

## **“Who Owns God?”**

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“A person will worship something – have no doubt about that.” Wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson. “We may think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our hearts – but it will out. That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming.”

Whether Humanist or Christian, whether Buddhist or Jew, whether earth-centered or unsure of our label, we human beings will “worship something” as Emerson puts it. Human beings are designed and compelled to think on that which is mysterious to us and seek to make important what holds meaning for us. “In other words,” wrote James Luther Adams, a twentieth century Unitarian Universalist theologian, “if we discover what persons really believe to be sovereign, what they will cling to as the principle or reality without which life would lose its meaning, we shall have discovered their religion, their god.”

By looking at what we spend our time and energy on tells us something of what we believe and what we hold as ultimate truths. That could be a disturbing realization depending on where and to what we are offering our skills and efforts. The struggle is, of course, to live out what we believe and to have our actions and words able to be measured by what we claim as truth. And Emerson cautions us to be watchful of what dominates our imaginations and thoughts. For we are just as likely to be living that which we would not profess as true of ourselves (if seen clearly) than we are to live acutely out of our unarticulated religious understandings. What is it you worship? What is it that

brings meaning to your life? What is it you hold sovereign above all else? Because you may not be certain or aware of what it is you hold ultimately true, but be sure we all hold something sacred.

Adams continues, “If we understand the word ‘religion’ to refer to the concern with the inescapable issues regarding the meaning and the fulfillment of life, we may say that there is no such thing as a completely irreligious person. Both the ‘non-religious’ and the ‘religious’ person are concerned with these issues, and they are both somehow believers; they are people of faith, whether they use the word ‘god’ or not...contrary to the rather generally accepted view, the basic concerns of religion are inescapable; indeed that some sort of religious faith is found among all people.” Adams argues that all people regardless of faith identity or religious institution are concerned with issues of life’s meaning and with the resources available in the living of one’s life. He says that is a “universal concern and the central concern of religion” in general.

We are religious. We cannot help but be religious simply by fact of our humanity. Because we concern ourselves with questions and ideas of the Ultimate, because we concern ourselves with the plight of those who suffer and our own suffering, because we believe and feel and know in the center of our beings that something of life is sacred, we are religious, we are people of faith.

And as religious people we must speak to our faith in the public arena. As Jim Wallis in *God’s Politics* writes, “God is personal, but never private.” He speaks of a Christian God, but I argue that whether you use the word ‘god’ or not, that which you hold as ultimate is not to be hidden or disguised. One of the greatest struggles of our

modern era is that religious liberals, who hold an open and multifaceted view of God and the Holy and what is called Sacred, have become so concerned with allowing for our diversity, that we have in effect removed ourselves from the larger conversation of faith. We need only look to the political arena to witness our lack of voice and attendance in the discussion of how and where and by what means religion and faith play a role in our public life and in the governance of our nation. We have been noticeably absent from the realm of public life as anything but many divergent views and without the strength and power of a single voice.

Political liberals have had voices speaking, though I would also argue not in chorus but in competition with one another, without any foundation of faith or religion to back up the social policies and change they are seeking. It appears as though liberals, whether political or religious, are fearful of actually appearing as people of faith. So we have left the arena of faith in public life to those who would define morals and values and religion narrowly, within strict guidelines and understandings. We have abandoned a place Unitarian Universalists once occupied fervently, in the era of abolition, women's suffrage, and civil rights. In our place have come louder and more aggressive voices calling for a narrow understanding and interpretation of God and all things religious and moral. In fact this extreme religious conservative movement "virtually claim[s] to own religion." Writes Wallis. He argues that what has come to be known as the religious right has a tight "grip on public debates about values." Wallis also argues that liberals have conceded the issue of religion; as well as the interpretation of the Bible, adds John Buehrens, former president of the Unitarian Universalist Association. Both contend that

we must engage in the difficult and risky work of reclaiming our right to participate in the discussion. “It is faith,” Wallis maintains, “that leads us to assert the vital religious commitments that fundamentalists often leave out, namely compassion, social justice, peacemaking, humility, tolerance, and even democracy as religious commitment.”

Remember we are people of faith. We are all religious; therefore we all have the right and the obligation to speak from our faith, from our religious tradition on issues of concern to all people. “Our religious congregations are not meant to be social organizations that merely reflect the wider culture’s values,” contends Wallis, “but dynamic counter-cultural communities whose purpose is to reshape both lives and society.” We may not win all policy battles that our faith calls us to fight for, but if we do not at least take on those we complain about we have lost our right to complain at all. Our faith may be personal but it is not private. James Luther Adams writes, “The faith of the liberal must express itself in societal form.”

Our Principles and Purposes, which you will find on the back of your order of service, calls us to “Affirm and promote a free and responsible search for truth and meaning; justice, equity and compassion in human relations...” If that is not a foundation of faith upon which to stand in the public arena and argue our points I don’t know what one would look like. We may not all agree within this congregation, or within our denomination as whole, on the policies we wish to see created or maintained within our government, but there is not one of us that does not and cannot stand as a person of faith in the battle to see what we believe to be just and right attained.

“We are ourselves the warp and woof of the behavior pattern which we observe in the world around us.” Wrote Edwin Buehrer. “We know that it represents us; that we cannot stand aloof in our individual splendor and say, ‘That is America and the American way of life, but it does not represent me, and I will have no part in it.’ In countless little ways have we taken on its social and ethical coloring; and when we sit in judgment over our times, we are also sitting in judgment over ourselves. We are in part and in substance this ugly thing we are talking about.”

We cannot stand by and watch that which we shudder to see become reality, what makes our blood boil, what makes us ashamed to be called American and do nothing while maintaining our right of judgment and critique. If we are not a part of the process, even if our ability to be so is limited and whether or not we ‘win,’ we have no right to sit back in our armchairs and say it has all gone to hell in a hand basket.

Though our voice may be small and often overpowered by a larger and more seductive public presence, we must still speak. We all know how to get our views out there: letters to the editor and to our legislators; speaking out when there is an assumption of agreement; offering your resources of time and money to organizations and institutions you believe are working toward your goals. It is not only in the larger arena that our voice matters but in every small venue we live in as well. Ultimately it means holding onto hope even when all seems lost and not letting apathy get the better of us. For inaction and apathy are a sure way of watching what matters to us, what we passionately believe is needed, be ignored, destroyed or pushed aside. If we are not willing to be out there supporting our beliefs and values and morals with our actions and words, then who will?

A modern twist on an ancient story goes, “I swallowed him whole. Yes, it was me, not Moby Dick, or one of his relatives, not a whale at all. It was me, Bibi, a Big Eye tuna fish.

There I was minding my own business, cruising along, checking out the damselfish, when I heard God call my name. And He commanded me to swallow Jonah. God didn’t tell me how long it would be for, only that I had to keep the man alive.

The glimpse I caught of Jonah before I swallowed him revealed a troubled spirit. He seemed a good man at heart but, according to God, was trying too hard to keep a low profile. He refused to God’s bidding.

During those three endless days and nights that Jonah was in residence I thought a lot about my mother. I longed for her counsel. It was my mother who nicknamed me Bibi, short for my given name Big Big, and I always reckoned I was her favorite. From the time I was hatched she would gaze at me with a worried look and say, ‘Bibi, keep a low profile.’

Honestly, I tried. But when a deep sonorous voice broke through the crashing music of the waves and called ‘Bibi!’ I responded, ‘Here I am.’ It clearly was not my mother’s voice, and I was surprised.

It was God. The Bible has since reported: ‘Now the Lord prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah.’ *Great fish*, mind you, not whale.

I also question the use of the word ‘prepared,’ not only because it smacks of flour and seasonings, but because nothing could have prepared me for what was to follow. And God didn’t even try. To be sure, He had his hands full with Jonah, whom He’d

commanded to be a prophet and who had run off to sea instead. For me, swimming away wasn't an option. This was God, who meant business.

Finally 'God spoke unto the fish and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land.' I took off at thirty miles an hour straight to my mother to tell her what happened.

She told that once a boy named Jonah had caught her and he had carefully removed the hook and thrown her back. It was after that close call that she gave birth to me and over three hundred brothers and sisters.

'You're saying this was the same Jonah?' I asked, incredulously. 'And that is why I wasn't allowed to eat him?'

'Perhaps,' she said. 'Perhaps not.' The she turned to me and said, 'Go swim up to the surface and tell me what you see. I was up and back in less than two minutes. I reported that I saw waves white-tipped and glistening.

'Where were they going?' she asked.

'Going?' I said, 'I couldn't tell. I only saw that they were moving and going somewhere.'

'It's the same with the things we do.' She replied. "The boy couldn't know what would happen by throwing me back into the ocean. And you cannot know what it means to have saved his life and where it will lead. You can only be sure that it will lead somewhere, and that it was the right thing to do.'

As I settled down to have a meal I thought on what my mother had said. What had happened to me, after all, was but one roll of a wave in a constantly moving sea. Perhaps even God didn't know where the waves would lead."

We never do know where our actions and decision will lead. But what we can be sure of is that we are heading somewhere. And that what we consider Holy is calling us along the way. We cannot avoid for all time the call to live out our faith in the world. We are likely to be swallowed and spat out just where we didn't want to be, but where we are most needed. Ours is not a leisurely and comfortable faith and I believe it is much less so than many others. We have no ready-made answers or doctrines that clearly lay out the boundaries of our tradition. Collectively we must negotiate the boundaries and yet leave them wide enough to allow for multiple religious and spiritual perspectives. Our work as Unitarian Universalists is two-fold: first we must have the difficult conversation within our ranks of what constitutes our foundations and what lies appropriately within the parameters of our tradition and cooperative faith; and second, to then, in our own ways both jointly and individually, use those parameters and foundations to bring our message of religious freedom to the larger community.

We cannot know if our efforts today or tomorrow will indeed produce the desired results, but we should not be aiming only toward the future. We must live now what that which we name as Holy calls us to be. We cannot put off living out our faith simply because we may not see its influence come to fruition.

“Imperfection is no excuse for inaction.” Wrote Edwin Buehrer. “It is at once appalling and inspiring to remember that the important work of the world must of necessity be done by imperfect people. Even the best among us have glaring shortcomings at one point or another... It is appalling, for we cannot forget how increasingly desperate our human situation has become. Appalling! But it is nevertheless also inspiring.

Ordinary people, imperfect people, have taken the world a long way and have at times lifted it to high levels of achievement... It is well to remember that only in an imperfect world and with imperfect people are such things possible at all.

Only in an imperfect world, with imperfect people can the very moral qualities which enable men and women to rise to levels of the sublime be cultivated and achieved at all.”