



A sermon by The Rev. Stephen Atkinson, Minister

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VOTING VALUES

Twelve years ago at the Toronto International Film Festival, I saw a French film called *Ridicule*, obviously 'ridicule' in English. It was set in the aristocracy of pre-revolutionary France. Apparently, the fancy-dinner customs of the time included displays of wit, elaborate word play and innuendo about persons present or not, allegedly all in good fun. The serious side of it was that adeptness in this social game was highly associated with status and social acceptability; one rose up the high class ladder by besting others, smiling falsely all the while.

The central event in the story as I remember it is that a provincial lord arrives in Paris for the first time, and a small number of people in court decide they don't like him; at dinner, they set him up to fail when it's his turn in the witticism competition. The result is that everyone laughs *at* him, not with him, and then act as though he's disappeared. The rest of the film shows his elaborate plotting to take revenge one by one on each of those involved. It's a beautiful film about ugly characters.

This weekend another film about ridicule just opened, Bill Maher's *Religulous*; he claims it's a documentary about religion, showing how stupid religious beliefs are and the people who hold them. I hear it's very funny. I admit I haven't seen the film and I won't; I did hear him and the director, Larry Charles, interviewed on a National Public Radio program on Friday so know something of what they've produced, their intention and their attitude to the subject and their subjects.

There are two reasons why I won't see the film, neither of which is that I disagree with its intention, which, to give it more credit than they have reason to claim, is to be critical of religion. I have no problem with critiquing religion. My first reason for refusing to see it is that, as with the *Borat* film last year, the filmmakers set up ordinary people in false or undisclosed circumstances with the intention of mocking them and opening them to ridicule; the argument is that these people *are* ridiculous. Well, all of us are ridiculous in some way, especially when we're set up to think something is one thing when it's not. In the case of *Religulous*, the filmmakers arranged in apparent good faith to interview people about their religion; only at the last moment did Bill Maher appear as the interviewer. It is fundamentally unfair and mean-spirited to use unwitting people in

this way; our First Principle, asserting the inherent worth and dignity of every person, demands that this kind of personal sabotage be rejected.

The other reason I won't see Maher's movie, and the reason why I say he 'claims' it's a documentary, is that, according to the radio interview, they only sought interviews with people they assumed or already knew would make their point for them. This is shooting ducks in a barrel; it's an arrogant bully who chooses to fight only those he or she knows can be bested and then to crow about having succeeded. Did Bill Maher interview Hans Küng, a Catholic critic of the recent papacies, or John Shelby Spong, the Methodist Bishop who turns Protestant social conservatism on its ear, or Sallie McFague, a Vancouver School of Theology professor and feminist theologian, or Mark Morrison-Reed, a previous President of the Canadian Unitarian Council, or Steven Epperson, my esteemed colleague at the Vancouver church, or any other thoughtful and brilliant critic of religion? No, he wanted to prove that religion is stupid by only showing the stupidity of certain aspects of religion. The interviewer wondered if they'd considered the real value that so many people find in, for instance, religious ritual. Maher simply asked, "Why is it important?" in a tone that disclosed he'd never thought about the possible meaning of religious activity. Our Fourth Principle is that we search for truth freely and *responsibly*; even if religion *is* stupid, which at most is only sometimes true, this movie is not free, responsible or searching as it presents that. I won't have anything to do with it.

I know that some of you may have seen the film already or plan to; you may have enjoyed it immensely or will if you go. I'm neither ridiculing anyone for that nor telling you what you should do. What I am doing is confronting us all, me included, with the impossible goal that we must refer to our principles in everything that we do, in all that we think and decide. Ridicule, one-sided arguments, intellectual bullying, dissimulation – *none* of that is in any way part of Unitarian Universalist spiritual life. We needn't offer these methods any respect.

This brings us to politics, elections and voting our values. I believe it's an interview of Justin Trudeau that I'm remembering from around the time that Pierre Eliot Trudeau died. Justin told how as a boy he was having lunch with his father in the Parliamentary restaurant; he saw a political opponent enter and sit down not far away. Justin told a joke that he'd heard about this man, and his father chastised him. Trudeau said to his son something like, "You never criticize the person; only the thinking or the policies." In our words, persons have inherent worth and dignity whatever they propose politically.

You might think that this goes without saying among us Unitarian Universalists. I recall, however, my surprise when I was living in the United States how vehemently my colleagues and friends spoke about politics and politicians, especially when conservative religious views were part of the picture. I don't mean that I didn't join in; frequently I fail to live up to my own standards, and I have powerful thoughts about politics and strong views about the use and misuse of religion in society. I was just surprised at the obvious assumption that it was perfectly OK to talk like this about political opponents when we'd rarely do so about other people.

An assumption easily found among us Unitarian Universalists is that we all have the *same* political views. I encountered this in Fredericton shortly after I first attended. My prior experience in spiritual communities was that politics was never spoken of; it was either divisive or somehow unclean. Within weeks of attending the Fredericton fellowship, I heard a few people speak as though everyone there would vote one way in an upcoming provincial election. Later I found out that it was common knowledge that there were at least three parties represented in their membership which made me wonder even more why people had spoken as if this weren't so. I also saw political diversity in the Dallas church where there were Libertarian Party members, as well as Democrats, Republicans and Independents. Libertarians in a nutshell take our values of individual freedom and responsibility to a radical level, seeing governmental power as unacceptable, but these Dallas church ones value Unitarian Universalist ideas.

The value of ours that I'm speaking of here is pluralism. We ground ourselves meaningfully in a variety of sources of human experience and religious truth which makes our communities diverse. Some of us are uncomfortable with that diversity, at least with respect to varying beliefs, but there's no avoiding the fundamental truth that we respect difference. It's important that we not make Bill Maher's mistake and demean difference, but that we ponder it and come as we can to understand it. This is another way in which we responsibly search for truth.

For instance, during this election there was an article in the Vancouver Sun about the psychology of politics. Though the study was small and open to criticism, it found some evidence that anxiety levels are involved with fundamental political stances. Certain physiological measures found higher anxiety levels in those with right-leaning views, and lower ones in those left-leaning. If this evidence is confirmed it fits with the political analysis that links the polarity of security versus freedom with conservatism versus liberalism, in small-letters, mind you.

This makes some sense as a hypothesis. We have innate levels of tension, vigilance and anxiety; this would partly be genetic and tend to run in families. Those

with higher levels would value security as a way to deal with fear and reduce risk; people with this value would tend to congregate into groups. Religious beliefs that affirm the importance of fear could be linked to the same traits. The converse occurs in those with lower levels of tension; they would be less vigilant to threat and readier to trust which could translate into a higher regard for freedom and acceptance.

The fact that we think of fear as negative and trust as positive mustn't be misleading. Both fear and trust are emotional mechanisms evolved to help us survive. There's nothing inherently wrong or right about them; without them both, we couldn't have survived as the species that we are. In that sense they have equal value and both traits exist in every person. Hypothetically, though, they could contribute significantly to those people one agrees or disagrees with about issues not recognized to be emotionally based.

As an aside, looking at politics in this hypothetical way, it might be true that, say, there's far more that the Conservative and the Green Parties have in common than is at all apparent. If both are motivated in some sense by fear, vigilance and the importance of security – Conservatives about the present and Greens about the future – then perhaps there's a whole new bridge between them that neither has identified; a new way for them to speak together and understand one another. Now *that* is a very Unitarian Universalist idea, the acceptance of one another, the ability to see in the face of the other what is true about ourselves, and to reach out across a gap to communicate and understand.

The principle of ours that is most relevant to elections and voting is that we support the use of the democratic process among us and in society at large, though I see very little of what I believe we mean by democratic process. We don't have democracy simply because we say over and over that we do. Democracy requires information to which we really have so little access. We are told about policies, but rarely given undistorted facts. It is difficult to find a news source that we can be sure is not tainted by bias; poll results pop up every day but never the questions people were asked or the motive of those who asked. Lies are presented as news stories. What does it say about how we engage with the world when negative campaigning influences us more than the truth?

Our values affirm the right of conscience, but where is that in our system which prevents large swaths of the population from having any voice? Voting in the past was restricted to property owners; our 'first past the post' electoral system continues to advantage those already having power and means. I believe people yearn for a parliament that represents diverse opinions, yet leaders, both in power or opposition,

act based on their desire to maintain or regain control. I think an example of this is that no electorate has yet been asked if *in principle* they desire proportional representation. Instead, governments set up complex methods to create *one* choice that people must accept or decline; the difficulty of merely understanding it ensures that it be defeated, and then the claim is made that the people don't want it as though they've voted *for* what we currently have. A result of this is an increasingly disengaged populace which allows the *status quo* to continue with little resistance.

I know this is not a very spiritual message that I deliver today, but I assure you that it is with my entire mind, heart and spirit that I yearn for a different way. The first time I was of age for an election, I was a Bahá'í and that faith suggests the only spiritual way to vote is to select the *person* with the best qualities regardless of their party. I lived away at school at the time, and didn't really know the candidates in my home riding; I decided not to vote. My mother, in an earlier iteration of her personality than you met last spring, huffed at me: "Well then, vote *blankety blank blank* like everybody else." She was pretty mad, but I held to my guns.

In subsequent elections, I believed I did know the qualities of the person I voted for and my heart and soul were comfortable; even if my choices rarely won, it felt good to vote! Many years ago, I decided I had to vote strategically to try to ensure the strongest voice against something I disagreed with. I hated feeling I had to do that, but the polarities in Canada were becoming stronger and clearer. Ever since then, I have felt I had to vote *against*, rather than vote with my spirit *for*.

Yet this is a Unitarian Universalist value, too – to deal with this world as it is, not to dream of a fantasy paradise elsewhere. I am spiritual *and* pragmatic; I look deep and high, but pay attention to the reality in which I live. So, as living according to values can do, it presents me with a dilemma. One value conflicts with another. Do I vote for the best person according to my ethical and spiritual judgment disregarding party affiliation? Do I vote from my loftiest ideals regardless of whether they're close to being attainable in this time and place? Or do I vote in the most practical way, in hope that doing so will make this imperfect world a bit more liveable for the next little while?

One thing I know now is that opting out of making a decision goes against *all* my values. I still have a lot to think about before October 14th.