

## Liberal Religion's Prophetic Witness in the Public Square

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Chesapeake

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Back in the early 1970s, my Dad was a moderate Baptist preacher, and sometimes he preached sermons with a political edge. Dad was moderate, both in his politics and his religion, so in a Baptist church, he often spoke to a congregation more conservative than he was. I teased him once, late in his life, and said, "You know, you decided to be a Baptist just so you could be a moderate and still feel like a rebel." He smiled at that, but I noticed he didn't disagree....

Now when Dad was preaching those politically-tinged sermons, it was the thick of the Vietnam War and the Pentagon Papers and Watergate. I still recall him explaining that he was allowed to talk about politics in the pulpit – at least to a degree – because in the Constitution, separation of church and state is not a two-way street. The First Amendment places limits on the state, but not on the church; it only prohibits the state from establishing an official religion and guarantees to the people the freedom to practice *all* religions. What Jefferson *meant* when he coined the phrase "separation of church and state" over a decade after the amendment, was not that there's a nonporous wall between the two. It means that the state can't tell churches what to do, but churches and religious people *can* still act out their political will and speak with their political voice. As Dr. King wrote in his book *The Strength to Love*, "The church must [remember] it is [neither] the master [n]or the servant of the state, but rather, the *conscience of the state*..."<sup>1</sup> The central challenge of this sermon is summed up in Dr. King's next line: He writes, "If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority."<sup>2</sup>

Many church folks worry when politics is mentioned from the pulpit, because they're afraid of losing the church's nonprofit status. Now there *is* a limit on churches' political activity – the same limit that's placed on political advocacy by secular nonprofits, like the free jobs office I run in Frederick. But what many people don't know is that the *prohibition* applies to *partisan* political activity *only*. This ban was put in place in 1954 by the Johnson Amendment to the US tax code, which prohibits nonprofit charitable organizations from participating in "any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) *any candidate* for public office."<sup>3</sup> So I'm not allowed to stand here this morning and tell you *who* to vote for this Tuesday – as if you would

listen anyway – and I’m not allowed to tell you what *party* to vote for, since parties put forward slates of actual candidates.

But churches and other nonprofits *can* involve themselves in *issues* – as Unitarian Universalists *do* when the UU Legislative Ministry does advocacy work on bills in the Legislature that are directly addressed by our UU Principles: bills about economic justice, prison reform, death with dignity, gun violence, health care, immigration, racism, and LGBTQ rights.<sup>4</sup> The Johnson Amendment does not hinder preachers’ ability to preach on social and political issues, nor does it curtail members’ rights to speak and act, as church members, on these issues. Churches are allowed to publish ‘issue guides’ for voters,<sup>5</sup> and many churches, especially conservative ones, do just that.

This limitation is a narrow one, leaving a broad space for political speech and action by churches. Conservative churches have learned to take full advantage of this liberty to speak plainly about what they believe, and they build social and political agendas based on their credos. Paul Razor wrote a book that was the UU Common Read for 2015. In *Reclaiming Prophetic Witness: Liberal Religion in the Public Square*, Razor carefully shows how conservative churches have exploited this freedom, and he also shows that few liberal churches besides Unitarian Universalists have done the same. Razor goes on to challenge UUs and other liberal religious people to articulate our religious principles boldly and publicly, *and to link them explicitly to the social justice issues we support*. And why? To garner allies from liberal religion! Razor analyzes several surveys and polls, and a raft of denominational membership statistics, and he arrives at several convergent estimates that about 30% of the electorate are liberal religious people who hold nonevangelical social justice work in high regard. Importantly, that liberal 30% outnumbers the fundamentalists on the other end of the spectrum, because there’s a good 50% in the middle who qualify as moderates.<sup>6</sup> Razor’s work makes sense: It’s high time for liberal churches, liberal religious people, to take advantage of our rights to say what we think and believe, *to link our positions on issues to our religious principles*, out in the public square, in order to embolden and recruit other religious liberals.

Now one thing I want to be careful about: It is incorrect to equate the word “liberal” applied to religion with the same word applied to politics. “Liberal politics” is on the left end of the political spectrum, and it includes a smorgasbord of political positions, like government-directed sharing of

wealth, or government protection of civil rights, or government protection of open self-expression. I imagine that if you talk long enough to just about anyone on the liberal end of the political spectrum, you'll find some traditionally liberal political position that they don't agree with, and likewise for folks on the conservative side; these are all coalitions, in the final analysis.

In contrast, "liberal *religion*" starts with freedom of individual thought and belief. Regarding *religion*, the term "liberal" harks back to the Latin root, *liber*, meaning "free." "Liberal religion" tells us not to believe something because it's written in an old book, or because a person in authority decided it's "orthodox."<sup>7</sup> Liberal religion tells us to follow the dictates of our own conscience, the nudgings of our own journey. When an intelligent and compassionate people extend that same freedom to each other, the result is *religious liberalism*, which emphasizes reason, respect, freedom, democratic decision-making, personal dignity, distributive justice – all the elements of our Seven Principles found in your order of service.

These principles of religious liberalism are *often* held by individuals who also ascribe to the tenets of liberal politics. But being a *religious* liberal doesn't automatically make you a *political* liberal – and vice versa. Rasor lists a who's who of people from moderate Christianity who have a Jesus who was a homeless person – and people with a Jesus who was homeless would make mighty good social justice allies for UU's to partner with. Not a few good UUs also happen to be Republicans; and many neoliberal and neoconservative Democrats would look askance at our UU principles. Furthermore, no one should be painted in a box for all time: Where any voter or political player sits, depends on the moment. Remember, both Obama and Clinton had their wars; and if you think those wars were just or unjust, *that* depends on where *you* sit – at the moment.

This suggests another liberal principle, or at least, a liberal value: *uncertainty*. Many religious liberals *and* political liberals seem to hold "uncertainty" in high esteem. My own liberal sensitivities give me a fondness for uncertainty, *ambiguity*, and irony – for contrasting truths that are held in tension.<sup>8</sup> But it seems to me that too much liberal uncertainty renders liberals less effective debaters, and it seems to demotivate parts of the liberal political coalition from getting to the polls in full strength. "Jeez, what if *they* are right?" – Does that lingering liberal doubt lead to apathy or a fear when push comes to shove? Does a liberal tendency toward uncertainty

make liberals prone to speak less forcefully and with less conviction when the time comes to articulate religious principles in the public square?

I wonder whether, for many of you, the full title of this sermon, “Liberal Religion’s Prophetic Witness in the Public Square,” brings up baggage from a past life spent in evangelical Christianity. I’ve spent the last several years getting used to the idea that being prophetic is ok, and I’d like to look at this word, “prophet,” with you for a moment, so we can get back to the original meaning of the word. We get the word “prophet” from the Jewish-Christian heritage, our Fourth Source. Many of us think of a “prophet” as a “seer” – somebody who foresees the future, who supposedly has ESP. But a prophet in ancient Israel was someone who *spoke truth to power* – and who spoke that truth *with certainty*. Whether man or myth, Old Moses spoke truth to power when he stood toe to toe with Pharaoh. In a more probable narrative that’s supported by archaeology and internally consistent texts, Amos spoke truth to power, calling out rich landowners who taxed sharecroppers for the privilege of farming land that had been stolen from those same sharecroppers. What he was doing was standing up to agribusiness, 750 B.C.E.-style!<sup>9</sup> Prophets who spoke truth to power sometimes also spoke of the future, but always in terms of, “Shape up, and things will go well; but keep acting unjustly, and you won’t like what happens.”

Speaking prophetically, like Amos did, requires, not ESP, but only a reasonable understanding of the news and the principle of cause-and-effect, plus the certainty and *guts* to articulate the obvious to people in power. Back in early 2003, during the run-up to the second Iraq War, my friend Narayan and I didn’t have ESP when we correctly predicted that Donald Rumsfeld was a fool for saying we’d be in and out of Iraq in “Days, not years” (google it<sup>10</sup>). It didn’t take a foreign policy expert or a psychic to see that when you destroy a country’s governing institutions and nobody’s left to prevent anarchy, the occupying power can’t just pack up and go home. Narayan and I were right, along with a lot of other people – the US was stuck in Iraq for 8 years – but we didn’t have ESP, we weren’t foreign policy experts. We were just two reasonably intelligent characters who read the papers, and who could see what was bound to happen because we weren’t blinded by hubris, or anger, or personal motives, or whatever it was that was at the root of all that.

Amos was just like that. The only thing that makes Amos a prophet, and not Narayan and me, was that Amos *spoke up* – *in the public square* – about

the injustice that bothered him, and he warned the people in power to adopt public policies rooted in justice and righteousness. *That's* what makes a prophet – it's somebody who speaks truth to power, and who does it in public.

It's a risk you take....

Now, when I talk about prophetic *certainty* when speaking truth to power, I'm not talking about turning into a liberal fundamentalist. There's a difference between prophetic witness and fundamentalism. The certainty of fundamentalism happens when people let their egos get in front of them, and they take personal moral pride in being *right*, and they take that pride as license for treating other people like dirt. That can happen on both the right and the left ends of the spectrum. The certainty I'm advocating is an humble conviction that we know what we're talking about in the present moment: For example, when I say someone is practicing hate speech by likening unarmed migrants to terrorists and criminals, I say it with certainty because I've tested my position against the UU source of reason (Source 5), and because my position aligns with several UU Principles without contradicting any of them. We can be certain, in the sense having done our homework, without being a liberal fundamentalist.

Given that picture of what our prophetic certainty might look like, how can we apply this in the coming weeks, and months, and years ahead? How can we use religious principles in the public square to grow beloved community beyond these walls? Let's look again to Paul Rasor, who gives several examples of ways we can articulate our public positions on social justice issues in terms of our religious convictions, and in so doing, attract other religious liberals into action. For example:

- How attractive would we make our appeal for environmental justice if we expressed it in terms of our "deep, felt experience of our UU Seventh Principle, 'the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part'?"
- How much more compelling would we make our argument in defense of voting rights" for all citizens – for felons in Frederick, Maryland, where I work to try to get them jobs; for black people in Durham, North Carolina, where I used to live – "if we articulated it in terms of the sacredness of our fifth principle, "The right of conscience and the used of the democratic process?"

- How much more inspiring would we make “our work for immigration justice or against torture” if we phrased our position in terms of our First Principle, “The inherent worth and dignity of every person,” which comes right out of the first line of the preamble to the 1948 United Nations’ “Universal Declaration of Human Rights”?<sup>11</sup>

If you take one thing from this sermon, I hope I’ve given you reason to be certain enough of your own religious beliefs to name them as the root of your actions in the sphere of public opinion – to be *prophetic* in the original sense of the word. I hope I’ve given you the assurance that a liberal congregation has the legal right, and the *moral* responsibility, to be prophetic in the public square, every bit as much as any other religious body. I hope I’ve given you pause to think of the ways you are *best fit* to serve: “We need *prophets of economics* to explain the cascading consequences of inequality, and to envision workplace democracy and socially responsible investment. We need *prophets of science* who can track and explain the steady increase in global temperatures, chart its implications, and convey the urgency of those implications to policymakers and voters. We need *prophets of the arts* to express their vision for social renewal in stirring songs and poetry, in inspiring stories, and in the performing and visual arts. We need *prophets who testify to the human costs of inequality and oppression*, who tell their stories of how individuals and communities are fighting back. We need “*prophets of faith* to bring the rich resources of religion into the struggle, making ancient traditions new by applying them to today’s challenges.”<sup>12</sup>

The real question is a personal one, for each and every one of us: “In light of my own strengths and experiences, and considering my own occupation and network, in what way do I feel called to speak or act prophetically in my own sphere of influence?”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Strength to Love* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1963).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Robert M. Penna, “The Johnson Amendment: Fact-Checking the Narrative,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Aug 24, 2018, [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the\\_johnson\\_amendment\\_fact\\_checking\\_the\\_narrative](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_johnson_amendment_fact_checking_the_narrative).

<sup>4</sup> U.U. Legislative Ministry of Maryland: <https://www.uulmmd.org/>.

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.npr.org/2017/02/03/513187940/the-johnson-amendment-in-five-questions-and-answers>.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Rasor, *Reclaiming Prophetic Witness: Liberal Religion in the Public Square* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> These thoughts closely follow those of Carl Gregg, in “Reclaiming Prophetic Witness: Liberal Religion in the Public Square,” Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Frederick, Frederick MD, May 31, 2015, as well as in many of his other sermons.

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<sup>8</sup> In his book, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*, Jonathan Haidt cites MRI studies that show structural differences in the brains of conservative and liberal religious people which could underly our different responses to uncertain situations. I find that data to be preliminary, and I'm leery of the deterministic implications, but I do find it an interesting theory; suffice to to say, more will be revealed.

<sup>9</sup> The primary relevant texts are Amos 5 and Hosea 2. For archaeological evidence consistent with Amos' story and for the modern parallels in agribusiness (as well as government, big business, education, banking and finance, the criminal justice industry, fashion and sports industries, military and policing), see:

- (a) Gale A. Yee, "Hosea," in *Women's Bible Commentary: Third Edition, Revised and Updated*, Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsey, eds. (Nashville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 300-5;
- (b) Gale A. Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Woman as Evil in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 82-5 (Google Reader e-book pagination).
- (c) Richard A. Horsley, *Covenant Economics: A Biblical Vision for All* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 71-79 (Google Reader e-book pagination).
- (d) Cedric C. Johnson, *Race, Religion and Resilience in the Neoliberal Age* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 26-7

<sup>10</sup> Or look here: <https://thinkprogress.org/rumsfeld-lies-about-pre-war-predictions-you-can-take-that-to-the-bank-5457831b2f25/>.

<sup>11</sup> The quotes in these three bullet points are from Gregg (op cit.), who himself was quoting Rasor (op cit.).

<sup>12</sup> The quotes in this paragraph are from Rasor (op cit.).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.