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## Joining Hands: Politics and Religion Together for Social Change

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*Joining Hands: Politics and Religion Together for Social Change*

, Roger S. Gottlieb

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Radical philosopher Roger Gottlieb, having studied both religion and politics over the years, thinks the two working together can better achieve progressive goals, for each, though flawed, performs better when reinforced with the other's assets. Never mind that this makes no sense in the abstract. Gottlieb's objective is altogether practical: to effect what he takes to be desirable social change (36–37). Social change, he believes, is brought about by forces that draw individuals into collective action towards the achievement of some goal. Both religion and politics, he claims, are forces that have this effect. As such, each is a "world-builder." Though each, as noted, has limitations, its efficacy in achieving goals is enhanced by the other's collaboration. In short, then, this book is part chronicle and part manual for the mutual reinforcement of religion by politics and of politics by religion. Its underlying assumptions are, however, scattered randomly among the various topics. So, though altogether timely and perceptive, it is probably not suitable as a required text.



Gottlieb develops his pragmatic thesis in two parts. In the first part he tells us what is meant by religion and politics, how each may support the other, and why "the time is ripe" for their interdependency to be maximized. In Part Two he explores how this has in fact been happening with regard to civil rights, gender equality, environmental protection, and personal coping skills. He bolsters each component of his presentation with citations from the relevant literature and both historical and anecdotal (some of it personal) detail. The result is a well executed collage. It invites attention to details most of which express the hope that a better future is attainable. Viewed from a distance, though, the outlook is less encouraging because of the impermeability of power relationships to the influence of either politics or religion or both. Gottlieb acknowledges this in passing and also discredits both other-worldly (199) and utopian (53) thinking. So in spite of the author's plea for hope, the reader is left with a sense of pessimism regarding long-term possibilities.

Gottlieb cites ideas and actions that support his thesis, but his brief is weakened in part by what he reports and far more by considerations beyond his purview. Regarding the former, he

amply instantiates how neither religion nor politics has effected major systemic changes that the ruling elite did not endorse. Regarding the latter, the parameters of his discussion are too narrow to generate assent to his thesis. His frame of reference is almost exclusively the United States post–World War II (see, however, 54– and even in this arena he devotes little attention to the emergence of the so-called Christian Right as a political power (see xxvii). Having thus narrowed the focus of his concerns, he barely alludes to such long-ago issues as the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Religious Wars (28), such mostly distant issues as Islamic states, Islamists' interpretations of *jihad* and *shari'a*, the periodic slaughter of Muslims by Hindu extremists and vice versa, Israel's denial of rights to non-Jews (see 23, 84), and the here-and-now contestations over abortion, gay and lesbian rights, or religious identity in a secular state. All these matters arguably yield reasons for maintaining a separation between church (or, more broadly, religion) and state. Gottlieb, though, brushes this arrangement aside after recommending his ambivalent if not Pollyannaish view over that of polar opposites (on this question) Stephen Carter and Ellen Willis. In lieu of argument, he merely notes that "theologians have been wrestling with these problems for centuries" (32). Leaving for later the insouciance of this attitude, I will first address some of the topics Gottlieb does address, beginning with the meaning of religion and the family of concepts with which it is associated.

Gottlieb tries but ultimately fails to distinguish religion from other engagements that cause in people "dedication, passion, and commitment." He recalls how a group of passionate Jewish political activists with whom he once worked lacked the "personal maturity and spiritual resources" to control their emotions (84). Neither Communists nor football fans are



religious, he says, because "religions are systems of belief, ritual, institutional life, spiritual aspiration, and ethical orientation that view human beings as more than simply their social or physical selves" (7). Religions are "only partly human creations," he asserts without elaboration (32). Nonetheless, a religion may or may not involve belief in a Supreme Being. What matters is that in every instance it elevates individuals beyond "the attachments and passions of our ordinary social egos" to an awareness that "some things have 'ultimate significance'" (7). Like Paul Tillich, who stressed ultimate concern, Gottlieb leaves unclear just how broadly his value determinant is to be applied. As a result, he has no basis for declaring non-religious either fervent Communists (not to mention Nazis) or, *a fortiori*, single-mindedly enthusiastic sports fans. Moreover, he neglects to help us understand how such concepts as the "ineluctably political nature of social reality" (55) and becoming "more fully religious by becoming political" (57) are consistent with the criterion that religious experience transcend the social. Religion's appeal, he says, is its "psychological insight and moral wisdom" (199). Yet he relies on customary usage rather than psychology when he talks about "religious (or spiritual) passion" or being "religiously inspired" in connection with the civil rights movement (chapter 5) but of "political passion" in connection with the Communist Party in the Soviet Union (79).

This is not a merely incidental aspect of Gottlieb's view. What it points to is his decided preference for some beliefs over others he rejects. The latter, it seems, are any beliefs that are tied to doctrines which invite exclusion (see xix). But he does not apply this eclectic standard uniformly. He (erroneously) faults secularist John Rawls for not allowing that the Torah might be true (30) and for not letting religious views into public discourse (29–32); and he faults American fundamentalists "because they are *wrong*" about certain social issues (xxvii). He brands as "a theological error" and "a significant political mistake" Reinhold Niebuhr's "strange belief that Christianity was more fitting to our human condition than any other religion or philosophy" (62). Within the parameters of this selective eclecticism, moreover, Gottlieb favors a non-doctrinal, distinction-obliterating collective emotionality. As he tells us in passing, "the new public religion will treat everyone with moral respect, regardless of the church to which they do (or do not) belong" (34). Accordingly, it is not the conceptual content of religious belief that matters but "the *emotional experience of that content*" (p. 92; italics in original). What matters is "religious feeling" (28), provided it is politically circumscribed (71–72). For, he considers it a moral duty to take sides against injustice (63). Indeed, one's belief about God must be a function of beliefs about justice (137). Given his interest in religious approaches to ecology, Gottlieb perhaps assumes in the present work a certain attitude about our world that environmentalists (or, better, deep ecologists) experience (see 79, 163, 175–176). He does not

so argue here, however. So his plea for social justice bolstered by activist religious feeling



must suffice as a substitute for morally defensible normative criteria of either beliefs or objectives, be they deemed religious or political.

In the absence of such norms, Gottlieb's espousal of transcending one's ordinary social ego to a vision of what is ultimately significant is open to disastrous interpretations. For, his belief that only collective action can succeed politically seems to imply that one's ordinary social ego is banal whereas one's transcendent state will ordinarily help bring about desirable consequences. This, however, is often not the case. After all, one's ordinary social ego might involve adherence to a morally responsible tradition and one's transcendent state might involve amoral participation in wholesale killing and mayhem. Gottlieb knows this, but hopes a "spiritual perspective" can contain the worst excesses. On his view, though, what needs containing is just desperation and arrogance (78–80). Not so. For, as Jonathan Glover shows in his *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Nota Bene, 1999), what is transcended in such instances is morality and what takes its place is moral blindness.

Here Gottlieb might insist that the terms 'ethical' and 'spiritual' in his definition of a religion restrict his endorsement of passions to those, say, that focus on achieving justice. If so, how is this justice identified, and by whom? This key problem aside, his book well captures the spirit of today's left-oriented religious activism. More narrowly, his description of how religious beliefs can facilitate enduring personal and social burdens is commendable, as is his insistence that to significantly ameliorate either kind of burden we need to initiate problem-oriented political processes.

To put this work in context one should consult Gottlieb's earlier works, notably, *History and Subjectivity: The Transformation of Marxist Theory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987); and *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment* (New York: Routledge, 1996). For other perspectives on the relationship between politics and religion, see Leroy S. Rouner, ed., *Religion, Politics, and Peace* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame University Press, 1999); Robert H. Craig, *Religion and Radical Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992). For alternative views of religion in the public sphere see Kent Greenawalt, *Religious Convictions and Political Choice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Robert Audi and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Religion in the Public Square* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997); and first and foremost Jon Mandle, *What's Left of Liberalism? An Interpretation and Defense of Justice as Fairness* (New York: Lexington Books, 2000).

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Previous Article Next Article