

Preaching

**WE NEED**

From a

**MORALITY**

Pulpit

**BUT NOT *TRADITIONAL***

of

**MORALITY**

Bones

**BOB AVAKIAN**

# Preaching From a Pulpit of Bones

We Need Morality but not *Traditional* Morality

By **Bob Avakian**

*The reality beneath conservative ideologue William Bennett's Book of Virtues. . . A provocative look at the limitations of "liberation theology". . . Morality from a revolutionary perspective. . .*

What is ethical thinking in a time of social fragmentation and imperialist globalization? Bob Avakian convincingly argues that morality has to be tied to a vision of a good society, a society free of exploitation and every form of domination. Even more does morality have to do with the struggle to create such a society. Avakian points the way toward what some doubt is possible, a materialist ethics. Like Mao's, this is a Marxism that aims at a social analysis that is clear and systematic but not "cold"—a Marxism with heart.

Bill Martin  
Associate Professor of Philosophy  
DePaul University, Chicago  
author of *Humanism and Its Aftermath*

For this clergyman who has struggled with the relevance of the Biblical faith in the face of the crises in our society, the critique of Bob Avakian comes as an urgent challenge. His thoughtful analysis underlines the urgency of recognizing how shallow has been our understanding and how futile has been much of our effort to work for a just society. There is insight and truth-speaking in this vital book which those of us of religious faith need to hear and to which we need to respond.

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New York Theological Seminary

Bob Avakian is Chairman of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA. His previous books include *Mao Tsetung's Immortal Contributions*, *Democracy: Can't We Do Better Than That?*, and *Could We Really Win?*

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We Need Morality  
but not *Traditional* Morality**

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## Publisher's Preface

Issues and invocations of morality swirl about us. The Christian Right and conservatives decry the “moral decline” of America and wage “cultural wars” against the anti-establishment political, social, and sexual values of the 1960s. Young people are bombarded with calls for “traditional morality.” A presidential crisis is marked by inquisition-like tactics and puritanical moral codes. Throughout U.S. society, there is debate and struggle about morality, and the stakes are very high.

In the *Prologue* to this book, Bob Avakian explains: “From whatever vantage point one looks, it is unmistakable that there is what could be called a ‘moral crisis’ in America. There has been, to a significant degree, ‘a breakdown of traditional morality.’ But the answer to this—at least the answer that is in the interests of the majority of people in the U.S. and the overwhelming majority of humanity—is not a more aggressive assertion of that ‘traditional morality’ but winning people to a radically different morality, in the process of radically transforming society and the world as a whole.”

With his unique perspective as a Maoist revolutionary, Avakian has for some time been exploring important questions concerning religion and morality and their role in society and history. He has written commentaries on Judeo-Christian and Islamic texts and revealed the oppressive social relations being upheld and reinforced. He has examined contemporary phenomena such as “creationism” and Christian fundamentalism and the larger political and ideological needs they serve. As a Marxist materialist, he has taken up the question of what is said to be humanity’s “religious impulse.” He has written about religion under socialism and the long-term task of people freeing themselves from the shackles of religious belief. In his typically provocative way,

Avakian has also warned of the danger of Marxism being turned into a “state religion.”

In recent years, Avakian has probed more deeply into the question of morality. He has analyzed the economic, social, and political factors underlying the crusade in the U.S. for “traditional values” and so-called “family values.” Beyond this, he has posed the need for a radical alternative to traditional morality. Such a communist morality, he argues, is indispensable in helping to guide and inspire the struggle to transform the world—in its economic, political, and social relations, and in the realm of ideas and values.

The two essays that make up *Preaching From a Pulpit of Bones* were written in 1996. The first essay is a response to conservative ideologue William Bennett’s *Book of Virtues*. Avakian’s dissection of Bennett’s notion of “the good” and the social agenda it serves was compelling at the time. Three years later, the Christian Right and powerful allied forces in U.S. society—with Bennett as one of their intellectual hitmen—were attempting to impeach and try a president on the altar of a fundamentalist Christian morality. Avakian’s essay takes on a new and bracing timeliness.

The second essay moves in another direction. Avakian develops a far-reaching critique of the attempts by advocates of liberation theology to construct a progressive, ethics-based politics according to Judeo-Christian scripture. He shows the limitations of this project. It is often said that to abandon theism is to abandon morality. But in this essay, Avakian not only explains why a truly liberating morality must of necessity break with religious tradition and beliefs; he also answers the question of just what kind of morality can take the place of a religiously based one.

These essays are being published at this time for two major reasons. They are an intervention into the debate and struggle about the “moral crisis” in America. And they set forth principles and criteria for an emancipating morality. On both counts, they constitute a challenge to all those seeking and searching for a road to liberation.

April 1999

## Prologue

Every year, as a pre-teen and young teenager, growing up in Berkeley in the '50s, I would go on a Labor Day weekend church retreat with my family and other members of the Presbyterian Church we attended. At that time I generally accepted—I had not yet begun to seriously question, let alone fully reject—the religious tradition I was raised in, but for me those retreats were not so much a religious as a social experience—a chance to hang out and have fun with other kids my age. But it was also something else: a chance to listen in on, and occasionally take part in, political discussion that went on there, especially around the dining tables where we all ate meals together.

Recently, in following the elections and the debates on “politics” and “morality” in the U.S., I had a vivid flashback to one such dining table discussion—which turned into rather heated disagreements at times, generally pitting the Democrats (including my parents) against the Republicans, over such issues as foreign aid and government assistance to the poor in the U.S. itself. As the discussion ended and we walked back to our cabins, reflecting on the arguments I had just heard, I asked my parents, very sincerely and with genuine bewilderment: “How can anybody be a Christian *and* a Republican?”

The core of what I had heard in the Republican-conservative positions sounded like nothing but a celebration of selfishness and hard heartedness. The Christianity my parents had instilled in me was one that emphasized compassion and generosity of spirit. But, as Nature came to recognize, it also involved something else—something common to “American Middle Class Values” in the '50s—a reverence not only for an imaginary god in heaven but also for very real and powerful earthly institutions, a strict adherence to conventions and values that, if

they did not celebrate selfishness and hard-heartedness as such, nevertheless celebrated and promoted a way of life and relations between people, and between nations, in which, as a matter of objective fact, wealth, power, and privilege within some few fortified enclaves of humanity are grounded in the most pitiless exploitation and degradation of literally billions of people all over the globe.

(To do justice to my parents, I should say that, through the course of the intervening decades, most pivotally the tumultuous '60s, they have changed many of their views on social and political matters. And, although they still retain religious beliefs, these not only are infused, as before, with a compelling sense of compassion but also are interpreted to more broadly encompass the struggle against social inequality and injustice.)

Even more fundamentally, I have also come to understand—through joining in the battle against the unspeakably unjust divisions among humanity, and by searching out their underlying cause—that no version of Christianity (or, for that matter, any other religion) can illuminate the way to the abolition of the agony and the alienation that such divisions mean for the great majority of humanity. That the “Judeo-Christian tradition” and the “traditional values” rooted in it represent *tradition's chains*—upholding, among other things: slavery, the subordination and degradation of women, brutality against children, and the slaughter and plunder of rival nations and people of different religions (read your scriptures if you don't believe me). And any attempt to reform society that seeks its rationale and justification in Christian (or any other) religious vision, even of the most unconventional or “radical” kind, may perhaps bend but will never be able to break those chains and will, in the end, be shaped and (de)formed by them.

From whatever vantage point one looks, it is unmistakable that there is what could be called “a moral crisis in America.” There has been, to a significant degree, “a breakdown of traditional morality.” But the answer to this—at least the answer that is in the interests of the majority of people in the U.S. and the overwhelming majority of humanity—is not a more aggressive assertion of that “traditional morality,” but winning people to a radically different morality, in the process of and as a key part of radically transforming society and the world as a whole. It is not the tightening but the shattering of tradition's chains that is called for.

What is required, what is urgently needed more than ever, is not a vision that accepts that “the poor we shall always have with us” and then, at most, speaks of compassion and caring for the poor; not one that decries selfishness yet rejoices—or in one way or another acquiesces—in a system that pits people against each other in ruthless competition and holds up as its paragons those who have been most “successful” in enriching themselves at the expense of others. What is needed is a vision that dares to call for ending the division of society and the world into different classes and nations, where a few are rich only because so many others are poor—a vision that points to the elevation of human beings as a whole to a new plane where there is no poverty, and no basis to get rich by keeping others in poverty, and where instead it is possible for all to work, cooperatively, to advance their common interests.

In short, what is needed is nothing less than the abolition of capitalism, and all other systems where wealth and power are monopolized by a few on the basis of exploiting the many. What is needed are the two “radical ruptures” called for in the *Communist Manifesto*—the radical rupture with traditional property relations and with traditional ideas, including traditional “values” and “morality”—the establishment of new relations among people, not based on class division and exploitation, and of a radically new morality grounded in principles of cooperation and striving for the common good above selfish interest.

To many, including some erstwhile (and ersatz) “radicals,” this assertion may sound ridiculous in light of the recent collapse—or “implosion”—of the Soviet bloc and the Soviet Union itself, as well as the fact that what was, in the China of Mao Tsetung, the “model” of socialist society being propelled forward toward communism by revolutionary struggle has been abandoned and reversed, and has been heaped with abuse and slander by the ruling elite in China itself as well as within the longstanding citadels of capitalism. All this, we are supposed to accept, represents the loudly proclaimed “death of communism.” Those of us who were radicalized by “the '60s” and were “turned on” to the possibility of a radically different kind of society are now supposed to recognize that things went too far then and it is time to settle down and accept reality. Well, I do not accept this, because it is not reality—it is not truth but wishful thinking on the part of those who uphold the present oppressive order in the world.

and the fact is that “the ’60s” did not go “too far,” but on the contrary did not go *far enough*. If they had, people would not have to be listening to the Newt Gingriches, Jesse Helmses, Rush Limbaughs, and the rest—or to their Democratic Party “adversaries,” with their pious doubts and petty amendments, their Covenants in rivalry with the Republicans’ Contract.

The experience and lessons of socialist revolution in the 20th century are questions that I have addressed in various other writings. In these two essays, my intent and focus is to speak to a particular and urgent need: to raise a radical—indeed, a revolutionary—voice of opposition to the highly orchestrated clamor for “traditional morality”: to show how this “morality” is, and always has been, a rationale for the most horrendous oppression, what fundamental needs and interests the insistence on this “morality” really serves, and why this insistence is so incessant now; how the attempt to forge an alternative to this that does not fundamentally break with the same religious-moral tradition is bound to meet ultimate failure; and how communist principles and their expression as communist morality represent in fact the only real alternative—how humanity can fashion a far better future guided by these principles and morality without the enslaving tradition of belief in and submission to religious authority and religious doctrine of any kind.

This discussion will begin with William Bennett’s *The Book of Virtues*, which has been widely influential and whose influence is as pernicious as it claims to be virtuous. Then I will explore some key points raised in *The Soul of Politics*, by Jim Wallis, founding editor of *Sojourners* magazine. Wallis is a Catholic activist generally associated with what has been termed “liberation theology,” and he attempts to rise above—while combining what he sees as the best aspects of—Conservative and Liberal ideology in fashioning a religious-based “politics that offers us something we haven’t had in a long time: a vision of transformation.” Finally, I will directly address such questions as: What role does morality play in human society, what is communist morality, what is it based on, how is it radically different from all other morality, what needs and interests does it serve, can it address not only the material needs but also the “spiritual needs” of people, and is its vision realizable?

Preaching From a Pulpit of Bones:  
The Reality Beneath  
William Bennett’s “Virtues”  
Or, We Need Morality  
but not *Traditional* Morality



To my surprise, my first impression in glancing through William Bennett's *The Book of Virtues* was that it seemed pretty innocuous. Bennett, after all, has been a leading figure in the Charge of the Right Brigade—an official in the Reagan and Bush administrations, waging war on the poor in the name of “war on drugs” and “war on crime,” and aggressively attacking any departure from old-time traditions in education and in general. I got this book because it has been a “bestseller” in the U.S., playing a major role in a high-powered cultural and ideological offensive propagating “the traditional American way of life” and “traditional values.” But “Virtues” is not a noisy proclamation of “conservative” principles—it is an eclectic collection of fairy tales and other fables, speeches, stories, poems, excerpts from novels, essays, dialogues, homilies, and so on.

Yet, as the saying goes, first impressions can be misleading. “Virtues” is not innocuous but insidious—and its seeming innocuousness serves its real insidiousness. It begins by stating that it is “intended to aid in the time-honored task of the moral education of the young...the training of heart and mind toward the good.” Right away, the impression is created that there is some definition of “the good” that everyone can, or should, recognize and agree on—a GOOD that has existed from time immemorial exactly as it is now and always shall be. In this way, the fact that Bennett has an “agenda”—and that his notion of “the good” reflects the outlook and interests of a particular class, a class that amasses wealth and rules society by exploiting and oppressing others—is covered over.

This deception is deepened by the fact that Bennett builds his model of “the good” by presenting layer upon layer of qualities that are

in fact given a particular class-based content but are put forward as universal “virtues.” For example, he writes in the “Introduction” that “The vast majority of Americans share a respect for certain fundamental traits of character: honesty, compassion, courage, and perseverance.” And he organizes the book into chapters dealing with these qualities and six others: Self-Discipline, Responsibility, Friendship, Work, Loyalty, and Faith. With the possible exception of the last in this list (depending on whether “Faith” refers to blind, unquestioning belief, as in religious faith, or to beliefs that are deeply held but also grounded in material reality), I am certainly not going to declare myself in opposition to these qualities in general, and there are few people who would. The question is: What content is given to these qualities, and in what context do they exist?

Take “Perseverance,” for example. Among the *Selected Works* of Mao Tsetung is a commentary on the traditional Chinese fable of *The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains*. This is the story of an old man who gathered his sons to dig away with a hoe at mountains the old man was determined to remove. Despite difficulty and derision, the old man persisted, declaring that if he did not remove these mountains during his lifetime, his children and if necessary future generations would carry on the work until the mountains were removed. Finally, the story goes, god was moved by his spirit and caused the mountains to be removed. Mao applied this to the task of waging revolutionary war to overthrow the “mountains” of oppression that weighed on the Chinese people. He said that the revolutionaries were like the foolish old man and the masses of people were like the god in the fable—they would join with the revolutionaries to remove these “mountains,” so the revolutionary fighters must persevere. Somehow, I don’t think this is the kind of lesson William Bennett has in mind!

Or take “Work”—one of Bennett’s “Virtues.” One of the interesting things brought out by Mel Watkins in his book *On the Real Side*—a survey of African-American humor from slavery days to the present—is that a very popular form of humor among slaves involved stories of slaves who avoided work by outwitting their masters. Are we to think that such slaves were not “virtuous”? Are we really supposed to believe that the masses of Black people who identified with this form of resistance were lacking in the proper “work ethic”?

Bennett is careful to cover a number of bases—for example, in his

introductory commentary to the chapter on “Compassion,” he includes a warning against “The divisive ‘isms’...racism, sexism, chauvinism, and the rest.” But, as we shall see, this is meaningless in the overall context of this book and the “values” Bennett is actually promoting. Also, in the book as a whole he makes an attempt to provide selections from a range of authors and viewpoints. These include not just the predictable calls for allegiance to god and country but also, for example, the 1852 speech by Frederick Douglass, himself a former slave, in which he issues a stinging denunciation of July 4th celebrations of American independence and freedom while millions are still held in slavery.

Once again, Bennett’s selection of materials to be included in “Virtues” is an eclectic one, although his “breadth” does have its limits. As I have indicated, Bennett has no interest in including excerpts from the writings of Mao Tsetung, for instance. At the same time, through all the eclectics, a definite viewpoint emerges and is propagated. Despite Bennett’s platitudes about being against “racism, sexism, chauvinism, and the rest,” his “Virtues”—the “traditional values” and “traditional morality” that are upheld—are in reality grounded in slave exploitation, white supremacy, patriarchal oppression of women, rivalry with and domination over other nations...and all the rest.

In some instances, the reactionary viewpoint Bennett is propagating is more or less openly proclaimed. But often it exerts its influence more subtly, or in a subterranean fashion. For example, it promotes various “authorities” whose life and works are actually a monument to oppression, such as Aristotle, Plato, the Biblical Moses and Paul, Columbus, and George Washington and Thomas Jefferson—all of whom upheld oppressive relations and institutions, including slavery. In the “Introduction” to *The Book of Virtues*, in speaking of “moral education” of the youth, Bennett says that, “Aristotle wrote that good habits formed at youth make all the difference.” And later in the book, excerpts from Aristotle are presented in which he speaks about self-discipline, justice, friendship, and happiness, among other things. But Bennett does not inform his readers that Aristotle also wrote (for example, in *The Politics*) about how the “ideal” was for those who till the land to be slaves, and how the concepts of happiness, and of choice, do not apply to slaves any more than they do to animals. Bennett does not point out that Aristotle’s arguments on slavery were an important

ideological weapon used by defenders of the slave system in the southern U.S. And Aristotle's defense of slavery is not separate from, but is consistent with and intertwined with, his overall views of justice and other "virtues." If the youth who are to be given a start toward "moral education" by *The Book of Virtues* turn to Aristotle for further guidance, what influence will this actually have on them?

Similarly, if George Washington is held up as a model of honesty and "civility" and not of cruel oppression—the banal tale of George Washington, as a boy, admitting to cutting down a cherry tree is found in Bennett's "Virtues," but the story of George Washington the slave-master, who once traded a slave for a barrel of molasses, is somehow missing from this book—then what kind of values and priorities are being fostered by this book of "Virtues?" What does it mean to include Frederick Douglass' denunciation of slavery in America, if George Washington—whose wealth and position were founded on slavery—is held up as a great man in the same book?

Some might object that it is necessary to view historical figures in the context of their own times and not simply to judge them by the prevailing standards of today. There is some truth to this, but besides the fact that many of the historical figures Bennett presents as models deserve to be condemned even in the context of their own times, the problem here is precisely that Bennett is attempting to put forward the works of these people—or certain selected parts of their works—as building blocks for "moral education" in *today's world*, while at the same time presenting these as representative of universal and timeless "virtues."

And the problem is compounded by the fact that many of the authors and many of the texts Bennett relies on are such accepted parts of the dominant culture and of "conventional wisdom" in countries like the U.S.—they have so much of the weight of tradition and the force of habit behind them—that what they *actually* mean and stand for is obscured. (For example, more than once I have had the experience where people I have known who are devoted and diligent readers of the *Bible* have responded with shock and disbelief when I have pointed out to them what is in fact being described, or advocated, in passages of the *Bible* they had read "blindly" many times.) Thus, to bring to light the essence and effect of Bennett's "Virtues" and the reality and purpose beneath them, it is necessary both to stand back and view this in broader

perspective and to examine more closely some typical examples.

"Children should be seen and not heard." Do we really want to go back to that?! Apparently Bennett does, because among the selections he chooses for the first chapter of "Virtues" ("Self-Discipline") he includes a little poem, "Table Rules for Little Folks," in which this saying—and everything it represents—is the central message. This is not some kind of aberration—reading through this chapter, from the very start, the model is established for what children should be like: submissive, quietly obedient to parents and to authority in general. And something else comes through as well: those children who do not live up to these standards can expect to receive severe punishment or otherwise meet a cruel fate. Not only is this note sounded in several of the seemingly sweet sing-songy rhymes Bennett includes, but to reinforce this, in introducing one of these rhymes Bennett makes a point of assuming an ominous tone, issuing the stern warning: "we face a hard, unavoidable fact of life: if we cannot control our own behavior, eventually someone will come and control it for us in a way we probably will not like." Discipline yourself—or some power above you will discipline you, with dire consequences!

Bennett has long and loudly declared that a big problem in the U.S.—and the main reason there is an epidemic of drugs and crime—is that too many kids these days are not raised to "believe in the Lord," that they have been cut adrift from the moral anchor of the *Bible* and the whole "Judeo-Christian tradition." And it must be said that here, in this first chapter, as well as throughout "Virtues," Bennett is right in line with this "tradition." It is, after all, the *Bible* that insists that children must be beaten if they are to turn out well. (See, for example, Proverbs, 23:13-14: "Withhold not correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell.") "Spare the rod, spoil the child"—how much brutality against children has been motivated and justified by that proverb taken from the *Bible*?

And that is not all. The *Bible* also insists, in a number of places, that children who are rebellious must be put to death (as, for example, Moses decrees, conveying the laws of "The Lord," in Exodus 21:17 and Deuteronomy 21:18-21). (Actually, it is quite astounding to see many of the things that the *Bible* declares are crimes requiring capital punishment—including, besides rebelliousness in children, blasphemy,

being a “witch,” homosexuality, adultery and other kinds of “fornication”!) Which parts of this “Judeo-Christian tradition” does Bennett want to insist on—and, if not all of it, where does he get the right to “pick and choose” which parts of “the Word of The Lord” he wants to enforce and which he wants to ignore? Let him—and all others who uphold this “tradition” and bemoan the erosion of “traditional values”—answer *those* questions.

One of the most essential things Bennett is actually after—one of the main pillars of “the Judeo-Christian tradition” and “traditional values”—is the forceful assertion of patriarchy. This is what is meant by the code words “Family” and “Family Values.” After all, as is emphasized throughout the Old Testament of the *Bible*, the husband/father is the lord of the household; and as Paul tells us in the New Testament, carrying forward the same tradition, wives must “submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church.” (Ephesians 5:22-23. I do not have room here to get into the many of the more grotesque expressions the assertion of patriarchy takes in the Old Testament in particular—including the places where “The Lord” gives the right to men to carry off women as prizes of war, to violate these women and force them to become wives and concubines of their conquerors. For those doubting this, or interested in looking further into it, the book of Deuteronomy is a good place to start.)

The *Bible* is the product of societies, roughly two to four thousand years ago, in which patriarchal family relations had already emerged, together with private property, and slavery was practiced. Particularly in the period of David and Solomon, slave labor played an important role, especially in agriculture but also in massive “public works,” such as the building of major temples (this was also the case in the Roman Empire during the time of the New Testament). The men of the wealthy and ruling classes not only had a number of slaves but often many wives and concubines, as well as children, under their authority as heads of the household. During the period covered by the Old Testament, the religious tradition of worshipping Yahweh won out over other religious trends and served as a unifying religion among the ancient Jews (or Israelites) in what (in “the West”) is today called the “Middle East.” The laws, rules, and commandments of the Old Testament in particular reflect these underlying factors.

A look at the “Ten Commandments,” in the context of the “Mosaic Law” of which they form a core, will illustrate this. For example, the Seventh Commandment says that “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” but at the same time “Mosaic Law” allowed a *man* to have more than one wife, if he could afford it: this was not adultery but *wealth*—greater possessions—more *females as property* and as *breeders of children as further assets* for the male head of the household. Thus, when the Fifth Commandment says, “Honour thy father and thy mother,” it is clear that the *Bible* means the father must be honored and obeyed as the head of the household and the owner of all the property therein—including his wife (or wives) and children, as well as any slaves, along with farm animals, and so on. The mother is to be honored *in her place*—beneath the husband, with authority only as it is given by him in the interests of protecting his property. This is reflected in the Tenth Commandment. Listed there among the things—the property—of “thy neighbor’s” that “thou” must not “covet” are his *slaves* (“manservant” and “maidservant”), his ox, his ass, and his wife, along with any other thing “that is thy neighbor’s.” (Interestingly, when Bennett includes the “Ten Commandments” in *The Book of Virtues* [in the Chapter on “Responsibility”], he leaves out the list of property in the Tenth Commandment and simply presents it as “Thou shalt not covet.” Could it be that the *Bible*’s inclusion of wives as well as slaves among the things that are clearly the property of “thy neighbor” might be a bit too revealing to at least some modern readers?)

The Sixth Commandment, “Thou shalt not kill,” has frequently been the subject of controversy and has frequently been misinterpreted. Sometimes it is cited by people arguing against capital punishment, or war; but, as admirable as their intentions may be in many cases, a reading of the *Bible*—including the very chapters that tell the story of how the “Ten Commandments” were given—makes clear that the *Bible* only means that it is forbidden to kill someone unless “The Law” and “The Lord” say it is right and necessary to kill someone. The *Bible* not only approves but insists upon killing people for many things. I have already cited some rather chilling examples, but consider this in addition: At the very time when Moses brings the “Ten Commandments” to “the children of Israel,” he discovers that, while he was up on the mountain receiving these Commandments from “The Lord,” the others below have lost faith and are worshipping an idol (a golden calf) they have made. Moses destroys the golden idol—burning and grinding it

into powder, mixing it with water, and making "the children of Israel drink of it." Then he calls on all those who are on "The Lord's" side to gather around him—and to kill all the rest! And so, the *Bible* tells us, 3,000 were slaughtered in this way. (See Exodus 32:16-28.) Bennett, in presenting the "Ten Commandments" in *The Book of Virtues*, introduces them with the statement that "Western morality may be said to begin" with these "Ten Commandments." And there is a great deal of truth to this.

"Western morality"—and, for that matter, the dominant morality in all parts of the world, wherever society is marked by class division and exploitation, patriarchy, and other forms of oppression—has always been a rationale and justification for oppression. Although, in a society like the U.S. today, literal slavery is no longer upheld and women are not literally (or legally) treated as the property of men, the exploitation of labor, the subjugation of Black people and other "minorities," and the oppression of women remain integral and indispensable parts of the prevailing system. And it is not surprising that, in the face of changes which tend to undermine or cause upheaval within that system—to say nothing of direct challenges to it—the ruling class of this society more aggressively asserts the authority of its "traditional morality" along with sharpening and more ruthlessly wielding its sword of repression. Thus, it is not only William Bennett and other "Conservatives" who are waging a holy crusade for "The Family" and "Family Values," but they are joined and rivaled in this by the Democrats and "Liberals" of the ruling class.

The fact is, however, that in this crusade, and more generally these days, the "Conservatives" have the initiative over the "Liberals." Why? There are a number of underlying factors: major geopolitical changes, in particular the disintegration of the Soviet bloc and the Soviet Union; changes in the world economy—involving the further internationalization of production and of speculative and other parasitic activity by capital— together with changes in the U.S. economy, including significant shifts in the composition of the work force away from "blue-collar" jobs; and a huge increase in debt associated with the unprecedented U.S. military build-up during the 1980s (the cost of "winning the cold war").

So the waning of liberalism must be seen against a broad canvas. On the one hand, economic and social shifts—like "downsizing" of

industry and the decline of unions, suburbanization and the fracturing of the old-line urban political coalitions—have weakened the traditional social props of New Deal politics. On the other hand, intense global economic pressures and looming fiscal crisis are forcing drastic restructuring of government spending and social programs—this following years of restructuring in the private sector. This is an era of "lean and mean" and ever more mobile capitalism. It is about cheapening production, depressing wages and benefit levels, and creating a more flexible and "disposable" labor force. And it is about massively slashing New Deal/Great Society-type social spending—now decried as "unproductive cost burdens." (Wasn't it the Democrat Clinton who coined the phrase, "end welfare as we know it"?) These and related factors have cut the ground from under the "New Deal consensus" and the concessionary programs ("war on poverty," etc.) which have been the basis for Democratic Party administration of capitalist rule in the U.S.

At the same time, many of these same factors, together with the struggle waged by the women's movement, have resulted in a situation where large numbers of women have not only the necessity but also the possibility of working outside the home. All this has been accompanied by a great deal of turmoil and upheaval, and one of its most important consequences has been that, from a number of angles and among various sectors of the population in the U.S., the basis of the traditional patriarchal family and the "traditional family values" associated with it has been significantly eroded. And yet all these changes are taking place within the confines of the same system—on the same foundation of capitalist economic relations.

This is potentially a very explosive contradiction, and in many aspects this explosiveness is already erupting. On the one hand, it is vitally important for those who preside over this system to "contain" this contradiction and not to allow it to produce a polarization that could threaten to tear society apart. In particular, they must try to avoid fundamentally alienating great numbers of women and driving them into radical opposition to the status quo—including many professional and other middle class women. At the same time, it is crucial for the guardians of the status quo to fortify patriarchal relations, while adjusting them to the realities of the present situation.

The polarization and bitter struggle around the right to abortion has been a concentrated expression of this. Clearly, the essence of the

anti-abortion "movement"—which from its inception has been led and orchestrated from "on high" (I am referring to the role of powerful ruling class figures, not the alleged inspiration from god)—has been to assert patriarchal control over women, including to insist on the defining role of women as breeders of children. The fundamentalist foot-soldiers of this "movement" make this very clear.

The following prayer offered at an "Operation Rescue" rally, cited in *Life* magazine (July 1992), typifies this: "Oh please, Lord, break the curse on women's hearts that says we don't need our men. Break that independence." The fact that this prayer was voiced by a woman provides an eerie reminder of the active participation, and the particular role, of significant numbers of women in the Nazi ranks in Germany under Hitler (something analyzed by Claudia Koonz in her book *Mothers in the Fatherland*). (It is one of the most outrageous ironies of the battle around abortion that the anti-abortionists have raised the specter of the Holocaust to characterize the abortion of fetuses, when in fact their agenda, with regard to women and more generally, parallels very closely that of the Hitler fascists, who in fact attacked abortion—and restricted and criminalized it—as something contrary to the essential "motherhood" role of women.)

In another dimension, the changes in the U.S. and in world economics and geopolitics have meant that millions of people on the bottom of U.S. society, particularly those in the inner-city ghettos and barrios, face the prospect of being more or less permanently "locked out" of any meaningful, or gainful, employment—except in the "underground economy," centering largely around drugs, which has become a major economic factor and a major employer in every major urban area (and many smaller cities and towns and even rural areas as well).

Here again, the need of the powers-that-be is to contain and maintain ultimate control over this situation—and over the masses of people on the bottom of society—and to erect and fortify barriers between them and other sections of society ("the middle class"). This explains the continuing increase in funds and forces devoted to crime and punishment—the police and prisons, the wars against these masses in the name of "war on drugs" and "war on crime"—on the one hand; and, on the other hand, the fact that these wars are never "won" but are always ongoing.

All this sets the framework and the "tone" for ruling class politics in the U.S. It demands that the "leading edge" of this be an aggressive, mean-spirited assault on those on the bottom of society and the slashing of concessions to them—a war on the poor in place of a supposed war against poverty—along with an equally aggressive and mean-spirited crusade to promote and enforce "old-fashioned values" of patriarchy and patriotism as well as good old white chauvinism (racism).

One after another, all kinds of "theories" and "studies"—claiming to show that there are innate and unchangeable differences between races and genders and other groupings in society which explain why some have and really should have a privileged and dominant position over others—are spread and legitimized throughout the mass media. This, it is claimed, provides the "scientific explanation" for why programs that purport to overcome such inequalities are doomed to failure and must be gutted. What it actually provides further scientific proof of is the utter bankruptcy of a system and a ruling class that is abandoning even the pretense of overcoming profound inequalities and instead is inventing "profound reasons" why they cannot be overcome. And in all this, while the "Liberals" have a role to play, the initiative belongs to the "Conservatives."

This takes us back to Bennett's "Virtues," and in particular to the first chapter of "Virtues" ("Self-Discipline"), where we read that children are to mold themselves—or be molded—in the image of a proper boy or a proper girl—and the difference between the two is very clear, and very familiar to anyone who grew up in the U.S. in the '50s. For example, one selection (a poem by Emilie Poulsson) tell us that "the kind of little girl/People like to see" is one who is "Modest as a violet,/As a rosebud sweet...Bright as a diamond,/Pure as any pearl." These, we all know, are not the qualities that boys are supposed to have: for them it is fine, and necessary, to be rough and forceful—so long as they do so in a way that remains obedient to and in the service of higher authority.

Once again, despite Bennett's platitudes about being against racism, sexism, chauvinism, and the rest, and despite the fact that a few selections about people like 19th century feminist Susan B. Anthony can be found in Bennett's "Virtues," it is unmistakable in reading through this book that from beginning to end very "traditional" gender roles, or stereotypes, are being held up as models. After all, Bennett's

whole point is to extol the "virtues" of such "tradition."

Thus, the poem that Bennett introduces with his dire warning—learn to control yourself or be controlled in ways you won't like—is titled "There Was a Little Girl," and it presents once again that old "double standard," where what is good for the gander is not good for the goose. The final stanza makes it clear: "Her mother heard the noise, / And she thought it was the boys / A-playing at a combat in the attic; / But when she climbed the stair, / And found Jemima there, / She took and she did spank her most emphatic." Along with gems like this, sprinkled throughout "Virtues" are the familiar fairy tales of the virginal princesses who are saved or carried off to bliss by the handsome prince (even if the prince first appear as frogs).

But, after all, isn't this pretty harmless—sure, this could be said to perpetuate sexual stereotypes, but isn't it a case of "politically correct overkill" and the tyranny of "feminazis" to make a big deal out of little things like this? Isn't all this "political correcting" getting rather ridiculous, even infuriating? That is obviously the point of the little book of parodies *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories* that apparently became something of a bestseller in the U.S. in recent times. But, in reading over those "Bedtime Stories," which spoof "politically correct" criticisms of old fairy tales, what stands out to me is not so much that the original tales should be rewritten but more that they should be seen in their true light—as illuminations of an era when divisions between rich and poor, princes and commoners, men and women, and so on, are thought to be natural and inevitable.

Can it really be said that the influence of tales like these—the models and morals they provide—are after all really so harmless? Among the things I reviewed in preparing to write this essay were clippings from U.S. newspapers that were sent to me, one of which is an article from *USA Today* (January 24, 1995) by Judith Sherven and James Sniechowski. It is titled "Why women stay with abusers," and the subtitle (or "kicker") is, "For millions, the ideal man is a romance-novel fantasy—powerful, protective, sexually aggressive. And an invitation to trouble."

The romance novel is, in U.S. society today, the equivalent of the "Prince Charming" fairy tale. It is aimed at teenage girls and women—and according to this article (citing *Forbes* magazine), 25 million Amer-

ican females are reading an average of 20 romance novels each month! This article asks a very important question and gives a very telling answer: "What do these women find so compelling? The hope and thrill of being 'saved' by a strong, dominant male who will take care of them and make them feel secure." But the reality of life with—which means living under the domination of—such men does not end up fulfilling the romantic fantasies of Harlequin novels. Often it turns into a dreadful nightmare. (This reminds me of Engels' observation that, in its origin, the word family [from the Latin familia] referred not to "the ideal of our modern Philistine, which is a compound of sentimentality and domestic discord," but to the "totality of slaves" in a household in ancient Rome—a household presided over by a male who had the power of life and death not only over his slaves but also over his wives and children.)

Is it not possible to see that the influence of Grimm fairy tales—and more modern-day versions of the same kind of fables—play a significant role in conditioning girls to accept and seek to act out these romantic fantasies, and that the consequences for them may well be anything but harmless or humorous? And when William Bennett & Co. seek to reinforce this ideal of "feminine virtues" and the "rewards" they will bring, what after all is the nature and effect of the "moral education" they are pushing?

With the whole unrelenting barrage of propaganda and hype about violent crime, crime in the streets, kids murdering kids, and on and on—and despite the fact that violent crime is a major social problem in America today—one of the things that is not so highly publicized by the media, the politicians, etc., is the fact that, for women and for children, the place where they are *most likely* to be subjected to violent crime and brutality, including murder, *is in their own home, by "the man of the house."* Women are more likely to be raped by their husbands—and children more likely to be sexually assaulted and molested by their fathers—than by strangers. It is only in recent years—and largely as a result of the social upheaval of "the '60s" (which actually carried over well into the 1970s), and in particular because of the women's movement that ~~was~~ brought forth out of that upheaval—that much light has been shed on *this* horrendous "domestic" violence. Before that, this ~~was~~ largely shrouded in darkness, behind the closed doors of "the home," protected by the "sanctity" of the "traditional family."

Until quite recently, in the dominant culture the concept of "marital rape" was considered a contradiction in terms. Well into the 1980s, in most states in the U.S. men could *legally* rape their wives, and it is only within the past two years that this has been declared a crime in all states. (North Carolina was the last state to do this, in late 1993.) Of course, despite the passage of these laws, marital rape remains a major form of violence against women and one of the major crimes for which people are least punished (along with various kinds of "white-collar crime" and crimes in which the victims are Black people and others who are portrayed and treated as less than human by the dominant institutions of society). A fortifying of "traditional relations" and their accompanying "traditional values" will, to say the least, hardly help to eliminate this crime and violence, and in fact will only serve to provide more cover or even "legitimacy" for it—and more generally for the oppressive social relations of which these crimes are a dramatic expression.

When we hear Bennett and others tell us that it is time to "get back to the basics" on which the USA was founded, and that "the '60s counter-culture" attack on this tradition has been the cause of "moral decay" and rampant crime in America, we must ask: do you mean we should go back to the situation where untold numbers of women were raped by their husbands every year, and this was all legal? Where hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Black people were lynched, year after year, and yet this was rarely if ever treated as a crime?

Bennett & Co. would no doubt answer that they do not mean *this*. But the fact is that they do want to reinforce the "tradition" in which girls and women are in effect the sexual possessions of men—presented as "pure virgins" under the "protection" of their fathers until they are married and become the objects of gratification, and even plunder, by their husbands. (The commodification of sex and sexual conquest and plunder—and the *misogynist core* of all this—must be exposed and uprooted, but "traditional values" and their adherents cannot point the way to abolishing this—they are, in fact, expressions and exponents of it.)

And Bennett & Co. *do* want a situation in which Black people are granted certain "civil rights," in words, and in turn are made to "act in a 'civil' manner"—that is, to quietly, submissively accept the reality in which they are subjected to systematic discrimination and brutality, daily outrage and insult. The truth is that people like Bennett most definitely do mean to aggressively reassert the male supremacy and

white supremacy which are in fact built into the very foundation and the institutional structure of capitalist America, and they do mean to—they must—uphold and carry forward the fundamental "tradition" of monumental and monstrous crimes on which this system has been built and on which it depends.

In one of his most powerful songs, the truly great reggae artist Peter Tosh rebukes the attempt to glorify the "so-called great men" of "Western Civilization," such as Christopher Columbus. He sings:

All these 'great men' were doin'  
was robbin' and rapin'  
kidnappin' and a-killin';  
so-called 'great men' were doin'  
was robbin' and rapin'  
kidnappin' and a-killin.'

He is right, of course. That is what they were doing and what their descendants are still doing—it is in the nature of their system.

Many times, in attempting to make the horror of this more vivid, various writers (including myself) have used the metaphor of capitalist wealth consisting of blood and bones. But, in fact, it is not just a metaphor. The reality of this is powerfully brought home in the book *Indian Givers, How the Indians of the Americas Transformed the World*, by Jack Weatherford. Beginning with the present-day ordeal of a Bolivian miner in Potosi—the site where literally mountains of silver were for centuries extracted, by actual or virtual slaves, and then shipped to Europe—Weatherford brings back from the dead the millions of Indians and Africans whose blood, skin, and bones actually established a pedestal for the wealth of (European) nations. Weatherford concludes bluntly: "The capitalists built the new structure on the twin supports of the slave trade from Africa to America and the piracy of American silver." And he then cites the statement in which Marx captures the essence of this with piercing irony: "[The] discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement, and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black skins, signalised the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production."

Nowadays, there is no major political leader in the U.S. who will



openly uphold slavery (although it is difficult to think of Pat Robertson and Jesse Helms and not picture slaveowners and overseers). But is there a major representative of the U.S. ruling class who does not uphold as “great men” slaveowners such as George Washington (“Father of our Country”), Thomas Jefferson (principal author of the “Declaration of Independence”), and James Madison (main author of the U.S. Constitution)—all of whom are put forward as models of “virtues” by Bennett in his bestseller *The Book of Virtues*? And, more fundamentally, is there any representative of that ruling class who is ready to say that, since the wealth of America’s capitalists and the power of their state has slave labor poured into its very basis, this wealth is ill-gotten and this power is illegitimate?

And what, in addition to this slave labor, makes up the rest of that base? Conquest and genocide of Native peoples; robbery of land and resources; ruthless exploitation of wave after wave of immigrants; the heartless harnessing of child labor to the machinery of capitalist accumulation; the degradation, brutalization, and low-wage exploitation of women; the subjugation and super-exploitation of non-European peoples. This has continued from the first conquest down to today and from one corner of the earth to another—from the garment sweatshops in the U.S. to even more horrendous hellholes in Haiti or Pakistan; from the slaughter of literally millions in Indochina and Indonesia to the mass destruction and death rained down on Iraq and its people, particularly its children.

All of this is the pulpit of bones on which people like William Bennett are leaning when they preach their “virtues.” They have the nerve to extol the value of “Work” (one of the chapters in Bennett’s book) when the work that, over centuries, has put them in the position they are in today has been the work of *others*, under conditions of outright or virtual slavery and other forms of brutal exploitation.

It is small wonder that in the chapter on “Work,” Bennett features stories, poems, and parables about bees and ants and the story of “The Rebellion Against the Stomach”—whose point is that the division of labor in which other parts of the body labor to feed the stomach is, after all, the best possible arrangement! For the “division of labor” in the world today—in which the ruling classes of a handful of imperialist states are fed and enriched by the labor of billions of people who are treated as little more than bees and ants—such a division of labor is

obviously one that these ruling classes, and their representatives like William Bennett, are anxious to maintain and enforce.

They pontificate about “Responsibility” (another of Bennett’s chapter headings) and how the lack of it is corrupting the youth and the people generally in the U.S. They insist that people must take responsibility for the choices they make in life. But why is it that, for the class of people Bennett represents, the choices involve things like whether to close down factories in this or that area and whether to invest billions in Mexico or South Korea, or what kinds of austerity measures to impose on Peru, or how to wage war against Iraq, or when to invade Panama or Haiti? While for people in a country like the U.S. who are part of what is broadly referred to as “the middle class,” the choices may be between accepting a cut in pay or losing their job, or deciding whether to go deeper into debt to help their kids get through college. And for millions in the ghettos and barrios of the U.S., the choices involve things like trying to get a minimum-wage job vs. going on welfare, or turning to crime—or having to fight in one of those wars the ruling class decides to wage. And meanwhile, a young girl in Thailand—maybe as young as 9 or 10—has the “choice” between slaving in suffocating squalor in factories making clothes or toys for export to countries like the U.S., or being forced into a brothel to be sold for sex to traveling businessmen from Japan, Europe, and the U.S.! It is the worldwide system of capitalist imperialism and its economic, social, and political relations of oppression that have shaped these different choices for different classes and groupings of people.

What a cruel, cynical, and monstrous lie it is to preach, as Bennett does: “As Aristotle was among the first to insist, we become what we are as persons by the decisions that we ourselves make.” Does that explain why 40,000 children die *every day* in the Third World from starvation and preventable disease, why *one out of every five* children in Peru dies before the age of 5, while people like William Bennett attend \$1,000-dollar-a-plate dinners to raise funds to promote their reactionary agenda?!

When Bennett declaims about the scourge of crime, I am reminded of the story (in a passage from St. Augustine, of all people!) about an exchange between Alexander the Great and a pirate he had captured: “Indeed, that was an apt and true reply which was given to Alexander the Great by a pirate who had been seized. For when that king had

asked the man what he meant by keeping hostile possessions of the sea, he answered with a bold pride, 'What thou meanest by seizing the whole earth; but because I do it with a petty ship, I am called a robber, whilst thou who doest it with a great fleet are styled emperor.' "

This same story came to mind as well while I was reading an article about "Bell Curve" author Charles Murray—a "soulmate" of Bennett's—in *The New York Times Magazine* (October 9, 1994). Here I am not speaking to Murray's "theories" about the alleged genetically based intellectual superiority of some people over others, including whites over Blacks—such "theories" have repeatedly and again recently been scientifically refuted, and they are being given "legitimacy" by ruling class institutions now only because they correspond to the ruling class program (or "Contract") that has gained the initiative for reasons discussed earlier. Rather, something that jumped out at me in reading this article on Murray was his description of his upbringing in a well-to-do family in the "Norman Rockwellesque" town of Newton, Iowa, headquarters of the Maytag Corporation. Murray emphasizes in particular the influence of his mother—he "tells a vivid story of her bursting into 'furious tears' when she learned that he had accepted a stolen sweater from a friend." Here once again is the very model of the "upright" privileged strata in the imperial heartland: expressing moral indignation over petty theft while their whole position and way of life rests on theft and murder that takes place on a grand, worldwide scale—although this may remain, for the most part, "invisible" to many in these strata, just as the masses who are exploited and brutalized remain, for all practical purposes, invisible to them...until they rise up.

One of the main reasons that people like Bennett aim so much fire at "the '60s" and its "counterculture" is that this dragged out into the open much, though far from all, of the reality beneath Bennett's "virtues," and called significantly into question the authority and legitimacy of the ruling class in its posture as the standard-bearer of righteousness and bastion of freedom. But "the '60s" did far more than that.

In addition to, and in the context of, a revolutionary upsurge throughout the world in that period, millions of people in the U.S. broke with the prevailing conventions and established authorities and took up the challenge of fighting for new relations among people and new cultural expressions that were not centered around careerism and battling for position in the cash nexus and the social pecking order and that con-

sciously rejected "America number one with god on our side." A great many people came to understand that the common source of all the evils they were fighting against—and the obstacle to the things they were fighting for—was the capitalist-imperialist system. Many who had been into crime had their sights raised and turned instead to revolution. The great potential for people to transform things—and to be transformed themselves—through revolutionary struggle was shown in many powerful and moving ways.

Between the anti-war protesters and the war planners in the Pentagon; between the Black Panthers and J. Edgar Hoover; between Black, Latino, Asian, and Native peoples on the one side and the government on the other; between the women who rebelled against their "traditional" roles and the rich old men who ruled the country; between the youth who brought forward new music, in the broadest sense, and the preachers who denounced them as disciples of the devil and despoilers of civilization: the battle lines were sharply drawn. And through the course of those tumultuous times, those who were rebelling against the established order and the dominating relations and traditions increasingly found common cause and powerful unity; they increasingly gained—and deserved—the moral as well as the political initiative, while the ruling class dug in and lashed out to defend its rule, but increasingly, and very deservedly, lost moral and political authority.

But, unfortunately, although perhaps hundreds of thousands became revolutionary-minded in that period and millions more were radicalized and rose up in various forms of resistance, there was no revolution—the old ruling class continued to rule, the old system remained in effect. And so, with the changing of conditions and relations within the U.S. and in the international arena, much of what was brought forward through this whole "60s" upheaval was turned around—some of it co-opted, some of it corrupted, and some outright crushed. But not all, and that is a continuing bone in the throat of the powers-that-be.

There is no going back. "The '60s" cannot be brought back—and if they could that would not be enough. For, even as far as they went, "the '60s" did not after all go far enough. But neither can people like William Bennett bring back "the '50s." The battle for the future will be fought from here forward.

The challenge for those who have not given up the vision of a radically different and better world—and for those who are for the first time searching for such a vision, or are rediscovering it—is to carry forward the best from past upsurges, but to carry it further and develop the means for actually making those two radical ruptures Marx and Engels spoke of—with traditional property relations and traditional ideas.

This is a real, and unprecedented, revolution—as opposed to the fortifying of tradition’s chains under the threadbare banner of “revolution”...against liberation! What is called for is nothing less than advancing humanity to a whole new stage of history, where it will have left behind the oppressive divisions which for thousands of years have brought horrendous consequences but which have been unavoidable—until now. And a crucial part of the battle to break tradition’s chains is to bring forward the radically new morality that corresponds to this world-historic transformation—that can expose in its true light “traditional morality” and at the same time can illuminate the way to a far higher basis for human relations.

Putting an End to “Sin”  
Or, We Need Morality  
but not *Traditional* Morality

The escalating moves by the likes of Pat Robertson to bring into being in the U.S. the kind of society portrayed (negatively) in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* constitute one of the more salient features of the political and social landscape of the U.S. today. Indeed, what is most striking is that this vision of the "Religious Right" has increasingly gained acceptance and been given legitimacy within "Mainstream American Politics"—that is, by the dominant political institutions and media. This became all the more striking with the release of the Christian Coalition's "Contract With the American Family"—issuing forth like the second blast of a two-stage rocket, following on the Republicans' "Contract With America." This second "Contract" has not only been met with enthusiastic support by a number of leading politicians within the Republican Party, various "conservative commentators," and so on, but has also been treated with at least respect by Democrats and "liberals" in positions of prominence and authority.

At the same time, this has predictably brought forth various voices and forces seeking to raise opposition, or provide an alternative vision, including within the "religious community." Prominent among these latter has been what *The New York Times* (May 23, 1995) described as "a broadly ecumenical group of Christian leaders" who issued a statement, "The Cry for Renewal: Let Other Voices Be Heard." According to the *Times*, this group is "calling for a verbal 'ceasefire' and a search for common ground untainted by partisan ideology."

The article went on to quote one of "the statement's primary authors, the Rev. Jim Wallis, the editor of *Sojourners*, a bimonthly

independent religious magazine," as insisting that "the document's signers were 'not looking for a confrontation' with the Christian Coalition"—that "Civility has to be part of the approach, and compassion"—and that the signers of this statement had arranged meetings not only with President Clinton and the Democratic minority leader of the House of Representatives, Richard Gephardt, but also with House Speaker Newt Gingrich, and that they had requested a meeting with the Christian Coalition's executive director, Ralph Reed. And an article in *USA Today* (May 24, 1995) quotes Wallis as follows: "The alternative to the religious right is not the religious left," said Wallis. "We need a politics whose values are more spiritual than ideological—a politics rooted in civility, compassion and community."

I found these comments by Wallis and his role as a prime mover in "The Cry for Renewal" of particular interest because I had been sent Wallis' book, *The Soul of Politics* (New Press, Orbis Books, 1994), and had read it and returned to it a number of times in connection with writing on the question of "traditional morality." This initially focused around William Bennett's *The Book of Virtues* and resulted in my writing a critique of that book: "Preaching From a Pulpit of Bones: The Reality Beneath William Bennett's 'Virtues,' Or, We Need Morality, But Not *Traditional* Morality." In the course of this study and writing, however—and Wallis' book was a significant contributing factor to this—I came to a deeper realization that it was not only necessary to expose and indict the moral position, or posturing, of people like William Bennett—along with its underlying economic, social, and political basis—but to speak to the question of morality in a deeper and more comprehensive way. This must include confronting the kind of moral and political vision offered by people like Wallis, as well as that of the Bennetts, Reeds, and Robertsons, and putting forth in opposition to this a communist view of morality.

In many ways, Wallis and Bennett approach things from opposite sides. Wallis identifies his life's work with and strives to see things through the eyes of the poor and exploited, the oppressed and marginalized, in U.S. society and the world. He gives expression to this idea: "A fundamental principle we have been working with is that the truth of a society is best known from the bottom." (p. 116) He insists upon the recognition that "The United States of America was established as a white society, founded upon the near-genocide of one race and then

the enslavement of yet another. This statement has always generated an emotional response. Some say it's outrageous, some say courageous. But it is simply a statement of historical fact." (p. 84)

Bennett, on the other hand, is a leading representative of The Top—of the ruling forces of U.S. society and the most powerful empire in the world today. And, as I pointed out in my critique of Bennett's "Virtues," he leans on—the system he upholds is grounded in—a mountain of broken bones and bodies which have been piled up, and are continually replenished, from the very real "historical fact" that Wallis insists on, and from the continuing operation of this "historical fact" in today's world: this is the pulpit from which Bennett pontificates, preaching his "virtues" and seeking to impose a draconian order, in the name of these "virtues," particularly upon those on the bottom of U.S. society and the world.

Yet, with all this, and despite Wallis' call for fundamental social change, he does not seek to have the world turned upside down; rather he seeks reconciliation between those on the bottom—who in fact constitute the great majority of humanity and the fundamental source of humanity's advancement—and the handful who exploit and torment them in order to remain on top. Wallis calls for "a new social vision" ("Introduction," xxiv), but in the end his vision retains considerable common ground with that of the most openly reactionary upholders of the present social order. He does not offer a fundamental alternative to what is represented by the Bennetts, Reeds, and Robertsons—and by the Clintons and Gores—but instead stands as a testament to the fact that any attempt to forge an alternative to this truly monstrous system that does not break with its religious-moral tradition is bound to meet with ultimate failure; that only communist principles and their expression in communist morality can illuminate the path to a radically different alternative that will enable humanity to fashion a far better future, without the enslaving tradition of religious doctrine and religious authority reinforcing oppressive social divisions.

There is much to agree with in *The Soul of Politics*—much truth that needs to be told and is forthrightly and powerfully told. Particularly in Part Two, "The Broken Community," Wallis lays bare, with considerable insight and passion, much of the glaring inequality and inequity (and, in Wallis' view, iniquity) in today's world and various forms of oppression, repression, and violence that are bound up with this.

In Chapter 4, "A Tale of Two Cities, The Division of the World," Wallis paints a vivid picture of exactly that division. He does not simply lament or condemn but brings alive the toll in human agony that results from the extreme and grotesque polarization between those who are awash in extravagant (Wallis might prefer the term "profligate") overconsumption and those who are without even the basic necessities of a healthy and decent life, not only within the communities of the poor in the U.S. itself but among vast masses of people throughout the world.

Speaking of Washington, D.C., where Wallis' work has been centered, among the teeming yet all-but-invisible (to the powerful and wealthy) poor in the inner-city ghetto, he points out: "Those who work in government buildings from which the New World Order is run must literally step over the homeless as they go into their offices. The symbolism is obvious, and the everyday scene is a striking metaphor of the world economic order." (p. 52)

Wallis also brings this to life with anecdotes, recounting, for example, the conversation he overheard on an airport shuttle bus between "two handsome young white couples" who were loudly discussing their favorite restaurants around the world. "Finally, one of them exclaimed in praise of his favorite place, 'It's just a wonderful restaurant—two can spend \$300 for dinner in your shorts!'" Wallis continues: "At my destinations the conversation is much different, often about survival: Where will our next meal come from? How can we keep the rain out and the children dry? Where can we find water clean enough to drink? Will we ever have any land to call our own?" (p. 126)

This calls to mind a routine (or vignette) by Lily Tomlin, in the persona of one of her famous characters, the Bag Lady. This Bag Lady recounts that she was not always homeless and haunted by dementia—that she once had a place among the comfortable in society, working for an advertising agency—but when she was assigned to do an ad campaign promoting between-meal snacks for people in the Third World, she went over the edge. The fact that, among this Bag Lady's former colleagues and those similarly situated, the irony here may not immediately strike home—that there are those who are ignorant of or, even worse, inured to the reality that, outside of a few enclaves of the elite, the everyday situation for people in the Third World is one of struggling simply to have something approximating meals, and the concept

of "between-meal snacks" has no meaning, except perhaps as cruel mockery—this is a striking expression of the inhuman condition, of the obscene polarization, that Wallis decries. And Wallis draws the contrasts even more sharply and starkly:

"[T]he poverty is simply overwhelming in many places we call the Third World, where the poor are suffering and dying almost beyond our capacity to count. The United States spent the 1980s further redistributing wealth from the poor and working class to the rich. Those at the top reaped a bonanza of excess and self-indulgence, while in the world's poorest places 35,000 children die every day for lack of the simplest things like clean drinking water and basic nutrition.

"That figure takes on a more dramatic meaning when we realize it would be a number approximately equal to filling 100 jumbo jets with 350 infants and children each and then watching one crash every 14 minutes. In the meantime, a small elite travels the world in first class." (p. 61)

Wallis goes some way in rejecting and refuting the comforting—for the comfortable—notion that the poverty, degradation, brutality, and violence that is daily life for the poor is of their own making, their "own fault." Speaking of how the drug trade has become a source—one of the very few sources—of wealth for a few and of livelihood for many of the poor, he points out that the drug economy "is, in fact, the only real market in the 'market economy' in places like Colombia and Columbia Heights...From Colombia in South America to Columbia Heights in Washington, D.C., *poverty sets the stage* for tragedy, and the drama of *drugs simply carries out the executions.*" (emphasis added)

Wallis does not simply state the incontrovertible "historical fact" cited above—that the U.S. was founded in white supremacy, with the near-genocide of the Native Americans and the enslavement of African-Americans—but he shows how racism and the oppression of people of color is a continuing and major part of the American way of life in every sphere. And he shows how the legal system, from the police to the courts and prisons, operates to perpetuate and enforce this oppression.

In a number of senses, one of the most revelatory parts of Wallis' book is his recounting of his personal experience in making what he

describes as “A Pilgrimage” from the white middle class community of his upbringing, in Detroit, to the Black inner city. Significantly, one of the impelling forces for this “pilgrimage” was the powerful urban rebellion, centered in the Black ghettos, that swept over Detroit in the summer of 1967. Wallis was provoked to ask, and restless in seeking the answer to, profound questions about the gaping divisions and inequalities between Blacks and whites in America. “I was persistent in taking my questions to my parents, teachers, and friends,” he writes, “but I soon discovered that no one could or would answer them. . . . Some people told me that asking these questions would only get me into trouble. That proved to be the only honest answer I ever got in the white community. It didn’t take long to realize that I wasn’t going to get the answers I was looking for from white people. So I decided to make my way into the inner city.” (p. 75)

Wallis tells how “I started by seeking out black churches.” And “As I asked my questions, a whole new picture of the world began to emerge. . . . The simple, self-justifying worldview of my childhood and my church, in conflict with my growing awareness of racism and poverty, caused mounting havoc in my teenage years. I was shocked at what I saw, heard, and read; I felt betrayed and angry by the brutal facts of racism. Worse, I felt painfully implicated.” (p. 76)

Significantly—although, as I will return to later, Wallis has stopped short of confronting the fullest significance of this—when he went further and deeper into the Black community, taking jobs among “Detroit’s manual laborers and unskilled workers, who worked hard for little money,” he discovered that, “The young blacks I met were much more angry and militant than the black Christians I had come to know, and they provided me with a new education.” Here Wallis came face to face with the reality of bright, insightful people—like “Butch, . . . typical of the militant young men I came to know”—whom the system never deemed worthy of being taught to write, and of how people like Butch and their families understood the nature of the police. (p. 76 and following)

Wallis recalls the lasting impression Butch’s mother made on him: “She was a lovely woman, gracious and warm. . . . Like my mother in so many ways, she was primarily concerned about the health, happiness, and safety of her family” and that concern caused her to teach her children, from bitter experience, the following about the police: “If

they ever got lost, they were to look out for the police. When they spotted a cop, they were to duck into an alley, crouch under some stairs, or hide behind a corner. When the policeman passed by, it was safe to come out and try to find their way home themselves. ‘So I tell my children,’ she said, ‘to watch out for the policeman.’” (pp. 78-79)

How much of the most fundamental reality—piercing through the lies of “Officer Friendly” and encapsulating the truth of Rodney King, of the dozens of Black people murdered in those days by Detroit police and of the hundreds of Black people murdered each year in cold blood by police across the USA, only to have it repeatedly declared “justifiable homicide”—is concentrated in the meaning of this woman’s words of advice to her children: “Watch out for the policeman?!” And when we put all this together—when we take the story of Butch and his family, in its fullest dimension, as representative of millions of Black people—then we can understand the profound meaning and implication of these statistics cited by Wallis: a recent study “showed that 42 percent of black men in Washington, D.C., were either in jail, awaiting trial, or on parole. It further revealed that 90 percent of African-American men in the city would be arrested at some time in their lives. The United States already has more people incarcerated, in numbers and per capita, than any country in the world—costing more, per prisoner per year, than a Harvard education.” (p. 81)

If you take just the last part of the last sentence quoted here and pursue to its fullest conclusion the contradiction it poses so dramatically—spending money incarcerating rather than providing an education for millions of young Black men—you will go a long way to getting to the fundamental problem, and solution, in U.S. society, and the world, today.

Wallis has journeyed a considerable ways in that direction, but then he has stopped, and pulled back. Both sides of this find expression in the following summation by Wallis of the seminal experience represented by his “pilgrimage” to inner-city Detroit:

“If education is to learn to see the truth and to know the world as it really is, then my education began when I got to know black people in Detroit. They showed me the other America, the America that is unfair and wrong and mean and hateful, the America that we white people

accept. But they taught me about more than racism. They taught me about love and family and courage, about what is most important and what it means to be a human being. In listening to the black experience, I discovered more truth about myself, my country, and my faith than by listening anywhere else." (p. 79)

As someone who came from a white middle class background but was part of the generation that came of age politically in "the '60s," there is much of what Wallis writes here that resonates deeply with me. In my case, the kind of learning experience he describes was facilitated by the fact that the high school I went to, Berkeley High, was (and I believe still is) the only public high school in that city and was nearly evenly divided between white and Black students, along with a smaller number of Mexican and Chicano and Asian students.

But "divided" is the right word, because the community as a whole was still overwhelmingly segregated and within the school itself there remained an overwhelming separation—which was very pronounced at social gatherings and even during things such as lunch: both inside the school cafeteria as well as outside (in the area where large numbers of students took their lunch) there were very clearly defined white and Black areas and an invisible but very real line separating them (although at one point some white fraternity-boy types made this visible by actually painting a stripe and labeling it "the Mason-Dixon line"! ). To cross that line, literally as well as in the larger symbolic sense, was not impossible but it was also not easy. It required a leap across a great divide—and for those white people who took this leap, it was a wrenching but also an uplifting and enlightening experience in the fullest sense of those words.

Like Wallis, I too began my real education by learning from the experiences, feelings, insights, and wisdom of the Black people who accepted me as a friend and opened their hearts and their world to me. And like Wallis, I was at first astonished and more and more deeply angered by learning of the daily outrages and insults as well as the whole historical oppression that Black people have been subjected to since the time the first slaves were brought to America, and I determined to be part of putting an end to this and uprooting the whole soil in which it thrives.

But, unlike Wallis, at a certain point, in acting on this determination and in learning more and more about the connection between this and all the other forms of oppression and exploitation that are woven into the very fabric of U.S. society and its relation with the rest of the world, I came to the realization that I must leap across yet another great divide, or ultimately I must settle for something less than overturning and abolishing all this exploitation and oppression and on some level I must make my peace with it.

This second leap meant, it required, recognizing and opposing the whole way in which the economy and the society are organized on the basis of private appropriation of capital and the distribution of wealth in relation to ownership (or non-ownership) of capital, rather than according to the needs of the people. It meant apostasy toward the holy trinity of country, family, and god—or, in reality, imperialism, the patriarchy, and the mystical, mythical embodiment of the dominant exploitative and oppressive relations as an all-powerful, supernatural force to which all must submit. In short, this leap represents, as Marx and Engels put it in the *Communist Manifesto*, a radical rupture with traditional property relations and traditional ideas.

This I have found to be the most liberating leap—even though it is one that, in a profound sense, must be repeatedly made. But it is a leap that—at least objectively and to no small degree subjectively—has been recoiled from by people who hold to the beliefs that Wallis does. To paraphrase Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, I have seen many of the best people of my generation in the U.S., particularly from the white middle class, become stuck precisely at the point where this leap and radical rupture must be made. In some instances it has been Elvis, in others baseball, and in still others religion that have symbolized and encapsulated what they have been unable to let go of. For Wallis, it is the latter above all.

I am reminded of John Lennon's song "Imagine," where among other things he calls on people to envision a world where there is "no religion, too." A few years ago, when Joan Baez performed in France, a concert of hers was shown on French TV and she sang "Imagine," but when she got to this point, after "and no religion, too," she felt compelled to add "except your own." It is this unwillingness, or inability, to imagine a world in which the people have laid down the burden of religion—where the belief in non-existent supernatural beings has



been removed together with the social conditions and relations that provide the basis for such belief—which is the “sticking point” for people like Wallis (and Baez); and this goes hand-in-hand with the unwillingness, or inability, to recognize the underlying mainsprings of the very inequities they genuinely and deeply abhor and seek to overcome. With such an outlook, one can only hit at symptoms, never at fundamental causes—and, worse yet, such an outlook will lead in the direction of covering over such causes and conciliating with those who profit from and seek to perpetuate them.

Wallis is aware of, and emphasizes, the fact that there is a connection between the poverty of so many and the luxury of a relative few in the world. He links not only the poverty and oppression within the U.S. itself but the polarization in the world—with masses of people in unspeakable agony at one pole—with the priorities and policies of U.S. society and the U.S. government, including its foreign policies and the wars it wages, or backs. In speaking to the fact that “we are in a time of transition” (p. 5), he indicates a sense that this transition is bound up with major changes in the U.S. and the world economy

heightened internationalization and automation of production, in which “whole communities and sectors are now being excluded” and “whole populations are now simply defined outside of the economic mainstream.” (p. 59)

Yet he concludes that the fundamental cause of all this is spiritual, that “the crisis of the global economy is, at root, a moral one; and mere political arguments and solutions will prove inadequate.” (p. 72) In fact, because Wallis’ analysis of the problem and the solution represents a distortion, an inversion, of the relationship between economics and politics, and ideology—because he rejects Marxist materialism and insists upon religious idealism—his arguments and solutions are themselves woefully inadequate and ultimately lead in the wrong direction. The philosophical dimension of this will be addressed later, but first it is worthwhile to examine some examples of what Wallis offers as the practical solution—or the direction toward that solution—to the problems and inequities confronting the masses of poor people in the U.S. and the world and what this reveals about Wallis’ approach.

Let’s start with the ending of *The Soul of Politics*. In the “Afterword” of this book, revealingly titled “A Time to Heal, A Time to Build,” Wallis speaks of witnessing the inauguration of Nelson Mandela

as the new president of South Africa. Wallis invokes the words of Mandela on this occasion: “‘The people of South Africa have spoken in this election,’ said Nelson Mandela. ‘They want change—and change they will get.’ The seventy-five-year-old leader of the nation continued a theme of reconciliation... . In a ringing appeal for reconciliation, the president said, ‘The time for healing of the wounds has come. The moment to bridge the chasms that divide us has come. The time to rebuild is upon us.’” This, Wallis concludes, represents “that hope that will transform the soul of our politics.” (pp. 253, 255)

But *hope for whom*, and *what kind* of change does Mandela’s presidency represent, and is this really what the masses of people—in particular the bitterly oppressed and exploited masses of African people in that land—want and need? In fact, the new regime in South Africa does not represent any kind of fundamental change that is capable of, or even aims to, overturn and uproot the exploitation and oppression of the masses of people. Rather, its aim and effect—its hope and result—is to bring about certain partial reforms and restructuring in the system there, in particular incorporating a section of more upper class and some middle class Black people into the ruling institutions and privileged strata, in order to establish a South Africa that is a more “stable” and more propitious feasting ground for exploiters, both local and international. This is often referred to as “creating a more favorable climate for capital investment,” and this is an explicit goal of the Mandela government.

Under this government there has been and there will be no seizure of political power by the masses of people for whom Mandela is alleged to speak, nor any fundamental redistribution of land and other means of production and restructuring of the economic system to establish these masses as the masters of the economic life of the country. The yawning gulf between a handful of exploiters, overwhelmingly white, and the vast masses of exploited Black people has not been overcome and will not be under this government and with the politics and policies it represents.

Among other things, this is reflected in an article that appeared in *The New York Times* (April 27, 1995), one year after the election that brought Mandela to the presidency. The title of this article is “After Apartheid, Change Lags Behind Expectations,” and one of the sub-headings encapsulates much of the essence of the matter: “Vast Gulf

Splits Rich and Poor.” But the most essential fact is that it is not simply a matter of change “lagging”—the fundamental change needed by the masses of people will never come by following the politics and ideology represented by Mandela. Such change can only come by breaking with this ideology and politics, rejecting the road of reconciliation with the exploiters and oppressors and carrying out a revolutionary struggle to overthrow them and overturn the conditions and relations on which they thrive and of which they are the representatives and enforcers.

The simple but profound truth is that there *cannot be* any reconciliation of the interests of the poor and those whose system maintains them in poverty—there cannot be any common ground between the slavemasters and the slaves. And, irrespective of anyone’s intentions, all attempts at forging such a reconciliation and finding such a common ground can, to be blunt, only end up selling out the poor and helping to maintain them in their conditions of enslavement, privation, and torment. If you don’t believe me—if you are inclined to dismiss this as “Marxist dogma”—then ask the masses of people in Mandela’s “new South Africa,” or in El Salvador, Palestine, and other places where such “reconciliations” are being imposed on them.

Another example of what Wallis considers hopeful “Signs of Transformation” sheds yet more light on the limitations of his approach. This story, included under a heading “Compassion”—with the telling subtitle: “No More Us and Them”—“comes to us from Brazil” and involved “A number of poor farmers [who] were about to lose their land to a government project.” The women of these campesino families went, with their children, to the neighborhoods of the rich senators who were to vote on this government project; and, as Wallis recounts it, they won the sympathy of the senators’ wives, who then prevailed upon their husbands to vote to defeat the project. Wallis draws this lesson: “...the campesinos kept their land. It happened because some people had begun to listen to each other. Compassion always begins with listening.” (pp. 161-62)

Whatever one might say about the story recounted here by Wallis—including how the role of wives in relation to their husbands is portrayed—the fundamental fact is that over the past several decades, during which this particular incident occurred, millions and millions of campesinos in Brazil have continued to be driven off their land in

accordance with the interests and dictates of major agricultural concerns and other forces of capitalism, local and international. Between the mid-70s and mid-80s, as many as 15 million rural inhabitants were forced to migrate to urban areas of Brazil, whose sprawling slums are continually expanded by this uprooted sea of people. By the end of the 1980s, the concentration of land ownership in Brazil was so extreme that approximately five percent of the landowners had two-thirds of the land, while on the other hand one-half of the landowners possessed, altogether, only one-fiftieth of the land. During this same decade, the already almost indescribably miserable standard of living of the masses in Brazil and throughout Latin America sank to still more miserable and desperate levels. And this same phenomenon can be seen all over the Third World.

Listening and compassion will not and cannot reverse, or halt, this process, because something more compelling is involved: the fundamental relations of capitalism in what Lenin characterized as its imperialist stage—highly monopolized and internationalized capital—and the driving forces of accumulation of this system. The heads of the big multinational corporations, the banks, and other major capitalist concerns will tell you: they have to operate as they do—they have to continually displace people from land and from employment, not only within particular countries but on an international scale—or they will be driven under by others who do so more effectively. And they are right. There is no hope under this system for the masses of people throughout the world who are driven from place to place and used and then cast aside in this way—no hope so long as they continue to be under the domination of capital and its underlying dynamics of accumulation and the political institutions and instruments of political power that are constructed and utilized to enforce this rule of capital. The only hope lies in rising up to overthrow and uproot all this.

This truth and how it clashes with the false hope that is held out by people like Wallis—no matter how admirable their intentions may be—was also driven home to me in watching a video of the IIBC movie, “The Burning Season,” on the life of Chico Mendes, who struggled mightily and heroically during this same period to protect the interests of “his people,” rural poor in a rainforest region of Brazil. Mendez insisted that this fight be waged non-violently, but in the end he himself was murdered, as many others have been, by the agents of

ranchers and other big capitalists determined to exploit and ravage the rainforest and its people.

In watching this film, I was repeatedly reminded of those who attack and slander the revolutionary struggle being waged in a neighboring country—the people's war led by the Communist Party of Peru (called "Shining Path" in the mainstream media)—because of the violent nature of this struggle. Of such people I would ask: How can you witness something like this story of Chico Mendes and "his people"—and more broadly how could one know of the reality of the masses of brutally oppressed people in countries all over Latin America and indeed throughout the world—and not recognize that this reality cries out precisely for a revolutionary war of the people? A war in which they do not simply lash out in an unorganized way without a strategic plan, but are organized and led so that they can fight effectively against the oppressive system ruling over them and move to defeat it in a systematic way, guided by a vision of a new society free of exploitation and oppression and bringing into being new relations and new people as they fight—as is being done under the leadership of the Communist Party of Peru? To insist, in the name of "hope" and "compassion," that this not be done is in reality to deny hope and compassion for these masses, who make up the vast majority of humanity.

And the same applies to Wallis' prescription for establishing new economic priorities and specifically for dealing with the economic devastation that has hit the inner cities of the U.S. In a section on "Community, A Moral Foundation for Economics," Wallis asks such questions as, "Why is real estate speculation that displaces the poor regarded as shrewd investment rather than as unacceptable social behavior?" And, in another section, "Reverence, Honoring the Whole Creation," he laments that "most of the biggest corporations still see real change in environmental policy as a threat to their profits." (pp. 167, 178)

But Wallis does not see that, so long as the foundation and the driving force of the economy remains capitalist property relations and accumulation—and this will remain the case until the system of capitalism and its political rule is overthrown—those who evaluate real estate investment and environmental policy according to the criteria Wallis decries are in fact *correctly* calculating according to the *prevailing and determining economic laws*. Wallis can write that "free-market capitalism

violates ethics when its devotion to profits overrides every other human or ecological consideration" (p. 27, emphasis added); but he does not grasp that it is not a matter of "when"—that under capitalism (whether in the "free-market" form or in the state-capitalist form, as in fact existed in the Soviet Union from the time of Khrushchev), devotion to profit as the "bottom line" *must* override every other consideration.

Wallis may genuinely abhor what he sees as the unnecessary excesses of the present economic and political system, but he does not recognize that these "excesses" are an *integral part* of that system, and that there is no way to eliminate—or to somehow avoid—them without uprooting that whole system. Wallis lauds and supports a program, relying substantially on churches, "To establish accountable community-based economic development projects that go beyond 'market and state' visions of revenue generation." (p. 225) But, leaving for later discussion of the fact that he reveals a fundamental lack of understanding of the socialist system (what he means with the reference to "state" economies), Wallis also betrays here again a fundamental misunderstanding of the dynamics of capitalist economics.

The fact is that any efforts at cooperative, community-based economic ventures will be taking place within an overall economic environment conditioned by the dynamics of capitalist accumulation and dominated by large-scale capital. It is these forces and interests that have shaped and continue to shape economic development in the U.S. and indeed worldwide, and more particularly have brought about the devastation of the inner cities of the U.S. Even the most large-scale and powerful pillars of capital cannot escape the laws of capital accumulation. Ask them why they have closed down plant after plant in the inner cities, and why they continue to "streamline" their operations and "downsize" their work force not only throughout the U.S. but everywhere else, and they will answer—with a statement of cold fact—that they "have no choice in today's competitive world market."

How can all this be reversed or overcome without overturning and fundamentally rupturing with the whole underlying relations and process of capitalist economics? And how can this be done without overthrowing the political structures and institutions that maintain and enforce these underlying economic relations? Viewed against this reality, the limitations of Wallis' vision stand out very starkly.

But perhaps the most concentrated expression of what is wrong with Wallis' vision comes through in his discussion of women, patriarchy, and the family. Here again, in a section titled "Pattern of Inequality, Exploiting the Sisters," *The Soul of Politics* contains searing exposure of some of the more horrendous aspects of this exploitation, including the sexual plunder of women by U.S. soldiers in countries like the Philippines, as well as the widespread rape and battering of women in the U.S. itself. And the inseparable connection between "Sexism and Advertising" in the economy and culture of U.S. society today is graphically illustrated. Yet, when Wallis seeks to examine "The Structure of Sexism" and to ground an understanding of this and opposition to it in Biblical terms and values, he is compelled to turn back on himself and to end up upholding or conciliating with much of this very structure of oppression.

Wallis states that "the real issue between men and women is not sex, but the inequality of power." He speaks of "the pattern that underlies and fuels" violence against women, and goes on to say that "The name of the pattern is patriarchy—the subordination of women to men...the control of women...has been the dominant characteristic of patriarchy from the earliest times... Like slaves, women were made into property themselves—male property." (pp. 104-105, 106-107) But the problem is that the source to which Wallis wants to turn for guidance in opposing this patriarchal oppression, the *Bible*, is itself a *major pillar* of precisely that oppression. This is strikingly evident from the very first books of the *Bible* (the first five, so-called "Mosaic," books) through the remainder of the Old Testament and throughout the New Testament, including very blatantly in the Epistles of Paul, who is generally acknowledged to be the major influence on the New Testament and the Christian religion as it developed and spread in its early formative period.

The subordination of women to their husbands and to male domination in general is both advocated and assumed throughout the *Bible*, and in many places—including the very chapters and books where the Ten Commandments and Mosaic Law generally are presented—the acquiring of women as slaves, and as prizes of war and objects of sexual plunder, rather than being proscribed is proscribed and ordained (see, for example, Exodus 21 and Deuteronomy 22, as well as Judges 21).

This profound contradiction—that Wallis wants to see an end to

patriarchal oppression and inequality for women but at the same time wants to uphold the morality and conventions associated with the *Bible* and the "Judeo-Christian tradition," which embody and reinforce this very patriarchal oppression and inequality—runs through the whole of Wallis' discussion of the pattern of sexual inequality and asserts itself very acutely in his treatment of the question of abortion—which he correctly identifies as one of the major "battlegrounds" in U.S. society (as well as many other societies) today.

Wallis writes that he and his colleagues at *Sojourners* magazine "have advocated for the rights and equality for women," and at the same time "we have upheld the sacred value of human life, drawing from our religious roots and our commitment to nonviolence." And he concludes: "These two values—the rights of women and the sanctity of life—have become the antagonistic poles of our public discourse." (p. 109)

Once again, and characteristically, Wallis wants to see an end to this antagonism through reconciliation—he wants to "tone down the rhetoric" of what he sees as two "extreme" positions—he insists that "we need answers that speak to the concerns of both sides." (pp. 109, 110) But what does it mean when someone who says he is opposed to patriarchal oppression describes unapologetic insistence on the right of women to abortion, and passionately militant opposition to the attempt to take away that right, as "extreme?" It means that this person's opposition to patriarchal oppression is, at best, incomplete and inconsistent, as indeed is the case with Wallis.

As many of us who support the right of women to abortion "on demand and without apology" have pointed out, the right of women to determine when and if to have children—their right not to be forced to bear children against their will—is the same kind of fundamental question as the right of Black people not to be slaves. Calls for reconciliation over questions and rights as fundamental as this can only serve those who would enforce enslavement and deny such fundamental rights. This is precisely what Wallis serves in treating abortion as something that should not be legally forbidden under all circumstances, but something that is also not an inalienable right and (as he quotes "Feminist Shelley Douglass") "is 'almost always a moral wrong.'" (p. 110)

In addition to the fundamental fact that what exists within a woman's body, from the time she becomes pregnant until that preg-

nancy ends, is not a full-blown “baby” or a “child” but a developing *fetus*, which is in effect an integral part of the woman’s body and physical functioning—which has the *potential* to become a separate full-blown human being but is *not yet* that—Wallis’ attempt to find justification for his position on abortion by invoking “the sacred value of human life,” and grounding this in Biblical tradition and injunction, cannot stand. Wallis refers, approvingly, to “Some women [who] favor a consistent ethic of life, which views threats posed by nuclear weapons, capital punishment, poverty, racism, patriarchy, *and* abortion as parts of a seamless garment of interconnected and interwoven concerns about life’s sacred value.” (pp. 109-110, emphasis in original) But, in fact, the *Bible* and “Judeo-Christian tradition” do not provide a basis for this “seamless garment” position.

As I pointed out in critiquing William Bennett’s “Virtues,” the Sixth Commandment, read in the context of the “Mosaic Law” of which it is a part, clearly means only that it is forbidden to kill someone unless “The Law” and “The Lord” say it is right and necessary to kill someone. The *Bible* not only does *not prohibit* but *insists upon* killing people for many reasons—and there are many cases where such killing would be considered by almost everyone today to be wanton and atrocious, however much it may be *celebrated* in the *Bible*. (See, for example, Exodus 32:16-28, as well as Exodus 21:17 and Deuteronomy 21:18-21.)

What this reflects is that in all human societies, including those which gave rise to the *Bible*, the taking of human life—as well as the aborting of fetuses, which are a form of life but not yet full-blown, separate human beings—will always be evaluated by society according to the criterion of how it affects society in an overall sense. And, where society is divided into different social groups—and most fundamentally different *classes*—then the view toward these questions that will predominate is that of the class in society which holds the dominant economic position and therefore dominates the political as well as the cultural and intellectual life of that society.

The societies that the *Bible* reflects and upholds are societies in which slavery and other forms of exploitation and oppression, including the patriarchal oppression of women, as well as rivalry and plunder between various nations and empires, are all integral and indispensable elements, and the way the *Bible* treats the taking of human life is a reflection of this.

Thus, while the *Bible* does not provide justification for the “seamless garment” position, it certainly does provide justification, or rationalization, for various forms, including the most extreme manifestations, of oppression and plunder, including of women. So long as one insists on clinging to the *Bible* and its moral vision—to “core values, derived from our religious and cultural traditions,” as Wallis expresses it (p. 42)—one will never be able to struggle, in a thoroughgoing way, to abolish all these forms of oppression, to uproot all exploitative and enslaving economic and social relations and their corresponding political institutions and ideological expressions. In the final analysis, only by rupturing with this vision—with these traditions and “traditional values”—is it possible to wage, and to win, such a thoroughgoing, truly revolutionary, struggle.

Wallis wants to transcend liberalism and conservatism, while combining what he sees as the positive aspects, and leaving behind the errors, of each—this is the common ground and reconciliation he seeks. He criticizes people like Pat Robertson for denouncing feminism as anti-family and for making “male control” the object; but Wallis calls for “healthy family values”—for “Restoring the integrity of family, marriage, and parenting...but in each case doing so in a way that ensures the dignity and equality of women.” (pp. 108-09) Wallis recognizes that “The code language of family values is often a cover for a return to the patriarchal structures of the past” (p.108); but he fails, or refuses, to see that the nuclear family itself has always been an instrument of patriarchal oppression. (He ignores, or fails to grasp, the significance of, the fact that the word “family” itself has its origins in the ancient Roman institution in which the male head of the household had not only control but literally the power of life and death over his wife and children as well as his slaves.)

As Engels demonstrated in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, this family arose together with the acquisition of privately owned surpluses and the split-up of “primitive communal” society into different and antagonistically opposed classes. It arose out of a simple division of labor having to do with the bearing and rearing of children—a division which, in those “primitive communal” societies, does not itself constitute an oppressive relation but which becomes such, and remains such, once and so long as there is privately accumulated wealth, particularly in the ownership of land and other means of

production, which the owners then seek to pass on from one generation of their progeny (in particular, their male progeny) to the next. In this situation, the male-female division of labor inevitably results in male domination and control—this is the historical and material basis for patriarchy and the oppression of women.

Only through the revolutionary transformation of society—to bring about the abolition of private property in the ownership of means of production, the eradication of class distinctions, and the elimination of all oppressive division of labor—will the “dignity and equality of women” be finally and fully achieved. In short, only the communist revolution represents the road to the complete liberation of women.

This does not mean that communists call for the immediate abolition of the nuclear family, because that can and should only come about, in society and the world as a whole, when the material and ideological conditions for this have been achieved, including the abolition of not only private ownership of the means of production but also of commodity production (production of things to be bought and sold) and with this the abolition of money-relations and of money itself. Throughout the entire revolutionary process that aims to create these material and ideological conditions for communism, the struggle must be waged to continually and ever more thoroughly overcome and uproot the relations of inequality and oppression that shackle women, to promote personal, family, and sexual relations that are based on mutual love and respect and equality between men and women, and to increasingly develop forms for the masses of people to carry out, through cooperative efforts involving men equally with women, the functions which are now focused overwhelmingly in the family and which are a burden on women in particular.

It will be possible to make a great leap in this once the present oppressive order has been overthrown and it then becomes possible to begin bringing into being whole new social relations and ways of thinking, on a societal level. And we must be bold in declaring that the final aim is the abolition of the nuclear family, along with and as a key part of the complete abolition, at long last, of the oppression of women.

Wallis wants to settle for something far less, and despite his seemingly very sincere agonizing over the indignities and oppression suffered by women, he is (as yet at least) unable to break with the tra-

ditional view of the family and of male-female relations. As a result, his views end up having much in common with those of the most openly reactionary crusaders for patriarchy, and for oppressive and exploitative relations in general, such as Pat Robertson and the Christian Coalition. When the implications of this are understood, it is no longer so shocking that someone like Wallis, who can speak so eloquently about the agony and torment of the poor and oppressed—and of how this contrasts with the self-indulgence of the privileged—can at the same time call for (re)conciliation with the most monstrous oppressors and tormentors.

This is what comes of Wallis’ attempts to transcend liberalism and conservatism. As Wallis characterizes things, liberals are concerned only with the social causes of problems, the conservatives only with personal moral responsibility, and they are both right and both wrong (pp. 20-22). It could be said that at least the liberals are on more correct ground, since their position (even as ascribed to them by Wallis) reflects to a certain degree the fundamental principle that in an overall sense, as Marx put it, it is people’s social being that determines their consciousness and not the other way around. In other words, in the relation between people’s ideas, including their values and morals, on the one hand, and the economic and social relations in which they are enmeshed, on the other hand, it is the latter which are overall decisive, even though ideas can and do play a very important part in the struggle to transform social conditions.

The real problem with the liberal position is that it resists and opposes the recognition that only through the revolutionary overthrow of the present order and then the thoroughgoing transformation of society to abolish exploitation and oppression—including the accumulation of socially produced wealth as private capital and the division between mental and manual labor as well as all other oppressive social divisions—can the fundamental causes of society’s problems be uprooted. And, as a matter of fact, it is only through this process, and the waging of the revolutionary struggle to carry it out, that the thinking, including the values, of people can be really and fully revolutionized—to repudiate individual advance at the expense of others and to put the common good of society and humanity above narrow and self-centered concerns.

Unable or unwilling to recognize this, and clutching instead at “traditional values”—and, more particularly, the prophetic tradition of

the *Bible* and “prophetic spirituality” (p. 44)—Wallis not only fails to correctly understand the fundamental nature and limitations of liberalism but also does not recognize the true nature and role of conservatism. Wallis writes that “conservatism’s best impulse is to stress the need for individual initiative and moral responsibility. But because of its attachment to institutions of wealth and power, preference for the status quo, and the lack of a strong ethic of social responsibility, conservatism has virtually abandoned the poor and dispossessed.” (p.22)

But Wallis does not see that there is an integral and inseparable connection between what he presents as the positive and negative of conservatism—that in fact the moralizing about “the need for individual initiative and moral responsibility” is simply a rationalization and camouflage, a way of disguising and “dressing up,” the most ruthless and literally murderous exploitation and plunder which actually constitutes the historical and present-day basis for the wealth and power, and the oppressive status quo, that conservatism upholds and glorifies.

It is not that conservatism, and all it represents, has simply “abandoned” the poor and dispossessed—it has thrived on the very conditions that have maintained the masses of people throughout the world in a desperately dispossessed and impoverished condition. To recognize this it is only necessary to recall the “historical fact” that Wallis speaks to, concerning the establishment of the U.S. on the basis of near-genocide and slavery, and the fact that life-stealing oppression and exploitation, within the U.S. itself and throughout the world, has continued to be the basis for the wealth and power of the system and the ruling class in the U.S.

It must be bluntly said that conservatism *has no* “best impulse”—its impulses are all conditioned by and serve the attempt to perpetuate this system, with all its horrendous consequences for the great majority of humanity.

For those who would say that I am guilty of exaggerated claims and extravagant language here, I ask you to think about the full meaning and implications of the following scene, which I witnessed on videotape: a gathering where Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and others raise their voices in prayer asking god not to forgive but to fortify Rios Montt, then the military ruler of Guatemala. Under the reign of Montt, as under the rule of U.S.-backed regimes in Guatemala generally, the

most unspeakable crimes have been carried out on a massive scale against the peasants and others in that country. Atrocities like the following, which I described in a book written a number of years ago, have now come to light more extensively, and it has become increasingly difficult for anyone to deny this; but, as you read this description, reflect on the fact that, if anything, my attempt to capture the horror of these events falls short of conveying a real sense of it:

“In neighboring Guatemala, numerous accounts in recent years have described scene after scene where government troops enter a village and, after executing everyone of fighting age, proceed to brutally murder old people, rape and kill women, and then take the small children and infants and bash their heads open.” (*Democracy: Can't We Do Better Than That?* Banner Press, 1986)

This, without exaggeration, is the kind of thing that conservatism has supported not only in Guatemala but all over the world, although perhaps the likes of Falwell and Robertson were moved by a special passion in championing Rios Montt's acts, since he is a “born-again” butcher—like them a reactionary evangelical Christian fundamentalist. One is forced to ask: What common ground could someone like Wallis want to establish with people like this and the social relations and values they represent?

At the same time, the truth is that in the final analysis liberalism also upholds the same social relations and values; it supports, or at least acquiesces in, the same kind of atrocities in the service of these social relations, even if this is sometimes accompanied by “pious doubts and petty amendments” (to borrow a phrase from Lenin). In particular, liberals in power—including the current U.S. administration, like all others before it—will not only justify these oppressive and exploitative relations but will *enforce* them, including through the use of massive military power and widespread brutality and atrocity. It is impossible to name a single U.S. administration, liberal or conservative, that has not done this and will not continue to do it.

Thus, Wallis' attempt to transcend liberalism and conservatism, while combining what he sees as the positive aspects of both, is bound to fail and to land him in an untenable position.

Wallis does not proceed from a correct understanding of the

relation between social being and consciousness. He does not understand the decisive role of the underlying material forces and dynamics that shape social relations and values but also repeatedly prepare the ground for revolutionary leaps and transformations in these social relations and values. (He does not recognize the truth and the profound meaning of Marx's analysis that all human history is fundamentally conditioned by the development of social productive forces, but at the same time, "All history is nothing but a continuous transformation of human nature"—*The Poverty of Philosophy*). He therefore remains mired in the attempt to construct, or reconstruct ("renew"), universal transcendental morals "derived from our religious and cultural traditions...basic values still in our collective consciousness" (p. 42), which in reality represent a tradition, a long history, of exploitation and oppression. But in Wallis' imagination, these can be converted into tools for liberation, or at least reconciliation.

In reflecting on Wallis' attempts at transcendence and reconciliation, I can't help thinking of the blunt words of Marx, in his criticism of the utopian reformer Proudhon:

"He wants to be the synthesis—he is a composite error.

"He wants to soar as the man of science above the bourgeois and the proletarians; he is merely the petty bourgeois, continually tossed back and forth between capital and labour, [bourgeois] political economy and communism." (*The Poverty of Philosophy*)

If we substitute for "man of science" the phrase "man of religion and spirituality," the essence of Marx's critique captures very well Wallis' position. It is this position that leads Wallis to declare "No More Us and Them." This is a classical expression of the middle strata caught between the two powerful antagonistic forces in the world today—the proletarians and other exploited working people on the one hand and the bourgeois (along with feudal and other pre-capitalist) exploiters on the other hand. It is representative of the resistance of these middle strata to firmly stand with, and accept the rule of, one side or the other in this antagonistic confrontation.

And that defines the difference between Wallis, who describes himself as an evangelical Christian, and the Pat Robertsons and Ralph Reeds, who also describe themselves in these terms. All of them make reference to the same scriptures and religious tradition, but they do

not draw all the same conclusions. And at times they draw very opposed conclusions—for the basic reason that Wallis generally represents a petty bourgeois position, although one that seeks to identify with the poor and dispossessed; while Robertson and Reed are representatives, in the most openly reactionary expression, of the big bourgeoisie, which dominates and exploits the poor and dispossessed and plunders whole nations throughout the Third World in particular. The problem for Wallis is that, irrespective of his intentions and inclinations, so long as he attempts to ground himself in the same religious and moral tradition, he will ultimately have to concede more and more ground to the Reeds and Robertsons.

Wallis does not see it that way—he believes the message of the *Bible* gives him the initiative in upholding the interests of the poor and dispossessed. In a section of *The Soul of Politics* titled "Conversion, The Priority of the Poor," Wallis cites the frequency with which the New Testament and the *Bible* generally mentions the poor. He recounts how "One zealous seminarian" [part of a group, including Wallis, that undertook a study to discover every Biblical reference to the poor and oppressed] "found an old *Bible*, took a pair of scissors, and then proceeded to cut out every single reference to the poor. It took him a very long time." (p. 149) Wallis then tells how "I used to take that holey old *Bible* out with me to preach. I would hold it high above American congregations and say, 'My friends, this is the American Bible—full of holes from all that we have cut out.'"

Wallis concludes that "the God of the *Bible* is the deliverer of the poor." (p. 151) But, again, the problem is that, while Wallis may be able to use this "*Bible* full of holes" for dramatic effect, the Robertsons and Reeds can use the core of the *Bible* for something more substantial—to justify the oppression and exploitation they uphold. And if that *Bible* holds out a hope for the deliverance of the poor, it does not do so in terms of the actual world but of some promised future world. This, for example, is clearly the meaning of the "Beatitudes," delivered in the "Sermon on the Mount."

The *Bible* does not say that poverty will be ended, and the division between rich and poor abolished, in this world, and all over the world. Recall Jesus' words: the poor ye shall always have with you. Rather, the *Bible* says that comfort shall be given to the poor, and that the rich and powerful should be compassionate to the poor and afflicted.



The fact that the *Bible's* treatment of poverty and oppression is not one of calling for—let alone illuminating the path to—the abolition of these things, and the uprooting of their material basis, is typified in the Book of Isaiah. This prophetic book figures very prominently in the foundations of Christianity. It was said to have been a favorite scripture of Jesus, and it is supposed to provide the basis for Jesus' bona fides as the Messiah. And it is quite frequently invoked by those seeking to establish the *Bible* and Biblical tradition as the basis for acting on behalf of the poor and oppressed and for the creation of a just and peaceful world.

Wallis even attempts to base his "notion of environmental justice" in "the prophetic vision of Isaiah... 'They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.'" (p. 179) If we turn to this part of Isaiah, we find that it is prophesying about things that were supposed to happen more or less in Isaiah's own time, several thousand years ago. It is predicting the rise of a new Kingdom in that time, ruled by descendants of David, which would bring together Israel and Judah.

And what does Isaiah say that new, united Kingdom will do? It will attack the Philistines on the west and plunder the people to the east. Not much fabric for a "seamless garment" here! (Isaiah, chapter 11) Nor, for that matter, is there much basis for "environmental justice." At the very end of this chapter, we are told that "The Lord" will dry up the Gulf of Suez and will bring hot wind to dry up the Euphrates, so that his people of Israel can easily return to their promised land. And, if that is not enough, we learn in chapter 24 that "The Lord" is going to devastate the earth and make it waste—the earth will dry up and wither, the sky as well as the earth will decay, because god has declared a curse on the earth. And, again, we hear in chapter 34 how the rivers of Edom will turn into tar and the soil into sulfur. Isaiah is literally full of passages like this.

Similarly, it is in the book of Isaiah that we find the famous passage about how everlasting peace will come and the nations will beat their swords into plowshares (Isaiah 2:1-4). But, according to Isaiah, this peace will come through the exalting of god's chosen people and the grinding down and slaughtering of their enemies, as is reflected in the passages already cited here.

But a few additional citations may be necessary to leave no doubt as to what is really being said here, and to give a sense of the blood-thirstiness of it all. In describing how Babylon will be punished, Isaiah conveys the message of "The Lord": he will attack Babylon and bring it to ruin, leaving nothing, no survivors. Not even children will be spared: babies will be battered to death and the women will be raped before they are slaughtered (Isaiah, chapters 13 and 14). And again, toward the end of this book, "The Lord" proclaims, through Isaiah, that He will make Israel's oppressors kill each other, they will be drunk with murder and rage, so that all mankind will know that He is Lord, that He is Israel's powerful god (Isaiah, 49:25-26).

Really, the blood almost runs off the pages of Isaiah, which is full of passage after passage after passage like this.

The words in Isaiah about aiding the poor and helping the oppressed cannot be taken in the abstract or considered in isolation from the overall context and message of Isaiah. For example, in chapter 16, it is said that oppression and destruction will end, but again this is part of a vision of how Israel will rise and crush and subjugate Israel's former oppressors and tormentors. They will be turned into the slaves of Israel—and then the whole world will be at peace and all shall break out in joyful singing! (Isaiah, 14:1-7)

Really, it is remarkable that anyone should attempt to use Isaiah—or more generally the "prophetic vision" of the *Bible*, or the *Bible* in its overall thrust—as some kind of basis for everlasting peace for humanity, with equality between nations as well as between women and men, and with justice for the poor and oppressed. But, as tortured and ultimately as impossible as that attempt may be, it is the kind of thing people are compelled to do if they feel compassion for the poor and the oppressed and a passion for peace but still resist rupturing with the very traditions and morals—and more fundamentally the underlying material conditions and social relations—that enslave the masses of the world's people and hold back humanity from advancing to the stage where the division of society into classes and of the world into different nations will have been overcome and lasting peace can really become possible.

The radical rupture that characterizes the communist revolution—a rupture with traditional property relations and traditional

ideas—is what objectively stands before people like Wallis (and indeed before humanity as a whole). Wallis' resistance to making this rupture is bound up with the fact that, while he sees and is moved by poverty and suffering, he fails (as Marx said of Proudhon) to recognize and embrace "the revolutionary destructive aspect" in poverty, "which will overthrow the old society." ("On Proudhon," Letter to J.B. Schweitzer, January 24, 1865)

The pronouncements against communism that are found in *The Soul of Politics*—which are marked by their superficiality as well as by that lugubrious pessimism that so often lurks in Western Christian theology—are also characteristic of the petty bourgeoisie. And, to be frank, they rely to a considerable extent on crude misinformation and prejudices, of which there is such a continual and widespread dissemination by the major institutions of bourgeois society—including not only the politicians and political structures but also the churches as well as the educational system and the mass media—and to which the petty bourgeois are so highly susceptible. Wallis writes that

"communism finally collapsed under the weight of its own hypocrisy, repression, and failure. The August Revolution of 1991 in the Soviet Union [referring to the events that consolidated the regime of Boris Yeltsin in the ruling position] irrevocably overturned the October Revolution of 1917 and immediately opened up space for better alternatives in a world stuck in the ideological ice of the Cold War, a world enduring the moral poverty of having only two options... .

"Communism collapsed because of its own failures rather than because of the much-proclaimed victory of the West (though the expensive competition of an endless arms race did help bankrupt the Soviets—a deliberate tactic on the part of the U.S.). The failure of Marxist communism was principally ethical, even theological [!]. Communism terribly overestimated how much humanity could be changed from the top down through enforced social engineering, while it fatally underestimated the corruptibility of the self-appointed elites who would carry out the utopian task. Communism was fatally undermined by not taking seriously the reality that evil resides

not only in structures, but also in the human heart. Ideology supplanted ethics in a horrible willingness to sacrifice countless human lives on the altar of ideological necessity. The inefficiency of the system merely compounded its moral failure." (pp. 25-26)

There is so much, and so many layers of, misrepresentation in Wallis' analysis—literally every sentence in the above citation is a compound error—that it is impossible to unravel and dissect it all without going into it at great length. And beyond that, the question of why and how the first communist revolutions and socialist states have been reversed and turned into their opposites—first in the Soviet Union and then in China—is a very big subject, requiring thoroughgoing and all-around summation and synthesis. Many in the international revolutionary movement, and Maoists in particular, have devoted a great deal of attention to, and have written extensively on, this subject; and, while we are continuing in the struggle to arrive at a still deeper and more comprehensive understanding of this question, it has already been possible to put forward a fundamental and substantial analysis of it. Wallis is either ignorant of all this, or has deliberately ignored it, in presuming to render a verdict on "The failure of Marxist communism."

Here, I will confine myself to summarizing some of the more salient points, by way of refutation of Wallis' verdict and the general run of anti-communist obfuscation it represents. This will serve as a transition to a discussion of communist principles, particularly as they find expression in communist morals and ethics.

First, Wallis conflates the recent events in (what was) the Soviet Union—beginning with the assumption of leadership of the Soviet Union by Mikhail Gorbachev and ending with the abolition of the Soviet Union itself as well as the dissolution of its erstwhile bloc in Eastern Europe—with the overturning of the October Revolution of 1917 and the socialist society it brought forth. And he conflates the experience of the Soviet Union—as filtered, and distorted, through the prejudice of his own ideological prism—with the experience of communist revolution and socialist society in general.

The truth—a truth brought to light through concrete analysis by Maoists, beginning with Mao himself, as early as the late 1950s in that the overturning of socialism in the Soviet Union and the setting of

Soviet society on capitalist foundations was embodied in the rise to power of Khrushchev and his associates and was sustained and carried forward by those who followed Khrushchev in leadership of the Soviet Union. Khrushchev and Co. were not communists, but revisionists—phony communists who cut the revolutionary heart out of Marxist communism, denying the need for the revolutionary overthrow of the old order as well as for the continuing revolutionary struggle of the masses in socialist society, in unity with the oppressed people worldwide, to thoroughly transform society and uproot the basis for class distinctions and oppressive social relations, everywhere in the world.

As Mao succinctly summed up: the rise to power of revisionism means the rise to power of the bourgeoisie—it leads to capitalist restoration and is the decisive act in that restoration. The fact that, until very recently, this capitalism in the Soviet Union was denied and disguised—and took place principally in the form of *state*, as opposed to “market,” capitalism—does not alter the fact that, from the time of Khrushchev, capitalist economic principles—most essentially, “profit in command”—and capitalist economic, social, and political relations were in force.

After the death of Mao, the same fundamental process—the seizure of power by revisionists within top leadership of the Communist Party and the restoration of capitalism under their rule—has taken place in China itself, although the process through which this has occurred and the momentous struggle that took place to combat and prevent it has been markedly different than in the Soviet Union, including the fact that so far this capitalist restoration in China has continued to be camouflaged with an increasingly threadbare cover of phony “communism.” It was Mao who not only led the momentous mass struggle against the likes of Deng Xiaoping and all they represent, but who repeatedly warned that, if people like this should come to power, it would be relatively easy for them to overturn socialism and rig up the capitalist system.

The reasons why this is so are at the heart of why the first communist revolutions and socialist states have met not with “failure” but with *defeat*—at the hands of forces that as yet remain extremely powerful in what is still the very early stages of the world-historical struggle to advance from the epoch of capitalist world domination to the era of world communism. The fundamental causes of this reversal are not in

any way “theological” but very material and grounded in basic contradictions marking this world in this historical period. To say that this has happened because of inherent flaws in communism is even farther from the truth than saying that the reason Christianity is not the dominant religion in Turkey today is because of some fundamental defect of Christian theology, rather than because of very earthly events, including the Crusades. Or, on the other hand, saying that the reason Christianity, and not the ancient Aztec religion, is the dominant religion in Mexico is because of the inherent theological superiority of the former over the latter, rather than because of the acts of Cortez and the Conquistadores and of the colonialist conquerors who followed them. (Or saying that the reason Christianity, and not various African religions, is the dominant religion among African-Americans is not because they were kidnapped and transported as slaves to America and had Christianity forced on them by their slavemasters, but rather because Christianity is a far better religion than Africa-based faiths.)

The point is that the experience of communist revolution and socialist society—as summed up in Mao’s pathbreaking analysis—has shown that, with the overthrow of the old order, particularly when this occurs in one or a few countries that remain encircled by imperialist powers and the states that make up their “spheres of influence,” the masses of people and their revolutionary leadership must simultaneously deal with the complex and difficult tasks of undertaking the socialist transformation of society and, in accordance with this, unleashing the productive forces of society, while at the same time defending the revolution and its gains from enemies, both “home-grown” and international, and supporting the revolutionary struggle of oppressed people throughout the world.

In this struggle, it is necessary to correctly deal with the conditions and contradictions left over from the old society—such as the great division between mental and manual labor and other major social contradictions, including those between men and women and between different nationalities—and with the reflection of these contradictions in the political and ideological superstructure of society (the political institutions and the cultural forms as well as the customs and ways of thinking that have acquired the “force of habit” in society). It is necessary to continually move toward fully overcoming and finally eradicating the inequalities that are rooted in these contradictions while

making use of all positive factors to build socialism and carry forward the revolutionary transformation of society and the world as a whole.

And Maoist summation of this experience has also shown how in carrying forward this struggle, it is necessary to combat and defeat the relentless resistance and outright aggression of not only the overthrown exploiters from the old society, and not only the forces of international imperialism, but also new-born exploiters, including especially within the top ranks of the communist leadership itself, who are nurtured in the very soil of these contradictions “bequeathed” to socialist society by the old order. Given all this, what is truly remarkable is not that the first attempts at carrying forward the communist revolution, after the overthrow of the old order, have met with defeat, but that the masses of people who have been unleashed through this revolution accomplished such truly world-shaking advances in transforming society and the world, in the face of such powerful and murderous opposition, in these first rounds of the battle for the communist future.

Communists, who have led these (and many other) revolutionary struggles, are hardly unaware of the horrendous acts that human beings are capable of carrying out under certain circumstances. After all, in these struggles the communists, together with the revolutionary masses, have received the terrible brunt of the devastation and slaughter carried out by some of the most monstrous oppressors in human history—including the Japanese imperialists who occupied China, the Nazi imperialists who invaded the Soviet Union, and the U.S. imperialists who have attempted to impose their “American Century” (or, now, “New World Order”) on people all over the globe, with the most barbaric destruction and atrocity.

But, unlike Wallis, communists grasp the profound truth that these acts are not the product of some innate propensity for evil that “resides...in the human heart”—some unchanging and unchangeable defect in “human nature.” They are the extension of underlying economic and social relations and, in this epoch, are the result of the extreme compulsion to which the dynamics of capitalist accumulation and competition drive the ruling classes of the capitalist world, who after all control not only the economic lifelines but also the political structures, the instruments of cultural and ideological influence, and the military apparatuses and arsenals of mass destruction of the capitalist-imperialist order.

In China, for example, the communists, together with the masses of people, not only witnessed and were subjected to the atrocities committed by the Japanese occupiers; they also were forced to live in a society (under the domination of U.S. and British as well as Japanese and other imperialisms) where peasants were so desperately poor that they stayed up all night to prevent their neighbors, or others, from raiding and stealing any meager fields and few crops they had; where baby girls were commonly killed at birth because they were considered less valuable than boys and too much of a burden on the family, and children often were sold into slavery or prostitution in a desperate attempt to keep alive others in the family. But, through the leadership of communists, these same masses of poor people were able to rise up and abolish these things and to carry out even more far-reaching social transformations through cooperative effort and revolutionary struggle (although now, under revisionist rule, the old relations and old horrors, including female infanticide, have re-emerged).

Wallis' charge that communists have demonstrated “a horrible willingness to sacrifice countless human lives on the altar of ideological necessity” is as wrongheaded and upside-down as the rest of his analysis of communism. For example, does Wallis regard the need to prepare for and then wage a war of resistance against the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union—carried out with an unbridled atrocity and destructiveness not unleashed by Hitler in his campaigns in the West—as some kind of abstract “ideological necessity,” or was this a very real and momentous *practical* necessity? And, notwithstanding that a number of serious errors were made by Stalin in leading this war of resistance, as in other aspects of building and defending the Soviet Union, communist ideology was a decisive motivating factor in enabling the Soviet people to wage, and ultimately to win, this war under almost unimaginable conditions of deprivation and degradation at the hands of the Nazis.

As for sacrificing lives, the most outstanding feature of this war and of revolutionary wars and struggles generally that are led by communists—is the *self-sacrificing* spirit and practice of communism, whose lives have been given in the tens, perhaps hundreds, of millions out of ideological conviction—a conviction representing the determination to overthrow and abolish the conditions and the causes of exploitation, oppression, agony, and torment to which the masses of

people throughout the world have been subjected by the very traditional property relations and traditional ideas with which Wallis has, so far at least, been unable to rupture.

Wallis insists that, for communists, ideology has “supplanted ethics,” and that communists have “violated ethics out of ideological necessity.” (pp. 25, 27) He thinks there can be, and is, some transcendental universal ethics that is above and independent of ideology. (“Is it not time to stop arguing ideology and begin to speak in terms of what is wrong and right?” p. 29.) But it is not the case that communists “supplant” ethics with ideology—communist ethics and morals *are an expression* of communist ideology, just as other moral and ethical values are expressions of *some other* ideology. Wallis does not grasp the essential truth that all ethics and morals are an expression of one ideology or another—and in class society *all* ethics and morals are an expression of the ideology of *one class or another*.

As Mao pointed out, in class society everyone lives as a member of one class or another, and every way of thinking, without exception, represents one class viewpoint or another. After all, does not the viewpoint expressed in the book of Isaiah represent very definite class interests? Does not the viewpoint expressed in the *Bible*, taken as a whole, also represent very definite class interests—is it not the extension of very definite social relations in a certain historical era? Does this not explain why “The Lord” of Isaiah can trumpet forth that he will lay waste to Israel’s enemies, turn Israel’s oppressors into Israel’s slaves, and in the process cause babies to be battered to death and women to be raped? (Leaving aside the fact that communists do not claim to be god, has Wallis or anyone else ever heard a communist advocate or uphold such despicable, truly monstrous acts, as “the Lord” of Isaiah and the *Bible* proclaim?)

Is not the idea that it is right and just for people to accumulate private property and wealth through the employment of others as wage workers—a right upheld and protected in the U.S. Constitution and its application throughout history (leaving aside its initial enshrinement of the “right” of owning slaves)—is this “ethic” not an expression of a definite class viewpoint? And, when people advocate the reconciliation of antagonistically opposed interests and class positions (reconciliation with liberty and justice for all), is this itself not the expression of the viewpoint of a class—and specifically that class, the petty bourgeoisie,

which finds itself caught between the two major contending classes in the present-day world and which hopes to avoid the all-out collision between these contending forces, even at the cost of maintaining the existing order with its ruthless oppression of the broad masses, literally billions of people, on the bottom of this world?

As Mao also pointed out, many in the petty bourgeoisie call for such things as “universal love for mankind,” independent and irrespective of class and social position, but in fact no one is capable of carrying out this principle in practice in a society divided into classes. If you really practice love for the exploiting classes, you cannot truly put into practice love for those they exploit and oppress. In the end, everyone must, and everyone will, choose to side with one or the other. Class divisions and social antagonisms cannot simply be wished away or fundamentally mitigated, they cannot be overcome through the adoption of non-antagonistic *attitudes* and the ethic of reconciliation—they will continue to assert themselves and exert their influence on ideas and morals. They must be abolished in the real world, in their material existence. They must be overthrown and uprooted through revolutionary struggle, and the morals and ideas that must lead the way in doing this are precisely those of communist ideology—the ideology of the revolutionary proletariat, whose historical role is to eliminate all class distinctions and their social and ideological expressions, in the real world and throughout the world.

A great irony that people like Wallis are caught up in is that their class outlook and bias prevents them from recognizing that it is precisely and only in socialist society and with the guidance of communist ideology that there can really be a “priority of the poor.” This was the case in the Soviet Union, not only under the leadership of Lenin but also, in its principal aspect, under Stalin. Tremendous advances were made not only in overcoming the miserable conditions of the workers and peasants in the Soviet Union but in overcoming the oppressive and degrading social relations that were the cause of the material suffering as well as the “spiritual anguish” of these masses. And this was accomplished not through so-called “top-down social engineering,” but through mass upheaval and the more and more conscious uprising of the masses on the bottom, breaking through the material and ideological fetters that had enslaved them and, yes, knocking down and holding down those social classes and forces that had thrived on—and

were determined to restore—those material and ideological fetters.

And this found realization on an even higher level through the Chinese revolution and in socialist China, above all in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Here was truly a society where everything—from health care, to the educational system, to the overall development of the economy as well as the development of political institutions and cultural and ideological expressions—was oriented to put first the needs of the masses of poor people, in particular the peasants in the vast countryside who made up (and still make up) the great majority of Chinese society.

Once again, the irony is that, in the absence of the revolutionary overthrow of the old order and the revolutionary transformation of society led by the communists, attempts to serve the needs of the poor can at most take place in isolated pockets of society. They can never be the prevailing “ethic” or practice of society, and they will always be hemmed in, suffocated, and subverted by the larger, dominant relations and priorities that rule society, as indeed is the case in countries like the U.S. today.

But more than that—and this is where the challenge to Wallis’ vision is sharply posed—the aim of the Cultural Revolution and the overall communist revolution in China was not simply to make “the priority of the poor” the ruling principle in society, but to advance to the point, in China and worldwide, where there were *no more poor* people, where the division between rich and poor and all conditions of poverty had been completely eliminated and surpassed. The fact that, in China as well as in the Soviet Union, this historic advance has been temporarily halted and reversed, and that for the time being there is no country where making such an historic advance is the guiding principle and practice, is understandably a source of comfort and (false) hope for the representatives of the old exploiting order. But it can bring no joy to anyone who truly seeks to speak and act on behalf of the poor, in their highest interests. It can only be positive as a source of crucial, if painful, lessons that will make possible an even more thorough and powerful revolutionary struggle to overcome all obstacles to the realization of those highest interests.

The communist viewpoint that corresponds to, and is necessary for, such a revolutionary transformation is radically different from that

of the “prophetic vision” and its view of the poor that Wallis advocates. In the end (and this is expressed most clearly toward the end of *The Soul of Politics*), the view of the masses of poor people that comes through from Wallis reduces itself to the uninspiring and, frankly, condescending notion of the dignity of the poor and oppressed in their long suffering. Under the heading of “Contemplation, The Inward Journey,” Wallis tells of visiting a slave cemetery and of how:

“I often just sit for a while with these children of God who knew so much sorrow and pain and yet were brought closer to their Creator than most of us ever get.

“They waited all their lives for deliverance and it never came. But in their waiting and hoping, they discovered a presence and a power never understood by their oppressors... .

“The slaves knew powerlessness, and out of it they found the power beyond themselves... .

“What the slaves have left us is the fruit of redemptive suffering and the ultimate power of powerlessness.” (pp.199-200)

It is almost embarrassing, but it is far more infuriating, to read this. The slaves Wallis pictures are hardly the slaves who waged more than 200 recorded revolts and uprisings; who found ways, daily and continually, to resist their slavemasters; who were never content to passively wait for deliverance; and who, when given the opportunity in the Civil War, eagerly joined in the war against the slavowners, volunteering in the hundreds of thousands, fighting with incredible courage on the front lines, despite discrimination right within the Union army, and sacrificing their lives at a far greater rate than the white soldiers in that Army (as captured to a considerable extent in the movie *Glory*).

The last thing the slaves needed—and the last thing that is needed by their descendants today and by enslaved and oppressed people everywhere—is some supposed “redemptive suffering” and “the ultimate power of powerlessness.” On the contrary, what they need is an end to the suffering imposed on them and, to make that possible, they need “the ultimate power”...of *power*.

They need to become conscious of and organized around their revolutionary interests and potential, in order to seize political power

over society from their oppressors, to use that power to prevent their oppressors from rising again to the ruling position, and beyond that to eliminate the basis for society to be divided into oppressors and oppressed. And to make this possible, they need to take up as their own the one ideology that corresponds to this historic goal and that illuminates the way to achieving it: communist ideology.

In contrast to the patronizing view of the masses that, unfortunately, is the ultimate expression of Wallis' vision, the communist view of the masses and their role in transforming this world—and in finally eliminating the need for belief in some other world—is expressed, in a typically succinct and powerful way, by Mao, who said that the masses are the motive force in the making of world history and that the masses have a potentially inexhaustible enthusiasm for socialism.

Mao insisted that in order to lead the masses, it is necessary to first learn from them, but he also made clear that this did not simply mean tailing after the masses. Mao understood well the profound point that Lenin emphasized: On the one hand, there is a great deal of wisdom among the masses, grounded in their experience of oppression and their resistance to that oppression; but, at the same time, being forced to live under an exploitative system, ensnared in its oppressive relations and institutions and subjected to its distorting and obfuscating ideology, the masses' "spontaneous" ideas are bound to be heavily influenced and largely conditioned by the viewpoint of the dominant class (in modern society, the bourgeois ruling class).

To deal correctly with this contradiction, Mao formulated the communist principle known as the "mass line." Mao summarized this as "from the masses, to the masses," and he explained the process involved this way: "Take the ideas of the masses and, by applying the scientific viewpoint and method of communism, concentrate what is correct in these ideas—what correctly reflects objective reality and corresponds to the most fundamental interests of the masses—developing on this basis lines and policies that can lead forward the struggle of the masses toward their own emancipation; and then unite with the masses and persevere together with them to carry out these lines and policies. And Mao pointed out that this is a continual process, a never-ending spiral, which must run through all revolutionary work from beginning to end.

Mao also emphasized another very important principle, drawn from historical experience: First the masses fight back and seek a way out of their oppression, and then they search for philosophy. Mao recognized the tremendous importance of ideas, above all correct ideas, in the revolutionary struggle and in human historical development generally. He gave prominence to the communist understanding that ideas can be transformed into matter and matter into ideas; that correct ideas, which have their ultimate point of origin and of verification in the material world, can become a tremendous force for transforming the material world as they are grasped and acted upon by masses of people. But a fundamental element of this understanding is the recognition that in the relation between changing circumstances and changing people (as Marx once expressed it), changing circumstances is overall basic and decisive.

In other words, the masses of people will not be able to fundamentally change their way of seeing the world and their basic motivations except as they take up the struggle to resist and finally overthrow their oppressors and transform the social conditions and relations that ultimately shape their being and their consciousness.

Preaching to the masses about "morals" and "personal responsibility" cannot lead to a positive change—one that is in the interests of the masses—in the absence of such a struggle and ultimately such a transformation of society. (As I pointed out in my critique of William Bennett's "Virtues," the very "choices" that different people are presented with in life are shaped by the position they occupy in the underlying economic, social, and political relations that predominate in society and the world. This is why, for example, poor people in the ghettos and barrios face the "choice" of selling drugs or very likely remaining poor. And why poor peasants in Thailand face the "choice" of having their families starve or selling their children into brothels or into sweatshop slave labor—choices that representatives of the U.S. imperialist ruling class, such as William Bennett, do not have to make for themselves and their families.)

On the other hand, in the context of a revolutionary struggle and ultimately a revolutionary transformation of society and the world, there is a tremendously positive and powerful role to be played by morals and ideology generally, *provided* that those morals and ideology correctly reflect objective reality, in its motion and development, and

correspond to the fundamental interests of the masses in transforming that objective reality.

The yearning for a transcendental, universal morality is acutely felt in contemporary society. To a large degree, this is because of the fact that the world is undergoing a major transition, which is often accompanied by ideological crisis.

In the U.S. there is a widespread feeling that there is a "moral drift" and "moral decay," and this is linked with certain important aspects of this transition, including the increasing participation of women, from broad strata, in the work force and the impact of this on traditional male-female and family relations, as well as significant developments in terms of immigration to the U.S. and the effect of this on the demographics of U.S. society, along with the displacement of large numbers of unskilled workers, particularly among Black people and others in the inner cities, and the threat of such displacement among broader numbers of people. All this has interacted with the phenomenon of "unresolved questions," particularly in the sphere of culture and ideology, including morality, which arose in relation to "the '60s" and have been carried forward and have remained unresolved since that time.

It must be recognized that the "pull" of "traditional morality"—presenting itself as transcendental morality and feeding off the force of habit and convention—has increased among a number of strata in more or less direct relation to the actual defeats suffered by communist revolution over the past several decades, the widely proclaimed "death of communism" in recent times, and the ideological confusion created and spread in relation to all this.

On the other hand, not only are changes in the U.S. and the world economy undermining important aspects of the material basis of "traditional morality," but even the "death of communism" and the "end of the cold war," which has been accompanied by a "streamlining" of the U.S. military, has added to the sense of "uneasiness" and "uncertainty" in the U.S. and has had an important aspect of splintering or "diffusing" the "cohesiveness" of the dominant ideological conventions. This has had a contradictory effect in relation to "traditional morality"—in some aspects actually reinforcing, while in other aspects undermining, it.

In the U.S. today, this has resulted in acutely felt conflicts involving "traditional morality," revolving around the fact that the ruling

class has the need to aggressively reassert this "traditional morality," even though it is more and more sharply in conflict with the direction society needs to take in order to resolve its deeply rooted problems. (On the other hand, the basis has not yet emerged for a fundamentally different morality to defeat and supersede this "traditional morality" in society as a whole. This contradiction will remain, and will continue to be acutely felt for some time, unless it is resolved either in a thoroughly reactionary direction, through some kind of fascistic imposition of "traditional morality" from the top in an all-encompassing sense, or in a really and fully revolutionary direction, through an overturning coming from the bottom and carrying with it broad layers of society to topple the existing order and undertake the creation of a radically new society with a radically different morality. Thus the role of communist morality and the battle between this morality and "traditional morality," in whatever expression, is and will continue to be a crucial question, a crucial arena of confrontation and struggle.

In this light, it is important to address the questions: What is the basis and role of communist morality, if there is not and cannot be any transcendental, universal ideology? In what is communist ideology founded, and how does it speak to major questions and contradictions that mark contemporary society? And how does communist morality speak to the questions of "good and evil" and of regulating human affairs without reference to a supreme being presiding over human existence?

The basis for communist morality is contained, in a concentrated way, in what Maoists refer to as the "4 Alls." This is drawn from the summary by Marx of what the communist revolution aims for and leads to: the abolition of all class distinctions (or "class distinctions generally"); the abolition of all the relations of production on which these class distinctions rest; the abolition of all the social relations that correspond to these relations of production; and the revolutionizing of all the ideas that result from these social relations. (See *The Class Struggles in France, 1848 to 1850*.) This provides the basic principle underlying communist morality and the basic standard for determining what is and what is not in accordance with communist morality: Whatever conforms to and contributes to these "4 Alls" is consistent with communist morality; whatever does not is opposed to, and opposed by, communist morality.



This, of course, does not mean that whenever someone claims to be a communist, and says that anything she or he does is in pursuit of these "4 Alls," then that automatically makes their actions an expression of communist morality. It does not mean that "anything goes" so long as it is presented as an expression of "communist morality" and a part of achieving communist aims. While the "4 Alls" sets the general standard for communist morality, how that must be applied in different circumstances is a matter of concrete analysis and application—as indeed it is with all morality (which is why, for example, there is such continual dispute among those who uphold the *Bible* and "traditional morality" about just what it means and how it should be applied in different situations).

One of the main accusations from those who oppose communism is that communists believe "the ends justify the means"—that anything is permissible so long as it can be said to be helping to move things toward the attainment of communism, eventually. This is not only untrue, it is an inversion of the truth. It is a principle of communism that the means must be *consistent with* and must flow from the ends (or aims). It is often necessary, and desirable, for communists to struggle for goals that are short of the final aim represented by the "4 Alls"—since this can contribute to the ultimate achievement of those "4 Alls"—but it is never acceptable for communists to uphold or fight for things, or to use means and methods, that are in *basic opposition* to that final aim. Communism demands the most determined and daring search for the truth, even if that truth should make one uncomfortable in the short run, because the more one grasps the truth—the more one has a correct and as comprehensive as possible an understanding of objective reality—the more possible it is to transform objective reality in a direction that best serves the interests of humanity.

In fact, it is the bourgeois exploiters who uphold and apply the notion that "the ends justify the means." This is particularly evident with the U.S. ruling class, whose "American pragmatism" makes a philosophical principle out of denying the existence of truth apart from its practical usefulness—and in particular its usefulness in effecting and defending the worldwide exploitation and plunder carried out by this class. It is precisely with such a philosophy, in the service of such exploitation and plunder, that means and ends become tautologically equated: Whatever strengthens the position of this ruling class and its

ability to enforce its oppressive rule, whatever enhances its "bottom line" of capital accumulation, is by definition true, good, justified, and virtuous, and there is no truth, goodness, justice, or virtue outside of (or opposed to) this. ("Beauty is truth, truth beauty—that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know," the poet Keats once, mistakenly, wrote. The pragmatic morality of the U.S. ruling class produces a perverse twist on this which could be rendered as follows: "We are truth and goodness, truth and goodness are us—that is all you need to know on earth.") If such people search for and then reveal the truth in anything, this is never as a matter of *principle* but is merely coincidence—a matter of their believing that, in this instance, such truth is useful to them and their ends.

This pragmatic outlook is the essential reason why representatives of the U.S. ruling class—including those who are themselves, privately, atheists or agnostics—incessantly insist upon "traditional morality" and promote the *Bible* and religion. They understand that this is useful, indeed very important, for them ideologically and politically, in reinforcing their rule and perpetuating their system. (When was the last time an American President did *not* end a speech with something like "God Bless You, and God Bless the United States of America"?)

Here one is reminded of the scene in *Spartacus* where two members of the Roman ruling class are talking and one asks the other, "Don't you believe in the gods?"—to which the reply is: "Privately I believe in none of them, publicly I believe in them all." What is expressed here is the same understanding that Napoleon (himself a skeptic, personally, when it came to religion) enunciated, setting forth a principle that has been found useful by exploiting classes throughout history: "Society [Napoleon declared] is impossible without inequality; inequality [is] intolerable without a code of morality; and a code of morality is unacceptable without religion."

In direct opposition to all this, communism is based on the understanding that humanity has reached the point where inequality is no longer necessary or tolerable; that it is impossible for human society to advance further without abolishing all social inequality; and that the accomplishment of this historic goal requires a radically new "code of morality"—communist morality—which gives expression to and serves the struggle to abolish all social inequality and oppression. In accordance with these principles, communism rejects pragmatic

rationalization and the notion that “the ends justify the means.” It demands that, in the struggle for the final aim represented by the “4 Alls,” the aims and methods, the ends and means, that are adopted at every point along the way toward that final aim must be in *fundamental unity* with that final aim.

This is not to say that everyone claiming to be a communist has always adhered to this principle—or to deny that genuine communists have fallen into pragmatism and other erroneous tendencies at various times. But the point is that this principle—concerning the fundamental unity of communist ends and communist means at every point in the revolutionary struggle—provides a standard for waging and leading that struggle and for distinguishing genuine communism from phony communism and other principles and practices that are opposed to the fundamental interests of the great majority of humanity.

Beyond the recognition of this basic principle, and of its central importance, it is possible and necessary here (without attempting to dissect different particular situations) to discuss how this principle applies to major social questions in today’s world. Take the question of politics and political power—how should society be governed and by whom? Another of the main accusations against communists is that they believe in and practice dictatorship. This is true—communists openly declare that their immediate political aim in overthrowing the capitalist system is to establish a dictatorship—but precisely the dictatorship of the proletariat: the rule over society by the (formerly) exploited class and masses of oppressed people and the repression of the overthrown exploiting class as well as newborn exploiters and oppressors.

This dictatorship differs from other forms of political power—of the state—in two essential ways. First, it represents, for the first time in history, the rule of the (formerly) exploited over the exploiters, and it is carried out in the interests of the masses of people. Second, and most essentially, the aim of this proletarian state is not to perpetuate the status quo but to continue to revolutionize it, with the final aim of abolishing all exploitation and oppression and all class distinctions (achieving the “4 Alls”), and together with that abolishing the need for any form of the state, for any form of government through which one group in society dominates others. But this proletarian state does *not* differ from previous states by being a dictatorship. Dictatorship is the *essential character* of *all* states—whether they acknowledge

it or not—including the bourgeois “democratic” state that exists in the U.S. today.

In the U.S., as in all societies divided into classes, one class has a dominant position in the economy—it controls the forces of production, including not only land, machinery, and so on, but the working people as well. And on this basis it controls the political institutions and structures, as well as dominating in the realm of culture and ideology. As a concentrated expression of this, it has a monopoly on armed force, which it uses to impose its rule and to suppress those who pose a fundamental threat to that rule. This is dictatorship, regardless of whether or not those dictated to are allowed to vote on which group of politicians shall administer this dictatorship on behalf of that dominant class.

From the standpoint of communist principles and morality, the dictatorship of the proletariat is necessary and good, while the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie is the direct impediment to the emancipation of the masses of people and to the advance of humanity, and is in that sense “evil.”

Communists recognize the need for and fight for equality between different nations and between men and women, but *not* between classes. There cannot be equality between classes, because one class or another must rule and organize society in accordance with its fundamental interests, and only through the rule of the proletariat can all class divisions be finally overcome. Here is another illustration of why there cannot be a transcendental morality that is applied for all time and to all equally, without regard to class distinctions. Just as “love for all humanity” (without regard to class distinction) cannot actually be put into practice in a class-divided society, neither can such things as the “golden rule.” If the proletariat fails to “do unto” the bourgeoisie things it does *not* want the bourgeoisie to “do unto” it—if the proletariat does not overthrow the bourgeoisie and then exercise dictatorship over it—then the result, in the real world, can only be that the bourgeoisie will exercise dictatorship over the proletariat and exploit the masses of people; and class distinctions, oppressive division of labor, and social antagonisms will not be abolished.

But, again, it is not a matter of a ruling class (or its political leadership) *simply saying* that it represents the dictatorship of the proletariat

and is ruling in the interests of the masses of people—this must be true *in fact*, it must be realized in practice. The organs of political power, and indeed all parts of the political and ideological superstructure of society, must be characterized by the increasing and increasingly class-conscious participation of the broad masses of people, breaking down the division between mental and manual labor and other major social divisions, and moving toward the achievement of the “4 Alls” in unity with the revolutionary struggle of the proletarians and oppressed masses throughout the world. Here, again, is the principle of the fundamental unity between the final aim of communism and the ends and means at every stage along the way toward that final aim.

This is what was represented by the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China—an unprecedented “revolution within the revolution” waged by hundreds of millions of people against conditions, relations, customs, habits, and ways of thinking that acted as fetters on the masses’ ability to rule and transform society, and against the social and political forces that upheld those fetters.

While this Cultural Revolution was led by Mao and his revolutionary comrades in the Communist Party, it was—as Mao himself emphasized—a gigantic uprising *from below*, and one of its most important aims and achievements was to expose the negative aspects of the Party and to further revolutionize the Party as a crucial part of carrying forward the revolutionization of society as a whole. All this is precisely why the Cultural Revolution—and Mao’s role—have been so grotesquely distorted and heaped with such abuse and slander by those reactionary social and political forces who were its target, from Deng Xiaoping to the ruling classes of the United States and the rest of the imperialist world.

Taking a more particular political question that is posing itself very sharply these days in the U.S.: How do communist principles and communist morality apply to the death penalty—executions carried out by the state? As with the question of political power generally, communists do not evaluate this abstractly, but in terms of the rule of one class or another and fundamentally in relation to the achievement of the “4 Alls.”

Communists oppose the use of the death penalty by the bourgeois state because this will be used overwhelmingly against people from the

oppressed masses and will be wielded to reinforce the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, fortifying its repressive apparatus and forging a more repressive political atmosphere which, again, will be overwhelmingly directed against the oppressed masses and those who oppose the status quo. This finds concentrated expression where the bourgeois state seeks to execute political and especially revolutionary opponents of its rule.

On the other hand, communists recognize that, under the dictatorship of the proletariat, the execution of some people—and in particular those representatives of the old order who have committed outrageous crimes against the people—is positive because it is a necessary part of enabling the masses of people to fully raise their heads, to smash the old state machinery, and establish and develop their own forms and organs of political power, and to carry forward the revolutionary transformation of society. This is especially so in the early stages of the new society, when the proletarian state is just being consolidated and the old bourgeois state machinery—which has held the masses down for so long through intimidation and terror—is being thoroughly shattered and dismantled. This differing stand toward the carrying out of the death penalty in two radically different kinds of societies—under the rule of fundamentally opposed classes—represents a consistent application of communist principles, of communist ethics and morality.

And, more generally, communist principles and morality do not lead to opposition to violence and war in general. Rather, communists oppose *reactionary* violence and war—which in this era is defined by the fact that it flows from and has the effect of serving imperialist domination, bourgeois dictatorship, and the all-around exploitation and oppression that is the essence of this system.

One of the most striking, and sickening, features of the much ballyhooed discussion among the “mainstream” politicians and media in the U.S. over the question of violence and the cause of its frequent eruption in the U.S., is the fact that there is seemingly endless debate about whether rap music and movies, or the ownership by individuals of assault rifles, is the problem, while the role of the U.S. armed forces in carrying out almost untold carnage with weapons of mass destruction—and the speeches of presidents, military officials, and other representatives of the ruling class justifying and glorifying this carnage and destruction—is somehow overlooked in these “debates” about

what promotes violence in America! Who, more than these instruments and mouthpieces of the ruling class, is really “teaching our youth that the way to resolve problems is through violence”—and *reactionary* violence at that?

What does it mean when these bourgeois political hacks rush to express their horror at what happened in Oklahoma City (the horror is very real, but the expression of horror by these politicians, et. al., involves the height of hypocrisy) when these same politicians and media “talking heads” supported, and helped “sell” to the American people, bombings of Iraq by the U.S. armed forces, which caused destruction and the death of people, above all of *children*, on a scale at least a *thousand times greater* than in Oklahoma City?!

In opposition to all this, communists support *revolutionary* violence and war—which flows from and serves the struggle to overcome and ultimately eliminate imperialist domination, bourgeois dictatorship and capitalist (and all other) exploitation and oppression, and to finally achieve the “4 Alls.”

At the same time, communists oppose the carrying out of acts of revenge and of violence which run contrary to the achievement of the “4 Alls,” even if those acts are carried out against members of the ruling and exploiting classes. This calls to mind another scene from *Spartacus*: At a certain point, after Spartacus and other gladiator-slaves have broken free, they return to the site of their former enslavement, and a number of them begin to drag their former owners and overseers into the arena, forcing *them* to engage in a “battle to the death.” But Spartacus, their leader, steps in and puts a stop to this—not out of sympathy for the oppressors but because of the effect this is having on his comrades. Spartacus has no problem understanding that the acts of violence by himself and other slaves, in their initial uprising and the battles they have carried out against the Roman armies, are necessary, and liberating, but this “battle to the death” in the arena does not serve but undermines that liberation—it *does* degrade the liberated slaves themselves.

(The principle involved here applies not only to decisive questions like the emancipation of slaves and the liberation of women and of oppressed nations but also to such things as the question of so-called “animal rights” that has become something of a phenomenon, particu-

larly among the more privileged strata in bourgeois society. While the concept of “animal rights” has no real foundation, since “rights” are a phenomenon of *human social organization* and have no meaning outside of the social relations of human beings [animals other than human beings do not consider the question of “animal rights!”], there is a question of the effect, precisely on human beings and human society, of the way animals—and, for that matter, plant life and the environment as a whole—are treated by people.

Like all other species, human beings always have and always will—they cannot help but—approach everything from the vantage point of their species; but precisely from this vantage point, the infliction of suffering on animals, or the destruction of plant life, which is not motivated by and does not serve the overcoming of suffering among human beings and the advance of human society overall, but instead is simply the expression of the desire to demonstrate cruelty or exercise power or is dedicated to no higher purpose than such things as luxury consumption for the parasitic and self-indulgent privileged strata—all this is degrading of humanity and should therefore be opposed.)

Communist morality is also opposed to the use of drugs and alcohol in a way that results in the physical and ideological degradation of the people, and to violence and brutality as well as such things as robbery and theft in which the oppressed masses victimize each other, because all this can only strengthen the hand of the oppressor and divide and demoralize the masses, making it more difficult for them to recognize their real interests and unite to fight for them. At the same time, communists never fail to condemn and expose the system—its social relations and institutions and its ideology—as the root cause of these contradictions and antagonisms among the people. And communists consistently oppose the attempts of the ruling class—which has carried out robbery, slaughter, and destruction, including the use of nuclear weapons, on a massive scale and a continual basis, in the service of its reactionary interests—to use acts of violence and crime among the people as an excuse and a vehicle for strengthening their repressive rule over the people, which is already carried out in a most violent and degrading manner.

At all times, it is necessary to draw a firm distinction between the people and the enemy—based on determining which class represents the social conditions, relations, institutions, and ideas that must be

swept aside, which class on the other hand represents those which must be brought to the dominant position, and which classes and groups must be won over, in order to make the next great leap in achieving the liberation of the masses of people and ultimately achieving the "4 Alls." The strategic objective must be to unite all who can be united against the actual enemy. And, even in dealing with the enemy, it is necessary to act in accordance with the fundamental interests of the people, and to be guided by the communist principles and morality that represent the highest expression of those fundamental interests.

For example, such things as rape can never be condoned and must not be tolerated in any circumstance and regardless of what class the victim belongs to or what they have done. In the course of the revolution, it will be necessary for the masses to mete out revolutionary justice to those who have accumulated blood debts through their crimes against the people. But meting out revolutionary justice must never include rape, because rape itself is a brutal, concentrated expression of the oppression and degradation of women and can only contribute to strengthening that oppression, and oppression in general.

Similarly, racist attacks on people of color can never be condoned and must not be tolerated—even if they are directed against individuals who have served as major functionaries of the bourgeois state and have committed crimes against the people—because such racist attacks themselves would only embody and extend the whole history of atrocities, including lynchings and other wanton and barbaric murders, that Black people, and other oppressed peoples, have been subjected to throughout the entire history of their experience in the U.S., under the rule of slavemasters and of capitalists. Again, it is one thing for the masses to mete out revolutionary justice to those, of whatever race or nationality, who have committed crimes against the people, but racist attacks could never be part of such revolutionary justice—they could only strengthen the hand of the exploiters and contribute to the all-around oppression they represent.

Communist principles include, as decisive aspects, the goal of overcoming all inequality between men and women and between different peoples and nations. The communist viewpoint and methodology makes clear that the oppression of women is inextricably bound up with the division of society into classes and all the exploitation and oppression that has accompanied this for thousands of years, and

that the abolition of this exploitation and oppression and of class distinctions themselves is inextricably bound up with the emancipation of women. In other words, the emancipation of women is a vital part of the "4 Alls," and all aspects of sexual and family relations must be evaluated essentially in terms of how they relate to this emancipation. Communist morality supports those things that advance the fight for that emancipation and opposes everything that debases women and reinforces their oppression in any way—including both "end of the empire" sexual decadence and "traditional morality," the degradation of pornography and the degradation of the *Bible*.

Similarly, while the ultimate achievement of communism will mean that not only hostility between nations but even the separation of humanity into different nations will have been overcome and replaced by the cooperative association of people throughout the world, this can only come about through a determined struggle to achieve equality between nations as a crucial part of the transition to communism. And, in turn, the achievement of equality between nations means, in its most concentrated and decisive aspect, the right of self-determination of oppressed nations, and in particular the liberation of the great majority of the world's nations, throughout the Third World, which are still subjected to all-around imperialist domination.

Communist morality opposes those things that uphold imperialist domination and inequality between nations—including discrimination against the languages and cultures of oppressed nations and minority nationalities and all chauvinist notions of the superiority of one people or nation over others. And communist morality supports those things that foster unity between the masses of people of all nationalities, on the basis of the fight for equality between nations, the right of self-determination, and the liberation of oppressed nations.

Both the examination of particular social questions and the discussion of general principles illustrate that communist morality does have both a definite basis and concrete application in the world in this era. As Engels explained, for the first time in history, the development of human society—with its foundation in the material forces of production—has reached the point where, for humanity as a whole (as opposed to relatively small and isolated groups of people in previous epochs), there is the basis for people to relate to each other, and to meet their material and cultural needs, on an increasingly ascending

level without the division of society into different classes and without oppression and social antagonism. And that is not all: Engels went further to show that not only is the division of society into classes and the monopolization of wealth and power and of intellectual life by a small handful no longer necessary, but such division and monopolization has now become “economically, politically, intellectually, a *hindrance* to development.” (*Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, emphasis added)

Thus, while communist morality—like all other morality—is not transcendental, in the sense of being independent of any historical and social basis and being applicable in any era, it *does* have the quality of universality precisely for this era: it corresponds to the leap that humanity must make in this era and to the means for making that leap. Communist ideology is not, as its opponents often claim, a “new religion” (although it has at times been degraded into something like that by revisionists, and into something like a “state religion” by revisionists who have risen to power). On the contrary, it is based on a scientific approach to understanding the actual forces operating in nature and in society. It points the way to an historic advance in humanity’s ability to understand and to transform these natural and social forces, and it provides a real and firm grounding for principles and morality that correspond to the great leap that humanity has already begun to make.

Communists, Mao said, should have largeness of mind; they should be bold and resolute in fighting for revolution and should put the revolution above everything else in their lives, subordinating personal interests to the revolutionary interests of the masses; they should consistently “adhere to principle and wage a tireless struggle against all incorrect ideas and actions, so as to consolidate the collective life of the Party and strengthen the ties between the Party and the masses”; and they should be more concerned about the Party and the masses than about any particular individual and more concerned about others than about themselves. (See “Combat Liberalism.”) This encapsulates the essence of communist morality in the historic era of transition from the bourgeois epoch to the epoch of world communism, of radical rupture with tradition’s chains, both material and ideological.

Communism answers the question—can we be good without god?—with a “yes.” This question was the title of a major article in *The Atlantic* (December 1989), and it is a question that is frequently posed, and harped on, in contemporary society. In that article by

Glenn Tinder and more generally in the posing of this question, the widely proclaimed “death of communism” figures prominently. This signals, in a kind of ironic and back-handed way, a recognition of the fact that communism has represented—and in reality continues to represent—the one hope of bringing about a (real) world where human beings are not mired in dog-eat-dog conditions and the corresponding mentality, where relations between them are not based on domination, plunder, and violence.

The answer to this question is on two levels. First, we *have to* be good without god, if we are going to be good at all, for the simple reason that there *is no* god. And second, the essential meaning of “good” in this era revolves around the abolition of all relations of oppression and exploitation and of the divisions among humanity between different and antagonistically opposed classes as well as nations. In other words, once again, the “4 Alls” of the communist revolution—and that not only *can* be, but *must* be achieved without god, that is, without the belief in god. As Mao expressed it, “The epoch of world communism will be reached when all mankind voluntarily and consciously changes itself and the world” (“On Practice”); and that requires understanding and dealing with the world (the universe), including human beings and our society, as they really are, without the need for the invention of god(s) or supernatural forces of any kind.

With communism will come the end of “sin.” If “sin” is defined as deviation from the way of god, then objectively there is not and never has been any such thing, because there is not and never has been any god. But, beyond that, when the point is reached where the material and ideological conditions exist for humanity to voluntarily and consciously change itself and the world, then there will also be no (subjective) basis for “sin,” because there will no longer be a need or basis for belief in god. At that point and into the future, there will still be right and wrong, good and bad—in the sense of what does and does not conform to objective reality and does and does not contribute to forging freedom out of necessity and enhancing the ability of society and the individuals who comprise it to continue developing in an all-around way. But there will no longer be the notion of “sin.”

This notion of “sin,” like the common concept of “human nature,” is yet another expression of something that is not at all transcendent, unchanging, and unchangeable, but on the contrary is historically and

socially conditioned and is viewed differently in different eras and different societies and among different social groupings and classes within the same society. Aristotle insisted that the concept of happiness did not apply to slaves, any more than to animals, but certainly the slaves of that time (if not the animals) did not agree with this. And in the more recent past, owners of slaves and upholders of slavery in the southern U.S., who invoked these arguments by Aristotle as justification, no doubt viewed “the nature” of the slaves, and of themselves, very differently than the slaves did. Today, in most parts of the world, it is no longer considered “natural,” or in conformity with “human nature,” to have slavery, but this is because of changes in the productive forces and corresponding changes in the production relations of society, and not because of changes in “human nature.” Or, perhaps it is better to put it, as Marx did, that these changes in “human nature” were brought about on the basis of changes in social productive forces and production relations and the attendant changes in the political and ideological superstructure of society (“all history is nothing but a continuous transformation of human nature”).

Yet, up until the present, with all these changes in the mode of production and in social and class relations, there have been certain general features of “human nature” that have remained fundamentally the same in different societies. This is precisely because all these societies have been marked by class division and the monopolization of economic life and thereby of political, cultural, and intellectual life by a small ruling group, or class, even though the *particular forms* of this class division and monopolization have differed in different eras and in different types of societies. This is why “traditions” from earlier forms of class-divided society can still be carried forward and exert a great influence on contemporary society, but why on the other hand this can involve some profound and acute contradictions, such as the following: Today, in the eyes of most people who advocate Biblical values and the “Judeo-Christian tradition,” such things as slavery, a man having not only one but many wives (along with concubines) as possessions, the conquest of women as prizes of war and the gang-raping of women, as well as the wanton slaughter of babies, are all considered great “sins.” Yet such gigantic Biblical figures as David and Paul—and indeed “The Lord” himself—have all practiced and/or advocated one or more of these things in ways that the *Bible* treats *not* as *sin*, but as the *opposite* of sin.

This illustrates, from yet another angle, not only why present-day advocates of Biblically based “traditional values” must frequently engage in rather remarkable mental gymnastics, as well as “myoptics,” but more essentially why there is the historic and urgent need for the two radical ruptures represented by the communist revolution.

In *The History of God* (a survey of the world’s major monotheistic religions—Christianity, Judaism, and Islam—and their historical development), Karen Armstrong develops the familiar argument that evidence of religion can be found throughout human history, from the earliest human societies (this includes communal societies that are not marked by the division into classes and by an oppressive division of labor between women and men), and this must indicate some kind of universal religious impulse among human beings. Armstrong puts it this way: “My study of the history of religion has revealed that human beings are spiritual animals. Indeed, there is a case for arguing that *Homo sapiens* is also *Homo religiosus*.” (“Introduction,” p. xix)

At the same time, Armstrong recognizes that religion has, and cannot help having, a pragmatic quality: “All religions change and develop. If they do not, they will become obsolete.” (p. 84) Armstrong attempts to resolve this contradiction—that religion is supposed to represent the word of a god (or gods) that are beyond human existence and in no way dependent on human social relations and conventions, yet all religion must change and develop or become obsolete—by positing some ineffable essence of god which human religious expression can only approach but never fully embrace or understand.

But we have seen not only that, throughout history and in today’s world, different social groupings, different classes, have different views of what is “natural” and what constitutes “the nature” of human beings (there being radical differences in how this is seen by slavemasters on the one hand and slaves on the other, for example) but that people with different class outlooks interpret the very same religious scriptures and doctrines in very different ways (as “evangelical Christian” Jim Wallis on the one hand and “evangelical Christian” Pat Robertson on the other hand are testament to). Beyond that, and even more fundamentally, we can turn once again to Engels, who not only showed that, for the first time in history, humanity has now reached the point where the division of society into classes is completely unnecessary *and* is a definite *hindrance* to the all-around development of society and people, but

also showed how religious belief, in all forms, has similarly become a hindrance to that development.

Engels spoke to how, up to this point in humanity's development, there has been a "general consensus" among peoples everywhere on the earth that supernatural forces and gods (or One God) existed. But Engels noted this is not proof of either the actual existence of god(s) or of some "inner need" of human beings to believe in god. Rather, it is a manifestation of the fact that, until the present age, human beings and human society had not reached the point where it was possible to develop a viewpoint and methodology that provides a systematic and comprehensive scientific approach to understanding the motive forces in nature and society (and in people). But, Engels emphasized, *that point has now been reached*—that viewpoint and methodology has been developed, and it continues to be developed. That viewpoint and methodology is precisely Marxist communism.

Armstrong herself recognizes that only with the revolutionary developments in science and technology, and the corresponding intellectual developments, that were associated with the rise of capitalism did the emergence of a full-blown atheism become possible. She puts it this way: "Until there had formed a body of coherent reasons, each of which was based on another cluster of scientific verifications, nobody could deny the existence of a God whose religion shaped and dominated the moral, emotional, aesthetic and political life of Europe. Without this support, such a denial could only be a personal whim or a passing impulse that was unworthy of serious consideration." (p. 287) And she recognizes the necessity to pose this question: "How will the idea of God survive in the years to come? For 4,000 years it has constantly adapted to meet the demands of the present, but in our own century, more and more people have found it no longer works for them, and when religious ideas cease to be effective they fade away." (p. 377) Yet Armstrong cannot embrace the vision of the future where the need, and the basis, for religion will no longer exist and where the idea of God itself, if it arose at all, could never be anything more than "a personal whim or a passing impulse...unworthy of serious consideration."

Armstrong gives voice to the widely propagated feeling that human beings would be losing something essential, something existential, by casting aside belief in god. Another of the main criticisms

(and misrepresentations) of communism is that it embodies some kind of cold mechanical approach to existence and human beings' place and role within it. This is linked to a confounding, deliberate or otherwise, of Marxist materialism with the more common meaning of materialism—the identification of "materialism" with consumerism and the drive to acquire material wealth is found in Jim Wallis' *The Soul of Politics* as well as in more than one Papal Encyclical and in other religious-based writings. But *Marxist* materialism has a fundamentally different meaning than this—and, in fact, it is a characteristic of the bourgeois and bourgeois society that they are marked by the restless and relentless drive for the acquisition of more and more material wealth, at the cost of the greatest human suffering. And this accounts, to a significant degree, for the pessimistic view of "human nature" that is so widespread within societies of this kind. It is Marxism that points the way to the creation of conditions where not only will "the love of money" no longer be a motivating factor, but money itself—and all the unequal and alienating relations between people of which money is inevitably a concentrated expression—will be abolished.

As Engels explained, the fundamental point of Marxist materialism is the relation between matter and ideas. Marxism recognizes that all existence consists of nothing but matter in motion, which can exist in an infinite variety; that matter as such has no beginning or end, but exists infinitely, although it is constantly undergoing transformation and *particular kinds* of matter in motion are continuously coming into and going out of existence; that the material world (or universe) is the source and the basis for verification of all ideas, and in fact that the mind itself and its thought processes are particular forms of matter in motion (chemical and electrical processes in the brain, and so on).

As applied to human society and its historical development, Marxist materialism makes clear that the underlying foundation of all human society is the coming together of people to produce and reproduce the material requirements of life, *and* that in order to do this, people must enter into very definite relations with each other in carrying out production; that these *production relations* will at any time be grounded in and correspond to the level of development and character of the *productive forces* (the land, machinery, and other instruments and means of production—the technology—and, above all, the people themselves with their knowledge and ability in carrying out produc-



tion); and that the *mode of production* (the production relations, grounded in the productive forces) gives rise to a corresponding *superstructure* of politics and ideology (political institutions, cultural and intellectual expressions, etc.).

But beyond that, Marxism focuses on the fact that the productive forces are continuously being developed and revolutionized while the relations of production (and, broadly speaking, the social or class relations), in which that development takes place, tend to lag behind this development of the productive forces. And when this contradiction arrives at the point where the production relations (and their corresponding political and ideological superstructure) have come into antagonism with the development of the productive forces—when they have become more a fetter on that development than a form through which it can advance—an era of revolution breaks out.

Since class-divided society first emerged out of early communal society, this has taken place through the struggle between classes; and at every stage this has centered on the struggle between the class which represents the *old* production relations (and superstructure) and has become the *direct obstacle* to the necessary leap in the development of the productive forces, on one side, and on the other side the *rising class* that represents *new* relations of production (and a new superstructure) that can overcome that obstacle and further unleash the productive forces.

And, finally, Marxism brings to light that, through this very process and this entire history of class struggle, humanity has now reached the point where the proletariat—the class in contemporary, capitalist society whose exploitation is the foundation of capitalist accumulation—can, by rising up to overthrow the rule of capital and then moving on to uproot the foundation of capital, revolutionize society and the world, putting an end to all exploitation, oppression, and the very division of society into different and antagonistically opposed classes. As Marx himself summarized it, “What I did that was new was to prove: 1) that the *existence of classes* is only bound up with *particular historical phases in the development of production*; 2) that the class struggle necessarily leads to the *dictatorship of the proletariat*; 3) that this dictatorship itself only constitutes the transition to the *abolition of all classes* and to a *classless society*...” (Letter to Joseph Weydemeyer, March 5, 1852, emphasis in original)

Could there be anything more breathtakingly sweeping, more inspiring than this? Marxism rejects *philosophical idealism*—the notion (which assumes many different expressions) that in the relation between ideas and matter, the former, not the latter, are decisive and determining—because this philosophical viewpoint represents an inversion of the actual relationship between matter and ideas and involves a fundamental distortion and obscuring of the real motive forces in people, in society, in nature, and in the relation between them. But Marxist communism is capable of motivating people with the most lofty vision and ideals—and of leading them to bring these into realization—precisely on the basis of a true and profound, and constantly developing, understanding of things.

Communism—the real, vibrant communism of Marx, Lenin, and Mao, not the phony, lifeless “communism” of Khrushchev, Brezhnev, and Deng Xiaoping—does not weigh down on but gives the fullest flight to the “human spirit,” to the imagination and the continual pondering of things which at any point are the source of mystery and of awe. Communism rejects the notion that mystery and awe must be identified only with things that cannot be known or understood; that the highest expression of this mystery and awe is belief in some unknowable and ineffable essence beyond material reality; and that we should obliterate the distinction between imagination and objective reality through the pretense that the supernatural forces and beings that human beings have created in their imagination are not only real but are the ruling and controlling forces of existence.

In the “Introduction” (p. xxi) to *A History of God*, Armstrong speaks to the fact that “Throughout history, men and women have experienced a dimension of the spirit that seems to transcend the mundane world. Indeed, it is an arresting characteristic of the human mind to be able to conceive concepts that go beyond it in this way.” Indeed, it is. But Armstrong goes on to argue, in effect, that this “arresting characteristic” will somehow be constrained if it does not find a religious expression. She repeatedly identifies the role of religion with that of art in this regard. Religion and art, she insists, “do not work like science.” (p. 306) This is true, and this is a very important distinction.

Science, unlike art and religion, has as its purpose and aim the discovery and explanation of why things are the way they are and what are the dynamics of change. Even though science must involve imagina-

tion—and the best science is impossible without considerable unleashing of the imagination—its essential objective is the transformation of the unknown into the known, of the mysterious into that which can be grasped, explained, and demonstrated. Religion and art, however, involve the presentation of things in a way that is “higher than life”—they involve not simply the exploration and representation of reality as it actually is, but typically involve extrapolations from real life to conjure up beings and events that *exist only in the imagination* but which people are asked to believe in, as if they *really exist*.

Yet, as important as it is to recognize this identity between religion and art, it is even more fundamentally important to grasp the difference between them. While much of art requires “the suspension of disbelief”—the willingness to accept that things which do not actually exist and are not actually happening *are* existing and happening—it requires this *only in a limited and relative sense*, only in relation to the work of art itself. Religion, however (including religious art), requires and demands that people *do* actually believe that its fantastic representations of beings, things, events, and forces really exist, when in fact they do not. Of course, certain forms and works of art (documentaries being a clear example) do attempt to portray real events and people, although here too the objective is to present this in a way that is “higher than life.” In such instances, the work of art shares with religion the fact that it asks people to accept that it is portraying beings, events, etc., that really do exist. But the *difference* is that, while this may be true of the work of art, it is *not* true of the supernatural beings and forces that religion presents as not only actually existing but constituting the motive and determining forces of existence.

If religion were to present itself in the same way and with the same expectations and requirements that art typically does—if it were to allow and encourage people to have the ultimate recognition that its fantastic creations are not real—then it would no longer be harmful and a hindrance to the all-around development of humanity in the way it is now. But it would also no longer be *religion*. In this era of world-historic transformation and in the future to come, humanity will never be able to do without the imagination and without art; it must and will do without—and do much better without—religion.

Throughout the world-historic revolutionary process that will replace the epoch of bourgeois exploitation with that of communist

emancipation, it will be necessary and important to unite all who can be united, including those who retain religious beliefs but are willing to fight together with, or give support and assistance to, the oppressed in rising up against the system that oppresses them—to unite with all those whose fundamental interests lie more with the oppressed masses and their revolutionary objectives than with the oppressors and the counterrevolutionary rule they seek to enforce. But while continually striving for such unity, and while respecting the right to religious belief and recognizing that the casting off of backward ideas must in the final analysis be the conscious and voluntary act of those who hold those ideas, it will also be necessary and decisive to struggle to establish the leading and guiding role of the one thoroughly scientific and thoroughly liberating ideology: communism.

The communist revolution and the communist world it will bring into being will give flower and give flight to art and to the imagination—to the “human spirit”—on a far broader basis and far higher level than ever before in human history, and it will remove the shackles of religion and all superstition. It will, in the words of *The Internationale*, “free the spirit from its cell” and allow it to soar to heights unseen, and unimagined, before. This it will do as part of the increasingly conscious and voluntary struggle of the great majority of humanity—and ultimately of humanity as a whole—to change itself and the objective world.

As I have written, in reflecting on my experience in the Berkeley Free Speech Movement and the lessons of “the ’60s”: When Mao called for combining revolutionary romanticism with revolutionary realism, in art and more generally, he was precisely rejecting mechanical materialist tendencies and speaking to the need to inspire people with the most lofty vision, and to do so in ways that unleash the imagination together with giving people a most profound understanding of reality and of the means for revolutionizing it.

Communist revolution gives the fullest dimension to the spirit expressed in the following words from “The Amazing Randi,” magician and debunker of “Psychics, ESP, Unicorns and other Delusions”:

“Parapsychology is a farce and a delusion, along with other claims of wonders and powers that assail us every day of our lives. Knowing what I do, and holding the

opinions that I do, has not made this world any the less exciting and wonderful and challenging for me, nor should it for you. On the contrary, to know that you are an individual not put here for some mysterious reason by some supernatural means, and that you are not protected by unknown powers or beings; to know that you are a product of millions of experiments in the evolutionary process and not the result of a seed thrown on this planet by extraterrestrials—that, to me, is very exciting... .

“Nonsense has reigned too long as Emperor of the Mind. Take a good look. The Emperor has no clothes!”

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