

An Atheist for President?
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When Dwight Eisenhower was first inaugurated in 1953, somebody thought at the last moment that the gigantic inaugural parade, which celebrated almost everything from motherhood to the success of the GOP, should also celebrate God.

A contrivance called "God's Float" was rushed to completion, but there was considerable embarrassment because of the shortage of appropriate materials. The float could not look Catholic, Protestant or Jewish (Muslim wasn't even on the radar screen back then!; Buddhism? Forget about it!) It would have to be given some dignified place of honor in the parade. But where? Finally, it was put first, and at the heart of the display was placed a rather innocuous and not-quite denominational building surrounded with competing mottoes proclaiming, "In God We Trust" and "Freedom of Worship."

Folks, there ends an especially bizarre chapter in the history of official godliness in American government. In fact, the McCarthy-infected 1950's were a particularly busy time for official godliness. The phrase "under God" was added to the Pledge of Allegiance; "In God we Trust" was put back on our currency, and Ohio adopted this state motto (later overturned): "With God All Things are Possible."

Of course, there isn't *supposed to be* any official godliness at all in the good old U S of A, at least according to our Constitution, a secular document which is too often misapplied despite its relative clarity. It begins "We the people" and contains no mention of "God" or "Christianity" WHATSOEVER. Its only references to religion are exclusionary, such as "no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust" (Art VI), and the famed First Amendment, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

Of all the misguided claims made about the First Amendment, perhaps none is more dangerous and insipid than those of TV evangelist-cum-politicos and alt-right bloggers and pundits who spew remarks like: "The Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, not freedom *from* religion." This has been a stock phrase of the Religious Right for decades, recited frequently by its faithful bullies. Despite what these shock jocks espouse or the repeating blunder that "our founders did not believe in the separation church and state," we are not, nor have

we even been, nor should we ever strive to be, a theocracy (a government based on a theological framework).

Yes, many of the folks who *settled* America in the early 1600's were Puritans escaping What they called the "Priest-craft" and persecution of Europe. They were devout Christians who saw themselves as participants in Divine history. They literally saw themselves as characters in a Biblical continuum, wandering in the wilderness before arriving on these shores. America was the Promised Land, their new Jerusalem. They were religious with a capital R.

But our Founding Fathers, at work on a burgeoning nation in the late 1700's, had other ideas. They recognized and guaranteed freedom of religion, including the possibility of freedom *from* religion. This should not be a matter of debate or opinion. If an American can believe freely, then one can choose not to believe at all; to be (dare I say it?) an atheist or more gently, a humanist.

Thomas Jefferson certainly realized this. When legislators in Virginia debated his landmark Statute for Religious Freedom in 1786, efforts were made to limit its guarantees of religious liberty to Christians only. In other words, Virginians would be free to profess any religion they wanted -- as long as it was a *Christian* denomination! This proposal was ultimately rejected and Jefferson's bill passed in its original form. Years later, Jefferson rejoiced in the fact that his legislation protected (in his words) "the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and Mohometan, the Hindoo, and the Infidel of every denomination" (my disclaimer added: as long as they were white and not enslaved).

But this foundational version of religious freedom is still a hot potato in national politics. And its still a bit of a stretch for an avowed atheist getting past the gates at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, although the numbers are bending favorably towards non-believers, with a surprising 54% of Americans claiming in 2012 that they would vote for a qualified atheist for President. To balance that, a 2016 Pew Survey showed 51% would be less likely to elect a candidate who did not believe in God (presumably the personal God of the Judeo-Christian tradition).

Herb Silverman, the self-titled "Unflappable Atheist" and founder of the Secular Coalition for America, experienced this challenge himself. In 1990, he ran for governor of South Carolina where an old law banned atheists like him from holding public office. Silverman lost -- by a landslide -- though his candidacy did lead to the repeal of the law by the state's supreme court.

Silverman, who tells the story of his run for office in his wryly titled book "Candidate Without a Prayer," says that to push their approval numbers higher, more atheists need to "come out," just as gays and lesbians have done. "I think prejudices will always be with us, so I am not optimistic enough to think (atheists'

approval rating) will be near unanimous," he said. "But I think the more role models we have the better things will be." I couldn't agree more.

Some encouraging trends are afoot. In the current Congress, 18 members refused to divulge their religious affiliations and Jared Huffman, D-CA openly declared himself a Humanist. Two California Democrats, Reps. Ami Bera and Judy Chu, checked Unitarian Universalist as their denomination. UU Walt Minnick of Idaho served from 2009-2011.

A few short years ago, only Arizona Democratic Rep. Kyrsten Sinema admitted to being "unaffiliated," which the Pew Foundation defines as people who are atheist, agnostic or who describe their religion as "nothing in particular." That means only 0.2 percent of Congress is unaffiliated or "Nones," compared with 23 percent of all U.S. adults.

That group is faster growing than any religious group in America and that 23% matches the number of evangelicals and the number of Catholics in the US today. Fascinating. Even so, nearly 91 percent of congressional members claim to be Christian, compared with 71 percent of U.S. adults. That's a hefty number and profoundly effects the passage of legislation.

If we go back, once again, to 1958, the heyday of official godliness, we learn from a Gallup poll that four out of five voters in America would have refused to vote for an avowed atheist for a high elected office under any circumstances. Of course, the lowly status of atheism was partly due to its linkage with Communism -- Communists are atheists; Communists are America's Number one enemy; ergo, atheists are also America's number one enemy. So much for moral complexity.

The religious lives of our Presidents has always been a source of innuendo and gossip. And the religions cover the gamut. Washington was an Anglican, Cleveland a Presbyterian, McKinley a Methodist, Hoover a Quaker, Harding was a Baptist, Kennedy was a Catholic.

Our 45th President says he is a "big religion guy" and a Presbyterian. Yet, he's also attended Catholic and Dutch Reformed churches and married his third wife in an Episcopal one. Does he go to church on Sunday? Nope. His prosperity gospel ringmaster Paula White makes White House calls, saying he's the chosen one. Astonishingly (at least, to me), 21% agree that Trump is anointed by God, 80% of evangelicals voted for him despite his blatant "sins," 72% of evangelicals still approve of him (a mere 6% drop from 2016).

Trump claims the Bible is his second favorite book (after his ghost-written "The Art of the Deal" and that his favorite Scripture passage is "The one about the two Corinthians." Yet, as we've recently witnessed, for Trump, the Bible is primarily a prop to hold awkwardly aloft after teargassing his own citizens in Lafayette Square. And on this very 4th of July weekend, he intends to host (during

a deadly pandemic, no less) a fireworks celebration of white-centered freedom on Native American sacred ground at Mt. Rushmore. Sweet Jesus!

Trump is essentially areligious and without real beliefs or a moral center. This has not always been the case in the Presidency. Did you know that four Presidents have been Unitarians (the two Adams, Fillmore, and Taft), Jefferson attested privately and in numerous writings to Unitarian leanings, and four more listed no church membership at all.

The surprise among the circumspect is no less an icon than Abraham Lincoln. The suspicion about Abe's atheism was so provocative that in 1893, a prominent editor published a 360-page report entitled, "Abraham Lincoln: Was He A Christian?" Given his legacy, does it really matter? Adlai Stevenson, a Unitarian Presidential candidate in both 1952 and 1956 labored under similar suspicions. So much so that, in 1955, he calmly joined the Presbyterian church while retaining his Unitarian membership. Nearly 60 years later, candidates continue to cloak their atheism or humanism in order to get or stay elected.

Case in point – Rep Barney Frank (D-MA), spent 16 terms in Congress and came out as a gay man in 1987, yet waited until after he retired in 2013 to reveal his atheist leanings. He explained this by saying that “atheist sounded aggressive and repudiating to people.” Well, maybe he could have done something to correct that view.

As it stands, there is very little balance in the religious thrust to policy making in Congress. It wasn't until 2007 that Rep Pete Stark, D-CAL became the highest ranking public official to ever admit to being an atheist (although he described himself as “a Unitarian who doesn't believe in a Supreme Being.”) Good on you, Pete.

I can imagine this confused some people, though, and it may be helpful to define our terms a bit more clearly. An *atheist* is a person who does not believe in a transcendent deity, a person who is not a theist. Some humanists are atheists and some are not. An *agnostic* is one who holds that it's impossible to know anything definitive about God and thus, remains uncertain. Some UUs are agnostics and some are not. I presume a number of you would place yourselves in one of these categories. Some UUs are theists who believe in a personal God, and that's fine, too. I'm not casting a vote for one over another. But an *infidel*, the most pejorative term, is one who is an unbeliever, who is "against" God.

Unfortunately, in the warped world of the religious right, not only atheists and agnostics (and UUs by association) are branded as infidels, but so is *anyone* who doesn't subscribe to a particular brand of conservative right-wing Christianity. So much for Jefferson's fortitude in 1786.

And we cannot overlook the ignorance of a shockingly high percentage of Americans who get their facts from social media , shock radio, conspiracy sites, and “fake news” and sincerely believe President Barack Obama was really a Muslim (even though he is a bona fide member of the United Church of Christ and was exposed to Unitarian Universalism as a child, too.

If we look at the propaganda-filled Voter Guides that the conservative Christian lobby is so skilled at distributing, illegally in some cases, we discover that the litmus test is not whether candidates are Christians, but what *kind* of Christians they purport to be. Of course, as I've been saying, based on the letter of Constitutional law, a candidate's religious leanings shouldn't technically be a factor.

But religious views have been pushed increasingly center stage by right-wing Christian groups who have swamped the debate and set the agenda. They've convinced many red-capped Americans that all candidates must pass a very strict litmus test based on creed rather than "what is just or correct or humane or compassionate?" It's possible that if PACS like the *Focus on the Family* were prohibited from tangling in the election process, religious leanings may recede back to a less prominent position. We might not even care!

It wouldn't matter whether the candidates ascribed to some mushy religiosity about a matter as seemingly small as the baking of wedding cakes for gay couples , but rather whether their policies and platforms passed an essential litmus test of ethics, principle, and right relationship to humanity and to the planet on important issues like Reproductive Justice, Marriage Equality, Economic Inequality, Black Lives matter, Global Warming, Gun Control and Immigration Reform.

It appears that the Supreme Court needs to be reminded that ours is a democracy, not a theocracy. We are electing secular political leaders to run a government, not religious leaders to manage a house of worship. And we must keep at it (especially as we've seen in the past month, around reproductive and LGBTQ rights). Ironically, the Anti-Defamation League, one of the largest *Jewish* organizations in America, has felt the need to assert that while candidates should feel comfortable talking about their faith in public, "at some point an emphasis on religion in a political campaign becomes inappropriate and even unsettling in a religiously diverse society such as ours."

Jefferson would agree. He originally coined the phrase "separation between church and state" in a carefully crafted letter to the Danbury (CT) Baptists in 1802. Alarming, that wall is constantly in danger of being breached. Consider whether we've really progressed very far from the astute observations of French

philosopher Alexis DeToqueville, whose poem we heard earlier, and who was fascinated by the interface of American culture, democracy, and religion.

During his travels in America in the 1830s he wrote: "Upon my arrival here, the religious aspect of the country was the first thing that struck my attention." "Religion in America," he continues, "takes no direct part in the government of society, but nevertheless it must be regarded as the foremost of the political institutions of that country...for they hold it to be indispensable to the maintenance of republican institutions." (and democratic, too, I might add!)

Frankly, I'd feel more confident about our elected officials at every level if I had some assurance that they believed in a Global Ethic and in some basic humane principles rather than the rank-and-file religious rhetoric and ill-defined morality we're served up on a regular basis.

As we've witnessed throughout history, avowed religiosity doesn't guarantee morality. In fact, according to a recent study, the ethical behavior of people who say religion is essential to their lives is often indistinguishable from the behavior of those who describe religion as unimportant. These findings run counter-intuitive to the assumption that religious people are more ethical and honorable than non-religious people.

Yet, even as fewer Americans are attending regular worship services, religious beliefs remain a key rubric for voting. I have nothing against the whole concept of being "religious" or the choice to be Christian. In fact, I try to be, and hope you try to be, religious in a UU way and UU my vote.

My beef is with the assumption that "religious" has a very narrow meaning in America, and that UUs are pegged as non-religious people, simply because some of us are atheists or agnostics or humanists. Unitarian Universalism *is* a religion. However, since our religion is not based on a creed, the litmus test looks quite different. I'd guess that if we voted based on a "religious" perspective, it might be one that captures our seven UU principles.

I won't speak for you, but I know that I'm much more interested in how our leaders actually *look*, standing transparent in the town square, as opposed to how they want to appear, propped up by spin doctors and vapid religious rhetoric in the media spotlight. I really don't care which Gods they believe in or even if they believe in God. Rather, I want to know our leaders believe in the creative, positive forces at work in Universe and that we have the power to harness those forces for good.

If we wish to coax more qualified atheists, humanists or liberally religious candidates out into the arena who share this point of view, we'll need to learn how to convince the general populace that their values (our values!) have universal appeal, even for devout Christians.

Candidates have mobilized and are ramping up in 2020. We need to show up for the fight. When you cast your vote on the next election day and then the next (and I do hope you will all vote), consider in what ways you are voting religiously as a Unitarian Universalist; that you will show up to demand fair elections and call out voter suppression to ensure that EVERY voice can lift and sing.

Also ponder your role in preserving freedom of religion, including freedom *from* religion. Be conscious of our continued need to stand sentry at that wall that separates church and state. And please be cautious that as you stand on the side of love, you do not become as opinionated, dismissive, and rigidly zealous as your opponent. In the voting booth, let's remind religious bullies that the original US motto, chosen by John Adams, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson is *E Pluribus Unum* (Of Many, One), not "In God We Trust."

Furthermore, on Inauguration Day 2021, let's reassert the fact that the presidential oath of office, the only oath detailed in the Constitution, does not contain the phrase, "so help me God" or any requirement to swear on a Bible. (Art II, S7). I, for one, would love to see a "People's float," bedecked with peace symbols, flowers and children, cruising down Pennsylvania Avenue, with the motto: " It's in *our* hands. In goodness we trust. Free to believe. Free not to. "

In the words of de Tocqueville, "America is great because she is good," yet I don't believe it is because "our genius and power reside in pulpits aflame with righteousness." Instead, I'd argue from this pulpit that our genius and power reside in the hearts of our citizenry aflame with freedom, reason, tolerance, and compassion. Anything less would be unpatriotic and a *God-awful* shame

Blessed be. Blessed we. Bless this country. Let freedom ring.

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Benediction: "I shall take my voice wherever there are those who want to hear the melody of freedom or the words that might inspire hope and courage in the face of fear. My weapons are peaceful, for it is only by peace that peace can be attained. The song of freedom must prevail." – Paul Robeson