

Daily Meditation 09-02-24

Aquinas vs. Trump, SCOTUS & Antichrist: My New Book

Good morning.

This morning, I would like to share with you two topics on my mind. One is, of course, the essay that you'd be reading this morning, a reflection on the very first page (full page) of my book on the Antichrist: Three teachings from Thomas Aquinas about tyrants and political evil.

I'd just like to point out, regarding that, that the dedication in my book is very purposeful and significant for me. I say, "I dedicate this book to the young leaders of the world." As an elder, of course, I'm interested in leadership that is coming along. And then I say, "and all those who are not in denial about climate change, and recognize our Earth as sacred and worth saving."

It's really a scandal and embarrassing, with so many so-called adults in denial about climate change, or pretending to be, and creating a whole political party around it. I can't think of anything more evil than choosing to pretend that we don't have to do anything about destroying the planet, Mother Earth. I do think that this matricide derives from the same place as the yearning to control women's bodies. That is from a patriarchal mindset and consciousness that is deeply, deeply afraid of the feminine.

And to think that it would lead us, or lead a whole political party, to say "What? Me Worry?" about climate change. The seas are rising, hurricanes are multiplying (in ferocity as well as number), wildfires are flaming, droughts are everywhere, and floods are, too. How people can say they love their children or grandchildren or future generations, when they're more bent on improving fossil fuel corporation profits, than they are about doing something. Going back on a lifestyle is beyond me.

And notice the word Earth as Sacred in my dedication. The opposite of evil in this book that's about evil, because it's about the Antichrist -- the opposite of evil is not the good. Bad is the opposite of good. The opposite of evil is the Sacred.

Is Earth sacred? Are the waters and the forests, the animals, the grasses, soil and the rain and the oceans? Are they sacred? Then to ignore their suffering is evil.

And then I add, I'm also dedicating the book to "those who believe that a government of the people, by the people, and for the people, is an aspiration worth struggling to preserve and improve upon, and who prefer Biophilia to necrophilia, joy to grievance, love to hate, and justice to the greed that guarantees injustice.

So the purpose writing a book on evil, or the Antichrist, is not to spread blame or shame, but just the opposite: to awaken the sacred, to awaken our capacity for good. And that is the purpose of blowing the whistle on the Antichrist that is alive and well in our time.

Now I said I had two topics to share with you today. The second is that I want to talk more about the death of my friend and leader, Rabbi Michael Lerner.

This morning, about half an hour before I was going to church, I received an email that told me that the funeral for Rabbi Michael Lerner was this morning, at 10:30. My church service is at 10, which I attend, and I could not attend Rabbi Lerner's funeral because it's a long way away. It was being held at the same place that I attended his father's funeral, a number of years ago, at a cemetery in Oakland.

So I felt bad about that on the one hand, but on the other, it made a lot of sense that I was attending a Christian Mass, an Episcopalian Mass, at the time that he was being buried in his Jewish ritual in Oakland, because Michael was very ecumenical. Obviously he knew I was a Christian and a Christian priest, first Roman Catholic and then Episcopalian, and we had a lot of respect for one another's different faith traditions and our leadership. We practiced in both.

And one of the stories about Michael Lerner is that he was deeply influenced by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, but also by Rabbi Zalman Schachner, whom many people credit with being the founder of the Jewish Renewal movement. I also knew Rabbi Schachner, Zalman Schachner, and he liked very much my language around deep ecumenism. I created that phrase in my book on *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*. And he told me more than once that he loved it because he had been doing it for years, but it didn't ever work for what he was doing, until he came across my term deep ecumenism. And I want to give credit to Joanna Macy, the Buddhist scholar and activist, because she alerted me. I got the term from her, insofar as she talked about deep ecology, as distinct from just regular ecology. Deep ecology takes you into the world of spirit, the world of depth.

And so I applied that to ecumenism. I felt too much ecumenism was in the head. It was about reading position papers to each other, theological position papers. And that bored me utterly. I think real ecumenism, deep ecumenism, is about praying together and working together, especially in protest against injustice.

But I'll tell you this story. The very last Mass I celebrated as a Roman Catholic priest, was at a Jewish Renewal center in upstate New York, where I did a retreat for a week, co-leading a retreat with Rabbi Porsche Wasko, and we both taught. And it was a powerful week. But the last day, Rabbi Zalman Schachner, one of the big influences on Rabbi Michael Lerner, showed up.

And he said, “Oh, this feels a really good thing you've got going here, let's end with a ritual.” I said, “Fine. What kind of ritual should we do?” “Let's have a Mass,” he said. “A Mass? I’m the only Christian here! You want to have a Mass?” He said, “Yeah, we should have a Mass.” And I said, “Well, let me take a poll.” And I asked the people, about 100 attendees, and 99 said, Yes, let's do this.

So we chose the Song of Songs as a theme, and we each chose a partner, and danced down the aisle and so forth. And there were about a dozen rabbis, several of them women, because Rabbi Zalman Schachner was the first rabbi to ordain women. And so I consolidated Mass with this group of 12 rabbis, including women, and built around the Song of Solomon.

And lo and behold, the next day, two days later or so, I got my pink slip from the Vatican, by way of FedEx, my expulsion from the Dominican Order after 34 years. So it was the very last Mass I ever celebrated as a Roman Catholic priest.

Now this takes me to Mass this morning. The first reading from the Mass—and I was very aware that Rabbi Michael Lerner was being buried, if you will, at the very same hour—the first reading today was from the Song of Songs. And I was so moved by the synchronicity of that. And I want to share with you the beautiful passage, chapter 2, 8-13:

The voice of my beloved: Look, he comes leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice. My beloved speaks and says to me, Arise my love, my fair one, and come away, for now the winter has passed. The rain is over and gone. The flowers appear in the earth. The time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtle dove is heard in our land. The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom. They give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.

What could be more Creation-centered than that! And notice when humans reach for symbols, for metaphors, for stories, for pictures, for images, they reach to nature, and nature's fruitfulness and fragrance. Boundlessness, energy, and all the images that come through as feeling, not just thoughts, in just that one small passage from the Song of Songs.

So I was moved that this prayer was offered in the Christian church I attended, at the very moment that they were praying for Michael Lerner at the cemetery in a Jewish ritual. And I also received, with that invitation to attend his funeral, an obituary that tells more of his amazing story, that I want to share with you. I shared something in the essay a couple days ago when I learned about his death.

He became an outspoken leader in the free speech movement. When he was working on his doctorate in philosophy at the University of California, he became chair of the Berkeley chapter of the SDS (Students for Democratic Society) from 1966 to 1968. He founded a group called Seattle Liberation Front, when he taught at the University of Washington, and was later tried and acquitted as a member of the "Seattle Seven. So he was an activist as well as an intellectual. He worked as a therapist in the labor movement, creating the Institute for Labor and Mental Health, and served as Dean of the Graduate School of Psychology at New College of California.

And I mentioned in my essay on him that, of course, he founded the Tikkun magazine.

He wrote about the Politics of Meaning. And in 1993 First Lady Hillary Clinton picked up on that phraseology and used it in her writings. And he met her, and he told me at our last conversation that he was disappointed in the way that he interacted with the White House at that time, He was critical of himself.

He authored 10 books and edited four anthologies, and one book he wrote was with Cornel West, entitled "Jews and Blacks: Let the Healing Begin." That was in 1995. He was invited to speak in 2016 at the memorial of his fellow anti-Vietnam War activist Muhammad Ali. And his works are at the Stanford University in an archive there.

So again, I want to share this story with you, of a great rabbi and a great leader, a great ecumenist, a great fighter for justice and for peace, the peace that only justice can bring: Rabbi Michael Lerner.

Thank you. See you next week.