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## Religious 'Progressives' Mobilize for Political Action

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Participants included, among others, James Forbes, senior minister of the Riverside Church in New York City; Bob Edgar, general secretary of the National Council of Churches USA; C. Welton Gaddy, president of the Interfaith Alliance; Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, president of Chicago Theological Seminary; Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism; and Jim Wallis, founder of the Sojourners Community and Sojourners magazine. Actually, this conference was a reunion of sorts for the theological left, and it must have been fascinating to observe.

The Center for American Progress is a relatively new liberal think tank established by John D. Podesta, a key Democratic strategist who served as President Bill Clinton's chief of staff during the impeachment crisis. Podesta, a Roman Catholic, organized his think tank as an alternative to the conservative Heritage Foundation, also located in Washington.

As expected, the Center for American Progress is filled with policy wonks and political operatives, and it takes a predictably liberal stance on the critical issues of public concern. The Center's web site features articles celebrating the "March for Women's Lives" and others arguing for reproductive "rights" as basic human rights. Eager support for abortion on demand is coupled with support for same-sex marriage and opposition to the Federal Marriage Amendment. The Center also targets conservative media and offers policy proposals for liberal candidates. There are few surprises to be found in its arguments.

The "Faith and Progressive Policy" conference is part of the group's efforts to mobilize the theological and religious left for political action. Impressed by the political impact of the so-called Religious Right, Podesta and his allies want to organize a potent Religious Left to counter the conservative influence. Of course, this leaves religious liberals in something of a quandary, for the more they move to the left, the more secular they inevitably sound to the public—thus the "religion gap" that now indicates an 18-point lead for President George W. Bush over Senator John Kerry among active churchgoers.

Still, give them credit for trying. The "Faith and Progressive Policy" conference must have had its moments. In his greeting to the participants, John Podesta warned, "Of course, in the last 20 years we've seen the emergence of religious leaders who tried to dictate legislation, public policy from their particular set of religious beliefs. It's been a time when the religious leaders who attracted the widest attention were, quite frankly, often those with the narrowest minds." Now, he seemed to argue, it's high time for broad-minded liberals to try to dictate legislation and public policy from "their particular set of religious beliefs." The problem, of course, is those very beliefs. What in the world do these people believe?

Reading their presentations doesn't offer much help. James Forbes, the (usually) very articulate and (always) very liberal pastor of the Riverside Church doesn't seem to know what they believe, either. "Well, here's why I am here today," Forbes explained. "I have come here today to say that I think that this meeting, Dr. Podesta, is evidence that little by little those of us of the progressive movement are beginning to believe that it was a prayer, that although everybody is not religious in the traditional sense of the word, and although we do not all have cards that identify our religious persuasion, there is a fundamental spirituality that recognizes that in the course of life itself there are times when the foundation upon which we were build [sic] has to be called into play, that all of us, even if we do not call ourselves religionists, have some sense that if we are to face the future, and if our nation is to be blessed, particularly in the light of current trends, we need to allow our religious sensibility, no matter how we talk about it, to be a part of what animates us in our efforts in the days ahead."

What was that? Those lines give ambiguity a bad name. Dr. Forbes' rousing argument seems to be that relatively religious people (who may not even claim to be religious, or have any specific religious beliefs) should allow their religious sensibilities, whatever they may be, to play a part in the political process, relatively speaking.

With arguments like that, the Religious Left is not likely to pose much of a political threat. John Podesta and his colleagues may ridicule conservative Christian leaders as narrow-minded, but they are themselves so broad-minded that they never get to a genuinely theological argument at all. Their secularized worldviews leave no space for solid, declarative, substantial theological assertions. Politics—"animated" by religious sensibilities, of course—is all that remains.

As a matter of fact, the most intensely theological portion of the conference presentations had to do with denying the very existence of any absolute or exclusive truth.

Professor Susannah Heschel of Dartmouth College, daughter of the late Rabbi Abraham Heschel, a world-famous Jewish philosopher, lamented all claims to exclusive truth. "Exclusive claims to truth and convictions that one's own religion is the only path to salvation, or the most highly-developed religion, or that there is a hierarchy of religions from childish to adult, have caused some of the great horrors in history. It is ironic: on the one hand, we claim the transcendence and unknowability of God, and on the other hand, we claim that ours is the only right and true representation of who God is and what God wants. How do we know that, if God is unknowable? The truth is, if we worship God the creator of heaven and earth and of all life on this earth, then we are worshipping the God of all humankind. If God is the creator of the universe, then God is either the creator of all people or of no people. There can be no exclusivity in religion."

Implicit in Professor Heschel's argument is a complete denial of divine revelation. God is indeed transcendent, and human beings have no capacity to search Him out and know Him by our own ingenuity. But, as an act of His own self-giving love, the transcendent God has revealed Himself to us, granting us true and authoritative knowledge. Furthermore, this is an exclusive knowledge. God did not reveal Himself as an amorphous "deity-in-general" but as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. There is content in God's self-revelation—not mere religious sensibilities.

Acknowledging the revealed knowledge of God would, to say the least, require a considerable revolution on the theological left. They would have to deal with the self-revealing God of the Bible, not the indulgent, philosophically-symbolized, psychologically-oriented deity of modern liberalism. They would also have to deal with the fact that this self-revealing God has given us His definitions of marriage, sex, and the dignity of all human life.

The denial of exclusive truth was a preoccupation for more than one participant in the conference. Rev. Robert Maddox, formerly President Jimmy Carter's White House faith liaison, made reference to John 14:6, in which Jesus says: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me." Not so, says Rev. Maddox. "Sooner or later, the church crowd is going to wake up and realize that there are going to be a lot of people in heaven other than us Christians," he told columnist Terry Mattingly. "I still believe Jesus is the way and the truth—for me. But it's that last part that troubles me, the part that says 'no man comes to the Father, except by Me'." Rev. Maddox went on to say, "I don't think we can get away with saying that anymore. That might have worked in the '50s, but it's not going to work in the 21st century."

Those are strange and tragic words coming from a former Southern Baptist preacher, and one who, until recently,

edited The Capital Baptist for the District of Columbia Baptist Convention. Interestingly, Mattingly reports that Maddox castigated conservative Christian leaders “using vivid, rodent-related vocabulary that can’t be printed in a family newspaper.”

Robert Maddox and his fellow former Southern Baptists at this gathering of religious liberals serve to remind today’s Southern Baptists of what was really at stake in the conservative reorientation of the denomination over the past twenty-five years. The issues remain the same—the truthfulness of the Bible and the integrity of the Gospel. These separate not only conservative and liberal religion, but true Christianity and its false pretender of theological liberalism.

The theological confusion and denial demonstrated at the “Faith and Progressive Policy” conference is far more important than the political strategies, and their effects will be far more devastating. Once again, we are reminded of what we are up against.

In the span of just a few short hours, the Center for American Progress offered a demonstration of the inherent ambiguity at the heart of theological liberalism, the weird “spirituality” of the religious left, and the rejection of revealed truth that stands at the center of the liberal project. Not bad for a half-day conference. Not bad at all.

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