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*In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful,
And may Peace and Blessings be upon the Prophet Muhammad*

Open Letter to His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI

*In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful,
Do not contend with people of the Book except in the fairest way
(The Holy Qur'an, al-Ankabut, 29:46).*

Your Holiness,

With regards to your lecture at the University of Regensburg in Germany on September 12th 2006, we thought it appropriate, in the spirit of open exchange, to address your use of a debate between the Emperor Manuel II Paleologus and a "learned Persian" as the starting point for a discourse on the relationship between reason and faith. While we applaud your efforts to oppose the dominance of positivism and materialism in human life, we must point out some errors in the way you mentioned Islam as a counterpoint to the proper use of reason, as well as some mistakes in the assertions you put forward in support of your argument.

There is no Compulsion in Religion

You mention that "according to the experts" the verse which begins, *There is no compulsion in religion* (*al-Baqarah* 2:256) is from the early period when the Prophet "was still powerless and under threat," but this is incorrect. In fact this verse is acknowledged to belong to the period of Quranic revelation corresponding to the political and military ascendance of the young Muslim community. *There is no compulsion in religion* was not a command to Muslims to remain steadfast in the face of the desire of their oppressors to force them to renounce

their faith, but was a reminder to Muslims themselves, once they had attained power, that they could not force another's heart to believe. *There is no compulsion in religion* addresses those in a position of strength, not weakness. The earliest commentaries on the Qur'an (such as that of Al-Tabari) make it clear that some Muslims of Medina wanted to force their children to convert from Judaism or Christianity to Islam, and this

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verse was precisely an answer to them **not** to try to force their children to convert to Islam. Moreover, Muslims are also guided by such verses as *Say: The truth is from your Lord; so whosoever will, let him believe, and whosoever will, let him disbelieve. (al-Kahf 18:29)*; and *Say: O disbelievers! I worship not that which ye worship; Nor worship ye that which I worship. And I shall not worship that which ye worship. Nor will ye worship that which I worship. Unto you your religion, and unto me my religion (al-Kafirun: 109:1-6).*

God's Transcendence

You also say that "for Muslim teaching, God is absolutely transcendent," a simplification which can be misleading. The Quran states, *There is no thing like unto Him (al-Shura 42:11)*, but it also states, *He is the Light of the heavens and the earth (al-Nur 24:35)*; and, *We are closer to him than his jugular vein (Qaf 50:16)*; and, *He is the First, the Last, the Inward, and the Outward (al-Hadid 57:3)*; and, *He is with you wherever you are (al-Hadid 57:4)*; and, *Wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of God (al-Baqarah 2:115)*. Also, let us recall the saying of the Prophet, which states that God says, "When I love him (the worshipper), I am the hearing by which he hears, the sight by which he sees, the hand with which he grasps, and the foot with which he walks." (*Sahih al-Bukhari* no.6502, *Kitab al-Riqaq*)

In the Islamic spiritual, theological, and philosophical tradition, the thinker you mention, Ibn Hazm (d. 1069 CE), is a worthy but very marginal figure, who belonged to the *Zahiri* school of jurisprudence which is followed by no one in the Islamic world today. If one is looking for classical formulations of the doctrine of transcendence, much more important to Muslims are figures such as al-Ghazali (d. 1111 CE) and many others who are far more influential and more representative of Islamic belief than Ibn Hazm.

You quote an argument that because the emperor is "shaped by Greek philosophy" the idea that "God is not pleased by blood" is "self-evident" to him, to which the Muslim teaching on God's Transcendence is put forward as a counterexample. To say that for Muslims "God's Will is not bound up in any of our categories" is also a simplification which may lead to a misunderstanding. God has many Names in Islam, including the Merciful, the Just, the Seeing, the Hearing, the Knowing, the Loving, and the Gentle. Their utter conviction in God's Oneness and that *There is none like unto Him (al-Ikhlās 112:4)* has not led Muslims to deny God's attribution of

these qualities to Himself and to (some of) His creatures, (setting aside for now the notion of "categories", a term which requires much clarification in this context). As this concerns His Will, to conclude that Muslims believe in a capricious God who might or might not command us to evil is to forget that God says in the Quran, *Lo! God enjoins justice and kindness, and giving to kinsfolk, and forbids lewdness and abomination and wickedness. He exhorts you in order that ye may take heed (al-Nahl, 16:90)*. Equally, it is to forget that God says in the Qur'an that *He has prescribed for Himself mercy (al-An'am, 6:12; see also 6:54)*, and that God says in the Qur'an, *My Mercy encompasses everything (al-A'raf 7:156)*. The word for mercy, *rahmah*, can also be translated as love, kindness, and compassion. From this word *rahmah* comes the sacred formula Muslims use daily, *In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate*. Is it not self-evident that spilling innocent blood goes against mercy and compassion?

The Use of Reason

The Islamic tradition is rich in its explorations of the nature of human intelligence and its relation to God's Nature and His Will, including questions of what is self-evident and what is not. However, the dichotomy between "reason" on one hand and "faith" on the other does not exist in precisely the same form in Islamic thought. Rather, Muslims have come to terms with the power and limits of human intelligence in their own way, acknowledging a hierarchy of knowledge of which reason is a crucial part. There are two extremes which the Islamic intellectual tradition has generally managed to avoid: one is to make the analytical mind the ultimate arbiter of truth, and the other is to deny the power of human understanding to address ultimate questions. More importantly, in their most mature and mainstream forms the intellectual explorations of Muslims through the ages have maintained a consonance between the truths of the Quranic revelation and the demands of human intelligence, without sacrificing one for the other. God says, *We shall show them Our signs in the horizons and in themselves until it is clear to them that it is the truth (Fussilat 41:53)*. Reason itself is one among the many signs within us, which God invites us to contemplate, and to contemplate with, as a way of knowing the truth.

What is "Holy War"?

We would like to point out that "holy war" is a term that does not exist in Islamic languages. *Jihad*, it must be

emphasized, means struggle, and specifically struggle in the way of God. This struggle may take many forms, including the use of force. Though a *jihad* may be *sacred* in the sense of being directed towards a sacred ideal, it is not necessarily a "war". Moreover, it is noteworthy that Manuel II Paleologus says that "violence" goes against God's nature, since Christ himself used violence against the money-changers in the temple, and said "Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword..." (Matthew 10:34-36). When God drowned Pharaoh, was He going against His own Nature? Perhaps the emperor meant to say that cruelty, brutality, and aggression are against God's Will, in which case the classical and traditional law of *jihad* in Islam would bear him out completely.

You say that "naturally the emperor knew the instructions, developed later and recorded in the Quran, concerning holy war." However, as we pointed out above concerning *There is no compulsion in religion*, the aforementioned instructions were not later at all. Moreover, the emperor's statements about violent conversion show that he did not know what those instructions are and have always been.

The authoritative and traditional Islamic rules of war can be summarized in the following principles:

- 1) Non-combatants are not permitted or legitimate targets. This was emphasized explicitly time and again by the Prophet, his Companions, and by the learned tradition since then.
- 2) Religious belief alone does not make anyone the object of attack. The original Muslim community was fighting against pagans who had also expelled them from their homes, persecuted, tortured, and murdered them. Thereafter, the Islamic conquests were political in nature.
- 3) Muslims can and should live peacefully with their neighbors. *And if they incline to peace, do thou incline to it; and put thy trust in God (al-Anfal 8:61)*. However, this does not exclude legitimate self-defense and maintenance of sovereignty.

Muslims are just as bound to obey these rules as they are to refrain from theft and adultery. If a religion regulates war and describes circumstances where it is necessary and just, that does not make that religion war-like, anymore than regulating sexuality makes a religion prurient. If some have disregarded a long and well-established tradition in favor of utopian dreams where the

end justifies the means, they have done so of their own accord and without the sanction of God, His Prophet, or the learned tradition. God says in the Holy Qur'an: *Let not hatred of any people seduce you into being unjust. Be just, that is nearer to piety (al-Ma'idah 5:8)*. In this context we must state that the murder on September 17th of an innocent Catholic nun in Somalia – and any other similar acts of wanton individual violence – 'in reaction to' your lecture at the University of Regensburg, is completely un-Islamic, and we totally condemn such acts.

Forced Conversion

The notion that Muslims are commanded to spread their faith "by the sword" or that Islam in fact was largely spread "by the sword" does not hold up to scrutiny. Indeed, as a *political* entity Islam spread partly as a result of conquest, but the greater part of its expansion came as a result of preaching and missionary activity. Islamic teaching did not prescribe that the conquered populations be forced or coerced into converting. Indeed, many of the first areas conquered by the Muslims remained predominantly non-Muslim for centuries. Had Muslims desired to convert all others by force, there would not be a single church or synagogue left anywhere in the Islamic world. The command *There is no compulsion in religion* means now what it meant then. The mere fact of a person being non-Muslim has never been a legitimate *casus belli* in Islamic law or belief. As with the rules of war, history shows that some Muslims have violated Islamic tenets concerning forced conversion and the treatment of other religious communities, but history also shows that these are by far the exception which proves the rule. We emphatically agree that forcing others to believe – if such a thing be truly possible at all – is not pleasing to God and that God is not pleased by blood. Indeed, we believe, and Muslims have always believed, that *Whoso slays a soul not to retaliate for a soul slain, nor for corruption done in the land, it shall be as if he had slain mankind altogether (al-Ma'idah 5:32)*.

Something New?

You mention the emperor's assertion that "anything new" brought by the Prophet was "evil and inhuman, such as his alleged command to spread by the sword the faith he preached." What the emperor failed to realize – aside from the fact (as mentioned above) that no such command has ever existed in Islam – is that the Prophet never claimed to be bringing anything

fundamentally new. God says in the Holy Qur'an, *Naught is said to thee (Muhammad) but what already was said to the Messengers before thee (Fussilat 41:43), and, Say (Muhammad): I am no new thing among the messengers (of God), nor know I what will be done with me or with you. I do but follow that what is Revealed to me, and I am but a plain warner (al-Ahqaf, 46:9).* Thus faith in the One God is not the property of any one religious community. According to Islamic belief, all the true prophets preached the same truth to different peoples at different times. The laws may be different, but the truth is unchanging.

"The Experts"

You refer at one point non-specifically to "the experts" (on Islam) and also actually cite two Catholic scholars by name, Professor (Adel) Theodore Khoury and (Associate Professor) Roger Arnaldez. It suffices here to say that whilst many Muslims consider that there are sympathetic non-Muslims and Catholics who could truly be considered "experts" on Islam, Muslims have not to our knowledge endorsed the "experts" you referred to, or recognized them as representing Muslims or their views. On September 25th 2006 you reiterated your important statement in Cologne on August 20th 2005 that, "Inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue between Christians and Muslims cannot be reduced to an optional extra. It is, in fact, a vital necessity, on which in large measure our future depends." Whilst we fully concur with you, it seems to us that a great part of the object of inter-religious dialogue is to strive to listen to and consider the actual voices of those we are dialoguing with, and not merely those of our own persuasion.

Christianity and Islam

Christianity and Islam are the largest and second largest religions in the world and in history. Christians and Muslims reportedly make up over a third and over a fifth of humanity respectively. Together they make up more than 55% of the world's population, making the relationship between these two religious communities the most important factor in contributing to meaningful peace around the world. As the leader of over a billion Catholics and moral example for many others around the globe, yours is arguably the single most influential voice in continuing to move this relationship forward in the direction of mutual understanding. We share your desire

for frank and sincere dialogue, and recognize its importance in an increasingly interconnected world. Upon this sincere and frank dialogue we hope to continue to build peaceful and friendly relationships based upon mutual respect, justice, and what is common in essence in our shared Abrahamic tradition, particularly 'the two greatest commandments' in Mark 12:29-31 (and, in varying form, in Matthew 22:37-40), that, *the Lord our God is One Lord; / And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy understanding, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. / And the second commandment is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these.*

Muslims thus appreciate the following words from the Second Vatican Council:

The church has also a high regard for the Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has also spoken to humanity. They endeavor to submit themselves without reserve to the hidden decrees of God, just as Abraham submitted himself to God's plan, to whose faith Muslims eagerly link their own. Although not acknowledging him as God, they venerate Jesus as a prophet; his virgin Mother they also honor, and even at times devoutly invoke. Further, they await the day of judgment and the reward of God following the resurrection of the dead. For this reason they highly esteem an upright life and worship God, especially by way of prayer, alms-deeds and fasting. (*Nostra Aetate*, 28 October 1965)

And equally the words of the late Pope John Paul II, for whom many Muslims had great regard and esteem:

We Christians joyfully recognize the religious values we have in common with Islam. Today I would like to repeat what I said to young Muslims some years ago in Casablanca: "We believe in the same God, the one God, the living God, the God who created the world and brings his creatures to their perfection" (*Insegnamenti*, VIII/2, [1985], p. 497, quoted during a general audience on May 5, 1999).

Muslims also appreciated your unprecedented personal expression of sorrow, and your clarification and assurance (on the 17th of September) that your quote does not reflect your own personal opinion, as well as the Cardinal Secretary of State Tarcisio Bertone's affirmation (on the 16th of September) of the conciliar

document *Nostra Aetate*. Finally, Muslims appreciated that (on September 25th) in front of an assembled group of ambassadors from Muslim countries you expressed "total and profound respect for all Muslims." We hope that we will all avoid the mistakes of the past and live together in the future in peace, mutual acceptance and respect.

And all praise belongs to God, and there is neither power nor strength except through God.

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Apostasy and Religious Freedom

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The issue of apostasy under Islamic Law (*shari'ah*), brought recently to public attention in the widely publicized case of the conversion of an Afghan citizen, raises troubling questions regarding freedom of religion and interfaith relations.¹ The Afghan state's prosecution of an Afghan man who converted to Christianity in 1990 while working for a Christian non-governmental organization raises in the mind of many the question of the compatibility of Islam with plural democracy and freedom of religion. Although the state court dropped the case under intense outside pressure, the compatibility issue has not been resolved as the judge invoked insanity as the basis for dismissing the case.²

The case was presented as an example of conflict between Islam and democratic governance, but in many respects the case is rooted in, and influenced by, the forced secularization of Muslim society, and the absence of free debate under authoritarian regimes that currently dominate much of the Muslim world.³

The issue of apostasy, like many other issues stemming from the application of *shari'ah* in modern society, is rooted more in the socio-political conditions of contemporary Muslim societies than in Islamic values and principles. More particularly, it is rooted in the incomplete transition from traditional to modern socio-political organization. It is rooted in the decision of many post-colonial Muslim countries to abandon traditional legal codes informed by Islamic law (*shari'ah*), in favour of European legal codes developed to suit modern European societies. The new laws were enforced by state elites without any public debate, and with little attention for the need to root legal codes in public morality.

Islam is the foundation of moral commitments for the overwhelming majority of Muslims, and is increasingly becoming the source of legitimacy for state power and law. Yet the post-colonial state in Muslim societies has done little to encourage debate in the area of Islamic law. The increased interest in adopting legal codes based in Islamic values, leaves the majority of Muslims with outdated legal codes that were intended for societies with markedly different social and political organizations and cultures.

The apostasy controversy highlights the importance of allowing Islamic reformers more say in public debate about political and legal reforms, and demonstrates the extent to which world powers undercut cultural and religious reforms by backing autocratic regimes that crack down on Muslim reformers in the name of combating political Islam. To legitimize their political rule and enlist the support of religious voices, autocratic rulers often align themselves with traditional religious scholars, who embrace a literalist understanding of *shari'ah* and perpetuate a rigid and anti-reform agenda in Muslim societies.

Traditionalist scholars have long embraced classical positions on apostasy that consider the rejection of Islam as a capital crime, punishable by death. This uncritical embrace is at the heart of the drama that was played in the case of the Afghan convert to Christianity, and which will more likely be repeated until the debate about *shari'ah* reform and its relevance to state and civil law is examined and elaborated by authentic Muslim voices.

Tradition and Traditionalism

At the heart of the apparent conflict between Islamic and democratic traditions is a static and stagnant approach to understanding Islamic law. The conflict stems mainly from a literalist understanding of the revelatory sources, i.e. the Qur'an and Sunnah (the Prophet tradition), and the body of Islamic jurisprudence derived from them through the exercise of juristic reasoning. The latter includes customary traditions (*'urf*) incorporated by jurists into the body of Islamic Law, as well as the various inferential tools used to derive the rules of Islamic jurisprudence from their sources, such as analogy (*qiyas*), public interest (*maslaha mursalah*), and community consensus (*ijma*). With the marginalization of Islamic juristic learning and the restriction of public debate on Islamic Law by the state, and the traditionalist jurists allied with it, a literalist approach of Islamic law has become rampant in many Muslim societies.

Under such climate, the most rigid and literalist interpretations of Islamic sources prevail, while enlightened and reformist views are suppressed and marginalized. The voices of many enlightened contemporary scholars – such as those of Rashid al-Ghanoushi, Hassan al-Turabi, Jawdat Said, and others – who reject the literalist interpretation of the Islamic sources are pushed to the

side, as these individuals have been persecuted for taking critical positions against the authoritarian regimes that rule their societies.

The Qur'an Is Clear on Religious Freedom

There is ample evidence in the Qur'an that individuals should be able to accept or reject a particular faith on the basis of personal conviction, and that no amount of external pressure or compulsion should be permitted: "No compulsion in religion: truth stands out clear from error." (2:256) "If it had been the Lord's will, they would have believed – All who are on earth! Will you then compel mankind, against their will, to believe?" (10:99)

By emphasizing people's right to freely follow their conviction, the Qur'an reiterates a long-standing position, which it traces back to one of the earliest known Prophets, Noah: "He [Noah] said: O my people! See if I have a clear sign from my Lord, and that he has sent mercy unto me, but that the mercy has been obscured from your sight? Shall we compel you to accept it when you are averse to it?" (11:28)

The message of freedom of belief and conviction, and the call to religious tolerance, is reiterated time and again through various Prophets, as it is quite apparent in the message of Prophet Shuaib to his people: "And if there is a party among you that believes in the message with which I have been sent, and a party which does not believe, hold yourselves in patience until Allah does decide between us: for He is the best to decide." When Shuaib's people threatened him with expulsion, he protested strongly, citing his freedom to choose his faith: "The leaders, the arrogant party among his people, said: O Shuaib! We shall certainly drive you out of our city, and those who believe with you, or else you shall have to return to our ways and religion. He said: 'What! Even though we do not wish to do so.'" (7:86-7)

Not only does the Qur'an recognize the individual's right to freedom of conviction, but it also recognizes his/her moral freedom to act on the basis of their conviction: "Say: O my people! Do whatever you may: I will do (my part). But soon will you know on whom an anguish of ignoring shall be visited, and on whom descends an anguish that abide." (39:39-40) "Say: Everyone acts according to his own disposition: But your Lord knows best who it is that is best guided on the way." (17:84)

The principle that the larger community has no right to interfere in one's choices of faith and conviction can be seen, further, in the fact that the Qur'an emphasizes

that the individual is accountable for the moral choices he or she makes in this life to their Creator alone: "O you who believe! Guard your own souls: If you follow (right) guidance, no hurt can come to you from those who stray. The goal of you all is God: It is He that will show you the truth of all that you do." (5:105) "So if they dispute with you, say: I have submitted my whole self to God and so have those who follow me. And say to the People of the Book and to those who are unlearned: Do you (also) submit yourselves? If they do, they are in right guidance. But if they turn back, your duty is to convey the message; and in God's sight are (all) His servants." (3:20)

Indeed, one cannot find in the Qur'an any support for the apostasy (*ridda*) penalty. The Qur'an makes two references to *ridda*: "Nor will they cease fighting you until they turn you back from your faith if they can. And if any of you turn back (commit *ridda*) from their faith and die in that state of unbelief, their works will bear no fruit in this life; and in the hereafter they will be companions of the fire and will abide therein." (2:217) "O you who believe! If any from among you turn back (commits *ridda*) from his/her faith, soon will God produce a people whom He will love as they will love Him – humble with the believers, mighty against the disbelievers, thriving in the way of God, and never afraid of the reproaches of detractors. That is the grace of God, he bestows on whom He please; and God encompasses all and he knows all things." (5:54)

In both cases the Qur'an does not specify any physical punishment here and now, let alone a death penalty. The Qur'an rather warns those who renounce their faith of disgrace and ill-fate. To the contrary, the Qur'an provides direct evidence that *ridda* is not punishable by death: "Those who believe then disbelieve, then believe again, then disbelieve and then increase in their disbelief – God will never forgive them nor guide them to the path." (4:137) Obviously, a death penalty would not permit repeated conversion from and to Islam.

Faulty Reasoning and Selective Reading

Yet despite the Qur'anic emphasis on freedom of conviction and moral autonomy, many classical jurists contend that a person who renounces Islam or converts to another religion commits a crime of *ridda* (apostasy) punishable by death. However, because the Qur'an is unequivocal in supporting religious freedom, classical jurists relied, in advocating death penalty for *ridda* (renouncing Islam), on two *hadiths* (Prophetic statements)

and the precedent of the Muslims fighting against Arab apostates under the leadership of Abu Bakr, the first Caliph. Although the two *hadiths* are reported in Bukhari and are considered authentic, they are both shaky and do not stand to close scrutiny: "Kill whoever changes his religion," and "Three acts permit the taking of a person's life: a soul for a soul, the adultery of a married man, and renouncing religion while severing ties with the community."

Now both *hadith* statements cannot stand as credible evidence because they contravene numerous Qur'anic statements. According to most established juristic schools, a *hadith* can limit the application of a general Qur'anic statement, but can never negate it.⁴ In addition, the *hadiths* even contradict the practices of the Prophet who reportedly pardoned Muslims who committed *ridda*. One well-known example is that of Abdullah bin Sa'd who was pardoned after Osman bin Affan pleaded on his behalf. Ibn Hisham narrated in his *Sirah* that the Prophet pardoned the people of Quraysh after the Muslims entered Makkah victorious in the eighth year of the Islamic calendar. The Prophet excluded few individuals from this general pardon, whom he ordered to be killed if captured, including Abdullah bin Sa'd.

Abdullah was one of the few persons appointed by the Prophet to write the revealed texts. After spending a while with the Muslims in Medina, he renounced Islam and returned to the religion of Quraysh. He was brought to the court of the Prophet by Osman, who appealed for his pardon. He was pardoned even though he was still, as the narration indicates, in a state of *ridda* and was yet to reembrace Islam.⁵ If *ridda* was indeed a *hadd* (a punishable crime), neither would Osman be able to plea for him, nor would the Prophet pardon him in violation of the *shari'ah* law. Therefore, I am inclined to the increasingly popular view among contemporary scholars, that *ridda* does not involve a moral act of conversion, but a military act of rebellion, whose calming justifies the use of force and the return of fire.⁶

Theory of Right

Islamic law (*shari'ah*) is essentially a moral code with few legal pronouncements, and the questions of which precepts are purely moral and which that have legal implications are determined through the theory of right.

The widely accepted theory of right among jurists divides rights into three types.⁷ (1) Rights of God (*Huquq Allah*) – These consist of all obligations that one has to

discharge simply because they are divine commands, even when the human interests or utilities in undertaking them are not apparent, such as prayers, fasting, *hajj*, etc.; (2) Rights shared by God and his servants (*Huquq Allah wa al-'Ibad*) – These include acts that are obligatory because they are demanded by God, but they are also intended to protect the public, such as *hudud* law, *jihad*, *zakat*, etc., and (3) Rights of God's servants (*Huquq al-'Ibad*) – These are rights intended to protect individual interests, such as fulfilling promises, paying back debts, honouring contracts. Still people are accountable for their fulfillment to God.

As it can be seen, the theory of right devised by late classical jurists – around the eighth century of Islam – emphasizes that people are ultimately answerable to God in all their dealings. However, by using the term rights of God to underscore the moral duty of the individual, and his/her accountability before God, classical jurists obscured the fact that rights are invoked to support legal claims and to enforce the interests of the right-holder. Because the Qur'an makes it abundantly clear that obeying the divine revelation does not advance the interests of God, but only those of the human being, the phrase "rights of God" signifies only the moral obligations of the believers towards God, and by no means should they be taken as a justification of legal claims.⁸

It follows that the rights of God which are exclusively personal should be considered as moral obligations for which people are only answerable to God in the life to come. As such accepting or rejecting a specific interpretation or a particular religious doctrine, and observing or neglecting fundamental religious practices, including prayer or *hajj*, should have no legal implications whatever. A legal theory in congruence with the Qur'anic framework should distinguish between moral and legal obligations, and should confine the latter to public law that promotes public interests (constitutional, criminal, etc.) and private law that advances private interests (trade, family, personal, etc.).

Unless the above legal reform is undertaken, there is no way to ensure that *takfir* (charging one with disbelief) and *zandaqa* (charging one with heresy) claims would not become a weapon in the hands of political groups to be used as a means to eliminate rivals and opponents. Indeed there is ample evidence to show that *zandaqa* and *takfir* have been used by the political authorities during the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties to persecute political dissidents.⁹

Reciprocity and Social Peace

The principle of reciprocity, central to all religious and secular ethics, lies at the core of the Islamic concept of justice. The Qur'an is pervaded with injunctions that encourage Muslims to reciprocate good for good and evil for evil.¹⁰ The principle is, similarly, epitomized in the Golden Rule of the Christian faith, and has been given a secular expression in Kant's categorical imperative: "Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law."¹¹

In modern society where people of different faiths live side by side and cooperate under a system of law that recognizes their equal dignity, due attention must be given to the principle of reciprocity as the essence of justice in a multi-religious society. Any attempt by a religious community to place sanctions and apply coercion on its members who choose to convert to another religious group will place a moral obligation on the latter to defend the newcomers who choose to join their faith. Muslims would feel morally obligated to defend the right of a Jew or Christian to freely embrace Islam and would not accept any coercive measure intended to restrict the right of Jews and Christians to convert to Islam. A Christian or a Jew who converts to Islam is no longer a Christian or a Jew but a Muslim, and must be respected as such. By the same token, a Muslim who converts to Christianity is no longer a Muslim but a Christian, and must be respected as such.

Indeed, there are already signs that the calls by radical voices within Muslim societies to revive apostasy laws have provoked calls by others to restrict conversion to Islam by members of their communities. In December 2004, members of the Coptic community in Egypt cried foul when a Coptic woman converted to Islam. Coptic leaders accused Muslims of forcing the woman to accept Islam, and thousands of Christian Copts demonstrated "in various parts of the nation against what they say is the government's failure to protect them against anti-Christian crimes."¹²

Although medieval Christian Europe practised coercion to force reverse conversions to Christianity, modern societies recognize the freedom of religion of all citizens. Muslim scholars have the obligation to reconsider modern reality and reject any attempt to revive historical claims rooted in classical jurisprudence that are clearly at odds with Qur'anic principles and the Islamic spirit, as well as with modern society and international conventions and practices. It would be a tragedy, for both social

peace in Muslim societies and world peace in an increasingly diverse global society, if religious communities were to embrace practices that limit freedom of religion and adopt measures that rely on coercion to maintain the integrity of religious communities.

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¹ Abdul Rahman is an Afghan national who converted to Christianity in 1990 while working as a medical assistant for a Christian non-governmental aid group in Peshawar, Pakistan. In 1993 he moved to Germany, and he later unsuccessfully sought asylum in Belgium before returning to Afghanistan in 2002. Abdul Rahman was divorced by his wife over his conversion to Christianity, and in the ensuing custody battle over the couple's two daughters, she and her family raised the issue of his religion as grounds for denying him custody. In February 2006, after a custody dispute concerning Abdul Rahman's daughters, members of his family reported him to the police. He was arrested after police discovered that he possessed a Bible.

² See "Conversion a thorny issue in Muslim world," *Christian Science Monitor*, March 27, 2006.

³ Ibid.; see also "Kabul Judge Rejects Calls to End Trial of Christian Convert," *New York Times*, March 24, 2006.

⁴ See for example *al-Shatibi, al-Muafaqat* (Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Ma'rifah, n.d.), vol. 3, 15-26.

⁵ Ibn Hisham, *al-Sirah al-Nabawiah* (Cairo: Mustafa Halabi Press, 1955 [1375]), Vol. 2, 409.

⁶ For an elaborate discussion of this point, see Mohamad Hashim Kamali, *Freedom of Expression In Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: Ilmiah Publishers, 1998), 87-106.

⁷ See for instance Al-lz bin Abdul Salam (d. 660AH), *Qawa'id al-Ahkam* (The Basis of Rules), Vol. 1, 113-21; *al-Shatibi*, op. cit., Vol. 2, 318-20.

⁸ The Qur'an repeatedly points out that people's neglect of its commandments has no consequences onto the Divine whatsoever – be it good or evil – but only onto themselves. See for example verses: (2 Baqarah 57), (7 al-A'raf 160), (3 Al-Imran 176-77), and (47 Muhammad 32).

⁹ The execution of Ghaylan al-Dimanshiq by the order of Caliph Abdul Malik bin Marwan, and Ahmed bin Nasir by the order of Caliph al-Wathiq after being accused of heresy are cases in point.

¹⁰ See for example (2:194) and (55:60).

¹¹ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (London: Routledge, 1993), 84.

¹² Aaron Klein, "Christians protest kidnapping, forced conversion. Wife of Coptic priest allegedly taken by Muslim extremists in Egypt," *WorldNetDaily.com*, December 6, 2004. www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=41805 (Accessed October 21, 2006).

The Socialist Decision and the “Politics of Fear”

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Paul Tillich's little known classic *The Socialist Decision* was written in 1932, a turning point that once passed would plunge Europe into social crisis, political division, economic chaos, and finally war. It was a time when the “politics of fear” reached its zenith. Consequently, this theological *cri-de-coeur* from Tillich is worth rereading against the backdrop of the current political atmosphere created by the never-ending “war on terror.” This politics of fear is created when political and civic leaders consistently focus on potentially catastrophic challenges to a people's security, identity, and way of life to rally support for a political agenda that belies conventional political norms and policies. In the US, the politics of fear is communicated through the language of “war on terror,” “axis of evil,” “al-Qaeda terrorist cells,” “culture war,” “illegal aliens,” “bird flu,” “AIDS,” the “homosexual agenda,” and a slew of other “maladies” that threaten to destroy “Americans” and their way of life. (The government's opposition also uses the same tactic, citing “theocratic Republicans,” “fundamentalists,” fascism, and Nazism.) This fear is a necessary ingredient in efforts to rally support for otherwise unthinkable actions, including unsanctioned and unwarranted military invasion, torture, secret prisons, holding prisoners without representation, suspension of due process, domestic spying, censorship of the press, and emboldened executive power.

Legion are the books that have tried to explain the seemingly irrational character of current US politics and foreign policy. Although these books have provided important analyses of the political climate in America, they have largely remained retrospective; that is, the vast majority describe only what happened and why. Missing is any analysis of the underlying moral crisis and, consequently, any proposal on where we ought to go. In this essay, I want to examine the underlying moral crisis with the help of the famed German theologian Paul Tillich, who in 1933 was himself looking for an alternative to the “politics of fear” and the political discourse of his day.

The Socialist Decision: Germany, circa 1933

In late 1932, Paul Tillich, then Dean of the Frankfurt School for Social Research, embarked on a project that

would identify some of the ideological roots of the deep divisions wracking German politics. Tillich saw that the liberal democracy and capitalist economy of the Weimar Republic had resulted in political, economic, and social chaos and fragmentation. While critical of the Republic, he also set out to correct the utopian ideologies promoted by conservative nationalists (the National Socialists) and Marxists.¹ The dichotomous nature of both ideologies, he observed, had resulted in divisive cultural debates rooted in monolithic, “either/or” thinking about nationalism and ethnic solidarity on one hand and a universalism rooted in modern principles of progress on the other.

Tillich argued that the Marxism of the 1920s and 1930s, like the conservative-nationalistic thought, had fallen prey to what might be called “non-prophetic” myths. Marxism, in its attempt to distance itself from bourgeois values, had unwittingly adopted what Tillich called the “bourgeois myth of demand.” This technorationalistic myth of the bourgeoisie obligated individuals, and especially workers, to pursue material interests instead of community interests. In other words, socialists, like capitalists, valued the maximization of production. Lost in this pursuit was the non-rational (not *irrational*) love of family, community, land, and culture. With regret, Tillich concluded that while Marxist socialism had promised the working class a revolution, it had only further perpetuated the atomization and alienation of the individual – the very situation Marxism denounced in liberal-bourgeois society.

Tillich could therefore understand why so many Germans turned to a “myth of origin,” a political theory that recognized the importance of ancestral ties, the relationship of the human being to the soil, and the meaning of a community's cultural heritage. Tillich identified two strains of this myth: a “revolutionary” and a “conservative” myth of origin. Tillich admitted that he was particularly sympathetic to a “revolutionary” myth of origin, such as the one that supported a less extreme variation of German-nationalistic ideology.² Unlike the “conservative” myth of origin, which sought to re-establish old social hierarchies, the “revolutionary” myth of origin rejected medieval feudalism and other traditionally oppressive social constructs. The “revolutionary” myth of origin also renounced modern competition as an inevitable and beneficial outgrowth of human community.

Taking the focus away from the radical individualism of industrial capitalism, the "revolutionary" myth redirected the German people (*Volk*) toward common goals and values. It promised an organic unity between the German people and their land, which provided socio-political rootedness, stability, and harmony.

For Tillich, though, an unchecked myth of origin cannot escape political romanticism, which understands politics as a natural phenomenon that unfolds historically with leaders destined by "Providence" or "the crisis of the times" to rule. Political romanticism inspired Germans to see history as a transcendent force, appointing leaders to combat forces that sought to destroy national identity or disrupt a perceived natural order. Although sympathetic to the revolutionary potential in political romanticism, Tillich realized that the German myth of origin was caught up in a tragic contradiction. On the one hand, it focused on the benefits of maintaining relational community bonds, a tie to the land, and a common understanding of the good. On the other hand, this same myth created a radical dualism between Germans and non-Germans, insiders and outsiders, good and evil. For these reasons, Tillich argued, social injustices would inevitably emerge in times of social crises; for in the call for unity, there was also a latent invitation to discriminate and persecute outsiders. So despite his sympathies for the revolutionary potential of a myth of origin, Tillich concluded that, alone, any myth of origin was too exclusionary to be an acceptable political ethic on its own.

To overcome the problems associated with accepting *either* a myth of demand or a myth of origin, Tillich proposed a socialist principle. This critical principle, he argued, is one that subjects the myth of origin to the controlling myth of demand – but the prophetic rather than bourgeois version of that myth. Following the Jewish prophets' demand for social justice, which had, to some degree, spilled over into liberal-bourgeois rationalism, Tillich held that the "ought" of the demand must exist as a constant limit on a myth of origin. That is, in political decision-making the demand for social justice must always take priority over a myth of origin because the demand for justice and solidarity is unconditional. The function of this prophetic demand, then, is to negate any potential injustice or exclusion based on a myth of origin. In effect, Tillich thought that the prophetic demand continually exposes the blind and unjust nationalism that inevitably results from an unchecked myth of origin.

Writing amidst a growing politics of fear in pre-Nazi Germany, Tillich clearly saw the need for a vision of community rooted in justice and solidarity. It was to be a community empowered by the "blood" and "soil" of the German people, but it was also to be limited by the prophetic myth of demand. Through the interrelationship between the myth of demand and the myth of origin, Tillich hoped that his prophetic socialist principle could check the conservatism of German-nationalistic political thought with the demand of social justice, and limit the techno-rationalism of the 1920s and 1930s Marxist-socialism with a sense of communal rootedness. In short, Tillich's approach was, as Gregory Baum has suggested, a search for a morally acceptable and self-critical nationalism.³

Regrettably, Tillich's book never made it into circulation. It was banned by the National Socialists in early 1933 and the remaining copies were later destroyed in a warehouse fire. By 1934, Tillich had been removed from his university post in Frankfurt, whereupon he fled to the United States, joining a number of his colleagues in New York City.

The Socialist Decision: The USA, circa 2007

To be clear, George W. Bush is not Adolf Hitler, the fall of the Twin Towers and the attack on the Pentagon are not 21st-century versions of the burning of the Reichstag, and Dick Cheney is not Heinrich Himmler. While such comparisons may have a home on radio talk-shows and cable news programs, they do not advance genuine political debate. Demonizing an opponent fosters a fear of the other, a process that effectively removes the moral obligation to respond to the opponent as a human being. Yet, this de-humanizing demagoguery has become all too common in the United States. Regrettably, this is just one indication that what the US of today shares with Tillich's Germany of the 1930s is a politics of fear. In the US, this politics of fear currently supports two wars: on the international front, there is the "war on terror," while on the domestic front, there is the "culture war." Consequently, we can still learn from Tillich's book.

A Conservative Myth of Origin and the "War on Terror"

A conservative myth of origin has long supported the idea of American exceptionalism. As the sociologist Robert Bellah noted in the 1960s, American political values coalesce around what he called "civil religion."⁴ This civil religion is founded upon the idea that "Providence"

destined America to become a great nation and to be a global promoter of "freedom" and "democracy." For instance, Ronald Reagan, in his farewell address in 1989, compared the "evil empire" of the Soviet Union to the United States, a "city on the hill ... [a] tall, proud city build on rocks stronger than oceans, windswept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace; a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity."⁵ Similarly, George W. Bush, in closing his 2003 State of the Union address, invoked a classic civil religion argument:

Americans are a free people, who know that freedom is the right of every person and the future of every nation. The liberty we prize is not America's gift to the world, it is God's gift to humanity. We Americans have faith in ourselves, but not in ourselves alone. We do not know – we do not claim to know all the ways of Providence, yet we can trust in them, placing our confidence in the loving God behind all of life, and all of history.⁶

Theologically, there is no single Christian tradition that grounds American civil religion. Indeed, as a matter of doctrinal orthodoxy, American civil religion operates outside the sphere of recognized, mainstream Christian theological principles. Yet, its narrative of America's exceptional founding and mission in the world not only unites Americans, especially so during a national crisis, it also mobilizes them to political action.

Given this history, it is no surprise that the Bush administration took up the American myth of origin, or civil religion, as the framework of its response to the attacks of September 11th. Just three days after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, President Bush declared from the pulpit of the National Cathedral in Washington, DC, "Our responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil." Similar statements have been the hallmark of presidential speeches over the past five years. Even as public support has begun to slip for the Iraq invasion, as it has in late 2006, Bush continues to make appeals to the "homeland" to mobilize support for his foreign policy. "This government is *going to do whatever it takes* to protect this homeland. We're not going to let their ['jihadist'] excuses stop us from staying on the offence. The best way to protect America is to defeat these killers overseas so we do not have to face them here at home."⁷ Used in this monolithic, uncritical way, the myth of origin justifies any action, even if it violates

accepted standards of human rights, such as the Geneva Conventions, the American Constitution, or the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

For Tillich, though, any military or political response supported primarily by a myth of origin needs to be submitted to the demand for justice. In this regard, the Bush Doctrine of pre-emption and democracy-building via market implementation falls woefully short. Security in both Iraq and Afghanistan remains a long way off. In Iraq, the situation is worsening on a daily basis. Indeed, Hans Blix, the former UN weapons inspector in Iraq, has observed that for Iraqis, the current chaos is worse than life under Saddam Hussein.⁸ Moreover, according to reliable estimates, the war in Iraq has been responsible for some 50,000 civilian deaths, and with a civil war on the immediate horizon, this number should increase substantially.⁹ In fairly crude terms, the Bush doctrine teaches that, if protecting America by doing "what ever it takes" requires the death of more than 50,000 Iraqi civilians, then this is the price of extending God's gift to the world, "freedom." From the perspective outlined in *The Socialist Decision*, a prophetic demand of justice must question the ethical foundations for the invasion of Iraq. Iraqi lives are no less valuable than American lives, which means it is a dehumanizing and unjust political argument that justifies the killing of so many innocent people in the name of a national ideal.

A Conservative Myth of Origin and the "Culture War"

On the domestic front, the "culture war" relies on a conservative myth of origin to polarize differences between conservatives and so-called liberals, who following Tillich's argument emphasize the bourgeois myth of demand to the point of excluding any myth of origin. Since the mid-1980s, and perhaps the late 1960s, there has been a growing division in the US between social conservatives and liberals on issues such as homosexuality, abortion, affirmative action, popular culture, and public education. Prior to 9/11, religious conservatives, such as Dr. James Dobson and Pat Robertson, thought that the greatest threat to America was a liberal-secular elite who were writing the majority of the country's textbooks, running Hollywood, and dictating domestic policy from federal courtrooms. Following Patrick Buchanan's lead at the 1992 Republican convention, conservative leaders declared that the threat to America's traditional values constituted a culture war.¹⁰ This, no doubt, accounts for the grave misstep of Reverends Jerry Falwell and Pat

Robertson on September 13, 2001, when they blamed the 9/11 attacks on the American Civil Liberties Union, as well as American pro-choice advocates, feminists, and homosexuals.

As many commentators noted, George W. Bush's embrace of the culture war was part of a concerted strategy drafted by Karl Rove, the Bush campaign director. The Republicans wanted to galvanize the religious right, which failed to turn out four million of its voters in 2000. In the first 100 days in office, President Bush introduced faith-based social welfare initiatives, supported school prayer policies, and advanced an education voucher system, which diverted federal funds to private, religious schools, while protecting the right of families to home-school their children. In the run-up to the 2004 election, Bush pursued culture war issues even more vigorously, signing a bill banning partial-birth abortions and proposing a constitutional amendment to define marriage exclusively as a heterosexual union, an amendment that had no chance of winning Senate approval. Yet, the message was clear: Bush would continue to wage a domestic culture war against liberal judges, politicians, and popular personalities who promote vulgar forms of culture, suppress religious freedom, and destroy traditional institutions.

Since the 2004 election, some Democrats – including Hilary Clinton – have encouraged the party to “get values.” In other words, Democrats need to reach out and speak to the values of NASCAR dads, exurban families, and religious conservatives. The problem, however, is that when Democrats start using the language of “values,” the right uses its “backlash insurance” and dismisses it as either vacuous political rhetoric or veiled state-run socialism.¹¹ To counter, Democrats would need to mount a sustained argument that the basic ideology behind the free market and consumer culture is inherently biased against moral and religious values, such as solidarity, the dignity of the human person, the common good, and economic justice. Yet, no serious Democratic leader can do this, because America's place in the world requires an integrated market system based on a free market mentality.

Conclusion: A Critical Nationalism

As Tillich argued in 1933, political choice amidst a politics of fear cannot be reduced to a choice between a myth of origin and a bourgeois myth of demand, between a myth that roots its principles in an idealized national identity and a myth that excludes national values in

favour of culturally disembodied demands for progress and equality. For Tillich, a socialist decision was the choice to hold a myth of origin in tension with a myth of demand – the demand for justice. Today, a socialist decision is a choice for a critical American nationalism. This means holding up US policies carried out in the name of a myth of origin to the demands of justice. It means asking about the effects of “democracy,” “freedom,” and even the “free market” on the people of Iraq and Afghanistan. It means questioning the effects of the “culture war” on US education policy, genetic research, and the legal system. Moreover, a critical nationalism means continually questioning leaders who, in the name of the “homeland” or some idealized national value, attempt to silence concerned voices when they raise the issue of justice for all.

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¹ Paul Tillich, *The Socialist Decision*, trans. Franklin Sherman (New York: Harper & Row, 1977; German original 1933).

² Tillich, *Socialist Decision*, 27–29.

³ Gregory Baum, *Nationalism, Religion and Ethics* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 62–83.

⁴ Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 96 (1967): 1–21.

⁵ www.reaganlibrary.com/reagan/speeches/farewell.asp (Accessed October 27, 2006).

⁶ George W. Bush, “State of the Union Address, 2003,” www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/01/20030128-19.html (Accessed October 27, 2006).

⁷ George W. Bush, “President Bush Welcomes President Karzai of Afghanistan to the White House, 26 Sep. 2006,” <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/09/20060926-3.html>. Emphasis mine.

⁸ <http://www.commondreams.org/headlines/04/0406-01.htm> (Accessed October 27, 2006). Blix reiterated this argument again in October 2006, in an interview with the Danish newspaper *Politiken*, <http://politiken.dk/udland/article190305.ece>

⁹ The estimates vary widely. As of October 2006, Iraq Body Count (www.iraqbodycount.org) estimates that roughly 48,000 Iraqi citizens have died as a result of the war. The Brookings Index, which relies on UN numbers and Iraq Body Count, puts the number at 63,000. A Johns Hopkins University research team puts the number at 655,000. For background on these sources, see the BBC report at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/6045112.stm

¹⁰ Patrick Buchanan, “1992 Republican National Convention Speech” (17 August 1992): <http://www.buchanan.org/pa-92-0817-mc.html> (accessed 21 October 2006).

¹¹ See Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Off Center: The Republican Revolution and the Erosion of American Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 12–13.

Religion and the American Left

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The recently formed Network of Spiritual Progressives argues that the liberal democratic-capitalist system under which the United States operates distorts not only the distribution of wealth, power, and prestige/status among Americans, but also the values and spirituality of the nation. In its "Covenant with America" (reprinted in this issue of *The Ecumenist*), the Network argues that the current market system is rooted in a crude utilitarian ethos that promotes materialism, competition, and an excessive individualism. Participation in this system does not leave us spiritually untouched. It distorts our souls. We begin to believe that life really is about accumulating wealth, exercising power over others, and protecting ourselves – and those of us who don't at least act *as if* we do. The Network of Spiritual Progressives seeks to counter the nefarious and insidious effect of the market on our self-understanding – what it calls the "globalization of selfishness" – in order to promote practices, attitudes, and forms of community that are rooted in principles of solidarity, justice, compassion, and ecological sustainability.

The Network of Spiritual Progressives is a multi-faith organization that challenges the "bottom line" in American culture. This "bottom line" holds that the maximization of wealth and power is the foundation of a free people and a democratic society. As a countercultural voice in American political debate, Michael Lerner's Tikkun community (www.tikkun.org) has played a prophetic role in promoting economic, social, and political justice. A Project of the Tikkun Community, the Network is headed by Lerner, along with Harvard theologian Cornel West and Catholic writer Joan Chittister. With over a hundred chapter organizations across the United States, the Network defines itself as a consciousness-raising group, much like those found in the early civil rights and feminist movements. Its three-point agenda is: (1) to redirect the dominant American social values away from those promoted by the large scale corporations, the mainstream political parties, and militarists and toward a genuinely humanitarian orientation; (2) to protest the misappropriation of God and spirituality by American conservatives who use religion to bolster those dominant values in the name of a spiritu-

ally rooted in the option for the poor; and (3) to clear a space in public debate for responsible religious voices in the face of "the many anti-religious and anti-spiritual assumptions and behaviors that have increasingly become part of the liberal culture."¹ This three-point mission statement is defined against the current political climate that has divided America into hostile camps of allegedly secular "liberals" and religious "conservatives." It is the product of a creative encounter between conservative, liberal, and radical political ideas with a non-sectarian religious commitment. It demonstrates that religious people can participate in the public sphere in a manner that promotes rather than restricts democracy, pluralism, and social solidarity.

More Is More: American Utilitarianism

Without using the word, the Network argues that the spiritual foundation of contemporary America has become Utilitarianism. In defending Utilitarianism, the political philosopher Jeremy Bentham argued that, since human nature dictated that every individual sought to maximize his or her pleasure without limit, the only rational public policy would be to pursue the greatest good for the greatest number. This represented a moral advance in at least two ways. It promoted egalitarianism; each individual counted as "one," that is, the state could not count the happiness of the aristocrat as more important than the happiness of the peasant or that of the Catholic as more worthy than that of the Protestant.² Secondly, it focused public policy on the nitty-gritty of everyday life. Modern societies affirm that ordinary daily life is important and reward efforts to increase comfort and limit suffering.³ However, it has been a shallow version of the Utilitarian ethos that has prevailed in the West, and especially the United States, and this is the root of the current spiritual crisis.

In both its deeper and shallower forms, Utilitarianism carried with it certain assumptions that have led to the current social, political, and ecological crisis. First, it promotes materialism. Bentham argued that we could only measure "the greatest good" in material terms. "Money," he wrote, "is the instrument of measuring the quantity of pain or pleasure. Those who are not satisfied with the accuracy of this instrument must find out some other that shall be more accurate, or bid adieu to politics and morals."⁴ This creed is written not only into

our cultural values but into our structures as well. For example, Marilyn Waring demonstrates how the United Nations System of National Accounts (the globally accepted measurement of productive activity in dollar terms or Gross Domestic Product) reduces political debate about "value" to instrumental discussions on how to promote the growth of GDP – whether it promotes human well-being or not.⁵ In effect, Bentham's legacy reduces moral decision-making to a quantifiable, material calculus without regard to non-material "goods" such as dignity of the human person. Second, Utilitarianism promotes individualism. Utilitarianism accepted as fact the anthropological speculation that human nature is defined essentially by our infinite desire to increase our happiness (defined as material well-being) and decrease our pain. This is the definition of classical economic theory of individuals as *homo oeconomicus*. We are never satisfied; more is more. Bentham argues that the fastest way to maximize our wealth is to gain power over other human beings and to turn them into instruments of production for our use. Consequently, the search for wealth alienates us one from another as each attempts to reduce his or her neighbour into an instrument of wealth creation. Bentham concluded, "Hence the intense and universal thirst for power, and the equally prevalent hatred of subjection."⁶

The legacy of a shallow interpretation of Utilitarianism, according to the Network of Spiritual Progressives, is at the heart of the malaise in the United States. Americans are alienated. The Utilitarianism of an earlier age has been institutionalized, most notably in the complex laws defining America as a free market society and in the legal rights granted to corporations as legal "persons." In this context, Americans – like most citizens of the West – have become excessively materialistic, individualistic, and competitive. They have forgotten their true identity as creations in the image and likeness of the one God. They have ceased to recognize their neighbours, strangers, and enemies, who bear this *imago dei*, as brothers and sisters who share a destiny with them.⁷ They have forgotten their dependence on God, their responsibility for one another, and their inseparability from the earth that sustains them. As a result, US political debate in particular has become a bizarre shouting match between two sides, liberal and conservative, neither of whom is prepared to address the deeper and deadlier malaise in American society for fear of losing the next election. Short-term gains have become their priorities.

The Poverty of American Politics

The flattening out of the definition of "the good" promoted by a shallow Utilitarianism has impoverished American politics. Spirituality, which includes time for personal development, loving, compassionate, joyful relations between people, and a healthy connection to the earth, has been dismissed out of hand. On the right, religion is reduced to a chauvinistic club that free-marketers use to bash those who challenge America's alleged moral purity and homogeneity. On the left, liberals relegate religion to the private sphere in order to defend democracy from the threat of theocracy. In the first case, the Network argues, religion is used as a form of authoritarian control. In the second case, there is no room whatsoever left on the national stage for issues of spirituality, whether they advance human happiness and well-being or not. The Network reminds these liberals that the public exercise of religion has not been limited to the New Christian Right and its various campaigns. I could add the example of Martin Luther King Jr., who refused to separate religion and politics and brought specific Christian values (the universal and inalienable human dignity that comes from the fact that we are all God's children), practices (prayer groups, sermons), and slogans ("Free at last" and "We shall overcome") into American public discourse. In its Spiritual Covenant with America, the Network rejects the fundamentalism of the right as well as the "first amendment fundamentalism" of the left.

The protest of the Network of Spiritual Progressives is rooted in a spiritually legitimated American nationalism and the parallels to King's nationalism are clear. Like King, the "imagined community" or assumed audience and horizon of the Network is America. Its Spiritual Covenant with America (see page 19 of this issue) focuses on a number of specifically American issues highlighted by the so-called culture wars that animate current US electoral politics. These include gay marriage, separation of Church and state, universal health insurance, national security, and immigration. At a deeper level, the Network exercises a prophetic nationalism when it calls the nation back to its founding values in a manner reminiscent of King, who placed himself in line with the Hebrew prophets. Finally, the Network positions its own prophetic message not as an "outside" tradition to which Americans must convert but as part of the nation's founding vision to which the people must return. There is a conservative element in this progressive

message. (See Scott Kline's article on Paul Tillich's understanding of the "myth of origins" in this issue of *The Ecumenist*.)

While the Network of Spiritual Progressives insists on a role for religion and spirituality in current political debates, its analysis of American society is not moralizing. It confronts squarely the real cause of America's malaise: the market system with its powerful corporations. Unlike so many others who bring religion to bear on America's social and political problems, the Network does not stop at a lamentation of the breakdown of sexual morality and family values, the use of drugs, the spread of pornography, and moral failings of individuals. It sees the roots of these social illnesses in the very system of which the dominant American culture is so proud. According to the Network, it is not our weaknesses, but our strengths, that lie at the heart of the crisis. It is our adoption of a market system that promotes utilitarianism, materialism, individualism and reckless disregard for the environment that is the problem. The Network's Covenant with America notes that corporations today have great power but no social responsibility. In fact, according to the courts, the only allowable goal for a corporation is the maximization of profits, the maximization of return on shareholder investment. By law, corporations are not allowed to "think green," invest in the community, act out of compassion for the poor, or benefit their employees unless they can demonstrate that these acts lead to increased shareholder value. Originally chartered by the state, corporations now exercise great power to influence public policy, protect their interests, circumvent laws, and reshape the playing field to their advantage.

It is this structural arrangement – this brute fact of wealth and power – that has insidiously led to the deep spiritual malaise in the United States. It has popularized *homo oeconomicus* as the model for human behaviour. Immersed in a commercial society, it has become our second nature. All attempts to remedy the deep suffering in American society – such as those offered by well meaning liberals and conservatives – are destined to fail unless they confront the reality of the market and its cultural and spiritual effects. Consequently, the Network proposes curtailing the power of corporations by returning them to their original status as *instruments* for the production of goods for humans, means rather than ends in themselves (the ultimate consequence of allowing them to be legally defined as "persons"). The Network supports a Social Responsibility Amendment

to the US Constitution that would require corporations to renew their charter once every ten years based on their contribution to the common good. Only a change of this order will address the social, psychological, political, and spiritual suffering that flows from the structural arrangement of the market.

Ironically, this revolutionary proposal for a redefinition of American social and economic life is founded on the putatively "conservative" value of personal responsibility. However, the Network now extends the concept to include taking ownership of the social and environmental consequences of one's actions – even one's corporate actions. It is also expands the concept of the common good to include spiritual, social, and cultural goods and not just material wealth. If corporations want the privilege of doing business, they must provide proof of their contribution to the common good, thus defined, as well as their socially and ecologically responsible behaviour.

Education and Health

How the Network's expanded vision would affect public policy is illustrated by examples from the Covenant itself. First, education would be redefined in order to promote the formation of the whole person, "such that it teaches the values of love, caring, generosity, intellectual curiosity, tolerance, gratitude, awe and wonder at the universe, democratic participation, and environmental responsibility."⁸ This education would provide a humanistic perspective that counters the one-dimensional definition of humans that the market system provides. Instead of preparing students for market success, the stated goal of so much of America's test-obsessed, rote-memorization, learning-outcome-oriented education culture,⁹ progressive education would make children indigestible by the market. Of course, education would still have to give people the skills to earn a living, but a humanistic education would make them too human to be reduced to mere instruments of wealth-creation or consumers of that wealth.

The other example is the reform of the US health care system. The Network seeks to end the market's domination of American health care with its "devil take the hindmost" attitude to the poor. It suggests a "single payer" health care plan (read: universal health care coverage as seen in every other developed country). However, it goes beyond that liberal agenda to demand that the definition of health itself be expanded to include psychological, social, and spiritual elements. It suggests

that the dominant model of health care, Western allopathic medicine, be supplemented by contributions from other cultures; that it address the issue of prevention and public health more seriously (two of the most effective but least profitable forms of health care); and that it address the many levels of reality of the human being rather than reducing the human to the material.

Overall, the Network wants to challenge the "globalization of selfishness" promoted by the spread of the free market economy. It does not provide a set of concrete policies, but rather promotes a new consciousness. The Network analyzes pressing social problems and traces them back to the brutal values inherent in the foundational institutions of our "civilization." More than individual choices and personal failures, this structural sin accounts for the great discontent in a nation where the pursuit of happiness is enshrined in its founding documents.

In response to the reigning Utilitarian assumptions and values, the Network proposes a fuller definition of human happiness and, consequently, radically new options, practices, attitudes, and forms of community. While it is clear where the Covenant parts company with conservative America – it is in part a response to Newt Gingrich's Contract with America – a careful reading of the Covenant demonstrates that the Network of Spiritual Progressives is not simply "the Democratic party at prayer." The Network rejects certain elements of the liberal creed, including its easy recourse to libertarianism when issues of personal responsibility, family, and sexuality are raised. The Covenant challenges both parties, which operate in accordance with the logic of the market and accept its dictates. After all it was Democrat President Bill Clinton who – in concert with a Republican Congress – signed into law the disastrous Welfare Reform Bill, officially known as the "Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996." Consequently, while many members of both the Democrats and Republicans will share some of the Network's values, they will find their parties – as social institutions – challenged by it.

An American Utopia

Clearly, the Covenant with America is utopian. Utopias are not put forward as blueprints – they seek to inspire. The Covenant outlines the dream of a more human, participatory, and compassionate society defined by solidarity rather than competition, humility rather than arrogance, respect for all creation rather than the

spirit of dominion. There is almost no hope that its orientation would be adopted by either of the two major parties, or that, in the unlikely event that it should, it would receive popular support. Of course, the same could be said of the egalitarian orientation of the early civil rights or feminist movements in America when they first started in the late 1950s. As a consciousness-raising movement, the Network of Spiritual Progressives holds itself outside of traditional politics. The distance of the Network from mainstream politics means that it will not exercise direct political influence in the short term, but it gives it the ability to promote its principles without compromise. In this way, the Network lives out the rejection of Utilitarian values that it preaches. As a network of people committed to transcending the dictates of the market society, it also serves as a community of resistance in these days of rampant conformity.

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¹ www.spiritualprogressives.org/nsp-tenets (Accessed October 27, 2006.)

² C.B. Macpherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 25.

³ Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Concord, ON: Anansi, 1991), 103.

⁴ Quoted in Macpherson, *Life and Times*, 25–26.

⁵ *If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990).

⁶ Quoted in Macpherson, *Life and Times*, 26.

⁷ See Michael Lerner, "A Jewish Renewal (Kabbalistic-Mystical-NeoHasidic) Approach to God", www.tikkun.org/rabbi_lerner/god http://www.tikkun.org/rabbi_lerner/god (Accessed November 2, 2006).

⁸ <http://files.tikkun.org/pdf/SpiritualCov2SingleP.pdf> (Accessed October 27, 2006.)

⁹ For a chilling examination of the penetration of market values, culture, symbols, and language in America's public school system, see Jonathan Kozol, *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2005), 89–108.

A Spiritual Covenant with America

From the Network of Spiritual Progressives

A progressive spiritual politics challenges the “old bottom line” in American society which teaches people that their life’s activities will be judged by how much they can advance their own material well-being, power and prestige. Surrounded by an ethos of selfishness generated by the old bottom line, people increasingly treat each other as vehicles to satisfy their personal needs. Instead of seeing other people as embodiments of the sacred, they are viewed instrumentally as “useful” or as “human resources” for the sake of advancing societal goals. Living in a society where people regularly absorb and then act upon this “marketplace rationality” in which “looking out for number one” seems the only rational way to live, many people feel lonely, alienated, and scared even in the midst of friendships and marriages – because they see themselves surrounded by so many people who only seem to care about them to the extent that they can “deliver something.”

What we need, then, is a New Bottom Line, one which judges institutions, corporations, legislation, social practices, health care, our educational and legal systems, and our social policies by how much love and compassion, kindness and generosity, and ethical and ecological sensitivity they inculcate within us, and by how much they nurture our capacity to respond to other human beings as embodiments of the sacred who can and do respond to the universe with gratitude, awe, and wonder at the grandeur of all that is.

This New Bottom Line is the central message of the Network of Spiritual Progressives. It leads us to present policies to our elected officials that are embodied in the Spiritual Covenant with America – an alternative to both Newt Gingrich’s “Contract with America” and the economic visions of American society that have been developed by liberal and progressive think tanks that are trying to help the Democrats out of their dogmatic slumbers.

The Spiritual Covenant with America

1. We will create a society that promotes rather than undermines loving and caring relationships and families. We will challenge the materialism and selfishness (often rooted in the dynamics of the competitive marketplace) that undermine loving relationships and family life.

Every institution or social practice that encourages us to see others as instruments for our own advancement rather than as embodiments of the sacred must be reconceptualized and rebuilt so that it instead maximizes our capacities to be loving and generous and caring. We will challenge cynical attempts to reduce life to self-interest. And we will oppose the cheapening of sexuality that regularly occurs as marketers use sex to sell their products and seek to do so with teens and now pre-teens. Sure, we need full employment, child care, flex time, a coordinated assault on poverty, and many other economic changes; so we support all these elements of the traditional liberal agenda – but our spiritual focus goes beyond the normal liberal list of demands to insist on a fundamental change in the values that our society promotes: our society must be safe for love rather than fostering the qualities in people that make love more difficult to sustain: cynicism, harshness, individualism, self-centeredness, despair about ultimate meaning, insensitivity to the possibility of transformation, and fear.

CONTRAST: LIBERAL AGENDA – Family support is always posed in terms that emphasize economic entitlements, but since everyone knows that family breakdown is not confined to those lacking economic supports, the liberal platform is seen as just using the family issue for its pre-existing agenda rather than actually addressing the fear in people’s lives about the breakdown of loving commitments and the resulting feelings of loneliness. We agree with the supports, but see them as necessary but not sufficient.

CONTRAST: CONSERVATIVE AGENDA – For the conservative ideology, family support often means restricting the rights of gays and lesbians to marry (as though that had anything to do with why families break up), teaching women to be subordinate to men in family life (a strategy that requires women to give up their own natural intelligence and wisdom to “go along” with men, rather than to build partnership relationships based on mutual respect, which have a much stronger foundation and greater prospect of lasting), opposing abortion (but giving little support to the child when it is born), and providing religious communities in which families are embedded and central (a positive aspect of the conservative agenda which has to be emulated by creating progressive

"communities of meaning" but without a right-wing ideology governing them).

2. We will take PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY for ethical behavior by reviving the sacred element in sexuality, shaping a purpose-driven life connected to our highest values, building an inner spiritual life, devoting time and energy to caring for each other as well as to self-development, affirming pleasure and humor and joyfulness and celebration of the grandeur of the universe and the mystery of being, and recognizing that government cannot replace our own efforts to build a spiritually grounded life.

We will be compassionate toward each other, recognizing that each of us is unlikely to be the fullest embodiment of our own highest ideals.

CONTRAST: LIBERAL AGENDA – Liberal politicians rarely articulate any sense of personal responsibility, because they claim that these issues are "personal" and have no role in the public sphere. We agree with them in opposing legislation on these issues, but not in believing that they have no appropriate public place. A movement can foster an "ethos" as well as legislation, and that is exactly what we did do when we fostered the ethos of respect for women, gays and lesbians, and minority groups. Taking personal responsibility is not just a personal issue. It is an issue of creating a form of community that encourages, supports, and rewards people for so doing, and that is absent from the discourse of the liberal world.

CONTRAST: CONSERVATIVE AGENDA – Conservatives talk about taking personal responsibility as their alternative to badly needed social programs, funding for which they continually seek to slash (health, welfare, education, support for the poor and the homeless). They claim to be concerned about poverty, but then say that individuals should take responsibility for eliminating poverty (for example, urging people to take jobs on which they could not even subsist, particularly given inadequate child care) or homelessness (but then they don't actually take homeless people into their homes each night to provide the "personal responsibility" alternative to abandoning the homeless to hunger and the streets of our cities). So when we talk about taking personal responsibility, we do so not to replace government and societal programs, but rather to address areas in

our own personal lives where we could have a huge impact.

3. We will build Social Responsibility into the normal operations of our economic and political Life. The Social Responsibility Amendment (SRA) to the U.S. Constitution that we propose requires corporations to get a new corporate charter once every ten years. Such a charter would only be granted to those corporations that could prove to a jury of ordinary citizens that it had a satisfactory history of social responsibility.

This is one step toward our larger goal of transforming the bottom line in our economy, government, and social institutions. While seeking support and endorsement for the SRA, we will encourage public officials to include a Social Responsibility clause in every contract-awarding process, so that corporations competing for public funds must present a detailed social responsibility report. And private citizens and local community groups and unions can challenge the accuracy of that report to the governmental body deciding on awarding of city, state, and federal contracts over \$100,000.

To make this happen, we will also seek public funding of all state and national elections and instant runoff procedures for counting votes.

CONTRAST: LIBERAL AGENDA – The Liberals continually seek to legislate minor restrictions on corporate avarice and social irresponsibility, and usually fail to get such laws adopted because of the tremendous power of corporations to influence financing for the legislators who must pass these bills. Meanwhile, corporations throw all their weight into opposing each little reform measure. We seek one big reform that would end the need for countless smaller reforms. While the SRA may take several decades to pass, the struggle for it will concentrate attention on the systemic nature of the problem we face.

CONTRAST: CONSERVATIVE AGENDA – Conservatives typically oppose any attempts to put constraints on corporate social irresponsibility because they believe that the best good for all will be achieved if each corporation pursues its own self-interest unrestrained, and then the profits it amasses will "trickle down" to the rest of the population.

4. We will reshape our education system such that it teaches the values of love, caring, generosity,

intellectual curiosity, tolerance, gratitude, awe and wonder at the universe, democratic participation, and environmental responsibility. We will emphasize education for these values without abandoning necessary reading and writing skills – and focus on learning respect, thanksgiving and awe for the wonders of the universe, and celebration of all the goodness that has passed on the cultural and scientific wisdom of the human race.

CONTRAST: LIBERAL AGENDA – Liberals focus on getting better pay for teachers and more money for building schools with lower teacher-student ratios. But they'd be far more effective in getting support for these important demands if they gave more attention to demands about the moral and spiritual content of what is being taught.

CONTRAST: CONSERVATIVE AGENDA – Conservatives correctly criticize the values that are actually being taught in our schools (materialism, competitiveness) but then fail to note that these values reflect the values of the marketplace that conservatives champion. And they propose false solutions whose underlying intent is to dismantle the public school system or at least wildly under-fund it and thereby "prove" that everything "public" must be a failure and that the only good thing is the private sector.

5. We will seek a single payer national health care plan and also broaden the public's understanding of health care. Our physical health cannot be divorced from environmental, social, spiritual, and psychological realities – and the entire medical system has to be reshaped in light of that understanding to focus on prevention, encourage alternative forms of health practice along with traditional Western forms, and insist that because human beings have many levels of reality, health care must reflect that rather than seek to reduce the human to the merely material.

CONTRAST: LIBERAL AGENDA – Liberals seek the gradual addition of benefits for different sectors of the population but leave the whole system in the hands of the profiteers, thus guaranteeing that their proposed changes will be undermined by the insurance companies and drug companies who raise their costs to make huge profits and thus make these health care reforms unreasonably costly. The single payer

plan does not increase but, rather, will decrease the total amount spent on health care by the U.S.

CONTRAST: CONSERVATIVE AGENDA – Conservatives continually place private profit over public need when it comes to health care. They think of health care as something that needs to be earned rather than as a manifestation of the sacred obligation we have to care for each other.

6. We will be stewards of the environment. We will champion voluntary simplicity and ethical consumption while seeking to change the global economy so that it is ordered in rational and sustainable ways.

We will bring spiritual wisdom into daily life to change our addiction to endless consumption and challenge the media and advertising-driven belief that price and number of things we own are the measure of our worth in the world.

CONTRAST: LIBERAL AGENDA – Liberals fight for partial reforms that rarely take into account the systemic and global nature of the problem and rarely note that for every reform they win, there are ten new areas in which environmental damage is intensifying. They have no global plan or willingness to imagine how to recast the global economy so as to make our planet environmentally sustainable. And they avoid any serious discussion of, much less fostering of, an ethos of voluntary simplicity.

CONTRAST: CONSERVATIVE AGENDA – Conservatives cheerlead for policies that actually reduce the amount of land protected from corporate abuse. They put the interests of corporate profit above their responsibility to be stewards of the planet, and often deny the urgency of global warming and other environmental disasters.

7. Foreign policy and homeland security transformation: We will build a safer world and promote a rational approach to immigration through a strategy of non-violence and generosity that eliminates poverty both in the U.S. and in every other country. The well-being of Americans depends on the well-being of every other person on the planet and of the planet itself.

We will support a Global Marshall Plan to use 5 percent of the GDP of the advanced industrial countries societies – each year for the next twenty years – to end

global poverty, hunger, homelessness, inadequate education, and inadequate health care. This will do more for homeland security and military safety than does sinking trillions of dollars into wars and strategies of world domination that can never work and are immoral. Ending poverty both at home and abroad is both an ethical and a security priority.

And we will challenge the globalization of selfishness promoted by Western corporations (and their clones in China, India, and Japan) and promote the spiritual values of solidarity, caring for others, and love as the most effective way to build a sustainable society and achieve "homeland security." Our path to a world of peace must be a path of peace, social justice, sensitivity to cultural differences and to environmental needs, and non-violence. We will maintain an army on our borders and carefully search every container that comes into the country, and redirect the trillions of dollars that would otherwise be spent on the military to ending global poverty and creating adequate education and health care. So, while we support the immediate withdrawal of troops from Iraq and the creation of an international Non-Violent Peacekeeping Force to prevent conflicts from escalating, we do so in the context of a coherent global policy that immediately implements the Global Marshall Plan (not by dumping money into the hands of corrupt governments, but through cooperation with non-governmental organizations committed to human rights, democracy, environmental sustainability, and enhancement and respect for native cultures and traditions).

We seek full rights for all immigrants who have made it to our shores. And we will solve the immigration issue in the only possible way: by making the countries from which immigrants are fleeing much more economically successful. Instead of imagining new methods for repressing the desire that so many immigrants have for a life free from extremes of poverty and political oppression, we will support the Global Marshall Plan in ways that would build the economic infrastructure of the "underdeveloped" world, ensuring that its benefits flow to all people and not just to the economic elites of those countries. We seek a world in which open borders are the norm, and there is no fear that the rich countries are being overrun by immigrants, because their well-being has improved so much in their own countries.

CONTRAST: LIBERAL AGENDA – Still stuck in the militarist assumptions of the past, liberal politicians compete with the conservatives about "who is

most effective" in projecting American power and domination around the world. They are more concerned to prove that they are "tough" than to prove that they actually have policies that address the issues that drive people into wars and terrorism. Similarly, their correct desire to avoid repression of immigrants does not link to a coherent answer to "what can be done to prevent future millions from risking their lives to get across our borders if we create incentives for them to take such risks?"

CONTRAST: CONSERVATIVE AGENDA – Though quick to demand testing of the effectiveness of liberal programs, conservatives have never proved the effectiveness of their strategy of providing security through wars and the domination of other countries. Distorted by their own "arrogance of power," they cannot acknowledge that 5,000 years of warmaking has not worked to bring peace and security but only, century after century, increased the numbers of people killed in wars. Nor can conservatives see that their wars have actually undermined the internal life of America and increased our propensity to rely on violence as a solution to otherwise frustrating problems. They call for more repression of immigrants and of countries that do not follow our rules, but seem unable to acknowledge that such programs do not work.

8. We will seek the separation of Church, State and Science. We will protect our society from fundamentalist attempts to impose a particular religion on everyone, but will not fall into a first-amendment fundamentalism that attempts to keep all spiritual values out of the public sphere.

We will protect science from invasion by the state, religion or corporate priorities, but reject "scientism," the worldview that claims that everything capable of being known or worthy of our attention can be fully described in scientific terms.

CONTRAST: LIBERAL AGENDA – Liberals confuse the separation of Church and State with the separation of spiritual values from the state. They claim to be defending the neutrality of public space, but fail to realize that there is already a religion operating in the public space: the religion of the dollar, of materialism and selfishness, the religion whose highest belief is that all that is real or at least all that can be known is that which can be verified through sense

datum or measured by the principle of exchange (which, for the public realm, usually means money, the one thing most easily validated and measurable). Thus, liberal defense of the first amendment is based on the false assumption that we actually have a neutral public space and that it must be protected from all values.

CONTRAST: CONSERVATIVE AGENDA – Conservatives often seek to privilege Christian values in the public sphere and get lots of support from many Americans who know that when their children come home from school drunk with the disease of “making it” in the larger society (either through good grades to get the best career, or by physical prowess and active domination over others) and “making it in their peer group” (either by conforming to the peer group standards of the group or, increasingly for young girls, by responding to the sexual pressure championed by a growing sector of the media) these children are responding to a public sphere drenched in corrupt values that loving parents want to resist. Using this perfectly legitimate desire for alternative sets of values, the conservatives rush in with a repressive agenda that will do little to solve the social problems, and in addition will seek to eliminate or dramatically weaken the actual functioning of the separation clause of the Bill of Rights.

Neither liberals nor conservatives understand how much the requisites of the marketplace drive “science” in its choice of research topics, so neither has seriously addressed how to protect science from these pressures. And those same pressures exist, though in somewhat different form, in the many religious communities that have become dependent on the support of the wealthy or those who have bought into the assumptions of the marketplace. Too often this has resulted in a clergy more subordinate to the fund-raisers than to their own highest moral and spiritual values.

We seek to change all this.

How Realistic is the Spiritual Covenant with America?

This vision, needless to say, is “unrealistic” in the sense that it does not conform to the assumptions of politicians and pundits in the mainstream mass media. For most politicians, that ends the discussion, because they’ve consistently been unwilling to risk any electoral loss for the sake of some higher good in

which they believe. But that is precisely why so many Americans have come to distrust their Representatives – because if they won’t fight hard for their own beliefs, how can they be counted on to fight for the best interests of American society when the going gets rough?

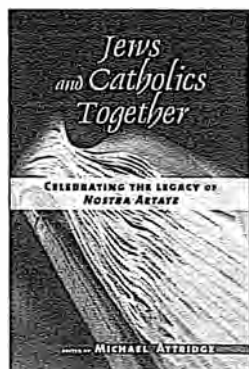
The women’s movement in its early years, the civil rights movement in its early years, and the environmental movement in its early years were all dismissed as “unrealistic” because they too stepped outside the frame of politics as it was then currently understood by the media and the politicians. We are following that same path.

We are a consciousness-raising movement, and so our primary task, like that of the other major movements that have had a lasting impact on American society, is to not compromise what we believe in for the sake of short-term political gain. We must instead advocate for our fullest vision and insist on why it makes the most sense as the path to heal American society.

We encourage people to meet with elected officials every year, but this is only a small part of what we need to do to get our ideas into the public consciousness, and we are sure that you can devise many more imaginative steps to take.

The full version of the Spiritual Covenant and what it implies can be studied in *The Left Hand of God: Taking Back our Country from the Religious Right*, by Rabbi Michael Lerner (Harper San Francisco, 2006).

**For more information or to join our efforts, write to the Network of Spiritual Progressives: NSP@tikkun.org or the Network of Spiritual Progressives
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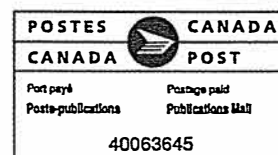
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