

Morality of America

Who speaks for the morality of America? It is obvious that we do not, or have not, and thus are not part of either the national or local conversation.

There is a movement among several conservative Christians and liberal religious leaders calling for another voice in defining what morality is for this nation. Unitarian Universalists have given America to the “religious right.” A UU minister, Rev. Stephens in his sermon, “Who Speaks for the religious and moral values?” says that he isn’t “willing to leave that honor and burden to the religious conservatives who now dominate the national conversation.” He further says that “religious liberals and centrists, partly out of a desire to avoid offending the secular people who make up a large part of their constituencies, do not often invoke the words of Jesus in the political arena. That I can readily understand. Yet this religious reticence from the center and left has the unfortunate effect of ceding to the right the powerful arguments that draw from the Bible and religious tradition . . . “

I say that it is not only the words of Jesus that we need to learn to speak from our mouths; we need to understand the values and beliefs of Christianity so that we can engage in the conversation, sharing our understandings – not for the purpose of imposing our values on others, but to let others know that there is an alternative to the beliefs and values of the Christian right and conservatives. That is what we are denying the world: a needed alternative and religious view that has in its own message the power to bring healing and well-being to those who find themselves victimized, devalued and oppressed by a belief system that is not their own.

To speak the words of Jesus, to engage in a conversation that is imbedded with Christian language, concepts and beliefs, does not require that we believe in these ideas, values or beliefs, but it does require a level of comfortableness, of assuredness in our own beliefs, that we can engage in the conversation without condemning the beliefs of others. Whether we want to or not, we live in a wilderness where the dominant religious language is that of Christianity, just as the dominant language of this nation is English. How foolish would it be for us as Unitarian Universalists to refuse to speak English? It is just as foolish for us to refuse to engage in the public political conversation because we do not want to speak the religious Christian language of the nation.

For what price are we willing to sell justice to this single viewpoint? The price we have paid thus far is a price far beyond the value of liberal religion when our own beliefs undermine the very message that we preach. Like the Unitarian Universalist minister Rev. Stephens, I believe that for the sake of a healthy and balanced dialogue in this country, liberal religious leaders need to demonstrate an understanding of the fullness of the bible and draw out themes – such as compassion, tolerance, and peace – that are conspicuously absent from the conversation. Let me be clear – I am not advocating that the liberal religious movement such as ours become Christian or speak only the Christian language – but I am saying that if we are really committed to being in the dialogue, if we really want to communicate to others, if we really believe in the affirmation of the

inherent worth and dignity of all people, then we need to lose our arrogance and become willing to first speak the language of others before we demand that they learn ours. Communication occurs when we speak to each other in a conceptual context that we both understand. Our religious language is a foreign language in the American wilderness of which we are a part. That is the point: we are a part of this wilderness, and no matter how we try to separate ourselves or make ourselves different from the rest who share the wilderness with us, it is our delusion to believe that it is so! We need to speak their beliefs and values to communicate our own values and beliefs without condemning their beliefs. There is always the threat that, in the defense of our values and beliefs, we become the oppressor. The conversation about morality is not about right or wrong, or good and bad; rather, in a pluralistic society, it is about the validity of all beliefs and the right to choose in a free nation one's religious beliefs.

Unitarian Universalist Christianity provides an answer and response, but so do our humanist beliefs, Buddhist beliefs, Jewish beliefs, earth based spirituality beliefs. The responsibility to demonstrate how this is true is on us and not the conservative Christian or religious right. We cannot and will not demonstrate this truth if we continue to refuse to speak the common Christian religious language that most of us were born into, even if we were not Christian.

We have a message of compassion, tolerance, justice and peace. We cannot afford to continue to speak to the faithful few out of fear of offending – we will offend and we do offend. Let us lift up our voice of compassion and be heard. Rev. Bill Sinkford, the UUA President, spoke eloquently in a language that reached the heart of the Christian message, and spoke of our commitment to the affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of all people, when he spoke these words in taking a stance in support of gay marriage: “We stand on the side of Love.” We need to reclaim our Christian heritage and language, redefining the meaning of these words, such as morality, within a UU context without inhibiting our ability to speak to the majority Christian religious believers in the nation.

If we truly believe that the living tradition we share draws from many sources, including the Jewish and Christian teaching which calls us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves, then we cannot continue to ignore one of the sources of our living tradition if we wish to let America be America again.

We the people must redeem the language as well as the land, the mines, the plants, the rivers of this wilderness we call America if we are going to make America again! For all of our social justice activity, for all our pronouncements of being a faith of deeds not creeds, for all that we stand for, do and/or say, it is meaningless if we are unable to swear this oath – AMERICA WILL BE!