

ONE NATION UNDER WHOSE GOD?
(or; Why We Need to Make Our Voices Heard)
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PROLOGUE: The Tortoise and the Tree (a Nigerian Tale)

What animal do you think is the smartest? Well, some tribes in Nigeria believe that at one time, long, long ago, the smartest animal in the world was the Tortoise. Mr. Tortoise was extremely wise, and he didn't hesitate to let the other animals know this.

"I have a Ph.D. and have read every book there is," he used to say. "My IQ is off the charts. Boy, am I smart!"

You can imagine how popular this kind of talk made him with the other animals. But despite the fact that he was the smartest animal in the world, the Tortoise was secretly worried about losing all his wisdom.

"I'm sure the others are jealous of my vast knowledge and might try to steal my wisdom. Aha! I have it! I'll gather up every bit of my knowledge, truth, tricks, and ideas, and put them in a basket. Since I know so much, it will need to be a very large basket. I'll then hang my basket of wisdom and truth from the top of the tallest tree, where no one will find it."

So he gathered up all his wisdom and truth into the biggest basket he could find. And in the middle of the night, when no one else could see him, the Tortoise started to climb with his basket to the top of the tallest tree in the forest. But since the basket hung down in front of his chest, he couldn't reach around to get a good grip on the trunk of the tree. He kept falling down with each attempt. All night long he tried and tried, but without success. In the morning, he was discouraged and exhausted.

Just then, a little deer came by. "Good morning, Mr. Tortoise. You look discouraged and exhausted. What's wrong?"

"Thanks for asking. I am discouraged and exhausted. I have put all that is precious to me in this basket. I want to hang it at the top of this tree, but I can't seem to get up there."

"Hmmm. Um, I have an idea."

"You? An idea? I sincerely doubt it. After all, I'm the one with the Ph.D."

"Well, how about tying the basket on your back instead of on your chest? Then you could get a good grip on the tree trunk and climb to the top."

"Humph!" said Mr. Tortoise.

But he gave it a try. And sure enough, he made it to the top of the tree. He was tying his basket full of truth and knowledge to the highest branch when he had a sobering thought. "A little deer who only got as far as fourth grade figured out how to solve a problem that I, the wise Tortoise, had failed to figure out. I don't know everything after all -- arrggh!"

The Tortoise was so disgusted with himself that he let his basket fall to the ground. The basket broke open, and millions of little pieces of truth went everywhere. (*Pieces are tossed into the*

audience.) And that is how truth and wisdom and knowledge and ideas were scattered all over the world, and why each of us is able to pick up a little piece or two for ourselves.

But it is also why no one person has ever been able to know all there is to know. There is always something more to learn, something new to think about, another piece of truth waiting to be discovered.

DISCOURSE

What does your piece of truth say? Let's hear a few. We won't read them all, but I promise you that every piece is different. And if we got together later this evening and put all our puzzle pieces together, there'd still be some empty spaces, because in our quest for truth and wisdom, we'll always need to leave room for mystery.

But what if every puzzle piece the Tortoise dropped from his tree said "Christianity" on it? That might make a lot of us feel left out, but it would fit well with what many Americans are saying these days.

And I don't know about you, but I'm tired of hearing it. I'm tired of hearing people say that the United States is and always has been a "Christian country." And my weariness turns to anger when they further insist that being a Christian country means teaching Creationism -- oh, excuse me, "intelligent design" -- in the public schools, posting the Ten Commandments in government buildings, curtailing reproductive freedom, and denying gays and lesbians the right to marry. Okay, so maybe we are a Christian country in the sense that a majority of Americans are members of one of the hundreds of Christian denominations. Case closed, since in a democracy, the majority rules? No, because our Constitution was also designed to protect religious minorities by placing fundamental rights of conscience beyond the reach of voting majorities.

Besides, whose Christianity constitutes this majority? There's a wide range of belief under the Christian umbrella. Some take the Bible literally, others see it as metaphor. Some view human beings as "sinners in the hands of an angry God," while for others God is love. Many Christians are evolutionists, strong supporters of gay rights, pro-choice. And so it goes. Christians have been arguing about what it means to follow Jesus since the day after his death. Certainly they were arguing about it as our nation was being formed.

Because so many of the "Christian country" proponents like to refer back to the origins of our nation, it's worth recalling a little history here. The first religions in our land were actually the earth-centered traditions of the Native Americans, who were here thousands of years before Europeans even thought about sailing west. So if we really want to go back to the "original" religion of what is now the United States, we'd all become pagans -- which is not a bad idea. If we don't nurture our spiritual connections with nature and take better care of the planet, we won't have a tree left to post the Ten Commandments on.

Of course it's true that the Pilgrims and Puritans who arrived in the 1620s and 30s were Christians. As school-children, we're taught the story of their bravery in crossing the ocean and enduring many hardships in order to find religious freedom. But we forget that they only wanted that freedom for themselves, not for anyone else. The Puritans pushed the native peoples out and established a theocracy in Massachusetts, with their brand of state-supported conservative Congregationalism as the only religion allowed.

By a strange quirk of fate, many of those tax-supported Congregational churches the Puritans established in Massachusetts later became Unitarian. Although the law mandating this public support was not enforced much after 1800, it was not taken off the books until 1833, which made Massachusetts the last state to officially dismantle established religion. Thus it is that the Unitarian branch of our family tree has the dubious distinction of being the last American faith to hold government sanction.

Well, all this church-and-state history is interesting, but I confess it felt a little dry and distant as Wade and I drove the ten miles over to Potsdam awhile back. By the time we got home three hours later, however, history had become visceral, for we had gone to see six of our church youth appear in Potsdam High School's excellent production of Arthur Miller's play, "The Crucible." As you may know, the play is about the Salem witch hunts, and is a chilling reminder of what can happen when religion and government are one. By the end of the play, my stomach was churning and my eyes welling up. The actors conveyed so well the fear, the hopelessness, and the evil that reigned in the "Christian country" of Massachusetts, and the incredible courage it took to stand up to the religious authorities.

And it really happened. My great (times eight) grandmother, Susannah North Martin, was hanged in Salem in 1692 as a witch. The actual transcript of Susannah's trial closely resembles the script in "The Crucible," and the same girls were her accusers. Watching the play was like feeling the noose tighten around my grandmother's neck. Or my own. For lest you think this was all long ago and far away, let me commend to you a line spoken by the trial judge in the play: "You're either with us or you're against us."

Perhaps the horrors of Salem crossed the minds of those who created the Constitution of the United States less than a hundred years later. Maybe they also remembered in more positive terms the Baptist Roger Williams and the Quaker William Penn, who founded colonies in Rhode Island and Pennsylvania based on freedom for all religions, with no government-supported church. For surely those who seek religious freedom for themselves cannot logically deny it to others, a fact which was eventually realized in Massachusetts and in the other colonies where one brand of Christianity had for awhile been privileged over other religions.

It is true that the founding documents of our country -- the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution -- have religious roots. They also have roots in Greek philosophy and Enlightenment humanism. The authors of these documents believed in God, but they had different ideas of what God is -- some were Christians, some Unitarians or Universalists, some Deists. The Holy in the Declaration of Independence is envisioned as "Nature and Nature's God" -- the Creator who brought the world into being, set forth the physical and moral laws that order the universe, and gave all human beings inherent worth, equality, and freedom. These are indeed spiritual principles. But there's no mention of Jesus or of Christianity or any other faith.

The Constitution goes even further and does not mention God at all -- not because the authors were atheists, but because they deliberately intended not to establish a Christian country. Do you hear me, Tom DeLay, Pat Robertson, and Antonin Scalia? The framers of the Constitution set forth the idea -- radical for their day -- of a country whose government was secular. They were supported in this by a coalition that included not just liberals and freethinkers, but conservative evangelicals who were themselves a minority faith in those days and who feared persecution from the mainline majority. Perhaps that's why the Senate

unanimously passed the 1811 Treaty of Tripoli, which included this statement: “the government of the United States is not in any sense founded on the Christian Religion.”

Not Christian -- and not Jewish, or Muslim, or Buddhist, either. Instead, the Founders set what that self-professed Unitarian Thomas Jefferson famously called a “wall of separation” between church and state, convinced that each individual’s religious faith, or lack thereof, was a matter of his or her own conscience and conviction. For some of our Founders, freedom of conscience was a gift from God; for others, it was simply an inherent human right. Some were deeply religious; others felt religion was mainly useful for promoting good behavior. But all agreed that the state must never compel belief or privilege some faiths over others. And most agreed that freedom *of* religion includes freedom *from* religion as well. For as Jefferson put it, “It does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.”

Brilliant minds though they were, the framers of our Constitution could not have envisioned the religious diversity of our country today. But the sixteen words of the First Amendment -- “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof” -- those words have given us a rudder to steer by for more than 200 years, though the sailing has never been smooth. From the very beginning, some agreed with the North Carolina minister who observed with horror that the Constitution’s prohibition of religious tests for office would amount to an “invitation to Jews and pagans of every kind to come among us.”

In 1864, a group of evangelical Protestants began a campaign to amend the Constitution to make Christianity the law of the land. They wanted to rewrite the Preamble to say: “We the people of the United States, humbly acknowledging Almighty God as the source of all authority and power in civil government, The Lord Jesus Christ as the Governor among the Nations, and His revealed will as of supreme authority, in order to constitute a Christian government... do ordain and establish this Constitution...” The drive to insert similar wording into the Constitution continued until 1954.

It’s frightening that this proposal was ever taken seriously, but the agenda behind it is still alive and well. It was only a few months ago that the Missouri General Assembly debated a resolution in support of prayer in the public schools and religious displays on public property as “the justified recognition of the positive role Christianity has played.” For, they said, “our forefathers recognized a Christian God and used the principles afforded to us by Him as the founding principles of our nation.” This resolution is exactly the opposite of what our founders intended, but hey, don’t confuse us with facts.

As Unitarian Universalists, we believe that no one person or book or religion -- or tortoise -- has the whole truth. For us, a free interplay of ideas and experiences gives humanity the best chance of finding paths to justice, compassion, and peace. So we celebrate the religious pluralism in which we live, and look for glimpses of goodness and beauty in all religions, in science, in the world of nature, in art and music, in the stories of our own lives. But to see life this way does require a tolerance for ambiguity and a spirit that delights in questions as much as in answers. Not everyone is comfortable living with shades of gray, however, and hence the appeal of the “Christian country” idea. As the number of immigrants coming to the U.S. from around the world has grown, so has the religious diversity they bring. For some, that’s cause not for celebration, but for circling the wagons even tighter.

“Screw the Buddhists and kill the Muslims” was the response of a public official in South Carolina during a 1992 dispute over displaying the Ten Commandments. I’m not sure attitudes have improved all that much since then, and certainly discrimination against Muslims has increased since 9/11. Meanwhile, the Lord’s Prayer blasts over the loudspeaker at a high school football game in Texas. A blessing “in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ” is offered at an interfaith gathering in New York. The Ten Commandments are posted in courtrooms, Easter week is a public school holiday, government flags fly at half-mast when the Pope dies (but not, one wonders, when the Dalai Lama dies?), and millions of gay and lesbian citizens are deprived of equal civil rights because of a few Bible verses.

Some of this is annoying, and much of it is destructive. But you know what? Sometimes I wish we were a truly Christian country. By that I mean a country whose people really followed the teachings of Jesus. After all, Jesus wasn’t interested in posting the Ten Commandments on the wall -- he probably couldn’t read. He told his followers to pray in private, not at football games or political rallies. He supported the separation of church and state: “Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s and unto God that which is God’s.” And he never mentioned homosexuality, abortion, sex education, or feeding tubes.

What he did talk about -- a lot -- was the disparity of wealth he saw around him. Jesus would not be a fan of unbridled, “me-first” capitalism, and he spoke out often against materialism and greed. Give away all you have, he told his followers, for “it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” Feed the hungry, he said, clothe the naked, comfort the afflicted, care for the prisoner -- all things we as a society should be doing a much better job at than we are.

But Jesus wasn’t just about faith-based charity. He was a radical egalitarian. For him, “Love your neighbor” meant everyone, no exceptions. So he ignored dietary rules and ate with outcasts -- tax collectors, lepers, prostitutes, the destitute. He offered his healing touch free to any who asked, and stayed at the home of anyone who invited him in. Jesus was a social and religious subversive who would be rejected by most of the people who today claim we’re a “Christian nation.” He attacked Judaism's purity regulations. He attacked Mediterranean concepts of honor and shame. He attacked the power of wealth. But most of all, Jesus attacked the tendency of every society, and of most religions, to draw boundaries, establish hierarchies, and maintain prejudice and discrimination. Too bad the religion of Jesus isn’t more popular among Christians.

Still, I pray that religion scholar Diana Eck is right when she says, “Step by step, we are beginning to claim and affirm what the framers of the Constitution did not imagine, but nevertheless equipped us to embrace” -- a society whose religious pluralism is seen not as a threat, but as a strength and a cause for celebration. If the colony that began as a narrow and cruel Puritan theocracy can evolve into the first state to affirm full legal marriage for same-gender couples, then there’s hope for us all.

And in that journey toward justice and compassion, we Unitarian Universalists have a role to play. Because we embrace diversity and freedom, because we strive to find ways to disagree with love and respect, and because we know there are many paths to wisdom and truth, we could help open minds and hearts in our wider world. We could. But will we? Will we make our voices heard?

Paradoxically, it often happens that a strength is also a weakness. And one of the things that stands in the way of our being a liberal religious force to be reckoned with is our very commitment to freedom and diversity -- or, more accurately, the way we interpret that commitment. I've heard UUs say that our respect for diversity means we cannot criticize or challenge another's beliefs, for each person has the right to their own religious and ethical opinions. Yes, but that stance may leave us stuck in the morass of cultural relativism. Or, putting it more bluntly, an acquaintance once told me that he could never be a Unitarian Universalist because we're such a "wishy-washy" religion. Ouch. Surely he's wrong. Isn't he?

My critic would probably consider the patron saint of Unitarian Universalism to be the man British author Dorothy Sayers calls St. Lukewarm. Sayers is best known for her detective stories featuring Lord Peter Wimsey, but she also wrote widely on Christian theology and penned a few satirical sketches purporting to be biographies of lesser-known saints. Her portrait of St. Lukewarm comes a little too close for comfort.

*INTERLUDE: THE STORY OF ST. LUKEWARM
(updated just a little from Dorothy Sayers)*

As Sayers imagines him, St. Lukewarm was a magistrate under the Emperor Claudius in the first century. He was so broad-minded that he offered his support to all religious groups, saying, "There is always some truth in everything." This liberal outlook earned him the sobriquet of "The Tolerator."

Sadly for him, St. Lukewarm the Tolerator fell into the hands of a sect of cannibals, for whom -- in his desire to affirm all faiths -- he had earlier erected a sacred cooking stove at public expense. The cannibals set him on to stew, but the water kept going off the boil, and when he was finally served up, his flesh was so tasteless that the Chief Cannibal spat him out.

In the few bland, monochromatic stained glass windows that depict him, St. Lukewarm the Tolerator is pictured holding a loaf of Wonder Bread and standing next to a microwave oven.

BACK TO THE DISCOURSE...

There's a lesson here, folks, and one I hope we can take to heart. As poor St. Lukewarm discovered, all religious ideas are not created equal, and to embrace religious pluralism does not preclude critical thinking. As UU minister Patrick O'Neill so eloquently asks, "Where is it written that being tolerant means being a spiritual wimp?" Living with religious pluralism entails openness and respectful dialogue, but this does not mean we abandon reason, conscience, and common sense.

True, some religious ideas may always be open questions -- whether or how we see God or the sacred; whether consciousness continues in some way after death; what gives meaning and purpose to our lives. About those things we can agree to disagree, and to learn from each other. But the belief that a woman who has been raped should be stoned to death is evil. So is the belief that homosexuality is a sin, that women are inferior, that slavery is okay, that some people -- untouchables in the caste system, for example -- are less than fully human. The belief that creationism should be taught as science is a threat to religious freedom. The belief that the earth is ours to plunder will destroy the planet. The belief that heaven awaits those who kill for their

faith puts every life in peril. The belief that one religion has an exclusive corner on the truth gives carte blanche to injustice, prejudice, and violence.

The list goes on and on, but you get the idea. Most religions have their share of improbable beliefs, but some are more compassionate and open-minded, while others seem to make sacraments out of ignorance and narrowness. Our task is to affirm and promote the compassionate and open-minded whenever and wherever we can. Our Unitarian Universalist tolerance does not mean we are neutral. We are not stuck with St. Lukewarm as our patron saint. We must listen to others with respect and without ridicule, but we can also speak our convictions with passion. We must stay open to new ideas and have the humility to know we could be wrong, but we can also bring our best understandings to the table.

It's vital that we do so, lest we someday find ourselves in a conservative Christian theocracy like the one our Founders sought to avoid. Not all value systems are equally worthy, not all show the same reverence for life or the same concern for love and justice. No religion is perfect, not even ours. But I am convinced in body, mind, and spirit that the world would be a better place if the principles of Unitarian Universalism held sway.

Imagine a world grounded in: The inherent worth and dignity of every person. Justice, equity, and compassion. Acceptance of one another. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning. The rights of conscience and the democratic process. The goal of world community. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence. That is the vision. The stakes are high.

By all means, let us keep looking for the wisdom and inspiration that transcend religious boundaries, for in so doing, we model our conviction that people don't have to agree about theology to live together in awe at the beauty of creation and in gratitude for getting to be part of it. By all means, let us listen to others with respect and compassion and humility. Yet let us also speak the truth of our minds and hearts and experience. Let us dare to challenge religious ideas that don't make sense, or that lead to actions that are unjust, violent, or cruel. And let us stop worrying about whether we're "proselytizing," and dare to set forth our own vision.

Theodore Parker said, and Martin Luther King repeated, that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. I'm reluctant to disagree with such great souls as Parker and King, but I don't think the arc does bend toward justice, not on its own. It falls to each of us to lean with all our might on that moral arc, and to pull it in the direction of justice and freedom, compassion and connection. No one person can do it alone. But together? Ah, now that is another possibility entirely. Let us make our voices heard.