

## Catholic Patterns in the American Left

*Amandine Barb*

### INTRODUCTION

“In American politics, being a Catholic liberal or a Catholic conservative inevitably mean[s] having a bad conscience about some issue”.<sup>1</sup> This statement from *Washington Post* columnist and self-declared Catholic E.J. Dionne sums up the ideological dilemma of many of his co-religionists in the USA, where the Church’s core teachings correspond as well to the agenda of the political “Left”—its advocacy for economic and social justice, and against the death penalty, for example—as to the values of the political “Right”—its conservative position on reproductive rights and sexual politics.

Throughout American history, liberal and conservative Catholics have been active in the public sphere, relying on the Church’s theology to legitimize their respective mobilizations. Since the early 1970s and the legalization of abortion by the Supreme Court,<sup>2</sup> however, conservative Catholics have overshadowed liberals in national politics, partnering with conservative Protestant Evangelicals in the so-called “Christian Right”, one of the key electoral allies of the Republican Party.<sup>3</sup> Yet, since the mid-2000s, there appears to have been a resurgence of a religious—and

---

A. Barb (✉)

Theology at Humboldt University, Berlin, Germany

more particularly Catholic—Left in the USA. In reaction to the prominence gained by conservative Christians under George W. Bush’s presidency, progressive religious Americans, who combine less traditional views of faith and religious authority, with a liberal approach to many social issues, such as immigration, the environment, gay marriage, and health care, have indeed felt the need to gain greater visibility and political influence. At the same time, Democrats, assuming that their image as the party of “secularists” had become a serious electoral liability, tried to reach out at these religious liberals, in an attempt to build a coalition similar to what the Christian Right had been for Republicans since the 1980s. In that respect, Catholics have been strategically very important, as they constitute today about 22% of the electorate, are often considered a key “swing voting group”,<sup>4</sup> and also represent the largest group (29%) among Americans who identify as “religious progressives”.<sup>5</sup>

This contribution aims therefore at analyzing the roots and the impact of the mobilization of progressive Catholics in contemporary American politics, against the broader backdrop of the emergence of a “Religious Left” on the national public scene since the mid-2000s. The chapter first provides a historical perspective on the Catholic Left in the USA, before focusing on its “revival” over the past decade and, more particularly, on the role it played under Barack Obama’s presidency. The final part assesses the weaknesses, but also the future prospects of progressive Catholics—and religious liberals, more generally—at the beginning of Donald Trump’s tenure in the White House.

## A FORGOTTEN CATHOLIC LEFT?

### *A Long History of Progressive Activism Among American Catholics*

The rise, over the past decade, of what journalists and scholars have labeled a “Religious Left”, in reference to the well-known “Religious Right”, should not hide the fact that religious liberals have always been politically active in the USA. Indeed, as Laura Olson puts it, “during much of the twentieth century, the dominant faith-based voice in American politics came from the Left”.<sup>6</sup> Among American Catholics more particularly, there is a long tradition of advocacy for causes that are traditionally defended by the political Left, such as immigration and support to refugees, as well as a more egalitarian health care system, and poverty relief. At the beginning of the twentieth century, for instance,

Catholics, alongside Protestants and Jews, were part of the *Social Gospel* movement that sought to fight poverty and foster education and social justice within American society. Founded in 1933 in the midst of the Great Depression by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, the *Catholic Workers Movement* also targeted economic inequalities, while promoting pacifism in international relations.<sup>7</sup> In the 1960s, Catholic organizations took part in the civil rights protests across the country, and voiced their opposition to the USA in Vietnam. In the 1980s, the “sanctuary movement” saw American Catholics offer shelter as well as material and legal support to refugees fleeing the civil wars in Central America. In doing so, Catholic churches defied the restrictive Federal immigration policies of the Reagan Administration, which made it difficult for Central Americans coming to the USA to receive asylum status.<sup>8</sup> These mobilizations have not always received the support of the Church’s hierarchy in the USA, represented by the *US Conference of Catholic Bishops* (USCCB). But the commitment of many American Catholics to these progressive issues directly follows Catholic theology, and notably the Church’s so-called social teaching doctrine, which emphasizes the need to promote the values of solidarity, human dignity, and social justice.<sup>9</sup> This activism is also in line with the recommendations set forth by the *Second Vatican Council* (Vatican II, 1962–1965), which called for Catholics to engage in worldly affairs.

Aside from the *Catholic Workers Movement*, several other organizations have long represented and served the interests of progressive Catholics in the USA. This is the case, for example, of the US branch of the anti-war group *Pax Christi International*, established by lay American Catholics in 1952, but also of the female-led *Network*, which describes itself as a “Lobby for Catholic Social Justice”.<sup>10</sup> Founded in 1971 by a group of Catholic nuns who had been previously involved in the civil rights movements and the anti-war protests, *Network* has advocated for many progressive causes over the years, including economic equality, immigration, and health care reform.

### *The Christian Right and the Sidelineing of Religious Liberals in US Politics*

Yet, after abortion was made legal across the USA by the Supreme Court in 1973, conservative pro-life Catholics started to mobilize and gain visibility on the national public scene, partnering with conservative

Protestant Evangelicals in what would later be known as the “Christian Right”, i.e., a loose coalition of religious groups who argue that American society has been perverted by the ideologies of liberalism and secularism, and who thus defend the restoration of what they consider traditional family and moral values. As a result, their activism has mainly focused on reproductive rights, the place of religion in public schools, or the defense of traditional marriage.

Some prominent conservative Catholic leaders, such as the priest Richard Neuhaus, editor of the magazine *First Things*, and author of *The Naked Public Square*, have established themselves as influential figures within the Religious Right.<sup>11</sup> Following the emergence of Christian conservatism as a “public religion” under Ronald Reagan’s first presidency, however, religious Americans advocating for social justice and other progressive issues—Catholics, but also Evangelicals and other Christians—were overshadowed by the conservative discourse on moral and family values that seemed to dominate the political sphere. The year *Roe v. Wade* was decided by the Supreme Court, for example, a group of lay members of the Church founded the organization *Catholics for Choice* in order to defend a pro-choice position compatible with Catholic theology. Their mobilization was however quickly disavowed by the USCCB, and the group’s visibility has since been limited on the national public scene.

With the alliance of the Christian Right and the GOP (or “Grand Old Party”, the nickname of the Republican Party) in the 1980s, a binary divide between what have commonly been described as a “faith-friendly” Right and a “secular” Left emerged in the American political landscape. Over the years, this religious polarization has led, in electoral politics, to what Robert Putnam and David Campbell have called a “God Gap”, i.e., the more often someone attends religious services, the more likely he or she is to vote for the Republican candidate.<sup>12</sup> In US politics, religion has thus become closely associated with the Republican Party, and with the defense of a conservative agenda, notably on reproductive and gay rights, or on the separation between church and state, while Democrats, and the Left more generally, have often been presented as the party of “secularists”.

But overall, the academic literature on religion and politics in the USA has itself reflected this schematic divide: while there is a vast, interdisciplinary, and international scholarship on Christian conservatism, religious progressives have been comparatively neglected by researchers, thus reinforcing the impression that they have not been as important and

relevant for the country's history and politics. As Olson noted in 2011, "there has been almost no scholarly research on the Religious Left in the past several decades".<sup>13</sup> Although a few studies have actually been published in recent years,<sup>14</sup> most of those who had previously written about a Religious Left in the USA, including several faith leaders, were themselves strong advocates of such a movement.<sup>15</sup> More particularly, the literature on progressive Catholicism has mainly focused on individual figures (Dorothy Day) or on specific mobilizations (the Sanctuary Movement), but lacks a comprehensive and global study of the history and contemporary politics of the Catholic Left, similar to those that exist for the Christian Right.

## FROM GEORGE W. BUSH TO BARACK OBAMA: THE "RENEWAL" OF PROGRESSIVE CATHOLICS

### *The 2004 Presidential Elections: A "Wake-up Call" for Liberal Religious Americans*

Although, therefore, there had already been calls, since the 1990s, for the joint political mobilization of liberal religious Americans, it is the first term of Republican President George W. Bush, as well as its reelection against the Catholic Democrat John Kerry in 2004, that really marked a turnaround, if not a "wake-up call", for many religious progressives—and many Catholics, more particularly. The latter started to mobilize and better organize during that period, in reaction to what they considered to be the overwhelming, and detrimental, moral supremacy of Christian conservatism on American society and politics.

Bush's presidency was indeed perceived by many as a victory for the Christian Right—as the climax of its decade-long rise into American politics. The Republican president spoke openly about the influence of his faith on his life and on his work in the White House. Several of his administration's policies also reflected the traditional agenda advanced by religious conservatives since Reagan's first presidency: his opposition to the legalization of same-sex marriage, the funding limitations set on stem cell research, or the creation in 2001, the first year of his presidency, of the *White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives*, which allowed charitable religious organizations to compete for federal grants to provide social services, but overwhelmingly favored Evangelical groups.<sup>16</sup>

The values of Christian conservatism thus appeared to dominate American politics and society during that period. This was all the more problematic for religious progressives—but also for Democrats—that in November 2004, Bush’s reelection over the Democratic candidate Kerry was thought to have been made possible by the so-called values voters, i.e., Americans who cast their ballot based primarily on a candidate’s position on moral and family values, such as abortion, homosexuality, and the place of religion in public life.<sup>17</sup> Although some studies challenged this interpretation of the 2004 election results,<sup>18</sup> it was highly commented at the time, and made a strong impact on progressive religious Americans, as well as on the Democratic Party. All the more so that Kerry, the third Catholic presidential nominee in US history,<sup>19</sup> also only received 47% of the Catholic vote (vs. 50% for Gore in 2000).

More particularly, many liberal Catholics were frustrated by the support that members of the Church institutional hierarchy, including some prominent Archbishops, had given to Bush during the presidential campaign. The leadership’s insistence on abortion and on the defense of traditional marriage, as well as its silence on the environment, the Iraq war, and on issues of social justice—against the backdrop of a looming financial crisis—left progressive Catholics with the feeling that the complexity of their beliefs and values was not properly represented. The *Catholic Voting Project*, for example, was launched in the midst of the 2004 presidential campaign by lay members of the Church, with the explicit purpose to counter-attack the attempts by conservative Catholics and Republicans to discredit Kerry’s candidacy because of his pro-choice position. The *Catholic Voting Project* condemned discourses that “isolate issues without taking into consideration the full richness and breadth of Catholic social teaching”, and thus “risk putting a partisan agenda before Catholic principles”.<sup>20</sup> Members of the USCCB, aligned on the position of Catholic Republicans in Congress, had indeed repeatedly argued in the media that abortion was a “foundational issue” in their faith,<sup>21</sup> and a “litmus test” for politicians,<sup>22</sup> and that it was therefore highly problematic for Catholic voters to choose a pro-choice candidate such as Kerry. In recent years, however, American Catholics, especially among the “millennial” generation, have become less conservative, and more flexible than the Church’s institutional hierarchy on family and moral values: although abortion remains a polarizing issue,<sup>23</sup> a large majority of Catholics (76%), agrees, for example, that the Church should allow the use of contraceptives, while two-thirds (66%)

find it “acceptable for a child to be raised by a gay or lesbian couple” (27% find it “unacceptable”).<sup>24</sup>

### *A New Religious (Catholic) Left*

As a result, while Democrats felt the urgency to narrow the “God Gap” and to reach out at religious voters, liberal religious Americans realized that they had to get more deeply involved into politics in order to finally give a voice to those Americans whose vote was also motivated, in part, by their religious beliefs, but who disagreed with the conservative politics of the Christian Right, and did not feel represented by its organizations. In the aftermath of the 2004 presidential elections, several newspaper articles and books were published that called for a “Great Awakening” of religious liberals in the USA.<sup>25</sup> The authors, such as the Catholic E.J. Dionne, quoted earlier, or the Evangelical founder of the organization *Sojourners* and long advocate of a Religious Left, Jim Wallis, and the rabbi Michael Lerner, editor of the interfaith magazine *Tikkun*,<sup>26</sup> claimed that it was time for the many, but often too invisible progressive religious Americans to come together and reinvest the public sphere. They did not all agree on every topic, notably abortion, but rather sought to emphasize the compatibility of their respective theology with the defense of issues long neglected by conservatives, such as the environment, the reform of the health care system, gay rights, anti-discrimination policies, and a pro-immigration platform. They attacked the discourse of the Christian Right for sidelining the core teachings of their faith on poverty and social justice, and for ignoring or neglecting the complex concerns of many religious Americans, besides family and moral values. In what Wallis already described as a “post-Religious Right” USA, they argued that a growing number of Americans, especially among the younger generations, were frustrated with the “reactionary” rhetoric of Republicans, as well as with the conservative preaching of their pastors, and were thus actually willing to embrace a more liberal approach to religion and politics.<sup>27</sup>

Among Democrats as well, in the aftermath of Kerry’s defeat, many lawmakers were seeking new ways to reach out at religious voters. Democrats started to mount specific strategies to attract them—by hiring individuals in charge of the outreach to the Evangelical and Catholic electorate, for example, or by starting to talk in greater depths about their personal faith, and the connection between their agenda and

Christian values. Catholic Democrats, in particular, felt the need to be more vocal and visible in order to counter-balance the influence of their Republican counterparts. They wanted to avoid leaving the monopoly of the discourse on faith and values to the GOP, but also aimed at appealing to the many white Catholic voters who live in some of the crucial “swing states”, such as Ohio and Wisconsin.<sup>28</sup> In that respect, in February 2006, 6 months before the first mid-term elections of Bush’s second presidency, a group of Democratic lawmakers released a text titled “Statement of Principles by Fifty-Five Catholic Democrats in the US House of Representatives”. In it, they acknowledged that there can be “disagreements with the Church in some areas”, but also asserted that they were “proud to be part of the living Catholic tradition”, which, through its “social teaching”, “highlights the need to provide a collective safety net to those individuals in society who are most in need”—the “poor and disadvantaged”. This statement showed that Catholic politicians on the Left—as other religious liberals—were now willing to talk more openly about their personal beliefs and the teachings of their faith, and how they impact their political agenda and their decisions as lawmakers. Rejecting the Church leadership’s focalization on the issue of abortion, these Catholic Democrats—some of whom were themselves “pro-life”—embraced the rhetoric and ideological platform of the emerging Religious Left, insisting on the importance of achieving social justice over the defense of moral and family values.

As a result of these calls for mobilization from religious leaders and Democratic lawmakers alike, several new Catholic advocacy organizations were founded in the USA, among which are *Catholic Democrats* (2004), *Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good* (2005), and *Catholics United* (2005), the latter group being directly born out of the *Catholic Voting Project*. These organizations aimed at promoting a more progressive approach to the Church’s theology, and at giving a new place and relevance to its social teaching in American public life. *Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good*’s official goal, for example, is to “promote the social justice of...the Catholic Church in American politics, media and culture”.<sup>29</sup> But, as Bush was beginning his second term in the *White House*, these organizations also sought to give a more concrete influence to liberal Catholics in national politics, by creating a bridge between members of the Church and progressive lawmakers. In that respect, and unlike the two other groups, which are officially non-partisan, *Catholic Democrats* was explicitly founded to “bring the rich tradition



of Catholic social teaching” to the Democratic Party, while at the same time “present[ing] [to the Catholic community] the Democratic way of working for justice and peace in the political world”.<sup>30</sup>

More generally, these organizations, which are often led by young Catholics, have adopted the mobilization strategies of the Christian Right in order to gain visibility and influence in national politics: they lobby politicians in Congress as well as members of the presidential administration, endorse candidates for elections, keep “scorecards” on Senators’ and Representatives’ legislative action on some of the key issues they advocate, frequently intervene in the media, and draft *amici curiae* in support of court cases. In contrast to Christian conservatives, however, progressive Catholics—as religious liberals more generally—tend to be more opened to diversity, as they often take part in interfaith coalitions alongside Protestants and non-Christian minorities, for example via *PICO National Network*, *Faithful America*, or *Faith in Public Life*.

### *Progressive Catholics and Barack Obama’s Presidency*

Progressive Catholics, as well as religious liberals more generally, actively took part in the 2008 presidential campaign that opposed the Republican John McCain to the Democrat Barack Obama, often voicing their support for the latter, a former member of the *United Church of Christ* who had worked alongside religious groups as a community organizer in the Chicago suburbs. At the same time, the choice of the Catholic Joe Biden as Obama’s vice presidential running mate concretely testified to the Democrats’ willingness to reach out at Catholic voters. In that respect, Joe Biden appeared to perfectly embody the values and ideals of the Catholic Left, as he acknowledged the crucial role played by his faith and by the Church’s teachings on his commitment to social justice, yet downplayed the importance of abortion as a campaign issue. This strategy proved ultimately successful, as a majority of Catholics (54%) chose the Democratic candidate for president. The former Senator from Illinois even managed to somewhat narrow the “God Gap”, receiving 43% of the vote of those who said they attended “worship services weekly or more” (vs. 39% for Kerry and Gore in 2004 and 2000, respectively).

While for many observers the end of Bush’s presidency coincided with a decline of the Christian Right in American politics,<sup>31</sup> Obama’s election,

on the other hand, thus seemed to signal a return of religious liberals to the national public scene, and a first victory for the nascent Religious Left. Once in the White House, Obama's "faith-friendly secularism"—exemplified by his reform of the *Faith-Based Initiatives*, which he made decidedly more ecumenical<sup>32</sup>—further appeared to fulfill what religious progressives had advocated for over the past years: the positive and pluralistic acknowledgment of the importance of faith and religious values in public life, in service of social and economic justice.

*“Obamacare” as a Rallying Opportunity for the Religious (Catholic) Left*

After Obama's election, the reform of the health care system—the *Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act* (*Affordable Care Act*) or “Obamacare”—and the campaign launched across the country in 2009 to support its adoption represented a first opportunity for religious progressives to actually showcase their agenda, as well as their unity and political influence. Describing “Obamacare” as not only a political and social necessity, but also as an ethical obligation, Democrats themselves actively sought the support and collaboration of religious groups, as a way to give a moral, and even “spiritual”, dimension to the law, but also to help foster the mobilization of Americans at the local level.

A universal, affordable health care had been for decades one of the main priorities of many liberal religious organizations in the USA. Yet, Catholics appeared divided over “Obamacare”, between the many groups that emphasized its compatibility with the Church's social teaching on the one hand, and the leadership, who mainly focused on the controversial status of abortion within the law, on the other. The USCCB feared that the *Affordable Care Act* would lead to taxpayer-funded abortions and therefore opposed certain portions of the bill. Yet, several Catholic groups—alongside Protestant, Muslim, and Jewish organizations—were among the strongest and most vocal supporters of the reform. They appeared in the media, mobilized church members, and closely worked with the Obama administration in its efforts to convince Americans of the urgency and merits of its plan for a new health care system. *Catholics United*, for example, sponsored TV ads in favor of the law, while *Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good* partnered with about 30 other liberal religious groups, such as *Sojourners*, *Evangelicals for Social Action*, the *Islamic Society of North America*, the *Buddhist Peace Fellowship*, and the *Jewish Council for Public Affairs*,

to create the coalition “Faith for Health”. In June 2009, the coalition launched the movement “40 Days for Health Care”, which, via a combination of political lobbying, church sermons, “Health Care Bible Studies”, “Health Care Cafés”, media interventions, and the distribution of “Health Care Tool Kits” in churches, sought to energize congregants and emphasize the compatibility of “Obamacare” with biblical and other religious teachings.<sup>33</sup> As a result, the campaign for “Obamacare” in the spring and summer of 2009 allowed these religious organizations to display their message of social justice and to gain greater visibility across the country. As the opposition to abortion and gay marriage among conservative Christians, the reform of the health care system, finally adopted in March 2010, thus functioned as a rallying opportunity for Catholics and other religious liberals, which testified to their efficiency at grassroots activism, as well as to their usefulness and relevance for the political Left.

### *The Key Role of Women in the Catholic Left*

In that context, it is also interesting to note the important role played by Catholic women in the mobilization for “Obamacare”, which reflects, more generally, their historical key position within the Catholic Left in the USA, as they have regularly attempted to challenge the male-dominated institutional hierarchy of the Church and its strong focus on family and moral values. In 2015, for example, Obama declared that without the support of Carol Keehan, CEO of the *Catholic Hospital Association*, which represents more than 600 Catholic hospitals in the USA, “we would not have gotten the *Affordable Care Act*”.<sup>34</sup> In 2010, Keehan, who is herself a nun, had publicly defied the USCCB, debunking their arguments about the risk of taxpayer-funded abortions, and thus granting a crucial moral and religious legitimacy to the controversial reform.<sup>35</sup> As exemplified by Dorothy Day or the organization *Network*, mentioned earlier, Catholic women’s activism—whether carried out by nuns or lay members of the Church—is of course far from being a recent development. The nuns who have run *Network* since the beginning of the 1970s have often challenged the conservative teachings of the Church, notably on reproductive rights and sexual politics, although they do not officially disagree with the leadership’s position on these topics, but rather aim at *shifting* the interest of American Catholics toward issues of social justice—to “change the conversation to mending the vast economic and social divides in our country”.<sup>36</sup> Since 2012, *Network* has organized the

movement “Nuns on the Bus”, which involves members of the organization travelling across the country to bring awareness to problems such as immigration, poverty relief, and health care. In that respect, *Network* also actively contributed to the campaign for the *Affordable Care Act*, sending a letter to Congress in favor of the bill,<sup>37</sup> and voicing their support to Keehan in her fight against the Church’s hierarchy.<sup>38</sup>

## THE CATHOLIC LEFT AFTER OBAMA AND UNDER TRUMP: ASSESSMENTS AND PROSPECTS

### *The Religious (Catholic) Left’s Weakness as a Political Actor*

In collaboration with these progressive organizations, Democrats have pursued their faith outreach strategies toward religious voters—and Catholics in particular. Following Obama’s example, for instance, Hillary Clinton chose the Catholic Tim Kaine to be her running mate in the 2016 presidential elections. If the Evangelical Mike Pence (who is now vice president), embodied the agenda and interests of the Christian Right,<sup>39</sup> Tim Kaine, a US Senator from Virginia who received a Jesuit education, seemed, as Joe Biden before him, to represent the values of the Catholic Left: during the presidential campaign, he regularly talked about the influence of his faith on his private life and on his work as a politician who supports immigration, economic justice, and a more egalitarian health care system. Yet, in November 2016, this strategy proved to be ineffective, as 52% of voters who identified as Catholic chose Donald Trump for president versus only 45% who cast their ballot for Clinton. This was especially true of white Catholics, who overwhelmingly favored Donald Trump (60% vs. 37% for Clinton). The Democrats’ appeal among this key segment of the electorate does not seem, therefore, to have been significantly and durably improved over the past decade, despite the party’s outreach to Catholic voters.

The 2016 presidential election has been all the more difficult for Catholic progressives, as the credibility of some of their key organizations has also been questioned following controversial revelations on the nature of their relationship with the Democratic Party. In the months leading up to the election, emails from Clinton’s campaign manager John Podesta, himself a Catholic, were leaked to the public. They were released by *Wikileaks* after presumably being “stolen” by Russian government-backed hackers. Within a discussion between

Podesta and Sandy Newman, President of the interest group *Voice of Progress*, about the need for a “Catholic Spring” that would encourage American Catholics to challenge the authority of the Church—which Newman called a “middle ages dictatorship”—and some of its most conservative teachings, notably on “gender equality”, Podesta wrote that “we created *Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good* to organize for a moment like this (...). Likewise *Catholics United*”. The formulation of his email thus seemed to imply that the launch of these two groups had been directly engineered by the Democrats themselves in order to transform the Church from the inside, in a way that would ultimately serve their political interests. These allegations were subsequently denied by the current leaders of *Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good* and *Catholics United*, but conservatives vehemently criticized the Democrats’ “interventionism” into the Church’s internal affairs, accusing them of politicizing and instrumentalizing the faith, and of trying to bend Catholic theology for electoral purposes.

More generally, despite the visibility gained since the mid-2000s and their effective mobilization in support of “Obamacare”, religious progressives as a whole have not yet achieved the same status as their conservative counterparts in national politics, failing to assert themselves as the equivalent of the Christian Right for the Left. The actual impact of their lobbying efforts on lawmakers is difficult to assess, as is their ability to consistently mobilize voters at the grassroots level, especially compared to the well-documented outreach strategies of conservative Evangelical churches, for example. Despite the gains made by Obama among religious Americans in 2008, the “God Gap” still remains an undeniable electoral reality in the USA: in the 2016 election, those who attended religious services more often than weekly were much more likely to support Trump than Clinton.

Several internal, systemic, challenges can explain the Religious Left’s weakness as a political actor in the USA. The strong theological diversity, which is a characteristic of religious liberals, first undermines their efforts to appear as ideologically united as the groups that comprise the Christian Right. Hence the difficulty, given the fractured nature of the Religious Left, to build the same type of coalition in support of the Democratic Party. This is also true for Catholics, whose Church, as mentioned before, is itself internally divided between liberalism and conservatism on many issues at the center of American politics, which can sometimes blur the message of progressive Catholic organizations, who

often have a difficult, if not openly hostile, relationship with the institutional hierarchy. Moreover, apart from Jim Wallis or Carol Keehan, there also seems to be a lack of charismatic leaders, who could be the equivalent for the Left of such conservative figures as Rev. Jerry Falwell, Rev. Pat Robertson, or former Christian Coalition director Ralph Reed.

### *Trump's Presidency: A Rallying Opportunity for Catholic Progressives?*

Progressive religious organizations, including Catholic ones, have been recently re-mobilized by the election of Donald J. Trump as president. As far as religion and church/state relations are concerned, Trump has espoused the traditional agenda of conservative Christians. He supports most of their claims, such as broad exemptions for individuals and groups opposed to same-sex marriage because of their "religious belief or moral convictions", or the repeal of the *Johnson Amendment*, adopted in 1954, and which prohibits churches and other tax-exempt religious institutions from engaging in political advocacy.

Beyond the fear of a return of conservative Christians in the White House, however, religious liberals have voiced their concern that Trump's administration, backed by a Republican-dominated Congress, may repeal "Obamacare", without immediately providing a satisfactory replacement, causing tens of millions of Americans to lose their health insurance. The dismantlement of Obama's signature reform had been one of Trump's main campaign promises, and one of his first Executive Orders as president was to allow federal agencies to "unwind" some of the requirements of the *Affordable Care Act*.<sup>40</sup> These developments prompted a strong mobilization of progressive religious groups. Simone Campbell, Executive Director of *Network*, declared, for instance, that "faith communities know [that the repeal of "Obamacare"] is a bad idea, and we will continue to advocate and pray for Congress to stop and listen to the voice of reason".<sup>41</sup>

But if the uncertain future of "Obamacare" has been of course a major concern among those very religious groups that had enthusiastically campaigned for its adoption, this has also been the case of Trump's first decisions regarding immigration. Only one week into his presidency, the Republican president signed an Executive Order that indefinitely barred the arrival of refugees from Syria, temporarily suspended the US refugee program as a whole for at least 120 days, and effectively banned immigration from seven Muslim-majority countries for a duration of

3 months.<sup>42</sup> Although the Executive Order has been halted by a federal Court in February 2017, it drew outrage and condemnations across the USA and the world, and triggered strong criticisms from religious organizations, especially those that traditionally defend progressive values in American society and politics. *Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good* called the Executive Order an “immoral and dangerous act”,<sup>43</sup> while *Network* declared it was “antithetical to the faith”. Many Catholic leaders also rejected Trump’s arguments about the need to favor Christians within the refugee program.

Even if it is of course too early to assess the scope and impact of these mobilizations, the united front displayed by progressive religious groups against the repeal of “Obamacare”, as well as against the ban on refugees and immigration from certain Muslim countries, suggests that the Religious Left may have found, with Donald Trump, a new cause around which to rally, and a new urgency to work closely with Democrats in order to fight conservative legislations in Washington. At a time of uncertainty and disarray for many liberals in the USA, religious progressives may have a crucial opportunity to provide a moral leadership to the Left and, more generally, to assert their relevance as political actors.

## CONCLUSION

In February 2016, a group of young Catholics launched the movement *The Tradinistas*, which officially advocates “Christian Socialism”, and is “devoted to a *ressourcement* of Catholic social teaching, (...), Marxist economic analysis, and their integration into a new kind of politics”.<sup>44</sup> Although certainly destined to remain marginal, this group testifies to the vitality of Catholic political thought and activism within the whole spectrum of the American Left, notably as a result of the recent mobilization of the “millennial” generation of Church members. More generally, and despite their sometimes limited political impact, the many groups, old and new, that comprise the Catholic Left, remain today—as throughout American history—a constant and strong presence within the religio-political landscape.

The election in 2013 of Pope Francis, who strongly emphasizes the social teaching of the Church, and appears to be less theologically conservative than his predecessor Benedict XVI, has also contributed to further legitimize the American Catholic Left’s focus on social justice,

as progressive advocacy groups have been able to claim the Pope's support, explicitly referring to his positions on the economy or immigration. But against the backdrop of a conservative Trump's presidency, the influence of Francis could even perhaps lead, in the short or medium term, to issues of social and economic justice being brought back to the forefront of the Church's advocacy in the USA. Already in 2017, for instance, the USCCB has, in the span of a few days, voiced its "strong" opposition to Trump's Executive Order on immigration,<sup>45</sup> but also, more significantly, reversed its previous position on "Obamacare", officially praising a law that "brought about important gains in coverage", and warning against a precipitated repeal that "would prove particularly devastating".<sup>46</sup>

## NOTES

1. Dionne, E.J. 2008. *Souled Out: Reclaiming Faith and Politics After the Religious Right*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 164.
2. *Roe v. Wade*, 410 US 113.
3. Williams, Daniel K. 2010. *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right*. New York: Oxford University Press; Wilcox, Clyde and Carin Larson. 2006. *Onward Christian Soldiers? The Religious Right in American Politics*. Boulder: Westview Press.
4. Nineteen percent of American Catholics identify as "Independent" or say they have "no political preference" (Pew Research Center, 23 February 2016. "US Religious Groups and their Political Leanings").
5. *Public Religion Research Institute*. 18 July 2013. "1-in-5 Americans are 'Religious Progressives'".
6. Olson, Laura R. 2011. "The Religious Left in Contemporary American Politics", *Politics, Religion and Ideology*, vol. 12, no. 3, p. 272.
7. Mountin, Susan, Runkel, Phillip M., Thorn, William J., eds. 2001. *Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement: Centenary Essays*. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press.
8. Cunningham, Hilary 1995. *God and Caesar at the Rio Grande. Sanctuary and the Politics of Religion*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
9. The Catholic social teaching stems from the encyclical letter *Rerum Novarum*, written by Pope Leo XIII in 1891.
10. [www.networklobby.org](http://www.networklobby.org).
11. Neuhaus, Richard. 1986. *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing.
12. Putnam, Robert D., Campbell, David E. 2010. *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
13. Olson 2011: 271.



14. Clarkson, Frederick, ed. 2009. *Dispatches From the Religious Left: the Future of Faith and Politics in America*. New York: Ig. Publishing; Green, John C., Guth, James L., Kellstedt Lyman A., Smidt E. Corwin. 2007. "A Gentle Creek or a 'River Glorious'? The Religious Left in the 2004 Election". In Campbell, David E., ed. *A Matter of Faith? Religion in the 2004 Presidential Elections*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution; Olson, Laura R. 2007. "Whither the Religious Left? Religiopolitical Progressivism in Twenty-First-Century America". In Wilson, Matthew J., ed. *From Pews to Polling Places: Faith and Politics in the American Religious Mosaic*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press; Sullivan, Amy. 2008. *The Party Faithful: How and Why Democrats are Closing the God Gap*. New York: Scribner.
15. Alpert, Rebecca. 2000. *Voices of the Religious Left: A Contemporary Sourcebook*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press; Wallis, Jim. 1996. *Who Speaks for God? An Alternative to the Religious Right—A New Politics of Compassion, Community and Civility*. New York: Delacorte Press.
16. Mark J. Rozell and Gleaves Whitney, eds., *Religion and the Bush Presidency*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan Press, 2007.
17. Frank, Thomas. 2004. *What's the Matter with Kansas?* New York: Henry Holt & Company; Green, John C., Mark J. Rozell, and Clyde Wilcox, eds., *The Values Campaign?: The Christian Right and the 2004 Elections*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2006.
18. Bartels, Larry. 2006. "What's the Matter with What's the Matter with Kansas?". *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 201–226; Fiorina, Morris, Abrams, Samuel J., Pope, Jeremy C. 2005. *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*. New York: Longman.
19. The first Catholic presidential nominee was the Democrat Al Smith in 1928 (he lost against Herbert Hoover). The second was John F. Kennedy in 1960.
20. *Catholic Online*. 6 October 2004. "The Catholic Voting Project Responds to Archbishop Burke's Pastoral Letter".
21. Goodstein, Laurie, Kirkpatrick, David D. 12 October 2004. "Group of Bishops Using Influence to Oppose Kerry", *The New York Times*.
22. Dionne, p. 170.
23. Abortion is "morally wrong" for 51% of American Catholics, while 47% say that it is "morally acceptable" or "nor a moral issue" (Pew Research Center 2017).
24. More precisely, 43% say that it is "acceptable and as good as any other arrangement for raising children", and 23% find it "acceptable but not as good as some other arrangements" (Pew Research Center 2015).
25. Wallis, Jim. 2008. *The Great Awakening: Reviving Faith and Politics in a Post-Religious Right America*. New York: HarperOne.

26. Lerner, Michael. 2006. *The Left Hand of God: Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right*. San Francisco: Harper Collins.
27. Fischer, Claude, Hout, Michael. 2002. "Americans with 'No Religion', Why their Numbers are Growing", *American Sociological Review*, vol. 67, pp. 165–190.
28. The Democrats' faith outreach strategy has indeed mainly targeted the white Catholic electorate, as a vast majority of Hispanic Catholics already vote for them (65% chose Kerry in 2004, and 67% voted for Clinton in 2016 (Pew Research Center, 9 November 2016)).
29. See [www.catholicsinalliance.org/about](http://www.catholicsinalliance.org/about) (last access: 14 January 2017).
30. "About Catholic Democrats", [catholicdemocrats.org/about](http://catholicdemocrats.org/about) (last access: 15 January 2017).
31. Dionne, 2008; Green, John C., 5 June 2008. "Assessing a More Prominent Religious Left", *The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life*; Sullivan 2008.
32. Under Obama, the program was renamed *White House Office for Faith-Based Initiatives and Neighborhood Partnerships*.
33. Barb, Amandine. 2015. "La gauche religieuse et la réforme démocrate du système de santé: étude de cas sur la politisation du sacré aux États-Unis". In Caron, Nathalie, Marche, Guillaume, eds. *La politisation du religieux en modernité*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes; Salmon, Jacqueline L. 25 July 2009. "Faith and Community Groups Organize to Promote Health-Care Reform", *The Washington Post*, 25 August 2009. "Religious Right/Left: Similar Health-Reform Strategies", *The Washington Post*.
34. Boorstein, Michelle. 9 June 2015. "I Love Nuns: Obama Appeals to Religious Allies as His Landmark Health Care Law Awaits Supreme Court Decisions", *The Washington Post*.
35. Carol Keehan, however, as well as the USCCB and many conservative Catholic groups, criticized the "contraceptive mandate", introduced in 2012 by the Obama administration as part of the *Affordable Care Act*. The mandate was meant to oblige employers to fully reimburse the cost of contraceptives used by their employees, including, for instance, the "morning-after" pill. It contained an explicit exemption for churches, but not for religiously affiliated institutions, such as day care centers, adoption agencies, schools, universities, and hospitals. After the Obama administration proposed an arrangement that made sure these institutions would not have to provide *direct* funding for contraception, Keehan agreed to support the mandate (Boorstein 2015).
36. "Nuns on the Bus 2016. Calling on Electeds and Candidates to Mend the Gaps!", [networklobby.org](http://networklobby.org) (last access: 29 January 2017).

37. Landsberg, Michele. 18 March 2010. "Nuns in US Back Healthcare Bill Despite Catholic Bishops' Opposition", *Los Angeles Times*.
38. Boorstein 2015.
39. Testifying to the importance of the Catholic electorate for both Democrats and Republicans, Mike Pence described himself as an "Evangelical Catholic" during the campaign.
40. Goldstein, Amy, Parker, Ashley. 20 January 2017. "Trump Signs Executive Order that Could Effectively Gut Affordable Care Act's Individual Mandate", *The Washington Post*.
41. Jenkins, Jack. 12 January 2017. "These Faith Groups are Demanding Republicans Stop Repealing Obamacare", [Thinkprogress.org](http://Thinkprogress.org).
42. The countries targeted by the Executive Order are Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen.
43. "Catholic Letter to Speaker Paul Ryan", *Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good*.
44. [tradinista.com/about/](http://tradinista.com/about/) (last access: 29 January 2017).
45. Pezzulo, Mary. 28 January 2017. "USCCB Speaks Out Against Trump's Immigration Orders", *Patheos*.
46. Gibson, David. 18 January 2017. "Catholics Bishops Urge Congress to Preserve Health Care Coverage", *Religion News Service*.

Catholics and US Politics After the 2016 Elections  
Understanding the "Swing Vote"

Gayte, M.; Chelini-Pont, B.; Rozell, M.J. (Eds.)

2018, XI, 226 p. 27 illus. in color., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-62261-3