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The Arrogance of Compassion by Peter Berkowitz

Michael Lerner would have us live in a 'loving and caring society,' even if we have to be compelled by law to do so

MICHAEL LERNER HAS high ambitions. In "The Politics of Meaning," Lerner, the editor and publisher of Tikkun magazine, seeks nothing less than to give "prophetic voice" to a new vision of politics that transcends the debates between liberals and conservatives and addresses our deepest psychological needs and responds to our loftiest spiritual longings.

The opening lines of Lerner's acknowledgments set the tone for the 350-page manifesto that follows: "Most of the ideas in this book derive from the Bible and from all that I have learned from the biblically based religious traditions, from my study and practice of psychoanalysis, and from various progressive political movements of the past centuries, particularly feminism and ecological theory."

Aiming to show humility, by acknowledging the sources of his political vision, Lerner comes off as proud of his unusual eclecticism. And, by calling attention to his intellectual qualifications, Lerner makes himself look ill-prepared for his ambitious undertaking. For however important may be the study of the Bible, psychoanalysis and progressive political movements, surely knowledge of history, economics, law and political thought --- subjects scarcely touched upon in Lerner's book --- are indispensable for one who seeks a radical remaking of society, and takes on the weighty responsibility of summoning others to follow his lead. And make no mistake: A total transformation of social and political life is, in Lerner's view, the only respectable response to the "ethical and spiritual crisis" that afflicts America today. This crisis receives expression, according to Lerner, in pervasive cynicism, selfishness and materialism, rampant social injustice, and widespread frustration of the basic human desire for "meaningful connection" and "transcendent purpose"; it has its source, in Lerner's view, in the spirit-numbing effects of the competitive free-market system. As it was for Karl Marx, capitalism is for Michael Lerner the root of all evil in the modern world.

Lerner believes that we can and must build a new world based on the Biblical teaching that human beings are created in the image of God. What follows from this ancient and magnificent idea is, Lerner seems to believe, straightforward and not open to serious dispute. He declares --- without the slightest glance at the perplexities and rich ambiguities of the Bible's account of God's creation of man and woman in His image --- that to be made in the image of God is to be commanded "to be partners with the divine in the healing and repair of

the world." The fact that there is controversy even within his own faith over what it means to be created in God's image --- whether, for example, it means human beings are rational or moral or powerful --- does not stop Lerner from attributing this idea --- and his political interpretation of it --- to most all faiths. Indeed, Lerner goes even further, arguing that a secular appreciation of nature yields the same fundamental teaching --- but expressed in different terms --- on which religions generally agree, namely, "a categorical obligation to an objective moral task of world repair." Lerner does not pause to notice that, much less explain how, Plato, Kant and Emerson --- not to mention Maimonides, Rashi and Moses Mendelssohn --- reached conclusions quite different not only from Lerner himself but from one another about the lessons taught by concentrated contemplation of nature.

The goal of Lerner's "progressive politics of meaning" is a "loving and caring society," which uses the organs of the state to form loving and caring individuals. Lerner himself observes that while the politics of meaning shares some opinions with today's liberals and some with today's conservatives, it really is neither liberal nor conservative in the contemporary political sense. Indeed. Although like today's liberals it speaks of toleration and choice, the politics of meaning is profoundly illiberal, putting toleration and choice at grave risk by giving the state responsibility for forming and caring for citizens' souls. And although with today's conservatives it stresses the moral and political importance of religion and family, the politics of meaning is deeply at odds with the spirit of conservatism in its dizzyingly optimistic view of what human beings can accomplish here on earth and the intrusive role it assigns the state in supporting and regulating the family.

Lerner also takes pains to distinguish the politics of meaning from the new generation of moderate moralists including Democratic Leadership Council liberals, communitarians and civic republicans, all of whom, in one way or another, argue that in the formulation of public policy, calculation of efficiency should be balanced against consideration of the impact of law and state action on citizens' character. So thoroughgoing and comprehensive is Lerner's commitment to using public policy to create loving and caring individuals that he proposes a redefinition of efficiency in terms of character formation: "An institution or social practice is to be considered efficient or productive to the extent that it fosters ethically, spiritually, ecologically, and psychologically sensitive and caring human beings who can maintain long-term, loving personal and social relationships."

Lerner perceptively points out that this new standard "leads to a rethinking of every aspect of our public and private lives." What is mind-boggling is his repeated and thoroughly unconvincing assurance that the comprehensive remaking of our public and private lives to which the rethinking he proposes is a prelude is consistent with toleration, democratic self-government, and respect for individual liberty. Blinded by ambition to excel at compassion, Lerner fails to reckon with the fact that compelling people to care, like forcing them to be free, invites socially sanctioned contempt and worse toward dissenters, free spirits, and not least those individuals, at once ardent and discreet, who understand that expressing love and

caring for another are rare and difficult achievements too fragile to be entrusted to the endless programs of ambitious activists and the clumsy and compromised hands of state bureaucrats.

Lerner appreciates that progress toward the goal of a "loving and caring society" must come incrementally. Nevertheless, he instructively sketches salient features of the public policy of a society organized around the politics of meaning. For example, in such a society the goal of the economy would be to help individuals "to nourish their souls." The goal of health care would be expanded from caring for the body to "healing the soul." Public education would promote "wonder and gratitude" toward nature; teach family coping skills; introduce students to all the major religious traditions in the United States "except any that specifically acknowledge a belief that certain other human beings are fundamentally inferior by virtue of some intrinsic feature (that is, groups that explicitly teach racist or sexist ideas)"; require community service; and give pride of place at graduation ceremonies to awards based not on academic achievement but "on moral achievement" or proficiency in empathy and caring.

Where not simply utopian, Lerner's public policy proposals seem in many cases perverse and likely to foster intolerance. For instance, wouldn't the practice of replacing awards for academic achievement in public schools with honors awards for sensitivity to the needs of others and service to the community --- that is, giving public sanction to the lesson that compassion pays --- introduce market considerations and the competitive spirit into a domain where they least belong and do the most damage? And, to take another example, in light of the Biblical claim that the Jews are the Chosen People, Yehudah Halevi's teaching in "The Kuzari" of Jewish superiority based on blood and land, and Maimonides' limitations on women's study, would a politics of meaning require the exclusion of Judaism from the public school curriculum? And, however that issue might be finessed, doesn't a politics of meaning put the state in the invidious and divisive role of determining which religions teach racism and sexism and which are therefore unfit for public school students' ears? Lerner, who has an unseemly tendency to reduce all objections to the politics of meaning to moral and intellectual deformations visited upon his critics by life under capitalism, would no doubt respond, as he does in anticipation of similar criticism throughout his book, that in a "loving and caring society" both religion and individuals will be so transformed that such questions will not arise, or if they do they will be resolved in a loving and caring manner.

This, however, is an astonishing reply, particularly for one who claims that his fundamental ideas about politics derive from the Bible. For while Lerner rightly calls attention to the stirring exhortations of the prophets to do justice and love kindness, he recklessly ignores the many and varied ways the Bible also chastens hopes by teaching the limits of politics. These limits derive from the central Biblical teaching that, in the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel (whom Lerner cites as one of his major intellectual inspirations), "Man is rebellious and full of iniquity." That we are fashioned from dust and will return to dust is an inseparable part of the Biblical notion that human beings are created in the image of God. That the imperfections of human nature are an ineradicable cause of unhappiness and evil on earth is

a crucial element of the vision of the prophet Jeremiah: "The heart is deceitful above all things. And desperately corrupt; Who can understand it?" And the Psalmist gives eloquent expression to man's terrifying and humbling distance from God: "Why dost Thou hide Thy face?"

Michael Lerner boasts that what sets his movement apart from other forms of progressivism is "our willingness to really take Biblical values seriously." But Lerner is too generous in his self-praise. In fact he seems to have ears only for what the Bible says is lofty in man, and not also for what it says about what is low and limited in human nature. He could not have asserted that capitalism is the root of all evil in the modern world --- nor suggested that a "progressive politics of meaning" was the cure to our woes --- had he taken seriously Jeremiah's admonition about the weakness and mysteriousness of the human heart. And the Biblical lamentation over God's hiding of His face serves as a standing reproach to Lerner's presumption to know so thoroughly what God commands of man as to lead in His name a revolutionary remaking of the whole of society.

There are many excellent reasons to reject Michael Lerner's politics of meaning. Not least is Lerner's cavalier use of the Bible --- which insults the intelligence of his reader and makes light of sacred scripture for partisan political advantage.

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