

Religious Socialism, Quakerism, and Modern Political Advocacy

An Educational Overview for the Union of Saints

Purpose

This document is intended to encourage careful study and discernment regarding the relationship between religious identity, political ideology, and modern advocacy movements. It distinguishes between historical facts, organizational statements, and interpretations of political events.

1. Quakerism: Historical Background

The Religious Society of Friends, commonly known as Quakers, began in England in the 1650s. Early Quakers were considered religious and social radicals of their time because they challenged established religious authority and practices.

Historically associated Quaker beliefs and practices include:

- emphasis on the direct relationship between individuals and God;
- rejection of a formal priesthood;
- spiritual equality of men and women;
- pacifism and opposition to war;
- simplicity and concern for social justice.

Modern socialism developed later, primarily during the 19th century. Therefore, Quakerism did not originate as a socialist movement and is not historically a socialist political ideology.

Some modern Quakers identify with democratic socialism, while other Quakers hold different political views. The political beliefs of an individual Quaker should not automatically be presented as the official beliefs of the entire Quaker tradition.

2. Religious Socialism and the Democratic Socialists of America

The Religion and Socialism Working Group is associated with the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). It describes itself as a group for people whose religious beliefs and socialist commitments are connected.

The group states that it seeks to organize religious people around socialist values and social justice concerns. It identifies defeating Christian nationalism as one of its primary objectives,

has expressed support for Hamas, uses the sickle as a symbol, and expresses opposition to Zionism.

3. Political Identity and Religious Identity

Religious traditions and political movements often overlap in individual lives, but they are not the same thing.

A person may be:

- a Quaker and a democratic socialist;
- a Christian and a socialist;
- a Jewish person with a variety of political views;
- a member of a religious community who disagrees with the politics of another member.

The beliefs of a political organization, working group, or individual do not automatically represent the beliefs of an entire religion.

4. The Importance of Source Evaluation

When examining political or religious advocacy material, it is important to ask:

- Who is making the statement?
- Is it an official organizational position or the opinion of an individual?
- Is the statement about a political ideology, a government, a religious institution, or people themselves?
- Is the language describing disagreement, political opposition, or support for a specific action?

Careful reading requires attention to context.

5. DSA, Israel, Antisemitism, and Controversy

The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) has published criticism of aspects of DSA activism related to Israel, antisemitism, and responses to the October 7, 2023 Hamas attack on Israel. The ADL has documented controversies involving statements and actions by some DSA members, chapters, or affiliated groups.

These issues require examination of specific statements, individuals, chapters, and events. A statement made by one group or individual should not automatically be applied to every person associated with a larger organization.

6. Evaluating Violence or Extremism

Concerning claims involving support for terrorism, celebration of attacks, or hostility toward religious communities are serious and should be evaluated through direct evidence, including:

- the exact statement or action;
- the date and source;
- who made the statement;
- the context;
- whether the statement expresses approval, criticism, reporting, or another form of discussion.

This approach allows conclusions to be based on documented evidence.

7. Key Historical and Educational Points

The following points are important for understanding these topics:

1. Quakerism is a 17th-century religious tradition and predates modern socialism.
2. Quakerism itself is not a socialist ideology.
3. Some individuals combine religious identity with socialist political beliefs.
4. Religious Socialism represents one modern interpretation of the relationship between faith and politics.
5. Political organizations should be evaluated by their own statements, actions, and documented history.
6. Religious communities and political movements should not be treated as interchangeable.

Conclusion

Understanding the relationship between faith and politics requires historical accuracy and careful examination of evidence. Religious traditions, political ideologies, and individual beliefs may overlap, but they are not the same thing.

The most reliable approach is to examine original sources, distinguish between organizations and individuals, and evaluate statements and actions within their full context.

References:

<https://www.adl.org/resources/backgroundunder/democratic-socialists-america-dsa>

<https://religioussocialism.org/>