Not in polite company. That's where you were not supposed to talk about either politics or religion. Perhaps it was because these two subjects were too important and would interrupt the small talk. Or maybe it was because they were potentially so divisive that they might spoil the party.

Well, that has changed over the years. Both politics and religion are hot topics these days. But now the discomfort seems to be discussing them together.

I recall, painfully, as an evangelical teenager being told by my church that Christian faith had nothing to do with either racism or war. (In truth, most of the good church people quietly supported both, succeeding in keeping their politics and religion separate.) But my heart was rising to the moral challenge of the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War.

The intuition that my faith did indeed have something to do with politics was the principal cause of my separation from the little church that had nurtured and raised me. Now in exile, I found a new home in the civil rights movement and the black community. There I learned what the relationship really was between the two forbidden topics in polite white society.

The civil rights movement was built on the foundation of the black churches. The illuminating oratory of Martin Luther King Jr. and the other preacher-activists of the movement made the integral connection between faith and politics clear.

I suppose it was inevitable that I would become a preacher-activist too. The nature of the intersection between religion and politics became a continual personal and vocational reflection.

The topic has now become more complicated. The evangelical folks I grew up with finally became involved in politics and now insist that faith indeed has real political implications. The issues that drew them in were abortion and the cultural breakdown of American society.

Their political involvement became quite alarming to many liberal Christians who had long insisted on the rightful relationship between religion and questions of public policy. It was one thing to support the religious call of black ministers to the barricades of civil rights. It was quite another to accept the religious right mobilizing on behalf of the unborn.
In his provocative book, *The Culture of Disbelief*, Yale law professor Stephen Carter reflects on the thorny problem. Carter contends that a prejudice against the influence of religious commitment upon political issues now characterizes many sectors of American society, including the media, academia, the law, and the corridors of political power.\(^1\)

Religious conviction is trivialized and becomes quickly suspect when it seems to be affecting matters political. While disagreeing with many of the tenets of the religious right, Carter defends their seeking to affect politics from their own faith perspective.

An African American and a constitutional lawyer, Carter claims that the American doctrine of the separation of church and state forbids the establishment of any religion by the state but not the influence of religious values in the public square. Along with others, such as historian Garry Wills.\(^2\) Carter suggests that religious faith has always helped shape American politics and that such influence can serve very positive as well as terribly negative ends.

Spiritual and religious values, indeed, can contribute in a time of social crisis to a renewed vision of politics. Yet, one need not be a member of a church, synagogue, or mosque to appreciate that contribution. In fact, one need not be a religious person at all. Anyone who believes that moral issues are at stake in our political choices can understand the need for renewal. Most people would probably agree that beneath the social, economic, cultural, and political problems we confront lie critical questions concerning our deepest values. Our crisis is also one of the spirit-deeper than just the turns and twists of secular politics.

A new politics will require the spiritual resources of our best moral and religious traditions. More and more people, religious or not, are searching for a new spirituality as well as for a new politics. The two must be joined and proceed together. The new spirituality that could guide our search for a new politics will most likely be found in the renewal of the moral and spiritual traditions we already know. In America, that will come from rediscovering our Jewish and Christian biblical traditions as well as learning from Native American spiritualities, appreciating the insights of other faith experiences, and remembering the moral imperatives of the political philosophies that shaped the founding of our nation. All have direct contributions to make in recovering our political ethics.

History and experience tell us that religious vision can turn into sectarian divisiveness, justifying some of our worst human behavior. On the other hand, our best religious impulses can remind us of what kind of people we really want to be; authentic faith can lift us to the heights of our humanity. Religious vision that awakens basic values can enable us to transcend narrow self-interest and embrace the common good rather than reducing things to their lowest common denominator and negotiating factional interests.

I view politics from the vantage point of my own religious tradition - in particular from the perspective of the biblical prophets and the teaching of Jesus. But given the prominence of the religious right in contemporary American politics, any reference to the Bible prompts many to mistrust and suspicion.
Yet I believe the prophetic biblical tradition can serve as a fundamental alternative to both the limits of secular humanism and the oppressions of religious fundamentalism. The religion of the prophets can help us shape a politics of conscience. As a foremost scholar of the biblical prophets, theologian Walter Brueggemann writes,

After the best efforts of self-indulgent existentialism, technological positivism, revolutionary Marxism, and free-market ideology, we may yet discern that the covenantal discourse of the Bible, preserved as it is by [a] confessing community, is as close as we can come to a genuinely public language. That discernment can happen, however, only when it is unambiguously clear that the speakers and advocates of such covenantal discourse are not proselytizing or serving parochial ends -- and that requires a self-emptying compassion.³

Such a voice, says Brueggemann, must be uncompromisingly bold but not sectarian,

speaking the human agenda in a way that honors our social pluralism, in a way that touches our shared human requirements of love, mercy, justice, peace, and freedom. These are the property of no confessional truth and the monopoly of no confessional community.⁴

Spiritual and religious values should influence our perception of and participation in politics. But while religion belongs in the political world, religion and ideology are not good partners. Stephen Carter warns against reaching conclusions on political grounds and, afterward, finding religious justification for them, instead of letting genuine religious conviction shape honest political judgments.⁵

Perhaps the best test of the spiritual integrity of our political commitments is their predictability or unpredictability. Religious perspectives on political matters must not be pre-able on the basis of prior ideological biases. We have seen ugh of that on both ends of the political spectrum. For much too long, conservative evangelicals have been the Republican Party at prayer, liberal religious leaders have been easily confused with the left wing of the Democratic Party, and even grass roots religious peace and justice activists have ⁷always distinguished themselves from the politics of other secular and solidarity movements. And, to be honest, most of have fallen into such political predictability from time to time, especially during the height of the contentious Cold War years.

But this is a new time. It is a time when the spiritual nature f the many crises we face is increasingly clear to many people. The failure of ideology on all sides and the now dysfunctional character of old political categories are also increasingly apparent. If discerned truthfully, religious faith will not be squeezed into predetermined positions of left, right, or center - or whatever new ones may emerge in the changing world of secular politics. At its best, religious perspective and conviction will transform categories by bringing independent moral values and social conscience to the public square.
New Openings

Emory University scholar-in-residence Eugene D. Genovese recently remarked on the subject of religion and politics. Genovese, a widely respected intellectual of the left, said, Liberalism is over. The Left is dead. Politics will be principally shaped by religious communities. The only question is, will they be repressive and totalitarian religious communities or lucid, progressive ones.\(^6\)

In an equally surprising development, the progressive magazine *Z* declared in its January 1994 issue, “It is long past time that the American Left reevaluated its judgment that religion is unadulterated superstition.” The article goes on to describe the historically religious roots of today's progressive egalitarian movements and the radical character of Jesus!\(^7\)

*Z*’s writer suggests that progressive Christian movements could be "the salvation of the secular left."

> Only a religiously based radicalism can succeed in winning a major sector of American sympathy. The American people will not sacrifice their lives for a secular utopia that does not fulfill their emotional and spiritual needs. Although the American Left seems to have little awareness of its own religious vision, the American people do know what they want, what Jesus wanted, a universal community of peace, love, and justice sustained by the experience of a loving God.\(^8\)

These are surprising and interesting developments. On the other side of the political spectrum, large evangelical groups like the relief and development organization World Vision and the student-focused Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship are making strong connections between faith and social justice. Especially important is their commitment to confront racism with Christian opposition.

Despite the popular identification of the evangelical community with the religious right, social concern among evangelicals is growing with new energy and power, especially among the poor and the young. In many developing countries, congregations of poor evangelical and Pentecostal Christians are providing new ferment for social justice. Across the old political spectrum, the possibilities for new forms of convergence are becoming more clear.

When religion becomes conformed to the culture, it can no longer provide a reliable path to spirituality, and our public life loses its moral compass. The two dominant forms of religion in our time have failed to provide the spiritual guidance that might inform a politics of moral conscience. Both conservative and liberal religion have become culturally captive forces that merely cheer on the ideological camps with which each has identified. And religion as a political cheerleader is invariably false religion.

Conservative religion has become preoccupied with words and dogma. Correct religious language and doctrine have re-placed an emphasis upon faithful living and action. A certain lifestyle is associated with conservative religion— but it reveals more about the cultural and political biases of its adherents than about the meaning of authentic faith.
Personal piety has become an end in itself instead of the energy for social justice. Religious language has little or no connection to moral action in society.

In a bargain for power, some conservative religious leaders have aligned themselves with reactionary political elements, creating a particularly bizarre and frightening combination of religion and politics. In the most materialistic culture in history, conservative religion has produced a gospel of prosperity. In a society whose inequitable distribution of resources has become obscene, conservative religion has become a defender of the wealthy. Within the greatest military superpower in the world, conservative religion has become a primary advocate for extending American hegemony and a consistent defender of the nation’s every war.

In an already divided and polarized society, the religious right has drawn even firmer boundaries. It has been a white religion, has fueled the backlash against women's rights, and has used blatant caricatures and attacks on homosexuals as highly successful fundraising techniques. The confusion and rejection of Christian faith caused by this unholy alliance of religious appeals and right-wing politics are now pervasive.

Liberal religion has lost its spiritual center. It has become both reactive to conservative religion and captive to the shifting winds of the secular culture. Liberal activism has often lacked any real dynamic of personal conversion and, therefore, transformative power. With liberal religion, social action in the world can become severed from its roots in faith, producing a language and practice that seem more bureaucratic and ideological than spiritual.

Liberal religion has made its own pacts with political power and has aligned itself with the liberal power centers of the society. Often its "political correctness" reflects the values of liberal elites more than the authentic voice of the powerless, in whose name liberal religion often claims to speak. Reforming our language for the sake of, for example, racial and gender justice is important. But ideological conformity undermines prophetic integrity.

Polarized religious leaders have behaved much like the politicians they have been allied with. The leaders of the religious right were the virtual chaplains of the White House during the Reagan and Bush years. The conservative presidents were the headline speakers at evangelical events, and the television preachers enjoyed unprecedented access to political power, along with honored places at Republican national conventions.

After the Democratic victory in 1992, many conservative evangelicals virtually identified the Clintons with the Anti-Christ (seeming especially offended by Hillary's role and power). At the same time, liberal Protestant leaders glowed in their newfound access to the corridors of power. Former diatribes against the government were quickly toned down in favor of a much happier relationship on "the inside." Most religious leaders would rather be invited to testify before a Congressional committee or have breakfast in the White House than be arrested for protest outside on the street. With few notable exceptions, the involvement of both conservative and liberal religious leaders in politics has left the ground of a genuinely independent and prophetic political witness largely unexplored.
One wonders how a president or government might truly be served by dialogue with religious leaders that encourages a serious accountability to political morality and offers prophetic insight to open up new directions and options. One wonders, too, whether any president would really want such a dialogue. In biblical language, does King David ever really want to have a serious conversation with the prophet Nathan? Uncomfortable topics tend to come up, like the bombing of children in Baghdad, which presidents from both parties have been willing to do.

Yet, there are precedents for such a relationship. One thinks of the biblical stories of Joseph and Daniel, captive slaves whose wisdom commended them to foreign rulers. There is also the modern example of the relationship between Martin Luther King Jr. and Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. The civil rights leader proved a prophetic goad to these powerful presidents, even though they both sought to undermine or discredit his leadership.

PROPHETIC SPIRITUALITY

Prophetic spirituality is the alternative to the current manifestations of conservative and liberal religion. Much older than either of the contemporary religious options, the prophetic biblical tradition is rooted in the Hebrew sages, Jesus, and the early Christian community. Prophetic spirituality has found expression in virtually every renewal and reform movement in history that has sought to return to radical religious roots.

Many religious traditions have their prophetic streams. Jewish and Christian faiths play leading roles in the history of the West, and the recovery of the prophetic character integral to both of them has much to offer our present crisis. The contemporary but sometimes shallow New Age explorations of Eastern and indigenous traditions indicate the cultural hunger for spiritual experience. Various Twelve-Step programs and recovery groups offer much-needed spiritual resources as well. But changes in consciousness will not be enough, without a consciousness that changes the world. The recovery of a prophetic biblical spirituality could offer some unique possibilities in renewing our moral values and reshaping our political life.

For years now, the religious right has controlled the public debate on politics and morality. Conservatives have tapped into people's longing for a new emphasis on values in public life. But that longing is for alternatives much wider and deeper than the narrow interpretations offered by the evangelical right wing. The extremism of the religious right suggests that the only alternatives are either to become totally secular or to subscribe to religious bigotry. A moral vacuum is waiting to be filled. People are now searching for another way, one that takes seriously the fundamental question of values—a question that lies just beneath the surface of political discussion.

Over the last few decades, a real alternative in American religious life has emerged, unrecognized by the media. While the press has focused on the loud voices of the religious right and limited its field of vision to the conservative tenor of the last several years, a prophetic spiritual movement for social change has been steadily growing and is making a difference in the institutions of both religion and society.

This spiritual movement existed before the religious right burst upon the national scene.
with Ronald Reagan's 1980 presidential victory, and the more prophetic commitment it
represents has grown ever since. It relates biblical faith to social transformation; personal
conversion to the cry of the poor; theological reflection to care for the environment; core
religious values to new economic priorities; the call of community to racial and gender
justice; morality to foreign policy; spirituality to politics; and, at its best, it transcends the
categories of liberal and conservative that have captivated both religion and politics.

The effects of this progressive spirit are being felt in virtually every constituency of the
American churches and in the Jewish community. This spiritual movement reaches out in
respectful partnership with other faith traditions beyond the religious mainstream of the
society. And it invites a new dialogue between the religious and nonreligious about the
shape of social and political morality. A renewed ecumenical community has the capacity
to offer new visions to a society desperately in need of them, on the basis of what South
African Archbishop Desmond Tutu calls "the spirituality of transformation." 9

The Religion of the Prophets

When we take the biblical tradition seriously, we can easily discern the relevance and
timeliness of prophetic religion to the conflicts and questions that daily bombard us. For
example, the biblical prophets encourage us to be suspicious of concentrations of wealth
and power; to mistrust ideological rationales that justify subordinating persons to causes;
and especially to become sensitive to the poor, the disenfranchised, the stranger, and the
outsider. The Bible radically relativizes all claims to ownership and domination of land
and resources by asserting that “the Earth is the Lord's” and its abundance intended to be
shared by all of God's children. As for democracy, the biblical view of the human
condition suggests that power and decision making should be decentralized and
accountable, not because people are essentially good but because we so often are not.

Had we been listening to the prophetic biblical tradition, we would have known that you
can't have an economic system that leaves masses of people behind without engendering
endless conflict. We would have known that growth and progress that abuse, exploit, and
degrade the earth will eventually poison our lives and choke us to death. We would have
known that we cannot deny human dignity to our neighbors because of their race, class,
or gender without endangering our own souls. We would have known that a society can't
place its ultimate security in weapons and technology, rather than in justice and integrity,
without falling victim to the social theft of arms races and the perils of escalating
violence. We haven't really been listening to the religious traditions to which we have
given cultural lip service, and the logic of the social systems we have created instead is
killing us.

A Sense of Community

Central to prophetic religious traditions is the idea of covenant. The moral requirements
of relationship and community serve to correct our human tendencies toward individual
selfishness and exploitation of our neighbors and the earth. Today the fundamental
covenant that holds life together has been profoundly damaged. We have little sense of
community with our five billion neighbors, scant knowledge of a harmonious relationship
with the ecosystem, and, at root, little meaningful experience of our identity as the
children of God. Our deep need is to find a way to connect. The broken relationships

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must be healed; everything now depends upon our making connections.

The broken covenant can be seen in my own Washington, D.C., neighborhood, just blocks away from the White House, where babies are born with AIDS and addicted to drugs; where children live without the basics of health care, education, housing, or family; and where the young are shot down in their own streets before they have a chance to grow up. We see it, not only in urban areas that have become war zones, but also in rural communities that are struggling to survive.

It's overwhelmingly visible in the so-called Third World, where the poor are suffering and dying almost beyond our capacity to count or care. Our denial of harsh realities ultimately denies our connection to our neighbor and any sense of a whole or holy life. Both at home and abroad, whole areas of the world and huge segments of humanity are forgotten.

A great yawning chasm has grown up between us, and we have likewise become alienated from the earth itself. The terrible separation threatens the fragile threads that connect us to each other and to the rest of creation. We can all feel the alienation. Our neighbor is unknown to us, and the only bond we have left is fear.

When politics loses its vision, religion loses its faith, and culture loses its soul; life becomes confused, cheap, and endangered. Nothing less than a restoration of the shattered covenant will save us. That will require a fundamental transformation of our ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. At the core of prophetic religion is transformation - a change of heart, a revolution of the spirit, a conversion of the soul that issues forth in new personal and social behavior.

Historically, religion has been a source of guidance for spiritual and moral values. Transcendence calls us to accountability and gives us a sense of meaning and purpose we are unable to find on our own. Without ethics rooted in transcendent reality, moral sensibility becomes merely a matter of shifting cultural consensus.

PROPHETIC IMAGINATION

We are suffering today not just from greed, injustice, and violence, but from a lack of imagination. For lack of vision, we are perishing. We need new visions and dreams; our future depends upon fresh imagination. We do, indeed, find ourselves in an in-between time; the old order is passing away and the new is begging to be born.

But what does that mean today? What is vision, anyway? Webster's Dictionary says vision is "the act or power of imagination." 10 And it defines imagination as "creative ability," the "ability to confront and deal with a problem," and "poetic creation." 11 Imagination comes from "what is remembered" or from what has been experienced only in part, the dictionary says. Oxford's says to imagine is "to picture" something new, 12 and vision is "something which is seen otherwise than by ordinary sight." 13 -- seeing more than meets the eye.
What does that tell us? First, we learn that vision depends on imagination—the ability to see what cannot be seen in the present and, indeed, the capacity to picture a new reality. Vision requires (a) using more than ordinary sight, (b) being rooted in a historical memory, and (c) building upon some experience of what you are seeking to envision. Such vision is indispensable to any society, but especially one in crisis, both for problem solving and for creativity.

New social visions and dreams thus will be rooted in our core values, derived from our religious and cultural traditions, and rooted in the moral sensibilities we still possess and the memory of basic values still in our collective consciousness—even though that memory may be fading. Vision will depend upon social innovation and will derive, in part, from those places where new social experiments based on remembered values are already occurring.

The alternative moral and political vision that our social crisis requires is unlikely to come from the pinnacles of power. Prophetic visions almost never do. The task of prophetic politics is most often left to faith communities and movements of conscience working from the bottom up to change people's lives and redirect a society.

A prophetic and inclusive spirituality could speak to the hunger among us for both personal and social transformation, and it could bring many people together. Such a movement must be pluralistic and nonsectarian, respectful of other faith and moral traditions, and open to meaningful cooperation. An independent spiritual voice for social justice and reconciliation is much needed now, and it is something the religious community could help provide.

Prophetic Politics

The good news is that such a voice can already be heard. This prophetic spiritual movement speaks the language of both social justice and personal responsibility. In economics, it takes us beyond the bottom line of profit or the stagnation of bureaucracy to an economic ethic rooted in the religious requirements of community. On the environment, this deeper biblical perspective transcends old notions of either exploitation or protection and proposes a theology of relationship to the earth.

Such a prophetic perspective sees racism and sexism as spiritual as well as social sins and calls for repentance. In foreign relations, it puts human rights over national self-interest and seeks alternatives to war as the familiar solution to the inevitable conflicts between nations. While standing as a much needed alternative to the theocratic impulses of the religious right, this new movement of religious conscience will, nonetheless, insist on the vital connection between politics and morality. In so doing, it will provide a social reservoir of what Walter Brueggemann has named “prophetic imagination.”

Over the past few decades, this spiritually based activism has become visible in religious efforts to end the threat of nuclear war, in congregations providing sanctuary to Central American refugees or building new houses for the homeless, in the creation of dynamic church-based coalitions for community organizing, and in religious efforts to save children, rebuild families, and renew the creation. In both cities and rural areas across the...
country, the number of spiritually based ventures and coalitions to heal and rebuild local communities is beyond counting.

After years of very limited results from institutional ecumenical dialogues, a vital ecumenism is emerging between people who have found one another while putting their faith into action. A new faith community has emerged in urban ministry centers, homeless shelters, and soup kitchens; in street protests and jail cells; on racial and ecological battlegrounds; in prayer and Bible study groups; and in diverse experiments in community and spiritual renewal. What has often been expressed as "prophetic protest" now has the capacity to be a vital source of "prophetic vision" as well. Out of religious values and moral concerns, new social and economic alternatives are emerging.

This movement of prophetic conscience is political without being ideological. Predictable and party-line politics is anathema to authentic prophetic witness. Refusing partisan politics may be one of the most important contributions of a prophetic vision. A truly independent religious, moral, and ethical perspective has much to contribute in shaping a new kind of politics, and we must make the nature of that contribution increasingly clear.

This new prophetic spirituality has yet to be named, but the media should move beyond old and inadequate labels to describe it. It draws evangelicals with a compassionate heart and a social conscience. It brings together mainline Protestants who desire spiritual revival and justice. It invites Catholics who seek a spirituality for social change. It includes African-American, Latino, Asian, and Native American faith communities who are working to shape a more pluralistic and just society. It has the capacity to bring Christians, Jews, Muslims, and other religious communities together in a dialogue and cooperation based on the respect and contribution of each one's particularities rather than on a bland religious reductionism. And it attracts those who, long alienated from established religion, are hungry for a personal and communal spirituality to undergird their struggle to live more justly.

Prophetic spirituality will always challenge the system at its roots and offer genuine alternatives based on values from our truest religious, cultural, and political traditions. Some potential constituencies from which such alternatives have already begun to emerge include the poor themselves as they become conscious of the causes of their oppression and organized in their efforts to change it; the religious community where the renewal of faith is perceived to have social and political consequences; artists and poets who are striking a new chord in popular culture; community leaders determined to renew the practice of democracy; and the increasing number of working and middle-class families who painfully experience the failure of the system's promises but reject demagogic appeals to scapegoat other victims. A different future will be constructed not by merely shuffling the elites at the top, but rather by transforming values and action from below among such people and their communities.

The politics we most need right now is the “politics of community.” In that birthing process, a prophetic spiritual network -- across the lines of race, class, gender, and region -- can act as the midwife of new possibilities.
The prophetic vocation is to challenge the old while announcing the new. Like the prophets, we must call certainty into question. The biblical prophets always had a twofold task. First, they were bold in telling the truth and proclaiming the justice that is rooted in God. They named the idols that had led the people astray and unmasked their destructive reality. And they called the people to return to their true selves and purpose, to reject their false gods, and to remember who they were as the children of God.

But in addition to truth telling, the prophets had a second task. They held up an alternative vision; they helped the people to imagine new possibilities.

Solidarity activist Adam Michnik used to say, "We live as if there is political space." In the worst years of the struggle for democracy in Poland, there was no political space. But by living as if there was, the Solidarity workers helped create that political space.

Today, we need those who are willing to live as if an alternative vision is possible. Even when the possibility of real change seems quite dim -- and especially then -- history needs people who believe that change is possible and are willing to bet their lives on it. That often takes a good dose of faith.

A number of transformations are now absolutely essential. In many places, such transformations are already under way. Together, they could turn us around and set our feet on a new path. They are central to the meaning of prophetic politics today.

Reconnecting personal values to political morality is the first step. Healing family life, asserting the covenantal character of our relationships, and rediscovering the preciousness of our children are all crucial for rebuilding our communities and reestablishing integrity in our public life.

Our addiction to materialism must be healed. We can be freed from the falsehood that the accumulation and consumption of things are the substance and measure of human life.

Our alienation from the rest of creation must be overcome. We can be converted from the idea that the earth belongs to us; we can live as if we are part of a creation that belongs to God. Our assumption that the world's created abundance is ours to use and use up, to own and divide, to exploit and destroy, can be replaced with the values of stewardship and equity.

Our ethic of profit can be transformed by an ethic of community as the foundation of our economic system. We can live as if social goods were more highly valued than consumer goods in measuring our quality of life.

We can squarely confront and repent of our sins of racism and sexism, correcting the oppression of people of color and women in our personal behavior, cultural attitudes, and social structures. By opening ourselves to a genuinely multicultural and gender-equal future based on justice and opportunity we will rediscover ourselves as a nation.
Genuine citizen participation can replace passive public polling as the defining practice of our political system. The dominant power of money over the political process can be broken and wealth removed as the primary key to government influence. The hold of media conglomerates over the flow of information and political debate can be exposed and public discussion opened to plural voices.

Our wasteful and destructive militarism can be reversed as we begin to place our security in domestic equity, international justice, multilateral cooperation, and the persistent negotiation of our inevitable human conflicts -- not in weapons of technological destruction.

Finally, we will begin to see and feel the connections between us all and with the earth and come to understand that, one way or another, our destinies are irrevocably tied together.

We need a new vision today. We need vision to provide us with a feeling of purpose, an assurance of meaning, a way of bonding, and a sense of direction. Vision connects us to the past and points us toward the future, which is what gives the present its truest significance.

We need to regain our bearings and find the values that can hold people together, give us a common sense of purpose, and point the way forward. We need to remember where we've come from, discover who we are, and together decide where we're going.

We need to understand the connections between all the issues we face and the spiritual foundations that undergird them. We must begin to restore the covenant we've lost with our neighbors on this planet and with the creation itself. The vision we now require is nothing short of a new covenant. At root, we need to return to our spiritual identity as the children of God.

There is an alternative -- the message of hope in a hopeless time. And we can live as if that new vision is possible.

Ordinary people can create the visions we need and put them into practice. We need more than new ideas; we need to build new communities at the local level. We can't be content to be better informed about the problems of the world; we must discover how our lives can make a difference.

The world will not change until we do; personal and social transformation are inextricably linked together. That is the wisdom of the spiritual and social movements whose legacies endure. New politics and new spirituality can only emerge together. We must now make that vital connection clear.

Prophetic spirituality can offer a vision for that transformation. Through stories and parables, instead of blueprints and ideologies, we hope to point the way toward a different kind of future.

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We stand at a political crossroads, and critical choices must now be made. Those choices are at heart religious, insofar as they will reveal our most fundamental values and moral sensibilities. The road we take will determine the kind of people we will become and the nature of the societies in which we will live. In short, the decisions we make will decisively shape the quality of life for ourselves and our children's children. The Hebrew Scripture says it well: "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live." 16
NOTES


9 Archbishop Desmond Tutu introduced the idea of moving the church toward a "spirituality of transformation" in a statement issued after a midterm sabbatical. In it he talked of shifting emphasis to "that of seeking to strengthen the inner life of the church, of pouring oil and balm on wounds, of nurturing our people for the tasks of transformation" ("Setting New Priorities," *Bishopcourt Update*, 18 June 1992, 3). The statement is available from the Office of the Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, "Bishopcourt," 16 Bishopcourt Drive, Claremont, Cape 7700 South Africa.


16 Deuteronomy 30:19b NRSV.