

XC – Politics and Moral Values

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By Butler Shaffer

[T]he salvation of the world consists in the salvation of the individual soul.

~ Carl Jung

The establishment party line being floated for public consumption is that George W. Bush's re-election was largely a victory for "moral values." That grown men and women can offer this assessment with a straight face offers some of the most compelling evidence for the moral and intellectual insolvency of our culture. Such a rationalization reflects the kind of perverted thinking that also leads people to speak of "wars of honor."

What are the "moral values" championed by Mr. Bush in his first term of office? His administration put together a mixture of blatant lies, deceptions, forged documents, and unfounded fears, to whip up a war frenzy against a nation that posed no threat to the United States. His unprovoked war — which had no more legal justification than did Hitler's invasion of Poland — has resulted in over 100,000 deaths and devastated much of Iraq. Some of the administration's business friends are profiting handsomely from this vicious undertaking, while at the same time many Iraqi prisoners have been systematically tortured at such places as Abu Ghraib. As the costs and revelations of duplicity in this war continue to escalate, the Bush administration appears ready to play the same unprincipled game at the expense of Iran, or North Korea, or any other country selected as the enemy du jour. If these are examples of the "moral values" that were triumphant on election day, can someone explain their meaning to me? How do such actions express "moral values" that differ from those of Machiavelli, or Attila the Hun?

What moral response is to be made to the utter insanity of all of this? A nation that posed no threat whatever to America is attacked with powerful bombs — in an exercise whose name, "shock and awe," is an admission of its terrorist purposes; many of the buildings in its cities are reduced to rubble, while hospitals and other facilities essential to life are destroyed. The same American government that wreaked such massive devastation then announced multimillion-dollar reconstruction projects to replace what had been ruined. "We don't do a combat operation in Fallujah unless we are prepared to repair it," said one high-ranking U.S. military official.

Trying to function with antagonistic assumptions generates this kind of moral confusion. It produces such Orwellian doublespeak logic as the Vietnam War rationalization that a village had to be destroyed in order to save it, or the earlier defense of burning witches in order to

save their souls. It is our refusal to question and resolve the contradictory nature of our thinking — a failure arising out of moral cowardice — that allows presidents to speak of warmaking as "peacekeeping," or obedience to state violence as "freedom."

That Mr. Bush's wimpish opponent — whose campaign resembled what, in the boxing world, would have been investigated as "taking a dive" — did not see fit to raise any of these matters as critical issues; and that voters turned out in record numbers to re-elect the perpetrator of these acts of destructiveness, dishonesty, corruption, and gross inhumanity, is more representative of the total abandonment of moral values. Perhaps London's newspaper, the Daily Mirror, summed up this election far better than any of the American media flacks dared to do: "How can 59,054,087 people be so DUMB?"

If lying, threats of aggression, torture, and the unprovoked slaughter of over one-tenth of a million people are expressions of the "moral" leadership of a government behind which millions of obedient followers are assembled in lockstep ranks, how bad can nihilism be?

It is difficult to speak intelligently of "moral values" in the context of collective behavior. Moral thinking is a uniquely personal undertaking, by which individuals develop their inner sense of principled behavior. People have a need for spiritual experiences; a need to transcend the inherently limited nature of their lives and to connect up with the universe — including other people — in satisfying ways. The personal exploration and expression of moral conduct is part of this need, the satisfaction of which occurs only within individuals, not through mass-minded crusades.

But as our lives become more politicized, our sense of meaning shifts from individual to collective considerations. We become increasingly less interested in the inner voices that challenge our thinking, and become more concerned with the outer voices that demand our attention and obedience. Over time, we abandon our internally-directed world in favor of an externally-directed one.

In a politicized world dominated by collectivist thinking, men and women become unwilling to question the purposes or actions of political leaders to whom they have given over the direction of their lives; to do so, would force the kinds of internal inquiries they have long abandoned. Lying and the distortion of truth become essential strategies for the success of political systems. Orwell's understanding of how the corruption of language provides the foundation for the deeper corruption of men and women in society, continues to play itself out. As the United States undertook its attack on Fallujah, Lt. Gen. Thomas Metz — identified as "Commander of the Multi-National Corps," a title intended to distort the reality of the American interests conducting the war — held a televised press conference, during which he kept referring to Iraqi insurgents as the "anti-Iraqi forces." By this kind of twisted reasoning, the American military must be regarded as the "pro-Iraqi forces!" I heard no media representatives challenge the general on this.

What is to be said of the "moral values" of an administration and its supporters that foster the distortion of thinking that makes government lying so commonplace as to no longer matter to most people?

A friend of mine who served in the Marines in the first Gulf War told me that a number of his boot-camp comrades wore T-shirts that read "pray for war." Current American soldiers in Iraq have been quoted as saying, after killing insurgents, "I got my kills. . . . I just love my job," while another stated "you guys get to do all the fun stuff. It's like a video game."

How incensed would most people become if a teenaged male wore a T-shirt that read "pray for rape"? How troubled would you consider the mind of your child if he could not distinguish the systematic killing of others from "a video game"? What moral judgments would we make about the upbringing of such young men, and why do we refuse to make those same judgments of political systems that foster and reward such thinking and conduct?

What does it do to our very souls to allow such twisted thinking into our minds, accepting its destructiveness when uttered by those we revere, while rejecting it when offered by others? What is the state of our own minds that so many of us have an insufficient immune system to immediately reject the politicogenic viruses that we are taught to welcome into our lives? Can we rediscover and listen to those inner voices whose concern seems to be to warn us of impending dangers?

The unconscious mind exerts powerful influences upon us and, at the same time, has difficulty processing and harmonizing contradictions. Our conscious mind may continue to chant politically-inspired bromides; but like the child who struggles with the inconsistencies between a parent's words and deeds, the unconscious mind seeks a resolution of its inner conflicts.

The mind — like any system — tends to take the path of least resistance to establish inner harmony. Since self-examination — particularly in the realm of the propriety of conduct — can be most discomforting, and having already been conditioned in an externalized mindset that sees the origins of problems arising from without, the mind becomes focused on the thinking and actions of others. Once this occurs, the pursuit of moral inquiries that might call into question our own behavior, becomes preoccupied with ferreting out the moral shortcomings of our neighbors. Through psychological projection, we unconsciously attribute to others the fears we still harbor about ourselves: we may ignore our inner voices, but they do not go away.

Most of us accept institutionally-certified lying, destructiveness, and corruption as an integral part of a "reality" that is beyond our questioning. At the same time, we struggle with unconscious forces that remind us of the contradictions by which we live. In a vain effort to

quiet these inner voices, many of us become increasingly obsessed with changing the thinking and behavior of others.

Anyone who believes that this recent election represented a widespread effort of Americans to examine the moral base of their individual thinking and behavior, is sadly deluded. People in the throes of a lynch mob mindset are not interested in self-examination, but in further rationalizing their scapegoating frenzy. It is no coincidence that, at a time when the state is engaged in some of its most contradictory, violent, dehumanizing, and destructive behavior — traits politicized minds prefer not to question — people would become preoccupied with less-threatening targets. As the state continues to expand the rolls of its victims, troubled but submissive minds turn their attentions to the victimless conduct of private persons.

The "moral values" crusade being conducted by conservatives and the media — with the Democratic party trying to figure out how to play the same game without offending its base supporters — has nothing to do with a critique of collectivized wrongdoing, but to an expansion of the practice. The politicization of "moral values" is but a front for more state meddling in the private lives of individuals. Drug use, gay and lesbian marriages, assisted suicides, abortions, pornography and sexual promiscuity, smoking, and obesity, are just a few of the targeted areas for which moral reformers call for more state intervention.

Some of these topics do involve an examination of moral issues. Any reasoned analysis of the abortion question, for instance, must eventually confront the private property principle: is the fetus a self-owning "person" or an extension of the property interests of the mother? But focusing moral inquiries around the private property principle is the most politically incorrect thing one can do in a politicized world, for such would call into question the very existence of the state. And so, the pro- and the anti-abortion debaters agree to shift the inquiry to grounds that pose no threat to the political establishment: "pro-choice" and "pro-life."

One can see, in the microcosm of this debate, just how intellectually confused and impoverished are the minds of so many Americans. Almost all who advertise themselves as "pro-choice" are not pro-choice at all: they are quick to endorse measures to prohibit people making choices on the basis of racial or ethnic discrimination, or to demand that taxpayers fund day-care facilities for working mothers. They want an abundance of state rules to preempt the choices of individuals. Nor are the allegedly "pro-life" advocates what they profess to be: far too many are flag-waving defenders of the war system, or supporters of capital punishment.

It is the height of foolishness to expect political systems to help improve the "moral values" of a society. The state thrives on a collective mindset; its existence depends upon the refusal of people to make fundamental inquiries into their thinking and behavior. Politicians and other state functionaries are not the least concerned with "moral values," except as they can

be used as slogans around which to energize Homo boobus into frenzied campaigns against their neighbors. Political systems are interested in one thing only: power — in getting it, keeping it, and expanding it.

The moral strength or weakness of any society is but a reflection of the inner lives of its members, a point Carl Jung expressed quite well in observing that "[i]f the individual is not truly regenerated in spirit, society cannot be either, for society is the sum total of individuals in need of redemption." Herbert Spencer's corollary to Jung that "[t]here is no political alchemy by which you can get golden conduct out of leaden instincts" has been lost on people who believe that anything is possible through political action; and that the ballot box is the only effective means for improving the lives and social behavior of people. Such is the outlook of thoroughly externalized and collectivized people who believe, as Mark Twain observed more than a century ago, that "[n]othing so needs reforming as other people's habits."

The Best of Butler Shaffer

