

April 2, 2006
UUFTC, Sonora

The Left Hand of God

We live in difficult times – We are bogged down in seemingly endless occupation of Iraq, with no apparent end in sight; we torture suspects and we suspend civil liberties; we continue to enact tax cuts for wealthy corporations and individuals at the same time that we are gutting social programs to care for the neediest among us; millions of people lack access to adequate health care; despite mounting evidence, we refuse to take steps to decrease our emissions of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, exacerbating global climate change; and we continue our dependence on the earth's finite reserves of fossil fuels. And, underlying these problems is an ethic of materialism that tells us that all we need to be happy is to make lots of money and buy lots of things; an ethic of selfishness and greed that encourages us to look out for ourselves and never mind our neighbor.

An old Chinese curse says: “may you live in interesting times!” Although the times we live in may sometimes appear bleak, there is no doubt that we live in “interesting times.” Dealing with the problems I just enumerated sometimes seems overwhelming, but we are also presented with an opportunity. We have the possibility of building a spiritual movement that would fulfill ancient prophecies by working to bring about a world based on love and peace and kindness rather than on violence and injustice. A tall order, you say? Yes it is! But I'd like to share with you this morning some ideas about how we might go about creating change in these “interesting times” we live in.

Rabbi Michael Lerner is the founder of the Tikkun Community and Tikkun Magazine. (*Tikkun* is a Hebrew word meaning “healing” or “transformation”). He has doctoral degrees in philosophy and clinical psychology, as well as having graduated from seminary and become a rabbi. Lerner has just written a new book called “The Left Hand of God,” in which he discusses the state of our current world – its emphasis on violence, materialism, and selfishness – and how we might go about changing all that.ⁱ

A bit of background. One of Lerner's many roles was to help found the Institute for Labor and Mental Health to study the psychodynamics of American society. Over almost 30 years, researchers with the Institute have conducted interviews with middle-income working people. The question they were seeking to answer was why so many people whose economic interests should lead them to identify with progressive political candidates so often voted instead for candidates from the right. What they found was very interesting. They discovered that many, if not most, of the people they interviewed were concerned about far more than their economic well-being. People talked about wanting “meaning” in their lives, about wanting to have a “spiritual goal,” a “justification for being on the planet.”

The researchers concluded that they were looking at what Lerner terms a “spiritual crisis” in our culture. People are concerned about living in a society where values are eroding, families are increasingly unstable, sexuality is cheapened, and money and selfishness rule everything. And many of the interviewees felt that the only

ones who were addressing these concerns in a public and systematic way were the political right and the religious right.

I believe that we are indeed in the midst of a spiritual crisis, as Lerner suggests. People are hungry for something more than their workaday world and an ethic of consumerism that seems to be their only relief. People are looking for ways to express their awe and wonder at being alive in this miraculous universe. They are looking for meaning, for purpose, for community, for something to live their lives by. And it is little wonder that they turn to religions that they think are going to satisfy this hunger, whether it be Islamic fundamentalism, Zionism, or the Christian right. When they do so, unfortunately, they too often turn to religions that promote and encourage violence and war; an exclusivist view that says we are the only ones with religious truth; and hatred and fear of people who don't believe as they do. In this country, the religious right has wholeheartedly supported preemptive war in the middle east and a corporate culture that advocates more wealth for the wealthy and lets the poorest among us fend for themselves.

How has this come to pass? As Michael Lerner explains, there is no denying a side to religion in the Abrahamic faiths that is based on fear and domination. God is seen as a king or warrior: powerful, combative, jealous, vengeful, and harsh in judgment. This religious path is about creating boundaries and restraints, about protecting humans from their own sinfulness. And God is perceived as being uniquely on the side of a particular group or nation. The world will suddenly be made right when God swoops down and defeats the forces of evil. Greed is one of the consequences of this fear-based world view – there will not be enough to go around, so we must always be suspicious of “the other.” This side of religious tradition is what Lerner calls “the Right Hand of God.” I think we can see that it is very much in the ascendant at the moment – fear prevails, the world around us is seen as dangerous and scary, and we must be always on our guard.

There is another view, however, that has been around just as long – it appears in scripture and religious tradition as well. This is the “Left Hand of God,” and it is based on a very different perception of human nature and a different worldview. It is based on hope and a belief that the best in humanity can be appealed to. That people can bring out the very best in themselves, that they can be loving and caring, generous and peaceful. Biblical religion does not start with fear – God creates the world and proclaims it “good.” Humans are created in the divine image – we are also “good.” That's in the very first chapter of Genesis. The central story of the Jewish Torah, the exodus story, is that of a people who were enslaved but were freed from slavery through divine intervention. It is a message of hope – we can overcome oppression; the world can be transformed.

Let me give an illustration of the difference between the right hand and the left hand in religious tradition. Remember the Story of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis. Abraham has a very rough early life, growing up in the Sumerian city of Ur, in what is now Iraq. He disagreed with his father about the clay idols that his father worshipped and his father kicked him out and turned him over to the ruler, Nimrod, for punishment. Nimrod has him thrown into a fiery furnace, but somehow Abraham escapes. But who can say what traumas he experiences as a result of this treatment by his father, to what extent he is now insensitive to the pain of others?ⁱⁱ

When Abraham is finally blessed with a son, Isaac, by his elderly wife, Sarah, he hears the voice of God telling him to do to his son what was done to him – to offer up Isaac as a burnt offering. Many religious voices see the greatness of Abraham in his willingness to make this ultimate sacrifice because God commands him to. No – Abraham’s greatness is that he doesn’t go through with it. He looks into his son’s eyes, and he hears the true voice of God, the voice that says: “Don’t send your hand onto the youth, and don’t make any blemish.” This voice tells Abraham to “break the pattern of passing on to the next generation the pain and suffering that was done to you.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The voice of cruelty that Abraham had heard was what Lerner calls the Right Hand of God, but it is not, he argues the true voice of God. The real voice of God – the Left Hand of God – is the voice of compassion and justice, the voice that does not demand the sacrifice of the innocent. And it’s striking that the Genesis text uses two different voices here, two different Hebrew names for God. The first is *Elohim*, which is more generic, and could even be translated as “the gods.” The voice that tells Abraham not to lay his hand on the boy is the voice of Jahweh, the God whom Jewish tradition identifies as the transformer and liberator from captivity in Egypt.

A New Testament example of Left Hand thinking appears in the Book of Matthew,^{iv} where Jesus says to the crowd – for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was naked and you clothed me, and so on. And the people say, we don’t remember that; when was it that you did these things? And Jesus replies: Just as you did these things for the least of my brothers and sisters, you did them for me. That is the left hand of God speaking!

So clearly, both voices exist within the Judeo-Christian tradition. There’s no point in denying that the right hand viewpoint appears often throughout the Bible and tradition. The problem is that when the right hand is so powerful, as it is right now, it is hard for people to see anything but this cruel, vindictive, fear-driven religious viewpoint. And this tends to cause progressives to avoid religion – “if that’s what religion is all about, let’s just keep it out of the public discussion altogether.” Meanwhile, the right, of course, is happy to bring religion into the public arena. When no credible vision for deep-seated transformation exists, when fear begins to win out over hope, people are more likely to affiliate with the right, which seems better equipped to deal with a world based on fear. And the left, rather than countering with a vision that invokes the left hand of God – a vision of hope and generosity – instead tries to tinker with kinder, gentler versions of the Right Hand. It tries to say, oh yeah, we are just as tough, but we do it differently, or do it better. People don’t believe that, and it’s no wonder. And to the extent that the left allows fear to dominate the discussion, it is powerless to shift the discourse.

The right believes that the best interests of the world lie in American domination over the global economy. The right believes in using military force to provide cover and protection for American corporate power. Many on the left don’t believe these things, but progressives are afraid that if it were to articulate their vision of a good world and a good society, people wouldn’t buy it. So the left equivocates, and what it doesn’t understand is that people don’t buy that. There’s an arrogance and a dismissal of the voting public in pretending to be something you’re not and hoping that people will vote for you anyway.

Let me give you a very concrete example of this attitude. Just last week, I received this letter from Sen. Hillary Clinton, asking me to contribute money. And why should I contribute? To oppose the administration and to elect more Democrats to Congress. And would someone like to guess how much of this letter is devoted to the invasion and occupation of Iraq and how to extricate ourselves from it? That's right – zero, zip, nada. And this on the issue that most troubles Americans today -- more than 60 percent of Americans perceive the Iraq war as a failure, and 72% of the American troops polled recently think we should be out of Iraq by the end of this year. The letter mentions global warming and energy independence in passing, but it has no program for either. My point is that this letter gives you nothing to be for – it articulates no vision, it makes no reference to positive values, it contains nothing that a person could latch onto and say, “Yes, I believe in this; supporting this vision would give my life meaning and purpose.” It's a cynical position, and it's also basically a self-defeating one.

For those who espouse a politics of hope and a vision of love, there is an inherent problem: achieving a world of love and kindness cannot be done using the tactics of power and domination. The Left Hand of God seeks a world in which winning out over the other is no longer the goal – the goal is of a world in which the humanity of all has been validated, including those whom we see as our “enemies.” But people often see this point of view as “unrealistic,” as soft and weak. The logic of Pharaoh could never understand the logic of Moses; the logic of Rome could never understand the logic of Jesus; and the logic of Bull Connor and George Wallace could never understand the logic of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

So where do we go from here? Well, it seems to me that if the left is ever to regain some power and bring true balance back into American politics, it needs to rethink its aversion to religion and spirituality and it needs to begin to address seriously the spiritual needs and aspirations of the American people. This calls for more than trotting out a few bible verses from time to time and visiting a few African-American churches at election time. It means coming to terms with the spiritual crisis that permeates our culture and finding ways to address people's legitimate need for values they can hold on to, for meaning in their lives.

Michael Lerner suggests one way to do this – by invoking the worldview and values of the Left Hand of God as a way of bringing progressive values back into the public discussion. Although Lerner, a rabbi, uses language of God and religion, this does not mean bringing any particular religion into the public arena. After all, most religious traditions, and humanist ones as well, emphasize values like taking care of the poor, working for peaceful, nonviolent solutions to world conflicts, and taking care of the Earth. We needn't be ashamed of speaking up for these values, fearing that we will be perceived as soft.

One thing Lerner does emphasize, and I want to end with this, is personal responsibility and accountability. The problems can seem overwhelming, and it is easy to give in to despair. I hear so many people say that they can't get involved right now, or that they are waiting for the right leader to come along and they will vote for that person. But if Lerner's analysis is correct -- and I believe it is -- then we can't wait for someone else to come along and create a movement for us. The present crisis isn't going to be solved by either political party, or by politics as usual. Not when candidates need a personal fortune or huge corporate contributions even to run for office. When a climate

of fear rules the public arena. Right now, the people are way ahead of the leaders, in their views on the Iraq War, their views on global warming, their views on the need for social programs to protect our population.

And the people are the ones who have to change things – by building a movement, by building communities based on love, caring, and generosity, by invoking the left hand of God, whether we call it that or not. Right here, in Tuolumne and Calaveras counties, there is a hunger, a need for discussion of a new vision of a world based on hope, not fear; based on love and generosity, not on greed and self-interest. I am proud that so many in this Fellowship work hard to articulate values of peace and caring. I love it that we do that! Together, I believe that we can do more; that we can build a community that lives out a model of generosity and caring, and that we can demonstrate that model to the world around us! These are indeed “interesting times,” and we can begin to address the spiritual crisis that we face by recapturing values that really matter, bringing meaning and purpose to our own lives, and to the lives of those around us.

May it be so! Blessed be! And Amen!

ⁱ Michael Lerner, *the Left Hand of God: Taking Back our Country from the Religious Right*, (San Francisco: Harper) 2006

ⁱⁱ Michael Lerner, *Jewish Renewal: A Path to Healing and Transformation* (New York: Putnam) 1994, pp. 39-51

ⁱⁱⁱ Genesis 22:1-19

^{iv} Matthew 25: 34-40.