



How Progressives and Liberals Can Speak Powerfully about a New American Covenant and National Purpose

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Since the 2016 election, as pundits and political scientists have debated what contributed to the Democratic presidential defeat, scholars like Mark Lillia have identified “identity politics” as a factor contributing to wariness about liberal politics among white, middle-class voters. In a November 2016 *New York Times* OpEd, Lillia argues that one of the “lessons of the recent presidential election campaign and its repugnant outcome is that the age of identity liberalism must be brought to an end.” Many argue for a turn to class politics instead.

Critics of this argument rightly point out that the Democratic Party cannot abandon its commitment to minority rights – not only because groups such as African Americans, women, and gays and lesbians have been among those most loyal to the party, but also because turning away from them would be especially harmful at this historical juncture, when marginalized people are under new threats from emboldened white-nationalists. Based on my research, I propose that progressive candidates and advocacy groups can “square the circle” as it were, preserving a commitment to minority rights while speaking in an inclusive vocabulary grounded in American civil religion and liberal theology.

Rethinking Identity Politics

Rather than surrendering to standoff between “identity politics” and “class politics,” it makes more sense for the Democratic Party to speak to both sets of concerns under a unifying rubric.

Cultural studies language – phrases like “white privilege” and “intersectionality” – can be off-putting to people not conversant in that vocabulary. More importantly, such terms do not fully describe the damage done by conservative policies.

If progressives are to convince moderate and even conservative voters to support equality-enhancing policies and engage in liberal politics, new metaphors and appeals must be devised. As linguist George Lakoff has explained, “Democrats can frame issues in terms of their own values and principles,” by deploying pertinent, visceral, powerful metaphors and speaking to human beings’ innate attraction to narratives and symbols.

A New Set of Metaphors

This crucial work is already underway with spectacular success. The Reverend William Barber II’s reinvention of Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Poor Peoples Campaign” has gained significant traction as a grassroots, progressive movement fighting conservative policy departures. Growing out of the “Moral Mondays” movement in North Carolina, the Poor Peoples’ Campaign uses religious language to advocate for “full employment, a guaranteed

basic income, and access to capital for small and minority businesses,” as explained by Jelani Cobb in the May 2018 *New Yorker*.

Not limited by Barber’s invocation of Christian theology and his recourse to scriptural narratives and religious metaphors, the Poor People’s Campaign is “a broad-based alliance of Christians, Muslims, Jews, nonbelievers, blacks, Latinos, poor whites, feminists, environmentalists, and others to protest the conservative agenda.” Barber’s campaign encompasses the concerns of minorities while speaking a broader language. When Barber and his allies evoke the Book of Isaiah from the Bible in a call to “Pay people what they deserve. Share your food with the hungry. Do this and then your nation shall be called a repairer of the breach” they are using progressive metaphors more powerful than the anemic academic language invoked too often on the left.

The Way Forward

Reverend Barber provides a model of how religious and theological language can once again be tethered to liberal politics, but it is important to keep in mind that such language is not just for overtly religious people. It can be used by and for agnostic women and men as well.

Sociologist Philip Gorski makes this point in his call to resurrect American civil religion in his book *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present*. “Civil religion” in this context refers to the unified collection of symbols and concepts – such as the *Declaration of Independence*, the *Constitution*, the *Gettysburg Address* – that can be invoked as markers of American identity by citizens of any faith or no faith at all. Gorski shows how trans-sectarian understandings of American nationhood have provided unifying themes in the past, and suggests how similar ideas could be used today to unify various strands of identity and class politics into a more cohesive whole, expressed in a reinvigorated American civil religion.

My concept of “covenantal nationhood” builds on this approach. By formulating a language of “covenant,” I argue, the left can define Americanness as a shared commitment to core values and beliefs – a very different way of understanding what makes Americans special in a way very different from the right’s focus on ethnicity and race. By calling for a new American “covenant,” progressive politicians can evoke past movements like the New Deal and the Great Society and invoke the emotive and symbolic power of civil religion for today’s and tomorrow’s progressive struggles. The ongoing fight for a more inclusive and just America is must be waged on behalf of the marginalized among all Americans, who stand to benefit together in body and spirit.