



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Reclaiming the Religious Left

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In this election cycle, I've been thinking about my early political education. My most formative teenage years were spent in the liberal enclaves of suburban Boston, Massachusetts, where politics were embedded into my education and community life. My first "job" was as an intern for my female democratic state senator the summer after my freshman year of high school. I rode the commuter train into the Statehouse every day, marveling at the marble hallways, bustling with people committed to the common good. With my senator's assistant, I worked on issues of girl's education, researching for upcoming legislation.

When my state senator was up for reelection in November, I stood with signs on street corners, participating in my first successful election. I knew that my civic engagement mattered. My budding Unitarian Universalist faith developed in tandem with my interest in politics. Coming of age in the early Clinton years, a great sense of political optimism pervaded. I remember walking past our Unitarian Universalist headquarters on Beacon Hill, moved that such meaningful historic landmarks stood side by side. Later on after college, I interned for our Unitarian Universalist Washington Office, again working on issues of education and welfare reform. In particular, I was working to keep comprehensive, evidence-based sexuality education programs in our schools, locally and nationally.

Many of you know about the Unitarian Universalist and United Church of Christ Our Whole Lives sexuality education programs, which are amongst the most comprehensive secular programs available and used widely across the country. In advocating for sex education, I began to dialogue with conservative religious organizations like Focus on the Family. Focus on the Family proposed an abstinence-only, or abstinence-until marriage approach to curriculum, loaded with fear-based tactics to scare high schoolers. These religious conservatives were also pushing for community "marriage education" programs embedded in the welfare reform bills, meant to encourage teens to marry before sex, or to be redeemed by marriage after the shame of sex before marriage.

In doing this political work, this time from a faith-based perspective, I began to speak with a shaky but emerging moral voice that would lead me to ministry. In my faith-based advocacy, I learned to use religious language, speaking about sexuality as "God's gift," and the importance of teaching young people about the "sacredness of our bodies," empowering them with accurate information to make the best choices for themselves. Building this moral voice did not always come easily, for me or for the other Unitarian Universalists with whom I worked.

For many of us, we often removed ourselves from the conversations initiated by conservative religious groups. We often characterized ourselves as a "different kind of church," we would say. "Not THAT kind of church." We hesitated to speak from the place of fundamental power: our faith. Instead, we were much more comfortable speaking from a secular place, based in our commitment to education and sound scientific evidence, all valid points grounded in the values we espouse, but not claiming an explicitly religious perspective. The conservative

Christian groups were more than happy to fill the void we left with theologically dangerous, albeit Biblically based, political rhetoric.

From the dawn of this nation, liberal religious voices like ours have had a seat at the political table, but not always on the side of the table you might imagine. Unitarian Universalist minister and theologian Forrest Church's book *So Help Me God: The Founding Fathers and the Battle Over Church and State*, places our Unitarian brethren decidedly on the side of what we would perceive as the "religious right" to "demand a seat for God in government," and the Baptists, today more typically conservative, stood on the left as "champions for church-state separation."

Second president John Adams was a devout Unitarian who first considered a career in ministry before law and politics (he apparently thought the church was too conservative for his views.) He was an advocate of a Christian federal authority, protected by the liberty of religious freedom. For Adams, a Christian republic with God at the helm made sense, as it was God who was the all-knowing power and endowed every person with a sense of moral agency. For Adams, government should temper human's prideful nature with humility, openness, and encourage virtue through the rigors of the Christian faith, as interpreted through his Unitarian lens.

Adams came from a line of New England Christians who first claimed the word "liberal" to describe their theological orientation, merging it with a political agenda. The liberal orientation of our Unitarian congregations emerged as a left-wing reformation of Calvinist Orthodoxy. Two theological tenets were central to this 19th century liberal theological reformation:

1. God as the highest good, the highest ideal of moral perfection
2. Made in God's image, human beings are naturally directed towards the highest good, and exercise their moral agency in the world through their actions

Now these tenets may sound a little mild to us today, but trust me, they were radical for their time. They reflected a new world view of great significance to the American moral tradition. In the Orthodox Calvinist view, the nature of God was as a punishing or retributive father God, a domineering presence who reigned over the world through strict moral laws meant to control unruly and sinful humans. In this view, the world was a dangerous, lawless place, full of human wickedness and getting worse by the day.

By the liberal reformist view, God, the highest moral good, was no longer a punishing but a benevolent, caring parent, doting on God's beloved children. God endowed each person with a mind, and with reason to discern truth from lies. Likewise, God endowed each person with conscience to discern right from wrong. The world, enriched by the ever increasing moral actions of people of conscience and reason, progresses towards the kingdom of God, or the beloved community as we might call it today.

This can be summed up in one bible verse, held dear to our theological ancestors:

The “double love” commandment: you must love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.

John Adam’s interest in aligning church and state quickly dissolved when Jeffersonian democracy took hold, bringing secular enlightenment values into government without the Christian theological center. The initial push to align liberal New England Christian leadership with federal politics from the “top down” became more difficult among a growing diversity of religious groups as the era of fused church/state politics ended. A new grassroots effort was embraced—a movement to bring liberal theological values into the public square through social institutions and policy reform. In the mid-19th century, Unitarians like Bronson Alcott advocated that high quality education should be available to all children regardless of their socioeconomic status, race or religion. Through founding educational institutions, liberal Unitarians fulfilled their theological belief that God endowed all people with a mind equipped for reason and conscience, not reserved solely for the privileged or the saved. This is one of the reasons, no doubt, that our original articles of incorporation as Neighborhood Church included education as part of our religious mission, and why we continue to promote education today.

Did this turn towards investment in social institutions and policy reform as the means of making change contribute to our hesitancy to express our faith directly in the public square? Probably not. We have three other early Unitarian presidents to thank for the fundamental shaping of our democracy: John Q. Adams, Millard Fillmore, and William Howard Taft.

What could be a factor is our longstanding fear of evangelism. While we were busy moving forward our religious agendas without calling them religious, America had two out of three Great Awakenings. With much hooting, hollering and hellfire at tent revivals, America’s most famous conservative preachers proclaimed the sinfulness of man and the impending end of days.

Unitarians, disdaining the message, also disdained the method. Disturbed by the shouting and emotion, we chose what we saw as the more reasoned approach: changing minds to change hearts, not the other way around. The third Great Awakening produced the Social Gospel movement, a liberal Christian revival focused on peace and economic justice, a movement with the spirit of revival without the sting of hell. Still, we didn’t jump on board for that revival either, choosing to work diligently on our own agenda. Looking back, it seems as if we prefer to do good works, quietly, living our values in the secular world rather than proclaiming our theological beliefs in public.

Our hesitancy to evangelize - Could this be the biggest impediment to claiming our place on the religious left, throughout history and today?

Unitarian Universalist minister and theologian Forrest Church had a theory from his 1991 book, boldly titled *God and Other Famous Liberals: Recapturing Bible, Flag, and Family from the Far Right*. Though Church passed away nearly seven years ago, he remains one of the rare ministers to openly embrace evangelism, for himself and for our faith.

Liberal and an evangelical. Each embodies the good news, not the bad news of hell-fire and damnation, where women who have abortions are criminals, the wage of homosexuality is AIDS, and the homeless somehow deserve to be. Despite the prevailing notion that liberalism is both antipatriotic and antireligious, it is neither. God, the most famous liberal of all, has a bleeding heart that never stops.

He goes on to make a case for why we, as liberals, need to, with passion, embrace the typical domains of the religious right: God, family and country, as we define them for ourselves as the religious left. How would you define your commitment to God, family and country? Would you? For me, God is the highest moral good, the most abundant love in the universe, the creative spirit which animates and endows our lives, the ground of our being from which we draw strength and power.

When I say family, I don't mean just our nuclear families, but an expansive sense of the human family, chosen and blood, which includes multiple generations, relations and identities including culture, race, and class. And when I say Country, I mean our imperfect but beloved nation which is based on the values I cherish: religious freedom, cooperative government, equality and mutual respect. This is country which I know my religious forebears co-created, a visible legacy of which I can be proud and see myself as carrying forward.

Now, friends, how would you share the good news of our faith, some news worth spreading? What would it take for you to go tell someone about it?

It may not be comfortable for us to claim the religious left, but it's important, not just for us, but for our religious neighbors under more direct attack. As a congregation, federal law prohibits us from endorsing political candidates, as it should. This restriction does not mean we should shy away from our liberal birthright, which places us at the political table with our interfaith brothers and sisters who share our values of dignity, respect and inclusion.

Now some say the religious right no longer exists, a phantom specter of the past which passed away with Jerry Falwell and his Moral Majority. I doubt that is true, but if it is, rushing to occupy its place may be something even more terrifying: A religious alternative right conglomerate of individuals and small groups, untethered by the conservative Christian underwriting commonplace in partisan politics. This alternative right shares the bad news of the religious right, but ascribes it to the evils of multiculturalism—hating not in the name of defending a religious worldview, but simply hate for hate's sake: a menacing disregard for gays, Jews, immigrants, Muslims, people of color, and yes, women who dare to consider themselves feminists.

If this alternative right is real, whether hiding behind the anonymity of a computer screen, it needs to meet with the soul-force of a powerful, values driven moral movement of people of faith who embrace both mind and heart.

Many of you may have noticed a powerful preacher who roused the halls at our Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly and the Democratic National Convention. Since April of 2013, North Carolina NAACP President and Christian minister Rev. William Barber has been drumming up what he calls a “moral revival” everywhere he goes. His mission: to organize and empower ordinary people of faith to “reconstruct” the moral foundation of our nation, eroded by immoral policy making. “When religion disguises meanness, we have a heart problem, and we need people of faith with good hearts to help revive the heart of this nation. Some issues are not left or right or liberal versus conservative. They are right versus wrong.”

He is calling for nothing short of a “Revolution of the heart” in the words of Dorothy Day, a “radical revolution of values” in the words of Martin Luther King. Will we get over our fear of evangelism and join Rev. Barber and his moral revival? Or will we sit out yet another Great Awakening? When we head to the polls in November, we will each vote our conscience because of, not in spite of, our faith. We will have a choice to vote on the America that we wish to live in:

The bad news: A doomed, fearful, and failing America, where walls are built around our borders and around our hearts. Or the good news of an America where government and people dedicated to the common good work together to create a safe, peaceful and sustainable world of expanding opportunity for all. Both the good news and the bad news have serious policy consequences. Which do we choose for our future?

It was Benjamin Franklin who once wisely said— “We must, indeed, all hang together or, most assuredly, we shall all hang separately.”

The decision is ours, but let us choose wisely, always trusting that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.