



From Mysticism to Politics

By Wes Granberg-Michaelson

EVERYTHING BEGINS IN mysticism and ends in politics.”¹ So wrote Charles Péguy (1873–1914), a French poet and writer who lived in solidarity with workers and peasants and became deeply influenced by Catholic faith in the last years of his life.² This provocative quote identifies the foundational starting point for how faith and politics should relate.

Usually, however, we get it backward. Our temptation is to begin with politics and then try to figure out how religion can fit in. We start with the accepted parameters of political debate and, whether we find ourselves on the left or the right, we use religion to justify and bolster our existing commitments. Those holding political power are adept at exploiting this temptation. They see religious groups as another “demographic” which can be harnessed to advance a party’s or a president’s political agenda. That pattern has been evidenced most

vividly in the last three decades by the unholy marriage between the “Religious Right” and the Republican Party, although, historically, this danger knew no partisan boundaries.

But what if we make the inward journey our starting point? What if we recognize that our engagement in politics should be rooted in our participation in the Trinitarian flow of God’s love? Then everything changes. We are no longer guided or constrained by what we think is politically possible, but are compelled by what we know is most real. At the heart of all creation, the mutual love within the Trinity overflows to embrace all of life. We are invited to participate in the transforming power of this love. There we discover the ground of our being, centering all our life and action.

This was revealed most fully in Jesus, as God’s Son. His love for enemies, his non-violent response to evil, his embrace of the marginalized, his condemnation of self-serving religious hypocrites, his compassion for the poor, his disregard for boundaries of social exclusion, his advocacy for the economically oppressed, and his certainty that God’s reign was breaking into the world all flowed from his complete, mutual participation in his Father’s love. Jesus didn’t merely show the way; he lived completely in the presence and power of God’s redeeming, transforming life.

This didn’t fit any conventional political alternative in Palestine at the time. Jesus wasn’t a Zealot, seeking the violent overthrow of an oppressive empire, although he welcomed a Zealot as his disciple, resisted and undermined the authority of political rulers, and was crucified as “King of the Jews.” He refused to identify with religious authorities who were willing to compromise their spiritual convictions to foster their collusion with imperial political power. Yet, the “politics of Jesus” presented a clear agenda for radical social and economic transformation in his time, as in ours.³

All this was rooted, however, in the incarnate participation of Jesus in the love of the Trinity. His life embodied what God’s love intends for the world and demonstrated the Spirit’s power to transform, heal, and make whole what is broken. Further, Jesus’ clarity about his identity preceded his action. Before beginning his ministry with his message of liberation found in Luke 4, Jesus wandered in the wilderness for forty days, encountering his demons, resisting false idols, relying solely on his trust in God, and emerging “filled with the power of the Spirit” (see Luke 4:14). Only then did he proclaim his

mission of liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freeing of the oppressed, and proclaiming the year of God's favor (see Luke 4:18–19). His mysticism preceded and then accompanied his politics.



TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE IN politics depends so much on having a clear view of the desired end. Where does that vision come from? Possibilities may be offered by various ideologies, or party platforms, or political candidates. But, for the person of faith, that vision finds its roots in God's intended and preferred future for the world. It comes not as a dogmatic blueprint but as an experiential encounter with God's love, flowing like a river from God's throne, nourishing trees with leaves for the healing of the nations (see Revelation 22:1–2). This biblically infused vision, resonant from Genesis to Revelation, pictures a world made whole, with people living in a beloved community, where no one is despised or forgotten, peace reigns, and the goodness of God's creation is treasured and protected as a gift.

Such a vision strikes the political pragmatist as idyllic, unrealistic, and irrelevant. But the person of faith, whose inward journey opens his or her life to the explosive love of God, knows that this vision is the most real of all. It is a glimpse of creation's purpose and a glimmering of the Spirit's movement amid the world's present pain, brokenness, and despair. This vision also recognizes the inevitable journey of inward and outward transformation—the simultaneous, continuing transformation of the inward hearts of people liberated by God's astonishing grace and the outward transformation of social and economic structures liberated by God's standards of justice.

So, for the Christian, politics entails an inevitable spiritual journey. But this is not the privatized expression of belief which keeps faith in Jesus contained in an individualized bubble and protects us from the "world." The experience of true faith in the living God is always personal and never individual. Rather, it is a spiritual journey which connects us intrinsically to the presence of God, whose love yearns to save and transform the world. We are called to be "in Christ," which means we share—always imperfectly, and always in community with others—the call to be the embodiment of God's love in the world.



IF THIS IS where politics for the person of faith begins, then where does it go and how might it end?

Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) once reportedly said, “The means is the end in the making,” and we frequently hear the admonition to “be the change that you want to see.” What we should recognize at the outset is that the methods, means, and style by which we engage in politics determines the end. In the present US political climate, this presents tremendous difficulties. Polarized, binary, either/or approaches to political participation have become hard-wired into conventional politics. The establishment of Fox News by the late Roger Ailes (1940–2017); the growth of cable news avenues with singular perspectives; the promiscuous presence of social media, allowing one to see the whole world through a biased lens; and the pressure to reduce issues to competing sound bites all contribute to a toxic political environment where participants talk at each other instead of with one another.

Overcoming this polarity becomes hard because patently clear moral issues of right and wrong seem plainly and painfully at stake. I once wrote Richard Rohr a note, which said, “Donald Trump makes it very hard for me to get beyond dualistic thinking.” Maintaining moral clarity is essential, and evidenced so clearly by the biblical prophets, Jesus, and those transformative prophets who have followed: Francis of Assisi (1181–1226), Archbishop Oscar Romero (1917–1980), Dorothy Day (1897–1980), Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968), and so many more. The challenges of climate change, immigration, healthcare, economic inequality, racism, and blind trust in military might are not simply political issues but profoundly moral choices. Biblical wisdom offers direct and unambiguous judgments on these and other questions which can’t be compromised and must frame the perspectives of we who embrace this faith.

But starting with mysticism means we experience the gift of the intrinsic wholeness and interconnection in all of creation. Each person is held within this web of gracious love. Thus, we begin with an embrace of the other, as God does, rather than positing a polarized separation into warring factions. While being clear about the end being God’s shalom, we also adopt the means to see others, not as

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enemies, but as those with gifts and wounds who yearn, whether consciously or not, to experience an unbounded love which calms their fears, shatters their illusions, and enlivens their souls.

In my view, the invitation to embark on such an inward spiritual journey is the only certain way I know to get beyond and beneath the siloed, polarized political culture of our time. We all need to wander in the wilderness before we pronounce our message.



ENGAGEMENT IN THE political process, broadly defined, is not an option. It's inevitable. For instance, in today's world, with devastating climate change, rural poverty, and immigration conflicts, what we have for lunch, where we eat, and how we get there all can have political consequences. When politics is the fruit of mysticism, it takes root in the daily living of our lives. It also often leads to direct political involvement, whether through voting, advocating, speaking, organizing, lobbying, or running for and holding elective political office. For all people of faith, the question is not whether to be "political," but how to do so with intentional awareness, commitment, and faithfulness to the vision and love which has claimed and called us.

From my experience as an assistant to a US Senator, a consultant to a White House advisory group, a long-time partner with an advocacy group for faith and justice (Sojourners), and a leader of a US denomination, here are three things I've learned:

1. **Always keep the end in clear view.** The political process constantly wants to shrink the horizon of what's possible. The person of faith wants to expand it, looking toward God's intended horizon. Always let that be your moral compass and remind those enmeshed in the political process how to envision the long-term goal.

2. **Compromise is not evil.** If the end for which we yearn is shaped by the hope of God's reign breaking into this world, we should learn to expect immediate outcomes that are imperfect. What's important are the direction and the sense of urgency. Are we moving toward the interdependent ends of justice, peace, and integrity of creation, with an imperative commitment, or are we retreating from them?
3. **Speak the language of religious faith.** Often people of faith engaging in politics assume that they must sanitize their vocabulary of spiritual language. Don't. Politicians expect religious people to share the basis of their convictions. That's not imposing this language on others, but being honest about our motives. It's fine to sound like a prophet when sharing a prophetic message.

During the healthcare debate this year, Jessi Bohon, a teacher in Tennessee, became politically engaged and went to a town hall meeting with her Representative in the House, Diane Black. Jessi got up and said, "As a Christian, my whole philosophy in life is to pull up the unfortunate. We are effectively punishing our sickest people." It was a conversation that went viral and served as a simple but powerful example of the political witness from a person of faith.



IN THIS ERA of Donald Trump's presidency, it's more important than ever for politics to emerge from mysticism. The late Edwin Friedman (1932–1996), author of *Generation to Generation*,⁴ wrote perceptively about how the dysfunction in family systems can be applied to religious organizations and the wider life of society. We can become easily trapped, Friedman argued, in emotional reactivity, where the dysfunction of one person, including a key leader, provokes equally dysfunctional responses of anger, anxiety, and fear from others. The whole system is afflicted by a series of emotional dominoes. It takes the self-differentiated leadership of others, who know their emotional and spiritual center and are not hooked by the dysfunction of the system, to bring health, clarity, and wisdom.

Our present political order is as dysfunctional as any that I have seen in my lifetime. It's fueled by the President's own narcissistic

wounds, but this infects the whole. Hopes and places of healing will depend on those who find a different and differentiated starting point. The necessary detachment from this ugly and injurious present political climate depends upon our inner attachment to the mystery of God's unbounded grace and divine, creative love. That is the foundation from which we can witness to truth, nurture community, and build essential bonds of solidarity with those who suffer. More than ever, politics which offers redemptive hope will begin with mysticism. •

