

The Politics of God

Symbolism doesn't need to be defended. It can serve as an excuse for inaction. But it can also be a catalyst for action.
- Richard Gwyn

The word "politics" is generally reserved among us for the management of government - federal, provincial, and municipal. Politicians are those who are actively engaged in politics, especially party politics, professionally or otherwise. Politics, and those who practice politics, are generally held in ill repute by many. Yet it is to our politicians we place the responsibility to care for the good of our society.

Politics is history in the making. When anything is past, it is history. But when anything is being dealt with in the present, it is not history -it is politics, for the political is the activity of getting things done.

Politics is the science of governing. This science has to do with how society exists, operates, and rules itself. It exists to protect humanity so that humanity may pursue the good, so that people may live and work in a state of security and well-being.

Jesus focused his teaching and ministry upon what he called the "kingdom of God". It was a dangerous phrase for Jesus to use as it loosened the political hopes of the people and drew down upon him the suspicion of the government and actually led to his death.

It may be more meaningful for us today to use the term "realm of God", as Jesus was thinking of the development of a society where love, neighbourliness, healing and peace are manifest.

Like the old prophets, Jesus believed

that God was the real creator of the realm. The realm grew not by national reconstruction, but could work along from person to person, from group to group, creating a new life as it went along. In that sense the realm was already here. Its fulfillment was yet in the future.

When we come to the word "God", which is a noun, we have difficulty for it falls into the category of things and objects. As Northrop Frye points out in his book, "The Great Code, The Bible and Literature", (Penguin Books, 1990) God was defined in the Old Testament Book of Exodus (3:14) as "I am who I am", which scholars say may be more accurately translated, "I will be what I will be." Frye declares we may come closer to what is meant in the Bible by the word "God" if we understand it as a verb, implying a process accomplishing itself.

(Politics, cont'd)

More than 30 years ago, Bishop John Robinson questioned the supernatural definition of God and argued that instead of trying to prove the existence of God, which can only be taken for granted, one attempt to disprove God and find God to be the ultimate reality. ("Honest to God", SCM Press, 1963). We can comprehend that ultimate reality exists. This is, as the philosopher, Immanuel Kant concluded, a necessary presupposition. We can no longer think of God as "out there", distant and mysterious, but an existing part of ourselves and our world.

If we allow ourselves we can become akin to the fundamental meaning of existence, the ultimate reality. The Gospel of St. Luke, (17:20f), tells us that "Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, 'The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For in fact, the kingdom of God is within you.'"

God is never a god of the status quo. God is never idle, and God never allows us to be comfortable within our way of life. The Old Testament prophet, Isaiah, begins his prophecy to the people of Israel, by proclaiming, "cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice."

The politics of God is our own involvement in the affairs of human life - scientific, technological, sociological, political. The realm of God demands our participation and loyalty if we and our world are to be saved.

God asks: "What do you do to your neighbours?"

OPTING FOR OPTIMISM

We are living at a time of great pessimism in our society. These are not cheerful times but unsettled and uncertain. There is a great deal of distrust and disloyalty among us.

This is not a new experience for people. In fact, there have been many times worse. Nothing could have seemed more distressing than the tyranny of Cromwell and the Long Parliament in the 17th century England. Churches were destroyed and people's freedom suspended. It was in this time a layperson, Sir Robert Shirley, did an extraordinary thing: he built a church, one which stands to this day in Leicestershire. For his pains he was imprisoned and died in prison. Later this inscription was placed over the entrance to the old church:

*In the year 1653
When all things were throughout
ye nation
Either demolished or profaned
Sir Robert Shirley, baronet
Founded this church
Whose singular praise it is
To have done the best things
in ye worst times and
Hoped them in the most calamitous.*

Christianity is an ultimate optimism founded upon a provisional pessimism. Pessimism comes and goes. It is provisional, temporary, changing. Optimism has to do with belief, faith, and hopefulness. It is persistent and eternal. Hope and faith belong together.

In 1487 an explorer named Bartholomew Dias sailed along the west coast of Africa. He had gone further south than any sailor before him. Finally he came upon a great promontory. He named it, "The Cape of Storms."

(Optimism, cont'd)

That is what it was to him. While he was there he had to battle high winds and waves. He did not see what he had hoped to see, a new, rich paradise. When he later reported back to king John II of Portugal, his sponsor, the king saw the possibility of this being a sea route to India, which explorers of the time were trying to find. The king renamed the promontory "The Cape of Good Hope." This was only a hope, as yet unfulfilled.

But, in 1497, a decade later, Vasco da Gama, followed through on this hope and discovered the way to India. The hope was fulfilled.

And so we pray at the beginning of the Lord's prayer, "Thy kingdom come", and then turn around at the end and say, "Thine is the kingdom." Jesus showed us the Cape of Good Hope, and the future is ours.

Camping in Algonquin Park taught me a lesson about growth and change. A forester showed me a small growth of deciduous trees growing in the shade of a pine forest. He pointed out the pines were maturing and beginning to die. He said that as the pines die their space will be taken by the young deciduous undergrowth and a new and different forest will develop.

In community old institutions mature and die. Social changes take place; new organizations come into being. Christianity is being challenged to form not only new ministries for a new age, but to begin to forge a new consciousness of the meaning of freedom and responsibility. Freedom is the opposite of fear, which is a state of mind among so many of us today. For free men and women such phrases as the sacredness of the

individual and the sanctity of the imagination will be more than cliches. For them parables are more meaningful than laws, illustrations more helpful than rules. If the spirit of revival is moving amongst us, well and good, for we shall then renew our strength, mount up with wings like eagles, run and not be weary, walk and not faint.

The realm of God is growing in our midst, ready to make our world new.

Indeed, our faith is an ultimate optimism founded upon a provisional pessimism.

Life is change....
Growth is optional....
Choose wisely....

The MIRACLE OF SHARING

One of the miracles of life is when people are able to share with one another. Material possessions have great significance in our world. There are so many things we feel we have to have.

Too often we donate money to help unfortunate people, or we send others to help them, or we content ourselves merely by remembering them in our prayers, but humankind are all part of a community, and it is reckless for us to ignore the needs of those around us.

In a recent sermon in Guelph, Jean Vanier, well known for his work with handicapped persons, questioned "why can't we share? Why can't we pool our resources?" Vanier has established

(Miracle of Sharing, cont'd)

homes for handicapped people and has devoted his life to counselling and caring for these needy persons.

Vanier said he had "discovered an invitation from Jesus. When you give a meal, invite the poor, the lame, the disabled and the blind, and you shall be blessed. You have to become their family...it is the benediction of living and it is a great privilege."

At the Sacred Assembly held last December in Ottawa and Hull, when 2000 aboriginal and non-native spiritual and church leaders and lay members met at the recommendation of Elijah Harper and the call of the Federal Government, the Honourable Ronald Irwin, Minister of Indian Affairs, pleaded for a new and better deal for Native Peoples. He said, "I need partners. I need allies. I need people walking side by side. I need them. I'm tired of this quiet revolution. I don't want non-Native Canadians to be quiet. If they see injustice, come out and say this is an injustice. Don't sit back and wait for others to do the job."

When Jesus and his disciples took part in the feeding of a large group of people (the feeding of the five thousand) as recorded in the gospels, the selfish hearts of the crowd were miraculously touched by what Jesus had taught them and they all shared with one another.

None of us can be a citizen of the community, or the realm of God, by themselves, but in harmony and unity with ones neighbours.

Opportunities to be generous of spirit and of our means are always present.

TO OUR EYES THE BLIND MAN

To our eyes the blind man's lover was ugly
when she would guide him each evening,
patient,
past dirty windows and the slandering eyes
of our neighbourhood - she never tired
of the gauntlet, the grins, the
whispering
gathered schoolboys or their poised
silence so much worse than
whispering....

And there I was with the others - the
lean one,
laughing - while streetlamps at the
butt of long
late-summer days grew bright and
spotlit
the two of them; scapegoats in a
circus ring
without roof or limit, so our laughter
leapt free, grew up as it hardened
into the walls and streets and crowds
we knew as cities....

Ugly, the boys sang, and I sang, but
he clutched
her hand so tight, so tight it seemed
he was the one guiding her to the
sweet
dark city of his love - free
from the bitter half-lit boroughs of
the seeing.

The above poem is taken from "The Ecstasy of Skeptics", Anansi Press. The author is Steven Heighton, a Kingston writer.

Fear is the darkroom in which all of your negatives are developed.

Dance, Dance, Wherever You May Be

The Christian life has two important ingredients: a *story* aspect, which is personal, and a *signal* aspect, which pinpoints and clarifies what I experience as a person. We need both stories and signals, personal and formal religion, the spontaneous and the organized. What has happened is that, as in leukemia, the balance between these two elements has been disturbed. In everything from travel to education, from religion to making love, the story has been devoured by the signal, the spontaneous by the programmed, the personal by the socially organized. Prefabrication has replaced building your own home, tourism has replaced travel, organized sports have replaced play.

Religion is the way you see yourself, others and the world and that requires a lot of thought and reflection. But living comes first. Reflection comes afterward. The first religious act is to clap your hands, to dance, to do, to act. It's time to put the personal back in religion.

The signal, the authorization for belief traditionally does not necessarily represent the best thinking, but merely the majority thinking. For example, during the golden age of Pericles, about 500 B.C.E., Heraclitus preached that the nature of reality was constantly changing; but Parmenides, Plato, and Aristotle, who represented the majority, preached that the facts of existence were permanently fixed. So the unorthodox bones of Heraclitus had to wait for a hearing; and finally, Galileo, Max Planck, and Einstein listened.

Orthodox thinking is essentially majority thinking, while the best

thinking has often been the unorthodox thinking. Frequently progress in human thought has been made by the nonconformists.

Being marginalized for being unconforming, unorthodox, by the majority presupposes that the majority know the truth; that they have "got the whole, wide world in their hands." It becomes merely follow the leader or heresy to those who will not play.

On the other hand there is something heroic about the heretic. Jesus was one: he did not follow the well-worn paths of the majority of his day. He worked on the Sabbath; he ate with sinners; he associated with prostitutes. He even dared to interpret the Law, to criticize the orthodox Pharisees, and to claim to be his own authority.

St. Paul, the theologian and the great organizer of the church, did not, as the Popes later did, declare himself infallible. He and the others of the New Testament days did not exclude themselves from the possibility of making errors. Therefore, as long as Christianity is defined primarily in terms of belief, the Christian, as a follower of Jesus, has every right to question present-day doctrines and creeds.

Even if one admits that orthodox thinking is majority thinking and not necessarily best thinking, that the charge of heresy is distasteful while the unorthodox themselves are often heroic, and that Pauline thinking is neither infallible nor at all times even Christlike, one may still argue that in the Gospels we do have the teachings of Jesus himself, and from those accounts we may fashion set

(Dance, cont'd)

creeds and doctrines for the professing Christian. But Jesus was a man of action and not of thought, a doer and not a philosopher. When he taught his emphasis was more on what people should do than how they should think. Even when he demanded faith it was faith to accomplish and act and not faith to accept an idea.

Christianity began with the carpenter of Nazareth who healed untouchables, who ministered to those considered sinners, who questioned at times the so-called infallible law, who taught no longer "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," but "love your enemy," and who, when nailed to a cross, spoke of his executioners, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

In the nuclei of atoms science has now found an unimaginable source of power, but it is a power that can hurt as well as help. Who decides which alternative will be chosen? We can destroy easily, quickly and effectively humanity which has taken two million years to develop on our earth. We are the custodians of life on the earth and it's a big responsibility.

True religion is not a mental assent to a memorized creed, but a world loyalty. In the midst of many religions, an age of nationalism, an age of science, we must seek equilibrium, a commitment to the common good, a balanced individualism. To quote John Ralston Saul ("The Unconscious Civilization," Anansi Press, 1995, P.190), "Equilibrium...is dependent not just on criticism, but on non-conformism in the public place. Saul goes on to say: "Common sense, creativity, ethics, intuition, memory and reason.

These can be exploited individually as a justification for ideology; or imprisoned in the limbo of abstract concepts. Or they can be applied together, in some sort of equilibrium, as the filters of public action."

We have a world to emancipate.

A Prayer: O God, who lives in us, let me answer the knock at my heart's door that the divine may flood my being with courage to live life as it ought to be lived, in response to the challenge of the moment. Help me to dance with you, Lord, wherever you may be. Amen.

Prophets

Christopher Morley one time said about prophets that they "were twice stoned - first in anger; *then, after* their death, with a handsome slab in the graveyard." When a prophet is safely dead and out of the way, how easy it is to pay them honour. But I think that the prophet much preferred the stoning than the honour after his death.

Don't Rock the Boat

The Old testament prophet, Elijah was called a "troubler of Israel" by the king. Modern Christians who have developed the fine art of not rocking the boat ought not to forget that the prophets neither took prescribed sedatives and that Jesus said, "I have come not to send peace, but a sword."