

Still room on the left for both believers and non-believers

By Bill Blaikie

During the 2005 Presidential election in the United States, responding to a button worn by Southern Baptists that said, "Vote your Values," Rev. Jim Wallis of the Sojourner Community in Washington is reported to have said: "I say, vote *all* your values. The cries of the poor ring from cover to cover in my Bible."

The social gospel interpretation of the Bible which informed and inspired many of those who helped build the CCF and NDP, and which continues to be important for many on the left today, was and is just such an attempt to vote "all the values" that are to be found in the Judeo-Christian heritage. Highlighted over and over again in the biblical tradition are those values having to do with defending the needy and the oppressed, and challenging the interests and worldview of the powerful.

In a time when, both north and south of the 49th parallel, religion is largely characterized in the political arena as a conservative force, there is a need both to diversify the face of religion in the political realm and to reclaim territory that was once seen to be held in common by religion and the left. There is a need to re-establish in the public mind the fact that there are faith-informed progressive perspectives on those issues which tend to be dealt with as if there is only a debate between faith and non-faith. In fact, what is really going on is often a debate between Canadians of the same faith, and/or a debate between conservative faith communities and a secular liberalism that owes its values in part to Christianity.

In any event, it is certainly a growing problem that faith is associated in the public mind with a particular set of conservative positions instead of being associated with a diverse group of people who, though they may share a particular faith, arrive at different conclusions about contentious public policy issues and, as a result, join or support different political parties.

It is not in the best interests of Canadians to have religion caricatured as narrowly focused on only a few issues, or, even worse, to have "faith" or

"religious argument" come to be seen as inadmissible in public discourse about public policy options. Questions of peace and war, the economy, and the environment are also issues to be informed by faith. But there are appropriate and inappropriate ways of speaking in an explicitly faith-informed way in the public square. The task at hand for both the faithful and non-believers is to discern and agree on the appropriate ways of such speaking. Dismissing views purely because they are "religious" is an approach which throws out the wheat with the chaff. Secular fundamentalism is not the answer either.

There is more common ground between faith communities, broadly speaking, and the left, than is ever credited in the image of religion served up by the media. Canadians who are active in both their own faith communities and progressive politics know this, but it is a fact under-promoted by a media culture fixated on the conservative aspects of religion. Witness the coverage of John Paul II, whose position on abortion was much more highlighted than his opposition to the invasion of Iraq.

In 21st century multi-faith, pluralistic and secular Canada, any dialogue between politics and religion writ large must transcend older paradigms and take full account of

the pluralistic country which Canada now most certainly is. In this sensitive environment, even language like the "social gospel" can be heard by some as residual Christian imperialism if it is not used properly. On the left there is a need to make the same kind of connection between social democratic principles and the social justice or prophetic traditions in all the major faiths, as was made by an earlier generation between the left and social gospel theology.

In the early 1980s, American left-wing thinker Michael Harrington said

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that the absence of serious thought about the human condition was the enemy of both faith and anti-faith. He called for a common cause against the mindless hedonism and *de facto* atheism of late capitalism in favour of "a values-

informed vision of individual and social meaningfulness that goes beyond the latest consumer or cultural fad."

The rulers of the present age would not welcome such an alliance. They would prefer to keep religion a private thing, to be called on only from time to time to legitimize their free market idolatry, their illegal pre-emptive wars, and their manipulation of the culture wars in which the collateral death of children and the destruction of creation due to poverty, war, and multinational profit strategies is uncritically accepted, while the decision of a woman to have an abortion is held up as one of the most heinous sins.

Deep down, I think we all know to whom Jesus was directing his admonition about throwing the first stones.

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Specialists

"Every man gets a narrower and narrower field of knowledge in which he must be an expert in order to compete with other people. The specialist knows more and more about less and less, and finally knows everything about nothing."

—Konrad Lorenz