

tual values from the state. They claim to be defending the neutrality of public space, but fail to realize that there is already a religion operating in the public space: the religion of the dollar, of materialism and selfishness, the religion whose highest belief is that all that is real or at least all that can be known is that which can be verified through sense datum or measured by the principle of exchange (which, for the public realm, usually means money, the one thing most easily validated and measurable). Thus, liberal defense of the first amendment is based on the false assumption that we actually have a neutral public space and that it must be protected from all values.

CONTRAST: THE CONSERVATIVE AGENDA—Conservatives often seek to privilege Christian values in the public sphere and get lots of support from many Americans who know that when their children come home from school drunk with the disease of “making it” in the larger society (either through good grades to get the best career, or by physical prowess and active domination over others) and “making it in their peer group” (either by conforming to the peer group standards of the group or, increasingly for young girls, by responding to the sexual pressure championed by a growing sector of the media) these children are responding to a public sphere drenched in corrupt values that loving parents want to resist. Using this perfectly legitimate desire for alternative sets of values, the conservatives offer rush in with a repressive agenda that will do little to solve the social problems, and in addition will seek to eliminate or dramatically weaken the actual functioning of the separation clause of the Bill of Rights.

Neither liberals nor conservatives understand how much the requisites of the marketplace drive “science” in its choice of research topics, so neither has seriously addressed how to protect science from these pressures. And those same pressures exist, though in somewhat different form, in the many religious communities that have become dependent on the support of the wealthy or those who have bought into

the assumptions of the marketplace. Too often this has resulted in a clergy more subordinate to the fund-raisers than to their own highest moral and spiritual values.

We seek to change all this.

How Realistic is the Spiritual Covenant with America?

This vision, needless to say, is “unrealistic” in the sense that it does not conform to the assumptions of politicians and pundits in the mainstream mass media. For most politicians, that ends the discussion, because they’ve consistently been unwilling to risk any electoral loss for the sake of some higher good in which they believe. But that is precisely why so many Americans have come to distrust their Representatives—because if they won’t fight hard for their own beliefs, how can they be counted on to fight for the best interests of American society when the going gets rough?

The women’s movement in its early years, the civil rights movement in its early years, and the environmental movement in its early years were all dismissed as “unrealistic” because they too stepped outside the frame of politics as it was then currently understood by the media and the politicians. We are following that same path.

We are a consciousness-raising movement, and so our primary task, like that of the other major movements that have had a lasting impact on American society, is to not compromise what we believe in for the sake of short-term political gain. We must instead advocate for our fullest vision and insist on why it makes the most sense as the path to heal American society.

We encourage people to meet with elected officials every year, but this is only a small part of what we need to do to get our ideas into the public consciousness, and we are sure that you can devise many more imaginative steps to take.

The full version of the Spiritual Covenant and what it implies can be studied in *The Left Hand of God: Taking Back our Country from the Religious Right*, by Rabbi Michael Lerner (Harper San Francisco 2006).

**For more information or to join our efforts,
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A Spiritual Covenant with America

From the Network of Spiritual Progressives



THE NETWORK
OF SPIRITUAL
PROGRESSIVES

A progressive spiritual politics challenges the “old bottom line” in American society which teaches people that their life’s activities will be judged by how much they can advance their own material well-being, power and prestige. Surrounded by an ethos of selfishness generated by the old bottom line, people increasingly treat each other as vehicles to satisfy their personal needs. Instead of seeing other people as embodiments of the sacred, they are viewed instrumentally as “useful” or as “human resources” for the sake of advancing societal goals. Living in a society where people regularly absorb and then act upon this “marketplace rationality” in which “looking out for number one” seems the only rational way to live, many people feel lonely, alienated, and scared even in the midst of friendships and marriages—because they see themselves surrounded by so many people who only seem to care about them to the extent that they can “deliver something.”

What we need, then, is a New Bottom Line, one which judges institutions, corporations, legislation, social practices, health care, our educational and legal systems, and our social policies by how much love and compassion, kindness and generosity, and ethical and ecological sensitivity they inculcate within is, and by how much they nurture our capacity to respond to other human beings as embodiments of the sacred who can and do respond to the universe with gratitude, awe, and wonder at the grandeur of all that is.

This New Bottom Line is the central message of the Network of Spiritual Progressives. It leads us to present policies to our elected officials that are embodied in the Spiritual Covenant with America—an alternative to both Newt Gingrich’s “Contract with America” and the economic visions of American society that have been developed by liberal and progressive think tanks that are trying to help the Democrats out of their dogmatic slumbers.

The Spiritual Covenant with America

1. We will create a society that promotes rather than undermines loving and caring relationships and families. We will challenge the materialism and selfishness (often rooted in the dynamics of the competitive marketplace) that undermine loving relationships and family life.

Every institution or social practice that encourages us to see others as instruments for our own advancement rather than as embodiments of the sacred must be reconceptualized and rebuilt so that it instead maximizes our capacities to be loving and generous and caring. We will challenge cynical attempts to reduce life to self-interest. And we will oppose the cheapening of sexuality that regularly occurs as marketers use sex to sell their products and seek to do so with teens and now pre-teens. Sure, we need full employment, child care, flex time, a coordinated assault on poverty, and many other economic changes; so we support all these elements of the traditional liberal agenda—but our

spiritual focus goes beyond the normal liberal list of demands to insist on a fundamental change in the values that our society promotes: our society must be safe for love rather than fostering the qualities in people that make love more difficult to sustain: cynicism, harshness, individualism, self-centeredness, despair about ultimate meaning, insensitivity to the possibility of transformation, and fear.

CONTRAST: LIBERAL AGENDA—Family support is always posed in terms that emphasize economic entitlements, but since everyone knows that family breakdown is not confined to those lacking economic supports, the liberal platform is seen as just using the family issue for its pre-existing agenda rather than actually addressing the fear in people’s lives about the breakdown of loving commitments and the resulting feelings of loneliness. We agree with the supports, but see them as necessary but not sufficient.

CONTRAST: CONSERVATIVE AGENDA—For the conservative ideology, family support often means restricting the rights of gays and lesbians to marry (as though that had anything to do with why families break up), teaching women to be subordinate to men in family life (a strategy that requires women to give up their own natural intelligence and wisdom to “go along” with men, rather than to build partnership relationships based on mutual respect, which have a much stronger foundation and greater prospect of lasting), opposing abortion (but giving little support to the child when it is born), and providing religious communities in which families are embedded and central (a positive aspect of the conservative agenda which has to be emulated by creating progressive “communities of meaning” but without a right-wing ideology governing them).

2. We will take PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY for ethical behavior by reviving the sacred element in sexuality, shaping a purpose-driven life connected to our highest values, building an inner spiritual life, devoting time and energy to caring for each other as well as to self-development, affirming pleasure and humor and joyfulness and celebration of the grandeur of the universe and the mystery of being, and recognizing that government cannot replace our own efforts to build a spiritually grounded life.

We will be compassionate toward each other, recognizing that each of us is unlikely to be the fullest embodiment of our own highest ideals.

CONTRAST: LIBERAL AGENDA—Liberal politicians rarely articulate any sense of personal responsibility, because they claim that these issues are “personal” and have no role in the public sphere. We agree with them in opposing legisla-

tion on these issues, but not in believing that they have no appropriate public place. A movement can foster an “ethos” as well as legislation, and that is exactly what we did do when we fostered the ethos of respect for women, gays and lesbians, and minority groups. Taking personal responsibility is not just a personal issue. It is an issue of creating a form of community that encourages, supports, and rewards people for so doing, and that is absent from the discourse of the liberal world.

CONTRAST: CONSERVATIVE AGENDA—Conservatives talk about taking personal responsibility as their alternative to badly needed social programs, funding for which they continually seek to slash (health, welfare, education, support for the poor and the homeless). They claim to be concerned about poverty, but then say that individuals should take responsibility for eliminating poverty (for example, urging people to take jobs on which they could not even subsist, particularly given inadequate child care) or homelessness (but then they don’t actually take homeless people into their homes each night to provide the “personal responsibility” alternative to abandoning the homeless to hunger and the streets of our cities). So when we talk about taking personal responsibility, we do so not to replace government and societal programs, but rather to address areas in our own personal lives where we could have a huge impact.

3. We will build Social Responsibility into the normal operations of our economic and political Life. The Social Responsibility Amendment (SRA) to the U.S. Constitution that we propose requires corporations to get a new corporate charter once every ten years. Such a charter would only be granted to those corporations that could prove to a jury of ordinary citizens that it had a satisfactory history of social responsibility.

This is one step toward our larger goal of transforming the bottom line in our economy, government, and social institutions. While seeking support and endorsement for the SRA, we will encourage public officials to include a Social Responsibility clause in every contract-awarding process, so that corporations competing for public funds must present a detailed social responsibility report. and private citizens and local community groups and unions can challenge the accuracy of that report to the governmental body deciding on awarding of city, state, and federal contracts over \$100,000.

To make this happen, we will also seek public funding of all state and national elections and instant runoff procedures for counting votes.

CONTRAST: LIBERAL AGENDA—The Liberals continually seek to legislate minor restrictions on corporate avarice and social irresponsibility, and usually fail to get such laws adopted because of the tremendous power of corporations to influence financing for the legislators who must pass these bills. Meanwhile, corporations throw all their weight into opposing each little reform measure. We seek one big reform that would end the need for countless smaller reforms. While the SRA may take several decades to pass, the struggle for it will concentrate attention on the systemic nature of the problem we face.

CONTRAST: CONSERVATIVE AGENDA—Conservatives typically oppose any attempts to put constraints on corporate social irresponsibility because they believe that the best good for all will be achieved if each corporation pursues its own self-interest unrestrained, and then the profits it amasses will “trickle down” to the rest of the population.

4. We will reshape our education system such that it teaches the values of love, caring, generosity, intellectual curiosity, tolerance, gratitude, awe and wonder at the universe, democratic participation, and environmental responsibility. We will emphasize education for these values without abandoning necessary reading and writing skills—and focus on learning respect, thanksgiving and awe for the wonders of the universe, and celebration of all the goodness that has passed on the cultural and scientific wisdom of the human race.

CONTRAST: LIBERAL AGENDA—Liberals focus on getting better pay for teachers and more money for building schools with lower teacher-student ratios. But they’d be far more effective in getting support for these important demands if they gave more attention to demands about the moral and spiritual content of what is being taught.

CONTRAST: CONSERVATIVE AGENDA—Conservatives correctly criticize the values that are actually being taught in our schools (materialism, competitiveness) but then fail to note that these values reflect the values of the marketplace that conservatives champion. And they propose false solutions whose underlying intent is to dismantle the public school system or at least wildly under-fund it and thereby “prove” that everything “public” must be a failure and that the only good thing is the private sector.

5. We will seek a single payer national health care plan and also broaden the public’s understanding of health care. Our physical health cannot be divorced from environmental, social, spiritual, and psychological realities—and the entire medical system has to be reshaped in light of that understanding to focus on prevention, encourage alternative forms of health practice along with traditional Western forms, and insist that because human beings have many levels of reality, health care must reflect that rather than seek to reduce the human to the merely material.

CONTRAST: LIBERAL AGENDA—Liberals seek the gradual addition of benefits for different sectors of the population but leave the whole system in the hands of the profiteers, thus guaranteeing that their proposed changes will be undermined by the insurance companies and drug companies who raise their costs to make huge profits and thus make these health care reforms unreasonably costly. The single payer plan does not increase but, rather, will decrease the total amount spent on health care by the U.S.

CONTRAST: CONSERVATIVE AGENDA—Conservatives continually place private profit over public need when it comes

to health care. They think of health care as something that needs to be earned rather than as a manifestation of the sacred obligation we have to care for each other.

6. We will be stewards of the environment. We will champion voluntary simplicity and ethical consumption while seeking to change the global economy so that it is ordered in rational and sustainable ways.

We will bring spiritual wisdom into daily life to change our addiction to endless consumption and challenge the media and advertising-driven belief that price and number of things we own are the measure of our worth in the world.

CONTRAST: LIBERAL AGENDA—Liberals fight for partial reforms that rarely take into account the systemic and global nature of the problem and rarely note that for every reform they win, there are ten new areas in which environmental damage is intensifying. They have no global plan or willingness to imagine how to recast the global economy so as to make our planet environmentally sustainable. And they avoid any serious discussion of, much less fostering of, an ethos of voluntary simplicity.

CONTRAST: CONSERVATIVES—Conservatives cheerlead for policies that actually reduce the amount of land protected from corporate abuse. They put the interests of corporate profit above their responsibility to be stewards of the planet, and often deny the urgency of global warming and other environmental disasters.

7. Foreign policy and homeland security transformation: We will build a safer world and promote a rational approach to immigration through a strategy of non-violence and generosity that eliminates poverty both in the U.S. and in every other country. The well-being of Americans depends on the well-being of every other person on the planet and of the planet itself.

We will support a Global Marshall Plan to use 5 percent of the GDP of the advanced industrial countries societies—each year for the next twenty years—to end global poverty, hunger, homelessness, inadequate education, and inadequate health care. This will do more for homeland security and military safety than does sinking trillions of dollars into wars and strategies of world domination that can never work and are immoral. Ending poverty both at home and abroad is both an ethical and a security priority.

And we will challenge the globalization of selfishness promoted by Western corporations (and their clones in China, India, and Japan) and promote the spiritual values of solidarity, caring for others, and love as the most effective way to build a sustainable society and achieve “homeland security.” Our path to a world of peace must be a path of peace, social justice, sensitivity to cultural differences and to environmental needs, and non-violence. We will maintain an army on our borders and carefully search every container that comes into the country, and redirect the trillions of dollars that would otherwise be spent on the military to ending global poverty and creating adequate education and health care. So, while we support the immediate withdrawal of troops from Iraq and the creation of an international Non-Violent Peacekeeping Force to prevent conflicts from escalating, we do so in

the context of a coherent global policy that immediately implements the Global Marshall Plan (not by dumping money into the hands of corrupt governments, but through cooperation with non-governmental organizations committed to human rights, democracy, environmental sustainability, and enhancement and respect for native cultures and traditions).

We seek full rights for all immigrants who have made it to our shores. And we will solve the immigration issue in the only possible way: by making the countries from which immigrants are fleeing much more economically successful. Instead of imagining new methods for repressing the desire that so many immigrants have for a life free from extremes of poverty and political oppression, we will support the Global Marshall Plan in ways that would build the economic infrastructure of the “underdeveloped” world, ensuring that its benefits flow to all people and not just to the economic elites of those countries. We seek a world in which open borders are the norm, and there is no fear that the rich countries are being overrun by immigrants, because their well-being has improved so much in their own countries.

CONTRAST: LIBERAL AGENDA—Still stuck in the militarist assumptions of the past, liberal politicians compete with the conservatives about “who is most effective” in projecting American power and domination around the world. They are more concerned to prove that they are “tough” than to prove that they actually have policies that address the issues that drive people into wars and terrorism. Similarly, their correct desire to avoid repression of immigrants does not link to a coherent answer to “what can be done to prevent future millions from risking their lives to get across our borders if we create incentives for them to take such risks?”

CONTRAST: CONSERVATIVE AGENDA—Though quick to demand testing of the effectiveness of liberal programs, conservatives have never proved the effectiveness of their strategy of providing security through wars and the domination of other countries. Distorted by their own “arrogance of power,” they cannot acknowledge that 5,000 years of war-making has not worked to bring peace and security but only, century after century, increased the numbers of people killed in wars. Nor can conservatives see that their wars have actually undermined the internal life of America and increased our propensity to rely on violence as a solution to otherwise frustrating problems. They call for more repression of immigrants and of countries that do not follow our rules, but seem unable to acknowledge that such programs do not work.

8. We will seek the separation of Church, State and Science. We will protect our society from fundamentalist attempts to impose a particular religion on everyone, but will not fall into a first-amendment fundamentalism that attempts to keep all spiritual values out of the public sphere.

We will protect science from invasion by the state, religion or corporate priorities, but reject “scientism,” the worldview that claims that everything capable of being known or worthy of our attention can be fully described in scientific terms.

CONTRAST: THE LIBERAL AGENDA—Liberals confuse the separation of Church and State with the separation of spiri-