



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Mixing spirituality and politics: A recipe for heartburn

Clay Nelson © 9 August 2020

One of the challenges I have faced in both of the religious traditions I have served is when some criticise my sermons or talks or musings or whatever as too political and not spiritual enough. In my defence I try to explain my view that they are all spiritual. This generally only annoys them. It certainly doesn't mollify them and I suffer heartburn. Perhaps if I could be less defensive it would help.

As we are approaching election season both here and in the country of my birth, I thought I might give it another go. Certainly the elections are on my mind, as I vote in both. A story from my early ministry might reveal more about how I view mixing spirituality and politics.

I was fresh out of seminary in the first year of my curacy when the bishop assigned me to chair the Diocesan Evangelism Committee. Certainly in my mind this was not a good fit. He might have ordained me, but he did not know me. I knew some already on the committee who fit my stereotype of happy, clappy, evangelicals and charismatics. They were not my tribe, but I was too new to thank the bishop for the "honour" and decline.

At the very first meeting they wanted to know if I had "made" my [Cursillo](#) weekend. Unlike you who are looking at me blankly, I knew a little bit about the Cursillo movement. For instance, I knew Cursillo had originated as a branch of the Catholic charismatic movement in Spain intended to bring men into the church (Women couldn't go to their weekend until after their husbands went to theirs.). I knew it had been appropriated by some Protestant denominations for the same purpose but without dwelling on the pope and the cult of Mary. I also knew that this was something I had zero desire to experience. Eventually they wore me down. I decided I would get two things out of going. They would finally get off my back about going and maybe I would understand those on this spiritual path a little better.

I went to another diocese for my weekend, so I could go incognito. It was a lovely retreat centre in upstate New York where I was welcomed warmly by the Cursillo team. People I did not know paid all my expenses. All my wants and needs were cared for, I just needed to go where I was told. The core of the weekend was listening to twelve talks about Christianity. That was the meat, the gravy was being bludgeoned by the expansive love of God. Every time we, the participants, came back to our sleeping quarters

there would be a pile of letters and little gifts from people throughout the Cursillo movement expressing God's love for us, personalised with our names. They had mastered putting together a programme that plucked every emotional string in our hearts. Even someone as sceptical and resistant as I was could not help being swept up into it. There was no denying it as a spiritual experience. But it also verged on being a dishonest one, or at least an incomplete one.

Cursillo treated spirituality as a matter of individual concern and pursuits. To be generous, I get it. Any real change has to begin from within. Ultimately, if we want to change the world we have to change ourselves. We have to embody the change we want to see in the world. As Confucius reminded us a long time ago, virtue begins in the heart, and it ripples outward and outward, to transform the family, community, nation, and the world.

Yet spirituality is also not ever the exclusive domain of the individual.

Omid Safi puts it this way:-

"There is a mystery to the human being that connects what is unseen in the human to the utmost in the universe. And it is we, embodied spirits, who contain this mystery. The spiritual is also about our bodies, our lives, the spaces we inhabit in the physical world.

"The spirit mingles.

"The physical is already illuminated with the presence of the sacred. If we care about the spirit, we cannot avoid concern with the here and now. The spiritual is about the social, the mystical is also about the political. The cosmic in us has to be about both changing the human and changing the world of which we are a part. The healing inside and the healing of the world are wrapped up in one another." <https://onbeing.org/blog/the-spiritual-is-political/>

When my spiritual high from my Cursillo weekend crashed I was sobered by the words of Unitarian minister James Luther Adams:-

"A faith that is not the sister of justice is bound to bring people to grief. It thwarts creation, a divinely given possibility; it robs them of their birthright of freedom in an open universe; it robs the community of the spiritual richness latent in its members; it reduces the person to a beast of burden in slavish subservience to a state, a church, or a party — a god made by human hands." <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/quote/faith-free>

James Gertmenian, political organiser, social justice activist and Unitarian minister, makes a similar point using birth imagery:-

"I don't mean to say that faith can't offer us moments of soaring hope and profound joy, but these come not in the absence of conflict but in the heart of it. The world is groaning in travail... while we work for something good to be born... [Every parent] knows that the action is in the delivery room, not the waiting room. The intersection of [spirituality] and politics, where there's struggle and pain, is the delivery room for the world we seek. That's where we need to be."

<https://www.uua.org/braverwiser/where-action>

Historically, Unitarians see their faith in this-worldly terms. This means that we see the spiritual sphere as inextricably linked with the ordering of human affairs. Our religion is in constant dialogue with the world as it is, and thus with the political and social issues of the day.

Unitarians are interested in the whole range of challenges facing our society and our world. We believe that our liberal religious ethos, our affirmation of human dignity, and our one-world vision have something valuable to offer in this regard.

Although many Unitarians are active in the social justice and political spheres, as a movement we are not aligned with any political party or single-issue political organisation. Unitarians can be found across the whole spectrum of democratic political parties, sometimes as dedicated activists. They can also be found in all manner of groups campaigning on humanitarian and environmental issues.

As a movement, Unitarians are religious, not political, but our religion has political implications, and our politics have a spiritual foundation.

My preaching always seeks to honour our tradition of mixing spirituality and politics not to annoy you or give me heartburn. I do it because the two are not oil and water, but inseparable.