

Threats to Multi-Cultural Tolerance and Globalism: The Challenge of Theocracy

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Abstract

Democracy needs to defend itself from the many immediate threats - technology, imperialism, global economic powers, human passivity and reactionary religion. Reactionary religion has taken the lead worldwide in rejecting pluralism and democracy, viewing both values as gateways to secularism and decadence. Both modernism and post-modernism have failed to fully address the success of the continued political advances of the religious right worldwide.

A new, postmodern politics of meaning is needed to address basic human needs currently served by the cosmology of traditional religious orthodoxy. Progressive thinkers in philosophy, religion and in critical theory must work dialectically to retain the good of religion and spirituality, the need for ultimate meaning, and the challenge of reducing negative, anti-democratic impulses. These impulses are embodied in theocracy and a fear of life. Until religion is totally reinvented or evolves to a higher level we will have to defend many democratic values from religious extremists. A live and let live political philosophy is a good defense of democracy.

Introduction: Defending Democracy from Theocracy with a New Spiritual Politics

"True politics is first of all a state of soul" (Socrates).

What we are calling a "live and let live" attitude - democracy with liberty - is always a difficult balance for any political culture or historic era.

A dialectical democracy would take a both/and approach to the divisions, tensions and contradictions of politics, science and religion. We could all get along under this system - a "live and let live" world. We must defend this concept of a dialectical democracy until the day of integral consciousness and human unity arrives, if it ever does. In the meantime, we would leave each other space to co-create the possible future without fear, bloodshed or theocracy.

Meanwhile, the shadow side of religion continues to attack democracy and tolerance for diversity, Democracy in turn needs the counterweight of liberal religion to argue for the values of pluralism and coexistence. Many new eco-spiritual and humanistic paradigms have arisen offering a more dialectic approach to future evolution. This new set of stories accepts a dialectical and evolutionary process of give and take in all fields; i.e., a dialectical democracy. Thus, a humanistic and progressive spirituality can provide a much needed ally to the forces associated with critical theory and true democracy.

The left hand of God offers an attractive theology of hope which fits the various models of democracy much better than religious fundamentalism.

Critical theory has deconstructed the roles of reactionary religion in opposing many, if not most, democratic reforms of the modern era. Academic critics of corporate global dominance need to also include a critique of the power of the religious right. Often the religious right brings large sections of lower and middle class voters into an alliance with the business elites. This

combination is fertile ground for corporatism or outright fascism. In an age of high-tech, state thought control via media and cultural memes the role of religion and religious philosophy can either produce a theocratic future or a post-capitalist, possible human viewed as more than simply a fallen creature needing the strong hand of a vengeful God.

An Immediate Crisis and Challenge to Democracy that Must Be Faced

Not only are we faced with a rise of political and religious intolerance we are risking the growth of a Big Brother state system as the only solution to fear, terror and violence. Once the general public clearly rejects religious extremism, theocracy and cultural intolerance, a key ally of vampire capitalism will be neutralized. Then economic Darwinism and undemocratic economic power can be reconsidered. Economic democracy will once again be on the human agenda. Curbing the bigots is a step toward curbing the bankers. Both are undemocratic.

Beat the Bigots then the Bankers: Strategic Necessity

This paper chooses to focus on the bigots and their allies who exploit fear and scapegoating to gain and hold power at the expense of human unity and tolerance. The bigot needs the ignorant and fear-ridden to hold power.

Achieving democracy and maintaining what modest democracy we have requires restraining both bigots and bankers who seek to bully or exploit the masses globally. True democracy encourages the voices of all stakeholders on the bedrock values of equity, justice and shared power. Excessive power held by bigots (and bankers) stands in the way of true, pluralistic democracy.

The shameful role of reactionary capital in making alliances with reactionary or extremist theocrats is left to a future study.

Can Progressives Mount a Successful Values-Based Response to the Right?

Concrete suggestions for maintaining a positive, values based pluralism have been advanced by several key religious liberals, Jim Wallis (2005) and Michael Lerner (2006). Both Wallis and Lerner see some common ground with religious conservatives in rejecting a soulless universe. Wallis, Lerner and many visionary thinkers realize the importance of a politics of meaning offering a purposeful life rooted in the common good while valuing diversity of expression.

Lerner, the author of The Politics of Meaning (1996) and Spirit Matters (2000), describes an emancipatory spirituality, beyond selfishness and materialism, that embraces generosity, atonement, joy, celebration, and a new bottom line; and that provides a new framework for thinking about childhood, loving relationships, and the world of work, politics, law, education, and ecology.

Van Jones, executive director of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, observed that "one key fact seems to escape the notice of today's activist crowd. The champions of the civil rights struggle didn't come marching out of shopping centers in the South. Or libraries. Or high school gymnasiums. To face the attack dogs, to face the fire-hoses, to face the billy clubs, these heroes and heroines came marching boldly out of church houses. And they were singing church songs. They set an example of courage and sacrifice that will endure for the ages. And as they did it, they prayed on wooden pews in the name of a Nazarene carpenter named Jesus." (Jones, 2005)

"I see the seeds of a wisdom-based, Earth-honoring, pro-democracy movement - one that affirms

and applauds religious and spiritual impulses, while opposing fundamentalism, chauvinism and theocracy. Over time, this kind of progressive movement has the potential to win - and win big - in the United States. To be honest: it is probably the only type of progressive movement that stands a chance in a country as religious as ours" (Jones, 2005).

A New Spiritual Politics is Needed to Protect and Extend Democracy

"It is my conviction that our secular disciplines and institutions are not capable of dealing with our social problems. They don't reach deep enough and they fail to address questions of meaning and value. They can only handle social manipulation, when it is the soul of the culture that is in trouble." (Moore, 2004).

Is there a genuine spiritual politics? "Politics is really the art of governance, a science that synthesizes opposing views into a higher level of understanding. Spiritual politics responds not just to competing interests and the demand for rights, but, rather, focuses on the next evolutionary step in growth for each individual and group. It directs resources and structures institutions to help citizens meet their own needs, while learning to embody the virtues common to all religions and systems of ethics - compassion, honesty, and the sharing of skills and resources."

"Creating a synthesis between liberalism and conservatism brings together liberty and virtue, community and individual initiative, compassion and self-reliance, altruism and accountability to create a more successful and democratic civic culture"(McLaughlin and Davidson, 2005).

The Critical Ally in Defending Democracy

"Creating an authentic, meaning-based democracy requires the cultivation of civic/democratic habits such as tolerance, but also fairness, mutual respect, compassion, and a sense of the larger community; i.e., concern for the whole/public/planetary good." (Kucinich, 2000).

The secular left which includes much of academia worldwide needs to expand its working alliance with religious liberals of all stripes. This may mean not only reframing the language of academic and public discourse, but more vigorously addressing the psycho-spiritual needs common to humans everywhere. The masses need personal meaning on all levels both outer and inner. A more humane meaning of life is afforded by democracy and religious pluralism as opposed to a fear-based religious politics of division and cultural war. The religious moderates and the moral mainstream are vital allies in defending democracy.

If the liberal/left is to forge a political agenda that addresses the deeper, meaning-based needs and ideals that the (religious) right speaks to, but in a truly democratic framework, we need to develop an agenda that focuses on the ethical and spiritual/religious dimensions of democracy.

This is a formula for success in all cultures where some basic human needs are met by traditional religion. The cultural wars are being fought worldwide on many levels. Hopefully, this essay will have value to forces defending democracy in many parts of the world not just the moral mainstream in the western world. Live and let live democracy has global relevance as a vision for the future.

If we argue for incorporating a "live and let live" socio-political attitude, we are talking about ethical values; i.e. articulating minimal ethical standards -- which are what the World Parliament on Religions, did in writing a manifesto for a new global ethic in Chicago in 1993.

Spiritual politics nourishes our bodies, minds, hearts, and souls; honors our ultimate concerns, highest ethical principles, and our sense of oneness with all sentient beings; counters our feelings of alienation by challenging us to apply the wisdom of the world's greatest spiritual traditions to today's pressing economic and social problems; and promotes personal, social, and global healing and transformation (Butts, 2006).

"There is a growing consensus that we need to restore moral, ethical, family, and community values to our governing structures. We want our leaders to act with integrity and to honor the public trust. We want a system that reflects our common human desire to be treated with truthfulness, fairness, respect, and dignity; and that truly cares for children while giving parents the time and resources to be effective caregivers." (Hewlett and West, 2004).

Tolerance and Decency Are A Necessity for a Just and Peaceful World

Why in the world can't we just get along? Since technology and economics are bringing diverse peoples ever closer together, we must learn how to get along. In an increasingly multicultural world with such great diversity in values, politics and worldview, it is a practical necessity to develop a "live and let live" attitude in all social relations. This will require a combination of fair-minded governments, world bodies and the best of global civil society to fully extend the notion of a social philosophy of "live and let live" worldwide. Countering the most reactionary religious forces is a necessary first step in breaking the unholy alliance of the business class with religious extremists.

We Can't Stand Pat: How We Can Take Back the High Ground from Haters

We badly need a humane solution to our basic societal concerns that does not turn to theocracy on one hand or an Orwellian police state on the other. Only by letting go of fear of each other and our sense of deep insecurity will we heal the conscious and unconscious basis of human conflict both personal and political.

A world view of trust in life and trust in self is an important step toward a gentle acceptance of all our neighbors - both near and far. As futurists and social philosophers we can see the long-term victory of tolerance and decency since at the practical level it is the most humane way to run the global village.

Let's all start with the "live and let live" attitude - and try to just get along.

Save Democracy, Oppose Theocracy and Fear

The politics of love and acceptance is challenged by a prevailing politics of fear. At various points in human history religion and fascism have formed a united front of terror: a symbol of a twisted cross in one hand and a machine gun or a bomb in the other. The danger today rests as much with a western version of theocracy based on the fear-based religious right. We can't stand

pat and let Pat Robertson lead George Bush down this perilous road into an eternal holy war against media-enhanced demons from the unknown.

Sometimes it's holy war against distant devils of terrorism, sometimes simply a neighbor like Venezuela and sometimes our fellow citizens and neighbors such as gays and lesbians. All of these scapegoats are simply ploys to seize state power and establish a theocracy.

We can't stand pat and let this happen.

Practical and Positive Strategies to Advance Tolerance and Turn Back Anti-Democratic Forces.

Meet the basic human need for spiritual nourishment in a more humane, tolerant manner thus addressing the positive appeal of traditional religion. Consider the work of the Network of Spiritual Activists who offers a new vision to serve the needs of heart and soul as well as economic security.

- Campaign to enlist religion, spirituality and psychology in expanded educational efforts to reduce human fear thus leading to a psychic capacity to accept or at least tolerate the various perceived threats from the outer world.
- Continue worldwide dialogue and cultural exchanges designed to reduce the levels of fear and ignorance associated with the "stranger," "the other" or the "sinner."
- Engage in inter-group dialogues seeking better understanding between historically divided groups. Many global, national and local groups are doing this. In practical terms this means a higher tolerance for diversity and a truce in the cultural wars.
- Intensify support for universal human rights codes associated with a deep belief in full human dignity. This is the bedrock for fighting ethnic bias, racism, gender inequality, classism, nationalism and religious bigotry.
- Adopt and extend the educational and political efforts designed to advance the notion of communal unity in diversity as the paradigm of the future. This concept is applicable not only to society and government but also to our personal lives.

All of this requires that the many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and related progressive movements include an expanded component of human rights advocacy with their various specific agendas. All groups must be multi-issue and address hatred and bigotry.

Just as labor unions and civil right groups have historically championed full human rights on the job and in society so too must all reform organizations include expanded programs opposing intolerance and outright bigotry. Thus, the humanistic visionaries in all of the various world movements and those simply working with a good heart at the local level must include the issues associated with a "live and let live" worldview. This is especially true for movements based on religion, spirituality, humanistic psychology and political philosophies.

In each nation or neighborhood the defense of justice and fairness may take a different form. Nonetheless, exposing the violent spirit of Pat Robertson's bigotry in the U.S. or fighting the rise of the far right in Europe is the urgent task placed before progressives in the West. In the Middle East, Africa and parts of South Asia the challenge is even greater. The best long-term hope for

humankind is a gradual victory of well-educated, cosmopolitan elites over the various fundamentalisms and oppressions now so dominant in so much of the developing world.

Make no mistake, a paradigm of “live and let live” can be crushed by victories for intolerance, fear of the world and the political scapegoating so popular among the fear-stricken fundamentalists. But the superior logic of moderation, compromise and respect will ultimately prevail.

While short-term struggle against anti-humanitarian and anti-democratic trends is essential to relieve injustice and oppression, a long-term vision would include not only a political solution but also a social and even spiritual transformation of global society.

A Role for Public Intellectuals, Social Philosophers and Community Educators

New paradigms have arisen offering a more dialectic approach to future evolution. The new story accepts a dialectical and evolutionary process of give-and-take in all fields; i.e., a dialectical democracy (Hawkins, 2005). Many social philosophers and shape shifters hold out hope for a series of paradigm shifts leading to even higher states of consciousness thus gradually eliminating much of the existing fear-based consciousness.

A Long Term Evolutionary Vision of the Possible Future of Democracy

Individuals invested in community leadership, progressive social change and personal growth can take practical steps toward a fuller appreciation of the multicultural world ethic. The realization of human unity and the gradual heightened consciousness of oneness will evolve from the discovery of common ground.

We argue for a steady, measurable advance of consciousness resulting in more democracy, power-sharing and communal understanding of the need for cooperation and human unity. Thus, spiritual democracy contributes to secular democracy allowing a “live and let live” future which trusts in the possible human living beyond fear, hatred or war. A live and let live democracy is necessary until humanity evolves to the higher consciousness of our unity in diversity, our timeless destiny of oneness.

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