

## **Marianne Williamson's All-American Grace**

We are told, much too frequently for many people's taste, that the United States is a Christian nation. Of course, this "truth" is told primarily by those who use their religion as a police officer uses their nightstick on a mouthy protester. Alternatively, we are reminded of the nation's Christianity by prosperity preachers whose bank accounts depend on the pretense that one's spiritual worth is dependent on one's material worth. Then there are those who, taking Max Weber's warning that the ultimate capitalist religion no longer needs a god because the accumulation of wealth has replaced such a being with the "spirit" of capitalism.

Most readers are probably having visions of right-wing radio and television preachers at a prayer breakfast with Donald Trump providing the benediction before they dig into their breakfast sandwiches ordered by the gross from McDonald's. To Trump's right are Joel Osteen and the ghost of Billy Graham breaking bread and talking about their dental work; Richard Nixon smiles up from hell. The thing is, though, not all today's nonsense about the special place god holds in their heart for the United States comes from the right wing. Indeed, one can hear many a liberal politician mix a little god and spirituality into their speeches no matter what sins they committed the night before. It's part of the tenets so many US citizens believe in the name of American exceptionalism.

The 2020 election cycle, which began way too early, includes the Christian Zionism of the Trumpists and most of the Republican party. The ultimate expression of faith for this group is the Apocalypse and Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Donald Trump's recent tweet that

seemed to accept his coronation as the King of Israel by the ultraright wing radio host Wayne Allan Root. Too the Christian Zionists, this must certainly mean the Four Horsemen are even closer than they were after Trump recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. On the Democratic side, the 2020 campaign features another uniquely US take on religion. It is the New Age manifestation of what Harold Bloom defined as the American religion—a marriage of the Pentecostal belief that god lives inside each of us and the seemingly unique American idea that one can become whatever they want. In the case of most US residents, it seems that the latter usually means they want to be as rich as the rich people they see on television. The candidate who represents this for the Democrats is Marianne Williamson, the new age hustler with a social conscience.

Williamson's spirituality is not racist like so many of her right-wing fellows, nor is it sexist. It is open to all who are willing to accept its essential message: one can change their world and place in that world by perceiving their world differently. Then, one must work to manifest that new perception. Although she began her spiritual career by reading and interpreting another person's interpretation of Jesus' gospels in the New Testament, it seems safe to say that what Williamson is selling is secular and non-denominational. It also preaches social justice in a manner reminiscent of various Catholic theologians and priests. However, it remains insufficient and, to put it nicely, utopian.

Karl Marx wrote in his introduction to *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* that religion represented "...at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a

heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions.” In other words, the reason people turn to religious faith is because of the nature of their existence on earth. Under capitalist systems, that existence is one that at its worst leads to an early, yet lingering death, with nothing to show for it. It is a life where one’s only value is determined by the capitalist class and is reduced solely to an individual’s labor. Furthermore, that labor itself is alienating and with little or no spiritual or emotional satisfaction. Marx understood this increasing alienation resulted from the ever-greater automation of the tools designed to create goods and the increasing separation of the fabricators from the finished product. He considered this a byproduct of capitalism's innovation and need to squeeze every last bit of surplus value from a worker’s labor. Williamson acknowledges the alienation of contemporary labor. Her solution, however, tells us to change our perception of that alienation. In other words, change the way you understand your exploitation, but don’t try to change the material reasons for it. Many modern workers have heard similar suggestions at so-called mindfulness workshops. These workshops dispense the idea that we should undertake each and every activity of the day with an awareness not usually assigned to mundane tasks. In other words, we should change our perception of such tasks, thereby making them something they are not. Not only does this let the bosses off the hook, it pretends that the worker’s position in the corporation is the same as the owners and management. Even though the worker is an autonomous, self-realized human being, their existence as an economic entity means they are directed to goals and activities that are dictated by the those who own the means of production. One does not change this essential fact by changing one’s perception of their work.

**Not Quite Pie in the Sky**

You will eat bye and bye  
In that glorious land above the sky  
Work and pray, live on hay  
You'll get pie in the sky, bye and bye  
-Joe Hill IWW Songbook

There are many decent things Marianne Williamson says. Her impulse to help others is certainly the best of them. On the other hand, her faith in capitalism denotes either that she really doesn't understand the essential foundation of capitalism--the pursuit of profit--or she just prefers to pretend it's not really as bad as it looks. Given her financial success, either possibility seems possible. After all, how could such a decent person as herself be engaged in a system that depends on the exploitation of most of humanity?

Her solution is a solution that addresses the symptoms of the problem, but glosses over the problem itself. Her call for a makeover of the current politics in the US acknowledges its moral vacuity, but not its material base. Williamson believes, like most every other US politician, that her nation is exceptional. "America," she writes. "Has been a vessel for the great Work from its inception.". Essentially ignoring the slave trade and native genocide the country is actually based on, she tells her readers that they should join her on a road of high and enlightened purpose. If we take this road, the nation's material wealth will "take care of itself.". Not only does this represent a gross misunderstanding of how capitalism actually works for most people, it is a straight out lie.

While her policy proposals are in some ways comparable to many of Bernie Sanders proposals, it is important to look at her core beliefs, her motivation. Most importantly, it is important to emphasize that she has no apparent skepticism about capitalism and its ultimate ability to be

used for good. Although she attacks the current neoliberal stage of capitalism and its need to privatize everything, she considers this capitalist phase as something that can be reformed within the superstructure of capitalism itself. There is no hint of a socialist thought in Ms. Williamson's worldview. Instead, as noted before, it seems to be framed by these two classically north American Protestant settler concepts: God is outside the world and in the world. This god cares about the world, especially the United States. Also, this god is inside each and every one of us and it is this that gives us the power to be whatever we want to be. These beliefs ignore a basic fact. If one is working for someone else to pay their bills and take care of family, they are not able to be whatever they want to be.

Like almost every other liberal to left candidate, Williamson refuses to acknowledge that we need something more than a prayer, more than a belief that we can be better, more than a change in direction. We need to fight the powers destroying the planet and its inhabitants. Liberal reform leaves the political and economic infrastructure intact. The rich and powerful are not afraid of those who merely want to make the system work better for those besides themselves. Indeed, they welcome the distraction while ice caps melt, families flee hunger and violence for concentration camps and desert treks, and working people in the homeland incur debt that can never be paid just to go back to work.

Ultimately, Marianne Williamson's answers at the debates and speeches on the campaign trail are founded in a system of spiritual claptrap for the liberal voter for whom there is no other economic system but some form of capitalism. Her (and their) faith is in a system that has proven it cannot be reformed. " We are part of the American river of destiny, running through time and carrying with it the extraordinary gift of one great idea: that there can be a land where

all are free to be and to become their essential selves.” Like Marx, she discusses the alienation people feel from their labor. Also, like Marx, she seems to understand that the worker ultimately loses their ability to determine their destinies or even to be the director of their own actions in such a system. She isn’t promising pie in the sky, but she is suggesting one can manifest a similar pie here on earth via her spiritual path. Williamson's prayer is that we will supersede this alienation by making our servitude meaningful as a means towards self-fulfillment. Marx rejects this essentially Christian notion knowing that the only way to end the alienation is by changing the material reality. In other words, by ending the capitalist system of wage slavery.

While it is reasonably certain that a revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist system is not in the offing--and that no US presidential candidate would be leading it if it was--Williamson's spiritual over material reality approach is, while uniquely American, unrealistic and doomed to fail in the long run.

Marianne Williamson is a left liberal answer to the right-wing preachers like Billy Graham and Pat Robertson. She is the Jesus who threw the moneychangers out of the temple to their John Calvin. Her spiritual message is 2019 USA's sigh of the oppressed creature, its heart of a heartless world, and soul of soulless conditions. She is this Democratic campaign’s opium of the people.