

## Life Together: An Agenda For Progressive Religion

By Dan Schultz

As progressives, we need, I think, a way of looking beyond the short-term goals of electoral victory or increased representation in the mass media to what alternatives to the dominant conservative ideologies we can offer to our nation and our local communities. We need a way of imagining a new world, a new way of life, one in which our hopes and dreams have been realized.

We need a way to seek the healing of the world.

I mean to suggest, then, that for progressives in 2006, there are a number of questions about religion that we need not be overly concerned with.

- We don't need to worry about what we are doing to attract conservative evangelicals.
- We don't need to argue for more "God-talk" in political campaigns.
- We don't need to fuss and fight about whether or not the Democratic party is "friendly to people of faith."
- We don't need to reconcile faith and science: they are separate, but not necessarily antagonistic, realms.
- We don't need to seek the conversion of American voters. The kids are all right the way they are, regardless of what they believe or don't believe.
- We sure as shooting don't need to aim for using "Biblical principles" in Democratic political strategy or governance.

What we do need to do is ask some basic questions: what are we after, in the end? And how do we intend to go about getting it, together?

I emphasize that last word because the alternative we are struggling against is one of separation. Modern conservatism is based on a single, hideous lie: that we are not all in this together, however you want to define "this". In fact, it is not too much to say that modern conservatism depends on a theological pre-supposition: that we are in the world over and against one another.

To be more accurate about it, conservatism seems to be built on the idea that the closer I am to God, the further away you are, both from God and from me. You might call this Hobbesian. Personally, I think it has more to do with the fetish of the free market and the unresolved tensions of Social Darwinism, particularly in its validation of racial ideologies. The people who subscribe to this theology have made competition more important than the God who prayed "that they may all be one." It has become an idolatry, in other words.

We should also understand that modern conservatives have used the idolatry of greed (unhealthy competition for resources) and fear of the other to achieve much of their agenda. To be too simple about it, greed has driven their economic agenda, while fear has driven their social and their security agendas. It was greed that created the secrecy surrounding Vice-President Cheney's Energy Commission. But it was fear that motivated the many Defense of Marriage Acts and the Bush administration's response to North Korea, Iraq, Iran, and Venezuela. In this sense, idolatry and fear are both means and ends, a destructive cycle that is corroding the soul of this nation.

The extent of the problem becomes clear when we look at specific issues:

- **Radical partisanship:** our political system is built on partisan politics. In fact, partisanship is a good in our system, in that competing interests hold back any one group from developing too much power. Therefore, we cannot simply say that this party or that one is "too partisan." They're supposed to be partisan.

That being said, the Republican party has taken partisanship to new heights in modern times. I don't think it takes too much intellectual heavy lifting to discern that that there is something deeply wrong when Ann Coulter jokes about someone killing a Supreme Court justice.

This bullying in the media provides a kind of rhetorical cover fire for the real action. There is a long list of Congressional activities specifically designed to keep Democrats and their constituents safely away from influencing the course of the legislative process: holding votes open to allow for extra time for arm-twisting, reconciliation committees that add material voted on by no member of Congress, bills rammed through without proper time for debate or review. Rather than representing the entire community, the Republican Congressional leadership has chosen to respond only to the narrowest of interests: well-connected businesses and conservative ideologues. Who represents the middle-class? Who speaks for the poor? And why are they not heard in our corridors of power? The answers to those questions are not pretty.

- Republican partisanship is used in service of what we might call "**Wal-Mart capitalism**," the pursuit of profit without regard to its social consequences. As we have seen through the example of Jack Abramoff, this confluence of political and financial power quickly leads to corruption. There are social consequences to this brand of capitalism as well: the near-slavery of Third World workers, the mistreatment of minimum-wage workers in this country, the betrayal of regulatory and environmental concerns. Again, we need not spend much time discerning how this separates us one from another.

- **Pre-emptive war:** Not only did the Bush administration invade Iraq almost without consultation, but they did so almost explicitly on the grounds of fighting the boogeyman. How much more obvious can an us-vs.-them mentality be than declaring that certain countries constitute an "Axis of Evil," then invading and occupying one of

them on pretexts that later turn out to be false? The point of the war in Iraq was never to deliver us from a mushroom cloud. It was to instill the fear of that cloud in the first place, and to focus the nation on an external enemy.

- **Sexual regulation:** As many much more intelligent people have argued, the drives to ban abortion and stave off same-sex marriage seem to have more to do with controlling sexual expression than with their stated goals. But notice that these issues are often framed in terms of the "traditional family" over and against advocates of sexual anarchy. Reading Rick Santorum's jeremiads, one almost has the sense of rampaging mobs outside the white picket fences of god-fearing Americans. Often, these controversies are expressed as a desire to maintain the values of a particular locale, as though no one in Tupelo could ever want an abortion without some kind of corrupting outside influence, or as if no one in Idaho ever discovered on their own power an attraction to the same sex.

In this, the desire to regulate sexuality has much in common with another American tradition: hatred of immigrants and racial minorities. We must protect our communities, it is said, lest they be overrun with people who don't respect our laws, or our customs. Translated: we want to stay well away from people who don't look or talk like us.

Let me be very clear: the Republican party did not invent racism. Nor have they been the only political party to exploit it. But let's not kid ourselves: since Nixon's infamous "Southern Strategy," it has been the Republican party that has used racial tensions to further its political agenda. In fact, it is arguably the Republican party's willingness to represent Southern racists since the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1966 that has fueled its dominance of recent American politics.

Last, you can see the same dynamics at work in what has been called the "war on science," or the struggles with public education. The assumption in some quarters is that knowledge is not morally neutral. Certainly, the recent call for Southern Baptists to withdraw their children from public schools reflects a separatist mentality. The belief guiding that call is that government-run school systems are morally unredeemable, and openly hostile to Christian values. Therefore, faithful people must pull away from the institutions and seek the safety of the home school, where traditional values can be taught properly.

What connects all these issues is a series of interlocking desires: the desire to give preference to one kind of person over another; the desire to shut one kind of person out of God's blessings altogether; the desire to maintain local - disconnected - control which supports systems of power that buttress the divisions expressed by the first two desires.

We need to oppose those desires. But we also need to provide an alternative to them. In the tradition of Robert LaFollette, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Martin Luther King, and Bobby Kennedy, we need to present a vision of a society united in support of one another.

We need a vision of a world in which no one is separated from the love of God.

Religion traditionally has been the forum in which Americans discuss their values. There really is no equivalent for the pulpit or the church basement in our nation's history. But America is growing more secular, year by year. Right or wrong, it is no longer fair - if it ever was - to assume that the church is the only place where morality is to be found. And if you take nothing else away from this sermon, take this: *it is possible to be moral without being religious*. An appeal to tradition simply will not work, because it recreates some of the very divisions we seek to heal, by separating believers from non-believers.

But there are two very good reasons to apply a religious analysis to these issues. First of all, I believe that religion has an unique power to create a meaningful alternative to the dominant narrative. This is quite separate from the question of agreement with particular religious beliefs. Look, for example, at the first part of this morning's text:

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? (Romans 8:35, 37-39, NRSV)

There are some buzzwords here that make more sense to Christians: elect, justifies, intercedes. But I don't think that you need to be a Christian to get the main point: God is on our side, and there is nothing in Heaven or on earth that can keep us apart.

Belief in such ideas is powerful. But the power lies not in creating a new reality. It lies in creating a living challenge to the Way Things Are. It is no accident, certainly, that Paul asks about "us," not "me." For, contrary to the easy formulation, faith is not belief in a proposition without evidence. It is a way of life, together. Faith is only as strong as the communities it inspires.

But not coincidentally, so is political life. A nation that creates the humiliation and degradation of the poor as ours does, or dumps its mentally ill on skid row, as our does, or countenances violence against blacks, Hispanics, gays and lesbians - as our does - that ignores the misery and starvation of Darfur, as ours does, that sexually violates its prisoners, as ours does, or ignores its people threatened by national disaster, as ours does, or pre-emptively attacks another country, as ours does, is neither a very faithful nation, nor one with a very successful politics.

The radical challenge to the status quo and the community committed to life together are one and the same. The most earth-shaking alternative is the one that involves a different way of life, a different way of being. This is the insight that religion has to

offer the community at large: that there is no power that can threaten life lived together, and there is no life worth living cut off from one another. Progressive faith shares with progressive politics, secular or not, the conviction that a shared life, lived with compassion, justice, moderation, responsibility, and tolerance is more than just a good life. It is *the* good life.

Friends, that is powerful. That is a threat to the powers-that-be. There are some people who make their living by creating hardship and distress for other people. There are people who get off on persecuting other people, who are so hard-hearted that they don't feel the need to respond to a little famine. Oh, they might say they're concerned with nakedness, especially on TV, but they don't mind seem to mind when a poor man stands naked before power or a poor woman dies alone, naked and afraid after a botched coat-hanger abortion. And they sure don't seem to hold back from sending other people's sons into peril, or applying the sword to those who can't afford the finest of legal assistance.

Any group with the potential to rewrite the rules of the game is a threat to their power, their privilege, their priority. A new way of life has the potential to upset all of that, and they know it. And so they will continue to mock, belittle, and hamper progressive religion, because of what we represent.

As a Christian, I affirm that the possibility of a new way of life is the gift of a good God, one who is capable of giving up his own son on our behalf. Moreover, my deepest conviction is that we are called to pour out our lives for one another as Christ Jesus did on our behalf.

I cannot expect you to share those beliefs. But I do ask that you would consider one further assertion: that the core of our work, whether religious or secular, whether Atheist, Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, Pagan, Unitarian Universalist, or really not much of anything, is not the same world reversed, with ourselves on top and our opponents cast down. It is a world transformed. A world in which we are free to pursue the common good without becoming the enemy of a sullen, hostile, and suspicious government.

A world in which the poor are fed.

A world in which the homeless are sheltered.

A world in which the prisoners are treated humanely.

A world in which economic opportunity is shared by all, for the good of all.

A world in which our bodies are our own.

A world in which race is no barrier.

A world in which love and fidelity is rewarded.

A world in which political opponents are friends first and traitors never.

A world in which all votes count equally.

A world in which soldiers' sacrifice is not wasted on vanity and greed.

A world in which the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.  
(Isaiah 11:6)

A world in which neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us one from another.

That is our goal. That is our desire. That is the challenge we present to the status quo. And the way we will get there is to live our lives together, as brothers and sisters united in common cause. That unity, that striving, is a threat far more radical than anything we could ever do in the White House, Congress, or a million ballot boxes across the nation. Those things are only the tools and the results of our unity, not the thing-in-itself. Where modern conservatism espouses separation, we have love.

What, ultimately, is the measure of a religion? Not its beliefs or confessions, but the way it is lived. Let us depart this morning as people committed to life together, and there is nothing that can stop us. And that, my friends, is true no matter what religion you practice - if any at all.

Amen.

*This is an edited version of a sermon preached at an Interfaith Worship Service held at the Yearly Kos Convention, June 11, 2006.*

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