

RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE ON THE LEFT

Speech by **James Loney**

To the founding meeting of the Faith and Social Justice initiative of
the NDP

September 9th, 2006

www.ndp-faith-justice-foi-npd.ca

The question I was asked to reflect on with you today is whether or not there's a place for religious discourse in the political left. It's a difficult, divisive, heavily embattled question that I think must always be wrestled with, and perhaps the goal is not that we proclaim a definitive answer, but that we continue to wrestle with it. I suspect for those of us whose political commitments proceed from our religious life or faith practice, it is a question that we cannot not struggle with.

We know of course, that religious discourse has been used to bless and sanctify just about every historical horror we can think of—slavery, genocide, imperial conquest, pogrom, crusade, apartheid, social cleansing, the displacement of indigenous people, the subjugation of women....Religious language has been used in every time and place to sacralize violence and maintain the great pyramid where everyone has their place, and marching orders to give or receive according to that place. As a gay man, I'm acutely aware of how religious discourse has been and continues to be used in ways that are oppressive, toxic, even life threatening.

My own tradition, Roman Catholicism, would erase me from the body politic altogether.

Feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether calls this the sacred canopy function of religion, where it is used to deify oppressive social structures. But this is not the whole story. Religious discourse has also been used to subvert and disrupt those same social structures. It's been used, for example, to energize the long struggle for women's emancipation and the abolition of slavery. People of faith in every time and place have spoken against war and the oppression of the poor and lived selflessly for the common good.

It seems that religion is always used to serve one of two antithetical purposes: to maintain the status quo in the interests of the powerful, or to transform the status quo in the interests of the powerless. This is a tension that is inherent in religious tradition itself, or at least it is in my own tradition—biblically speaking it's the tension between the prophetic imagination of God calling us always into the harmony of peace and justice, and the sacred canopy protecting the idolatries of God, king, country and empire (or lately national security) whom we are required to serve without question according to whatever coercion and violence they deem necessary. (Yes, even God can be made into an idol. It was the mystic Meister Eckhart who said we must give up God for God's sake. Thomas Merton said our idea of God tells us more about ourselves than it does about God.)

The easy thing would be to bypass the whole mess and confusion and seek to abolish religious discourse altogether from politics. A nice, tidy, straight forward separation of church and state. Everybody please live in their own religious closet. But people of faith know in their bones this is not an answer they can accept. It's not an answer I can accept. To isolate religion from the public sphere is to condemn religion to the don't-worry-be-happy, you'll have pie in the sky when you die passivity that curses the poor to never-ending slavery, the worst kind of sacred canopy.

Religion is anything but a private matter. It requires us to move outside ourselves, roll up our sleeves, do the right thing, get involved. It's not something we even have a choice about. When we have been seared with the gift of faith, we are compelled to act for others and in this find our freedom and our joy.

Religion is anything but a private matter. It involves us immediately and directly in the world. It requires us to move outside ourselves, roll up our sleeves, do the right thing, get involved. It's not something we even have a choice about. When we have been seared with the gift of faith, we are compelled to act for others. Our freedom and our joy are found in living the implications of what we believe. People of faith have to be in politics because faith *is* political. If politics is about organizing and building the common good, faith informs us about the nature of the common good, gives us a way of understanding what the common good is and how we are to act for it. More than that, it liberates and transforms us individually and personally so that we can in turn act for the liberation of others and the transformation of the world.

The question then becomes what does that liberation and transformation look like. Different interests define and analyze it differently. Reform and social progress do not necessarily mean the same thing to NDPers and Conservatives. That's because the tension that grips the various religious traditions—the sacred canopy in conflict with the prophetic imagination of God—also grips our society. We cannot escape it. So long as there are rich and poor, so long as there are the powerful and the powerless, so long as our society is organized in a pyramid, we are going to have this tension. One's definition of "reform" and "progress," and indeed one's definition of the problem requiring the reform, is going to be profoundly influenced by one's place in the pyramid.

We have to acknowledge it: society is in conflict and this conflict pervades every form of social organization, including religion. It exists in every church, synagogue, mosque, temple, government office, political party, university dorm, drop-in center and day care. It's my understanding that the NDP exists to engage this struggle. As a person of faith I am called by my religious tradition to engage in this struggle too. The struggle—to build a new society in the shell of the old where it is easier to be good—is a struggle between the status quo and social change. This is where the rubber hits the road. Are you in solidarity with the powerful or the powerless? Are you listening to the voices of those who don't count, or to the voices of those who do? Are you willing to be transformed by the suffering of the oppressed, or will you deny their existence in order to protect "our way of life" as George Bush called it. What is your "our"? Who is your "we"? Who do you belong to? These questions live at the root of every social

commitment, regardless whether that commitment is articulated in political or religious language.

If politics is about building the common good, faith gives us a way of understanding what the common good is so that we can act for the liberation and transformation of others and the world. The key question is this: are you willing to be transformed by the suffering of the oppressed, or will you deny their existence in order to protect “our way of life” as George Bush called it.

There’s a serious consequence to consider if we pull up the draw bridge of religious discourse and isolate ourselves in our mosques, temples, synagogues, churches, meeting houses, sangas.....If we do this, if we accept the discipline of silence in order to protect political life from the intrusive absolutism of religious claims, then we allow those who are the keepers of the status quo to use religion as a sacred canopy without contest. We give them the exclusive right to speak for God.

Of course, a certain modesty and collegiality is required from those of us whose social and political engagements are grounded in a religious commitment. It’s a modesty that recognizes that our understanding of the truth is partial, and a collegiality that’s perhaps best summarized by philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty: “We only come to the truth with all the others.”

Of course, a certain modesty and collegiality is required that recognizes our understanding of the truth is partial and that respects those whose beliefs are different from our own. A certain separation of “church and state” is necessary to protect us from the absolutism of religious claims.

Some boundaries are essential. A certain separation of what’s traditionally called “church and state” is necessary to protect us from the intrusive absolutism of religious claims, and from the sacred canopy effect where religion is used to protect the interests of the elite. This separation also helps protect religious institutions themselves from being corrupted by powerful interests. I think it’s essential for the NDP to observe this boundary and avoid the use of religious discourse when speaking about public policy.

This, I think, is how Christian Peacemaker Teams observes this boundary. In the course of our work in Palestine or Iraq or Colombia or Kenora, we don’t go around trying to convert people or telling them what they should believe.

(We might be telling some people what they should not do, like, for example, imprisoning, bombing, torturing and killing people.) I think we have a desire that Christians should themselves act in accordance with the claims of their tradition—to remind them that we are called to love one another, even our enemies, and dropping bombs on people is not exactly an act of love—but we have no desire to instruct those of other faiths, or those of no faith, in the ways of our faith. If anything, our desire is to learn from those of other traditions so that we can grow together in living and being what we are called by God to be. Our identity is clear—we are *Christian* peacemakers. We want to make peace because that's what it means to *be* a Christian. We have to do this because of who we are.

And this, I think, is the positive dimension of including religious discourse in political life. Our society is an amazing, incredible complexity of languages, cultures and histories. Religion is part of that diversity. Politics at its best is the process of negotiating that diversity and knitting it together into a common good that includes and serves every citizen in their diversity, foremost among us are those who are suffering, for that suffering is the index of our commitment to the common good.

Our society is an incredible complexity of languages, cultures and histories. Religion is part of that diversity, and part of the diversity of the NDP. Politics at its best is knitting that diversity together into a common good that includes and serves every citizen, especially those among us who are suffering, because their happiness is the yardstick of the common good.

Because religion is part of the diversity of our society, it needs to be part of the diversity of politics, and therefore part of the diversity of the NDP. It makes sense to me that the NDP conceive of itself as a place where people can be who they are, in their various identities, including religious, and contribute to the common good according to the richness and beauty of their particular identity. In this way, the NDP can be a place where people of different faiths work together, learn from each other, negotiate differences and model the dynamic pluralism that is so essential to a democratic society. A requirement to check their religious affiliation at the political party door would, I think, impoverish both the NDP and the society it seeks to serve.