

**MIXING IT UP: A Liberal Religious Approach to Politics and Religion**  
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***Readings:***

“Government is a good thing, mostly. Religion is perhaps a good thing too, most of the time. But when the two mix, it’s a recipe for disaster (from Latin *dis-* + *-aster*, literally unfavorable stars.” (from a website, source unknown to me).

“Genuine politics—politics worthy of the name—the only politics I am willing to devote myself to—is simply a matter of serving those around us: serving the community and serving those who will come after us. Its deepest roots are moral because it is a responsibility expressed through action, to and for the whole.” (Vaclav Havel)

***The Sermon:***

Politics and religion—not supposed to talk about those in polite conversation. I always see a sermon as part of an ongoing conversation, and not a merely polite one. We ministers are called not to politeness, but, as it has been said, to comfort the afflicted—and afflict the comfortable. So although I’m not part of your ongoing conversation, as a guest for the moment, here is my contribution to your conversation, in which you may find *some* comfort and *some* affliction. This may be a good time for such a sermon: just after our national holiday, a political and religious commemoration, and in the midst of an interesting, if lengthy, presidential campaign.

The daily news these days provides plenty of affliction. We know now how dangerous is the mix of fundamentalist religious and political ideologies. And we ourselves send our kids off to fight what sounds too much like a battle of “good versus evil.” After September 11, 2001, that prayer in song, “God Bless America,” became a political statement. Candidates for political office are talking about how their faith will or will not be put into action in their governing and policy-making. All this makes me wonder: How do—and should?—our liberal religious faith and our politics interact?

Since the earliest Unitarians of the Protestant Reformation, our faith is strung on a thread of three strands: reason, freedom and tolerance. Reason guides our thinking about religious and spiritual truths. Freedom leads inevitably to differences in belief. And tolerance protects those differences and insists upon mutual respect. Since the earliest Universalists in 18<sup>th</sup> century England, we have believed that all souls are essentially good, and eventually saved, not only some mysteriously chosen “elect”. Both our historic traditions have emphasized essential human goodness and dignity.

The common thread in religious liberalism—ours or any other—seems to me to be a spirit of openness and generosity. “Liberal” in the sense of “a liberal allowance” or “a liberal helping of pumpkin pie.” The Reverend Forrester Church, whose writings have so lucidly defined our tradition, I’m happy to say agrees with me: “The word ‘liberal’ means open-minded, generous-spirited, kindhearted, and openhanded....” (Maybe I should have mentioned this before the offering!) “God is the most famous liberal of all,” he goes on. “Nobody is more bounteous,

generous, and profligate than God. Take a look at creation. There's too much of everything." I love this sense of the word "liberal" and I would like to practice it in my religion and in my life.

Religious liberals tend to be more concerned with *living* rightly than with *believing* rightly. As Church says, the Biblical book of Matthew says when we die we'll face a quiz. The questions will have nothing to do with what we believe about sexuality, abortion or communism. The questions will be simply: "Did you feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit those in prison, and heal the sick?" None of our Seven Principles talks about the nature, attitudes or even existence of a supernatural being. They all talk about how to behave toward each other and the earth. Or, as an old Unitarian saying has it, our faith is based on "deeds not creeds." What an irony that the *name* of our creed-less religion yokes the names of the two doctrines that shaped it!

Unitarianism: the doctrine that God is one, not three persons. Universalism: the doctrine that God saves all souls.

Religious liberals don't usually take Scripture literally. Fundamentalists do—even though they usually apply this selectively, to passages that seem to justify their beliefs. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Unitarian minister Theodore Parker expressed the Unitarian attitude when he said that it is not the doctrines and interpretations, but the Bible's *teachings* that form the permanent part of Christianity. At a time when Unitarianism was still a Christian sect, Unitarians often said—and many UU Christians still say, "We believe in the religion OF Jesus, not the religion ABOUT Jesus." That is, what Jesus actually taught, not what people have come to believe about the nature of Jesus or his relationship with God.

But Parker had a problem. He was so liberal that even his fellow Unitarians, including clergy, couldn't deal with him. Believe it or not, they asked him to resign from ministry, and when he refused, they ostracized him. Their *theology* was liberal in its time; but their *behavior*—insisting that Parker's beliefs line up with theirs—was orthodox. I leave it to you to consider, at times, whether we ever, in our congregations today, demand that others conform to our beliefs or our lack of belief, in order to "belong?" (There's some of that "afflicting the comfortable" I'm supposed to do!)

We usually contrast the words "liberal" and "conservative". Liberals favor openness and inclusion with plenty of margin for error; conservatives want to guard and preserve what has already proven of value. But those attitudes are not always mutually exclusive. And here's a fine irony. Sixty years ago or so, the traditional, orthodox Unitarians were Christian theists and the more liberal Unitarians were humanists. By twenty to thirty years ago, the humanists, often agnostic or atheist, became the majority. But in the past twenty years a hunger for more explicit spirituality has emerged among us, often accompanied by more traditional theological language. This is not always welcomed by the humanists, agnostics, and atheists among us, who would like to keep Unitarian Universalism more the way they knew it. So the *liberal* Unitarians of sixty years ago have become today's UU *conservatives*. Yet they *are* religious liberals. Do the terms "liberal and conservative" really apply here?

Maybe, when it comes to religion, the terms "liberal" and "*orthodox*" work better to distinguish us from our religious cousins on the right. For the orthodox faith is more a matter of belief, guided by religious authority. For the liberal faith is lived action, guided by personal experience.

Liberals will rarely defer to authority when the authority clashes with their personal experience. Revelation is never sealed. We religious liberals agree *that we don't have to agree about belief*. Or at least we say we do.

Where we disagree is on how to translate our beliefs into action—that is, politics. But when it comes to politics we frequently fail to honor our agreement to disagree—and assume that we all *do* agree. We often hear comments among us that seem to assume a sameness of *political* liberalism among us: we're all liberal. But friends, if we are truly *religiously* liberal—generous and open— isn't there room among us for political conservatives? I know that political conservatives have been edgy when we express liberal political views in ways that suggest we *all* share them.

Religious liberalism and political liberalism *do* often move in the same groove. But they are not synonymous and we need to avoid confusing them. One is about doctrinal and scriptural interpretations; the other concerns beliefs about the best way to achieve the greater good. A religious liberal may feel that society is best served by restrictions on abortion, bans on pornography, gun ownership guarantees, and other positions usually associated with the religious right. We usually think of 19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarians and Universalists as abolitionists—and indeed many were. But some of them were northern cotton mill owners whose livelihood depended on southern slavery, and sometimes they fired their ministers for opposing it. Today we think of ourselves as defenders of the oppressed, but our staunchest religious orthodox neighbors often feed more of the hungry and shelter more of the homeless than we do. We make a serious mistake when we confuse *religious orthodoxy* and *political conservatism*.

I'm reminded of our Pilgrim and Puritan forebears who plowed the Atlantic for a new land and religious freedom—and when they got here, enjoyed their religious freedom and denied it to others. Roger Williams or Ann Hutchinson, persecuted for their beliefs, or Mary Dyer, hanged on Boston Common as a Quaker, would have something to say about how much religious freedom the Puritans practiced. Tolerance and liberalism were not our forebears' strong suit!

As for separating church and state (which both religious *and* political liberals believe in doing), the Puritans mixed them up in grand style. Take their meetinghouses: it's ironic that today some people want to call their church a "meetinghouse" because they think it's *not* a religious term. The Puritan meetinghouse was the locus of both town government and weekly worship. Well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century New England townsfolk—whether or not church members—paid taxes to support the parish church and its minister. And in the Salem witch trials, the blurring of civil and religious authority proved fatal. Where and how in America today do we blur these lines? I suggest it is often—and not only on the righthand sides of the political or religious divides.

A lot of Americans today are no more religiously liberal or liberally religious than those ancestors. It's clear that the religious right does not want to separate religion and government. Religious liberals have had to struggle to avoid having religious right beliefs imposed on the rest of us by legislation in areas like reproduction, public prayer, gender and sexual-orientation discrimination. Their stands on such issues are driven by an assumption that the religious morality of a particular outlook should be law for all.

I suggest that we religious liberals need to do three things. First, we need to *not* confuse political conservatism and religious orthodoxy. We need to not assume that all religious liberals are politically liberal or that all religious orthodox are politically conservative. And we need, in our congregations and in the world, in our treatment of each other, to heed our own semi-creedal belief that all people are worthy of respect. Regardless of whether their politics coincide with ours. Let me say it straight out. We need room in our pews for Republicans.

Second, we need to understand—without intellectual condescension—the appeal of evangelical and fundamentalist religious movements in this time of uncertainty and anxiety—economic, political, and spiritual. Rabbi Harold Kushner said at a Unitarian Universalist General Assembly a few years ago, that such movements offer stability, community, and an appeal to the heart—things a lot of people, including me, really need. He reminded us, moreover, that the appeal of the religious right may in fact be “a healthy [response to the] reality of the vulgarity of secular American life,” and that this response may not always be “rooted in small mindedness but in moral seriousness.”

Moral seriousness is not a dirty word. Religious liberalism has a strong history of moral seriousness. It’s time to blow the dust off and reclaim it. This is the third thing we need to do. The religious right does not possess an exclusive claim to moral seriousness. Reclaiming a moral grounding is complicated by our tendency to relativize, but we can’t shake off the accusation of the religious right that we are lacking in morality unless we understand the moral grounding of our own viewpoint.

Here is my take on our moral grounding: Is there a *more* moral set of statements than our Seven Principles which call us to respect all persons and the web of existence? Is there a more moral way of seeing our lives, than through, not the narrow lens of one tradition, but the broad, inclusive lens we gain from *many* great spiritual traditions? Is there a more moral stance toward our fellow beings than the openness, kindheartedness and generosity which characterize the liberal spirit?

I have to say here that when I finished writing this sermon, I turned on the evening news. The BBC was interviewing an American presidential candidate—someone relatively obscure—I don’t remember his name—I don’t even know if he was Republican or Democrat. The interviewer asked if the candidate, a Southern Baptist, would put his faith into his governing. Of course I will, he said. Then he was asked: President Bush says he puts his faith into his governing by his current policies—would you do it as he does? No, said the candidate. As a Christian, I feel the basis of my faith is to do unto others what we want done to us. We have no business as missionaries establishing democracy in other countries. We need to intervene when people are abused, to offer help where people are suffering. That’s the basis of my faith. Here was a religious conservative talking about putting his faith into his politics in a way that I, a religious and political liberal, can agree with.

As we recognize our moral imperative, *we need to put our religion where our politics are.* Vaclav Havel says, “Genuine politics...is simply a matter of serving those around us.... Its deepest roots are moral....” I don’t mean that we should urge legislation of the particular form of our religious beliefs or non-beliefs. We need not demand that the Seven Principles be

engraved on a plaque in town hall or that pictures of Michael Servetus burning at the stake be installed in the Capitol! I mean that all of us need to live our lives by our religious principles. We need to carry them with us into the workplace, into the marketplace, and yes, into the voting booth.

We must be in all things tolerant, free, and reasonable, from our Unitarian roots. In all things open, kindhearted, and generous, from our Universalist roots. This is no piece of pie-in-the-sky. It is what our faith tradition demands of us. If religion is, as has been said, what we each do in the privacy of our solitudes—how we behave when no one is looking—then it is not a thing set apart for polite words on Sunday morning. It is a force that demands, yes, comfort for the afflicted—from all of us. And affliction—or at least, great challenge—for the comfortable—which is most of us. It is a force that must shape all our being and doing in the world.

I end with words that have appeared in publications from the Unitarian Universalist Starr King School for the Ministry:

There must be communities of people/ who seek to do justice/ love kindness  
and walk humbly with God,/ who call on the strength of/ soul-force/ to heal,  
transform,/ and bless life.

I thank all that is holy and good that such communities do exist among us, and that they *can*. We need to make sure that they continue to be able to exist.