

**The 2026 Schiffman Lecture in Religious Studies**  
**“Progressive Faith and the Public Square”**

*Delivered by the Rev. Dr. Molly Housh Gordon*

*At Columbia College*

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Before we begin, as we hear the messages of war around us intensify, I invite you to join me in the spirit of prayer or presence for peace, and if you know the tune Finlandia and the words “This is My Song” perhaps you would like to join me in song.

*This is my song, Oh God of all the nations,  
A song of peace for lands afar and mine.  
This is my home, the country where my heart is;  
Here are my hopes, my dreams, my sacred shrine.  
But other hearts in other lands are beating,  
With hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.*

*My country's skies are bluer than the ocean,  
And sunlight beams on cloverleaf and pine.  
But other lands have sunlight too and clover,  
And skies are everywhere as blue as mine.  
Oh hear my song, oh God of all the nations,  
A song of peace for their land and for mine.*

In the same moment that we are hearing of war and threats of annihilation, we are also receiving dispatches from the space ship Integrity, looking back at us from beyond the moon, reminding us of the beauty of our earth.... One planet, one humanity, fragile, interconnected,

and so beautiful. We pray for the preservation of all that life, and all that beauty. May it be so.

Good morning.

As Dr. Price so kindly introduced, I am the Rev. Dr. Molly Housh Gordon, and I serve as minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church here in Columbia. I am originally from Tulsa, Oklahoma where I grew up at All Souls Unitarian Church, a congregation that was, in my growing up, and still is today, active as a public witness to progressive religious values amid a broader fundamentalist culture.

From that upbringing I learned deep lessons about the identity *and* the necessity of the progressive church. I continued that learning formally through study in the religion and philosophy department at Hendrix College, in the Masters of Divinity program at Harvard Divinity School with a focus on the liberal theological tradition, and with a cohort of doctoral students studying Public Theology at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.

Growing up a progressive person of faith in Tulsa, Oklahoma impressed upon me the high stakes of creating progressive spiritual community in places of fundamentalist dominant culture. There was and is a deep vitality in a congregation that is clear about the stakes of its message.

In this particular moment the stakes are as high as they've ever been.

We are feeling that and naming it at the Unitarian Universalist congregation I serve, and (though we don't have pews) our chairs are overflowing with people longing for solidarity, deeper meaning and

connection amid a time and culture that seeks to destroy all of those things.

But I hear from our newcomers that they are a little shy when telling friends and family they've found this place that renews their hope... this place where they belong to the dream of a world with more thriving. They find themselves telling their friends with chagrin, a little disbelief... I found this church. And then immediately adding: don't worry, not *that* kind of church. Or, No, it's not *really* religion. Or, hey, it's definitely not what you're thinking when I use the word faith.

And I understand the embarrassment. Faith has gotten a bad rap lately.

In the current public narrative in the United States, perpetuated by those in greatest power, faith is most often being used to describe a very particular thread of fundamentalist Christianity called Christian Nationalism. It is a thread deeply aligned with ideas of racial purity, so it is most accurate to call it White Christian Nationalism.

White Christian Nationalists believe that a single faith, namely their particular interpretation of Christianity, should not only take over the public square, but should in fact form the government.

We are being governed, currently, by those steeped in and committed to this White Christian Nationalist Ideology.

They have said so explicitly, and we see their worldview being enacted at every level of government, from the White House and Congress to the Missouri state house... from a war in Iran that some generals have been describing as a way to bring about the return of Christ, to the genocidal

targeting of those perceived to most threaten race and gender uniformity, to the punitive carceral structures controlling and punishing human bodies, including children, and beyond.

White Christian Nationalism is in the driver's seat for American authoritarian rule, and it is helpful, therefore, to understand something of their theological framework - their conception of faith.

White Christian Nationalism rests on and relies upon a single, consolidated source of all authority understood as an all powerful white male god. In Christian Nationalist world view, God's authoritarian power is needed to govern humans, because we are inherently fallen and sinful. In this deeply patriarchal tradition, white men are least fallen and must therefore lead others in strict hierarchical structure.

Within this hierarchy, most humans are found untrustworthy and must therefore be controlled. Since change and difference are a threat to a single unchanging authority, White Christian Nationalism seeks to manage or eliminate difference and change.

Amid the unpredictable vagaries of life and death on earth, White Christian Nationalism is driven by a core need for certainty, and this need yields a deep investment in bringing about an eschaton, or an end to history, because an end to history is the only way permanent certainty may be achieved.

The ascent of White Christian Nationalism into possession of near authoritarian power over a large and diverse nation has become an existential threat to Christianity, which is a vastly varied tradition, and most of which is NOT aligned with authoritarianism or White Christian

Nationalism. But which has become, mostly unwillingly, associated now with authoritarian control.

White Christian Nationalism has also become an existential threat to the never-quite-realized but always-quite-possible dream of multi-racial democracy, a threat to billions of humans, millions of plant and animal species, and in fact a threat to life on earth, because White Christian Nationalism quite actively seeks an end to the world as a necessary condition for the return of Christ. They are pursuing the end to life on earth.

Let me say that again. The ascent of White Christian Nationalism into possession of near authoritarian power over our nation has become an existential threat to Christianity, to people and their communities across the globe, to animal and plant species, and to life itself on earth.

This approach to faith, however, is in the minority in our nation.

A 2025 survey from the Public Religion Research Institute found that only 3 in 10 Americans identify as either an adherent of or sympathizer with Christian Nationalism, with 2/3rds of Americans self-identifying as skeptical of or rejecting Christian Nationalism. In Missouri, the numbers are more like 44% adherents and sympathizers and 56% percent skeptics and rejectors.

How has a minority ideology with such deep authoritarian tendencies managed to ascend to the highest offices of political power in a supposed multi-racial, multi-faith republic that mostly opposes them?

There are a hundred overlapping factors in their rise. These factors are, in turn, economic, historic, political, strategic, racialized, gender-coded, and more.

But I have a hypothesis about one of the religious reasons. And that is, that, in the last four decades, most people of faith have simply ceded the public square.

In a globalized nation full of stunning religious diversity, faced with the genuinely difficult question of how religions could remain plural and multi-vocal in the public square without it coming to blows, many people of varying traditions simply took their faith private.

We entered an era of prosperity gospel Christianity, hyper-individualist new age healing practices, and other trendy religiosities that turned faith inward — framing it as a personal relationship, an individual exercise, and a thing separate from questions about how we live life together in community with varying commitments, worldviews, and beliefs.

The privatization of religion co-occurred with a powerful, rising neoliberal economic philosophy that sought the privatization of every public good and was delighted to watch religion follow suit.

With a large portion of the crowd of diverse religiosities now absent from the American public square, Christian Nationalism laid the groundwork and made its move to claim that public square entirely.

But I want to reassure you today, they have not quite managed it. They are not there in the public square alone.

See the clergy kneeling before the detention centers.

See the lay people filling the streets with hymns.

See the White Lutheran church ladies and the Somali Muslim Mamas filling up tailgate tents at the protest with big aluminum trays of hot dish and sambusas.

Go to the NAACP candidate forum in the church that has hosted them for decades.

See the rabbi blessing a trans person's new name.

See the downtown Baptist church hosting the drag artist who writes songs of religious reconciliation.

There is an entire multi-faith, multi-racial religious movement that never left the public square, entirely. A progressive faith tradition stretching back throughout American history, braided from many unique threads of religious, racial, class, and gender identities, and persistently advocating for shared power, mutual thriving, and the flourishing of human difference.

When authoritarian religion proclaims itself the only option in the public square, it is attempting to make its opposition invisible and its power inevitable.

We cannot consent to that inevitability, and it is therefore urgent that we recognize, describe, and learn from other religious actors in the public square.

Progressive faith never left the public square. It has had its periods of inward turn in messaging, loath to proclaim too loudly into a diverse marketplace of ideas. But it has always kept skin in the game: at least a

foot in the public square, and often bodies there too, in protest and witness to the acts of empire.

Progressive faith stays to contest for the public square, because progressive faith is deeply and inherently invested in there being a public square.

In the face of the privatization of nearly everything, religious spaces are one of the third places where we encounter one another as neighbors, in all our difference. Progressive faith finds holiness in that encounter, where life meets life and is stretched to grow. Progressive faith pulls toward plurality, and toward investment in collectivity.

It is, therefore in the nature of progressive faith to be out in the public square.

But here's the rub. It was never seeking to control the public square. And it never will.

Progressive faith has a fundamentally different relationship to power than White Christian Nationalism does.

Progressive faith will never have the consolidated power we see among White Christian Nationalists now governing our nation, because that consolidation of power is deeply antithetical to the progressive religious worldview and ethic.

In a moment of authoritarian power, it can be hard to see anything but the religious framework that has aligned itself with that power.

It can be hard to hope for anything but an equal and opposing power taking over and forcing the authoritarians to their knees.

This is not the kind of power progressive faith pursues.

Progressive faith's vision for the world will never arrive via coercion, in part because progressive faith envisions a world without coercion.

When progressive faith offers a vision for a better future, it is delivered as an invitation. Perhaps even, at its best, as a seduction.

Progressive faith does not imagine one controlling power replaced with another, but rather a vast and beautiful network of care sustaining us each in equitable relationships of shared power for the purpose of mutual thriving.

We believe our multi-vocal imagining *is* our power.

In that spirit of that imagination, I will be moving away from comparison to Christian Nationalist ideologies for the remaining remainder of my talk. Defining ourselves in opposition gives authoritarian ideology power, and anyhow, we are up to something entirely different.

What I want to do today is share, joyfully, some of the defining characteristics, as I see them, of progressive faith, and then tease out how those characteristics live and breathe in the world, as progressive faith is pulled by its commitments into the public square.

As I describe these characteristics of progressive faith, I confess it is my hypothesis that these characteristics are present in some way to varying degrees in progressive faith communities across tradition. They are a theological engagement with contemporary progressive worldviews, from which we cannot productively untangle them.

However, I will be clear that I am personally situated in a particular tradition and identity with a particular historical trajectory and culture, and my claims are inevitably made from that position.

I do not fool myself that I could speak with universality about a wide variety of progressive communities and traditions without putting a foot wrong. And I hope if you are a member of a progressive faith community of a different tradition or identity than mine, that you will check these ideas against your own experience, and then perhaps do some bushwhacking off the path I am laying toward your own adventures.

Progressive faith is nothing if not open to divergence, uncertainty, and multiplying possibility.

So, to be clear about my own position, as I mentioned earlier, I was raised and now minister in the Unitarian Universalist tradition, which is a historically protestant tradition that has evolved over time into a progressive, pluralistic assortment of spiritual seekers, explorers of various traditions, inter-faith families, atheists, agnostics, and those who are uninterested in religious labels, but who want to be a part of a shared community of inquiry, belonging, solidarity, and hope.

As a tradition, Unitarian Universalism is descended from Puritan and Universalist European colonizers, who arrived on this continent in pursuit of religious freedom and also land theft.

While we have evolved into a tradition that is committed to anti-racism and anti-oppression and that is growing in every form of diversity, our history and current collective identity remain majority white, with many of the biases and hierarchies that identity enforces.

Though I actively seek to transform them when I find them, I inevitably carry intellectual habits formed in those hierarchies and biases myself, and I invite accountability for how they may show up here, in my words and ideas.

Unitarian Universalists are joined in their practice of progressive faith by representatives of almost every tradition and denomination you can imagine - each of which has its own unique progressive branch or branches.

The work I share with you today is both descriptive and constructive. On the one hand, I believe the seeds of these viewpoints are defining characteristics of progressive faith. On the other hand, I am describing them here in their ideal form, acknowledging that nothing on this earth exists in its ideal form.

Progressive faith is plural and ever-changing, and so it is messy and, I believe, beautifully full of potential.

So here is the first characteristic:

**Religious progressives are a constitutionally uncertain people, and that may be our greatest strength.**

The poet Rilke, in his letter to a young poet, invites us to “love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue” without expecting settled answers or certitude. “Live the questions now,” he writes.

Religious progressives live the questions, and can do no other. Many of us were the ones kicked out of Sunday school classes or academic classes at some point for our pesky questions. We were the ones whose why’s just kept going long after anyone knew the answer. We intuited that there was always more to learn, and we kept on chasing understanding.

Eventually the pursuit of perpetual inquiry leads us to the far edge of what we can know, and also to the near edge of what we *cannot* know or even quite imagine. Progressive inquiry ultimately dumps us gently into the lap of mystery.

Progressive faith communities, then, engage matters of belief using metaphor, nuance, and poetry, and also acknowledge the persistent presence of that which we will never know.

Once we are aware of all we cannot know, progressive faith draws us, with some urgency, into spiritual practices of radical presence, trust in God or an unfolding universe, and material care for one another.

Drawing near to uncertainty means coming close to the precariousness of life, but also to its hope. Facing an unknown future, we are aware that

so much could go wrong, and we are also aware that much is still and always possible.

Facing an unknown future, we turn to prophetic imagination - to “I wonder,” and “what if,” and “we are dreaming.” Another way to put this could be to say that progressive faith is deeply invested in possibility. Certainty forecloses possibility, where uncertainty welcomes myriad possibilities with space to unfold.

Progressive faith living up to its ideals in the public square will engage prophetic imagination to proclaim the worlds we dream about in seductive detail. Our investment in possibility will lead us to actively nurture the places of openness and experimentation in our communities. Our nearness to unknowing will lend us humility in how we navigate our response to challenges in coalition. And our perpetual stance of inquiry will lead us to learn deeply from one another, which brings me to my second characteristic...

**For religious progressives everything is plural, including authority, including truth.**

The exercise of perpetual inquiry and an ultimate acknowledgement of mystery can lead progressive people of faith toward openness to multiple sources of meaning and even truth. We turn to this world and witness it full of vast and beautiful variety, and we affirm the necessity of all that difference.

We also come into contact with the world’s deep paradoxes, how competing truths can coexist, sometimes painfully, in our own hearts, and we realize that truth is a multiple thing that we hold in open hands.

Not relative but deeply in relationship with all the plurality and difference around us.

Accepting plurality in the world around us also requires our discernment — our humble and courageous decision-making in a landscape of truths. This discernment, in turn, requires an investment in personal conscience as a source of authority.

This may also be a constitutional trait.... I have never met a religious progressive who could quite give up the authority of their own deepest experience of the world as one valid source among others.

Therefore, for religious progressives, authority, too, is multi-vocal. It does not rest only in a single text, figure, or deity. It may rest partially and even greatly in any of those things, but it also rests in personal conscience, emerging understanding through science and other ways of knowing, and in relationships and the commitments we make to one another. These are all sources of authority that have a claim over how we understand the world and how we move through it. We hold them in conversation with one another.

Progressive faith living up to its ideals in the public square values coalition, diversity of belief and tactic, and a deep commitment to holding complexity well in multi-vocal movements. It will seek to be one voice among many, and not to shape the conversation all its own. It will build communities that are functionally, if not formally, democratic, anti-hierarchical, and anti-authoritarian. It will share authority and decision-making well and pull toward a community of equitable power and mutual thriving.

Including human conscience as a powerful source of authority requires some measure of our third characteristic...

**Religious progressives believe that humans are trustworthy moral agents, when well supported, and should therefore be supported and trusted in their own moral agency.**

You may begin to see how these characteristics are tangled up with one another, flowing in and out of one another. You cannot allow the human conscience as a source of authority unless you believe that humans are trustworthy moral agents, and of course you can never acknowledge our moral agency without allowing us each some measure of authority in our own lives.

Religious progressives put some measure of faith in humans, not necessarily as ultimate and certainly not as inerrant, but as trustworthy actors in the world and in their lives.

Religious progressives in our era do not share the indefatigable optimism about human nature that some of our progressive ancestors described. We have seen too much of humanity's tragic features to believe that progress rolls on inevitably due to our inherent and unadulterated goodness.

We have seen the terrible harms created by humans at their worst, and we have witnessed the incredible beauty created by humans at their best.

Neither entirely good nor entirely bad, and never entirely defined by any single act, we are, nevertheless, moral actors in a changing world.

Despite our failures and foibles, progressive people of faith maintain a hope for - and a call to - the best humans are capable of, and we believe the best we are capable of is quite astounding.

But within that call to the best we are capable of is a necessary co-occurring point — that what humans are capable of increases when our needs are met - when we have shelter, food, care, healing, education, and fulfillment. Religious progressives know that humans are most able to be reliable as trustworthy moral agents when they are well supported.

We also know that sometimes support is the loving and fierce accompaniment it takes to unlearn the deadly cultural conditioning of patriarchy, white supremacy, and other supremacy frameworks that twist and fracture our moral capacities.

At our best, when we see those failing to live up to our potential as moral agents, the first question for us will be: what support do they need to become more trustworthy to themselves and to others, and who is best equipped to give that support?

Progressive faith living up to its ideals in the public square will refuse to give up on each other or on the potential of humanity. It will see no one as disposable and will always work to keep the door open, back to who we know we could be together. It will work actively and materially to meet people's basic needs so that they can grow into their full and trustworthy human potential. It will replace calls to punishment with structures of support, even when that support needs to include deep accountability. It will remember our mutual human fallibility and potential and hold our relationships in that light. We are after all, constituted by relationship, which is our fourth characteristic...

**Religious progressives experience that human life is made of relationships, and that those relationships must be non-coercive, expansive, and mutual.**

Religious progressives observe that we are interconnected in defining ways that cannot be untangled, and that how we acknowledge and live in to those interconnections matters deeply.

Seeing the great harm we cause to one another when we intentionally ignore or are simply ignorant of our interconnection, religious progressives seek to live our interdependence on purpose — holding up the dignity of the individual, while pulling toward a robust “we,” in communities of wide welcome, deep belonging, and material mutuality.

This is no simple task, especially amid our differences, and so a question of obsession for some progressive religionists is: how do we hold plurality and still hold together? We discern that an essential part of the answer to this question is non-coercion.

We put ourselves in freedom-limiting relationships with one another on purpose, each discerning what we can compromise for our shared thriving.

When there is no single right way to do things... how then do we live? *How* is the right question, because when we seek expansive community amid diverse belief, we need to put a lot of energy into navigating process together. We make the way by walking. Our focus, then, is drawn toward how we treat one another, both at the large and the very

intimate scale. We commit to treating one another in all our entanglement with care rather than control.

Progressive faith living up to its ideals in the public square will understand that the Beloved Community we seek to build at the large scale begins in how we treat one another in our close relationships, and extends outward from there. It will invest deep time and energy in relationship maintenance in organizations and coalitions, knowing that this is not a distraction from the greater work, but the necessary starting place for any greater work. It will hold the individual and the collective alike in regard and seek a balance of thriving for each.

This paradox of the individual and the collective as co-constitutive and equally essential, is one of those open tensions at the heart of life, not to be resolved, but to be deepened into... which brings us to characteristic number five....

**Difference is sacred, and it is a source of tension that invites us to grow. Engaging paradox and tension well is a core human task.**

To the religious progressive, difference is not only a foundational characteristic of life on earth, it is a source of sacredness, from which springs complexity, creativity, beauty, and profound meaning. We align here with Audre Lorde who writes: “Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening. Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters.”

Without difference there would be no creation, no possibility, no flourishing of life, and yet, in a paradox at the heart of life, our differences are also a source of deep tension and conflict in the ongoing dialogue of who we are, what matters most, and how we then behave.

These tensions are not trivial and they are, essentially, unresolvable.

Unresolvable does not mean unsurvivable, but does point toward a different goal than resolution.

When we experience friction, novelty sparks, and something new is created.

A religious progressive living into their ideals will not seek to resolve or diminish paradox and tension, but rather to engage it until it opens us into a deeper understanding of one another and the world, and perhaps into the creation of novel possibility. Tension can be a source of transformation rather than an existential threat, if we stick with it through discomfort to a new opening.

But it is truly a spiritual task to learn how to hold the tension of paradox and difference well, rather than pushing that discomfort off onto someone else to make ourselves feel better or more at ease.

Progressive faith living up to its ideals in the public square will expect disagreements, mistakes, and disappointments, and will build skills for repair, productive conflict, and collective care. It will invite us each to stay at the table through difficulty, to work together toward mutual understanding and growth. It will have strong boundaries to distinguish

between difficulty and abuse and will have clear procedures to halt abuse as well as deep strategies to stay in relationship through difficulty.

In this way, our spiritual communities are practice grounds for some of the skills most essential to our humanity... the places we live into our interdependence, our mutuality, and our dream for the world, a core part of the sixth and final quality I will name today...

**Religious progressives do not predict an end to history, instead seeking to create the conditions of ultimate thriving in this life, in our relationships, and on this material earth.**

We look upon the world with our curiosity, our conscience, our value of plurality and relationships and difference, and our commitment to holding tension well, and what we see is a world and its people that are always unfolding, a never ending cycle of life, death, transformation, and always always change.

Amid these cycles we rejoice at the vast possibilities always still available to us. Amid these cycles, we locate a significant amount of hope in *this* life and our actions on this earth.

Religious progressives neither seek nor predict an end to history. That would be too settled, too certain, too deadly static to reflect our experience of the world and our hope for its vast possibility and beautiful multiplicity.

Instead, we practice what is called a radically realized eschatology. We find that the world we dream about — the beloved community of mutual thriving — is always both already here *and* never fully here. It is

practiced in pockets and moments. It is beheld in glimpses. It is felt between us in the fleeting times where we dial in deep and get our mutuality really right.

Our eschatological hope is not to force the whole world into the stasis of perfection at last, but simply to grow those moments of belovedness, to make more of them in our living, here with each other on this beautiful planet.

The author Arundhati Roy has said, “Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.” The religious progressive says: Another world is not only possible, I have seen her, never completely, but from the edges of my vision, in fits and starts, in real relationships and communities and human life.

I have seen another world, and fallen in love with it, and dedicated my life to glimpsing it whenever and wherever I can, through my actions of compassion and care.

Progressive faith living up to its ideals will remember that nothing is achieved everywhere all at once for all time. It will practice the world it seeks just exactly where it is, creating pockets and moments of heaven on earth, or the kin-dom of God, or beloved community, in the space between us on this material earth. It will recognize those moments when they arrive and rejoice in them and be glad. Progressive faith will love the hell out of this world, not by seeking to universalize what is particular or halt our unfolding, but rather by creating conditions for thriving right where we are, expanding our care in growing circles of concern.

This is the promise of progressive faith: deep investment in communities of care practicing a mutual thriving that holds the paradox of difference expansively and non-coercively, that shares power equitably, that supports and trusts human conscience, and that responds to an uncertain world with curiosity, possibility, and hope.

If you give your attention only to those exercising authoritarian power over our communities and lives, you would necessarily conclude that the last year has been really bad for the values of progressive faith. This is true.

Here is another truth. I have never been more hopeful in my progressive faith. I have never felt more crystal clear about its call, its necessity, and its power. And I have never seen it thriving more.

In a time of existential threat to faith, freedom, and life on earth, there are millions of people all over the world, practicing pockets of a better way right this moment.

They are doing it in intimate relationships, and in communities of practice, and right there in the public square.

They are protecting possibility.

They are rooted in care.

They are growing.

They are full of hope.

I leave you with the words of Rev. Wayne Arnason, which we often use to conclude worship:

Take courage friends.  
The way is often hard,  
The stakes are very high,  
And the path is never clear.  
Take courage.  
For deep down, there is another truth.  
You are not alone.