The Judeo-Christian Right Wing: Part 3

In 1925, a book entitled “The Man Nobody Knows” was published.It was the roaring 20’s—an era of romanticized excess and glorified opulence—where financial speculation ran amok.Naturally, for Christians, the need was encountered to rationalize this fun-filled orgy of materialism and decadence.So the book depicted Jesus as a **successful businessman**, and—predictably—became a bestseller.

Ever since then, from Creflo Dollar to Mitt Romney, there has been an odd tradition of smug, self-serving Christianity across America.The strange thing is that this tradition is patently incompatible with anything that Jesus of Nazareth actually said.Christian demagogues may be reminded that a man named Jesus from the town of Nazareth is the protagonist in the holy book they routinely invoke.Rarely do people praise a text in a manner that requires the audience to disregard every word uttered by the main character, but that is precisely what the target audience is expected to do in the above scenario.(One pictures a man touting To Kill A Mockingbird in order to make the case that slavery is a fine idea…by emphasizing the fact that Atticus was more successful than Tom Robinson.)

More to the point: Nobody would read the story about Lot impregnating both his daughters and conclude that **“It’s fine for parents to have sex with their children”** is a key lesson to take home from Genesis.Why not?Because when reasonable people read the Pentateuch, they don’t take it literally.By WHY don’t they take it literally?Because sanity entails, among other things, that people recognize blatant hogwash when they see it.It’s why so few people practice Santeria and Scientology.

Thank heavens, then, both Jews and Christians opt to completely ignore the edict in Deuteronomy 21:21 to stone disobedient children to death.Reasonable people are able to ascertain that—the contents of their holy book notwithstanding—this is probably not a good idea.(And so it goes with Matthew 15:4.)It is by using our innate capacity for discernment (a capacity that exists independently of the text-in-question) that level-headed people are inclined to prudently parse all texts in this manner—even sacred texts.

Yet religiosity often seems to inoculate otherwise sober minds from the dangers of critical reflection—and “save” people from the arduous task of having to think for themselves.The prospect of being assigned existential choreography holds tremendous appeal for the mentally lethargic and chronically insecure among us.And so crowds listen to their anointed cleric, and simply “take his word for it”.It’s much easier that way.(After all, aren’t Cardinals more in tune with the divine than plumbers and dishwashers?Obviously, that’s exactly what CARDINALS want everyone to think, lest they be out of a job.)

Honest people are wary of importing their own interests into the interpretation of any text.Why don’t most people read astronomy textbooks and conclude that Virgos shouldn’t court Scorpios during the Vernal equinox?Because that’s not what any passage in such a book actually says.Such an odd interpretation of the relation of the celestial equator of Sol and Earth’s ecliptic to romance would never be given credence in any serious astronomy class; yet equally bizarre interpretations are commonly entertained in churches across the country when a different book is involved.So we hear things like “God hates fags” in concert with “God is Love” from those referencing the same source.

Alas, dogmatists often only see what they want to see.(Ergo astrology buffs and Christian Republicans.)Behold: Legions of self-righteous “Christians” loudly proclaiming their fealty to Jesus of Nazareth while demeaning anyone who has the audacity to NOT toe the G.O.P. line.What’s going on here?Whether one is Christian or not, one must admit that this is nothing short of bizarre.

Gary Kamiya of Salon.com put it well once when he said: “We do not know very much about the historical Jesus.But everything we know indicates that the carpenter from Galilee would not have been pleased to learn that [a] pack of coldhearted, sanctimonious, wealth-exalting politicians were claiming to be his followers.”

A BRIEF REVIEW:

The thesis is as follows: One can endorse right-wing policies; but by doing so, one forfeits one’s right to claim to be a follower of Jesus. To advocate for either corporatism (Neoliberal economic ideology) or militarism (Neocon foreign policy) is to go against everything that Jesus stood for–as explicated by the dozens of New Testament passages already cited. I contend that the salient messages of the New Testament are antithetical to all right-wing policy. This includes not just compassion

and good will for one's fellow man, but admonishions to help the downtrodden / poor / disenfranchised / weak / sick, entreaties to eschew material / financial acquisitiveness, and requests to pursue peace.

What I aim to do with this third installment of the "The Judeo-Christian Right Wing" series is elaborate on the main thesis (focusing on the New Testament) and respond to possible arguments.

A LITTLE BACKGROUND:

It seems peculiar that at some point during the last year of Jesus' life, or at least in the months that followed his execution, one of his followers never said: "Hey, someone should probably write some of this shit down!"As far as we can ascertain, nobody did.

It was not until about three decades later that someone eventually recorded the folklore that had been orally transmitted for over a generation.The room for extensive narrative metamorphosis (modifications and embellishments, both witting and unwitting) in that intervening period goes without saying.Barring a few letters penned by a man named Saul (from Tarsus) about "the Christ", that first document ("Mark") is the best point of departure for determining what, exactly, the carpenter from Galilee may have actually said.

In only one of the Gospels (John) does Jesus insinuate that he is divine (i.e. god incarnate).Only in "John" does Jesus intimate that following HIM is the only way to achieve "salvation".Not surprisingly, "John" is the latest (and thus most embellished) of the canonical Gospels.It is no wonder, then, that "John" is the most quoted of the four Gospels by those who desperately try to circumvent Jesus' moral message—while extracting the tid-bits that best suit their own purposes. Yet John is highly suspect for its blatant embellishment…along with numerous passages that are obviously false (e.g. "If you ask anything of me in my name, I will do it" in 14:14. So much for that.)

Unsurprisingly, the original Gospel (Mark) was the briefest version—and didn't directly touch on the notion of Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah.(A resurrection doesn't even happen in "Mark".)The more spurious dogmas were added much, much later, when—rather than being just another Jewish sect—the "Jesus" following was transformed into a full-fledged, new religion.We should recall that contemporary "Christianity" is more a byproduct of the Council of Nicaea (a government tribunal convened by Emperor Constantine for obvious political purposes) than it is the

authentic legacy of a subversive Jew from first-century Canaan.Vaunted folklore has a funny way of being appropriated by institutions in order to rationalize otherwise dubious agendas.

One does not need to believe in the infallibility of any of those hallowed scriptures to see that the “Jesus” depicted in the Gospels was opposed to violence, aggression, and militancy…and was equally opposed to material acquisition, avarice, the marginalization of the poor, and the worship of affluence.In other words, the Galilean carpenter written about in the four Gospels was adamantly against everything that defines today’s G.O.P.Nevertheless, in between attending church to **praise Jesus**, denizens of the right wing routinely harangue Progressives for wanting to assist the destitute by way of pro-social public policy…and for being reticent to support a gargantuan military-industrial complex.

For those of us who actually read the Gospels (canonical and not), we find that the protagonist (a.k.a. Jesus) explicitly stated that he was concerned not just about the non-rich (i.e. the middle class), but about the poorest: the most disenfranchised and looked-down-upon members of society.He states: “Blessed are the destitute, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Luke 6:20). Later, he notes that “he that is least among you” is in the greatest graces of God (Luke 9:48).The Prince of Peace was certainly not a fan of war-profiteering, nor did he encourage cow-towing to those with the most wealth and power.

Sound much like the Republican platform?Nope.Not even close.But with a rigged exegesis, anything is possible.Between Jehovah’s Witnesses’ stricture on birthday celebrations and Mormons with their posthumous “proxy” baptisms, one wonders if there’s some book the rest of the world isn’t aware of.(Joseph Smith’s writings notwithstanding, if it were possible for most Mormons to more flagrantly flout the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, I can’t fathom how.But I digress.)

Indeed, we observe that it’s possible for certain people to read the Gospels and conclude that we shouldn’t drink soda or coffee…just as Hassidics read the Hebrew Bible and conclude that every man should wear tassels on the hem of his shirt.I could read Dr. Seuss’s “Green Eggs & Ham” and conclude that cats should live in tree houses…but I don’t.Why not?Because I’m sane.

I suspect that if Jesus were alive today, he'd be demeaned by Republicans as a "bleeding heart liberal".The irony couldn't be more profound.So why, then, do so many people who profess fealty to the kind-hearted carpenter named "Jesus" turn around and promote right-wing policies?Put another way: How, exactly, do they square these two patently antithetical stances?

In Matthew 19:21, Jesus of Nazareth says: "If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell what thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven."He seemed to be concerned with a "treasure" of some sort, but not the kind that one finds in a bank.Surely, when Jesus upset the tables of the money-changers, he did not mean to lionize hedge fund managers.

Nor did the Hebrew from Canaan ever say, "Blessed are the private equity firms" in any document archeology has yet revealed.When Jesus overturned the tables in the temple, he made quite clear the fact that usurers / financiers represented the conduct in this world that was most objectionable to him.When he spoke of "whited sepulchers", he was referring to Goldman Sachs, not to Planned Parenthood.Alas, the political party most affiliated with "Christianity" adamantly insists that it's the other way around.

Once we read the indictment of the Pharisees (i.e. usurers / financiers) in Matthew 23:25 and Luke 11:39, it is clear that Jesus was denouncing all manner of material / financial acquisitiveness.Obviously, one can be a hedge fund manager, an investment banker, or a private equity titan (or a person who supports policies that promote such moneyed interests)…OR one can be a follower of Jesus. But one can't be both. In the first essay of this trilogy, I offered dozens and dozens of passages that illustrated this crucial point.

There is a name for today's equivalent of the Pharisees' racket: Wall Street.Indeed, the modern era's versions of the Pharisees often operate in fancy-sounding places like The Chamber of Commerce, The Business Roundtable, The American Enterprise Institute, and The Club For Growth…Bible firmly in hand.

It is made quite clear in Matthew 19:24 that the possession of tremendous amounts of money (i.e. the overvaluation of worldly possessions) stands in the way of the path of salvation: "Again I say unto you: It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven."(Evidently, Christian plutocrats are banking on a lot of camels being able to go through the eyes of lots of needles.)Jesus' most explicit repudiation of the wealth-worshipping ethos

endemic to Country Club Republicans is, of course, the story of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19).This would seem to have direct implications for tax and welfare policy.

Alas.

COUNTER-ARGUMENTS:

“But hold on there,” one might interject.“What about Matthew 26:11: the part where the woman washes Jesus’ feet with perfume?”When the disciple points out that the perfume could have instead been sold for funds to help the poor, Jesus responds: “She has performed a good service for me.For you will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.”Perhaps THIS indicates a different message.

In that single passage, it seems like Jesus kinda-sorta-almost changed his mind about using funds to help the impoverished…and was perfectly fine with spending one’s money on decadence rather than on helping the poor.

To read Matthew 26:11 in this way requires a complete inability to discern the symbolism involved.Unless we each think of ourselves as God, the “buying perfume trumps helping the needy” interpretation makes no sense at all.Cleansing god’s feet is, of course, a symbolic act—just as is eating his body and drinking his blood.(We don’t conclude from The Last Supper that Jesus wanted us to drink each other’s blood.)The woman was paying tribute to god, not encouraging everyone to spend money on luxuries for themselves.After all, she was using the perfume to wash GOD’S feet (either literally or metaphorically), not her own.

Essentially, Jesus (i.e. god) was pointing out that he would only be around for a couple more days, so this was—obviously—a unique situation.So even if we take the man named Jesus from Nazareth as actually being god (incarnated as a homo sapiens male in iron-age Palestine), the anecdote makes perfect sense.If God was, in fact, gracing mankind with his presence for a very limited window of time, then this episode was obviously being treated as a one-time exemption from the mandate to NOT use one’s money to shop for Earthly indulgences.

Here we have an act sanctioned to symbolize what Jesus had just stated **in the prior verse** (Matthew 25:40): “That which you did for the least of these, you did it for me.”In other words, doing something for the poor and doing something for god

are one-in-the-same-thing.The point here, then, is that we should continue to “wash god’s feet” by helping the least of these—whom we can be sure will always be somewhere in need of assistance—be they in Palestine or Harlem.

Understanding this, the point is NOT that we should all wash our feet in expensive perfumes (instead of using our resources to help the poor).Unless we think of ourselves as God incarnate, spending our money on such luxuries (i.e. on our own gratifications) is not warranted.Matthew 26:11 comports with Jesus’ overarching moral message, and is surely meant to be read with Matthew 25:40 fresh in one’s mind.

“Now just wait a just gosh-darn minute,” one might persist.“At several points, the Old Testament talks about the pious being entitled to ‘riches’ or ‘treasure’. In Matthew 13:12 Jesus says: ‘For to those who have, to them shall be given; and they shall have an abudance.’ So…doesn’t god want us all to prosper?”

Indeed, he does.But what, exactly, does prosperity mean in this context?A drug lord prospers—in terms of accumulating stupendous spoils for himself.Ebenezer Scrooge was certainly prospering handily at the onset of the tale, **A Christmas Carol**.Prosperity can mean many different things. To WHAT KIND of “riches” / “treasure” / “abudance” does Jesus refer?What KIND of “prosperity” was he endorsing?(Obviously, drug lords and Ebenezer weren’t living the lives that Jesus had in mind.)

Matthew 13:10 and 13:13 provide an explanation of why Jesus speaks in metaphors / parables (directly after he uses the metaphor of seeds growing in deep, fertile soil yielding the most robust grain). He explains that he employes parables as a pedagogic device, so that his listeners will better understand his message. In 13:12, he is clearly referring to his audience having (and being given, and thereby having increased) **wisdom** (the secrets of God’s Kingdom). Thus, it is having WISDOM (and being given WISDOM, and thus ending up with an abudance of WISDOM) to which Jesus refers when we speaks of “abundance”.

We Americans often conflate making a good living with making a good life; and misinterpret **standard of living** as **quality of life**…not to mention misconstruing material prosperity as probity and confusing affluence with excellence.But these distinctions are crucial.Since ancient Greece, great thinkers have been asking: What constitutes the Good Life?Material wealth has NEVER been part of the answer.Agape, arete, virtue, a sense of humanity, civic responsibility, good works, and contributing

to the common weal: these are what make someone praiseworthy.Though the two aren't necessarily mutually exclusive, there is a difference between being a good businessman and being a good human being.

Shall we esteem people by the content of their bank account or by the content of their character?One often doesn't reflect the other.After all, Jesus was materially impoverished even as he offered his followers a more profound kind of bounty.So it should be plain to see: Jesus was not talking about material prosperity.There are, indeed, kinds of prosperity other than opulence…and kinds of treasure other than gold, and we should recognize what they might be.

The record is quite decisive on this point.John 10:10 reminds us that Jesus came so that we could all "have life in abundance".This is not difficult to read: God wants us to have LIFE in abundance…LIFE being the key word.Financial accumulation is not what God had in mind here, as Ecclesiastes 5:10 makes quite clear:"He that loves silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loves abundance with increase: this is vanity."And, as if it weren't already clear enough, we are told in Luke 12:15: "Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consists not in the abundance of the things which he possesses."

Needless to say, Jesus wanted us ALL to prosper—but "prosper" in a certain way.Deuteronomy notifies us that God gave us the ability to acquire wealth.Indeed, Yahweh also gave us the ability to steal, to kill, to cheat, and to lie.We should therefore conclude that it is how we choose to use our powers that will determine whether on not we are in God's graces.

Matthew 6:19-34 is clear that we should not accumulate material treasures for ourselves, but should seek divine treasure instead: "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."(This is repeated in Luke 12:34.)Later, in Matthew 12:35, we're told about "the treasure of the heart" being the key to God's grace.Clearly, our connection to the divine is a function of what sorts of things we treasure.It is sinful for our heart to be vested in material wealth.To emphasize the point, we're told that we "cannot serve both God and mammon".

"Ok, fine.Well, then, what about Matthew 25:14-30 and Luke 19:12-28?" one might ask—a fair enough question.

The parable of "the talents" is intended to tell us that we should use our god-given talents judiciously—that we mustn't squander whatever assets we're blessed to have.Moreover, the story explains that each of us is entitled to the fruits of our own

labor and that we shall reap what we sow—a message in keeping with both Karl Marx and karmic justice.Luke 12:48 states: “Everyone to whom much is given, much shall be required.” Clearly, the message is that one has a moral responsibility to use one’s resources in a pro-social and beneficent manner. To read the parable any other way is to distort the moral of the story.

(Keep in mind, it doesn’t say: “Blessed are the wealthiest, for they shall inherent the Earth.”)

“Fine, then.But EVEN STILL… Isn’t there something noble about free enterprise?For the love of god, shouldn’t we be able to give via personal charity—as independent individuals—rather than providing for the general welfare via the State?After all, we can help the poor via private means.Levying taxes in order to fund public works isn’t necessarily what Jesus had in mind when he urged us to help the poor.”

This is an important point.But the fact remains: It has been shown over and over and over again that acts of ad hoc charity are not adequate to effect social justice.Time after time, it has been demonstrated that a centrally-coordinated effort is required to guarantee that the entire citizenry has access to certain things—things to which all civilians are entitled in a civil society.This is why we have the concept, “public goods”.Philanthropic organizations do wonderful things, but are inadequate to the task of ensuring public goods for all people.

We can’t help but recognize that Jesus’ message had definite repercussions for public policy.And it’s safe to say that laissez-faire capitalism and corporatism was not it.Obviously, Jesus was for “the little guy”: this can’t possibly mean anything other than the working class over corporate power (organized labor over corporate interests, consumer protections over corporate profits, etc.)

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

If “Christians” stopped devoting so much energy to “praising” Jesus, and instead simply read what he actually said, right-wing Christians would become a rare thing, indeed. Should such a scenario come to pass, people would recognize “right-wing Christian” for the oxymoron that it is.

Whenever rituals (institutionalized protocols) trump underlying principles, something has gone woefully awry. More to the point, whenever rituals become disconnected from (or more important than) the messages that they allegedly promote, our values have gone significantly askew.

A right-wing reading of the Gospels requires a significant degree of hermeneutic schizophrenia.To maintain the impression that Jesus would have been “all for” unchecked corporate power…and would have championed affluence as the mark of human excellence…requires a stupendous feat of cognitive dissonance.Alas, as we’ve seen, many people manage to come away from the Bible with all sorts of dubious lessons.

Of course, anyone can cherry-pick “choice” excerpts from the full text ‘til the cows come home…and STILL never really get anywhere.After all, that’s precisely what Salafis do with the Koran, what the Revisionist Zionists do with the Pentateuch, what Hassidics do with the entire Torah, and what Pentecostals do with Emperor Constantine’s officially-compiled “New Testament”.And some churches just make stuff up (see “Roman Catholicism”).Apparently, Jesus of Nazareth would not have liked birth control pills.(Evidence for this, we may presume, is forthcoming.)

What a person takes home from a reading of a sacred text often says more about the person than about the sacred text.Be that as it may, when one is judicious with one’s reading, it becomes quite clear how NOT to read a text.There are certain clues that one is missing something important: mindless regurgitation, reciting designated excerpts in a choreographed way, rote memorization at the behest of authority figures, ignoring the larger context when it proves inconvenient, etc.Intelligent people who think for themselves do none of these things.

HINT: If you’re quoting Revelations more than the Gospels, you’re probably missing the point.If you’re paying more attention to John than to the synoptic Gospels, you’re probably missing the point.If the Pauline letters are given more emphasis than Mark, you’re almost certainly missing the point.And if you take the Pentateuch literally, you are definitely missing the point.(This is not merely “my own opinion on how everyone should read the Bible”; this is all quite obvious once one actually understands WHAT THE BIBLE IS.)Recognizing that scripture is a historical artifact (created under certain circumstances) is a prerequisite for understanding the implications of what one is reading.

We can selectively recite passages until we’re blue in the face…yet never actually glean a morsel of insight.A discerning reading of ALL scripture is required if we’re going to take ANY of it seriously.One doesn’t have to be a “Christian” to recognize this.(It’s no surprise that I’ve met Hindus and Buddhists who understand the Bible

far better than the vast majority of “Christians”.How is this?They are impartial.When there are no biases, no vested interests, no ulterior motives, it is amazing how lucid a reading becomes.)

When someone reads the Old Testament and concludes that “don’t eat ham and cheese sandwiches” is one of the more important “take-aways”, it is evident that some people are willing to go completely down the rabbit hole. So we get people who will refuse to cut their side-burns…yet are perfectly fine with slaughtering innocent civilians (the Judean Settler Movement) and men who think wearing a beard is more important than respecting basic human rights (the Taliban).Exegetical shenanigans abound in any religion—just ask Jim Jones.But this goes far beyond “confirmation bias” and highlighting strategically-selected excerpts…while obfuscating inconvenient passages.Pulling off such a stunt requires systematic dogmatism and wonton myopia.

Want to meet someone who has almost no understanding of the Hebrew Bible whatsoever, visit an Ultra-orthodox synagogue.Want to find someone who has memorized every last inane line in Revelations…but knows almost nothing about the historical Jesus…then visit a Southern Baptist church.Want to find someone who mandates an utterly idiotic treatment of the Muslim Faith, talk to one of Iran’s Grand Ayatollahs…or a Wahhabi cleric in Saudi Arabia.And want to find someone who probably hasn’t the faintest clue what the early history of Christianity actually involved, visit the Vatican.This isn’t funny; this is tremendously disturbing.Religion does strange things to people.(Put another way: People will undergo astounding mental contortions in order to rationalize even the most indefensible convictions.)

There are some sects of “Christianity” that do seem to actually read the Gospels with some modicum of “reading comprehension”.Quakers may be the most obvious case.The more “liberal” Lutherans, Episcopalians, and Presbyterians sometimes qualify as well.The original British Methodists are another example (not to be confused with the American version).There are some pseudo-Catholics who might also qualify (though, tellingly, this generally entails disagreeing with absolutely everything coming out of the Vatican).Not coincidentally, such people overwhelmingly tend to be Progressive.

Those who have seen the movie **Pulp Fiction** may recall that Jules Winnfield had a penchant for quoting Ezekiel 25:17 to justify cold-blooded murder.That didn’t make him a biblical scholar; it merely demonstrated that any half-literate degenerate can quote scripture to suit his own purposes.Exegetical shenanigans run rampant in

religious fundamentalism—which is precisely why it consistently proves so horrendously dysfunctional.(There is muddled interpretation aplenty; but then there is whole-cloth fabrication.)

Fanatics LOVE embarking on cherry-picking expeditions (Exodus 21:23 to justify anti-abortion crusades, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 to rationalize homophobia, etc. etc. etc.)Indeed, it is not difficult to extract whatever one needs (when one has thousands of pages of symbolism-saturated text to work with) in order to suit one's purposes—whatever those purposes may happen to be.If I wanted to promote the death penalty for anyone caught picking up sticks on Sunday, I could find ample support for such a law in the Pentateuch.(Don't press elevator buttons on Saturday? No problem, I can quote a couple handy passages for that too. That doesn't make me magnificently pious; it makes me an idiot–like the guy who refuses to eat ham and cheese sandwiches.)

In such a dubious scheme, anything "I" want to do, whatever it is, is—by definition—"righteous".That way, vengeance is merely "doing god's work" and cupidity can be passed off a virtue.This works out splendidly well for anyone seeking to couch their agenda in piety.At the end of the day, Divine Providence is whatever one makes it. "God's work" is whatever one wants it to be. Sometimes this is a matter of simply distorting the meaning of a text (as the right-wing often does with the U.S. Constitution); other times, this is a matter of outright ignoring what the text actually says (as gun-fetishists do with the 2nd Amendment).

At the end of the day, theological exegesis isn't rocket science; it's more like abstract impressionism for the dogmatically inclined.So we're left with the use of our own mental faculties if we are going to make any attempt to discern the underlying message of a book—no matter what the book may be.It should begin to raise eyebrows when the text's plain meaning is mangled beyond recognition by those with obvious vested interests.There is a difference between an honest misinterpretation and systematic exegetical perfidy: it's high time we highlight the fundamental difference. ("I may be endorsing the slaughter of innocent Palestinian civilians, but at least I'm not mixing dairy products with meat!")

In the first essay of this trilogy, I mentioned over 130 passages that make the over-arching moral message of the Bible quite clear.Defying that message, I demonstrated, requires one to ignore the most salient portions of the book…while essentially contriving non-existent messages to suit one's own purposes.In the present essay, I have mentioned several additional passages that confirm that

point.The verdict is irrefutable: To actually heed the message in the Gospels is to be a Progressive / humanist.By the same token, to endorse right-wing policy is to decisively rebuff the message of Jesus of Nazareth.

So many people obsess over “praising” Jesus. How about just listening to what he actually said? That would be a good start.

Perhaps we may conclude with the most famous rhetorical question in human history:“For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?” (Matthew 16:26).Once Jules Winnfield asked himself this question, he decided to stop killing.Go figure.

POST-SCRIPT:

Sometimes I imagine a group of people holding up (legitimate) chemistry textbooks and proclaiming that, due to the content of the books in their hands, everyone should subscribe to alchemy.The reasonable response to this curious scene would, of course, be: “But nothing in that book you have supports alchemy!”We all understand that this would be an appropriate response whether or not one concurred with the information in the chemistry textbook…and whether or not one believed in alchemy.

As we well-know, the majority of America’s right wing considers itself “Christian”.Understanding this fact, the point of the preceding essays is this: If someone wants to support right-wing policies, then so be it.We can have a civil discussion about the possible avenues for bringing about a better world.But if one opts to promote the right wing, it is duplicitous to then turn around and, in the very next breath, pretend that one is adhering to the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth.You can’t call yourself a vegan if your diet is primarily comprised of meat.Vegp;p;ans understand this; carnivores understand this.

Personally, I surmise that most of what Jesus of Nazareth had to say—according to the sparse records we now have to go on—was sage and eminently worth heeding.Leaving aside any theology one may care to entertain, I think the carpenter from first-century Galilee had a message that the entire world should embrace.This holds whether or not one feels one must appease a deity that demands to be appeased…or subscribes the the dogmas of original sin and salvation.

The fact of the matter is that I—a secularist through and through—seem to understand the Gospels far better than do most self-professed “Christians”—a perplexing state of affairs, to say the least.But even more to the point: I seem to take Jesus of Nazareth more seriously than most self-professed “Christians”.Naturally, I find this circumstance to be somewhat odd.I’m befuddled by it in the same way that I’d be befuddled to learn that I take Wicca more seriously than most witches.For if that were the case (which it certainly is not), I’d wonder what—exactly—made THEM a witch and me NOT a witch.(In such a curious scenario, what would “witch” even entail?)

And so we’re faced with a profound query: What does it really MEAN to be “Christian”?Ask any ten “Christians” this simple question and one will invariably receive at least a dozen different answers.Such is the nature of religiosity.After all, institutionalized dogmatism often has more to do with the institution than anything else.If what we now call “Christianity” is consummate with a right-wing orientation, then the protagonist in the Gospels I’VE read would most certainly not be a Christian.Perhaps it’s time we acknowledged what’s really going on here.To the entire American electorate, we might say: “The G.O.P. or Jesus.The choice is mutually exclusive.Pick one.The latter is highly recommended.”

EPILOGUE: A List of Religious Role Models

“So who, then, are you referring to?” comes the response to the discussion of religionists who’s lives are in keeping with the salient moral message of their sacred scripture. Who, indeed. Tragically, such exemplars are few and far between. Here, I list the 40 most notable figures from the modern era (that I am aware of).

The most laudable Christians have been Progressives:

- Dorothy Day
- Dorothy Cotton
- Jane Addams
- Abigail Adams
- Fiorello LaGuardia
- Robert M. La Follette
- Cesar Chavez
- William O. Douglas
- Henry Wallace
- Vito Marcantonio

- William Sloan Coffin
- Martin Luther King Jr.
- Bayard Rustin
- Archbishop Oscar Ramero
- Danny Thomas
- John Raleigh Mott
- William Penn
- Archbishop Desmond Tutu
- Archbishop Francois Fenelon
- Henri Dunant
- Albert Schweitzer
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer
- Gustavo Gutierrez
- Dag Hammarskjold
- Norman Borlaug
- Nelson Mandela
- Gene Robinson
- Jimmy Carter
- John Lewis
- Dennis Kucinich

The most laudable religious Jews have been Progressives:

- Victor Frankl
- Emil Hirsch
- Abraham Joshua Heschel
- Samuel Holdheim
- Abraham Cronbach
- Gunther Plaut
- Sally Priesand
- Awraham Soetendorp
- David Goldberg
- Jeffrey Newman
- Denise Eger
- Jill Jacobs
- Arik Ascherman

(This is, of course, to speak nothing of laudable SECULAR Jews, whereby the list would be far more extensive. As with my other essays on religion, the thesis has nothing to do with ethnicity. We are concerned here with **religiosity**.)

Both the Christians and religious Jews of the world would be wise to heed the example of these noble figures–people who transcended dogmatism, tribalism, and hyper-traditionalism…and embraced the better angels of their nature (irrespective of institutional affiliations). We may hope that someday we live in a world where ALL religionists are more like these people of Faith.