

Hypocrisy in Politics and Religion

10 February Hypocrisy in Politics and Religion - Dorothy Rowe

For this talk Dorothy Rowe moved away from psychology and talked about the hypocrisy in both politics and religion drawing on current political themes to develop her argument.

See her website for details on all the different facets of her work and books: www.dorothyrowe.com

When George Bush and Tony Blair departed the political stage, we hoped that the eight years of political lies and hypocrisy had come to an end. No more Weapons of Mass Destruction, no more God speaking directly to the president and telling him to go to war, no more Blair excusing himself by saying, 'I believed that what I was doing was right.' Believing that you are right does not make what you do right. Hitler believed that what he did was right. Blair's successor Gordon Brown might not have Tony Blair's charm, but he did seem to tell the truth, while Obama, we hope, will save the world. People welcomed the new pope, Benedict XVI, while overlooking the fact that he had been in the Hitler Youth. They assumed that, like many young Germans, while he outwardly conformed, he knew that what the Nazis taught was wrong. However, when he reinstated Bishop Richard Williamson who had claimed that only about 200,000 to 300,000 Jews had died in the Holocaust, many people had to reconsider their assumption.^[i]

As ever, *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*- the more things change the more they remain the same. In politics and religion, hypocrisy reigns supreme.

Hypocrisy is a form of lying. Being hypocritical, we pretend to be someone that we are not. Our lies serve many purposes, but under all those purposes is just one purpose. We lie in order to hold ourselves together as a person.^[ii] We want others to think well of us, and we want to think well of ourselves. If other people reject us, or we reject ourselves, our sense of being a person threatens to shatter, crumble, even disappear. When the situation we are in suggests we are not the person we want to think ourselves to be, we often choose to lie.

Contained within our concept of the person we are is the concept of the person we could become. Sometimes this concept concerns the talents we possess and could develop. Sometimes the concept is about power and the advantages that come with power. The beliefs that we hold about politics and religion are contained within our concept of who we are. For some of us, these beliefs are not very important. They are no more than a few decorations added to the structure of our sense of being a person. But for some people, the beliefs they hold about politics or religion are the beams that hold up the whole structure. They find any threat to these beliefs very frightening. Such fear readily turns to anger. Over the past few months I have been the object of this anger felt by the religious people who were offended by my book *What Should I Believe?* If there had been a stake handy, I would have been burnt on it.^[iii] When in 1972 I was at the Karl Marx Clinic in Leipzig in the DDR. I failed to make a sufficiently fulsome response when the Director of the clinic asked me about what I thought of mental health care in the DDR. I felt I came close to being shot. I had put myself in these dangerous situations because I had told the truth as I saw it.

We all know that politicians lie. It is built into the democratic political system. Each political party represents the interests of a particular group in the community. It would be possible to have a cooperative political system where the different

parties agreed on certain issues, and agreed to differ on others, but instead we have an adversarial system where parties face one another across the political chamber and argue. If the party in power holds a certain opinion, the opposition party must hold the opposite view. Individual party members are required to present themselves as sharing the opinions of their party. To do otherwise would put their careers at risk. Thus hypocrisy is built into the political system.

It has always been easy for an opposition party to take an opposing stance to the government's economic policy. An economist, who once was an advisor to the Conservative Party, told me, 'For every economist who holds an opinion on the economy, there is an economist who holds the opposing view. Both are wrong.' Economists advise our political leaders, so can we assume that, when it comes to economic policy, all political leaders are wrong?

Whenever we are faced with a new situation, the only means we have to deal with it is our past experience. But what do we do when the situation we are facing is very different from all the situations we have faced in the past?

The current financial crisis bears some similarity to the Great Depression of 1929, but, in those days, the global institutions that we now take for granted did not exist. The present head of the Federal Reserve Bank of America is Ben Bernanke who is a world authority on the Great Depression. The Nobel Prize winning economist Paul Krugman said of Bernanke 'Nobody was more prepared, intellectually, for the mess we're in.' He went on, 'The Bernanke Fed has suffered from the problem of being, again and again, behind the curve. The financial crisis keeps developing new dimensions, which few people - including the very smart people at the Fed - see coming.'

Complete ignorance has never stopped a politician holding forth about his views and claiming to be right. When Australia was facing the credit crisis, the Leader of the Federal Opposition, Malcolm Turnbull, would have people believe that he and he alone knew what should be done. The fact that he spent so much time criticising what the Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was doing suggested that he did not know what should be done. However, Malcolm Turnbull is an ambitious man, and, in fulfilling that ambition, some hypocrisy might stand him in good stead with those people who believe that no Labor Prime Minister could ever be right about anything.

When Margaret Thatcher was prime minister of Britain, she dominated her cabinet, forcing many of them to endorse publicly policies in which they did not always believe. Kenneth Clarke, as Minister for Health and then Chancellor, gave Margaret Thatcher strong support, and he prospered accordingly. With the defeat of the Conservative government in 1997, he returned to the back benches. He has considerable business interests and is often heard in the media talking about his passionate interest in jazz. His ambition now seems to be to lead a pleasant life. David Cameron, the leader of the opposition, does not seem to have realised that he cannot control someone who has no further political ambitions. He brought Clarke into the shadow cabinet as business minister. Cameron and his shadow chancellor, George Osborne, are very ambitious men, so no matter what steps Gordon Brown took to deal with the credit crisis, they criticised him. Cameron's once economic adviser admitted very readily to me that Cameron had no ideas about what should be done, but when has having no ideas ever stopped an ambitious politician?

A paucity of ideas often leads to greater and greater exaggerations. George Osborne had claimed that Gordon Brown had already 'bankrupted Britain'. Cameron joined him, claiming that very soon 'the money will run out' and Britain will be bankrupt.'

In the business of buying and selling we have to trust one another. Doubt one another and trade collapses. No politician should express in public any doubts about his country's ability to meet its debts. In the past banks have collapsed, not because they did not have any money but because people believed that the banks did not have any money. Kenneth Clarke was able to put his country's interests ahead of his own. When asked in a television interview whether there was a possibility that Britain would go bankrupt, he said, 'I don't think that's a realistic possibility.' [iv]

Note the Clarke talked about possibilities, not about absolutes. Many people acknowledge that, whatever ideas we hold, there is nothing about which we can be absolutely certain. We can talk in terms of possibilities. This includes talking about politics and religion. We can feel favourably towards certain religious or political ideas, but be aware that what ideas we have have grown out of our experiences, and that other people, having had different experiences from ours, see things differently. When we speak about the basic subject matter of religion, the nature of death and the purpose of life, we allow for doubt. There are many Christians who make plenty of room for doubt. I had an email from one of my readers called Nicky who told me about her life and said,

I find your words about religion very wise, although I'm a Christian now, but I think this kind of wisdom is universal. So many people won't tolerate or take seriously someone else's point of view, and I think that, despite the fact you are not a believer, you have real respect for other's beliefs and understanding. I've found some very wise and friendly people at Church - they say we just have to believe God loves us and will forgive us. We do not need to do good works to get into Heaven, just to believe that Jesus died for us, and that we are not to judge, or anticipate how God will judge others (whether Christians or not). We will do good because of our love for God and each other.

The godly whom I offend cannot tolerate doubt. They regard their beliefs as being absolutely true, and they reject those who do not share their beliefs. I was shocked by the hypocrisy of those who present themselves as highly moral people. A radio producer working in the BBC Religious and Ethic Department edited my recorded words so that what was broadcast was the opposite of what I had said. Catherine Pepinster, editor of The Tablet, interviewed me, and then wrote an article about me that she must have known was intemperate. She tried to prevent me seeing the article. Although it had been published in the journal, it was not put on The Tablet's website, and it took three months of emails and phone calls from my publisher's PR and me to extract a copy from Catherine's secretary.

It takes courage and self-confidence to live our life in the face of uncertainty. Many people feel that they cannot summon up such courage and self-confidence, and so they tell themselves that what they believe is absolutely true. The philosopher Simon Blackburn spoke of 'the problem of the false sincerity of those who deliberately insulate themselves from reasonable doubts in order to maintain the convictions they need to prosper.' [v]Such people try to hold themselves together by lying to themselves. They try to hide from themselves the knowledge that there is nothing in life about which they can be absolutely certain. They tell themselves that they believe something which they, in fact, do not. In word and deed they are hypocrites.

When we tell ourselves something which we know is not the case, we repress what we know to be the truth and create in ourselves a conflict that inevitably has dire consequences. People lie to themselves about all kinds of inconvenient truths. In my writings about depression, I have talked about those people who want to believe that their parents were kind, loving, wise people, and so they repress the truth that their parents had hurt and betrayed them. Instead of recognising that a painful childhood leads to unhappiness, they blame themselves for everything that has gone wrong in their life, and so turn ordinary unhappiness into depression.

When we first lie to ourselves and repress something that we know to be true, we learn a tactic that is always at hand whenever we are in a situation where acknowledging the truth could be bothersome. We abandon trying to establish what the truth is, and instead create immediately comforting lies.

Establishing the probability that something might be true is actually very difficult. I am in the process of writing a book called Why We Lie [vi] and have just finished a long chapter about the difficulties human beings have in establishing the probability of any truth. Lying is easy. All we have to do is to create a fantasy.

Lies are usually expressed in language, and when lying becomes our preferred mode of communication, we abandon any attempt to find a precise and accurate language in which to express our thoughts. We use language to misinform.

Take, for instance, these two statements, 'I have faith in God', and 'I trust God'. Here the words 'faith' and 'trust' are assumed to have the same meaning, but they do not. Trust requires evidence. Faith does not. The various religions require their followers to have faith. Some churches, like the one Nicky attends, require their congregation to have faith in something quite modest, in contrast to some religions who demand a faith that involves the giving up of all independent thought. In contrast, we trust people and institutions when the evidence shows that the people or the institutions are trustworthy. All it needs for us to lose trust is one piece of evidence to the contrary. Despite the fact that God is, at best, forgetful and somewhat unreliable, and, at worst, indifferent to what befalls believers, many people continue to have faith in God.

We are always engaged in interpreting what is going on around us and inside us. We have two kinds of interpretations. We can look for evidence to support the interpretations we create, or we can create interpretations and not bother to look for any evidence. The first way is rational thinking, and the second fantasy. Fantasy is tremendously important in many ways, but we should always remember that the definition of madness is the inability to distinguish in your own thinking between rational thinking and fantasy. I have met a great many people who have lost this ability. Only a small proportion of these were psychiatric patients. The rest masqueraded as normal people, often in positions of power and influence. These are people who insist that their fantasies about the way the world is are absolutely true. They

repress the knowledge that to doubt is part of being human. They lie to themselves, and, inevitably, they lie to others. They cling to their lies because they fear that, if they acknowledged the truth, they would fall apart. At the end of his book *The Return of Depression Economics and the Crisis of 2008* Paul Krugman wrote, 'the only important obstacles to world prosperity are the obsolete doctrines that clutter the minds of men.'^[vii] Krugman was writing about economic doctrines, but his words apply equally to the doctrines of religion.

[i] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k6C9BuXe2RM>

[ii] Dorothy Rowe *What Should I Believe?* Routledge, 2008, pp.48-50.

[iii] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/atheism/>
http://www.dorothyrowe.com.au/index.php?u=BBC_Apology.htm
http://www.dorothyrowe.com.au/index.php?u=The_Tablet.htm

[iv] *Weekly Telegraph* 27/1 - 4/2 2009.

[v] Quoted in David Runciman *Political Hypocrisy* Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2008, p.172.

[vi] HarperCollins 2010.

[vii] Penguin, London, 2008, p.191.

