

"Is there such a thing as a conservative UU?"

Sermon written by the Rev. Thom Belote, minister of Shawnee Mission UU Church, Overland Park, KS; adapted and delivered Oct. 15, 2006 by Jennifer Forker at Big Sky UU Fellowship in Helena, MT

I. Admission & Self-disclosure

It would be unfair to begin this sermon without a statement of self-disclosure, so that you know where I'm coming from (although I'm guessing a lot of you know exactly where I "come from").

I am unabashedly and unashamedly a liberal. I "wear" several "liberal" stickers on my car, including the two fishies: The Jesus fish swims facing the Darwin fish, which are centered on the back of my mini-van. This is my way of saying to the world: "Meet me in the middle." Or, "I believe in both."

I consider myself to be a vocal liberal, as evidenced in the one sermon that I wrote a few years back and which I delivered here last May that was titled "Rescuing Jesus from Christianity." Only a *serious* liberal would want to save Jesus from Christianity.

I was raised in a liberal-leaning family in a country that is a *liberal*, constitutional democracy. I was a feminist in my teens and remain so. When I started dating Jim, that long-suffering, poor man sitting over there, one of the first questions I asked him, in an attempt to figure him out, and figure out if he were the guy for me, was: "Are you a feminist?" He quickly answered "yes," and passed that test. (There were others. Ask him later about John Denver.)

I think like a liberal. I act like a liberal. I consider myself a liberal.

II. Ground Rules

Now. There are some ground rules I want us to adhere to: First, I want to challenge you to actually *hear* what I say, not what you think I say. Second, listen non-defensively. Do not take what I say personally. OK, at least try not to. The core of my message this morning is about transcending -- going beyond -- the personal. And finally, if you feel challenged (and I hope to challenge both liberals and conservatives today) that is not a bad thing. If I don't challenge you, I'm derelict in my duty. You can take or leave what I say, but it's foolish to dismiss it before you've considered it.

III. Proposition

My central proposition is this: *There is such a thing as a conservative UU, but there is no such thing as a UU who isn't liberal.* I will try to convince you that there is a liberal sense that is essential to this faith.

My secondary proposition is even more challenging: Some of us here like to define our identities with different segments, saying things like, "Religiously, I am a liberal, but

politically, I am a conservative.” Or, “I am a social liberal, but a fiscal conservative.” I propose that such segmented self-hoods tend to produce friction, tension and inconsistency.

This is evident, if you think about it. Suppose that there is an opportunity to further a great social good, but doing so has a significant cost attached. How does someone who is a social liberal but a fiscal conservative decide whether to support this opportunity or not? They would be asked to choose between two masters, two competing ideologies. They would experience tension.

Please note: I have deliberately used the words “inconsistency” and “tension.” I did not say “confusion,” or “insanity,” or “stupidity.” People are, after all, inconsistent. Part of that has to do with psychology. Part of it is history. Part of it is family systems. Part of it is culture. All of these things push and pull upon us. An example of this would be someone who is an absolute atheist but who attends a Lutheran Church every Sunday. For this person, the tension of being religiously inconsistent might be less than the tension of, say, disappointing a parent or spouse by not going.

So, I propose that there is such a thing as a conservative UU, but there is no such thing as a UU who isn’t liberal.

IV. Definitions

And, of course, we should probably define our terms.

Chris Walton is the executive editor of *UU World*, the quarterly magazine of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, and which most of us probably receive at home. He’s also the editor of uuworld.org, the Association’s weekly online magazine.

I’ll tell you a little something about Chris, which I picked up from his blog page, philocrites.com.

This is Chris Walton, describing his own beliefs: “When people want to pigeonhole me theologically or ideologically, I always squirm — but I can sympathize with their interest in knowing where I’m coming from. To make things simple, I sometimes say that my religion is Christianity; my theology is liberal; and my denominational affiliation is Unitarian Universalist.”

Since Chris is a UU who writes on subjects like this one, we’ll use his definitions.

Chris writes that there are several, different kinds of conservatism, or rather, kinds of conservatism rooted in different types of ideology. Among these are kinds of conservatism that are clearly incompatible with Unitarian Universalism. For example, you can’t really be a UU and a theocratic conservative. Theocratic Conservatives – like Falwell or James Dobson – believe that God has given clear and absolute instructions for

living and that the entirety of government and society (including the private lives of individuals) ought to be brought in line with these God-given instructions.

Another kind of conservatism Chris mentions is Aristocratic Conservatism. This type of conservative believes that there is a certain group of people – perhaps set apart by birth, race or class – who have an inherent right and obligation to rule. This, too, is clearly incompatible with the liberal theology of Unitarian Universalism.

We might ask those who identify as conservative, what they are conserving. UUs who identify as conservatives certainly would not say that they are conserving the infallible commandments of the one true God. UU conservatives certainly would not say that they are conserving the rights of the naturally superior to rule over the naturally inferior. I suspect that most UUs who identify as conservative would say that they are interested in conserving their freedoms, their “life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness,” their family traditions, their American Way of Life.

And, if that is what you are most interested in conserving, and if you consider yourself a conservative in this vein, *then I am sorry to tell you that those are liberal ideas. Which would make you a conservative liberal.* (And it’s really too bad that Elwood isn’t here with us today, isn’t it? Because he’d have something to say about today’s sermon, good or bad. But Elwood, an espoused “conservative,” moved to Billings, which is our loss.)

We live in a liberal constitutional democracy. We broke away from the monarchy because of liberal ideas about authority and representation. Do you believe in human rights? That’s a liberal idea. Do you believe in the inalienable rights of individuals to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness? Those are liberal concepts. I mean liberal in its broadest sense.

To quote our friend Chris Walton, of the *UU World* magazine, directly, “*If you embrace the idea that individuals can legitimately question and challenge the authority of inherited privilege or inherited submission; if you believe that in political and religious matters people have the moral right and should have the political freedom to reject established doctrines and organize around new ones; if you root the legitimacy of institutions not in their God-given, timeless, eternal Truths but in their responsiveness to evolving human needs; well, if you tend in those directions, you're a liberal whether you want the label or not.*”

Another definition of liberalism is supplied by political scientist Peter Steinberger. He suggests that the basic core of liberalism is this: Holding the belief that luck plays some role in the lives and fortunes of human beings, and insisting that we have a common responsibility to do something to lessen the harm caused by bad luck.

V. History

Now back to Chris Walton: “*The founders of this country were liberals, but there was a diversity within that liberalism, a diversity that extended from populism (think Thomas Jefferson) to what we might call conservative liberalism. Indeed, most of our religious*

forebears in the late 1700's and early 1800's actually fell on this more conservative side of liberalism. They were the Federalists and Whigs, not the Jeffersonian Democrats, and they advanced a system of checks and balances, an independent judiciary, constitutional protections, and limits of presidential power. They worried about what would happen if the population was unconstrained, and so instituted a form of government designed to protect us from ourselves as well as from the people we would elect. They were conservative liberals.

VI. The Mystery of the Big Tent

In looking at the current political landscape, though, I marvel at and am deeply baffled by the Big Tent that current-day conservatism has managed to erect. How is it that conservative liberals (which we may call “moderates” or “secular Republicans”) manage to share a party with extremist zealots like James Dobson? How do libertarians co-exist with fundamentalists who want to legislate personal morality and intrude on private conduct?

Why do true fiscal conservatives stand for an administration that assumes tremendous debt and doles out enormous amounts of corporate welfare? How do isolationists reconcile with pre-emptive warring, nation-building neo-conservatives?

Books by the likes of George Lakoff and Thomas Frank can be read as attempts to hypothesize what holds all these various and seemingly incompatible factions together. From a position of ideological consistency, it seems like such a house of cards. Why hasn't the Republican Party gone Enron? There may indeed be good answers to these questions, but phrased this way, it remains a mystery to me.

VII. Beyond Identities and Toward Ends

I'd like to suggest to you that the identities of “Liberal” and “Conservative” are words that describe an approach to living in the situation in which we find ourselves. Being liberal or being conservative are strategies – strategies for living in the world as it presents itself to us. But just naming those approaches, those strategies, is of limited use. Because the much more interesting question is, “What does the world you envision as it might someday be look like?” What are the ends? First ask this question... and then begin to flesh out what that means to you and your family, what it means to your neighbor, what it means to the person in some other place on the globe. Name the ends and the ramifications of those ends. And then work back.

What is necessary to satisfy those ends? And then finally, what is necessary for you to do to move the world closer to that?

I would like to imagine that all Unitarian Universalists share a fairly similar idea of those ends. Our identities may differ, and occasionally bump up against one another, but our ends look alike, or they're at least compatible, inclusive of one another. That is a faith statement. I believe that conservative liberals share the same ends that liberal liberals do. I think, to suggest an analogy, that we may be reading the map and disagreeing on the best route, but the destination is the same. I do not think that many other types of

conservatives agree with our ends. They imagine a different destination. Some of those ends are world domination, world conversion, world monopoly – forcibly if necessary ... violently if necessary.

Let me spell this out for you. I think I can safely say that, in this church, we all, if asked to choose between the two, would prefer a world that is peaceful as opposed to a world that is strafed with violence. We would prefer a world where people are basically free as opposed to a world that denies people their human rights and the rights of conscience. We would prefer a world where none go hungry, or live in unsanitary conditions, as opposed to a world where the haves neglect the have-nots. And we prefer a world where diversity exists – diversity in our lives – as opposed to a world in which we fear those who are different and cast out those unlike ourselves. Can you be a conservative UU? I would answer by saying, “Sure, you can be a conservative liberal. But you’re still a liberal.”

VIII. Conclusion: The role of the Liberal Church

I want to end by offering a brief meditation on the role of the liberal church for the individual and society. I have taken on a challenging topic this morning, a topic that may be charged for some of you. I have tried to do this in a responsible way, not by exploiting the tension with cheap jokes or double-talk, but by taking the topic seriously – crafting an argument, defining my terms, and hopefully stretching our thinking a little bit. But the responsible way is not to avoid the topic. The responsible way is not to give it a trite, conventional treatment, nor is it to be nothing to nobody by trying to be everything to everybody.

Some will disagree about the role of the liberal church. Some will say that the role of the liberal church is to be a safe, neutral space where you (whoever you are and as you are) can come get inside your nest and never be exposed to any idea that challenges or offends or stretches you. That is not a church, certainly not a liberal one. The role of the liberal church is to deepen your understanding of self and the world (theologically and intellectually), and to be a place of engagement and dialogue in the truest sense of the term – a context in which transformation takes place.

Our role in society is to be equally engaged and transformational, not meek and removed. It is to clearly and unambiguously call our nation and world back to those great and holy ends we envision for this world. To declare them courageously and to share the theological basis for them. And it’s our role as a liberal church to unmask and challenge those forces in our country and world that advocate demonic ends, and scheme demonic means for reaching those ends. Our identities ought not distract us from the work of furthering our shared life-giving vision of the world as it *might* be. The risk that it might not be as such should be enough to disarm all inferior disagreement.

www.philocrites.com: Commentary by [Chris Walton](#) on Unitarian Universalism, liberal Christianity, American religion, and liberal culture.

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