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VALUES, FAITH, AND THE PROGRESSIVE AGENDA

Today we come to you at a time where the idea of values is becoming more present in our societies and our political discourse. Of course there is nothing wrong with the discussion of values, whether they are moral, religious, ethical or political.

But we do have a problem. The problem is that our unwillingness to address these questions as a movement has resulted in the domination of such questions of values by the political and religious right. For us, as the International League of Religious Socialists, this is something that we find strange, because when we look at this question of values, we see the historical role played by the religious left in the establishment of socialist ideals and socialist values in nations like Sweden, Britain, and Canada, as well as in the liberation theology movements in Latin America. Our Nicaraguan comrades know the value of the religious left in mobilising the people against the reactionary elements in both the church and state. And of course, our South African comrades know the essential role played by religious socialists in their long struggle.

Religion and progressive ideas have frequently gone together hand in hand. At the same time, any spiritual system that does not engage itself in the struggle for democracy, economic and social justice, and the rights of all people, regardless of gender, race, religion and class is unworthy of its own values.

So how shall we as the Socialist International address this problem of fundamentalism and the rising voice of the religious right? We would put it to you that the most effective way to deal with the religious right is with the organised efforts and knowledge of the religious left.

People like Buttiglione and Bush cannot be fought only on the basis of secular policy when they are making the news and winning support on the basis of their religious ideas. What is needed is a direct argument of their particular vision of faith, by those who can discuss questions of faith from an informed religious socialist perspective. In the same way that we use economic arguments to oppose neo-liberal views of capitalist economics, we can be most effective against those who use religion as a tool against human rights by using religious arguments against their fundamentalist views of religion.

But this is not only an argument for those who consider themselves religious in some special way. Spirituality does not belong only to those who have one particular set of beliefs. Spirituality belongs to all of us, like the air we breathe. Each person comes to their own vision of spirituality in a manner that is important to them, and this must never again be stolen away by those forces on the right whose vision of the world is grounded on the oppression of the human spirit.

Together our movement can and shall work to build a different definition of values. Together we can and shall demonstrate that the parties of working people do not ignore the religious sympathies of the working class. Together we can and shall show that religion need not be a source of division, but instead has the possibility to bring people together across differences, by focusing on those values which we share in common. All of us, religious or not, can appreciate the crucial importance of this effort in the conflict in the Middle East, as well as in rejecting the notion of a clash of civilisations.

If there is any doubt that such a task can be accomplished, we need only to look at the encouraging achievements in diversity and tolerance made right here in South Africa. Despite all the fears of what might have happened after apartheid, the careful process of reconciliation, guided in large part by able socialist hands in the ANC, proved that our vision of values can win out over those for whom values is just a code word for intolerance and xenophobia.

It has never been more important to raise a religious socialist voice in opposition to the dangerous developments I have mentioned. We feel confident that we can rise to that challenge for the benefit of all humanity.