

No, the Democratic Party is (still) not the party of God (guest post)

By [Daniel José Camacho](#)

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(This is a guest post written by my friend Daniel Camacho. This particular post originally appeared over at Religion Dispatches on May 19th, 2016. You can find the original [here](#).)

Image via Etsy of "St. Hillary Clinton Prayer Candle"

In a recent [piece](#) over at Slate, Ruth Graham argues that the current state of the Republican Party and conservative evangelicalism presents liberal Christians with an opportunity to be heard through the Democrat leadership of Hillary Clinton.

This largely confirms the crisis in political imagination of American Christians that I've [written](#) about previously. In an effort to triumph over the religious right, many progressive Christians have married their faith and politics to the Democratic Party, leaving little to no gap between their political visions and the party's policies. Instead of celebrating this as a successful strategy for re-ascendancy, I see it compromising radical Christian commitments to peace and justice.

Graham writes,

With Hillary Clinton all but assured to be the Democratic standard-bearer come November, the door has not been wider in decades for an activist Christian left to play an indispensable role in progressive politics. Clinton will be able to do what has been unthinkable for decades: take on her Republican counterpart from a position of faith. The Democratic presumptive nominee boasts a more convincing Christian worldview than does the Republican, who has had trouble convincing churchgoers of his theological seriousness.

In order for Graham to present Clinton's "position of faith" as breaking the door open for an "activist Christian left," she ends up committing various leaps and omissions.

Graham blurs the important distinction between theological liberalism and progressive politics. The two are not synonymous. In other words, one can approach the Bible critically, revise traditional dogma, and strive for an inclusive church while subscribing to a number of economic, foreign policy, health, and education-related political agendas. She also reduces the terms "left," "progressive," "activist" to essentially mean the mainstream politics of the Democratic Party. The article suggests that the "Christian left" or "religious left" is basically anything *not Republican*.

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(Note: in this piece, I use progressive/liberal Christian to designate those who self-identify as such theologically, or who self-identify as *not conservative* theologically. Politically, self-identifying Christian liberals can and do fall along a broad map of conservatives, centrists, populists, leftists etc.)

Additionally, Graham throws figures such as Walter Rauschenbusch, Daniel Berrigan and Hillary Clinton all into the same political camp. The 20th-century Social Gospel movement is invoked—along with Presbyterian minister Norm Thomas’ presidential candidacy for the Socialist Party of America—without acknowledging how the corporate, neoliberal [direction](#) of the Democratic Party is a far cry from these precedents. Daniel Berrigan’s anti-militarism is mentioned without any attempt at reconciling this with the deep [militaristic instincts](#) of Hillary Clinton. Even Clinton’s faith and “lifelong Methodist” status is emphasized without naming how her [aggressively anti-BDS](#) stance puts her in opposition to activists in her own United Methodist Church seeking to divest from companies supporting Israeli occupation.

How can all of this be held together? One reason is, as I’ve been [arguing](#), that many progressive Christians have reduced their “realistic” political options to the shape of Democratic Party strategies. Even though profoundly alternative political theologies can be symbolically affirmed, it is Democratic realism that sets the scope of what is possible. So homage can be made to Rauschenbusch’s Social Gospel and King’s radical dreaming, but it is Reinhold Niebuhr (Obama’s “favorite philosopher”) who carries the day. There may be talk about Jesus subverting empire, but it would be idealism and purity politics to actually apply this to real world empires in our day. The best we can do is back lesser evils who manage the empire well.

Some may say this is a pragmatic partnership. If so, it’s one with little accountability and almost no ability to push back. Obama’s nearly three million deportations (including [plans](#) to target Central American women and children once again in 2016) and Clinton’s hawkishness can be forgiven whereas it’s the Republicans who commit unpardonable sins. Appalled by Republicans but captive to the Democrats, many progressive believers are left with no leverage to pressure a party in which corporate, incarcerating, and militaristic agendas are mainstream. To say this is merely a pragmatic alliance short of conformism is revealed as a bluff when they realize that they have nowhere else to go.

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Liberal Christians often pay lip service to many politically radical Christian thinkers and activists while lining up behind the political and economic forces that they fought against. Therefore, the martyrdom of Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero can be remembered even as the same [U.S.-backed] military forces that killed Romero [continue](#) to wreak havoc today under bipartisanship support. Likewise, many can praise popular, grassroots movements such as Black Lives Matter while ultimately siding with elitist, antidemocratic stances like the [one](#) taken by Andrew Sullivan. The individual queer identity of a Latin American liberation theologian like Marcella Althaus-Reid can be celebrated. But her critical [words](#) about economic development and heterosexual ideology sustaining capitalism are rather distasteful for our times, times in which philanthropic foundations can be saviors and breaking up a few big banks is pie-in-the-sky.

King wrote about the problem of gradualism and spoke about “the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism.” Yet, it’s clear—just as it was in his day—that although liberal Christians shower such stances with praise, few actually dare to follow. Liberals sometimes valiantly fight to push their churches and denominations beyond gradualism concerning racism, gender, and sexual identity, only to turn around and preach gradualism about economic justice and U.S. empire.

Are the Democrats the new party of God? As Graham’s piece confirms, many liberals enthusiastically think so. Is Hillary the leader with faith that Christians have been waiting for? Without irony, many are ready to [declare](#) YAAASS and #SlayQueen.

To be sure, some liberal Christians may be uncomfortable with the enthusiasm or with the theocratic language of describing God in a political party. But whether or not they call Democrats the party of God, many still see Democrats as the only viable political partnership for the progressive people of God.

The Trump-induced crisis in the religious right certainly presents liberals with a window to change religious narratives and political theologies. But what will these changes be? In seeking to counter-attack increasingly right-wing Christians, perhaps liberal Christians have also failed to realize the rightward shifts under their own feet.

Some might call these concerns a case of purity politics. But there are multiple politics of purity just as there are multiple pragmatisms. At some point in U.S. history, the majority of liberal Christians made peace with the militarism and neoliberalism that have come to characterize the Democratic Party. Somewhere along the way, no amount of tortures, incarcerations, and deportations could stop strategic support. With the next political chapter about to begin in the U.S., we might get to see where this ideal takes us.