

## Diversity and a New Bottom Line

Michael Lerner

Much of the discourse around diversity in the West in the past decades has painted a picture of societies composed of a large majority of people who shared a common ethnic, racial, or cultural heritage, were financially secure, and were being asked to share what they had (economic well-being, political power, cultural dominance) with some “Other” who had not yet been let in. The issue was primarily about inclusion into the various contexts in which the successful and the powerful had been previously operating.

The demand for inclusion and for respect toward those who had previously been on the outside has a firm basis in Torah. The most frequently repeated injunction of Torah is some variant of the following: When you come into your land, do not oppress the stranger, remember that you were strangers in the land of Egypt. The Torah applied this principle by insisting

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Author’s Note: I have written this paper not only as an abstract thought piece, but also as an actual invitation to you, the reader, to join our emerging Network of Spiritual Progressives, on line at <http://www.spiritualprogressives.org>, by phone at (510) 644-1200 or via my e-mail address.

*Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry*

“One law shall there be for you and the stranger within your midst.” This notion of inclusion has yet to be fulfilled in the contemporary world: few societies have actually embodied this principle successfully. I have spent much of the past twenty-five years critiquing the State of Israel’s failure to take this Torah principle seriously in dealing with the Palestinian people and challenging American society with regard to its treatment of domestic minorities.

#### THE NEW CHALLENGE

The issue of diversity will look very different in the twenty-first century. The fundamental challenge today is not how to include the Other within the successful and powerful societies of the West, but how to build a new global society in which all of us on the planet come to understand this fundamental truth: that our well-being as individuals and as members of our own particular religious, ethnic, racial or national group depends intrinsically on the well-being of everyone else on the planet and on the well-being of the planet itself. In an age in which discontented tribes in Afghanistan or Pakistan can become the source of domestic terror in London or New York, and in which the destruction of the environment in one part of the planet can cause a global warming that destroys all parts of the planet, and in which fiscal irresponsibility by some banks in Western countries can cause an economic meltdown in all countries, the interconnectedness of all with all is becoming increasingly obvious.

Commenting on the biblical story of Adam and Eve, Talmudic sages proclaimed that the point of the story was to prevent any one group on the planet from claiming that its origins came from a higher level of closeness to God, or a more noble background than any other group: we all derive from the mud of the earth. And these rabbis went on to proclaim that God took that mud from every corner of the planet, again to block chauvinistic consciousness.

Even though our interconnectedness is increasingly obvious, the corresponding spiritual, religious, psychological, and intellectual foundations for that recognition are far from preponderant in our world today. Indeed, it may well be the case that the human race spends its time in stark denial and, hence, accelerates the destruction of the planet rather than coming together to build a new global economy and a new global political reality. The unity of humanity, indeed the unity of all creation, may be a necessary and deep

truth from the standpoint of God, but it is no secret that this way of seeing ourselves has not been fostered by the religious communities of the world any more than by the secular power elites. Both in our political life and in our religious life, those who articulate this idea are often seen as traitors who are obscuring the particularities of our own tradition and betraying the uniqueness and special value of our own traditions.

A few years ago, I helped create a new international organization called the Network of Spiritual Progressives. One of its goals is to bring together into one framework religious and spiritual leaders who recognize the need for a new global consciousness, and who wish to give some energy to escaping the narrowness imposed by the demands of loyalty to our own religious or denominational institutions without breaking those ties completely or merging into some new age mush in which the deep spiritual wisdom of our own religious life is emulsified for the sake of the global unity. Our intent, instead, is to affirm the particularities of each religious and spiritual tradition, and yet to make it possible for religious leaders to work together to facilitate the development of a new global consciousness and new economic and political arrangements appropriate to the global crisis facing the human race.

Our central political goal is this: we seek to popularize the notion that institutions, corporations, governmental policies and laws, social practices, and even our personal behavior should be judged "rational," "efficient," or "productive" not only to the extent that they maximize money, material goods, new technologies, or accumulation of power (what we have labeled "The Old Bottom Line"), but also to the extent that they maximize our capacities to be loving and caring, kind and generous, ethically and ecologically sensitive. We need to transcend a narrowly instrumental or utilitarian approach to other human beings or to nature so that we can respond to the universe with awe, wonder, and radical amazement at the grandeur and mystery of creation. We have called that "The New Bottom Line." In order to minister in a very diverse world, religious leaders will need to embody the courage to see the world through this New Bottom Line framework and to build global institutions that will benefit everyone on the planet.

#### A NEW GLOBAL CONSCIOUSNESS

This new perspective embodies much that is beautiful and appealing in the wide variety of religious and spiritual traditions of the human race. And yet, although the hymns sung in our places of worship may reflect these values,

very few religious communities have dedicated themselves to building a world that actually reflects those values. In all of these traditions, there is a counter-voice, warning us that the “real world” is filled with hurtful and selfish people who care only about advancing their own interests, and that these people will seek to dominate and control us unless we dominate and control them first. What we need, according to this view, is protection from the Other and that can only happen if we accumulate power and ensure that we have the necessary instruments of violence at our disposal and can use them effectively. Thus, we develop economic and political institutions based on the assumption that Others are not to be trusted. Of course, when others see that that is how we are acting, they develop the same kinds of political structures and institutions. They know that if we believe they are not to be trusted, we are likely to act in ways that will hurt them unless they too protect themselves from what they fear will be our preemptive actions against them. This way of seeing the world does not, in my view, originate in religious communities, although most religious communities in the past five thousand years have a strand within them that insists on incorporating this worldview of fear and corresponding strategy of domination into the worldview of that religious community.

In my book *The Left Hand of God*, I argued that most religious communities have also developed a counter to the worldview of fear and the strategy of domination: namely, a worldview of hope and a strategy of generosity and love. It is this alternative worldview that continues to excite most people about religious and spiritual traditions even though over the course of the past several thousand years most religious communities have lost their passion for this alternative. It tends to be honored more in the liturgy than in the lived action of those religious institutions. All too often the notion that the world can be healed and transformed through generosity and love is reduced to a purely personal level as instructions for how to live in one’s family and neighborhood, but abandoned when thinking about what kind of political, economic, and social structures to build in the larger society.

Before becoming a rabbi, I worked as a psychotherapist for twenty years researching the psychodynamics of American society. In a study that I and my colleagues conducted with some ten thousand middle-income working people, we discovered that there is a huge ethical and spiritual crisis in the lives of Americans based in large part on the triumph of the ethos of selfishness and materialism in the larger society. People spend all day long in a

world of work in which the values of looking out for number one and accumulating material goods are taken as the “common sense,” which defines how one is to be evaluated and rewarded as a worker; it becomes almost impossible not to bring into one’s personal life that same way of thinking at home with family and friends. The plague of believing that the only safe way to live is as a “rational maximizer of self-interest” and as an accumulator of more and more things too often overwhelms counter-messages we may have received from our religious training or from our own inner spiritual knowledge. The consciousness shaped by the marketplace permeates the lives of many, undermining loving relationships, making it hard to sustain families, and making people feel lonely even when they are married.

We are living at an historical moment in which it is becoming increasingly clear that the social order built on the basis of the Old Bottom Line cannot be sustained. And yet, most people remain so deeply shaped by the assumptions of the worldview of fear and the strategy of domination that they cling desperately to politicians and policies that are “realistic” from the standpoint of the Old Bottom Line. In one way or another, all of us imagine that our only choice is to find ways to revive the system of selfishness and materialism, make sure that it is functioning well, and believe that our alternative New Bottom Line is too utopian or unrealistic to take seriously anywhere besides our houses of worship. Even in our religious communities, the counter vision appears mostly in our prayers but not in the ways that those houses of worship actually function internally. Although we may regard ourselves among the religious who would actually like to see their own religious communities move in a different direction, we often face an overwhelming argument against so doing: namely, that there are so many people in our denomination or our religion who are deeply committed to the Old Bottom Line that to insist that the religion or denomination take the New Bottom Line seriously would lead to a permanent split in our local or national or international church, synagogue, mosque, or the denomination or religion as a whole. Few are willing to take that risk.

#### GENEROSITY AND LOVE: THE NEW BOTTOM LINE

The world needs a whole new approach based on recognition of the unity of all humanity and a commitment to a new global consciousness. The Network of Spiritual Progressives is not simply some attempt at interfaith dialogue, on the one hand, nor is it a covert attempt to start a new religion on the other

hand. It is, rather, an attempt to build an interfaith movement for the New Bottom Line that is adequately respectful of the differences in our traditions and simultaneously committed to allowing us to work with people from other denominations and religions to take our own highest religious and spiritual commitment to forge a world of love and generosity and give that commitment real teeth. Imagine if clergy who wanted a New Bottom Line had, both on a local and national level, a support group of religious leaders who all shared that same commitment. Instead of each feeling alone or relatively isolated within their own religious community, they'd have an instant community of fellow religious leaders with whom they could brainstorm about how to move forward toward building a world in which they really believe.

It is my contention that this is the path that will make it possible for us to form future religious leaders who have something to offer to our diverse world. I do not mean to belittle the importance of learning cultural nuances, becoming familiar with the theologies and liturgies and histories of other peoples that we will be increasingly encountering. The professionals who teach cultural and religious diversity will play an increasingly important role, and their messages should be incorporated into our religious schools from the earliest grades. Speaking as a rabbi, I would hope, for example, that every Christian school teaches its students about the long history of Christian anti-Semitism and how that prepared the path for a popular anti-Semitism that culminated in the Holocaust. I also hope that all Jewish schools teach about how Jewish nationalist assumptions, clothed in religious garb, led to the extraordinary perversion of Judaism that manifested in the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza by the State of Israel. And I hope that every mosque will teach how a small group of fanatics took Islam and tried to turn it into a violent and hate-filled community seeking to destroy the West and eliminate all other religions. I hope that we will learn each other's stories and each other's music and art.

I believe, however, it is only when our religious communities have a global vision of love and generosity that we are willing to apply to the economic, political, and social realities of the societies in which we live that our religious leaders will be prepared to minister to the diverse context of our present century. In order to illustrate what can be accomplished across denominational and religious lines, I propose to examine the present economic crisis to illustrate what it would mean to talk in a language that might help

us transcend our own internalized traps and demonstrate what we can do as religious leaders to build a global community serving God. Although White House chief of staff Rahm Emanuel observed in November 2008 that “you never want a serious crisis to go to waste,” that is exactly what the White House and Congress have allowed to happen. Secular progressives are disappointed, but spiritual progressives are doubly so. This is a crisis that demands the deepest of revisions of our worldview and economics.

The underlying assumption of every economic bailout or stimulation package is the same: to get out of a recession bordering on a multi-year depression, ordinary citizens must spend more money on consumer goods. To progressives, this is an irresponsible misuse of the opportunity created by the current crisis. Even raising the minimum wage or granting citizenship to current illegal immigrants or forgiving bad mortgages may be too limited thinking. The economic crisis is global and requires a global solution. Spiritual progressives insist that this is the moment for Americans to acknowledge to ourselves that our well-being depends on the well-being of everyone else on the planet. Instead of each nation-state trying to develop policies meant to benefit only its own citizens, we need the world’s major economic powers and representatives of the developing countries to cooperatively work out policies that dramatically reshape the way that we, the human race, produce and consume the resources of our planet.

A central part of such global thinking requires a new conception of efficiency, rationality, and productivity. The old bottom line measured productivity and efficiency by how much money or material goods were produced. We need a New Bottom Line that evaluates corporations, government programs, laws, social policies, and even personal behavior by how much love and kindness, generosity and caring, ethical and ecological sensitivity, are produced and how much we are encouraged to respond to the universe with awe and wonder at the grandeur of all that is. Hundreds of years of capitalist excess made the old, narrower utilitarian attitude seem like “common sense” because it worked to generate an ever increasing accumulation of material goods. But the societies that have bought into that old bottom line are now reeling from the economic collapse generated when tens of millions of people acted on the assumption that trumping all ethical and spiritual concerns was the obligation to maximize one’s own material well-being regardless of environmental and human-relationship consequences. In my book *The Left Hand of*

*God*, I detail what this New Bottom Line might look like in our schools, corporations, health care, legal system and our approach to foreign policy.

#### NEW WISDOM ABOUT PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION

Spiritual wisdom and daily spiritual practice are needed by the entire human race in order for us to develop the intellectual and psychological foundations for a green economy. There is a difficult balance to negotiate between improving the material well-being of the most oppressed and materially deprived citizens of the planet, while teaching the majority of citizens of the more advanced societies how to reduce their level of material needs. Many today feel deprived if they cannot get a new model car every few years or dramatic escalations in the capacities of their iPhones™ and computers. People need to come to the point where they no longer believe that their personal successor value is measured by how many new material gadgets, electronic devices, automobiles, apartments or houses, home furnishings, and exotic vacations they have.

Spiritual progressives believe it is time to bring into the democratic process a discussion of the kinds of consumption that are worth fostering, in contrast to those that contribute to the further erosion of our planet's life support system. Free market fundamentalism is no longer an unchallengeable element of the American Way. The values of a New Bottom Line resonate with those whose spiritual consciousness is already predisposed to question the ultimacy of material accumulation and who no longer believe that the planet can survive the profligate consumption of its raw materials. Thinking through the details of building a society based on shared values and committed to treating the planet as something other than a bottomless cookie jar—from which we can extract whatever we wish without fear of consequences—will not be easy and will require the fostering of a new spiritual awareness. Too many liberals and progressives, lacking a spiritual and ethical foundation for making such choices, have simply embraced the notion that any kind of spending will get us out of the current crisis.

This is the moment in which biblical ethics and the wisdom of spiritual traditions are actually more realistic than the plans of the capitalist economists. Ideas like the biblical prohibitions against waste, the command to be stewards of the planet, a legal system that obligates us to care for others (which thus transcends a system of rights based only on self-protection)—all



these no longer seem utopian, but instead are recognized as matters of survival for the human race. Even the amazing biblical view of a societywide sabbatical takes on an attractive allure: an entire society stopping its production for a given year and relying on the food, fuel, and wealth that has been accumulated during the other six years and that now gets redistributed equally to everyone for the sabbatical year, meanwhile freeing the entire population from work so that they can participate in everything from job retraining to get new skills, to pure vacationing with the planet, to democratic assemblies in which people collectively define their societal priorities for the coming six years. A sabbatical year for every person once in seven years is a practical work benefit that should be a right of all workers. But this takes on a whole different meaning and opens up amazing possibilities for everyone if everyone takes off the same year, creating a festival of freedom and creativity that would be experienced by many as a far greater reward than any material benefits that they were giving up because their society had taken itself off the productivity grid for a year. Yes, there could be enough food and fuel and health care—though this will take careful planning for many years before implementation. But the idea itself points us into unexplored terrain: What if we really didn't have to work all the time? What if the world and our own personal world could survive on less? If, instead of appearing to be a huge sacrifice, the reduction of consumption was experienced as part of an exciting spiritual journey, it might just be possible for us to get off the juggernaut of endless material "progress" before it destroys everything.

We have enough food for everyone on the planet. Money has become the distribution mechanism, making it possible for some people to have way more food than they need or is good for them, while others living only miles away, don't have enough money to buy the food they need. The same is true of health care, education, and even energy. Having a year in which these goods are distributed equally and for free may be the necessary first step toward making it possible for people on the planet to imagine a world in which money is no longer the arbiter of essential goods and services.

The West, indeed all of the world, may need to turn to the wisdom of the biblical traditions to get an alternative framework to that which has predominated in the past few decades in the global economy. Spiritual progressives are putting a challenge to the wise women and men of all spiritual traditions: bring your spiritual wisdom into the public sphere and tell us how specifically you would run our economy, our corporations, our legal and

medical and educational systems, our banks, our money-economy, our approach to wealth-creation, and every other aspect of the society. If ever there was a moment in which that thinking is needed, it is now.

This is the “moment of truth” for all the spiritual traditions of the world: if you have something to teach us about how to live, apply that wisdom concretely to developing a spiritual bailout vision for the entire planet. We urge you to find the people in your own communities who have the most to say about the ongoing relevance of your tradition and join us as we try to combine and refine the wisdom of these various traditions in a way that will help our policy makers reshape what they mean by a bailout, its goals, and its methods. Help us create this discussion in your church or synagogue or mosque or ashram, labor union, professional organization, college or university campus. And as we watch the Obama Administration begin to slide down a disastrous path toward endless war in Afghanistan and Pakistan, we recognize that this is precisely the moment to acknowledge our need for a new conception of how to achieve “homeland security” that no longer gives primary attention to “the strategy of domination.” Instead, we need a fundamentally new paradigm: the strategy of generosity and care for others, making them feel that you genuinely desire their well-being. In return, they will feel the desire for their activities to contribute to your well-being.

In practical terms, a global strategy of generosity would translate into a Domestic and Global Marshall Plan, in which the advanced industrial societies dedicate one to five percent of their gross domestic product each year of the next twenty years to finally eradicate global poverty, homelessness and hunger, provide all with adequate education and health care, and systematically repair the global environment while ending the production of unnecessary and wasteful forms of production. While a market mechanism should remain a central part of this process, global planning, democratically controlled, must become a major priority for the human race. Otherwise, government spending to increase consumption may simply accelerate the production of environmentally destructive consumption.

It may be that, in the first few years of the Obama Administration, a strategy of generosity will only gain political traction if it is sold to the public as an addition to rather than total replacement for a strategy of domination. Similar political constraints may make it important to insist on calling for a Domestic as well as Global Marshall Plan in order to overcome the fear of many who are suffering in the current meltdown that we are taking away

from them supports that they need to get past the immediate downturn in employment and in social benefits. Yet, it is precisely at this moment, that we must help people understand that there is no way to overcome the local meltdown without healing the global meltdown, and that a global strategy of generosity is both a moral necessity as well as a practical self-interest plan for the American people.

Spiritual values like generosity, reciprocity, and caring for others have very practical implications and can become the cornerstone of a sustainable global economy. Unless our economic recovery is directed by a larger spiritual vision, rather than a return to the profligate consumption of the past, we will have missed what may well be the last best opportunity to create a sustainable and ethically coherent world.

#### NOTE

1. Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God: Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (New York: HarperOne, 2006).

*“The new context of our time is a globalized community with international relations. The complexity of our multicultural and globalized world with its new spiritual demands is challenging for pastoral/spiritual care providers....Passion is the first essential competency. It is energy, curiosity, a calling for the process and often the hard work of encountering the unknown, engaging ‘otherness’ and leaving one’s comfort zone. It is the ability to connect head and heart, making oneself vulnerable, unlearning and learning.”*

Anke Flohr

“Competencies for Pastoral Work  
in Multicultural and Multi-Faith Societies”

—From *Interfaith Spiritual Care: Understandings and Practices*