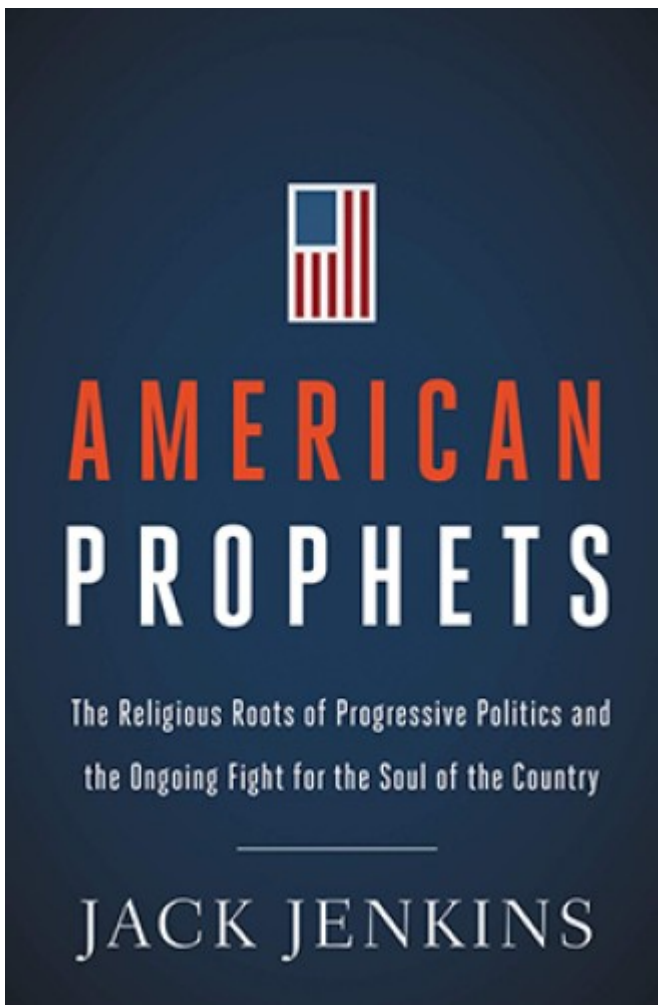


Can the religious left be as effective in Washington as it's been on the streets?

Jack Jenkins's book is informative and persuasive, if not exactly unbiased.

by [David P. Gushee](#) in the [October 7, 2020](#) issue

In Review



American Prophets

The Religious Roots of Progressive Politics and the Ongoing Fight for the Soul of the Country

By Jack Jenkins

HarperOne

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In his fascinating new book, Religion News Service reporter Jack Jenkins documents an impressive array of political organizing and activism from the American religious left since the Obama years. *American Prophets* will be the authoritative account of this eruption of activity and moral energy.

Jenkins offers lively accounts of the organizing efforts of religious left leaders and those they have inspired. He profiles Sister Simone Campbell of Nuns on the Bus, William Barber and Liz Theoharis of the Poor People's Campaign, Sharon Brous of the Jewish Emergent Network, Linda Sarsour of the Women's March, and Jennifer Butler of Faith in Public Life. He talks with Traci Blackmon about her racial justice work and Gene Robinson about his efforts toward LGBTQ equality. He chronicles the New Sanctuary Movement, the Water Protector movement, and the Black Lives Matter movement. He reports on those who have staffed recent Democratic faith outreach efforts, such as Mara Vanderslice Kelly, Joshua DuBois, and Michael Wear. He takes his readers on moving visits to momentous sites of recent religious activism, including Ferguson, Charleston, Charlottesville, and Standing Rock.

The thesis running through the book is that the religious left has reemerged with power and passion in recent years—and that it provides much of the energy for progressive social change movements in areas including racism, climate change, sexuality, health care, Indigenous rights, poverty, immigration, and women's rights. Thus, Jenkins argues, the religious left is a force to be taken seriously, especially amid the awfulness of the Trump years and the compounded awfulness (because they should know better) of Trump's religious apologists. "Far from being a historical relic," he writes, "the Religious Left I have come to know exerts growing influence on modern Democratic politics" and well beyond.

The title of the book helps make clear that Jenkins is not an impartial observer. Although he says, "I do not consider this book to be an advertisement for the Religious Left," he gives evidence that he is a young man of and for the religious left and that he deeply admires those he describes as the prophets of our time. Jenkins

wants culture watchers to attend to this inspiring and increasingly vital movement—and to note both its involvement with and its differentiation from the secular left.

He also wants the Democratic Party to take the religious left seriously in its election year outreach, as it did in 2008 but not in 2016. And he wants the religious left to win “the ongoing fight for the soul of the country”—language that tracks closely with how Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden is describing what is at stake in this election.

Full disclosure: I know and have at times participated alongside many of the people and movements described in the book, including the fight for the Affordable Care Act in 2010 and the struggle for LGBTQ equality in the church. I can attest that Jenkins’s reporting on the faith outreach efforts of Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton is accurate because I lived it: I was the recipient of active attention in the first case and zero attention in the second. I’ve talked with the faith outreach director of the Biden campaign, and I am an open endorser of Democratic candidates for the first time in my career. From this stance, I’m struck by three observations.

First, it is striking that the left/right division in American society by now goes all the way down and manifests itself deeply and thoroughly in religious life. A parallel book could be written—and many have been—about the conservative activists of various faiths engaged with every major moral-political issue of our time in wholehearted opposition to the vision of the religious left. In red and blue America, we live in parallel moral-religious universes. One side’s holy cause is the other’s abomination. It is intense to live in such times, and Jenkins’s lively prose captures this intensity. One wonders when the fever will break.

Second, the Democratic Party has a problem with religion because its own soul is divided into what Jenkins suggests are three groups. Hard secularists don’t want their party investing in religious outreach or religious people, whom they believe to be destructive. Interfaith advocates believe Democrats should be the party of loving, constructive, liberal religious faith—which means it must represent the vast diversity of religious beliefs that America now embodies. More traditional Christian believers (like black Baptists and Methodists, Rust Belt Catholics such as Joe Biden, and some churchgoing mainline suburbanites who vote Democratic) do not want Christianity entirely banished from the Democratic repertoire. The stark differences in vision between these three factions of the party are very hard to reconcile.

Finally, the religious left seems more comfortable in the streets than in the halls of power. The legacy of the civil rights movement looms large. Certainly, the Trump years have given us many reasons for street protest. But if the Democrats do win in November and the religious left gets a place at the table in Washington, it will need people who know how to work the levers of power, get laws passed, and change public policy. It will need analysts, lobbyists, and legislators as well as street protesters. Jenkins tells us about a few religious left leaders like this, but the energy of the book and of the religious left seems mainly in the streets.

I, for one, hope that January 2021 will give our nation the chance to find out whether the religious left can be as effective in Washington as in the streets.