

## **Godless Morality**

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As a clergy person I have no quarrel with anyone's right to invoke an Almighty God of his/her choice. But when God interferes with democratically accepted morality, it is time to set limits. This is not to say that I deem God to be trespassing on the proper functioning of government.

Those limits were set by the Founders of our country. How prescient those men were (and one local Quincy lady as well). How could they have known that two hundred and sixty years later that their then fairly homogenous population (if you didn't count native Indians, which they did not) would have become a melting pot of Jews, Catholics, Protestants, of Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, spiritualists; and each one of them with a different concept of Deity and civic morality.

The simple deistic nature of the God of Jefferson, Paine, Franklin in 1778, and we must not omit the Adamses, has been altered, bowdlerized, personalized almost beyond recognition. Their eighteenth century's deistic God created the world and left it to fend for itself. Today's personalized Father God is yet another creation. He has become a sexless spirit, called upon to bless the good, punish the bad, censor moral values of the day -- all foreign to what the Founders had in mind. So-called New Age theology promotes a God who is sweetness and light, one in whom belief makes one feel real good and presents no moral challenge.

A democratic society like the United States of America must be morally just and theologically neutral. Theology has no place in foreign affairs, education, welfare or in the civil lives of such a diverse population as ours.

More and more we see this separation of church and state eroding, so discreetly is religious morality introduced into ritual or law that one hardly notices. Today the religious ideology of influential denominations has invaded civil law to such an extent that we can no longer avoid the charge that separation of church and state has become a myth.

There is a very fine line between myth and fact. As long as every time I must pledge allegiance to the United States as "One Nation under God," the state is ineluctably associated with religion. As long as every President of the United States must take his oath of office with one hand on the Holy Bible and conclude his oath with the words "So help me God" the separation of church and state is mythic.

As long as "faith based" organizations are financed by US taxpayers to perform social services mandated by law to be performed by secular government agencies there can be no separation of church and state. As long as the United States courts allow money designed for public education to be diverted to parochial schools where religion is taught,

rather than to repair deplorable, damaged inner city schools, there is no true separation of church and state. As long as every morning the staff meeting of the Attorney General of the United States opens with mandatory prayer and Bible study (always the Christian Bible), the separation between church and state is at least problematic.

Here are a few reasons for declaring the vaunted separation of church and state a myth. Authoritative religions are a threat to a free democratic society. Our nation, our Unitarian and Universalist values presuppose secular foundations. These values are created by the community, with the consent and authority of its citizens, not by a religious hierarchy. The community, not the church, whatever its denomination, sets the moral values for the entire community.

This, it seems to me, is what defines a democratic society. And it is this very freedom which I perceive to be eroding before our indifferent eyes. Whether through civil anomie or political chicanery, democracy is being invaded with moral strictures deriving from a presumptuous religious vision. Not only in politics but in almost every phase of modern life, at home and abroad.

It is a cosmic paradox that human beings are set down in an ethically neutral amoral world, and in the process of evolving attempt to create law and order out of chaos. We owe a debt of gratitude to world religions for their contribution to humanizing our animal spirit. But when religious institutions become stratified and politically powerful, it is time for civil society to assert its right to determine its own moral values and prevent private prejudices from becoming public law.

The Constitution of the United States guarantees its citizens freedom of religion. Perhaps it should have gone one step farther and guaranteed us freedom from religion. There is something arrogant and ego-centered in narrow minds of political leaders who make theological pronouncements.

In a New York Times interview with the then Governor of Texas, George W. Bush, Sam Howe Verhovek reported something as disingenuous as it is pretentious

George Walker Bush was visiting his parents in the White House one day when the talk turned to religion. 'Mother and I were arguing -- not arguing, having a discussion -- and discussing who goes to heaven,' ..... Bush pointed to the Bible, 'Only Christians have a place in heaven.' And she said, 'Surely God will accept others.'

He said 'Mom, look, all I can tell you is what the New Testament says,' And she says, 'OK,' and picks up the phone and says to the White House operator, 'Get me Billy Graham.' And Bush said, 'Mother, what are you doing?'

Bush told Verhovek that Graham, when called upon to referee this theological dispute, told them he agreed with George W. 'from a personal perspective,' but then gently admonished both mother and son: 'I want to caution both. Who are you two to be God?' (from Bush by Molly Ivins)

Who, indeed. I worry when law and morality become legislated by theological nincompoops, when a contaminated theology impinges on a secular society. A democratic society requires a secular ethos which accepts and respects all persons: theists, atheists, true believers, believers of whatever fantastic cults or other theological misapprehensions, as long as their antics do not derail people of contrary views and are of no danger to the community.

Public prayer and other religious manifestations in a public setting do not foster or protect public morals. On the contrary they impose private spirituality on others. There is a tension between morality and theology just as there is a tension between reality and wishful thinking. One's religious beliefs must of necessity reflect one's morality but not impose it on others.

For democracy to function and flourish there must be common moral values which preempt any and all personal creeds and dogmas. Fine as they may be, the authority of the Ten Commandments must not trump the authority of the first Ten Amendments to the constitution of the United States.

The operable word is authority. Authority for orthodox religion derives from faith in absolute values handed down to a willing constituency by an unelected hierarchy, the perpetuation of tribal rites.

The authority for a democratic society derives from the rule of the people. Civil authority creates civil laws whose sole function is to maintain a decent, peaceable society, communities in which people may live together to attain those great goals: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

When a law no longer serves these purposes it may be amended, corrected or, as is generally the case simply ignored. At the time when my thirteenth great grandfather was minister here in Quincy, it was unlawful on Sunday to kiss your wife (or, I presume anyone else's wife).

Religious institutions are welcome to establish their own moral standards as to what they may eat, drink, copulate and otherwise conduct their lives. They have no right to introduce religious ritual into secular law.

Without moral and ethical values there can be no viable civil society. Whatever important part institutional religion may have played in creating it, the time has come to set limits on its further incursions and remove whatever vestige of power any one religion has over society at large.

So the question before the house is not: Have institutional religions exceeded their mission and must be abolished? Rather, the critical question is: With the multiplicity of religions, , must we be enslaved by any one particular religion?

Furthermore, must we believe in God (or even gods) to be moral? ... To be religious? Greek gods certainly served no such purposes. Is secular humanity subject to some higher power which in some inscrutable way sets moral standards for our behavior? Does there exist a moral law in which one size fits all?

To Unitarian Universalists such questions are beneath the dignity of a response. As a religious group we are in general accord that there is at most one God. Humanists amongst us agree that God is an idea which has indisputable reality solely in the mind of each individual believer.

What unanimity there is amongst us is that we are all on a religious search; that this search takes us beyond the narrow confines of alleged Judeo-Christian truths. That we are our own arbiters in our search for moral values and religious beliefs.

But is this really so? Ralph Waldo Emerson, godfather of liberal religion, puts a different spin on morality and from whence come our moral laws. They begin with each individual, expand through family into community, and ultimately the world.

Moral values just do not happen and the God to which Emerson attributes moral laws he calls 'the God within us.' Moral laws teach us through childhood learning, he tells us: 'The action of light, motion, gravity, muscular force come first.

Only after learning these basics do moral values grow. Ultimately Emerson concludes, 'If one is at heart just, then so far is he God.'

Far from this being a theological statement it is a progression of human growth from animal to human. Yet a godless morality is not enough. It is not enough that you and I observe what we believe to be moral acts. Immanuel Kant who recognized that morality is meaningless as long as it is limited, wrote in *The Metaphysics of Morals* there can be 'only a single categorical imperative and it is this: Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.'

Morality begins with each individual deciding what is ethical, what is just. This gets filtered through the give and take of family life. It flows through small communities like this church, and eventually works its way into national and international morality. Thus is each of us part of a whole network of godless morality.

To change the metaphor, I give you this thought from Harry Emerson Fosdick: 'We ask the leaf, 'Are you complete in yourself?' And the leaf answers, 'No, my life is in the branches.' We ask the branch and the branch answers, 'No. My life is in the root.' We ask the root and it answers, 'No, my life is in the trunk, and the branches, and the leaves. Keep the branches stripped of leaves and I shall die.' Nothing is completely and merely individual.'

As it is with the oak tree, so also is it with the tree of life.

Amen.