

A Religion That Matters

by Daniel Jantos

This talk draws on material and ideas from:

Martin Hagglund [This Life. Why Mortality Makes Us Free](#)

Peter D. Hershock [Buddhism in the Public Sphere](#). Reorienting Global Interdependence.

Today, I would like to invite us to reflect on the 5th of our 7 principles..... “The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.”

Over the past couple of weeks of thinking about this reflection, what I have found particularly clarifying, is the word “secular.” I find something in that word “secular” liberating just now. And I have become curious about what that was. How do you think about the word secular? Perhaps you might share your thoughts at the end on our uses of the word secular.

I’ve been trying out this word and found the word “secular” to be quite useful in trying to explain what chaplaincy in a public and multicultural university is and could be. Once in a while I have said that “I thought my religious sensibilities are secular.” I have to be a little careful where and how I use it. Some find the use of that word to be provocative and disloyal to the traditional calling of those who are “**religious**” professionals. How can you be a chaplain and be “secular”?

But I am these days looking for inclusive terms. The university has recently agreed to allow me to change my title from Chaplaincy coordinator to “Inclusive Communities coordinator”. I think that the word “inclusive” makes a very different first impression from the word “chaplain” – which especially in Australia, comes with a great deal of, what I would call, ambiguity.

For myself, I am delighted and take comfort from the fact that our own UU movement would have no trouble with me substituting the terms – even as a religious professional. I am grateful to think of how much precedent there is in our movement

for radically putting the needs of people ahead of any creedal or historical purity or consistency.

I think “secular” also expresses a commonality, perhaps even a broadening of accountability, that the words “sacred” or “religious” have forfeited. Accountability is very much in question in our current national and global conversations..... as highlighted by the recent American election. Who are we accountable to?

Those of us who have a habit of going to traditions of faith and practice for insight would suggest that such questions as “who am I accountable to” can be answered on the basis of principles and teachings that can inform our practices? Beliefs usually say something about our most valued goals – both individually and collectively? They animate our commitments. And, in fulfillment, bring us real happiness and brings strength to our communities?

That is a much-valued goal for me: what makes for happiness? What gives me a sense of fulfillment and purpose? What strengthens our community? What actually has proven to unite us over the millenia and bring peace; brings us together as a society rather than divide us into camps of mutual othering and resentment and therefore chaos and inevitably violence?

I have often gone to the 7 principles for that foundation and found there a deep wisdom in the simple and beautiful set of principles that are the heart of the Unitarian Universalist movement. It is there we have put “democratic process” at the heart of what we believe. What is a democratic process?

From the earliest accounts we have of human community we see a tension between consolidating power and control or sharing it. And what I want to highlight today is a shift – an evolution – from consolidation to democratization. Early on we see strong inclinations on the part of governance structures to consolidate power and control. We might look at it through the lens of public works. The bigger the projects the greater the consolidation of power.

The pyramids, for example, were a huge public infrastructure project. A huge investment. Enormous management of labour. Incredible expenditure of resources and application of innovations. 4500 years ago the pyramids represented the level of power and control of the Egyptian pharaohs. The ziggurats of Persia, 2500 years ago, were similar. The Mayan temples, Angkor wat in Cambodia or the Forbidden City in Beijing. Public infrastructure being built to reflect what mattered most – the importance of the ruling elite and their connection/closeness to the Divine beings who held ultimate power. The forbidden city in Beijing, was considered to be the

home of the “son of God,” as the emperor called himself then. The forbidden city has 9,999 rooms. God, they believed, has 10,000.

It’s interesting to notice how theological these big infrastructure projects were. They did that very theological thing – inspired awe. But awe is actually not often a democratizing dynamic. You can visit the palace but when you do, plan on feeling small.

In Europe from the 16th to the 19th centuries, monarchs’ level of control over their kingdoms was measured by the grandeur of their palaces. It is said that Louis XIV built Versailles because France needed to look stronger. The Romans built roads, harbours, bridges – in far flung places that no Roman would go unless he was in the army. But that was a consolidation of power and control. All that infrastructure led back to Rome and there to the all-powerful Caesar. London in Victorian England was the biggest city in the world – infrastructure built on the consolidation of power and wealth that was flowing into the city from the colonies. Consolidation of power, wealth and control.

By the time the Eisenhower freeway system is built in the US in 1950’s we can see a shift. That huge infrastructure project reflected the optimism of post WW2 America - a national sense of the victorious unstoppable optimism - a nation empowered. But already in London and more so in the US we see something more democratic. We have an infrastructure in which control is not **impersonated** in an individual or a royal family but rather the sovereignty of the people and increasingly democratic institutions.

With this democratizing preference we see a parallel shift. For the Mayans, supernatural “spirit” forces determined everything. China’s imperial leader’s power and control came from closeness to that divine entity who has the ultimate agency. Obedience was a matter of personal and collective survival. Today we are not quite so obedient. And we are nowhere near as hierarchal. We have generally moved to a **secular** preference for seeing and interpreting the world. Theology has given way to history as a way of understanding the past. Prophecy and mysticism have given way to politics and policy development for shaping the future.

And with that a separation of the state and Church – the realm of the earthly, temporal and the heavenly and eternal.

Death and the hereafter was an obsession in the building of pyramids. That’s much more of a private affair for us these days. We rarely build great cathedrals any more ...let alone tombs like the Taj Mahal - which is to some extent what many of the greatest cathedrals were. The Divine right monarchs for a few centuries were sort of “halfings,”- bridging the divine and the human. No more. Queen Elizabeth may still be the head of the church of England but I don’t get a sense that Charles cares too much for that particular role. And it probably didn’t take too much persuading at all for Meghan to talk Harry, with their keen sensibility for a new generation’s views, out of any attachment to that legacy.

We are facing in a different direction. It is a democratizing trajectory. And with that a preference for a secular framework. We are building the NBN. The monarchs of

today, the children of school teachers and factory workers and immigrants, who arrived in the west in coats made of cleaning rags - Besos, Musk and Branson - are sending rockets to Mars for minerals to power our homes and cars and cities.

We would not have gotten here without the protestant reformation – an incredibly important milestone in the story of democratization. The Protestants got a taste of agency and it profoundly shifted all our views of power and control and how the natural and the supernatural are humanly bridged. People were encouraged to have a very personal experience of the very **intimate “holy”** spirit that empowers and quickens each one’s capacity to explore, question.....even dissent. In time, we came into the outrageous confidence of publishing our own stories and views in tweets, posts, pages - in our own style and personality. It is amazing who becomes an “influencer” and what goes “viral”.

It seems that the earlier theological paradigms tended towards consolidation of power and control. Theology seemed to want to keep us small and poor and subservient. I deeply value the role of humility. But I most value its purpose when expressed in the presence of others, in relationship to each other with whom we share this space. I value humility in recognizing our place in the ecosystems of our planet.

Democratization is that kind of humility. Not walking on your knees in self-effacement but making room for the other - fostering solidarity and mutual, collective wellbeing? In that sense humility seems to be more of a secular function?

Perhaps these are part of the reason why we have over the years bifurcated the authority of the church and the state – religion and politics. In the process we have chosen to hugely expand the scope of secular power (public education being one example). We have pushed theological questions and religious practices much more into the private sphere. Secular entities dictate the terms of engagement in western democracies and not the other way around. It seems we are generally more comfortable with that.

I suppose the point of all that ramble is to bring focus to the concept of freedom because freedom and democracy are often paired. Theologians often speak about liberation, salvation and enlightenment but less about freedom and never seem to have gotten a real appetite for democratic processes. So freedom must needs be a political term. And a practical consideration. Not in some eternal future life but here, now, in this life. Not implicit and veiled in some set ritual within the church or mosque or temple but imperative in the fulfillment of our obligations to each other here and now. And that’s the democratic imperative. It is what we mean when we refer to the “democratic process.”

But in a democracy no one is entirely free. So what are we talking about when we talk about freedom in a democracy? Autonomy is possible only for someone who is not in a relationship. And certainly not possible for someone who is in a relationship that is democratic in nature. Democracy presumes the other. It is, by definition, a process of making room for the other, listening, allowing for the possibility that I may have to accommodate the other persons preference, that I may need to compromise.

As we progress along this trajectory of democratization, especially those of us who believe in justice and equality for all, then democratization becomes not only an abstract term but we see it embodied in real terms and in actual conditions.

This is why just before his brief life ended Martin Luther King Junior began talking about some very secular things that had to do with economic realities.

“And then I got to Memphis”, he said in his speech to the sanitation workers union on April 3rd, 1968.And the threats, there are all these threats.....“We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place.... I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've *seen* the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land! And so I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. My eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!”^[1]

King is using religious language here but he is not talking about the hereafter. He is talking about the fact that, Memphis was like no community he had ever seen. On a night in which tornado's were passing through western Tennessee, and lightning and thunder rolling through the city, more than 2,000 union members and supporters had come out to hear him speak. The whole black community had rallied in Memphis since February in complete solidarity to support the ongoing sanitation strike. And they were forcing the city of Memphis to listen to their demands and make structural changes to the system, not just small adjustments.

King's poor people's campaign had shifted. “The discount education given to Negroes” he wrote in Where Do We Go From Here, “will in the future have to be purchased at full price if quality education is to be realized. Jobs are harder and costlier to create than voting roles. The eradication of slums housing millions is complex far beyond integrating buses and lunch counters.” The civil rights movement “must move towards the grass roots level of our communities” and “we must now compel unwilling authorities to yield to the mandates of justice,” we have laboured with the idea of reforming existing institutions of the society a little change here, a little change there. Now I feel quite differently, I think you've got to have a revolution of values.”

A democracy is a shared space not just for talk. It is an acknowledgement that the resources we have are shared resources – limited and mutually owned. If public hospitals and public schools suffer because some have taken substantial profits out of the pool for themselves, well then that's a question of justice and equity. It is undemocratic. If some people are free to travel and move wherever they wish to homes they have for a week or two of the year in places they like to drop in on, and other people can't access the food and sustenance they need and the safety they crave for themselves and their families because there is border and its closed.....well then that's a question about our democratic processes. It is a question of whether or not we believe in equality and equity as a principle.

So it's a radical thing this belief in the democratic process. And there is a huge and exciting need for entities who could contribute to developing the skills, reflections and practices of how better to relate to one another. But to do that one, whether it is a person or an organization, has to believe in democracy and be willing to hone and temper that belief in the context of the shared space, sharing power, sharing resources, sharing a vision of what it means to be a community and a citizen.

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