

ASK THE RELIGION EXPERTS

*An extended version of my response to the weekly question for the **Ask The Religion Experts** feature in the **Ottawa Citizen**. We hope this will generate thoughtful reflection of real-life applications of Buddhadharma and deeper understanding for us all.*

Saturday, September 1, 2012

Q : Should religion play a role in the labour movement?

A : The patron saint of the labour movement, Karl Marx, famously said “Religion is the opiate of the masses”, reflecting a very strong element within labour politics that embraces materialism and eschews anything transcendent. Nevertheless, there is alongside that a long history of religious figures being actively involved in left-influenced liberation movements. From Joan of Arc (Roman Catholicism) up to Mahatma Gandhi (hinduism), Archbishop Romero (Roman Catholicism), the Dalai Lama and Ari Ariyaratne (both Buddhists), charismatic religious figures have aligned themselves with leftist/labour values and movements. They undoubtedly recognized the appropriateness of their own engagement in such activity, and considered it consistent with their spiritual roles.

Such individuals have influenced history and politics, but should religious organisations themselves be involved? There are certainly arguments being made to isolate religious activity into the tiniest corner, or right out of society. Such materialist argument ignores the very real experience of transcendence that is present in the everyday lives of workers everywhere. So it would seem logical that religious organizations participate in an organization-to-organization dialogue. This need not

reconstitute any labour organization as a spiritual one, but only serve to expand the issues of workers lives to include religious ones. The incorporation of environmental issues on a union agenda is a good parallel.

We might also ask whether the labour movement itself would benefit from a religious dimension? If we are to take the labour movement as being concerned with the well-being of workers, it hardly seems advisable to exclude a person’s religious life from that well-being. Of course this does not mean that unions should be negotiating with employers to include religious activity as part of worker’s responsibilities. It could, however, suggest that sufficient time be available for workers to engage in regular and special religious obligations during the working year. Further, this might suggest that, as the military and university communities acknowledge, the services of a chaplain might enrich the lives of workers.

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:: om namu amida butsu::*

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<http://www.ottawacitizen.com/life/ask-the-religion-experts/index.html#>

All my past columns are available online at:

<http://www.realperson.com/ARE.htm>

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