

## Preaching the Relativist Gospel in an Absolutist Age: The Sequel

Last year I came to Whidbey Island to preach the relativist gospel for the first time. In my talk I attempted to describe the powerful truth of relativism and the work of relativist thought in the world as a response to the popular illusions and profound dangers of moral absolutism. I pointed out, citing Barbara Herrnstein Smith, that "...all beliefs are equally contingent. All beliefs depend equally on a variety of conditions and are more or less valid within that framework." And I added to this the observation that *everyone thinks relatively*, everyone's beliefs are dependent on a variety of contexts; the difference between the objectivist and the relativist being that the relativist recognizes this and maintains a core of skepticism toward all seemingly absolute convictions including his or her own. We are relativists, I said; and we should be proud relativists, willing to spread the good news of relativism. The world needs us, I said...

Well, since I was last here, the need has, if anything, grown more acute. It seems like the absolutists have achieved stunning political successes that threaten to reverse the ethical, social, and economic progress our country has achieved over the past century. The religious absolutists—crusaders and jihadists alike—are duke-ing it out in Iraq and telling us that we are obligated to support one absolutism or another. Ruthless culture warriors in this country are doing everything in their power to divide us. A lot of us are feeling discouraged and helpless before the onslaught of a juggernaut of reactionary absolutism, which often appears to be compounded and magnified by willful (or intellectually slothful) ignorance.

Last year, I tried to articulate for you and for myself, what it is that we relativists believe—or, more accurately—I tried to point out to you how we go about discovering and thinking about what we believe. This time, I promised to talk about some ideas for how we all could go about the task of spreading the relativist gospel—a task that amounts to no less than the creation and dissemination of a positive relativist agenda that takes the ethical and ideological initiative away from the absolutists.

I expect that at this point many or most or all of you are thinking something like—as my kids used to say—“dream on, Walter.” You might well be thinking, “The absolutists are legion and we relativists are few...” Well, if you are thinking this—as I do at times—you are mistaken: It is more accurate to say that people who think they are absolutists are legion. Actual absolutists are many, but fewer and farther between than it seems and the most extreme of them form a lunatic minority constantly struggling to gain or retain the allegiance of a great mass of people to whom absolutism sounds good only conditionally, occasionally, and in limited circumstances.

For example, my *bete noire*, columnist John Leo is a fervent moral absolutist, standing with the Pope and praising him as the central pillar of a structure of absolute moral law—that is, when it comes to the matter of abortion and who is authorized to decide what a woman can do with her own body. Yet when the same Pope says that the death penalty is morally wrong or that it is morally wrong to go to war in Iraq, it is no longer quite so clear to Mr. Leo what the absolute moral law is and who (other than him) is qualified to be its spokesperson. Even most of those who argue that the Bible (or the Quran) is the literal record of God’s absolute moral code do not think that a child should be killed for disobeying its father or that it is quite ok to keep slaves. And precious few of the most prominent Christian absolutists believe that rich persons will be like camels threading their way through the eyes of needles when it comes to entering heaven.

Let me say it again, more bluntly: except for a few nuts, most people are not real absolutists. Almost everybody is a relativist to one degree or another, although many people, for a variety of reasons, will never admit it. This being so, much of the work of preaching the relativist gospel—of relativist evangelism—is not to convert absolutists but to address potential relativists—people with minds slightly ajar—and help them come to terms with their relativism, to show them that relativism is the most common, most sensible, and most moral stance that a person can take, to show them that relativism is something to affirm and be proud of. It is not necessary to make a Unitarian Universalist out of everyone (although I believe that they would all be better off for it). It is only necessary to help them be comfortable being relatively relativist in whatever faith tradition they choose.

So what do I think we should do? How can we go about preaching the good news of relativism? Right now, somebody out there is thinking, “Easier said than done, Walter.” To which I would respond like this: “You are quite right, it’s not easy...but it is very very possible and very very necessary. And the first step is to believe in this necessity, to believe that actively combating the illusions of absolutism must and can be done.”

I believe that there is not a single liberal relativist in the country who is not thoroughly convinced of the dangers and cruelty of the moral absolutist agenda—and, for this reason, I am not going to spend my time recounting things we ought to be afraid of... What I hope I can do is start people thinking about and talking about positive programs for spreading the liberal relativist gospel, programs that are about what we affirm, about what we aspire to, about what our vision is for ourselves and our society. Such programs have everything to do with what we are and what we believe and nothing to do with what we fear...

In this brief talk, I am going to tell you a little about what I am doing to spread the gospel and what I have learned in the course of my mission. I am using my experience only as one example of what is possible, with the understanding that there are many ways to spread the good news, many potentially effective programs—wonderful programs that wouldn’t ever occur to me. If we are going to act instead of viewing with alarm, if we are going to act positively instead of merely reacting to others’ actions, then we need to talk to each other, to come up with a host of creative programs; we need to find many ways to move the world toward what is as right, and good, and decent as we can make it here and now—a multiplicity of answers that provide options for people whatever their core beliefs.

It is a bit heretical to say this, but we Unitarian Universalists have a tendency to remember fondly the protest marches we have engaged in—and we often forget that the important thing is not what we are marching against but what we are marching for. On that note let me tell you, for example, what I have been doing to fight my own despair at the political and moral trajectory of our country and what I have learned about positive ways to spread the relativist gospel.

A year ago, three of us East Shore Unitarians taught a Junior High age RE class. In my mind, working with children and youth is what I do best—but this class was a torment. We used an old “what do I believe” curriculum that seemed to focus on pointing out how ridiculous other people’s beliefs are as a way of showing how reasonable we are by contrast. We didn’t like it as teachers and the youth didn’t like it much either. We spent far too much time enforcing some semblance of discipline and far too little time doing what we wanted to do. Anyone who has taught a Jr. Hi class has probably had this experience on occasion.

But in that year, two of us teachers participated in a gathering that profoundly altered our perspective on what we could and should be doing. The Interfaith Council of Washington was in the process of developing a youth program. As a first step, they held a workshop that brought together teens from a wide variety of faith traditions—Muslims, Jews, Sikhs, Native Americans, Wiccans, Hindus, Buddhists, Unitarian-Universalists, Bahai’s, Quakers, and several varieties of Christians— for activities that included discussions and skits intended to introduce the various faiths to one another and to seek ways to talk to each other about what we believe. We brought some of our youth and acted as skit leaders and adult representatives of Unitarian Universalism.

For me the workshop was a wondrous and transforming experience. The title and theme was “Uncommon bonds” and I saw decidedly uncommon bonds being formed throughout the day across religions, cultures, and ages. We were inspired—I began to see this as way that I could bring my personal skills and interests to bear directly on the project of becoming an evangelical relativist. During the spring and summer we began organizing an exciting new youth program at East Shore. We gathered a core group of adults and youth with the goal of building on a suggestion made by the youth in another Uncommon Bonds workshop: that we visit each others places of worship in order to get to know one another better. The youth chose to call their group YES-U, an acronym for Unitarian Youth Exploring Spirituality. We first agreed on a few basic principles: Our group would be entirely voluntary; the youth would be in the group because they wanted to be there. No matter how good it looked to parents, we would strongly support the right of any youth to opt out. We would commit to studying other religions in a serious and

positive manner. We would visit with open minds and engage in respectful dialog. We would share our thoughts and impressions with each other afterwards.

I have been working with youth for more than a quarter century and, I must admit, the experience of working with this group—20 young people, most at the younger end of a 13-17 year old range—has been entirely unique—stunning, amazing... I knew I was in for something unusual when, in one of the first meetings, I lectured them for 50 minutes straight on Islam and the Arabic language and they sat there quietly and attentively except for some cogent questions. And this kind of thing has happened over and over again. Unreal...

And then there have been the visits... We sang and danced and ate challah with mystical Jews. We visited the youth of a congregation of Sunni Muslims, where our circle of young people was surrounded by a group of Muslim parents, terrified that we would ask hostile questions that their youth couldn't answer. Our young people calmed them all by showing that they understood the fundamental principles of Islam and by drawing their counterparts into a discussion of the principles we hold in common.

We read the Quran and broke the Ramadan fast with a Shiite Muslim congregation. (And as part of the fallout of all this, two of our adult leaders were invited to advise a group of young Muslims about organizing the first Muslim youth group in Washington.)

We visited the Guru-dwara of the Sikhs in Renton. We bowed respectfully before the Guru Granth Sahib, the text that is the last of the 10 Gurus, the spiritual descendents of Guru Nanak Dev. Then we listened to the *kirten* (a reading of sacred verse) and to a presentation on the Sikhs by Sujot Chawla Kaur, a young woman (now a student in my department at the UW) who has attained the order of halsa, highest level of spiritual commitment among the Sikhs. Our youth again impressed their hosts with their knowledge of the history and culture of the Sikhs and were themselves impressed and attracted by several of the Sikhs' beliefs: their deep reverence for the inherent worth and dignity of all persons—which they symbolize by all taking the same last name (Singh for men, Kaur for women) as a gesture toward social equality; their acting out a commitment to their communities by feeding everyone who comes to them—all on the floor, in long lines so that no one has precedence or a place of honor, so that everyone is equal. Our

youth were especially entranced by the fact that the *halsa* all wear a small sword to symbolize the use of their strength to protect the weak and helpless.

The Hindus we visited explained to us that for them the divine is really one and indivisible from the totality of the universe—a view that we could easily share. But human beings, they said, are limited and need symbolic objects through which to express their spiritual selves. Therefore, the large pantheon of Hindu gods stands as a set of optional bridges to the ineffable reality of the divine.

Just last Friday evening our youth attended a Festival of Lights service with Taize singing and chanting at the St. James Catholic cathedral. Several of our youth were even asked to serve as temporary acolytes in the lighting of candles. It was an enchanting evening, by the dim light of candles in a great cathedral...

We have learned a lot from our travels—and we are far from done. Already the youth are thinking about what we will do next year. But I have been quite taken by some of the most peripheral lessons and have been profoundly impressed by what this group of youth has taught.

Because we have emphasized dialogue over observation, most of our visits establish some sort of relationship with the youth and some adults of the faith communities we encounter. In the course of our seeking, in a non-threatening way, to learn about their faiths, we seem to arouse in them a curiosity about us—why are we doing this? Who are we? What do we believe? The Muslims were quite bewildered when we told them that most of us were not Christians; that, like them, we believe that there can only be one God. They had never heard of us. And they were taken aback to hear that we have no “holy book”—until one of our adult leaders assured them that we have “a whole library of holy books.”

The Latter Day Saints had prepared a whole program intended to educate our youth about their faith but in the end their curiosity overwhelmed them and we had an interesting discussion of what Unitarian Universalists believe. Afterwards, the LDS youth leaders allowed as it might be good for their youth to engage in some of our interfaith programs—something they had never considered before. My take on this was that they are very proud of how strong their youth are in their faith—but when they saw

our youth, strong enough, confident enough to risk encounters with many other faiths, they were—however unwillingly—impressed.

One unexpected (and, on the adults' part, highly valued) consequences of these dialogues was that when we debriefed after our visits, a common theme was a plea from the youth that went something like this: we are learning a lot about other religions but we really need to know more about Unitarian Universalism—we need you to tell us more about who we are so we can do a better job of telling about ourselves to the people we visit... All the work we put into the class, and many times that, would have been worthwhile, had there been no other result than this...

But, when I take a broader point of view, the positive results of our encounters appear to have been instructive, not just for youth and youth programming, but for us all. I have learned that we, religious liberals, are not the only ones in the United States concerned about the rise of hegemonic absolutism, we are not the only ones who fear attempts to divide us on religious grounds. The world out there is full of potential allies many of whom would never identify themselves as religious liberals; there are uncommon bonds to be forged in places where we seldom look with people we barely know.

I have also learned what powerful spokespersons we can be—powerful both because our message and our beliefs resonate with those of many other faiths and because the very nature of our faith allows us to go out and interact fearlessly and sympathetically with widely diverse communities of belief. Just think about some of the basic principles we affirm, for example, this list adapted from an article on “Our Faith” by William Schulz, former president of the UUA:

- *Whatever we think the holy might be, we believe that creation itself is holy, that the natural and supernatural are one...*
- *Life's gifts are available to everyone, not just the chosen or the saved or the adherents of one religion.*
- *That which is divine (or most precious and profound) is made evident, not in miracles or supernatural events, but in simple and everyday wonders.*

- *Human beings are responsible for the planet, its people, and its future. Social justice and care for the earth are religious obligations.*
- *Every one of us is the child of creation—we share in its burdens and its gifts—and therefore strangers need not be enemies.*
- *Even though death confronts us all, we focus on living honorable and impassioned lives, without either fearing death or looking beyond it.*

Each of us could come up with a slightly different list or with some significant additions to this one, but few, if any, of us, would object to any of these affirmations. And this, my friends, is relativism—not “moral relativism” in the negative, straw-man formulation of the absolutists, but a positive, profoundly moral relativism charged with an energy that is attractive, unifying, inclusive rather than repulsive, divisive, and exclusionary.

I have been inspired with the thought that what our group of youth has done in a small way, our adults could and should do on a much larger scale. Liberal thought, relativist thought, scientific thought seem to be under attack, in retreat, out of favor these days. And often our tendency is to see the project of our faith community as providing a refuge where we come to lick our wounds and affirm our common beliefs among like-minded people. We are very good at going out from the church or fellowship and enacting our beliefs in many venues and causes—but we are not so good at telling the world straight out what it is we believe, of affirming our beliefs on the larger stage, of seeking allies, of being evangelists for a liberal, relativist morality.

Much of the power of our youth group’s interactions with other religions derived from the fact that we went to them in the spirit of inquiry, with a sincere interest in learning about their beliefs and practices. This is what we Unitarian-Universalists do. It does not seem remarkable to us; it is at the very roots of our practice. And sometimes we miss the fact that for many faiths, this is quite unusual and perplexing behavior. This, I believe, is why our visits invariably resulted in dialogues in which we were asked about our beliefs, in which we were able to talk about our faith to people who would never have thought to inquire, people whose interest grew out of our interest in them, out of our wish to be informed rather than our desire to inform them.

I am convinced that there are many ways for us to do this kind of reaching out. I am also convinced that, except for a few examples, I do not know what they are. We often talk of our selves—with a mixture of pride and some chagrin—as an “intellectual” church. Certainly we are a church filled with people who think deeply, powerfully, and creatively. We may have a tendency to rely too heavily on theoretical arguments and factual analyses but I know that if we took on the project of evangelism seriously; if we met together and talked and thought and sought creative ways to engage with other faiths—and not just with the ones we know about, the ones that are most like us or most share our views—we could have an impact that far exceeded our numbers.

In recent years, fomenting division, demonizing others, excusing religious intolerance, and promoting illusions of persecution have been spectacularly successful political tools, but they are also tools for building an unhappy society, a society at war with itself. We can do better than this. We can subordinate both our outrage and our intellectual, theorizing skills to the pragmatic task of creating the country of the real American dream; an America where we welcome diversity, gladly acknowledge our responsibilities to care for each other and the earth on which we live, an America where we can strive for a society that honors a broad range of sincerely held moral principles while resisting, whenever possible, the urge to impose our will upon other people’s choices. We can do this, I believe, by reaching out—alike to those who would be our friends and to those in whose minds we are monsters and demons. We can ask them who they are; we can let them watch us struggling to understand them; we can seek the places—however few there may be—where our hopes and dreams, our beliefs and moralities intersect.

But we cannot do this in a theological vacuum. This is one of the first things that the kids in our youth group learned. In order to reach out confidently, in order to interact with other faiths on equal footing, we need to know who we are, what we believe, where we come from. And we need to be able to articulate this knowledge to others. In the absence of creeds and dogmas that everyone subscribes to in the same language, we Unitarian-Universalists often know more about other religions than we do about our own; we can talk endlessly and intelligently about anything under the sun and are often struck dumb when it comes to articulating our own faith. We need to stop being satisfied with

this state of affairs. We need to think seriously about what it is that we believe; we need to practice giving our answers to the big questions of religion—and even if we think that we have many answers to some big questions, we need to be able to speak clearly and convincingly about over-arching principles or ranges of belief.

This kind of self-education and preparation for a broad-based lay evangelism is something that I think we all could be doing in Unitarian-Universalist churches and fellowships everywhere. I believe that the time has come for us to reach out from our places of worship and refuge. It is time for us to bring the gospel of, religious, moral relativism to the rest of our country. In my vision, ours would be an evangelism that seeks not to convert others to our faith but to spread the good news that different faiths with differing sincerely and firmly held moralities can live together in peace and harmony, that we can rejoice when our moralities coincide and gladly do the very hard work of coexisting with moralities that we cannot accept for ourselves.

I believe that it is time for us to give up our comfortable refuge, time for us to stop hiding behind the excuse that we are few in number and they are many, time for us to give up feeling weak because we wield neither heaven as a reward nor hell as a threat; it is time for us to go forth and fight the good fight in the arena of religion. For the Christians, it is approaching Lent, a time when giving up some comfort prepares the way for a glorious resurrection. It is no longer enough to complain, to hope for a political rescue and a white knight to push back the impending dark. It is time for us to give up the security of our besieged fortress and go out in the world to spread our good news wherever there is a listener. Let me close with what I take to be a very relevant meditation on Lent by Lynn Ungar:

What will you give up for this season

to help life along

in its curious reversals?

As if we had a choice.

As if the world were not

constantly shedding us  
like feathers off a duck's back—  
The ground is always  
littered with our longings.

You can't help but wonder  
about all the heroes,  
the lives and limbs sacrificed  
in their compulsion toward the good/

All those who dropped themselves  
upon the earth's hard surface—  
weren't they caught in pure astonishment  
in the breath before they shattered?

Forget sacrifice. Nothing  
is tied so firmly that the wind  
won't tear it from us at last.  
The question is how to remain faithful  
to all the impossible,  
necessary resurrections.

Walter G. Andrews  
Bellevue, 2005