

“Religious Liberalism and Political Liberalism”
August 17, 2008
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Bruce A. Bode

Lighting the 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.

(QUUF Covenant Statement)

Opening Words

This is a resplendent new day that has been given to us.

Let us then rejoice in it and be glad.

And let us count our many, many blessings:

Let us be grateful for the incredible gift of life,

For the capacity to see, to feel, to hear, and to understand.

Let us be grateful for this time of fellowship, for work to do, and service to render.

And let us then be especially grateful for the ties of love which bind us together, giving dignity, meaning, worth, and joy to all our days.

Introduction to Responsive Reading

Our responsive reading this morning is written by the Rev. Dr. David Rankin, a retired Unitarian Universalist minister with whom I served as an associate for over fifteen years at an independent religiously liberal congregation in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

The reading consists of ten statements intended to summarize the commonly-held principles and values of religious liberals. And though each statement begins with the words “We believe,” in no way is it meant to be a credal statement. That would certainly contradict a number of the beliefs stated here. Rather, this is simply one expression among others of the approach to religion found among members of Unitarian Universalist congregations and religious liberals in general.

Responsive Reading

MINISTER: We believe in the freedom of religious expression. All persons should be encouraged to develop their own personal theology, and to present openly their religious opinions without fear of censure or reprisal.

CONGREGATION: We believe in the toleration of religious ideas. All religions, in every age and culture, not only possess an intrinsic merit, but also a potential value for those who have learned the art of listening.

MINISTER: We believe in the authority of reason and conscience. The ultimate arbiter in religion is not a church, or a document, or an official; but the personal choice and decision of the individual.

CONGREGATION: We believe in the never-ending search for truth. If the mind and heart are truly free and open, the revelations which appear to the human spirit are infinitely numerous, eternally fruitful, and wondrously exciting.

MINISTER: We believe in the unity of experience. There is no fundamental conflict between faith and knowledge, religion and the world, the sacred and the secular, since they all have their source in the same reality.

CONGREGATION: We believe in the worth and dignity of each human being. All people on earth have an equal claim to life, liberty, and justice; and no idea, ideal, or philosophy is superior to a single human life.

MINISTER: We believe in the ethical application of religion. Good works are the natural product of a good faith, the evidence of an inner grace which finds completion in social and community involvement.

CONGREGATION: We believe in the motive force of love. The governing principle in human relationships is the principle of love, which always seeks the welfare of others and never seeks to hurt or destroy.

MINISTER: We believe in the necessity of the democratic process. Records are open to scrutiny, elections are open to members, and ideas are open to criticism, so that people might govern themselves.

CONGREGATION: We believe in the importance of a religious community. The validation of experience requires the confirmation of peers, who provide a critical platform along with a network of mutual support.

Introduction to Readings

What is “religious liberalism?” As I will say in my sermon, at the core of religious liberalism is a belief in the *authority of the individual* in matters of religion, a belief, as one of the statements in the responsive reading this morning puts it, that “The ultimate arbiter in religion is not a church, or a document, or an official; but the personal choice and decision of the individual.”

My readings this morning relate to this theme of authority in religion. First, words of Jesus from the Gospel of Matthew where we find a series of teachings that begin, “You have heard that it was said to the men of old ... but I say unto you....”

For example, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” (Matthew 5:38-39)

A series of these statements can be found in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 5, at the beginning of the “Sermon on the Mount.” At the conclusion of that “Sermon on the Mount,” recorded in Matthew 7:28-29, is this summary statement:

And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.

But the question is this: Do these teachings now become the new authority, the new orthodoxy, replacing the *particular* teaching but keeping the *structure* of authority in place? Or, in breaking with the old authority, does one become like the teacher, seeing in the teacher an example of one who teaches you how to be the authority for your own life as the teacher himself was?

I regard the difference between these two approaches as the essential difference between “religious orthodoxy” and “religious liberalism.”

Theodore Parker, a controversial Unitarian minister in the mid-1800’s, made this statement in a famous sermon titled, “The Transient and Permanent in Christianity,” delivered in 1841. He said:

It is hard to see why the great truths of Christianity rest on the personal authority of Jesus, more than the axioms of geometry rest on the personal authority of Euclid, or Archimedes. The authority of Jesus, as of all teachers, one would naturally think, must rest on the truth of his words, and not their truth on his authority.”

(Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism: Channing, Emerson, Parker, Introduction by Conrad Wright, p. 129)

An older friend of Parker’s, Ralph Waldo Emerson, also had something to say about the nature of personal authority in these matters – this from his essay, “Self-Reliance,” also published in 1841. Emerson wrote:

There is a time in everyone’s education when one arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; and that one must take oneself for better, for worse, as his or her portion, that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to one but through one’s toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to one to till. The power which resides in a person is new in nature, and none but the individual knows what that is which one can do, nor does one know until one has tried. Not for nothing one face, one character, one fact, makes an impression, and another none. This sculpture in the memory is not without pre-established harmony.... We but half express ourselves, and are ashamed of that divine idea which each of us represents.... Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string.

“RELIGIOUS LIBERALISM AND POLITICAL LIBERALISM”

Introduction

Since we are in the season of a major national election, I thought this would be a good time to explore and discuss the relationship between organized

religion and the larger society and, specifically, the relationship between “religious liberalism” and “political liberalism.”

Throughout my ministry in religiously liberal congregations – and I have been with four such congregations, one an independent religiously liberal congregation and three Unitarian Universalist congregations – I have operated with what might be characterized as a “wall of separation” between “religious liberalism,” on the one hand, and “political liberalism,” on the other. That is, I have defined and maintained a sharp distinction between the two so that identification as a religious liberal does not by any means imply that one is also a political liberal.

Over the years of my ministry, however, I have noticed that there seem to be fewer and fewer political conservatives in our religiously liberal congregations. I don’t have research numbers to back me up on this, but it’s certainly an impression I have.

One piece of evidence for this is that there is an affiliate organization in the Unitarian Universalist Association who call themselves the “Conservative Forum for Unitarian Universalists.” It was founded in 1986 to, as they say, “ensure that all Unitarian Universalists are free to pursue a responsible search for religious truth and meaning in our societies and denomination, regardless of their individual views on politics, economics, or social issues.”

They have, no doubt, felt compelled to come together to create such an organization in order to maintain that there is also this stream in the larger politically liberal waters of Unitarian Universalists.

So what I wish to do this morning is to explore the topic of religious liberalism and political liberalism reflecting on the following three questions:

1. What’s the distinction between religious liberalism and political liberalism?
2. How do the principles of religious liberalism relate to the principles of political liberalism, on the one hand, and to political conservatism, on the other?
3. And, thirdly, what about taking public social and political positions as a congregation or denomination?

The core of religious liberalism

So, first, what's the distinction between religious liberalism and political liberalism?

The core of "religious liberalism," as I understand and work with it, is found in some of the statements from the responsive reading this morning. The first statement, for example, which states: "We believe in the freedom of religious expression." This is the encouragement to individuals in our congregations "to develop their own personal theologies and to present openly their religious opinions without fear of censure or reprisal."

And if you want such freedom for yourself, it follows you should also promote and encourage that freedom for others. Thus, the second statement of this summary of religious liberalism: "We believe in the toleration of religious ideas."

Then the third statement, the one I have suggested is the most important in terms of getting at the heart of religious liberalism: "We believe in the authority of reason and conscience. The ultimate arbiter in religion is not a church, or a document, or an official; but the personal choice and decision of the individual."

This, I would contend, is central to religious liberalism: the authority of the individual in constructing a life, in searching for and discovering personal truth and meaning.

Several other statements in that responsive reading also strengthen this idea, such as statement six: "We believe in the worth and dignity of each human being" – again a statement that honors the individual soul.

And statement eight: "We believe in the motive force of love" – certainly a principle that respects the sanctity of each person.

And, finally, statement nine: "We believe in the necessity of the democratic process" – which is a way of seeking to recognize and honor each voice in a congregation.

All of these statements flesh out of a number of the principles of the covenant our Unitarian Universalist Association congregations, which you can find printed near the front of your hymnal.

In particular you might note principle #5, which has to do with “the right of conscience,” as well as principle #3, which speaks of “a free and responsible search for the truth and meaning.”

These, in turn, are related to other principles affirming the place and value of the individual in religion: principle #1, which affirms “The inherent worth and dignity of every person;” principle #2, which affirms “Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations; and principle #3, which promotes the “Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth.”

But the core of all this, the chief defining and distinguishing characteristic of religious liberalism, is the belief that the locus of authority in matters of religion rests with the individual, not with an institution, a creed, a book, or an authority figure.

Religiously liberal congregations are formed to provide a structure, a container, an environment in which individuals are granted the largest possible freedom to reflect, think, ponder, consider, question, doubt, probe, explore, search, and re-search.

Our congregations are communities that build, guard, and defend the structures that allow for freedom of individual thought and individual conscience. Thus, the ideal in this religious fellowship is to provide you with an opportunity to discover who you are, how you might live, and what you may contribute to life. We aim and covenant to mutually encourage, support, and assist each other in this enterprise.

A personal example

In my own life I can clearly identify the point at which I stepped across the dividing line, moving from religious orthodoxy to religious liberalism.

Many of you, probably, were raised in an essentially liberal setting where it was expected that you would be your own authority in matters of religious philosophy – those questions and concerns of ultimate meaning, worth, value, and belief. It was understood that you would make your own

decisions, discovering and choosing your own sources of religious inspiration.

But perhaps for many others of you here, including myself, this was not the case. I was raised to believe – and fully accepted – that I should submit my thinking and living to the authority of the biblical scriptures, as interpreted by my particular Protestant denomination. Thus, for many years, right up into my mid-twenties, I struggled with this – a combination, on the one hand, of trying to bring my thoughts into coordination with the scriptures and, on the other hand, of trying to see if there were interpretations of the scriptures that might agree more with the direction in which my thought was moving.

Eventually, it all became too much and I said, in effect:

“Enough. From now on I will look for *inspiration* in the scriptures, but not *authority*. I will look for assistance in living my life, but it will be *my* life. I will look to Moses and Micah and Jesus and Paul as fellow searchers and travelers, brothers seeking a faith to live by, but they will not be *authorities* for my faith.”

Thus, I have a clear personal experience of the meaning of religious liberalism – “liberalism,” which has at its root the Latin word, “*liber*,” meaning “free.” I know through hard personal struggle of the freedom, the liberty, that is at the heart of religious liberalism, and I am loathe to give it up.

Process before particular content

Religious liberalism, as I work with it, has to do not, first of all, with a *particular* faith or a *particular* set of ideas but, rather, with an *approach* to faith – and with the recognition of individual authority and responsibility in these matters. It has, first of all, to do with a *process*, not a particular content. The *particular* content is the privilege and responsibility of the individual seeker.

Indeed, within Unitarian Universalist congregations we speak of a wide variety of sources – “living traditions” we call them – from which members of our congregations draw inspiration as they seek to determine a way to

live. Six such sources are identified in our Association's covenant and, again, you can find them listed near the front of our hymnal.

But these are not meant to be an exhaustive list of sources. Indeed, there is a current initiative in our Association that is seeking to add a seventh source to the existing six, namely, to add "the arts" as a source of religious inspiration – an addition which I would certainly support and welcome, since I generally find more inspiration in the modern arts, particularly poetry, than in most of the traditional scriptures of either Christianity or world religions.

So what this comes to is that religious liberalism promotes a *process* for an individual before it defines a particular *content* for the individual. And therein lies a factor that, to me, accounts for a primary distinction to be made between "religious liberalism" and "political liberalism," namely, that religious liberalism does not prescribe a particular content whereas political liberalism does. Now, the content of political liberalism may be quite broad and not always easily defined, but still it is a specific content that can be distinguished, for example, from the content of political conservatism.

My point is this: moving out of a religiously liberal approach individuals may, through their thinking, their experiences, and their evaluation of religious traditions, come in good conscience to a number of different conclusions and perspectives as to how one should live and what practical policies and positions one might promote in a given society.

Connections between religious liberalism and political liberalism

And now let me give you some examples of how the principles of religious liberalism might relate, first, to political liberalism, and, then, secondly, to political conservatism.

So, first: Are there places where the principles of religious liberalism interface and overlap with political liberalism? Are there principles in the religiously liberal approach that would tend to steer one toward political liberalism?

Let me list four places where I see political liberalism and religious liberalism meeting and overlapping:

1. First, political liberalism is usually identified as being *progressive* in its orientation, willing and interested to examine the status quo and to make changes that seek a larger good. There would be a link here to a liberal approach in religion, where the individual, not bound by the authority of the past, is encouraged to examine the status quo and to seek changes that would enlarge the life of society.
2. Secondly, political liberalism is typically identified with the expansion of individual rights, extending such rights to persons who have not previously had them. The religious liberal would also be jealous of and zealous for such individual rights. And, historically, it has been the case that much of the inspiration and energy for such expansion of rights has come from religious liberals.
3. Thirdly, political liberalism tends to see a positive role for government in extending individual rights and promoting the welfare of all. And religious liberalism also has “liberality” at its core – a generosity of spirit and an openness and idealism that would want government to be helpful in this regard.
4. And, fourthly and finally, political liberalism is usually identified with an affirmation of diversity – diversity of belief, diversity of practice. Again, religious liberalism with its principle of toleration of individual difference would connect with this.

Connections between religious liberalism and political conservatism

But are there also principles, values, and qualities in political conservatism that might interface with and overlap with a religiously liberal approach? I believe there are. And, again, I’ll list four such possibilities:

1. First, political conservatism has usually been identified with a reliance on the individual and the embrace of personal responsibility. This would certainly be in keeping with religious liberalism and the value of individual conscience and personal examination.
2. Secondly, political conservatism has generally sought a more limited role for government than political liberalism, and for at least some religious liberals this would connect with a sense of individual

responsibility for life. There are a number of religious liberals who tend toward a libertarian political philosophy.

3. Thirdly, political conservatism, traditionally, has sought fiscal responsibility and avoidance of waste. That has pretty much gone by the wayside with the current administration, but this value is still generally considered to be part of a politically conservative agenda as the name “conserve” would suggest. And, insofar as that would be followed, religious liberalism and its efforts toward personal responsibility would again connect.
4. And, finally, political conservatism has traditionally been identified with hard-headed, pragmatic realism and with a concern for order in society and how to bring that about. Again, this could relate to the religious liberal who is concerned to thoroughly examine a life, to be scientifically precise, tough-minded, and realistic about the nature of being and reality. Certainly a free-thinking religious liberal might agree with the recently-deceased Alexander Solzhenitsyn, when he said in his controversial address to Harvard graduating students in 1978:

The defense of individual rights has reached such extremes as to make society as a whole defenseless against certain individuals. It is time, in the West, to defend not so much human rights as human obligations.

So religious liberals might come to different political philosophies and support different political organizations in achieving those ends.

Taking social and political positions as a congregation or denomination

Let’s look, finally, today at the question of how religious liberals might express their social and political positions in and through their religious institutions. And let me sharpen and clarify the issue by saying first what it is not.

The question is not whether one’s religious values and beliefs relate to the political and social realm, for certainly, most religious liberals would agree that our religion, our faith, our lifestance – pick your term – has to do with *this* world and living in *this* world. Religion is not, first of all, for the next

world or only for the private and inward life. One's faith, one's life stance, has to do with *all* of life, which would certainly include the social, economic, and political areas of life.

So the question has to do with the role of the religious institution or organization in relating to social, economic, and political concerns. And the issue has to do with the tension between the individual liberty of conscience, on the one hand, and doing something in the world, on the other.

This is always a tricky business – and not just for religiously liberal congregations and denominations but also for religiously conservative or orthodox congregations and denominations.

I had a conversation this past week with a long-time friend who is a minister in an evangelical and orthodox denomination. And he said that his denomination rarely makes pronouncements or takes particular political or social stands, but that even when they do, as in the case of abortion for example, the individual denominational member is not bound by that stand as they are in doctrinal and creedal areas. It might be a bit uncomfortable for those who take a position at odds with the public stand of their religious denomination but they can continue to hold a varying opinion without being declared “heretical.”

So how to approach this question?

An argument for no public stands

For many years I was a minister in a congregation that basically took the approach of keeping the church as an institution out of the political arena, taking no public stands whatsoever. Their thinking went something like this:

We don't want politics in our church. Rather, let the church stick to helping me to discern my spiritual relation to life so that I can live out of that. This is the one place where I can do that. There's no other organization that is deliberately created for such a task. So don't undermine that role.

Now, we can and we should explore, discuss, and debate questions that relate to social, economic, and political issues. After all, our life is in this world. But here in our religious organization we shouldn't vote

on these things; here we don't take stands. And if you want to take a political stand, then join an organization that is designed for that purpose. Or, create such an organization yourselves for that purpose. But don't bind the religious organization to given political policies or to given political parties. We must maintain the freedom of our religious organization and the freedom of individual consciences within our organization.

An illustration of this came up for this congregation a number of years ago when there were a number of people who wanted the church to declare its property a "nuclear free zone." It was, of course, a symbolic gesture – the government was not asking to manufacture or store nuclear weapons at the church – but still it was an important statement for many, a statement relating to the worthy effort to protect human life from nuclear annihilation. (It's hard to think of any political and social issue more important than that.)

But such a vote had never before been taken by the congregation – that is, a vote that would commit the entire congregation to a particular political position. And when the smoke had cleared and the vote was tallied, the motion was defeated.

Those who were fairly new to the congregation were stunned, perplexed, and hurt – "I thought this was a *liberal* congregation?! What's the meaning of this?"

Well, what this was is that many people in the congregation, a majority as it turned out, didn't want the church voting on *any* political issue. Again, their position might be stated something like this:

If in this religious community you have found a spiritual connection to life that has implications in the social, economic, and political realms, as one might certainly expect, and if you want to live these out in a given way, then inquire if there are others in the congregation who think, feel, and are moved in the same way you are. You are free to do that here. More than that, you are encouraged to do that here. So put out a call for persons within the congregation who might be interested in a given cause or a given social or political concern; but, please, don't commit the religious institution *as an institution* to any particular political or social stance.

And, indeed, several times in this congregation's history social justice issues have been addressed by groups that had come out of the congregation, so that organizations like Planned Parenthood or an environmental action council were spun out of it – organizations that received their impetus and a good deal of their membership from the religious organization, but who had formed separate organizations, not ones related to the religious organization.

An alternative view

Well, an alternate view to this position is the argument that congregations can and should express themselves publicly and institutionally on political, economic, and social issues. This argument might be put as follows:

As religiously liberal congregations we are concerned about our larger community and world, and we have thoughts and opinions for what will make it a more equitable, just, and beautiful place. Not to engage the larger society *as an institution* is a dereliction of our responsibility. We are, so to speak, hiding our light under a bushel basket; we are diminishing our power to do good in the world and to make a difference.

Further, to take social and political stands *as an organization* is important for our own members. It keeps us alert and awake to our work in the world; it keeps us from being too insular and self-involved; it promotes discussion and education within our own organization.

And the argument that this impinges on the liberty and freedom of conscience of our congregational members doesn't hold water. As a religious institution we take votes on all kinds of matters. Sometimes one is in the majority, other times not. But, please, when you're in the minority on a given issue, don't withdraw; don't take your chips and leave the game. We need you; we need your opinion. It is of the essence of our religious organizations that you bring your opinion to the table so that it can contribute to the whole.

And, certainly, within our religiously liberal institutions, you have a perfect right to say publicly that you disagree with the public position of the majority.

Indeed, essentially, this is what is done at the level of our national association. Each year at our national general assembly votes are taken that relate to the social, economic, and political issues of the day. These are the votes of the delegates from the member congregations of our Association.

They don't bind the thinking of member congregations or the conscience of individuals within those member congregations, but they are indications of the majority beliefs and positions of Unitarian Universalists on the social, ethical, moral, economic, and political concerns of our society.

This week I came across a sermon by a colleague of mine, the Rev. Jessica Rodela, who in this sermon advocates both stirring up political debate in our congregations as well as the possibility of voting on controversial social issues. In part she says:

I say to you that it is especially important to grapple with our differences in our churches, and especially appropriate for us as Unitarian Universalists. Because our politics reflects our values, and values create our religion, it is inescapable – even fitting – that these conflicts surface at church. That we employ separation of church and state is a necessary social evolution for a pluralistic community; but it does not negate the fact that religion is political. To separate religion from politics renders religion irrelevant and politics lethal. Every one of our seven principles is a political statement, a paradigm of our values and beliefs. We do not turn to liberal religion in order to be told what to do but rather to be shown how to see. And we cannot – must not – learn where to look by only gazing at our own navels. If we create our church community as a monolith to agreement, we remove the checks and balances vital to our own spiritual growth and we rot in the stagnant pond of our assumptions; we stifle creativity when we are not called to the challenge. To practice choice, we have to be faced with something other than ourselves. As Sharon Welch writes: “We need each other to be moral.”

(from Rev. Rodela's sermon, “Can't We Get Along? Loving Your (Political) Opponent”)

Possible divisiveness

I know from personal experience that publicly expressing views on controversial social and political issues from the pulpit can be divisive for a congregation. When this current Iraqi War was heating up in the fall of 2002, and I could see which way the wind was blowing, I gave a couple of sermons in Houston, questioning what was happening.

I prefaced those sermons by saying that this was my position and that there was freedom in the congregation to hold differing opinions. The sermons

were well-received by the majority of the congregants. And for the minority who didn't share these opinions, I met individually with them to affirm the value of their voices. But for some it was too much and they left the congregation, which both troubled and saddened me.

Politics at QUUF

I understand that about this same time a vote on the impending Iraqi War was taken here in this congregation, the only time, I believe, that such a congregational vote has been taken on a matter of public policy. And that when the vote was made public the opposing votes were also given, thus, recognizing that not every one in the congregation agreed with the majority position.

For the most part the way QUUF has dealt with public social and political issues is to encourage those with interest and concern to bring those concerns to the congregation through bulletin and pulpit announcements and through setting up tables to provide information and literature or to sign petitions on one matter or another. But in order to protect the freedom of the individual the advocate is to stay behind the table and not button-hole people.

In addition, in the last two years our congregation has, through its Designated Offering Committee, offered the opportunity for congregational members to contribute financially to organizations that we as a community value and wish to support. Again, however, these funds are not part of the operating budget of our congregation and no one is required to contribute; thus, once again protecting individual liberty in our religious fellowship.

And, finally, of course, our Social Action and Education Committee has, over the years, lifted up various community needs and concerns, providing members of the congregation with possibilities for community service and witness. Again, however, they have been careful to protect individual liberty, by indicating when taking a public stand that the position is that of the Committee, not necessarily the congregation as a whole.

And let me end by calling your attention to some upcoming plans of our Social Action and Education Committee, namely, to bring in a special speaker, the Rev. Carol Ann Cole, in late October to involve us in congregation-wide conversation about the role of social action and education

in our congregation. This promises to be a most interesting conversation; it's right at election time, and so please stay tuned for more detail on this.

Benediction

And 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.

Extinguishing the 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 given by the Rev. Bruce A. Bode on Sunday, August 17, 2008. The spoken sermon, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ somewhat in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)