

Unitarian Universalist Church of Columbia, Missouri

Church and State – Is the "Wall of Separation" Crumbling?

Homily – July 3, 2011 – by Steve Scott

Tomorrow, July 4th, we commemorate adoption of the Declaration of Independence, with its stirring declaration of unalienable human rights – life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Although not specifically enumerated, religious freedom was included in the concept of liberty, and I'd like to start this morning by asking you to join me in a brief thought experiment to better appreciate what religious freedom means to us.

As Unitarian Universalists, our first principle is the inherent worth and dignity of every person. But imagine for a moment that our government has become a theocracy with state-mandated religious beliefs that conflict with our principles. Imagine further that among these mandated beliefs are that humankind is inherently sinful, that only a select few will be "saved," that naturally superior men should dominate inherently inferior women, and that some people, including adulterers, gays and lesbians, are beyond redemption and deserve to be severely punished or even executed. Think about how that would make you feel.

Now, imagine this theocracy makes it a criminal offense – heresy – to promote contrary beliefs, and that heresy is punishable by imprisonment or even death. Thus, it becomes dangerous for you to affirm your Unitarian Universalist principles openly, and you can only do so privately, always fearing that someone will report you to the authorities. How would that make you feel?

OK. Relax. We're done with our thought experiment, and I know it may seem far-fetched – because in the U.S. our concept of liberty includes religious freedom, as our founders established when they adopted the Constitution and Bill of Rights. Together, those founding documents erected what Thomas Jefferson called a "wall of separation between church and state."

But over the ensuing 200+ years, that wall has been repeatedly breached, to the point we must worry whether it is in danger of crumbling altogether and plunging us into the nightmare scenario of our thought experiment.

As Unitarian Universalists, you almost certainly came here this morning believing in separation of church and state. I hope that after hearing this homily, you will leave strengthened in that belief and resolved to do whatever you can to preserve church-state separation, the foundation of our religious freedom – one of the key liberties we celebrate tomorrow.

Some historical perspective may help steel our resolve. In the past year, after being guilty by their unread presence for 40 years, I have begun slowly working my way through Will and Ariel Durant's multi-volume "Story of Civilization." What I find striking about ancient civilizations is the extent to which government and religion were intertwined – and in many cases indistinguishable. Clearly many ancient rulers assumed the mantle of religious authority to bolster their political power – indeed, many of them claimed to be gods and demanded worship from their subjects. Theocracy is what we call such mixtures of church and state.

In Western history, with the rise of the Roman Christian church, the difference between church and state became more distinct, but government and church continued to be intermingled. Most city-states and nation-states recognized a particular church – most often the Catholic – as the official religion and sanctioned harsh punishment for heresy. For its part, the church generally supported the political authority of the city or state and acknowledged the "divine right of kings."

The breakdown of this uneasy alliance between church and state began with the Protestant Reformation and continued with the later Enlightenment, a period when reason and growing scientific knowledge challenged the very foundations of religion.

Along the tangled path to separation of church and state, many individuals and groups were persecuted, tortured and executed for alleged heresy. We've all read and heard about the horrors of the various inquisitions – particularly the Spanish Inquisition. Indeed, as Unitarian Universalists, we claim our own martyr, Michael Servetus, who was burned at the stake along with his books in Geneva in 1553 at John Calvin's behest for asserting that the doctrine of the Trinity had no basis in the New Testament.

In the late 1600s when colonists began arriving in America in large numbers, many came so they could practice their religions unmolested by European church-state regimes. However, for the most part, they followed the European pattern and established theocratic systems here which punished or banned religious dissenters. But New World conditions – with abundant land where religious dissenters could move and practice their faiths without molestation – promoted religious diversity. The 1700s saw the rise of numerous other sects, notably the Baptists and Methodists, whose adherents eventually grew so numerous that it became impossible for the established churches to maintain control.

Looking back, we can identify two main factors leading to the Founding Fathers' decision to write a Constitution which mentioned neither God nor Christianity. One factor was that many of these men believed that religious liberty was best secured by separating the religious and secular realms. The second factor was that even the devoutly Christian among the founders were acutely aware of the growing numbers and political clout of dissenting religious groups who wanted to be left alone by government and who might well block ratification of the Constitution if it appeared to sanction church-state entanglement.

As a result, the original Constitution intentionally contained only one reference to religion in Article 6, which declares that "No religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States."

It is not much recalled today that the "Godless" nature of the Constitution infuriated many Christians and led them to oppose ratification. This opposition, mostly from the established churches, was the strongest challenge to ratification. On the other hand, numerically large non-establishment religious groups, including the Baptists and Methodists, strongly favored ratification.

After the Constitution was ratified, provision for religious liberty was extended by the adoption of the First Amendment, which declares that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...."

But while the new national government was avowedly non-religious, some powerful states still had state-sanctioned churches as late as the 1830s. This fact led to struggles by early Presidents to define the boundaries between church and state. On several occasions, under pressure from establishment churches in New England, the first two Presidents, George Washington and John Adams, issued calls for national prayer days.

In contrast, the third President, Thomas Jefferson, did the most to build the wall between church and state. In the hotly contested election of 1800, the deist Jefferson emerged victorious over John Adams even though Jefferson was savagely attacked by establishment churches as an infidel. Ironically, Jefferson was strongly supported by Baptists and Methodists, who, despite Jefferson's religious beliefs, accurately perceived him as more supportive of their religious liberties.

While Jefferson is best remembered for penning the seven words "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" in the Declaration of Independence, his 1802 letter to Baptists in Danbury, Connecticut remains the single most influential presidential document in the history of church-state relations. In that letter, he stated that the First Amendment built "a wall of separation between church and state," a phrase that has continued to resonate through our history.

Unlike the first two Presidents, Jefferson never declared a national prayer day, and he won reelection in 1804 by a landslide.

The tenure of the fifth President, James Monroe, marked the beginning of a long period of détente between church and state because the state-established churches began to lose their political franchises. Monroe was able to adopt a policy of keeping God out of the White House while acknowledging the role that churches could play in stabilizing society and promoting reforms. This model has held sway for much of our subsequent history.

Nevertheless, during the 1800s and 1900s, religious groups made various attempts to inject religious beliefs into government – mostly without success. However, there were some notable breaches in Jefferson's wall of separation. In 1863, God was acknowledged on U.S. currency. Also, there was a continuing controversy through the 1800s and early 1900s over Sunday delivery of mail, and religious groups who contended Sunday mail delivery blasphemed the Sabbath finally had their way when Sunday delivery ceased in 1912. And, of course, the words "under God" were added to the Pledge of Allegiance in 1954 in reaction to the perceived threat of "Godless Communism."

In recent years, however, the trickle of efforts to inject religion into government has become a flood, as documented in Michelle Goldberg's 2006 book *Kingdom Coming – The Rise of Christian Nationalism*.

(As an aside, at my urging, we have several copies of that book available at our book table, and Fran Reynolds has agreed to make a summertime exception and unlock the book cabinet if anyone wants to acquire the book.)

In the book, Goldberg points out that many modern fundamentalist Christian leaders, though nominally of different denominations, have been shaped by dominion theology. This theology asserts that to prepare for the second coming of Christ, "Godly" men have the responsibility to take over every aspect of society. In other words, these proponents of Christian dominionism – also called Christian nationalism – advocate reshaping U.S. government at all levels as a theocracy.

For example, George Grant, then executive director of D. James Kennedy's Coral Ridge Ministries, wrote the following in a book widely read in fundamentalist circles: "Christians have an obligation, a mandate, a commission, a holy responsibility to reclaim the land for Jesus Christ – to have dominion in civil structures, just as in every other aspect of life and godliness. But it is dominion we are after. Not just a voice. It is dominion we are after. Not just influence. It is dominion we are after. Not just equal time. It is dominion we are after. World conquest. That's what Christ has commissioned us to accomplish. We must win the world with the power of the Gospel. And we must never settle for anything less. Thus, Christian politics has as its primary intent the conquest of the land – of men, families, institutions, bureaucracies, courts, and governments for the Kingdom of Christ."

Emboldened by the presence of one of their own, George W. Bush, in the White House for eight years, many leading representatives of the religious right have become more open about their theocratic ambitions in recent years. Indeed, during the Bush years, it seemed that the

church-state wall was in danger of crumbling altogether. Bush funneled billions of dollars of taxpayer money to fundamentalist organizations through his "faith-based initiatives."

Influential U.S. Senators Jim Imhofe, Tom Coburn, Jim DeMint, David Vitter, Larry Craig, Bill Frist, John Cornyn, and Sam Brownback were either fundamentalists or fellow travelers eager to please fundamentalist groups. The situation in the House of Representatives was, if anything, even worse.

And the Supreme Court had the fundamentalist trio of Roberts, Scalia, and Alito, aided and abetted by Thomas and occasionally Kennedy, a situation that persists today.

Recent years also have seen the explosive growth of so-called "megachurches." In 1970 there were 10, but now there are more than 900 around the country. Many of these churches have become self-contained communities, complete with coffee shops, gyms, bookstores, and boutiques. The bookstores sell Christian home-schooling materials so fundamentalists can avoid sending their children to public schools, those dens of iniquity which teach evolution and inculcate secular humanism. We have several such fundamentalist congregations in our own community.

Besides electing fundamentalists to Congress, the religious right also has had great success electing state governors, legislators and lower-level officials and passing state propositions banning gay marriages and civil unions.

However, fundamentalists also have had some setbacks, including the loss of true believers Rick Santorum and Tom DeLay from Congress, the defeat of a highly restrictive anti-abortion initiative by South Dakota voters in 2006, and, of course, the election of President Barack Obama in 2008. On a disheartening note, President Obama has continued the faith-based initiative, although at a reduced level.

Almost every day, if you're looking, you can find examples of efforts to entangle religion and government.

Here in Missouri, our General Assembly recently approved putting a state constitutional amendment to the voters in 2012 which purports to expand the right to pray in public places, even though our state constitution already says people have the right to worship God according to their own consciences. The amendment passed the Senate 34-0 in May and cleared the House 126-30 in March.

We also see this activity at the local level, most often in school board elections. For example, Sara Dickson, a candidate in the April Columbia School Board election, ran as an avowed Christian conservative and quietly supported teaching creationism in the public schools. And we have a senior faculty member at the MU School of Law, Carl Esbeck, who is prominent in national fundamentalist legal circles.

Even our own Unitarian history is not entirely free from advocacy of church-state entanglement. In New England the Unitarian churches grew out of the older Congregational Churches founded by the Puritans. As such they were part of the state-supported establishment church and opposed disestablishment. Perhaps fittingly, it was a famous Universalist, Thomas Whittemore, who led the legislative initiative in Massachusetts in 1833 which resulted in ending state support to the Congregational and Unitarian churches.

As you might expect, the modern UU position strongly supports church-state separation. The Unitarian Universalist Association's current policy statement says the UUA has long expressed its support of separation of church and state in relation to public education, partisan politics, free exercise and religious pluralism. Therefore the UUA works to ensure that federal

dollars are not used to fund religious discrimination and seeks to combat government endorsement of religious beliefs and to ensure freedom of religious expression.

So, as we prepare to celebrate our country's liberties tomorrow, let us consider what we can do to help plug holes in Jefferson's "wall of separation." Of course, we can support the UUA's continuing efforts to speak out and take action against such breaches. We can join and support Americans United for Separation of Church and State. We can publicly affirm whenever and wherever necessary and appropriate that religious liberty is best protected by a government that does not favor any particular religion.

And we can speak out against and expose local efforts to inject religion into governmental affairs. For example, during the recent local school board election, I did just that when I made a point of asking at a candidate forum whether any of the candidates favored teaching intelligent design or creationism in the public schools, thereby informing the general public for the first time that Sara Dickson advocated creationism. I am happy to note that the voters soundly rejected her candidacy.

Above all, we must not be complacent. While I have noted that the religious right has had some setbacks, we must remember that fundamentalists are not dismayed by temporary defeats. How could they be dismayed when they believe God is on their side? They are motivated, they are organized, they are well-funded, and they are morally certain the future is theirs. They are not going away, and we ignore them at our peril.

Quoting Thomas Jefferson again, "The price of freedom is eternal vigilance."