

Unholy Separation?

A sermon for Unitarian Universalist Congregations by Martin Bryant
Given at Wildflower Church, a UU Congregation for South Austin, Texas
March 4, 2007

The late Harvard pre-historic biologist Stephen Jay Gould was the world's foremost champion of evolution as assumption, a life-long Boston Red Sox fan, and an amazing writer. I heartily recommend all of his books: The Panda's Thumb, the Flamingo's Smile, Hens Teeth & Horses Toes, which brim with humor, evolutionary insight, and delightful natural history.

All of his books, except one – Rocks of Ages. The first words of this book are *I write this book to present a blessedly simple and entirely conventional resolution to an issue so laden with emotion and the burden of history that a clear path usually becomes overgrown by a tangle of contention and confusion. I speak of the supposed conflict between science and religion, a debate that exists only in people's minds and social practices, not in the logic or proper utility of these entirely different, and equally vital, subjects.*

Gould goes on to propose the principle of NOMA – non-overlapping magisterium, which in Latin means “a domain of authority in teaching”. And asserts that science and religion represent two wholly different sets of information regarding the natural world and human experience and that scientists are no more qualified to speak concerning matters spiritual than clerics are to speak concerning matters scientific. He spends the next 222 pages asserting, in a very practical way, that these two can be separated and takes no small delight in the subtle observation that his magisterium, that of science, seems to be waxing in influence, while the other seems waning.

Poppycock!

I would assert quite the opposite, that science and religion both deal with substantially the same information – what is reality? How does humanity, how do I deal with it? Whether you want to call it natural law, wisdom, God's law, the unified field theory, chaos, physics, or the Tao, as scientists see farther and dig deeper into what holds our world together they find exactly what millennia old sacred texts predicted they will find, a whole lot of nothing, awe, faith, and some great new questions.

Scientists recognize this: like Neils Bohr who saw parallels to his sub atomic research in the Tao te Ching and Robert Oppenheimer who quoted the Bhagavad-Gita and Albert Einstein who wrote “science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind” and ***The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed.***

If anyone can see this, UUs, on a spiritual “search for truth” should be able to. Science has dogma and practice and occasionally becomes bound by it and requires some freeing work. Science requires insight, sometimes beyond reason and patience trying faith. In science, the observer makes assumptions and then tests them to see whether they might be worthy of basing more assumptions on. In spirituality, the faithful one accepts spiritual metaphors and goes about acting with morality and perspective in their daily lives with these metaphorical assumptions as guides, expecting to better see the beauty of the underlying whole, to better see the face of God.

Many UUs revere America’s principle of the separation of church and state as more inviolate than any spiritual belief. They would assert that without this important principle, our religion, if there be such a thing, would not exist – therefore it is a priori foundational and perhaps more important than Unitarian/Universalism itself.

Actually, separation of church and state is a secondary principle, designed to protect a more fundamental one – freedom of religion. The separation principle is a wall, based on the experience of the founders, designed to keep any single religion from becoming so influential in the government so as to limit the rights or growth of minority faiths.

Although it may seem at times the converse, as Aristotle and countless others have observed, government and morality are inseparable. Government is about the cooperative management of the ways in which we interact with others. If we successfully separate government from religion we deny our primary instrument for implementing morality – the government, access to our primary instrument for developing and communicating it – our religion.

So the separation principle needs to be vigilant enough to protect freedom of religion, but flexible enough to permit our spirituality to do its work. So if it is a wall, it needs to have doors of all sizes save those large enough to march armies through.

Separation needs to affirm the rights of minority religions a voice, while avoiding witch hunts which would strip the Ten Commandments from our walls or expressions of personal faith from our public discourse. There are those in the “freedom from religion” camp whose work I would obviously not endorse. The balancing work of separation is not all that easy, and the principle of has been very inconsistently applied in enforcement of our tax code and in spirit. While some churches fear to take a stand on moral issues, other have active candidates speaking from their Sunday morning pulpits.

Among UUs, some of whom are refugees from emotional or dogmatic oppression in the past from various Christian sects, there can be an almost dogmatic reaction to the idea of a “majority religion”. At one point, none other than Thomas Jefferson predicted UU’s would be the majority religion in America; perhaps we do not grow because we find this prophecy troubling.

These UUs believe that “separation of church and state” protects them from a Christian majority taking over the U.S. government. I think there are problems with this perception. Christianity, though stronger here than in Europe may no longer even be a majority religion in the United States, and is hardly cohesive enough to control culture or government. There are signs it may be in cultural decline and fundamentalist noise-making the stuff of death throes, not. In reality, the so-called “Christian Right” has had much less success in translating their work into American public policy than those on the left.

And any church corrupt enough to wish to take over the functions of government or force out other religions from our pluralistic society is corrupt enough to abuse the church state separation principal against those minority religions. And we have seen some of this.

As incoherent as the separation of church and state is in vision and implementation it is fortunate that it is not the only defense of our religious freedom.

Every single religion which has come to the United States has adapted to our pluralism. Almost all came here with anti-universalism “exclusiveness” tenets – “ours is the only way to the spiritual goodies – all of the others are shams.” Over time almost every religion in America – and perhaps gradually in the world, has been forced to diminish or entirely release this tenet. The reason has nothing to do with federal regulations, nothing to do with the separation of church and state, but everything to do with American’s belief in freedom – which as UU’s know perhaps better than others, is spiritual in itself. This is what Thomas Jefferson perceived in our movement so long ago.

As a people, we Americans are opposed to Fundamentalism – in any form – Christian or Muslim - not because we are anti-religious – far from that – but because fundamentalism is anti-freedom.

The diversity that is an underlying tenet of nature is undeniable. God did not make us unique to force us under a yoke of a single thought. The most important protection for that more important principle –Freedom of Religion – is our love of freedom itself. And that yet stirs within us.

But what about abuses! What about the burned at the stake martyrs of science to religion, book burnings, fundamentalist governments and corrupt Papal control of regents!

What about mighty nations driven to bloody, bullying horrible wars by an allegedly faithful follower of the “Prince of Peace”?

These represent another problem of separation – the separation of spirituality – a true faith – from religion - the same thing which causes churches to protect pedophile priests. This corruption of religion is not a breakdown of the “separation” principle in government.

Frankly in the last six years, America could have used a lot more of the real Jesus. The Jesus that cries out over the millennia, asking us to “lay down our swords” and “turn the other cheek” – the Jesus that risked all to help the sick and who took time to teach children and disadvantaged - the paragon of patience, nonviolence, forgiveness, and compassion. Our most prominent current foreign policy disaster, is not a holy war in any holy sense, it is the result of far too little Jesus – not too much.

And our state – with spirit denied access to her halls – is left to act as our large amoral, soul-less corporations act – with success and profit as the only goals. Is it any surprise that we act for greed and not compassion? Without a God, what can humble the last superpower and bring it to confess its mistakes and right its own wrongs?

Our current President only gets away with his false spirituality because we have too few people of real spirituality in Washington to compare it too. We can no longer recognize it in that context, if we ever could.

Perhaps the last real leader of faith we had – was Jimmy Carter – who studied and wrote about his religion. A man who could see oppression in government control of industry and rising deficits, who had amazing, unpopular patience with the Iran hostage crisis and the fever of inflation, who had the courage to bring Israel and Egypt together at Camp David – a peace that has lasted to this day. But faced with global warming, our democratic system in crisis, and the consequences of our own arrogance we may need leadership that exceeds even this standard – and where in history can we look for this? Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Desmond Tutu, people of faith.

I know someone here is thinking – “well then it is all semantics. If you’d just started out by saying – ‘we need to separate religion from science and government – but not spirituality’ – we’d all be eating lunch a lot earlier”.

But it is not that easy and all of this does have practical application. And we can start, as we so often can, with ourselves. Here in this room, we do not have one spirituality or religion – we have many. We do have a church and we make “separation” decisions about Wildflower Church all the time.

Every time we take the Wildflower banner into a peace march or demonstration in favor of the rights of homosexuals to marriage, we bring our church into the realm of public policy. And we so need to do these things.

In the 19th century it was primarily ministers, including Unitarian Thomas Starr King who fought against slavery long before abolition became law. Later, women’s suffrage became an issue of faith, including Unitarians Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Olympia Brown. In the last

century – Unitarian Minister James Reeb and other clerics of other faiths marched with Martin Luther King Jr. in the streets. And the end of the war in Vietnam was as much the result of a motion among the national Methodist conference as any public policy or poll which began Americans disengagement.

Time and time again in our nation's history social change started among the people, and was expressed in churches long before the halls of congress. There are issues so hard that neither party in our two-party system will deal with them until compelled to by their constituents. And if we stifle the moral of voice our churches we break our national spirit. I know there have been very celebrated scandals, and there exists fundamentalist intolerance but most clerics in America, in our world, like most people, are good people we have much in common with.

At the annual national general assembly of our UU movement, the organization considers the adoption of “statements of conscience”, in which the UUA takes a stand on social issues. These are occasionally controversial and the national organization makes a good attempt to not just “talk the talk” but “walk the walk” by backing those that are adopted with ongoing committees, funding, and programs. Since 1961 – for almost a half-century our organization has been engaged in this process.

Last Year the organization made a prominent statement concerning Global Warming /Climate Change, and others supporting peacemaking efforts in among world governments, in support of stem cell research legislation, and a call for immigrant justice. In prior years, major statements have included a call for Criminal Justice reforms, and the responsibility of individuals and organizations to be responsible consumers as a moral imperative. Minor statements have included an opposition to U.S. sponsored torture, concerns about electronic voting, Debt Relief for Poor Countries, and the latest among many calls for campaign finance reform, the end of the penalty, and marriage rights for all American couples. You can review these at www.UUA.org/actions.

Although some have concerns about this, these statements get more consideration and represent more of a ongoing definition of what UUism is than anything of an abstractly spiritual or theological nature.

However, congregations in our movement have congregational polity, and some congregations accept statements of conscience as well. Usually these are carefully considered and require a 2/3rds vote. Congregants worry about politicizing their churches and maybe more worrisome is the problem of lengthening congregational meetings, but this makes some sense. Without congregational statements such as these – sending that banner into a march, or directing social action efforts become the decision of a few well meaning folks, or a national body who met years ago in another city.

Whether made at the national or local level, the statements are defining in a movement that can use some definition. And they endorse – in fact demand... faith in action... and action can speak more loudly than words. Sometimes we have so many words (I have so many words...) it is hard to make sense of them.

I remember several yeas ago I was watching the developing candidacy of Howard Dean and the church life at another local UU church with a great deal of interest. A controversy arose when a group of church members wanted to host a Howard Dean rally in the sanctuary. Some thought this might threaten the church's tax exempt status (which it would not – those who wish clarity on this contact me after the service).

But the church members were willing to rent the hall as would any wedding and even specify the location by address if required to avoid the appearance of sponsorship.

However, the argument finally came that drew me into the discussion. One member stated “do we want this sort of thing in our ‘sanctuary’? Don't we want to preserve the sanctuary from this?” The implied sullied nature of the event had nothing to do with Howard Dean in particular, but rather about politics in general.

And this exhibits the problem of separation so clearly. Although we may rankle about whether we want applause or laughter or coffee in our worship service, when we start to reflect that our church is something apart, a sanctuary more holy than the outside world, we are leading to a form of corruption. This is not a place where we come to be holy, where we protect spirituality from the world. This is the locker room, the training room, the gym of spiritual fitness – but “out there” is the playing field. This is the practice room – the concert hall is in our every day.

For all of the great work that many wonderful volunteers put into Wildflower Church it is not any sort of end – it is a means only. The “point” is not Sunday morning – but in our minute to minute daily lives. Do you think “the face of God” is more evident in here than in a real field of bluebonnets or the crushing blow of a hurricane and the compassion of those in its wake? Is not that face as visible in the queue at the Dept. of Motor Vehicles as in any congregation? Or as audible in bird song as in hymn, and as apparent under a microscope as in some dusty text?

Do you think you can serve a church by “separating” it? Can you serve your spirituality by “separating” it?

Any religion worth having is worth not separating from anything. The American principle of Separation of Church from State may be a useful convention worth keeping around, and objectivity an important scientific principle, but a true spirituality, a true faith **cannot** be separated from anything.

“No separation” is at the core of the yin and yang – living in this world and yet not of this world; the paradox of the not just many and one but of the one and none. We must act, we are doers in the universe – we cannot help but do this. But we act best when we see as much of the unity as we can comprehend. Think globally, act locally – holistically.

In the end, it is about living in the world with integrity. In the thesaurus, you’ll find an antonym of integrity is separation. What is “holy” about, but being holistic, having integrity? “Wholeness” and wholeness is not homogeneity – it is ... awareness of interconnectedness.

Holy and wholly are one and the same.