

Progressive Religion ... Is Not An Oxymoron!

By David E. Roy

In this column, I want to look at four arenas of religious activity that are worthy of interest to all progressives: Rabbi Michael Lerner's Tikkun community, Evangelical Christian Jim Wallis' Sojourner endeavor, the Islamic Hadith Project in Turkey and the Faith and Process project of the Center for Process Studies.

The Tikkun Community

A major purpose of Rabbi Lerner's Tikkun community (www.tikkun.org) is the effort to reconnect spirituality and religion to the political left in the US. (I say "reconnect" deliberately because some of the greatest movements for social change in the past have had their roots in religion. This includes, for example, the 19th Century drive to end slavery and the civil rights movement in the 20th Century.) Rabbi Lerner's critique of the political left, developed in *The Left Hand of God: Taking Our Country Back from the Religions Right* (2006), is that liberals have increasingly ignored the "spiritual hunger" for deep meaning in our society, focusing instead primarily on the physical and material hungers.

The Tikkun movement (from the Hebrew *Tikkun Olam*, to repair the world) is the latest emergence out of Lerner's long and multi-faceted career that extends back at least to the Free Speech Movement in the mid-1960s. (He even had the honor in the late 60s of being called "one of the most dangerous criminals in America" by none other than J. Edgar Hoover!) The Tikkun community aims to bring together spiritual progressives from any and all faith traditions and focus their energies on effecting social change in the form of a new "Global Marshall Plan" for the world. The premise of this plan is as follows:

[We are] ... seeking to have the advanced industrial countries of the world use their resources to eliminate once and for all global poverty, homelessness, and hunger; provide quality education and health care for all; and repair the global environment. As an initial commitment, we want the U.S. to donate at least 1-2% of its Gross Domestic Product each year for the next twenty [years]

Among the benefits they anticipate is a decrease in poverty-fueled violence and therefore an increase in security, here and abroad. This is a much different, non-fear based approach to homeland security than what we have today.

Another of the important interfaith facets of the Tikkun community is called the New Spiritual Progressives or NSP. This NSP has four primary aims:

- Foster a New Bottom Line of love, generosity & ecological sensitivity in our economy, education, media, & government.
- Foster a new global consciousness and solidarity.
- Promote awe, radical amazement, gratitude & developing an inner spiritual life.

- Challenge the misuse of God & religion by the Religious Right and religio-phobia on the Left.

Rabbi Lerner and Tikkun are not without controversy within the American Jewish community, in particular because of his (and therefore Tikkun's) position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Lerner and Tikkun call for an approach that recognizes the worth of both peoples and that seeks peaceful approaches by all parties in the efforts at settling this long-standing and brutal conflict.

Nonetheless, this an essential movement that is rooted in Judaism at the deepest levels, including its mystical side as well as its practical, heal-the-world side.

Jim Wallis' Sojourners

Jim Wallis is a forthright evangelical Christian who is working diligently to pull that large and powerful group away from focusing almost exclusively on the polarizing issues of abortion rights and the GLBT communities and re-root evangelical Christians in the primary concerns of Jesus as recorded in the New Testament. These concerns include the poor and the sick, and the economic and social systems that work against those who are in the greatest need and have the least power. Today, Sojourners also includes a major emphasis on the environment.

Yes, it is true that Wallis' Sojourners (www.sojo.net) is not anywhere near 100% support for GLTB rights or what most progressives would understand to be an abortion-rights position. Within the Christian spectrum, Sojourners adopts a moderate to moderately conservative approach: Gay and lesbian relationships should have full legal and social protection and rights according to Sojourners, but it is opposed to gay and lesbian marriages. Sojourners stresses that abortions should be minimized; however (and unique within the evangelical community) the organization does *not* propose any legal restrictions on abortion.

Importantly, Wallis and Sojourners actively oppose what they consider to be the religious right, including James Dobson, Pat Robertson, the late Jerry Falwell, and others who have been featured by our major media as "the" Christian spokespersons. Sojourners' opposition is frequent and strong. Wallis refers to himself as a "left-of-center" evangelical. In keeping with that spirit, it is quite clear that on other key social and political issues, Wallis and Sojourners are full-court press on change in the direction that most secular political and social progressives would pursue.

To put Wallis' evangelical Christianity into perspective, it is helpful to understand that the Christian sacred writings (the New Testament) all have an historical context. While there may be timeless wisdom embedded in these texts, they are also temporally bound to the people who compiled them and in particular to the intended audience. (This theme will also come up in the next section on the Turkish Hadith Project.)

In addition, there is a strong consensus among biblical scholars that the early church, in response to the sacred energy that was experienced by Jesus' followers, wrote glowing commentary, including some that they put into the dialogue bubble connected to Jesus – even though Jesus most likely did not say nearly all that is attributed to him. (See the work of the so-called Jesus Seminar for details).

A crucial example is the famous text in the Gospel of John, where Jesus seems to say that the only way to God is through him (John 3:16). This is understood by a great many biblical scholars today to be entirely the words of the early church, not Jesus. However, for most evangelicals, including quite likely Wallis, this idea is one of the cornerstones of their faith. (As is common knowledge, this text has been used throughout history to justify unspeakable atrocities in the name of the Prince of Peace.) This clearly has gotten in the way of ecumenical and interfaith work for many evangelicals. This is where Wallis is different. He is fully plugged into the radical vision that Jesus had, one that is clearly in keeping with the progressive movement in the US (tend the poor and the sick; what you do to the least among us, you do to me). So, Wallis and others in his camp are definitely allies with progressives – as long as secular progressives do not demand absolute philosophical purity.

The Turkish Hadith Project

The Hadith are the collection of sayings by or attributed to the Prophet Muhammad. In Islam, they rank second only to the Qur'an in their importance as rules and guidance for the faithful Muslim community. The Hadith also serve as much of the basis for Islamic law or Sharia.

According to recent reports, including articles in *Newsweek* (5/31/08) and the *Christian Science Monitor* (3/11/08), the Turkish government through its Religious Affairs Directorate (headed by Mehmet Gormez) initiated a full-scale reexamination of all 170,000 sayings in order to better understand them in today's world society. The project is being carried out by the Hadith department at Ankara University's divinity school; Ismail Hakki Unal is head of the department.

The scholars involved have been careful to emphasize their aim is to recontextualize this massive body of sayings, many of which are perhaps 1,400 years old. These sayings were expressed in a particular setting and do not always make sense unless one understands the original context. One example that is given concerns the prohibition of women traveling alone. Gormez is quoted in *Newsweek* as saying that this prohibition resulted from the unsafe conditions at the time; that the Prophet Muhammad in other writings expressed regret for the days when it was possible for women to travel alone.

A second aim is to harmonize the Hadith with the Qur'an and to eliminate those sayings that contradict the Qur'an.

While some in the West are equating this project with the Christian Reformation, those involved in this enterprise flatly reject this interpretation. Unal, the Ankara University theologian, is quoted in the *Monitor* as saying that this is not reform, but an effort "to go back to the basics and origins of Islam."

This aim poses a paradox. On the one hand, returning to the basics and origins sounds quite conservative. On the other, it will inevitably modernize and radically modify some deeply entrenched ways of looking at the Islamic way of life.

As Christians scholars have discovered, recontextualizing sacred writings is both enlivening and deeply unsettling. While new meaning emerges that can be profoundly

transforming, this same phenomenon shakes apart the pictures and stories that millions of believers have used to make sense of their religion, their world, and themselves. It will be important to watch what happens when this material is published (scheduled for December of this year).

Faith and Process

The Faith and Process project (www.processandfaith.org) was begun 25 years ago as an offshoot of the scholarly Center for Process Studies of the Claremont School of Theology. From humble and informal beginnings, the program has matured into an extraordinarily valuable resource for liberal and progressive thinkers.

The initial aim of Faith and Process was to help transform the more esoteric ideas generated by theologians and philosophers into more accessible and useful materials for lay people. This has resulted in a program that now is providing a clear, understandable voice to a theology that undergirds an extraordinarily powerful progressive approach to the interface between religion and the world.

Faith and Process and the Center for Process Studies spring from the radical reworking of the understanding of the nature of reality by Alfred North Whitehead. By affirming that *process* and not *substance* is the more fundamental dynamic of reality, the door is opened to a whole host of new perspectives for all fields of thought, including religion and theology.

Process and Faith has sought to provide thinking followers of diverse faith traditions a language that embraces all facets of life: science *and* religion; mind, body *and* spirit, faith *and* reason. The P&F web site is rich with resources that deal with a wide range of topics.

One of the most interesting resources for many site visitors is the "Ask Dr. Cobb" section. (John B. Cobb Jr., who is in his 80s, is the foremost process theologian, and one of the most important theological figures of the past 50 years.) Each month, he responds to a question from the public. There are more than 100 brief essays posted. While some of the topics may be of more interest to those within faith traditions (and those who are seeking to overcome bad theology and religious teachings), other topics are more generally interesting to progressives: animal rights, ethnic diversity, global warming, homosexuality, intelligent design, patriotism, process and science, process and Islam, among others.

While it is nearly impossible to sum up what makes process thought and process theology so unique and compelling for many, the web site has a quotation from Whitehead that helps: "God's aims always push us toward care for the world." In process theology, the Sacred is understood to be an intimate and integral part of every aspect of the world; and the Sacred is recognized as seeking the well-being of all. (Think about that for a moment.)

These ideas play themselves out in ways that are harmonious with progressive aims. Simultaneous, these concepts strongly oppose such nonsense as God being out there punishing people and whole nations for supposed bad behavior; as well as the idea that coercive domination over people and the natural world is somehow divinely

sanctioned, caused or even desirable. In process thought, the divine form of power is *persuasive* and not coercive. (Tell that to those responsible for the interrogations at Guantanamo.)

The world certainly would be on the way to being a far better place if it were generally affirmed that the fundamental creative drive in the universe seeks the well-being of all, and does this in a persuasive manner – and that we humans are called to model this.

Please Talk to Me

As musician Peter Gabriel once said, “Please talk to me!” I invite Alliance readers to let me know your questions and concerns. I would really like to have a dialogue with you on the topics that matter to you. For example, I could focus on the “pastor problems” that both Obama and McCain have had (with Jeremiah Wright and John Hagee, respectively). Both situations merit a closer look for progressives. Or, perhaps there are other topics. Please let me know via e-mail (admin@cctnet.com).