



FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF PHILADELPHIA

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A NATION OF RELIGIOUS MINORITIES

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I'm indebted to the insightful comments of those who responded to my request for feedback: Natalie Aydin, Reverend Paul Beedle, Justine Blau, Jeff Frankl, Ed Greenlee, Reverend Alex Holt, Eric Isaacson, Dan Johnson, Stephen Kramer, Linda Lord, Kate Luhr, Anne Slater, Mary Stomquist, and Dan Widyono.

Introducing the Lecture

Now, you know me. I am not a one-note preacher man. There are times you'll hear me offer a pastoral response to a national tragedy. Other days you'll receive a philosophical reflection upon the nature of life. Other times you'll watch me stand on my political soapbox and give an impassioned reflection about societal injustices. Then there are days when you'll find me playing a professorial role, which is indicative of my duty to do in-depth research on topics of moral significance. Today is such a day. And so class, please take out your notepads because after this lecture there will be a test.

Reading

In 1802, Thomas Jefferson wrote the following letter to the Danbury Baptists.

“Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man and his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," thus building a wall of separation between Church and State. Adhering to this expression of the supreme will of the nation in behalf of the rights of conscience, I shall see with sincere satisfaction the progress of those sentiments which tend to restore to man all his natural rights, convinced he has no natural right in opposition to his social duties. I reciprocate your kind prayers for the protection and blessing of the common father and creator of man, and tender you for yourselves and your religious association, assurances of my high respect and esteem.”¹

Nine years later, James Madison, another defender of religious freedom, wrote to the Baptists and affirmed that the "practical distinction between Religion and Civil Government is essential to the purity of both..."²

Madison further expanded his public position by saying, "We are teaching the world the great truth that Governments do better without Kings & Nobles than with them. The merit will be doubled by the other lesson that Religion flourishes in greater purity, without than with the aid of Government.”³

And so it has been woven into the legal fabric of our country: the imprint of the metaphor of the “wall of separation.” This grand experiment has shaped how our country has sought to govern a citizenry that comprises of many different religious interest groups. At times, the theology of the majority has been used to rule all; at other times the theology of the minority was protected. There have been wins for some and losses for many.

Before offering my lengthy lecture, please enjoy the following choral selection. It perfectly introduces my talk about our civic duty to form a more perfect union.

Would You Harbor Me?

*Words and Music by Ysaye M. Barnwell from
Sweet Honey in the Rock*

Would you harbor me? Would I harbor you?
Would you harbor me? Would I harbor you?

Would you harbor a Christian, a Muslim, a Jew,
A heretic, convict, or spy?

Would you harbor a runaway woman or child,
A poet, a prophet, a king?

Would you harbor an exile or a refugee,
A person living with AIDS?

Would you harbor a Tubman, a Garret, a Truth,
A fugitive or a slave?

Would you harbor a Haitian, Korean, or Czech,
A lesbian or a gay?

Would you harbor me? Would I harbor you?

From Monoculturalism to Multiculturalism

Do you believe the United States was established as a Christian nation, is currently a Christian nation,⁴ and will remain a Christian nation? Or do you believe that although the Founders came from a variety of Christian denominations they chose not to establish a state religion? This age-old debate leads us to recognize that even today, there remains a lack of unity among Christian traditions, demonstrating that there is not a unified religious majority in the United States. In a country with a plethora of Christian sects and a number of non-Christian traditions, pluralism already exists. We, therefore, need not wait for some future increase in non-western religions to face the complexities of diversity, because the problem of governing pluralism has always existed and will continue into the future. From my perspective, what is changing is our awareness that we are and will continue to be a nation of religious minorities.

With over 1,500 religious groups currently represented,⁵ the United States is arguably the most religiously diverse nation in the world. This is at a time when the fastest growing sector associates with no religion.⁶ In fact, the religious demographics in the United States have become increasingly complex, as the former predominant Christian traditions—Episcopal, Presbyterian and Congregationalist—have declined by 20 to 40 percent. “The United States now contains seven times more Muslim Americans (6 million), ten times more Buddhists (2 million), nine times more Hindus (1 million), and 220 times more Sikhs (220,000) than it did in 1970.”⁷

In response, there has been resistance to the erection of buildings associated with non-western religious groups, which suggests a new kind of religious animosity. You’ll remember that during the 2010 mid-term elections it became politically advantageous for some candidates to oppose the plans to renovate Park51, a Muslim Community Center in lower Manhattan. They used this issue in particular to tap into the public’s fear of Muslims in general. Could this be another example of history repeating itself?

Our nation acted from religious bias against “Quakers, Shakers, and Catholics in the 18th century; against Catholics, Jews, and Mormons in the 19th century; and against Catholics, Jews, and Sikhs in the early 20th century.”⁸ Today, policymakers remain fearful about the new outsiders: Muslims. By 2050, Muslims will surpass Jews to become the third largest denomination. Due to high fertility rates and immigration, non-white Latinos will help move Catholicism from one-quarter to one-third of the total population. In one generation, the historic Protestant majority will become a minority. In one generation, an abundance of non-western religions will have greater representation. In one generation the United States will be even more defined than it is today as a nation of religious minorities. What is a nation of religious minorities? It is a pluralist democracy where no one religious sect, or non-religious group holds the majority of the voting population.

Studies show that by the year 2050, the demographics of the United States will be in striking contrast to that of the country’s first census, which was reported in 1790. At the birth of our country, 75 percent of the voting population consisted of White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestants males (WASP).⁹ The remaining distinguishable ethnicities in the voting population included Dutch, French, German, Irish, and Swedish, and in smaller numbers, Belgian, Danish, Flemish, Italian, Norwegian, Polish, and Swiss. “If we include all the people living in what was the United States in 1790—African, European, and Native American—we find that about 40 percent were not Anglo Americans.”¹⁰ Despite this diversity WASPs made up 75 percent of the voting population, because some people were given more value than others.

And how did they govern in a time of emerging religious diversity? WASPs used their power to pass discriminatory laws against the Irish and Germans, who were primarily responsible for bringing Catholicism to a new republic that espoused principles of religious freedom. Political groups, like the *Supreme Order of the Star Spangled Banner*, began to organize violent hate campaigns against “alien riffraff”¹¹ by . . .

“raiding Irish and German homes, churches, schools, and businesses. Arson, vandalism, beatings, and murders occurred throughout the 1850s, with virtually every large northeastern city experiencing major disturbances. Organizing as the American Party, they elected 75 congressmen in 1854. By the next year they had elected six governors and many local officials.”¹²

This is an example of how a religious majority wrote their theology into law. They used the democratic process to prevent religious minorities from participating in their government. By the year 2050, will this theolegal¹³ behavior continue? Will coalitions of religious groups organize with the intent to elect officials who share their beliefs? Will some religious groups be more politically powerful than others and use their influence to write their theology into law? Or will the mere fact that there will be no one majority religion require that we, the people, govern our country differently than we have in the past?

Governing Pluralism: History Repeating Itself

The struggle to govern a pluralist democracy is not a new problem.¹⁴ In fact, some patterns in our past continue to plague our current debates. For instance, early in our history, controversies brewed when Quakers “refused to take their hats off in court”¹⁵ – a conflict that devout Muslim women are facing today when asked to remove their religious garb while testifying.

Ten years after the adoption of the U.S. Constitution the Senate ratified a treaty with an Islamic state which confirmed, quote, that “the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion.”¹⁶ Despite this explicit rhetoric, many public officials perceive our country to still be a Christian nation.¹⁷ At the time of Founding, “only between 8 and 17 percent of the colonists belonged to a recognized church,” suggesting that faith was a private and localized practice. In modern times, the striking decline in church attendance in Protestant mainline churches, and the increase in the number of the people who do not identify as religious, has led people of faith to be threatened by the increasing secularization of U.S. citizens.

The *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* predicts that the “sharpest gains for secularism will be within the white population, where secularists will surpass [Christian] fundamentalists by the year 2030.” However, due to the “relatively low fertility [rates] of secular Americans and the religiosity of the immigrant inflow” there will be a “countervailing force that will cause the secularization process within the total population to plateau before 2043.”¹⁸ These trends are likely to create increased tensions in the public arena. Martha Nussbaum notes that the propositions of the past which may

“have seemed common ground of all the religions (the singleness of God, the concern of God for human beings, the very existence of a deity) are now newly divisive – not simply dividing religious people from atheists and agnostics, but dividing monotheists from religious polytheists, and theists from members of nontheistic religions (Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and in some interpretations Unitarian Universalism).”¹⁹

And yet, even among such diversity Justice Scalia continues to claim that the government can publicly endorse monotheism and disregard polytheists, and that the Establishment Clause “permits the disregard of devout atheists.”²⁰ These kinds of remarks soil the fabric of our legal system. It is as if Scalia is trying to conjure up the Latin phrase used in 1648, *cuius regio, eius religio* – which means, “whose realm, his religion.”²¹ For too long, nations were governed by this explicit or tacit belief that if you rule the region, your religion will rule. This motto reflects the unfortunate fate of governments throughout human history, where religious tribes and territories formed to enact civil laws that shunned those with differing beliefs.

At the extremes, we have two common forms of governance in the world: theocracies, where one religion is used to make all law, and purely secular nations that use law to uphold the belief in freedom *from* religion. In theocracies like Iran, religious minorities such as the Baha’is are imprisoned and threatened with corporate execution; whereas in secular societies, such as France, religious minorities like Muslims and Sikhs are revolting because of policies that deny their right to wear garb but permit Christians to wear a cross. Both kinds of governments are mistaken. Islamic leaders mistake theocracy with unity when it is clear that there is an incredible amount of diversity within Islam. Civil leaders in France mistake secularism for hostility to religion, when the wall of separation is designed to be neutral to religion.²² When it comes to governing religious pluralism, both theocratic and secular systems of government have proven to be ineffective because they fuel bigotry, hostility, and violence.

There is a third kind of government, a middle ground that seeks to balance these two extremes. I call them *theolegal democracies* that vow *not* to establish a state religion but to permit freedom of belief. The United States is a theolegal democracy by recognizing that religion is but one part of a complex political system, which is why public officials have the freedom to

use God-talk in the public arena. Whether we like it or not, this practice strengthens democracy by inspiring people of faith to participate in their government without establishing a state religion.

Our imperfect theolegal system offers an alternate promise to the theocracies and the secular nations of the world: our elected officials vow never to enact laws *respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof*. Jefferson interpreted this to be the “building a wall of separation between Church and State.” At the time, the religious diversity consisted of various forms of Christianity. The fear was that one of those denominations would be chosen as the state’s church, thereby potentially threatening different Christian sects. Therefore, the term “separation of *church* and state” was appropriate for the times denoting the wall between Christian institutions and the civil institution. Aware that the United States has over 1,500 religious groups currently represented, it seems reasonable to modernize the term by saying, “separation of *religion* and state.” The purpose of this change is to illustrate the wall between the plethora of religious institutions and government.

Why is separation necessary in the 21st century? Put simply, the Establishment Clause is the mean by which the promise of liberty is achieved: it prohibits the state from either advancing or inhibiting religion and it prohibits an excessive entanglement of religion and the state. The Establishment Clause is the foundation by which freedom of religion has become not simply a political slogan but a fundamental human right.²³ This pledge has attracted a plethora of religious pilgrims to this promised land.

The First Amendment promise of free exercise of religion has become a lighthouse to all those around the world who wearily navigate through storms of persecution. As we gather during this hour, religious minorities throughout the world are being killed, literally killed, because a person in authority holds a different belief. There is violent unrest in the world—genocide in Libya, honor killings in India, religious-based apartheid in the Middle East, blasphemy laws in Pakistan, and on and on. As citizens of the United States, as citizens of the world, we need to demonstrate for all of humanity that pluralism can be peaceful, just, and equitable for all.

From Exclusion to Pluralism

The promise of religious freedom made 224 years ago has set our country on a trajectory toward pluralism. At first this promise was lived out through acts of exclusion. The colonies promised religious freedom for certain kinds of Christianities but denied it other others. Over time the promise was achieved through an ethic of tolerance. Our government said it would tolerate religious minorities as long as they succumb to the laws of the WASP majority. From tolerance our country evolved into a state of acceptance for some religious traditions, as noted by the increase in Catholics, Jews, and Mormons serving as political officials. This is one of many markers in our country’s struggle to make the dream of religious freedom a reality.

Over time, our population has become even more diverse, a sort of stressor which could bring us back into a state of mere tolerance for the new stranger who comes from non-western religions. After much discrimination and persecution of Muslims and Sikhs, for example, we’ve learned to promote religious diversity only to continue to remain intolerant of Atheists. It’s an all too common pattern in our society: we learn to stretch toward acceptance of diversity but then recoil to the practice of bigotry and then continue to elect a Christian political majority. In order to prevent our nation from becoming a *de facto* theocracy, the religious minorities in our country must participate in democracy to ensure that the God of the elite is not used to rule all.

The only way out of these growing pains is to move from exclusion to tolerance, and from acceptance to diversity into an authentic state of pluralism. Diversity may be the existence of difference but pluralism is the engagement of those differences.²⁴

Diana Eck from Harvard's Pluralism Project reminds us that *pluralism* and *diversity* are not synonymous. Diversity is "splendid, colorful, perhaps threatening" but pluralism is our collective commitment to be actively engaged with that diversity. Pluralism "requires some knowledge of our differences" and makes rooms for individuals and communities to make "real and different religious commitments." This requires a sophisticated understanding that our differences cannot be categorized as one and the same. Rather the promise of religious freedom is lived out when, as Diana Eck states, "people of every faith or of none" are invited "to be themselves, with all their particularities, and yet to be engaged in [co-]creating a civil society, through the critical and self-critical encounter with one another." The purpose is not to achieve...

"agreement on matters of conscience and faith, but [to] achiev[e] a vigorous context of discussion and relationship. *E Pluribus Unum*, "out of many, one," envisions one people, a common sense of a civic "we," but not one religion, one faith, one conscience. *Unum* does not mean uniformity. Perhaps the most valuable thing people of many faiths have in common is their commitment to a society based on the give and take of the civil dialogue at a common table."

Conclusion

I say, let this house of worship be such a table. Just as the United States Constitution is a grand experiment in religious freedom, so Unitarian Universalism is a grand experiment in religious pluralism. Why is this our aim? We are preparing ourselves to be responsible citizens in a pluralist democracy. In this way, we become poised to help our fellow citizens move beyond the patterns of exclusion, beyond the mere tolerance of difference, moving toward a pluralist democracy where the separation of religion and state becomes the scaffolding for religious freedom.

I say, let this church be not separate from different religions but let our community seek to respect and understand a plurality of beliefs. Let this church be not separate from our government but a reasonable participant in upholding the promise of religious freedom. Such freedom will allow for a deeper understanding of one another, a greater harmony among the people, and most of all a stronger commitment to make the promise of religious freedom a reality.

May it be so on this day and all the days to come.

Closing Hymn

This is My Song

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*This is my song, O God of all the nations,
A song of peace for lands afar and mind.
This is my home, the country where my heart is,
Here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine;
But other hearts in other lands are beating
With hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.*

*My country's skies are bluer than the ocean
And sunlight beams on clover-leaf and pine,
But other lands have sunlight to, and clover,
And skies are everywhere as blue as mine.
O hear my son, thou God of all the nations,
A song of peace for their land and for mine.*

Spoken Benediction

Please reach across the aisle to hold hands. Do you remember me saying that after the lecture there would be a test? Okay, here's the test.

Spend your days reaching out your hand to those who are different from you; lean in and listen to their stories and then invite them to participate in this great experiment called pluralism. In doing so, you live out the promise of Unitarian Universalism while supporting our Constitution's promise to religious freedom.

Such a test will take more than our lifetime to pass, because as we have learned from our ancestors there will be many failures. But this is a test worth preparing for – so prepare not only yourself, but also future generations to responsibly participate in a nation of religious minorities.

Class dismissed.

Notes

¹ Jefferson, Thomas (1802) Letter to the Danbury Baptist Association, January 1, 1802.

² Madison, James (1811), Letter to Baptist Churches in North Carolina, June 3, 1811

³ Madison, James (1822), Letter to Edward Livingston, July 10, 1822

⁴ The U.S. Religious Landscape Survey (2008) 26 percent of the population is Evangelical Protestant; 24 percent Catholics; 18 percent Mainline Protestant; 7 percent Historically Black Protestant; 1.7 percent Mormon; and 0.3% "other Christian." Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, Pew Foundation.

⁵ Parillo, location 1,556.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ Parillo, 1,556

⁸ Parillo, location 1,603.

⁹ A term popularized by E. Digby Baltzell in his 1964 book *The Protestant Establishment: Aristocracy and Caste in America*. Yale University Press, reprinted 1987.

¹⁰ Parillo, location 890.

¹¹ Kennedy, David M.; Cohen, Lizabeth; Bailey, Thomas A. (2009). *The American Pageant, Volume I: A History of the American People: To 1877* (14th revised ed.). Cengage Learning. p. 314.

¹² Parrillo, location 1,153-1,155.

¹³ For a complete discussion of this term, please see "An Introduction to the Theolegal Theory" in our forthcoming book, *Whose God Rules? Is the United States a Secular Nation or a Theolegal Democracy?* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

¹⁴ In fact, governing pluralism is not a modern problem as noted by scholar Anver M. Emon in "*Non-Muslims in Islamic Law.*" In *Encyclopedia of Legal History*. Ed. Stanley N. Katz. 4:233-235. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹⁵ Nussbaum, Martha (2008). *Liberty of Conscience: In Defense of America's Tradition of Religious Equality*. New York, NY: Basic Books. p. 26

¹⁶ "As the Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion; as it has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion, or tranquility, of Mussulmen; and, as the said States never entered into any war, or act of hostility against any Mahometan nation, it is declared by the parties, that no pretext arising from religious opinions, shall ever produce an interruption of the harmony existing between the two countries."

¹⁷ In response to the terrorism of a few Muslim extremists Lt. General William Boykin said in 2003 that we must go to war because, quote, "we're a Christian nation, because our foundation and roots are Judeo-Christian and the enemy is a guy named Satan." In 2006 Barack Obama stated that "We are no longer just a Christian nation, but we are also a Jewish nation, a Muslim nation, a Buddhist nation, a Hindu nation..." to which former Governor Sarah Palin remarked in 2010, "Hearing any leader declare that America isn't a Christian nation and poking an ally like

Israel in the eye [is] mind-boggling...” (David, Teddy and Matt Loffman, *Sarah Palin’s ‘Christian Nation’ Remarks Spark Debate: Advocates of Church-State Separation Say Palin Is Distorting Founders’ Intent*, ABC News, April 20, 2010.)

¹⁸ Skirbekk, Vegard and Anne Goujon (2010) *Secularism, Fundamentalism or Catholicism? The Religious Composition of the United States to 2043*. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (2010) 49(2):293-310.

¹⁹ Nussbaum, Martha (2008). *Liberty of Conscience: In Defense of America’s Tradition of Religious Equality*. New York, NY: Basic Books. p. 5.

²⁰ The full quote reads, “With respect to public acknowledgment of religious belief, it is entirely clear from our Nation’s historical practices that the Establishment Clause permits this disregard of polytheists and believers in unconcerned deities, just as it permits the disregard of devout atheists.” *McCreary County, Kentucky v. ACLU*, 545 U.S. (2005), Scalia, J. dissenting.

²¹ Nussbaum, Martha (2008). *Liberty of Conscience: In Defense of America’s Tradition of Religious Equality*. New York, NY: Basic Books p. 35

²² For further discussion see Amarta Sen’s book *The Argumentative Indian*, chapter four “Secularism and Its Discontents” which highlights how in India the concept of “secular” implies the plurality of religion not the exclusion of it. Special thanks to Paul Beedle for brining this to my attention.

²³ See Article 18 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which reads, “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

²⁴ Eck, Diana (2010) *From Diversity to Pluralism*, Harvard University “The Pluralism Project.”