After Wojtyla: Thoughts for the Times on Democracy and Faith

written by Christopher Rhoades Dykema | February 25, 2010

THE SPECTACLE of adoration following the death of Karol Wojtyla, also known as Pope John Paul the Second — maudlin and baleful as it was — was also time wasted by the American left. What incremental analysis it fostered came from the ranks of the faithful, not of the irreverent.

Writing in *The New York Times* for April 5, 2005, Catholic historian Thomas Cahill cited Wojtyla's packing the church hierarchy with prelates who shared his retrograde stances on "masturbation, premarital sex, birth control (including condoms used to prevent the spread of AIDS), abortion, divorce, homosexual relations, married priests, female priests and any hint of Marxism."

Cahill's concerns were practical and strategic as well as principled: "It is nearly impossible to find men who subscribe wholeheartedly to this entire catalogue of certitudes; as a result the ranks of the episcopate are filled with mindless sycophants and intellectual incompetents." And he described the consequences: "The situation is dire. Anyone can walk into a Catholic church on a Sunday and see pews, once filled to bursting, now sparsely populated with gray heads."

The following day, the Rev. John Dear, author of *Jesus the Rebel: Bearer of God's Peace and Justice*, and many similar works, wrote on the Common Dreams web site that "While I mourn for John Paul II, I lament that he did not ordain women, support liberation theology, or defend martyred Archbishop Oscar Romero. But I recognize that he was clearly against war, poverty and nuclear weapons. This conviction, I think, holds the key to the future of the church."

Father Dear thinks change in the church is inevitable, that the dramatic and deepening shortage of priests will compel relaxation of the Wojtylite legacy's crude ascetic misogyny. Women, he hopes, will get ordained. Then the compassionate ethos of the Second Vatican Council will once again flourish. He thinks it's a kind of restoration, though — like the Mishiach — it won't come soon. Dear admits we might have to wait " ten years or one hundred . . . for . . . the Catholic community's full embrace of the Gospel of peace, renunciation of the just war theory and renewed adherence to active nonviolence in the tradition of the early Christian martyrs."

This is wishful thinking, and there is no reason to believe change for the better is coming. Sadly, though, some secular progressives still think this kind of thing is more than vacuity, and overlook obvious facts. The habit of talking to liberal and radical Catholics sometimes encourages this — they tend to be such very nice people, and one wants to share their hopes. On the other hand, George W. Bush surely opposes "war, poverty and nuclear weapons," at least in the abstract. Wojtyla and his successor, Ratzinger, would too. But among the presidential and papal perquisites is for empty rhetoric to escape normal scrutiny.

The passing of a major theocratic figure could have served as the time for a full-scale discussion of religion. Materialists could have benefited from an opening to examine whether a politics rooted in religious values and orientations can have strategic value for the defense and advancement of democratic values and institutions in the U.S. In this of course there are two key questions: are there experiences and assumptions about faith that are applicable to progressive politics today? If so, which, if any, should be retained? Which discarded ?

The discussion never happened.

IF NOTHING ELSE, the religious right's role in the 2004 election should dispel any doubt that a politics of faith has the potential to influence power. That potential is too important to leave just to religious folk. But how do we address the political problems faith poses? Do we attack it, because we know better, or accommodate it, without knowing what principled accommodations can be made. Blanket opposition means staring down the huge majority of Americans — an anomaly among people in advanced democracies — who define themselves as religious? Being agnostic toward religion means a fey tolerance toward institutions and practices that lie at the heart of false consciousness. Each has its drawbacks.

Of the various faiths, I want to focus on U.S. Catholicism as particularly problematic for the left. Organized Judaism, despite its abiding interest in Middle East policy and the involvement of prominent and religiously identified Jews in American life, is too marginal in too many parts of the United States to make substantial political difference by itself. So is Islam for the time being, though for different reasons.

Within mainstream Protestantism the religious Left is fairly transparent. It needs no new analysis. Little about it has changed fundamentally in some decades, except that like the Left, it has weakened. And, of course, its broad base, the mainstream Protestant churches, has drastically lost membership.

As for the Protestant evangelical churches and organizations, they are our opponents — except for a few marginal and equivocal outliers like James Wallis and The Sojourners. To be sure, there is a distinction between the evangelical churches and organizations and those masses who move in and out of their sphere of influence. Evangelical commitment is often flighty, a distraction from material realities for desperate people. In this case, progressives can learn to discuss concrete economic and other material issues in more compelling ways that can draw people back to reality. Figuring out how to do that is a worthy project, but a different analysis, and one beyond the scope of this article.

By contrast, making political sense out of contemporary Catholicism is urgent. Its importance is contradictory and complex. Unlike evangelicalism, it is not a straightforward enemy of nearly all that is progressive. In the past liberals and leftists have allied, and fruitfully, with parts of Catholicism. There is a self-identified Catholic left, and for a long time much of the broad left could feel fairly comfortable with Catholicism. That has changed, and the change is permanent. There is no prospect for revitalization of the institutional Catholic church's progressive role.

Moreover, many of the crucial political fissures of the foreseeable future in the United States are ones that increasingly place all orthodox patriarchal monotheism, especially Catholicism, on the side of reaction. A look at Wojtyla and his legacy illuminates why.

THE LATE KAROL WOJTYLA was a commanding figure.

In parts of the left there is a conventionally reassuring view of this man: he suffered from a kind of disconnect. On the one side he supposedly saw issues of war, poverty and injustice as progressives do, but then there was this unfortunate stick-in-the-mud quality when it came to issues of sexuality and gender. So he was a well-meaning man with a blind spot.

To be sure, there was a lot about him to encourage these illusions: his warm exterior, his winning manner, his restless travels to meet the suffering and unfortunate, his seeming openness to all, his carefully cultivated persona, his training and experience as an actor.

Let us be clear. Wojtyla was a brilliant and skillful ideological politician. In the twentieth century, probably only Lenin compares with him. He leaves vulgarians like Hitler and Stalin in the dust. Wojtyla was also an intellectual of some substance. He wrote a doctoral dissertation on the abstruse philosopher Max Scheler, sometimes called "the Catholic Nietzsche." And all the while he was a humble servant of the lord.

Above all, he took his Catholicism seriously. Most secular liberals and radicals miss the implications of this fact. And their Catholic counterparts, too, try to forget the core of Catholic faith, or to deny its importance–preoccupied as they are with human existence as people actually live it, and contaminated, as they also are, with democratic humanist values.

By contrast, Wojtyla's right wing supporters, who celebrate his achievements, often cite his reviving a sense of direction in a church he found in disarray. This is accurate enough. "He Roused Us From a Lethargic Faith," was the title of Cardinal Ratzinger's (now Pope Benedict XVI's) homily. Though Wojtyla added nothing new, his immense energy and organizing zeal did codify and regularize what was traditional. Most of all he emphasized Jesus and Mary, and the relation of god to humanity. In his long reign, Wojtyla held the church to his own authentic Catholic image. If we want to understand the politics of Catholicism in the coming years, we need to take Catholicism as seriously as he did.

True, Wojtyla did not entirely neglect good works, Christian love, and compassion. They are very much part of the Catholic tradition and are much of what preoccupies liberal and radical Catholics as the basis of their politics. But Wojtyla's priorities were clear, and just as traditional. He left no doubt: the importance of works, love, and compassion was secondary. The mysteries of Christian faith came first.

People who think in secular terms miss the salience of the mysteries. They mostly ignore notions like the nature of deity, virgin birth, immaculate conception, or the divinity of Christ. They know these matters are important to others but don't think about them themselves, or inform themselves as to their meaning or implications. For many secular progressives there is an informal tradition of treating other peoples' faith as a private and personal matter, with a presumptive claim on deference, respect, even approbation.

To this way of thinking, it is legitimate to make realistic secular criticism of the stances people of faith take on worldly, practical issues like abortion, gay rights, condom use. Questioning the substance of faith itself, however, is supposed to be somehow improper, even when the regressive stances flow from the beliefs. When it comes to criticism, faith, even its most bizarre manifestations, enjoys a *prima facie* claim to immunity. This is supposed to be the virtue of tolerance in operation.

Hence, when progressive people enter debate with the theologically inclined about issues of public concern they accept an inherent handicap from the start. Defenders of Catholicism, like the blustery William Donohue of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, appeal to liberal guilt by asserting that criticism of Catholic faith, and of the church, is equivalent to racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination, and that secular critics are no better than haters.

The secular- minded are not the only ones with this tenderness about discussion of faith. Many liberal and radical Catholics also avoid discussion of the sort of theological matter that so consumed Wojtyla and his followers. Their kind of Catholicism comes out in their often histrionic compassion and genuine, courageous, even sometimes heroic self-sacrifice. They profess this — often, even to themselves — as a substitute for theological doctrines they only vaguely believe, and would rather not think about.

When they didn't get in his way, Wojtyla sometimes ignored Catholics like this, but he never approved of them. Publicly wagging his finger at Father Ernesto Cardenal, in Nicaragua, in 1983, was only one example. And Wojtyla's ideological enforcer, Ratzinger, effectively purged the church hierarchy of the liberation theologists.

Buy why was Wojtyla this way? No mystery about that. He went out of his way to explain.

Among Wojtyla‘s monuments is *The Cathechism of the Catholic Church*, of 1994, which, in 823 pages, tells you almost everything you need to know.

In particular, it tells you that ascetic misogyny — and its corollary, homophobia — rank higher for an authentically orthodox Catholic like Wojtyla and his partisans than does good works, or the eradication of poverty, or securing peace, or winning other compassionate concerns, important as those may be.

The *Catechism* includes the Apostles Creed, the most basic of Catholic doctrinal statements. It starts with a clear evocation of male dominance: "I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary."

This is a family narrative, with a powerful father, a mother and a child. Though not quite an origin myth in itself, it does consciously and explicitly mimic the founding mythology of Adam, Eve and a child. From the start, this establishes a specific family structure as the norm: men, as husbands and fathers, are in charge. Women, as wives and mothers, are subordinates. Children relate primarily to the parents, and not to broader groups. In the sweep of human history, this particular family form, even in its very diverse manifestations, is hardly universal. In the Catholic way of thinking, however, it is the only legitimate one. God invented it.

"The family based on marriage corresponds to the Creator's design ‘at the beginning' (Matthew 19:4). In the Kingdom of God, where no seed can be sowed other than that of the truth that is already written in the human heart, the only seed capable of ‘bearing fruit through perseverance' (Luke. 8:15), this truth becomes mercy, understanding and a call to recognize in Jesus the ‘light of the world' (John. 8:12), and the power that frees from the bonds of evil." (From the Pontifical Council for the Family on the subject of "Family, Marriage and ‘De Facto' Unions'")

Historically, patriarchal monotheism, in all its manifestations, including Catholicism, has developed in interdependence with this type of family structure. The experience of growing up in families where husbands and fathers dominate forms the fantasy basis of patriarchal monotheist faith. It gradually supplanted earlier forms of family organization. In institutionalized form patriarchal monotheism reinforces their authority. Patriarchal monotheism became more and more prevalent along with this kind of family form.

But is this how we live now? Objectively, we know that growing numbers of contemporary men and women organize their lives differently. They have little choice. Throughout the world, profound political and economic changes are altering the internal structure of the family and the ways men and women experience each other. In turn, children growing up experience a structure of authority in the family that corresponds less and less well to patriarchal monotheist ideals.

For example, there used to be a sharp distinction between men's and women's work. Many men did heavy labor that required a physical strength that only men were likely to possess. They also tended to earn more and their wages mostly supported the family. Women did less strenuous work, and tended to do it in the home, unpaid. Nurturing the children was a key component of women's

expected work.

But we know this has changed. Except in rural areas, productive work has almost totally moved out of the family. Women work for pay. Fewer men, proportionally, are primary breadwinners. Ideals of masculine and feminine behavior and of relationships between them are changing too, in ways that are complex, to be sure, but that mostly tend toward greater equality, in practice, if not in law or custom.

This is a very large social reality, with implications that progressive people and left organizations have hardly explored, except for their general support — usually on the basis of "rights" — of women's equality, feminist concerns like reproductive choice, and laws banning homophobic discrimination.

Changes in family reality create whole ranges of social needs, both materially and affectively. The same changes limit the family's ability to meet both the old needs, and the new. The need for nurturance constantly mounts, just as the family's effective ability to meet it declines. This has created political conflicts that go beyond these rather conventional feminist and gay rights positions inherited from the 1960s and 70s.

In the absence of initiatives from progressives, the religious right has dominated public debate over family policy, pushing a gender politics that seeks to restore an imagined norm of male-dominant heterosexuality and "family values."

In the summer of 2004, for example, Cardinal Ratzinger, then prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (the Inquisition's new name) sent a "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World."

Ratzinger began with the modest claim that: "The Church, expert in humanity, has a perennial interest in whatever concerns men and women." He disclaimed any desire to subordinate women. But then he went on to deplore "certain currents of thought which are often at variance with the authentic advancement of women." He named them "lethal feminism."

In Wojtyla's and Ratzinger's view, the womb is woman's destiny, whether she uses it or not. Women's reproductive sexuality is their essence. Their highest callings are virginity and motherhood. If this limits women's options, men, of course, ought to be nice about it. But this is a fundamental doctrine, at the core of everything. To think otherwise calls "into question the family, in its natural two-parent structure of mother and father, and make homosexuality and heterosexuality virtually equivalent, in a new model of polymorphous sexuality." The effects of this are "lethal."

The *Catechism* already told us "The Christian family is a communion of persons, a sign and image of the communion of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit. In the procreation and education of children it reflects the Father's work of creation. . . . . The Christian family has an evangelizing and missionary task."

God said it was so: every husband penetrating his wife — vaginally, of course — carries a little of the divine, at least by example, and so long as he doesn't wear a condom. God just meant it that way. Wojtyla was listening, and that's the way it is. These are the misogynist and homophobic "family values" of the Christian right, including Wojtyla and the institutional Catholic church.

ALL THIS FOLLOWS irresistibly from fundamental mythological elements in the Apostles Creed, those having to do with Jesus' uniquely idiosyncratic conception, birth, and quasi-human, quasi-divine

identity. This is the idea of the trinity, which manifests the emotional conflicts typical of people whose formative experience is in male-dominant family structure. The central experience of Catholic worship, the sacrament of the Eucharist, the ritual symbolic cannibalism of communion, links the believer to this mythological family fantasy.

Now, however, we are at a point in human history in which women's objective position in society is becoming more equal to men's. Changes in family structure and the roles of men and women are changing in ways that undermine the experiential basis of patriarchal monotheist faith. It gets harder to believe in an omnipotent, omniscient father-god if the father you knew growing up is your mother's objective equal, and your parents may not be a stable, married pair.

Wojtyla and Ratzinger hold to the basics, though. This is an understandable defensive reaction. In the last generation they worked together to intensify Catholicism's traditionally obsessive focus on the notion of virgin birth, a rather zany fantasy about human reproductive biology.

The trinity and virgin birth are political doctrines. They deal with power, inasmuch as they regulate relations between men and women by defining their ideal qualities. This is particularly true when they idealize the roles of revered figures as they dominate and submit to each other. And Mary certainly submits! The *Catechism*: "To obey (from the Latin ob-audire, to ‘hear or listen to') . . . is to submit freely to the word that has been heard, because its truth is guaranteed by God, who is Truth itself. . . The Virgin Mary is its most perfect embodiment."

There is no idealization like the idealization of Mary. Take original sin for example. The sin of Eve saddled every human with it. But, by the doctrine of Immaculate Conception, Mary starts out sinless. She has to. How would it look if the mother of the savior was a sinner? But how is this possible? Indeed you may wonder. Here is where the ascetic misogyny comes in. It's because her mother, Saint Ann, in the genital act leading to Mary's conception, did not experience orgasm.

And then, of course, Mary herself conceives in a way that no actual woman can equal. None of that messy erotic stuff for her. This is because, as the *Catechism* elaborates the creed: "Mary's virginity manifests God's absolute initiative in the Incarnation. Jesus has only God as Father. ‘He was never estranged from the Father because of the human nature which he assumed. . . He is naturally Son of the Father as to his divinity and naturally son of his mother as to his humanity, but properly Son of the Father in both natures.'"

This gobbledygook makes sense only as expression of unconscious wishes, ambivalence, and conflict. It's clear though: there is an idealized, all powerful masculine figure, and there is an idealized, submissive female. Her role is clear, too — she opens herself to an obscure divine entity, who impregnates her with whatever substance it is, if it is a substance, that engenders whatever it was that her son, who is also his father, turned out to be. More trinity.

God is immensely powerful and paternal. His identity, too, is ambiguous — it blurs with his son's. There also a fourth, more amorphous figure: the holy ghost. In the middle ages, when people thought more intensely about this kind of thing, theologians speculated about just how the holy ghost actually impregnated her, if she remained a virgin. Some thought he blew in her ear.

Mary was and remained a virgin — i.e., a figure idealized through denial of her factual sexuality — even as she procreated and delivered her offspring. This peculiar assertion is not trivial, though most Catholics don't think much about it. People like Wojtyla don't let it go however, and we can be sure his successor, Ratzinger, will go on flogging it.

Of course, the notion of the trinity, and of virgin birth within it, defines the feminine ideal in

grotesquely rarefied terms. No living woman can ever live up to Mary's standard. This is the dark side of any idealization. Where this kind of thinking prevails, any living, breathing, non-mythological, normally sexual woman is at risk for stigma. All it takes is a little bad luck. Getting raped, for example.

Conversely, such thinking also defines legitimate sexuality, masculinity and femininity in a crudely stereotypical, rigidly delimited, crudely binary way. To be legitimate, sexuality has to be at least potentially reproductive. Men are humans that penetrate other humans so that they can make them pregnant. Women are humans that other humans penetrate so they can become pregnant.

What about people who seek pleasure through other forms of coupling? Pleasure is inherently suspect, of course. What of gays? We know the answer in general, but here's what Ratzinger's Congregation said specifically in 1986: "To chose someone of the same sex for one's sexual activity is to annul the rich symbolism and meaning, not to mention the goals, of the Creator's sexual design. Homosexual activity is not a complementary union, able to transmit life. . . ." It "is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil; and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder."

This explicit homophobia flows consistently — indeed, inescapably — from Catholicism's essential ascetic misogyny. It goes back to the creeds. Though Ratzinger went on to deplore "violent malice in speech or in action" towards gays, this soothing tone yields to an hard edge of menace, lurking under the velvet surface of Christian love, which, of course, emulates the love god showed in giving his only-begotten son for the redemption of man: " when homosexual activity is consequently condoned, or when civil legislation is introduced to protect behavior to which no one has any conceivable right, neither the Church nor society at large should be surprised when other distorted notions and practices gain ground, and irrational and violent reactions increase."

In other words, Christian men's violence against gays is kind of bad form. However, if gays and their supporters do persist in seeking democratic gender equality, and Christian men rise up to attack . . . well then, the church will wash its hands.

THIS IS THE BASIS of the politics of faith in the United States. It claims to defend the family against forces that threaten it. We have to recognize that this claim is not absurd on its own terms.

Those, however, who want to see "love" and compassion as the true essence of patriarchal monotheism, and who still think they can recast it as a "tolerant" humanism, are unable to explain this essentially retrograde character away.

This mythological thinking is not a regression to something ancient. Rather, people like Wojtyla and Ratzinger cling to mythological fantasies and an ideology that came into its own only rather recently in human terms, when the family ruled by the husband and father became the actual, and not the abstract ideal for the whole of society, and not merely its feudal elites.

Even in western Europe as recently as 1900 there were widespread pre- modern features, with patriarchal monotheism only an overlay on top of earlier magical, animist beliefs. The change to a faith in one, single, masculine, paternal deity is historically recent. It rests on a narrative that accounts, in magical terms, for the relation of the human person to a power which is overwhelming, but inscrutable. This is not at all the experience of a pre-modern peasant hoping for the indulgence of an immediately tangible, though still arbitrary power, like the sun, the fertility of the soil, the rain, which can foster the crops, or the availability of game.

Patriarchal monotheism is an ideology of societies that rest on relations of money and exchange. The patriarchal monotheist god is what the sociologist Emile Durkheim called a "collective representation" of human experience. God is a fantasized personification of the market as it dominates the vicissitudes of life. And the patriarchal monotheist god is a father, since market relations also encouraged development of the isolated family in which the father/husband ruled. In whatever religion, this deity is masculine and paternal, because the developing personality's first experience with power and authority is with the father's.

But reality can and does change underneath this fantasy. When the actual family in which we spend our lives takes on a different form, people confront an emotional choice. They can accept that the family is changing, and that society needs to develop alternatives to meet the needs the family once was able to meet. Or they can cling, with increasing frenzy, to mythologies and quaint doctrines whose loss of basis in experienced reality leaves them more and more decadent.

Feminism and the gay movement are examples of the first of these responses, an attempt to come to terms with reality. In the U.S., the religious right, including evangelicalism and the core of Catholicism is the other response. Other fundamentalisms, such as contemporary Judaic orthodoxy and political Islam, play the same role. These faiths flow coherently from mythological narratives and from the ideas that rest on them. If we ask these people of faith to be tolerant and humanistic, we ask them to abandon their faith.

To be sure, many who profess a formal commitment to these faiths really do not want to bash gays, do support gender equality, and broadly support a democratic gender politics. Their contradictions exemplify the deterioration of faith.

As a social phenomenon, faith is at the center of conflict, both in practical and psychological terms. This creates a complex political situation. On the one hand, faith, in U.S., still commands sufficient legitimacy that progressive political forces mostly cannot challenge it directly, yet. On the other hand, the inner imperatives of their faith compel reactionary religious forces to behave in ways that frequently drive some of their more lukewarm supporters away.

We saw this in the public response to the religious right's attempt to remove President Clinton from office. When they had to choose, a majority of Americans thought Clinton's behavior not admirable, but they wanted him to be president because they thought — whether accurately or not — that he was doing something for them. We saw the same response to the Catholic church's conduct in the ongoing priest scandal and in the recent Terri Schiavo imbroglio.

What is happening? On the one hand, the most malignantly reactionary religious forces in the United States have won major political victories. They control congress and the presidency and grasp at the judiciary. At the same time their desperation is plain to see. Do they fail to recognize their victories, or is this just excessive spleen?

Actually, it is some of both, but also neither. If they seem insatiable it's because there are basic forces in the society, more precisely in the broad political economy, that are changing family experience and the roles of men and women in ways that confound them. But there is more.

One key secularizing force is the way marketing recruits images of the human body to sell products. Many progressives with a nostalgic streak dislike the reification inherent in this process. At the same time they overlook the way sexual imagery functions to undermine the quainter kind of objectification of the body inherent in patriarchal monotheism. The idealization of women in the concept of virgin birth, for example, may be older, but is no nicer than those images of women and men used to sell cigarettes, cellular telephones, beer, automobiles, and what have you. The notion

that the idealizations flowing from ascetic misogyny are somehow more acceptable than those in pornography, to cite a somewhat starker example, is really just another instance of the power of fake nostalgia to move even people who think themselves forward-looking. The late Andrea Dworkin, with her anti-porn fulminations and alliances with right-wing religious groups, is an example of how dangerous this kind of thinking can get.

WE NEEDN'T LOVE all aspects of the objective process of secularization. What we do need to do is recognize it as a force that weakens our enemies. More specifically, we need to think clearly about how to work politically as the objective process of secularization forms the material reality we all live with. In other words, our reactions to it need to rest on analysis of the material consequences of the same political-economic changes that bring the objective process of secularization into being.

In particular, we need to think programmatically, rather than in terms of protest politics.

Much of the left still responds to events with protest, or at least by thinking and talking about protesting. We did it this way in the 1960s, when we felt strong, and it worked pretty well in the civil rights and antiwar movements. While that was going on, however, the right was planning its own programmatic challenges to the then-prevailing liberal corporate state, the legacy of the New Deal. We criticized it too, and sometimes rightly, but mostly didn't advance alternatives. When we did they tended towards an anti-political, anti-bureaucratic populism that the right has since appropriated, with devastating political effect.

The right came to power with a clear, consistent sense of what it wanted to do in social policy–all consistent too, with authentic patriarchal monotheism. It wanted to restore the authority of the family, and really of fathers in the family. It wanted to restore gender roles to what they supposedly used to be. It wanted to re-establish homophobia as a norm.

More, the right wanted to base social efforts to address human need on compassion, variously manifested, but always with an essential message of individualism and paternalism. Authentic compassion is an obviously good thing of course. But its essence is in the private encounters of individuals. It cannot form the basis of universalistic social policy and social provision, because these rest not on individual relationships, but on encounters between individuals and organized society. The right- wing thrust in social policy was to pervert the pretense of a private virtue into a social policy.

The essence of this institutionalized sophistry is the means test, never absent from American social welfare, but which they wanted to make immeasurably harsher. The recipient of compassion would always have to demonstrate some form of incapacity or disability, and hence of deservingness. And the fraudulent right-wing appropriation of compassion was just one side of its social policy program. The other involved a sentimental fantasy of the ideal family.

All of what the right has attempted in social policy includes a conscious and intentional obliviousness to the material realities of changing family life. Consider our enemies' success. Forty or so years ago, back when the liberal-left was protesting war and racism, conservatives confronted a fairly well- entrenched welfare state. It was a limited one but it seemed secure. They developed a clear alternative notion — an intensely individualist neoliberal society in which the person has "freedom" to advance himself by participation in the marketplace. If he or she needs help with this, then the default nurturer is the family. To be sure, this leaves most people essentially defenseless before corporate power, but that's inconsequential compared to restoring and defending family values.

Restoration of this spuriously idealized family is key to right wing social policy. This is most signally so, according to conservative dogma, if the person needs help by virtue of being a child in a failed family. Anyone else could qualify for assistance from the broader society by only proving, through one or another form of means test, that he or she deserved compassion. A fixation with small government, family restoration, and compassion go hand in hand. They succeeded in reforming welfare to meet these criteria, and now want to do the same with Social Security.

In the absence of challenge from a militant left, liberals have capitulated, and right wing social policy prescriptions have become ideologically hegemonic. This has well served the political and material advantage of corporate elites. It creates a privatist justification for social policies resting on low taxes, a subservient work force, and a populace politically demobilized by fear of social dissolution and crime, (itself, in large part an expression of the entrepreneurial individualism of people without capital).

Hopefully it is not too late for the left to develop an alternative, progressive social policy, resting on precisely opposite principles. The right achieved its aims, in large part, because it had a clear conception of what it was after, and there were many organizations committed to its vision of just how stunted the social wage ought to be. The left needs to create a mechanism to counter what the right has done, but in order to create it we need to understand what we are up against. In particular, we need to recognize the changed political role of faith today.

SOME STILL HOPE to revivify the traditional liberal and left cooperation with liberal people of faith. Unfortunately, liberal and radical patriarchal monotheism is a nearly spent force. We may not like this but we get nowhere by ignoring this reality.

Cooperation between secular and religious leftists in the past depended on the issues being altogether different from those at the center of day-to-day politics now. Forty years ago it was possible to see the African-American claim to equal political and social participation as consistent with the central notions of patriarchal monotheist faith. This was particularly true in the much earlier case of abolitionism, whose thrust, and sometimes, its conscious intent, was to legally legitimize father- dominated African-American family formation. It is not a criticism to point this out. Back then, in the context of slavery, patriarchal monotheism was historically progressive. Similarly, during the Civil Rights Movement the notion of racial equality didn't challenge ascetic misogynist assumptions.

Again, forty years ago, in the antiwar movement, the pacifist and quasi-pacifist atmosphere could fit in with notions of Christian love that are secondary derivatives of ascetic misogyny. It was possible to hold to the notion — common among Christian liberals and radicals — that the crucial element of Christian faith is kindness, gentleness, concern for the feelings and well-being of others, and so forth, and that the various right-wing manifestations of Christianity are just perverse mistakes, false imitations of the sound essence of faith, which is Christian love.

All that has changed in less than a lifetime. The presuppositions of optimistic liberal patriarchal monotheism largely vanished. Progressive social policy must aim to establish universalistic social provision, eliminate the means test in all its forms, and challenge the legitimacy of compassion as the basis for determining need. Fundamentally, a progressive social-prevision policy would challenge ascetic misogyny. Appeals to compassion are obsolete, and play into enemy hands.

British right wing former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher once said that there is no such thing as society. A central element of the right-wing approach to social policy lies in that pretense that

organized society does not exist; there are just individuals and families. When it comes to social policy and social welfare, privatization is key to the right-wing thrust.

Privatization necessarily implies a denial of reality. It rests on the pretense that it is possible to meet human needs in a sound and equitable way through applying private, compassionate, and charitable efforts to meeting human needs that are really in origin. Piling privatization of social provision onto an ideology of compassion is not just a way to save money on human services or cynically reward faith-based service delivery agencies run by political allies. It is also a grand approach to denying a material dimension to any rights that come with participation in the society. Linked to social policy, compassion is itself inherently regressive and reactionary.

IT IS NOT JUST that recipients of faith-based services have to undergo humiliation, self-abasement, enforced praying, and other indignities, and, in general, a series of experiences that reinforce the notion that suffering is a bit meritorious. More important, from the strategic standpoint as well as from the point of view of longer-term adequate social provision, is that faith-based services based on compassion are fragmented and residual.

Residualism distinguishes the respectable from the disreputable. It invites those who aren't quite abjectly poor to demean those who are. The means test sets up a hierarchy of deserving. Its classic and original form is the proof of need for public material relief, but it has other forms, including labeling various diseases as more deserving of concern than others, or defining some drug addictions or uses as more stigmatizing than others. It is a device for creating ignominy.

That is why we cannot look to the religious left for a coherent and effective approach to social provision. The message of the scriptures offers no useful guidance. Some religious liberals and leftists deplore the religious right's emphasis on the Book of Revelations rather than the Sermon on the Mount, and hanker after the glory days of the Civil Rights movement, and of those political movements, like welfare rights, that were part of its orbit.

Yet the supposedly alternative notion of Christian love and Jesus' message of compassion offers us little support when the political task is to develop a democratic and progressive social and family policy founded on universalism. Compassion also lends itself more to episodic histrionics than to provision of nurturance, as a matter of right, by a responsible governmental administration whose principle is universalism.

Only universalism broadens the definition of eligibility to include everyone. In some countries, a large part of public financial assistance falls under family allowances, which are payments for which all children are eligible, and which create a floor under income. They are cheap to administer because there is no means test, children of all levels of family income qualify, and the only criterion of eligibility is to be a child.

Social welfare policy and family policy are linked, and need to be part of a progressive strategy. Here too, patriarchal monotheism offers us no support. Its roots in a father/husband dominated family narrative show it to be necessarily retrograde.

The Catholic position on this is clear. The Catechism puts it thus: " 2207. The family is the original cell of social life. It is the natural society in which husband and wife are called to give themselves in love and in the gift of life. Authority, stability, and a life of relationships within the family constitute the foundations for freedom, security, and fraternity within society. The family is the community in which, from childhood, one can learn moral values, begin to honor God, and make

good use of freedom. Family life is an initiation into life in society."

Again the restorationist thrust. But what would a progressive family policy look like?

The key issue is how to respond realistically to the political and economic shifts that have changed family structure and functioning. These change not just men's and women's roles, but also the family's ability to bring together two disparate and fundamentally distinct functions. One is the developmental nurturance of children, and the other is meeting the nurturant needs of adults. Older family forms were able to harmonize them with some ease and success. But the family as we experience it in the U.S. today has great difficulty managing this.

Again, right wing family policy defines reality as irrelevant. In fact it claims not to be a policy at all: there is no need for family policy because the male dominant family is divinely ordained and natural. There is no real conflict between the family‘s nurturant tasks. It's simple, they tell us, just go with god's plan. You don't need a village to raise a child, says Pennsylvania Sen. Rick Santorum. You need a family.

We need to maintain a clear sense that any reform which presupposes the conventional family definition will be ineffective and diversionary. In particular, we need to steer clear of any reinforcement of heterosexual male-dominant gender definitions. Fortunately, a lot of reality is on our side.

Unwittingly, much of the culture is tending in a progressive direction on this point. Last year's Supreme Court sodomy decision is one example. A majority of rather conventional older judges was able to see that gays are not abnormal and not dangerous, and, in fact are everywhere, without anything having gone too far wrong. Another example is the increasing majority who accept civil unions for gays, and the growing acceptance of gay marriage. This is the objective process of secularization at work.

Another hopeful sign is the apparent languishing of organizations that aim to restore male-dominant family relationships. Take the Promise Keepers, whose leader is a rabid homophobe. It proclaimed the need to artificially pump up ideals of responsible masculine dominance in the home. Another is the Nation of Islam with its Million Man March, putting forward an obsolete ideal of fatherhood. Both of these organizations had a corresponding feminine ideal — the submissive and domestic wife and mother. Both are stagnating.

Here is where a progressive family policy intersects with the aspirations of the existing feminist and gay movements. Neither has developed a vision of family and social welfare policy that goes beyond an emphasis on "rights," but both implicitly point towards it, inasmuch as universalist developmental services for children, like day care, and universally funded public education, are the only way to assure that children will actually get what they need.

But the family has another function that often works at cross-purposes with its function as the arena for child development.

The instability of the family, and its tendency to dissolve through formal or informal divorce, comes out of its other task in meeting adult nurturant needs. Now that production has migrated out of the family unit, there is less to hold couples together. There also is no specifically normative set of relationships that one can call by the name "family." There is nothing to stop same-sex relationships from seeming as legitimate as those between men and women. Younger people, having grown up in families that formed and reformed as they grew up, find less experiential basis for taking heterosexual family life as a norm.

Creating a national family policy that addresses the conflict between the family's two functions is a prime task for all throughout much of the world, and is probably the most important domestic political issue in the U.S. So far the right has dominated discussion. The left needs to join this issue and put forward strong alternatives.

Part of knowing what to do about the reactionary politics of faith involves knowing how to pose these alternatives. However, it is difficult to see such an alternative in the self-abnegatory pity politics of those liberals and leftists who still think a progressive alternative is a primary focus on the poor, perhaps through attempts to revive New Deal institutions, instead of developing universalistic programmatic initiatives.

A particularly ineffectual version of this outdated foolishness is the attempt at a kind of intellectual sleight of hand — the claim that cruelty to the impoverished and downtrodden is un-Christian. This limping argument invites devastating counter-attack. From the evangelical standpoint, for example, there is a strong neo-Calvinist "tough-love" counter-argument: that it is kinder to be strict, to make the poor work their own way up to a more respectable state, and that helping them only reinforces dependency.

From the Catholic camp there is a different counter-argument — to see a pitying Christian concern as part of a seamless web of compassion — a "preferential option" if you will — that extends to the poor and friendless as well as to the at-risk fetuses, and to argue for making the society soundly Christian enough that it will be able to work to eliminate poverty, cruelty, and injustice. These arguments have the merit of consistency with fundamental doctrines rooted in the bizarre family fantasies of scripture and Catholic tradition — mothers, fathers, children drenched in maudlin sentimentality.

For the right the pathetic image of children getting sacrificed to their divorcing parents' self-indulgence is a way to legitimize retrograde policy prescriptions. This ideological ploy attacks as hedonistic pleasure seekers, oblivious to their offspring, those many parents who experience the vicissitudes of marital attachment. The ascetic aspect of ascetic misogyny manifests itself here — since the purpose of the family is procreation, in the Catholic view, husbands and wives should all just buckle down and get to work. What others might see as social reality, as day-to-day difficulties of typical relationships of men and women in the contemporary United States — well now! That's no excuse!

The religious right really is no fun. Its dismal thoughts, in essence, reduce sexuality and family life to labor. "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return."

This comes from Genesis 3:19, which is about the expulsion from the garden, a mythologized version of an historical event — a political triumph of male-dominant religion and the political defeat of Canaanite polytheism, which had a significant goddess component and which preceded patriarchal monotheism.

By contrast, a progressive family policy would recognize the family's basic limitations as a nurturer. It would recognize the things it is capable of doing and define areas of universal responsibility for the whole society in nurturing children. Day care, for example is not just a way to accommodate working parents. It is a positive experience of participation in society and offers something the family cannot offer.

Basic to a progressive family policy is for pleasure to be an end rather than a distraction in the family situation. Affirming pleasure is something progressives ought to be about. Once again,

perhaps, we need to recognize that one of the left's most sterile aspects is its own inclinations towards asceticism.

When we agree on the basic characteristics of a progressive social welfare and family policy, there remains the question of the politics of putting it into public discussion. Our opponents, as it happens have created strategic vulnerabilities, which offer opportunities for strong progressive political initiatives.

Patriarchal monotheism's basic doctrines, and, in particular its ascetic misogyny, have led many of the churches into difficult terrain. One manifestation of ascetic misogyny is the Catholic church's priestly celibacy. On taking the Sacrament of Ordination a man's sacrifice involves abjuring a particular kind of fun, and leading a life supposedly free of sensual distraction. This absurdity is a clear manifestation of ascetic misogyny in doctrine if not in practice. Moreover, celibacy is at the root of the Catholic church's criminal failure to protect children entrusted to the care of sexually predatory priests and nuns.

Nothing has done more to discredit the Catholic Church than this scandal. In some countries, such as Ireland, it has become a political issue in its own right. Unfortunately, the American tradition of deference to faith has somewhat spared the church, thus far.

One must stipulate, of course, that no one knows if priests, more than anybody else, have a greater tendency towards child-raping. Early in the crisis, spokesmen for the church estimated that the molesters among the priesthood represented just 2 percent of all priests.

Ratzinger, more confident, asserted late in 2002 that "In the United States, there is constant news on this topic, but less than 1 percent of priests are guilty of acts of this type."

In June, 2002, the church in the United States established a "Charter for the Protection of Children and Youth," and bound itself to conduct yearly audits of progress in assuring the safety of children who had to encounter priests. The church's own audit then found the child-molesting percentage of priests to be 4 percent, even though its findings rested on self-reported data the dioceses themselves — grudgingly — supplied.

Moreover, the comparison with a non-priest population is difficult, as nobody really knows the percentage of all American men who molest children. One could make a case for a "rotten apple" interpretation of the problem of the child-raping priest, if, in fact, the problem lay only with the priests themselves.

However, the church's great crime was not the individual crimes of the priests. Rather, it is the church policy, worldwide in scope, of concealing and facilitating these individual crimes. In France the Bishop of Bayeux, Monsignor Pican, served a prison sentence for failing to report sexual assaults on minors by a priest, René Bissey. Even in the United States however, where faith commands every politician's reflexive respect, civil and criminal actions have uncovered gross dereliction. Dioceses have entered into plea-bargains. The church has to sell off vast properties to pay damages.

It is worth looking at the researches of the psychologist and psychotherapist, A. W. Richard Sipe. Sipe entered the Benedictine order in 1953 and the priesthood in 1959. He seems to be a conscientious man, and probably took his own vow of celibacy seriously as long as it applied. (He left the priesthood in 1970, and married.) In 1960, impressed with how the interior culture of the church honored celibacy in the breach — or, better put, in and around the breeches — he began to study celibacy's actualities instead of its idealities. His many publications are clinical and scholarly, but leave little doubt that most priests are actively sexual, many with women, many with other men,

especially other priests, many with themselves as masturbators, and some with children.

In fact, though Catholic ascetic misogyny is the basis for required priestly celibacy, and the fiction that the church organization is a sexless environment, the reality is the opposite. Celibacy only succeeds in creating a pervasive, though covert, immature, and cynically guilt-ridden sexualized environment.

But why now? Many priests' victims described crimes dating back decades. Why did they come out only now?

Here too, the cultural changes in the broader society flowing from a consumer society and changes in gender roles, have left neither the priest nor their victims untouched.

As early as the 1970s, prescient voices within the church pointed to the immaturity and general lack of adult personality formation of the priests they were recruiting. The church's damage control after the crisis began in 2002 included The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops setting up The National Review Board for the Protection of Children and Young People, which found that priests ". . . ordained in their mid-twenties, had the emotional maturity of adolescents. This lack of 'normal' psychosexual development may have hindered some of these priests from achieving a healthy celibacy and may explain why some of them sought the company of adolescent boys. The Review Board was struck by the large number of individuals who believed that many offender priests lacked emotional and psychological maturity and considered this phenomenon to be a cause of the incidence of sexual abuse of minors by clergy."

In this enclosed "Secret World," as Sipe called it, the dark side of ascetic misogyny flourished. One could call this hypocrisy, but that would obscure the coherent psychodynamic chain linking ascetic misogyny to antisocial and criminal behavior, and, more important, to the church's policy of criminal squalor in tacitly accepting it. On the other hand, the society's growing sexual openness and the gradual weakening of homophobia freed many of the victims to come forward.

The Catholic church is not the only offender. Other churches have done the same, and also gotten caught. In Texas the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America had to pay $36 million to victims of a pastor whose crimes it had concealed. The Catholic case is the biggest, of course, because it is a bigger church, with wherewithal for a bigger criminal enterprise.

It is quite astounding that progressives have done so little to respond to the sex abuse revelations. It is easy to link the churches' regressive policies on family and social welfare policy with their egregious criminal conduct, given that both arise out of fundamental features of patriarchal monotheism's ascetic misogyny. This issue gets right to the question of whether or not patriarchal monotheism really can serve as a sound guide for organizing and regulating the family and sexual conduct. The Catholic church's opposition to loving relationships between men and men and women and women, for example, is difficult to reconcile with its inability to cope with its liturgical staff's seeking exploitive sensual gratification.

Challenges to regressive church initiatives are potentially effective. Ecclesiastical prestige no longer shields the churches from bad publicity. Just one example: when gay marriage, in response to a court decision, became an issue in Massachusetts, the Catholic Church mounted a vigorous campaign against it. The Most Reverend Thomas L. Dupre, Bishop of Springfield, was among its more frothing and homophobic spokesmen. Hearing of this, two outraged men he had raped as a young priest, came forward to expose him, and Dupre resigned abruptly last year.

This happened solely due to the personal initiative of two courageous individuals. Imagine how

much more we could gain if exposures like this went along with a fight for a progressive, universalistic, social welfare and family policy.

The coming years will bring more and more opportunities. Ratzinger has moved quickly to intensify campaigns for the church's prime, authentic commitments. He seems to think a smaller, but more ideologically pure church is the way to go. He has removed the pleasantly liberal Jesuit editor, Father Thomas J. Reese, from the magazine *America*. He has chosen, as his successor at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Archbishop William Levada, of San Francisco, notorious for his secretive response to the sex abuse scandal. There will be much, much more of this, and it will go far to discredit the church and Catholicism generally.

The United States remains a country in which faith retains unusual legitimacy, but mass faith is becoming less systematic, less church-based, and, as time goes on, less faithful. Moreover, the number of those who disclaim religious affiliation is growing rapidly, particularly among young people, and particularly among those with a Catholic background, though their outlooks are various. In Europe, of course, the situation is far more favorable, but there is a longer tradition of anti-clericalism there. It goes back to the struggles against feudalism and for formal democracy, when the churches, especially the Catholic church, were on the reactionary side. The United States did not develop that way, and we've had little recent anti-clerical agitation.

Yet even those who are falling away from faith do not have a coherently organized secularism to identify with and — for the moment — creating one would be both artificial and premature. There are even still a few instances where the old alliance between progressives and the Catholic Church is not yet dead.

On the other hand, the usual progressive notion of religion as the third rail of American politics is also outdated. Changes in the roles of men and women, and in the functioning of the family more and more erase the distinction between issues of personal conduct and those issues leftists like to think are more authentic, those with a material focus. A politics built around a long-range campaign to meet human needs in a democratic, gender-progressive way, with a realistic family policy is the key to the left breaking out of isolation.

That is the positive side of what we need to do. How do we deal with those authentic patriarchal monotheists who oppose what we support, the religious right?

Let us note that there are limits to their influence. They have failed when they took on issues that draw the attention of the general American population and which demand that Americans make some kind of decision, as with destroying the Clinton presidency or building support to keep a brain-dead woman's heart and lungs going. And though they are numerous and influential they are still a minority.

The Catholic part of this minority is a minority of the Catholic whole. For decades, polls have showed majorities of Catholics rejecting church teaching on issues crucial to the essential Catholic ascetic misogyny, those on subjects like birth control, for example. The priest scandal creates further new opportunities.

A PROGRESSIVE APPROACH on matters of faith can succeed, and must succeed if we are to defend democracy and advance beyond its current parlous state. For reasons outlined here, Catholicism is probably the weakest link in the religious right, and dealing with it is a priority.

Direct secularist challenges to faith are premature for now, and our decisions about this for the

future need to follow assessment of what is expedient. On the other hand, where the churches' conduct is overtly criminal, there need to be systematic efforts to mobilize the criminal justice system to cope legally with their challenges. For example, progressives need to support legislative initiatives to extend statutes of limitations on sexual abuse, and to require clergy to report abuse to secular authorities, even though this would violate the seal of the Confessional.

The political approach to faith needs to be positive, in presenting progressive alternatives to the currently hegemonic regressive family and social welfare policy. We need to understand that alternatives challenge patriarchal monotheist faith in a basic way.

Above all, progressives need to recognize faith as essentially male-dominant, ascetic misogynist, and anti- democratic, even when, as it happens, we agree with people of faith on specific issues. This means the careful study of faith, of patriarchal monotheist doctrine, of scriptural narratives and of all their implications is essential to any sound understanding of our political tasks. Political Islam is just one faith that needs to be understood and contended with.

Moreover, looking to the future, beyond the defensive mire of today, we have to recognize that faith became a mass phenomenon as human society came to rest on all-embracing relations between people based on monetary exchange, and on family structure based on rule by the husband and father.

Now, however, the development of capitalism has changed that kind of family. The experience of day-to-day family life makes belief in a masculine and paternal deity less and less psychologically tenable. The worldwide phenomenon of fundamentalism is a menace, but also is a defensive response. We see it in all religions. Wojtyla and Ratzinger are its most overt Catholic manifestations.

In the United States, the authentic core of patriarchal monotheism works to support privatism in meeting social needs. It serves corporate power, and is the basis of the right wing alliance between the reactionary churches and reactionary economic elites.

On the other hand, there are democratic and humanistic responses too. They embrace the objective process of secularization and ride it towards a healthier, democratic culture. This is the basis of a sound left politics in the coming years.

Footnotes