

Faith in the Public Square

Mark Rocques, in *Curriculum Unmasked*, states that most school textbooks render religion innocuous. That is, if and when they do speak of the different religions of the world, they are portrayed as having little or no impact on public life. Textbooks mention religious founders, sacred scriptures, special celebrations, principal spokespersons and revered buildings. But attention is not given to religious impact on life in the public square. Is religion indeed strictly private, and inconsequential for public life?

There is nothing further from the truth. Secularist textbook writers may feel or think that religion is, or should remain, private. That is their view, however, and not one shared by the adherents of the very religions they describe. That their views dominate the textbooks used in schools is extremely unfortunate. It renders a very distorted picture of religion. Is it that secularists, apart from failing to recognize their own bias and religious presuppositions, do not tolerate a religiously active public life?

How do we understand, let alone recognize, active religious faith in the public square? The media is fixated on actions by rabid fundamentalists who blow up abortion clinics or march the streets waving guns. But they fail to give attention to, let alone analyze, the deep religious convictions of persons who have made a positive contribution to our society or the world. These persons have struggled for peace and justice because their religious convictions compel them to do so. Is it the case that many of us succumb to such biased portrayals, and we no longer fully understand that religion is more than a private or silly matter, and does it actually spur people to public action?

Oscar Romero, Archbishop of the Catholic Church in Guatemala, demanded that the military stop oppressing the poor in that country. His strong Catholic beliefs, which saw Jesus identifying with the poor and oppressed, caused him to leave the security of his church surroundings, something that the military advised him



against. Rather than merely baptizing babies, celebrating the sacraments, blessing the children and visiting the sick, Romero marched in the streets in solidarity with the disadvantaged of his parishes. In the process he too became vulnerable, like those under his care. But his religious convictions would have been rendered meaningless, though private, had he done otherwise. Mahatma Gandhi, a Hindu who entered the public sphere was also

his religious convictions convinced him that all humans were equal in the eyes of God and were to be treated with freedom, justice and dignity. Closer to home, Tommy Douglas, founder of the New Democratic Party, worked intensely in the 1950's to introduce social security to protect the poor and vulnerable.

In all of these cases the message is the same. Individuals, and groups of individuals, convicted by their religious beliefs, engage in public affairs for freedom, justice and dignity of the poor and disadvantaged. Their faith did not remain private, but was the force that carried them undaunted against great odds.

These actions, of course, are not merely matters of the past. Today the situation has not changed, in spite of the current impression that religion is strictly private, or even irrelevant. People of deep religious convictions still bring their faith to the public square. They seldom attract media attention, nor are their convictions the kind spoken of in texts. But they are active, and they make an impact. One reads about their actions mostly in the alternative press, actions which seek social, political and economic justice for all in society, not just the rich and powerful. Should it surprise us that we do not read about their activities in the *Financial Post*, or the *Globe and Mail's Report on Business*?

The founder of the Christian faith, to which the Christian Scriptures testify, never intended his words, deeds and actions to spur only private life. His call is also one of public action and involvement, in every area of our being.

It also touches education. In this sense, the learning process becomes the training for spirited engagement in the public square where there is no such thing as unemployment. There is plenty of work. Perhaps if school texts were more thorough (honest?) in their portrayal of religion, students might discover deeper meaning in their studies and more conviction in their work.

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Womynsay

Womyn do speak, I know, because I've heard them. Well, I think I've heard them.

As a child I heard my mother speak: "Clean your room; Do your homework; Eat your vegetables and drink your milk." I also heard her say, "Because I said so; Well who said life was fair? Stop crying, it will be OK, I promise—I think so—I know so!" My mother also sang songs to me, mostly in French—my "mother's tongue." One was a lullaby, another about a dog, and another about baby Jesus who was born with no thumbs (an interpretation from grandfather of the original).

Basically what my mother said was a collection of Do's and Don'ts; guidance/discipline, words of general wisdom accompanied by attempts to comfort and create security. Words, that in the end, would provide me with the tools by which to live—after all, is that not what a parent does?

However, I wonder... Although, I've heard my mother speak did I hear her as a womyn or did I only hear her as my parent?

What do womyn say?

Considering this distraction, somewhere in my mother's parenting must have been a womyn's voice, she is, after all, a womyn, first and foremost. So I wonder... Where do I hear the womyn's voice that I know my mother speaks?

Among the many words of wisdom my mother gives she continually promotes my academic career. She says, "Don't worry so much about relationships, get a good education, invest in yourself before you commit to someone else." Good advice, but through her words she expresses herself as an experienced womyn, offering knowledge to her child who is also a womyn. She speaks as a womyn, her voice filtered through her role as a parent. "Don't lose your ambitions, don't lose yourself. I married young, I know—you forget who you are, then you start to exist for everyone else." These are my mother's words. This is what my mother said.

When I ask myself, "What do womyn say?" I listen for womyn speaking as women, because, as I illustrated, womyn speak through their many roles (ie: parent, worker,

Francophone, and consumer). I am also conscious that womyn are always womyn, as opposed to the roles they play.

My mother provided me with my first human interaction: my primary relationship, companion, authority... When I was smaller, I thought no one could be more perfect and more beautiful than my mother. That opinion was quickly lost through adolescence and my mother was suddenly the most annoying, meddlesome, and absolutely backwards individual. As an adult I've reconciled these distinctions, and my mother is, well, human. No angel. No demon. Simply womyn. But not a womyn simply. Essentially, I have recognized that my mother is a womyn like me. And now that I've escaped the bonds of youth I am able to appreciate her as a parent and as a womyn—with love, life and experience as a part of what womyn say.

The Womyn's Collective will meet Jan. 27, Monday, 7:30 Movies: Earthwalk Adam's World.

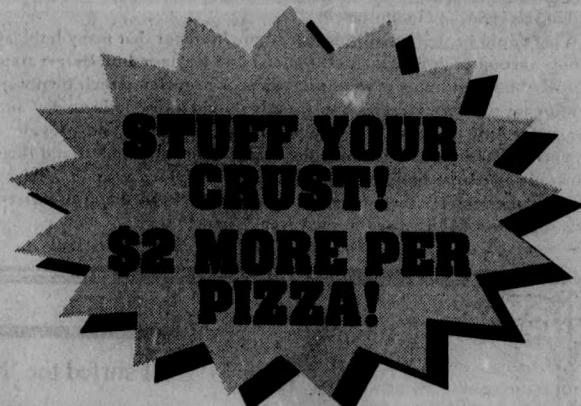
Cina Rodas is a member of the womyn's collective.



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