Creeds and Deeds: Mixing Politics and Religion

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Recently Rachel and I were at a wedding breakfast as compensation for my officiating at the wedding. This wasn't a particularly new experience. I have pronounced at least 500 couples to be husband and wife or wife and wife or husband and husband. The reception is not the most comfortable part of a wedding for me as an introvert. Most of the time the only people I know are the bride and groom and they are a little busy on such occasions to spend time chatting with me. Such occasions are even more challenging for Rachel, also an introvert, who usually only knows me, but ever the supportive partner, she goes so I have someone to talk to.

The few who speak to me on such occasions usually say something polite about how nice the service was and then flee for the bar. A few others offer me all the reasons they don't go to church, but then flee for the bar before I can administer absolution. On rare occasion a person will offer me their off-the-wall theological perspective, expecting or hoping for my agreement. I usually just nod refusing the bait. As you might gather, I find such affairs awkward and uncomfortable made only slightly more palatable by good food and drink. So, why do I go? Simply out of politeness. After all a minister is expected to be polite.

I should have known that this wedding reception was going to be different and might try my intention to be polite. Just before the guests were to be seated for the meal under a marquee in the groom's parent's backyard, Hurricane Winston poured its abundant gift upon the couple's wedding. More specifically, it drenched our seats that were just outside the marquee's protection (So much for my supposed connections to the big guy in the sky). After trying various solutions to protect the seats, the whole table was moved into the garage, displacing the bar, leaving the other guests at our table no place to flee.

The meal began safely enough with comments about the weather and some gentle ribbing of one guest at our table for the sound system he had provided, as it had performed badly during the speeches. I confess I enjoyed that a little too much because after the service that same guest had told me how bad our sound system was and that he could give us a good deal on a new one. There were polite questions about Unitarians, admitting they knew nothing about us. In an attempt to move to what I mistakenly thought was a safer topic, I mentioned my work with the Living Wage Movement. They had little knowledge of that either. At one point, I naively asked the owner of a chain of home electronics stores who had criticised our sound system if he paid his employees a Living Wage. It was like that moment in an ice hockey game when the gloves come off and all civility leaves the arena. He defended his low pay of his employees in an offensive manner. He succeeded in spewing falsehoods and half-truths while being arrogant, patronising, and misogynist all at the same time. Usually I back off in such moments, pouring oil on troubled waters, but not this time. I chose to challenge his assumptions. My only excuse is he was a bully. That only made him escalate his attacks. Too late I remembered that axiom to never wrestle with a pig. Not only will you both get muddy, the pig enjoys it. I might also add that it makes those witnessing the match very uncomfortable.

It was an occasion for theological reflection as I replayed the troubling exchange in my head while unsuccessfully trying to go to sleep that night. It is clear I broke the cardinal rule I grew up with in America: don't discuss money, politics or religion at a dinner party, even if it is just a family celebration--perhaps, especially if it is a family occasion. While not sure if the same rule applies here, I suspect so. The only exception might be at a social occasion with Unitarians. We thrive on debate and are pretty good at dialogue otherwise we would have gone our separate ways long ago.

The rule exists because how we use our money, how we vote, and how we express our spirituality is dictated in each case by our values and our values define us. My values reflect my answers to those universal questions that are religion's job to ask: Who am I? How do I know what I know? What is my purpose? Who or what is in charge? What does my death mean? When we open up to others about money, politics and religion we expose our answers, making us vulnerable. That often feels dangerous. While a dialogue can be useful, an argument about who is right or wrong is likely to be explosive. It cuts too close to the bone of our being. Historically, we have religious wars, pogroms, holocausts, witch-hunts, excommunications, and inquisitions as examples. In the present day, we have the US primaries. What this says about us is that money; religion and politics are always mixed together in our very being. While we might not like to make ourselves vulnerable in the polite company of strangers, if we never expose ourselves are we not doing little more than taking up space and wasting oxygen? If our beliefs that reflect our values are never expressed or lived out do they really exist?

When Unitarians and Universalists in the US merged in 1961 they sought to answer this question in their motto: Deed, not Creed. I am told that there was a time we had the same motto in front of our church on the Wayside Pulpit. While other faith traditions use a creed to bind the faithful into a community, we went a different direction. UU congregations have members with a diversity of theologies and philosophies, including theism, deism, pantheism, paganism, non-theism, atheism, and humanism. All are engaged in a common search for meaning and values without the requirement to believe or accept any specific doctrine or creed. People of different beliefs (for we all have them) can share the same values. For instance we join with other faiths to work for peace, the environment, equality and the Living Wage.

In our last Adult RE class we watched a presentation on what Muslims universally believe and what those beliefs value. Then we reviewed what Unitarians believe and value. We affirm and promote:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;
- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbours as ourselves;
- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results

of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;
- Spiritual teachings of Earth-centred traditions, which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

It turns out Islam values the same things despite having beliefs that are not likely to be held by the average Unitarian.

But not all religious or cultural or personal beliefs express our values as Unitarians.

Unitarian educator, Sophia Lyon Fahs, argued eloquently that it does matter what we believe. She points out that some beliefs are divisive, while others create closer bonds between people. Some beliefs weaken a person's selfhood, while others nurture self-confidence and a sense of personal worth. She concludes by stating: "Some beliefs are rigid like the body of death, impotent in a changing world. Other beliefs are pliable, like the young sapling, ever growing with the upward thrust of life."

Her point is that, while there is no single correct set of beliefs, it does still matter what we believe. It matters because our beliefs influence, if not determine, how we live and act in the world. Would you rather that everyone believed in hate, intolerance, and greed—like those voting for Donald Trump--or in love, tolerance, and generosity? Beliefs that are life enhancing, rather than life negating or life destroying, make for a more enjoyable and fulfilling world. But there is an important caveat. This is true only if those beliefs are actually lived out.

One day a soap manufacturer and a minister were walking together down a street in a large city. The soap manufacturer casually said, "The religion you preach hasn't done much good, has it? Just observe. There is still a lot of wickedness in the world, and a lot of wicked people, too!" The minister didn't reply until they passed a dirty little child making mud pies in the gutter. Seizing the opportunity, the minister said, "I see that your soap hasn't done much good in the world; for there is still much dirt, and many dirty people around." The soap maker replied, "Oh, well, soap is only useful when it is applied." And the minister said, "Exactly, so it is with religion." Deeds speak louder.

Around the turn of the last century a growing number of progressive Christians, which still included Unitarians at the time, started to preach a new and radical message. They felt the priorities within their faith had gotten out of whack. For too long, they said, Christianity has focused on controversies about the person of Jesus: Was he a man? Was he a god? And they said, those questions, which seemed so important to older generations, are not what Christianity is really about.

They said it matters not who Jesus was. We are no longer interested in a religion about Jesus, because the heart of Christianity is the religion of Jesus - the lessons he actually taught during his life: feeding the poor, caring for the vulnerable, lifting up the oppressed, encouraging the fearful, being a good Samaritan, building "the kingdom of God on earth." This is the heart of religion, these new folks said, and they called it the Social Gospel -- a Gospel calling them to reform their world here and now, to create a more just society, a more compassionate society here and now, not in the afterlife, but for living people on this earth.

They moved from an emphasis on “right belief” to an emphasis on “right action” or ethics. Our Unitarian tradition teaches the same. It’s more important what you do — whether you live a life of kindness and compassion, peace and justice — than what you say you believe. We believe in deeds not creeds. Or as John Adams, the second President of the United States and a Unitarian said, “I do not attach much importance to creeds because I believe [one] cannot be wrong whose life is right.”

Right action based on our spiritual beliefs leads inexorably to politics, the total complex of relations between people living in society. We recognize that our religion is of value only to the extent that it helps us live out our values in our relationships with other people and with our surroundings.

We are a religion seeking transformation. Not just transformation of ourselves but of our community and the world. Our values, expressed in the Seven Principles, demand our involvement in the public square, not just hanging them on the wall on a colourful banner.

We live in a world where values incompatible with ours often dominate. Racism, greed, poverty, inequality, patriarchy, violence, oppression, and destruction of the planet abound. If we want to see a different world, one that values the inherent worth and dignity of each person; freedom of individual belief; justice, equity and compassion; acceptance and growth; peace and liberty; assuring everyone has a say and a vote in community decisions; and finally, the interdependence of all creation, from the global down to all its individual creatures, including humans, then we must boldly mix religion and politics. Doing it alone is hard and invites our silence. Doing it as a community gives us the courage to break the cardinal rule and make a difference.