

A Religion of Values

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One of the hottest buzz words in recent public discourse is the word "values." Beginning with the preachers of the religious right and their political collaborators who, some years ago, began talking about "family values" in a way which suggested that the term was code for a program aimed at forcing women back into the kitchen, gays and lesbians back into the closet, and African-Americans into the back of the bus, the concern for values has spread to middle of the road and even liberal politicians and commentators until a call for return to traditional values can be heard from virtually every quarter.

Caught up in this discussion of values are many of the fears, frustrations and discontents of our time. Whatever is wrong with our nation--from random violence, to political corruption and ineptitude, to homelessness and poverty--is now being described as a crisis of values. Implicit in the discussion is the assumption that once upon a time there was a system of values to which we all were loyal and that the solution to the problems which beset us is to be found in a return to the old ways, the old beliefs, the old behaviors.

Anyone who has read even a little American history will know that there has always been a plethora of family styles among us, that despite the efforts of the public schools to fashion out of our stubborn heterogeneity one people adhering to a single standard of virtue, we have never achieved that dream, that from the very beginning there has always been a violent streak in our culture which from time to time and place to place erupts through the veneer of civility, and that from the very beginning our political leaders, those who manage our corporate life, have never been held in high esteem. Consequently, I doubt that the solution to the problems confronting us is to be found in an effort to return to a past which never existed outside our elementary school readers.

That does not mean, however, that the question of values, the standards by which we live, is unimportant or irrelevant. Indeed, the fact that there has always been a competition between value systems in this country makes it all the more important that we be clear in our own minds what it is we treasure, what dreams lure us and what values we serve. This is particularly true in times like these when change is rapid and often disruptive. This morning, an occasion when we welcome new members among us, I would like to discuss with you the values which underlie and inform the religious movement of which we, in this congregation, are a part.

Some years ago, Robert Miller of Tufts University conducted a study of the value system of Unitarian Universalists and compared the results with an earlier study, using the same instruments, of major Christian and Jewish groups. The results were quite surprising.

Given the fact that Unitarian Universalism has generally been regarded as part of the religious, the social, the political, the intellectual establishment of this nation, Miller had expected to find that individual Unitarian Universalists shared most of the value system which characterized the other major religious groups in the United States. However, after all the data had been analyzed, it was quite clear that Unitarian Universalists, to a surprising degree, embraced a value system which differed significantly from that of most of the other religious groups which had been surveyed.

Miller described the difference by making a distinction between moral values and competence values. The Christian and Jewish groups surveyed placed a high degree of importance on moral values--on bravery, obedience, cleanliness, honesty, reverence, national security, a comfortable life, happiness--what one was referred to as "the boy scout virtues." While not dismissing these moral values, Unitarian Universalists consistently rated competence values--self-respect, wisdom, inner harmony, mature love and an exciting life--higher on the scale than the moral values which were the major concern of other religious groups.

There was one other distinction between Unitarian Universalists and most other religious groups. The majority of religious groups rated salvation as a primary concern--virtually equating concern for salvation with being religious. Unitarian Universalists betrayed their distinction in the way they handled that value. The instrument Miller used called for the people being surveyed to take eighteen pre-pasted strips on which words were printed and paste them in order of importance on a form provided, with the most important being number one and the least important being number eighteen.

Unitarian Universalists were not content with listing salvation as number eighteen. They were concerned to demonstrate that they considered this a profoundly negative concept. So, some of them pasted the word salvation under the line; some inserted it upside down on line eighteen; some pasted it sideways on the margin of the page; some relegated it to the back of the page, and many simply threw the word away, refusing to give it any place in their value system. Unlike other religious groups, Unitarian Universalists could see no value in the promise of absolute and final salvation.

Miller pondered the meaning of his study. To begin with, he concluded that internally we are not as diverse a group as we sometimes think we are. Among us, he found a remarkable consensus in the area of values. Our sense of diversity may derive from the fact that we differ so strongly from the other religious groups which make up this nation. Beyond this, it is clear that our values focus on the individual rather than the group, and center on a concern for meaning in our own lives. For us the primary function of the group is to support that effort. More than this, in searching for mature love, wisdom, self-respect, inner harmony, and an exciting life, we seem prepared to forego security and finality, and to embrace some level of risk and uncertainty as the best path to that meaningful life. For us there are few absolutes to which we must conform our lives. Rather, there are personal goals and a variety of avenues for approaching those goals. The value structure embraced by Unitarian Universalists reveals a conviction that ultimately we are responsible to ourselves for the lives we live and for the impact of those lives

upon the world around us, that we can only meet our obligations to others if first we be true to ourselves, and that our success or failure is to be judged by how we live, here and now, with ourselves and with others around us. It is not that we do not care about community, nor is it that we feel no obligation to others, but rather that we believe that genuine community must be rooted in a respect for the individual and that we meet our obligation to others best out of the fullness and richness of our own lives.

Miller was right to see in the results of his survey a remarkable and unique religious vision within Unitarian Universalism and his conclusions are supported by a recent study by researchers at The City University of New York, published in a book entitled *ONE NATION UNDER GOD*. Whereas much of religion seems devoted to inculcating obedience to authority and to objective standards, Unitarian Universalists have emphasized the importance of integrity, of personal responsibility, and the validity of personal experience as a standard for judgment and action. Our concern in the area of values is relational and situational: not what do the rules require of me, but what kind of person am I becoming, and how do I relate to those around me in this concrete circumstance.

Nor is this value system a recent development among us, the result of the disruptions and alarms of the twentieth century. Indeed, at the very beginning of our movement, it is possible to see that emergent value system at work. In 1553, in the Protestant city of Geneva, Switzerland, under the leadership of John Calvin, Michael Servetus, a Spanish physician and theologian, was led from his prison cell, taken to a public square and there, with his books piled around him and strapped to him, was burned to death. Servetus' crime had been his stubborn determination to proclaim the truth as he understood it, to proclaim that truth by whatever means available to him. Servetus was not part of a movement, was not the founder of a sect, was not the leader of a cult. He was an individual with an idiosyncratic vision of the nature of God and humanity and the relation between them. Yet we have always been drawn to this lone individual, stubbornly clinging to his vision of truth, seeing in him an early martyr to our vision of religious values.

Calvin defended the burning of Servetus by insisting that there is an absolute truth, an immutable system of values which must be accepted and embraced in order that human society may continue and human individuals may find salvation. Servetus, by challenging that truth, by refusing obedience to the conventional wisdom, endangered the immortal souls of all who heard him or read his works. Therefore, public safety demanded that he be silenced forever and his books be destroyed.

Most of the leaders of Christian Europe concurred in the decision to execute this rebellious man. Certainly the Catholics did not object. The Inquisition had already condemned Servetus as a heretic and would have burned him had he not escaped their clutches. The Protestants, fearing that his heresy in denying the doctrine of the trinity would bring their new religious reforms into disrepute, were glad to be rid of him. But one man did not concur. In Basel, Sabastian Castellio raised a voice in lonely protest. He said, in part:

I do not defend Servetus. I have never read his books. Calvin burned them together with their author.... Calvin asks how doctrine is to be guarded if heretics are not to be punished....To burn a man is not to defend a doctrine, *it is to burn a man*....However we differ in opinion, why cannot we love one another?

In many ways, Castellio was more the fore-runner of Unitarian Universalism than Servetus. It was Castellio who insisted that religion as he understood it was based upon a concern for the individual rather a commitment to correct doctrine. Castellio insisted that it is wrong to persecute people because they differ on obscure doctrines; that the sharing of opinion threatens neither the community nor the individual, that love for the individual and freedom of expression form the essential basis of true religion and morality and social order. What is more, it was out of his own sense of integrity, his fullness of being that Castellio found the impetus to challenge John Calvin and the dominant opinion of society, despite the dangers to himself.

In his vision of the true religion and the moral state, Castellio prefigured the value system upon which Unitarian Universalism would be based. Later, in Poland, the Unitarians often would find themselves divided over issues of doctrine. They debated each other strenuously. Yet they regularly concluded their debates with a ritual in which they admonished each other that differences of opinion were not to become a basis for division, and pledged that they would respect honest differences and live together in peace. In Transylvania, Unitarians extended tolerance beyond the confines of their own community of faith to include their fiercest enemies. In New England, Ralph Waldo Emerson led Unitarians into a personal and individual relation to the holy and the sacred, giving us our unique mystical vision and our peculiar spiritual vocabulary. Emerson taught us that every individual is an expression of the sacred, that every individual is an inlet of holy truth; that by attending to our experience of the world and listening to the voice within us we can discover our own path to mature love, to wisdom, to self-fulfillment, to an exciting life. And most of us still share that vision, even if we have never read Emerson.

And in Summit, New Jersey, the statement of purpose contained in our constitution affirms this ancient tradition: "We unite to seek truth, to serve humankind, and to dwell together in peace, reserving to all individuals the right to their own beliefs concerning the nature of God, humanity and the universe." The mission statement which was created just last year echoed the same concern as we affirmed that our mission is "to be a welcoming and inclusive regional congregation supportive of the individual's religious and ethical quest."

The values which modern Unitarian Universalist share have a long and vital history. Throughout our history, we have been that religion which believes that people are called to integrity, not obedience, to self-fulfillment, not salvation, to wisdom, not doctrine, to mature love of others which presumes love of self, to an exciting life rather than to resignation. Throughout our history, we have been that religion which believes that the community exists to further the growth of the individual, rather than the other way around. Throughout our history, we have been that religion which believes that only

through self respect, self fulfillment, self care and a fierce concern for personal integrity can we develop the resources to act responsibly, with compassion and empathy toward others, to contribute creatively and significantly to the community and to the larger world. Throughout our history, we have been that religion which believes that the sacred is not to be found in revered dogmas and unchanging truth but is to be discovered in the evolutionary process by which new truths, greater understanding, larger wisdom is ever emerging among us. Throughout our history, we have been that religion which "reverses the past, but trusts the dawning future more."

This makes of us a peculiar people. Our trust is in the process, not the product. Our hope is in the individual whose vision carries beyond what is and challenges us to consider what might be. Our conviction is that empowered individuals provide the only reliable basis for creative rather than demonic community. Our commitment is to support each other in realizing the power and the vision and the creative truth that is in us and to work together for a world in which that kind of support is present for all, without regard to race, or creed or social condition. Ours is a religion focused upon a peculiar set of values. As a consequence, we are a peculiar people. We find our attention riveted upon future possibility rather than past accomplishment; we find ourselves concerned for emergent truth rather than finished revelation; we find ourselves seeking the holy in that which arises among us and within us; we find ourselves trusting that life was meant not to be grimly endured, but to lived with excitement, as a great adventure the goal of which is to discover who we are, and what is of value, and how we can live together and love one another, enriched by the differences among us.