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Todd Fuist Discussing His Book, Religion and Progressive Activism

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WLT Sound Ideas Interview with Todd Fuist, July 24, 2018

Charlie Schlenker: A Sociology professor at Illinois Wesleyan University believes a new book he and several others have compiled fills—a major void in scholarly literature. Todd Fuist tells GLT's Eric Stock writings about progressive religion were nearly impossible to find. He and several colleagues aim to fix this.

Todd Fuist: This is something a lot of people I'm not sure know exist. A lot of the Sociological work on religion and politics is specifically on conservative religion and even just kind of anecdotally, you know, when I would say to people I'm writing my dissertation on progressive religious groups, I'd get—from both conservative religious people, from secular people—I would get “well what are you talking about? Does that exist?” So we kind of wanted to document this thing that was an important part of contemporary politics and politics in American history that wasn't getting its full due, we thought, in the sociological literature.

Eric Stock: Why are there so few scholarly sources on progressive religion?

Fuist: Well, first off, there's kind of a thing that dovetails with the reasons why people don't think there's progressive religion, and a lot of that is just that the religious right takes up a lot of the air space for kind of our discussions of politics and religion. So there are lots of people—and Laura Olson who's one of our—our authors, talks about this in her chapter of this book—there are lots of people who are both progressive and religious, but there's not a strong like religious left identity in America in the same way that there's a conservative right religious identity in America. People will call themselves Christian Conservatives, people will call themselves the Christian right; there's organizations like, you know, historically the moral majority and focus on the family that are conservative religious organizations that plug you into that world. But for people in the religious left, it's a bit more disparate, it's a bit more, you know, um you're religious and you're progressive, but you don't think of them as a single identity. So uh it's something a lot of people kind of let fall off the radar. Like one of the things that we mentioned in the first chapters—this was strange, because we first conceptualized this book when Barack Obama was in office, and Barack Obama was a kind of, you know, standard-bearer for what we might of as progressive religion. He was a democrat, but he was also himself religious. The black church has long uh pushed for social justice issues. A lot of Mainline Protestants groups, a lot of uh Jewish groups have pushed for social justice issues, but there's not this sense that they're this kind of unified thing in the way the Christian right is unified.

Stock: First, let's contrast the term “secular liberal” with “religious conservative.” Now, secular liberal is not the absence of religion, but how do you define that?

Fuist: Good question. So, lots of people who are secular and a liberal—like you said—are not necessarily irreligious, they might be—there's been a rise in, we've noted in Sociology what are sometimes called “religious nones,” not N-U-N-S, but N-O-N-E-S; people who when you give them a survey, check “none.” But some of those people are still religious, quote-on-quote. What we find is that for a lot of them, what they object to is maybe less the beliefs, but maybe more

the institution, or—maybe more particularly for liberals—this um identification of religion with conservatism. So even a lot of people who have strong belief—I’ll say a strong belief in God or a strong belief even in, you know, very kind of orthodox Christian beliefs—might still kind of check “none” because they don’t really go to church, and they don’t really want people to think they’re conservative, and they don’t really want to be identified with particular politics like being against gay marriage for example, which is often associated with um religion in America. So they say “none,” but they actually do have a theological belief.

Stock: When you’d referenced uh President Obama, Martin Luther King as political figures who had used religious rhetoric on freedom, equality to advance progressive goals in a world where many—particularly secular liberals—have suggested any matter of religion be completely removed from politics—I guess the whole separation of a church and state argument—are those who use theology to take a more progressive stand on such heated issues risk push-back.

Fuist: Yes, and actually this gets at one of the other reasons why progressives um and progressive religious folks struggle to kind of articulate their views. This is kind of looked at in our book by uh Rhys Williams and Paul Lichterman in their chapter as well as uh Mia Diaz-Edelman who looks at this. One of the things that we find is that progressive religious groups tend to be more diverse, racially diverse, and they tend to be more theologically diverse. So a progressive religious group or coalition might have Muslims, Jews, uh Christians, uh Catholics, um, you know, Buddhists in it, whereas Christian right groups tend to be dominantly Evangelical Christians, maybe a few Catholics. So there’s actually this difficulty in kind of expressing who they are theologically, who they are, you know, kind of—what is the core identity here—and that makes it difficult and can get you that push-back where—not even just from secular people, not even just in your left-wing group from secular people who, if you say a prayer before a meeting or something might feel alienated, or have some push-back, or want to use religion publicly—but actually from even within your group, that, you know, if you have a group that has this kind of broad coalition of different religious, you know, kind of communities, even if—if—if you’re, you know—what kind of prayer do you say before your meeting? What kind of language do you use when you push for healthcare reform, or something like that. It kind of makes that tricky.

Stock: I’m Eric Stock, this is Sound Ideas with Assistant Professor of Sociology, Todd Fuist at Illinois Wesleyan, whose book explores progressive religious activism. And is there a risk of “over-labeling” given that many Americans are perhaps somewhere in between—not entirely conservative on a lot of issues, not liberal on a lot of issues—and—and their faith is probably more complicated. Do you risk putting people on extreme ends of the spectrum?

Fuist: Oh, absolutely. And I think um part of what we were really trying to do in this book was untangle where we see this, how this plays out, and try to, you know, identify where and how we are seeing progressive religious activism, progressive religious language, without kind of going to this thing of trying to create this thing called “the religious left” and say this is who they are and they’re in this box. What we defined it as was a group or, you know, a kind of church or a movement, you know, kind of counts for our analysis if they have what we call progressive action. So they are taking action on progressive issues, they are agitating for, you know, single-payer healthcare or something like that. If they have what we call progressive identities, which is

they actually identify as progressives. They say, “yes, we are a progressive church, we are a liberal church.” If they uh hold progressive values. That would be if they, you know, believe and promote from the pulpit or from their, you know, public speeches uh social justice, equality— issues typically associated with progressivism. And then progressive theology. ‘Cause there is, you know, Feminist Christianity, there is kind of progressive readings of, you know, liberation theology.

Stock: So what do you feel was the end result? As you said at the beginning, that this information wasn’t readily available because, you know, religious conservatives were sort of defined a certain way and religious liberals were not. So what do you do with this information then?

Fuist: We wanted to see, you know, what does progressive religion do in the public sphere. We think it does a handful of things. One is it serves as a basis for mobilization. People can meet in churches—this is how the Civil Rights Movement organized, they had pastors as leaders, they had, you know, people coming together in churches to have meetings. It can provide frames and languages, it can provide a way to talk about issues, you know, it can provide a way to um understand a particular political issue, you know—what so ever you do to the least of my brothers, that you do unto me—and they can also provide moral authority. In my own research I had a—a pastor say to me, that I thought was kind of funny, she said “I hate wearing the collar. I don’t like wearing this, it’s uncomfortable.” She’s like, “you better believe when I go to a protest I wear the collar, because I want people to know that I represent a church, and I represent the faithful, and I represent, you know, religious voices who are in favor of this issue.” So it presents a sort of moral authority to people who are looking to kind of make waves on a particular issue.

Stock: How does that structure differ from religious conservatism?

Fuist: There’s been a lot of articles recently, like kind of journalistic articles about what has happened since—particularly 2016—with regards to progressive religion. There’s been an upswing of it starting kind of in the late Obama years. The Nuns on the Bus happened then, the Moral Monday protests began happening then, and there was suddenly this—this great visibility of these groups that were doing these sort of moral protests. And I think that um what a lot of journalists who examine this are saying is that in the Trump-era, in some ways the Christian right who have been the traditional kind of holders of morality in America—kind of in the public discourse—have begun to see that moral authority by kind of saying like well—Franklin Graham going out there and saying, well, you know, it’s okay that Trump had these affairs, and it’s okay that he might have paid hush-money to this porn star—it’s cool, he gets a mulligan. This is kind of allowed—there to be a sense that morality is sort of up for grabs in America right now and folks like William Barber, the Nuns on the Bus, uh some of these more progressive religious figures who are trying to make their voice heard, Father Pfleger in Chicago, are suddenly getting a lot of airtime saying, “no, we are the people who uh have the moral authority to say let’s go ahead and push for a greater equality.” That is a moral issue, it’s a moral cause.

Stock: This is Sound Ideas, I’m Eric Stock with Todd Fuist, Assistant Professor of Sociology at Illinois Wesleyan, who has a book exploring progressive religious activism. So a trend that you

said sort of began late in the Obama administration or during his years in office and is continued, perhaps accelerated in the Trump administration. Where do you see this in the next 5-10 years? Will it continue on the same trajectory or as it moves into the political sphere have fits and starts like we see in much of political life?

Fuist: Right. It's hard to say. Um Rebecca Sager who's in the book um—in her chapter she talks about a specific um campaign—democratic campaign—that had trouble incorporating progressive religious values into it. So given some of the difficulties I've been talking about here, it's hard to predict, right. Like I could imagine some of the stuff sizzling out because it's hard to build that broad coalition where you have progressives, and where you have um secular folk, and where you have liberals, and where you have religious folk, and you have people of different religious backgrounds, and everyone's kind of trying to march in the same direction; that's really hard. So it's very possible it could fizzle out, you know, it's very possible these coalitions won't last. I was struck in 2016 at the Democratic National Convention that they had William Barber speak um they had, you know, Khizr Khan speak, and they both kind of spoke from this position of morality, in some ways religious morality—especially William Barber being this um, you know, reverend—and the crowd really kind of went wild for them. William Barber got a really big um ovation and I just kind of—it kind of struck me that I wonder if there is on the left a certain um hunger for being able to capture that morality, particularly as it seems to be slowly being vacated by folks on the right—especially in the era of Trump—that maybe there's a desire and a hunger to say “listen, that we are a broad based people here, we have religious people, we have people who can speak to this with moral authority and we are all part of the same coalition pushing for these particular issues.”

Stock: And you referenced Mr. Khan, who is a Muslim—

Fuist: Yeah.

Stock:—and his son was killed, a Purple Heart recipient—so we're not talking about just Christianity.

Fuist: Right. One of the things we tend to find is that, you know, the religion that makes, you know, people on the left most uncomfortable, just by virtue of, you know, the kind of current politics, is essentially conservative Evangelical Christianity. But actually there's a long tradition of, you know, the black church that has been—always had a home on the left. The Civil Rights Movement going all the way back to the abolitionists—that's always had a home on the left. And as folks are concerned about, you know, hate crimes against Muslims, which have been on the rise, it makes total sense that people who are concerned about that issue would want to bring Muslims in to work on some of these concerns with them. So you can see that there's kind of, you know, the ability to bring together some of these coalitions based on, you know, these groups that are already, you know—have kind one foot in the camp of progressivism because of issues of racism, because of issues of, you know, religious discrimination, issues of discrimination against immigrants—those folks are already there, and to elevate their voices is not particularly challenging.

Charlie Schlenker: Todd Fuist, Illinois Wesleyan University Professor speaking GLT's Eric Stock. Fuist's book "Religion and Progressive Activism: New Stories about Faith and Politics" is available well—where all books are sold. This is Sound Ideas on 89.1 GLT and WGLT.org.