

Religious Left makes political push: Sending a message to Republicans

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With a full-page ad in the *New York Times*, a flashlight-illuminated protest on Broadway and a plea from rock star Bono for spiritually motivated, poverty-fighting activism, the Religious Left sent a message to the presidential candidates and the voters during the Republican Convention.

After years of impotence, their movement is back, progressive religious leaders say. While it is hard to tell if that assertion has real political muscle behind it, political analysts on the right as well as the left agree that the movement appears determined to make the case that God is not a Republican.

“What we’re seeing in this campaign is a reinvigoration of the progressive religious voice,” said John Podesta, president of the Washington-based Center for American Progress and a former chief of staff for President Bill Clinton.

A major force in the 1960s civil rights movement and war on poverty, the Religious Left has been overshadowed in recent decades by a highly organized Religious Right employing high-tech communication and old-fashioned political strategies to energize grassroots voters.

Scores of state and national nonprofit groups like the Christian Coalition have shown they can light up congressional switchboards, overpower e-mail servers and put issues on the national agenda.

In the past, religious progressives—their preferred term, as opposed to liberals—have tried to counter these efforts, but they have lacked the institutional breadth and structure that translate into real political power. Even supporters of the left say the movement’s impressive display of activism during convention week in New York may be a matter of geography. Many progressive religious organizations, such as the National Council of Churches, are based in New York.

The full-page ad in the *New York Times*, sponsored by the progressive evangelical organization Sojourners and signed by dozens of religious leaders, had a supersized headline saying, “God is not a Republican. Or a Democrat.” That was noticed, but the test will be how effective the movement is outside one of the country’s most liberal large cities.

“This may be a case of too little too late,” said Podesta, because there is no strong “nationwide organization backing this up.”

Michael Cromartie, director of the evangelical studies project of the Washington-based Ethics and Public Policy Center, said the Religious Left is preaching to the liberal choir, not religious swing voters. “They already have this [liberal] vote,” he said. “This National Council of Churches crowd is not about to vote for Bush anyway.”

Cromartie and other conservatives cite surveys that show the more religious people claim to be, measured by church attendance, the more likely they are to say they’ll vote for Bush.

But Democrats are fighting to close this “God gap.” It was Clinton who, with prophet-like fervor, uttered the convention week’s first cry from the Religious Left’s wilderness. “Political involvement dictated by faith is not

the exclusive province of the right wing,” the former president said at a Sunday service in New York’s interdenominational Riverside Church.

Using religious language, Clinton accused Republicans of lying about the Vietnam war record of the Democrats’ candidate, Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts. “Sometimes I think our friends on the other side have become the people of the Nine Commandments,” Clinton said. “It is wrong to bear false witness.”

Riverside, an ethnically diverse megachurch, is the mother ship of “Mobilization 2004” and “Let Justice Roll,” nationwide efforts advocating “prophetic justice principles” for this year’s voters and candidates. James Forbes, Riverside’s pastor, said he has traveled to Seattle, Oregon, Minnesota and Boston preaching that “the elimination of poverty” must be a core faith value. He and others say they will keep up such visits until the election.

“What we’re seeing is a revitalization of progressive religion,” said Paul Sherry, the National Council of Churches’ poverty mobilization coordinator, who has traveled with Forbes. “This is far beyond an isolated phenomenon. We’ve been impressed, even surprised, by the depth of commitment we’re seeing in all the cities.”

Spiritual commitment was the theme August 31 at St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church a few blocks from the GOP convention site. No candidates were endorsed, but Irish rock star Bono challenged an interfaith crowd of about 250 people to work for social justice by changing political equations.

David Beckmann, president of Bread for the World Institute, a Washington-based hunger-fighting organization, urged activists to “give some money and give some time to a candidate who you believe will help bring justice to the poor and hungry.” Beckmann said he dislikes the term Religious Left, arguing that hunger is a bipartisan issue and noting that Republican Bob Dole is on his group’s board.

But, in an interview, Beckmann said his group has never been as politically active as this year, and it’s having an impact. He said John Edwards, Kerry’s running mate, has used poverty statistics in his “two Americas speech,” and Kerry has promised to double what Bush has spent to fight AIDS in Africa. That came after Beckmann and other activists met with Kerry’s foreign-policy advisers at the campaign’s request.

Opposition to Bush policies motivated Michelle Whitfield of New York to take part in a demonstration on her 42nd birthday. Like others lining Broadway, she pointed a flashlight heavenward near Riverside Church. Whitfield, a legal secretary, said: “Progressive people are spiritual people. Who was more spiritual than Martin Luther King?”

When asked if the voice of progressives will have a major impact this election year, Whitfield admitted she has been disappointed in the past. “It might this time,” she said. “It should. But I won’t say it will.” —*Mark O’Keefe, Religion News Service*