

pom-pom waving

Participation in religious and political entities can be a positive force in a variety of ways, from promoting fellowship and comradeship to building community and celebrating shared values. But that it can be a positive force doesn't mean it has to be. It is our interpretation that makes the difference. Why the "all or none" mentality? Must we embrace the inherently contentious, divisive tenets of any ideology? Why adopt such a stance? What is the true nature of this sort of devotion? Can we not embrace the good aspects of any given ideology while rejecting the damaging and divisive? And is the idea of a superior faith nourishing to humanity and to society? Is language like the "one and only true religion" the language of a benevolent, loving, omniscient God? Or is this the language of very human demagogues who need to keep the masses conveniently divided?

It is still assumed by many of us that religious orthodoxy is the only way to achieve spiritual fulfillment and that the political apparatus is the only way to fulfill our civic duty. Does it seem likely that such traditions are even the best way, let alone the only way, in either case? Isn't spirituality accessible to many people outside of traditional organization and in a variety of ways? Don't many people function better outside of group process or as members of smaller, more intimate groups? There are many ways that we can improve the conditions of society outside of the political apparatus. It would surely be untenable to assert that political and religious institutions are without any value. But it is equally untenable to claim they possess the only value, or even the most value.

It isn't our mere association with these traditional value systems, whether the religious or the more political, that is problematic, but rather our doctrinaire attitudes towards them. Here is the reason our ideological discussions are doomed from their very outset. We are conditioned to view the world in a black/white, right/wrong, 'us against them,' manner. Dialogue is plagued by excessive emotion and lack of rational cooperation and exploration of nuance. As a society, we have a tendency to bill our beliefs irresponsibly, as if they are incontrovertible, obvious facts. Authoritative posturing runs rampant. Emotions exceed due diligence by a wide margin. We are far quicker to point out the shortcomings of other belief systems than recognize their value. Genuine, open minded, resolution oriented, intellectually responsible interactions are unlikely when we act as though our ideals were handed down from on high or are superior for some other reason. And we are conditioned to do just that, via the education system, mass media, and in the pews.

Religion, politics, and a broad range of "socially responsible" value sets are precisely the places we would expect to find the support, financial or otherwise, of despots looking to promote sectarianism to neutralize the ever feared "will of the people." Strong belief systems rooted in genuine search and questioning is natural. It's when strong belief systems develop without that requisite due diligence that the problems arise. Call this shortcoming what you like. People call it different things. 'Blind faith' is traditional but somewhat passe. I think 'pom-pom waving' is a better fit. As we shall see, it is a problem that extends beyond religious values, running a broad gamut from the toeing of political party lines to extreme nationalism and a variety of (presumably) socially responsible behaviors.

What are the chances that pom-pom waving can ever really be a positive force in the world? Can becoming obsessed with the actions of other groups, while remaining relatively unconcerned with similar problems in our own affiliations, be good for society? Why would we take such great pride in casting our votes even with the full knowledge that our lives are the same regardless of which party is in power? Doesn't it raise a red flag that we fail to make any headway on important issues and ideological dialogues and that we are becoming ever more polarized and hardened by them, languishing in the same old stand-offs? When our churches ask us to believe that we are "God's chosen people" and our president's State of the Union address has come to resemble a pep rally or revival meeting, isn't it reasonable to ask how much of our time we can rightly give and if there aren't perhaps better ways to fulfill our civic duty and find spiritual fulfillment? How can we develop our innate, ideological sensibilities if we, as a society, are conditioned to look in so few places for answers?

We have recently witnessed money printing extravaganzas dubbed "quantitative easing," in line with propaganda of yore, and with trillions upon trillions of dollars being piled onto the taxpayers tab. We also saw the very fortuitous treatment given the nation's largest banks in 2008 - 2009, and the subsequent government refusal to divulge the recipients of trillions of taxpayer bailout funds. If such events do not speak eloquently to the utter insignificance of the voice of the people, then what does? Blaming the other side is tantamount to complicity, for it only gives an air of legitimacy to the system. If it's the President's fault, for example, there's always a simple solution. Only when we stop blaming the president, the administration, the party, do we begin looking at the real problem – the system itself. There is no shortage of policy and proposed legislation boasting broad value to society. There is, however, a massive shortage in the results column. It's not really that difficult to explain the disparity. The same sorts of events will continue to unfold, rest assured, not because the world has gotten more complicated or any other excuse, but because the system was designed to produce such results.

We can't change the fact that power begets power. But we can empower each other by sparing ourselves the divisiveness and energy drain of being pom-pom wavers. Our system has not been designed for popular participation, at least not in any genuine sense, not above and beyond superficial, token participation. Much as with religion, doctrinaire political attitudes have some crippling side effects on our families and communities, making our natural social organization and reconciliation increasingly difficult, while simultaneously (falsely) satiating our desire for justice, which masks the reality of division and alienation. Though there is some good work to be done within these traditional value systems, success there is inexorably intertwined with one's interpretation of them, with intellectual integrity, and with an open minded, objective approach to them. While pom-pom waving certainly has its place, it isn't here. The unintended side effects are far too great.

The time is ripe to rethink the prevailing conception of "civic duty" and how best to resist corruption and achieve social change. Are we better served, and is the local community better served, by large movements/ideologies which tend to be authoritative and divisive, which frame things in the usual conservative vs progressive manner, often ignoring needs specific to your community and/or your family? Or are we better served by smaller, more local and intimate efforts? Should resistance be direct, transparent and confrontational? Or should it be indirect, quiet, and undermining? Do we vote and sign petitions because we really think anything is going to change? Or is there something else that we are getting from this? I would suggest that we are all well equipped with the necessary creativity to empower ourselves in our local communities, where our real power rests, in a myriad of different ways. But we have limited

access to this creativity as a direct result of our conditioning, which tells us that our involvement and pom-pom waving can buy us peace of mind and a satiated sense of duty more quickly and easily.

Relatively speaking, our lives are good. There is no doubt that much is true. But believing that couldn't change very quickly or that we are in control is not true at all. Moreover, understanding where our system comes from and who controls it empowers us in a number of important ways. While we have instilled within us a propensity for realpolitik and pom-pom waving, changing this is very much within our grasp, which is rather nice in a world where there is so much that isn't. Our involvement in all this can have extremely negative potential side effects insofar as it becomes fanatical and doctrinaire. Can we afford to put our faith into an intrinsically corrupt political system, just as we did the food system or the financial system? How many great ideas, creative adaptations and innovative responses were never realized because we were distracted by some prefabricated ideal, and one that had a strong tendency to alienate us from our natural allies? What sort of values would characterize our society if we knew nothing of the "progressive" or "conservative" orthodoxies trumpeted incessantly in the mainstream media? Toeing party lines gives us a false sense of hope and achievement, which masks the reality of division and alienation. Can't we be true to our innate sensibilities without falling into dogmatic slumber? Isn't this just more fuel to the already raging fire that is systematically working to weaken family and community? Are we simply destined to regurgitate prefabricated scripts like wind-up toys?

The electric car is finally making a comeback, after its debut almost 200 years ago. I'm sure there are a thousand or so culture serving ways to explain the hiatus without using the word "oligarchy". And I'm sure many of these are perpetuated so that the myth of "freedom and democracy" can endure. But "oligarchy" is a lot shorter, more to the point, and much closer to the truth.