Spiritual Politics: *Innovative Approaches*

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Spirituality? Politics? How can we mention these in the same breath? Most people would say you can be either a spiritual seeker—or a political activist—but never both. For those caught in dualistic, "either/or" thinking, politics and spirituality seem worlds apart-- two different arenas that should never be mixed or they produce deadly results--such as we see today with certain politicians trying to impose their religious beliefs on everyone else through public policies.

But there's a big difference between spirituality and religion. "Religion" refers to an organized institution and community of believers, with specific dogmas and practices. But spirituality relates to one's inner, moral-centered life in relation to the Transcendent. It is concerned with qualities of the human spirit such as love and courage. Religion can help a person be spiritual, but spirituality isn't dependent upon religion.

In actual practice, true spirituality can ennoble politics and politics can ground spirituality. Spirituality can help people leave ego and power trips at the door and truly serve the good of others. Politics can provide a practical arena for applying spiritual principles such as compassion, as instant feedback is given if someone doesn't "walk the talk"— if their words are more pious than their deeds. Bringing spiritual values such as altruism and courage into politics could offset the immense power of moneyed interests to influence policy, and offset the cynicism and apathy of much of the public.

Gandhi had no trouble bringing his spirituality and politics together. He said, "I could not lead a religious life unless I identified with the whole of mankind, and that I could not do unless I took part in politics."

But what about separation of church and state in this country? As Congressman Dennis Kuncinich says, "Our Founders never meant to imply that we should separate… the actions of government from spiritual principles." Nor did they intend that we should avoid discussing spiritual ideas in the public arena. They only intended that the State not impose religious beliefs on citizens or interfere in the practice of religion.

People today are yearning for a spiritually based politics guided by moral values—a politics that doesn't appeal only to self-interest and pit one group against another. They seek a type of political discourse that speaks to their deepest values as human beings, that provides a greater sense of community and a transcendent purpose as a nation, that offers us a higher vision of public life and service to the common good--rather than appealing only to greed and lust for power.

As Jim Wallis writes in *God's Politics*, we shouldn't be asking if God or Spirit is on our side, but rather ask, Are we on God's side? Are we embodying our spiritual values and promoting compassion, justice, and peace?

A recent poll found that 84% of Americans agree that "our government would be better if policies were more directed by moral values." Another poll in *The Washington Post* found that the issue of greatest concern to voters wasn't healthcare or education, but rather moral values.

If citizens make it safe to discuss spiritual values in public life, then they can hold politicians accountable for the spiritual values they espouse. The public has made it very clear they don't want negative campaigning, and candidates today often try to convince voters that their campaign is the most positive. A refreshing call to honesty, service and sacrifice from a candidate often draws people to vote for the first time in many years.

How can we recognize a spiritually based politics? Here are some key qualities:

- Courage in standing up to special interests
- Honesty and integrity—"walking the talk"
- Lack of ego-inflation and manipulation of others
- Fairness and justice
- Non-violence and peaceful means
- Compassion for the disadvantaged
- Serving the good of the whole, rather than personal interests
- Respect and civility for opponents
- Collaboration and partnership
- Whole systems thinking—understanding how everything is interconnected
- Reliance on intuition and inner guidance
- Faith in a Higher Power—God, Spirit, the Universe, etc.

Spirituality in politics is most apparent where citizens altruistically engage in politics to help others, rather than just protect their own self-interests (e.g. lowering

their taxes, providing healthcare they need, etc.) Although promoting self-interest may be necessary and certainly is not wrong, it is not motivated by unselfish concern for others. However, even when the public motive is to help others, one needs to also honestly assess whether the private motive might be increasing one's own power or fame, as this would reduce its spiritual value. And ultimately the measurement of spirituality is integrity—whether someone embodies the spiritual principles they promote.

There are many ways in which spiritual values impact American politics today. (Of course, depending on your personal political leanings, it may be harder to see the spiritual motivation in the politics of your opponents.) Providing for the poor, the homeless, and the handicapped, as well as reducing violence and drug abuse have always been key arenas for spiritual activism. Liberals generally promote government-funded social programs as solutions, while conservatives promote private solutions, including faith-based organizations.

Another arena is fighting injustice and inequality by speaking truth to power. Liberals and reformers have generally taken more of this approach. Issues include human rights, racism, women's rights, etc. Many spiritually oriented people have been increasingly concerned about the protection of wildlife and stewardship of the natural world. Environmental protection, endangered species protection, and energy conservation are key issues. The invocation of service and sacrifice for a higher ideal to activate political will is another major arena for spirituality.

One of the most contentious areas recently for spirituality and politics has been what one side calls "declining morals and family values" in schools and popular culture. Fundamentalist Christians have been the most vocal about this, but others have also expressed concern. The issues here are school prayer, censoring sexuality in movies and TV, banning abortion, etc.

The Seeds of a Truly Transformed Politics

While doing research for our book Spiritual Politics, we found that in addition to these traditional arenas for spirituality and politics, there is a new politics emerging around the country today that embodies a more innovative spiritual approach.

1. Using a "higher common ground" process for resolving conflicts and making policy

Many of the new political approaches transcend the usual adversarial approach to find higher ground on polarized issues. There is usually a grain of truth on each side in any political conflict. Healing, reconciliation and forgiveness are spiritual qualities very much needed today.

The training of initiates in ancient mystery schools included training in paradoxical thinking--holding two opposite ideas at the same time and seeing the truth in both. Taoists teach about yin and yang--the polar opposites--that are held in a dynamic

balance. Buddhists follow the Noble Middle Path between the pairs of opposites. In the Jewish Kabbalah or Tree of Life, the middle pillar shows the path of balance between the opposites.

As Einstein said, we can't solve a problem on the same level of consciousness that created the problem. We have to find higher common ground.

Multi-stakeholder dialogues, which involve all parties in a collaborative dialogue, are proving to be the most effective way to develop viable policies and reduce conflict on divisive issues such as race, abortion, and the environment. For example, The Institute for Multi-Track Diplomacy helps resolve ethnic conflicts worldwide through involving all stakeholders in dialogues--government, business and non-profit groups —and listening deeply to all perspectives. Search for Common Ground helps opponents on both sides of the abortion debate find common ground by working together to prevent unwanted pregnancies and to make adoptions more easily available. America Speaks creates innovative citizen dialogues on local issues such as neighborhood development and national issues such as Social Security.

The ageless wisdom of East and West emphasizes that unity is needed before there can be lasting peace in the world, and peace is needed before there can be shared abundance. Peace is built on right human relations. Through efforts to transform conflict and listen to the voices on all sides of an issue, the seeds of a new politics is beginning to emerge. It is a politics that recognizes the underlying unity of humanity and builds a new synthesis based on identification with the whole.

2. Working to transform consciousness--the causal factor

Our negative patterns of thinking are the deeper cause of problems in our world. As medical researchers in psychoneuroimmunology are discovering how our thoughts affect our health, we need to explore how our collective thoughts are affecting our collective social health.

The Ageless Wisdom of both East and West reveals how to change the world by changing consciousness. To create peace in the world, we must create peace within ourselves. In the West, the Bible says, "As a man [or woman] thinketh in his heart, so he is." Likewise, the Buddhists say, "With our thoughts we make the world." Energy follows thought--mind is the builder. The interplay of human and Divine thought creates all reality.

For example, The Foundation for Global Community, (formerly Beyond War) based in Palo Alto, CA, successfully enlisted hundreds of teams around the country to help Americans reframe their consciousness about nuclear war. They learned to see it as obsolete, because no one could actually win a nuclear war. So a new, non-violent strategy for security was promoted.

Tikkun, an interfaith community started by Rabbi Michael Lerner, produces a national magazine and "Spiritual Activist" conferences that promote the consciousness

of a "new bottom line"—compassion, generosity and caring—instead of the old bottom line of materialism and selfishness. To address the spiritual crisis in America, they have created a "Spiritual Covenant with America" to encourage spiritual people to stand publicly for their highest vision and values.

Other groups such as our Center for Visionary Leadership, are helping people study the deeper spiritual causes of current events and crises and the karma involved. Events can be a rich source of collective learning if we're willing to explore the lessons being offered through shared national experiences. We can interpret events as the symbolic out-picturing of the inner forces at work and explore their hidden causes in consciousness. The Native Americans called this "Reading the Book of Life."

For example, collective disasters and wars provide major opportunities to learn compassion for victims, as well as to learn the consequences of our actions. "As you sow, so shall you reap," as the Bible says--or "karma" as the Hindus say. When the Mississippi River flooded major portions of the U.S. several years ago, for example, sewage dumped in its tributaries backed up and returned to the towns that had dumped it. This new spiritual approach to politics does not look for others to blame, but rather takes responsibility for our own thoughts and actions.

3. Using meditation to invoke the soul of a nation and spiritual help for leaders, policies, and crisis situations.

A spiritually based politics recognizes that we humans do not have to struggle with our problems alone, as help is always available from higher dimensions when it is asked for. There are many examples of guidance by higher spiritual forces throughout history, such as George Washington's vision of an angelic presence at Valley Forge, the help received by the Allies during the Battle of Britain in World War II, and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's vision of Mohammed inspiring him to create peace in the Middle East.

Prayer has been used by all religions down through the ages, but today there are many groups that promote meditation for creating peace and justice, such as the Buddhist Peace Fellowship in Berkeley, CA. Pathways to Peace in Larkspur, CA for example, has organized prayer vigils to ask for spiritual help in crisis situations. A major meditation vigil around the world helped support the peace process in Bosnia at a crucial juncture. Pathways to Peace and many organizations promote meditation for the United Nations every September 21st on International Peace Day. Intuition in Service in New Zealand sends out regular notices about important events and crises to be held in the light of meditation.

The Faith and Politics Institute in Washington D.C. provides retreats and reflection groups to support Congresspeople and their staff in being true to their deepest values when confronting difficult issues such as campaign fundraising.

At The Center for Visionary Leadership, we encourage people to invoke the soul of their nation, because like individuals, each nation has both a self-serving personality

and a more altruistic soul. We also created a meditative prayer to help heal the divisions that divide us as a nation, and many people around the country have been using it for years. Citizens of several other nations have also adapted it to their own country.

We also encourage people to "Adopt a Leader"--find a national leader that needs help spiritually, but has a lot of potential, and follow his or her career, praying or meditating for him/her, that s/he may align with higher spiritual principles and serve the good of all.

4. Synthesizing the spiritual aspects of both hierarchy and democracy

A new approach to politics takes the spiritual aspects of hierarchy--leadership and quality--and the spiritual aspects of democracy--caring and inclusiveness--and raises them up into a higher synthesis. The synthesis of the best of democracy and the best of hierarchy creates enlightened leadership. Democracy provides the loving container to hold and nourish people's development, and hierarchy models the direction for others to grow into.

The principle of hierarchy acknowledges current abilities, quality and excellence (actualized potential). Hierarchy recognizes current accomplishments. It values leadership, purpose, direction, and vision. It can be very efficient and provide clarity and accountability, encouraging and rewarding initiative. It can provide models of achievement for others to aim for, offering mentoring for those who are younger or less experienced.

Each of us must learn to recognize whom we can learn from because they are more advanced in certain areas (and thus we can learn humility). But we must also recognize whom we can serve because they haven't yet developed certain qualities that we might have (and thus we can learn responsibility).

The principle of democracy acknowledges future potential and empowers its development, giving people the maximum freedom to grow and develop. It provides opportunity and encouragement. It values inclusiveness, relationship, listening, compassion. Equal opportunity, political rights, and decision-making power are bestowed on all so that individuals may develop their full potential. There is an emphasis on inclusiveness, where everyone is equally honored and encouraged to participate. This can be especially reassuring especially for those lacking self-worth or self-confidence.

A number of new groups are experimenting with this innovative approach, such as Foundation for Global Community in Palo Alto, CA and the Findhorn Foundation in Scotland. Governance structures include enlightened, empowered leadership at the core with very participatory, decentralized decision-making. Leaders listen carefully to concerns from all participants, and build consensus on major issues.

5. Promoting "best practices"—spiritually based solutions to social problems

Many new solutions have been pioneered by "civil society" groups (non-profit organizations) which represent a powerful third force beyond government and business that embodies the spirit of service found in all religions. Their spiritually based solutions are effective because they address the whole person--body, mind and spirit--and change lives, rather than just provide food or shelter.

Sojourners in Washington, D.C. has helped juvenile gang members give up violence and drugs and find a new life through a spiritual approach. The Restorative Justice Institute in Virginia brings together crime victims and offenders for reconciliation and forgiveness. The Alliance of Concerned Men in Washington, D.C. helps unmarried fathers reconnect with their sons and take responsibility for their education. The Sarvodaya self-help movement in Sri Lanka is built on Buddhist principles of loving kindness, sharing and service, with thousands of participants meditating together each day.

In the widespread trend to bring spirituality into business, an increasing number of Americans are working to make their companies reflect their values in how they relate to their employees, their community and the natural environment. They are promoting a triple bottom line—people, planet, profit—and making their companies more socially responsible. Many people are hungering for a deeper sense of meaning and purpose at work and want to apply their values in a practical way.

Similarly, many citizens want their politics and government to reflect deeper, more universal spiritual values. They demand that politicians embody the values they espouse—but without imposing these values on others. Bringing together spirituality and politics is a key idea whose time has come—in fact, it's long overdue! But as the French say, Everything begins in mysticism and ends in politics!

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