



OUR CRISIS OF FAITH: ON REDEEMING OURSELVES, OUR FAITH COMMUNITIES, AND OUR COUNTRY

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“It is not the intention of our religion that we achieve political unity but rather that, through our common faith, we move together on the same journey . . . witness to the sanctity of life, all the time working to build more just and peaceful societies.”

—Tom Fox

America is in a crisis of faith. But it isn't a crisis of the conventional religiosity that we no longer practice. We've lost the faith that as a people we can be the best, that we can achieve the best. We're not only losing our belief in doing well, creating and managing material production, and enjoying the benefits. We've also lost the faith that we can do *good*, that as a nation we can do well what we really believe in, and that we can do it together.

This crisis of faith has been made real for me through my experience with many Americans who know what they *believe* but not what they should *do*. I have met them over the years of my learning, doing, and teaching community organizing, work that began in neighborhoods and in the last five years has been in congregations and parishes.

Responsibility and Redemption

Most of us have forgotten, if we ever knew, what we have in common as Americans—the things that are worth thinking of, talking about, and acting on. Think of us at our best—as a people, a country, a nation, even as a civilization—and what comes to mind are the extraordinary ways we have been graced by God. The blessings are countless, beginning with the land itself, this country that is so rich and wondrous. Consider the myriad peoples that inhabit

the land—their gifts, talents, histories, and cultural wisdom. Then there is our extraordinary political history. With all its foibles and failures, it is a model emulated everywhere. When we criticize our ventures in war or departures from human rights, we do so from within our political tradition. Few of us would trade this constitutional federal republic, with its civil liberties and political rights, for any other form of government.

And yet, despite these blessings and a compelling tradition of self-governance, we have stopped taking responsibility for our shared public life, its benefits and burdens. We rationalize the abandoning of that responsibility by calling government irresponsible. When we do this, we close our eyes to degradation, corruption, and injustice, inordinate consumption and depletion of resources, unmanageable wastes and environmental pollution, and our own alienation and privatization—all in proportions not previously known here. So many of these problems remain unchecked because there is no shared public commitment to deal with them.

The question is whether we will redeem ourselves as a nation and how we will do that. It is a question that should be central to the life of all communities of faith and communities based on democratic values. The devastating circumstances

of our lives—the widespread loss of family, spiritual community, and meaningful work—challenge us to stop the worship of physique, possessions, position, prestige, and power. This question of redemption should preoccupy all of us who imagine ourselves as children of God or citizens of a democracy. It must be a priority for our thinking, our talking, and our action. It is a question that asks us who we are as struggling children, what visions and hopes are born in our struggles, how we experience ourselves when called by God, and how we serve God by acting on those callings.

But in daily life we have stopped talking about our most profound concerns and hopes. We do not reflect on or talk about our deepest values and their sources—whether family, congregation, school, or union—and whether we still believe in those values. In the last two decades, economic and political changes have created a social drift in which millions of us are living our daily lives continuously overwhelmed. For many, whether low-, middle-, or upper-middle-income, keeping our heads above water takes all our time and energy.

Perhaps it is also true that there are things we do not want to say and we do not want to hear—although they need to be said and heard. They are about the pain in America, the sickness of all kinds, and the death—all around and within us. If we do not talk about our problems, we cannot fix them. If we do not struggle with how we hurt and hope, we will never produce a vision, and we will never respond to our callings.

It is not possible to close our eyes forever to our own sickness and death—it is within us too, not only “them.” Even our most affluent communities are marked by high rates of parenting failure, divorce, alcohol and drug use, domestic violence, and suicide. Perhaps the most visible reminders of what is happening in America, despite valiant efforts by dedicated congregations and parishes, are the homeless. Less visible are the plethora of addictive sicknesses for which we have developed 12-step programs; deteriorating family life, with single- and two-working-parent families the rule and effective parenting of children the exception; overwhelmed public schools, where a quarter to three-quarters of all students arrive with baggage from home that undermines their learning and the staff’s teaching; pandemic toxic pollution and the utter failure of technology to remove it; the wave of gang violence and drugs; and the disintegration of bridges, roads, and other public works. On even a larger scale, there are covert intelligence communities that are running amok, making secret deals with organized criminals and corporations at the expense of the general good. And all this when

credible representative democracy is approaching its demise in the face of unaccountable partisan political power brokers, political action committees, and their media manipulators.

Three dominant ideologies have rationalized America’s rampant social sickness and stunted development:

- That full development will result eventually from the benefits of science, material technology, and hierarchical organization;
- That GNP growth in the corporate industrial sector will trickle down, ending joblessness and poverty, and their secondary effects; and
- That education is the key to long-term prosperity.

The first nearly always bypasses local needs and social problems. The second is contrary to all historical evidence. And the third ignores the present circumstances of American public education and its seemingly insurmountable problems

The country’s continuing social underdevelopment, with its massive political and economic consequences, is characterized not only by selective material poverty and restricted opportunities—a punishing combination—but also by widespread social powerlessness. A ponderous number of us are permanently vulnerable, defenseless against intrusive and exploitative institutional power, public and private.

Mass Bureaucracy and Loss of Faith

Anyone who feels smug about the break-up of the Soviet Union or the disintegration of its empire in Eastern Europe should look carefully at what is going on here. What we are seeing in the East and the West is the decline and destructiveness of mass bureaucracy—public and private—when these hierarchical organizations alone are responsible for government and the economy. Mass bureaucracy monopoly is a colossal failure in both totalitarian and democratic states. Consider governance in urban areas, where two-thirds of the world’s population will live by the end of the century. The key effect of bureaucratic rule has been to treat citizens as incompetent to manage self-government and to form, alter, and direct institutions for that purpose.

The net effect in the U.S. can be seen best in the loss of institutions of “local government,” which are no longer local and hardly government, at least in terms of our traditional understandings of inclusive political participation and self-rule. With enormous constituencies, so-called local government officials exit the extended political arena, except for public-relations purposes; they become members of boards of directors, attempting to over-

see their centralized bureaucratic enterprises. They narrow most of their political behavior to negotiating deals with well-organized and endowed elites, pluralities, and special interests. The sheer size of contemporary urban government removes the burdens of political representation as those usually are understood. With constituencies of several hundred thousand to more than a million, political action and participation costs are exorbitant. Local government, as a mechanism not only of service delivery but overall political rule, is an historical artifact for most Americans.

After his visit to this country in the early 1830s, the French nobleman Alexis de Toqueville wrote that centralized bureaucracy would be the “despotism democratic nations have to fear” in the future. He described a new type of public organization, for which he acknowledged having no name. He presciently imagined an organization that would “degrade without tormenting,” that would isolate individuals and undermine community, and that would become the unsatisfactory arbiter and guarantor of equality, equity, and accessibility—all the while narrowing the public space until the citizenry is reduced to “a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd.”

The rise of mass bureaucracy in America has been paralleled by a loss of faith that as citizens we can act for the common good. Despite claims to the contrary by bureaucrats, bureaucracies have not proven to be efficient or effective. In fact, long ago we stopped expecting efficiency and effectiveness from them. Moreover, bureaucracies are hardly a model for equality, equity, and accessibility. During this century’s fast-growing influence of mass bureaucracy, there has been a parallel growth of organized evil in the cities. Bureaucracies know little about producing public goods, but even less about eliminating what contemporary urban political-economists refer to as “public bads.” At the same time, public bureaucracies have become handmaidens in the promulgation of corporate consumerist values. The result is a displacement of spiritual, familial, communal, and democratic values. And our faith communities in turn have been overwhelmed by the broad societal influence of corrupted and incompetent political and economic leadership.

In summary, four things have happened: (1) hierarchical organizations have increasingly come to dominate and oppress our social, political, and economic life; (2) we have abandoned our public powers, the powers we possess as citizens with “certain inalienable rights,” to govern directly and to guide representative government and hold it accountable; (3) our faith- and value-based com-

munities have experienced a historic decline and demoralization; and (4) our spiritual, familial, communal, and democratic values and lifestyles have been and continue to be perverted by bureaucratic and corporate organizations and their bottom-line ethos.

Thus our rejection of responsibility for the public powers reflects a national crisis of faith and values, a crisis of living our faith and values, not only “believing” in them. It is nothing less than a betrayal of our national inheritance—religious and political.

Struggling With a Calling

The question is, who is going to fix America? The answer is, we are—or it won’t be fixed. Too many of us have been waiting for leadership from the top. But there is no leadership at the top, not that can deal effectively with what is going on at the bottom. Furthermore, the top benefits from the current situation and, as the saying goes, no one with four aces asks for a new deal. The leadership must come from the grassroots.

We have a choice, those of us who are struggling with a calling, who have a sense of what we value most and a vision of what a better life could be. The choice is whether we continue to use our faith- and value-based communities to escape from what is going on in our cities, neighborhoods, and families—or whether through these communities we heal, rebuild, challenge, confront, and fight if necessary to transform life in urban America. No decision is a decision to continue doing nothing.

We cannot fix our political and economic problems apart from the religious and spiritual fabric of our lives. And our religiosity and spirituality will never be vitalized if we fail to act together on our shared values and visions. The twin themes underlying pathology in this country are exceedingly simple: First, by abandoning faith- and value-based communities, we have allowed the best of religious and democratic values to be perverted in the name of commercialized mass society and culture. Second, by abandoning responsibility for self-governance, not holding accountable the people we have elected to public office and ourselves, we have allowed corrupt officials, organized criminals, corporate bandits, and covert intelligence cowboys to pervert our politics and economy. The fundamental role of every citizen in a representative democracy is to hold accountable those who exercise power in his or her name. Our disinterest and disillusionment with the electoral process springs from the same crisis of faith in our ability to act powerfully in the world, the doubt that we can effectively pro-

mote our values and self-interests in secular society.

Faith to Life in Action

Organized religion and public worship historically have been a pivotal value-base for American democracy. But if they are now much less attractive to Americans than they once were, that may be understandable. Given the demands of daily life in this country, most of us cannot afford unproductive institutional affiliations, such as becoming an active member of a congregation that lacks relevance to our practical problems. In far too many of our faith communities there is no regular talk among members about their deepest concerns, the day-to-day problems that are destroying their individual lives, their families, even their neighborhoods and cities—notwithstanding the activism of a few well-identified and isolated individuals. It is too rare in most congregations and parishes to find basic values and visions clearly and consistently articulated in a way that can help us bring our faith to life in action, that can help us do something practical about the destructive forces we are all facing.

If the best values and visions of our traditions are to guide our redemption—personal, communal, and national—we have some special tasks to accomplish as part of organizing ourselves for action. We need to know the teachings of our traditions.

We need to examine those teachings to see if they are serving their original purpose, that is, uplifting humanity and human society toward the qualities we ascribe to God. If they are not, we are obligated to change those teachings—carefully but nonetheless decisively—so that they once again serve God’s purpose and nurture our action in the world. Finally, if our valued teachings cannot be redeemed, they must be allowed to succumb and new ones created that can redeem our lives, our communities, and our nation.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, “The prophets remind us of the moral state of the people: few are guilty but all are responsible.” The present crisis in America is about bringing our faith to life in action in the world, demonstrating our ability to respond as children of God and citizens of a democracy by exercising our capacity for self-governance.

The danger of allowing social life to deteriorate further in America is not that we will go so far that we cannot be saved, in some theoretical sense, but that practically as a people we will never recover from our demoralization and degradation to save ourselves. The opportunity we are given now is to repair and remake the world, to become co-creators with God, who allows us to co-direct the history of bringing the World to Come.

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