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The political future of religious progressives

by Thomas Reese

Faith and Justice

In recent years, religious progressives have been the neglected stepsister compared to her big brother, the religious right. Big brother gets all the attention from the media, while little sister is ignored. She also goes around with a tin cup begging for nickels and dimes while big brother has lots of money to spend.

Does little sister have future?

Yes, argue William A. Galston, E.J. Dionne Jr., Korin Davis, and Ross Tilchin in *Faith In Equality: Economic Justice and the Future of Religious Progressives*, a report from the Brookings Institution.

For one thing, age is on the side of religious progressives. Only 36 percent of religious conservatives are under 49 years of age, as opposed to 66 percent of religious progressives. Most of religious conservatives (62 percent) are baby boomers or older. "What's clear is that the religious right is not the wave of the future," the authors write.

But they also admit that "large-scale religious disaffiliation among the young means that religious pro-gressives do not have a foothold in the new generation comparable to the powerful sentiments in favor of religious conservatism among older Americans."

Or as David E. Campbell and Robert D. Putnam explain in "God and Caesar in America," for young adults " '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."

The report does not soft-pedal other challenges religious progressives face.

There is need to overcome the identification of "religious" with "conservative" by the media and much of

the public.

There are also tensions over religion in the Democratic Party. Democrats are "often tongue-tied about faith and uneasy about discussing it in public," the *Faith in Equality* authors write. Some secular Democrats oppose any use of religious language.

There is an ambivalence among Democrats about the role of religious progressives, though they make up 28 percent of the Democratic Party. The *Faith in Equality* authors note how progressive funders and organizers reached out to the religious progressives during the 2008 election only to turn their interests elsewhere afterward.

And "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," *Faith in Equality* states. Part of this may be because religious progressives are often unwilling to blindly follow the party line on, for example, abortion, the Afghan war or drones.

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The decline of unions, an ally and financial supporter of progressive groups, has also hurt religious progressives.

Conservative campaigns against the funding of certain organizations by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development has also instilled fear in these groups. They fear losing their funding if they work on economic issues with other progressive groups that might also support gay marriage or abortion.

Despite all these problems, the authors have hope. After all, "Throughout American history, religious voices have been raised, forcefully and often bravely, on behalf of social reform."

They point to religious organizations working on progressive causes, including "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."

Special mention was made of community organizers that work with churches, such as Inter-faith Worker Justice, PICO National Network, and the Industrial Areas Foundation. During the presentation of the report at Brookings, PICO was singled out as the most effective in working with churches.

The authors believe that growing awareness of economic inequality, the election of Pope Francis, and the ability of religious progressives to work as bridge-builders between believers and nonbelievers all work in favor of religious progressives.

The authors say the idea of the "common good" as a core principle can unite a broad coalition, as John Carr of the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life at Georgetown University put it, "to lift people up who are left behind."

In support of this view, the authors cite a July 2013 PRRI/Brookings survey: "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."

Nor should progressives leave family issues as a conservative monopoly. "We need to talk about the

family and how economic justice is about economic security for families," Carr argues.

The authors conclude that religious progressives "will never constitute the same cohesive and relatively homogeneous force that religious conservatism represents," but they "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."

The authors write that the political climate is changing in favor of religious progressives. They believe today is more like the period immediately before the rise of the civil rights movement rather than the time before the rise of the religious right. In the civil rights movement, religious and secular progressives worked together. Can economic justice be the cause that unites them again?

Let's hope so.

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