

Is Revival Brewing Among Religious Left?

A new report from a center-left think tank is questioning the appeal and impact of the religious left. It also touts economic justice as the most “fertile ground of this era” for liberal religious political mobilizing, with the civil rights movement of the 1960s as the exemplar.

The study released by the Brookings Institution titled “Faith in Equality: Economic Justice and the Future of Religious Progressives” notes the major impact of religious left voices have had throughout American history. But it cites challenges to religious political witness from growing secularization, divisions between religious and secular Americans, and weakened infrastructure for liberal churches.

The report finds that the religious left has not played a central role in organizing for Democrats the way religious conservatives have for Republicans. The success of Democrats in 2008, it argues, “led not to a redoubling of interest on the progressive side religion, but quite the opposite ... Engagement with religion atrophied.”

“Historically, liberal religion leads to spiritual atrophy, as the embers of faith and doctrine cool, so too understandably do religious zeal, loyalty and motivation,” notes Institute on Religion and Democracy President Mark Tooley.

“So the religious left has always carried the seeds of its own demise. Its future always depends on doctrinally conservative churches and believers becoming liberal.”

He continues: “The old religious left is mostly faded, having helped marginalize the once Mainline churches whose elites sustained it. Now liberal religious activism depends on Evangelicals falling away from the core of their faith. And so

the cycle continues.

“Instead of generating more religious left dead-end activism for, as suggested, economic justice, i.e. welfare and regulatory state advocacy, why not a new church public witness rooted in Christian orthodoxy and natural law? Why not social holiness centered on spiritual rejuvenation instead of social justice centered on coercive redistribution and bureaucratic centralization?

“The civil rights movement depended on biblical anthropology. So too must any faithful and effective religious political witness,” Tooley concludes.