Opinion

News




Former U.S. Vice President Joe Biden delivers an address after receiving the Laetare Medal at Notre Dame Stadium in Indiana May 15, 2016. Biden has incorporated moral language in his campaigning, arguing that the "middle class is not a number. It is a value set." (CNS photo/Barbara Johnston, University of Notre Dame)



by Michael Sean Winters

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Last week, E.J Dionne penned what I think of as a classic "E.J. at his best" column, reaching back to the vision and the discipline of his friend Michael Harrington to shed light on the debate today within the Democratic Party about whether the Democrats can or should go "too far to the left." Dionne correctly notes that the phrase is "imprecise and misleading."

Dionne argues that today's Democratic Socialists are enlivening the conversation in important and interesting ways, and he also advocates for some of the realism that Harrington brought to politics. "Our new left should attend to the realism Harrington preached," he writes. "Social reform in our country has usually depended on alliances of the center and the left, and outright warfare between them only strengthens the right. The word 'democratic' must always be given priority over the word 'socialist,' and broad coalitions are the lifeblood of democracies."

I would add that social reform in our country has also usually had a strong religious and moral component. One of the reasons Democratic campaigns have seemed so flat is that their speechwriters and policy advisers are raised in thoroughly secular ways and lack the ability to connect with the wide swath of Americans whose understanding of politics and culture is still shaped by religious idioms.

Those who flirt with democratic socialism need to be especially mindful on this score because the adjective "godless" so often is attached to the word "socialism" by conservative critics.

Here is a perfect quote to achieve that inoculation:

> Democratic socialism managed to fit within the two existing models as a welcome counterweight to the radical liberal positions, which it developed and corrected. It also managed to appeal to various denominations. In England it became the political party of the Catholics, who had never felt at home among either the Protestant conservatives or the liberals. In

> Wilhelmine Germany, too, Catholic groups felt closer to democratic socialism than to the rigidly Prussian and Protestant conservative forces. In many respects, democratic socialism was and is close to Catholic social doctrine and has in any case made a remarkable contribution to the formation of a social consciousness.

Those words were penned by Pope Benedict XVI in an essay published at First Things back in 2006.

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Hillary Clinton's religious commitments were real, yet some of her speeches were as dry as a pinot grigio. So, I was a bit surprised when I found myself nodding in agreement with an article at the journal Democracy that Dionne linked to by Jake Sullivan, who had been Clinton's 2016 policy adviser. He writes:

> In the face of Trump, some Democrats will be skittish about embracing big, bold economic policy solutions for fear of alienating independents and moderate Republicans who can help defend our national institutions, our core values, and our democracy. What these trends suggest is that Democrats do not have to choose between shoring up the "vital center" in American politics and supporting a more vigorous national response to our economic challenges. Both are possible. Indeed, both are necessary to defeating the long-term threat of Trumpism.

Not only does the polling data Sullivan cites suggest that the "vital center" has shifted decisively in favor of a more activist government, he notes that Trump himself campaigned on providing some classic government intervention, such as his promised infrastructure plans, but has since governed as a classic laissez-faire Republican.

Sullivan, like Dionne, looks back in order to discern the path forward, writing:

> We need to marry the principles of Roosevelt and the ambition of Johnson with updated understandings of how the job market works, how families live, and how corporate and political power are exercised in the globalized,

> technology-driven landscape of the twenty-first century.
>
> We also need a new mission. For Roosevelt, the fight was economic depression. For Johnson, it was a war on poverty. Today, it has to be rescuing and rebuilding the American middle class.

Here I agree with his call to update our understanding of the changed ways that markets operate and families live, but I also spot a problem with his proposal. Democrats have been talking about the "middle class" in every campaign in memory. And, Sullivan goes on to discuss the "hollowing out" of the middle class in ways that are more demographic and economic than moral and aspirational. The religious language is largely missing, although he does happily quote Joe Biden's observation that "Middle class is not a number. It is a value set." Democrats need to focus on that value set: the dignity of work, a just wage, solidarity among workers and across classes, and societal help not only for those who struggle to pay for college but especially for those who do not go to college.

Sullivan also calls for some new policies. This is critical. Not only do the Democrats need some new leaders with the "new car smell" President Obama rightly noted that voters like, but policies that address the problems people face today.

> Talk of "training" and "apprenticeships" has usually meant a half-hearted, half-funded effort that doesn't supply skills or jobs. … Much can be learned from our friends in Europe. After adjusting for population size, the United States has just 7 percent as many apprentices as England does.

American politicians are ill advised to campaign by invoking another country as a model, but surely some of our Democratic governors and mayors have tried some new policies, launched promising pilot programs, etc. In the lead up to the midterms, and especially in the period immediately after the election, the Democratic Party should find ways to highlight such programs. Less time talking about sexual grievance and more time talking about how California balanced its budget. Less time talking about including every last special interest group and more time talking about good paying union jobs in the solar industry. Less time talking about late term abortions and more time talking about first time moms and the programs that help them.

I don't know if the Dionnes and Sullivans of the world will dominate the debate about the Democratic Party's future, or if the money managers at Emily's List and the Human Rights Campaign will. If the former, the Dems have a chance.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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