

November 30, 2005

As we celebrate Thanksgiving in America and give thanks for bountiful blessings, we are reminded of the many who are unable to give thanks for peace because their lives are affected by raging conflicts in their homelands.

We wanted to share this transcript of an interview Terry did with Rabbi Michael Lerner, about finding peace through our faith.

Finseth: The theory of the clash of civilizations started in the United States. What do you think of it?

Lerner: I believe that it is one way of looking at the world that accentuates despair and the inevitability of conflict, and it's a possible way that it becomes prominent when people are into despair and when people are into fear and there's an alternative way of understanding this hysterical moment as one of humanity coming together to resolve a shared problem of trying to repair 150 years of ecological irresponsibility. Then that may well also be the possibility for the 21st Century. So which feeling one adopts about the nature of the global reality is a reflection of the level of hope or despair that exists in the person who's adopting the theory. And so when one goes to theories that are, let's say that there's an inevitability of conflict, one is coming from that moment in one's own self or one's own heart or one's own mind, in which one has been convinced of the despair position about the world.

Finseth: Usually religions are described as paths of peace, but we see (at least in some places) the contrary. How can we help religions find their peace-making role?

Lerner: Well again you see (I am sorry to repeat myself), but here's the exact same issue. Inside every religion you have many texts and many traditions—some of those texts represent human beings at their most hopeful moment; at a moment in which they are looking at the world and seeing the possibility of goodness. Some of those texts represent human beings at their most scared moment; at which they see the world from a standpoint of being alone in the world and feeling that everyone around them is out to get them; is going to hurt them. So our task is to strengthen the hopeful element within every religious tradition, and the best way we can do that is by respecting the greatest amount of love and caring and kindness and generosity of spirit that is possible within ourselves, because it's when we do that, we reinforce that same part within other human beings. You see every human being has that struggle going on inside of them, between the hopeful part and the despairing part. And so every religious tradition has that, and so the more others respond to us with hope and love and generosity, the more that part of us can come out. The more they respond to us with fearful and suspicious or attacking behavior, the more that part comes out in us. In other words, there's an ongoing dynamic that goes on—a dialectic.

Some people might say in response to that, oh yeah well, what were we supposed to do after 9/11? Were we supposed to respond in a generous and kind way? But the truth is that history did not start on 9/11; 9/11 is the culmination of a long history of Western insensitivity toward every religious tradition. So we can't think of 9/11 as the determining truth of the nature of reality.

Finseth: What specific contribution do you think Judaism could play in that (which basically you've just answered)?

Lerner: Well, I think yes. I mean, sure we have Judaism right now as being identified with the most fearful elements in our history. Now I understand why. After all, we have suffered the death of millions and millions of people in the middle of the 20th Century. And as a result, the Jewish people have been traumatized, but the trauma that we faced in the 20th Century is now being acted out upon the Palestinian people, not to the same extent, God forbid, and not with the same horrendous murderous behavior, but never-the-less, acted out in a hurtful, insensitive way. And we the Jewish people, need to overcome that trauma. And Judaism, if it can't overcome that trauma, will be stuck in the consciousness of Hitler, rather than in the consciousness of Moses. So we're needing to overcome that. On the other hand it would sure be helpful if the Palestinian people and other Arab people would act towards us as though we are not fundamentally evil and as though we weren't the embodiment of the worst things in the world. So again, it is a dialectic that in each religious tradition there is a struggle going on—and inside Judaism right now there is a struggle going on, because there are some of us who are trying to build or to renew Judaism by bringing out its loving parts, which are the parts in the Torah that say, specifically, that it is a commandment, a mitzvah, a requirement of Jewish laws, to love—not only our neighbor—but to love the other, to love the stranger.

Finseth: So what is the future of interfaith dialogue, then?

Lerner: Well, interfaith dialogue can be a purely phony interaction between groups of paid, “make nice” [people]—whose job it is; who are employed by the community, to make nice with the others. But meanwhile, the vast majority of people in each community continue to hate each other. That's how it's been for the past 50 or 60 years, at least in regards to Jewish-Christian relationships, and many others, and certainly between Western religions—between Judaism and Christianity on the one hand and Islam on the other hand. So interfaith dialogue can be purely phony, or it can be much more real; it can be real if we:

1. Each were to teach the other about the other's tradition, if we were to really learn about the other's tradition, not just say in some abstract way, we're respectful of you, but to really learn what the other believes, to try and understand the other's world view and their (best) views.
2. To—on the grassroots level, not just on a level of a Pope goes to a Synagogue, but on a grassroots level—meet people and to learn from persons, what each other's lives are like. So if there were interfaith dialogue at that level there would be a real possibility of a more fruitful interaction between the religious communities.

Finseth: You mentioned the Pope; how do you view Catholic-Jewish relations, after Ratzinger's election?

Lerner: Well, let's put it this way ... the future well being of the Jewish people depends on there being peace and economic well being and ecological sanity on this planet. So that's our main survival issue. We need a planet in which people get along with each other, support each other,

and take care of each other. So to the extent that Ratzinger contributes to that, things will be very good. But to the extent that he contributes to mutual suspicion in the world, to distrust of other peoples, to insensitivity to the fundamental survival needs of the planet, then things won't be so good, between Jews and Catholics. I'm praying everyday that this pope will embody the highest and most loving energies possible on the planet.

Finseth: I want to switch back to Islam. Can you tell us something about your relations or interactions with Islam?

Lerner: Yes, I have been meeting many Islamic leaders in the United States and in Palestine, and I find that there is a great deal of humanity and wisdom amongst many of the people I meet. Now obviously, I don't meet the ones who want to kill me! But let's say that I have more in common with some Muslim leaders and some Christian leaders, than I have with some Jewish leaders. But I think that's how it is for everyone, because there really is within all of the religious traditions, a voice of love and a voice of hate, and the voices of hate in the Jewish world would get along a lot better with some of the people who are currently running Iran than they would with me! Similarly, there are Christian fundamentalists in the United States who would get along better with the Imams in Iran than they would get along with me. I've met some wonderful Islamic leaders and have been to Mosques and even been invited to speak in a Mosque in the United States and have found a great deal of humanity and sympathy and even understanding of the distorted policies of the current government of Israel.

Finseth: Good. On the same line then, you mentioned [visiting] the Mosques and speaking in the Mosque—I don't know if that's the main experience, but can you share with us a meaningful Jewish-Muslim experience that you were a part of—a story that really touched you?

Lerner: Yes, well one thing that very much touched me, was participating with Muslims in Jerusalem in a silent walk around the walls of the old city, in which Muslims and Jews marching together for peace. I was a part of that demonstration a few years ago. It was a very beautiful and moving experience.

Finseth: We subscribe to your email magazine, of course, and have been reading and following your writing all along.

Lerner: Oh, so you know I didn't give the full answer on Ratzinger?

Finseth: Would you like to say more?

Lerner: I'll say one slightly more critical thing. Last week, Ratzinger removed from office the editor of the major Catholic magazine in the United States, named *America*. He did that because this priest, who is the editor, had allowed there to be different voices in the Catholic world discussing theological issues, some of which were questioning previous Vatican stands and trying to show that within Catholic theology there was room for a dialogue. He replaced this guy. So that was a very scary moment that may indicate a direction towards authoritarian rule rather than a more open discourse. His view seems to be the opposite of the view that predominates in the Jewish world. In the Jewish world there's a famous story of two contending theological

interpretations: One of them, the school of Shammai, the other the school of Hillel. And they were both arguing and arguing and arguing on every single point they disagreed, and finally they appealed to the ultimate authority, because we don't have a pope, so they had to appeal to God directly, and they agreed to pray to God that God should intervene. Finally a voice came out of heaven and said, "This one, Hillel, and this one Shammai are both the voices of the living God." I wish that that could be heard from the Vatican.

One other thing—I don't know if this goes into your community—but we are creating in the United States, a thing called the Network of Spiritual Progressives: to bring together people who want to have a voice that is an alternative to the religious right—here, meaning the religious right in the Catholic world, and Protestant world, religious right in the Jewish world, and the religious right in the Muslim world. We're creating a network of spiritual progressives, and in fact we're having a conference this summer from July 20 - 23 in Berkley, at the University of California. People from all over the country are coming to help shape a voice that will be an interfaith voice, not just Jews, Christians and Muslims, but also Buddhist, and Hindus and a wide variety of religious traditions will be represented there, trying to create a spiritual left so that that can speak as an alternative to the religious right. So if people there who read you want to know more about it, they should come to our website (www.tikkun.org).

We give thanks for you and your part in this ministry of peace making and interfaith dialogue with us!

Happy Thanksgiving.

Grace and Peace,

Terry and Michele Finseth

The 2006 Mission Yearbook for Prayer & Study, p. 185