

THE GLOBAL FUTURE OF FAITH

A Sermon Delivered at
First Parish in Needham
Unitarian Universalist
UN Sunday, October 24, 2010
John Buehrens, Minister

OUR COVENANT AS A GREEN CONGREGATION

Setting ourselves to the task of Greening our Congregation,
together we promise these things:

*Most simply, we will each do our small part to care for
the earth around us.*

We will start with one step forward toward the thriving world that
we envision.

*Then we will step again, and again, setting forth
together in this community.*

Deep problems call for religious answers. Recognizing the depth
and urgency of the environmental crisis, we must answer the
earth's call to our spirits.

*We will bring the concerns of the earth to live deep in
our hearts and in the heart of this congregation.*

Realizing that we have been too concerned with consuming things
now, we must turn our attention to the future.

*We will take up the needs of the generations to come:
clean water to drink, sweet air to breathe.*

Acknowledging the earth most basically as our home, we must set
about the task of restoration.

*In this our congregational home, we will find small and
large ways to remember the environment in our
worshipping, our learning, our celebrating, and our
justice-making.*

Aware of the urgency and complexity of our environmental crisis,
we end by promising simply this:

*As people of faith, we pledge ourselves to work toward
a planet transformed by our care.*

. . . [A] fundamental change in the nature of religiousness is occurring. The change assumes different shapes, but some of them overlap. With globalization, religions are becoming less regional. Christians, Buddhists, Muslim, and Hindus now live on every continent. Religions are also becoming less hierarchical. Lay leadership and initiative flourish in all of them, as the Muslim Brotherhood [in Egypt], Soka Gakkai [in Japan] and the Latin American base communities [all] demonstrate. In addition many are becoming less dogmatic and more practical. Religious people today are more interested in ethical guidelines and spiritual disciplines than in doctrines. They are also becoming less patriarchal, as women assume leadership positions in religions that have barred them for centuries, sometimes millennia. Women are publishing commentaries on the Qur'an, leading synagogues, and directing Buddhist retreat centers. There are now women pastors, priests, and bishops in Christian denominations.

As these changes gain momentum, they evoke an almost point-for-point fundamentalist reaction. Some Shinto leaders retort by emphasizing the sacredness of Japan, while the Barat Janata party seeks to "Hinduize" India. Radical Islamists dream of reestablishing a caliphate that encompasses all of Allah's land. Some Israeli settlers on the West Bank want to establish a "Torah state," a holy land governed by scriptural law. The religious Right in the United States insists that America is a "Christian nation." Literalist bishops in Africa and their American allies threaten to split the world-wide Anglican Communion over the ordination of gays and women. Indeed, a core conviction of all fundamentalist movements is that women must be kept in their place. All these, however, are in the true sense of the word "reactionary" efforts. They are attempting to stem an inexorable movement of the human spirit whose hour has come.

The wind of the Spirit is blowing. One indication is the upheaval that is shaking and renewing Christianity. Faith, rather than beliefs, is once again becoming its defining quality, and this reclaims what faith meant during its earliest years. . . [To be sure,] that primal impetus was nearly suffocated by creeds, hierarchies, and the disastrous merger of the church with the empire. But . . . a newly global Christianity, enlivened by a multiplicity of cultures and yearning for the realization of God's reign of shalom is finding its soul again. All the signs suggest we are poised to enter a new Age of the Spirit and that the future will be a future of faith.

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Last weekend I was in Dallas, Texas – the very brassy buckle of America’s Bible Belt. I’d been invited to speak there on progressive theology by a group of Unitarian Universalists whose motto is “freely following Jesus.” Yet in one weekend I’ve rarely had more interfaith, global, and positive interactions.

It began with an excellent workshop on Zen Buddhist meditation, taught by a Filipino-American Catholic, who was a Jesuit priest -- until he married and had children. Now he teaches at a Methodist seminary. What he teaches is less doctrine than the experience of growing more centered, aware, connected and compassionate -- which seems to transcend traditions.

Later I talked with a woman from India, wearing a sari, with a saffron dot in the middle of her forehead, about why she had joined a new Dallas-area Unitarian Universalist congregation called Pathways, which, as we do here, celebrates multiple paths to greater wisdom.

Overnight I stayed with two long-time UUs, whose son graduated from Princeton at the top of his class, and is now a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford -- studying theology, to their amazement, having been *baptized* last year as a *thinking* Christian, rather like President, and like, him hoping to be a leader in politics and public issues.

While I gave my own lecture, a colleague in UU ministry, Naomi King – the daughter of writer, Stephen King – was sending out my remarks through the internet blogosphere. She said I got a thousand hits. I heard about UU ministry partnerships from Hong Kong to East Africa.

In the midst of the weekend, I got an email report from my friend, Rabbi David Rosen, from Jerusalem, who founded Rabbis for Human Rights in Israel, and leads interfaith efforts for peace there. The news was modestly hopeful. David is never naïve, but also never despairing.

Then I heard a young UU minister, from a new Chicago congregation, “Micah’s Porch,” preach a powerful sermon about justice, compassion, and walking humbly – or what it would mean for us to turn against any American effort to play the part of Rome in guaranteeing world peace through endless war, and turn instead to another vision—the one Jesus himself embodied.

Finally, at the airport as I waited for my plane back to Boston two men, one Mexican, the other Muslim, came up to me to talk when they saw me reading a great little book with the title, “*They Take Our Jobs!*” and *20 Other Myths about Immigration* [Aviva Chomsky; Beacon Press]

By the way, I’ve invited the author that book to speak here in January. And our parish-wide “Book of the Year,” is *The Death of Josseline: Immigration Stories from the Arizona-Mexico Borderlands* by Margaret Regan [Beacon Press, 2010] presenting a series of intimate stories on the issue from immigrants, activists, human rights workers, and border patrol people.

But never mind! Today is United Nations Sunday, celebrating the 65th birthday of the UN on October 24th, 1945, when the founders declared to the world:

We, the peoples of the United Nations, [Molly steps to the lectern, reading the italics]

Determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women, and of nations large and small;

To promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,

And for these ends to practice tolerance and to live together in peace as good neighbors;

To unite our strength to maintain international peace and security,

To insure that armed force shall not be used, save in the common interest,

To employ international machinery in the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all people,

Have resolved to combine our efforts to accomplish these aims.

Like all covenants, from the covenant of marriage to the covenantal relationship that forms a non-creedal congregation, the Charter of the United Nations arose out of gratitude – specifically, for the end war. It was an act of faith, confirming that we human beings are indeed “the promise-making, promise-breaking, promise-renewing species,” as one theologian put it.

Lately I have been thinking a lot about the global future of faith. My one-time teacher, Harvey Cox, became famous in 1965 with his first book, *The Secular City*. Some people read him to mean that religion would disappear, that secularity would triumph. But that’s not what he was saying at all. As a theologian, he was simply saying that even what seems secular and not religious in our world, like secular politics, has religious significance. It represents various forms of faith, even though various false gods and messiahs, bound to disappoint, may abound.

I've said it many times before. Each of us on this planet has a religion, whether we admit to having one or not. It may not have much to do with the tradition or culture we were raised in. It just shows up in what we value; in what we do. As Thomas Jefferson said, "It is in our lives, and not from our words, that our religion must be read."

Or as I've often put it, paraphrasing a great minister from the church in DC where Mark is a member, "Belief is many things, and so is disbelief, but for us religion is what happens to us when we open our minds to greater truth, our hearts to deeper compassion, and our conscience to the call of justice." To which Mark might add, "and our wallets to the call of community!"

What Cox argues in his newest book is that for more and more people around the world, religion is similar. It is less about beliefs and, and hierarchies, and more about transforming spiritual experience. He points out that the first three centuries of Christianity had no creeds. The early church was more interested in the alternative vision associated with Jesus, a vision that did not die with him – of what the world could be like if, instead of the power-over politics of the Roman Empire, we could even *begin* to treat one another as we should: as equal sisters and brothers, bowing down to no one but the Unseen Spirit of the life we share.

Then Rome itself took over the church – and the original Age of Faith was succeeded by centuries when the emphasis was all on what you do believe or don't believe. What's now emerging now, says Cox, across all global religious lines, is an Age of the Spirit – when belief is far less important to the future of faith than spirituality.

I think that's right. As long as we recognize, as the scriptures say, that not all spirits are equally holy and make for wholeness, for justice and peace. Down in Dallas, for example, I know that more and more so-called Christians just love being told Jesus wants them to be rich. On the plane back I read a great religious critique of the Tea Party's belief in the libertarian doctrine of individualism and minimal mutual support through government.

But I also know why so many Americans are afraid and angry. They have worked hard. They have loved their country. And now, no less the workers in the streets in France, they feel it has broken its promise to them: the promise of a better, more prosperous future. They're right. But when in blaming "the government" they should recall what Pogo once said in the comics: "We has met the enemy; and they is us!"

During my lifetime, since World War II, America has become the new Rome. We want bread and circuses, lots of safety and services, and low taxes. We don't mind if our corporations

exploit the earth or peoples overseas. Or if our legions – made up now of hired mercenaries from among the poor, not a citizen army – are almost permanently at war. We just hate it when the government bails out the banks and the corporations and not us, and then finds that its own accounts are so overdrawn that we can't repair highways, or schools, or provide health care or jobs or shift to a green economy. I don't mind the Tea Party questioning "Washington" spending. I just wish they would question its most wasteful aspects. Question the \$3 trillion dollars in long-term costs for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Question whether it makes sense for the U.S. to have 761 military bases overseas. Question the bi-partisan assumption that this what is necessary for America to provide "leadership" in the world.

I am no isolationist. From my teenage years, when my family hosted an exchange student from Uganda, and I studied in Italy, and my first serious girl-friend had studied in Japan, I have considered myself a world-citizen. I want America engaged in the community of nations. But I agree with BU professor international relations Andrew Bacevitch, who was a colonel in the US Army and whose son died serving in Iraq: It is time for the US to lead less by force, and more by example. It is time for us to cultivate our own garden, and make it flourish again.

The new Conservative coalition in Great Britain is cutting their military by 40 per cent, along with social spending. God forbid that we should feel obligated to pick up the military slack or imitate their austerity by failing to invest wisely in the health, education, well-being, sustainability, and competitiveness of America's people and our economy.

Instead, let's bring the troops home. Let's stop fearfully imitating ancient Rome. Let's disentrall ourselves from what President Eisenhower called "the military-industrial complex," and from what Bacevitch and others call the Washington consensus about the need for militarism to support a cheap-product, high-profit, low-wage, no economic security economy. Instead, let's and have faith that there is a future for ourselves, and our children, and our children's children. Let's let America be America once again. As a "beacon to the nations" -- because of its fairness, humility, generosity, and love for peace.

So may it be. Amen.

UNISON PRAYER 505

Thich Nhat Hanh

Let us be at peace with our bodies and our minds. Let us return to ourselves and become wholly ourselves.

Let us be aware of the source of being, common to us all and to all living things.

Evoking the presence of the Great Compassion, let us fill our hearts with our own compassion – toward ourselves and toward all living things.

Let us pray that we ourselves cease to be the cause of suffering to each other.

With humility, with awareness of the existence of life, and of the sufferings that are going on around us, let us practice the establishment of peace in our hearts and on the earth. Amen.

***HYMN 121**

We'll Build a Land

Carolyn McDade

We'll build a land where we bind up the broken,
We'll build a land where the captives go free,
where the oil of gladness dissolves all mourning.
Oh, we'll build a promised land that can be.

Come, build a land where sisters and brothers,
anointed by God, may then create peace:
where justice shall roll down like waters,
and peace like an ever flowing stream.

BENEDICTION