

Sermon at First Unitarian Church, Omaha, Nebraska
By Ellery Schempp
April 25, 2010

It's a great pleasure for me to talk to UUs, because the Unitarian church where I grew up played a seminal role in my life.

I bring you greetings from UU First Parish in Bedford, MA. Y'know, the brotherhood of man and the neighborhood of Boston. Y'know, of course, that first there were the Puritans, who evolved to become Congregationalists, and they evolved to become UUs. This shows that evolution is the right idea.

A few years ago, I spoke to the UUA:
Unitarian-Universalists have had a distinguished history in fighting for civil rights of African-Americans, women, gays, and others—but the civil rights of heretics is not so commonly mentioned. I guess I am here to stand-up for the heretics and the unsaved.

It is not often that someone can include the Constitution, the Bible, the ACLU, and UUs in the title of a talk.

Let me tell you: There is nothing in the Constitution about the Bible and there is nothing in the Bible about democracy or our Constitution.

Our Constitution never once mentions God or Christianity or any Commandments. It is a purely a humanistic document. The preamble begins, "We the people ... do ordain and establish..."

It mentions religion just twice, and both times the word "no" is attached. The first mention is in Art. VI "no religious test shall ever be required..." The second time is in the First Amendment in the Bill of Rights, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." The Constitution is a religiously neutral, secular, and political document. No Founding Father thought the idea of an independent judiciary or three branches of government came from divine revelation.

The Bible never once mentions democracy, a republic, or anything related to American values. The Bible never once mentions freedom of speech or freedom of religion. The Bible provides no model for 'good' government or for personal freedoms. It is a purely religious/theological document.

So it seems to me that Bible-reading and prayer in schools do not promote American civic or patriotic values at all.

(I might mention that the Bible never mentions the Trinity, either. Y'know, father, son, holy ghost. The Bible also fails to mention Satan or the phrase "original sin". UUs will appreciate this.)

But it is amusing to note that the “great sages” of the Bible didn’t have the wit and humanism to give even a passing nod to democracy. Gods have never been in favor of challenges from mere humans, although in some perverse way they seem to be addicted to getting constant reaffirmation via prayer and sacrifices. This always struck me as curious. But then, the Biblical sages had little foresight –I mean they are not even on Twitter or Facebook.

I began thinking about the Constitution and the Bible way back in 1956. I was a 16-yr old in the 11th grade in the Abington Senior High School, in a suburb of Philadelphia. Pennsylvania had a law that required 10 verses of the Bible to be read—without comment-- in every classroom at the beginning of each school day. This was followed by the students standing to recite the “Lord’s Prayer” and the flag salute. 20-30 states had similar laws.

It is interesting that this daily ceremony was known as “Morning Devotions.” It seemed to me that this established, or preferred, a Christian religious practice in the schools under the authority of the government. I actually read the First Amendment; it is only 45 words long, and not taxing even for teenagers.

On the Monday after Thanksgiving weekend, I brought a copy of the Qu’ran to school. I wanted to show that there were other Holy Books; the Bible was not unique. The Quran was merely by accident, but my friend’s father had a copy in his library. It could have just as easily been some Hindu or Buddhist scripture.

The school rule was that during Bible-reading, kids were required to put away all other material and listen. On that morning, I disobeyed the rule by opening the Quran and reading it—silently—and, nervously, I might add. I did not stand for the Lord’s Prayer.

The reaction was swift. My homeroom teacher confronted me. I replied that “As a matter of religious conscience, I could no longer participate in these devotions.” He was tongue-tied. But he knew disobedience when he saw it.

He sent me to the school principal. He was equally dumbfounded when I said that I thought these “devotions” violated the First Amendment. He waved his arms in a wide sweep and said there are 1300 other students here, and it was a matter of respect.

Now there was a bit of teenage rebellion in me, but it was clear to me that he meant respect for HIS authority. But I felt on safe grounds talking about the Constitution—I am sure he read up on it that night.

I had good grades. My being in front of him introduced cognitive dissonance, big time.

Since I didn’t fit the mould, he sent me to the Guidance Counselor, who inquired about my family life and whatever troubles I might be having. Perhaps I had a

conflict with authority and my father? No, I had a disagreement about Bible-reading. Yes, I was confident of their support.

That evening over dinner I reported on the day's events to my folks. My Dad suggested that I write to the ACLU.

The letter that I wrote to the ACLU was long forgotten, but Steve Solomon, the author of this book about the Abington Supreme Court case, Ellery's Protest, found a copy in the National Archives—of all places.

I typed it out on Dad's typewriter with two fingers. Remember typewriters?

The letter I wrote to the ACLU in Philadelphia said:

"November 26, 1956

"Gentlemen:

As a student in my junior year at Abington Senior High School, I would very greatly appreciate any information that you might send regarding possible Union action and/or aid in testing the constitutionality of Pennsylvania law which arbitrarily (and seemingly unrighteously and unconstitutionally) compels the Bible to be read in our public school system. I thank you for any help you might offer in freeing American youth in Pennsylvania from this gross violation of their religious rights as guaranteed in the first and foremost Amendment in our United States' Constitution.

Sincerely yours,
Ellery F. Schempp"

Well, speaking for American youth was rather pretentious, indeed. I was 16 years old then. Since then, I have learned to write shorter sentences. I also enclosed a \$10 bill—~\$100 today. This got their attention—if a kid can save this sum from his allowance and grass-cutting, he must be serious.

1956. This was two years after the Supreme Court desegregation ruling that racial segregation was intrinsically unequal. A few years after the McCarthy era when every dissent was labeled "communist" and treason. HUAC. And about a year after Playboy started publishing. Two years after Congress added "under God" to the Pledge. The mood was to conform as the highest objective in life, like in the book, *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*.

In 1956, Adlai Stevenson ran for President against Dwight Eisenhower.

A woman rushed up to him after a speech: "Every thinking person will vote for you! she gushed. Adlai replied, "It is not enough, madam. We need a majority."

I was lucky to grow up in a family that knew about the ACLU and were members of a Unitarian Church. We were a quite ordinary family living in the suburbs, except for this.

I was much moved by reading a wonderful book titled *The Democratic Way of Life*, by Eduard Lindemann and C.V. Smith. It presented an idealistic view of democracy based on Liberty, Fraternity, and Equality, and the role of political minorities. This gave me confidence that separation of church and state was a valuable ideal for liberty, equality, and social comity.

Why did I object? First of all it was just silly. In the younger grades, the teacher would read the Bible. By junior high, teachers turned it over to the pupils to do it in turn. Hardly anyone remembered when it was their turn. All you had to do was open the Bible at random, stumble through 10 verses, and you were done.

And anyone who has seen a class of 2nd or 3rd graders, you know, you can get them to pray or pledge—that is, they stand up, they mumble, they sit down. They done their duty.

I recall that one kid started reading the begets. There is lots of begetting going on in the Bible---although this is often overlooked in Sunday School. Anyway, the next day, another kid carried on, and so on, until finally the teacher said “enough”. I am sure that all this begetting created worries about abstinence-only.

Bible-reading and prayer were supposed to fill us with some inspiration for the tasks ahead that day, according to the lawyers for the school board. Indeed, I do recall some inspiration. On my next turn to read, I chose verses from the Song of Solomon, “thy breasts are like two doves in the morning dew”. This was pretty heady stuff for 14 yr olds (at least in 1956!)---especially when sanctioned by the school. Then came, “King Solomon had 300 wives and 700 concubines”. At the time I aspired to having only a single girlfriend, so this was distinctly inspiring.

I was also motivated by several other feelings and thoughts:

An important part of my understanding came from our Unitarian traditions—this was before Universalists joined. U’s had emphasized questioning authority, and seeking. I thought it was neat that in Sunday School we learned to appreciate Nature, and we went to other churches and synagogues to learn what they believed. So the idea that there was one universal Truth was an idea I rejected.

One “Universal Truth”? like in the Bible? Isn’t it rather amazing that the Bible has spawned something like 289 different denominations? Each one claims to know the “truth” of Bible teachings. There is one thing we know for sure: Preachers and priests interpret the Bible to assure their own financial success.

Our church in the Germantown section of Philadelphia was more Christian-oriented than anything I would join now. But I cannot recall any instance where someone in the church came up to support us; the church I think was embarrassed by the Schempp case.

But, I felt that there was a fundamental issue of fairness for all. My Jewish school friends were clearly uncomfortable with Christmas and Easter passages. Jews do

not consider the New Testament the ‘Word of God’, and there are certainly passages there that have been hurtful to Jews over the centuries. The Bible is not the Holy Book of Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, or Hindus. Non-believers, pagans, humanists, and others do not need Christianity preached to them in the schools. If freedom of religious conscience is good for some, it is good for all. That is equality and fairness.

Nor do I consider the Bible a valuable source of truth--certainly no more than any other book written 2000 years ago. It is ridiculous to imagine that bronze age herders with kings from a ‘blood line’ of Kohains could have moral insights that are relevant today.

And, while there are some beautiful verses, there are also many quite ugly sections. There are many stories and passages in the Bible that demonstrate that the Bible is a book unfit for children.

And the notion of reading about Noah's Flood under the imprimatur and authority of a state-sponsored devotion and then going to geology or biology class was, and is, deeply offensive to my scientific sensibilities. We all know that Noah's Flood never happened. I do not believe in miracles or supernatural interventions in human affairs, and I thought it was wrong for the schools to teach them.

I disbelieve in talking snakes, too. Or at least I used to---but then Glen Beck and Sarah Palin came along.

Of course, in school, no power on earth or heaven can prevent a pupil from offering up a silent prayer before taking an algebra exam. However, I always urge that doing the homework and studying is far better preparation than prayer. This is the ex-professor in me.

Anyhow, I had got to thinking—this is always a bit risky! The school lawyers argued that prayer and Bible-reading were vital for instilling moral values. I began to worry. Kids in Arizona, Oregon, Minnesota, Colorado, and 15 other states didn’t have these “devotions”. Did that mean they were less moral than us in Abington? (Fortunately, they were too far away, so we didn’t have to compete with ‘heathens’ in sports.)

Then I had a really scary thought—maybe it meant that us Abington kids were weak in morals and thus we were in much greater need!

Many people are surprised to learn that Bible-reading in the schools was controversial 160 years ago. In 1844 there were riots in Philadelphia over the practice; men were killed, churches were burned—over Bible-reading. This is well-described in Solomon’s book. It is just as divisive today—the question as to which version of the Bible—the Douay version used by Catholics, one of the 20 or so versions used by Protestants—from the King James version to the many newer translations.

These riots were much mixed up with anti-immigrant feelings, the newer immigrants being mostly Irish and Italian Catholics, and they objected to Bible-reading in the schools, which they regarded, correctly, as a Protestant practice. In fact this issue became the primary motivation for the Catholic church to start the institution of Parochial schools—to save them from Protestants. By 1956, however, the Church's position had shifted—their objection was to secularism, to secular humanism, and their goal was to make secularism, that is, neutrality, the enemy.

Seven years later, in 1963, a year after I graduated from Tufts, the US Supreme Court decided the case called *Abington vs. Schempp and Murray vs. Curlett*. The Justices decided 8-1 that Bible-reading and public-prayer rituals in the schools were unconstitutional under the First Amendment. It is important to note that three (3) of the court's most conservative members supported this decision in their understanding of 'original intent'.

The Schempp/Murray case was just one part of a continuum. There were many prior families who paved the way—Everson, McCollum, Torcaso, Engel. Particularly Engel vs Vitale in 1962, where the Court ruled the NY Board of Regents prayer unconstitutional; the memorable phrase is, "It is no part of the business of government to be composing prayers." The Everson case in 1947 was particularly important for establishing that the 14th Amendment meant that the First Amendment applied to the States.

From this remarkable era, Vashti McCollum, Roy Torcaso, Madalyn Murray, and my parents, Edward and Sidney have died. Steve Engel is elderly. I am about the only living person who knew all of them.

Pennsylvania has had more than its fair share of important court cases—Abington, Lemon, Allegheny County, Dover—the wonderful decision about "intelligent design" in Dover, Pennsylvania. This is because Pennsylvania is Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, with Alabama in between.

The Abington/Murray case is called a landmark. It followed seamlessly from Engel. But it added one new dimension—the court recognized that children deserve special protection from an overbearance of majority authority, summed up in the phrase, "Children are not noted for their resistance to the forces of social suasion."

In other words, a practice that might be OK with consenting adults must be judged differently when imposed on impressionable kids. The authority that naturally attaches to teachers and schools must not be used to promote religion over non religion or one religious viewpoint over another.

We received about 5,000 letters, roughly 1/3 supporting us, 1/3 opposing in reasonable terms, 1/3 hateful and vituperative. Many of the letters in support mentioned Matthew Chapter 6 about not praying for public display as "hypocrites do" seeking public approval and not using "vain repetitions".

My parents answered every letter with a return address. This was in the days before Xerox machines and when stamps cost 3½ cents—still, hundreds of dollars. We were accused of being everything the writer hated: what are you?—commies, nazis, Catholics, Jews? What are you, Baptists? “In the name of Christ, go to hell.” Some were newspaper pictures smeared with excrement.

I don't recall any letter that accusingly asked: What are you, Zoroastrians? I conclude that nobody hates Zoroastrians. (You might want to look into this.)

One of the things we learned was that in the United States it was considered bad not to be Christian, it was very bad to be a communist, but it was really quite awful to be an atheist. When people called us you "communist atheists" they had reached their ultimate outrage! Atheists are the most hated--and feared--group in America. Fear and hate often go hand-in-hand.

For myself, I was always perplexed that prayer in schools was so important. After the SC decision, the famous cartoonist Herblock showed a father reading his morning newspaper at breakfast and blustering, “What does the Supreme Court want us to do? Listen to the damn kids pray at home?”!

President Kennedy made the same observation in that June of 1963. “I am sure that we can all pray a bit more at home and in our churches and synagogues.”

But Senator Eastland from Mississippi fulminated: “The SC has put the niggers in and thrown God out.”

For myself, I always thought that if there was ever a time that prayer was surely needed, it was when getting a driver's license or entering a shopping mall. To show that I am not just an out-of-date foggy, I now pray quite earnestly whenever I encounter a driver texting on a cell phone.

I wish here to honor Madalyn Murray O'Hair who became more famous. Her case started in Baltimore, in 1960, and wound up thru the Maryland courts. It happened that her case and ours reached the SC at the same time.

The SC “joined or consolidated” the two cases, so there was a single decision, *Abington vs. Schempp and Murray vs Curlett*. Madalyn Murray was a colorful figure, and a lightning rod because she was an outspoken atheist. Sadly, she, her son Garth, and adopted daughter Robin were brutally murdered in 1996.

My family did not suffer as much as Madalyn Murray's, because we were Unitarians. Nobody knew what that meant, but it sounded good. In any case, we had the magic word "church" in our traditions. If Unitarians had pagodas, it would have been different. However, my brother Roger was kicked around a few times; kids shouted “now passing the commie camp” from the school bus as they passed our house. My sister Donna was mortified, and some parents told their daughters not to play with her. I later learned that my principal wrote letters of

disrecommendation to every college I applied to. In fact, he called to demand that Tufts rescind their admittance.

We lived at 2459 Susquehanna Rd in Roslyn, part of Abington Township. A few years ago, Donna, Roger, and I were in town and revisited our old home. The present owner was extremely nice, invited us in. But I noticed that the house number was now 2457! He explained that the old number got so much mail that they asked the Post Office and town to renumber the addresses--they now go from 2457 to 2461. No ungodly 2459! This will be a disappointment for all those who thought our house number was 666.

The First Amendment is clear. There shall be no intertwining of government and religion, but you can have all the personal beliefs you want. You can believe in psychics, magnetic bracelets, in Zeus or Jupiter, in Venus or Aphrodite, faeries and pixies, praying and rituals, to your heart's content. But you have no right to get any government to help you impose your views on us.

I oppose the view that praying and searching for "spiritual peace or healing" is a satisfactory substitute for learning about difficult issues in the world—and struggling with them. I think our struggle is not to find inner peace, but to keep alive the itch that makes us want to do better. As the poet John Donne observed, there is peace in the grave, "but none, I think, do there embrace."

Public prayer is not intended to promote religious values, but to enhance the authority of some churches and some political views over others. Similarly with the posting of the 10 Commandments. It is about power, not about religion.

And the Constitution clearly intends that there should be freedom FROM religion. Government is to be free from religious interference. This is clear, because the Constitution makes no provision for any church or religion to have any official role. Our Constitution and our government do not depend on any divine blessing.

We got many letters about what I call the missionary position. Many people who protested the SC's decision said, "well if it weren't for prayers in the schools, many kids would never hear about Christ or God." What an absurd idea. But so what?--what is the source of this notion that "everyone has to be introduced to Christ" -or to Allah? in order that their souls might be saved? If believers are happy with their souls, why not leave mine alone? The right to privacy—to be left alone by government and police—is an important Constitutional liberty.

The school attorneys argued at length that the Bible-reading was vital to instilling moral values. They even went so far with this as to claim the Bible was not a religious book. But what about these moral values?

I note that when Catholics and Protestants talk about "morality" they actually mean sex. But no writer in Biblical times had the slightest clue about sperm, ova, and genetics. Did you know that the human egg was only discovered in 1827? (In St. Petersburg in Russia by Ernst von Bauer and Heinrich Pandar.)

After all, it is largely religious dogma that opposes gay marriage and rights of women. It was religious dogma that made contraception illegal. It is religious dogma that promotes circumcision and genital mutilation. It is religious dogma that promotes 'abstinence' and categorizes masturbation as 'sin'.

It was religious dogma 100 years ago that insisted that women were "morally unfit" to vote.

And it is religious doctrine that aims to discredit evolution and insert 'intelligent design' or creationism in the schools in place of sound science.

The 10 commandments? The first 6 are about a god belief and have no moral or ethical content at all.

I do not see the 10 Commandments as showing the slightest concern for children or "family values", nor for freedom of conscience. Our laws are clearly based on economic capitalism and humanistic values. Is there anyone that thinks our tax laws and Medicare laws are based on 10 Commandments?

Y'know there are actually 613 Commandments in Jewish scriptures filled with "thou shalt not's".

Surely there is more to ethics and morality than who has orgasms when and with whom. But to listen to Focus on the Family and Catholic Bishops, that is all that excites them.

And just to emphasize the point---there is no such thing as "God's Law". Or "Natural Law". That doctrinal notion was, I think, the real 'original sin'. There are something like 1,218,000 preachers and priests in the US alone who make a comfortable living by proclaiming to have God's email address. Consider the phrase, "if you read the Bible correctly..." You can go anywhere you please starting with that.

As to 'original sin', it is disturbing to think that two out of every three persons you meet believes that he or she is depraved. I once gave some thought to this, but I soon realized that it was impossible to be original in sinning nowadays.

Another part of "Christian morality" emphasizes the virtues of suffering. The Pope has a particular hang-up about this---every pronouncement mentions suffering. He is not out to alleviate it—he thinks it is wonderful and brings you closer to god. The infamous Mother Theresa took this to such absurd lengths that she absolutely refused to give palliative drugs to terminal patients, who thus died in horrible pain.

I am not hostile to religion. I am hostile to what Dan Dennett calls in his book *Breaking the Spell* "toxic religions", that is those that demean the human experience and demean the joys of being alive.

We all know that early childhood conditionings make us disposed to some tradition that we like. I am an atheist. I am also a member of a UU Church. I love

Christmas trees. My partner, Arlene, who comes from a Jewish tradition, also likes Christmas trees for Winter Solstice celebrations. There is a place for some rituals. A place for celebration of the beauty and intelligence and love and compassions we all share.

By the way, the Christmas tree was first introduced to America in 1846 in Cambridge, MA by Karl Follen, a Unitarian. And you might know that Christmas was not a national holiday until 1867, made after the Civil War.

Moreover, religion by rote does not promote spiritual values, nor does constant repetition of the Pledge promote patriotic or civic values. Public prayer is NOT intended to promote religious values, but to enhance the authority of some churches and some political views over others. It is about power, not about religion.

I note that almost everyone is an atheist. Christians are atheists with regard to Zeus and Woden; Muslims are atheists with regard to the Egyptian sun god Ra; Jews, Christians, Muslims are atheist with regard to the Hindu god Shiva. And so it goes.

Modern day atheists merely believe in one fewer god than you do.

Monotheism has not produced any observable benefits. In the old days, if the rain god or crop god or fertility god didn't do right, you knew exactly who to complain to. Now you have to complain about the whole universe, from global warming to bank bail-outs to Acorn community organizing---merely to get your foot in the door.

There is a good case for polytheism. If you have 365 gods, then every day is a holiday..

In our Constitution, the word in the First Amendment is 'religion'. "no law respecting an establishment of religion." The phrase is not "a" 'religion', but religious doctrines or dogmas in general, which are prohibited from being established by governments. This is an important distinction—non-establishment is broader than merely one church or ecclesiastical organization.

The Founders were thoughtful men, and they did not chose the word 'religion' over 'church' without careful thought as to the meaning. Madison noted that throughout history "superstition, bigotry, and persecution have accompanied the union of religion and government". He also noted that Christianity did not need the support of government to flourish. This is a counterpoint when "original intent" is shouted out."

Owing to Tom Paine and the general intellectual movement of the times—the Enlightenment-- and distaste for the existing systems, the founders reached back to ancient Greece—a pagan, non-biblical civilization—for inspiration about democracy and a government based on the common man.

The notion of the “Divine Right of Kings” had prevailed from the earliest days of Christianity, and arose from earlier pagan philosophy that rulers, by virtue of their being rulers, were obviously favored by the gods. This Divine Right notion not only gave kings legitimacy in the eyes of the Church, but allowed that whatever religion the king had, everybody else had to have. Kings loved the idea, of course.

Having discarded the Divine Right notion, our Founders had no intention of allowing a new set of religious doctrines to take over.

Almost all the language in the Declaration of Independence is to refute the church authority in rulership. This is where we see “inalienable rights”, granted by the Creator to ordinary humans, disputing the supposed superiority of the kingshipclass, that had been supported by the Church. The Declaration of Independence is equally for independence in both government and in religion.

It had to be so. Divorcing the King meant divorcing the King’s religious authority.

The Declaration of Independence was not based on the Bible or Commandments. In fact, it was in direct opposition to churches and religious hierarchies. There is not a single phrase in the Bible that offers a model for the Declaration of Independence.

For the Colonies to declare independence in direct violation of the King was, indeed, a radical step. The Divine Right notion was deeply imbedded in everybody’s mind, in priestly leadership, and in political thinking before this.

The authors of the Declaration, mostly Thomas Jefferson, needed poetic language and appeals to emotion to overcome the Divine-right mindset, and to reject the notion that we needed a blessing from the Almighty in order to prosper.

One of the most brilliant ideas of the Founders—probably James Madison—was the idea of an independent judicial branch.

This, too, was a radical departure from the European systems the Founders were aware of. Under the Divine Right notion and the hegemony of the church, there were actually two different court systems—normal civil and criminal courts under the King, but also church courts. Church courts dealt with cases of heresy and blasphemy as well as clergy misconduct. There were no checks and balances on these courts at all.

This issue was revisited just a few years ago when the Catholic Church in Boston had the chutzpah to argue--actually argued-- that our courts had no power over priests, that priests were to be judged only by the church’s Canon Law courts. This self-serving position was summarily rejected by the U.S. Federal courts--a ratification that constitutional law trumps church law.

People sometimes say, “We are a Christian nation.” We are not. We are a Constitutional nation.

It is, of course, entirely true that a majority of Americans self-identify with some brand of Christianity. But our Constitution, our laws, and our governments are not Christian. They are not Jewish or Muslim or Buddhist, either.

And look how successful separation of church and state has proven to be. The United States has more church-goers, more denominations, and more money donated to churches than any other country in the world. All the evidence shows that the secular Constitution has been extremely good for “religiousness”. And religiosity.

Today there are loud voices claiming that Christians are being persecuted and that their beliefs are under threat of annihilation. I cannot take them seriously. In fact, they are nuts. When I drive down the street, almost every corner has a church, with a prominently displayed cross. It is absurd to think that Christians are an endangered species.

I do note that churches always have lightning rods. This shows a lack of confidence.

In fact, the Christian right are thriving—and flush with political power. And have huge amounts of money. And claim to speak for all Americans.

But are they using this power to promote tolerance, good government policies, decent conditions for our citizens? Sadly, often not. They are exercised about posting the 10 Commandments, having more public prayer, getting tax money for religious schools, denying gays the right to marry, prohibiting abortion, having a “National Day of Prayer”, and insisting on keeping “under God” in the Pledge. I think people turn to gods when their own situations are unhappy or confused. If there is fear for the future and little joy, then a promised reward in an “afterlife” looks attractive.

Unfortunately, pandering to public piety has always appealed to politicians. I oppose politically motivated “god-talk”.

Many of our fellow Americans seem to feel vague fears and seek refuge in the supernatural for a naïve sense of security by displays of religiosity. The role of separation of church & state is all the more important—it does government no good to rely on magical thinking, and it does religion no good to be separated from reality.

There are many dimensions to fear. There is a huge amount of belief in psychics, astrology, alien abductions, faith healing, appearances of the Virgin Mary—even on cheese sandwiches!—stone statues that burst into tears, in exorcism, ghosts, prayer, demons, life after death, crop circles, raptures, creationism, magnetic bracelets, homeopathy—all stuff related to magical thinking and supernaturalism—the list of irrational nonsense is endless. We used to call this superstition. We are in an age of belief in silly things. Many are relatively harmless, but it is a sign of an unhealthiness in our society. And, this is, I think, related to fear.

Apparently, for many, the world does not make sense. And is thus a bit unknown—or worse, unknowable. This makes people want to cling naively to all sorts of weird notions that give them emotional comfort and seem to make sense. The Teabaggers are a perfect example. My plea is to use the power of our rational minds to understand the world.

And for some reason, televangelists are unwilling to share God's email address with the rest of us. Doesn't sound like Christian charity to me. I mean, for people who claim to talk to God every day, via telepathy or satellite, I am willing to put up with Comcast.

I do know that one-way tickets to Heaven are frightfully expensive. There are better bargains on the Internet.

But even as the religious right has grown in power and influence, there is another trend that assures that separation of church and state issues will continue to vex us. This trend is that we are, in fact, becoming more secular. Perhaps a cause and effect? In any case, the respected Pew organization polls show that over the last decade the number of Americans describing themselves as non-believers, agnostics, or even atheist has risen dramatically, especially in the under 30 age group. The polls show that something like 14-18% of the population now considers themselves non-believers---it is the most rapidly growing segment. That is some 45-50 million Americans, more than the membership of most denominations. Among freshman college students at Tufts and Harvard, now 33% put down for religion "none". This was unthinkable 10 years ago.

It is refreshing to hear our President now refer to Christians, Jews, Muslims, and non-believers. But it is disturbing that even now, some 85% of Americans say they would never consider voting for an atheist.

From a democracy viewpoint, religious officials and promoters are not elected, take no oath of office for the Constitution, and do not have to account for their money. Religious leaders have always tried to capture the power of government to promote their self-interests and agendas.

I am confident. I think "We the people..." is a beautiful and enduring idea.

There is a viewpoint, "No "man or men" can save this nation. It's time to put our trust in God, or we perish." I totally reject this idea. I think our Constitution reminds us to do like the delegates did in Philadelphia 227 years ago. They did not sit around waiting for prayer or scripture or rapture.

I end with these thoughts:

The Constitution was made for "We the people"... not for deities. It is up to us humans to cherish and defend it. Various gods can fend for themselves quite well without help from hairless apes.

I am a strong supporter of Separation of Church and State. I think public displays of piety for political gains does an evil purpose in public and demeans religious values. I think our loyalty and our patriotism is to our Constitution.

We have to recognize what we are up against. Televangelists bring in \$350 million/year, and churches more than \$1000 million. Consider the NCSE with about \$900,000/year. The FFRF has about 14,000 members; the AHA recently broke 10,000. The entire UUA is about 700,000.

We all know beauty in our own lives; expanded we recognize a wider beauty. The love we have known in our own lives; expanded is a wider love and understanding. Poetry inspired from the Dead Sea Scrolls: “So I have walked on Uplands unbounded, and know that we, who arrived unbidden, may have consort with things eternal.” Our uplands embrace music and science and beauty and caringness beyond the farthest horizons of scriptural literalists.

I am grateful for the role that Unitarian-Universalism has played in my life and very happy that the UU tradition of free thought encouraged me to have this role in history.

Y’know, the Bill of Rights guarantees several freedoms—freedom of speech, religion, rights to a fair trial, etc. It does not guarantee freedom from long-winded speakers. This was an oversight of the FF.

Thank you.