



Freedom of Conscience, Freedom of Religion, Freedom of Spiritual Belief

by Silvia Antonia Brandon-Pérez, May 6, 2018

“When fascism comes to America, it will be wrapped in the flag and carrying the cross.”
—Sinclair Lewis

“Disobedience is the true foundation of liberty. The obedient must be slaves.”
—Henry David Thoreau

“Let us fight to free the world! To do away with national barriers! To do away with greed, with hate and intolerance! Let us fight for a world of reason, a world where science and progress will lead to all men's happiness. Soldiers, in the name of democracy, let us all unite!”
—Charles Chaplin

I am a long-time socialist and ordained woman priest according to the rites of the Roman Catholic Church, deemed excommunicated automatically because of my "disobedience" to the principles that ordination is forbidden to individuals unless they are male. I contribute these thoughts because of the inability of many fellow socialists and revolutionaries to accept and most particularly to respect my

belief systems. It seems to be one of the forbidden topics. Allow me, then, to claim a moment of your attention.

I was married to a wonderful man who was not a believer but who worked with the religious left. As a human rights lawyer and social activist I have always defended the rights of others to have any or no beliefs, and he was my soulmate. And yes, I believe in eternal souls because of $E=mc^2$. I am also a Reiki healer, a practitioner of Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT), and a student of hypnosis. I have been a teacher of meditation and in my work as a healer and a social justice activist I hold space for those who are grieving, who are battling diseases, who are dealing with the issues I deal with on a daily basis: the stress of living in an uncaring gangster-capitalist society and, with regard to the United States, in a traditionally racist one.

Every day I run into someone who proclaims proudly that they are an atheist and who wants me to explain why I am not. In the same way that no one needs to explain themselves to me, I do not need to explain myself to anyone, but I expect respect for the work I do even if it doesn't fit into "approved doctrinaire" beliefs. I will "explain" what I mean because I think this is important for the future of our work of subversion. Although of Sephardi descent, I was raised Catholic and had my start in liberation theology in the mountains of the Dominican Republic. I do follow a subversive Palestinian Jew, and to me subversion of Empire is thus a command to do the same. Read Reza Aslan's *Zealot: the life and times of Jesus of Nazareth*. Aslan, a Muslim, has written a wonderful treatise on the man I call Isa or Yeshua.

Yesterday I attended a people's trial of the Sheriffs of Alameda and Contra Costa County, with respect to their brutality against immigrants. I had been one of three priests who had served the office of Alameda County Sheriff Gregory Ahearn; other clergy had served Contra Costa County Sheriff David Livingston. We heard from witnesses, from journalist and social activist David Bacon, from members—as I have been for years—of School of the Americas Watch. We heard from psychologists who are working with the post-traumatic stress created by the terrible situation in immigrant prisons. We held a trial. They were found guilty of human rights crimes.

The groups that are doing the best work on immigration are interfaith groups. We have rapid response networks. We write letters and we show up at court hearings. And sometimes we chain ourselves to ICE buses. We do civil disobedience. School of the Americas Watch, which may be one of the most important groups doing the work of solidarity throughout the world, is originally a Catholic group, founded by a veteran Catholic priest, Roy Bourgeois, and a band of other Catholics who had been doing work throughout the Americas—priests and nuns who "hung their habits" and married one another, but who never gave up their beliefs.

Roy was excommunicated for supporting women's ordination. He attended the ordination of my program companion, Janice Sevre-Duszynska, a veteran activist who has been arrested many times and who has served hard time as a prisoner of conscience in federal prison. One of my other heroes is Rita Lucey, who also served time in federal prison as a prisoner of conscience and had to undergo psychotherapy because of her ongoing rage as part of PTSD. Now in her eighties, she inspires me daily. Then there's Kathy Kelly, a Catholic woman who defied the government by taking food and medicines into Iraq, who has been arrested over a hundred times, who ends her retreats by singing *Dona Nobis Pacem*, whose Voices in the Wilderness had to be closed down because she refused to pay a penny of the government penalties, and is now doing the same work as Voices for Creative Non-Violence. As the Rev. Lucius Walker of Pastors for Peace used to say when taking medical supplies to Cuba, we are

not the ones who are breaking the law. Those who are my friends and fellow conspirators include the Swords and Plowshares movement people who also serve hard federal time, who go to jail for justice, who have spent their lives ministering to others and conspiring.

Most of the work I do these days is interfaith. It includes Jews and Muslims, Lakota and Lenca . . . so many I would need a separate essay to write them all in.

I went to Standing Rock twice in answer to a call for prayer. Standing Rock is an important milestone in the environmental work that I have been doing for decades now. Standing Rock solidified my belief in working through spirituality, conspiring (which means literally to breathe together, to hold the breath of life or the breath of the divine, originally, together in harmony) for a better and more just world. I was asked by the young group of spiritual leaders, from many states and Indian nations and beliefs, all the ones who use different names for the unnamable, to lead them in prayer in one of my last days there. I had become sick because I had been taking care of so many sick. I had walking pneumonia and hypothermia. From bed, as they surrounded me, I thanked them for being there, for fighting, for spending endless days and nights fighting corporate evil. In 2003 I followed Cindy Sheehan, also a Catholic rebel, to Crawford, site of the summer "White House." The work of peace (and prayer, and meditation, and testimony) was amazing. I cooked for three weeks for attendees and in between performed songs on stage. We did the work that is always done in these types of events: *Memoria y resistencia*. We protested, held hands, sang, prayed.

I am inspired (again, filled with the breath of life or the divine) by these comrades in faith. When I attended the kickoff event for the Poor People's Poverty Campaign, which is based on the work of a brave preacher, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who called out the triplets of militarism, racism, and materialism, I was inspired, filled with that breath of the divine.



My Sephardi grandfather, Gerald Brandon, a polyglot who was a journalist and a war correspondent born in Rutherford, New Jersey, but reporting from the trenches, frequently read to me in several languages, and insisted that there was a *mot juste* that would express perfectly anything I wanted to say. Years later I realized that one of the things he was always saying was attributed to Hillel the Elder: "If I

am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?"

I include a picture of abuelo Gerardo with Pancho Villa along with this article. His pictures were used in portraying the life of José Doroteo Arango Arámbula, who later took on the name of Francisco Villa and is now remembered as Pancho Villa, the only man to successfully invade the United States during the First World War—on March 9, 1916. I learned Scrabble in several languages, and even chess, as a child, from my most unforgettable character, condemned to death in Mexico after publishing articles against General Venustiano Carranza; the family had to find someone to bribe and were successful, otherwise I wouldn't be writing these lines.

When I practiced law in New Jersey for 28 years, one of the things I did even though I hated it was immigration defense work. I was one of many lawyers across the nation who defended, pro bono, the Haitians who were fleeing Duvalier's paramilitary *Tonton Macoutes*. The Duvaliers, *père et fils*, were monstrosities aided and abetted by the U.S. Government. The State Department made the amazing pronouncement that the *Tonton Macoutes* were a private "gang" that was unrelated to the government. This made the granting of political asylum an impossibility. We defended them anyway, and I had any number of cases I took over from lawyers who had only been able to devote time to one or two appearances. I met Haitian priests in the Vodun religion. My twin sister from another incarnation, civil rights attorney Moonyene Jackson-Amis, who used to sing spirituals with me when we were depressed in law school, did the same thing. She came last year from Maryland, where she lives now, to attend my ordination. She was the first Black councilwoman in Easton, Maryland, a seat of entrenched slavery and racism.



I am starting a home temple, filing papers in Sacramento, and I am already running a Catholic Worker House, following the work of Dorothy Day. I am doing prison and hospice work, and immigrant

defense and advocacy work. I marry people, and sit with the dying and honor their grief and pray with them if that is what they want.

We must conspire together. Some of us will do so in the original context of the word, and will inspire one another with the breath of the divine. Marx, in the end, whose 200th birthday we celebrated on cinco de mayo—a day that is *not* Mexican independence day—had it right. But solidarity means love, and love is quite possibly the best and strongest virtue there is.

Here is a link to an article <https://www.vogue.com/projects/13543313/roman-catholic-women-priest-movement-giulia-bianchi/>

The article talks about the photographer Giulia Bianchi whom I met in Pennsylvania when we ordained three bishops in our organization, including the one who ordained me, Olga Lucía Benjumea Alvarez, who works in Colombia with women coming out of prison and who are thus denied work and rights by the government.

I have never believed in the infallibility of any being while he or she is alive, and recently the head of the Vatican, Francisco, admitted to not being infallible. Marx, Lenin—whose works I have in Spanish, side by side with Jim's copies in English—were not infallible. Modern quantum physics is akin to the writings of the old metaphysicians (Read the Tao of Physics, written by Nobel Prize physicist Fritjof Capra).

We can and we must change. And that means that no topic is off limits. No voices are left out of the conversation. The work we are doing, each in her or his own way, is sacred. *If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?*

P.S. The community which followed the crucified man and lived in the catacombs was completely communistic. There was no private property; everything was shared.

P.P.S. I just received a note from Janice's partner that she was arrested in Washington DC at the confirmation hearing for Gina Haskell, noted war criminal and torture "specialist" being promoted by Herr Trump.