



12-21-2018

Religion and Progressive Politics in the United States

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Recommended Citation

Braunstein, Ruth; Fuist, Todd N.; and Williams, Rhys. Religion and Progressive Politics in the United States. *Sociology Compass*, 13, 2: , 2018. Retrieved from Loyola eCommons, Sociology: Faculty Publications and Other Works, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12656>

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Journal:	<i>Sociology Compass</i>
Manuscript ID	Draft
Wiley - Manuscript type:	Article
Keywords:	Culture < Compass Sections, Political Sociology < Compass Sections, Social Movements < Compass Sections, Social Movements and Social Change < Subjects, Public Opinion < Communication and Media Studies < Subjects, Politics < Subjects, Religion < Subjects, Political Sociology < Government, Politics, and Law < Sociology < Subjects, Social Movements and Social Change < Sociology < Subjects, Sociology of Religion < Sociology < Subjects

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Abstract

In recent years, scholars interested in the role of religion in American public life have largely focused on the Christian Right or the role of religion in civic life. Compared to these extensive literatures, relatively little attention has been paid to the role of religion in liberal or progressive politics. These efforts are more widespread and more racially, socioeconomically and religiously diverse than is typically recognized. Moreover, while these actors seek influence within the most visible political realms of elections and policymaking, they also focus on shaping the cultural identities, narratives and discourses that undergird democratic life. This article offers a framework through which to conceptualize the progressive religious field of action, and reviews the growing body of research on the individuals and organizations that comprise this field. It begins by examining the prevalence of progressive religious views and activities among the general public; reviews research on three different types of progressive religious political organizations – national advocacy organizations, social movements, and faith-based community organizations – as well as religious congregations' efforts to spur members to political consciousness and mobilization; and evaluates the place of progressive religion in American political culture. Finally, it points to fruitful areas for future research.

Introduction

In recent years, scholars interested in the role of religion in American political life have largely focused on the Christian Right, a movement that rocketed to national political influence in the early 1980s. Yet a focus on the role of religion in conservative politics overlooks a wide range of other ways in which religion enters public life. For example, in local communities across the country, religious congregations and other faith-based organizations provide social services (Wuthnow 2006); supply citizens with civic skills (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995); and encourage citizens to develop social capital (Lichterman 2005; Lichterman and Potts 2008; Putnam and Campbell 2010). Religion also plays a prominent role within many immigrant communities (Foley and Hoge 2007; Numrich and Kniss 2007). These diverse phenomena have been well-documented, yet they are typically considered “civic” rather than “political.”

Compared to these extensive literatures, relatively little attention has been paid to the role of religion in *liberal or progressive politics*. Work on the role of the Black Church in the civil rights movement (e.g., Morris 1984) and, to a lesser extent, on anti-war activism and the

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3 farmworkers' movement during the 1970s (Cox 1967; Hadden 1969; McNamara 1969),
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5 represent important exceptions. That said, by relying on these earlier movements (especially the
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7 civil rights movement) as templates for how religion can be marshaled to the cause of social,
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9 economic and racial justice, we miss the large variety of ways that religion figures in progressive
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11 politics—historically and today. These efforts are more widespread and more socially (and
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13 religiously) diverse than is typically recognized. They also seek influence beyond the most
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15 visible political realms of elections and policymaking, focusing as much if not more on shaping
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17 the cultural identities, narratives and discourses that undergird democratic life.
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21 While there have certainly been periods when progressive religious voices have been
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23 drowned out by louder and more visible actors – on both the religious Right and the secular left –
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25 at other times progressive religious voices have been impossible to ignore, and millions have
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27 mobilized in answer to their call to action. This article reviews the growing body of research on
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29 this field of action, offers a framework through which to conceptualize connections between
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31 these varied efforts, and points to fruitful areas for future research.
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38 **A progressive religious field of action**

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40 First, however, it is necessary to acknowledge that many religious groups and individuals
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42 avoid calling themselves “liberal,” “progressive,” or “left-wing” even while participating in
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44 social action that could mark them as such. Others may embrace aspects of a progressive agenda
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46 even as they also promote certain beliefs or engage in practices commonly identified as
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48 conservative. This lack of a clearly bounded category of social actors that identify as religious
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50 progressives poses analytic challenges to studying this phenomenon.
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3 As an alternative, we conceptualize our object of study as a progressive religious *field of*
4 *action*. By this we mean “a set of individuals and organizations that are defined by knowledge of
5 each other, relationships to shared discourses, symbols and historical referents, and a shared
6 orientation toward a set of common stakes and overlapping values, such as social justice, peace,
7 community, equality, and the common good” (Fuist, Braunstein, and Williams 2017:12).
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14 Importantly, the field is also defined in part through efforts to distinguish itself from other fields
15 of action, namely, the conservative religious and secular progressive fields.
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19 The diverse set of individuals and groups who comprise the progressive religious field
20 tend to have one of the following characteristics (Fuist, Braunstein, and Williams 2017).
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- 24 • *Progressive action*: They participate in social action oriented toward greater economic,
25 political, and/or social equality—including anti-poverty activism or mobilization around
26 the issue of universal health care.
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- 30 • *Progressive values*: They espouse a commitment to reform-oriented change and/or social
31 justice—including anti-racist or feminist values.
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- 35 • *Progressive identities*: They consciously identify with other groups and individuals
36 generally viewed as religious progressives—for example, by hanging pictures of Martin
37 Luther King, Jr., in its meeting space or understanding oneself as connected to the peace
38 movement.
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- 45 • *Progressive theology*: They engage in efforts to deconstruct, reform, or challenge faith
46 traditions toward the end of making them more inclusive or just—for example, by
47 promoting Biblical feminism, queer theology, Latin American liberation theology or anti-
48 racist theology.
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55 While these qualities are connected and often bundled together, they are not inherently a
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3 complete package, and may appear in various combinations in different groups.
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5 Guided by this conceptualization of progressive religious action, we identify several ways
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7 in which the individuals and groups that comprise this field seek to influence American politics
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9 and culture. We begin by examining the prevalence of progressive religious views and activities
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11 among the general public. We then review research on three different types of progressive
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13 religious political organizations – national advocacy organizations, social movements, and faith-
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15 based community organizations – as well as congregations’ efforts to spur members to political
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17 consciousness and mobilization. Finally, we evaluate the place of progressive religion in
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19 American political culture.
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26 **Progressive religion among the public**

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28 As Wuthnow (1988) documented thirty years ago, American religion “restructured”
29
30 along a liberal/conservative axis following the 1960s. Major social divisions that ran along
31
32 denominational or faith tradition lines became less significant than a cross-cutting cleavage that
33
34 separated liberals from conservatives within each faith tradition. Liberal Protestants came to
35
36 share more with liberal Catholics than they did with conservative Protestants. Certainly, that
37
38 division can be seen in many attitudinal measures, such as those indicating support for women’s
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40 reproductive rights or immigration policy. This restructuring was largely driven by differences in
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42 education levels, region of the country, urban versus small town/rural residence, and occupation
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44 in “knowledge” industries.
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49 What has not been as well recognized in much of this literature is the extent the
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51 liberal/conservative axis also has gendered and racialized components—women are more liberal
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53 than men in most categories, and ethnic and racial minority Protestants and Catholics are
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3 consistently liberal on economic and political issues, if not always on all gender and sexuality
4 concerns (e.g., McDaniel 2016). Public opinion research largely bears this out. During the last
5
6 three decades, white evangelical Protestants have become increasingly Republican, and remain
7
8 more conservative than most groups on issues of gender, sexuality, and family. Mormons look
9
10 much the same. Roman Catholics are evenly divided between the major political parties, with
11
12 white, non-Hispanic Catholics more likely to be Republican, and Hispanic and other Catholics of
13
14 color more likely to be Democratic. White mainline Protestants are generally “socially liberal”
15
16 and moderate on economic issues – and in 2008 became more likely to identify as Democrats
17
18 than Republicans for the first time since the New Deal (Smidt et al. 2010), and Jews are
19
20 consistently liberal (with the notable exception of a conservative stance on Israel). Other faith
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22 traditions – whether because they are politically diverse or because their members are relative
23
24 newcomers to U.S. politics – do not (yet) have clearly defined political profiles.
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31 As the Republican Party solidified its support among white evangelical Protestants and
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33 many white Catholics, two decades of scholarly attention went to the attitudinal determinants of
34
35 the conservative religion-politics nexus. While remaining rooted in gender, sexuality, and family
36
37 issues, religiosity measures such as weekly worship service attendance and belief in biblical
38
39 literalism were revealed to be the best predictors of Christian Right orientation. However,
40
41 attendance and literalism are themselves declining in American religion (see Chaves 2017).
42
43 Much of this decline has come from people who have grown tired of the tight connection
44
45 between conservative religion and Republican politics, and there is evidence that this weariness
46
47 has also contributed to the rise of religious “nones” (Hout and Fisher 2002, 2014).
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51 As a result, some analysts see an opening for a resurgent religious Left. Various
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53 demographic, political, and cultural changes since the turn of the century (e.g., Dionne 2008;
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3 Jones et al. 2013) may well have opened the door to an increasing association between religious
4 commitments and liberal political attitudes and voting, and increasing identification between
5 religion and progressive values. As Petz and Smidt (2015) document, President Obama inspired
6 younger voters, including white evangelicals, to support a more progressive political outlook (see
7 also, Rhodes 2011). This was perhaps most visible in the declining opposition to same-sex
8 marriage among younger people (e.g., Perry and Whitehead 2016; Walls et al. 2014). Further,
9 many younger religious cohorts, especially among Catholics, are sympathetic to immigrant rights
10 and are alienated by the GOP Right's hardline on that issue. In sum, the attitudinal landscape has
11 become increasingly fractured across the American religious public except on the Christian Right,
12 and easy associations among religious tradition, identity, or practices and political opinions miss
13 important distinctions.
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28 Yet it is unclear whether the growing number of individuals who hold progressive
29 religious views could coalesce into a progressive religious movement capable (narrowly) of
30 offsetting the power of the religious Right or (more broadly) of providing Americans an
31 alternative way of imagining the role of religion (and God) in their efforts to "forge a common
32 life" (Bretherton 2014). The religious Left is fairly inchoate, with a broad agenda, and tenuous
33 ties to the Democratic party (Sullivan 2008; Olson 2017; Sager 2017). It also includes a socially,
34 religiously and politically diverse set of constituencies who do not just tolerate, but actively
35 celebrate, differences in opinion (Alpert 2000; Kellstedt et al. 2007; Olson 2011). Despite these
36 challenges, a large number of organizations and leaders are working – often below scholars' and
37 the media's radar – to lift up the voices and values of Americans who are progressive *and*
38 religious.
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Social movement activism

Despite the visibility of the Christian Right, religious activists have consistently mobilized for progressive causes through U.S. history. Broadly speaking, religion has factored into progressive mobilization in three key ways: by (1) serving as a tangible resource, (2) shaping the motivations, ideologies, practices, and identities of participants, and (3) granting a source of moral authority.

When Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her bus seat in 1955, E.D. Nixon, head of the local NAACP, called a meeting to plan a boycott. It was no accident that the meeting took place in a church and drew on the networks of local ministers because churches have consistently provided tangible resources that movements need to mobilize (Morris 1984). In the civil rights movement, black congregations offered space for meetings, dense networks that helped spread information, and paid staff who could dedicate time to activism (Harris 1999; Morris 1984). Similarly, religious groups played a “movement midwife” role in the Central American peace movement by raising money and serving as “feeder organizations” (Smith 1996). Congregations were able to use their extensive networks to publicize movement concerns and, in several cases, “entire congregations would vote to become involved in refugee work” drawing “tens of thousands of Americans... into the Central American peace movement” (Smith 1996:113). Meanwhile, the New Sanctuary Movement has used church space to, in some cases, literally house immigrants in danger of deportation (Yukich 2013), while progressive faith-based community organizing groups have made extensive use of the resources provided by member congregations in their advocacy work (Wood and Fulton 2015; Geraty 2017).

Churches, however, have provided more than meeting space and money for movements. As Pattillo-McCoy (1998) notes, the “importance of the black church lies not only in its

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3 organizational ability...but also in its cultural strength as a common language that leaders and
4
5 followers...can share to coordinate action” (781). Religious languages have been used to frame
6
7 and motivate progressive activism throughout U.S. history in movements as diverse as the eight-
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9 hour movement (Mirola 2015), LGBT rights (Wilcox 2003), and women’s suffrage (McKanan
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11 2011). For example, Martinez (2017) documents the intertwining of immigrant rights activism
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13 and Christian imagery during a Posadas event (a ritual observed by Mexican Catholics that
14
15 reenacts the story of the Holy Family). The Posadas procession Martinez attended had speakers
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17 who directly tied the story of the Holy Family to the plight of undocumented immigrants. The
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19 Plowshares movement, similarly, has drawn on understandings of Christian sacrifice and
20
21 righteousness to motivate high-risk activism. Nepstad (2008) finds that the shared religious
22
23 understandings of the Plowshares movement created trust between participants necessary to plan
24
25 and undertake actions that would almost certainly result in arrest, such as breaking into missile
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27 silos.
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33 Third, because religious groups in the U.S. are “perceived as the ‘carriers of the moral’ in
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35 the culture,” their claims to moral authority tend to be more persuasive than those of other kinds
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37 of groups (Williams and Demerath 1991:419). While Hart (2001) has argued that progressives
38
39 often *lack* a transcendent, moral language when communicating their ideologies, Fuist (2017)
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41 demonstrates that progressive religious groups are able to blend the moral language of religion
42
43 with left-wing structural critique. As Tobey’s (2016) research shows, the aforementioned
44
45 Plowshares movement base their audience-conscious actions on a self-understanding of “moral
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47 distinction” that “sets them apart from a war-making state, a complicit Church, and an apathetic
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49 society” (5-6). Braunstein (2012), similarly, shows how liberal religious activists deliberately
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51 highlight their connections to faith communities to demonstrate that, as religious citizens, they
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3 are “properly distanced from interest group politics, yet able to provide decisionmakers with
4 direct access to information culled from the faith communities they represent” (117). It is worth
5
6 noting, though, that the moral legitimacy granted religious activists is highly contingent upon
7
8 their religious and racial identities—while white Christian faith leaders and communities are
9
10 framed as neutral and disinterested moral arbiters, non-Christian faith leaders and people of color
11
12 are often viewed with suspicion or as motivated by more “base” political or economic interests
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14 when they enter public life (Edgell 2017; Yukich 2017).
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21 **National advocacy organizations**

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23 While liberal religious advocacy organizations often support the work of social
24
25 movements, they occupy an organizational field whose features shape their broader efforts in
26
27 important ways. These organizations, which include membership-based advocacy organizations;
28
29 the Washington offices of liberal denominations; faith-based service agencies; and national
30
31 networks of congregation-based community organizations, participate in the competitive field of
32
33 interest group politics in Washington, DC, where they bring varied faith perspectives to bear on
34
35 policymaking debates. They do so by lobbying for public policies that are consistent with their
36
37 communities’ religious values or with values that are broadly shared across multiple faith
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39 communities, like peace, social justice, or the common good. Many also seek to mobilize
40
41 grassroots support for their efforts, by engaging in public campaigns that highlight the moral
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43 valence of issues and calling upon people of faith to pressure their representatives (Hertzke 1988;
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45 Wuthnow 1988; Hofrenning 1995; Yamane 2005; Fowler et al. 2013).
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51 Although the national policymaking field is dominated by technical experts and moneyed
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53 interests (Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012), many religious groups play a role in many policy
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3 debates, thanks to their aforementioned reputation as the “carriers of the moral” in American
4 society (Williams and Demerath 1991). Their moral authority on issues of public concern is not
5 only dependent on the values, lessons, and stories they draw from their religious traditions. It is
6 also rooted in their structural position as “outsiders” who in theory lack a material interest in the
7 outcomes of policies (Williams and Demerath 1991); as well as their status as representatives of
8 large number of citizens and carriers of local knowledge about how policies are experienced
9 within local communities (Braunstein 2012).

19 Because these advocates justify their existence by reference to the authenticity and
20 distinctiveness of their *religious* voices (Moody 2002; Olson 2002), they are mindful of the need
21 to communicate in ways that both highlight their religious identities, but also conform to the
22 secular speech norms of the “lobby craft” (Hertzke 1988:88),¹ and build broad interfaith support
23 for their positions (Lichterman 2005; Wood 2002). To this end, they have developed various
24 solutions to these challenges. For example, Braunstein (2012; 2017) shows how the Nuns on the
25 Bus campaign and other similar organizations use “secular” storytelling to broaden the appeal of
26 their claims even as they maintain the moral force of religious authority. Similarly, Fuist (2017)
27 demonstrates that the “moral talk” used by advocacy groups establishes different “models” for
28 understanding connections between faith with social justice efforts, making the religio-moral
29 authority clear, even as it de-centers specific sectarian arguments. Finally, Gorski (2017a,b)
30 argues that civil religion offers a means of marshalling religion’s prophetic power in a way that
31 is inclusive and widely accessible.

51 **Faith-based community organizing**

55 ¹ Policymaking here must be distinguished from politics, in which religious expression is encouraged and
56 commonplace. But a line is typically drawn between the two—in theory, if not in practice.

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3 Occupying a niche position between social movements and relatively enduring
4
5 civic/political organizations, faith-based community organizing (FBCO) networks bring
6
7 congregations and other local institutions together to train local leaders equipped to advocate for
8
9 policies that better serve their communities. The national field of faith-based community
10
11 organizing coalitions represents one of the largest and most diverse grassroots movements for
12
13 social justice today (Wood and Fulton 2015; Fulton and Wood 2017). Indeed, a 2011 census of
14
15 FBCO coalitions operating nationwide found that this field as a whole represented over 5 million
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17 people, up from around 2 million in 2001 (Wood, Fulton and Partridge 2011). Major national
18
19 coalitions include the PICO National Network (People Improving Communities through
20
21 Organizing), the Industrial Areas Foundation, and DART (the Direct Action and Research
22
23 Training Center).

24
25
26 Over the past two decades, this field has received increased attention from scholars, who
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28 along with practitioners within the field (e.g., Jacobsen 2001; Chambers and Cowan 2003; Gecan
29
30 2004; Whitman 2018), have documented these organizations' unprecedented successes in a range
31
32 of policy areas (Wood and Fulton 2015). At the same time, however, they have also had to
33
34 overcome a variety of challenges arising from their structure and vision. First, because FBCOs
35
36 are primarily comprised of "ordinary" people, they invest in developing these leaders' political
37
38 confidence, skill, and subjectivity (Stout 2010; Han 2014; Oyakawa 2015; Braunstein 2017).
39
40 Especially for members of marginalized or oppressed groups, FBCOs are spaces in which to
41
42 develop empowering "redemption scripts" (Flores and Cossyleon 2016). They also encourage
43
44 participants to expand their "collective moral imaginary" (Delehanty and Oyakawa 2017) in a
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46 manner that helps them determine how their self-interest intersects with the common good of
47
48 their diverse communities (Delehanty 2016; Braunstein 2017).
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3 Second, most FBCO leaders are not experts in the technicalities of public policies,
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5 despite having significant knowledge about policies' impacts on their communities. As such,
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7 they have developed creative ways of communicating this well of local and experiential
8
9 knowledge, often through ritualized storytelling performances, intended to deepen the
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11 understanding and tug at the heartstrings of decision-makers. During these "public accountability
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13 actions," often held within places of worship and in front of large crowds of witnesses, FBCO
14
15 leaders then demand commitments from public officials and other elites to address their
16
17 concerns. Along with other tactics, these practices are central to FBCOs' efforts to hold elites
18
19 accountable to ordinary people, a condition they view as necessary for a healthy democracy
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21 (Stout 2010; Wood and Fulton 2015; Braunstein 2017).
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26 Third, although FBCOs primarily focus on reigning in growing power imbalances
27
28 between ordinary citizens and elites, they must also work to limit power imbalances within their
29
30 own coalitions. Indeed, such imbalances are common within organizations that exhibit high
31
32 levels of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity, like most FBCOs (Wood, Fulton, and
33
34 Partridge 2012; Wood and Fulton 2015; Geraty 2017). If left unchecked, these imbalances can
35
36 fuel distrust and disagreement. As a result, many FBCOs emphasize their equality and shared
37
38 values as "people of faith." They reinforce this identity by drawing heavily on religion to build
39
40 shared group identities and cultures (Hart 2001; Swarts 2008; Stout 2010; Wood 1999, 2002);
41
42 developing "bridging cultural practices" – like interfaith prayers – that emphasize their
43
44 commonalities as "people of faith" while downplaying or celebrating their other differences
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46 (Braunstein, Fulton and Wood 2014; see also Warren 2001); or cultivating a "multicultural
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48 activist etiquette" intended to make all parties feel safe, equal and included (Diaz Edelman 2017).
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3 Overall, scholars have expressed enthusiasm about FBCOs' capacity to "revitalize"
4 democracy (Warren 2001); to be the future of "progressive politics in America" (Osterman 2003;
5 see also Hart 2001); to cultivate a distinctive model of grassroots democracy (Stout 2010) or
6 active citizenship (Braunstein 2017); and to promote racial and economic justice (Wood and
7 Fulton 2015). Interest in FBCOs also continues to grow—among scholars of religion and
8 theology who see in FBCOs a sophisticated example of religious ethics in action (e.g., Snarr
9 2011; Bretherton 2014; Lloyd 2014); as well as participants in the Trump resistance movement
10 who see in FBCOs a powerful model for holding elites accountable (Whitman 2018).
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24 **Religious congregations**

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26 In quieter and less overly "political" ways, religious congregations are also fertile ground
27 in which progressive religious politics can grow. While denominations were once the boundary
28 markers of American religion, they have declined in significance compared to a liberal-
29 conservative divide that cuts across denominations (Wuthnow 1988). Congregations have thus
30 become, for many Americans, a site where politics are regularly debated and enacted. In
31 countless congregations in the U.S., we can see this play out in two key ways: (1) in the
32 conversations that happen within congregations about progressive issues, and (2) in how
33 congregations organize and act on behalf of progressive causes.
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44 Many congregations encourage discussions that shape members' perceptions about
45 progressive causes, including immigrant rights (Yukich 2013; Adler 2017) and racial equality
46 (Marti 2005). As Munday et al. (2011) demonstrate, congregational cultures can sacralize acts
47 and issues through how they frame them to their members. As such, when congregational leaders
48 or participants talk about economic equality as God-ordained (Fuist 2017) or immigrant rights as
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3 sacred (Martinez 2017), they provide cultural resources to members that can promote progressive
4 action. For example, research links debates about LGBT issues within congregations to an
5 increase in LGBT acceptance and inclusion (Cadge, Day, and Wildeman 2007). In some cases,
6 ostensibly “straight” congregations have had ongoing conversations about how to best practice
7 their desire to be inclusive while also adhering to their perceptions of scripture (Moon 2004); in
8 others, members have embraced being “welcoming and affirming” to LGBT persons, while still
9 promoting and enacting Christian understandings of monogamy and gender (McQueeney 2009).
10 Conversely, as an outgrowth of the LGBT rights movement, the Metropolitan Community
11 Church denomination, and many congregations within other traditions, actively identify as
12 LGBT churches (Wilcox 2003). These congregations may promote queer theologies that
13 demonstrate alternative applications of faith traditions to issues of sexuality, politics, and gender,
14 shaping how participants understand and behave as queer persons of faith (Fuist 2016; Dillon
15 1999).

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Many progressive congregations also go beyond discussion, by organizing to take collective action. Only a relatively small fraction of congregations report being involved in progressive religious *political* activities (Beyerlein and West 2017), but self-identified liberal congregations engage in more service-based action than conservative congregations (Chaves and Tsitsos 2001), and Catholics, black Protestants, and mainline Protestants tend to be more civically engaged than conservative Protestants (Ammerman 2002; Beyerlein and Hipp 2006). While churches of all persuasions connect with non-profit groups, progressive churches are also more likely than conservative congregations to partner with secular groups, expanding their ability to foster “bridging social capital” within their communities (Ammerman 2002; Beyerlein and Hipp 2006; Lichterman 2005). Taken together, congregations involve themselves in public

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3 life in a variety of ways, including talking about progressive politics in a way that shapes the
4 understandings and actions of members, and serving as a site through which members can
5
6 coordinate public actions (Beyerlein and West 2017).
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11 12 **American political culture**

13
14 American ideas about politics are embedded in a religious history and worldview (Mead
15 1985; Harrington 1986; Williams 1999; McKenna 2007). In many parts of Western Europe and
16 Latin America, progressive politics came with an inherent anti-clericalism. To be progressive
17 was to be (and often still is) secular. Not so the United States. The nation's cultural grounding in
18 a mix of liberalism, Calvinist Protestantism, and civic republicanism (see, e.g., Bellah et al.
19 1985) has kept a place for religion, even in the midst of political and economic reforms.
20 Protestantism continues to enjoy a privileged place in that cultural heritage, but American
21 political culture remains open to a diverse range of religious worldviews, ideas, and actors.
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33 Progressive religious activists can thus draw heavily from theological and doctrinal
34 resources when engaging in politics: they cite Hebrew prophets speaking truth to power, Jesus
35 overturning the money-changers' table in the temple, and the turn-of-the-century's "Social
36 Gospel." These religious stories, symbols and ideas are a key part of the "cultural repertoire"
37 (Williams 1995) that gives Americans a language and a set of symbols to think and talk about
38 politics. In addition to these explicit religious references, many of the ideas common to
39 American political culture have deep associations with religious worldviews and teachings that
40 are less apparent. For example, the idea of individual dignity as a political principle emerged in
41 Enlightenment philosophy, but has also been a feature of a number of Christian doctrines (Wood
42 2014). So, too, ideas about equality—when groups such as the Quakers, and many in the
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3 Anabaptist tradition, extended their conceptions of the Christian soul across racial lines, this
4 formed some of the bedrock of abolitionist sentiment and action (e.g., Smith 1997; Young 2006).
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6 While classical liberalism did not need an immanent God for its conception of a well-ordered
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8 society, there was nonetheless an elective affinity between Protestantism and emerging liberal
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10 thought in England, Scotland, and the Netherlands. Without a clerical establishment in colonial
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12 America, a political culture developed in which religion and progressive political notions could
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14 coexist. As Siedentop argues, “liberalism rests on the moral assumptions provided by
15
16 Christianity” (2014: 338). There is a case to be made that there is no significant American
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18 political language that is completely secular—indeed, even socialism in America was intertwined
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20 with religion (consider Robert Owen’s New Harmony, Indiana, or Dorothy Day’s Catholic
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22 Worker).
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28 The most significant articulation of religion’s place in American political culture is found
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30 in the concept of “civil religion.” First applied to the U.S. by Bellah (1967, 1975) the idea
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32 posited a generalized cultural understanding that linked the nation’s history, identity, and destiny
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34 to Providence and Divine favor. Importantly, Bellah’s civil religion was prophetic, insofar as it
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36 provides transcendent standards for the good society, to which the nation is accountable. Thus,
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38 civil religion is a resource for critiques of the extant, toward a more just and inclusive future (see
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40 also Gorski 2017a,b). While Bellah was keenly aware of the founding “sin” of slavery in the U.S.,
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42 he saw in civil religion a way to challenge and eventually transcend racial injustice. American
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44 civil religious language has proved a useful resource for many progressive movements (e.g.,
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46 Braunstein 2017a; Williams and Alexander 1994; Flores and Cossyleon 2016; Reed, et al. 2016).
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54 **Where do we go from here?**
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3 This article reviews the growing body of research on religion and progressive politics,
4 and situates this work within its historical and scholarly context. Despite a recent uptick in
5 interest in this subject, however, many questions remain unanswered, and relevant theories – of
6 social movements, civic and political action, religion and democracy, etc. – will need to be
7 revised in light of new findings.
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14 This review has focused on the U.S., a political context in which public religion has, in
15 recent decades, been monopolized by religious conservatives. While this has contributed to the
16 overshadowing of the progressive religious field in the U.S., we do not wish to convey this is
17 necessarily the case elsewhere. Moreover, many religious advocacy and activist organizations
18 transcend national borders, requiring researchers to be attuned to both the contours of each
19 national political field in which they are engaged, as well as broader transnational field in which
20 these organizations are embedded (e.g., Nepstad 2004; Bandy and Smith 2005). In each case, it
21 would be a mistake to impose upon these other sites the American political categories and
22 historical reference points we have discussed. Scholarship on religion and American politics has
23 historically benefitted from engagement with the large body of research that exists on the
24 intersection of religion and politics outside of the U.S. (e.g., Smith 1996), as well as through
25 more structured comparisons of “public religion” in the US and elsewhere (e.g., Casanova 1994;
26 Mayrl 2017; Nepstad 2017). The more general takeaway is that theory building about the
27 relationship between religion and politics should keep this global dimension in mind.
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47 So too should researchers stay connected to the growing body of scholarship on the
48 history of progressive religion in the U.S. and around the world. In recent years, mirroring
49 developments within the sociology of religion, historians and historical sociologists have become
50 increasingly interested in this subject, examining historical precursors of contemporary
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3 progressive religious movements (e.g., Swartz 2014); the previously unrecognized religious roots
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5 of social movements (e.g., Young 2002; Gahr and Young 2017); and the complex interplay
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7 between religion and class in the development of progressive, radical and populist politics (e.g.,
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9 Calhoun 2012; Carter 2015; Cantwell et. al 2016).

12 Finally, while the scholars mentioned in this essay have made significant headway
13
14 mapping this field and its contours, work is also underway to identify emerging conceptual blind
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16 spots—some of which also impact the progressive religious field itself. For example, much of
17
18 this research is conducted in or around religious congregations. While this reflects the central
19
20 role congregations play in these efforts, it also leads researchers to overemphasize the political
21
22 action of groups who are most comfortable with congregation-based political talk and organizing
23
24 (namely, Christian and Jewish communities), and to ignore those groups who are not (including
25
26 many new immigrant communities, like Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists) (Yukich 2017).
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31 Similarly, the ways in which researchers conceptualize “religion” will impact what
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33 “counts” as religious-based political action. To the extent this definition emphasizes religious
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35 organizations and leaders or identification with religious traditions, researchers will miss more
36
37 subtle ways in which religious and more vaguely “spiritual” ideas, ideals, practices, values, and
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39 subjectivities infuse political action (e.g., Stanczak 2006). This is especially important as the U.S.
40
41 witnesses a historic spike in the number of religious “nones,” who are rethinking what it means
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43 to be religious, to be political, and to combine these in practice (Hout and Fischer 2002, 2014),
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45 perhaps via a “new sacred politics” (Lloyd 2017). Critical reflections on these blind spots will
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47 not only advance our empirical knowledge, but also our capacity to build more general
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49 theoretical insights, toward the end of better understanding the American political landscape.
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