

III. Dorothy Day and Politics

At various times in her life, Dorothy Day considered herself an anarchist, and she was for a brief period a socialist. Her relationship with politics was always complex and often confounding. She believed individuals should not leave to government what they should do themselves, and while she was an early advocate of women's suffrage, she never voted. Throughout her life, she challenged the government's authority to levy taxes, wage war, implement a draft, and develop weaponry. She marched, protested, witnessed, and was arrested when she felt that government infringed upon or did not uphold human dignity and care for the vulnerable. Not everyone agreed with her stances or her tactics, but everyone knew that she stood upon her convictions and would be heard.

Questions to Consider

1. Do you agree with Day's extreme pacifism? Is it a tenable position---or even a Christian one, as Day declared? On what do you base your opinion?
2. What should be the Christian approach to non-violence? Can it be legitimately considered as a way of life? What would that look like? What role should the government play, if any, in an individual's decision to practice non-violence?
3. Day generally did not engage with government in the sense of advocacy, as many religious organizations do. Neither did she exercise the right to vote, despite her early work for women's suffrage. Did these decisions limit her effectiveness, in your view? Or do they help articulate her vision of the importance of the individual? On what do you base your opinion?
4. Do you consider Day to have been a true "anarchist"? How does that complicate your view of her as a religiously devoted person?
5. What do you make of Day's involvement at various times with Communism and Socialism? Can a person be either and still be a Christian? Are Socialism or Communism and Christianity compatible in some ways---or in none?
6. One can use the facts of Day's life to argue both for and against combining Christianity and political activism. Do you believe Christians should or should not be politically engaged? If the latter, to what extent should Christians be engaged? Is there a point at which Christianity and politics clash, or one supersedes the other? To inform your response, consider reading *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, a document released by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops on the intersection of Catholicism and politics (<http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/faithful-citizenship/>).

7. Do you see Day's political activism as a model for most Christians? Or is it simply too extreme? What is her political legacy for today's Christians?
8. Day could often be a thorn in the side of Roman Catholic hierarchy in America, but she always abided by church authority. Was this an appropriate compromise, or should she have directly challenged church authorities when she thought they were wrong?

Related Day Quotes:

RTE INTERVIEW

3:15 The works of war destroy the food, destroy the homes, and do the very opposite of what the Lord asks. So that makes us, of course, ardent pacifists, and as such we could not possibly be Communists or Fascists or think in terms of use of force at all.

*We make this demonstration not only to voice our opposition to war, not only to refuse to participate in psychological warfare, which this air raid drill is, but also as an act of public penance for having been the first people in the world to drop the atomic bomb. We are engaging only ourselves in this action, not the Church. We are acting as individual Catholics. (***The Life You Save May Be Your Own***, 236)*

[Writing of her youthful engagement with Socialism] *For me Christ no longer walked the streets of this world. He was two thousand years dead and new prophets had risen up in His place. I was in love now with the masses. . . . The poor and oppressed were going to rise up, and they were collectively the new Messiah, and they would release the captives. (***The Long Loneliness***, 46).*

[Writing of her decision to convert to Catholicism] *I had become convinced that I would become a Catholic; yet I felt I was betraying the class to which I belonged, the workers, the poor of the world, with whom Christ spent His life. (***The Long Loneliness***, 144)*

[Of that conversion] *I was just as much against capitalism and imperialism as ever, and here I was going over to the opposition, because of course the Church was lined up with property, with the wealthy, with the state, with capitalism, with all the forces of reaction. This I had been taught to think and this I still think to a great extent. (***The Long Loneliness***, 149)*

Related Quotes from Interviewees

Cornell West (c. 5:00?)

There is this element of decentralizing and democratizing property that goes hand in hand with Dorothy Day's view of the world. She had a profound suspicion of the nation-state that has a monopoly on the instrumentalities of violence that are responsible for killing so many people, especially innocent people. So I think there is an anarchist element. I would say that she is what we could call anarchist, which is to say she's ideologically unclassifiable. There's no one category you can subsume her under. I would say more than anything else she was a love warrior.

Kate Hennessy

13:34 she did describe herself as an anarchist even late into her life. And what she meant by that is taking personal responsibility. Not waiting for other people to take charge, whether it's politically, socially, whatever. But you personally must take charge.

Paul Elie

1:20 She was an anarchist, she said so. She wrote extensively about anarchism, the thing about anarchism is it's a loosely defined term and her form of anarchism took the form of a radical suspicion of institutions and the laws and arrangements around them. But it wasn't a formula for chaos.

Jim Wallis (9:00)

A lot of very sensitive people who cared about suffering were drawn to Marx and communism. So they would say read the daily worker. And on Mayday she and Peter Maurin would go out and say "Read the Catholic Worker. A penny a copy." She thought if Marxism, communism was radical, why shouldn't Christianity be radical? This is radical. More radical. So here is this terrible situation, economic injustice and suffering and conflict and maldistribution. People are literally hungry on the street and homeless. And she says, wait a minute, following Jesus, that's radical, let's do that. And that's what they did. They were an alternative end to communism and here were idealistic young people of faith that said, this should be radical too. Following Jesus is radical, Dorothy said from the start and she was right.

Jim Wallis (30:05)

Dorothy's views about the economic systems would have still seemed to many, communist, because she was criticizing the structures. The distribution system; who wins, who loses? She never was willing to be quiet and just serve the poor, she always spoke up.

(c. 33:00) For her it meant resistance and serving the poor. There wasn't much working with politicians for her, it was resistance and working for the poor. I love that but then the

question becomes do you resist for the poor and also work with members of parliament or the senate or the house who want to make a difference like William Wilberforce did in overcoming slavery in the UK. He was a member of Parliament and he fought for 30 years to end slavery. Dorothy would've liked that but I don't think Dorothy would have been a member of parliament.

Mark Massa

14:34 She would always chuckle because she would get these letters from outraged Catholics saying, "You're just a cover. We know you're really Commies masquerading as good Catholics." And in her mind there was no, there was no line there. Taking the Gospel seriously blended seamlessly into a radical Socialist understanding of our duties to the poor.

Robert Ellsberg

02:34:30 her profound suspicion about the power of the state and especially with the income tax, that was largely dedicated to supporting the military in preparation for war--- she didn't want to have anything to do with that. It's not as if Dorothy ever really had a lot of income to dispose of one way or the other. she just never paid federal income tax. and where that only became an issue for the Catholic Worker was in the 1970s during the Nixon administration when he began to try to use the power of the IRS to go after social critics and protesters.

Jim Wallis (19:43)

Here's what she said, "You just need to look at what the gospel asks and what war does. A great comparison we all need to make. The gospel asks that we feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the homeless, visit the prisoner and perform works of mercy. War does all the opposite. It makes my neighbor hungry, thirsty, homeless, a prisoner, and sick. The gospel asks us to take up our cross, war asks us to lay the cross of suffering on others."

So at the foundation here, Dorothy is saying the alternative to war and violence is to do what Jesus says about taking care of those who are most struggling . . .

Cornel West

14:46 It took tremendous courage for her to call into question the tradition of "just war" that had been hammered out going all the way back to Augustine by towering Catholic theologians. . . .It's a very powerful and sophisticated position. But she also knew that it could too easily become a rationalization for killing innocent people. And it became a

rationalization of how violence takes on a logic of its own, a dynamic of its own far beyond the kind of moral concerns that you do find in “just war” theory.

Kate Hennessy

01:05:30 She didn't really make any kind of distinctions about whether one war was more complicated or more clearly wrong than another. I think that's a really hard thing for people to understand. I mean, we really want to hold onto the idea that there are just wars. And she was very clear: there's no such thing as a just war, there's always a war against the poor. It's always the poor that suffer the most.

Simone Campbell

28:15 It came from the fact that everybody has inherent dignity, so how can you kill anyone? How can you, as a strategy, go out and kill others and know that the people you are sending to war will be killed themselves? And for her, out of the dignity of the individual, I think she came to the absolute sense that war was wrong, war was futile, war didn't accomplish anything and that she needed to stand up against it.