



Christian Political Engagement:

An Interview with Michael Plekon

By Shirin McArthur

Shirin McArthur: Your most recent book, *Uncommon Prayer: Prayer in Everyday Experience*, speaks about our life of prayer beyond the doors of the church. How is political involvement an uncommon prayer—or not?

Michael Plekon: If one looks at the New Testament, it is hard not to see the reality of politics in the lives of Jesus and those around him. I realize that many “spiritual” people prefer to separate politics from faith. It keeps things neater, happier, without any conflict. But it’s not real! It’s not honest, either. Think about the coin with the image of Caesar imprinted on it, the constant questions about what can or cannot be done on the Sabbath, the bickering about who is deserving

of God's mercy—just the people of Israel or also the marginalized: the Samaritans, Syro-Phoenicians, Romans, and other non-Jews. Rather than trying to edit politics and the rest of everyday life out of our faith, I believe the example and the teachings of Jesus want us to come to terms with our world, as challenging as that may be.

Shirin: When you consider political involvement by faithful Christians, are there particular saints or holy men and women that come to mind from your tradition? How did/do they live out their uncommon prayers?

Michael: We have the example of so many “living icons,” persons of faith to orient us. Mother Maria Skobtsova (1891–1945) was an Orthodox Christian nun who hid Jewish people and other targets of the Gestapo in her Paris houses of hospitality. Very important in our American context was the late Archbishop Iakovos (1911–2005), head of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese. He fearlessly marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., at Selma and remained a public voice for civil rights, despite death threats from his own community. The litany of witnesses contains many familiar names but even more with little name recognition at all. I think each of us could start identifying, upon reflection, many who are currently alive and working in our neighborhoods right now.

Most of all, I think we have to start taking seriously our own callings to stand up for those in danger and need. The present political situation in the Trump administration has made this both very clear and extremely critical. When distributing groceries at the food bank based in the church we attend, I and my colleagues have to be aware of ICE agents trolling such public locations, both to terrorize and to detain immigrants and refugees, who are now deemed undesirable in our country. Those to whom we look for examples of doing the works of lovingkindness, such as the few I mentioned, show us that we cannot hide from being Christ to others. Their experiences also indicate that we may pay for doing so.

Another strong voice, witness, and example these days is Papa Francesco, the Bishop of Rome. It should surprise no one that his championing of God's mercy, his making mercy the model of how the church should act—whether toward divorced folk or LGBTQ people or refugees, the many who are challenged and the poor—this preaching of the Gospel of mercy has made him a number of opponents, even enemies, among pastors and church leaders, as well as some lay people.

Shirin: You have said that real transformation is not just about standing with those who are targeted and against hateful acts; it will also entail our seeking to build bridges with those with whom we disagree. Where do you see bridge-building happening? What difference does/can faithfulness make in the strength and capacity of the bridge?

Michael: Bridge-building—others would call it communion or fellowship or reconciliation—yes, this is also necessary. Doing the works of lovingkindness, as have Jesus and other persons of faith, cannot take the form of establishing a wall of enmity, dividing us from those who think differently or who do what is harmful to the weak, those in need, the challenged, and the poor. I do think we must rid ourselves of false piety. By this I mean the all-too-easy ways in which some spiritual people blithely claim to be one, even with those opposed to them, while overlooking the actual disagreements and, worse, the toxic behavior of others.

To be specific, I cannot agree with or support the desire to cut millions of Americans from health insurance coverage because expansion of Medicaid and the subsidies provided to purchase coverage are adding to the deficit. The proposed “replacement” to follow repeal of the Affordable Care Act included an enormous tax cut to the wealthiest fraction of the top 1% of Americans. This kind of lawmaking lacks mercy, is unjust, and must be opposed. Likewise, despite claims that only those with serious criminal records are being singled out for deportation, numerous additional non-documented immigrants are, in fact, being detained and deported. Appeals court judges halted the administration’s travel bans because they were the enactment of a campaign promise to exclude Muslims from the US, no matter their vetting and status, rather than the foundation for good bridges.

Shirin: What suggestions would you have for those who want to build spiritually strong political bridges?

Michael: Bridges connecting those with whom we disagree must be built with spiritual, living stones. There are basics upon which we can agree, such as our love for God and God’s love for us. I have been blessed, gifted, to have lived in three great church traditions—Roman Catholic, Reformation/Lutheran, and Orthodox. Almost a century ago, the greatest Orthodox theologian of the modern era, Fr. Sergius Bulgakov (1871–1944), confessed that, for all our bickering, even our suspicions, fears, and hatred, God had left us still one. It is from this communion with God that we build or, if necessary, rebuild bridges

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with those who do not share our vision. We have to proceed “as if” there still remains fellowship in the Lord of all. As Martin Luther (1483–1546) said, we must always put the “best construction” on what challenges us.

Shirin: What do you say to those who are tired of division, “us vs. them,” and confrontation in the political sphere?

Michael: I say to all of us who are weary—and we *all* are weary: Do not fear, little flock, our Father gave us the kingdom—that is, the beauty and the power of God’s presence among us. We are not alone, left to our own devices. In the worst of times in the past, as the lives of so many persons of faith have taught me—over against the terror of the Russian revolution and the Nazi machine of death, in the face of crippling poverty in the Great Depression, during the paralyzing suspicion of the Cold War and then the destructive wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan—women and men continued to hold on to God and not only read the scriptures and prayed, but also did works of mercy for those in need around them. There is always some work of God that I can do. I need to look around me, carefully, to find it.

Shirin: What do you think Jesus would have to say about the political climate in the US over the past decade or so?

Michael: I will just say this, as I did at the start: We cannot try to run from what is ugly and threatening into a spirituality of escape. Likewise, not every one of us is capable of being elected to political office, leading a movement, starting a shelter or food bank or soup kitchen. Jesus would notice where we no longer trust those different from us, and even despise them. Jesus would also call us out for punishing the victims of financial havoc and corporate greed as if they

were the perpetrators. There appears, in the current administration, to be an agenda of deconstructing the “administrative state.” This is being lauded as a step toward freedom for us, releasing us from any obligation to help others or share with the less fortunate.

Since the start of the last century, some of our best presidents and other government leaders have envisioned God’s justice (and I would say mercy) as there being no one left in need of food, clothing, shelter, or medical care. Jesus saw enough of the Roman empire’s occupation of Palestine to know the power of military might, the power of the state to tax, to control, to take the lives of those who stood in the way. We cannot be God’s children and, at the same time, only want the “hard power” of military might without the mercy of caring for those in need. Thus it seems clear that Jesus would not weep, but rather drive out those who turned his Father’s house and world into a marketplace of greed for only the wealthy few because it was assumed that their prosperity would “trickle down” to the rest of us. It simply does not.

Shirin: You say that the new Jerusalem, at the end of times, is when all will truly be “great again”—riffing off President Trump’s campaign theme. If Christ’s return will usher in this new Jerusalem, why do faithful Christians need to participate in the political arena?

Michael: Oh, but nowhere in the Book of Revelation, nor, for that matter, anywhere else in the New Testament, is the “new Jerusalem” some kind of magical “happy ending” staged by God for those remaining! That book was written to console communities being oppressed, people suffering all kinds of official, but also local, harassment, simply for being who they were. The new Jerusalem, like the “kingdom” of heaven, is an image of when God will be “all in all.”

The idea of making America “great again” would be a splendid, godly project if it were the vision of Isaiah, that the lion would lie down with the lamb, that spears would be turned into plows and farming tools, that every suffering and sadness would be taken away—poverty, discrimination, sickness. It is the vision seen by all those hungry people who followed Jesus out into the middle of nowhere, sharing just a couple loaves of bread and dried fish and having an abundance precisely because they trusted and loved enough to share. The miracle in that, and everywhere else in the scriptures, is never a magician doing tricks. Rather, it is always ordinary folks like you and me seeing everything differently, seeing as God sees—and acting upon it.

Shirin: What else would you like to discuss in this intersection of politics and religion?

Michael: I suppose it would be best to close with some concrete things. I would say, in this time—a most challenging one—we need a combination of both resistance and constructive, healing action. It is important, for example, to look around your building or your block and the wider neighborhood. There are specific things you can do: Volunteer at a seniors’ or veterans’ center, at a soup kitchen or food bank, where there are English classes for immigrants or after-school tutoring for kids. Political divisions should not prevent us from direct assistance to others in need.

As a university professor for over forty years, I believe that staying educated and knowledgeable about what is happening in the country is crucial. All talk of “fake news” and partisan media aside, we need to know the contents of new legislation, and of legislation being repealed. Hearsay and “alternate facts”—that is, non-truths—are destructive. So, too, is retreating, escaping from what is happening, only to then feel frustrated and angry. It is very good to talk to those who are concerned about the administration’s direction. It is also important to listen to the “other side,” to understand the opposing positions and their reasoning, even if they are objectionable. Only an examined life is a life worth living.

Lastly, we should realize that our spiritual aims and tools of the trade need not be expressed in pious, traditionally “religious” ways. Political and social engagement can be suffused with the spirit of the Gospel. Our actions preach the Gospel. How else will we hear what God has to say unless we put ourselves before God, silently; unless we read the scriptures; unless we lift up our world and those around us in intercession? How will we stay peacemakers as well as resisters unless we practice the works of lovingkindness, forgiving as we are forgiven? To paraphrase Dr. King, we will never extinguish hatred except by love and forgiveness. ♦