



THE *REAL* SOURCE OF HUMAN GOOD

© 2004 John Burciaga

This is not an unimportant subject. Religion is important at any time and place in history and, at times is quite volatile. Religion and politics both are powerful but they have different kinds of power, and it always has behooved politics to handle religion with care.

Jefferson and others in early America knew this only too well: the electoral campaign that brought him to the presidency was not without his being targeted for defeat by the pulpits of his day that called him an atheist and infidel, and warned that he would have the militia to take Bibles from American homes. His and Madison's recognition of religion's volatility gave rise to what we still call the "wall" of separation between church and state. Another ingenious solution by our founding parents was to prevent an "establishment" of religion by making it impossible, *hopefully*, for any one religion to be on the back of any other.

Now that the elections are over, this will be what I call a *thinking cap* sermon for reflection, information and the lessons we may take from them. The outcome of the recent election includes the emergence of religion as a more visible and *causal* part of American life. Before, its visibility was on the personal level but now it has begun significantly to *influence* other spheres of our lives. I regret that much of it, while given to large numbers, institutional wealth and the use of media, reflects unscientific notions and insular social views rather than inclusive ones. What we have known in the past of this kind of religion will become louder and more insistent.

GOOD AND BAD RELIGION

I still am one who believes that *knowledge is power*. It may not be as sexy and attention-getting as claims of ultimate truth and of absolute knowledge of "God," but it prevails in the long run. I believe also that we should avoid thinking that numbers mean something important or that those who are most adamant in their convictions surely must be right. I would like us to take a *long view* and remember that a people's assumptions, along with their general fortunes, have a way of reversing in rapidly changing times—although it is precisely both change and its rapidity that have made possible the kind of religion that may be dangerous today. A fine article by John Shelby Spong, retired Episcopal Bishop of Newark, NJ remarked correctly that religion originates as a defense against fear, and nothing more creates fear than change.

It is human to be resistant to change, but it is only through change that we grow. Growth, in turn, creates conflict but we need not be fearful of conflict if we know how to handle it. That does not mean we should not be assertive with our own views, or hesitant to know and point out the differences.

Here are some important things to keep our eyes on for the next several years. One is that *religion, in and of itself, tends merely to make good people better, and bad people worse*. Many of the errors of history about which we complain so much are the result of what happens when religion goes bad, or falls into the hands of bad people. Especially is this true when religion

seeks to ally itself with wealth, power, or political parties. The Spanish *conquistadors* were notable for their allegiance both to God and Gold, and the latter offered much more inspiration and made them so adventurous and courageous. At last, it also gave their God a bad name, as such alliances always have done down through time.

A WORD AGAINST GOD

Another comes from the Danish theologian, Kierkegaard, who cautioned that *the first word about God ought always to be a word against God*. This warning was more than clever; it keeps people honest and discourages the temptation that anything said about “God” must be true. It is not true that those who say words against God merely are atheists of a pernicious sort, opposed to society and given to anarchy. To begin with what clearly is wrong with religion, and to acknowledge the human tendency to err, especially when it comes to assertions about religion, is the healthiest of all starting points. Perhaps we all have had the experience of someone who has condemned us for our beliefs because ours differs from theirs. That this is arrogant should be clear. Certainly UUs should begin all statements of personal faith with, “*We could be wrong but...this is how I or we feel...*”

BEHAVIOR AND BELIEF

Then, if we are to call ourselves religious to any degree, we must be careful *what we are thinking and doing in the name of God and religion*. That, as much as anything, should be what religion is about. Otherwise God and religion are the excuse for endless mischief and for the belief that some people are better than others; and once a valuation of inferiority is put on others, in time we may feel justified in doing anything we wish to them. For these reasons I take some pride that, as a religious movement, Unitarian Universalism does indulge *questions*, not just assertions, about god and faith.

Aside from self-scrutiny we must have a positive agenda. One of the reasons I parted company with my previous ministry and its faith was that I no longer had confidence that belief was the engine of the religious life. By belief I mean attachments to certain dogmas in the expectation that they always will issue in a good life and good actions. It became more important to me to be ethical and moral, meaning that I have to wake up every day ready to live my values to the fullest. And to some degree it leaves you on your own little island of self-responsibility where you have no one other than yourself to blame. It is not necessary to be judged by “God”—too many religious people pay precious little attention when they are; we are as well judged by our own standards if indeed we take them seriously and are faithful to them. After all, we do not suffer *for* our sins but *because* of them.

The argument whether belief or behavior is the essence of religion is quite old. Even Christian faith has been divided over it: the biblical book of James made a strong case for the importance of deeds, saying that, without them, faith is dead. Luther strongly disagreed and said that someday he would use the book of James to light his stove. This was the same Luther who had no confidence in reason, either, and urged believers, as he put it, “to kill reason and pull its

fangs”—a banal idea if ever there was one. I am proud that UUs generally seem to believe that deeds, not beliefs, best honor religion.

“RIGHT THINKING”

For one thing, belief does not necessarily make for right action. A good example was found in the recent CNN televised special on religion: we saw a young girl who could cite chapter and verse of the bible with emphasis on those who are “saved” or “lost,” depending on their personal religious beliefs. Her parents feel they have “instilled” right thinking in her but it has resulted in ideas that are rote; it were better that she be encouraged to think critically, ask questions and arrive at sincere convictions. How is the world improved by those who are articulate but prejudiced?

A personal incident remains in my mind. While a minister in Florida, I was interviewed by a Reform rabbi on public television and during our conversation, which was nothing extreme or dramatic, we merely asserted our own progressive views with no mention of other people’s beliefs. A teenaged trainee from a local high school did not like either his Judaism or my religious liberalism, and walked onto the set to interrupt us with a scathing denunciation of our opinions.

A BIBLE ABOUT JUSTICE

The rabbi and I looked at each other and knew it would be best to let her have her say without quarrel. As it was a taped interview, when she finished we were able to resume taping and complete the program. Now, all of you anywhere near my age know that in our teen years, it would have been unthinkable to do such a thing; for one, adults were authority figures. Today, many teenagers seem to know when it is and isn’t appropriate to take issue with something with which they disagree or dislike. But in some religious cultures in America apparently their young are prepared to hold strict beliefs and to socially assault anyone who differs, regardless of circumstances. I have to tell you that I have since seen that behavior repeated, and in the current climate, we can expect it to continue to recur.

Then there is the place and importance of the Bible in the modern world. I am one who feels we must reclaim it as an important document of Western civilization, yet remind the world it is not a code-book for personal salvation but one that speaks at much greater length about social justice. The reason this is missed in modern America is because the kind of religion we most hear from repeats a very narrow slice of the Bible to the neglect of its broader and greater testimony. Now that we have been how easy it is for a senator of twenty years’ experience to have changes of heart and mind during his political career, one can imagine how this is very problematical for a diverse document like the Bible, which was written over a thousand years. Hence we can say that the Bible is the quintessential *flip-flopper*, as its perspective matured over the generations of its compilation. We do not blame it for its self-contradictions, but acknowledge them as the vagaries of human imperfection, since mere mortals, not God, were its authors.

...AND SPEAKING OF GOD

Something else we can expect, in the future, is to be subjected to religious litmus tests—in social circles as much as in religious ones—regarding where we stand on matters of God and the person of Jesus. It is heresy in our part of the world even to insinuate that God is not the most important part of religion. In the current climate it will be tempting for some to feel that they can set all the rules and ignore much of history. But other notions have been held, and with great profit. The Buddha insisted that the real issue in life and for religion was not God but human suffering, and launched his great religious ethic known as the Noble Eight-Fold Path which has well-served Eastern civilization for centuries. If an ethic based on belief in God ever is to serve the present era it must be freed from past errors, not to mention from the human ego. More than 75 years after the notorious “Monkey Trial” over the teaching of evolution in the public schools, the god of the American airwaves again is becoming as petulant, insular and whimsical as an ancient Greek deity. That is not progress, but a modern tragedy.

PROVING GOD

Early theistic religion believed not in a god but *gods*. Even in the book of Genesis, which is comprised of more than one belief tradition, one of the words for God is a *plural*. To the ancient mind, the world was alive with gods, not to mention with demons. And what people even today consider as evidence or proofs for “God” were used in early times as proofs for the existence of *gods*. Philosophers, even those before the time of Plato, observed that belief in gods was found in every locale, but in no locale did *everyone* believe in them. When Plato tried to establish absolute proof for their existence, he took the two most popular ideas about gods and declared them untenable: one was the notion that gods must exist because most people believe in them; the other, that the world’s design presupposed a creator or maker.

Clearly, these same “proofs” are held yet today, though they were considered wrong even far back in human history. Plato said that even were *everyone* to believe in the gods, that in itself is not proof of their existence; and that the world presupposes a maker or creator is only a tempting figment of the human imagination. John Locke later said that once you say that “God” made the world, you can’t stop there but must ask *who made “God.”* Plato went on to try to prove the existence of gods by an argument from Motion—one which people found not a little dry, hard to understand and have ignored ever since.

GOD, MANY GODS, AND NO GOD

When it comes to religion, it safely may be said that a third of the world believes in one god, another third believes in more than one, and yet another third believe in none. This is shocking to people in our part of the world, but is nonetheless true. Judaism, Christianity and Islam may be monotheisms, but Hinduism, e.g., appears to have a multiplicity of gods—although in truth those popularly held are actually different *manifestations* of the one true spiritual being,

which is Brahman. But original Buddhism, Zen, and Jainism; the religion of the Tao de Ching and of the Upanishads, all are godless religious ethics, whose leaders were among the most remarkable people in history. So it is but a prejudice of the Western world that religion necessarily is about a god or gods.

So where does inspiration come from? What is the *source of human good*? It is easy enough for me to say that there may be more than one, even many. In so doing I need not feel threatened that others may disagree with what is good for me. Nor is it troubling that others may hold a faith unlike mine but appears to help them to be exceptionally good people. Something we may have in common however is the value we put on being *in community*, that is, sharing values in common with others. That is the strength of what we call a “congregation,” such as this one.

THE REAL SOURCE OF HUMAN GOOD

But what power does a congregation like this have if its chief value is not god or gods? One of the high points in our faith was that an empirical philosopher at the University of Chicago in its great humanist days, by the name of Henry Nelson Wieman, became Unitarian Universalist and wrote a book titled, *The Source of Human Good*. Wieman said that “God” for many people is but one name we may give to the *power of being in community* and focused together on ultimate human values. He asserted that this can be felt by any group of people, as long as its concerns are not self-centered or trivial.

I believe that is what we feel when we are so engaged in this very congregation. We *know* there is a “power” in our being here and in being together. It is here when we *ask questions* about god and truth, and not merely make assertions about them. It is here when we honestly must say *we don't know*, in response to questions about life and truth. It is here even more powerfully when we serve others, including each other. It is, simply put, the *real* “source of human good.”

Whatever “god” is, or whatever name we give to what is deeply felt but at last elusive and indefinable, may be experienced in being together, in examining the wisdom of the world in all its diversity, and in service to each other and to all humanity.

America has lost some ground in its religious maturity. But error cannot and will not last. Truth is ever pushing its way into life like a weed through cracks in concrete. We do not need made-up stories that strain either our credulity or that of others. We do not even need the whole truth, for it is our fate never to know it. But we must never cease to seek the truth, for the journey truly is the destination.

* * *