

Major American Jewish Theologian Calls for “Left-Hand-of-God” Theology

Colleagues,

One of you ThTh receivers sent me this review of “The Left Hand of God,” a book by Michael Lerner. No surprise, such a title caught my attention. Also no surprise, Lerner’s left-hand, right-hand, distinction is not congruent with stuff you have read in past ThTh posts, that have commended Luther’s view of the ambidextrous deity. But he’s at least “talking the talk,” and he draws on the Hebrew scriptures for clues about “walking the walk.” I pass on to you the review (from the Los Angeles Times—by Episcopal rector Ed Bacon) that came my way. Tacked on after the review are some additional thoughts about “walking the walk” on what seems to me an even more Biblical path than the author himself proposes. Once again, no surprise, it’s hermeneutics, the lenses you use for reading the Bible and for reading the world. Lerner (and the reviewer too?) are using one set; I think I’m using another.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

The Left Hand of God: Taking Back Our Country From the Religious Right

By Michael Lerner Harper. San Francisco. 408 pp.,

\$24.95

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RABBI Michael Lerner's "The Left Hand of God: Taking Back Our Country From the Religious Right" is his latest contribution to a long list of inspiring and practical writings. Here, Lerner contends that "the America we love" is threatened with destruction. His critique stems from the moral values, spiritual practices and political actions of the ancient speak-truth-to-power prophetic tradition.

Lerner's career of balancing social and political action with religious practice began in the Jewish Theological Seminary, where his professor Abraham Joshua Heschel held that the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., in his preaching and his politics, was in effect the 20th century incarnation of the Hebrew prophets. In this book, Lerner – rabbi of San Francisco's progressive Beyt Tikkun synagogue and editor of Tikkun, a journal striving to "mend, repair, and transform the world" – updates this tradition for the beginning of the 21st century.

Lerner believes America is in the grip of a spiritual crisis.

On the one hand, there is what scholar Walter Brueggemann calls "the imperial consciousness." This right-wing mind-set worships its own power – an act of idolatry, according to Lerner. Its adherents ignore the groans of the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized, conducting business as usual as though no one were hurting and there were no groans.

On the other, an impotent liberal cohort lacks the moral courage and political savvy to resist a culture of imperial domination in both church and state. The compromises made by

the left because of political expediency result in a political lassitude, which amounts to complicity with the forces of empire.

But Lerner is chiefly concerned with the millions of people who are not conservative ideologues but who have in recent elections voted that way because they yearn for the “purpose-driven life of meaning” promised by the communities of the religious right. There they find a sense of belonging, of dignity, of outrage at meaningless marketplace thinking and (in Lerner’s indictment of his own liberal tribe) a respectful absence of condescension. The irony that begs for explanation is the phenomenon of this group voting against its own enlightened self-interest.

Lerner’s reflections are informed by his interviews with “middle-income working people,” conducted over 28 years for the Institute for Labor and Mental Health, which he co-founded in 1977. “The psychotherapists, union activists, and social theorists who were working at the institute,” he writes, “had one question we particularly wanted to answer: why is it that people whose economic interests would lead them to identify with the Left often actually end up voting for the Right?” What he and his colleagues discovered was “that many people need what anthropologist Clifford Geertz once termed a ‘politics of meaning’ and what I now call a spiritual politics a spiritual framework that can lend meaning to their lives [and] allow them to serve something beyond personal goals and economic self-interest. If they don’t find this sense of purpose on the Left, they will look for it on the Right.” With consistent passion, Lerner insists on respect for this group of people. The left sabotages its efforts every time it views them as somehow less intelligent and evolved than, say, the liberal elite.

For Lerner, the key is something he calls “meaning needs.” The

left has to recognize “that people hunger for a world that has meaning and love; for a sense of aliveness, energy, and authenticity; for a life embedded in a community in which they are valued for who they most deeply are, with all their warts and limitations, and feel genuinely seen and recognized; for a sense of contributing to the good; and for a life that is about something more than just money and accumulating material goods.” The right, he maintains, has supplied all this in a variety of ways. The left is clueless, unaware that such needs even exist.

At the core of Lerner’s argument is his description of two competing theologies.

The theology of the “right hand of God” gives conservative ideologues their religious credibility. This theology “sees the universe as a fundamentally scary place filled with evil forces. God is the avenger, the big man in heaven who can be invoked to use violence to overcome those evil forces, either right now or in some future ultimate reckoning. [T]he world is filled with constant dangers and the rational way to live is to dominate and control others before they dominate and control us.”

The “left hand of God” theology sees God as “the loving, kind, and generous energy in the universe” and “encourages us to be like this loving God.”

Lerner readily admits that the right-hand theology exists in the scriptures of the world’s major religions, but he objects to its use by the religious right to promote a kind of imperial dominion, a la Pat Robertson’s 1986 stated goal “to rule the world for God.” The scriptural passages often used to justify a dominionist position in both Judaism and Christianity, Lerner points out were originally written to empower the oppressed

with assurances that God would hear their cries and come in power to liberate them and establish a reign of justice and peace. Thus, he argues, the hard-core religious right has perverted religion: They distort scriptural texts and ancient theologies written for the powerless and use them to theologically undergird the powerful. Lerner sees this core as a relatively small part of American society. The much larger populace that votes with the religious right does so in support of what it sees as “a community that gives priority to spiritual aliveness and is affirming and loving. That is the experience they are looking for, and for that they are willing to hear God’s voice in the way the Religious Right hears it.”

Lerner’s solution is to call for the redemption of religion in the thinking of the secular left, along with the establishment of a politics that refuses to allow the values of the commonwealth to be trumped by the powers protecting private wealth. He advocates the development of a “spiritual left” as a coherent alternative to religious triumphalism. Were we to adopt this “spiritual-political alternative” and bring together three groups he has identified on the left the secular, the “spiritual but not religious” and the “progressive religious” then America could be rescued.

Like Rabbi Lerner, I am a clergyman in a faith community rooted in the prophetic tradition. I share his concerns about the health of the United States and of the world, as measured by our care for one another in a context of peace. I share his hope that there is abundant spiritual energy available to individuals for effective social action over the long haul. That energy is accessed when people are meaningfully rooted in communities where their dignity (along with that of every other human being) finds warm affirmation and where prayer leading to vigorous social action is the norm. These communities can, as Lerner insists, be empowering oases of hope in the midst of the

politics of fear in which we now live.

Rabbi Heschel taught that in every moment something sacred is at stake. His student, Rabbi Lerner, has written a book that sends a clear call to everyone who cares about the future of America to take part in the transformation of our history into something of beauty, meaning and justice a work that, whether we think of it that way or not, is intrinsically sacred.

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Some second thoughts

1. Michael Lerner [I would normally say, “hereafter ML.” But those initials I’ve used so often for someone else.] uses left-hand/right-hand as labels for political parties, and not as labels for God’s two distinctively different operations in human history. Lerner’s rabbinic monotheism (like all monotheisms—Islam included—with no trinitarianism available) can’t make sense of an ambidextrous deity. For him God’s left-hand and right-hand label human politics—the left one being right (=correct) and the right one being wrong. For Luther God’s two hands label God’s own politics. Despite their contrasting, sometimes conflicting, character both of them are “right” because God says so. Below I cite some lines from the review and then add some lines of my own.
2. “The America we love” is threatened with destruction. Yes. It is the politics of God’s left hand that America confronts. Might even be that the “politics of the right” which so vex Lerner are part of God’s own get-your-comeuppance program. Remember back in Exodus 14 when the Egyptian war-machine was stopped dead in its tracks at

(better “in”) the Reed Sea. I’ve always thought that they were simply inundated and drowned when Moses stretched out his hand.’ Not quite. The reason they couldn’t escape the return tsunami was that “the LORD looked down upon the host of the Egyptians and discomfited [what a term!] the host of the Egyptians, clogging their chariot wheels [Hebrew actually says: God took the wheels off] so that they came to a standstill.” Where are the wheels of America NOT falling off—not only with our war-machine, but throughout the land?

3. The ancient speak-truth-to-power prophetic tradition. America is in the grip of a spiritual crisis. “The imperial consciousness.” an act of idolatry. Biblically viewed “spiritual crises” always take place on coram deo, the divine-human interface. If for no other reason than that the “crisis” signals more than that the wheels are falling off, but that the critic behind the crisis [same root-word in Greek] is God. Thus the “truth” spoken by the prophets was less addressed to “power” (i.e., the coram hominibus realities of the day) but to the idolatry of self-worship. For this the Baal-business was a prop. That’s all coram deo stuff. In the USA the shibboleth is “In God we trust.” Our imperial consciousness proclaims: “It is ourselves that we worship.”
4. Compromises made by the left . . . amount to complicity with the forces of empire. The left sabotages its efforts. There are no clear signals that the left is any less hooked on the idolatry of self-worship than the right is.
5. They yearn for the “purpose-driven life of meaning” . . . “meaning needs.” People need. . . a ‘politics of meaning’ and what I now call a spiritual politics. You have to “hang your heart” on something. So Luther in explaining the first commandment. And it is a “have to.”

Even atheists are heart-hangers. Meaning is a relatively modern word for what hearts hang on. In the Bible it's called God. And the crucial question is—true God or false God. So in today's parlance, “true” meaning or “false” meaning.

Lerner sees the political right in America attending to this need (with false meaning, of course) and the left ignoring or even pooh-poohing it. I.e., offering nothing at all to the universal “meaning need.” In his own words: The right has supplied all this in a variety of ways. The left is clueless, unaware that such needs even exist.

6. At the core of Lerner's argument . . . two competing theologies. The theology of the “right hand of God” . . . “sees the universe as a fundamentally scary place filled with evil forces”. God is the avenger, the big man in heaven who can be invoked to use violence to overcome those evil forces, either right now or in some future ultimate reckoning...[T]he world is filled with constant dangers and the rational way to live is to dominate and control others before they dominate and control us.”Luther got his left-hand / right-hand notion about God from the Hebrew scriptures. I wonder if Lerner, who is eminently learned, knows that. But though what he depicts here is the theology of the political right, it is biblically God's left-hand at work. Distorted, of course in the sentences above by the perverse notion that humans can “invoke,” actually, manipulate, that deity to fulfill our agendas. That is the primal reversal of making God our servant, the epitome of idolatry.
7. The “left hand of God” theology sees God as “the loving, kind, and generous energy in the universe” and “encourages us to be like this loving God.”What Lerner portrays here is his wished-for theology of the political left.

Biblically—especially in the Hebrew scriptures— it approaches the God-talk of God’s right hand. Even here it’s a tad wishy-washy about “generous energy in the universe.” As though it is inherent in the cosmos and not a quality of the kosmokrator, the lord of the cosmos. In addition you wouldn’t expect a Jewish scholar to add Jesus to the mix. But Christians do, and do so with a twist about both hands of god that might perplex Lerner. The two hands of the deity are not up for us to say yes to one and no to the other. Christians claim: “He’s got the whole world in his hands”—BOTH of them. We are on the receiving end of both, not choosers at all. First of all of God’s left-hand operations—preserving us when we do right and giving us due recompense when we don’t. That goes for nations too. When the wheels fall off, God has loosened the bolts. No choosing. It’s inflicted. Christians don’t actually “choose” God’s right hand either, the redemption agenda. Though here, in contrast to God’s leftish work, they can say no. Better said, they “flee” to God’s right hand. First of all they are surprised that God enacts a “regime-change” at the coram deo interface, a sweet swap where sinners do NOT get their comeuppance, but meet Messianic mercy. Secondly, that it is offered for free. Thirdly, that it “works” when you trust it.

8. Imperial dominion, A la Pat Robertson’s “to rule the world for God.” A dominionist position...the hard-core religious right has perverted religion: They distort scriptural texts and ancient theologies written for the powerless and use them to theologically undergird the powerful. Years ago, when Transactional Analysis (simplified Freudianism perhaps) was the rage, some bright seminarians we were teaching were taken by it. They asked Bob Bertram just how kosher it was. He wrote a brief essay, now posted on the Crossings website “Works of Bob Bertram” under

“Transactional Analysis.” His final paragraph says:
“For the most constructive use of TA by Christians I would propose two alternatives. We should either demythologize TA’s soteriological pretensions and then employ it for a very limited level of secular, interpersonal behavioral change, or we should radicalize it with the anti-Gnostic Secret of the Christian Gospel and then use it for the Kingdom unabashedly and outright. Of these two alternatives, my preference is the second.”

“Demythologize its soteriological pretensions.” That’s what’s needed for both left and right politics these days. With its penchant for God-talk the right makes no bones about its soteriological goal to “save” America. The left is no less soteriological, but eschews God-talk. Lerner wants to correct that fatal flaw. Listen again to the reviewer.

“Lerner’s solution is to call for the redemption of religion in the thinking of the secular left, along with the establishment of a politics that refuses to allow the values of the commonwealth to be trumped by the powers protecting private wealth. He advocates the development of a ‘spiritual left’ as a coherent alternative to religious triumphalism. Were we to adopt this ‘spiritual-political alternative’ and bring together three groups he has identified on the left, the secular, the ‘spiritual but not religious’ and the ‘progressive religious’ then America could be rescued.”

“Rescuing America.” Is that soteriology or not? Depends. To rescue America to its God-given left-hand agenda—not to save the world—would be good rescue indeed. To “de-gnosticize” America from its alleged wisdom about how the

world is to be run, and our own Messianic pretensions as the chosen nation to carry out that mission, will take more than education. That's a call for repentance. I'm sure that such a call was in the mix of Bertram's second option above: "to radicalize [Lerner's proposal] with the anti-Gnostic Secret of the Christian Gospel." What all Bob had in mind in that one-liner, I'm not sure. But it is a tease.

9. Like Rabbi Lerner, I am a clergyman in a faith community rooted in the prophetic tradition. . . . I share his hope that there is abundant spiritual energy available. The first word in the prophetic tradition is regularly repent. Especially when prophets speak to power. All the more so when prophets speak to world powers. See Jonah to Nineveh. There is no hope—it's a false hope—in a nation's "abundant spiritual energy" if God is at work "discomfiting" that nation, even detaching the wheels from its war machine. The Israelites were rescued—through divine discomfiture—at the Reed Sea. What would it have taken to rescue the Egyptians?
10. Rabbi Heschel taught [Rabbi Lerner] that in every moment something sacred is at stake. Every moment in human life is a moment coram deo. To acknowledge that the "sacred is at stake" is to acknowledge that "we ourselves" are at stake [in more ways than one] in such encounters. In coram deo encounters God is at the interface asking: Adam, where are you? The first response to such an interrogator is not "awe," but "ouch." And then repentance, and then grabbing for God's right-hand. That's where rescue lies when we are at stake (sic!) in those very moments that Heschel and Lerner are talking about. Also rescue for the nation—to save it FROM the lethal consequences of its usurping God's right-hand work, its soteriological pretensions, and to

save it FOR its calling as God's left-hand hitter in these United States. Lerner's title is a grabber. But it needs some work. The Biblically-specified politics of God's own left hand is what neither the political left (who shy away from God-talk) nor the right, (who do it all the time) are doing in America today. But they could be closer to the mark—and so would Lerner—if they got wind of God's own politics of left and right.