



# UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK  
Spirituality · Community · Justice

## Pluralistic Ethics & Political Polarization: Struggling to “Speaking the Truth in Love” in Election Season

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Over the past few decades, many studies have shown a **growing political polarization** in our country. This widening gap between the right and the left has made finding a middle ground increasingly difficult. So in this presidential election season in which our collective awareness of political polarization is heightened, I want to invite us to consider how our Unitarian Universalist values might help us in navigating this divide.

Unitarian Universalism is part of the free church tradition—as opposed to an episcopal tradition (in which a bishop has control) or a presbyterian tradition (in which a regional group of elders has control). We believe in the importance of individuals *freely choosing* beliefs, ethics, and community for themselves. We also live in a free country. But here’s the hard part: **free individuals do not always choose to believe, act, or associate in ways that I (or you or we) might prefer.** Along these lines, there are ways of reading our UU Seven Principles as supporting a certain set a political beliefs. But there is another way of reading these same principles as protecting the rights of those with whom I (or you or we) disagree:

- The inherent worth and dignity of *every person*
- *Justice, equity and compassion* in [all] human relations
- *Acceptance of one another....*
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning
- The right of *conscience* and the use of the *democratic* process....

- 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.

In a hotly-contested presidential election season, even as we might argue passionately for our respective political perspectives, our UU Principles call us to respect a baseline of freedom for individuals to discern for themselves.

That being said, there is a bias built-in to the free church tradition. **Affirming individual freedom tilts a society toward pluralism and diversity.** History shows us that when there is individual liberty, some individuals will chose conformity (to tradition, community, or authority), but many others will chose radically diverse expressions of personality.

Along these lines, some people occasionally express surprise at my journey from the Southern Baptist congregation of my childhood to becoming a Unitarian Universalist. But **both Baptists and UUs are part of the *free church* tradition.** They are both composed of individuals who freely choose to affiliate with a given congregation, and each given congregation is in turn autonomous: congregations also freely chose whether or not to affiliate with larger groups, networks, or associations. Indeed, the full name of the UUA is the “Unitarian Universalist Association of *Congregations*.” We are not a denomination, but an *association*—a movement—of free individuals and congregations who have freely chosen *interdependence*, because we are stronger together.

Growing up, I learned about what Baptists call the **Four Freedoms**:

- Religious Freedom - there should be *freedom from* state-sponsored or state-forced religion
- Soul Freedom - individuals must choose for themselves what they believe
- Bible Freedom - individuals must read and interpret scripture for themselves
- Church Freedom - individual congregations are autonomous and self-governing

Sounds pretty UU! And emerging from these four freedoms, you will find many Baptist congregations that are theologically conservative as well as Baptist congregations that are theologically liberal. Because while it is true that Jerry Falwell, Mike Huckabee, Roy Moore, Tim LaHaye, and Fred Phelps are Baptists, it is also the case that **Martin Luther King, Jr. Bill Clinton, Al Gore, Jimmy Carter, Jesse Jackson, and Bill Moyers are also Baptists.** That’s the

kind of diversity that emerges from individual freedom and liberty, both in congregations and in our larger society.

But **what happens when individual liberties and preferences conflict?** For instance, many of you likely saw the front page headline last week in *The Frederick News-Post* that read, “Transgender teen says he and his mother were removed from Cruz event.” How do we as a society adjudicate between one person’s “freedom” to choose the bathroom that feels right to them and another person’s (uninformed) fear about gender-neutral bathrooms? I’ve used quite a few gender-neutral bathrooms over the years, and I can report that it turns out they are just bathrooms!

In reflecting on these issues, I appreciated a story from one of my former colleagues in the Alliance of Baptists, The Rev. Dr. Amy Butler, who is now the minister at Riverside Church in New York City. On a recent flight returning from Europe, Amy found herself in the midst of a conflict around differing interpretations of religious freedom and individual liberty. As she approached the seat listed on her ticket, she noticed that all around her empty seat were men identically dressed, seemingly part of an orthodox religious group. It turns out that she guessed correctly. As soon as she sat down, the man beside her pressed the flight attendant button and said that Amy would need to be moved to another seat: **“his religious freedom, he said, was [being] violated....as his religion does not allow him to sit next to a woman who is not his wife.”**

Amy confesses, “I had so many thoughts in that moment.” She did not give up her seat, but the conflict also just beginning. There were other perceived violations of religious freedom around airline food not passing theological muster as well as the men feeling religiously prohibited from interacting with female flight attendants. She writes, **“The end result was a noisy, contentious, and anxiety-ridden eight hours.”**

So how do we move forward? Is there an unresolvable impasse between a woman’s freedom to sit in her assigned seat and a religiously orthodox man’s conviction that the God of his understanding forbids him to sit next to a woman who is not his wife? How do we solve the dilemma of one person’s perceived religious freedom to sell wedding cakes *only* to opposite-

gender couples or another person's desired religious liberty to maintain "traditional gender roles" in bathrooms?

Religious liberty is about the freedom to choose your own religion without coercion by the government, religious leaders, or the larger community. But that **individual freedom does not extend to unduly controlling other people**. When I read about conflicts over religious liberty, I sometimes think that we have lost perspective about what serious religious persecution looks like—such as during the Inquisition when individuals were forced to be part of a state-sponsored religion under threat or imprisonment or death.

Freedom of religion does not give individuals or groups power to impose their religion on others. I respect (though disagree) if the God of your understanding tells you to not use contraception, but that does not give you the right to block your employees's access to birth control. The First Amendment has both a Free Exercise clause *and* an Establishment clause: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." So while you do have freedom of religion, your individual freedom of religion does *not* include the right to establish your religion over others; that would be one step too far. As our Unitarian forebear and Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes (1841 – 1935) said, "**The right to swing my fist ends where the other man's nose begins.**" Or, as Rev. Amy said in reflecting on her airplane encounter, "Religious freedom is just that: freedom. Note that we don't call it 'religious comfort.'" When we forget this insight, **claims about religious liberty too often end up masking what in reality is an attempt to force an individual or group's sexism, racism, or homophobia on the larger society.**

To be clear, in a free society, individuals can *freely choose* sexist, racist, or homophobic beliefs; however, a commitment to individual liberty requires limits on how individuals interact with one another. As The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "It may be true that morality cannot be legislated, but behavior can be regulated. It may be true that the law cannot change the heart but it can restrain the heartless. **It may be true that the law cannot make a man love me but it can keep him from lynching me.**" And I do not mean to be flippant when I say next that simply keeping us from killing one another—and then allowing us to live freely amidst one

another in all our diversity is a tremendous catalyst for progress. As Dr. King said later in that same speech:

One of the tragedies of our whole struggle is...monologue, rather than dialogue, and I am convinced that **men hate each other because they fear each other. They fear each other because they don't know each other** and they don't know each other because they don't communicate with each other, and they don't communicate with each other because they are separated from each other.

This dynamic remains true today. So many people have become less sexist not by abstract argument, but through a relationship with their daughter, mother, spouse, or other loved one who was being discriminated against. Likewise, the struggle for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender justice has been advanced much less by reasoned arguments (although those have been important too) than by people experiencing loved ones coming out of the closet—and seeing that LGBT folk are not a “them” but part of “us.”

Even in the face of our increasingly polarized country, there is a broader trend of expanding concentric circles of who is included as a fully enfranchised and represented member of “We the People.” Almost 60 years ago, when then-Senator John F. Kennedy was running for president, he had to give a major speech to convince the U.S. public that a Roman Catholic could be president without being unduly influenced by the pope. Today, to use another branch of government as an indication of how far our culture has shifted, **there are five Catholic members of the Supreme Court, three Jewish members, and no Protestants.** Similarly, despite major persecution against Mormons in our nation’s history, in the last presidential election cycle, “white evangelicals voted for [Governor Mitt] Romney in even greater numbers than they had voted for George W. Bush four years earlier. **Romney may have lost, but Mormons won**” (Prothero 137).

When I was young and my worldview was formed almost exclusively from a Southern Baptist perspective, I would have been happy to learn that all six billion people on Earth had become Southern Baptists overnight. But as I grew older, I began to meet increasing numbers of *non*-Southern Baptists who were kind, well-adjusted, smart, funny, competent human beings. When your roommate is a Roman Catholic, your best friend is an atheist, and your favorite

professor is a Buddhist, it is increasingly difficult to maintain with integrity the position that any one belief system is the only or best way of being in the world. This conviction does *not* make me a relativist. (I don't believe that simply anything is permissible.). But **I am a pluralist, who believes there is more than one legitimate, healthy way of being in the world.**

So in this presidential election session, be passionate about your convictions, but also **be mindful of the difference between “brutal honesty” and “speaking the truth (as you see it) in love.”** Amidst a political process that often cynically pits neighbor against neighbor, let us continue to build the Beloved Community.

For now, I would like to leave you with these words from Diana Eck, a Professor of Comparative Religion at Harvard University, who for many years (starting in 1991) directed the Pluralism Project, which helped document previously unreported religious diversity all across this country including in small towns and rural areas. Dr. Eck shared these words in a sermon at the Unitarian Church of All Souls, New York in 2007. They remain relevant today for the role we Unitarian Universalist might play today amidst our politically polarized society:

The world has need of your theology. If there ever were a time that we need to **spin out a new fabric of belonging and a wider sense of “we” for the human community**, it is certainly now... In a world divided by race, and by religion and ideology, the very presence of a [religious movement] like yours—committed to...the love of neighbor and service to humanity—is a beacon. The Unitarian Universalist theology (and yes, you have one) **does not reduce the mystery of the divine, the transcendent, but amplifies it, broadens it to include the many, many ways in which the divine is known and yet unknown.** Developing a consciousness of our growing religious interrelatedness, developing a moral compass to give us guidance in the years ahead—these are among the most important tasks of our time. You have a theological orientation toward oneness and mystery...that is essential for the world of religious difference in which we live.... In this era, **Unitarian Universalism is not the lowest common denominator, but the highest common calling.**