

## INTRODUCTION

THE ETYMOLOGY OF words is often a great place to start when exploring a topic or idea. *Religio* means to reconnect, which was apparently seen as God's unique work. *Polis*—which led to the word politics—simply means city or public forum or the aggregated world of people.

This gets us off to a great start. We live in a very disconnected or unconnected world, and thus are quite unreligious or irreligious—even the many who regularly attend church, synagogue, or mosque. (I know that is not the common perception today with the prevalent use of social media, but my assumption here is that this superficial “connecting” is part of the problem because it makes us think we are in contact when often we are not at all.)

One of the pieces that has historically remained the most disconnected for many religious people has been the public forum. Unlike its Jewish forebears, Christianity, in its first two thousand years, has kept its morality mostly private, personal, interior, fervent, and heaven-bound, but with very few direct implications for what is now called our collective economic, social, or political life. Politics and religion remained largely in two different realms, unless religion was uniting with empires. Yes, we looked to Rome and Constantinople for imperial protection, but little did we realize the price we would eventually pay for such a compromise with foundational Gospel values.

This convenient split took the form of either the inner or the outer world. We religious folks were supposed to be the inner people while the outer world was left to politicians, scientists, and workers of every stripe. Now this is all catching up with us, as even the inner world has largely been overtaken by psychology, literature, and the huge world of self-help. Fewer and fewer people now expect religion to have anything to say about either the inner or outer worlds!

If we do not go deep and in, we cannot go far and wide.

Now, in my opinion, the reason we lost our Christian authority is because we did not talk about the inner world very well (believing doctrines, practicing rituals, and following requirements are not, in

and of themselves, inner or deep). Frankly, Buddhism did the inner far better than the three monotheistic religions. We Christians did not connect the inner with the outer—which is a consequence of not going *in* deeply enough. We now have become increasingly *irrelevant*, often to the very people who want to go both deep and far. We so disconnected from the political—God’s aggregated people, the public forum—that soon we had nothing much to say.

I am not talking about *partisan politics* here, but simply the connecting of the inner world with the outer world. We have allowed the word *partisan* to be the first and sometimes only meaning of the word *political* (another sad result of our dualistic thinking), and so people do not even allow us to preach the purely Gospel message from the pulpit—as it might sound “political”! Our dualistic way of thinking allowed us to be hamstrung and silenced.

Politicians on the Right normally love this, because we thereby become easy friends of the status quo and, if we dare to critique it, we will be called “political”—as if this is a terrible thing to be. If we affirm the status quo, we will be called loyal, conservative, Christian, and faith-based! It is no surprise that President Trump wants to remove the prohibition on religious groups taking political stands. He knows they will reliably be on the side of the status quo because they usually want to *conserve* the privileges of the comfortable (the clergy themselves usually being in the comfortable class). This was the very thing that St. Francis wanted to change in his community.

Here is my major point: There is no such thing as being non-political. Everything we say or do either affirms or critiques the status quo. Even *to say nothing is to say something*: The status quo—even if it is massively unjust and deceitful—is apparently okay. This “non-political” stance is an illusion and the powerful have always been able to rely upon what Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924) called “useful idiots.” Many church people do not know that they are often used as useful idiots on issues like the total legitimacy of the State of Israel or the war machine, the not-so-obvious biases of the budget, the single-issue voting of many “pro-life” Christians, the willingness to call the Gospel “Socialism,” and on and on.

We cannot allow Christianity to be used as useful idiocy any longer. We must use the power of the Gospel to critique and affirm both the Left and the Right of most public positions, knowing that the Left normally does not represent the Gospel either, but is also

another power-and-control position. Its primary advantage is that it has developed a critical mind—but, even there, it often becomes too negative and too critical.

The Left often does not know how to both “transcend and include,” which is true non-partisan and healthy politics and religion. In its idealism, it often becomes ideological, arrogant, dualistic, individualistic—problem-solver more than reconstructionist—and thus something other than Love.

Where then do we go? This does leave us with almost “nowhere to lay [our] heads” (see Luke 9:58). This is the essential powerlessness of Gospel power—or is it? The Hebrew Prophets, Jesus, Buddha, Francis, and Gandhi first appear to be “nothing,” outside the system, and really of no consequence. But just wait a while. It is these wisdom figures who offer the real and final power. Like leaven and yeast, their much deeper assumptions rise, again and again, in every age, while kings, tyrants, ideologies, and empires keep changing and passing away.

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