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GODS: TOWARD A CONTEMPORARY DISCOURSE ON RELIGION AND DEMOCRACY

In memoriam, Rabbi Balfour Brickner, 1930–2005

As I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, „To the unknown god.” What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

– Acts of the Apostles

The prophet faces a coalition of callousness and established authority, and undertakes to stop a mighty stream with mere words. Had the purpose been to express great ideas, prophecy would have had to be acclaimed as a triumph. Yet the purpose of prophecy is to conquer callousness, to change the inner man as well as to revolutionize history.

The Prophets

– Abraham Joshua Heschel

Yet if the only form of tradition, of handing down, consisted in following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes, „tradition” should positively be discouraged. We have seen many such simple currents soon lost in the sand; and novelty is better than repetition. Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour.

„radition and the Individual Talent”

– T. S. Eliot

Introduction

In contemporary times one can interchange the words „Christian,” „conservative,” „religious,” „right,” and „Republican” in a sentence without changing the meaning of the sentence. A lexicon shift of this magnitude is an indication of meaning-making power. The greatest victory of the religious right is not political but existential. The hegemonic discourse about a supreme being is synonymous with the American empire and its economy (currency and cultural values)—the imperial god.¹ What is at stake is not only democratic freedom of minority populations, the promise of the Civil Rights Movement, the Great Society vision and the New Deal’s social safety net, and international security but also how we make meaning for ourselves in the language of religion and god-talk.

Unfortunately, the popular countervailing argument has been wanting and has not addressed the question of meaning-making. The most popular books written by „liberal” religious leaders are critiques of the left’s quarrel with religion. Both *God’s Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It* by the Rev. Jim Wallis² and *The Left Hand of God: Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* by Rabbi Michael Lerner³ bear an unrelenting critique on the lack of religious sensibilities of the left. Wallis’s writing and his Sojourner organization lend themselves to a neo-liberalism that hearkens back to nineteenth-century ideals of religion very much like that of the Social Gospel as espoused by Walter Rauschenbusch. It does not take seriously the discourse of those it claims to serve—the poor. Wallis has yet to engage seriously the radical tradition of African-American religion.

On the other end of the spectrum is Michael Lerner’s Network of Spiritual Progressives. Lerner’s book and organization emerge from a new-age discourse about spirituality that does not recover the best of mainline religion. Hence, it is alien to most American’s religious understanding. Both books and organizations are primarily interested in appealing to white spaces. In addition Wallis and Lerner spend a significant amount of ink on teaching the Democratic Party how to be bet-

ter at courting religious voters. Placing religion in the service of a political party is inappropriate, if not idolatrous. Wallis and Lerner are not willing to situate themselves within communities of the poor and follow their genius. They make simplistic references to the prophetic tradition of the Black church.

In fact Wallis and Lerner do a disservice to progressive religion by refusing to sit at the feet of a tradition that has one of the richest histories of social justice in the nation. Their „ahistoricism” is profound. Both leaders and the movements that they embody are concerned with new religious forces, without recovering that which has come before. Their ill-advised critique of the left serves not the poor but the right in a sustained effort to dismantle the promise of the Civil Rights Movement and other social programs of progress. However, the success of both of these texts has less to do with their insight and more to do with a hunger in the public space for an alternative view of religion and its role in politics.

Given that the critical victory of the right is existential rather than political, the countervailing project must highlight the existential. This intervention is critical to our understanding the way in which we derive meaning. To achieve such an aim, one must take ontological risk that will lead to existential vertigo. „Ontology itself can not formulate ethical precepts. It is concerned solely with what is, and we cannot possibly derive imperatives from ontology’s indicatives. It does, however, allow us to catch a glimpse of what sort of ethics will assume its responsibilities when confronted with a *human reality in situation*.”⁴

Perhaps the greatest ontological risk is to see and know the genius of African-American slaves, honor their theological sophistication, and use their wisdom as a guiding light in the contemporary debate about religion and democracy. To begin among the poor and forgotten is an existential act; to use their wisdom as a guide is, at once, prophetic and revolutionary.

This essay reframes the discourse around god-talk and democracy by sifting through the prophetic African-American religious tradition. This inquiry hangs on two presuppositions: First, the Black theological project is a left-of-center project. It begins, historically, with the humanity of Black people inside the American empire, an existen-

tial „worship” of the prophetic god. Second, African-American religion has always read the biblical narrative in close proximity to the sacred text of American civil religion (for example, the Constitution and Declaration of Independence). These presuppositions pose two fundamental questions: How have those who have been denied meaning made meaning of god and democracy? What can they teach us about our contemporary crisis?

gods

In rural Arkansas I was raised in the ways of a Victorian, southern Black woman who loved Jesus and justice. She rescued a six-month-old from a fate that may have been too terrible to tell. Encyclopedias were my gift of memory, and I read them in great detail. Her admonishments, shaped by her god, possessed existential gems that pointed to the measure of one’s humanness: „You must never look down on people.”

My grandfather, Elder James Thomas, was a railroad worker and retired pastor. He possessed a third-grade education and was possessed by a thirst for knowledge. He delighted in tidbits of Black history that he had gleaned from folklore. His proudest moments were when he knew that I had gotten it. For him the Bible was the book that he mastered, and his greatest desire for me was that I master that text in the struggle for justice.

I was strongly encouraged to take voice lessons, which I loved, and forced to take piano, which I despised. Faith Temple Church of God in Christ was led by sharecroppers who celebrated the life of the mind, social justice, and Jesus, and they placed a special hope in young folks. The fifth Sunday of the month was reserved for youth. Youth would be responsible for the order of service as ushers, deacons, devotional leaders, choir members, and even preachers. No matter how badly I botched Bach, I received an abundance of „Go ahead, baby” and a standing ovation.

Folks who were just two-and-a-half generations from slavery and functionally illiterate instilled in me a commitment to learning and service. Among them were Mrs. Roberta and Mr. Andrew. On docu-

ments that required her signature, Mrs. Roberta made her mark—an X—because she could not write her name. „Come here and read to me, boy,” she commanded with a hand on her cane and royalty in her voice. „Come here, boy, and read to me about our people.” I was obliged to do so with fear and trembling. My grandfather’s hopes, my grandmother’s vision, and Mrs. Roberta’s desires all flowed from a peculiar conception of god and religion. Their bodies housed a sophisticated theological project that ran counter to the predominant conception of god and religion of our day. It is my hope that a rendering of their god will offer a different vision of god and religion in our time, so that we may keep burning democracy’s flickering light.

Slaves and their progeny have encountered the absurd in both the material and the nonmaterial world; the American empire alienated people of African descent from the possibility of making meaning for themselves. In his definitive work *Slavery and Social Death*, Orlando Patterson framed the meaning-making crisis presented to African-Americans on the southern plantation. His term „natal alienation” goes directly to the heart of what is critical in the slave experience, namely, „the loss of ties of birth in both ascending and descending generations.”⁵ To be forcibly denied access to one’s predecessors, present social life, and progeny in one’s situation leads to an existential vertigo. „On the cognitive or mythic level, one dominant theme emerges, which lends an unusually loaded meaning to the act of natal alienation: this is the social death of the slave.”⁶

How have these people made meaning of themselves, their situation, and ultimately their god and religion? On an epistemological battlefield that is blood-soaked (metaphorically), methodological, and material, the African-American conception of god and religion has been waged. The deepest questions of meaning could hang, if not lynch, those engaged in meaning-making activity. „On the crucial existential level relating to black invisibility and namelessness, the first difficult challenge and demanding discipline is to ward off madness and discredit suicide as a desirable option.”⁷

To the DuBoisian inquisition, „What meaneth Black suffering?” the African-American experience „theologizes” the absurdity of the American hegemony over their lives and life chances. Experiencing hellish material conditions, which suggest that one kills one’s self,

many people of African descent engaged in a theological rebellion, a strange phenomena that I characterize as Camusian dialectic. They (slaves then, „free” people now) said to themselves, „This is an absurd situation, but I will not be reduced to an absurdity”—perpetually hewing a stone of hope out of a mountain of despair. This is Martin Luther King, Jr.’s theology encountering Sisyphus’ tragedy.

Theologically discerned, they existentially rebelled against their absurd situation. „The very moment the slave refuses to obey the humiliating orders of his master, he simultaneously rejects the condition of slavery.”⁸ Rooted in Hebrew Bible narratives, they had been commanded from the heavens to „tell ol’ Pharaoh to let my people go.”

Their unsupervised and, at times, contested gatherings were a counter-hegemonic practice in and of itself. A people who have been historically denied access to the broader democratic project and ultimately their humanity were using a religious space to affirm their beauty, intelligence, and capacity while praying and working out their spiritual salvation and social freedom. The emerging American empire refused their humanity and worked vigorously and violently to conserve the inhuman system of slavery. In the face of such brutality and totalizing reality, for Black folks to assert their humanity was a left-of-center project. Their religious vision was one that called for a world without chains.

We used to slip off in de woods in de old slave days on Sunday evening way down in de swamps to sing and pray to our own liking. We prayed for dis day of freedom. We come from four and five miles away to pray together to God dat if we don’t live to see it, do please let our chillun live to see a better day and be free, so dat dey can give honest and fair service to de Lord and all mankind everywhere.⁹

The slaves did not leave a dense theological treatise to articulate their notions of power and freedom because learning to read was criminalized when engaged in by slaves. The permissible activity of singing (for example, the spirituals) was their first theological text. Ex-slave Vinnie Brunson recalled, „Dey sing ’bout de joys in de nex’ world an de trouble in dis. Dey first jes sung de ’ligious songs, den dey commenced to sing ’bout de life here an w’en dey sang of bof’ dey called dem de ‘Spirituals.’”¹⁰

Reflecting death, misery, suffering, judgment, sadness, and hope, the spirituals served to articulate their situatedness and offer a sense of hope beyond their tragic circumstances. Oft times, spirituals had dual meanings:

Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,
Coming fo' to carry me home.
Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,
Coming fo' to carry me home.
Well, I looked over Jordan and what did I see,
Coming fo' to carry me home?
A band of angels coming after me,
Coming fo' to carry me home.

Lyricaly, it is a telling of the story of the Hebrew god's entering into human history to take a faithful servant to paradise for reward and an eschatological hope beyond the misery of the plantation. Moreover, this song was sung as sign and signal to the slave hearer that the Underground Railroad was near and that those who desired the reward of freedom on this side of the Jordan should get on board. At once, these songs were about a god who, through time and space, was concerned about freedom for the faithful both here and in the hereafter. Their god, as opposed to the slave master's god, deemed them and their plight to be worthy of freedom.

They express the profound conviction that God was not done with them, that God was not done with life. The consciousness that God has not exhausted [God's] resources or better still that the vicissitudes of life could not exhaust God's resources, did not ever leave them. This is the secret of their ascendancy over circumstances and the basis of their assurances concerning life and death. The awareness of the presence of a God who was personal, intimate, and active was the central fact of life and around it all the details of life and destiny were integrated.¹¹

In Black preaching, singing, prayers, testimony, and other liturgical interactions, Jesus is hope in unhelpful circumstances. Set against the darkness, Jesus and his god were light. Jesus is „a bright and morning star,” „water in dry places,” „the lily of the valley,” „the rose of Sharon,” „a friend to the friendless,” „a rock in a weary land,” „a lawyer in the court,” „a doctor in the sickroom,” and a whole host of such phrases from the essence of their belief in and about the divine and their situation that begins with an assumption of their worth and

redemption. They knew that the darkness would not have the last word, because god was with them.

Whether the song uses the term, Jesus, or the oft-repeated Lord, or Saviour, or God, the same insistence is present—God is in them, in their souls, as they put it, and what is just as important, [God] is in the facts of their world. In short, God is active in history in a personal and primary manner. People who live great pressures, grappling with tremendous imponderables which left to themselves they could not manage, have no surplus energy for metaphysical distinctions. Such distinctions apart from the necessity of circumstances or urgency of spirit, belong to those upon whom the hold of the environment is relatively relaxed. Urgency forces a reach for the ultimate, which ultimate in the intensity of demand is incorporated in the warp and woof of immediacy.¹²

A former slave named Isabelle Baumfree believed that the slave's god changed her name to Sojourner Truth in order to go about preaching the good news of freedom for slaves and women:

My name was Isabella; but when I left the house of bondage, I left everything behind. I wa'n't goin' to keep nothin' of Egypt on me, an' so I went to the Lord an' asked him to give me a new name. And the Lord gave me Sojourner, because I was a travel up an' down the land, showin' the people their sins, an' bein' a sign unto them. Afterward I told the lord I wanted another name, 'cause everybody else had two names; and the Lord gave me Truth, because I was to declare the truth to the people.¹³

With this in mind, a number of African-American religious individuals, institutions, and organizations worked to end the vicious system of slavery and expand democratic opportunity for themselves and their fellow citizens. Read in proximity of sacred documents of American civic religion, namely the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, former slaves breathed theological life into democratic ideas:

„Children, I talks to God and Gods talks to me. I goes out and talks to God in de fields and de woods. [The weevil had destroyed thousands of acres of wheat in the West that year.] Dis morning I was walking out, and I got over de fence. I saw de wheat a holding up its head, looking very big. I goes up and take holt ob it. You b'lieve it, dere was *no* wheat dare? I says 'God ..., what *is* de matter wid dis wheat? and he says to me, „Sojourner, dere is a little weasel in it.” Now I hears tal-

kin' about de Constitution and de rights of man. I comes up and I takes hold of dis Constitution. It looks *mighty big*, and I feels for *my* rights, but der aint any dare. Den I says, God what *ails* dis Constitution? He says to me, „Sojourner, dere is a little *weasel* in it.”¹⁴

For Sojourner and those who came after her, god spoke to them about the ways to make their experience more democratic. The weasel was the denial of her kith and kin's rights of citizenship. Her god was concerned with the evils of society and compelled her to move toward the establishment of democracy.

Harriet Tubman, the most successful conductor of the Underground Railroad, was called the Black Moses. Escaping from slavery, a heroic effort in and of itself, she never forgot those she left behind. She called upon her God to provide her the strength to carry out the divine task of liberating others from the horrors of slavery:

„I had crossed the line. I was *free*, but there was no one to welcome me to the land of freedom. I was a stranger in a strange land; and my home, after all, was down in Maryland; because my father, my mother, my brothers, and sisters, and friends were there. But I was free, and they should be free. I would make a home in the North and bring them there, God helping me. Oh, how I prayed then,” she said; „I said to the Lord, ‘I'm going to hold steady on to you, and I know you'll see me through.’”¹⁵

In 1862 she awoke one morning, „singing, ‘*My people are free! My people are free!*’”¹⁶ Reflecting on her nineteen trips in the belly of the beast of slavery in the dead of winter, „I just asked Jesus to take care of me, and He never let me get *frost-bitten* one bit”¹⁷ Both Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth heard the proclamation of the gospel of freedom in the Constitution and the voice of god.

In the twentieth century, progressive social movements called upon god to improve their lot and laced their public discourse with religious ideals and themes. At the Progressive Political Convention of 1912, the delegates marched down the convention floor aisles singing, „Onward Christian Soldiers.” The Rev. George Washington Woodbey, pastor of Mt. Zion Baptist Church, ran as Vice President with Socialist Party presidential candidate Eugene Debs. In a powerful dialogue with his Christian mother, Woodbey described his view of god, Jesus' mission, and religion as one that was compatible with socialism. In the

end, his mother converted to socialism but never surrendered Jesus. For Woodbey socialism was the closest political system to the gospel.

The Civil Rights Movement was the last serious invocation of the slave god on American soil. The hymns and spirituals that became the freedom songs of the Civil Rights Movement illustrated the saliency of religion in social movements. „I woke up this morning with my mind stayed on Jesus” became „I woke up this morning with my mind stayed on freedom.” Jesus was both existential and political freedom.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., „languaged” the prophetic god into public space. King proclaimed in one of his final sermons, „Somewhere we must come to see that human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and the persistent work of dedicated individuals who are willing to be co-workers with God.” The goal of his Southern Christian Leadership Conference was „to redeem the soul of the nation.” The soul of a nation is its social structures, political discourse, and quality of life. Using evangelistic idiom to win democratic rights for African-Americans was a grand example of god-talk and democratic expansion.

In what is considered his most „dangerous” speech—„A Time to Break the Silence”—King employed the tortured phrase „vocation of agony.” Harking back to, or, better yet, calling upon the shared experience of his predecessors Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, King named the challenge of calling upon god in the struggle for social justice. He gave this speech in the midst of death threats, repudiation from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's board of directors, and merciless attacks in the mainstream and African-American media.

Camus wrote: „The rebel does not ask for life, but for reasons for living. He rejects the consequences implied by death. If nothing lasts, then nothing is justified; everything that dies is deprived of meaning. To fight against death amounts to claiming that life has a meaning to fighting for order and for unity.”¹⁸ A major task of King's speech was to rebel against the monopoly on religious discourse shaped by conservative religious individuals and institutions, thereby creating space for the revelation of the prophetic god:

Some of us who have already begun to break the silence of the night have found that the calling to speak is often a vocation of agony, but

we must speak. We must speak with all the humility that is appropriate for our limited vision, but we must speak. And, we must rejoice as well, for surely this is the first time in our nation's history that a significant number of its religious leaders have chosen to move beyond the prophesying of smooth patriotism to the high grounds of a firm dissent based upon the mandates of conscience and the reading of history.¹⁹

King carved out a place where the task of religion is to challenge the role of government. His notion of „the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism” provides a cursory glance at the role of the United States in the manipulation of foreign governments and its treatment of the poor (at home and abroad) that has led to a crisis in American civilization:

A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.²⁰

This speech was not simply about American foreign policy gone awry but about the very nature of religion and democracy. The role of government in the lives of the poor throughout the world was addressed by his courageous oration. It has to be noted that in 1958 Martin Luther King and 2,000 other Baptist ministers were expelled from the National Baptist Convention because of their commitment to civil rights. Moreover, of the nearly 500 Black churches in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963, only nine participated in the Civil Rights Movement. By no means does this essay claim that the dominant view of god and democracy was the prophetic view but, rather, that there have been prophetic minorities willing to risk life and limb to seize the public's imagination and transform public policy.

This cursory glance looks at an epistemic framework for discussing religion and democracy. The fourteenth and fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution and the Civil and Voting Rights Act are public-policy testaments to this framework. From the bosom of my grandmother's preceding generation and succeeding generations emerges

the litmus question for religion in public discourse: How does it contribute to the expansion of democratic opportunity? May we be wise enough to listen to those who are the unlistened-to for the soul of democracy.

Endnotes:

¹There are many gods. I am attempting to name them in way that keeps track of the fallibility of gods constructed by humans, including my own. In this essay, using a lower case „g” is to lower our conception of gods so that no religion can claim to have sole access to the divine.

²(San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005).

³(San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006).

⁴Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957), p. 91 (emphasis in original).

⁵Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 7.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁷Cornel West, *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999), p. 102.

⁸Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, tr. Anthony Bower (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974 [orig.: *L'Homme Révolté* (Paris: Libriaire Gallimard, 1951)]), p. 14.

⁹Ex-slave Alice Sewell, quoted in Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, and Steven F. Miller, eds., *Remembering Slavery: African Americans Talk about Their Personal Experiences of Slavery and Freedom* (New York: New Press, 1998), p. 205.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 185.

¹¹Walter Earl Fluker and Catherine Tumber, eds., *A Strange Freedom: The Best of Howard Thurman on Religious Experience and Public Life* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1998), pp. 69–70.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 70.

¹³Olive Gilbert, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Bondswoman of Olden Time, with a History of Her Labors and Correspondence Drawn from Her „Book of Life”* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991 [orig.: Battle Creek, MI, 1878]), p. 164.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 147.

¹⁵Jean M. Humez, *Harriet Tubman: The Life and the Life Stories* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), p. 217 (emphasis in original), quoting from Sarah Hopkins Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (Auburn, NY: W. J. Moses, 1869), pp. 19–20.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 258 (emphasis in original).

¹⁷Ibid., p. 259 (emphasis in original), quoting from Sarah Hopkins Bradford, *Harriet, the Moses of Her People* (New York: George R. Lockwood and Son, 1886, repr. 1897), pp. 90–91.

¹⁸Camus, *The Rebel*, p. 101.

¹⁹Martin Luther King, Jr., „A Time to Break the Silence: Declaration of Independence from the War in Vietnam,” Riverside Church, New York City, April 4, 1967.

²⁰Ibid.