

# There is Good News and Bad News: Religion and Politics

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ONCE UPON A TIME, just a few decades back, culture critics were confidently predicting the demise — or a least the decline — of religion. Technology, literacy, education, science would take their inevitable toll. Religion would survive, perhaps, in small enclaves, family rituals, and folk festivals. But religion would never be a factor in the public sector, the "political realm." The dead would bury the dead.

Has any political- cultural predication ever been so wildly inaccurate? The prediction was freighted with ideology and wishful thinking. A quick check of the front page of the *New York Times* in the past few weeks mirrors what has been appearing there for the last two decades. In Europe, Muslim immigrants are challenging the predominantly secular cultures (as well as the racism and xenophobia) of nearly all the EU member states, while Turkey waits nervously at the threshold. In Japan, Prime Minister Koizumi prays publicly, even ostentatiously at the Yasakuni Shrine, which is staffed by Shinto priests and honors the thousands of Japanese who have "died for the emperor." His visit enraged and dismayed religious minorities — Christians and Buddhists — in Japan. In Iran, the Islamic revolution, which replaced the oppressive shah with an equally repressive theocracy, is now questioned by large numbers of Iranians (even though the recently elected mayor of Tehran speaks with an Islamist rhetoric.)

In India, the Bharata Janata Party, whose program was to "Hinduize" India was turned out of office, but retains a large following of the country's poor. In Pakistan, radical Islamic madrasas multiply while the public school system languishes. In China, the Maoist myth is dead, no longer believed even by Communist Party leaders. Since nature, culture, and politics, all abhor a vacuum, the big question now is what will replace it? The main contenders seem to be either the religion of consumer/capitalism (with its own myths and rituals) or some characteristically Chinese form of Christianity, or maybe a mixture of the two. In Latin America, which lived with and under 500 years of Catholic corporatism, evangelical Protestantism (mainly in its Pentecostal expression) is spreading like a prairie fire. The Catholic Church is hemorrhaging at the rate of tens of thousands per day. In Israel, pioneered by left-leaning, anti-religious Zionists, a growing ultra-orthodox movement, strongly allied with the American religious right, insists on pushing the "Jewish state" (which is actually a multi-religious state with a 20 percent Palestinian Muslim and Christian minority) toward a "Torah state." Inspired by the theology of the late Rabbi Abraham Kach, this "messianic Zionism" insists that Israelis have a divine mandate to cling to every square inch of the *eretz Israel*, and some look forward to the time when the Temple will be rebuilt.

And what can we say about the United States? A new brand of evangelicalism has plunged into a strange alliance with big business, super-patriotism, and anti-gay and anti-feminists forces, and has had some striking victories, but as 2006 begins, appears to be fragmenting and losing some of its clout. The Catholic Church, still reeling from the pedophile scandals has, at least temporarily, lost credibility for the prophetic voice it began to find in the past few decades with the bishops' eloquent statements on nuclear weapons and the economy. The official leadership of the American Jewish community, once a staunch supporter of progressive causes, seems paralyzed by its uncritical alliance with Israel's occupation policies as to be nearly incapable of reclaiming its former progressive role. Alliances have emerged among religious groups that once disdained each other. Conservative Protestants ally with Catholics over reproductive policy and gay rights, but the two groups differ sharply over the death penalty. The Republican strategy of federal support for "faith-

based initiatives" has successfully lured some (but still very little) black church leadership away from its traditional loyalty to the Democratic Party.

So, the reader may well be asking, what is the *good* news? To respond to this question it is important to remember a number of things. First, religion by its very nature can kindle emotions for bane or for blessing. It inspires titanic leaders in the struggle for peace and justice like Mahatma Gandhi, the Berrigan brothers, Martin Luther King, Andre Trocme (Protestant pastor and leader of the French resistance in World War II), and Dorothy Day. But it can, and has, also inspired frantic xenophobia, cruelty and — most dangerous of all — false innocence and self-righteousness. American evangelicals led the 19th century struggles for abolition and prison reform. They provided the face and much of the inspiration for the civil rights movement and the opposition to the Vietnam War. Buddhists and Quakers immolated themselves in desperate protest against the American destruction of that small Asian country. In the 1970s, hundreds of churches and synagogues opened their doors to "illegal" refugees from the American wars on El Salvador and Nicaragua. When Bill Clinton submitted his "welfare reform" legislation (actually welfare removal) the most active opposition to it was mounted not by labor unions or left wing groups but by the Catholic bishops.

Second, if we look away from the domestic scene, we can see movements emerging in opposition to many of the regressive ones catalogued in the first paragraphs of this article. In China, for example, religious groups are beginning the long, hard task of rebuilding civic networks after the devastation of years of oppression and the rampant, rising inequality. Thousands of tiny Christian-based communities have come into existence. They are "pre-political" at this point, but represent some of the most marginated groups in the new cruelly-capitalist China. Falun Gong worries the Party leadership not because of its ideology, which seems quite bland, but by its amazing network and its capacity to assemble large numbers of people very quickly, features that worry any authoritarian regime

Christian and Buddhist groups in Japan are fighting to keep Japan's anti-military constitution in the face of American domestic Japanese pressures. The huge Buddhist lay organization, Soka Gokkai, which years ago had certain cult-like qualities, has transformed itself into a vigorous advocate of peace, gender, and cosmopolitan values, and has shed its proselytizing programs.

Developments in the Muslim world are maddeningly complex. Although Islamists sound to Westerners like theocrats (and often are), their main enemies are the ruling elites in Muslim countries whose control of the oil and alliance with Washington undergird their often shaky grip on power. What we are witnessing in the Middle East is a virtual civil war within Islam, even a kind of class struggle, in which the United States and Britain have become involved, but in which the West is viewed by millions of young Muslims only as a secondary enemy, allied to the wrong side. Understanding this lethal struggle within the Muslim world will require American progressives to rethink many of the categories we fondly cherish. The Muslim Brotherhood, which was founded in Egypt in part to oppose Nasser, attacked capitalism (as unfair to the poor), nationalism (as divisive) and communism (as atheistic and tyrannical), and advocated a return to the "Koranic values" of justice and equality.

POLITICAL PROGRESSIVES need to ask themselves a very hard question. Why are most of the religious movements mentioned above supported mainly — not entirely — by the poorer and most marginated segments of the populations? I know full well there is an automatic answer to this question, which left progressives can utter without any effort. It has to do with the famous "opiate of the masses." But the massive misfiring of this oft-repeated bit of Marxist lore requires more. It requires that we ask why it failed so spectacularly to explain what happened in the 20th century,.

Rethinking this question, furthermore, will in no sense necessitate moving outside a analysis that still draws its strength from Marxist thinkers. Two such thinkers in particular come to mind. The first is Antonio Gramsci, founder of the Italian Communist Party. Gramsci never accepted Lenin's wooden, materialist view of history or his peremptory dismissal of religion. A far more subtle thinker, his critique of religion was far more sophisticated. It was based on pragmatic and political grounds, not metaphysical ones. He knew more about the history of religion than Lenin, whose ideas grew from his understandable exasperation with Russian Orthodoxy. Gramsci knew that the long history of religion includes, of course, much evidence of its use by oppressive regimes to bludgeon and subdue their victims. But he also knew that religions also had — albeit less frequently — sparked revolutions. Most importantly he knew that if genuine support for socialism was to emerge from the bottom, religious symbols would inevitably play a role. Just after World War II, a group of left-wing Italian Catholics even tried to form a Catholic Communist Party, "but were forbidden to do so by the Vatican." Nevertheless, until quite recently the CPI attracted very large numbers of Catholic voters, even when the Vatican threatened automatic excommunication for such electoral misbehavior.

The other Marxist thinker who needs to be heeded now if we are to understand our historical moment is, of course, Ernst Bloch. A brilliant historian and theoretician, Bloch also refused to embrace metaphysical atheism, which he considered "bourgeois," and argued that the left must understand the power of myth, ritual and dream. Bloch settled in East Germany after World War II in the fond hope that the kind of humanistic Marxism he advocated might find a home there. It was not an impossible dream. The lower and middle ranks of the SED in the German Democratic Republic were filled with admirers of Bloch. However, after Bloch decamped for Tübingen when he saw, to his dismay, how things were developing in the DDR, his admirers had to bite their lips, at least in public. Then after the Russian and East German destruction of Dubcek's "socialism with a human face" in Czechoslovakia in 1968, Bloch became even more persona non grata and the DDR spiraled even further into Walther Ulbricht's derivative version of Stalinism. Given the demise of other plausible Marxist interpretations of religion, it may be time to retrieve his legacy.

American history offers its own examples of alliances between progressive political movements and religious groups. In each of his campaigns for president, Eugene V. Debs received the largest share of votes in Kanawha County, West Virginia, where United Mine Workers organizers and Pentecostal preachers cooperated in his support. Debs was succeeded in the leadership of the American Socialist Party by Norman Thomas, a Presbyterian minister. An admirer of Thomas, (and one of my teachers) the great Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr ran for New York State Senate on the Socialist line in 1930. I have already mentioned the Civil Rights movement, but it is important to be reminded of the work done for years before Martin Luther King appeared on the scene by Fellowship of Southern Churchmen in helping organize the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union and of the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, founded and run by church people, where Rosa Parks received her training in nonviolent resistance to racism.

It is sad that both progressive groups and religious movements in America have largely forgotten this history. The undeniable power of the religious right in the United States today has propelled its leading spokesmen into a position that sometimes enables them to re-write history, including religious history. They would like us to forget there ever was something called "The Social Gospel," which thrived in this country from the late 19th century until World War I (when, because of its bent toward pacifism, it began to decline as American jingoism rose.) Opponents of affirmative action have tried to co-opt Martin Luther King into being on their side. Neoconservatives have tried just as hard to hijack Reinhold Niebuhr, but can never stomach his constant warnings against national pride, and the sin of identifying American interests with what is best for the whole world.

There is much organizing to do. And a lot is happening, albeit not widely reported in an

American press charmed by TV evangelists Focus on the Family. The progressive Evangelical, Jim Wallis, heads a national religiously based program to combat poverty, not with charity but with justice. His book, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It* was on the *New York Times* bestseller list for weeks. Wallis draws huge crowds at evangelical colleges all over America, and students and faculty greet his attacks on the religious right with standing ovations.. Rabbi Michael Lerner has assembled over 500 "spiritual progressives" year after year, and has just published a book entitled *The Left Hand of God: Taking Back Our Country From The Religious Right*. In October, 2005, leaders of several religious groups, joined by many lay people, met in Cambridge, MA to organize the "Inter- Religious Network to End the Nuclear Weapons Threat." Jews, Catholics, Muslims, Buddhists, and Protestants of several different denominations attended. A national program will be launched early next year.

One of the most active and promising of these religious social action coalitions is the Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice, based in Chicago. Supported by a wide range of denominations and groups, the ICWJ is rebuilding the old alliance between religion and labor, and a moment when the labor movement is poised either to burst into a new activism or continue to decline. Young labor leaders realize they need to reach out to new constituencies and that there is no reason whatever why the religious right should be able to mobilize churches, many of whose members need a strong labor movement. The ICWJ is currently fighting to make sure the Gulf Coast reconstruction is done with living wages. It is also continuing its long exposure of the labor practices of Wal-Mart.

This labor-religion front is a promising one. Labor organizers have been very receptive. Given the fact that so many of the workers in the service industries are black, Asian, or Latino, and often more religious than other populations, cooperation seems natural. When the students at Harvard carried out a building occupation, encampment in the Yard, and demonstrations to demand a living wage for the University's employees, the main faculty support came from professors of religion. Representatives from the fields that have often advocated for such causes were embarrassingly absent.

So there is some good news, after all, and one could report on many similar developments, but there is still a serious obstacle. All too frequently progressive religious people are greeted with scorn by considerable numbers of secular radicals and liberals. The old prejudices persist. Some still believe the liberation will only come when "the last king is hanged with the entrails of the last priest." One hopes that when that day comes, they can find a king somewhere who really wields power and that the priest is not Dan Berrigan.

The time has come for a new coming together of religious groups bent on real change and not just charity with secular progressive movements that have often steered away from such alliances for reasons that no should no longer prevent what has been, and could be again, a real solidarity.

## **Footnotes**