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Have 2020 Democrats Found God?

Presidential candidates are acknowledging a rising Religious Left.



Sen. Cory Booker during a commemorative service March 3 at Brown Chapel AME Church in Selma, Ala.

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In Sen. Elizabeth Warren's Bible, one chapter is heavily underlined: Matthew 25, in which Jesus praises his followers for feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, and welcoming the stranger.

“Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me,” he says.

For many Christians of a progressive bent, the passage captures the values they hope to see reflected in the 2020 Democratic primary.

In recent years, this "Religious Left" has grown as a political force. Though many of its members eschew partisan labels, including the term "left," they have become prominent advocates for progressive goals. Take the Rev. William Barber. Religious leaders point to Barber as perhaps the most influential pastor working towards social justice today. In 2016, his thundering speech at the Democratic National Convention earned widespread praise. Since then, he launched a new Poor People's Campaign, named after Martin Luther King Jr.'s original anti-poverty initiative.

Democratic presidential candidates appear to be courting Barber, who said he's not ready to make an endorsement. But he is ready for a more robust moral conversation.

“In 2016, we had a very flawed presidential election,” Barber said. “I’m not just talking about voter suppression and the Electoral College. ... We had 26, maybe 27, presidential debates, and not one of those debates was dedicated to the issue of poverty. ... Not the middle class. Poverty.”

Faith leaders say politicians hesitate to discuss poverty because poor Americans don't donate to their campaigns; many also don't make it to the voting booth. But if candidates want to win over Barber, they'll have to start paying attention to those neglected communities. “We are nonpartisan, but we are not nonpolitical,” Barber said. “What we believe is if you drive the agenda, people will know who to vote for, because they will look at them through the premise of the agenda, not just rhetoric.”

In June, Barber plans to invite the presidential candidates to a gathering of 1,500 people affected by poverty. For now, he shares his priorities when they call.

Although it's early in the election cycle to hire staffers who specialize in outreach to faith groups, religious leaders say candidates are already reaching out informally to seek staffing recommendations or request feedback on their remarks.

"This is a group of people who are really strong on values and have powerful stories of faith themselves," said Joshua DuBois, who led faith outreach in President Obama's White House. "For example, I've been impressed by how Elizabeth Warren and Cory Booker root their economic policies in the language of common values and human dignity, rather than just policy points," DuBois said.

Faith leaders commonly praise Warren's economic agenda. Many agree with Barber that poverty is the critical moral issue of the age. When asked which candidates are doing the best job addressing it, Warren's name often comes up first.

For his part, Booker has deep ties to churches across America, including in key early states. In the past, Booker has accompanied his mom to her church in Nevada, which will host the third Democratic primary next year. In Iowa, one of Booker's ancestors helped found Corinthian Baptist Church, which has long been involved in issue engagement.

"Cory Booker has been at every church, I believe, in America," joked the Rev. Leah Daughtry, who was CEO of the Democratic National Convention Committee in 2016. "That's just his thing."

Booker is also known for his work on racial justice, which looks to be another key issue in this campaign. A half-century ago, religious leaders spearheaded the civil-rights movement; today, they find themselves in a similar position.

The Rev. Amos Brown has been a leader in both eras. In the 1960s, he was arrested alongside Martin Luther King Jr.. Today, he is president of the San Francisco NAACP and pastor at the city's Third Baptist Church, where he talks about the

intersection of faith and public life.

“We are not one nation under God with liberty and justice for all,” Brown said.

“There’s never been justice for some folks. This president has been given a pass ... by the evangelicals who are not about good news for everybody, only good news for white people and maintaining the status quo.”

For years, Brown has been close to Sen. Kamala Harris, whose candidacy sparks excitement in the black church.

“She was at my church about a month ago,” Brown said. “It was unannounced, but she came. She came with me to worship, she and her husband and one other member with her. And she made remarks to the congregation. I applauded her. I don’t tell my members who to vote for, never have, but I have made it clear who am I supporting in this primary: Kamala Harris.”

Harris’s campaign will benefit from her relationships in African-American communities, which have long been the cornerstone of the Religious Left. Black voters, a significant constituency in the Democratic Party, are also more likely to believe in God than any other racial group.

Candidates seem to be catching on to the political upside of talking about faith.

“We’ve seen more rhetorical outreach and religious expression in the last few weeks than we saw in basically all of 2016,” said Michael Wear, who led Obama’s faith-based outreach for his 2012 campaign. “There’s something of a repudiation, or at least a course-correction.”

Much of that rhetoric has come from South Bend, Indiana Mayor Pete Buttigieg, a gay Episcopalian who often discusses how religion shaped his politics. Buttigieg lacks the well-established networks that other candidates have built among faith leaders. But Christian political activist Jim Wallis says that isn’t stopping him from having an impact. While Wallis has personal relationships with some candidates,

notably Elizabeth Warren, he has never met Buttigieg. Still, Wallis thinks the young mayor could help reframe religion as the domain of the American Left, not just the Right.

“I think the Religious Right is terrified,” said Wallis. “This could change the whole narrative. And who would have expected that a Midwest mayor in Indiana—I’m from Michigan, so I know that part of the world well—a Rust Belt state, a gay married man, would be the one to change the narrative on religion in politics?”

Buttigieg stepped onto the national stage at a time when other factors were already bringing religion to the forefront of the Democratic Party. One such factor was President Trump; religious leaders say his stances on immigration and poverty contradict Christian teachings.

“In this Holy Week, Maundy Thursday is often a day when Christians practice foot washing,” Wallis said in the days before Easter. “Foot washing is a sign of what Jesus meant by leadership. It’s called servant leadership. ... Is that what we see coming out of the White House? Not hardly.”

Even before Trump, pastors on the left were building a movement. In 2005, for example, the Rev. Jennifer Butler founded Faith in Public Life, an organization that brings religious principles to the fight for progressive policy.

“We’ve recognized part of the problem is that we, as progressive religious leaders, have to be more organized and more vocal in the news media,” Butler said.

Many describe a flawed media narrative about Christianity. Wallis, for instance, thinks secular journalists struggle to cover people of faith outside of the Religious Right. Others say reporters have ignored religion altogether.

But this year, there’s been a shift. Indeed, some candidates, such as Sens. Amy Klobuchar and Kirsten Gillibrand, have begun talking about faith in response to questions at televised town halls. These more frequent dialogues could help Democrats in 2020.

“[Religion] is going to pull more people into that center of gravity,” Butler said. “I meet so many young, white evangelicals, for example, who are really casting about to figure out how to put their justice values in play. They’ve just been taught, so often, that to vote for Democrats is to vote against God.”

Conversations about faith and values are likely to bring out the base as well.

“I think progressives of faith will be among the most important coalitions in 2020 ... whether that’s Methodists and United Church of Christ caucus-goers in Iowa, black church leaders in South Carolina, or Catholics and Latter-Day Saints in Nevada,” said DuBois. “And beyond the early states, across the country, a lot of Democrats go to church.”