Reclaiming the Gospel: Progressive Christian Responses to the Rise of the Religious Right

Althea Downing-Sherer

Barnard College of Columbia University

Supervised by Professor Gale Kenny

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Abstract

This research seeks to uncover how progressive Protestant clergy are making sense of their Christianity in this current political moment, especially considering increased political and academic discourse surrounding white Christian nationalism in the United States. In this article I analyze interviews with 10 progressive Protestant clergy in both Iowa and New York City to discover clergy strategies for responding to the Religious Right and how these responses compare. Common responses include a desire to model an alternative version of Christianity in the face of the religion's association with the Religious Right, a modern Social Gospel movement that prioritizes concrete social justice action over conformity, and theological and political arguments that delegitimize the faith of the Religious Right. American religious history narratives have disproportionately centered evangelicals, leaving the influential contributions of progressive Christians out of the picture. Now, with the Religious Right appearing more politically relevant than ever, most scholarship on modern American religion involves investigating the perspectives of religious extremists rather than the progressive Christians who oppose them. This research aims to correct evangelical-centered narratives and highlight the influential role progressive Christians, especially mainline Protestants, continue to play in modern day politics.

Introduction

On January 6, 2021, thousands of rioters stormed the United States capitol decked out in patriotic gear, "Trump 2020" merchandise, and for some, Christian symbolism. They clutched Bibles to their chests, held large crosses aloft, and showcased a version of Warner Sallman's iconic "Head of Christ" wearing a MAGA hat. Scholars scrambled to investigate the factors that led to such a blatant showing of what many deemed "white Christian nationalism"—a fusion of a

conservative form of Christianity and American civic life. Yet many overlooked how the shifting political landscape of Christianity was impacting progressive Christians, who were forced to reconcile their faith with the extremism it had become associated with. This research aims to explore how progressive mainline Protestant clergy are narrativizing their experience of this current political moment for Christianity, especially considering the impacts increased debate about white Christian nationalism in the United States have had on Christianity's reputation among the general public. Scholarship on the changing landscape of Christianity in America primarily focuses on dissecting the beliefs of conservative Christians and evangelicals, but overlooks the important political contributions of progressive mainline Protestants. This study challenges the dominant evangelical-focused narrative of American religious history by recentering the voices and contributions of progressive Christians.

This study examines how mainline Protestant clergy are making sense of their faith and in some cases how they view Christianity as the basis for their progressive political beliefs. I use in-depth interviews to explore the perspectives of clergy in Iowa and New York, states whose political leanings and perceptions of Christianity differ vastly. Iowa in particular swung more Republican between 2012 and 2020 than any other state in America (Weisman 2024). The effects of this extreme and abrupt polarization—trickling down from state government into church pews—have given progressive Iowan pastors a unique perspective on the relationship between their faith and politics, especially when political conservatism is one of the strongest predictors for Christian nationalism (Perry & Whitehead 2020).

My research uncovered how progressive mainline Protestants are responding to the Religious Right. One major response was an instinct to model an alternative form of Christianity in the face of the religion's perception problem. Many clergy expressed the view that Christianity

had become increasingly associated with the conservative politics of the Religious Right and hoped that modeling a politically progressive form of Christianity could combat the negative public perception of Christianity.

Another strategy clergy used to differentiate themselves from the Religious Right was emphasizing their prioritization of concrete social justice action over conformity or passive faith. Pastors spoke most frequently about LGBTQ rights activism and the immigrant and refugee support their churches offered. The way clergy described the link between their faith and activism was reminiscent of the early twentieth-century Social Gospel movement, which also used Christian ethics to address social issues. However, these interviews revealed what a modern Social Gospel movement looks like when many clergy see themselves as holding diminishing public influence.

Finally, clergy often portrayed themselves as authorities on Christian orthodoxy and used scripture to discredit the faith of the Religious Right. Some even accused Christian nationalists of being "heretics" and a "perversion" of Christianity. Despite the persistent scholarly gap when it comes to progressive Christianity, these interviews emphasize the lasting political significance of progressive Christians—particularily the role they play in condemning the Religious Right.

Literature Review

During this study, many clergy expressed fear over Christianity's association with rising levels of white Christian nationalism in the United States. A 2022 Pew survey found that 45% of American adults believe the United States should be a "Christian nation," suggesting that my subjects' concern over rising levels of Christian nationalism was not unfounded (Pew Research Center 2022). However, despite Christian nationalism emerging as a major concern in clergy interviews, a 2022 survey found that 54% of Americans had actually never heard of Christian

nationalism (Pew Research Center 2022). Because white Christian nationalism is a term that can appear overly vague for some to downright offensive for others, this study simply defines white Christian nationalism as a conflation of a certain form of Christianity—typically conservative evangelicalism—with a political agenda.

Recent scholarship has been concerned with understanding America's recent rise in white Christian nationalism. In their 2020 book *Taking Back America for God,* Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry attempt to empirically analyze Christian nationalism in the United States. They argue that Christian nationalism as a cultural framework fuses conservative Christianity, whiteness, American nativity, and conservative political ideology. Perry and Whitehead also found that political conservatism was the strongest predictor for Christian nationalism, ahead of even literal interpretations of the Bible or evangelical affiliation (Perry and Whitehead 2020).

The 2021 Baylor Religion Survey also found a strong link between Christian nationalism and support for conservative President Donald Trump (Baylor University 2021). The ways in which evangelical Protestant association with the Republican party have increased—or perhaps simply become more apparent in recent years—have spurred scholars to investigate shifting political perceptions of Christianity. Some have found that the rise of the "nones"—Americans who hold no religious affiliation—can be somewhat attributed to broad backlash against the Religious Right (Braunstein 2022). This generalization of Christianity as conservative and fundamentalist can result in cognitive dissonance between holding religious beliefs and liberal political views. Evangelical Democrats have been found to struggle with role conflict, or the social tension between their religious and political persuasions (Rhodes 2011). Another example of religious disaffiliation as backlash against the Religious Right is the fact that a higher percentage of nonbeliever groups are found in evangelical-rich counties than in counties with

more nonbelievers (García and Blankholm 2016). A deepening link between religious affiliation and politics is reinforced by the 2023-2024 Pew Religious Landscape Study, which found that long-term decline of Christianity is much more common among political liberals than conservatives, with a 25-point decline for liberals since 2007 compared to an only 7-point decline for conservatives (Pew Research Center 2025).

With the Religious Right appearing more politically relevant than ever, it can be easy to overlook the important contributions of progressive Christians, in this current political moment and beyond. In fact, American religious history narratives have disproportionately centered evangelicals and their contributions to the New Right (Sutton 2024). The dominance of the Religious Right in modern political discourse has also overshadowed the political contributions of liberal Christians. However, some scholars have recently argued that understanding how the political mobilization of religious liberals contributed to the rise of American liberalism is just as important as understanding the link between evangelicals and the Religious Right (Zubovich 2022; Jenkins 2020).

Liberal Protestants played an essential role in mid-twentieth century politics, including supporting the civil rights movement, the passing of the New Deal, and the formation of the United Nations (Zubovich 2022). Understanding the Social Gospel movement is crucial for understanding the politics of liberal Christians. Between approximately 1880 and 1920, the Social Gospel movement sprung up in response to the rapid industrialization of the United States. As opposed to prioritizing otherworldly, spiritual salvation, the Social Gospel emphasized using Christian ethics to take action toward “social salvation,” or concrete changes towards economic justice and social equality. Social Gospelers’ goal was to transform American society to more closely resemble the Kingdom of God (Danielson et al. 2018).

Historically, liberal Christians' Protestant globalism made them naturally opposed to the Christian nationalism (Zubovich 2022). Scholars have found that for religious activists, involvement in the sanctuary movement combines both political *and* religious values (Yukich 2013). Progressive Christians still play an influential role in modern day politics, through movements like the Rev. William Barber's Moral Mondays, refugee sponsorship, and outspokenness against the Religious Right as seen in Episcopal Bishop Mariann Budde's viral sermon calling on Trump to have mercy on the nation (Braunstein et al. 2017).

However, some scholars argue that despite effectively mobilizing individuals for political activism in the past through social reform movements in the mid twentieth-century, the civil rights movement, and even the 2008 Obama presidential campaign, in recent years the Religious Left has not effectively mobilized itself into political activity, at least not on the same level as the Religious Right (Conger 2022). Conger attributes this to the fact that recent Democratic campaigns have not made efforts to collaborate with faith-based organizations or target religious voters. The diminishing public influence of mainline Protestant churches is also a subject of fascination for scholars and clergy alike (Mathewes 2002).

Baker and Martí (2020) explore the possibility of a resurgent Religious Left, as portrayed by journalistic sources, but conclude that there is in fact a notable decline in Americans who identify as both religious and politically liberal. They find that the Secular Left has become more prevalent while the Religious Left has seemingly disengaged. However, other scholars critique the declension narrative and find that the Religious Left may be influential in ways beyond its power as a voting bloc, such as offering strong civic engagement and an alternative to a Christian nationalist moral narrative about the United States (Mathewes 2002; Braunstein 2018).

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design, using semi-structured interviews in order to explore how progressive Protestant clergy are responding to changing public perceptions of Christianity and the dominance of the Religious Right in political discourse. I chose a qualitative approach because it allowed for in-depth discussion of clergy's nuanced responses to these themes. "Progressiveness" was determined by participants' association with traditionally liberal mainline Protestant denominations and/or their advertisement of social justice activism and acceptance of diverse identities.

I interviewed ten pastors in total, seven from Iowa and three from New York City. I chose to focus on Iowa due to its unique political situation. Iowan clergy have firsthand experience pastoring through abrupt political polarization, making them experts on the current interplay between liberal Christianity and politics. I also spoke with clergy from New York City to learn about the experience of being a mainline Protestant pastor in New York—an overwhelmingly liberal area—differed from the experience of pastoring in Iowa.

The study used semi-structured interviews—a set of pre-prepared questions with flexible follow-up questions—to allow for flexible exploration of the study's themes while maintaining some consistency across the interviews. The interview guide included open-ended questions about the pastor's background, the role politics played in their congregations, their familiarity with and perspectives on white Christian nationalism, and their opinions on the public perception of Christianity.

Participants have all been made aware that their identities and any identifying information about their churches will be completely anonymized in order to ensure confidentiality. All interviews were audio-recorded, saved to a secure file, and transcribed. The

interviews then underwent a thematic analysis through a process of coding the transcriptions and pulling out key themes and sub themes.

One limitation to the methodology is a small sample size and a focus on only two regions, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. However, the goal of this study is not to generalize about the experiences of all progressive Protestant clergy across America. Its goal is to more deeply understand the nuanced experiences and perspectives of a small group of clergy in Iowa and New York City and to improve the field's understanding of how progressive Christian clergy are understanding this current political moment.

Key Findings & Analysis

Modeling an Alternative: Responding to Christianity's Perception Problem

A view that interviewees frequently emphasized was that Christianity had a serious perception problem. When I asked clergy about what they thought the public perception of Christianity was like in this current political moment, I received answers ranging from "terrible" to that Christianity is all "bigoted idiots." Many pastors even described experiencing pressure to distance themselves from the Christian label due to its association with conservative Evangelicals, despite holding progressive political beliefs themselves. However, many participants also argued that their role as clergy was to model and promote an alternative to negative perceptions of Christianity, an alternative that was generally more social justice-oriented, open-minded, and prioritized action over passive faith or doctrinal purity.

Most of my interviewees spoke about their own and their congregation members' concerns about the negative public perception of Christianity. Luke, a pastor from a congregation in Iowa City, Iowa, said:

"People really like [our church], but don't like Christianity, or Christians, or at least the dominant expressions of them. So, and people tell us pretty regularly, like, 'if [this church] wasn't around, I'm not sure if I would go to church. I'm not sure I could do this anywhere else.'"

Luke's church has a unique background in that it came into being as a nondenominational Protestant church that was originally more socially conservative. Yet over time the church left its parent organization and committed to defending LGBTQ rights and participating in other social justice work. Another pastor, Mel, from a progressive Methodist church in New York City claimed that the dominant voices in American Christianity were either "conservative Evangelical or Christian nationalist" and spoke about experiencing shame over expressing his faith publicly due to negative public perception of Christianity:

"Would I walk down the street with a big cross on my neck? I probably wouldn't. I probably could, or should … I guess I'm not comfortable with that, with what people think that says, or what a big cross around your neck says about. Because I think there is a perception of Christians as narrow. And it's not what I want to identify with."

However, Mel's discomfort with the Christian label did not extend to his Christian faith and values themselves. He was sure to clarify that this "narrow" perception of Christianity had very little about it he could identify as Christian. He explained that for him, true Christianity involved caring for marginalized groups. He quoted Paul, exclaiming "I'm not ashamed of the Gospel" and explained that it "deserves a hearing" because it is "based on an ethic of love, of justice."

Leonard, a pastor from a small church in Iowa, further emphasized negative perceptions of Christianity:

"There's a sense in the population that Christianity is just a shell of what it should be or ought to be or meant to be. That it is filled with power-hungry hypocrites. And that it is the source of much of what is completely immoral in this country today."

Leonard also explained that he felt social pressure to take some form of ownership for the actions of more conservative Christians. He explained that non-Christian friends of his want Christians like him to "repent" for Christian nationalism. Leonard felt unable to do that since that was not the type of Christianity he was rooted in. Because he felt his version of the faith was not

linked to Christian nationalism, he theorized that he was possibly "tending towards a new kind of Christianity."

Experiencing pressure to take ownership for the shortcomings of Christianity was a common theme among all of my interviewees. However, the ways they responded to this pressure differed vastly. In contrast to Leonard, some accepted ownership and expressed a need to "repent" for their association with certain Christians. Laura, a pastor from Iowa City, explained how she had organized an adult education group on white Christian nationalism. She spoke about confronting her own contributions to Christian nationalism in this group:

"What we like to do is point to the proud boys. What we like to do historically is talk about the KKK. What we don't like to do is talk about how, you know, somebody's favorite hymn that they still want to sing is actually also white Christian nationalism, and how we have contributed to it."

Yet other clergy called for progressives to articulate a positive vision for Christianity rather than decrying Christian nationalism. Dahlia is currently a Midwestern conference minister but had spent the 2016 election and COVID-19 pandemic pastoring at a politically diverse church in Dubuque. When I asked her about the public perception of Christianity, this was her response:

"Awful, which is why when we get somebody's ear, we shouldn't just go on and on talking about the rest of Christianity and how much they suck. We should have a positive vision. But actually I think it is changing. I think you see a consciousness, at least among people, that there are different ways of being Christian."

Dahlia was also critical of the use of the phrase "white Christian nationalism," calling it an unhelpful term due to the general population's lack of knowledge about it. She accused the term of being a "self righteous shortcut" and "excuse narrative" for some progressive clergy who prioritized political agendas over welcoming different viewpoints back into the church. She felt that these "excuse narratives" were preventing mainline churches from growing.

Levels of concern over Christian nationalism also varied across regions: clergy in more conservative areas in Iowa tended to see it as a more urgent issue while those in New York City often viewed it as an abstract issue existing primarily in news headlines rather than their own communities. However, clergy in New York City expressed higher levels of concern over political issues more relevant to their communities, such as tension over the conflict in Israel and Palestine.

Evidently, the way these clergy interpret the public perception of Christianity as overwhelmingly negative has impacted both their personal and political relationships with their faith. For almost every single pastor I spoke with, this impact manifested in a desire to model an alternative form of Christianity. Luke from Iowa City explained that since January 6, his church had focused on offering "very intentionally, an alternative to that predominant expression of certainly white Christianity in America." Offering an alternative was especially important for pastors in conservative areas where their church was the only one of its kind. This was the experience of Jeremy, a pastor in Cedar Rapids, Iowa:

"In Cedar Rapids, I mean, we're a lot different than Iowa City. There are not many progressive churches that are really willing to do much about their faith. We have some that talk a good game, but not very many that will really engage in courageous ways. And so I sort of feel like our calling and our place in the world is to kind of lead courageously, so others who won't might find out that it didn't kill us, then, you know, they might be willing to do more."

Crystal, a pastor from Muscatine, Iowa, related to this experience, stating that her church was a "hidden gem in the city of Muscatine" because the town leaned more conservative. Other clergy talked about how being one of the only progressive churches in their communities was "clarifying in identity."

So what is this alternative form of Christianity that progressive clergy seek to model in the face of Christianity's perception problem? Typically, clergy emphasized both the theological and political differences of their version of Christianity. Theologically, this involved a non-literal

reading of scripture, a prioritization of faith put into action, and claims that Christian nationalism was a false, even heretical, form of Christianity. On the political side, this involved a focus on social justice work, especially involving LGBTQ rights activism and immigrant and refugee support.

A Modern Social Gospel

Almost all of my interviewees, other than Luke who came from a nondenominational background, are mainline Protestants. Mainline Protestants are a theologically progressive group of Protestant denominations who were once very influential in parts of American society, especially in their contributions to the Social Gospel movement (Zubovich 2022). Remnants of Social Gospel thinking were evident in my interviews, where clergy repeatedly emphasized concrete social justice action as an essential extension of their faith. However, there was also a sense among clergy that the social influence and relevance mainline churches once held was rapidly declining, due to either Christianity's perception problem or simply an indifference toward the church. My interviewees' descriptions of their activism and the religious beliefs that inform it revealed what a modern Social Gospel movement can look like for a mainline facing the erosion of its cultural influence.

Many clergy also explained that they saw Christian activism as more important than ever for this current political moment, especially as a means of countering the Christian nationalism. Leonard expressed this view:

"There is always this balancing act that we have to play between the challenge and the comfort of the spirit and the material. But we are in a moment where that scale is definitely weighing down on that side of we need to speak out more, we need to be more engaged, actively engaged, directly engaged in what's happening in this country and this rise of authoritarianism which is fueled, funded, and just pushed along the way by Christian nationalism."

Many pastors also described their faith and politics as inseparable. Jeremy explained how his sermons were more than abstract messages but were for "inspiring and firing up people so

that they can hear the call to action and get engaged." On a personal level, Jeremy confessed that over the last few years his faith had become more concrete and something that calls him "into the world." Mel also emphasized the importance of linking faith and political action, arguing that "prayer is something you do quietly at home and when you're demonstrating against a cool and capricious government." Crystal expressed similar sentiments, and like Leonard, positioned her views as an alternative to Christian nationalism:

"Christian nationalists want to say that God sort of is this puppet master, and God already knows how everything's going to play out, and that God is causing things to happen, whereas I've moved more towards God is the universe and God is the energy that moves through the world, but we are the actors, right? We're the ones that, when we put God on trial and say, 'Why did you let this happen?' Or 'why did you make this happen,' God's going to look at us and say, 'Why did you do that?' And so I feel like I'm expanding in my own personal empowerment of 'I'm not going to sit around and twiddle my thumbs and wait for things to get better,' but like I'm going to participate in co-creating the world with God as much as I can."

Emphasizing social justice action as a way to disassociate Christianity from the Religious Right and offer an alternative was a common theme among clergy. When I asked Jeremy how he thinks pastors should respond to misconceptions about their faith, he said that those misconceptions should draw clergy to action with the goal of building something different.

While clergy were involved in a broad range of social justice activism, from fighting for economic justice to climate change awareness, the areas pastors spoke most frequently about were LGBTQ inclusion and immigrant and refugee support. These progressive stances inherently opposed the patriarchal and white supremacist core values of Christian nationalism.

Many pastors identified their church's process of becoming accepting of LGBTQ members as a transformative means of putting their religious beliefs into action. There was also a sense that advertising LGBTQ acceptance was a way to atone for how some Christian churches have historically excluded LGBTQ people and contributed to their marginalization. Out of everyone I spoke with, Luke's church underwent the most dramatic shift on LGBTQ issues. The

church was not inclusive when he first joined, but became officially inclusive around 2016 after undergoing a significant evolution. Now, out of all of my interviewees, Luke's church was one of the most outspoken about LGBTQ rights issues. A group from his church recently attended a protest at the Iowa state capitol against the removal of transgender rights from the Iowa Civil Rights Act. Other clergy described displaying pride flags in front of their churches, marching in pride parades, and inviting members of the LGBTQ community to speak about their experiences during church services.

However, LGBTQ rights issues were also a major source of division. Many clergy described struggling to maintain their progressive stance on the issue without alienating conservative members. For most pastors, becoming inclusive came first, even if this resulted in conservative members leaving the church. Crystal described experiencing division over LGBTQ inclusion in her church, which led to older, conservative members leaving. She also spoke about how the church's inclusivity had caused division between it and the wider community of Muscatine, Iowa, where they were known around town as the "gay church." Crystal did not mind the nickname, but was bothered by the stigma community members had toward the church's openness.

Clergy often confessed that losing conservative members meant losing their biggest donors and, of course, lower church attendance. Conversely, many clergy found this demographic shift to be clarifying in identity and viewed it as an opportunity to lean into more politically progressive work. Jeremy said that when conservatives left, the church became smaller and lost some "really big check writers," but the shift also brought a "lot more energy." Crystal spoke about experiencing a similar transformation with conservatives leaving:

"There's sort of this old guard membership who, I think in a lot of ways, they were sticking around for a new pastor to come in and bring back more of a conservative vibe. They

didn't get that. And so the shift has been they have gone elsewhere, and we've gotten a handful of new members that are much more diverse and have little children, and so we're still in that shift of priorities and what church looks like, and all of those things. We're sort of walking the plank in the middle ground right now of what used to be and what could become. But overall, I think that all of the things, all the changes I've seen have been good. They've all been shifted towards more love and more openness, and that's where I feel the spirit is calling me, and so I'm happy to shepherd the church in the same direction."

Dahlia, however, saw this rationalization of conservatives leaving as another part of certain churches' "excuse narratives." She criticized churches who prided themselves on losing conservative membership for their "self righteousness." This is an example of the range of ways clergy are responding to political divisions within the church. Some, like Crystal or Jeremy, prioritized political action even if it meant alienating conservative members. Others, like Dahlia, prioritized purely religious aspects of the church in hopes of fostering political diversity.

Another outreach area clergy emphasized was their work supporting refugees and immigrants. Benji, a Presbyterian pastor in Iowa City, was involved in sponsoring Congolese refugees through housing a Congolese congregation and assisting with citizenship classes. Leonard's church sponsored an Afghan refugee family and housed them in their parsonage, Mel's church collaborated with community organizations to provide essential resources to asylum seekers in New York City, and Jeremy's church shared its space with a large African national community. This activism is a natural extension from the role mainline Protestants played in endorsing a global ecumenical movement in the mid-20th century, such as their ecumenical engagement through the World Council of Churches. My interviewees' commitment to supporting and collaborating with people of many different nationalities and faiths also made them inherently opposed to white Christian nationalism—an ideology that, in the United States, favors whiteness, a specific type of Christianity, and American nativity.

Despite extensive involvement in their communities and commitment to Social Gospel ideals, some clergy worried that the social and cultural relevance of mainline churches was in decline. “What influence do mainline churches have now in the broader cultural context?” Benji asked while ruminating on how he responds to political issues as a faith leader. He explained that beyond the typical misconceptions about Christianity— that it is all Christian nationalists—he observed primarily indifference toward the church. People were impressed by mainline churches’ social justice work, but were uninterested in attending Sunday services. He told me that the church’s inability to draw in visitors and fix its perception problem means it had “very little influence.” Crystal also argued that “we live in a society that church doesn’t hold the purpose that it used to.”

Many scholars debate the accuracy of the religious declension narrative. Some have criticized the media for exaggerating mainline decline, especially the narrative that Christians are leaving liberal churches in droves to join conservative ones (a view expressed by many of my interviewees) (Todd 2012; Hulsether 2012). In fact, the Pew Religious Landscape Study found that the share of Americans who identified as Christian, after steadily declining for years, now showed signs of leveling off (Pew Research Center 2025). Yet no matter how accurate religious declension is, clergy’s concerns about the declining influence of mainline churches and the negative public perception of Christianity had significant impacts on how they narrativized their experience of this current political moment and their social justice outreach efforts. Because of these views, pastors explained their activism not only through theological terms—as a modern Social Gospel movement that involved putting their faith into action—but also through political terms. For many clergy, activism acted as purposeful backlash against the Religious Right, who they saw as tarnishing Christianity’s reputation.

Who is a Real Christian?: Claiming Authority on Christian Orthodoxy and Invalidating the Faith of the Religious Right

Another reaction to negative public perception of Christianity and the prevalence of the Religious Right in political discourse was an instinct to delegitimize the Christian faith of the Religious Right. My interviewees typically did so by portraying themselves as authorities on Christian orthodoxy and drawing on scriptural evidence to support their version of Christianity as the more authentic practice. While some pastors criticized the Religious Right for co-opting Christianity for their political agenda and positioned themselves as more "openminded" Christians less concerned with orthodoxy, the link between their religion and politics and concern with a certain type of Christian orthodoxy was still apparent. Mainline Protestants are often thought of as less concerned with strict adherence to traditional orthodoxy than evangelicals because of their historical-critical approach to biblical interpretation, acceptance of theological diversity within congregations, and prioritization of social justice action as an expression of their faith. Yet many of the clergy I spoke with still appeared concerned with a correct interpretation of the Bible. Leonard from Iowa City addressed the tendency of mainline Protestants to maintain a certain level of concern with orthodoxy:

"Those of us who are quote-unquote progressive, we like to think that we are focused on 'orthopraxy,' so right practice, right? And less so on orthodoxy, as in what it is we believe completely. But I do think that there is this strand within progressive clergy sometimes to actually be more concerned with orthodoxy. We talk about the power of the deed and the action, but that talk usually just stays in the pulpit."

That concern with orthodoxy was apparent in interviewees' criticisms of the Religious Right. Some accused the Christian nationalism of being "anti-Christian," "heretical," a "perversion" of Christianity, a "corruption," of "misreading Christian scripture," and of "coopting and abusing" Jesus' message. Many clergy acknowledged the weight of using terms like "heresy," but argued that it was an accurate descriptor of Christian nationalism. Emery, a

Presbyterian pastor from New York, summarized this strategy of invalidating the Religious Right by declaring that "Christian nationalism may be nationalistic, but it is not Christian."

Clergy also often cited scriptural evidence to back up their claims. Mel criticized the Religious Right's tendency to interpret the Bible literally, yet simultaneously used scriptural evidence to back up his political views:

"If you want to talk about a biblical basis for Christianity and then you fail to see that so much of Scripture is concerned about poverty and people who are poor, economically poor. If you fail to see that so much about Scripture is about welcoming the stranger, yeah, alien, whatever language, and considering them not separate from your own community. If you fail to understand the Gospel story of Jesus, where he becomes as a baby, becomes a refugee. His family flees to Egypt, and that doesn't make you think that there are refugees and asylum seekers who need to be cared for. ... I really do take the Bible seriously, because I don't always take it literally."

There was also a tendency among some clergy to not recognize evangelicals that held Christian nationalist views as "real" Christians. Calla, a campus pastor from New York, explained her views on the authenticity of the Religious Right's religion:

"I guess I wouldn't even call it the Religious Right. I'd call it the Right who has decided to co-opt religion in just the most egregious way."

Benji, a pastor at a Presbyterian church in Iowa, was also skeptical of the religious authenticity of conservative Christians:

"I ran for city council in Ankeny, and one of the guys who ran against me on his webpage, he talked about being, you know, a proud Christian. Some people don't like that. And so we're at the candidate forum, and I was talking about some stuff, and so I asked what church is he a part of? And, you know, he hems and haws, but he's not really part of a church anymore. And so inside, I'm like, okay, so you're a proud Christian, a Christian without a church home, without a community, and I don't understand. I think that that's what we're seeing, right, is this, church-free—in many ways Christ-free—nationalism."

However, the view that the Religious Right are inauthentic Christians and solely practicing "Christ-free nationalism" was not universal among progressive clergy. Many clergy clarified that they saw evangelicals as legitimate Christians, yet disagreed with their approach to the religion—emphasizing the diverse spectrum of ways to practice Christianity. Leonard argued

that most Christian nationalists are true Christians yet are simply "privileging one version of Christianity." Crystal's perspective on the issue was similar. Her answer also once again conveyed a desire to offer an alternative to popular narratives about Christianity. Rather than invalidating the faith of the Religious Right, she makes room for heterodoxy: portraying Christianity as a diverse spectrum and describing her version of Christianity as a more progressive, open-minded alternative to other versions:

"We need to make sure that people know that Christianity too exists on a spectrum. It's hard right now in our culture, because there's this concern with what is truth, right? No one knows what the truth is. So you have one person, one Christian over here saying the truth is that you're a sinner, and then another Christian over here saying the truth is that your very existence is love itself. And how do you tell people that's not true? Ours is true, because truth is a spectrum. So I think we just have to say there are other options. Yeah, you know, like, I'm not saying that that's wrong, but that's their belief, but like we also exist."

Clergy criticisms of the Religious Right came with other nuances, such as recognizing the danger of appropriating religion for political causes on the Left as well as the Right. Calla acknowledged the risks of conflating religious belief and a political agenda:

"I do think the danger that we fall into, which it's a social or cultural danger, it's not a danger in the church, but we need to be careful about it, is just conflating Christianity with a certain political agenda. And that seems dismissive. But with a progressive political platform or something, there can be overlap between the values, but it's not the same. And I think we fall into that trap that I think Christian nationalists fall into where we're letting our political ideology sort of guide the way that we understand our religious faith."

Despite these caveats, it is still true that almost every pastor I spoke with was in some way concerned with their version of Christianity being the most scripturally accurate or orthodox version compared to that of conservative evangelicals. This concern with orthodoxy for some seemed to stem from a need to defend against misconceptions about Christianity and its conflation with the Religious Right. Mel explained his defensiveness around this topic:

"It's such a tragedy, in my mind, that some of that is what people think of when they think of Christianity. That form of Christianity. And there's really so little about it that I can identify as

Christian and so I just really resent it, that that's what's touted as Christian, or as following Jesus, in any way, shape, or form."

Dahlia was especially concerned with how Christianity's perception problem has contributed to diminishing church attendance and has written at length on ideas to attract people to the church again. She criticized certain mainline Protestants' obsession with prioritizing political agendas, specifically in the United Church of Christ, the denomination she is a part of. She argued that the churches who thrived were more "Jesusy" and focused on high-quality worship, while the congregations who struggled "love to talk about Christian nationalism, and they never want to talk about Jesus." Dahlia argued for using religious rather than political messaging as a way to increase church attendance, and in a way criticizes certain churches' concern with political orthodoxy, which can become synonymous with religious orthodoxy for some clergy. Debates about Christian orthodoxy and a link between religion and politics are nothing new. Yet the way many of my interviewees perceive the Religious Right as culturally and politically dominant puts them in the unique situation of having to defend their version of Christianity. Invalidating the religiosity of the other side is an easy way to do so.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Despite being overlooked in both media and academic narratives, progressive Christians continue to play an influential role in modern day politics through offering an alternative, politically progressive version of Christianity and through extensive social justice work reminiscent of a modern Social Gospel movement. Faith transformed into action—such as advocating for LGBTQ rights or supporting immigrants—functions not only as an extension of these clergy's progressive theology, but also as a strategy for distinguishing themselves from the culturally dominant Religious Right.

Many clergy also expressed fears that modern Christianity was negatively perceived by the general public. Some theorized that this perception problem was due in part to rising levels of Christian nationalism in the United States. In order to reconcile their faith with popular misconceptions about it, many pastors invalidated the religiosity of the Religious Right by accusing conservative Christians of “heresy” or “corruption.” There have been battles over who is the authority on Christian orthodoxy since the religion’s inception. Christianity has always been appropriated for political agendas, from the persecuted early Christians to those in power when it was named the official religion of the Roman Empire. This tension is evident throughout history, with the Black liberation theology of enslaved people contrasting the horrible ways white Christianity sometimes enables slavery. During the Civil Rights Movement, the Christianity of Martin Luther King Jr. or Howard Thurman prioritized the rights of the oppressed, while many white Christians used the Bible to argue against interracial marriage (Dailey 2005). Now, the vast theological and political differences between modern mainline Protestants and conservative evangelicals underscore the importance of research that highlights the diverse range of ways one can practice Christianity.

Future work on this topic could include a more in-depth ethnography on how progressive Midwestern Christian churches are making sense of their faith in this current political moment. This could involve speaking with congregants and other members of the church community in addition to clergy to see how their experiences differ from those of faith leaders. In my Leadership in Action project next summer, I hope to continue my work fostering interfaith dialogue and sparking conversations about the overlooked yet increasingly significant relationship between religion and modern politics.

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