

“What Good is Jesus in a Society of Many Faiths?”
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What Good is Jesus in a Society of Many Faiths?

Well, it depends on what Jesus you want.

Consider Pope Benedict XI’s new book, *Jesus of Nazareth*, in which he presents “the Jesus of the Gospels as the real, ‘historical’ Jesus” (xxii). In the April 13th press release announcing publication of the book, its Italian publisher Rizzoli described the Pope’s core project: “The pastoral concerns of the pope and his exceptional theological doctrine come together to focus on the central theme of the work: the conviction that, in order to understand the figure of Jesus Christ, it is necessary to start from his union with the Father.”¹

Now let’s have a look at a quotation from John Shelby Spong’s new book *Jesus for the Non-Religious*. It is the “human life of Jesus that opens me to see God as the very depth of the meaning of Jesus’ life.”

These two quotations touch on similar issues—the relation of Jesus to God, and the question of how we should understand that relationship. Yet would anyone here confuse Pope Benedict’s perspective with Jack Spong’s? Anybody? Just checking.

Why do we think of Pope Benedict’s formulation as conservative and Spong’s as progressive? By the end of today’s workshop I want us to have a better understanding of what makes “conservative” speech conservative and what makes liberal or progressive speech progressive. Once we figure that out, it will be easy to answer the question that our session poses.

I propose to get at this issue of how conservatives and progressive speech works by using a model proposed by George Lakoff in his book *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*. It may seem like an odd turn to take up “politics” in response to our

¹ Quoted in “Jesus of Nazareth: Pope Benedict XVI’s path toward Jesus; A Special Excerpt from the Pope’s New Book,” *Columbia* (Knights of Columbus), vol 87, no. 6 June 2007, pp. 7-8.

question about faiths, but “faiths” or religious communities are also political communities – and we’ll see that the issues about conservative and progressive speech, in fact, overlap.

Now, I should warn you at the outset: I’m first going to walk through Lakoff’s model, and just when you’re feeling comfortable with it, I’m going to disagree with it, show you why and offer a slightly different model—one that accounts more clearly the different orientations between Benedict and Spong.

Georg Lakoff is a professor of cognitive linguistics. He studies how people “conceptualize the world” in what we call “worldviews,” i.e., “everyday conceptualization, reasoning, and language.” In an early work with Mark Johnson, entitled “Metaphors We Live By,” Lakoff argued that while we often think of conceptual language as a kind of pure reason, quite different from the “figurative” poetics of decorative language, in fact, concepts are deployed in our everyday speech through metaphors. His classic example is the concept “argument” which we “understand” through the metaphor: argument is war. For example, he defended his position; she marshaled her arguments; my argument blew him out of the water, etc. etc. No one ever explicitly tells you that “argument is war”; but that metaphor governs how we think about arguments. Concepts, Lakoff argues, are deployed and are both understandable and persuasive through metaphorical structures. And one can study the patterns of everyday speech to uncover the metaphors that govern and shape our speech.

In *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*, Lakoff argues that politics is a form of moral discourse that is generally shaped by the broad metaphor of the Nation as Family—in which the government is the parent and the citizens are the children (154). One speaks of the Founding Fathers, for example, or George Washington as the Father of the country. Citizens are supposed to contribute to the well-being of the nation as children contribute to the well-being of the family. And citizens, like children within families, live within the rules and guidelines laid down by government. If citizens break these rules, they are “punished,” the way children are punished, and so on. If citizens work hard, they should

be “rewarded” for their efforts with success. But everybody should work together for the sake of the whole.

Now Lakoff argues that the logic of parents and children implied in the Nation as Family metaphor allows for a basic distinction between different parenting styles; between what he calls a “Strict Father” model and a “Nurturant Parent” model. These models represent ideal types—in fact, most of us operate with some blend of both. Nonetheless these basic metaphors provide the guiding logic for the ideological commitments and values of conservatives and liberals. What we call the “true believers” are simply those who follow out the coherent logic of their metaphor to its extremes. How do these simple metaphors create ideological systems?

Now, again keep in mind, I’m going to first lay out the basics of these models and then critique them. I am thinking with Lakoff’s model because his metaphorical analysis is genuinely helpful and predictive, in fact, of the patterns of both conservative and liberal thinkers—certainly in the U.S. I am thinking against him insofar as I believe that his primary metaphor of “parenting style” doesn’t really get to the heart of the “culture wars” – certainly in the U.S. since the political return of fundamentalism with Jerry Falwell’s “moral majority” in 1980, or even, on the liberal side, the emphasis on civil rights and equality, also steeped in religious language. I’ll argue that the “God-world relation,” as Tillich called is actually the more important and more useful conceptual frame than Lakoff’s “parent-children” structure.

But, with that caveat, let’s get back to Lakoff.

The parenting metaphors—strict father, nurturing parent produce ideological systems giving priority to some relationships and to certain aspects of the parent/child relationship over others:

For example, the Strict Father model gives priority to authority and obedience (and hence as well to issues of law and order, as well as great admiration for the military chain of command). Lakoff admits that there are strict mothers too, but that the idealized type is the

strong father. Moreover, the strict father model tends to give priority to sons over daughters. There is, in other words, a fundamental sense of order to the strict father model—a hierarchical order, according to which the rules of the father are to be followed by the children. And this, for their own good.

The primal experience,” says Lakoff, “behind” the **Nurturant Parent** model, on the other hand, is “one of being cared for and cared about, having one’s desires for loving for loving interactions met, living as happily as possible, and deriving meaning from mutual interaction and care” (108). “Unlike the strict father model that assumes that children learn through reward and punishment (110), the Nurturant-Parent model, says Lakoff, assumes that children “learn best through their attachment to their parents—which are ideally secure and loving attachments.” He continues, a bit later: “The ideal parents must be, of course, what they want their children to be: basically happy, empathetic, able to take care of themselves, responsible, creative, communicative and fair” (111). Rather than obedience, the Nurturant Parent model seeks understanding, “meaning” and “empathy” as the basis of moral development.

The relative openness of the Nurturant Parent model requires an emphasis on communication, co-operation, and interdependence in contrast to the hierarchical model of the Strict Father. Lakoff writes, “If children are to become nurturing, they must develop a social conscience. They need to learn honest questioning and sincere probing . . . For this reason, nurturant parents encourage questioning, self-examination, and openness” (111). The nurturant-parent model is suspicious of competition insofar as it elicits “aggressive behavior” (112).

Liberals, operating from a Nurturant Parent model, respect rules and laws, but they view them from a different perspective than those adhering to a Strict-Father model. When liberals attend to rules and laws, they do so not as absolute standards that *must* be obeyed; rather liberals respect rules insofar as those rules facilitate and nurture the broader goals of

empathy, respect and meaning in the Nurturant Parent model. Liberals, in this model, are suspicious of unilateral or hierarchical power and of war rhetoric for the way in which it imposes a kind of patriotic obedience on the nation, silencing dissent, yet they affirm the importance and power of government to intervene in society and in free-markets to make sure that the powerful do not simply run roughshod over the powerless, and to ensure some measure of common dignity among all citizens. You can see how the Nurturant Parent's basic value of nurturance of children's capacity to question, learn, and participate, stands in sharp contrast to the Strict Father's emphasis on authority over children, and thus how the Nurturant model opens up an entire ideological vision that is played out politically and culturally.

But if that is the basic model, Lakoff adds a second metaphorical strand to his Strict Father model. That other strand comes through at the very beginning of Lakoff's description of the model, when he writes: "The Strict Father model takes as background the view that life is difficult and the world is fundamentally dangerous" (65). To cope with this dangerous world, "a child must learn," according to Lakoff, "self-discipline, *self-reliance*, and respect for legitimate authority" (66). And he adds a bit later: "Survival is a matter of competition, and only through self-discipline can a child learn to compete successfully" (66).

From this combination of "obedience to authority," on the one hand, and an affirmation of "competition" for survival on the other, one can begin to see how conservatives think: --they support law and order; they often view minority racial and religious groups as outsiders to the majority-family—to be "tolerated" only insofar as they defer to the "religion of the fathers." Conservatives don't like social programs, because conservatives insist on self-reliance and being able to stand on one's own two feet, and they view liberals as lacking discipline—"no wonder those liberals evaded the draft" (but Dick Cheney got 5 "legitimate" deferments). And, say conservatives, through their social programs, liberals encourage a lack of discipline and promiscuity of all types. Liberals subvert the structures of society, according to strong-father conservatives. Competition, on the other hand, strengthens a nation—

especially free-market competition. Everybody has the opportunity to compete, but government shouldn't be picking winners and losers through things like Affirmative Action programs. Are you beginning to see how this works?

Critique of Lakoff's Strong-Father Model.

Now Lakoff doesn't say in particular where this model comes from. When did it emerge? Was "conservative" political rhetoric *always* dominated by a strong father model? To be sure, he realizes these metaphors are fluid even as they have power over time. But I think a key to the emergence of the model *as Lakoff describes it* occurs in the era of Ronald Reagan and the rise of the Moral Majority.

The clue, I think, resides in that "second strand" of the Strict Father model that I mentioned a few moments ago, where Lakoff writes: "The Strict Father model takes as background the view that life is difficult and the world is fundamentally dangerous" (65). Am I missing something, or is that "background view" in fact another co-equal metaphor of conservative logic, capitalism as a Darwinistic State of Nature—survival of the fittest? In other words, the Strict Father model combines two kinds of conservatives—those supporting a strict sense of authority and obedience on the one hand and those supporting economic competition on the other.

In a now landmark speech from 1977, at the 4th Annual CPAC (Conservative Political Action Council) Convention, entitled, "The New Republican Party," Ronald Reagan argued that the longstanding split between social conservatives and fiscal conservatives was no longer necessary. In fact, he said, bridging this false divide between conservatives, could forge a new conservative majority in the nation.

Yes, conservatism can and does mean different things to those who call themselves conservatives.

You know, as I do, that most commentators make a distinction between what they call "social" conservatism and "economic" conservatism. The so-called social issues—law and order, abortion, busing, quota systems—are usually

associated with blue-collar, ethnic and religious groups themselves traditionally associated with the Democratic Party. The economic issues—inflation, deficit spending and big government—are usually associated with Republican Party members and independents who concentrate their attention on economic matters.

Now I am willing to accept this view of two major kinds of conservatism—or, better still, two different conservative constituencies. But at the same time let me say that the old lines that once clearly divided these two kinds of conservatism are disappearing.

In fact, the time has come to see if it is possible to present a program of action based on political principle that can attract those interested in the so-called “social” issues and those interested in “economic” issues. In short, isn't it possible to combine the two major segments of contemporary American conservatism into one politically effective whole?

I believe the answer is: Yes, it is possible to create a political entity that will reflect the views of the great, hitherto, conservative majority.

Reagan's speech is a helpful benchmark for recognizing that metaphorical systems do not simply exist in language but are developed and forged in and through public discourse. Lakoff would not disagree with that point, but nor does he help the reader realize that what he [Lakoff] describes as the strong-father model is itself a testament to the rhetorical achievement of the Republican Party over the last thirty years in blending those two types of conservatives into a social movement.

And central to my critique of Lakoff's mere parental metaphor is that an essential element to that new conservative movement is the re-introduction of God—and a particular view of God to public discourse, that of Jerry Falwell and white, protestant evangelicals and fundamentalists.

By not treating the importance of Reagan's rhetoric, in particular, Lakoff overlooked and side-stepped the importance of God language to shaping how contemporary conservatives think. [perhaps for marketing purposes] But if one listens just a bit to Reagan's Acceptance Address at the 1980 Republican Convention—especially to his final lines, one is reminded of just how important God language is to the conservative model.

Reagan's 1980 run for the nomination allowed him to test his "new conservative" proposal. His explicit opposition to abortion appealed to both conservative Catholics and evangelicals, as did his invocation of God and prayer, so evident in the closing of his 1980 Republican convention address. As before, I quote here at some length but watch for how Reagan connects the concerns of economic conservatives with those of religious conservatives.

And, the time is now to redeem promises once made to the American people by another candidate, in another time and another place. He said,

"For three long years I have been going up and down this country preaching that government—federal, state, and local—costs too much. I shall not stop that preaching. As an immediate program of action, we must abolish useless offices. We must eliminate unnecessary functions of government...we must consolidate subdivisions of government and, like the private citizen, give up luxuries which we can no longer afford.

"I propose to you, my friends, and through you that government of all kinds, big and little, be made solvent and that the example be set by the president of the United State and his Cabinet." So said Franklin Delano Roosevelt in his acceptance speech to the Democratic National Convention in July 1932.

The time is now, my fellow Americans, to recapture our destiny, to take it into our own hands. But, to do this will take many of us, working together. I ask you tonight to volunteer your help in this cause so we can carry our message throughout the land.

Yes, isn't now the time that we, the people, carried out these unkept promises? Let us pledge to each other and to all America on this July day 48 years later, we intend to do just that.

I have thought of something that is not part of my speech and I'm worried over whether I should do it.

Can we doubt that only a Divine Providence placed this land—this island of freedom—here as a refuge for all those people in the world who yearn to breathe freely: Jews and Christians enduring persecution behind the Iron Curtain, the boat people of Southeast Asia, of Cuba and Haiti, the victims of drought and famine in Africa, the freedom fighters of Afghanistan and our own countrymen held in savage captivity.

I'll confess that I've been a little afraid to suggest what I'm going to suggest—I'm more afraid not to—that we begin our crusade joined together in a moment of silent prayer. (emphasis added)

God bless America.

In these lines one can see Reagan presenting himself, in league with religious conservatives, as the redeemer, the candidate of providence, calling for the redemption of the nation, for recapturing “our destiny” gone astray. His final paragraphs make clear what the “real” problem of current American sinfulness is: that praying in public has become risky, that we Americans no longer pray in public, and that we fail to acknowledge God and God’s providence. Here is Reagan shaping the cultural divide in terms of faith vs. unfaith, linking the Republican “crusade” to take back the White House with the restoration of religious faith among the American people, and tapping into religious conservatives’ resentment of the Supreme Court’s prayer-in-public-schools decisions of the early 1960s.

In these same closing paragraphs, however, Reagan uses F.D.R.’s own 1932 Convention Address to make his [Reagan’s] case against big government. While Reagan consistently affirmed the reality of God, God’s providence, and the importance of national piety to appeal to *social conservatives*, he also criticized “big government” with its waste and “welfare queens” in order to appeal to *economic conservatives*.

Reagan’s affirmation of both God’s power and providence on the one hand, and the importance of economic markets on the other helps to explain why conservatives after Reagan have either rejected or are silent on the subject of Evolution—they are protecting their coalition. Conservative political support for “creationism” and “intelligent design” movements protect the social and religious conservatives’ affirmation of the reality and power of God. “Teach the controversy,” the current occupant of the White House, said when asked whether “Intelligent Design” belonged in the science classroom.

At the same time, Christian Evangelical and Catholic conservatives never really criticize capitalism or the business community for the same reason—protecting the economic side of the conservative movement. Somewhat ironically, therefore, conservatives reject the scientific theory of Evolution because it challenges their assumption of an all-powerful father,

while embracing a form of social-Darwinism through their trust in market economics as a guide to public policy. Put yet more strongly and strangely, while the almighty father of traditional Christian theology provided the overarching umbrella of the conservative metaphorical system, market economics provided the vehicle of God's providential rule. Lakoff's model doesn't explain these coalition relationships as well. Things probably don't get *this* bizarre in Australia.

[Still, it is worth asking: how is it that Christian evangelicals and neo-liberal Catholics can square the operations of the market place with their conviction of a strong-father God? For a deeper explanation one has to turn to a tendency in post-Calvinist Protestant thought that equates "doing well" financially or economically with signs of God's election and favor.

Christian variations of the Gospel of Success are important markers in this evolving story, along with institutions like the Sunday-School movement, whose publications from the mid-1820s forward related stories of poor and orphaned children who became disciplined and successful by attending Sunday School, as well as other markers including phrases such as the "Protestant work ethic." This 19th and 20th century cultural motif of hard work views competition itself as a primary manifestation of the social-Darwinistic state of nature. In the Christian version of this economic narrative, Christianity provided the proper virtues and discipline necessary for success. Apart from Christianity, it was thought, persons tended to become slovenly, riff-raff, alcoholic, without character.² Over time, therefore, it has become possible for many to believe that God distributes his blessings (and curses) through the unpredictable "invisible hand" of the marketplace. Ironically, while the almighty father of traditional Christian theology provided the overarching umbrella of the conservative metaphorical system, market economics provided the vehicle of God's providential rule.]

Now, the public policy implications of this metaphorical structure now come into sharper focus. Because conservatives tend to believe that the market separates out winners

² See Lakoff on this point, 67.

and losers—and one *should*, therefore, be committed to an “opportunity” society—public policy is not obligated to deal with those whose opportunities did not pan out. Social programs like Welfare, or Social Security, according to this view, reward people not for succeeding but for failing to be disciplined savers, or disciplined achievers. “Equal opportunity,” while never actually present in fact, is always asserted as part of the American conservative creed (along with their opposition to Affirmative Action!) because of its corollary: individual responsibility. For conservatives, as for the traditional Christian, “salvation,” or “success” is an individual affair—stemming from humility, hard work, discipline, and other values stemming from Christian teaching. The almighty father, therefore, retains his power precisely as the one who distributes the blessings of the market-place to those whom he chooses—the elect—while the children demonstrate their obedience precisely by seeking their self-interest through individual hard work and competition, tempered by Christian virtue.

[The conservative rhetorical twinning of “obedience” and “competition” turned certain core aspects of Christian teaching on its head. The pursuit of self-interest, for example, was itself the very name of sin in the classics of Christian thought. Yet, once wedded to a public piety of divine providence, self-interested “competition”—loaded with the appropriate values of self-discipline and obedience—became a way of seeking God’s grace. To be sure, conservatives favor and encourage “charity” to the elderly and those unable to care for themselves as a private virtue and as a visible sign of one’s “salvation.” Yet, apart from such obvious cases of need, conservatives assume that failure is due to having “squandered” one’s opportunity—or that one did not work hard enough to *make* one’s opportunity, etc. Conservatives can welcome those who have led “liberal,” “permissive,” or “wasted” lives provided they turn themselves around and take responsibility for their actions; no form of social injustice can be recited as part of the slacker’s return to a life of discipline and right order.]

Combining several of these arguments, one can see why conservatives insist on only minimal government: first, because of its emphasis on individual responsibility and second because of its confidence in the market in selecting winners. For conservatives, programs like Social Security and Medicare, etc., interfere with the providence of God distributed through the working of the markets. Such programs are not simply too expensive for society, but run directly counter to the will of the strong-father. Moreover, if government takes more money than it needs, then it is interfering with one's responsibility to make the most of one's opportunity to be faithful to the father.³

Notice that Lakoff's basic metaphor: the Nation as Family remains intact in this analysis, but what Reagan emphasized was – one nation under God—and *that* God was the God of Christian evangelicals, fundamentalists, and conservative Roman Catholics who believed in natural law and order – wedded, of course, to the interests of big business—a free-market, trickle-down economic theory. And that remains true to this day in conservative politics—where belief in God is considered a “family value” and hallmark of the Republican party.

What about how liberals think?

If Lakoff's discussion of the strict-father approach to conservatism is problematic in what it leaves unexplained, Lakoff's treatment of how liberals think is even more troublesome. His argument for a “nurturing parent” model, while not entirely off base, is not at the heart of the liberal way of thinking. They begin, instead, with a theological vision informed by the modern period that affirmed democracy, modern philosophy, science and the language of a social gospel, namely, a humanity of equals—what the French revolution immortalized as *fraternite*.⁴

³ Compare Gingerich's “Opportunity Society” with Clinton's “Opportunity, Responsibility, and Community.”

⁴ Lakoff's discussion of John Rawls as the philosophical founder of modern liberalism (20-21) needs to be augmented with the contributions of liberal theology and the social gospel movement at least.

Taken as the primary metaphor for how liberals think, the affirmation that “all are created in the image of God” shapes a very different understanding of character and ethical obligations from what is found in the strong-father model. Liberals, for example, can accept and work with those who are not Christians or theists as equal partners in a way conservatives cannot. This is important from the outset, for moderate-to-liberal Christians frequently find themselves in ecumenical, inter-faith, and humanist company on issues of the public square. At one level, the rationale is constitutional. The U. S. Constitution guarantees the free-exercise of religion and rejects any official establishment of religion. Taking these twin themes seriously has led liberals to affirm a sense of mutual respect for other traditions—a respect that has led to explicitly religious efforts of ecumenical and interfaith dialogue. At a deeper level, however, liberals assert the essential equality of other persons—grounded in both Genesis 1:26 and the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence.

Because liberals believe that all are created in the image of God, they believe that all deserve a profound respect that goes far beyond a market-driven view of “equal opportunity” or mere social tolerance. The nurture, care, and growth of the human person are the primary ways—in the liberal model—that one attends to God. While liberals may appreciate the economic efficiency of markets they tend to intervene in markets when important social goals are at risk. Liberals do not mistake the market, or its fruits, for God or God’s blessings. For religious liberals, the tendency to equate market success with divine blessing is itself a form of idolatry. Markets are not in the image of God, people are. There is, thus, in the basic liberal model a qualitatively different kind of ethical priority than what is found in the conservative model. Here, caring for the neighbor is more than a private gesture of charity but the requirement of public policy.

An important historical marker in the development of American liberal thinking about markets was the Great Depression. While the theory of capitalism itself (dating back to Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*, 1776) had been associated with a commitment to

“liberalism,” the work of John Maynard Keynes (*The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*, 1936) which emphasized the importance of government intervention into markets, and thus of a “mixed economy” (part market, part government), was influential in shaping Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal approach to the economy. “Liberal” economic theory became associated with Keynesian theory, while the term “conservative” became associated with those who favored a strict free-market approach, unencumbered by government intervention.

For liberals, programs like Social Security and Medicare are important because they demonstrate concern for the well-being and just order of society; such programs help insure that all people have access to the basic goods of human life—food, clothing, shelter, and health care—and thus to full social participation in the life of the society.

To be sure, conservatives affirm that all are created in the image of God.⁵ However, for conservatives, this affirmation is clearly secondary to belief, first, in one all-powerful God (the insistence that this is a “Christian nation”), and second, in the mystery of divine providence as delivered through the invisible hand of the markets. For conservatives one is *really* made in the “image of God” only to the extent that one is obedient to the true strong-father.

Religious liberals, by contrast, tend to see the Providential activity of God not as an all-powerful ruler manipulating history—especially not by rewarding people through either financial markets or lotteries—but as the invisible power at work in the midst of human communities seeking wholeness for persons and justice for peoples of the world.

⁵ In a *New York Times* op-ed piece, published January 2, 2006, at A17, entitled ‘Nearer, My God, to the G.O.P.,” Joseph Loconte, a research fellow at the Heritage Foundation, warned Democrats to avoid matching Christian conservatives verse for verse in an attempt to reach out to religious voters. Instead, Loconte suggested that Democrats “might take a cue from the human-rights agenda of religious conservatives.” Setting aside for the moment my immediate question of whether Loconte thinks Jesse Helms, for example, had such a human-rights agenda, Loconte adds: “Evangelicals begin with the Bible’s account of the God-given dignity of every person.” That’s not correct in a way that Lakoff’s analysis helps to illuminate. Evangelicals don’t *begin* their version of a human rights agenda by affirming the “God-given dignity” of every person. They *begin* with an emphasis on the strong-father model of God and family.

Again, while Lakoff is correct to speak of a liberal model of nurturing parent, the parenting image doesn't get at the basic metaphor (i.e., the God/world relation) in the way the metaphor of "all people are created in the image of God" does. This latter metaphor structures a kind of trust in others, as opposed to the conservative model's basic suspicion of those outside "the family" and insistence on self-reliance. Because of that fundamental openness to the neighbor and the stranger, one can be even clearer about what the nurturing parent nurtures, i.e., openness and responsiveness to the world and to other people.

Such a position often means that liberals are slower to punish (e.g., they tend to be against things like "mandatory sentencing" and the death penalty) than conservatives. This, in turn, often leads to other charges from conservatives that liberals, by failing to attend to discipline, character, and punishment, are culturally "permissive," enabling an "anything goes" respect to moral issues such as abortion, pornography, gay rights, religious pluralism, and so on. But liberals *are* attending to discipline, to character, and to punishment—but they do so from a different starting place.

While liberals also believe the world is dangerous, the primary dangers stem, in their view, from the ways that wealth and power (what conservatives tend to identify with success and salvation) function to oppress and dismiss those who have not succeeded or who lie outside the "family" religion. Hence, liberals are frequently more concerned about the principle of equal justice for all—whether for gays and lesbians, or members of other races, or religious traditions other than those "established" by majorities or cultural traditions—than they are about principles of "law and order." In addition to the importance of FDR, therefore, one also sees the importance of the Civil Rights movement, and the rhetoric of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose theologically informed rhetoric of social change also empowered feminist and gay and lesbian calls for civil rights, and for deeper appreciation of cultural diversity.

Liberal openness to the world translates into the importance of education and the skills of critical thinking. Because “God” is understood not as controlling the world but as inspiring it, knowledge—scientific or philosophical—is not a threat to God’s reality or purpose. While conservatives tend to reject any knowledge, such as the scientific theory Evolution or historical criticism, that would challenge their foundational beliefs, liberals welcome such criticism as part of the process of seeking genuine wisdom and as part of the human obligation in recognizing the importance of others’ perspectives and the limitedness of one’s own.

While Lakoff’s focus on parenting models helps identify a contemporary set of metaphors that carries much of the cultural freight in our contemporary political debates, it also masks the profound role that religious traditions continue to play in public life. We won’t understand how conservatives and liberals *really* think in America until we grapple far more directly than Lakoff does with the major metaphors of our Christian heritage.

Paul Tillich argued the interpreting the God-World relation is the most fundamental task of theology. I think that that God-world relation is better able to make sense of our political and theological disputes between conservatives and progressives than Lakoff’s parent-child model.

Conservative political and theological discourse gives priority to God language in the Strict-Father model that establishes not only lines of authority and obedience but also boundary lines as well—a clear sense of who is in and is out, e.g. belief in dogma, literal Bible, and so on. Progressive speech begins not with God per se but with human beings and the earth created in the image of God, and possessing therefore an equal dignity, deserving of a profound respect—that is always the basis of non-abusive love. In other words, progressives move outside the “family” or “tradition” in which they have grown up in order to affirm the goodness of, and respect due to, a broader, more public set of concerns than what is affirmed or allowable by the Strict-Father conservative family.

Both models can address the same topics but will do so from different metaphorical starting points and therefore with different priorities. Progressives can affirm religious tradition and ritual but not to the point that it stifles or silences new human knowledge, creativity, and acknowledgment of wisdom in other traditions. They can also talk about God but will do so not as a ruling Father but more as a dynamic force or presence at work in the world. Conservatives can affirm the equality of all God's children, but it will insist that human dignity and equality is fully and rightly known only in obedience to God's authority as set forth in scripture, for example, or in obedience to the church, and so on.

What Difference Does Jesus Make?

By emphasizing Jesus' essential "union with the Father," Benedict demonstrates how conservatives think about Jesus—as one with the Father, and therefore, as well, one who as "Son" is perfectly obedient to the Father. When theological conservatives think about Jesus they first think about God—and it's Father-God.

In his obedience to the Father, Jesus models how *we also* ought to be obedient to the rightful authority of the church that speaks for God-in-Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Speaking of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, Benedict says that Jesus "takes his seat on the cathedra of the mountain. . . . Jesus sits on the cathedra of Moses. . . he sits there as the greater Moses, who broadens the covenant to include all nations." Moreover, Benedict is careful to point out that Jesus is not simply speaking for himself as an ordinary person. "The 'mountain' is the place where Jesus prays – where he is face-to-face with the Father. And that is exactly why it is also the place of his teaching, since his teaching comes forth from this most intimate exchange with the Father." And, as for obedience to this new law and teaching, Benedict writes: "The Sermon on the Mount is addressed to the entire world, the entire present and future, and yet it demands discipleship and can be understood and live out only by following Jesus and accompanying him on his journey." And whose "cathedra" might such authentic discipleship acknowledge? That's right Peter's.

There is a direct line between Benedict's understanding of Jesus and his 1999 document *Dominus Jesus* – the themes of which were reiterated again in recent months – that Christian churches not fully in accord with the Roman Church cannot be thought of as genuine churches of Jesus Christ in any whole or complete sense, primarily because they do not acknowledge the primacy of Peter.

So, if you ask Benedict what Good is Jesus in a Society of Many Faiths, the answer is easy, Jesus is superior to them all. And Jerry Falwell, were he still alive, would agree.

Liberals on the other hand, begin at the other pole by thinking about the world through the anthropological lens that all are created equal—a logic which moves more easily beyond the boundaries of race, gender, nation, and religion to affirm a common dignity that undercuts any *a priori* claim to hierarchical superiority.

So, you tell me: how would Jack Spong answer our question? What good is Jesus in a society of many faiths?

I have sought to understand Jesus as a boundary-breaker, as one who calls people to step outside the circles of their security systems. His was a life that recognized the reality that fear stifles humanity, builds protective walls, creates defining prejudices and erects religious systems designed to give security to chronically frightened people. To walk the Christ path is to be empowered to step outside and beyond these various human security systems. It is to walk beyond all religious forms that bind our humanity in order to enter the religionless world of a new humanity. It is to seek divinity not externally but as the deepest dimension of what it means to be human. It is to enter divinity only when we become free to give ourselves away. . . . (286)