

Moral Values for a Pluralistic Society

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September 25, 2005

Social justice work holds an important place within the world of Unitarian Universalism, both in individual congregations, and denomination-wide. That was particularly evident yesterday, when over forty of us from this congregation traveled to Washington, DC and joined thousands upon thousands of UUs and other committed Americans. Together we marched, and rallied, and took a moral stand against the current war in Iraq.

One of the ways that social justice work is encouraged and guided in our denomination is through the selection, at each year's General Assembly, of a major issue for at least two years of study and action. The process culminates with the creation and adoption of a Statement of Conscience. That statement generally includes suggestions for continuing action, and also provides our Washington Office with the basis for lobbying our elected representatives on relevant legislative matters.

The Study/Action Issue selected by this past summer's General Assembly was "Moral Values for a Pluralistic Society." The guiding question for this issue is: "How might the moral and ethical grounding of Unitarian Universalism be given greater voice in the public square?"

Of course moral values are a concern for all people at all times. It is our moral values that guide our behavior as we try to do what is right, and avoid doing what is wrong. What makes this issue particularly timely is the recognition that we do indeed live in a pluralistic society. That means that different individuals and different segments of society frame moral issues differently. While there are many values shared by nearly everyone, there is wide variability when it comes to how those values are prioritized. Those differences are crucial when it comes to finding the right balance when competing values come into conflict.

Religious liberals have become increasingly concerned in recent decades as religious conservatives have seemingly had a monopoly on moral discourse. As the influence of the religious right in politics and public policy development has grown, there has seemingly been a vacuum where a religious left should be. As the gap between rich and poor expands, as our nation continues to bully the rest of the world, as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people face increasing backlash, the exclusion of religious liberals from the civic dialogue is downright dangerous.

Before I go any further I want to talk about one of the real challenges of dealing with all these issues of values and morality and their intersection with public life; i.e. politics. There is a real temptation to fall into the trap of seeing everything as black or white, right or wrong, good or evil, in an absolute sense. But in fact, one of the scariest things, for me, about the religious right is their tendency to do that very thing. And so it is important to me to try and avoid that trap.

I think one of the best strategies for avoiding the trap is always to come back to the basic values underlying issues of concern. I find myself sometimes taking a position on an issue in knee-jerk fashion in response to the position taken by my political "enemies". If they're for it, it can't be good! I sure wouldn't want to be caught agreeing with those lousy so-and-sos.

But that's sloppy thinking. It's the easy, lazy way to a position that may or may not be valid. If I want to maintain my integrity and be confident in my stance, I must be able to articulate how it reflects my moral and ethical values. I must apply those core values as consistently as possible.

This is particularly important in the context of a religious community or organization. Our tax-exempt status is based in part on the assumption that we will not engage in partisan

politics. That does not mean that we must avoid speaking out on political issues. Morality clearly falls within the bailiwick of religion. And virtually every political issue has moral implications. And therefore, it is perfectly appropriate that we should weigh in on the major political issues of the day, so long as we address them in the context of moral values.

We should not be taking positions simply because of the support of a particular political party, or of a particular special-interest group, or even of the Unitarian Universalist Association headquarters in Boston. We should take positions because they are consistent with *our* espoused values. Being a pluralistic community ourselves, we may not always be able to come to a unified collective position. In that case, however, we can still express ourselves as individuals. And we can use our disagreements as an opportunity to be in dialogue and to examine more deeply our values and our ways of applying them.

I am generally critical of either/or thinking, especially when it's taken to excess. After all, when there are two or more sides to a complex issue, seldom is either side all right or all wrong. But sometimes an either/or model can be helpful in understanding some phenomenon, as long as it's taken with a large grain of salt. I'd like to spend the rest of my time this morning talking about such a model that helps me better understand the seemingly very wide gap between conservatives and liberals in this country. It also has some important implications for the question I posed when I began this talk; namely, how can the moral values of religious liberals be given greater voice in the public square?

George Lakoff, a professor of Cognitive Science and Linguistics at the University of California, Berkely, has been exploring these very questions for several years. Among his many books are *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*, and *Don't Think of an Elephant!: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate*. Lakoff analyzes the unconscious world-views of liberals and conservatives, and explains why they are at odds over so many seemingly unrelated issues. And he shows how the right wing's stranglehold on political and moral dialogue has grown out of their ability to frame the issues. He believes that liberals must bring their values to bear in reframing the debate, especially since people persistently vote their values and identities, even more than their own best interests.

At the heart of Lakoff's analysis of conservative and liberal world-views is a basic metaphor: society as family. In fact, contends Lakoff, at the root of the two very different world-views are two very different ideal models of what a family should be. Again, let me caution you that I will be over-generalizing for the sake of providing a conceptual framework to think and talk about a set of issues. For instance, when I speak of conservatives here, I really mean rigid, religiously-inspired right-wingers, as opposed to, say, socially progressive fiscal conservatives. And with that disclaimer, here I go.

The conservative ideal for the family we will call the Strict Father Model. Lakoff writes:

The strict father model begins with a set of assumptions:
The world is a dangerous place, and it always will be, because there is evil out there in the world. The world is also difficult because it is competitive. There will always be winners and losers. There is an absolute right and an absolute wrong. Children are born bad, in the sense that they just want to do what feels good, not what is right. Therefore, they have to be made good.

What is needed in this kind of world is a strong, strict father who can:

- Protect the family in the dangerous world
- Support the family in the difficult world, and

- Teach his children right from wrong.

What is required of the child is obedience, because the strict father is a moral authority who knows right from wrong. It is further assumed that the only way to teach kids obedience – that is, right from wrong – is through punishment, painful punishment, when they do wrong. . .

[I]f they are physically disciplined, they learn not to do it again. That means that they will develop internal discipline to keep themselves from doing wrong, so that in the future they will be obedient and act morally. Without such punishment, the world will go to hell. There will be no morality.

And what are some of the wider social implications of this kind of view? First, a top priority is enforcing the kind of morality that comes through authority figures, ultimately from a particular version of a commanding, judgmental God. As for economics, wealthy people are the good people, for they have mastered the discipline required to be moral and to compete against those less disciplined. The poor are poor because they lack the discipline to prosper. Social programs are immoral because they remove the incentive to be disciplined. Education should be structured so as to promote discipline and obedience to authority. Health care is an individual responsibility, not that of the taxpayers. Same-sex marriage – well that, of course, is a direct slap at the strict father model. And if we consider that the whole view of social structure is based on that model, is it any wonder that the phrase “family values” evokes such strong feelings? Indeed, same-sex marriage is a direct “attack on the conservative value system as a whole, and on those whose very identity depends on their having strict father values.”

Now let me describe an alternative family model embraced by liberals or progressives. We’ll call this the Nurturant Parent Model. Notice, first of all, that the nurturant parent model is gender neutral.

Both parents are equally responsible for raising the children. The assumption is that children are born good and can be made better. The world can be a better place, and our job is to work on that. The parents’ job is to nurture their children and to raise their children to be nurturers of others.

What does nurturance mean? It means two things: empathy and responsibility. If you have a child, you have to know what every cry means. . . And you have a responsibility – you have to take care of this child. . .

All this is not easy. . . You have to be strong. You have to work hard at it. You have to be very competent. You have to know a lot.

In addition, all sorts of other values immediately follow from empathy and responsibility.

Values like freedom, opportunity, fulfillment in life, fairness, community, service, and cooperation. Those are very different from the primary values associated with the strict father model. And so it is no surprise that we find corresponding differences in the kind of public policy stances taken by progressive liberals.

It is taken as a simple matter of justice and fairness, for example, that families can take different forms, including same-gender parents, so long as those families are loving and

nurturing. Nurturing the earth itself becomes a core value driving environmental initiatives. Social programs are society's way of nurturing those who have been denied the opportunities required to make it on their own. And foreign policy is a tool for building international cooperation and equitable development, rather than a means for world economic and political domination.

Lakoff points out that conservatives have been very good at getting their values and principles out into the public mind. So much so that they can all be evoked by a simple ten-word philosophy: Strong Defense, Free Markets, Lower Taxes, Smaller Government, Family Values. He goes on to propose his nomination for a corresponding ten-word philosophy for progressives: Stronger America, Broad Prosperity, Better Future, Effective Government, Mutual Responsibility.

A stronger America is about more than just defense; it includes things like education, healthcare, and a healthy environment. Broad prosperity means that everyone should share in the bounty they help create, not just those who control the so-called free markets. A better future, in terms of education, environment, healthcare, etc., means not sacrificing needed social programs in order to provide welfare for the super-rich. Effective government means eliminating *real* waste, but not using the excuse of eliminating waste to gut those crucial social programs. Mutual responsibility suggests an equitable, two-way approach based around caring, responsibility, and strength, as opposed to an authoritarian, hierarchical approach based around discipline and punishment.

It's up to each of us to decide which road we prefer to take. But if we select the progressive way of nurturance, empathy, and responsibility, we have another task before us: getting those values out into the public mind and heart as effectively as our strict father counterparts have done with their values. George Lakoff calls this task "reframing the debate." I have time to give you just one small example of what that means.

Consider the phrase "tax relief," which is a familiar conservative refrain. In order for there to be relief, there must be an affliction (taxes), an afflicted party (the taxpayer), and a reliever who removes the affliction and is therefore a hero (and we all know who that is). There is a brilliant job of framing. Anyone who comes out against the hero's plan becomes a villain for trying to prevent relief.

How else might we think and talk about taxes? How about as an investment in our future? After all, where do highways, the Internet, communication systems, and the space program come from? Or we might think of taxes as paying our dues for living in America. After all, we depend on a complex infrastructure that we did not provide for ourselves, except through our taxes. These ideas could provide the basis for a reframing of the debate on tax-cuts which, incidentally, seem to go primarily to those who need it them the least.

Such reframing is one way to be more effective in promoting progressive policies. And another key that Lakoff and I agree on is the importance of speaking from our moral perspective at all times. "Progressive policies follow from progressive values. Get clear on your values and use the language of values. Drop the language of policy wonks."

And so, one answer to the question of how our moral and ethical grounding might be given greater voice in the public square is, first, to be clear on what that moral and ethical grounding is; and second, to use the progressive values implied by that grounding to reframe the debates of the day in the interests of a more humane and nurturing society.

So may it be.