

## **Religious Freedom in an Election Season**

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Tuesday afternoon two gentlemen rang the bell at First Church when I was the last staff person in the building. They identified themselves as being with the Obama campaign and they wanted to look at our facility because First Church is a polling station. I did not want to let them inside. They did not call first and I was almost the last adult in the building. They had no identification cards. For me it was a safety and security issue and a question of political "infiltration." For them it was about voter rights.

Their concern was if voters would have to wait outside, if we had restrooms, etc. And although I know these are issues in some polling station, what I considered saying was "Once you can tell me the fifth principle of this congregation, I will let you in the building. (It is "The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large")." Absolutely no voter will wait outside unless he or she wants to wait outside. Yes, there are restrooms. Our members even register local voters without evangelizing. We have even driven local voters without rides to the polls. And partisan campaign literature is not allowed in the building. I am actually serious about that fifth principle. I hope you are too.

One gentleman said "I am a lawyer." I was underwhelmed. I asked them to call later, and the other gentleman said "I am not from around here. What is your area code?" Friends, if you ever relocate to an area to do grass roots work, know the area code. Could it have been a more patronizing encounter?

When I lived in Golf Manor in 2004 I felt like the burned-over territory because I received so many calls at my home residence prior to the election. This year, I have not received one call at home. I have not yet voted. Maybe it's my zip code. I really have no idea.

What I do know is that the minister's office at First Church has become the burned-over territory in 2008. I have received letters and phone calls from the Alliance Defense Fund and Providence Forum ("In November we may very well be facing the most crucial election in our nation's history. That's why we're calling on you, as a respected gatekeeper of the Christian community, to encourage the members of your congregation to show up at the polls and vote their conscience), and the Obama campaign. I wouldn't even take the call from the Obama campaign because after an initial screening, the woman didn't seem to know enough about the line of non-profit tax status and political work in congregations. I received a letter from the Obama campaign stating "Joining me on this historic ticket is a person of deep faith, Senator Joe Biden."

Personally, your minister, an ordained reverend, and graduate of Divinity School, does not believe it is relevant if Senator Joe Biden is a person of deep faith. I am irritated that someone thought I needed to know that. I have more interest in whether or not he is a person of deep intellect, honesty, integrity, compassion, acceptance, patience,

perseverance, political savvy, a team builder and negotiator. That's what I care about. Those are the credentials this minister cares about.

Thirty years ago the Religious Right got us into a glob of religious political glue we have yet to extract ourselves from. The merger of politics and religion won votes, lots of conservative votes, but the cost, of religious integrity and cultural polarization, was far too high. As the Reverend John Wimberly, a proud member of the ACLU writes

To think we can enact divine absolutes in any given piece of legislation or by the election of any one candidate is to overload the political arena with a burden it cannot bear. We need to inject some spiritual humility into the process. In the political marketplace, the role of the church is to keep God's eternal values in the discussion while not allowing ourselves to get too tied to any one means to an end.<sup>1</sup>

You might not resonate with the quote that "the role of the church is to keep God's eternal values in the discussion." Try replacing it with our "UU values in the discussion." I want our UU values in the discussion, but I am not naïve enough to think that only one political party or candidate can and will enact those values. Wimberly is dead on when he notes that politics lives in the "realm of compromise, accommodation, tradeoffs, and happy mediums."<sup>2</sup> This is what needs to happen in politics. And as a UU minister I need to say that "Don't ask, Don't tell" denies justice, equity, and compassion in relationships, as do tax cuts for the rich. So my UU values have engaged me in political difference with both a Democrat and Republican President.

It's a messy marketplace, at best. And as much as you and I might not like the Religious Right, they didn't create the messy marketplace. In the United States, it began with our forbearers, the Puritans. As I told you in the sermon I preached on September 7, the Puritans established religious and political control over the developing Massachusetts Bay Colony. When they were new to the Americas, and a mostly homogenous group (of course, excluding the native residents) it worked. With the arrival of Baptists, Quakers, and Anglicans the unity of religion and politics fell apart. It would not hold with diversity and so it is today. Legislating and/or politically allying religion or religious values with one group, is ultimately unsustainable in the United States.

I often have to ask myself which "hat" I am wearing, my religious or political hat. When those two gentlemen came to the door I was wearing my religious hat because I answered the door as the minister of the congregation. Of course, religion influences my political decisions, but not entirely. Politically I understand why President Clinton ultimately chose "Don't ask, don't tell." Religiously, I don't like the decision. Do you see the difference? But it is so confusing.

Religiously, I don't like being contacted by the Alliance Defense Fund with their suggestions that I influence First Church members to be good Christian gatekeepers. Religiously, I don't like it when the candidates, whether Obama or McCain contact me as a minister. It's a slippery slope, a glob of glue. I do not want to replicate the goo of the Religious Right by becoming the Religious Left because it would violate our Unitarian

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<sup>1</sup>John Wimberly, "Partisan Religion," *Congregations* 34 (2008):22-26.

<sup>2</sup> 25.

Universalist religious values, specifically that 5<sup>th</sup> principle on the right of conscience and use of the democratic process.

Politically, I know why the Alliance Defense Fund contacts me, because most clergy aren't as discerning as I am, and it works. They have elected Presidents of the United States with the letter I received. Same with the campaigns. Politically I know why they do it. And I know that it works for many clergy and denominationally-affiliated people. Senators Obama or McCain request something and a congregation moves. We could almost hear religious conservatives shouting in praise when Governor Palin was placed on the Republican ticket this year. I am convinced that most Americans have no discerning dividing line between politics and religion, regardless of what the IRS says. As a country, I think we suffer from this exaggerated overlap.

Recently a member sent me an email she had received from a family member. Here is an excerpt

This is the scariest election we as Christians have ever faced and from the looks of the polls, the Christians are not voting Christian values. We all need to be on our knees . . . The United States of America and our citizens need prayer more than ever . . . stop whatever you are doing and spend one minute praying for the safety of the United States, our troops, our citizens, for peace in the world, the upcoming election, that the Bible will remain the basis for the laws governing our land and that Christianity will grow in the US.

Our member was appalled. For me it wasn't the praying, it was what the prayers were for – that the Bible will remain the basis for American laws. The *Constitution* tends to have a bit more to say about the law, and that is a good thing. And then there is that prayer that Christianity will grow, as if Christianity needs to grow in order to preserve our country, founded as it was, with documents that don't refer to God and explicitly give no preference to any religious group. It's that glob of religious and political goo that overloads the political arena with a burden it cannot bear.

In my political fantasy world religion would have a regular and diverse dialogue with politics. There would be conversation, education, pluralism, and debate, rather than enmeshment with one misunderstood religion. Enmeshment happens in weak fearful system. In my religious fantasy world, religion provides hope, compassion, optimism, and courage, not fear and hell. In my religious fantasy world people pray for the safety of our leaders and candidates, their wisdom and humility (please, humility), a dissipation of hatred and prejudice, a greater love and value for humankind in all its beauty and diversity, and compassion and justice for the most vulnerable among us. It's my religious prayer. And in a world of political accommodation and tradeoffs, I am aware that my prayer is unrealistic. But I will still offer it, and remain in religion, not politics.

At its worst, religion is used to foment hate and intolerance, and neither politics nor religion can bear this burden with integrity. I recently received a copy of the DVD *Obsession: Radical Islam's War Against the West* in, is it possible, my Sunday *New York Times*? Yes, it is possible. A little research through *The Guardian* and *Huffington Post* (granted, liberal standard-bearers) indicates that this documentary highlighting Islamic violence has been distributed by unclear funding sources to voters in swing states, like Ohio in the past two months.

Putting on my political and religious hat, this is not coincidence, because Senator Obama, though a Christian, has a connection to Islam through his father. Some group or groups with a political agenda are misusing religion, nationalism, and fear to shape an election. In late September, several days after the *Dayton Daily News* agreed to distribute the DVD in its paper, there was an attack on the Dayton Mosque while over three hundred people, including children, were in attendance. Coincidence? Maybe, but I doubt it. So now someone with a political agenda used religion and hatred in a way that undermined our civil society. In just the last three weeks, a Dayton area resident hung an effigy of Senator Obama in his front yard. Now we have mixed politics with religious hatred, racism, and violence.

These are not proud moments for me as an American or as a person of faith.

Religion and politics are vital voices that need to speak with one another and remain separate. Senator Obama belongs to a congregation with a former pastor, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, who is outspoken and at times inflammatory on the issue of racial injustice and government negligence. That is the Reverend Wright's job as a minister in his urban neighborhood. I am not bothered that Senator Obama attends his congregation. As a minister, I am well aware that not every member here agrees with everything I say. It is the same for member of congregations around the world.

Likewise, I am not upset by Governor Palin's current attendance at an evangelical congregation, and former attendance at a Pentecostal congregation. Religiously, her congregation has different views that I do. They believe that the Bible is the inerrant word of God. I do not. But she has the *Constitutional* freedom to worship there, again, regardless of the inflammatory things her pastor says. And if they raise their hands and clap and speak in tongues and have a laying on of hands, they are free to do so. And those of us who think these religious behaviors are ignorant, just might be elitist and classist. These choices do not disqualify her as a viable candidate for office.

What does upset me though is an overlay of religion onto politics. I was uncomfortable with President Reagan's smooth acceptance and careless relationship with the Religious Right. I have had much more respect for both President George Bush, Sr. and Senator John McCain, for aligning themselves with policies that they believed met the best needs of the nation, even if they did not match the interests of the Religious Right and caused rifts within the conservative party.

The test for Senator Obama, Governor Palin, and any other candidate is how and when they let their religious values influence them in political office. Because they are politicians first, and if President, sworn to uphold the *Constitution*, I expect them to follow the laws of the land without religious preference or prejudice. This charge can only lead Presidential and Vice Presidential candidates into conflict with their religious values. It is inevitable because politics is about accommodation, compromise, trade-offs, and happy mediums, particularly when one leads an increasingly diverse nation. It is why Duck can comfortably write his memoirs, while I will be left with life's persistent questions until the day I die.

I do not believe that the majority of Americans are this discerning, though. To most Americans, religious or not, access to politicians and policies, is worth any cost. If any of the individuals who spread *Obsession* are Christian, I doubt they spent much time considering that Jesus taught his followers to "Love thy neighbor." As Wimberly notes, these sorts of situations discredit religion. He writes "And well that we should be

discredited and disgraced if we allow God's Word to become synonymous with some political word or candidate – if we allow ourselves to use or be used by a political candidate or party.”<sup>3</sup> The Interfaith Alliance asked me to sign a pledge and “stand up for religious freedom . . . by uphold[ing] certain standards during the election season.” Standards such as; refusing to endorse a candidate, preventing partisan speeches or materials in the congregation, and respecting candidates who have religious beliefs different from my own. It was the one piece of election communication that I received and gladly signed this season.

I encourage all of you to vote, this is part of our 5<sup>th</sup> principle and a religious value as Unitarian Universalists. You have the freedom to endorse any candidate or issue you choose. You have the freedom to advocate for those candidates outside this building, and issues inside and outside. You have the freedom to refuse to be used, the freedom to wear a political or religious hat (I just counsel you towards humility if you believe you have a seamless overlap), and the freedom to make an awful mess.

Maybe I shouldn't have been so irritated by the men at the door. Eventually I let them inside. They seemed too oblivious to be criminals. And in deference to our fifth principle, I am certain that somewhere in the Cincinnati area there does exist a polling station that will compromise the ability of citizens to vote. Best they check First Church off their list (which they immediately did once they saw the facility) and get on with their search. There will never be an easy balance between religion and politics, and for this I am grateful. We lack the humility and self-awareness for such a task. At best, we will have a rich dialogue, with plurality, education, greater understanding, and compassion for all, and that, in this election season, is my religious fantasy. I will go to the polls as a citizen and minister on November 4<sup>th</sup>, and proudly vote in accommodation and compromise, all the while praying for self-awareness and humility.

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<sup>3</sup> 24.