**The American Creed – Self-Rule is Based on a Religious Idea**

Alison Wohler August 13, 2023

The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Chautauqua

**The Reading (from Our Seven Principles in Story and Verse by Kenneth W. Collier, p. 72-73)**

I want to preface the reading this morning with a reminder of our 1st and 5th Unitarian Universalist principles.

We covenant to affirm and promote:

1. The inherent worth and dignity of every person.

5. The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.

*People unfamiliar with Unitarian Universalism may wonder why we have enshrined the democratic process and the right of conscience among our basic Principles. How is democracy a religious issue?*

*Democracy is the rule of and for the people, and one way of allowing people to rule themselves is to allow the majority to govern most of the time. One my reason that democracy is nothing more than a way of organizing ourselves for the smooth functioning of the community. If people can agree to allow a majority to control the group, more often than not the community will be well governed. But what does that have to do with religion and with conscience?*

*There is more to democracy than a simple counting of noses. Our terrible history of slavery and racism illustrates better than almost anything how terribly wrong the majority can be and how much pain a tyranny of the majority can create. Furthermore, it should never be forgotten that not only can the majority be terribly wrong, but the majority is not the people. It is only the largest fraction of the people. (And occasionally in this “democracy” of ours it is not even that. When a significant enough portion of the electorate do not vote, then even a very small fraction of the people can determine the outcome of an election.}*

*The idea of self-rule is based on a religious idea: people should rule themselves because no one is privileged. That no one is privileged follows from something that we Unitarian Universalists take as a given, namely that every person contains inherent worth and dignity. If each person is equally worthy, then no one is more worthy that others. Because no one is privileged, it follows that each person in the community is responsible for the well-being of every other person and all are equally responsible. But if all are responsible, then all should participate in governing, and democracy is the best way we know to accomplish this.*

**Sermon**

The theme for Chautauqua’s Week 8 is Freedom of Speech, Imagination, and the Resilience of Democracy. I chose my sermon topic, which will include some historical perspective, to set the stage for what we will hear over the course of the week. Quoting the very famous William Faulkner: “The past is not dead. It’s not even past.”

My title is “The America Creed – Self-Rule is Based on a Religious Idea.”

Big caveat. When I say “a religious idea,” I am not referring to anything from one specific religion. So you can relax. I am certainly not proposing that the United States was formed as a Christian nation. Quite the opposite in fact. There is a difference between specific religious beliefs and religious thinking.

Religious thinking is more general, less specific. It has to do with the questions we ask in all religious communities, and why we ask them. Most of the time we are asking “What does it mean to be human, and how are we to be with each other?” In my way of looking at these things, ethics and religious thinking are not that far apart.

Religious thinking is simply about what the literal meaning of the word implies. The word religion mean to re-bind. That’s it. Now, as you can imagine, there are different ideas among the different religions about with what, exactly, we are attempting to re-connect. Some would say God. Some would say Jesus. Some would say enlightenment.

From a Unitarian Universalist perspective, we might reasonably be expected to desire to reconnect to the interdependent web or to Right Relationship; to not think of ourselves as separate or above or dominant over nature; to bring things back into a kind of sustainable equilibrium.

My reading this morning referenced our 1st UU Principle, that of respect for the worth and dignity of every person. That no one is privileged and therefore each voice (each vote) counts in our democratic system of government. Let me read the concluding paragraph to you again:

*The idea of self-rule is based on a religious idea: people should rule themselves because no one is privileged. That no one is privileged follows from something that we Unitarian Universalists take as a given, namely that every person contains inherent worth and dignity. If each person is equally worthy, then no one is more worthy that others. Because no one is privileged, it follows that each person in the community is responsible for the well-being of every other person and all are equally responsible. But if all are responsible, then all should participate in governing, and democracy is the best way we know to accomplish this.*

I would add that our 7th Principle, that of respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part, is another perspective on the same idea of equality. We are equally a part of the web.

Equally important to the interdependent web, but not necessarily identical – in our shape, or in our thoughts. But equally responsible to each other in the web that holds us. I will hold you up as you help to hold me up. The golden rule. Would that not lead us to the famed City on a Hill, the Blessed Community of our higher aspirations, the Garden of Eden?

These are religious ideas because they are answers to that most important of re-binding questions: What does it mean to be human and how are we to be with each other.

John Dewey, American secular humanist philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer of the first half of the 20th century, believed that democracy was an ethical idea rather than merely a political arrangement. He considered participation, not representation, to be the most important part, the essence, of democracy. He wrote: “A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. He believed in the power and potential of education and of participation.

By the way, I ran across a note I had made some years ago of a quote on one of those signs we sometimes find outside the Hall of Philosophy. It was titled “The Chautauqua Promise” and read: “At Chautauqua we take seriously the obligations of a citizen in a democracy to be engaged with the important issues of our times, to be practiced in discussing those issues across partisan boundaries and to understand self-interest in balance with the common good.”

The mission of Chautauqua, and our thoughtful participation in its programs and opportunities for discussion and feedback make this a model of John Dewey’s idea of how to have and keep a democracy. I personally think one of the most difficult parts of the Chautauqua Promise is understanding how to balance self-interest with what is good for the whole of the institution.

Our country is also finding this balancing act to be a problem these days. Wouldn’t you say?

Isn’t that always the tension we find ourselves facing in our ethical/philosophical/religious lives? The wants of the individual vs the common good. It was over 70 years ago, in 1946, that Victor Frankl proposed that the Statue of Liberty on the east coast be balanced by a Statue of Responsibility on the west coast. Freedom and Responsibility. The individual and the common good.

Importantly, it was on a little ship off the Massachusetts coast in 1620, not even landed yet, where a document foreshadowing the very democracy that we now enjoy was written and signed. We now call that document the Mayflower Compact. A brief part of it read: “*We, the undersigned, do solemnly and mutually, in the Presence of God and one another, covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil Body Politick, for our better Ordering and Preservation… And by Virtue hereof do enact, constitute, and frame, such just and equal Laws, Ordinances, Acts, Constitutions, and Offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general Good of the Colony.”*

Religion was not even mentioned in this Compact, even though religion was exactly the reason the Mayflower travelers were here in the first place.

As an aside, assuming the family tree I have developed on Ancestry.com, with the help of their immense system of records, is correct, one of the 40-some signers of that Mayflower Compact was John Howland, a direct ancestor on my father’s side.

But, back to business:

I have always been a big fan of UU minister and historical scholar Alice Blair Wesley, who, in her 2001 Minns lecture, wrote:

*On November 23, 1920 at a commemoration ceremony for the 300th anniversary of the Mayflower landing, then*[*Massachusetts governor*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Governor_of_Massachusetts)[*Calvin Coolidge*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calvin_Coolidge)*, who became the 30th*[*U.S. President*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/President_of_the_United_States)*a few years later, said the following about the Mayflower Compact:*

*The compact which they signed was an event of the greatest importance. It was the foundation of liberty based on law and order, and that tradition has been steadily upheld. They drew up a form of government which has been designated as the first real constitution of modern times. It was democratic, an acknowledgment of liberty under law and order and the giving to each person the right to participate in the government, while they promised to be obedient to the laws.  
  
But the really wonderful thing was that they had the power and strength of character to abide by it and live by it from that day to this. Some governments are better than others. But any form of government is better than anarchy, and any attempt to tear down government is an attempt to wreck civilization.*  (Minns Lecture No. 1, 2000-2001.)

The late Forrest Church, another UU colleague, wrote the book upon which the title of this sermon is based. It is called The American Creed. I’ve been wanting to base a service on this book for many years. Thus the reason I jumped at the opportunity to preach at the beginning of this year’s Week 8 theme on Democracy.

I will preface my continuing remarks by noting the acknowledged hypocrisies of our founding fathers when it came to their personal behavior versus what they wrote into their idealistic documents. But let us consider, for this discussion, the amazing gift those idealistic documents were to our country and the world. We can do both – acknowledge the founders’ imperfections, and also appreciate and respect the importance of what they wrote.

The American Creed consists of the truths that our Founders found self-evident and wrote into our Declaration of Independence.

*We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.*

I can hear in this echoes of the Mayflower Compact.

The essence of our nation’s creed is *e pluribus unum.* Out of many, one. But that “one” need not be thought of as beige or the uniform consistency of cream of wheat. “One” does not mean the same. “One” refers to the mission driven totality of all its equally beautiful parts.

George W. Bush (whom I have to say I seldom find reason to quote) said something important to a group of students in Beijing, China, in 2002. He said “Under our law, everyone stands equal. No one is above the law, and no one is beneath it…In a free society, diversity is not disorder. Debate is not strife. And dissent is not revolution. A free society trusts its citizens to seek greatness in themselves and their country.” (The American Creed, p. 134)

Forrest Church cautions against forgetting our nation’s creed and creating a vulnerable vacuum into which fundamentalist and other religious rhetoric will rush to fill the void. (p. 135-6) His book was written in 2002.

Church writes that “truth, cast in language that, in turn, spells out the truth for succeeding generations deserves to be called a creed… Though employing the language of faith, it transcends religious particulars, uniting all citizens in a single covenant. It treats believer and atheist alike, offering each the same protections, securing freedom of and from religion.”

Thomas Jefferson, the primary draftsman of the Declaration of Independence, called it “an expression of the American mind… the genuine effusion of the soul of our country.” (The American Creed, p. 31)

Church writes that “none of Jefferson’s propositions is original, but in 1776, when placed in the context of all previous government charters, these “self-evident” truths were hardly self-evident. In fact, they were unique in the history of statecraft. Never before had government limited or bound itself in such a manner or established itself on so egalitarian a footing. The divine authority for human laws was invoked in a strikingly novel way.” (p. 31)

My hope, in giving this sermon today, is that when you listen to the collection of ideas and information offered by this week’s speakers and clergy, you will remember the very few words that form the backbone of what we are, who we are, as a nation. Obviously we are not perfect. Our creed has many stains upon its idealism. But as Forrest Church advises, perhaps warns, we should not forget the big ideas of The American Creed, lest other creeds fill the void.

When statesman and author, Richard Haass, was interviewed on MSNBC recently I immediately ordered his book The Bill of Obligations: The Ten Habits of Good Citizens.

Quickly, in the interest of time, I will tell you what these habits are. These might also be good to remember as we make our way through this week on Democracy.

The ten habits of good citizens are:

* To be informed.
* To get involved.
* To stay open to compromise.
* To remain civil.
* To reject violence.
* To value norms.
* To promote the common good.
* To respect government service.
* To support the teaching of civics.
* To put country first.

I think one of the more important points he made, particularly in these current times, is the one about valuing norms. Haass writes that norms are different from laws – and they are something more. “Norms are the unwritten traditions, rules, customs, conventions, codes of conduct, and practices that reduce friction and brittleness in a society. Laws provide the scaffolding of a society, but norms are what fill in and make it livable, the furniture within the building, so to speak. Norms are related to the spirit and intent of the law, to behaviors that for one reason or another cannot be legislated or formally required but that all the same are desirable, even essential, for a democracy to be successful.” (The Bill of Obligations, p. 97-98)

Summing up:

To ask what it mean to be human is a religious question. To believe that all people are both equally worthy and responsible for each other, and have a say in the rules, laws and norms with which we live in this Democracy – is a religious idea. The self-rule of our American Creed was founded on a non-specific religious idea.

Dan Rather (whose blogs I follow) wrote, in an uncharacteristically humorous mode: (from a tweet on 10-30-2022)

*Democracy reminds me of trying to fold a fitted sheet:*

* *It takes a lot of effort.*
* *It’s going to be messy.*
* *Almost no one is going to do it perfectly.*
* *We have no choice but to give it a try to avoid complete chaos.*

And finally, these more serious closing words from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (8-28-1963)

*I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.”*