

“ARE POLITICS AND RELIGION GOOD BEDFELLOWS?”

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Sermon

I shared with you a surprising realization a few weeks ago when I did the sermon on Muhammad. The realization was that the wall of separation between church and state—cherished by so many of us—can arguably be traced back to Jesus. As I noted, Jesus talked about a separation between the spiritual realm and the realm of the state. This realization that Jesus is the source of the wall of separation would certainly also be surprising to many Christians on the political right. It seems to me that the aim of many on the Christian right is to erode if not destroy the wall of separation—in the name of Jesus, no less! In attacking the wall of separation, I believe they are attacking the teachings of Jesus.

Baptists way back to colonial times and the early days of the United States better understood Jesus’ teaching regarding religion and the state. With the possible exception of Thomas Jefferson, there has been no more important or influential advocate of the wall of separation than the seventeenth century Baptist preacher Roger Williams. He got himself kicked out of the colony of Massachusetts because he so vigorously opposed state support of the Puritan faith. For centuries Baptists remained in the forefront of defending church/state separation. Only in recent generations has this foundational principle come under challenge within at least the Southern Baptist segment of the Baptist faith.

This teaching of Jesus warrants more exploration. Notably, while Jesus didn’t want religion and the state fused, he did talk a great deal about the need for his society to become more just. For Jesus, the principle that the realms of Caesar and religion are distinct did not mean that religion has nothing to say about issues of justice and morality. He took strong and courageous stands on issues of justice—for example on peace and on economic justice. One could even call his stands counter-cultural (then and now). So while religion and government should not be one and the same, Jesus did believe that religion should have a voice in important issues of justice and morality.

It seems to me that this is a good territory on which to stand. In this area, then, I align myself with the teachings of Jesus. I believe that the wall of separation has everything to do with prohibiting state support of or opposition to specific religious institutions. The state should never support or discourage any specific religion or religious institution (for example, by funneling tax dollars into religious schools).

But religion can and should have a voice in important issues of justice and morality. Slavery comes to mind as perhaps the most powerful such issue in American history. Religion was used on all sides of the question, but nowhere more powerfully

than by the Abolitionists. For many—probably most—Abolitionists, their faith was the primary source of their opposition to slavery. If they had not brought their religious viewpoints to bear on slavery, I’m not sure they would have had the passion and the conviction to maintain the Abolitionist battle through so many years and so many defeats. And if the Abolitionists hadn’t sustained their battle, slavery would have survived far longer in this country.

I find it interesting and affirming that the rules of the Internal Revenue Service today are in synch with this sort of balance. The IRS rules are designed to keep religion out of the business of governing, but they allow for religious organizations to take stands on issues of morality and justice. If a church or its ministerial or lay leaders work for or against a specific candidate in the name of the congregation, they risk losing tax exempt status. But a church or its leaders can take a stand on issues of morality and justice without fear of losing tax exempt status.

In my ministry here I’ve tried to maintain this sort of balance. I have never suggested that you should vote for or against a particular candidate for office. I won’t do so today, or ever. I have criticized people holding public office, and if you look at my sermons I’ve been pretty balanced about this: both Democrats and Republicans have been the subject of criticism. In recent years it’s more frequently been Republicans who have been the focus of my criticism. That’s because they’ve been in power. But I have never urged you to vote against a public official I have criticized, nor shared any conclusion that I would vote against such an official. No public official is perfect or should be immune from criticism. I’m sure if I was a minister back in Lincoln’s day I would have expressed concern about his suspension of habeas corpus—even as I privately knew (I can tell you this) that I’d vote for his re-election.

I am reminded about a story my minister in Grand Rapids tells:

In 1968, I delivered a sermon prior to the presidential election. It was not a partisan plea, since I was not overly impressed with either Richard Nixon or Hubert Humphrey. Instead, I merely recommended, at the conclusion of the sermon, that I hoped everyone would vote for the most intelligent, experienced, and compassionate candidate. So imagine my surprise when a man confronted me in the reception line and angrily shouted, “How dare you use the pulpit to support Hubert Humphrey!”¹

So I will never tell you to vote for or against a particular candidate. But as a minister I am allowed to express opinions about important issues. I have done so frequently and will continue to do so. I almost always make it clear that in doing so I am speaking for myself and not necessarily any of you or the Fellowship as a whole. I try never to give the impression that because I’m the minister you’re supposed to agree with whatever I say. This is part of the reason for having the Congregational Response: it is a potent weekly reminder that each of you is entitled and encouraged to think for yourself.

I believe it is also important for congregations and denominations to be able to speak out on issues. I would not want to see this Fellowship or our UU Association do this constantly, but I do believe on occasion it is important and valid for us to do so.

¹ David O. Rankin, *Dancing in the Empty Spaces* (Boston: Skinner House Publishing, 2001), p. 19.

The issue of marriage equality is one such issue. I am thrilled that after a careful process, lengthy conversation and strict adherence to the democratic process, we voted as a Fellowship to support marriage equality. Given our UU principles and heritage, I believe this is an important stand for us to take, and that our doing so has been right and proper.

I think there's a logical necessity to extend this right to other religious organizations, even those that take a stand opposite from ours. So I have absolutely no problem with the Catholic Church, for example, taking a stand in favor of the amendment on civil union and marriage. Some on my side of the issue have expressed concern and dismay at announcements from the pulpit and in diocese publications and signs on church property, but not me. If it is our right to express our opinion—and I think it is—then it is their right to express theirs. Similarly, I believe Catholic churches have every right to put up crosses as a statement against abortion rights. Now I may not agree personally with how the Catholic Church arrives at such decisions—by hierarchy—but then that's part of why I'm not Catholic. The Catholic Church has every right to run itself as Catholics see fit, just as we have every right to run ourselves as a democracy. They should not push hierarchy on us and we should not push democracy on them. If some Catholics don't like the church's governance, then they can fight for change or leave. And if some UUs don't like the way we govern ourselves, then they can fight for change or leave. This is the nature of free religious associations in the United States.

I am very grateful to this spiritual community for taking such a clear stand on the issue of marriage equality. I believe we have made a difference. We have shown the wider community that there are people of faith and even congregations that oppose the ban. We have raised considerable money for Fair Wisconsin—nearly \$7000! And even more significantly we have provided a lot of volunteers for Fair Wisconsin and for Faith in Action Against the Amendment. We have made a difference.

Of course not everyone in our Fox Cities community has been pleased with our stand. I am glad to say that the sign we have on Calumet St. has not been vandalized even though it has been the target of criticism in the newspaper.

I have received several calls from people who have negative responses to our sign. The most illuminating of these conversations was with a man who was particularly bothered by our voting democratically on moral issues. He challenged our belief that the democratic process is a good means for deciding moral issues. "Isn't there something more absolute?" he asked.

I think this is a great question. It has helped me come to a clearer understanding of moral truths. Here's what I believe: I believe that there actually is such a thing as Moral Truth (with capital letters). These Truths *are* absolute. Here I agree with the caller. But I also believe that none of us human beings have complete and unfettered access to these Truths—including the Pope, including the people who wrote the Bible, including Gandhi, including Jesus, including Jerry Falwell, including the UUA President, including the caller, including you, including me. *None* of us being God and *all* of us being fallible, we are called to do the best we can in our own imperfect ways to discover and interpret these Truths. Because of our fallibility, when we do so, we have found not Truth with a capital "T" but only truth with a small "t." We might be wrong. We never can grab hold of the Absolute Truth. To think we can is idolatry—pretending to be God. And it is hubris—excessive arrogance and unwarranted pride.

In this inherently imperfect quest for Truth, I find that I do better in the company of others than on my own. That's part of why I'm here in this spiritual community. When we come together in our services and small groups to share our understandings of Truth, I believe that each of us is more likely to come closer to Truth than searching on our own. And I believe that working together as a whole congregation in a democratic process generally helps us get still closer to Absolute Truth. Working together is not a guarantee that we're right, but I do think it's helpful.

So the sign on Calumet St. summarizes our communal attempt to arrive at a moral truth (small "t") regarding the issue of marriage equality. It represents our best effort at discerning the Truth. And even though we acknowledge we might be wrong, we're going to stand up and speak the truth as we see it. But following Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., we're going to do so in a way that does not bring violence to those who disagree with us. We must not inflict violence on behalf of something that might be wrong.

So are politics and religion good bedfellows? My answer is a qualified yes. They can be good bedfellows *if* we are intentional about the relationship and attentive to the boundaries that maintain the unique identity of each. I believe political questions cry out for a religious perspective, and that it is appropriate and good for us to bring our religious understanding to these questions. I also believe that it is imperative even as we vigorously articulate our position that we be ever aware that our conclusions may be erroneous. If we become certain about our rightness, then we are guilty of idolatry and hubris. I want to emphasize that this possibility exists not just for those who disagree with us, but also for us. It was interesting that at the end of my conversation with the man who was concerned about our sign, he advised me to keep on searching for the truth. I replied that I advised him to do the same. I could tell that this interchange helped each of us realize that this advice pertains not just to those who disagree with us, but at least as importantly it applies to ourselves.

I want to close this sermon by acknowledging my perception that elections in recent years have become increasingly jarring and unsettling experiences. Perhaps this is because they have felt so consequential. I suspect it is also because the volume and nastiness of the political dialogue has reached such a fever pitch. Over these past weeks, checking my mail, reading the newspaper, watching commercial TV, and answering the phone have all become opportunities to experience quite literally the volume and nastiness. I'm reminded of the Grinch complaining about "the noise, the noise, the noise!" For me it has been important to try to find a quiet place within that is sheltered from the fever pitch of the campaign. In this place I understand that though this is a consequential election, I need to maintain a sense of perspective about it and about my deepest convictions. I remind myself that I may be wrong, that those who disagree with me are not blood enemies, and that regardless of the outcome, the journey to justice is a long and winding and foggy road.

This election will either be a step forward on the road to justice, or a step backwards, or a sideways step. Give me fifty years and I might be able to figure out which one of these is the case. But whatever the direction of this step, the road to justice stretches on ahead of me far into the future. Indeed, it stretches all the way to the far horizon. The only thing I am certain of is that I need to stay on the road to the best of my

ability, today and on Wednesday morning and as long as my journey on this planet continues.

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