

Trevor Sargent: *Practice what you preach*



Trevor Sargent (born in 1960) was a Comhaontas Glas/Green Party member of the Irish parliament for Dublin North 1992-2011, Green Party Leader 2001-2007, and Minister for Food and Horticulture 2007-2010. He was, before full-time politics, a Green Party County Councillor and a school principal in Balbriggan, North County Dublin.

In 2013 Trevor and his wife, Áine Neville, moved to Wexford where they are developing an organic horticulture business. Trevor is the author of a popular book "Trevor's Kitchen Garden, A Week-By-Week Guide to Growing Your Own Food" and he blogs about gardening at trevorskitchengarden.ie. He is also studying for a Masters in Theology degree from Trinity College Dublin, with a view to ordination as a Church of Ireland (Anglican) priest.

How would you define religion?

Religion to me is having values based on a belief that there is something beyond this life and its day-to-day concerns and general busyness. It is the belief that there can be a special miraculous dimension to life.

What religious tradition do you come from and what does it mean to you and your public and personal life?

I am a member of the Church of Ireland which is part of the Anglican Communion and I have always been involved with my church. The public and personal are for me very much connected and religion has been important for me from a very early age. There are many serious challenges in life, things that need to be done to bring justice and right wrongs and so on, and those challenges are increasing. Jesus is a sign of hope which is central to my faith and that can be drawn on in my public and personal life. If we remember the letter of James in the Bible, James says that we must not only hear the word but do the work and be active. Faith without action is empty; unless one puts into practice what one preaches then there is no real faith or belief, because it is not acted upon. I feel that when Jesus talked about 'thy kingdom come' he wasn't talking about a remote location, his meaning was that his purpose was to redeem the world and to do this we need to put his words into practice.

My religion motivates me and gives me the strength to tackle intractable difficulties. If one reads the New Testament in the context of climate change it helps; when Christ talks about His burden being light I think it is about sharing what's on your mind and then handing over to Him. You feel you are part of a team and you need to play your part but there are others there. It is like being in a beehive, there are many other bees in the colony, the hive has its intelligent collective decision making process and you can do your bit rather than organising the whole colony yourself.

How do your values and religious belief relate to being active as a green politician?

I disagree with a certain view that totally separates religion and politics. I don't think you can pigeonhole religion as if it was some Sunday only exercise although I understand this where

religion is seen as divisive, but I try to stand where Jesus would stand. I can't see Christ signing up to the way religion has been today presented and I think we should try to recover the humble, tolerant and inclusive essence of Christian faith. Greens often aspire to treading lightly on the earth. If we could all tread a little more like Christ, much of the stress on the ecosystem could be alleviated before too long. In the book of Romans, chapter 8, verse 19, I think, Paul talks about creation waiting in eager anticipation for green minded Christians to redeem it. Paul does not say those words exactly, but that is how I read it. This redemption includes ALL creation, all biodiversity including humanity, as far as I can understand from reading it in context many times.

Perhaps we need to make the distinction between religion and politics, which may be faith based or inspired by belief, and religion and the state, which is required to be a neutral space between contending beliefs and no belief.

Yes I agree, it is perhaps best to avoid mischievous interpretation of what I mean, which is in no sense intolerant of other faiths and beliefs.

What is your personal experience with religion in public life and public debate?

I was conscious that, as leader of the Green Party, I was there for all members and that meant a large diversity of cultural and religious backgrounds. There was an onus on me to represent a consensus view as the leader and in a collegiate way. That is my natural style anyway, so I was not very public about my religious faith, although it wasn't a secret either. There were people in the Party who were not comfortable with religion straying into politics. I was happy to talk about it if asked, but I did not want to initiate discussion about my own personal faith. I did take some comfort in the manifesto of the Green Party of England and Wales which had a policy on the spiritual dimension to life and which recognised this as important part of life which wasn't to be ignored and couldn't just be set aside as an irrelevance in political discourse. I was also comfortable in the openness of the green movement to a wider circle of ethics to include respect for other animals and creation generally.

As a member of parliament I found my faith reached across political barriers and helped with the resolution of conflict, not only with other politicians here in the Republic of Ireland but in Northern Ireland and Westminster also as well as in South Africa and America. I was involved in forming a prayer group in the Irish parliament and this engendered great empathy from people who had different Christian beliefs and different political ideas. It acted as a safe space; it served to break down division.

I recall that in 1996, I was asked to go to Drumcree (In Northern Ireland) as an observer during the orange marching period. (The unionist tradition in Northern Ireland idolises William of Orange, the Dutch protestant who deposed the Catholic King James as King of England at the battle of the Boyne in 1690 and these 'Orangemen' march to commemorate the event every 12th July. Some marches go through Catholic residential areas which can be extremely intimidating for the residents and it can lead to conflict and violence). It was a time of tension for the nationalist community living on the Garvaghy Road below Drumcree church which was a focus for the Orangemen who had decided to stay at Drumcree until they would be allowed to march back down the Garvaghy Rd. The parades commission had decided rightly that there would be no marches other than with the consent of the

residents. However this was not what happened and the march took place without the agreement of residents, and there were riots.

I was a guest of the nationalist community in their enclave. After the stand-off on the Sunday morning the sun came up and I told them that, coming from a Church of Ireland background, I would usually have gone to my local church which that morning was Drumcree church on the hill that was the focus of the conflict. After praying about it, I decided I should attend the church service. This meant getting across barricades and going through security check points, and being dismissed as an idiot for wanting to walk up that lonely road but it felt like the right thing to do.

Were you welcome when you got there?

Reverend John Pickering greeted me and was understandably nervous because of the tension and I asked him where I should sit because I didn't fit into the Orange and Unionist tradition. Nearby were the seats for the Women's Coalition and I felt I would be OK with them as they were non-partisan. However, they were not able to get there because of the barriers, so it was a men only congregation of stony faces which filled the church and they began singing the hymn which starts with the line '*Will Your Anchor Hold in the Storms of Life*', but I was not used to that hymn being sung in such trenchant terms. It was a very surreal moment.

What do you consider to be the main challenges we face as a society in the relation between religion and the state or religion and secular world?

I think that this idea that there should be a gulf of separation between religion and politics needs to be challenged for two main reasons. Firstly, the challenges that we face as a society are large and daunting and in a way disempowering to people because they are so great. People say what can I do? What can I do about climate change and the widening gap between rich and poor? I'm only me and I have to live, and that's the way life is. What can I do about all the people being killed or made homeless, and other massive challenges?

Unless there is a willingness to harness the power of faith to help people to transcend their particular day-to-day experience and to work and be motivated to do things that are more than humanly possible, then we will wallow in a culture of cynicism and self-pity, and politics will be worse for it. Unless we embrace the potential of reconciling the religions of peace then I don't see much hope and that's why I would be marrying politics and faith in God in my own personal life. I'm talking about marrying both politics and religion to try and help me to be encouraged and strengthened and transformational my own life and hopefully for others also. I think religion has a role to play in helping people to rise to overcome overwhelming challenges.

Secondly, because religion has been effectively told to stand in the corner and mind its own business and not interfere with politics, it has become completely fixated with matters of personal sexual morality and it has begun to cannibalise itself. It is so fixated with these matters that are not part of those great global challenges. For example, population growth worldwide is causing an enormous ecological footprint and making it more difficult for that very population to sustain itself and for the next generation to have a sustainable life, and yet the religious discourse seems to be locked in a time warp of 'go forth and multiply'.

How do you see the place of Islam in Europe?

It will be difficult to reclaim the message of peace that is central to all of the faith communities that Abraham has been a father figure for, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Much will depend on people who are accepted within the different faith communities coming together and identifying what unites them, because the focus seems to be on what divides them. This is my own view but one based on reading and faith and prayer.

I think the conflict with Islam has little to do with religion. People who are carrying out such attacks as the atrocities in Paris, London, New York and other places are endangering people of all faiths and none, and encouraging reactionary Europeans to regard people of the Muslim faith with suspicion. The hijacking of religion is something which people will need to challenge, given that it is causing such divisions and such pain. I think of the 165,000 Christians who were killed last year because of their faith, I would say most of them were killed by people who didn't know what Christian faith really stood for, other than perhaps it was shorthand for western colonialism and they would identify Christianity with that. People of Christian faith need to speak up for what Christianity is really about. Mahatma Ghandi famously said, when asked his view of Christianity in Europe, that he thought it would be a very good idea.