

## Spiritual Activism

*Jordi Pigem*

**S**ocial Concern and spiritual insight went hand in hand in the few truly exemplary revolutions of the 20th century, like those inspired by Gandhi and Martin Luther King. And yet, apart from some remarkable exceptions (like socially-engaged Buddhism and liberation theology), religion and spiritual values are nowadays increasingly monopolised by the political right - or by fundamentalism. When a compassionate concern for the world is not nurtured by spiritual insights, it often leads to despair or to burnout. And spirituality without compassion is an oxymoron. Rabbi Michael Lerner puts it this way: "I simply cannot understand how somebody can be a spiritual being and not be *actively* involved in transforming the world".

A new movement has been launched to empower spiritually inspired approaches to politics. Its formal birth took place at the University of California in Berkeley, in July last year, with a conference on Spiritual Activism attended by 1,380 people - Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists and many that see themselves as "spiritual but not religious". It was mainly sponsored by the University of California Peace and Conflict Studies Programme and the Tikkun Community. *Tikkun*, an old Hebrew word that can be rendered as "to mend, repair and transform the world", gives its name to a progressive Jewish and interfaith organisation that is becoming more and more influential in the US, through the events and campaigns it sponsors and through the inspiring speeches and statements by its co-chair, Rabbi Michael Lerner. In addition, they reach an international audience through the bimonthly magazine *Tikkun*, a spiritually inspired "Critique of Politics, Culture & Society".

Out of this gathering is beginning to emerge a Network of Spiritual Progressives, not linked to any political party but aimed at a deep transformation of our [US] increasingly grey, disappointing and mendacious political scene. A major goal of the Network is to change the current 'bottom line' that guides the US (and, following its lead, most of the world). This *New Bottom Line* advocates that "institutions and social practices should be judged rational, efficient, and productive not only to the extent that they maximise money and power, but also to the extent that they maximise love and caring, ethical and ecological sensitivity and behaviour, kindness and generosity, nonviolence and peace, and enhance our capacities to respond to other human beings in a way that honours them as embodiments of the sacred, and nurtures our capacities to respond to the Earth and the universe with awe, wonder and radical amazement".

Another goal of the Network of Spiritual Progressives is to challenge "the misuse of religion, God and spirit by the Religious Right". Religious fundamentalism is one the driving forces (besides fear and sheer greed) behind self-centred, short-sighted, narrow-minded *neocon* politics. Turning the tables of spiritual values to put them upright, the Network of Spiritual Progressives aims instead at "universal disarmament and social justice, with a preferential option for the needs of the poor and the oppressed", convinced that faith should incarnate into "a commitment to ending poverty, hunger,

homelessness, inadequate education and inadequate health care around the world, and to repair the damage done to the world by one hundred and fifty years of environmentally irresponsible approaches to industrialisation, investment, trade, energy and transportation”.

A related aim of the Network is to challenge the “anti-religious and anti-spiritual assumptions and behaviours that have increasingly become a part of liberal culture”, as well as challenging “the extreme individualism that permeates global market culture”, countering the Religious Right with a “Spiritual Left”. But at the end of the day, the issue runs deeper than the left/right divide. It touches on the materialistic assumptions of modern culture, equally embraced by Western conservatives and liberals (no matter how much they disagree on particular issues). It touches on a worldview that only accepts as truly real what is literal and just so, or what can be reduced to abstractions, measurements and formulae. The former, the literalism that strips things out of their context, is the practice of fundamentalism; the latter is the reductionistic approach of most of modern science, which for instance substitutes mere grey ciphers (wavelengths of this many or that many nanometres) for the lively colours of our immediate experience. Needless to say, fundamentalism and reductionistic science are indeed far apart and hardly comparable, and yet they are both manifestations of a culture that has lost its imagination and therefore its soul.

Professor Michael Nagler, author of *The Search for a Nonviolent Future* and an inspiring figure of the Network, described in a recent article in *Tikkun* how our dispirited worldview, that describes us and the world as built of disconnected material parts, renders us at best “misfits in a sterile universe”. This, continues Nagler, “cannot but result in some form of totalitarianism”. Our bureaucracy, our commercial mass media, and most of our science and technology all lead, each in their own way, towards a materialistic, dehumanising, dispirited worldview that denies the soul and plunders the world. Isn’t this worldview best described with *Macbeth’s* words: “A tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing”?

Sooner or later oil, the key resource that sustains the shiny sham mirage of the global economy, will start to be scarcer and run out. External, material resources diminish the more they are used. But our best inner resources grow and are replenished the more we get them out, the more we extend them to reach and help others. These are challenging times. And we can’t wait now for a new Gandhi or a new King. On the contrary, many underprivileged men and women, children and elders, as well as plants and animals, mountains and rivers, maybe the Earth and Spirit themselves, it is all of them who are now waiting for us.

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