

# THE LEFT HAND of GOD

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Michael Lerner, *the Left Hand of God- Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005),

## PART ONE: America's Spiritual Crisis

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<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
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The unholy alliance of the political Right and Religious Right threatens to destroy the America we love. It also threatens to generate a popular revulsion against God and religion by identifying them with militarism, ecological irresponsibility, fundamentalist antagonism to science and rational thought, and insensitivity to the needs of the poor and the powerless.<sup>1</sup>

In the United States we reached the fullest development in the form of a **bottom line** mentality that judges every activity, every institution, every social practice as rational, productive, or efficient only to the extent that it produces money or power. This way of organizing our society promotes selfishness, materialism, to deal with other human beings as though they were mere material objects to be manipulated for the sake of our own self-interest, and to relate to the physical universe as though it is nothing more than a resource to satisfy our personal needs.<sup>2</sup>

Professionals are no longer seen as vocations serving the common good or the God of the universe but become instead simply careers, opportunities for individuals to accumulate money and prestige for themselves.<sup>3</sup>

**We feel hunger** because human beings are theotropic – They turn toward the sacred- and that dimension in us cannot be fully extinguished. People feel a near-desperate desire to reconnect to the sacred, to find some way to unite their lives with a higher meaning and purpose and in particular to that aspect of the sacred that is built upon the loving, kind, and generous energy in the universe that Lerner describes as the “Left Hand of God.” The Left Hand of God view encourages us to be like this loving God. As the Talmud teaches, “Just as He is filled with mercy, compassion, and loving-kindness, so should you live your life manifesting mercy, compassion, and loving-kindness to all whom you encounter.”<sup>4</sup>

**There is an enormous spiritual hunger in America.** It is yearning for a new way to think and a new way to live. We have been trapped into thinking that fulfillment comes from achieving material success. But as the globalized economy makes accessible more and more material goods at prices that can be afforded, and more Americans have more commodities – more computers, cell phones, DVDs, cars, boats, televisions, and other things –than any one else on earth, we find ourselves reaching for something else, something that cannot be satisfied by a new purchase. We want meaning to our lives, a way of connecting our own path to a higher purpose. And when we can't find that higher

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God- Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God- Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God- Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 2.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God- Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 2.

purpose, when our lives are stuck in a kind of endless struggle to just get by and get through, we often feel dispirited, depressed, or just plain unhappy.<sup>5</sup>

Lerner describe “meaning needs” of Americans as follows:

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. These are “meaning needs.”<sup>6</sup>

95 percent of Americans say they believe in God, and 60 percent say they pray at least once a week.<sup>7</sup>

**The notion of God with the “Right Hand of God”** sees the universe as a fundamentally scary place filled with evil forces. In this view 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. Seen through the frame of the Right Hand of God, the world is filled with constant dangers and the rational way to live is to dominate and control others before they dominate and control us.<sup>8</sup>

**The notion of the right Hand of God** is a way of understanding the sacred that emphasizes the need to wipe out the evil forces in the world through war, domination, and the control of evil impulses. This is a view of God that has roots in the Bible and gains plausibility whenever people face an overwhelmingly oppressive reality – as did the Jews held as slaves in ancient Egypt or Jesus and his disciples under Roman imperialism – and can see no way to transform that reality short of a divine intervention to overpower the evil force. But when the Right Hand of God is embraced by the powerful, it has a whole different meaning. In contemporary America, the most militarily and economically powerful force the world has ever known, the embrace of the Right Hand of God has been used to provide legitimacy to an American empire and a competitive and unjust economic marketplace.<sup>9</sup>

There are many decent Americans who get attracted to the Religious Right because it is the only voice that they encounter that is willing to challenge the despiritualization of daily life, to call for a life that is driven by higher purpose than money, and to provide actual experiences of supportive community for those whose daily life is suffused with

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God- Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 357.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God- Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 16.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God- Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 36.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God- Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 2.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God- Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 358.

alienation and spiritual loneliness.<sup>10</sup> Many Americans have a powerful desire for loving connection, kindness, generosity, awe and wonder, and joyous celebration of the universe. These desires are frustrated by the way we organize our society today.<sup>11</sup>

**This political Right wing agenda** is sacking the common wealth of this country to enrich its allies in America's economic elite. The political right is willing to deplete the educational system of its funding base, to dismantle Social Security benefits for the elderly and social services for the poor, to destroy forest and pave over farmlands and pour poisons in the air, to turn water into a private commodity to be sold, to eliminate fish and animal species, to lift restraints on putting dangerous chemical into the foods and produces we consume, and to make war around the world. This political Right achieved power by forging an alliance with a Religious Right that is willing to provide a sanctimonious religious veneer to the selfishness and materialism of the political Right in exchange for the political power it needs to impose parts of its religious agenda on America. Capitalizing on a very real and deep spiritual crisis engendered by living in a society that teaches "looking out for number one" as its highest value, the Religious Right has managed to mobilized tens of millions of people to vote for candidates who end up supporting the very economic arrangements and political ideas responsible for creating the spiritual crisis in the first place. With this alliance now propelling them into control of Congress, the presidency, and the judiciary, they have launched a cultural crusade against liberals, secularists, activist judges, homosexuals, feminists, and anyone who still believes in peace and social justice.<sup>12</sup>

The Religious Right such as George Grant, in his book *The Changing of the Guard: Biblical Principles for Political Action*:

"Christians have an objective, a commission, a holy responsibility to reclaim the land for Jesus Christ – to have dominion in civil structures, just as in every other aspect of life and godliness. But it is dominion we are after. Not just a voice. Not just influence. Not just equal time. It is dominion we are after. World conquest. That's what Christ has commissioned us to accomplish. We must win the world with the power of the Gospel. And we must never settle for anything less... Thus, Christian politics has as its primary intent the conquest of the land – of men, families, institutions, bureaucracies, courts and governments for the Kingdom of Christ" (pp. 50-51).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God- Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 3.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God- Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God- Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 6.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God- Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 8.

Lerner points out that thinking this way lead in a very dangerous direction, one that would actually increase the pain and suffering of humanity.<sup>14</sup>

The Right is bulldozing the whole society toward a world that the majority never chose.<sup>15</sup>

That very yearning for a world based more on love than on domination over others, for a world in which people respond with awe and wonder rather than with a purely utilitarian attitude toward other human beings and toward nature, is the core of a religious and spiritual tradition that Lerner calls the “**Left Hand of God.**” Those belongs to this tradition see God as the Force in the universe that makes possible transformation from a world based on pain and cruelty to a world based on love and generosity, the Force that makes possible the transcendence of what Freud called the repetition compulsion (the tendency to pass on to others the pain that has been inflicted upon us), the Force that makes possible a world of nonviolence, peace, and social justice.<sup>16</sup>

This view of God also has roots in the Bible, as well as in the sacred stories and visions of most of the world’s spiritual and religious traditions. **The Left Hand of God** emphasizes the need to build a world based on love, kindness, compassion, generosity, mutual cooperation, recognition of the spirit of God in every other human being and an awareness of our interdependence with others, responsibility to the well-being of the planet, and a powerful sense of awe and wonder at the grandeur of creation.<sup>17</sup>

Lerner picked the Left as the best potential embodiment of the Left Hand of God view because he believes that much of its current agenda (end the war, provide for the poor, save the environment, protect civil liberties, fight for social justice, respect the right of minorities and groups that have faced discrimination or oppression in the past, end torture, respect human rights), no matter how poorly articulated, is consistent with the spiritual vision of the **Left Hand of God.**<sup>18</sup>

**The Right Hand of God** is the hand of power and domination, the vision of God in which love is presented as consistent with celebrating the pain inflicted on those who are perceived as evil. So, for example, some on the Christian Right may celebrate the baby Jesus and acknowledge the Sermon on the Mount, but many experience God through the

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<sup>14</sup> Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God- Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 9.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God- Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 10.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God- Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 18.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God- Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 358.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God- Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 19.

frame taught to tens of millions of Americans who have made the books in Tim LaHaye's Left Behind series best sellers. The Jesus they think about is the God whose Second Coming to earth will violently wipe out enemies and punish sinners. And that view of God then fits nearly with a politics of militarism, xenophobic nationalism, and support for U.S. domination over other countries. It's this vision of a muscular religion, backed by a God of power, that ensures that no one will ever call them naïve, because in their actual politics they are not siding with the powerless but cheerleading for the powerful.<sup>19</sup>

Lerner suggests that throughout history, and within each of us, there are elements in our experience that encourage us to see the world through the vision of the Right Hand of God and elements that encourage us to see the world through the vision of the Left Hand of God. The more we are in a state of fear, the more that the Right Hand of God seems intuitively correct, whereas the more we feel hopeful and trusting, the more that the Left Hand of God speaks to us.<sup>20</sup>

Lerner suggest people to ask themselves,

Would I rather see the political Right and its allies in the Religious Right continue to have power to make war, escalate militarism, weaken the First Amendment separation of church and state, reduce taxes for the rich while eliminating social programs for the poor, dismantle environmental protections, lead campaigns against gays and lesbians, and pack the Supreme Court so that it could place new restrictions on women's right to choice? Or would I prefer to overcome my negative feelings about people who are in a different place than I am on religious issues and questions about God so that I could make common cause with them and create a Left that could speak to the spiritual hungers of the American people?<sup>21</sup>

Lerner emphasizes the need:

The need for a life that has higher meaning and purpose than a one-dimensional focus on economic security and accumulation of material goods; the need for work that contributes to the common good; the need for love and sanctify both in family life and in friendships; the need for privacy and protection from the invasiveness of new technologies; the need for a new relationship to nature that not only fosters ecological sustainability and a massive effort to repair of all the environmental damage we have done to the planet but also encourages awe and wonder and joyous celebration at the grandeur of creation; the need to experience and form a life that has relationship to the spiritual dimension, that is, to those aspects of reality that cannot be measured or subjected to empirical verification; the need

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<sup>19</sup> Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God- Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 21.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God- Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 358.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God- Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 24.

for a society that encourages kindness, generosity, compassion, nonviolence, peace, and social justice, and affirms pleasure and wisdom and rejects the manipulative, technocratic, reductionist thinking that today parades as “savvy” or “efficient.”...It is these needs that form the foundation for a fundamental transformation of our world.<sup>22</sup>

Lerner comments about how we hear the voice of God;

In all religious traditions we find both the voice of hope and the voice of fear. Our religious texts, divinely inspired though they may have been, were composed and interpreted by human beings who heard both voices in their heads. At times they have responded more to one voice, at other times more to the other. And so, God’s voice has sometimes been heard as more loving, compassionate, justice seeking, and generous and sometimes as more harsh, judgmental, power oriented, and domination seeking. Both voices are present in our religious traditions. Which one we give greater credence to then becomes our “true reading” of texts and traditions.<sup>23</sup>

He also emphasizes that the more loving and compassionate vision of God, what he calls the Left Hand of God, represents the healthy, hope-filled position of human beings, while the harsh and judgmental vision, what he calls the Right Hand of God, represents the situation of human beings who have not yet become healthy and are therefore filled with irrational fear.<sup>24</sup>

He reminds us of the moments when holding to a vision of the Right Hand of God that was a psychologically and spiritually healthy position, given the historical realities of oppression that people were facing. Sometimes the most brutalized people need to believe that their oppressors will be overthrown, and a Right Hand of God consciousness gives them the only picture they can imagine of how that might happen, given their perception that there are no other political options. When Jews were enslaved by Egyptian imperial power, they were subjected to genocidal measures on the part of Pharaoh (who sought to kill all the male children), constant physical oppression, material deprivation, and religious repression. It was in this context that they responded to the death of the Egyptian army sinking into the waters of the sea by celebrating God as “a man of war” and proclaiming, “You Right Hand O Lord, is Mighty in Power (Ex. 15:3-6). Yet history often shows that this is a difficult balance to maintain, because once one justifies using violence and domination over others in some circumstances to overthrow oppressive rule, one can develop a psychological proclivity for using violence to solve one’s pressing problems.<sup>25</sup>

What the Prophets saw, and what has happened once again in contemporary Israel, is that the Torah tradition could be used to justify a social order that was in many respects the exact opposite of the loving message of God. When the message the Right Hand of God,

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<sup>22</sup> Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God- Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 25.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God- Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 32,

<sup>24</sup> Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God- Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 32.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God- Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 32-33.

developed for the powerless, is adopted instead by the powerful, existing inequalities and systems of oppression are ignored and calls for social justice, peace, nonviolence are dismissed as pretty thoughts about some future messianic era (for Jews) or a Second Coming (for Christians). Arguing that the “real world” is too dangerous for the demands of the Torah, the Prophets, Jesus to be taken seriously, the powerful insist that the only path to peace and social justice is to impose their own religious vision on the whole world, and to accept cruelty and injustice as inevitable until that that apocalyptic transformation has taken place. The purveyors of this distortion can always refer, as they always have, to external threats as evidence that the world is not yet ready for the transformative call of the Left Hand of God.<sup>26</sup>

Lerner reiterates:

Jesus railed against the Jewish establishment of his day, like other prophets had done in their own time, and once again highlighted a commitment to the poor and the oppressed. Jesus insisted that people not duplicate Rome’s oppressive rule in the way that they treated each other. His followers and many early Christians understood this message clearly – understood, as did the powerful in Rome, that it was a revolutionary message calling upon the faithful to reject the power of tyrants and embrace the power of love, which would ultimately be more forceful than anything Rome could deliver. Just as the message of Torah was tragically turned into its opposite by “the religious” and their establishment, so Christianity, taken over by Constantine, became its opposite, a system that provided justification for the powerful while ignoring or even actively subverting the needs of the poor and the powerless.<sup>27</sup>

Reference: James Carroll’s *Constantine’s Sword* and Michael S. Morthcott’s *An Angel Directs the Storm: Apocalyptic Religious and American Empire*.

These perversions of Judaism and Christianity took place in the name of the original vision, drawing on the texts and the justifications that could be found there because at one point those triumphalist texts had provided needed empowerment for the poor and the downtrodden, and had been a psychologically necessary buttress against despair. In the United States, the powerful have appropriated God and religion to justify imperial rule around the globe. They are not intent on using power to rectify the situation of the powerless. On the contrary, as their domestic moves make clear, they redistribute the wealth upward from the poor to the rich. The global system of capital that they have created has had that same impact, increasing the suffering of the powerless while empowering a small class within each society to act as the guardian of the interests of Western capital in third- world countries.<sup>28</sup>

The Religious Right allies with and provides much of the ideological cover for this development. It allows the powerful to worship their own power and then, taking the work

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<sup>26</sup> Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God- Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 33.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God- Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 33.

<sup>28</sup> Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God- Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 34.

of their own hands, declare it the God to be worshipped by all. This is pure idolatry. It allows America, the most powerful and arrogant of all the arrogant and powerful nations that exist today, to identify itself in its own mind with the oppressed children of Israel and thus to imagine that its use of force is divinely sanctioned.<sup>29</sup>

## 1. The Real World's Bottom Line - 39

Political meaning (P. 41)

### The World of Work

Americans are told to focus on the economic bottom line, to value money and power above all else, and to see themselves primarily as rational maximizers of their own self-interest.... Bottom line is this: Everyone is out for themselves, and everyone is going to get an advantage wherever they can and whenever they can, and that means don't trust anyone, because they are all going to do what they have to, to get ahead and make it for themselves. It's just how it is.<sup>30</sup>

The medical system was taken over by insurance companies (P. 46)

Reality: We live in a world of intense competition, and in order to stay in our jobs and succeed in them, we need to maximize the bottom line of money or power (or in some cases fame or prestige) flowing to those who run the institutions for which we work. To succeed in doing that, we need to learn to see others primarily in terms of "How can they be of use to us in our position in the marketplace?"<sup>31</sup>

Loneliness and alienation at work (p. 49)

Emptiness and deadness (P. 50)

Schizophrenic experience; Real world voices and Jesus' voice P. 51.

As the *Times* reported:

The after-tax income of the top 1 percent of American household jumped 139 percent, to more than \$700,000, from 1979 to 2001, according to the Congressional Budget Office, which adjusted its numbers to account for inflation. (P. 53)

Very few jobs provide an opportunity to connect to meaning and purpose higher than "making it" financially. Why is this psychological issue so important? Because how people feel about themselves has a direct relationship to the kind of politics they support.

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<sup>29</sup> Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God- Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 34.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God- Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 44-45.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God- Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 47.

Instead of challenging the real world, many of the people seek to escape from the economic and psychological bottom line of the real world by joining a religious community. Unable to fulfill their spiritual selves in their everyday work, they seek out religion as psychic nourishment.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God- Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 54.

else on earth, we find ourselves reaching for something else, something that cannot be satisfied by a new purchase.

We want meaning to our lives, a way of connecting our own path to a higher purpose. And when we can't find that higher purpose, when our lives are stuck in a kind of endless struggle to just get by and get through, we often feel dispirited, depressed, or just plain unhappy.<sup>33</sup>

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**Building the Culture of a Spiritual Politics Movement**

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<sup>33</sup> Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God- Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 357.