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A Theory of Democratic Christian Appeals

Andrew MacPhail

Oberlin College

Author Note

Andrew MacPhail, Department of Politics, Oberlin College

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Abstract

The conventional wisdom in American politics associates Christian appeals with the Republican Party. However, the fact is, many prominent Democratic politicians identify as Christian along with many Democratic voters. This paper draws upon extant research in political psychology to propose a theory of how Christian appeals from Democratic politicians might positively influence liberal voters' political decision-making. The first section provides a brief overview of Christian social activism in the United States in order to establish the compatibility between progressivism and Christianity throughout American history. The second section outlines the theory that proposes how Democratic politicians could use Christian appeals to craft moral narratives in order to catalyze emotional reactions in liberal voters that might positively impact their attitudes towards Democratic candidates. Finally, the third section further explicates the theory via case studies of Christian appeals in the rhetoric of Barack Obama, John Kerry, and Hillary Clinton. The first case study is congruent with the theory, while the second and third case studies demonstrate the potential effectiveness of Christian appeals even in the absence of certain theoretical elements.

Keywords: Democrats, Christianity, narrative, morality, emotion, affect contagion

A Theory of Democratic Religious Appeals

When liberal voters think of Christianity and American politics, some may think of the Christian right's support for Republican causes. Liberals might recall September 11, 2001, when televangelist Jerry Falwell Sr. blamed the fall of the twin towers on "abortionists...pagans, feminists, and the gays and lesbians [and] the ACLU" (FitzGerald 2017: 466). Perhaps they remember the 2004 presidential election, when Archbishop Charles Chaput suggested that anyone who voted for John Kerry had committed a sin and was not fit to receive communion (Kirkpatrick and Goodstein 2004). Conversely, some liberals might think about Christianity in America in terms of many Republicans politicians' habitual public invocations of their Christian faith. For instance, during the presidential primary in 2015, Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) told an audience in Iowa that conservatives should "get down on their knees and pray" that the Supreme Court would decide several cases in favor of "traditional" marriage (The Guardian 2015). More recently, in 2018, former Attorney General Jeff Sessions cited a Bible verse, Romans 13, in his defense of the president's family separation policy (Zauzmer and McMillan 2018). And in the 2016 presidential election, even Donald Trump, a candidate better known for his libertine lifestyle than any particular devotion to his Christian faith, made a point of mentioning on the campaign trail how he was "very proud" to be Protestant as well as the need to "bring Christianity back" (CSPAN 2016).

In light of these strong associations between Christianity and the political right, it understandable that some Americans may have forgotten that at one point many Christian groups advocated for progressive social causes. Yet these days, although 78% of Democrats in the 116th Congress are Christian and 57% of registered Democratic voters are Christian, the Democratic Party stays largely quiet about Christianity (Pew 2019). In fact, if anything, some Democrats

have been accused of outright hostility to religion, such as when Senator Kamala Harris questioned a Republican judicial nominee over his membership in the Knights of Columbus, a Catholic fraternal organization (Gabbard 2018).

Given that the demographic reality of the Democratic Party is that the majority of Democratic voters and politicians are Christian, this paper proposes that Democrats need not cede Christian discourse to the Republican Party. To contextualize this proposal, the paper's first section conducts a brief overview of the historical relationship between Christianity and progressivism in America and observes that Christians of a variety of denominations have often stood at the forefront of progressive causes. In the second section, the paper uses extant research in political psychology to propose a theoretical argument for how Christian appeals from Democratic politicians might positively impact liberal voters' political decision-making. In the third section, the paper concludes with a series of case studies that further explicates the theory by demonstrating its mechanisms in action in the rhetoric of three prominent Democratic politicians. Specifically, the case studies examine Barack Obama's Christian rhetoric in which all the elements in the theory are present, John Kerry's Christian rhetoric that lacks moral frameworks for his policy proposals, and Hillary Clinton's Christian rhetoric that lacks a strong connecting narrative. The case study analysis concludes that even in the second and third cases that are not entirely congruent with the theory, Democrats can still positively influence liberal voters' political decision-making by integrating Christian language into their political appeals.

Christian Activism for Progressive Causes

Charles Finney and the Abolitionism of Early Evangelical Protestants

In 2018, Americans may often associate the term "evangelical" with the political right, and for good reason: men like Jerry Falwell Sr. (the founder of the Moral Majority) and Pat

Robertson (erstwhile presidential candidate), two of the most famous evangelical preachers of the late 20th century, were both staunch social conservatives who supported Republican presidents (FitzGerald 2017). However, Falwell and Robertson were only the latest generations of evangelicals in a religious tradition that stretches back to colonial America. Throughout American history, there has never been a monolithic evangelicalism. In centuries past, evangelicals resided in the North and the South, the frontier and the city. Some were biblical literalists and theological conservatives who exhorted the church to stay out of politics, while others broke from the strict doctrinal confines of their progenitors. The common theological thread for these Christian men and women was the centrality of an experience of spiritual rebirth to their faith as well as their emphasis on the redeeming power of Christ on the cross (637).

In America's early days, the dominant religion was Puritanism. As James Morone (2003) points out, "by 1640, the New England Puritans made up more than half the European population in what would become the original United States" (Morone 2003: 31). These Puritans were Protestants who rejected the Church of England's style and doctrines. They decried the elaborate trappings of Anglican ritual, in which they saw echoes of the reviled liturgy of the Catholic Church, and they rejected the Anglicans' policy of open church membership, instead deciding to limited membership in their churches to those who "could demonstrate God's grace moving within them" (37).

Over time, the Puritans lost their monopoly on American religion. In the middle of the 18th century, New England preachers like Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield became the foci of what historians call "The Great Awakening," a restructuring of American theology that emphasized an individual's personal relationship with Christ via an experience of spiritual rebirth (FitzGerald 2017:19). Whitefield and his followers, like Gilbert Tennant, drew huge

crowds at religious revivals as they railed against “unconverted” ministers, or ministers who had not acknowledged or experienced a singular moment of spiritual conversion (ibid). To a certain extent, The Great Awakening democratized American Christianity: individuals who claimed to have experienced a spiritual rebirth began to preach in public, unannounced and without permission from local authorities (21). Soon, a new class of itinerant preachers emerged and spread their message to the colonial frontier, where they formed local churches that existed independently of preexisting ecumenical institutions (23). By 1743, several new denominations had emerged from the tumult, including the Separate Baptists, the New Side Presbyterians, and the Methodists, who all shared the same democratizing ethos that deemphasized the authority of the clergy and focused on an individual’s personal relationship with Christ (24). People who belonged to these denominations became known as “evangelicals,” a word derived from the Greek “*euangelion*,” meaning “gospel” or “good news” (Merritt 2015).

At the beginning of the 19th century, another series of religious revivals once again changed the landscape of American Protestantism. Known as the Second Great Awakening, these revivals began in Cane Ridge, Kentucky at a gathering of 10,000 people who camped for days listening to the sermons of itinerant preachers. While they listened, many attendees experienced “religious ecstasies” such as speaking in tongues (glossolalia), fainting, dancing, and singing (FitzGerald 2017: 26). The preachers of the Second Great Awakening elaborated on the message of their predecessors a half-century earlier as they advocated for a relationship between God and human beings in which any mediating institutions between an individual and God were at best superfluous and at worst corrupt (29). Preachers like John Leland, a prominent Baptist, not only “opposed all forms of clerical organization,” but also “maintained that each individual had right to his own interpretation of the scriptures,” while others, such as Alexander Campbell, the son of

Ulster Presbyterians, insisted that “people could read the ‘plain facts’ of the Bible for themselves” (29, 30).

Leland and Campbell’s extreme version of *sola scriptura* (no creed but the Bible), resonated with a rebellious America “ingrained” with antitraditionalism stemming from “struggle against Roman Catholic traditions, and then promoted among early-national Americans by the democratic individualism arising from the Revolution” (Noll 2002: 379). This “Revolutionary alliance between newly empowered ordinary people and the traditional authority of the Bible” would soon cause deep fissures within the evangelical population as questions of biblical teachings on slavery came to a head in the Civil War (379). Preachers and ministers who shared Leland and Campbell’s ideological bent, called antiformalists, adhered to a variety of evangelical Christianity that was “frankly sectarian, emotional, apocalyptic...[and] marked by great solicitude for spiritual liberty” (176). These men would eventually defend slavery on theological and hermeneutical grounds. However, there was another group of evangelical thinkers and preachers based in Northern cities who were led and inspired by a man of particular import to the history of the religious left: Charles Grandison Finney (379).

Born in 1792, Finney started his career as a lawyer before becoming an itinerant revivalist preacher following a conversion experience in his late twenties (FitzGerald 2017: 35). Using a forceful and logical preaching style influenced by his background in law, Finney quickly developed a reputation as a formidable preacher whose sermons “produced powerful emotional reactions, even among merchants and lawyers who had attended church for years and sat unmoved through other revivals” (36). He traveled the country, emphasizing that Christians “had

a duty to...work for the attainment of God's kingdom on earth¹" by "[ridding] the world of its 'great and sore evils'" (37).

One of the evils that Finney focused on in particular was slavery. Finney refused to allow slaveholders to take communion and urged Christians to publically denounce slavery (308). His powerful anti-slavery message won him the support of two wealthy philanthropists on the East Coast, Arthur and Lewis Tappan, a pair of silk merchants who founded the American Anti-Slavery Society and took it upon themselves to invest in a certain "struggling manual labor college" in Oberlin, Ohio (FitzGerald 2017: 41). Many of Finney's converts and protégés enrolled at Oberlin, and soon Finney himself accepted a professorship there² to teach theology (43). Before long, "thanks to Finney's celebrity, Oberlin grew apace, and under his influence it became a center of progressive evangelical Christianity" (43). In fact, it was Finney who stood before Oberlin's board of directors and insisted that they accept black students as well as white (43).

At Oberlin, Finney advanced a particular theological idea called "perfectionism," which was a modification of John Wesley's (the founder of Methodism) concept of "entire sanctification" (44, Noll 2002: 335). Frances FitzGerald (2017) describes how

To [Finney], sanctification meant "a higher and more stable form of the Christian life" in which Christians lived in perfect obedience to God's law and devoted themselves completely to loving God and their neighbors...in Finney's view, all Christians...were subject to temptation, to backsliding, and even to losing their salvation. All he was really

¹ This doctrine, that the Second Coming of Christ would usher in a reign of peace and prosperity, is known as postmillennialism.

² Or rather, here.

proposing was that Christians could grow in their faith and act more as Christ would have them (FitzGerald 2017: 44).

In accordance with this theological proposal, Finney told Christians in his sermons that “piety and personal morality were not enough: Christians had to prove ‘useful in the highest degree possible’ in advancing God’s kingdom” (39). He elaborates on this idea in *Lectures on Revivalism* in which he writes, “[people] are moral agents, and have the powers which God requires them to exercise” (Noll 2002: 307). Finney’s perfectionism also demarked him as a theological opponent of many Southern Protestant denominations that embraced a doctrine called “the Spirituality of the church.” This doctrine, “generally accepted by southern evangelicals...held that ‘the Church, as an order of grace, was permitted no official involvement in the social reform of the state, an order merely of justice’” (FitzGerald 2017: 52). While historians such as Noll (2002) and FitzGerald (2017) regard this doctrine as essentially an excuse to avoid an discussion of slavery, Noll (2002) does note its theological bases, including the belief that “God, rather than humans,” was the agent of social change and that reformist “activism meant a sinful replacement of dependency upon God with idolatrous reliance upon the self” (Noll 2002: 312).

Adherents to the spirituality of the church were in many ways the theological opposites of Finney and his Oberlin fellows, who believed that individuals were “subjects of moral obligation” who had “a call to...ethical seriousness and a belief in God’s...readiness to transform the present world through the Holy Spirit” (312, FitzGerald 2017: 44). Yet despite Finney’s emphasis on moral agency, his primary focus remained on individual salvation and the subsequent goal of attaining entire sanctification, or perfectionism. For Finney, perfectionism was essentially a spiritual matter (Noll 2002: 308). However, the logical consequence of

individuals becoming more Christ-like in a spiritual sense was that “the more people converted to Christianity, the more righteous society would become” (Evans 2017: 23). It is important to note this theological distinction. Unlike the intellectual leaders of the Social Gospel in the 20th century, Finney’s theology did not yet directly connect faith and works. To be sure, the elimination of social ills was the natural conclusion of perfectionism; however, Finney first and foremost maintained that individual righteousness born out of a conversion experience was the proper avenue towards building the kingdom of God.

Finney’s perfectionism is an early example of how evangelical Christianity is compatible with progressivism. By calling on individuals to become more Christ-like, Finney was asking them to attempt to emulate a sinless life of righteousness in the face of temptation and tribulation. He believed that if more people could truly love God and their neighbors, society would fundamentally improve. Today’s Protestant Democrats can look to Finney as an example of how a theology of closeness to Christ can lead to tangible social action. Evangelical theologies and attitudes are by no means the antithesis to progressive politics. If Finney could invoke closeness to Christ as he sought to uproot the horror of slavery, it seems plausible that modern Christian Democrats could discuss their own faith as they campaign against any one of the challenges facing America today.

The Social Gospel: Modernist Protestantism and Social Reform in the Early 20th Century

Charles Finney, though criticized by some of his contemporaries for his advancement of perfectionism, was not a “modernist” Protestant theologian. By contrast, Walter Rauschenbusch, the intellectual founder of the Social Gospel movement, most certainly was. Unlike Finney, Rauschenbusch developed a theology that revolved around the importance of works to faith. Born in Rochester, New York to a German father in 1861, Rauschenbusch attended school in

Germany before entering the Rochester Theological Seminary in 1883 (Minus 1988: 2). After completing his ministerial training, Rauschenbusch was assigned to a German Baptist church in the heart of New York City (60). Rauschenbusch's experience in New York opened his eyes to the miseries of the urban underclass: crowded tenements, disease, and abject poverty (ibid). Soon, he began to ponder how his faith might help him address the societal conditions around him. At first, he struggled to conceive of a new theology, as he had been educated in an evangelical tradition that eschewed "mere questions of mine and thine" and did not explicitly connect faith to works. Instead, its mission was "to save the immortal souls of men" (61, 67). However, Rauschenbusch eventually made an intellectual breakthrough when he heard a Catholic priest endorse a socialist mayoral candidate in New York by quoting the Lord's Prayer: "Thy Kingdom come! Thy will be done on earth..." (62).

This phrase galvanized Rauschenbusch's creation of a modernist Protestant theology that focused on the centrality of works to faith. First, he joined the Society of Christian Socialists, a group whose mission was to "awaken members of Christian churches to the fact that the teachings of Jesus Christ lead directly to some specific form or forms of socialism" (65). Several years later, Rauschenbusch founded his own society called the Brotherhood of the Kingdom (85). One of his first actions as founder was to write a series of pamphlets articulating his vision of what would become known as the Social Gospel. In these pamphlets, Rauschenbusch condemned the traditional evangelical focus on personal salvation at the expense of the creation of "a collective Kingdom of God on earth" (88, 89). He recast the evangelical mission as "the evangelization of the world" that was "to be realized here and now" through "the spread of the spirit of Christ in the political, industrial, social, scientific and artistic life of humanity" (ibid).

FitzGerald (2017) explains how Rauschenbusch's historical importance derives "less from his policy prescriptions than from his evangelical piety and his use of modern scholarship on the New testament to articulate the Social Gospel" (FitzGerald 2017: 68). For example, in his book *The Social Principles of Jesus*, Rauschenbusch used scripture "to formulate in simple propositions the fundamental convictions of Jesus about the social and ethical relations and duties of men" (Rauschenbusch 1916: 1). In this volume, Rauschenbusch continued to develop the connection between works and faith that forms the foundation of the Social Gospel. He quotes Matthew 25ⁱ to justify his conception of a Christian life that is judged "Not by creed and church questions, but by our human relations...by our practical solidarity with our fellow-men" (41). To remain "apathetic" to social problems meant eternal condemnation at the hands of Christ (ibid).

Rauschenbusch's new conception of a Christianity that worked to improve the human condition captured the minds of subsequent generations of public servants, church leaders, and activists. First, Evans (2017) describes how "many New Deal priorities...have roots in the worldview of the social gospel" (Evans 2017: 147). He states that

[Franklin] Roosevelt's cabinet included individuals who endorsed many aspects of social gospel thinking, in particular his secretary of the interior, Frances Perkins, as well as Harry Hopkins, head of the New Deal's Works Progress Administration and one of Roosevelt's most important advisors (ibid).

Rauschenbusch also succeeded in persuading ecumenical institutions such as the Federal Council of Churches to adopt tenets of the Social Gospel into their mission statements and their charitable endeavors (Evans 2018). And years later, as Martin Luther King Jr. stood before a nation and demanded racial equality, King credited Rauschenbusch for inspiring his belief that a

Christianity which “professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the social and economic conditions that scar the soul, is a spiritually moribund religion only waiting for the day to be buried” (Evans 2017: 1).

In short, Rauschenbusch’s conception of a Christianity dedicated to remedying worldly injustice inspired American Protestants throughout the 20th century to advocate for progressive causes. When he reframed evangelicalism to encapsulate the creation of a more perfect godly society in the here and now, he provided a religious justification for public servants and community leaders to advocate for structural changes in American society aimed at uplifting the most vulnerable. Given that the Social Gospel helped inspire the most famous set of liberal public policy reforms in American history, the New Deal, it seems plausible that today’s Protestant Democrats might consider drawing upon their faith to justify their own ambitious policy proposals.

Vatican II and Progressive Catholic Activism in the Mid-20th Century

After exploring two strands of American Protestantism, we now turn to Catholicism, the second largest Christian denomination in the United States (Pew 2017). By the mid-20th century, fear and mistrust of Catholics had begun to subside as more and more Catholics moved slowly into the middle class due to educational opportunities afforded to them by the GI Bill (Scribner 2015: 3). Although several Protestant ecclesiastical organizations continued to issue statements condemning Catholics in inflammatory terms, such as when the National Association of Evangelicals passed a resolution declaring that the Catholic Church propagated “Satanic ideologies,” by and large, by the 1960s, American Catholics were no longer cultural pariahs; they even managed to help elect a coreligionist, John F. Kennedy, to the presidency of the United States (ibid).

The 1960s was a formative decade in the history of Roman Catholicism. Vatican II, the first ecumenical council called by a pope in one hundred years, fundamentally transformed the Church when it began in 1959. Not only did Vatican II permit presiders to say the Mass in the vernacular rather than Latin, it also issued theologically progressive declarations such as *Nostra Aetate*, which acknowledges the legitimacy and worth of other world religions. This spirit of reform extended to matters of racial justice. John McGreevy (1996) describes how some Catholics viewed certain theological proclamations that originated from Vatican II as a call to action on civil rights. For example, Vatican II reformulated the relationship between the Church and its constituent members in universal language by describing them as “the people of God” (McGreevy 1996: 160) Moreover, the council “emphasized that a truly Catholic Church placed its ‘concern...first of all on those who are especially lowly, poor and weak’” (ibid). Other conciliar documents like *Gaudium et Spes* also highlighted the Catholic duty to serve and “to rescue” while being “alert to the ‘signs of the times’” (ibid).

The Church’s stance on racial justice continued to crystalize as the decade progressed. In 1963, Pope John XXIII issued *Pacem in Terris*, an encyclical that explicitly condemned racial discrimination, and the very next year, Martin Luther King Jr. met with Pope Paul VI, who assured him that the Church supported the black struggle for civil rights in the United States (152). Sure enough, during the Selma to Montgomery March in 1965, Catholic clergy and laypeople heeded King’s request for aid and flooded into Alabama (155). Images of priests in collars and nuns in habits marching with King and other activists appeared in newspapers around the country, sending an unmistakable signal that Catholics would not sit out the fight for racial equality (156). After Selma, Catholic activism continued. In Milwaukee, one of the most segregated cities in America, Father James Groppi, one of the priests who had marched in Selma,

organized daily marches into the city's predominantly white South Side until the city council passed an open housing ordinance (202). Groppi also engaged in other kinds of activism, such as chaining himself to a school construction site to protest school segregation; his unflagging commitment to the black cause earned him individual praise from King himself (ibid).

In certain areas of the country, the assimilated racism of Catholic immigrant populations like the Irish and the Polish complicated the Church's stand against segregation by stifling the activism of the clergy (McGreevy 1996). However, while it is true that certain segments of Catholic America in the 20th century were not exactly shining beacons of liberalism, there nonetheless existed a strong tradition of Catholic association with the politics of the left. One figure in particular embodied this connection. Her name was Dorothy Day.

Dorothy Day (1897-1980) founded the Catholic Worker movement in 1933 when she distributed the first copies of an eponymous newspaper during a Communist rally in Union Square in New York City (Davies 2017, Roberts 1984: 2). Day converted to Catholicism as an adult after a whirlwind adolescence in which she was arrested at the age of twenty for participating in a suffragist demonstration and interviewed Leon Troksty while working for a socialist newspaper (Davies 2017). Soon after she became a Catholic, Day met Peter Maurin, a French itinerant Catholic activist. Together, they started the Catholic Worker movement (Rademacher 2018: 91). Influenced by writers such as Kropotkin and Tolstoy, Day freely described the Catholic Workers as an anarchist movement in which membership "involved freely choosing to serve the poor out of love rather than obligation...even if this choice led to confrontation with ecclesiastical and civil officials" (ibid). In accordance with the Church's teachings on the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy (derived from the words and deeds of Christ as recorded in the Gospels) Day and Maurin set up hospitality houses in New York City

where they housed and fed all comers while living in poverty themselves (Davies 2017, Rademacher 2018).

Day's legacy of radicalism extends beyond serving the poor³ in radical cohabitation. Throughout her life, she remained committed to a philosophy of absolute nonviolence. Unlike prominent Catholic clergymen in the '30s and '40s, Day rejected theologian Thomas Aquinas's doctrine of *jus ad bellum* and condemned war in all of its forms, including World War II (Krupa 2018: 194). Via *The Catholic Worker*, she spoke out against Roosevelt's internment of Japanese-Americans, eviscerated Truman's decision to bomb Nagasaki and Hiroshima, and later, in the '50s and '60s, was arrested for refusing to participate in air-raid drills, choosing instead to sit in the street in silent protest of violence in all its forms (195). Although these positions lost her support amongst some elements of the Church, Day maintained that her writings and actions stemmed from "the nonviolent love ethic" of Christ (Coy 2018: 174).

Father Groppi and Dorothy Day are but two examples of Catholic activists over the years who have fought for progressive social causes. One could spill much ink, for example, recounting César Chávez's leadership of Californian farm workers in a strike that galvanized the support of Church officials and Catholic politicians such as Bobby Kennedy. Yet suffice it to say that the 20th century Catholics had a moral voice, and that moral voice often sang in harmony with that of the political Left. Admittedly, while modern Catholic Democrats may feel constrained in invoking their faith to justify their policy stances due to the Church's vehemently anti-abortion stance, which I discuss in section three, throughout history, Catholics have understood the Church's moral teachings to apply to issues besides abortion. In the 20th century, the Church and its constituent members have stood firmly on the side of progressive causes like racial equality,

³ As of 2017, there are some 250 hospitality houses around the world, and *The Catholic Worker* (the publication) continues to be distributed to this day (Davies 2017).

peace activism, and alleviating the plight of the poor. There is a good deal of historical precedent that legitimizes Catholic Democrats bringing their faith into the public sphere as they seek to explain their support for progressive causes.

A Theory of Democratic Christian Appeals

At the very least, figures like Finney, Rauschenbusch, Fr. Groppi, and Day demonstrate that Christianity is not incompatible with liberal causes. The fact is, Christian individuals such as these often stood at the forefront of progressive battles against a wide array of social ills. In light of the history of Christian advocacy for progressive causes throughout American history, the absence of Christian appeals amongst modern Democrats presents a puzzle to political observers. After all, 222 of the 282 Democrats in Congress are Christians, and nearly 60% of Americans who identify as Democrats are Christian as well (Pew 2019). Moreover, some of the biggest names in the Democratic Party, including Cory Booker, Elizabeth Warren, Nancy Pelosi, Hillary Clinton, Joe Biden, and Barack Obama, are devout Christians (Foer 2018, Pew 2019, Mitchell 2009, Cox 2015, Hertzke, Olson, den Dulk, and Fowler 2018). Yet Democrats do not exactly trumpet their Christianity from the rooftops. Unlike their counterparts on the right, it would be unthinkable for a 2020 Democratic presidential candidate to echo G.H.W. Bush's declaration that "I believe with all my heart that one cannot be president without a belief in God" (Lieven 2012: 145).

This section asks, "How might Christian appeals from Democratic politicians influence liberal voters' political decision-making?" Answering this question matters because history shows us that there is political power in religious appeals. Recall Charles Finney, who called upon all Christians to join the abolitionist cause, and Walter Rauschenbusch, who urged Christians to take their faith to the streets and build the Kingdom of God on earth. Yet despite this history, right now, many Christian Democrats do not use Christian appeals in their political

rhetoric (Beinart 2019). In an effort to encourage Christian Democrats to reexamine their relationship with religion in the political arena, this section will use extant research in political psychology to formulate a theory about how and why Christian appeals might be effective electoral tools for Democratic candidates who seek to earn the support of liberal voters.

Literature Review

Generations of political scientists have sought a better understanding of how and why voters choose whom and what to vote for. The conventional wisdom regarding vote choice dating back to Aristotle casts the voting process as an instance of rational choice (Popkin 1994). According to these scholars, voters can be categorized as *homo economicus*, or people who decide whom to vote for based solely on a dispassionate cost-benefit analysis of how a candidate's policies help them or hurt them (Downs 1957, Campbell et al. 1960, Key 1966, Kramer 1971, Haidt 2012). However, recent scholarship has challenged the notion that vote choice and political opinion formation is an entirely rational process (Demasio 1994, Marcus et al. 2000, Mendelberg 2001, Lodge and Taber 2013). Some scholars, such as Marcus et al. (2000), Mendelberg (2001), and Lodge and Taber (2013) demonstrate that truly rational choice is impossible due to a myriad of subconscious cognitive processes that automatically bias our downstream decision-making in a matter of milliseconds. Still others, such as Popkin (1994), frame vote choice in terms of low-information rationality that relies on heuristics, or cognitive shortcuts, to arrive at a decision. Finally, scholars like Haidt (2012) and Lakoff (2002) contextualize vote choice as taking place within moral systems or matrices that guide political decision-making.

In many ways, this new generation of scholarship should please political practitioners. If citizens do not vote by simply weighing competing policy platforms and arriving at a reasoned

conclusion as to which one is more beneficial for their own economic wellbeing, political campaigns and the accompanying institutions that mediate between candidates and voters remain extraordinarily important to how voters decide. For example, scholars have shown that political debates, candidate talk-show appearances, and the tone and substance of press coverage, just to name a few factors, all affect how voters conceive of the political reality that informs their voting decision (McKinney and Warner 2013, Parkin 2014, Wolfsfeld 2011). Moreover, if vote choice is indeed a process that transcends the bounds of rational choice, the rhetoric candidates use takes on an added significance as well. Postman (1985) presciently argues the language candidates use in televised campaign ads, for example, “puts forth a psychological theory of unique axioms:... all problems are solvable, that they are solvable fast, and that they are solvable through the interventions of technology, techniques, and chemistry” (Postman 1985: 130).

What Postman (1985) means here is modern political candidates must use language and symbols to market themselves, to create an appealing self-portrait “whose image is best in touching and soothing the deep reaches of [voters’] discontent” (135). Political decision-making, in other words, is fundamentally linked to emotion. Neuroscientists and political psychologists agree that the way we experience emotion is underpinned by a basic organizational principle of the brain called “approach/withdraw” (Westen et al. 2006, Westen 2007, J. Haidt personal correspondence, December 18, 2018). Haidt (2012) articulates the basics of this principle quite simply when he describes how “brains evaluate everything in terms of potential threat or benefit to the self, and then adjust behavior to get more of the good stuff and less of the bad” (Haidt 2012: 64).

Westen et al. (2006) and Westen (2007) argue that the influence of approach/withdraw also extends to components of automatic subconscious decision-making processes such as affective

tagging. In psychology, “affect” refers to a positive or negative feeling, while affective tagging refers to the theory that the vast majority of cognitive concepts are associated with positive or negative affect (Taber and Lodge 2013). Westen et al. (2006) explain how the approach/withdraw principle affects subconscious decision-making processes when they write, “processes of approach and avoidance, motivated by affect or anticipated affect, may apply to motivated reasoning, such that people will implicitly approach and avoid judgments based on their emotional associations” (Westen et al. 2006, Schlaghecken and Eimer 2004). Studies have shown how motivated reasoning occurs in the context of political decision-making, moral reasoning, and stereotyping (Westen et al. 2006, Haidt, Koller, and Dias 1993, Rozin et al. 1999).

In light of this body of research, candidates who treat elections as simply a contest between two competing policy platforms that voters evaluate rationally based on their own self-interest do so at their own peril. Several authors have pointed out that Democratic candidates are guilty of adhering to this misconception about what voting entails while many Republicans, on the other hand, have embraced this updated paradigm of voter behavior by directing their electoral messaging at voters’ emotions (Westen 2007, Ricci 2011, Ricci 2016). Meanwhile, those Democrats who try to walk voters through the specifics of a policy proposal are easily brushed off by their conservative opponents, such as when George W. Bush famously dismissed Al Gore’s concern over his tax plan’s effect on income inequality as “fuzzy math” in one of the 2000 presidential debates (Berke 2000). Given that voters are more likely to participate in politics if they experience positive feelings towards a candidate, it is possible that Democrats who fail to generate emotional responses in their voters may find themselves at an electoral

disadvantage compared to a Republican opponent who deliberately targets voters' emotions (Westen 2007: 70, Parkin 2014: 133, 153).

One of the ways Democrats could target voters' emotions is by framing policy issues in moral language. Studies show that people's emotions are activated over the course of arriving at moral judgments (Rozin et al. 1999, Green et al. 2001, Sanfey et al. 2003, Jones and Fitness 2008, Blair 2007, Huebner, Dwyer, and Hauser 2008, White et al. 2017). If candidates can use moral frameworks to generate positive affect about cognitive objects associated with their candidacy, voters' overall attitudes towards their candidacies will improve (Lodge and Taber: 30). This attitude improvement occurs because a) all cognitive objects are affectively tagged (researchers call this "hot cognition"), b) cognitive objects are often connected in a predetermined schema, and c) the more objects in voter's schema about a candidate that are associated with positive affect, the more positive the voter's overall attitude towards the candidate will be (Lodge and Taber 2013: 43). Therefore, in order to better target liberal voters' emotions, Democrats might heed the political scientists, sociologists, and philosophers who write about the role narrative plays in situating ourselves in a moral landscape (Smith 2003, Patterson and Monroe 1988, Bruner 1996, Somers and Gibson 1995).

I argue that Democrats can use Christian language to frame their policy proposals in moral narratives in order to activate voters' emotions and motivate them to support their candidacies. According to scholars like Haidt (2012) and Lakoff (2002), liberal voters think about morality through particular psychological frameworks. I posit that invoking Christian language would allow Democrats to engage with these frameworks in a holistic way that effectively positions them to activate emotional responses in liberal voters as they arrive at moral judgments.

Narrative, Morality, and Emotion

Sociologists as well as political theorists agree on the important roles narratives play in our lives (McNeill 1982, Smith 2003, Patterson and Monroe 1988, Bruner 1996, Somers and Gibson 1995). Somers and Gibson (1995) state that stories guide “people to act in certain ways and not others” (Somers and Gibson 1995: 2). Stories that tell us how we should act are not simply fables teaching us how to conduct cost-benefit analyses. On the contrary: as Bruner (1996) puts it, “finding a place in the world, for all that it implicates in the immediacy of home, mate, job, and friends, is ultimately an act of imagination” (Bruner 1996: 41). Bruner’s (1996) use of the word “imagination” indicates that narratives are not always the products of dispassionate reasoning. Rather, narratives are constructed by the collective imaginations of various societal, cultural, and religious forces, as well as the imagination of the individual.

One of America’s political parties seems to grasp the important political implications of crafting a powerful narrative. Republicans from Orange County to Staten Island tell a similar story about the challenges America faces (governmental overreach, the fraying of America’s moral fabric), who or what is at fault for these challenges (secularism, socialism, government bureaucrats, and free-riders), and how we fix them (a renewed commitment to personal responsibility, religion, and a redistribution of power to local governments) (Ricci 2011, Ricci 2016, Smith 2003). Recently, Donald Trump has absconded with this message and made it even simpler: America was once great, it no longer is, and we should do everything in our power to return it to greatness. With Make America Great Again (MAGA) as the backdrop to campaigns across the country, Republicans deliver voters a simple message: America, the land of perfect righteousness and global agent of good, is slipping (Lieven 2012). Republicans are patriots who want to return America to its glory days, whether they think of this economically (as in a revival

of coal or manufacturing) or socially (back to a time before political correctness, say). It is obviously important for folks to listen to them and care about their story because with every passing second, America slides further and further from greatness. As such, voters have a moral imperative to act in support of Republican candidates and by extension, America itself. This story can inspire a range of emotions in voters—excitement, anxiety, pride, and even humiliation—emotions that in turn motivate political behavior (Westen 2007: 70, Fukayama 2018: 92, Lieven 2012: 82).

Politicians who use stories to take aim at voters' emotions are hardly employing a novel political strategy. As we have seen, in centuries past, some public figures used Christianity as the backbone of their political narratives as they called Americans into action for progressive causes. Nonetheless, many modern Democrats do not tell stories. Consequently, they miss an opportunity to appeal to voters' emotions. Westen (2007) sums up the party's struggles with "emotionally compelling" narratives when he bemoans Democrats' failure to use stories that justify their candidacies and policy proposals. He writes, "the Left has no brand, no counter-brand, no master narrative...instead, every Democrat who runs for office...has to reinvent what it means to be a Democrat, using his or her own words and concepts" (Westen 2007: 146, 169).

Ricci (2016) attributes the storytelling-adverse character of Democrats to the particulars of liberalism as a political philosophy when he states, "liberals as a class simply don't see the world in terms of large shared stories" (Ricci 2016: 64). After all, liberalism has roots in Enlightenment humanism, a tradition that "rejected the mythical, theological, transcendental, or metaphysical explanations that used to justify large institutions" (192). It makes sense, therefore, that liberals avoid using stories to frame their understanding of the world, at least in the public sphere, and gravitate instead towards an empirical politics comprised of a list of policy proposals dedicated

to “citing facts...and revising circumstances” rather than “advocating fundamental beliefs” (Ricci 2016: 95). William McNeill warns of the political consequences of this lack of storytelling when he writes, “in the absence of believable myths, coherent public action becomes very difficult to improvise or sustain” because voters may lack the motivation to participate in politics (McNeill 1982: 1). Miller (2013) asserts that the first question citizens ask themselves about politics is, “Do I *want* to participate?” (Miller 2013: 210). Some liberal-leaning voters may very well answer this question in the negative after listening to Democratic candidates who offer them bland buffets of policy proposals without a common narrative thread to bind them together: cut carbon emissions by exactly 1.2%; leave Syria in 6.5 months; offer faster broadband speeds for rural areas.

With this in mind, the challenge for politicians, and for Democrats in particular, becomes how to generate an emotional response in voters. As Westen (2007) puts it, “we do not pay attention to arguments unless they engender our interest, enthusiasm, fear, anger, or contempt. We are not *moved* by leaders with whom we do not feel an emotional resonance” (Westen 2007: 16). Democrats can accomplish this by constructing narratives that appeal to voters’ sense of morality. Research in neuroscience and moral psychology suggests that emotion is intrinsically connected to moral reasoning (Rozin et al. 1999, Green et al. 2001, Sanfey et al. 2003, Jones and Fitness 2008, Blair 2007, Huebner, Dwyer, and Hauser 2008, White et al. 2017). One study in particular by Haidt, Koller, and Dias (1993) highlights the connection between emotion (or affect) and moral judgments and is worth examining in more detail. In this study, researchers presented subjects of varying socioeconomic status (SES) in Brazil and the United States with “affectively loaded stories” of harmless taboo violations (Haidt, Koller, and Dias 1993: 615).

Then, they asked them if the action in the story⁴ was a) morally wrong and b) if someone was harmed by the action. The authors found that “most of [the] subjects said that the harmless-taboo violations were universally wrong even though they harmed nobody,” a conclusion that appears irrational to proponents of a harm-based morality like that of the liberal political philosopher John Stuart Mill (Haidt 2012: 26).

In other words, emotions guide moral reasoning, so much so that our explanations for moral judgments may actually be post-hoc rationalizations for a decision driven by affect (Greene and Haidt 2002, Haidt, Koller, and Dias 1993, Haidt 2012, Lodge and Taber 2013). Fortunately for Democrats seeking to tap into voters’ emotions via their moral reasoning, some of the most important narratives in our lives are those that address morality, or the way we treat others and ourselves. As we attempt to find a place in the world and figure out a way to organize our actions, we cannot avoid questions of morality. Smith (2003) says as much in his book *Moral, Believing Animals* when he writes, “To be a human person...requires locating one’s life within a larger moral order by which to know who one is and how one ought to live” (Smith 2003: 118). It is clear, then, that the stories that Smith (2003) describes as guiding “how one ought to live” and Bruner (1996) describes as “finding a place in the world” necessarily possess moral elements or implications (Smith 2003: 118, Bruner 1996: 41).

The stories politicians tell are no different in that morality often lies at the heart of political stories. Moreover, politicians who make it clear to voters that their policy proposals are grounded in a particular moral framework may benefit on Election Day. One study shows that political participation increases when voters believe that their preferred political candidate reflects their moral values and convictions (Skitka and Bauman 2008).

⁴ For example, one of the stories describes a woman who finds an unwanted American or Brazilian flag in her closet and decides to cut it up and use it as a rag.

Unfortunately, if political stories are often moral stories, this leaves some Democrats in a double bind. Liberals' inherent inclination to avoid stories in the public sphere precludes them from engaging with voters' moral matrices, which in turn fails to garner the emotional reactions that drive political decision-making. Given that many Republicans do tell these kinds of stories, those Democrats who do not arguably make elections more difficult for themselves. To complicate matters further, Democrats who struggle with moral language may find themselves at a loss in terms of how to tell any stories at all. In order to alleviate this tendency, Democrats might consider drawing upon Christian language to craft moral stories that arouse voters' emotions. Smith (2003) explains that morality is a central concern of religion when he writes, "religion is...about the proper organization and right guidance of life. Religion tells people...what are good, right, true, wise, and worthy desires, thoughts, feelings, values, practices, actions, and interactions (Smith 2003: 99). Christianity fits into this description. From the Ten Commandments to the Beatitudes, Christianity inarguably urges its followers to act within a particular moral system. Famous Christian figures like Charles Finney and Walter Rauschenbusch preached this message as well. In their eyes, Christians had a moral, faith-based duty to act in certain ways. Accordingly, Democratic politicians who are Christian may find that their faith provides them with the language they need to create an effective moral narrative that resonates with liberal voters. The next part of this section will analyze this proposal in more detail by examining the interaction between Christian language and two different psychological models of liberals' moral matrices.

The Interaction of Christian Language with Nurturant Parent Morality

What kinds of language might Democrats use as they construct moral narratives with a foundation in Christianity? George Lakoff's (2002) Nurturant Parent Model provides us with a

starting point for examining which Christian themes might resonate with liberal voters' moral matrices. To begin with, he proposes two divergent cognitive linguistic models of liberal and conservative morality. Liberals adhere to a Nurturant Parent Model of morality, and conservatives adhere to a Strict Father Model of morality. Each of these models encapsulates and prioritizes a "collection of metaphors of morality" which results in the formation of "different family-based moral systems...[that] give rise to different forms of moral reasoning" (64). The metaphors associated with these models correspond to two different types of "ideal family life" (64).

Lakoff (2002) introduces the Nurturant Parent Model as follows:

[there are] preferably two parents, but perhaps only one. If two, the parents share household responsibilities. The primal experience behind this model is one of being cared for and cared about, having one's desires for loving interactions met, living as happily as possible, and deriving meaning from mutual interaction and care (Lakoff 2002: 108).

The most salient aspect of this model as it relates to Christian morality is its emphasis on "deriving meaning from mutual interaction and care;" in other words, nurturance (ibid). In the model, "a child has a right to nurturance and a parent has a responsibility to provide it" (117). The responsibility Lakoff (2002) refers to here not only describes how liberals think about the moral duties inherent to the family, but the government as well. Americans, he argues, actually understand the nation as a metaphorical family: we talk about a *fatherland* sending its *sons* and *daughters* to war; the word "*patriot*" derives from the Latin word for father, "*pater*;" the federal government is "Uncle Sam." (154). As such, liberals view politics as well as community and family life through identical moral prisms. Just as parents possess a certain authority and

responsibility with regards to their children, so too does the government possess a certain authority and responsibility with regards to its citizens (ibid).

Lakoff (2002) proposes a four-part conceptual metaphor that outlines these moral responsibilities of parents and governments: "(1) The Community is a Family. (2) Moral Agents are Nurturing Parents. (3) People Needing Help are Children Needing Nurturance. (4). Moral Action is Nurturance" (ibid). This last metaphor entails two additional important corollaries. First, "moral action may require making sacrifices to help truly needy people" (118). Second, "community members have a responsibility to see that people needing help in their community are helped" (ibid).

Christian Democrats could effectively use religious language to interface with this collection of metaphors because the morality of the Nurturant Parent Model reflects an understanding of the moral obligations inherent to community life that echoes a central Christian doctrine: love one another (John 13:34, 1 John 3:11). This simple message, one that lies at the heart of Jesus's teachings in the New Testament, encapsulates Nurturant Parent Morality's emphasis on "deriving meaning from mutual interaction and care" (108). Moreover, other parts of the New Testament highlight the centrality of works to Christian faith in a way that fits with the model's second corollary: "community members have a responsibility to see that people needing help in their community are helped" (118). For example, James 2:14 says, "What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works" (James 2:14). Additionally, documents issued during Vatican II highlighted the Catholic Church's concern with helping the most vulnerable members of society (McGreevy 1996: 160). Passages like James 2:14 in the Bible along with declarations from Vatican II demonstrate how important it is for Christians to take moral action in their communities. Doing so is only right if Christians seek to follow Jesus's

command to “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39). The conception of a community bound together by love that Jesus articulates in the Gospel of Matthew directly recalls one of the corollaries of the Nurturant Parent Model that links the need for moral action in the community to the urgency a parent feels when their child needs help.

Let’s imagine how Christian Democrats might use this model to ground their policy proposals in moral language that tells a story about who they are and why they are advocating for particular policy proposals. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) and Conor Lamb (D-PA) are two new members of the House of Representatives. While Ocasio-Cortez is widely regarded as one of the most liberal Democrats in the 116th Congress, Lamb is a moderate representing a swing district in the Pittsburgh suburbs (National Journal 2019). Unsurprisingly, Ocasio-Cortez and Lamb talk about policy in different ways. For example, both politicians have sections about the environment on their campaign websites. Lamb’s section talks about supporting the oil and gas industry’s job-creating properties while defending the government’s ability to punish polluters (Lamb 2018). On the other hand, Ocasio-Cortez’s section advocates for a Green New Deal that includes a 100% renewable energy economy (Ocasio-Cortez 2018). These goals are significantly different and arguably divergent: it seems quite unlikely that Ocasio-Cortez will be interested in joining forces with Lamb to help grow the Pennsylvania oil and gas industry.

However, both Ocasio-Cortez and Lamb are Catholics. If they wanted to, they could draw upon the language of their faith to ground their objectively dissimilar environmental policies in a similar moral matrix that signals their role as nurturing moral agents. Here is what Ocasio-

Cortez's section on the environment might look like if she told a story about her policy that used Christian language:⁵

Not only does climate change threaten the wellbeing of our planet, it threatens the health of our fellow citizens, specifically those in low-income communities. As Matthew 25:31-46 reminds us, we need to care for "the least of these." Alex's Green New Deal will do just that. By transitioning to a 100% renewable energy economy by 2035, we can protect the most vulnerable Americans from rising sea levels, raging wildfires, and dangerous heat waves while simultaneously providing new green jobs for the people that need them most.

Now, let's engage in the same exercise for Lamb:

I support robust and responsible energy development. Natural gas extraction strengthens our district by employing hundreds of our families, friends, and neighbors. I will do everything I can to make sure these jobs stay where they are. As Matthew 25:31-46 tells us, we have a moral imperative to take care of each other, and that starts with making sure that everyone has the chance to find a good, safe middle-class job.

For Ocasio-Cortez, inserting a religious appeal in her website's section on the environment explains that the policy proposals in her Green New Deal have a moral basis in nurturance, specifically nurturance of the most vulnerable members of the national community. The urgency this message conveys aligns with the urgency liberal voters feel about helping the disadvantaged, given that Nurturant Parent Morality links helping the needy to caring for one's own children. Similarly, for Lamb, adding a religious appeal enables him to justify his dedication to robust energy development by situating it in a nurturant moral framework about caring for the community via increasing economic opportunity. Matthew 25: 31 helps Lamb implicitly position himself as a nurturant parent who wants the best for his district. This positioning directly aligns with how the Nurturant Parent Model conceives of the role of government. Finally, citing a verse from the Gospel of Matthew tells the same story about both candidates that accomplishes what

⁵ Some of the language in this section and the subsequent section includes words and phrases taken directly from the websites of Ocasio-Cortez and Lamb.

Smith (2003) calls “locating one’s life within a larger moral order:” despite their policy differences, Ocasio-Cortez and Lamb are people of faith who have committed to public service because they feel a moral duty to help their constituents (Smith 2003: 118).

Christian Language as a Holistic Approach to the Moral Foundations

The Nurturant Parent Model provides a starting point for examining what kinds of Christian language might resonate with liberal voters’ moral matrices and why that is the case. This section expands on this claim by turning to Haidt’s (2012) Moral Foundations theory and analyzing how Christian language would allow Democrats to not only interface holistically with each individual foundation, but also those foundations that liberals usually tend to ignore or shy away from in their political rhetoric.

Haidt (2012) argues that human morality has six foundations: Care/Harm, Fairness/Cheating, Loyalty/Betrayal, Authority/Subversion, Sanctity/Degradation, and Liberty/Oppression (Haidt 2012). He claims that varying receptiveness to each of these foundations accounts for discrepancies in moral reasoning across different cultures and classes (Haidt 2012: 146). These foundations, says Haidt (2012) are actually “universal cognitive modules” that evolved to meet the primary “adaptive challenges of [human] social life” (ibid). One of these challenges is “the fundamental question of animal life: approach or avoid” (64). Accordingly, each of the moral foundations has two sides, one that corresponds to “approach” responses and one that corresponds to “withdraw” responses.

When different cultures and individuals assign different weights to each of the six moral foundations, distinct moral matrices emerge. Other cultures’ moral systems appear at best incomprehensible and at worst immoral to people adhering to a particular moral matrix. The French, for example, view the Islamic teaching requiring women to cover their heads and faces

as fundamentally at odds with their conception of a liberal democratic society. As a result, in 2011, France passed a law that made wearing the *niqab* in public illegal (The Guardian 2018). This is an example of a clash between a cultural moral matrix that emphasizes the Liberty/Oppression Foundation and one that emphasizes the Sanctity/Degradation Foundation.

One of Haidt's (2012) central proposals in *The Righteous Mind* is that liberals are mostly receptive to just three of the six foundations, Care/Harm, Fairness/Cheating, and Liberty/Oppression, while conservatives are very receptive to all six (Haidt 2012: 211). He goes on to claim that the comparatively narrow spectrum of liberal morality places Democrats at an electoral disadvantage because their messages fail to resonate with individuals with broader moral matrices that emphasize other foundations such as Authority/Subversion, Loyalty/Betrayal, and Sanctity/Degradation (ibid). Moreover, in light of Shklar (1989) and Ricci's (2016) analysis of the oppositional nature of Democratic messages, we can expand upon this claim: the Democratic disadvantage with regards to the moral foundations extends beyond a three-foundation morality versus a six-foundation morality because Democrats have a tendency to utilize messages that emphasize Harm over Care, Cheating over Fairness, and Oppression over Liberty. In other words, the content of Democratic political appeals gravitates towards the "withdraw" side of the moral foundations. If Democrats were to use Christian language in their political messaging, they could effectively engage with the "approach" side of the moral foundations as well as the other three foundations that they tend to avoid altogether.

Before analyzing the interaction between Christian-inspired language and the moral foundations, I will explain why some Democratic messages tend to emphasize the "withdraw" sides of the moral foundations over the "approach" sides. Political philosopher Judith Shklar's (1989) term "the liberalism of fear" explains why some Democratic policy proposals have an

oppositional orientation⁶ that focuses more on the “withdraw” sides rather than the “approach” sides. Shklar (1989) claims that this oppositional orientation is inherent to liberalism as a political philosophy (Ricci 2012). She posits that “liberalism must restrict itself to politics and to proposals to restrain potential abusers of power in order to lift the burden of fear and favor from the shoulders of adult women and men” (Shklar 1989: 31). This statement identifies certain ideological constraints on liberal politicians (ibid). Liberals, she argues, make policy in order to react to the threat of current or future abuses of power. As a result of “liberalism target[ing] different forms of tyranny according to time and place,” Democrats assemble lists of policy proposals⁷ that aim to “mend the defects in modern society” (Ricci 2016: 97, 140). These lists are by nature oppositional. As such, they tend to highlight the “withdraw” sides of the three moral foundations liberals care most about: Harm in Care/Harm, Cheating in Fairness/Cheating, and Oppression in Liberty/Oppression.

By alluding to scripture and referencing common Christian themes in their political messaging, Democrats could formulate policy proposals that highlight the “approach” side of the three liberal moral foundations. Imagine a political appeal from a 2020 Democratic presidential candidate like Senator Elizabeth Warren who has made alleviating economic inequality one of her signature issues. Senator Warren, a practicing Methodist, might consider citing scripture in one of her Iowa stump speeches as she defends, say, the Dodd-Frank Act and a high corporate tax rate (Dionne 2012). She could say, “As president I will ensure that powerful Wall Street corporations operate within the law, and I would remind them of their Christian duty to

⁶ Trump has undoubtedly amplified some Democrats’ oppositional tendencies: for example, recall Rep. Rashida Tlaib’s exclamation that “We’re gunna impeach the motherfucker!” on the night of her swearing-in (Rupar 2019).

⁷ For a thorough analysis of liberals and their lists of solutions to social and political ills, see Ricci (2016) Chapter 8.

contribute to the common good. Recall how 1 Timothy 6:18 instructs the rich ‘to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous, ready to share’” (1 Timothy 6:18). This use of scripture highlights the Fairness side of Fairness/Cheating better than a message that only highlights Cheating (like “break up the banks”). This example demonstrates how Democrats might construct political appeals that transcend the limitations of the liberalism of fear and equally engage both sides of the moral foundations. Instead of disseminating messages that lean towards an emphasis on the “withdraw” sides of the moral foundations, Democrats could disseminate “approach” messages of social justice with a Christian underpinning that emphasize compassion, empathy, and responsibility.

While Democrats might certainly try to focus equally on both sides of the moral foundations by using Christian language, the advantages of using such language to more effectively engage with Haidt’s (2012) moral foundations theory do not stop here: Democrats could also use Christian language to interface with the other three moral foundations that they usually avoid discussing. If we examine Haidt’s (2012) research more closely, while he does assert that liberals primarily rely on three moral foundations, he does not state that liberals ignore the other three altogether. The aggregate results from the study he conducts to determine which moral foundations resonate most with particular individuals indicate that liberals are certainly very concerned with Care/Harm, Fairness/Cheating, and Liberty/Oppression, but they also care about Authority/Subversion, Sanctity/Degradation, and Loyalty/Betrayal (Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009: 1033). Given that most liberals do care about the other three foundations and comparatively few liberals thought that they were completely irrelevant to moral judgment, Democrats could feasibly broaden the moral appeal of their political messaging by referring to the other three foundations. In turn, this could potentially result in voters attaching positive affect

to a greater number of conceptual nodes associated with Democrats' candidacies. Moreover, engaging with the other three foundations might also help Democrats gain some political traction amongst more conservative Democratic voters.

It is worth noting that liberals with a broader moral palate, to use Haidt's (2012) analogy, do not confound Lakoff's (2002) model. Clearly, Nurturant Parent Morality posits that liberals are very concerned with the Care/Harm foundation. Yet the concept of nurturance applies to other foundations as well. For example, Lakoff (2002) describes how parents in his model have a legitimate authority due to their effective nurturance and thus should be listened to and respected (134). To put this another way, Nurturant Parent Morality does not perceive all hierarchies as bad or immoral; as such, concerns over the Authority/Subversion foundation might arise in the model in instances when legitimate authority is not respected.

Democrats who wish to interface with broader moral matrices, especially those emphasizing the Sanctity and Authority foundations, could do so using Christian language. After all, defining and venerating the sacred and respecting divine authority are central to many religious enterprises, including Christianity (Smith 2003: 109).⁸ To examine how this might work, we can turn to the "Reforming Our Criminal Justice System" section of the 2016 Democratic Party Platform where we see that Democrats' argument for abolishing the death penalty reads as follows: "The application of the death penalty is arbitrary and unjust. The cost to taxpayers far exceeds those of life imprisonment. It does not deter crime" (Democratic Platform Committee 2016). This argument reads like a typical liberal policy proposal in that it a) relies on empirical frameworks such as an economic cost/benefit analysis to make its case and b) it contains a weak moral appeal that half-heartedly addresses the "withdraw" side of the Fairness/Cheating

⁸ Smith quotes Peter Berger as stating "Religion is the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established."

foundation. Democrats could broaden the moral appeal of their anti-death penalty stance if they phrased it like this:

The death penalty has no place in the criminal justice system. Dangerous and violent criminals should certainly face punishment for their decision to abuse the liberties inherent in American society, yet we must retain our reverence for life by remaining loyal to our moral heritage. We are all made in God's image, and all life is a divine gift.

This paragraph demonstrates how Democrats could use a religious appeal in their stance against capital punishment that aims at the "approach" side of the Sanctity/Degradation foundation by emphasizing the intrinsic value of every human life in explicitly religious terms. Voters who are responsive to the Sanctity/Degradation might read this appeal and view proponents of the death penalty in an unfavorable or even immoral light, as by advocating for capital punishment they are challenging Christian teachings.

The Impact of Christian Language on Political Information Processing

For some readers, this sort of language pertaining to a Christian conception of the sacredness of life skirts uncomfortably close to the arguments religious conservatives make in opposition to abortion. As such, these readers might argue that if Democrats used this type of language, they would needlessly expose themselves to charges of hypocrisy. However, I argue that using Christian language is worth that risk. Research shows that the positive affect associated with mentions of Christianity can bias downstream information processing so as to positively influence individuals' subsequent evaluations of a candidate in a phenomenon called "affect contagion" (Albertson 2011, Lodge and Taber 2013). This final section of the theory will elaborate on the specific cognitive mechanisms involved in hot cognition and affect contagion in order to explain how this process occurs and why it would behoove Democrats to take advantage of it via Christian language in their political appeals.

In their book *The Rationalizing Voter*, Lodge and Taber (2013) propose the *John Q. Public* model of political information processing. This model centers upon the importance of hot cognition to political reasoning. It argues that political decision-making rarely occurs within the conventional model of reasoned evaluation. There are three stages in this conventional information processing model that casts voters as intentional rational deliberators. First, an event occurs that causes the mind to retrieve affectively and semantically related considerations from working memory and long-term memory. Next, the mind uses these considerations to engage in conscious deliberation. Finally, reasoned evaluations emerge from these conscious deliberations (Lodge and Taber 2013: 19). While scholars and politicians who believe that voters are capable of rational, empirical deliberation will gravitate towards this sequence, it fails to account for the wide array of unconscious mechanisms that influence our decision-making.

Many of these mechanisms fall under the category of hot cognition, which lies at the heart of the *John Q. Public* model. It refers to the fact that “all thinking is suffused with feeling” (ibid). Lodge and Taber (2013) propose that information stored in our long-term memory is organized in conceptual objects “linked together by a network of associations” (29). Each conceptual object carries positive and/or negative affect. As a result, our information processing is affectively charged from the very beginning. The conventional processing sequence of consideration retrieval, conscious deliberation, and reasoned evaluation only occurs within the affectively charged context of hot cognition.

Just after the beginning of the information processing sequence, once these positive and/or negative feelings have been aroused, “activation will spread along well-traveled associative pathways...thereby enriching our semantic understanding of the original stimulus” (20). As our mind seeks to understand the stimulus before us, it necessarily draws from concepts stored in our

long-term memory, as our working memory (what we are thinking about in real-time) can only grapple with around seven concepts at a time (17). Cognitive scientists frame this step in information processing as a competition between activated concepts. Lodge and Taber (2013) argue that concepts that are both semantically and affectively related to the stimulus are most likely to win the competition and move into working memory (18). They refer to this process as affect contagion (135). If the affect associated with the original stimulus is positive, concepts that are semantically related to the stimulus *and* carry positive affective tags are most likely to enter working memory, where they will enter conscious awareness as relative considerations for evaluation (*ibid*).

Affect contagion has important implications for political reasoning. Remarkably, Lodge and Taber (2013) show that even primes that are semantically unrelated to political issues and go unnoticed by conscious thought can “influence subsequent conscious thinking and reasoning” (136). They primed undergraduates at Stony Brook University with cartoon smiley faces, frowny faces, or neutral faces⁹ and found that subjects exposed to positive primes (smiley faces) demonstrated increased support for an anti-immigration policy as measured by the number of positive thoughts they recorded about the policy (146). These results provide support for what Lodge and Taber (2013) call the “affective mediation effect” in which “affectively biased thoughts enter into the construction of reported evaluations and promote prime-congruent policy preferences and attitude change” (137). In this case, the attitude change is implicit, meaning “outside of conscious appraisal” (35).

⁹ The cartoon primes were smiley faces, frowny faces, or neutral faces. They were flashed on a computer screen for 39 milliseconds, which is too fast for conscious awareness. Before and after the primes were displayed, the subjects were shown “masks” meant to impair visual memory of the primes.

When we consider affect contagion in the context of emotion-based moral judgments, we can posit a mechanism through which the affect associated with moral judgments can influence political evaluations. If a Democratic candidate uses Christian language to propose a variety of policies rooted in Nurturant Parent Morality or the Moral Foundations theory, when liberal voters think of those policies, they will feel a flash of positive affect because the policy proposal is congruent with their moral matrices. These flashes of positive affect go on to impact downstream information processing via the affective mediation effect. When liberal voters who have subconsciously associated a candidate's policies with positive affect form overall evaluations of a candidate, these evaluations are formed on the basis of conceptual objects that are also positively affectively tagged. Therefore, these final evaluations are more positive than they would have been otherwise (in the absence of the initial positively affectively tagged policy proposal rooted in a moral matrix).

While Lodge and Taber (2013) use semantically unrelated primes to induce attitude change, other researchers have achieved the same effect using Christian political appeals as semantically related primes. Studies like these continue to strengthen the case for Democrats to use Christian appeals: affect contagion may occur not only due to the positive affect attached to moral judgments that are congruent with liberals' moral matrices but also *because of the positive affect attached to Christian appeals in and of themselves*. In one study, Albertson (2011) tests to see if Christian political appeals are congruent with hot cognition and the affective mediation effect. She asked her undergraduate subjects to read a segment of a political speech attributed to either George W. Bush or Bill Clinton. In the control condition, the speech had no religious appeal, while in the treatment condition, the speech had a short biblical reference. After they read the speech, subjects took a paper Implicit Attitude Test (IAT) and answered follow-up questions that

included an explicit attitude measure (a feeling thermometer) and a political behavior question asking the students to report the likelihood that they would attend a speech given by either Bush or Clinton in a nearby town (Albertson 2011).

Albertson (2011) found that exposure to religious appeals significantly improved implicit attitudes towards both Bush and Clinton. Additionally, she found significant increases in the treatment group's reported likelihood of attending a nearby political speech given by Bush or Clinton. Granted, these results were only true for subjects who either identified as Christian or were raised Christian. This intuitively makes sense: "persuasion at the implicit level relies on a match between the nature of the appeal and the background of the individual" (Albertson 2011: 122). However, more intriguing is the fact that these results held amongst those individuals with previous exposure to Christianity even if they indicated on the post-IAT survey that they believed that there was too much religious discourse in politics. Given that a majority of her subjects expressed a preference for less religious discourse in politics, which could very well be the product of adherence to a political philosophy that espouses the separation of church and state, these findings speak to the powerful effect of religious appeals on information processing.

To recap, Albertson (2011) found that exposure to a Christian appeal improved attitudes towards the political figure issuing the appeal *and* positively influenced political behavior associated with supporting that person. To frame Albertson's (2011) results in terms of the *John Q. Public* model, it is possible that Christian appeals carry positive affective tags regardless of whether the individual in question is a practicing Christian or even endorses the presence of religious language in politics. As we saw earlier, a positive affective tag colors downstream processing by biasing the sampling process from long-term memory in favor of affectively congruent objects, which become the basis for subsequent evaluations. And while subjects'

explicit attitudes (formed by conscious deliberation) towards the candidates may have remained the same in the control and the treatment conditions, their implicit attitudes and their projections of their future political behavior told another story, a story that bolsters the case for integrating Christian language into political messaging.

Discussion

This section has taken a top-down approach to making the case for how Democrats could invoke Christianity as the basis for moral narratives in their political messaging. First, I discussed how narratives shape our understanding of ourselves as moral agents. Democrats who tend to avoid storytelling will consequently struggle to disseminate a moral message. When voters are exposed to moral messages, they make moral judgments that are affected by lightning-quick, subconscious emotional responses to the moral scenario in question. Many political decisions have moral underpinnings, so when voters make political choices, they are often catalyzed by emotion rather than an empirical cost-benefit analysis of policy.

Given that many Democratic politicians are Christians and that many Democratic voters are Christian as well, Democrats could conceivably use Christian language to help them craft moral narratives that resonate with liberal voters' moral matrices. First, I showed that language centering around the central Christian teaching of "love thy neighbor" would interface well with Lakoff's (2002) Nurturant Parent Model of liberal morality, as well as the "approach" sides of the liberal moral foundations proposed by Haidt (2012). Second, I argued that Christian language would assist Democrats in interfacing with more expansive moral matrices like those emphasizing a combination of the other three moral foundations. Specifically, I demonstrated how Christianity might be useful in interfacing with the Sanctity/Degradation foundation.

Finally, I turned to the *John Q. Public* model of political information processing to propose that any mention of Christianity has the potential to positively influence political attitudes at the subconscious level. The implications of this model for my theory are profound: because the attitude change occurs below the threshold of conscious awareness, liberal voters with exposure to Christianity might view a Democrat who uses a Christian appeal more positively even if some of these voters report they would rather religion stay out of politics altogether. This occurs via the process of affect contagion in which the processing of positively affectively tagged conceptual objects leads to the subsequent movement of similarly affectively tagged objects into working memory, where they form the basis of overall political evaluations. Arguably, Albertson's (2011) findings regarding implicit attitude change and Lodge and Taber's (2013) model of affect contagion suggest that simply mentioning Christianity can assist Democrats in improving liberal voters' political attitudes towards their candidacies.

In short, Christian Democrats, if they so choose, have a path forward when it comes to integrating their faith into their political messaging. Extant research in political psychology suggests that the use of Christian appeals may very well be a legitimate electoral tactic for Democratic politicians trying to earn the support of liberal voters.

Christian Appeals in the Speeches of Barack Obama, John Kerry, and Hillary Clinton

This section conducts three case studies of Democratic politicians' political rhetoric in order to explicate the theory from the second section. In these studies, I will examine several speeches for the four core components of my theory: 1) Does the candidate employ a narrative framework that explains their own candidacy or some aspect of their vision for America? 2a) Does the candidate use Christian language? 2b) What are the possible implications for this use as it relates to the *John Q. Public* model of subconscious information processing? 3) Does the candidate

frame their candidacy or their policy stances in moral terms? 4) If so, do they talk about morality as it relates to Christianity?

I will begin by analyzing the oratory of President Barack Obama. I have selected Obama as an “easy” case in order to demonstrate the “logic and mechanisms” of my theory as well as its plausibility (Lipson 2005: 106). Obama is an “easy” case because he presents the absolute best-case scenario for my theory for the following reasons. First, he is unusual in that he is a Democrat who is comfortable with invoking Christian appeals in his public addresses. Second, he believes it is important for liberals to use religious language to frame political issues in moral terms. Third, he acknowledges the power of narrative in people’s lives. Finally, he is electorally successful, having won campaigns at the state, federal, and national level. Given that Obama’s own analysis of liberals’ difficulties with narrative and moral language aligns with my theory, his rhetoric provides an excellent starting point to examine how my theory might function in real political environments.

After conducting the Obama case study, I will analyze the rhetoric of John Kerry, the erstwhile senator and secretary of state who ran an unsuccessful presidential campaign in 2004. I have selected Kerry in order to analyze some of the possible challenges some Christian Democrats may face as they attempt to construct moral narratives grounded in religious language. I will compare Kerry’s rhetoric to that of Obama to show how he falls short of the best-case scenario: while Kerry does use Christian language to construct a narrative about his candidacy, he fails to effectively use this language to frame his policy stances in moral terms. In order to add a common dimension to the comparison with Obama, I analyze the speech Kerry gave on the 39th anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery March at a Black Pentecostal church in Mississippi, which is the same commemorative occasion marked by the second of the two

Obama speeches I examine. Of the many differences between Obama and Kerry, the most salient one, for the purposes of this case study and comparison, is Kerry's Catholicism versus Obama's Protestantism. I argue that even though Kerry drew upon his Catholic background to construct a narrative about his candidacy, this same background may have made it more difficult for him to use religious language to discuss moral issues in 2003 and 2004 due to the tension between Kerry's pro-choice position on abortion and the vehemently anti-abortion stance of the Catholic Church, as well as Catholic teachings concerning deference to the Church's biblical interpretations. Despite these possible external constraints on Kerry's ability to use his faith to address moral issues, Kerry still manages to use Christian language in a way that positions him to benefit from affect contagion.

For the last case study, I will analyze a speech that Hillary Clinton delivered during her 2016 campaign for president of the United States. I will show that despite her reputation as a poor political storyteller, when the occasion demanded it, Clinton's speech in this instance contains all four core elements of my theory. This case is an example of the plausibility of my theory in that it shows how even those Democrats who typically struggle with narrative can effectively use Christian language to frame their policy proposals in moral terms.

Christian Narrative in the Rhetoric of Barack Obama

Even amongst the ranks of American presidents, the depth and breadth of Barack Obama's intellect and his gift for oratory sets him apart from his fellow denizens of the Oval Office. Beginning with his 2004 speech at the Democratic National Convention (DNC), it was clear that Obama was no ordinary state senator. Yet even though there are many aspects of Obama's life that are undoubtedly extraordinary, such as his whirlwind upbringing overseas and his historic election to the Harvard Law Review, Obama shares one important characteristic with millions of

Americans: his Christianity. Historians like John Fea have gone so far as to call Obama “the most explicitly Christian president in American history;” and even before he became president, he made a habit of speaking about his Christian faith in his public addresses (as cited in Smith 2015: 368). After his victory in 2008, Obama continued to speak frequently about his Christianity, especially during times of national sorrow like the aftermath of Sandy Hook and the Mother Emanuel shooting in Charleston, South Carolina (369). In this case study, I use two of Obama’s most famous speeches to demonstrate the general plausibility of my theory as well as its logic and mechanisms (Lipson 2005).

The “Call to Renewal” Speech

Throughout his career of public service, Obama’s rhetoric has demonstrated that he understands the power of moral narratives. In 2006, then Senator Obama delivered the keynote address at the Call to Renewal conference in Washington, D.C., an event sponsored by a progressive faith-based organization called Sojourners. At this event, Obama spoke at length about the relationship between faith and politics. He began by framing his speech as an attempt to alleviate the suspicion between religious and secular America. Democrats, he claimed, are far too willing to cede religious discourse to Republicans out of fear of offending secular voters. By doing so, they fail to appreciate what drives people towards religion in the first place:

This religious tendency is not simply the result of successful marketing by skilled preachers or the draw of popular mega-churches. In fact, it speaks to a hunger that’s deeper than that... Each day, it seems, thousands of Americans are going about their daily rounds... and they’re coming to the realization that something is missing. They are deciding that their work, their possessions, their diversions, their sheer busyness, is not enough. They want a sense of purpose, a narrative arc to their lives (Obama 2006).

In this passage, Obama explicitly recognizes the centrality of narrative to the human condition. Moreover, he asserts that religion provides a narrative arc to the lives of many

Americans. Echoing Somers and Gibson (1995) and Smith (2003), Obama states that the religious narrative arc he conceives of underpins not only people's sense of purpose but also their "values" and their "obligations toward one another" (ibid). Consequently, Obama argues that when Democrats avoid discussing religion, it prevents them from "effectively addressing issues in moral terms" because "if we scrub language of all religious content, we forfeit the imagery and terminology through which millions of Americans understand both their personal morality and social justice" (ibid).

These passages demonstrate an awareness of the advantages available to Democrats who invoke religious appeals that is congruent with my theory. Obama even anticipates Ricci's (2012) analysis about the lack of liberal storytelling when he observes how, "After all, the problems of poverty and racism, the uninsured and the unemployed, are not simply technical problems in search of the perfect ten point plan. They are rooted in both societal indifference and individual callousness — in the imperfections of man" (ibid). Here, Obama, in so many words, takes aim at those liberals who adopt a purely dispassionate and empirical approach to problem solving. These individuals, he suggests, should elevate their rhetoric beyond a ten-point, problem-solution framework¹⁰ and instead situate themselves as public servants grounded by a moral mission.

The question remains, however, whether Obama follows his own advice. Does he use his Call to Renewal speech to tell a moral narrative underpinned by Christianity about his calling to public service that resonates with the Lakoff (2002) and Haidt (2012) models? I suggest that he does. In 2006, Obama was not yet running for president. As such, his Call to Renewal speech did

¹⁰ The campaign website of Andrew Yang, one of the many Democrats running for president in 2020, takes this approach to an extreme. The policy section on his website features over fifty policies, including "Making Taxes Fun" and "NCAA Should Pay Athletes," that Yang explicitly frames in terms of problems and solutions.

not need to offer a great deal of policy proposals or justify his candidacy for some higher office. Nonetheless, early on in the speech, Obama does recount his own faith journey in a way that grounds his public service in Christian morality. Furthermore, on the occasions when he does address specific policy issues, he does so in a way that resonates with how Lakoff (2002) and Haidt (2012) conceive of liberal moral matrices.

Around ten minutes into his speech, Obama begins to talk about his own upbringing and his conversion to Christianity. He explains that growing up, he was skeptical of organized religion, but after working as a community organizer for a group of churches in the South Side of Chicago, he decided to enter the church himself. He describes how “kneeling beneath that cross on the South Side, I felt that I heard God’s spirit beckoning me. I submitted myself to His will, and dedicated myself to discovering His truth” (ibid). This last phrase in particular (“and dedicated myself to discovering His truth”) speaks to Obama’s conception of his faith as an ongoing journey that interacts with and informs his public service. With this story as a backdrop, Obama mentions several policy issues he cares about. First, he turns to gun violence and emphasizes the importance of “keeping guns out of our inner cities” (ibid). But rather than directing his ire at the NRA or some other conservative foe, Obama focuses on the moral ramifications of an individual’s decision to commit gun violence. He says, “when a gang-banger shoots indiscriminately into a crowd because he feels somebody disrespected him, we’ve got a moral problem. There’s a hole in that young man’s heart — a hole that the government alone cannot fix” (ibid).

Here, Obama’s focus on the moral deficits of the shooter, as well as his assertion that government alone cannot fix those deficits, frames gun violence in a way that resonates with liberal morality. Recall one of the foundational metaphors of Nurturant Parent Morality: “People

Needing Help are Children Needing Nurturance” (Lakoff 2002: 118). In Obama’s opinion, someone who shoots into a crowd needs help, and not just any sort of help. Obama’s image of a hole in the heart of the shooter speaks to his belief that a violent person needs spiritual help *that the secular government cannot provide*. Instead, Obama may have meant to suggest that if only the shooter had been spiritually nurtured by a community of faith, perhaps a Christian community like the one Obama himself participated in before his political career, the shooter would have ended up on a more peaceful path. Therefore, the moral issue at stake here, according to Obama, is Care in Care/Harm, and not just care for the victims of violence, but care for the perpetrators. In the context of Obama’s speech, it is clear that this particular conception of care stems from his Christian faith and the moral values he believes this faith entails.

The Selma 50th Anniversary Speech

In 2015, Obama spoke at the 50th anniversary of the Bloody Sunday March in Selma, Alabama, an event in which civil rights demonstrators crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge only to be beaten violently back by local police. Obama’s rhetoric in this speech once again demonstrates the basic plausibility of my theory: Democrats can use moral narratives grounded in Christianity to appeal to liberal voters’ moral matrices. In this speech, Obama recounts the actions of civil rights activists and change-makers throughout American history and describes them as followers of a divinely inspired path laid out by scripture. He does so in the following passage in which he says, “The march on Selma was part of a broader campaign that spanned generations; the leaders that day part of a long line of heroes...they did as scripture instructed: ‘Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer’¹¹” (Obama 2015). With these words, Obama casts the history of American progress with regards to social justice as essentially

¹¹Romans 12:12

a Christian endeavor. While he does not claim that progressive change is the exclusive domain of Christians (or indeed of religious people as a whole, a point which he emphasizes in his Call to Renewal speech), he clearly indicates that progressive social change goes hand in hand with a “moral imagination” inherent in Christian principles (ibid).

In the middle of his speech, Obama turns to discussing modern-day policy issues, including criminal justice reform and economic inequality. If we as a society can exercise the moral imagination of the Selma marchers, he says, we can “we can make sure our criminal justice system serves all and not just some,” “roll back poverty and the roadblocks to opportunity,” and “we can make sure every child gets an education suitable to this new century” (ibid). In light of what Obama says before this, these policy proposals become tethered together by the common thread of American improvement stemming from a moral, Christian imagination.

For Obama, the question of who, exactly, does the improving is easily answered: “Selma shows us that America is not the project of any one person. Because the single-most powerful word in our democracy is the word ‘We’” (ibid). He goes on to list a number of individuals and groups who are noteworthy in their efforts to better America. This conception of improvement as a moral imperative driven by a national community is essentially a nurturant one. If we return to the four foundational metaphors of the Nurturant Parent Model, we see that the notion of “we” is central to liberal morality. For reference, the four-part conceptual metaphor that outlines the moral responsibilities of parents and governments is as follows: “(1) The Community is a Family. (2) Moral Agents are Nurturing Parents. (3) People Needing Help are Children Needing Nurturance. (4). Moral Action is Nurturance” (Lakoff 2002: 154). In this model, moral action is a communal activity. A family, or a community, acts together to nurture its children, or people in need. Moreover, people in this community “derive” meaning and purpose from these moments of

“mutual interaction and care” (108). For example, the meaning Obama derives from moral nurturance is the meaning of America itself, an America that is a “beacon of opportunity” in which “loving this country requires...the willingness to speak out for what is right” (Obama 2015).

Obama ends his speech with an espousal of American exceptionalism rooted in Christianity that is worth quoting in full.

When it feels the road is too hard, when the torch we've been passed feels too heavy, we will remember these early travelers, and draw strength from their example, and hold firmly the words of the prophet Isaiah: “Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on [the] wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not be faint.”

We honor those who walked so we could run. We must run so our children soar. And we will not grow weary. For we believe in the power of an awesome God, and we believe in this country's sacred promise. May He bless those warriors of justice no longer with us, and bless the United States of America. Thank you, everybody (ibid).

In this conclusion, Obama returns to a Christian moral narrative in order to recap the two primary themes of his speech. Both of these themes pertain to Haidt's (2012) moral foundation of Sanctity/Degradation. The first theme deals with the sacred character of activism throughout American history. The second theme pertains to the sacred properties of American exceptionalism. The first paragraph in the quote above corresponds to the first theme. Here, Obama once again characterizes the struggle of American change-makers and activists as divinely inspired by linking their tribulations to scriptural axioms. He suggests that perseverance and hope in the face of difficulties can be understood as sacred Christian endeavors. The quest for freedom and social justice transcends the mundane. In this framework, those who stand in the way of freedom are standing in the way of God and degrading scripture itself. In the second paragraph, in which he asks God to bless the United States of America, Obama links American exceptionalism to the divine when he refers to “the sacred promise” of America (ibid). America

is exceptional because it is sacred, and it is sacred because it is exceptional, he implies. Either way, the American polity and all it entails is something inherently sacred because it is connected to God.

These rhetorical moves have far-reaching implications. For example, they allow Obama to implicitly suggest that anyone who disagrees with his conception of America and the evolution of American freedom would actually pit themselves against God as well as Obama himself. Questions of policy, in this framework, transcend empiricism and become questions of advancing America along a godly path of moral justice. My theory suggests that this sort of rhetoric potentially has powerful psychological effects on voters. It provides them with a story that deals with morality and consequently asks them to make moral judgments regarding where America is now and where it is heading. The affect inherent in these decision-making processes may improve political attitudes and galvanize behaviors that benefit Democratic politicians. With regards to Albertson's (2011) findings that the mere mention of Christianity improves political attitudes towards Democratic politicians amongst subjects with a Christian background, while it is certainly a fool's errand to attribute Obama's electoral successes to any one particular factor, the fact remains that he was a Democrat who often spoke about his Christianity and never lost an election after the year 2000. At the very least, the findings of Albertson (2011) and Taber and Lodge (2013) suggests that mentions of Christianity are a) positively affectively tagged and b) processed so quickly so as to positively influence political attitudes regardless of the contents of liberal voters' preexisting conscious opinion of a candidate.

As a gifted orator who appreciates the power of moral narratives, Obama has no difficulty weaving religious appeals into his political rhetoric. By addressing policy within a moral, Christian framework, Obama's messages have the potential to resonate with liberal voters' moral

matrices. When liberal voters evaluate his subsequent political actions, his policies and the cognitive concept of Obama himself as a public official have already become associated with positive affective tags that arose over the course of their moral judgments. Policies with positive affective tags that are associated with Obama instantly influence voters' decision-making processes via affect contagion, in which processing a stimulus associated with positive affect leads to similarly tagged considerations moving into working memory, where they form the basis for an evaluation of a candidate that is more positive than it would have been otherwise, without the Christian appeal (Lodge and Taber 2013). Essentially, Obama's synthesis of moral narrative and Christianity allows him to most effectively take advantage of voters' political processing systems as articulated by the *John Q. Public* model.

Catholic Constraints on the Religious Rhetoric of John Kerry

Not every Democrat is able to use religious appeals as effectively as Obama. When John Kerry won the Democratic presidential nomination in 2004, he began to talk publically about his Catholic faith more frequently than he had during the primaries (Weiss 2010: 47). This strategy may have seemed necessary to Kerry and his advisors given that his Republican opponent, President George W. Bush, was a devout Christian who regularly spoke about his faith and the influence it had on his politics¹² (Smith 2006: 366). One of the earlier examples of Kerry's new strategy is a speech he gave in Jackson, Mississippi, to a black Pentecostal church in March 2004. In this speech, Kerry effectively uses Christian language to construct a narrative about his candidacy. However, he does not use Christianity to frame his policy proposals in moral terms. I

¹² One of Bush's most famous electoral moments occurred during the 2000 presidential debates when he stated that Christ was his favorite philosopher because "he changed my heart" (as cited in Smith 2006). Moreover, immediately after Bush was inaugurated, he declared the subsequent Sunday a national day of prayer, as he believed he needed the prayers of the public in order to succeed in the presidency (ibid).

posit that this absence of a moral framework can be attributed to Kerry's desire to avoid public conflicts over moral issues with the hierarchy of the Catholic Church.

Kerry grew up Catholic in Boston, Massachusetts. Despite his last name and his hometown, Kerry does not have Irish roots. His grandparents were actually European Jews who converted to Catholicism upon immigrating to the United States (Kranish 2003). According to Kerry's recent biography, *Every Day is Extra*, his faith faltered after he returned home from Vietnam, but after a time of serious reflection, he eventually reconciled with his Catholicism as a senator (as cited in Sullivan 2018). This reconciliation did not lead to Kerry changing his position on abortion, a practice opposed by the Catholic Church. On the contrary, Kerry remained one of the most pro-choice politicians in the Senate (FitzGerald 2017).

As Weiss (2010) notes, the speech Kerry gave in March 2004 to the Greater Bethlehem Temple Church in Jackson, Mississippi marked a substantial departure from the ways in which Kerry had previously spoken about Christianity on the campaign trail. In the past, Kerry had mostly mentioned religion in the context of distinguishing himself from Bush and the Republicans, both of whom, he claimed, "threw" faith at people "overtly" and "reached too far" with their partnerships with Christian organizations (Interfaith Alliance 2003). In Jackson, however, Kerry wholeheartedly embraced religious rhetoric. It is worth acknowledging that the Greater Bethlehem Temple Church is a black Pentecostal church; as such, Kerry likely attempted to put his best foot forward, so to speak, in terms of his ability to talk about Christianity (Weiss 2010: 47). This factor influenced my selection of this particular address for the case study because it provided Kerry with a clear opportunity to invoke Christian rhetoric without fear of alienating people of other faiths or of no faith at all. Yet even in a scenario where it was appropriate to deliver a no holds barred religious address, Kerry did not use his Christianity to

appeal to his liberal audience's¹³ moral matrices. Instead, he uses scripture to craft a narrative in which faith motivates himself and his supporters. In essence, my analysis of this case will show that while Kerry's rhetoric incorporates the narrative components of my theory but leaves out other central components, specifically moral framings of policy issues, he still stands to benefit from the positive affective tags associated with mentions of Christianity (Albertson 2011).

Kerry, like Obama several years later, addressed his audience on the anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery Civil Rights March. In accordance with the occasion, Kerry begins by recounting how "a courageous flock of God's children set out on Highway 80 to live the words that still call out to the faithful today: 'When you pray, move your feet'" (Kerry 2004). But Kerry quickly switches to a more secular theme. After describing the violence John Lewis and his fellow marchers endured on the bridge, Kerry continues, "We need to remember that it was hope that conquered the despair of the marchers as they looked towards the entrance of Selma" (ibid). He spends a few lines summarizing all the despair he has encountered on the campaign trail before returning to the theme of hope: "But in every corner of this country...there was one sound in America that rings out louder than...despair. It was the sound of hope. Hope that we can bring change to America" (ibid).

When we compare these lines to Obama's Selma anniversary speech, we can ascertain some crucial differences between the two narratives the two men construct. First, Kerry does not fully commit to using Christianity as the primary theme of his speech. Although he attributes the *motives* of the Selma marchers to Christianity, he attributes their *success* to hope, a sentiment that is much more general and secular than faith in God. By contrast, Obama attributes the marchers' success to their adherence to scripture, specifically a passage from Romans that

¹³ Black Protestants are a historically Democratic religious constituency who overwhelmingly voted for Kerry on Election Day (Green et al. 2007: 24).

mentions both hope *and* prayer: “Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer” (Obama 2015). Furthermore, Obama takes an expansive view of faith’s meaning and connection to America as a whole when he characterizes the marchers as “ordinary Americans” with “faith in God – but also faith in America” (Obama 2015). Kerry, however, identifies the more secular qualities of hope and courage as those shared by ordinary Americans that will catalyze change. He muses that hope is “the one sound in America that rings out louder than the pain” and urges his audience “to find just a tiny bit of the courage of those marchers” in order to move forward (Kerry 2004).

When Kerry does return to the religious themes of his speech, he declines to articulate the implications of Christian teachings for public policy. Instead, Kerry once again portrays Christianity as simply as a motivation for vaguely defined political action, presumably in support of his campaign. He says,

We'll be tested to see how much we really remember the words of the scripture, 'What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds?'¹⁴ We need to remember those words so we march forward against a sorry politics where too often words suffice where deeds are demanded (ibid).

In this passage, Kerry undoubtedly succeeds in portraying his candidacy and the work of his supporters as driven by Christianity. He uses the theme of marching with faith to tell a story about his candidacy that situates it within a Christian framework. However, Kerry does not effectively use these references to Christianity to layer moral elements into his speech. While he does list several of his policy goals, such as alleviating economic inequality and reducing health care costs, he prefaces them with an opaque faith-based exhortation, “We're marching with faith

¹⁴ James 2:14

- and determination that together we've come too far not to mean what we say and say what we mean" (ibid). What this line means is anyone's guess, but it certainly represents a missed opportunity to speak clearly about the moral implications of faith and how that influences Kerry's public policy; while Kerry's speech does include a narrative that explains his candidacy and vision for America using Christian language, this narrative does not use a Christian moral framework to justify his policy proposals.

One difference in particular between Kerry and Obama may have contributed to the absence of moral language in Kerry's address. As discussed above, Kerry, unlike Obama, is Catholic. As such, Kerry may have felt constrained in his ability to speak about morality from a faith-based perspective due to his unwillingness to invite hostility from members of the Catholic hierarchy. Throughout the election, Kerry frequently fended off a barrage of criticism from a variety of powerful Catholic clergy due to his staunch pro-choice policy positions. For example, then Archbishop Raymond Burke of St. Louis announced that Kerry would be barred from taking communion at any church in his diocese (Sullivan 2018). Another clergyman, Archbishop Charles Chaput, of Denver, Colorado, went even further in his criticism when he suggested in a New York Times interview that anyone who voted for Kerry would be "participating in evil" and should thus go to confession before they receive communion (Kirkpatrick and Goodstein 2004). In many instances, Kerry responded to these critiques by emphasizing the separation between church and state or by highlighting his "obligation" to represent all Americans, regardless of faith, and adhere to the Constitution (Weiss 2010: 46, Goodstein 2004). It is possible that Kerry avoided speaking about moral issues from a Catholic perspective because his public position on abortion that defied the Catholic Church at best earned him negative press and at worst delegitimized him as a religious spokesperson on moral issues in the eyes of Catholic voters.

The ripostes Kerry exchanged with the Catholic Church in the campaign speak to why Democrats of particular Christian denominations may determine that the risks of using their faith as a foundation for moral narratives outweighs the potential rewards. To examine this through the lens of Lodge and Taber's (2013) *John Q. Public* model, it is possible that the bad press Kerry received for his abortion position resulted in the association of his candidacy with negative affective tags such that when voters thought of Kerry, their evaluation of him was immediately preceded by a flash of negative affect. While this scenario is purely hypothetical, it is worth noting the possibility of a similar occurrence with regards to the Authority/Subversion moral foundation. For American Catholics who feel a great deal of respect and deference to the Catholic hierarchy, Kerry's public spats with various archbishops may have activated the "withdraw" side, Subversion, of the model. As a result, voters may have viewed Kerry as immoral due to the threat he posed against a cherished institution and subconsciously assigned him a correspondingly negative affective tag.

An additional factor that may have allowed Obama to more freely tie his faith to moral issues than Kerry is the highly structured relationship between Catholic clergy and laypeople. According to the 2016 edition of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, "to the Church belongs the right always and everywhere to announce moral principles" (Ratzinger 2016: 492). Furthermore, the faithful "have the duty of observing the constitutions and decrees conveyed by the legitimate authority of the Church" (ibid). The obedience required of Catholic laypeople has long been a crucial difference between the Catholic and Protestant confessions. This difference is especially salient in the United States, where early evangelicals in the 18th and 19th centuries held anti-clerical and anti-traditionalist attitudes that stemmed in part from their struggle against Catholicism (Fitzgerald 2016: 29, Noll 2002: 379). These particular characteristics of

Protestantism in the United States potentially make it easier for Protestant politicians like Obama to offer their own interpretation of scripture as part of a moral argument for a policy proposal. Noll (2002) emphasizes how the democratic nature of early American Christianity manifested itself in an adherence to literal interpretation of scripture. According to Noll (2002), “stripping away the dross of the past enabled present-day readers to grasp what scripture really meant. What scripture really meant was exactly what it said” (Noll 2002: 381). This stands in stark contrast to Catholic dogma regarding scriptural interpretation that asserts that the tradition of the Catholic Church must be taken into account in any biblical exegesis (*Dei Verbum*).

This is all to say that non-Catholic Christian Democrats are unlikely to face such a debilitating level of ecumenical pushback against any particular scriptural interpretation they choose to offer on the campaign trail. As such, they may find it less hazardous to use biblical language as the foundation for moral narratives in terms of risking potential public spats with religious officials on the opposite side of a particular policy issue. However, even though Kerry may have avoided linking his faith to specific moral issues, he had no difficulty fitting Christian language into a narrative explaining his candidacy. Given that the mere mention of a candidate’s Christianity may positively influence liberal voters’ political attitudes via affect contagion,¹⁵ this case shows that even Christian Democrats who do not use religious rhetoric in complete congruence with my theory due to external constraints may nonetheless accrue electoral benefits from talking about their faith on the campaign trail (Albertson 2011).

An Absence of Narrative in the Rhetoric of Hillary Clinton

Former First Lady, senator, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has been widely criticized for her lack of a coherent narrative throughout her 2016 presidential campaign. For example,

¹⁵ See page 60.

Mike McCurry, the former press secretary for the Clinton White House, recently disparaged Clinton's messaging in 2016 when he asked an audience, "What was Clinton's brand?...Love trumps hate? Stronger together? Fighting for us? I'm with her? It never got to a point where she could frame an argument about the future" (Johnston 2017). Ricci (2016) offers a similar critique in the postscript of *Politics Without Stories* when he states, "Hillary Clinton projected no narrative about America's current situation. She did not tell a tale about where the country was, how it got there, and how, if necessary, life in America could be improved" (Ricci 2016: 209). And with regards to religion, Clinton mentioned her faith only in passing in her many of her most important public addresses, such as her speech as the presumptive Democratic nominee and her acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention in July (Smith 2015).

I do not necessarily disagree with these public figures and scholars. However, the purpose of this case study is not to add to the chorus of Clinton's rhetorical critics. On the contrary, I want to examine Clinton's rhetoric in the most favorable context possible in order to ascertain how Clinton uses Christian language and moral frameworks in a political situation that arguably calls for a different kind of message than an everyday stump speech. As such, I have selected for analysis the speech that Clinton gave in July 2016 to the African Methodist Episcopal Church's general conference in Philadelphia. Just like in the Kerry case study, because the black church is a bastion of Democratic support, this conference provided Clinton with a liberal and religious audience and setting that demanded engagement with Christian language. Moreover, Clinton is a Methodist herself, meaning that she likely felt more comfortable invoking her faith in front of this audience than she may have otherwise. I argue that while Clinton does successfully use Christian language to frame her policy proposals in moral terms, she does not integrate them into a coherent narrative explaining who she is, why she is running, or what her vision for America is.

Ultimately, this case study demonstrates that even Democrats who are not adept at using narrative in their speeches can still target voters' moral frameworks simply by integrating Christian language into their public addresses.

Before turning to heart of the case study, it is helpful to situate this speech in the context of Clinton's faith background. Clinton is a devout Methodist who has written about how her faith has shaped her outlook on public service. In her 2004 memoir *Living History*, Clinton recounts how her "active involvement in the First United Methodist Church of Park Ridge opened my eyes and ears to the needs of others and helped instill a sense of social responsibility rooted in my faith" (Clinton 2004: 21). She goes on to describe her deep appreciation of John Wesley's teaching, "God's love is expressed through good works" (22). She concludes, "I took Wesley's admonition to heart" and explains how "prayer became a source of solace and guidance for me even as a child" (22).

In light of Clinton's own writing about her faith, it is reasonable to assume she felt relatively comfortable invoking Christian language in front of a liberal religious audience. Indeed, this comfort is evident in the very first moments of her speech. After thanking the church officials for welcoming her to the conference, Clinton immediately cites scripture when she says, "You seek to meet what the Book of Micah¹⁶ tells us are the Lord's requirements for each of us: 'To do justice, love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God'" (Clinton 2016). Soon after, Clinton references her own Methodist community as she reflects on the importance of the AME Church to black communities across the country (Clinton 2016). These two early references to scripture and her status as a co-religionist theoretically position Clinton to benefit from voters' subconscious information processing. When voters process Clinton's mentions of her own

¹⁶ Micah 6:8.

Christianity, the work of Albertson (2011) suggests that their subsequent attitudes towards her candidacy may improve. Even if some members of the audience might articulate otherwise negative sentiments about Clinton, the speed of hot cognition preempts these kinds of conscious counterarguments. Moreover, Lodge and Taber's (2013) proposal of affect contagion suggests that affectively related concepts are more likely to move into working memory, where they form the basis for subsequent evaluations (Lodge and Taber 2013). This means that, theoretically, when liberal voters in Clinton's audience associate positive affect with her mentions of Christianity, when they continue to think about Clinton, they will be more likely to recall other positive information about her. In turn, this makes it more likely that their ultimate evaluation of her candidacy will be more positive than it would have been otherwise (if she did not use Christian rhetoric).

After introducing herself as a fellow Methodist, Clinton quickly pivots to the main topic of her speech: criminal justice reform and the fraught relationship between police and people of color in America.¹⁷ Clinton addresses these incidents through the prism of "stronger together," one of the central themes of her campaign. She discusses the lack of trust between people of color and police and says, "With so little common ground, it can feel impossible to have the conversations we need to have, to begin fixing what's broken... No one has all the answers. We need to find them together. Indeed, that is the only way we can find them" (ibid). She suggests that finding answers together is not a mere political platitude. Rather, she emphasizes that "listening to each other" is actually required by scripture and quotes the Proverbs 2:2 instruction to 'incline our ears to wisdom and apply our hearts to understanding'" (ibid).

¹⁷ The week of her speech, police killed two black men in Baton Rouge and St. Paul, and in Dallas, a sniper killed several police officers monitoring a protest of these very killings. .

These scriptural elements of Clinton's speech do not comprise a narrative about her candidacy. Instead of proposing a vision of an American's place in the world or locating Americans' lives within a broader moral order, Clinton instead offers rhetoric that is more akin to an argument in favor of a particular problem solving method (Smith 2003, Bruner 1996). Clinton describes herself as someone who offers a simple scriptural remedy, listening to each other, for repairing the relationship between police and people of color in America. She repeats the phrase, "we need to listen" throughout her speech as a way to emphasize the importance of listening to the voices of communities of color as they struggle with racial discrimination and police violence (ibid). From the prism of the Nurturant Parent Model, this exhortation would resonate with liberal moral matrices. In Lakoff's (2002) first description of the model, he states that "if the parents' authority is to be legitimate," "open, two-way, mutually respectful communication is crucial" (Lakoff 2002: 109). In her speech, Clinton hammers home the importance of exactly this type of communication when she states, "White Americans need to do a better job of listening when African Americans talk" (Clinton 2016). Towards the end of her speech, Clinton continues to emphasize the importance of "two-way, mutually respectful communication" when she states, "We can come together...not separated into factions or sides; not shouting over each other" (Lakoff: 2002, Clinton 2016).

However, Clinton does not effectively locate her call for dialogue within a broader narrative context; instead, she simply states, "fierce debates are part of who we are" (ibid). Furthermore, she does not attempt to explain how better dialogue might solve other problems America faces. In this sense, her claims are fairly narrow because they only pertain to solving gun violence. Rather than use narrative to make a sweeping, faith-based moral claim like Obama, Clinton limits her proposal to one particular corner of American politics. In turn, this limits the

opportunity for her to engage with liberal voters' moral matrices on other issues. Yet even though Clinton does not engage in the same kind of political storytelling that Obama does, the fact that she still successfully uses her Christianity to interface with liberal voters' moral matrices demonstrates the power of Christian appeals. Christian Democrats who draw upon their faith to frame policy issues in moral terms can do so regardless of their comfort with narrative (although as the rhetoric of Obama suggests, using narrative arguably makes Christian appeals more effective). If, as liberals, they tend to avoid storytelling in the public sphere, as Ricci (2016) claims, they can still reference their Christianity to good effect without narrative in order to activate liberal voters' emotions in the context of moral judgments as well as catalyzing the process of affect contagion that results in more favorable political attitudes towards their candidacies.

Conclusion

In a recent article in *The Atlantic*, columnist Peter Beinart (2019) notes that several of the 2020 Democratic presidential candidates, such as Senator Elizabeth Warren and Beto O'Rourke, tend to portray religion as a source of division that stands in the way of a unified progressive mission. These same candidates also tend to avoid talking about their faith in their landmark public addresses such as their campaign kickoff speeches (Beinart 2019). This paper attempts to explain why Christian Democrats such as these¹⁸ need not neglect religious appeals. It has amassed a variety of evidence that suggests that invoking Christianity on the campaign trail may have considerable benefits to Democrats as they seek to earn liberal voters' support. To be sure, not every Democrat has the rhetorical ability of Barack Obama, who is a master of crafting Christian moral narratives. While I propose that Obama's Christian appeals are probably the

¹⁸ Senator Warren is Methodist, and O'Rourke is Catholic (Pew 2017).

most effective because they are entirely congruent with my theory, I also analyze how John Kerry and Hillary Clinton may have positively impacted liberal voters' attitudes towards their candidacies via their use of Christian appeals without moral frameworks or coherent narratives. I argue that from a theoretical standpoint, any mention of Christianity at all may help a Christian Democrat electorally. Democrats like Obama who invoke Christianity in accordance to my theory may very well find that discussing their faith opens new rhetorical pathways to them that will allow them to move and motivate their voters.

That, after all, is what politics is all about.

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ⁱ Matt. 25:31-46....for I was hungry, and ye did not give me to eat; I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink; I was a stranger, and ye took me not in; naked, and ye clothed me not; sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not. Then shall they also answer, saying, Lord, when saw we thee hungry, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee? Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not unto one of these least, ye did it not unto me. And these shall go away into eternal punishment: but the righteous into eternal life.