

## **Which way Christianity? Or, any mainline religious heritage?**

While it may seem a stretch, I'd like to argue that there is a gift in religious fundamentalism that we who consider ourselves "mainline" or "liberal" may not fully appreciate. Essentially a reaction to the modern world, fundamentalism exists as a potent movement in each of the world's great religions. As a shared reaction to what is wrong with the world, nostalgia for the ways things were and an authoritarian approach to human relations, fundamentalists from across the religious spectrum share core values they don't share with co-religionists. The same, I believe, is true for those who share a liberal or mainline understanding of their faith tradition. What this suggests is that the lines that have traditionally separated religious groups are now irrelevant.

So what's the gift? The gift is that those whom we may have seen as "the enemy" are people who take their faith seriously enough to apply it to specific issues of our time. The issues they have pressed are abortion and sexual orientation, and, increasingly, evolution. What is the mainline, traditional or liberal response to these issues? There will always be a degree of hesitancy to any liberal faith, because the search for understanding precludes satisfying the need for certainty. Nevertheless, the question of where mainline or liberal religious people stand on the issues of our time is legitimate and urgent. That is the gift or challenge of fundamentalism.

Underlying the issues that fundamentalists have pressed is another more basic issue, and that is how to interpret the Scriptures. Did the Bible miraculously materialize, a gift directly given by the divine, and thus whose meaning is certain and infallible? Or, is the Bible, while treasured, a human document whose meaning is found in its interpretation? It can't be both. There is a real choice here, which each of the Christian denominations is trying desperately *not* to face.

One who has written prophetically of this split in Christianity is Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong, whom Higher Dimensions Family Church is bringing to Tulsa Sunday, June 19<sup>th</sup>. In works such as *Why Christianity Must Change or Die?* and most recently, *The Sins of Scripture*, Spong argues passionately for the second option, taking seriously an understanding of the Bible as a human document, which then opens one to a "God revolution," that is, a profoundly new way of envisioning the divine and the divine's relationship to the world. Read about Bishop Spong's visit and Higher Dimensions' "Inclusion Symposium 2005" further on in this issue of our newsletter.

Fundamentalism is not the only reaction to the so-called modern world. Emerging in various faith traditions are new ways of understanding the faith and applying it to what we face today. These are signs of renewal. They take seriously the disciplines of ecology and the physical sciences, biblical scholarship, a positive valuation of other religions, and non-violence in the quest for a better world. I call your attention to the major article of this issue, "Cosmology and the Way of Jesus: A New Spiritual Vision for a Dying Culture."

Desperate times demand new ways of thinking about God and what it means to be human. It is what I understand it means, "to confess the faith." That these are such times was underscored by the UN's recent Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, concluding, "Planet Earth stands on the cusp of disaster." What is our response? Nothing less than how we understand God and our basic faith documents is at stake in forging a response to our times. May we have the courage to face what we need to face. May the rest of this newsletter further reflection and action toward a new and inspiring vision, perhaps even in our own midst, "a God revolution."  
--Russ

### **Report on National Day of Prayer**

The misuse of the National Day of Prayer for a partisan political agenda appears to have been the norm

around the country. One of the ways this got played out locally, in both Oklahoma City and Tulsa, was to have multiple services. As an alternative to the all-Christian events, the Tulsa Interfaith Alliance joined with the Oklahoma Conference for Community and Justice and the Tulsa Metropolitan Ministry in hosting an interfaith service at noon at the Civic Center Plaza. It was a beautiful event in which representatives of different faith traditions each heard the other speak of his or her faith and pray for our country and world.

Bishop Edward Slattery, Catholic Diocese of Tulsa, began the service with excerpts of John Paul II's book *Go in Peace: A Gift of Enduring Love*. Copies of these excerpts, including Bishop Slattery's prayer, may be obtained by calling the TIA office, 747-7777. Continuing the service were Swami Gattu, Hindu Temple of Greater Tulsa; Mr. Todd Singer, Community Relations Committee of the Jewish Federation of Tulsa; Ms. Michelle Hoffman, Bodhicharya Oklahoma; Rev. M.C. Potter, Antioch Baptist Church; and Dr. Sandra Rana and two students from the Islamic Society of Tulsa. Perceptively bringing the service together and concluding it from the Native American tradition was Mr. Clark Inkanish, Wichita elder.

**Remarks of Mr. Todd Singer  
Interfaith Service  
for the National Day of Prayer  
May 5, 2005**

The mysterious, infinite God can never be **fully** comprehended, but God's goodness can be realized.

Jews believe that there **is not** just one path to God. We share the desire to walk in God's light, each faith community along its own path.

There is much that differentiates religions, we celebrate rather than try to minimize those differences. Each faith community represents one of the infinite ways in how we welcome God into our hearts and souls, our daily actions. Each faith tradition stands atop a mountain reaching for the same holy star.

All worshippers hope to get a glimpse of the divine and bring that vision into their personal and communal lives. But we stand here today in a spirit of theological humility. We remember that our truth is *ours* alone, a partial glimpse of the infinite.

We pray for the day that all believers no longer assert the superiority of their perspective over others. For the end of claims that any one particular religious truth must be true for all. Is it not enough for believers to rejoice, celebrate and witness within their own way?

We learn from those who worship God in other ways, because we know that we do not possess the whole of God's truth. We leave room for God's mysterious majesty to express itself in the world in ever new and unexpected ways.

Wherever we find graciousness and compassion we encounter God's presence, even if it be outside our own community.

On Shabbat, the Jewish Sabbath, as we gather for worship in our synagogues or in our homes, we say:

*"Hinay ma tov umanayim, shevet achim gam yachad."* "How good and pleasant it is for brothers and sisters to dwell peacefully together." That message applies not only for Jews worshipping together, but for all of us.

Our presence here today resonates that love **does** conquer doctrine, unity **does** surmount exclusivity, and that knowledge **does** shatter all fear.

As Jews recite in our daily prayers, "Let God's great name be blessed for ever and ever. Let the name of the Holy One, blessed is God, be glorified, exalted and honored, though God is beyond all the praises, songs, and adorations that we can utter, and let us say: Amen."

**Cosmology and the Way of Jesus:  
A New Spiritual Vision for a Dying Culture**

**by the Rev. Dr. Alan Bentz-Letts**

How and where will mainstream Protestant Christianity find the spiritual energy and hope for the future? For decades the conservative churches have been growing, and many white American congregations are shrinking or

closing altogether. Denominations are being split apart over the issue of homosexuality. The scholarship coming out of the Jesus Seminar has frightened many churchgoers. The apparent re-election of George W. Bush insures the continued prominence and influence of the Christian Right. Bush's second term raises the threat of a growing American form of fascism under the guise of fighting the "war on terrorism."

The contention of this article is that only a spiritual, theological renaissance of progressive Christianity will provide the energy and hope needed in this grim situation.<sup>1</sup> Such a renaissance will be controversial and could split the churches even more than the fight for gay/lesbian acceptance. Yet a "saving remnant" might emerge with a new Christian vision that would provide hope for the future.

I believe the basic elements of this vision have already emerged. They are found in the discoveries of twentieth-century physics and astronomy, in the writings of the Jesus Seminar, and in various aspects of the feminist, ecological, and liberation movements since the 1960s. While such disparate areas of knowledge and social activism obviously cannot be easily harmonized, I believe certain insights from each do reinforce and support each other, and can be worked into a viable and exciting synthesis. What are the major elements of this new spiritual vision?

### **Cosmology**

The intellectual problems of a supernatural God "but there," separate from creation, have long plagued Christianity. Given the view of the world emerging in the European Enlightenment and modern science, how can such a God be said to act? And why does such a God permit evil and tragedy to occur? The discovery within the past forty years of the existence of background radiation coming from the farthest edges of the universe

have led astronomers to date the beginnings of our universe some 15 billion years ago in the so-called "big bang" explosion. Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme and others concerned with the spiritual implications of such a discovery, have insisted that a capacity for spirit and consciousness has been present from the very beginning of the physical emergence of the cosmos.<sup>2</sup> Spirit and matter have always gone together, as can be seen in the tendency toward order and balance, and the fact of responsivity and creativity in evolution. Human consciousness is just the final flowering to date of what has always been present.

If this is so, then contemporary science gives an enormous boost to an understanding of God that has been present in the Christian tradition from the beginning, but which has often lost out to a supernatural, interventionist view. I am thinking of Paul's borrowed description of God in Acts 17 as the One "in whom we live and move and have our being."<sup>3</sup> The Logos and Wisdom Christologies found in the Johannine and Pauline literature, when interpreted from less rigidly orthodox perspectives, also point to a God more immanent in creation. In recent times, the Tillichian understanding of the "ground of being," and the panentheism ("everything is in God") advocated by Marcus Borg and others illustrate this shift from a picture of God as a supernatural, largely transcendent being separate from creation to a force immanent in creation, though not identical with any particular part of the Universe (and thus transcendent also in a sense).<sup>4</sup>

My "take" on the panentheist position is that God is an energy force flowing through the entire universe, through every particle and piece of that universe, and particularly through the parts which exhibit awareness and life. Such sacred energy connects everything together, is influenced by changes in any individual unit of creation, yet also transcends each individual. God can be said to be "within" each human being, as the energy of body and soul, and yet "beyond" each individual too, stretching to the limits of the universe. While such an energy force may seem impersonal, lacking in the qualities of the biblical God, Tillich's insight can be a help here.<sup>5</sup> For when this force is felt in the depths of our spirit, it is experienced as a divine presence, deeply and inextricably personal.

While no understanding of God is going to be free of all philosophical problems, I believe this panentheist position meets many of the objections raised by contemporary skeptics. (Marcus Borg likes to confront atheists with the question, what kind of God is it that you don't believe in? Most often the response describes a supernatural God separate from creation.) Just as important, it also fits well with, and reinforces, some of the other elements of the emerging theological vision, as we shall see below. And it adds an important element of

mystery and awe to an often bland and moralistic Protestantism.

Describing God as an energy force frees Christianity from its long, patriarchal tradition and also its long underemphasis on the third person of the Trinity. While the supernatural God is closely, and perhaps inextricably, tied to Father imagery, both feminine and masculine imagery for God (biblical and non-biblical) can (and ought to be) used to describe an energy force. The Goddess tradition can also be appropriated judiciously. The interdependence of body and spirit, physical and spiritual, is also affirmed. Contemporary physics, feminism and new theories of healing all are moving us away from the old Cartesian dualism. In Sallie McFague's beautiful words, we can look on the Earth (and our own bodies) as the "body of God," and come to a new appreciation of its sacred quality.<sup>6</sup>

### **Jesus of Nazareth**

In the cult classic film, *The Matrix*, the main character, Neo, is asked by the Oracle whether he believes he is the One. His answer in the negative is later followed by a sequence in which Neo undergoes death, resurrection, and ascension. The film echoes the Jesus Seminar's conclusion that Jesus did not speak of himself as the Son of God, or any of the other titles that came to be applied to him by his followers after the Crucifixion.<sup>7</sup> Rather, the "pre-Easter Jesus" (in Marcus Borg's term<sup>8</sup>) put the focus on God and the Reign of God instead of himself. In so doing, he regains much of the humanity which had been lost over the centuries in the development of Christian doctrine.

Certainly intellectual problems have stood in the way of many Christians affirming the traditional picture of Jesus Christ. If Jesus was truly human as well as divine, how could he be completely free of sin? Can anyone truly imagine, much less identify with, a person who never indulged a selfish impulse? The portraits in Christian piety of the baby Jesus who never cried and never soiled his diapers, and of the adolescent Jesus with nary a prurient sexual fantasy, only compound the problem.

Then there is the huge problem of how the actions of one human being can change the fate of the rest of the human race. The traditional doctrine of substitutionary atonement requires an acknowledgement of the sinlessness of Jesus, whose innocent sacrifice is then accepted by a righteous God as satisfaction for the debt owed by sinful humanity. As feminists have been pointing out,<sup>9</sup> what kind of a vengeful, sadistic God would require the death of his own offspring to meet the exacting standards of his grim justice? Mel Gibson be damned!

In my view, it is high time for the Christian Church to make some radical changes in traditional Christology. The cosmological understanding outlined above makes this possible. Jesus can be viewed as a human being like the rest of us who tried to open himself as fully as possible to the sacred energy force flowing through the Universe. In Marcus Borg's words, he can be seen as a spirit person (or shaman) and a prophet.<sup>10</sup> This does not make him uniquely different from other human beings, since we encounter other shamans or prophets in our experience. Yet Jesus' surrender to God, and his courage in risking death, make him a lasting model (especially for Christians) of love and justice.

If some object this is nothing more than the Jesus of liberalism, the other half of Marcus Borg's depiction comes into play. The "post-Easter Jesus," the experience of the risen Christ who came to the disciples and still keeps coming to contemporary disciples, is the mystical presence of the divine energy in our human spirits. It is this energy force (Holy Spirit) which makes possible conversions and healing and recovery from addiction and prophetic witness for peace and justice. In a real sense, it is the "divine" in us.

Presumably this energy force, or God, is shared with other world religions. Christianity has no unique access to it. But can we say that, in so far as Christians are transformed by the divine spirit, this energy force gets stamped with the image and the way of Jesus? (And other religious traditions would have their own unique particularities: Moses, Torah, Koran, Mohammed, etc.) Christianity began in the life-story of a Jewish peasant

from Palestine and can never separate from those roots. It is Jesus, his life and his teachings, and that of his followers, which are distinctive about Christianity. Yet this does not mean the acceptance of all the Christological baggage of the centuries nor the subordination of other faith traditions.<sup>11</sup>

### **Christ and Culture and Earth**

These changes in the understanding of Christianity are linked, of course, with changes in our values and actions. Foremost is a transformed understanding of our relationship with the rest of life and the universe. Thomas Berry, Miriam Therese MacGillis and others have introduced the new sin of anthropocentrism, or making humanity and its welfare the supreme and defining value.<sup>12</sup> If all of life evolved from the initial “big bang,” and if a sacred energy flows through all existence, then divinity is shared by everything that is, and everything is to one degree or another “*imago dei*.” Yes, within existence there are degrees of consciousness and freedom, and thus in certain circumstances a ranking of species may be justified. But humans must experience a revolution in consciousness by acknowledging and accepting their place within nature rather than by placing themselves above it and separate from it. We human beings are a species among all the other species God has created, and what matters is the good of the whole system, the Universe itself. Our decisions, our actions, our ethical theories must be based not on whether they are good primarily for humanity, but whether they promote and sustain life and the earth as a whole. Other creatures have rights too.

Here lies the importance of the battle with creationism. As Berry emphasizes, the theory of evolution does not just give us facts about the Earth, but it tells us who we are.<sup>13</sup> It is the basis of our self-identity, and only with a right understanding of that identity will our actions heal and build up the planet. When we protect the Earth and other creatures and insure their long-term survival, we are in a real sense, doing a religious duty, sanctifying God’s body and God Herself. From this perspective, the actions of the Bush Administration (e.g., the Cheney task force on energy) are nothing less than religious blasphemy.

Within this overall framework of the sanctity of life, the unavoidable claim of nonviolent resistance on the Christian conscience becomes clear. By nonviolent resistance I mean the philosophy and tactics of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. Those movements were ways of seeking justice without resort to lethal violence, although they did employ coercive methods like boycotts, sit-ins and breaking minor laws. Nonviolent resistance respects the sacred quality of life and avoids the terrible devastation of the environment which war brings. It is, in my view, the ethic which is most compatible with the cosmological understanding outlined above and with the way of Jesus. And as the radical pacifist A.J. Muste pointed out, the loss of war-making powers by governments would force them to meet social demands for justice and curb their tendencies toward dictatorship.<sup>14</sup>

Advocacy of nonviolence would place the churches in direct opposition to the American Empire. It would no doubt bring hostility and persecution. No one can anticipate this with glib assurance. Yet it would present a clear alternative to the American Empire. Together with a cosmology based on mystery and scientific fact, and an attractive Christology, such a new spiritual vision would, I believe, call for the energies and commitments of progressive-minded Christians. At last there would be a formidable challenge to the Christian Right.

Alan Bentz-Letts has served in campus ministry for over twenty years and is currently the Protestant Chaplain at Hofstra University. He earned his Ph.D. in Religious Studies from Yale University and has been teaching contemporary theology and spirituality for the past seven years.

### **Cosmology and the Way of Jesus: Notes**

1. It’s interesting that social critic Paul Goodman believed that the essential thrust of the movements in the 1960s was religious, not political. See *New Reformation: Notes of a Neolithic Conservative* (New York: Vintage Books/Random House, 1969).
2. See Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), especially

chapters 3 & 5, and Brian Swimme & Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1992).

3. Acts 17:28.

4. See Paul Tillich, *The Courage To Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952) and *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1951), Vol. I; Marcus Borg, *The God We Never Knew* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), especially pp. 12, 32-34.

5. *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1955), especially pp. 81-85.

6. *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), pp. 60ff.

7. Marcus Borg reports this as one of the "hear-consensus positions" of the Jesus Seminar. Cf. *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), p. 42, note 23; cf. also p. 29.

8. *Meeting Jesus Again*, p. 15.

9. See, for example, Rita Nakashima Brock & Rebecca Ann Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering and the Search for What Saves Us* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001)

10. *Meeting Jesus Again*, pp. 29ff.

11. Jesus' death and resurrection need to be discussed here but space considerations prevent that. For those interested in how those issues would be worked out in terms of the writer's perspective, see my "Jesus' Death and Resurrection," *Encounter*, Summer 1997 (Vol. 58, No. 3), pp. 251-274.

12. Berry, *The Great Work*, pp. 44-45; Miriam Therese MacGillis, "Exploring a New Cosmology" (videotape). Available from Genesis Farm, 41A Silver Lake Road, Blairstown, NJ 07825.

13. *The Great Work*, pp. 31-32, 83.

14. See L. Alan Letts, "Peace and the Gospel: A Comparative Study of the Theological and Ethical Foundations of A.J. Muste's Radical Pacifism and Reinhold Niebuhr's 'Christian Realism,'" unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1975, pp. 236ff.

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### An Invitation from Higher Dimensions

Please join us for INCLUSION 2005, June 15-19, here at Higher Dimensions in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and hear the full message from the hearts of Bishop Carlton Pearson and guests including John P. Kee, Bishop John Shelby Spong and others. It's important that we meet, greet and gain partnerships with others of like precious faith. Truth-seekers, new-thought thinkers, those willing to not only make a difference in the world, but also to make the world different.

**Tulsa Interfaith Alliance  
SEVENTH ANNUAL MEETING  
Fellowship Congregational Church, Tulsa, OK**

**April 19, 2005**

**PRESIDENT'S REPORT**

The last testament of Martin Luther King, Jr. was titled *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* It was his last book, published the year he was assassinated in 1968. In the last chapter he suggests a parable for our time: a widely separated family inherits a house in which they have to live together. This is the great new problem of humankind, King writes, we have inherited a great world house. Black and white, progressive and conservative, Christian, Jew and Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist, God-fearing and God-denying, however separated in culture, ideas or interest, we have to learn to live together or perish, because whatever affects one directly now affects all indirectly.

The Tulsa Interfaith Alliance came into being approximately nine years ago out of concern that the religious right, a blend of Christian fundamentalism and political ideology, falsely claimed to represent religious people in the political arena and misrepresented the core values of the founding documents of our country. We further felt that drawing on the best of our respective religious traditions, religion need not be divisive but could be a resource for accomplishing the great task of our time, how very different people can learn to live together.

We remain an organization pretty much where we were last year, with roughly 750 on our newsletter mailing list, 427 on Barbara Santee's e-mail list, and a paid membership of forty. We also remain largely an organization limited to the board of directors, with very little involvement of the wider membership. My vision has always been of a decentralized structure with committees carrying on the major work. I see us moving in that direction with the orientation and planning retreat May 19<sup>th</sup>. Let me encourage you to use the form opposite the agenda to indicate your area of interest and if at all possible attend the planning session on May 19<sup>th</sup>.

I want to take this opportunity to thank the

board, officers of the board, and in particular Judie Suess, our vice president, and Janet Storts, who handles our office work, who have given leadership to our organization while I have been sick.

Summary of the past year:

- Communication: This is carried out through the newsletter, which we published four times since the last annual meeting, Barbara Santee's e-mail list, and the website [www.tulsainterfaith.org](http://www.tulsainterfaith.org). We are currently looking for someone to take over the website and keep it up to date.
- Education: We sponsored one forum with the Tulsa Geological Society and University of Tulsa Geoscience and Biology Departments on the move to introduce Intelligent Design into the Public Schools. Dr. Vic Hutchison of OU, whom we will honor later this evening, made the presentation and answered questions. We also supported and were involved in educational programs of NCCJ and TMM.
- Nurture of Satellite Groups: In addition to Tahlequah we now have proto-Interfaith Alliance groups at Stillwater and Ponca City. Not everyone in the Bible-belt is an adherent of the religious right. Wherever we can foster hospitality to the stranger, discussion of community issues and the civic values we espouse, we seek to do so.

Response to bigotry. No one, of course, is bigoted or prejudiced, at least knowingly or admittedly. That of course is the problem, to raise awareness of what hurtful prejudice is. We made judgment calls in three specific cases: KFAQ's Michael delGiorno's attack on Muslims, prompted by a voluntary professional workshop on cultural diversity sponsored by the Tulsa Public Schools; Immigration Reform for Oklahoma Now's thinly veiled harassment

- of undocumented workers and immigrants; and, in support of the Tulsa Indian Coalition against Racism, the

Union School Board's stonewalling on the mascot issue.

- Voter Registration: Considerable amount of board time was spent in the fall to see that during the election campaign preachers played by the rules of the game. We heard complaints of prominent religious leaders violating their church's 501©3 tax exempt status. Short of a law suit we decided there was little we could do. We did support the national organization's Get Out the Vote Campaign, and we joined with the National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice, the Eastern Oklahoma Labor-Religion Council and TMM in a voter registration effort titled 'Faithful Citizenship.' The project focused on low wage income earners. Director Carol McGowan and her team of five interns registered 3,468 voters, surpassing their goal by 54%, the highest percentage of the eight sister projects in the country. We may justly take pride in the work of Carol and her team.
- Gift. We received our second largest financial contribution. Our treasurer, John Osborne will make the announcement in a moment.

From time to time it is good for an organization to go back and review what it was that brought it into being and clarify its purpose. We who came together some nine years ago did so not because we felt Tulsa needed another interfaith organization. Tulsa is blessed to have two of the finest in the country in TMM and NCCJ. (We will hear from their directors in a moment.) Nor did we feel that the community needed another organization to encourage civic participation, as that was done very well by others, such as the League for Women Voters. What caused us to come together was our concern for the way religion was being used politically. The confluence of politics and religion, we felt, bode ill for our country and world.

What is different today is that the situation is worse. Religion is blatantly used for political power. Nine years ago it was the Christian Coalition, which had superseded Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority, as the leading organization of the religious right. Now, to mention only a small sampling of what constitutes this movement, we have James Dobson's Focus on the Family, Gary Bauer's Family Research Council, the Center for Reclaiming America, the \$37 million empire run by D. James Kennedy, Tim LaHaye of 'Don't get left behind' fame, the Traditional Values Coalition, the American Family Association, or, how about this one, the Judeo-Christian Council for Constitutional Restoration. On and on it goes. This is a gravy train. There is money and power in this movement, and it is dangerous.

The purpose of these groups, which they have stated very clearly, is to make this a "Christian nation." Their argument is that the founding fathers were deeply religious, that they never intended a separation of church and state, and that the problems we face as a nation will be solved only when we return to our roots as a "Christian nation."

I say this is a falsification of American history and denial of what constitutes us a people. While the term "separation of church and state" does not occur in the Constitution, neither does Christianity or God. The Preamble begins, "We the people. . .," not "we the Christian people," or "we the godly people." The Constitution further denies explicitly any religious test for federal office. However religious the Founding Fathers were, they understood the purpose of religion was to form individual character and social conscience. Government was not to be in the religion business. That was the "new order of the ages," which they made a motto for the young republic. The religious wars of Europe, from which the first immigrants fled, were not to be repeated here. But that is just where the religious right would lead us.

We exist as an organization to say this. We will not demonize the religious right, because one always becomes what one makes the enemy, but neither will we deny our conscience and not call extremism what it is. Only a secular government, that is, a government strictly neutral regarding religion, can be fair to all religions. That's the point of the separation of church and state. Imagine claiming God's will, as Tom Delay did in his unprecedented intervention in the Terri Schiavo case. How do you argue with that? You can't, which is why these folks do it. God-claims end all discussion. Let our organization say, and say clearly, that however God

may speak to you, when you speak to your neighbor, who may have a different understanding of God, you are required, either by good sense or common respect, to so state your argument that you can both understand it. It's called rational discourse, which is what you expect of those who represent us in Congress or the legislature. It's also called ethics.

This brings us to the other change in the past nine years, and that is that the religious right is now firmly lodged in the Republican Party. This is not a partisan observation. This is the judgment of such respectable Republican leaders as John Danforth, who recently resigned his position as Ambassador to the United Nations in protest to what was happening to his party, and Christine Todd Whitman, former Republican governor of New Jersey. Read her book. The Republican Party today is not the Grand Old Party some of us were raised in. For the good of the party, as well as for the good of our nation, we say it is wrong to make government do the bidding of any religion or religious program.

Dear friends, I am alarmed by the Republican and religious right's attack on the judiciary. When members of Congress threaten impeachment of judges who don't decide cases the right or "godly way," justice is imperiled. And, shortly, we will see the U.S. Senate attempt to eliminate the filibuster of court nominees, which would end a 200-year tradition of seeking to respect minority views. Eliminating this rule, which the Vice President calls the "nuclear option," would enable the Republicans to stack the judiciary and control all three branches of government. Let us say it clearly; this is the road to tyranny. To sell this travesty Senator Frist is leading a national campaign accusing opponents of being "anti-faith." Senator Frist is welcome to his faith, but he is not welcome to slander mine or yours, and he's not welcome to install judges that will stuff his version down the throats of us all. We will oppose all forms of religious bigotry.

Dear friends, I am alarmed that while the planet is sending us distress signals, we are in denial. Climate change, water scarcity, land degradation, the signals are getting louder. What they say to us is that we are spending earth's natural capital, putting the ability of the earth's ecosystems to sustain future generations in peril. Large corporate interests, allied with certain religious notions, feed this denial. Whatever one's ideas about the return of Jesus, to use that as an excuse to avoid responsibility for care of the earth is an appalling morality. Let it be said, and let us say it, that what we do to the earth we do to ourselves and to our children and grandchildren following us.

Dear friends, I am alarmed that while fellow citizens are bleeding and dying in a war started under false pretenses, and which continues to beg for justification, the President proposes to give tax cuts to the super wealthy, driving up the deficit, while cutting programs in education, nutrition for women and infants, Head Start, home ownership, job training, medical research and veterans benefits. I am at a loss to understand the religious faith, let alone the economic thinking, that could possibly justify this assault on the social compact. The American people have a choice between empire or republic. Let us be a voice for the latter.

Two visions of America are at stake in these issues, and in particular in our quarrel with the religious right. One vision is of a Christian nationalism; the other is of an open, pluralistic society. As an organization we mirror the vision we seek to proclaim: We are diverse; we do not agree on all matters; we recognize the complexity of moral decision-making, and we honor dissent. This makes it difficult for us to be as clear on some issues as the religious right, but that is precisely the difference between a democratic and totalitarian system of thought. Authoritarians are always clear, and authoritarianism is incompatible with a democratic society.

I close with the two bread and butter issues of the religious right, namely, the humanity of gay and lesbian people and reproductive freedom. Our board of directors has taken a position on both issues. However difficult they may be for some of us, I do not see how we as an organization can challenge the religious right unless we do so on the issues they have put front and center. The American public has a right and needs to hear defined the moral values that underlay these issues.

Regarding the first, we oppose all attempts to discriminate against gay and lesbian people. We believe that if

you are a tax-paying citizen of this country, you are entitled to the same legal benefits as anyone else, regardless of race, religion or sexual orientation. Definitions of marriage belong to faith communities, not in state constitutions. Let couples that seek the benefits of a civil union go to the courthouse for a license and then seek to have their union blessed in the faith community of their choice. Keep church and state separate.

The second issue gets reduced to abortion, but there is far more involved. Reproductive freedom also means family planning, the availability of contraceptives, honest sexuality education, all of which the religious right opposes, even though they reduce the number of abortions. Let us affirm with opponents of abortion that we too value prenatal life, but we do not put that life above the life of the woman who carries that life. Responsibility for life begins with born, breathing life. No woman, a 19<sup>th</sup> century rabbi said, is required to build the world by sacrificing herself. Her life, the life of her family, the well-being of her community and planet are part of the moral calculus in determining a culture of life. There are gray areas at both ends of the life cycle. Moral decision-making is often complex, but if women are not respected enough to make the decision when or whether to bring life into the world, with all that entails, then they are second-class beings, and that is exactly where the religious right intends to place them.

I recently came across a Buddhist publication (*Turning Wheel*, Winter 2004) that featured an article about a Muslim community in France in the 1940s that saved Jews. "Their children are like our own children" was the subtitle of the article. That's the kind of religion that is going to enable us all to live in the same house. As the brochure of the Interfaith Alliance Foundation states it: "We are people of faith and goodwill, united to promote democratic values, defend religious liberty, challenge hatred and religious bigotry, and reinvigorate informed civic participation." These are the goals that will enable us all to live in the great world house. Let us be about their realization.

-Russ

### Congratulations, OCCJ!

Congratulations to the Oklahoma Conference for Community and Justice (OCCJ), formerly the Oklahoma Region of the National Conference for Community and Justice. We celebrate with our sister interfaith organization on its becoming independent and applaud the wonderful educational programs developed by what we will now know as OCCJ.

**Sam Jones** is back on the air. Radio Station KRVT AM 1270 on the dial, Fridays from noon to 1:00 p.m. The show is taped on Mondays from 5:30 to 6:30 p.m. in the atrium of the Embassy Suites Hotel, on 32nd Street behind Drysdales. His show features the fine music of Sonny Gray and his group.

### Some websites you might check out:

If you are interested in a progressive Christian voice, visit the Christian Alliance for Progress website [www.christianalliance.org](http://www.christianalliance.org)

EarthLight Magazine and Online Library Empowering individuals and communities to live and work in touch with Earth and Spirit.  
[www.earthlight.org](http://www.earthlight.org)

Sojourners, [www.sojo.net](http://www.sojo.net), is a Christian ministry whose mission is to proclaim and practice the biblical call to integrate spiritual renewal and social justice. In response to this call, we offer a vision for faith in public life by:

- publishing [Sojourners](#) magazine, [SojoMail](#) and other [resources](#) that address issues of faith, politics, and culture from a biblical perspective;
- preaching, teaching, organizing, and public witness;
- nurturing community by [bringing together](#) people from the various traditions and streams of the church;

- hosting an annual [program of voluntary service](#) for education, ministry, and discipleship.

In our lives and in our work, we seek to be guided by the biblical principles of justice, mercy, and humility

## **An Open Letter Concerning Religion and Science**

Within the community of Christian believers there are areas of dispute and disagreement, including the proper way to interpret Holy Scripture. While virtually all Christians take the Bible seriously and hold it to be authoritative in matters of faith and practice, the overwhelming majority do not read the Bible literally, as they would a science textbook. Many of the beloved stories found in the Bible - the Creation, Adam and Eve, Noah and the ark - convey timeless truths about God, human beings, and the proper relationship between Creator and creation expressed in the only form capable of transmitting these truths from generation to generation. Religious truth is of a different order from scientific truth. Its purpose is not to convey scientific information but to transform hearts.

We the undersigned, Christian clergy from many different traditions, believe that the timeless truths of the Bible and the discoveries of modern science may comfortably coexist. We believe that the theory of evolution is a foundational scientific truth, one that has stood up to rigorous scrutiny and upon which much of human knowledge and achievement rests. To reject this truth or to treat it as one theory among others is to deliberately embrace scientific ignorance and transmit such ignorance to our children. We believe that among God's good gifts are human minds capable of critical thought and that the failure to fully employ this gift is a rejection of the will of our Creator. To argue that God's loving plan of salvation for humanity precludes the full employment of the God-given faculty of reason is to attempt to limit God, an act of hubris. We urge school board members to preserve the integrity of the science curriculum by affirming the teaching of the theory of evolution as a core component of human knowledge. We ask that science remain science and that religion remain religion, two very different, but complementary, forms of truth.

To view the list of thousands of religious leaders who have signed this letter already, please go to:  
[http://www.uwosh.edu/colleges/cols/religion\\_science\\_collaboration.htm](http://www.uwosh.edu/colleges/cols/religion_science_collaboration.htm)

If you would like to sign this letter, please send an e-mail to [mz@uwosh.edu](mailto:mz@uwosh.edu) listing:

Your Title and Name  
 Affiliation/Church (optional)  
 City and State

*Michael Zimmerman, Office of the Dean, College of Letters and Science, University of Wisconsin Oshkosh  
 Oshkosh, WI 54901 920-424-1210*

### **Inclusion Symposium 2005, June 15th-19th Higher Dimensions Family Church, 8621 South Memorial Drive**

- When was the last time you heard something fresh about God?
- Do you have questions about God, heaven or hell that may never have been answered to your satisfaction?
- Do you think Christ died only for Christians?

There will be sessions beginning Wednesday evening, June 15<sup>th</sup>, then day and evening through Saturday. Speakers in these sessions, such as John Kee, Harold Lovelace and Bishop Carlton Pearson are well-known in the African American Pentecostal tradition. Those outside this circle have something to learn from these leaders who from within their own tradition are pushing the boundaries. In the evening of Sunday, June 19<sup>th</sup>, beginning at 6 p.m. Bishop Spong will speak.

Bishop Carlton Pearson captures the intent of the Symposium by quoting Tom Peters, "An ability to embrace new ideas, routinely challenge old ones, and live with paradox will be the effective leader's premier traits."

Carlton continues, "Through much study and prayerful meditation, we are encountering a keen sense of present truth and are eager to share it with the world."

Registration fee is \$20.00. For further information call Dewilda Williams at (249-5937) or e-mail Dewilda.williams@higher.org.

The Interfaith Alliance is a non-partisan, grassroots organization dedicated to promoting the positive, healing role of faith in civic life and challenging intolerance and extremism.

Contributing Editor: Russell L. Bennett,  
Typing and Layout: Janet Storts.

"There will be no end to the sad conflict in the Holy Land without stable guarantees for the rights of all the peoples involved, on the basis of international law and the relevant United Nations resolutions and declarations. Only with a just and lasting peace, not imposed but secured through negotiation, will legitimate Palestinian aspirations be fulfilled." - Pope John Paul II, March 2000

Statement made by the Pope during his pilgrimage in the Holy Land and his visit to Bethlehem's D'heisheh Refugee Camp

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