faith “can play anything like the motivating, energizing, and organizing force of religion among religious conservatives.”

He pointed to “the low percentage of religious progressives who say that their religion is the most important thing in their lives, compared to the high percentage of religious conservatives” who say this. Steinfels noted that he was “never quite sure what people mean when they say religion is the most important thing in their lives,” but he added that offering “the most important response” seems “a good measure of the strength and intensity of religious identity.”

In addition, he called attention to the survey's finding that "87 percent of religious progressives view religion as a 'private matter' that should be kept out of public debate on political and social issues. That view," he observed "may provide a sort of negative counter to aggressive religious interventions on behalf of traditional, sexual, and personal norms. But it does not provide much ground for religious engagement on the sorts of issues the study puts before us: helping the poor, maintaining the safety net, and opposing inequality."⁵⁶ This ambivalence about religion's public role necessarily complicates the task of prophetic public witness.

This, in turn, underscores the fact that religious progressives have differences among themselves over exactly how church and state should interact. This was brought home by the wide array of reactions within the broader religious community to the controversy over contraception coverage under the Affordable Care Act. Indeed, the celebration of diversity itself is a value held dear by many religious progressives.

Yet this also points to the religious progressives' particular mission: to argue that compassion and inclusion are not only essential American values, but are also virtues that should be lifted up during a time of growing inequality and extreme political polarization. Religious progressivism crosses racial and ethnic barriers, and religious advocates for social justice can help bridge secular and religious communities at a moment of great misunderstanding between them. If there is a model for religious progressives, it may be the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Rooted in faith but wide open to non-believers, the civil rights movement spoke an inclusive religious and civic language. It was militant on behalf of needed change, but its vision focused on a shared table of brotherhood. It accepted the realities of power, but emphasized persuasion and conversion, not simply the defeat of adversaries. It changed the law. It also changed individuals and communities.

One of the best examples of applying the lessons of the civil rights era to the movement for economic justice is the "Moral Monday" movement in North Carolina which recently spread to Georgia. The movement, lead by Rev. Dr. William Barber, II, president of the North Carolina NAACP, rallied thousands in demonstrations on issues ranging from voting rights to Medicaid coverage to tax credits for the working poor. It's notable that the movement is multi-racial and multi-generational, attracting supporters from many different backgrounds.⁵⁷

And there's a strong case that the current moment looks far more like the era leading up to civil rights activism than to the period that ushered in the religious right. Just as the civil rights movement spoke to a widespread desire in the nation to perfect the post-war social contract to include African-Americans, so do new social movements on behalf of greater equality and mobility speak

56. Peter Steinfels in remarks at The Brookings Institution, "Faith, Values and the Economy: New Survey Explores Economic Policy, Role of Religious Progressives and Conservatives," July 18, 2013. Transcript available at <http://www.brookings.edu/events/2013/07/18-values-economic-policy-religion>

57. Ari Berman, "What's Next for the Moral Monday Movement?" *The Nation*, February 19, 2014.

to a broadly felt need for a new social contract. The religious right spoke to the country's worries about social change. The religious progressive movement speaks to the country's desire for economic change. In the late 20th Century, "family values" were invoked in opposition to what many saw (and feared) as a cultural revolution. In the early 21st Century, family stability is most threatened by an economic revolution that has created a growing gap between the economy's productivity gains and the wage growth of most American workers.

What's clear is that the religious right is not the wave of the future. One finding from the PRRI/Brookings survey brings this home: the religious conservative movement is dominated by older Americans; the religious progressive cause is more popular among the young.

The PRRI/Brookings survey found that the mean age of religious progressives is 44, just under the mean age of the general population of 47. The mean age of religious conservatives is 53. The figures are even more dramatic at the older and younger ends of the population. Among Americans aged 68+, 47 percent are religious conservatives while only 12 percent are religious progressives. But among Millennials (ages 18 to 33), 17 percent are religious conservatives but 23 percent are religious progressives.⁵⁸

Two things are striking here. The first is the obvious problem for the religious conservative cause: it lacks the strong foothold among the young that a movement needs to build for the future. The enormous gap between the oldest and youngest generations in their respective orientations toward the religious right points to a troubled future for religious conservatism. The edge that religious progressives have among the young also presents an opportunity to our religious traditions: a focus on social justice and inclusion offers a more promising path to engaging the energies and allegiances of the new generation than does a continuation of the culture wars. Pope Francis is one religious leader who seems to have noticed this.

On the other hand, large-scale religious disaffiliation among the young means that religious progressives do not have a foothold in the new generation comparable to the powerful sentiments in favor of religious conservatism among older Americans. Religious progressives clearly outnumber religious conservatives among the young. But because of their relatively low levels of formal religious commitment, a majority of the Millennials identify with neither religious progressivism nor religious conservatism. A renewed religious social justice movement must thus find ways of speaking both to those motivated by faith (including theological conservatives who, as Loskota notes, are increasingly engaged in justice issues) and to more secular Americans.

And this is why the civil rights era model for religious commitment has broad relevance to the current moment. The civil rights movement interwove religious and civic themes. It appealed to

58. PRRI/Brookings, July 2013. See chart "Religious Orientation by Generation," (p 34) and Appendix 3.

American civic and republican traditions (reflected in Martin Luther King's repeated invocations of the Declaration of Independence, the Founders and Lincoln) as well as to the prophetic Biblical tradition. It combined a strong secular justice tradition with the deep religious feeling and faith of the African-American Church. It was resolutely ecumenical, drawing on the theology of Reinhold Niebuhr and Abraham Heschel as well as the reformist energies in the American Catholic community set loose by Pope John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council. Civil rights Christianity was a resolutely multiracial and hopeful creed. It was centered more on the conversion of adversaries than on their defeat. It emphasized struggle, organizing, movement-building and "the fierce urgency of now." And it seeded the fertile ground of a post-World War II nation that was prepared to move toward racial justice by the shared struggles of the Great Depression and the shared sacrifices that victory in war required.⁵⁹ Economic justice may prove to be the fertile ground of this era.

59. E.J. Dionne, Jr., "Full Faith," *The New Republic* (March 20, 2008).

CONCLUSION:

A STONE OF HOPE

“With this faith,” Dr. King declared in 1963, “we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.”

We end where we began: Religious witnesses have been essential to the success of movements for justice throughout American history. While religion in the United States has always shown its progressive and conservative sides (and has sometimes been an uneasy combination of the two), the country’s faith communities have been able at critical moments to speak to “the jangling discords of our nation” with prophetic power. At a time of deep mistrust of politics, government and collective action, religious Americans engaged in public life have both an opportunity and an obligation—to challenge, to inspire, and to heal.

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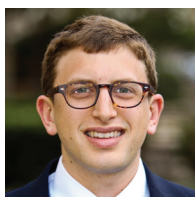
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