

Notes From The Religious Left: A Manifesto Against Theocracy

**a reflection
by Rev. Bill Gupton**

**Sunday, Sep. 18, 2005
Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church
Cincinnati, Ohio**

This past Friday, my fourth-grade son – along with, apparently, virtually every school-child in America – took part in a mandated, civic exercise called “Constitution Day” – a celebration of the 218th anniversary of the signing of the Constitution of the United States.

Two days earlier, this past Wednesday, a federal judge in California declared another ubiquitous schoolroom practice – the reciting of the Pledge of Allegiance – to be unconstitutional. That decision, needless to say, will be appealed – and will eventually, find its way to the John Roberts Supreme Court.

My friends, these are important days in which we live. Important times for our children, for our grandchildren, for future generations of Americans – because what kind of country they will live in, is being determined – in these days, in our time. And anyone who doesn’t believe there is a culture war taking place right now, has his or her head in the sand. What is happening, before our very eyes, each and every week here in America, is a desperate, ideological tug-of-war between two drastically different worldviews, two different – and deeply-held – visions of what America stands for, and what America should become.

Those of you who might now be expecting me to express my righteous indignation at the compulsory nature of what my son did on Friday, will perhaps be disappointed in what I am about to say. The fact is, I’m quite glad that the public school teachers of America were – in effect – required, by a stroke of President Bush’s pen, to teach our children about the

Constitution this week. I do not mind at all that Patrick and his peers had to read, recite, and discuss the Preamble – after all, I made sure, before he left the breakfast table that morning, that Patrick remembered, and was able to articulate, who had written those words – just who Thomas Jefferson was, and what he meant to not only Unitarianism, but to the ideal of freedom of religion, in America and around the world.

No, if anything, my issue with this brief, almost perfunctory reflection on our nation's Constitution lies in what was not covered that day. What was not recited. Words, in fact, that I wish the next generation would recite every so often. Words that come a bit after the Preamble: the very first words of the Bill of Rights, the First Amendment – the words I've printed at the top of your church bulletin today: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

For like Jefferson, I believe those words – if followed, if adhered to – have the power to save us, as a nation. I believe those words – if taken to heart and lived out – could resolve many of the issues facing our fractured society today. But, also like Jefferson, I fear there will always be those who would prefer to do just the opposite – and in these dangerous and important times, I do not for a minute underestimate their power, or their resolve.

It was Jefferson who, having been one of the primary architects of American colonial liberation from what was then the most powerful nation on earth – having also been the victor in elections and political struggles so contentious and divisive that we (who know a bit about such things ourselves) cannot even imagine them – it was Jefferson who wrote in his diary that the battle to maintain religious freedom against forces who would curtail it, was "the severest contest in which I ever engaged."

Friends, I stand here today to say that the struggle to maintain religious freedom is also the severest contest – and the most important – in which we may ever engage.

Stop and consider for a moment just where we are. We are in the sanctuary – and I mean that word in every sense of the word – of a Unitarian Universalist church. We are in a sanctuary where not only dissenting religious views and differing beliefs are voiced – we are in a sanctuary that itself is the physical manifestation of an institution of free religion. If there's nothing else I learned at All Souls Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and at the

Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California, it is this – that a Unitarian Universalist church only exists because there is religious freedom, and it exists for the purpose of preserving, protecting, and defending that religious freedom.

That is why, I was taught, we are here this and every Sunday morning. That is why we gather here, week after week, year after year – not to provide a pleasant worship experience, though that is important. Not to create a loving and supportive community of seekers, though that is important. But to show to the world what religious freedom looks like – and to perpetuate that freedom, through the generations.

In short – as we will explore in greater depth tonight in our adult discussion group – this and other Unitarian Universalist churches represent the vision of our nation’s founders – a vision immemorially summed up in those first words of the Bill of Rights: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

But I am also here this morning to declare, unequivocally, that there are many – far too many – for whom these words, these lofty ideals, are but an impediment, an obstacle to be overcome, on their way to creating an America dominated by Christian fundamentalists. I am here this morning to issue a warning, and a call to action, for all of us, as people of faith, as carriers of the torch of religious freedom. I am here today to say that the so-called Religious Right, in America today, has become far too powerful – politically, economically, culturally – and that their arrogant, absolutist efforts, no longer hidden behind a veil of secrecy, are aimed at nothing less than establishing their religion as the religion of this land.

Make no mistake – I have no problem with those on the “religious right” practicing their religion. My problem comes when they seek to make me and my family practice theirs, when they seek to turn what is also my country into a nation whose laws conform to their religious doctrine. And there’s no other way to put it, folks – that’s just what the leaders of the Religious Right – and many of the politicians they have placed in power in America today – ultimately hope to do.

For those among you who will dismiss this claim as mere paranoia, as yet another baseless “conspiracy theory,” I want to take some time now to introduce you to the history of the movement broadly known as the

Religious Right – and to share with you some of the thoughts, and the words, of its leaders and adherents.

For much of the following information, I am indebted to the Center for Religion, Ethics, and Social Policy at Cornell University...

In 1973, a man named Paul Weyrich, a former consultant for the Barry Goldwater campaign, formed an institute called the Heritage Foundation. This organization – which, unfortunately, bears the same name as this church – eventually birthed a couple of much more well-known groups: the “Moral Majority” and the “Christian Coalition.”

Weyrich and the Heritage Foundation had a very simple, single-minded mission: To alter the balance of power in American politics by expanding the base of the Republican Party.

And how did they seek to accomplish that goal? By their own admission, and by notes and draft documents dating back to those early years, they targeted fundamentalist, Pentecostal and charismatic Christian churches, seeking to turn them into grassroots political outposts.

Throughout the 1970s, unbeknownst to just about everyone – including, it seems, many members of the churches themselves – the foot soldiers of the Heritage Foundation began to infiltrate and eventually dominate many conservative Christian congregations – churches that up until that time had traditionally demonstrated what in Theology 101 we used to call the “preferential option for the poor” – that Bible-based, Jesus-demonstrated vision of helping those in need, reaching out to those who are suffering, giving a helping hand to the poor and destitute, standing up against the powers and principalities of injustice and domination.

Gradually, such Christian ideals were replaced, in the congregations now controlled by the nascent Religious Right, with a narrowing focus on saving America from the perceived “enemies of righteousness” – feminists, gay people, liberals and the like. And so, the seeds of fear and distrust were planted – seeds that have flowered into the kind of culture war we witness all around us today.

As I say, back then, all this took place underground. No one noticed – or, if they did, they dismissed it as a problem of the fringe, an issue of concern only for those with radical religious beliefs, not the mainstream of America.

How far we have come! Today these things take place front and center, and are celebrated publicly. Here is the front page of the Local Section of the Cincinnati Enquirer, dated August 26, 2005. The headline is so large I probably don't need to read it to you, but it says, "Patriot Pastors Recruited."

Wow, I thought, when I read this, I'm a pastor. I'm a patriot. Where do I sign up?

Well, not really – because I knew full well, as soon as I saw it, what this article was really about. And sure enough, there's a picture of the Republican candidate for governor of Ohio, Ken Blackwell, schmoozing with Rev. Russell Johnson, minister at the 2500-member Fairfield Christian Church, during a meeting at Kings Island Conference Center – where, says the article, hundreds of ministers – "evangelicals, Pentecostals, Baptists, and a smattering of Catholics ... were being recruited" by Rev. Johnson to join a Heritage Foundation-like group called the Ohio Restoration Project, an organization that hopes to "recruit an army of more than 2,000 pastors" who – again quoting the article – "will promise to fulfill a very special mission that combines the spiritual with the political."

Let it be noted that Blackwell addressed the group of pastors while holding a microphone in one hand and a Bible in the other. Let it also be noted that, as the article reports, "by the time the two-hour lunch had finished, many [ministers] had filled out cards left on their seats [and] volunteered to become one of Johnson's 'patriot pastors'."

By the way, the slogan of the Ohio Restoration Project is this: "America has a mission to share a living Savior with a dying world."

The wall of separation between church and state which Jefferson fought so hard to insure is crumbling, folks – in America, in Ohio, right here in our own backyard. And so, I ask you today: What are we going to do about it?

Are we going to sit idly by and tisk-tisk our way into obscurity? Are we going to wring our hands and commiserate with one another – preaching, as it were, only to the choir, sharing our thoughts and concerns only with those

we know will agree with us? Or are we going to start raising hell about these blatant violations of the Constitution – these blatant violations of our constitutional rights?

But perhaps you are not yet convinced there's anything to really be worried about. If that is the case, listen for a moment to the following:

“ Our goal is a Christian nation... We don't [just] want equal time; we don't want pluralism... We have a Biblical duty, we are called by God, to conquer this country.” Those are the words, as quoted in the Indiana News-Sentinel, of Randall Terry – founder and leader of the virulent and violent anti-abortion group Operation Rescue, and most recently self-appointed spokesperson for the parents of the late Terry Schiavo.

Or listen to these words: “It is our job to elect only born-again believers to public office. If office-holders aren't Christian, and refuse to obey the laws of God, we must work ... to unseat them.” So wrote the man who finished third in last week's primary for the mayor of Cincinnati, Charlie Winburn.

Or how about this: “[At last] we can see the majority shifting on the [Supreme] Court. Instead of going 4-5 against the Lord, [now it will] go 5-4 in His favor” (that “His” was with a capital “H,” by the way). Those are the words of Pat Robertson, upon learning of the latest vacancy on the Supreme Court.

Robertson, of course, is the same good Christian who recently advocated for the assassination of a democratically-elected South American president, the same good man whose insane daily diatribes would be easy to dismiss as just that – except for the fact that they reach millions of viewers every day, and bring in millions of dollars in contributions every month – dollars that are then diverted into political action, you can be sure.

But, you may still say, these aren't the people who actually make the decisions that affect me and my children. They aren't the elected officials, the ones who have true, delegated power from the people – power to make public policy, power to make laws and legal decisions.

What say you, then, to the fact that Tom DeLay, Majority Leader of the House of Representatives, at a National Day of Prayer gathering he helped organize in Plano, Texas, insisted that “only Christian” ministers be allowed

to offer the public prayers – prayers that were, I will point out, taking place literally in the public square, on public property. Shows you the kind of respect DeLay holds for the principle of separation of church and state, doesn't it?

Things get no better, though, if we look to the senate, where the Majority Leader, Bill Frist, last month advocated the teaching of so-called “intelligent design” in our public schools. This, of course, is the same Bill Frist who – in what many consider the first public appearance of his 2008 presidential campaign – last Spring spoke, by live television feed, to literally hundreds of thousands of fundamentalist Christians, sitting in the pews of their churches, in the infamous “Justice Sunday” broadcast.

No, though they do hold what I still believe are ideas outside the American mainstream, these are no longer marginal political players. Both men, you will notice, have the word “Majority” in front of their office title.

As Bill Moyers said recently, “We’re not talking [anymore] about a handful of fringe lawmakers who hold or are beholden to these [radical] beliefs. Nearly half the U.S. Congress, before the recent election – 231 legislators in total – [and] more since the election – are [openly] backed by the Religious Right. Forty-five senators and 186 members of the [last] congress earned 80 to 100 percent approval ratings [in their voting] from the three most influential Christian right advocacy groups. They include ... Frist, assistant majority leader Mitch McConnell, conference chair Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania, policy chair Jon Kyl of Arizona, Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert, and majority whip Roy Blunt.”

Are you worked up yet? OK, I'll admit it – I'm trying to get you worked up here. I am worked up. And I'd rather not be worked up alone. Not in a Unitarian Universalist church. Not in an institution whose primary purpose, in my opinion, is to protect the religious freedom of one and all.

So the question becomes – what shall we do about it?

This summer, at our Unitarian Universalist General Assembly, I attended a workshop titled “Is the U.S. Becoming a Theocracy?” At the close of that workshop, a man in the audience rose to speak – a man whom I greatly admire: former UUA President John Buehrens. What John said to the group was this:

“ The only way we are [ever] going to succeed in taking back the heart of America for the cause of religious freedom, is the very same way the Religious Right took over the political soul of America during the past quarter century ... person by person, mind by mind, family by family, dinner-table-argument by dinner-table argument, at family gatherings, at the Thanksgiving meal, in churches and in schools and in grocery store lines.”

And so, that is what I am asking of you today. Engage in those conversations, difficult as they will sometimes be. Explain to others why you think our religious freedom and other civil liberties are under attack, if in fact I have convinced you that they are. Speak your mind. Speak your peace, rather than keeping a respectful silence. You never know who you might influence; you never know who you might meet.

As for me, I've begun talking to strangers while waiting in line – and those of you who know me, know that doesn't come easy. But it's that important. I've started wearing certain T-shirts, as an intentional conversation-starter. I've become much more open about what I believe, and what values I hold dear – simply in the hopes that I might influence another.

Let me close this morning by sharing just one experience I had recently. Late on a lovely summer Saturday afternoon, I was shopping in an antique store out in the country, about fifty miles north of here. I had found what I wanted – a distinct little end table no taller than a basketball, with charm and personality and a little nick or two. When I placed it on the counter, the lady working there said something like, “Well, that's different.”

That morning I had happened to put on my Thoreau Society T-shirt, and printed across the front was that famous quote about “If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he is marching to the beat of a different drummer.” I looked down at my shirt, pointed to it, and said to the lady, “Yeah, I like to travel to the beat of my own drummer.”

I wondered if that would be the end of it, but the woman – probably 60 years old, plainly dressed and obviously the proprietor of the store – leaned over the counter and looked around conspiratorially, then whispered to me, “I'm an independent thinker, too.”

I replied with something to the effect of, “I find it’s often better that way” – and she suddenly got a gleam in her eye and shot back, “Ah, but there are lots of people who don’t want you to think for yourself, aren’t there?”

Before I knew it, this woman was telling me about what had happened to her at church last fall, just prior to the November election. She told me that she had, in her little country church in rural Ohio, been subjected to increasing pressure each week – by her pastor, by the leaders of the church – to publicly commit herself to vote the way “the Lord wanted her to vote.”

“But,” she said proudly, “I travel to the beat of my own drummer.”

We talked for a while longer about the Lord, about the state of affairs in America today, about religious freedom – and about its opposite, theocracy – and then I left.

One conversation, one person, one heart at a time.

May that woman always travel to the beat of her own drummer. May each of us. And may we have the courage to speak up for – and defend, when necessary – our cherished freedoms, including – and particularly – freedom of conscience, and freedom of religion.

Amen.