

There is no abstention from politics

The apolitical heresy takes two forms: jihadi extremism and blissed-out spirituality. Both disregard other human beings



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The question: Can religion be apolitical?

Religion is politics. It just is. The great French sociologist Émile Durkheim was right almost a century ago when he wrote of religion as "an eminently social thing". We learn it (or don't) at our mothers' breasts and cling to it (or not) as we set out into the world. We speak the word of God with human lips and hear it with human ears. The ways we do so are our first inkling of what a good society should look like. And that inkling forms habits of how we bother to treat one another. How we treat one another is politics.

Few have known this quite as well as the Episcopalian lawyer-theologian William Stringfellow, a man who followed Karl Barth's advice to read the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. "There is no option in this world of abstention from politics", he wrote. "Everyone everywhere is involved, whether intentionally and intelligently or by default or some moral equivalent of it." So, no: religion cannot be apolitical. But people can think it is, and that's when it becomes truly dangerous, or at best vapid and naive.

The apolitical heresy takes two forms. On one side there's militant, jihadi-dominionist enthusiasm; it wants to cut out the political middleman – preferably by blowing him up – and rule the world by dictates straight from on high. Then there's what nowadays calls itself "spiritual", a supposedly non-religious religion, forever disavowing its own very traceable history and its rather amorphous communities for the sake of private, personal, luxurious experiences. (Durkheim diagnosed this as "collective forces in individualised forms".) What both types of heresy both have in common, in their apolitical aspirations, is a blissed-out disregard for fellow human beings. The rest of us become nothing but aids or obstructions to probably-delusional ends.

This is not to say that our houses of worship should be rented out as echo-chambers for the fads of electoral politics. What religion can be, and should be to be worth all the trouble, is somehow *differently* political. For William Stringfellow, this meant striving to understand America biblically, not ("to put it in an appropriately awkward way"), the Bible Americanly. It's a call for the prophetic voice, the one that has cried out – often alone – in my country's history for abolition, for equality, for the poor, and for peace. No political party would utter these demands when it mattered most. Maybe they could have, maybe they should have, but they didn't, and some religious communities did.

I happen to be a Roman Catholic. My pastor used to be an operative in Washington for the party I normally vote to oust. Some in the parish lobby against abortion while others protest war, each in the name of Christ and the church. The usual political boxes don't define this political community. Yet there we are; here we are. We can celebrate mass on Sunday and argue about the news on Thursday night at the pub around the corner.

We're trying to organise a community around the needs of a fast-changing, fragmented neighbourhood. Doing so involves politics too, but Washington is a long way away.

Religious politics should be no excuse for anyone to relapse into dogma, to settle genuinely hard political questions with out-of-context religious answers, or to somehow dodge them. Those are the apolitical heresies again, idolatries as dumb as statues: fundamentalism and navel-gazing.

The politics of religion takes as much careful thinking and discerning as any other kind of politics – and preferably more, considering what prodigious forces religious people claim to represent. Yet they have to try. Living religious communities can hear the cry of injustice in ways that politicians and bureaucracies often can't, or won't. The complaints of others, after all, come in human voices, just like those that teach us about God.