

**“How Shall We Live? Part IV:
The Relation Between Religion and Politics”
March 6, 2005
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Bruce A. Bode**

Poetry for Order for Service

O let America be America again –
The land that never has been yet –
And yet must be.

(“Let America be America,” Langston Hughes)

Call to Worship

Holy and beautiful is the custom by which we gather on this Sunday morning.

Here we come to give our thanks, to face our ideals, to remember our loved ones, to seek that which is permanent, and to serve goodness, beauty, and the qualities of life that make it rich and whole.

Through this hour breathes the worship of all ages, the cathedral music of all history, and blessed are the ears that hear that eternal sound.

Congregational Covenant Statement for Lighting of Chalice (Spoken in unison)

We are travelers. We meet for a moment in this sacred place to love, to share, to serve. Let us use compassion, curiosity, reverence, and respect while seeking our truths. In this way we will support a just and joyful community, and this moment shall endure.

Responsive Reading

Our responsive reading this morning consists of statements taken from The American Creed: A Spiritual and Patriotic Primer, written by The Reverend Forrest Church, senior minister of All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City. This book, published in 2002, was born out of the experience of 9/11, the All Souls Unitarian Church being very close to ground zero.

“What is it,” Forrest asked following that horror in his city, “that binds us together as a people?” The answer he gives in his book is that it is more than self-interest and self-preservation; rather, it is a spiritual vision as set forth in, what he calls, our “primary creed,” namely, the Preamble to our Declaration of Independence.

This past week in preparation for this sermon I re-read this little book. I’d like to recommend it to you, particularly in regard to some of the questions I’ve been addressing in this sermon series. It’s a book that, to my mind, gets at the heart of the American experiment: concise and insightful, hopeful, generous in its approach, optimistic in its possibilities for the future, balanced in evaluating the past, and written with passion,

purpose, and clarity of both thought and phrase. Most of all, I recommend this book because it provides a plumb-line, a measuring-rod, by which we Americans might know and evaluate ourselves.

Responsive Reading

MINISTER: “Creed” sounds forbidding and ecclesiastical. The American Creed is neither, but it is monumental.

CONGREGATION: Creeds have to be monumental, struck in metal that, when refined in the furnace of history and burnished by developing thought, can endure the trials of time.

MINISTER: They have to be steadfast enough to redeem history itself, reawakening tired minds, rekindling passion in hearts grown weary.

CONGREGATION: Creeds are spiritual touchstones. They are finished in fire, yet cool to the touch when passed from hand to hand one generation to the next.

MINISTER: Capturing the essence of the American experiment, the American Creed affirms those truths our founders held self-evident: justice for all, because we are all created equal; and, liberty for all, because we are all endowed by the Creator with certain unalienable rights.

CONGREGATION: The American Creed doesn’t impose parochial faith upon its citizens but protects freedom, including freedom of religion, by invoking a more universal authority.

MINISTER: Though employing the language of faith, it transcends religious particulars, uniting all citizens in a single covenant.

CONGREGATION: It treats believer and atheist alike, offering each the same protections, securing freedom of and from religion.

MINISTER: Equally important, it protects freedom from itself, tempering excesses of individual license by postulating a higher moral code.

CONGREGATION: The American Creed calls our nation under the judgment of an authority higher than sect, mammon, or self-interest.

MINISTER: America is a union of faith and freedom, in which faith elevates freedom and freedom tempers faith.

CONGREGATION: In America, faith and freedom wed to form a union greater than either alone is capable of sustaining.

(Statements from The American Creed, Forrest Church)

Introduction to Reading

This morning I will be speaking about the relationship between government and religion and about some of the founding ideals of our American republic, namely, religious liberty, religious toleration and religious pluralism, ideals encoded in our original national motto, the Latin phrase, "*E pluribus unum*," meaning "Out of many, one."

That phrase is found on the Great Seal of the United States, designed by John Adams, Ben Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson. You can find an imprint of the Great Seal on the back of a dollar bill.

The phrase, *E pluribus unum*, served as our national motto for 174 years, from 1782 to 1956, at which time it was replaced – it was at the height of the cold war with the Soviet Union – by a second motto, "In God we trust."

In The American Creed Forrest Church, son of former Idaho senator, Frank Church, discusses the moral vision represented by this motto, a moral vision upon which our nation was founded, a vision which has guided our nation, and which continues to judge it. Forrest Church writes:

Reading

...the American Creed invests everyone who comes here with transcendent value. In this respect, unity is indeed an American sacrament. But it is our pluralism that unites us. Considerable blending has taken place over the years. Nonetheless, the populations that compose the nation are tossed together more than they are blended. America is more like a salad bowl than like a melting pot. Otherwise our motto would be *unum* alone, which decidedly we are not. At our finest, we remain both proudly pluralistic *and* united. When a Russian Jew and a Russian Christian come to America, two things unite them that divided them in the old country: their faith in freedom and their freedom of faith.

William James...employed it [the melting pot image]...to describe American religion, but not until 1915 did the word *pluralism* enter the American political lexicon. The philosopher Horace Kallen (himself a Jewish immigrant) introduced it in his article "Democracy Versus the Melting Pot." Kallen wrote that no alchemist can transform a people's ethnicity into common currency simply by throwing it into a crucible, no matter how society may treasure the notion of universal human coinage.... To strike a balance between ethnic and religious uniqueness on the one hand and social cohesion on the other has long been the goal of American pluralism. We accomplish this, however, not by blending out distinctions but by mutually honoring them.

The metaphor Kallen came up with to describe this form of interdependence is a symphony orchestra. In an orchestra sections complement one another. Varied chords may be struck by different groups of instruments, leading to a rich harmonic texture. The whole is expressive of a strength and complex beauty that could not be simulated by one section of instruments all by itself. "[One] theme shall be dominant, perhaps, among

others,” Kallen wrote, “but one among many, not the only one.” Kallen himself was more committed to plurality than to pluralism. Plurality (or diversity) merely describes a condition; pluralism represents an ideal. In fact, it is *the* American ideal.

(The American Creed, pp. 65-66)

“HOW SHALL WE LIVE? PART IV: THE RELATION BETWEEN RELIGION AND POLITICS”

Introduction

This is the fourth sermon in a series with the overall title of “How Shall We Live?” – that is, how shall we live in a country that has seen increasing polarization in recent years, particularly since 9/11, and particularly as illustrated in the last presidential election?

You might note that my question of “How shall we live?” has really been quite limited in its scope. I haven’t addressed certain major global concerns. I haven’t asked, “How shall we live in a world that is more inter-connected and inter-related than ever before?”, nor, “How shall we live in a world that is straining in numerous ways under the environmental impact of our human species upon it?”

Two weeks ago, however, I did explore the world-wide phenomenon of fundamentalism, seeing it, with the help of scholar Karen Armstrong, as a global response and reaction to the changed conditions in which we humans find ourselves – changed ways of thinking and being that have come about with the development of a scientific and secular approach to life that had its origins in 16th and 17th century Western Europe but which has now spread throughout the world.

Our human world, argues Karen Armstrong, has undergone, and continues to undergo, a shift in orientation to life similar to the shift in orientation that took place several thousand years ago with the development of agriculture. That development created the possibility of and need for new religious approaches, approaches that came into being during what historians call the Axial Age, approximately 700-200 B.C.E. – approaches that have nourished the human psyche and given wings to the human spirit up until our time.

But now all over the globe, says Karen Armstrong, we humans are struggling with the new conditions in which we find ourselves, reassessing our religious traditions, and trying to determine what to take with us from these inherited traditions from the Axial Age, what to leave behind, what to revise. Fundamentalism in its various permutations and formulations is one attempt to deal with these changed modern conditions.

Last week I looked at fundamentalism here in the United States, the place where, at the beginning of the 20th century, this modern movement started, and a place where it continues to spread, now with influence at the highest levels of our government.

This past Thursday evening a number of us gathered here in this sanctuary to have a dialogue about fundamentalism – to share our understandings of it and our concerns with it. At that gathering there was personal testimony given from several individuals whose lives had been very directly affected by fundamentalism – in some cases walls of separation dividing previously close relationships.

It was not these kinds of “walls of separation” that our forebears had in mind in separating church and state, religion and politics. Quite the opposite: the idea and ideal was that by separating the institutions of religion and government a richer religious life and a greater civic harmony would be possible for all.

The question of neutrality in religion

So let us turn now to look for a few minutes at the relationship between church and state, religion and politics, seeking to understand how these two spheres are distinct and where they meet.

And let me begin by re-quoting a statement that I used near the end of last week’s sermon, a statement from a representative of one movement within Christian fundamentalism, that of the Christian Reconstructionists, who, unlike the older fundamentalists, want to engage the world and reconstruct what they take to be a Christian nation and society. This statement is from Gary North, founder of the Institute for Christian Economics, an organization you can visit on the web. This particular statement was written already in 1982.

So let us be blunt about it: we must use the doctrine of religious liberty to gain independence for Christian schools until we train up a generation of people who know that there is no religious neutrality, no neutral law, no neutral education, and no neutral civil government. Then they [the newly educated individuals] will get busy in constructing a Bible-based social, political and religious order which finally denies the religious liberty of the enemies of God.

(“Christianity and Civilization,” Spring, 1982)

In one way I agree with Gary North’s assertion that there is “no religious neutrality, no neutral law, no neutral education, and no neutral civil government.” In one sense religious liberty, religious toleration, and religious pluralism are not neutral entities; rather, they are principles, concepts, beliefs, values, and ideals that have application and implications for how we will be together.

Ours was the first nation to experiment in a big way with these principles, concepts, beliefs, values, and ideals, placing them at the very center of our civic life. (Religious freedom and pluralism was tried briefly in the mid-1500’s in Transylvania under the only Unitarian king in history, John Sigismund.) No other nation before had ever tried to organize and construct its civic life with the principles of religious freedom, religious toleration, and religious pluralism as central organizing principles. No other nation had sought to disestablish religious institutions, that is, to separate the institutions of religion

and government, as opposed to having the government support and sponsor a given religion. No other nation had as its original motto the words, *E pluribus unum* – “Out of many, one.” As Forrest Church writes:

“*E pluribus unum* cut directly against the grain of all previous human experience. “One over many” was familiar to history, as were “over many a few” and “some apart from others,” but “out of many, one” had no historical precedent.”

(The American Creed, p. 24)

And no other nation had declared, “We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men – [which was understood generically at the time to mean all humans] are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

Thomas Jefferson, the primary author of these words, also added this statement in his first inaugural address: “Equal and exact justice for all ... of whatever state or persuasion, religious or political.”

That these principles of equality and religious liberty came to be at the center of our civic life may be due largely to the particular and peculiar historical circumstances in which they were formed. Originally, the various groups forming the colonies desired religious freedom, but it was religious freedom to establish their own religion, not, in most cases, religious freedom for others or religious freedom for all. However, historical circumstances created a need to join together in common cause to combat a common enemy that had its own established religion.

Thus, some would describe the development of the separation of the institutions of religion and government and the principles of religious liberty and religious pluralism that it promotes as a happy accident, and others would describe it as a divinely guided plan. But whatever the case, once in place these principles seemed so right that they have influenced, and continue to influence, nations around the world – and this despite the fact that these principles have so often been abridged in practice in our country; and of course the leading author of these principles of equality and liberty, Thomas Jefferson, was himself a slave-holder who had not the strength to act upon what he knew was right and just.

At any rate, far from being neutral, the principles and ideals of the inherent dignity and worth of each individual and with it the promotion of religious liberty, religious toleration, and religious pluralism form the very soul of our nation. These principles are more than simply practical ways of organizing a society. They are statements of beliefs and ideals to which we have given our allegiance and in this way they bear a resemblance to religious values and ideals. Indeed, they are some of the same basic principles around which Unitarian Universalist congregations form their covenant.

Some observers of America, like English author G. K. Chesterton, writing in the latter part of the 19th century, have commented on America's affinity to religion. Chesterton said, "America is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed," a creed, he said, that is set forth "with theological lucidity in the Declaration of Independence." He spoke of America as "a nation with the soul of a church." (The American Creed, p. xii)

So the question before us is not whether our nation will be guided by one approach that has a set of values, as opposed to another approach which is value-free; rather, the question is which set of values and ideals will we be guided by: one that attempts to organize our society on the basis of a specific interpretation of a specific organized religion or one that seeks a way of organizing our society through an attempt to embrace a plurality of religious perspectives and spiritual traditions.

Up to this time the approach in our country that has carried the day, at least in principle – in practice we continue to try to work out the implications – has been the approach of religious liberty, religious toleration, and religious pluralism. It is out of this approach that the principle of the separation of church and state, of religion and politics, has come.

This distinction, as I understand it, has to do with the separation of the institutions of religion and government and not the separation of religious and philosophical values and moral ideas of those who are connected to religious institutions from the public and political sphere. An individual's religion and personal philosophy, which is rightly honed and celebrated in the religious institution to which that person may belong, will certainly have public ramifications. One's religion, one's religious philosophy, one's world- and life-view, relates to the totality of one's life – at least I would hope it does – and is not a strictly private or one-day-a-week phenomenon.

Thus, the idea of the separation of the institutions of religion and state means that the state is not to interfere in the free exercise of religion. But the reverse is not the case. That is, it doesn't imply that persons connected with religious institutions are to separate their values and ideals from public life or the government. The government is, or ought to be, the friend of organized religion, for it is in religion that one seeks personal meaning and value.

That's not to say that meaning and value is sought and found only in organized religion, or that one must be part of an organized religion to have an interest in the life of the spirit; but, nevertheless, organized religion is instituted for the purpose of helping humans address their deepest questions of meaning and value, and for the living of a moral and responsible life. (Whether organized religion does that adequately or well is another question.)

In our system, as least as originally set forth by our nation's founders, government was understood to be the friend of religion. The institution of government desired and depended upon the institution of religion to bring ideals, values, moral discernment, and qualities of spirit into the mix of things in our civic life.

It is this sense that the governmental principle of religious freedom is neutral or empty. It doesn't indicate or dictate a particular content. Freedom by itself is an empty thing. Of itself, it is nothing, but it is a terribly important nothingness – the empty space, the empty container, which will hold what is most precious. Freedom is the necessary pre-requisite or pre-condition for the life of the spirit.

The role of the government is to try to insure such freedom – equal freedom for all. And its role is to protect against those persons or religious institutions that would ask special privilege or seek to dominate.

But government in our system is supposed to be the friend of religion, not its enemy. Thus, as in our responsive reading today, “America is a union of faith and freedom, in which faith elevates freedom and freedom tempers faith.” That is, one's particular faith or religious philosophy, that which fills the empty container of freedom, invests that freedom with meaning. And on the other hand, freedom tempers faith, that is, it guards against the absolutistic and exclusionary tendencies of one's individual faith and perspective.

(See The American Creed, p. 2)

Should the public square be empty?

The question comes up in regard to the principle of the separation of the institutions of church and state: Should the public square be empty? Does the separation of the institutions of church and state require that the public square be empty of any content that is connected with specific religious institutions?

This is a tricky issue and an ongoing struggle. My personal preference is that the public square can be used as a means to demonstrate the religious pluralism that sustains our individual and communal lives.

As an example: in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where I lived for many years, in early June of each year an arts festival is held in which religious groups and organizations of all kinds are invited to set up food booths as a fund-raiser for themselves. It adds delight to the festival and, in its way, is a celebration of our religious pluralism.

Another example, somewhat more controversial, is this: For about the last ten years in which I lived in Grand Rapids, each year at the celebration of the Jewish festival of Hanukkah, a large menorah was allowed to be set up by a conservative Jewish denomination in the Calder Plaza, which is a public square in Grand Rapids. And each day, then, for the eight days of Hanukkah a large candle would be lit, celebrating this Jewish tradition relating to freedom. It was something the community accepted and something that I personally enjoyed – an opportunity, again, to celebrate something of the religious pluralism that existed in our community.

Obviously, there are problems and concerns that can attend expressions of religion in the public arena: questions of fairness, difficulties with those who would be absolutist, concerns that those in the majority would overwhelm the minorities.

Perhaps sometimes in seeking fairness and equality, it is simply easier to say, "Clear the decks; throw out anything that reminds anyone of anything connected with any religious institution of any kind."

Personally I think we lose quality in this way, the opportunity for education and communication. And it may also give the impression that the state is the enemy of religion instead of its friend and protector.

Conclusion

Let me close this all too short discussion of this subject with a couple of final thoughts.

In our discussion of fundamentalism this past Thursday evening, several times the thought was expressed that we religious liberals need a positive message that we can tell to others, some shining ideal that is life-affirming, life-giving, life-renewing.

Let me suggest this morning that we may not have to look far to find such a positive message. It is simply to look to the fundamentals of our national faith, fundamentals that I have spoken about this morning as expressed in the Declaration of Independence:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident; that *all* humans are created equal ... endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights ... life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Or Jefferson's first inaugural address: "Equal and exact justice for all ... of whatever state or persuasion, religious or political."

Or Amendment I of the Bill of Rights to the U.S. Constitution: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

Or our nation's original motto: "*E pluribus unum*" – "Out of many, one."

These have been the positive ideals out of which our nation was born. We have served them imperfectly and we have far to go. Their implications have unfolded over the years and through hard experience. Nevertheless, I believe, and I think most Americans believe, that these ideals still serve.

The pluralistic principle, religious and otherwise, which I have been speaking about, was a necessity at the founding of our nation. Even more today it is a necessity still. We will sink or swim as a society *together*.

Finally, our American experiment has been an inspiration for the peoples of the world. Our founding ideals of equality and justice for all and the related principles of religious liberty and religious pluralism have been emulated throughout the planet. And now our original motto of *E pluribus unum* is needed world-wide – as a planet we will sink or swim *together*.

How ironic and how possibly tragic that the nation which gave birth to this pluralistic principle is now seen by multitudes throughout the world as the primary threat to that pluralistic principle.

So I suggest there is a positive message and a high ideal close at hand. It is simply to recall ourselves to ourselves, first within our nation, and, secondly, as a nation among nations. Not seeking pre-eminence, not seeking to be number one, but seeing ourselves as one among many – with equal and exact justice for all.

As a boyhood friend of Forrest Church, Al Gore, recently said: “If what America represents to the world is leadership in a commonwealth of equals, then our friends are legion; if what we represent to the world is empire, then it is our enemies who will be legion.”

Again, I invite you to a discussion of this sermon topic here in our sanctuary this coming Thursday evening, March 10, at 7:00 p.m.

Benediction

Now may peace be in our hearts,
and understanding in our minds,
may courage steel our wills,
and the love of truth forever guide us. Amen.

Extinguishing of Chalice

We extinguish this chalice
But not the light of truth,
The warmth of community,
Or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
Until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the sermon preached by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on Sunday, March 6, 2005. The spoken sermon, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)