

police. Instead of glorifying the rich and vulgar, we should celebrate those who share their wealth and talents.

This political-cultural coalition not only has to be extensive but also must exist for decades, even centuries, to ameliorate existing ecological damage. This political movement can never completely disappear. Just as nuclear war made total war a futile exercise in self-annihilation, the current political economy (which includes explosive population growth as one of its defining characteristics) must also become a temporary historical phenomenon. To make that transition without violence or disaster will be extraordinarily hard: Almost every one of those future nine billion people wish to live comfortably and have a family. Fortunately, we have a chance to survive and thrive (assuming fatal environmental damage is not already irreversibly imbedded into the biosphere) if we adapt the best norms, traditions, and institutions created over the past 2500 years.

So where can such an enduring coalition be found, capable of resisting the ruling class's inevitable counterattacks? In the United States, the American secular Left is not going to succeed alone, because America remains a very religious nation. A recent Pew poll determined that seventy percent of Americans identify with Christianity even though the number of "unaffiliated" Christians and Non-

2016] *BRIDGING THE SECULAR-RELIGIOUS DIVIDE* 865

public school events¹⁰ Whenever a friend aggressively attempts conversion, our friendship painfully shrivels. Many atheists and agnostics endure a guilt-ridden “breach of faith” with their family’s religions. Not only must they reject many of their ancestors’ cherished opinions, but they also risk divine retribution after death. It can be difficult to gracefully weather such domestic and theological conflicts. I still laugh at George Carlin’s sardonic sacreligiosity, a mash-up of insights, caricatures, and heartbreak.¹¹ Rural billboards extolling Jesus and ranting talk-radio ministers trigger unease.

Christian Progressives already share many core religious dogmas with

The rest of this essay provides several reasons why a skeptical, relativist, agnostic perspective,¹³ infused with Buddhist insights and practices, can be one of many ways to bridge the persistent divide between the secular Left and the religious Right. Combining selected Buddhist beliefs and practices with the assumption that we tiny, temporary humans will probably never solve many of the Universe's mysteries can produce direct personal experiences that develop more sympathy and admiration for traditional religious believers.

The nontheistic meditator creates a "spiritual" domain of kindness and awareness that is not necessarily "religious." Conscientiously attempting to develop more ethical habits stimulates and reinforces humane insights that surface during regular meditative practice. The practices and effects of meditation and prayer can be very similar; practitioners quietly spend time with themselves. Secular meditators often encounter joyful mind states closely resembling those of religious mystics. The time and disciplined effort put into regular prayer and meditation can create mutual respect. If you tell someone you understand why they (but not you) find comfort by believing in God, an afterlife, transcendental states, and supernatural purposes, they may

dramatically transcends and rejects the scientific method.¹⁴ Existing evidence overwhelmingly supports the inference that our lives' arc moves from "dust to dust."¹⁵ The crushed turtle in the dirt road appears to merge with the earth.

The tension between empiricism and religious beliefs permeates such political controversies as the environment or the structure of the economy. When Progressives analyze white working class conservatism, they often conclude those workers "don't know their own interests."¹⁶ In other words, those conservatives irrationally fail to understand reality. There is some truth in this accusation, an echo of Engels' "false consciousness."¹⁷ But it is hard for any of us to think clearly in this hyperactive, cacophonous world. A massive propaganda machine polarizes and over-stimulates the populace through disinformation, encouragement of addictive cravings, and relentless waves of distracting entertainments. Many Americans' view of politics is formed by television attack ads, which borrow the paranoid style of militaristic sloganeering to convince the populace that only shameless, greedy hacks would endure such a degrading gauntlet to obtain power. Furthermore, there would be little reason to write essays like this unless the writer sought to change other people's minds about something. Sadly, the critique of delusion applies to almost everyone. Few Americans from any background fully appreciate how they are creating numerous environmental threats to their society's long-term interests. Far fewer (myself included) make the necessary changes. After all, one "rational" response to looming environmental breakdowns is to "eat, drink, and be merry."

It is also patronizing to claim fellow citizens do not "know their interests." Very few people consistently know their best interests, much less act upon them. America's doubling of its obesity rate is an example.¹⁸ As is

14. See 1 SØREN KIERKEGAARD, CONCLUDING UNSCIENTIFIC POSTSCRIPT TO P

2016] *BRIDGING THE SECULAR-RELIGIOUS DIVIDE* 869

Leadership Council, the economic differences between the two parties have diminished. Leaders from both political parties throw occasional bones to the masses, bones which also feed their wealthy patrons: The Bush administration passed the prescription drug bill and the Democrats implemented the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. Democratic policies of increased taxes and regulations may cause average people to lose almost as much disposable income (at least over the short term) as Republicans. Nor are environmentalists immune from seeking to impose significant economic costs: Many people crave noisy gas-guzzlers that should no longer be made. Furthermore, Supreme Court liberals have not been sympathetic to white working class interests; the liberal bloc has defended affirmative action,²² gun control laws,²³ a rigid separation of church and state,²⁴

exchanged presents during the Christmas season of 1914.²⁷ Needless to say, generals on both sides quickly terminated such madness.²⁸

III. BUDDHIST-INSPIRED SKEPTICISM/AGNOSTICISM

There are different theories of skepticism, ranging from “global”

daily, pragmatic theory of causation by walking in front of a train. Hume, who had a conservative, cheerful disposition, did not believe human beings were completely depraved or would become deranged without supernatural constraints. Human nature is complicated. Most of us love our children and care for others. He believed our main problem, which we are collectively demonstrating on a planetary scale, is a chronic inability to adequately consider long-term consequences.

Although it would be contradictory to claim certainty about the ultimate source of human morality, we apparently can create a moral code without seeking divine assistance. Thus, we might choose to retain global skepticism as humbling background while constructing a pragmatic system to get us through the day. To adopt a popular environmental slogan, such skeptics

sound right: We fearfully agonize by seeking too much control. The secular Buddha was not suggesting that his path eliminated pain;⁵⁸ it prevented the mental suffering that often follows and aggravates initial injuries. Notice how this assumption of impermanence undermines some environmentalists' goal of "sustainability." There is no way to sustain this political economy, even if we wanted. We must change to survive and flourish.

The Third Noble Truth claims we can eliminate suffering.⁵⁹ I am not just skeptical but also wary of such transcendental propositions. If everything in life transforms, how can anyone achieve permanent enlightenment? Furthermore, the existence of such a mind state cannot be refuted. While we observe people altering habits and perspectives, we cannot determine if somebody permanently transcended normal reality. From a more political perspective, priests and other believers often invoke transcendental capacities to elevate themselves above the laity, thereby ossifying and excessively legitimating any hierarchy needed to spread doctrines through teaching and example. For a global/local skeptic like myself, it is best to dilute the proposition; the Buddha's path can significantly reduce mental distress b

dimensions within Buddhist traditions, I have periodically shifted objectives. Sometimes the primary pursuit has been to become a kinder person. During other periods, the quest has focused on discipline, concentration, clarity, or joy.

Whenever life presents severe challenges, the practice requires dogged endurance. If the physical or mental agony is great enough, that problem can be the starting point of the formal sitting meditation. The Tibetan nun Pema Chödrön recommends that the meditator drop

the changing background noise seems like an orchestra. At every moment, I try to remind myself that I have never perceived “this” combination before.

The Tibetan Buddhists believe compassion was not just a means to enlightenment but also the ultimate goal. The Bodhisattva foregoes permanent enlightenment, returning to normal reality to alleviate other beings' suffering.⁹² A weird tension exists within the Buddhist tradition: Its monastic quietism tends to accept the status quo, but its psychology, epistemology, and morality are revolutionary.

V. THE VARIETY OF SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES

During a recent silent meditation retreat, I often walked with a steaming cup of tea to the front of the main building. One could look past the simple but thoughtful flower garden, over a tall hedge, to a line of hills faintly tracing the Western horizon. Two or three times—for less than a total of ten minutes—an extraordinary degree of tranquility spread through mind and body. It felt like residing within a serenely beautiful three-dimensional painting that gradually and elegantly changed every moment. Nothing seemed displaced, including myself. Normally, there is a slight tinge of anxiousness and tightness in the chest, a bodily symptom of existential dread. I now am more aware of that extremely low-grade anxiety's physical manifestations, because they significantly diminished during those episodes. Soon, this blissful consciousness complied with the Law of Impermanence and dissolved. Indeed, I spent several minutes watching that increased clarity gradually fade into regular consciousness. Thanks to experience and core teachings about impermanence, the subsequent upsurge in anxiety generated little distress. For whatever it is worth, this was not my first experience of an exceptionally gratifying mind state. Most meditators would not continue

relationships with life and death, including the slight tremor of existential dread churning the heart. It is not always easy to be unconditionally friendly to whatever manifests within.

It may be a truism, but it is humbling to remember that every person has a unique blend of strengths and weaknesses. I appear to have something of a religious temperament but a secular intellect that prefers suspending judgment about the most fundamental, seemingly unknowable questions. Thus, those blissful events seemed somewhat transformative, but not at all transcendental. If one reads mystical literature from any culture, one encounters similar descriptions of peaceful, deep integration. A religious person might say I had been “blessed.” While there definitely arose a sense of gratitude resembling grace, such terminology seems a bit too hierarchical, intimating a divine force concerned about my life. My guess is that meditation triggers chemicals and thoughts deeply imbedded in our minds that enable us to continue living while knowing we will die.

Overall, these practices have generated experiences, thoughts, and feelings that create a common ground for intimate, honest conversations with those who have had more theistically inspired experiences of well-being. I have an increased respect for religious enthusiasm, so long as the enthusiast has similar respect.

VI. THE SANGHA

The Buddha described “three jewels” that assist people towards enlightenment: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.⁹⁴ Creating a peaceful refuge by emulating the Buddha’s character and behavior should not become a cult of personality; that outcome would undermine his teachings about self-absorption and taming the ego. He offered himself as a role model, as have such essential thinkers as Confucius, Jesus, Socrates, and the early skeptic Pyrrho. While the word “dharma” has several meanings, most people believe the Buddha referred to his ideas in this passage. The Sangha consists of a group of motivated meditators who befriend, support, and educate each other.

This communal aspect of Buddhism is underappreciated in the dangerously atomized West, where so many people are obsessed with self-improvement. The Sangha is another “holy place[] where the races meet,”⁹⁵ providing an opportunity to develop through friendship and discussion. Interacting with numerous people, some of whom will trigger aggravation, is

94. See SANGHARAKSHITA, *THE THREE JEWELS; THE CENTRAL IDEALS OF BUDDHISM* (2006).

95.

another meditative practice. New meditators often find the first year or two of meditation quite rewarding, even exciting: They calm down, perhaps have intense experiences, and perceive the world and themselves differently. But over subsequent years, various impediments arise, undermining the commitment to sit every day with whatever arises in the mind. One member of my Sangha cryptically joked, “Meditation is not all that cracked up as it claims to be.” One need only look in the mirror to be reminded about the difficulties of maintaining any discipline; billions of us cannot overcome such destructive addictions as cigarettes, laziness, excessive consumption, obesity, or debilitating depression.

The Sangha resembles a religious congregation. One witnesses the personal and interpersonal benefits of associating with a wide range of people interested in each other’s well being. For those who don’t enjoy social chitchat, it is a relief to be around others willing to discuss life’s deeper joys and challenges. From a political perspective, these groups exemplify the intermediary institutions that De Tocqueville maintained were an essential to American democracy. Such groups help satisfy the need for tribal solidarity that throbs within our genetic code. Instead of watching screens alone, we

2016] *BRIDGING THE SECULAR-RELIGIOUS DIVIDE* 891

Sympathetic joy celebrates others' successes. Instead of writhing in jealousy and resentment, you rejoice in other people's happiness, hoping they continue to thrive. At the crudest level, one will become happier if other people's accomplishments make one cheerful instead of envious. Obviously, this reaction undermines the competitive instinct, which increases self-absorption, always seeking advantage and/or a higher rung on various hierarchical ladders. As with loving kindness, sympathetic joy can be cultivated during formal meditation by first delighting in one's own successes before rejoicing in the accomplishments of loved ones, the triumphs of friends, the victories of people one doesn't know very well, even the achievements of "difficult people" who cause you stress and injury, and the

energetic aspects, they are a bit more passive, encouraging us to perceive others more tenderly and less competitively.

We must define compassion precisely, because compassion has often been commingled with sympathy and empathy. We can start with Schopenhauer's clarifying definitions. One acts compassionately by helping another being without expecting anything (internal or external) in return: "[T]he relation between justice as practiced by men and genuine honesty of the heart is analogous to that between expressions of politeness and the genuine love for one's neighbor. "Unlike politeness, such love overcomes egoism not ostensibly, but actually."¹⁰⁷ Schopenhauer believed that the compassionate principle was the only way to combat the bourgeois creed of selfishness, which measures the worth of everything by its exchange value¹⁰⁸ and abides by the maxim, "Help no one; on the contrary, injure all if it brings you any advantage."¹⁰⁹ Even worse is the sadistic impulse: "But rather injure all as much as you can."¹¹⁰ Thus, compassion, not justice is the strongest challenger to "might is right."¹¹¹ Notice how Schopenhauer's definitions are a declaration of war on prevailing Western political and economic assumptions. Humans should not be motivated exclusively by self-interest. A compassionate act is an absurd act, an existential act defying prevailing social conventions, personal needs, and even the probable meaninglessness of life. Most neoclassical economists would call it "irrational," which actually is a compliment.

So how does compassion differ from empathy and sympathy? Empathy, a skill that varies from person to person, enables someone to sense another's emotions. Bill Clinton famously said, "I feel your pain."¹¹² If you spent any time with the man, you probably felt you were the center of his kindly attention. While empathy is often humane, it also can be a sociopath's tool. The trick of any confidence game is for the "con man" to gain the victim's confidence by pretending to care for them and understand their situation. Many sociopaths are friendly, charming, and sensitive to others' feelings and needs (which they then manipulate for their own interests).

A sympathetic person feels badly when observing other suffering beings. The sociopath has little sympathy but may have a great deal of empathy. The

107. *Id.* at 122.

108. *See id.* at 101.

109. *Id.* at 92 n.6.

110. *Id.*

111. *Id.*

112. Bill Clinton, Excerpts from an Exchange with Heckler (Mar. 26, 1992), in *The 1992 Campaign: Verbatim; Heckler Stirs Clinton Anger: Excerpts From the Exchange*, N.Y. TIMES (Mar. 28, 1992), <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/03/28/us/1992-campaign-verbatim-heckler-stirs-clinton-anger-excerpts-exchange.html>.

all frightened, vulnerable creatures living in an increasingly unstable world. Pervasive guilt, conflict, and distrust will increase as our environment rapidly deteriorates. The corporate-state machine continually stimulates our more problematic basic instincts—existential dread, sexual desire, economic uncertainty, tr

2016] *BRIDGING THE SECULAR-RELIGIOUS DIVIDE* 895

culture that is predominantly kind, tolerant, and creative. There must be widespread respect and kindness, if not equal “concern and respect,” for other beings and landscapes we have been desecrating.

This shared journey on the path of kindness will not eliminate disagreement about major issues: Some warm-hearted people will always oppose abortion because of their concern for the fetus. Other decent individuals are far more worried about the pregnant woman’s fate. Perhaps we can agree to disagree about issues like abortion, affirmative action, and gay marriage instead of demonizing the opposition. We could celebrate our common strengths and weaknesses, creating a coalition of decency that overcomes the institutionalization of war, greed, and delusion. If the oceans turn so acidic that most of the oxidizing plankton die, no humans will exist to remember our particular positions about the cultural issues that the elite have left for us to squabble about while they pontificate and luxuriate in Davos and Bohemia Grove.

