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During a speech in Toronto in the fall of 2002 at a debate organized during the NDP Leadership Race, I made a reference to the social gospel as one of the traditions that inspires and informs the NDP. In the question period that followed I was taken to task by a woman at the back of the hall who said that “gospel” was a Christian concept and that by using the word “gospel” I was engaging in a form of Christian imperialism that left non-Christians out of the conversation.

Whether one thinks that this was over reaction to an objective description of one of the origins of the party, or a brilliant flash of multi-cultural sensitivity, it nevertheless raised for me an important question. How do those of us who see ourselves in the social gospel tradition speak of ourselves and what we believe, in a 21st century Canadian context that is characterized by secularism, pluralism, a touchiness on the part of many about anything Christian, and a touchiness in general about the role of religion in politics.

However we may currently decide to speak when we speak to the present out of the social gospel tradition, it is certainly historically the case that something called the social gospel informed and informs the political left in Canada. This was recently reaffirmed in a new book by Prof. Ian McKay of Queens University. In a chapter of *Rebels, Reds, and Radicals* devoted to “redefining the left” in Canada, he names spiritual awakening and the social gospel as one of several paths to leftist politics in Canada.

Prof. McKay refers to the discomfort which many on the secular left feel when confronted with the fact that, as he puts it, “many leftists in Canada have been believers, rooting their resistance to capitalism in religious values”.

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 unfortunately tend to be dealt with as if there is only a debate between faith and anti-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 Canada’s Judeo-Christian heritage.

In my view, it is not a good thing to have religion caricatured as narrowly focused on only a few issues, or, 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 nonbelievers 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.

In my view the reason that the left in Canada was as successful as it was, either in forming governments or in influencing governments, was because Canadians would often hear in what the left was saying the practical expression of what they were hearing in their scriptures and from their church's teachings. In the current context, this resonance may be more difficult to achieve, but the religious left, or for that matter, the religious centre, must not abandon the public square to a brawl between secular fundamentalists and the religious right.

The economy is a moral issue. That is really what the social gospel was all about, and will be all about no matter what new form it may take. The economy is every bit as much a moral issue as those issues which are sometimes set apart as "moral issues" and which, it is sometimes argued, are matters of conscience. The social gospel says that having a global economic order, read the WTO, that doesn't even recognize let alone enforce core labour standards, while protecting the interests of powerful corporate investors, is a moral issue, and should be a matter of national conscience when Canada speaks at such meetings.

Too many actual and potential laws and regulations in the interests of justice or the environment are regarded as anathema by the WTO inquisitors because they interfere with the market and are called non-tariff barriers.

In my view the way the market has been elevated from one false god among many in the human political pantheon, to the false god of the post-Cold War era and the era of free trade, as if the market existed outside of our collective obedience to it, is an open and shut case of idolatry. It is our graven image. The very nature of idolatry is to be found in humans granting god-like status or powers to something, and then forgetting that those god-like powers are not independent or objective, but derive from the power we ourselves grant.

When we treat the marketplace as if it is not a human creation, that can be changed, modified, or even replaced where necessary, we are forgetting that it is we ourselves who have created this particular golden calf.

The challenge of the social gospel in the 21st Century is three fold, religious fundamentalism, market fundamentalism, and secular fundamentalism. There are different combinations to look for, all of which pose difficulties. Religious

fundamentalists, often allied with market fundamentalists, despite plenty of scripture that should make them skeptical of the market, don't like the social gospel, either because their real religion is the market, or they suspect any conclusions that come out of a theology that is often, but not always, more liberal than theirs.

Secular fundamentalists may be anti-market or market critical but either because they are dyed in the wool secularists or because they are so turned off by of right-wing religion, they want to ban all religion from the public square.

Religious talk in public places, and particularly Christian talk that sounds either like a lament for Christendom, or a call for a return to Christendom, is the kind of religious talk in public places that inspires some to want to banish it from the public square. If it has an authoritarian or judgmental air to it, an attitude associated with Christendom, it offends, not just against the privatizing of religion, but also the reality of religious pluralism and the fact that for presumably good reasons, God has permitted Christendom to expire.

Christians with a post-Christendom consciousness and Canadians of other faiths have a joint project in finding a new footing for Christian and other religious voices in the public realm, not by hearkening back to an earlier day, but by going ahead to a post-Christendom and post-privatization context in which religious argument is taken seriously in public discourse, and religious language is allowed to enrich public discourse.

There will always be a role for people of all faiths, to speak out of their prophetic traditions, challenging the rulers of their day to do justice, to love kindness and mercy, and to measure their political choices not in terms of how they help the rich and already powerful, but how they help the hungry, the poor, the vulnerable, the marginalized and the environment that future generations will have to live in.

As Rabi Michael Lerner says in his recently published book, *The Left Hand of God*, by which he hopes to encourage a network of spiritual progressives in America that will revitalize the left, there is a need to challenge the unholy alliance between the political right and the religious right. This is necessary in principal, in the interests of truth, but also necessary in practice, for good tactical reasons. To do this it is necessary to challenge the religio-phobia of the left and the misguided theology of the right.

In the Canadian context, ordinary Canadians with religious or spiritual sensibilities need to know, as they once did more fully, that the political left is a place which respects and shares their sense of being part of a larger and more ethically challenging and fulfilling reality than advanced consumer capitalism can provide.

It is ironic indeed, that the religious right offers refuge from the meaninglessness of the very market society it champions, but no less ironic than the way the left sometimes finds itself unable to come up with a politics of meaning that can successfully compete to fill the void.

I hope that this event might be the start of a process by which New Democrats who come to their politics through faith will find a place to talk to each other, to talk to the party, and to listen to those in the party who have problems or reservations about such a dialogue. In the end we will need to do something like this if we want to truly and intelligently engage the 21st Century, in which the fate of the world may well hinge on there being a better relationship between faiths, and between faith communities and the world.

The prophetic voice will not always be welcome wherever and whenever it challenges the various fundamentalisms, or idols of the passing ages, but it is essential that the prophetic perspective be defended as one of the very important ways that God speaks to us in human history.