

The Left Hand of God: Taking Our Country Back from the Religious Right, by Rabbi Michael Lerner. 2006. Harper San Francisco. Pp. 407. \$24.95

Rabbi Michael Lerner's latest book contains a much needed analysis of America's political and spiritual landscape. The subtitle could just as well have been "Taking our country back from the fear promoting, anti-democratic Republicans and the Spineless Democrats." It could just as well be read as an indictment of the country's educational system which has left the majority of Americans unable to recognize alternatives to a lifestyle of self-indulgent materialism. Although Lerner correctly identifies many of the excesses of our possessive form of individualism as well as the egregious failures in addressing social justice and environmental issues, this is not an angry book. Nor is it partisan in allocating blame. He presents a third pathway that has the potential of freeing both the left and the right of the social pathologies of fear, moral relativism, opportunism, self-centered individualism, and the anti-democratic quest for power. In order to understand this third path, it is necessary to give serious consideration to the vocabulary that separates the Left Hand of God politics from that of the religious right.

Basically, the spiritual qualities he identifies with the Left Hand of God include love, caring compassion, nurturing community relationships and well-being in the here and now. In effect, the God of Lerner is a verb, a spiritual force that comes into being through acts of care and nurturance. The God of the Religious Right is patriarchal, vengeful, judgmental, and ever at war with the forces of evil; and these qualities are reproduced in the consciousness and social policies of those who claim to know God's plan for humankind. Lerner strongly disagrees with this interpretation of God, and with the politics of fear and domination that are now on the ascendancy in society. In order to reach across potential sectarian divides Lerner argues that the qualities of the Left Hand of God are not unique to a specific religion. Rather, they are represented as central to the social gospel of the followers of Jesus, who was rooted in ancient Jewish traditions that are still central to the daily practice of many Jews today. They are also present in other religious traditions such as Buddhism and Islam. By clarifying the distinction between what he calls the "Left Hand of God" and the "Right Hand of God" he is attempting to find common ground for a dialogue rather than perpetuate the friend/enemy approach that is a prominent feature of today's political discourse.

In effect, Lerner hopes to shift the country's political discourse from one that is based on fear, greed, and the quest for power to one that is based on the spiritual qualities that he sees shared by the world's religious traditions. But he is not advocating the kind of politics where God's name is constantly invoked. Rather, Lerner gives concrete expression to the politics of the Left Hand of God in what he calls a "Spiritual Covenant with America." It could not contrast more sharply with Newt Gingrich's "Contract with America." Lerner's eight point covenant includes a reform agenda that ranges from promoting more loving and caring relationships within families, holding corporations socially and environmentally accountable, to promoting stewardship of the environment and a foreign policy based on non-violent relationships and a program of generosity that eliminates poverty world-wide. The Spiritual Covenant with America deserves to be read in full by participants at all levels of government, and by individuals and social activist

groups across the country. To give the covenant a life beyond that of the printed word, Lerner has created the Network of Spiritual Progressives that has local chapters as well as a national organization that brings together leaders of different communities of faith, social and environmental justice activists, for the purpose of changing the direction that corporations, the military establishment, and religious fundamentalists are taking the country.

While Lerner's Spiritual Covenant with America addresses the need for a wide range of social reforms that other social reformers have advocated in the past, he provides insightful guidance for avoiding the strategic mistakes of these past social reformers. Readers may agree with Lerner's criticism of how the environment is being undermined by the progress that corporations are making in addicting Americans to a lifestyle of competitive and acquisitive individualism. Unfortunately, many readers share the same taken-for-granted patterns of thinking that are based on the cultural assumptions that equate change with progress, that represent individuals as originating their own thoughts and that have as their greatest goal the achievement of greater autonomy, and that represent traditions as a source of backwardness. These assumptions continue to give conceptual direction and moral legitimacy to the industrial, consumer-based form of progress. The failure to understand how language carries forward the misconceptions of the past can be seen in how even the most educated segments of society continue to refer to market liberals as conservatives when their primary goal is the further expansion of markets that undermine the cultural and environmental commons. At the same time, people concerned about conserving our democratic institutions, the intergenerationally based mutual support systems that represent alternatives to further dependence upon industrial production and consumption, and who are working to expand on past achievements in the area of social justice are called liberals. Overlooked is that the thinking of these faux conservatives can be traced back to John Locke's justification for the privatizing and monetizing the commons and to Adam Smith's defense of free markets.

Without explicitly challenging the deep cultural assumptions that are reproduced in today's political discourse about economic and individual progress, and that are responsible for the ethnocentric vision of America's future, Lerner introduces a different vocabulary that has its roots in more ancient traditions of human experience. I would like to be optimistic about the potential of market liberals and Christian fundamentalists to begin thinking and speaking in the vocabulary that is essential to promoting Lerner's Spiritual Covenant with America. However, getting people to recognize their own taken-for-granted patterns of thinking, and then to change them (as feminists learned) is a source of uncertainty. There is yet another problem: namely, giving spirituality a more central place in today's political discourse does not guarantee that it will not become yet another source of conflict between those who associate it with nurturing and a social justice agenda that strengthens community and those whose messianic and authoritarian efforts are intended to secure their own eternal salvation.

Lerner's proposals face yet another challenge that has its roots in the public's failure to understand how language reproduces the misconceptions of the past. And in lacking this

basic understanding the public fails to ask for greater accountability in the use of our political vocabulary. The result is that most readers will interpret Lerner's Spiritual Covenant with America as being closely aligned with liberal values. Although Lerner has deep disagreements with many of the past strategies of liberals, they are the group that is most likely to take seriously his reform agenda. History tells us that there are two potential problems with relying upon liberals. One of them may be endemic to liberals who stress their right to arrive at their own conclusions and to pursue their own interests. This tendency is especially evident among university faculty. Even though the evidence of global warming and changes in the chemistry of the oceans is now beyond dispute (and what could be more important to the future of humankind?) most liberal academics continue to pass on to students their specialized fields of knowledge that have little or no relevance to understanding the cultural roots of the ecological crisis. They also continue to pursue their own research interests as though the ecological crises did not exist. Even on moral and social justice issues, these participants in the culture of critical discourse find virtue in endless debates.

Lerner makes a sustained effort to identify a common ground that will appeal to the Right Hand of God fundamentalists who are not totally deaf to the social gospel message of the New Testament. However, the long standing misuse of our main political labels will lead many fundamentalist readers to identify Lerner's progressive reform agenda with the liberalism they hear demonized by extremist talks show hosts and by fundamentalist preachers. What they are unlikely to recognize is that he gives legitimacy to his covenant agenda by drawing upon his own religious traditions, as well as the social gospel traditions of Christians and other religions. In effect, what Lerner is proposing is the intergenerational renewal of the spiritual traditions that contribute to the mutual support and general well-being of community. The generosity toward other cultures, which is also part of his eight point reform agenda for America, requires respecting the traditions of other cultures—particularly those that enable their members to live within the sustaining capacity of their bioregions. Furthermore, Lerner refers explicitly to the need for greater intergenerational connections and responsibility. Given the way Lerner grounds his spiritual covenant in what he identifies as the Left Hand of God traditions, the future of his movement may depend upon a more nuanced and explicit treatment of what needs to be conserved and what needs to be changed—including how many reforms actually build on the social justice achievements of the past.

One of the ironies of the current state of political discourse in America is that while Lerner recognizes the spiritual and social justice achievements of the past, the religious right views the past as the history of the fall into a state of sin. Their priority is the need to prepare for the Second Coming by erasing the past. Their efforts, along with those of the market liberals in the Bush administration, to overturn environmental legislation, to undermine the traditions of separation of church and state, an independent judiciary, and the separation of powers, indicate that they view traditions as impediments to the coming of God's kingdom on earth. For the market liberals, traditions that represented the efforts of earlier generations to achieve social justice are impediments to a free-market economy—and thus must be reversed. The current state of confusion about what our political labels stand for creates an important opportunity for Lerner and his followers. A

more culturally grounded representation of the culturally diverse range of community traditions of moral reciprocity and mutual support that need to be conserved through intergenerational renewal may lead many people who are not working to replace our democracy with a theocracy, but think of themselves as conservatives, to recognize that they can make a contribution to achieving Lerner's vision of what America could become—and that they have a place in his movement.

The Left Hand of God is indeed a remarkable book, one that has the potential to unite diverse groups around a common set of values and reform policies that are especially needed in these times. It is also a courageous book in that it challenges the underlying causes of relativism that keep people from supporting a socially just and ecologically sustainable society—such as secularism, scientism, and the individual quest for a more materialistic lifestyle. As the evidence mounts that the existing political parties are morally bankrupt, and are largely beholden to the corporations that finance their ability to stay in office, it is hoped that a large segment of the public will not only read Lerner's book, but join in supporting his Network of Spiritual Progressives. Its spiritual covenant with America is one that many diverse groups should rely upon as their compass for giving the country a moral direction that is sustainable.

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