



The Interfaith Unionsm
for Progressive Religion



Pogo, Laplace and Progressives

by David E. McClean

The last presidential election highlighted the need for progressives (those who keep a critical eye on the very imperfect and fallible structures and institutions of our society) to get our act together with respect to how to reach more voters across the country. There is a disconnect, and it must be addressed – but not just to win elections. If winning elections is the sole goal, then we deserve to lose, for we would then have nothing to offer the country, just as too much of it now suspects. No, it must be addressed to show the country the full range of progressive thought, which includes progressive *religious thought*, and to invite the nation to share-in that thought as it deliberates the important questions of the age.

A Message to Members

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In my Social Ethics class, which I teach at a Long Island college, I made a point of showing my class the November 5, 2004 episode of the PBS show *NOW*, which was then hosted by Bill Moyers. This linked-up well with a book that I chose for the course, George Lakoff's *Moral Politics - How Liberals and Conservatives Think*.

The *NOW* show featured Christopher Edley, Jr., Dean of Boalt Hall School of Law at UC, Berkeley. (You can view the episode by going to the *NOW* web-site.) Edley's post-mortem of the election highlighted the fact that progressives are too focused on the minutia of policy, what Edley called "policy plumbing," and are disconnected from the on-the-ground concerns of the American people. This seemed a bit much, in view of the fact that John Kerry got more votes than any other Democratic candidate in history. Still, Edley seemed to be on to something.

That something is that getting the issues right doesn't necessarily put you in the White House, or the Senate for that matter. People want their concerns taken seriously, and some of those concerns have to do with deep, existential matters, matters of ultimate concern – such as, for example, whether or not their souls are right with God (as they conceive God), and whether or not the values that they are taught in their houses of worship are taken seriously in the public square. After all, eighty-one percent of American adults identify with some religion, usually some version of Christianity, and many more claim to be theistic even though they don't identify with any religion in particular. Therefore, for a candidate for high office to not be able to speak their language, the language of faith, IN A CONVINCING WAY, is a serious problem.

(April 2005 - Vol. 1, No.5. Welcome to a very special ministry, and a very special effort to, through faith and love, help to heal the wounds and divisions in our world in concert with other like-minded people of faith. The Interfaith Union's project is healing our divisions - divisions of nationalism, divisions of race, divisions of sex and sexual orientation, divisions of class, divisions of culture, divisions of faith, divisions between secular and sacred, divisions between market and family, divisions that chop-up our souls, cloud our eyes and bid us to live lives of inner deformity and social distance. *Note on the image: The tree is a ubiquitous image, found in many faith traditions. It suggests life, power, spiritual growth, and insight.* WWW.IUNION.ORG (a New York not-for-profit religious corporation). Copyright 2005, The Interfaith Union for Progressive Religion. All Rights Reserved.

The Religious Right had so much clout during the past Presidential election because it knew full well how to speak the language of faith (even when those hearing it did not agree with the Religious Right on all matters of theology). It knew how to address the “values” of religious people (which it helped to sculpt!), and had no problem using religious language in the public sphere and in pressing for the policies it wants using explicit, unapologetic religious references.

The past Presidential election was a “perfect storm” for conservatives. The issues that were extant included an alignment of nationalism and a psychological state that cognitive scientist George Lakoff says hooks-up with a very powerful root metaphor that the Republicans played right into. That root metaphor was the metaphor of America as a “family.” The dominant version of “family” that Republicans represented is what Lakoff calls the “Strict Father” version. In the Strict Father version, policy plumbing matters, but the general health and survival of the family *matters more*. In that version, there is a lot of discussion about strength, power, dominance, protection, and retribution (punishment). This hooks up nicely with the Religious Right’s notions of “God the Father” and what Lakoff calls “Strict Father Christianity” (which, I quickly add, is not the dominant version but one that is highly vocal and easily mobilized if approached the right way).

This Strict Father metaphor is the heuristic opposite of the metaphor that is most associated with Democrats – the Nurturant Parent metaphor. What’s *that*? Well, it is generally concerned with the inward health of the polity or nation - things like the rights of the “children” (citizens), and a more sophisticated and nuanced version of their well-being.

In a time of concerns about terrorism, a Nurturant Parent metaphor just won’t cut it if the country believes that what it needs is a Strict Father, someone who will protect it at any cost – even if that Strict Father has the policies all wrong!

It was possible for Democrats and progressives to understand this as well as Mr. Rove and Mr. Falwell understood it. Progressives certainly don’t want to play the types of games that Messrs. Rove and Falwell played, but we should want to change how we address the concerns of the nation. Those concerns are mostly *our* concerns. We progressives don’t want to see bombs going off in coffee shops or subways any more than conservatives do. We *religious* progressives don’t think that the Religious Right has a lock on God, any more than we do. The problem is that we act like we are not as committed either to security or to God, and we are weak in our public proclamations. This must change.

Religious progressives need to get over their fetishization of a puerile form of “rationalism” and get out there into the fray. That is, we better get out there with our version of God – a version of God that many in the country hunger for and prefer. If we remain timid in our embrace of our religious traditions and perspectives we stand to be defeated not only by the Right, but by ourselves. It is the Pogo warning: “We have seen the enemy, and he is us.” That is, the enemy may be those secular progressives who think that

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God-talk is irrelevant to just about everything. In terms of God, Laplace's statement, when answering a question by Napoleon concerning the former's celestial mechanics, i.e. that he had "no need of that hypothesis," may be well and good for a many mundane undertakings, but the kiss of death for progressives seeking to suggest a different model of "family" to the nation.

Religion has much to offer even progressives who have "gone secular." That does not mean that they need to "come to Jesus" but that they would do well to get a much better understanding of the nature and richness of religious experience and life. If secular progressives continue to hold religion at arms-length, if they continue to think the Anti-Establishment Clause means no religious talk in the public square, we will likely have a government that is hostile to progressive values (what we believe are the real values of a religion with a love ethic at its core) for a long time to come.

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