

A Time for Heresy By Bill Moyers

When Dean Bill Leonard asked James Dunn to join him here at Wake Forest's new Divinity School, my soul shouted "Yes!" These two men personify the honesty and courage we need to meet the challenge of faith in the fundamentalist dispensation of the 21st century as radical interpretations of both Islam and Christianity seek, in the words of C. Welton Gaddy of the Interfaith Alliance, "to take over the government and use cause structures to advance the ideology, hierarchy, and laws" of their movement.

James Dunn and Bill Leonard are Baptists. What kind of Baptist matters. At last count there were more than two dozen varieties of Baptists in America. Bill Clinton is a Baptist. So is Pat Robertson. Jesse Jackson is a Baptist. So is Jesse Helms. Al Gore is a Baptist. So is Jerry Falwell. No wonder Baptists have been compared to jalapeno peppers: one or two make for a tasty dish, but a whole bunch together will bring tears to your eyes.

Many Baptists are fundamentalists; they believe in the absolute inerrancy of the Bible and the divine right of preachers to tell you what it means. They also believe in the separation of church and state only if they cannot control both. The only way to cooperate with fundamentalists, it has been said, is to obey them. James Dunn and Bill Leonard are not that kind of Baptist. They trace their spiritual heritage to forbearers who were considered heretics for standing up to ecclesiastical and state power on matters of conscience. One of them was Thomas Helwys, who, when Roman Catholics were being persecuted by the British crown, dared to defend the Catholics. Helwys went to jail, and died there, for telling the king of England, King James – yes, of the King James Bible – that "Our Lord the King has no more power over their [Catholic] conscience than ours, and that is none at all."

Baptists helped to turn that conviction into America's great contribution to political science and practical politics – the independence of church and state. Baptists in colonial America flocked to Washington's army to fight in the Revolutionary War because they wanted to be free from sanctioned religion. When the war was won they refused to support a new Constitution unless it contained a Bill of Rights that guaranteed freedom of religion and freedom from religion. No religion was to become the official religion; you couldn't be taxed to pay for my exercise of faith. This was heresy because, while many of the first settlers in America had fled Europe to escape religious persecution at the hands of the majority, once here they made their faith the established religion that denied freedom to others. Early Baptists considered this to be tyranny. Said John Leland: "All people ought to be at liberty to serve God in a way that each can best reconcile to their own consciences."

It was all about a free conscience in a free state, and James Dunn has spent his life as a champion of both. No one in my time has been a greater defender of "soul freedom" – the competence of each man and woman to interpret their own experience of God in the light of faith and reason. When James stood up against fundamentalists who would have the state recognize their literal reading of the Bible as the foundation for public policy, they smeared him. They demonized him. They tried to fire him from his denominational position. But they couldn't silence him. He stood against them when they set out to turn the Southern Baptist

Convention into a monolith of dogma run from the top down by a cabal of credalists demanding doctrinal conformity. He riled them when they sought to turn the pews of their churches into precincts of partisan politics. He infuriated them when he opposed their plotting with the White House to draft a Constitutional amendment that would trivialize prayer by reducing it to a perfunctory ritual approved by the state. Said James Dunn: "The Supreme Court can't ban prayer in school. Real prayer is always free." When the fundamentalists and their obliging politicians claimed that God had been expelled from the classroom, Dunn answered: "The god whom I worship and serve has a perfect attendance record and has never been tardy."

I think of people like Dunn as primal Baptists. Traces of their mindset go all the way back to the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel in the book of Genesis. I relish the interpretation of this ancient story of Davidson Loehr, a former carpenter, combat photographer, and scholar who is now a minister in Austin, Texas. He reminds us that technically Jacob's adversary was not an angel; it was the local deity who stood guard at the boundary beyond which Jacob was not supposed to venture. Local gods were everywhere in those days, protecting parochial fiefdoms. This one told Jacob he couldn't leave, to turn around and go back. But Jacob wouldn't turn back; he had miles to go and promises to keep. He was called to discover his destiny, move out to the great world awaiting him. If he turned back he would spend the rest of his life in a place too narrow, with a god too small. So Jacob had to go to the mat with this presumptuous authority figure and they wrestled all night. It must have been a terrible struggle because when morning came and Jacob had pinned the god for the last time, his leg was on fire with pain. He crossed the river and on the other side he got a new name – now he would be known as Israel – but for the rest of his life Jacob walked with a limp. Pain comes with freedom – it's just the deal. The little gods don't want you to grow, learn, think for yourself. But you have to test their truth claims against your own life's experience – against your own faith and reason. To cross over to freedom you have to show the bogus gods at the border that you have a mind of your own.

It's fascinating what is revealed to you. Joseph Campbell told me a story (also recently recounted by Davidson Loehr) about the Australian tribe that used the bullroarer to keep people in awe of the gods. The bullroarer is a long flat board with notches, or slits, at one end, and a rope at the other. When you swing it around your head, the action produces a musical humming. The sound struck the primitive tribes as other-worldly, causing them to tremble in fear that the gods were angry. So the elders would go into the forest and come back with word of what it would take to placate the gods. And the people would oblige.

Now when a young boy in the tribe was ready to become a man, a ritual took place. Wearing masks, the elders would kidnap him and take him into the woods, tie him down, and with a flint knife slice the underside of his penis. It was painful, but the medicine man said this is how you became a man.

It meant shedding one's innocence. At the end of the ritual one of the masked men dipped the bullroarer in the boy's blood and thrust it in his face, simultaneously removing his mask so the boy could see it's not a god at all – it's just one of the old guys. And the medicine man would whisper, "We make the noises."

Ah, yes – it's not the gods after all. It's just the old guys – Uncle George, Uncle Dick, Uncle Don. The "noise" in the woods is the work of the old guys playing gods, wanting you to live in fear and trembling so that you will look to them to protect you against the wrath to come. It takes courage to put their truth-claims to the test of reality, to call their bluff.

We need such courage today. This is a time for heresy. American democracy is threatened by perversions of money, power, and religion. Money has bought our elections right out from under us. Power has turned government “of, by, and for the people” into the patron of privilege. And Christianity and Islam have been hijacked by fundamentalists who have made religion the language of power, the excuse for violence, and the alibi for empire. We must answer the principalities and powers that would force on America a stifling conformity. Either we make the heretical choices that will inspire us to renew our commitment to America's deepest values and ideals, or the day will come when we will no longer recognize the country we love.

Here's what I mean.

Two years ago, the American Political Science Association produced a study entitled *Democracy in an Age of Rising Inequality*. The report said people with wealth – privileged Americans – are “roaring with a clarity and consistency that public officials readily hear and routinely follow” while citizens “with lower or moderate incomes are speaking with a whisper.” The study concluded that “progress toward realizing American ideals of democracy may have stalled, and even, in some places, reversed.”

The following year – 2005 – the editors of *The Economist*, one of the world's most pro-capitalist publications, produced their own sobering analysis of what is happening in America. They found great and growing income disparities. Thirty years ago the average annual compensation of the top 100 chief executives was 30 times the pay of the average worker; today it is 1000 times the pay of the average worker.

They found an education system “increasingly stratified by social class” in which poor children “attend schools with fewer resources than those of their richer contemporaries.” They found our celebrated universities increasingly “reinforcing rather than reducing” these educational inequalities.

They found American corporations no longer successful agents of upward mobility. It is now harder for people to start at the bottom and rise up the company hierarchy by dint of hard work and self-improvement.

The editors of *The Economist* studied all this evidence and concluded – and I am quoting a pro-business magazine, remember – that the United States “risks calcifying into a European-style, class-based society.”

Let that sink in: The United States “risks calcifying into a European-style, class-based society.”

In 1960 I heard John F. Kennedy promise that “a rising tide lifts all boats.” He was right then. He would be wrong today. Just this past weekend The Washington Post, in a lead editorial, called for a second look at the old belief “that anyone who works hard and plays by the rules can attain the American dream by sharing in the fruits of economic progress.” As great wealth accumulated at the top, the rest of the country is not benefiting proportionally. Across the country working men and women are strained to cope with the rising cost of health care, pharmaceutical drugs, housing, higher education, and public transportation – all of which have risen faster than typical family income. The economist Robert J. Gordon, quoted in The Financial Times (another pro-business publication), says there has been “little long-term change in workers share of U.S. income over the past half century.” The top ten percent of earners have captured almost half the total income gains and the top one percent has gained the most of all – more in fact, than all the bottom 50 percent.

We are witnessing a marked turn of events for a nation whose DNA contains the inherent promise of an equal opportunity at “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” We were not supposed to be a country where the winners take all. The great progressive struggles in our history were waged to make sure ordinary citizens, and not just the rich, share in the benefits of a free society. Today, however, the majority of Americans may support such broad social goals as affordable medical coverage for all, decent wages for working people, safe working conditions, a good education for every child, and clean air and water, but there’s no government “of, by, and for the people” to deliver on those aspirations. America is no longer working for all Americans.

How did this happen? By design. For a quarter of a century now a ferocious campaign has been conducted to dismantle the political institutions, the legal and statutory canons, and the intellectual, cultural, and religious frameworks that sustained America’s social contract. The corporate, political, and religious right converged in a movement that for a long time only they understood because they are its advocates, its architects, and its beneficiaries.

Their economic strategy was to cut workforces and wages, scour the globe for even cheaper labor, and relieve investors of any responsibility for the cost of society. On the weekend before President Bush’s second inauguration, The New York Times described how his first round of tax cuts had already brought our tax code closer to a system under which income on wealth would not be taxed at all and public expenditures would be raised exclusively from salaries and wages.

Their political strategy was to neutralize the independent media, create their own propaganda machine with a partisan press, and flood their coffers with rivers of money from those who stand to benefit from the transfer of public resources to elite control. Along the way they would burden the nation with structural deficits that will last until our children’s children are ready to retire, systematically stripping government of its capacity, over time, to do little more than wage war and reward privilege.

Their religious strategy was to fuse ideology and theology into a worldview freed of the impurities of compromise, claim for America the status of God’s favored among nations (and therefore beyond political critique or challenge), and demonize their opponents as ungodly and immoral.

At the intersection of these three strategies was money: Big Money.

They found a deep flaw in our political system and zeroed in on it.

Our elected officials need huge sums of money to finance their campaigns, especially to buy television. The average cost of running and winning a seat in the House of Representatives – the so-called “People’s House” – now tops one million dollars. The chairman of the Federal Election Commission said just this weekend that anyone who expects to run for the nomination for president – the nomination – in 2008 will need to have raised one hundred million dollars by the end of 2007. That money isn’t going to come from regular folks – less than one half of one percent of all Americans made a contribution of \$200 or more to a federal candidate in 2004. No, the men and women who have mastered the money game have taken advantage of this fundamental weakness in our system – the high cost of campaigns – to sell democracy to the highest bidder.

Some simple facts:

The number of lobbyists registered to do business in Washington has more than doubled in the last five years. That’s 16,342 lobbyists in 2000 to 34,785 last year. Sixty-five lobbyists for every member of Congress.

The total spent per month by special interests wining, dining, and seducing federal officials is now nearly \$200 million. Per month.

But it’s a small investment on the return. Just look at the most important legislation passed by Congress in the last decade.

There was the energy bill that gave oil companies huge tax breaks at the same time that Exxon Mobil just posted \$36 billion in profits in 2005, while our gasoline and home heating bills are at an all-time high.

There was the bankruptcy “reform” bill written by credit card companies to make it harder for poor debtors to escape the burdens of divorce or medical catastrophe.

There was the deregulation of the banking, securities, and insurance sectors, which led to rampant corporate malfeasance and greed and the destruction of the retirement plans of millions of small investors.

There was the deregulation of the telecommunications sector which led to cable industry price-gouging and the abandonment of news coverage by the big media companies.

There was the blocking of even the mildest attempt to prevent American corporations from dodging an estimated \$50 billion in annual taxes by opening a P.O. box in an off-shore tax haven like Bermuda or the Cayman Islands.

In every case these results were driven by the demands of Big Money in the form of campaign contributions and the cost of lobbying.

And in every case, the religious right was cheering for the winners.

You've heard about Tom DeLay and Jack Abramoff, I'm sure. Let me tell you a little more than what you might have heard.

Tom DeLay was a small businessman from Sugar Land, Texas, who ran a pest extermination business before he entered politics. He hated the government regulators who dared to tell him that some of the pesticides he used were dangerous – as, unfortunately, they were. DeLay got himself elected to the Texas legislature at a time the Republicans were becoming the majority in the once-solid Democratic south, and his reputation for joining in the wild parties around the state capital earned him the nickname “Hot Tub Tom.” But early in his political career, with exquisite timing (and the help of some videos from the right-wing political evangelist, James Dobson) Tom DeLay found Jesus and became a full-fledged born-again Christian. He would, in time, humbly acknowledge that God had chosen him to restore America to its biblical worldview. “God,” said Tom DeLay, “has been walking me through an incredible journey ... God is using me, all the time, everywhere ... God is training me. God is working with me”

Yes, indeed: God does work in mysterious ways.

In addition to finding Jesus, Tom DeLay also discovered the power of money to power his career. By raising more than two million dollars from lobbyists and business groups and distributing the money to dozens of Republican candidates in 1994, the year of the Republican breakthrough in the House, DeLay bought the loyalty of many freshmen legislators and got himself elected majority whip, the number three man in Newt Gingrich's “Gang of Seven,” who ran the House.

Here's how they ran it: On the day before the Republicans formally took control of Congress on January 3, 1995, DeLay met in his office with a coterie of lobbyists from some of the biggest companies in America. He virtually invited them to write their own wish list. What they wanted first was “Project Relief” – a wide-ranging moratorium on regulations that had originally been put into place for the health and safety of the public. Soon scores of companies were gorging on his generosity, adding one juicy and expensive tidbit after another to the bill. On the eve of the debate 20 major corporate groups advised lawmakers that “this was a key vote, one that would be considered in future campaign contributions.” On the day of the vote lobbyists on Capitol Hill were still writing amendments on their laptops and forwarding them to House leaders.

Watching Tom DeLay become the virtual dictator of the House, with the approval of party leaders and the blessing of the Christian right, I was reminded of the card shark in Texas who said to his prey, “Now play the cards fair, Reuben; I know what I dealt you.” They were stacking the deck against the people.

Consider what they did to the bill for Medicare prescription drug coverage. As the measure was coming to a vote, a majority of the full House was sympathetic to allowing cheaper imports from Canada and to giving the government the power to negotiate wholesale drug prices for Medicare beneficiaries. But DeLay and his cronies were working in behalf of the big pharmaceutical companies and would have none of it. So they made sure there would be no amendments on the floor and they held off the final roll call a full three hours – well after midnight – in order to strong-arm members who wanted to vote against the bill.

There are no victimless crimes in politics. The price of corruption is passed on to you. What came of all these shenanigans was a bill that gave industry what it wanted and gave taxpayers the shaft. But when the deeply flawed bill passed in the wee hours of the morning, the champagne corks popped in the offices crowded with lobbyists for the big drug and insurance companies. They were about to be richer on the backs of America's senior citizens.

When Tom DeLay worked the system to reward the rich and powerful, he had come a long way from Sugar Land, Texas. The people who had voted for him had the right to expect him to represent them, not the big lobbyists in Washington. This expectation is the very soul of democracy. We can't all govern – not even tiny, homogenous Switzerland practices pure democracy. So we Americans came to believe our best chance of responsible government lies in obtaining the considered judgments of those we elect to represent us. Having cast our ballots in the sanctity of the voting booth with its assurance of political equality, we go about our daily lives expecting the people we put in office to weigh the competing interests and decide to the best of their ability what is right. What do they do instead?

Well, as Tom DeLay became the king of campaign fundraising, The Associated Press writes “He began to live a lifestyle his constituents back in Sugar Land would have a hard time ever imagining.” Big corporations provided private jets to take him to places of luxury most Americans have never seen – places with “dazzling views, warm golden sunsets, golf, goose-down comforters, marble bathrooms, and balconies overlooking the ocean.” The AP reports that various organizations – campaign committees, political action committees, even a children's charity established by DeLay – paid over \$1 million for hotels, restaurants, golf resorts and corporate jets used by DeLay. There were at least 48 visits to golf clubs and resorts; 100 flights aboard corporate jets arranged by lobbyists; and 500 meals at fancy restaurants, some averaging \$200 for a dinner for two.

Spreading a biblical worldview kept DeLay on the move and on the take. But he needed help to sustain the cash flow. He found it in a lobbyist and fellow ideologue named Jack Abramoff, who personifies the money machine of which DeLay, with the blessing of the political and religious right, was the mastermind. It was Abramoff who helped DeLay raise those millions of dollars from campaign donors that bought the support of other politicians and became the base for an empire of corruption.

Just last month Jack Abramoff pleaded guilty to fraud, tax evasion, and conspiracy to bribe public officials. It's a spectacular fall for a man whose rise to power began 25 years ago with his election as chairman of the College Republicans. Despite its innocuous name, the organization became a political attack machine for the far right and a launching pad for

younger conservatives on the make. Karl Rove had once held the same job as chairman. So did Grover Norquist, who ran Abramoff's campaign and would become the most powerful operative in Washington for advancing the movement's strategies. At their side was a youthful \$200-a-month intern named Ralph Reed. Over the next several years they would yoke politics and religion to turn the conservative revolution into a rapacious racket.

Ralph Reed found Jesus and wound up running Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition. Time magazine put him on their cover as "the Right Hand of God." Reportedly after seeing "Fiddler on the Roof" Abramoff became an Orthodox religious Jew who finagled fake awards to provide himself with credentials in the new piety-soaked world of conservative Washington politics. One of those bogus awards named him "a distinguished Bible scholar." He received the "Biblical Mercantile Award" from an organization which laundered money for Tom DeLay's junkets to plush golf clubs.

It's impossible to treat all the schemes and scams this crowd concocted to subvert democracy in the name of God and greed. But here are two examples.

Abramoff made his name, so to speak, representing Indian tribes with gambling interests. As his partner he hired a DeLay crony named Michael Scanlon. What they had to offer, of course, were their well-known connections to the political and religious power structure, including friends at the White House (Abramoff's personal assistant usefully became Karl Rove's personal assistant), members of Congress, Christian right activists like Reed, and right-wing ideologues like Norquist (according to one report, two lobbying clients of Abramoff paid \$25,000 to Norquist's organization – Americans for Tax Reform – for a lunch date and meeting with President Bush in May 2001.)

Before it was over the Indian tribes had paid them \$82 million dollars, much of it going directly into Abramoff's and Scanlon's pockets. But some of the money found its way to the righteous. Ralph Reed, for one, had his hand out. Reed was the religious right's poster boy against gambling. "We believe gambling is a cancer on the American body politic," Reed had said. "It is stealing food from the mouths of children... [and] turning wives into widows." Reed was right about that, of course, but his distaste for gambling was no match for his desire to make himself some moolah by helping to protect Abramoff's gambling interests. When Reed resigned from the Christian Coalition – just as it was coming under federal investigation and slipping into financial arrears – he sent Abramoff an email: "Now that I am leaving electoral politics, I need to start humping in corporate accounts... I'm counting on you to help me with some contacts."

Abramoff came through. According to published reports, he and his partner Michael Scanlon paid Reed some \$4 million to whip up Christian opposition to gambling initiatives that could cut into the profits of Abramoff's clients. Reed called in some of the brightest stars in the Christian firmament – Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, James Dobson, Phyllis Schlafly – to participate in what became a ruse in Abramoff's behalf. They would oppose gambling on religious and moral grounds in strategic places (Texas, Louisiana, Alabama) at decisive moments when competitive challenges threatened Abramoff's clients. Bogus Christian fronts were part of the strategy. Preachers in Texas rallied to Reed's appeals. Unsuspecting folks in Louisiana turned on their radios one day to hear the voice of God – with Jerry Falwell

and Pat Robertson doing the honors – thundering against a riverboat gambling scheme which Abramoff wanted defeated because it threatened one of his own gambling clients. Reed even got James Dobson, whose nationwide radio “ministry” reaches millions of people, to deluge phone lines at the Interior Department and White House with calls from indignant Christians. In 1999 Abramoff arranged for the Mississippi Choctaws, who were trying to stave off competition from other tribes, to contribute over \$1 million to Norquist’s Americans for Tax Reform, which then passed the money along to the Alabama Christian Coalition and to another anti-gambling group Reed had duped into aiding the cause. It is unclear how much these Christian soldiers, “marching as to war,” knew about the true purpose of their crusade, but Ralph Reed knew all along that his money was coming from Abramoff. When he fiddled, his brethren on the Christian right danced.

It gets worse.

And here we get to the heart of darkness.

One of Abramoff’s first big lobbying clients was the Northern Marianas Islands in the Pacific. After World War II the Marianas became a trusteeship of the United Nations, administered by the U.S. government under the stewardship of the Interior Department. During World War II thousands of Marines died on the Marianas, fighting for our way of life and our freedoms. Today, these islands are a haven for tourists – first-class hotels, beautiful beaches, championship golf courses. But that’s not the whole story. The islands were exempted from U.S. labor and immigration laws, and over the years tens of thousands of people, primarily Chinese, mostly women, were brought there as garment workers to live in crowded barracks in miserable conditions. The main island, Saipan, became known as America’s biggest sweatshop.

In 1998 a government report found workers there suffering severe malnutrition and health problems and subjected to unprovoked acts of violence. Many had signed “shadow contracts” which required them to pay up to \$7000 just to get the job. They also had to renounce their claim to basic human rights. They were forbidden to engage in political and religious activities, to socialize or to marry. Some of the biggest names in the retail clothing industry were enabled to slap “made in the USA” labels on the clothes and import them to America while paying the workers practically nothing.

When these scandalous conditions began to attract attention, the sweatshop moguls fought all efforts at reform. Knowing that Jack Abramoff was close to Tom DeLay, they hired him to lobby for the islands. Conservative members of Congress lined up as Abramoff’s team arranged for them to visit the islands on carefully guided junkets. Conservative intellectuals and journalists, for hire at rates considerably above what the women on the islands were making, also signed on for expense-free trips to the Marianas. They flew first-class, dined at posh restaurants, slept in comfort at the beachfront hotel, and returned to write and speak of the islands as “a true free market success story” and “a laboratory of liberty.”

Abramoff took Tom DeLay and his wife there, too. DeLay practically swooned. He said the Marianas “represented what is best about America.” He called them “my Galapagos” – “a perfect petri dish of capitalism.”

These fellow travelers – rightwing members of Congress, their staffs and their lapdogs in the rightwing press and think tanks – became a solid phalanx aimed at any and all attempts to provide workers on the islands with a living wage and decent living conditions. When a liberal California Democrat, George Miller, and a conservative Alaskan senator, Frank Murkowski, both indignant at the “appalling conditions,” tried to raise minimum wages on the islands and at least prevent arbitrary deportation of the workers, they were stopped cold.

After the 2000 election, when the spoils of victory were being divided up, Abramoff got himself named to the Bush transition team for the Interior Department. He wanted to make sure the right people wound up overseeing his clients in the Marianas. He enlisted Ralph Reed, who said he would raise the matter with Rove, to stop at least one appointment to Interior that might prove troublesome. It was about this time that Reed wrote an email to Enron’s top lobbyist touting his pal Abramoff as “arguably the most influential and effective GOP lobbyist in Congress. I share several clients with him and have yet to see him lose a battle. He also is very close to DeLay and could help enormously on that front. raised \$ for bush...[sic]”

For his services to the Marianas Jack Abramoff was paid nearly \$10 million dollars, including the fees he charged for booking his guests on the golf courses and providing them copies of Newt Gingrich’s book

To this day, workers on the Marianas are still denied the federal minimum wage while working long hours for subsistence income in their little “petri dish of capitalism” – “America at its best.”

There are no victimless crimes in politics. The cost of corruption is passed on to the people. When the government of the United States falls under the thumb of the powerful and privileged, regular folks get squashed.

We are dealing here with a vision sharply at odds with the majority of Americans. These are people who want to arrange the world for the convenience of themselves and the multinational corporations that pay for their elections. With their fundamentalist medicine men twirling the bullroarers in the woods, they would turn America into their petri dish – a replica of the Marianas, many times magnified: A society “run by the powerful, oblivious to the weak, free of accountability, enjoying a cozy relationship with government, thriving on crony capitalism,” in the words of Al Meyeroff, who led a class-action suit in behalf of the worker on the Marianas and learned what they were up against. Let this, too, sink in: If the corporate, political, and religious right have their way, we will go back to the first Gilded Age, when privilege controlled politics, votes were purchased, legislatures were bribed, bills were bought, and laws flagrantly disregarded – all as God’s will.

So, my friends at Wake Forest, there is work to do. These charlatans and demagogues know that by controlling a society’s most emotionally-laden symbols, they can control America, too. They must be challenged. Davidson Loehr reminds us that holding preachers and politicians to a higher standard than they want to serve has marked the entire history of both religion

and politics. It is the conflict between the religion of the priests – ancient and modern – and the religion of the prophets.

It is the vast difference between the religion about Jesus and the religion of Jesus.

Yes, the religion of Jesus. It was in the name of Jesus that a Methodist ship caulker named Edward Rogers crusaded across New England for an eight-hour work day. It was in the name of Jesus that Francis William rose up against the sweatshop. It was in the name of Jesus that Dorothy Day marched alongside auto workers in Michigan, brewery workers in New York, and marble cutters in Vermont. It was in the name of Jesus that E.B. McKinney and Owen Whitfield stood against a Mississippi oligarchy that held sharecroppers in servitude. It was in the name of Jesus that the young priest John Ryan – ten years before the New Deal – crusaded for child labor laws, unemployment insurance, a minimum wage, and decent housing for the poor. And it was in the name of Jesus that Martin Luther King Jr. went to Memphis to march with sanitation workers who were asking only for a living wage.

This is the heresy of our time – to wrestle with the gods who guard the boundaries of this great nation's promise, and to confront the medicine men in the woods, twirling their bullroarers to keep us in fear and trembling. For the greatest heretic of all is Jesus of Nazareth, who drove the money changers from the temple in Jerusalem as we must now drive the money changers from the temples of democracy.