

Unitarians And Empire: Our Obligation In The 21st Century

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“Freedom consists not in doing what we like, but in having the right to do what we ought.” -- Pope John Paul II. I thought it fitting to begin with a quote from a man of faith, a man who used his office to speak on the need for peace and love in a world of war and violence, who also served as the first pope in what we call the post-colonial age. The era in which European imperial powers – Britain, France, Spain – relinquished control of colonial territories in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and the Pacific in a movement giving power to the people who live in those countries to rule themselves.

Religion and politics have long served as the complements of each other, with religion serving as the articulation of the moral guidepost toward which human beings strive, and politics serving as the forum for which differences are addressed and common problems resolved. In the United States, the line between the two is difficult to see at times but it's there. Here in Canada, you have a system where religion is not a barometer for capacity in elected office, nor is its influence in policy overt. I come to you as an American citizen. I also come as a stranger. Not just from the perspective of someone who hasn't yet greeted each of you, but as a man from a land viewed by Canada as more militant, more fearful, embodying the traits seen for thousands of years in the various dominant societies in the world. There are differences between the cultures of our two countries. And one fact demonstrates the depth of those differences: I am a citizen of the American Empire. And so are you.

Yes, our passports are different. Our accents are different. My partner and I could marry here and live a happy life and share a bank account and adopt children with no problem at all. But those differences are rather cosmetic. Most if not all of us in this room keep our money in financial institutions that trade in securities in multinational markets, the dividends and interest created by such transactions finance corporate operations overseas that are responsible for much of what we see on television. We all benefit from the Imperial expansion of the British in North America in the 17th and 18th Centuries. We have white skin and are afforded the benefits of people who look like us in this part of the world. We who have white skin would not be here had British, French, Spanish forces not conquered the people who were here before. We have benefitted from Imperial expansion. But for the disagreements between British settlers in North America in the 1770s, we might have no formal border between our homes. Our differences are accidents of history, arbitrary borders drawn to serve economic interests at the time we were created.

When I speak of Empire in today's world, I do not speak of the form of control exerted by the British over much of the world up to World War II. The American flag does not fly over Canada, or Afghanistan, or Iraq. It's not which flag flutters overhead that matters,

rather it is the currency in our wallets, the organizations that control municipal finances, the people who serve as regional officers of multinational corporations and the influence they exert. This is a moral issue.

The Empire about which we are speaking is Informal, but it is very real. We as Unitarian Universalists have an obligation to recognize the true nature of our society and bear witness to the effects our privilege has on the world and the people around us. Researching for today's dialogue, I read quite a bit on the history of Religion in the midst of the Empires of the past and how people of faith made quite a difference in shaping and improving lives for many conquered people in the midst of oppression. One source "Missions, Nationalism, and the End of Empire", cited many works of Gandhi and his efforts to guide India toward formal independence from Britain, as well as the myriad ways in which conquered peoples adapted the Christian theology imported by European rulers to suit local needs. At the beginning of the text was a quote from Ogbay Kalu, a professor of Religious studies at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago and a citizen of Nigeria who witnessed and participated in his country's Independence from Britain in 1960.

"Decolonization did not imply a radical change of socioeconomic structure... The goal of decolonization was to return to informal empire where former rulers would retain sufficient economic and technological resources to exercise powerful influence upon future development." "The advantage of informal empire for those who exercise it is that it is both economically more advantageous and politically far more difficult to assail. During the era of formal empire, Christian missions occupied a privileged position from which to challenge the conduct of empire from the standpoint of Christian humanitarian principle. In the present, supposedly 'postcolonial' and globalized age, the poor in the nations of the Southern hemisphere are at least as vulnerable, if not more so, to the impact of economic forces beyond their control as they were during the era of formal rule by Western powers."

The moral issues that Kalu brings up are alarming. The American Revolution 235 years ago shook the establishment in European politics by providing a strong counter to the ideas of divine rule by the monarchs of the various European states and their colonies. No longer was there an unchallenged rule of British subjects in North America. There was a revolution... by white, rich, landholding slave-owners who declared that all white rich landholding men – not women – were created equal. They manipulated Christianity to suit their assertions of self-rule. This assertion did not ensure equal and fair treatment of women, CERTAINLY not equal and fair treatment of African slaves who had no rights under the new law. The revolution served the interests of a particular group, not a universal sweep of enumerated rights for all. It was, in fact, more an assertion of dominance by one group over another; one group taking power from another and maintaining a system of dominance. That is not the Christian teaching I know. As I continue my studies at Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago, I take heart in knowing that throughout the history of the United States, Unitarian and Unitarian

Universalist ministers often stood at the front line in the great struggle for social justice. But these days, the history of the revolution is distorted, again by those who seek to oppress. This new movement claims that the founders of the American Republic were noble and fair, and everyone had a fair change in the new United States. My obligation as a UU is to tell them they are wrong, and carry the word of truth on our history.

While the revolution spurred changes of where the political center lay for early European Americans, the economic structure did not change. Over the centuries, the United States has gained economic and political influence in the world while the United Kingdom's influence has waned. Now, America serves as military might, with still unchallenged control of material assets in much of the third world. Canada is right there beside us, provides logistical and personnel support. Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.

The question I have in all this is where is the moral center? Where is the opposition to this order in the world that has been set by the Informal Empire, where those with material wealth and favor by the political powers are effectively guaranteed the basic rights of life, while those who are economically colonized – the poor, ethnic and religious minorities – are left to fend for themselves?

On this Palm Sunday, when Christians celebrate Jesus' return to Jerusalem, let us search for our arrival in den of truth and the land of right relations. We have the tools to set the world right in relations, to help cast off the oppression of Empire, formal and informal, economic and race-based, European and Native and Aboriginal. We have a lot of work to do.

The effective challenge to this Empire lies in the heart of Unitarian Universalism. We as religious liberals, with the embrace of cultural and religious pluralism and the implicit understanding of the need to embrace different people with different ideas from the norm can and must work to spread our message with these ideals in mind. Though we certainly don't all treat the 7 UU principles as gospel, they are the underpinnings of our relations with each other and the guide by which our larger organizations function

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

And there are lessons in the history of resistance to Empire that can help frame the ways to create a more just world. The most successful movements against Imperial rule have been rooted in a spiritual connection with the greater world, with the communities that yearned for freedom and self-determination that appreciated the value of love and unqualified forgiveness. In the history of the British Empire, the American Revolution was the first to challenge the crown successfully, but it was much later, in the 1930s, when the movement led by Mahatma Gandhi showed the British Raj that indeed there would be a large nonviolent movement challenging the unjust and uneven system.

Gandhi is well known for his peaceful approach to challenging the British authorities in their mandate. What is less known is his approach to religious interpretation and his appreciation of its value in determining what is moral. Gandhi appreciated the Bible and venerated the teachings and life of Jesus, incorporating many Christian hymns and psalms into his spiritual practice. For him, the value of Jesus was less in the supernatural than the historical example of a man who peacefully and lovingly challenged the rule of the Romans. Gandhi approached dialogue with the British not as a native Indian seeking to challenge the rule of an oppressive regime, but as a man of peace and love who could speak in a universal spiritual language. In 1935, he wrote:

“I believe there is no such thing as conversion from one faith to another in the accepted sense of the term. It is a highly personal matter for the individual and his God... It is a conviction daily growing upon me that the great and rich Christian missions will render true service to India, if they can persuade themselves to confine their activities to humanitarian service without the ulterior motive of converting India or at least her sophisticated villagers to Christianity, and their social superstructure, which notwithstanding its many defects has stood now from time immemorial.”

I'll avoid the conceit of debating whether Gandhi could really have run one hell of a UU congregation. But... can you hear the concept of Universality in his words? The emphasis more on the need for love and acceptance of pluralism? And in his case, it worked. It worked to stunning form! Yes, the British had lost much treasure and power due to World War II, but by 1947 it was not British exhaustion that led to the end of Imperial rule; it was the appreciation by all parties that the Indian people were moving on.

Fittingly, India is the consummate example of a thriving, multi-party, parliamentary democracy, with a Sikh Prime Minister, a Hindu President, a Muslim Parliament Speaker. Gandhi's appreciation of a just society of representation for all is reflected in the Democracy that exists thanks to his love, his capacity to see the value of self-determination.

Other voices within the sphere of British subjects bent Imperial rule at times to serve local needs, finding ways to empower those who were without voice. In Kenya, local Giyuku took the language of the Bible, brought by the oppressive British regime, and

translated it in ways that empowered men without property or wealth to find their voice in local affairs. This led to what became a moral war known as “Mau Mau”. People found a voice in spite of the political reality, they were able to take oppression and create a dialogue that eventually helped to reshape their society. The legacy of British rule in Kenya is a sense of nationalism borne through not just an opposition to foreign occupation, but a sense of individual empowerment, inadvertently brought about by an imported religion.

That was a formal Empire, with armies to challenge and Kings and Queens to refuse to bow to. How does the work of using religious language to empower the oppressed manifest today, with the challenges we face? We have no army to oppose, no men speaking foreign tongues mocking our religious values. We do have slavery to work against. In the United States, the number of people who are going without health insurance is rising. The number of children living in poverty is expected to double because of the Great Recession. Economic forces are the enemy. Poverty is the army to oppose. And love and unconditional acceptance of all is the answer.

Our call to spread the ideals of UU is not some abstract principle that we pull out of our totes on Sunday mornings and present to each other. It is what has been slowly blowing out the forces of injustice and inequity and hate and racism and sexism and homophobia and bringing out the shining ray of love! It’s easy to forget the connections we have to movements past and movements present, to act as though the humanist root in modern UU is somehow superior to the theology of those Anglicans and Hindus and Muslims and Catholics and that we have the true answer. As a group of predominantly upper-middle class, white, formally-educated gardeners of peace, we should be very careful in ensuring that we are using soil that all plants can grow in.

To quote something I’ve heard quite a bit in my formative moments at Seminary, the Arc of the Universe is long, and it bends towards justice.

Much as the twentieth century was the era of cultural and political independence for the formally oppressed in political and religious geopolitics, the twenty-first will be the time when we human creatures determine the scope of economic independence from the interests in the world who use religion and perceived righteousness as a platform to abuse the earth, to torture human beings, to disrupt the balance of life. The call is to recognize our weaknesses, our complicity in the comfortable structure that comes from a lighter skin color, and to recognize the power we have. To recognize the power we have in the ideals of love and forgiveness and truth in the era of economic oligarchs. We can fight them. And we can win.

James Joyce said, “History is a Nightmare from which I am trying to awake.” We are awake. We are alive. We are blessed. I now see the world not through the prism of geopolitics. In the plane of the spirit, the dimension of the soul, there is no Canada; there is no United States. The customs declaration I filled out when I landed in

Saskatoon on Thursday is part of the illusion. The boundaries that separate us are superficial. All there is unconditional love, and the work awaiting those in the business of spreading it to those in need.

We walk with Gandhi. We walk with Martin Luther King, Jr. We walk with the Mau Mau in Kenya. We walk hand-in-hand with those UUs, and Catholics, and atheists and Hindus who have steered the world from oppression and toward justice.

“Freedom consists not in doing what we like, but in having the right to do what we ought.” May we continue the slow and steady march toward justice, doing what we ought, together.

Amen.