

Spirituality 1-19-98

I guess I touched a nerve when I wrote a letter to a local paper suggesting that reactionaries are reactionary because they have the intellectual depth of tuna sushi – which is true because they are handicapped by their absurd ideology. Evidently some local reactionaries felt offended, and wrote back to the paper suggesting that my philosophical position – Marxism -- lacks spiritual depth.

I guess the reactionaries like to believe this because it gives them comfort in a world filled with mystery. One cannot doubt that the world is a difficult and dangerous place, and that it is becoming more dangerous all the time. And for those who are ill-equipped to grasp the complex movement of reality, it can seem most perplexing. So, they are anxious and afraid.

One obvious point has come into sharp focus lately. Throughout the Middle East religious fundamentalists have grown frustrated and even violent. This trend is most disturbing in Algeria, but also in Egypt and is developing in Turkey and Morocco. We even have them here, but our fundamentalists are Christian, or at least claim to be.

There is something in fundamentalism that soothes the spirit in a time of turbulence and difficulty. So it is not surprising that fundamentalism would be flourishing in a world in which overtly Left politics have been so thoroughly repressed. To the uninitiated the rise of fundamentalism may seem anachronistic – religious values taken from the middle ages. But the human spirit is an elusive thing that always and forever yearns to be free. Real freedom, overtly advocated by the Left has been pushed to the back burner for now, and religious fundamentalism expresses human resistance to economic oppression (however inadequately).

This is, of course, a precarious turn of events. Although, it is true that Left politics is also on the rebound -- the labor movement, the Communist Party, and the confluence of peace and justice interest groups. These overt advocates for justice will eventually triumph, such is the human will, but in the interim religious forms of fascist politics will also experience growth.

Sadly, the right has to its advantage that it dictates what the truth is, and that truth is found only in their leaders, and in these leaders' interpretation of their holy books – the Bible or Koran. It is easier for the reactionaries to accept what someone tells them is true. The left says that every human has the capacity to grasp truth for themselves, and in practice does just this -- to the degree they have the courage to see the world as it is. But seeing the world as it is can be disturbing.

The reactionaries I insulted claim that Marxism is spiritually bankrupt because it does not dictate a culture, or hold to the supremacy of any culture. To Marxists, truth can only be determined by the individual in her or his own experience of the world. To be sure Marxism offers potent tools -- materialism and dialectical logic -- to help in the exploration. But in the end we are all alone in the world, and must determine for ourselves what we are and how we relate to the universe – our spirituality.

Reactionaries see this as deficient because no one is telling them what to believe. We on the Left call this freedom -- because it is. Freedom can be a difficult thing for those who feel unsure, vulnerable, and even angry. All of this is quite understandable, and quite human.

The political struggles of the immediate future will involve just these issues. Fundamentalism is growing as the repression of working people around the world

intensifies. People will resist -- always. Sometimes this resistance takes unexpected forms, but these diversions into the realm of dictated truth serve to allow people to express their resistance until such time as they find a path of resistance that will bear fruit.

The capitalist class uses this frustration for its own ends, and because the Right does not question the structures of the economy it has the advantage of attracting financial resources. This makes the Right a particularly dangerous thing. Ironically, the danger lies precisely in the utter humanity of the reactionaries' feelings; feelings of hurt, or pain, of fear. It will take a great deal for humanity to overcome the very real fear in a world gone mad, in a world in which the economy is in a process of collapse.

It is quite human to feel more secure to the degree one understands the chaos around us. Sometimes chaos is just that, and we can only resolve to ride it out. Grasping for truth in a book or in the dictates of an Ayatollah or Jerry Falwell will only fail, because there is no truth there only lies meant to temporarily soothe anxious souls.

So, hold fast to your own truth, to the truth of your experience of the world. Experience is the best teacher – the only teacher. Sometimes one can only surf as the truth crests in a tidal wave of history around us. But look to your brothers and sisters for they seek and will find the same truth. Experience is that special something we share that makes us human and teaches us truth – together.