More than a century ago, Dostoevsky wondered, "Can civilized men believe?" Today, cultural observer Os Guinness wonders the reverse: "Can unbelieving men be civilized?" To paraphrase another of Dostoevsky's questions, "Can we be good without God?"

Of course we can, presume most Americans, seventy-four percent of whom answered "yes" when Gallup asked, "Can a person be a good and ethical person if he or she does not believe in God?" Moreover, religion hardly provides immunity from greed, lust, and bigotry. Examples come easily to mind of faith and dishonorable character—a televangelist's luxurious mansions with gold-plated bathroom fixtures, Bible-quoting Ku Klux Klanners, apartheid defenders, gay bashers, and reactionary Christians who seem to equate God's will with government indifference to the poor. As Madeleine L'Engle lamented, "Christians have given Christianity a bad name." The same could be said of peace-sabotaging Muslims and Jews. Every religion, every political party, and every social movement must endure those who embarrass it, who give skeptics like Richard Dawkins cause for seeing faith as "one of the world's great evils, comparable to the smallpox virus, but harder to eradicate."

People of faith are, for whatever reasons, somewhat more traditionally moral—more honest and law-abiding and less hedonistic. But are they more actively
compassionate? Or are they mostly self-righteous hypocrites?

People often wonder about Christianity, which has a curious history of links with both love and hate. On one side are Bible-thumping slave owners, Ku Klux Klanners, and apartheid defenders. On the other are the religious roots of the antislavery movement, the clergy’s leadership of the American and South African civil rights movements, and the church’s establishment of universities and Third World medical care.

A midcentury profusion of studies of religion and prejudice revealed a similarly mixed picture. On one hand, American church members expressed more racial prejudice than nonmembers, and those with conservative Christian beliefs expressed more than those who were less conservative. For many, religion seemed a cultural habit, a part of their community tradition, which also happened to include racial segregation.

On the other hand, the most faithful church attenders expressed less prejudice than occasional attenders. Clergy members expressed more tolerance and civil rights support than lay people. And those for whom religion was an end (“My religious beliefs are what really lie behind my whole approach to life”) were less prejudiced than those for whom religion was a means (“A primary reason for my interest in religion is that my church is a congenial social activity”). Among church members, the devout expressed consistently less prejudice than those who gave religion lip service. “We have just enough religion to make us hate,” said the English satirist Jonathan Swift, adding “but not enough to make us love one another.”

Faith-related compassion becomes even clearer when we look at who gives most generously of time and money. Fortune reports that America’s top twenty-five philanthropists share several characteristics. They are mostly self-made. They have been givers all their lives. And “they’re religious: Jewish, Mormon, Protestant, and Catholic. And most attribute their philanthropic urges at least in part to their religious backgrounds.”

The same appears true of the rest of us. In a 1987 Gallup survey,
Americans who said they never attended church or synagogue reported giving away one and one-tenth percent of their incomes. Weekly attenders were two and a half times as generous. This twenty-four percent of the population gave forty-eight percent of all charitable contributions. The other twenty-five percent of Americans give the remaining half. Follow-up surveys in 1990, 1992, and 1994 replicated this pattern.

The highest forms of altruism, psychologists Dennis Krebs and Frank Van Hesteren contend after reviewing available theory and research, are rooted in a "cosmic feeling of oneness with the universe, identification with the species, active compassion for a commonwealth of beings." Such altruism is "selfless, stemming from agape, an ethic of responsible universal love, service, and sacrifice that is extended to others without regard for merit." Something like the religious idea of a reality and purpose beyond self would seem foundational to such "universal self-sacrificial love."

As always, there are numerous exceptions—big-hearted people outside the church and miserly people of faith. Moreover, churches can become unwitting allies with low-wage industries when they rush to provide low-cost housing, food, and clothing without asking why the workers cannot afford these necessities. "In one Nebraska community," recalls David Ostendorf, director of the Center for New Community, "churches responded to the appeals by the nation's largest [meat] packer to assist new immigrant employees with affordable housing and day care, but never asked the company why the workers could not afford either one." By so doing, the churches conspired in the packer's exploitation of both workers and the community.

Still, it takes a curmudgeon to quarrel with the motives that draw people to feed the hungry, house the homeless, heal the hurting, and care for children. And mountains of data and anecdotes make it hard to dispute the conclusion of Frank Emerson Andrews that "religion is the mother of philanthropy."

People of faith helped abolish the slave trade, lead civil rights movements, and challenge
totalitarianism. In aristocratic England during the 1700s, as in America, the wealthy stood on the backs of children working in squalid conditions, and of slaves forcibly removed from their home continents and sold as chattel to masters in strange lands. But then, year by year, opposition grew. Slave trader John Newton was spiritually transformed from profiteer to pastor, abolitionist, and lyricist of "Amazing Grace." With other evangelical enthusiasts of the time, Newton endured the fashionable world's contempt and became a hero to politician William Wilberforce, who had likewise experienced a religious conversion. When Wilberforce considered resigning from the House of Commons, Newton, along with Prime Minister William Pitt, urged him to become a force for good. Wilberforce took the words to heart, believing that "Almighty God has set before me two great objectives": "the abolition of the slave trade and the reformation of [morals]."

For two decades, he eloquently pressed his case against stiff opposition. "Things have come to a pretty pass when religion is allowed to invade public life," huffed one British lord. Undaunted, Wilberforce and his community of believers persisted. They founded the Society for the Education of Africans, the Society for the Bettering of the Condition of the Poor, and the Society for the Relief of Debtors, and finally won the hearts of citizens and the Parliament. On March 25, 1807, the slave trade was banned.

It was, of course, some time later that slavery itself was abolished in England and the United States. The races were still not enjoying equal rights in 1956, when a young Martin Luther King sermonized in Montgomery, Alabama, that "standing up for the truth of God is the greatest thing in the world... The end of life is to do the will of God, come what may." Only through spiritual transformation, he said, "do we gain the strength to fight vigorously the evils of the world in a humble and loving spirit."

At the dawn of a new millennium we stand where two roads diverge. One continues down the well-traveled track of
radical individualism and materialism leading toward a deepened cultural crisis. As “me thinking” continues to prevail over “we thinking,” as the rich-poor gap continues to widen, as the media continue to promote coercive human relations and uncommitted sex, as marriage continues to disintegrate, as children’s well-being continues to nose-dive, and if violence rebounds with the next recession, calls for imposed order will likely increase.

However, there is also a less traveled road we are beginning to steer toward. As the slumbering public consciousness awakens, something akin to the earlier social reform movements—the civil rights movement, the feminist movement, the environmental movement—seems to be germinating. “Anyone who tunes in politics even for background music can tell you how the sound has changed,” observes Ellen Goodman. Yesterday’s shouting match over family values has become today’s choir, she says. When singing about children growing up without fathers, “Politicians on the right, left, and center may not be hitting exactly the same notes, but like sopranos, tenors, and baritones, they’re pretty much in harmony.” We are recognizing that liberals’ risk factors (poverty, inequality, hopelessness) and conservatives’ risk factors (early sexualization, unwed parenthood, family fragmentation) all come in the same package.

As we come together again on the common ground of concern for our children and their future, let us imagine the culture we aspire to. Whatever our differences, most of us wish for a culture that:

- welcomes children into families with mothers and fathers that love them, and an environment that nurtures families,
- rewards initiative and restrains exploitative greed, thus building a strong economy that shrinks the underclass,
- balances individual liberties with communal well-being,
- encourages close relationships within extended families and with supportive neighbors and caring friends, people who celebrate when you’re born, care about you as you live, and miss you when you’re gone,
- values our diversity while find-
ing unity in shared ideals,
• develops children’s capacities for empathy, self-discipline, and honesty,
• provides media that offer social scripts of kindness, civility, attachment, and fidelity,
• regards relationships as covenants and sexuality not as mere recreation but as life-unifying and love-renewing,
• takes care of the soul by developing a deeper spiritual awareness of a reality greater than self and of life’s resulting meaning, purpose, and hope.

So we face that fork in the road. We have, as Solzhenitsyn said in concluding his commencement address at Harvard, “reached a major watershed in history, equal in importance to the turn from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. It will demand from us a spiritual blaze; we shall have to rise to a new height of vision, to a new level of life, where our physical nature will not be cursed, as in the Middle Ages, but even more importantly, our spiritual being will not be trampled upon, as in the Modern Era.”

This ascension is similar to climbing to the next anthropological stage. No one on earth has any other way left—but upward.

Those who take this upward road—those who live remembering the future—will fulfill the ancient prophecy of Isaiah: “You shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.”