

VOTING OUR VALUES: how liberal religion decides
Rev. Kit Ketcham, Nov. 2006

Do you remember this old song? Sing it with me if you do.

“Gimme that old-time religion, gimme that old-time religion, gimme that old-time religion, it’s good enough for me. It was good for our mothers, it was good for our fathers, it was good enough for them and it’s good enough for me. Gimme that old-time religion, gimme that old-time religion, gimme that old-time religion, it’s good enough for me”

Except it’s not, is it? That old-time religion is one reason we here today are Unitarian Universalists. That old-time religion doesn’t offer what we are looking for in terms of a spiritual life or a set of beliefs or a way of relating to the world.

That old-time religion, tied as it often has been to a fear of science, a distaste for changing cultural norms, and opposition to doubt and questioning of literal interpretations of the Bible, lost most of us as we began to read other books besides the Bible, as we began to study justice issues, as we began to see that our current world was not well-served by a religion which was living in the past, rejecting new information, following ancient laws without compassion or a sense of justice.

And those of us who were raised UU were not attracted to another more rigid religion because of those very characteristics.

As I was thinking about how my own experience intersects with this topic, I was reminded of kitchen table discussions in my childhood, when my mother and father would bemoan the rising of "modernism" and "worldliness" in human lives, because it meant to them estrangement from God, a rejection of God's word, and too much connection with popular culture.

I've always been more an observer of differing opinions rather than a rebel, so I tucked this thinking away in my brain and brought it out later to hold up against the popular culture I was familiar with, to check its validity.

And it seemed to me that my parents were overly concerned; science didn't seem evil, nor did the effort to understand what the Bible really said in its original languages. I didn't mention my opinion to my parents, not wanting to argue, but it fermented and bubbled during my youth and on into college, where I learned things about Christianity and Jesus that were left out of my Sunday School lessons!

As I prepared to write this sermon, in the context of our current political climate, I attended our district's annual fall ministers' retreat, where the topic was "Unitarian Universalism and the Challenges of Religious Identity".

In conversations with my colleagues and listening to our speaker, the Rev. Dr. Paul Rasor, who is the director of the Center for the Study of Religious Freedom in Norfolk, VA, I found my own experience and the ideas presented coming together to clarify for me what it means to be a religious liberal, particularly a Unitarian Universalist, and how that influences my choices when I vote, when I attend community events, what causes I support, and where I give my money.

As liberal religious thinkers, you and I tend to be committed to the same things: First, that our religion must live in the present, using modern knowledge and experience. Second, that our religion must be openminded, prizing free intellectual inquiry. And third, that our religion must be credible and relevant; in other words, it has to matter and to make sense.

And we have other commonalities as well: our religion occupies the middle ground between fundamentalism and the secular world, in the real world of contemporary culture. Our religion operates on the belief that reality involves movement and change, interdependence, fluid understanding of truth, with little black and white thinking. Our religion promotes autonomy, thinking for oneself, mistrusting external authority. And our religion bases its ethics on humaneness, not on doctrinal tenets.

As a minister who is engaged with many other clergy and laity of varying faiths, both Christian and non-Christian, I have been struck by what we have in common as liberal religious thinkers. There is not a lot of difference between liberal faiths and their work in the world, if you set aside theological differences.

I notice and appreciate this every time I meet with the South Whidbey Lectionary study group or with the other members of the Religious Coalition for Equality. Here are men and women whose theology is different from mine in many ways but who are working with me to achieve the same goals-----justice, compassion, equity, and a healing community which supports and nurtures our living planet.

Some of these colleagues are Republicans, at least in the original sense of a voter committed to the Republic and its health. Many are Democrats. Others are Libertarian and Green and Independent. We may have cast differing votes for different people and issues in the election just past, based on our knowledge of them and our personal understandings of the ideals they represent.

But these colleagues and I voted our consciences, not a party or doctrinal line, and we made our choices based on what we consider to be the important social issues of our cultural milieu, not on religious doctrines which seek to impose theocratic ideals on our nation. We don't vote to deny human rights; we vote to uphold freedom and equal opportunity. And we vote for the human beings who seem to us to exemplify these ideals.

I ask you to think, right now, about how you decided what candidates you voted for. What were the most important qualities of a candidate that you supported? (congregational response)

Here's how I chose my candidates for office: I looked for credibility in a candidate, a person with integrity who I think is less likely to be swayed by political contributions than others; I looked for measurable differences between the candidates; if I had personal knowledge of the candidate, either through personal experience or through a credible friend's experience, that helped me make my decision; I looked to see if the candidate had demonstrated values which are life-enhancing for all, not just for a few; and the candidate's ads tell me whether he/she has ethics which I can accept. I've heard you offer some similar techniques.

And what about issues? How did you decide which issues you would vote yes on and which you would vote no on? (congregational response)

On issues such as legislative referenda or citizen initiatives, I looked at the financial backers of the initiative or referendum. Were those backers' values similar to what I believe is life-enhancing for all and good for the planet? Was the issue based on good science and logic? Did it address a core need of society, such as reduction of poverty or equitable treatment of all persons or preservation of the planet? Did I have a personal connection to this issue through those I know who may be affected by its outcome?

I would guess that many, if not most of us, chose Unitarian Universalism in the same ways that we chose who and what to vote for on Election Day.

You voted for this religion, instead of another. How did you make that decision? How did you think that through and come up with UUism as your choice? (cong. response)

I had never heard of UUism until I went to Denver as an American Baptist Home Missionary, to work in the Denver Christian Center. Our preschool class was supported by volunteers from the First Unitarian Church of Denver and they worked side by side with me in that classroom as we taught small children songs, alphabet, games, numbers, and getting along with others.

Later, a handsome young man courted me by taking me to a service at that Unitarian Church and to protest marches sponsored by the First Universalist Church of Denver. We were married by a Unitarian judge.

My decision to become active as a UU was based on my observation that this faith tradition put its money where its mouth was; it supported social justice actions; it was based on reason and science, not supernatural doctrines; its spiritual ancestors were credible men and women, people I admired, both living and dead; it was self-critical, that is, it questioned itself-----it addressed internal racism and homophobia and intolerance.

And I liked the UUs I met. They were smart and funny and serious, all at the same time. They were skeptical of the same things I was skeptical of! And they liked me! I felt at home, welcomed, accepted. And they believed the same things I had come to believe: that Jesus was a good man, but not God; that it was important to change society to be more just, more compassionate; that many faiths had truth and that there were multiple paths to the top of the mountain.

Election Day also challenged us to respond appropriately in another way as well. We endured the political ads, the mudslinging, the debates, the differences of opinion, all the while hoping that our side would win, that the candidates we voted for would come out on top, that the issues we saw as critical would be resolved in positive ways, preferably the ways we voted!

This year, many political races for our state and federal legislatures were hanging in the balance; the outcome of the election will affect American politics in the coming years. And we asked ourselves, if so and so wins, what will we win? If the other candidate wins, what will we lose?

We speculated and wondered---maybe we even prayed “let our candidate win!” But now the wait is over. The votes are in.

Some of us stayed up late to field the returns as they were coming in. This year I’m betting that many of us did that, jubilant at the wins, regretful at the losses.

And the next morning, in the newspaper, the headlines told the story: So and So wins. Congress looks like this. The pundits offered their interpretations of the results of the election. We looked at the results, offered our own thoughts, and moved on to the next stage of the democratic process, accepting the results of the election.

If we feel that “our side” won, we are jubilant and eagerly anticipate the changes that we hope will be enacted because of the wins. If we feel that “our side” lost, we are depressed and angry and look for reasons to object to the results.

What was your reaction on Wednesday morning if your candidates and issues were voted in? (congregational response)

Mine was a long sigh of relief and hope that perhaps a long siege of corruption and conflict will come to an end. You might be interested in what I wrote on my blog the day after the election:

Let the wild rumpus begin!

Rumpus rumpus rumpus, I used to say to my son when we got to that part in Maurice Sendak's wonderful book "Where the Wild Things Are". Son Michael was a bit of a wild thing as a tot, though he has integrated that part of himself nicely into his adult identity.

No, the wild rumpus I'm talking about is the party that continues to happen now that the Dems have regained some measure of influence in Congress and, hopefully, over the trajectory of this nation which has been pretty much downhill over the past several years.

But I hope there's a designated driver or several in the party. This is not the time for every Dem to go on a tear of thanksgiving for power regained, for enemies vanquished, for vengeance exacted. This is not the time for every Dem leader to lord it over the vanquished, screw over the losers, make plans to rub noses in the mud and humiliate the opposition.

This is the time for all of us to cheer wildly for our success and then commit ourselves to integrity, honesty, compassion, and to work for the greater good, not the good of a few.

This is the time for all of us to bask in the satisfaction of a job well done and then bend ourselves to the new work of righting the wrongs that have been committed.

This is the time for all of us to love our enemies, do good to them who despitefully have used us, and walk the very straight and narrow path that leads to salvation. After a lovely wild rumpus, of course.

What was your reaction if any of your candidates and issues were rejected? (congregational response)

Mine has been sorrow and weariness at the decision by my fellow Americans to pursue some paths that seem to me to be lacking vision and perhaps integrity and I, like you, will gird up my loins for the next stage of being true to my religious values.

For whatever the eventual outcome of this past Election Day, we will always have countless challenges and problems to solve democratically. We as liberal religious thinkers will pursue those solutions in certain common ways.

Recently I watched a documentary about the writer and thinker Howard Zinn, whom many of you doubtless know, at least by reputation, as a man whose integrity and commitment to peace and justice are more than admirable; he is truly a prophet in the best sense of the word.

The documentary, "You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train", closes with the following quote by Howard Zinn, and I will close with it as well. It says to me that whatever the longterm or shortterm outcome of this election, it is merely one more instance in an endless series of instances, some good, some bad, and our work for peace and love and justice do not end because of an outcome either desired or feared.

"To be hopeful in bad times is not...foolishly romantic; it is based on the fact that human history is a history of not only cruelty, but of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future ---- the future is an infinite succession of 'presents,' and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory."

Let's pause for a time of silent reflection and prayer.

CLOSING HYMN # 159 "THIS IS MY SONG"

BENEDICTION: Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that as human beings in a democratic society, we have the opportunity and responsibility to speak out for the values which are life-enhancing for all. May we accept this responsibility and act according to our consciences and may our voices be heard as we speak for justice and equity in human life. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.

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