

“Liberal Religion”

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Everyone has been discussing a plan to build an Islamic Center in lower Manhattan two blocks from the site of the World Trade Center, or as it has been described “a Mosque at Ground Zero”, even though it is not technically a mosque, nor at technically at Ground Zero. Even though the officials of New York City have approved, politicians from as far away as Georgia and Alaska have urged that it not be built since it would offend the sensibilities of those who lost people on September 11, 2001.

It’s pure political demagoguery, of course, pure political symbolism. It is hard to imagine anyone whose life would be materially affected by whether this thing is built or not. But such is the state of our political discourse.

But the issue demonstrates once again that, in the words of Bob Dylan, “There’s a battle outside and its ragin’” One of the cultural antagonisms in our country and elsewhere in the world has been the

slow centuries long ascension of a liberal approach to religion and the fierce resistance to it that some people are waging. On the one hand, to religious liberals, the idea that a major religious body would be forbidden to build a house of worship somewhere because it might offend others is completely unthinkable. It would be like book-burnings, or censoring the news, or putting people in jail for expressing an unpopular opinion. To others, it makes perfect sense: false religions are not entitled to same freedoms as true ones. There is a church somewhere that has announced a “Burn a Koran Day” and urges churches and families to gather round the bonfire.

We Unitarian Universalists tend to think of our religious viewpoints as being very unusual, held by a very small group of people. Let’s face it, we tend to be both very proud and very chagrined that Unitarian Universalists are a very well-educated, intellectually-oriented and chronically independent and individualistic sort. And you can’t argue with the numbers. There are less than 200,000 of us, scattered around the country, many here in Massachusetts.

But if we think of ourselves as a small and idiosyncratic religion, we miss the larger picture, which is the growing prevalence of liberal

approaches to religion throughout the world. There are all sorts of religious liberals in the world – and I would include most types of Jews in the United States, many mainline Protestants in this country, some Roman Catholics, almost all Western Buddhists, neo-pagans and the vast majority of the religiously unaffiliated and unchurched, whose attitudes toward religion is liberal.

I would like to identify today five essential propositions of liberal religion, which are loosely shared by most forms of liberal religion. And I would like to do by referring to some of the material in our hymnbook.

The Commitment to Religious Pluralism

So, Let's sing a hymn together: It sounds along the ages. It was written originally by a Unitarian: William Channing Gannet , a descendent of Wm Ellery Channing and well-known 19th century preacher, who occupied a center position as the Unitarian movement was divided into an Emersonian Transcendentalist Faction and a more Conventionally Christian Faction.

This hymn carries one of the fundamental themes of liberal religion, which is commitment to religious pluralism, which has been often expressed as believing that all the great religions arise from the same human hunger, a response to the same call. Hence, each religion should be freely practiced by those who respond to it.

How about a similar Reading: #474 – this would have come from the early 20th century preacher John Haynes Holmes, a re-working of the 19th century Bengali religious reformer Keshab Chandra Sen, who was active in a variety of religious forms that sought to create religiously liberal forms of Brahmanism and Hinduism. A person could learn much about religious liberalism just by researching the Indian names that appear as sources of readings in the hymnal.

The legal structure of religious pluralism: the secular state which stands aside from religious conflicts, of course, was developed as part of the Revolution in the United States by the religious liberals of the day, among the Founders. Even that idea is contested today by those who are not religious liberals, and who read US history to be more theocratic in intention than it has turned out to be.

The commitment to religious pluralism is controversial. Most of us have met people who don't believe in it – who believe that only their religion offers a chance at salvation – and yet, most of us have met many people, of all religions and none, who accept the essential moral equivalence of all religions, and non-religions, as a given.

The commitment to Truth Independent of Religious Teaching

Let's read together #644 in the hymnal, which is a portion of the Wisdom of Solomon.

There is a strand in the Bible called the Wisdom tradition and it is associated with Solomon, the Emperor of Israel and Judea, at its height. It created another divine Persona, another way of knowing God – not the warrior god YHWH, but Wisdom or Sophia or Philosophy etc. They never said that Wisdom was separate from God, the writers of the Wisdom tradition did make a significant break within the monotheistic tradition. Through Wisdom, which is a gift from God, it is possible to know and understand the world on its own terms. Wisdom was a personification of the human ability to observe, think, learn and teach.

In that sense, they used wisdom as we would use the terms Reason or Science, while never letting go of the construction that the faculty of Wisdom is from God.

You see what's happening here, and it happened a long time ago, and in the heart of the religious tradition of Judaism: the separation of knowledge into two different sources: there are religious teachings and there is wisdom which is developed by human beings.

It is a principle of Religious Liberalism that there are these multiple forms of knowledge, and yet they are not compartmentalized.

Religious beliefs must be somehow correlated and justified to other forms of truth and knowledge. Read #460. Read #293 and #297.

It does not mean that we reject all religious belief or teaching that is not scientifically provable. We recognize that there are truths that are not literal truths and that the human mind is capable of distinguishing between powerful myth and a scientific fact. It is this distinction that creationists don't make and reject. But make no mistake, when you say that the stories about the resurrection, the virgin birth or the miracles

are powerful stories, as insightful as some of the latest research on brain functioning, you are correlating that knowledge with science.

You would think that principles like religious pluralism and the singularity of reality, despite the multiplicity of perspectives on it, would no longer be controversial, but they are, as reading the daily papers will show.

Secularity: The Personal Life

Let us consider a third principle: the principle of secularity. I think of secularity as a motion of withdrawal. At one point in human history, religion was total – every aspect of every person’s life was under religious judgment and instruction. If you read the book of Leviticus, you see that when it was written, religious authority governed every aspect of one’s life: what you ate, what kind of clothes you wore, how you thought about life’s issues and decisions. But since then, and increasingly so, whole domains of life have been withdrawn from religious authority. Individuals get to decide what they will eat and what kind of clothes they will wear. Individuals and families decide

where they spend their money. Individuals decide about their sexuality and sexual practices, not the church. People have this thing called their personal life, and in their personal life, they are not subject to any external authority, save the law.

Let's read the Free Mind by William Ellery Channing again. Notice what he is doing here. He is saying that religious opinion is a part of one's personal life. It used to be that religious authority governed your personal life, here, this father of liberal religion asserts the opposite – that your choice of religious authority is your personal decision. This is the connection between liberal religion and freedom.

Following along with this theme – Hymn #151.

Is this still controversial? An unsettled question in our culture? A present religious battle? This is at the heart of the question of gay marriage.

The Sacred Is Everywhere

The fourth principle of religious liberalism that I want to point out is that religious liberalism moves the “sacred” out of its own sphere into everything else. At one point in Western history, almost all art was religious art, all writing religious writing, all music, sacred music. Read this call to worship by UU minister Jacob Trap Number #441. The contemplation of the sacred is not the adoration of things connected to religious tradition.

I had the experience recently of sitting in a gallery at the MFA in Boston, surrounded by great paintings of from centuries ago, almost all of them depicting a biblical scene or a saint. I have seen these painting enough to know the stories they were telling, but I became aware that I was not only seeing them in terms of their religious content, but also as pictures of ordinary humans – this one looking like sleek businessman in first class on the airplane, that one a gaunt homeless man, that one an anorexic teen-aged girl. They were not paintings to illustrate doctrine and belief; they were direct pictures of the human condition, and to the extent that they were honest and skillful, they were sacred.

Let’s sing a song: #21.

Pragmatism

And finally, Liberal Religion is the triumph of pragmatism as the judge of religion. Religion is true and sacred to the extent that it results in lives that are ethical, in societies that are just, and human beings that are capable of joy and purpose. Liberal Religion asks, how is this working out for you?

I would like us to read Theodore Parker's wonderful benediction, #683 and hymn #113 and the Griswold Covenant #471. These are typical turns for religious liberalism: turning the words and doctrine of the old religious inside out – as principles alive and active in the world, in the push and pull of society.

I would love to see some social researcher try to poll and find out how many religious liberals there are out there. Don't ask them to which denomination they belong, but ask them practical questions about their attitude toward other religions and the place of religion in their mental worlds and social life.

I would suspect that here in New England, at least 25% are religious liberals, perhaps even more. Of course, most of them do not belong to

any religious institution or are nominal members out of family loyalty and tradition. Some have fully internalized the pragmatic thrust of liberal religion and don't think about religion at all. They just try to be good people, kind and fair, grateful for all their blessings (so to speak) and respectful of all that is mysterious and being knowing that runs like an undercurrent beneath our ordinary lives. They are remorseful when they screw up and grateful for the grace that shows up in their lives. Some of them will even say that they are spiritual but religious. You know.

Not everybody is a religious liberal, but more than we would think, if we think too narrowly about this church. And there are lots of those who are not, and they are struggling hard for their point of view to be dominant. There has been a long running theological dispute between religious liberalism and evangelical fundamentalism that goes back to colonial days, and it continues.

While we respect the right of all people to their own opinions, and wish for everyone the best, we do know which side we are on, and we sincerely believe that the future health and happiness of humanity depends on how this clash of opposing religious viewpoints is resolved.

Let's sing This Little Light of Mine.