

Tikkun

POLITICS + SPIRITUALITY + CULTURE

(tē·kūn) To mend, repair, and transform the world.

FALL 2012

CHRISTIANITY
WITHOUT THE
CROSS?

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AMERICA BEYOND THE 2012 ELECTION

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What Comes Next for Spiritual Progressives?

BY STEPHEN H. PHELPS

AMERICA'S POLITICAL DYSFUNCTION is a symptom of a national identity crisis. Americans are drawn in incompatible views of human purpose. I appreciate how Gary Dorrien (writing in both this issue of *Tikkun* and in *The Obama Question*) frames the broken mirror of national identity in two panes. In one is yearning for unrestricted liberty to acquire wealth; in the other is yearning for self-government—that is, a desire for rightful power to apply core values in the creation of public policies and practices, including those that pertain to wealth. Not only do large blocs form around these two yearnings, but many individuals seem internally split by the competing desires. They want

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leadership, but no clarity comes from political or religious leaders. If this crisis goes unsettled for much longer, the system will founder. That fact should cheer no one, for in the present state of affairs, tyranny, not revolution and reconstruction, will follow.

While these split yearnings have certainly vied with each other throughout America's history, they are not *see* and *saw*, paired off like talk show foes. To the contrary, an absolute hierarchy of values rules here, for the crisis is not essentially political, but spiritual: the crisis goes to the core question of humanity's purpose.

A spiritual perspective holds that human consciousness is capable of connecting material reality with nonmaterial reality. A spiritual perspective brings a moral imperative to bear: since high and low can touch, they must be allowed to touch as often as possible. Both those who reject this distinction of spiritual and material reality and those who put material values first (regardless of what they say of God and truth) hold what I would describe as unspiritual worldviews. In a spiritual worldview, a person becomes truly human to the degree that she learns how all things can and must be connected to values beyond themselves. Scriptures throughout the world share one mind on this matter: things below must serve the things above. It is absurd when men who claim Jesus as their pioneer also set the acquisition of wealth at the pinnacle of their principles. These men are basically unspiritual, their policies are necessarily inhumane. They have lost touch with the possibility that the integrity of laws and leadership can make space for people to develop both inward and outward expressions of self-government.



Clearly no creature survives without the desire to get and keep its stuff. This is kindergarten teaching. So is the observation that when this desire goes unrestrained, it deranges our conscience and distorts our social relations as it draws votes and money like moths to the flame of politics. It blinds us to our total situation. But such is our crisis: kindergartners have more clarity about the relationship of greed and fear to growth, love, and development than they will have when they become adults. As U.S. demographics move inexorably away from a white majority to a nonwhite majority, legislatures and corporations obsess over the possibility of keeping *all* of our stuff. This obsession is actually motivated by a racialized fear over the coming loss of power, but so lost are the sheep without a shepherd that in the tumult of distractions and desires, it becomes difficult to feel their basic yearning for their own humanity through increased self-government.

A spiritual awareness sees perfectly well that things and bodies matter and need appropriate attention. But the eye of spirit understands that the true and human value of any thing can only be set in the nonmaterial viewfinder. As to keeping stuff or letting it go, therefore, the mature want to discern which will serve the greater end. A spiritually qualified person knows that letting go is sometimes the best course for herself *because* it is best for all, and that letting go is ultimately life's only course. This acceptance of mortality is apparent in the spiritually mature insofar as they exhibit less fear and a greater ability to share power, to let others in, and, at the right time, to let go of stuff. Only this kind of freedom has ever marked the path of possible peaceful futures. The political consequences are immense.

And here is the glad surprise: as a racehorse yearns to run, humans yearn to move toward their higher nature. Deep down, we know our purpose. We want to touch deep values. We love to feel compassion. Stories of integrity, equality, courage, and shared sacrifice stir us. Since most Americans identify as Christians, these yearnings are often felt through

the symbol of Jesus. One need not accept Jesus to understand that spiritual progressives must take Christian Americans at their word, as people alert to the relationship of higher and lower. This does not mean using religious symbols in the public square. It means understanding that politics are fundamentally played on the field between fear and love, between holding and letting go—and that humans want to respond to their highest ideals.

But we are all also afraid—to die, to lose, to give up. If left leaderless through loss and grief, a human being contracts in fear and does not learn his or her own capacity for growth. The hardened heart shows up as reactionary, self-protective politics. When spiritual progressives see and accept this natural tension in all social relations, we are able to conceive and interpret any effective policy in terms of the desire for growth and development, both inward and outward. We know that all of us are always tapping the ground in front of us to learn whether it is safe to take the next step. We must not lose sight of the fact that inner self-government (the highest expression of personal freedom) and political self-government grow together—or fail together.

Paying taxes is the only public act in which all people in a nation are potentially united according to the will of the self-governed. Every good act that will bind us together (*e pluribus unum*)—from providing for health care or education to rebuilding infrastructure—will come through budgets and taxes that set our intention to grow together, inwardly and outwardly. Barack Obama's writings show that he has spiritual awareness and the capacity to affirm human purpose. As president, however, his thought shows up only slightly left of center on the continuum of power politics. Dorrien is right that in its current crisis, America cannot elect a "more compelling human being" than Obama. It is time that we spiritual progressives organize with like-minded movements to connect the higher and the lower in politics at every level. ■