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A member of the National Guard walks the grounds of the U.S. Capitol on the second day of f

A member of the National Guard walks the grounds of the U.S. Capitol on the second day of former President Donald Trump's second impeachment trial in Washington Feb. 10, 2021. (CNS/Reuters/Kevin Lamarque)



by John Gehring

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February 15, 2021

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Earlier this month, politicians and faith leaders gathered virtually for the National Prayer Breakfast, an annual event in Washington that convenes an elite crowd of secular and spiritual power brokers. When Donald Trump spoke last year, the religious right was ascendant, Christian nationalists had a cheerleader in the White House, and the president used the occasion to gloat about the Senate's vote to reject his impeachment. In stark contrast, Feb. 4, President Joe Biden urged Americans this year to unite in a "common purpose: to respect one another," and "defeat political extremism, white supremacy and domestic terrorism."

Even as the Republican Party and a beleaguered Christian right struggle to find a path forward after Trump's defeat, religious progressives are already redefining the narrative around faith and politics in Washington. Members of Congress, scholars and religious activists who lobby the Biden administration and on Capitol Hill express growing optimism that a broader space has opened up for the religious left to make an impact.

Along with the prominent role Biden's Catholicism plays in his personal life and public profile, members of Congress now include the first Black senator from Georgia, the Rev. Raphael Warnock of Ebenezer Baptist Church, the historic pulpit once held by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Warnock grounds his positions on voting rights, the economy and criminal justice reform in prophetic, faith-infused language.

Georgia's first Jewish senator, 33-year-old Jon Ossoff, grew up attending an Atlanta synagogue that was a hub for civil rights activism. During high school, he interned for the late Rep. John Lewis, an icon of the movement. In a letter he wrote to the Atlanta Jewish community before his election, Ossoff said his Jewish faith "instilled in me a conviction to fight for the marginalized, the persecuted and the dispossessed."

U.S. senators from Georgia, the Rev. Raphael Warnock, left, and Jon Ossoff (CNS combination

U.S. senators from Georgia, the Rev. Raphael Warnock, left, and Jon Ossoff (CNS combination photo/Reuters/Mike Segar and Brian Snyder)

Rep. Lucy McBath of Georgia, whose son was shot and killed in 2012, previously served as the national faith and outreach leader for Everytown for Gun Safety. Freshman Rep. Cori Bush of St. Louis, the first Black woman to represent Missouri in Congress, is an ordained minister who came to prominence as a Black Lives Matter organizer. Bush has been a consistent advocate for a universal basic income (UBI), an idea that Pope Francis endorsed in broad terms last spring when he called for the consideration of a universal basic wage that "would ensure and concretely achieve the ideal, at once so human, and so Christian, of no worker without rights."

The most prominent star on the political left, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, has spoken about how her progressive policy positions on economic and climate justice are framed in moral terms that align with her Catholic faith. In addition, several top officials in the Biden administration — including John Kerry, the special presidential envoy for climate — are Catholics who have often cited Francis' writings on inequality and climate change. Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg, the first openly LGBTQ cabinet secretary, consistently critiqued the hypocrisy of the religious right and often spoke about faith during his presidential run.

A multiracial alliance

The recent flurry of media coverage heralding a resurgent religious left is not new.

"The religious left is back," The Washington Post declared in 2006. "Long overshadowed by the Christian right, religious liberals across a wide swath of denominations are engaged today in their most intensive bout of political organizing and alliance-building since the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements of the 1960s."

Even before his first presidential campaign, Sen. Barack Obama thrilled religious progressives with a comprehensive speech about faith and politics that skewered the Christian right, and urged the Democratic Party to get serious about faith outreach, during a 2006 conference sponsored by Sojourners.

Members of Maryland Lutheran churches hold up banners calling for action against racism du

Members of Maryland Lutheran churches hold up banners calling for action against racism during an interfaith prayer vigil in Baltimore June 3, 2020, to pray for justice and peace following the May 25 death of George Floyd. (CNS/Catholic Review/Tim Swift)

If media and faith-based activists have been touting the existence of an emboldened religious left for at least 15 years, what is different today? Will the religious left — more a diffuse, diverse constellation of leaders and organizations than a distinct voting block — move beyond making headlines to having political juice in Washington's corridors of power?

Tom Perriello, a former member of Congress from Virginia, became a key strategist advising progressive religious leaders and Democratic Party officials grappling with how to respond to the Christian right's media, organizing and fundraising advantage evident in the wake of George W. Bush's 2004 presidential election. In that era, "values voters" were understood in the popular imagination to be white, Christian and Republican.

A progressive Catholic who narrowly won a 2008 House race at the age of 33, Perriello told NCR that after Bush's first presidential win, the Democratic Party and progressive organizations made an effort to build more robust faith strategies. But responses often felt top-down and transactional.

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"For too long it was a white-led party that saw Black people as a constituency," Perriello said. "The party was dominated by white liberal donors, the most secular group in America. But now we're finally taking seriously the idea of being a genuinely diverse party with Black and brown leaders holding far more of the reins, microphones and seats of power. When they set the agenda, faith and faith communities naturally play a much bigger role. When you empower women of color, expect faith and justice to play a more prominent role in our politics."

Perriello cited as an example the prolific voter registration efforts led by LaTosha Brown, a progressive Christian who cofounded Black Voters Matter and helped propel Warnock's historic election.

"If you got on a call with the Black women leading the fight in Georgia, you best be comfortable having things opened with a few verses from the hymnal," said Perriello.

Amy Sullivan, author of *The Party Faithful: How and Why Democrats Are Closing the God Gap*, thinks today's religious progressives have "the potential to complicate narratives that have been way too pat for decades."

One of those narratives that needs to be challenged is reducing the Black church to simply being a part of Black culture. "For a very long time we've had this Disney-fied idea of church leaders as almost these civil rights mascots," Sullivan said. "It's offensive and doesn't give them enough credit for their very specific theological critiques. With Sen. Warnock, we're about to see what the Black church really is and the perspective it can bring to politics."

Perriello views today's religious left as more primed for success than in past years because it's now "a multiracial faith alliance that is genuinely prophetic," a movement that reminds him of the diverse, faith-imbued coalition that rallied behind Robert Kennedy's 1968 presidential campaign.

"In communities that are marginalized, faith is a powerful and liberating force," he said, "A Democratic Party that reflects its voter base more than its donor base could produce a fire you cannot hide under a bushel."

Republican members of the U.S. House of Representatives take their oath of office on the floo

Republican members of the U.S. House of Representatives take their oath of office on the floor of the House Chamber during the first session of the 117th Congress on Capitol Hill in Washington Jan. 3, 2021. (CNS/Reuters/Joshua Roberts)

Returning to its roots

Rep. Brendan Boyle, of Pennsylvania's 2nd Congressional District, is grateful that the conversation about religion is changing in the nation's capital. A Catholic who graduated from the University of Notre Dame and studied under Sojourners' founder, the Rev. Jim Wallis, Boyle was elected to Congress in 2014 when he was still in his 30s.

"I was drawn to someone who was linking faith and politics from a progressive viewpoint," he said about Wallis. "Before the late 1970s, if you were religiously motivated and active in politics then it was more likely that you were liberal rather than conservative. That obviously changed with the religious right. Perhaps my greatest pet peeve about politics in my lifetime is the way 'religious voter' or 'values voter' became synonymous with conservativism. At long last I think that is changing," Boyle said. "There are many of us now on the left who are vocal about how our faith has motivated our political views."

When Sullivan's book came out in 2008, news stories were trumpeting the rise of the religious left, which challenged "this idea that the religious right was the only game in town," she said.

Now, compared to 15 years ago, the progressive religious movement has matured and expanded, and it is "a legitimate stakeholder that is not going away," she said. White Christians' transactional alliance with Trump has exposed "the complete collapse of the religious right having any claims to moral legitimacy," Sullivan observed.

But progressive strains have always flourished throughout U.S. history. "We've seen it become prominent in moments when Americans have reckoned with racism in the nation's institutions, from abolitionists fighting against slavery in the mid-19th century to civil rights activists fighting against segregation in the mid-20th," said Kevin Kruse, a historian at Princeton University and author of *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America*.

President Joe Biden speaks during the virtual 2021 National Prayer Breakfast Feb. 4. (CNS scr

President Joe Biden speaks during the virtual 2021 National Prayer Breakfast Feb. 4. (CNS screenshot/2021 National Prayer Breakfast)

"And of course we've seen it in anti-war campaigns, such as the activism of the Berrigans during the Vietnam War," he added. Jesuit Fr. Daniel Berrigan and his brother Philip, a Josephite priest at the time, were part of the "Catonsville Nine" who were convicted of destroying draft records in 1968.

Kruse also noted there has been "a reliable movement of progressive religious voices promoting left-wing economic policies and welfare reforms — most famously, the self-styled Christian Socialists of the late 19th century and the 'social gospel' movement whose members vocally supported the New Deal."

Catholic social teaching also played an influential role in seeding ideas that later blossomed into progressive economic and labor policies expressed in Roosevelt's New Deal. Fr. John Ryan, a populist priest who wrote his dissertation at Catholic University of America in Washington, drafted the U.S. bishops' 1919 "Program of Social Reconstruction," which called for living wages, public housing for workers and insurance for the elderly and unemployed, among other policies considered radical at the time. Ryan later became an influential advisor to Roosevelt's administration, prompting his critic Fr. Charles Coughlin, the popular and anti-Semitic "radio priest" to dub him the "Right Reverend New Dealer."

John White, a professor of politics at Catholic University, sees parallels between that time and a nation currently grappling with a pandemic, economic uncertainty and deep social divisions. While Biden and other Catholics in politics have the challenge of a polarized church where some vocal bishops openly defy Francis, White sees an opportunity for Catholic social teaching and the church to play a vital role today.

"We have a young generation that is much more predisposed to government action because they are in need," White said. "We also have a rising immigrant population that is demanding protection and wants families reunited. The growing parts of the Catholic Church are minority groups, and a progressive faith-based agenda addresses their needs. These groups, especially immigrants, are looking to the church for help and protection."

People pray during Mass at Sweetest Heart of Mary Church in Detroit Nov. 21, 2020. (CNS/De

People pray during Mass at Sweetest Heart of Mary Church in Detroit Nov. 21, 2020. (CNS/Detroit Catholic/Valaurian Waller)

Progressive policies

Catholic advocates who lobby on Capitol Hill are working to make that a reality. Social Service Sr. Simone Campbell, executive director of Network, sees both opportunities and challenges when it comes to progressive faith activism making an impact on specific legislation and policy.

"Our people are very engaged and ready for the long haul," Campbell told NCR. "We will see what we can shake out of the Congress. We know that the executive orders and administrative policies and actions are likely to be mostly acceptable by comparison to the last administration, but we will keep pushing, especially on immigration, trade policy, healthcare and income. It is exciting to us that the issue of racial equity is front and center in everything."

Campbell also has a relationship with Biden, a unique leverage point to communicate priorities from progressive faith coalitions in Washington. "In the White House, we have good connections to lift up our issues, and a president who takes Catholic social teaching seriously. The fact that we helped shift the Catholic vote in the election gives us a bit of influence with the strictly political folks."

Progressive Muslim and Jewish advocates are cautiously hopeful about a new political landscape. Maggie Siddiqi, a Muslim who is the senior director of the Faith and Progressive Policy Initiative at the Center for American Progress in Washington, sees it as "only natural" that the Biden administration and Congress will be receptive to their concerns.

Artists and community members in Minneapolis help erect a new fist statue Jan. 18, 2021, to

Artists and community members in Minneapolis help erect a new fist statue Jan. 18, 2021, to replace the old one in the square where George Floyd, a Black man, died after a white police officer knelt on his neck for nearly nine minutes. (CNS/Reuters/Ben Hovland)

"President Biden was very vocal about his faith values throughout his presidential campaign and led a faith outreach strategy that readily engaged with diverse religious communities in a number of ways, so I think we can expect to see a Biden administration that is similarly interested in hearing from and working with diverse religious communities," Siddiqi said.

A few days after the election, the Center for American Progress released a set of recommendations for the Biden administration on engaging with religious communities. Among other ideas, the report urged Biden to reclaim the issue of religious liberty from the right, and to work with Francis to organize a global meeting of religious leaders to discuss climate change and refugee issues.

Rabbi Jason Kimelman-Block, the Washington director of Bend the Arc, a progressive Jewish advocacy network, said the religious left is now in a position to act more proactively after four years of being on the defensive against Trump administration policies. He is enthusiastic about Biden's appointments, especially Alejandro Mayorkas, the first Latino and the first person who has been a refugee to lead the Department of Homeland Security. Mayorkas' mother fled the Holocaust, and the new secretary has served on the board of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society.

But Kimelman-Block cautioned that white supremacist violence remains a clear danger, especially for Jews, Muslims and other minority groups. "So many of those vulnerable communities are religious communities or congregate in religious spaces," he said. "So there is an ongoing need to remain vigilant and protect them from an emboldened right-wing movement."

Along with taking advantage of the new political winds in Washington, Sullivan, the veteran chronicler of progressive religion, observes that if the religious left is going to remain a potent force into the future a major chasm must be filled.

"We need more funders who see progressive religious advocacy as valuable and worth funding," she said. "There needs to be investors who have long-term patience instead of wanting to see results in congressional cycles. It took the religious right decades. We're not going to do this overnight."

[John Gehring is Catholic program director at Faith in Public Life and author of *The Francis Effect: A Radical Pope's Challenge to the American Catholic Church*.]