

A RELIGION OF CIVICS VERSUS A CIVICS OF RELIGION: FINDING A THIRD WAY

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INTRODUCTION. James Forbes is the Senior Minister of Riverside Church in New York City, an interdenominational, interracial, international church of over 2000 members affiliated with both the American Baptist Church and the United Church of Christ. He is a longtime friend of the Unitarian Universalist movement. In 2001, he gave the annual Thomas Ware lecture at UU General Assembly. Dr. Forbes praised our movement for its social justice work. He recalled our distinguished five-hundred-year tradition of dissent and protest. And he offered us the challenge of a simple-sounding question. Why do we do it?

Dr. Forbes recalled Albert Camus' famous observation that every protester proclaims a loud NO to whatever is being protested, but underneath that NO is always a YES. The word protest, after all, means to testify FOR something. So when we UUs protest and say NO to injustice, he wanted to know what we are testifying FOR.

The question is interesting, but how, if at all, does the answer make a difference in our lives, in what we do – rather than simply being an interesting explanation of why we do it? The words of a distinguished former UUA president suggest that the answer might be no, it doesn't make any difference. "The important thing about religious living," he declared, "is not what we profess with our lips but how we witness with our lives." Sounds good, but is that really true?

Some ways of pursuing social justice move us closer to our ultimate values. Others do not. Still others may even teach away from those ultimate values. Knowing what those values are and how proposed social justice efforts further them enables churches and those they try to enlist in their causes to make appropriate choices. Articulating our values also enables others in the public sphere to know what to expect from us. Justice-making is not just a matter of what we do but also how we do it. The "how" issues, like the what issues, can only be addressed meaningfully if we are clear on what ultimate values our activism is designed to serve.

Quite apart from whether we prevail in a particular effort, justice-making is also a matter of education on the importance of the values that drive the work. In the long run, this educative aspect may be more important than whether the particular justice-making goal is achieved at all. Justice-making must satisfy the universal human need for larger meaning. It can only do that if we make the particulars of the work symbolic of such larger meaning. This also requires that we integrate such particulars into an overarching story or mythology, in which the participants in our justice-making can envision themselves playing a noble role.

For all of these reasons, as religious people, we can only give life the shape of justice if we give justice the shape of our mission, which is to say, the shape of the spiritual values we consider to be of ultimate importance.

I. THE EXISTING LANDSCAPE

In America there are two main schools of thought, and then a radical third one, about whether and how churches should be present in the public square. The purpose of understanding these schools of thought is to lay a foundation for asking what place UUs should stake out for themselves in this landscape.

A. The Civic Religion School of Thought

This is a conception of the relationship between religion and public policy in which, in the words of the postmodern philosopher Stanley Fish,

religion is essentially a private transaction between you and your God and therefore is, at least in principle, independent of your actions in the public sphere, where the imperatives you follow might be political, economic, philanthropic, environmental--imperatives that could be affirmed or rejected by persons independently of their religious convictions or of their lack of religious convictions.

The “civic religion” concept is colloquially captured in Jefferson’s comment that “It does me no injury for my neighbor to say that there are twenty Gods or no Gods; it neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.”¹

Defenders of civic religion call it the “true religion,” the “American national religion.” They see it as consisting of “our nonsectarian belief in the freedom of the individual to think, speak, and act in his or her best interests.” Although the phraseology sounds like a defense of choice of beliefs, Stanley Fish rightly sees this position as “a belief in the evil of any sectarian belief whatsoever, of any belief that asserts itself strongly and is jealous of its priority.” It is an attack on “belief in general, at least as it commits you to the truth of a conviction or the imperative of an action. The only good belief is the belief you can wear lightly and shrug off when you leave home and stride into the public sphere.”²

Proponents of civic religion have made a religion of civics. They would insist, no doubt, that it is a specialized one, rather than a universal one, designed to be operative only in the arena called the public sphere (or square). In the privacy of their own beliefs and lives, this civic religion leaves citizens remain free to have their own religion – to worship one god or twenty, in Jefferson’s phrase. To confine a universal religion to the private sphere, though, is tantamount to killing it. Civic religion is likely to leave us – and for the most part, I believe, has in fact left us -- with religious belief that is as thin and insipid in the private sphere as civic religion would have it be in the public sphere.

¹Stanley Fish, “Postmodern Warfare: the Ignorance Of Our Warrior Intellectuals”, *Harper’s Magazine*, July, 2002 pp. 4-5.

²Stanley Fish, “Postmodern Warfare: the Ignorance Of Our Warrior Intellectuals”, *Harper’s Magazine*, July, 2002 p. 6.

B. The Religious Civics School of Thought

Until the relatively recent rise of the religious right, civic religion was the dominant public square paradigm in modern America. Rejecting that paradigm, the religious right certainly has marched into the public square under the banner of their beliefs. No belief “worn lightly” for them. The beliefs they banner have a distinctive character: they are ideological and political – treating as ultimate values things no higher than a principle or idea that can be translated into public policy backed by the coercive power of the government. A religion that idolizes ideas in this way is inherently fundamentalist. The religious right would gladly establish a polity organized around such ideas. We could call it a theocracy, or an ideocracy, or, where the authority for the ideas is claimed to reside in the Bible, a bibliocracy (government by book – the one and only “good book”).

Regardless of name, the important point is that such churches are not only “in” the public square, but “of” it. They are fundamentalist, ideological, and intensely political.

An excellent example of this approach to religion in the public sphere can be found in Jerry Falwell’s invitation to Newt Gingrich to give this year’s commencement address at Falwell’s Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia. The example requires some background.

When Gingrich was Speaker of the U. S. House of Representatives in 1998, he led the charge to have President Clinton impeached, on the basis of the Lewinsky scandal. Remarkably, the heightened scrutiny of personal morality brought on by the impeachment movement resulted in marital infidelity disclosures that destroyed the political careers of several leading members of Gingrich’s own party. Gingrich himself was having an extramarital affair at the very time he was condemning the president for sexual misconduct, but he concealed this politically very relevant fact. If he had disclosed it, his political career probably would have gone the way of those of the other Republican leaders whose extramarital affairs were brought to light. Gingrich’s career, as an officeholder at least, did come to an end soon after the impeachment battle, but for reasons having nothing to do with “family values” or accusations of sexual misconduct. The 1998 midterm elections were disastrous for the Republicans, and he resigned soon thereafter.

Now, nine years later, Gingrich would like to run for president in the 2008 election. So last March he arranged to be interviewed by Gary Dobson, head of a rightwing religious organization called Focus on the Family, and a personal friend of Gingrich. Dobson lobbed Gingrich softball questions about marital infidelity. Gingrich confessed that he had been having an affair during the time when he was leading the impeachment charge. He insisted that this was not hypocritical, because the impeachment charge, strictly speaking, was about Clinton’s alleged perjury – lying under oath in a deposition. It is painfully obvious that this confession was politically timed – delayed long enough that in the mass media environment to make it sound like ancient history, but offered soon enough that, by the time of the upcoming presidential campaign, it at least will be stale news, even if not exactly ancient history.

Gingrich then went to Falwell, seeking his imprimatur on this confession. Falwell obliged, declaring Newt's confession to be genuine, and invited him to be the commencement speaker at Falwell's private religious academy, Liberty University. He went on to draw a parallel between his embrace of Gingrich and his embrace of Reagan in 1980, saying: "I well remember the challenge we evangelicals faced in 1980 when our candidate, Ronald Reagan, was the first presidential candidate who had gone through a divorce. We wisely made allowance for God's forgiveness, and America was the beneficiary of this great champion."

The point of this story is not what a lowlife Gingrich is. Nor is it about the particular ideas and principles Jerry Falwell and the religious right have chosen to embrace in terms of public policy. Rather, the point is the stark exposure the story gives to the kind of relationship between religion and the public sphere modeled by the religious right. The Catholic word for what Falwell gave Gingrich is an "indulgence" – the formality of forgiveness, dispensed by a church in exchange for value given. In the Middle Ages, when literal indulgences were commonplace, money was the customary value given; with Gingrich, it's even worse. His payment was an implicit commitment to remain in alignment with the ideas enshrined in Falwell's religion. Or, most of them. The essence of the Falwell/Gingrich bargain is "I'll forgive you for offending one idea on our list if you'll promise to support the other nine as a public officeholder."

Actually, it's more like the other eight than the other nine, because Gingrich not only committed adultery, violating the Seventh Commandment, but also lied about it – violating the Ninth Commandment by bearing false witness. The fact that Gingrich concealed the truth rather than affirmatively lying about it surely can't make any difference for purposes of the Ten Commandments. That would exalt form over substance. Misleading people by not telling them something you know would profoundly affect their willingness to follow you is indistinguishable from lying. Gingrich also tried to distinguish his concealment of his marital infidelity from Clinton's false witness because Clinton was under oath, testifying under penalty of perjury. But that's not a distinction that Falwell's church would respect either. The Ninth Commandment doesn't talk about oaths. Jesus admonished against oath-taking. (Matthew 6:33-37)

So we are left with an interesting comparison of how Falwell's religion regards Clinton and Gingrich. Clinton committed sexual misconduct and lied about it. Gingrich committed sexual misconduct and lied about it. Clinton was contrite after being caught in his lie. Gingrich was contrite at a politically chosen moment nine years later. But Falwell's church embraces Gingrich and views Clinton as the antichrist. The difference must lie in a comparison of the report cards of Gingrich and Clinton on the remainder of Falwell's list of key ideas. Surely it is plain that Falwell's church is founded on ideology and political calculation, rather than a religion whose ultimate value is transcendent – i.e., not of this world.

Falwell was careful not to endorse Gingrich as a presidential candidate, but it's obvious he supports the idea of Gingrich being a candidate to become THE candidate. Undoubtedly another political negotiation would have been required for a formal endorsement – one entailing more promises of political loyalty from Gingrich. Falwell's supportive push of the Gingrich's forward momentum toward candidacy, along with his reference to Reagan as "our candidate," further underscore the ideological/political character of his religion. Once any organization has

anointed a politician as “our candidate,” the rules of the political game basically require that the organization cease to speak negatively about the candidate as to any particular issue or qualification for office. This too is a bargain between the candidate and the endorsing organization. Falwell’s church is saying to the endorsed candidate, essentially, you pledge your loyalty to our list of key ideological positions, and we’ll agree not to use our prophetic voice to hold you accountable to any other positions, and certainly not to use it to call you to anything that transcends all such positions.”

From the Falwellian perspective, there is nothing “unholy” about this bargain, because the “whole” of Falwell’s religion is an ideology -- a list of ideas or positions. The Falwellians and others on the religious right, who share this ideological bent, have made their religion into a civics – a mirror-image of the way in which civic religionists have made their civics into a religion.

C. The Third Way: a Church IN the Public Square, But Not OF It

What path is open to a church that finds the preceding two models unacceptable? First, it would ignore the demand of civic religionists that churches stay out of the public sphere altogether. Second it would proclaim a transcendent ultimate value – one that transcends ALL things in this world, and therefore one that would partake of the “not-of-this-world” realm. Something transcendent in this ultimate sense is bound to be difficult even to talk about, causing us to resort to words like God, universal spirit, the infinite, holy, wholeness, love, etc. The common thread in these characterizations of “the transcendent” is that if such a value were to be realized, the need for justice-making would disappear. A transcendent value is one that brings eschatology into view.

Civic religion clearly has no such transcendent value. It is concerned with an ideology – addressing such subjects as the organization of economic markets, maintaining order, preserving an appropriate balance between individual freedom and civic responsibility, and public welfare in a limited, purely materialistic sense. These are the values of liberal democracy.

Religious civics of the kind urged by the religious right would substitute a more comprehensive set of ideas (ideology), such as an “everything we need to know for living we can find in the bible” set; but there is still no transcendence – no ultimate value greater than all of those this-world values, either individually or in the aggregate. There is a rhetoric of transcendence, of course: the religious right endlessly invokes God, Jesus, the Kingdom of God, etc. But the lack of transcendence is made evident by the very fact that Falwell and the other leaders of the religious right are willing to horse-trade their values and silence their prophetic voices for the sake of incremental this-world gains. The transcendent is invoked rhetorically, subordinated to the objectives of the religious right’s this-world agenda (ironic for a group of religions thought of as so focused on “the sweet hereafter”). Jesus is just a rhetorical precinct captain, or at most another endorser, like the labor unions, the chamber of commerce, the police officers’ association, etc. The religious right would substitute a theocracy (or bibliocracy) for liberal democracy, but it would still be an “ocracy”. Transcendent religion is “nonocratic,” because its very essence is not of this world.

With the declaration of a transcendent value, the question of how the church should relate to the public sphere comes into clearer focus. As C. S. Lewis famously said, when first things are put first, second things are increased, rather than diminished. Justice is a “second thing” in a transcendent religion. For every potential public sphere justice issue, the transcendent church will ask questions like these:

- how might the outcome of this issue move the world closer to, or further away from, our ultimate value?
- Given the limited time and resources we have for our ministry, how does what is at stake in this issue, in relation to our ultimate value, compare with what is at stake in other situations where we might intervene?
- If we do intervene on this issue, how can we translate our not-of-this-world ultimate value into terms that are meaningful to those we are trying to reach?
- If we do intervene on this issue, what challenges confront us concerning how we intervene in a manner that is itself in furtherance of our ultimate value?

The consistent theme in these questions is the primacy of the ultimate value in every aspect of the work. The transcendent church can advocate for justice, but it does this by witnessing to the relation of the justice issue to the ultimate value, rather than by engaging in political compromise – either by diluting its witnessing advocacy or by shaping its positions for the sake of forming alliances.

To abjure compromise may seem like dogmatism, or rigidity for its own sake; but it isn’t. Rather, it reflects the radical departure from this-worldly values that a truly transcendent ultimate value entails. Compromise always demands the silencing or diluting of the prophetic voice in its proclamation of the meaning of the ultimate value in the world and the urgency of embracing it. It is doubtful that a transcendent church should ever do this for the sake of incremental gains in the achievement of justice in a particular arena. To do so would be no better than invoking the ultimate value as a rhetorical support for worldly values. (“vote for our position because that’s what Jesus would do.” etc. -- see Section I-B above)

II. WHERE UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISTS ARE, AND WHERE WE SHOULD BE, IN THIS LANDSCAPE

A. A General Description Of Where Unitarian Universalism Is Now

It is hazardous to make broad generalizations about Unitarian Universalists, but not hazardous to say that a great many have embraced political and cultural liberalism as ultimate values, thus placing themselves squarely in the Civic Religion camp described in Section I-A. (See Davidson Lohr, “Why ‘Unitarian Universalism’ Is Dying,” pp. 2-4, a theme talk at SUUSI available on the website of the First Unitarian Church of Austin. Lohr is regarded as a heretic in some UU circles, but heretics often have a valuable message.) Our religious movement has a chronic weakness in theological depth. This is evident in the failure of the UUA’s Commission on Appraisal to articulate any notion of “theological center” in our movement when it was tasked with doing so in 2005. Stanley Fish’s description of Civic Religion as holding that “the only

good belief is the belief you can wear lightly and shrug off when you leave home and stride into the public sphere” is painfully apt as applied to Unitarian Universalism.

B. The Marriage Amendment Controversy In Virginia As an Example

We can see where Unitarian Universalists are and where we should aspire to be in this public sphere landscape by considering a specific example. An anti-same-sex marriage initiative appeared on the ballot in Virginia last November. Many UU churches opposed it, and in doing so, allied themselves with churches from other denominations and various secular groups that felt the same way, for a wide variety of reasons. A group of these UU churches prepared an “Open Letter” stating their position and offering a detailed set of reasons why the ballot proposition should be defeated. (A copy of the Open Letter appears as Attachment A to this presentation.)

The Open Letter contained eight hundred words of text. Only about a quarter of those words actually talked about oppression of gays and lesbians. The rest of the text focused on collateral consequences of the ballot proposition for various other groups – custody rights for unmarried parents, health benefits for single people, hospital visitation rights, and restraining orders against domestic violence by involving unmarried persons. This choice of emphasis conveyed an impression that the main objection to the ballot proposition was overbreadth – not that it was wrong through and through and was an attack on gay and lesbian people, but rather, that its language was so broadly worded that it swept in many other groups and had many unintended consequences. The point that the proposition hurt gay and lesbian people was there in the text, but it was given a low profile.

This emphasis was a conscious political strategy on the part of the sponsoring UU churches. A principal author of the Open Letter said as much in an article in *Interweave World*, a newsletter published by a UU affiliate group devoted to bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender concerns. (A copy of this article appears as Attachment B to this presentation.) He declared that UUs wanted to “shout to the whole state, ‘don’t you get it? Marriage is a civil right, for God’s sake!’”, but then embraced the political realities this way:

“[B]eating a referendum measure requires recruiting the largest number of votes, and that means appealing to all kinds of people and doing coalition politics. This can be uncomfortable. You’re not only sleeping with strange bedfellows (the Libertarian Party of Virginia, for example), you have to make them coffee in the morning. So, that’s what we’re doing.”

(emphasis supplied) The writer insisted that the Open Letter did not compromise UU principles, because they were always mentioned in the public statements of position by the sponsoring group of churches – including in the Open Letter. He acknowledged, nonetheless, its strategic emphasis: “only toward the end of our Open Letter do we spell out how we understand marriage equality to be a fundamental civil rights matter.”

My UU congregation in Williamsburg, Virginia voted to oppose the ballot proposition, with only one dissenting vote. We were in complete sympathy with the group of UU churches in

Virginia that sponsored the Open Letter. We felt it was important, though, not only to be in the public square on this issue, but also to be there in a way that reflected the special role of churches in this sphere – the importance of being “in” the public square without being “of” it.

We published an op ed piece in the regional paper for Tidewater Virginia declaring ourselves on the ballot proposition and treating it for what we felt it so clearly was: an attack on gay and lesbian people. We foregrounded that reality, rather than de-emphasizing it. Within the constraints of a 600-word op ed space, there was only a limited opportunity to link our position to ultimate religious values, but we tried. The main point of the op ed piece was that marriage is not simply a civil right, but rather, a sacred right – because marriage itself (deep commitment in an intimate relationship) is a blessed state. Celebration of the marriage thus brings blessing not only to the marrying couple but also to the entire religious community witnessing it. Love changes everything. (A copy of this op ed piece appears as Attachment C to this presentation.)

The op ed piece – and the thinking underlying it – are very imperfect expressions of a theology of marriage grounded in transcendent values, as described in Section I-C above. They do represent, nonetheless, an effort to move in that direction, which requires a long process of theological dialogue in our community.

The theological weakness of Unitarian Universalism is on display in the case of the same-sex marriage battles waged across the country. UUs are passionate on the juristic issue of the right to form (and dissolve) marriages. No Unitarian Universalist flag is planted, though, in the territory of what our religion might say about how marriage relates to ultimate religious values, such as wholeness, the holy, spiritual healing, or love; or for that matter, how to have a good marriage once those rights have been exercised – articulating what is “good” by relating marriage to such values. (See “Time to Commit,” by William J. Doherty, *UU World*, January/February 2005, for an excellent treatment of this subject.) We say “marriage is a civil right,” but never “marriage is a sacred right.” If there is something sacred at stake here – and I certainly believe that – we should articulate what that is. This can be done without any disrespect to people who choose not to marry, not to make a commitment to a long-term relationship. If nothing sacred is at stake here, we have no business – no religious business – joining issue on it in the public square.

C. Where We Should Go From Here

Unitarian Universalism should move toward the transcendent church model, which of course entails not just a different conception of social justice work but rather a fundamental shift in the character and mission of our religious movement. The world needs the power and intensity of a new religion. We need to embrace a theology, free of the fear that doing so will pitch us into dogmatism. It might seem that the logical way to work toward such a shift would be to concentrate on the theology and THEN translate the results into social justice work. Perhaps, but some of the most profound religious experiences – ones that give us a thunderous experiential message about transcendent values that are already within us and waiting to be activated – are to be found in the particular rather than the theoretical, in preparing for and doing the justice-making. We can develop a theology of transcendent values in many ways. We need to be on the roads that can take us there. Justice-making is such a road.

ATTACHMENT A

Dear Leaders of Religious Communities in the Commonwealth of Virginia:

On November 7, you and members of your congregations will be asked to vote on Ballot Referendum Question #1, popularly known as the Marshall-Newman Amendment or the Virginia Marriage Amendment. We believe this amendment is dangerous and warrants a powerful, united religious response.

The amendment is socially dangerous. The Christian, Jewish and humanist members of our congregations are concerned about the harmful impact this Amendment would have on many of the most vulnerable citizens among us – especially unmarried women, single parents, adoptive children, and same-sex couples.

The amendment is spiritually dangerous. The Marshall-Newman Amendment adds no new incentive or protection for marriages. Nothing about it would lower our state's high divorce rate, discourage out-of-wedlock pregnancy, or protect children from harm. Whether those who drafted it had that intent or not, we believe the effect of this amendment on the ballot – let alone in our Constitution -- is to make scapegoats of gay and lesbian persons for these broad social ills.

The amendment's first sentence, which defines marriage, only repeats what is already Virginia law. Its second paragraph goes much further, adding these words to the Bill of Rights:

This Commonwealth and its political subdivisions shall not create or recognize a legal status for relationships of unmarried individuals that intends to approximate the design, qualities, significance, or effects of marriage.

If passed, this sweeping new language would tie up our courts in a long series of legal battles, because it would throw open to legal challenge any local or state law that offers the "qualities" or "effects" of marriage to any two unmarried people.

In Ohio and Michigan, where similar amendments were recently passed, unmarried men and women are now threatened with the loss of health benefits and legal protections. Courts in Ohio have ruled that women whose abusers are not their husbands are no longer entitled to seek protective orders. In Virginia, 60,000 unmarried domestic violence victims seek protective orders each year.

By blocking rights and protections for some and not for others, the amendment violates a universal moral principle: Love your neighbor as you love yourself. Protections threatened include:

- The freedom of private businesses to offer domestic partner health benefits
- Hospital visitation rights for anyone who is not a married spouse or blood relative
- Custody rights for unmarried parents.

Unitarian Universalists believe that love in the human heart – committed love that seeks to nurture and make room for growth of self and another – is holy. We are called to celebrate that love wherever it arises, and accordingly, our ministers have been blessing same-sex unions for many years with the same rituals we use for heterosexual marriages.

We recognize, however, that this nation and its religious leaders are not united on the question of same-sex marriage. Whatever your beliefs on this subject or the beliefs of the people you serve, we hope you will lead your people to defeat this amendment, which not only targets a vulnerable group but imperils the separation of church and state. It sets a dangerous precedent to write into our historic Bill of Rights any definition of marriage that favors one social, political or religious tradition over another.

Virginia's Bill of Rights is justly famous as the first constitutional statute in history to protect religious minorities. It is a bill of rights because it protects each of us from being bullied by our government or by majorities of any kind. This shield within our constitution must never be used as a weapon.

GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender) individuals and couples have often found a spiritual home in Unitarian Universalist sanctuaries. As a result, we know the stories of their lives. The lesbian couple with a happy adoptive son, the single gay dad with two teenage kids, the man whose longtime partner is hospitalized with cancer — these people are not abstractions to us. Their families are part of our family. Perhaps they are part of your church families also.

We are witnessing more of them who, fearing especially for their children's security, are uprooting themselves from jobs and communities to relocate in states that respect their rights as families. Every time this happens, our congregations — and the Commonwealth of Virginia — are the poorer for it.

Please join us in taking a stand as religious leaders united to urge people to vote no on ballot measure #1.

Signed--

Rev. Michael McGee, Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington Rev. Linda Olson Peebles, Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington Rev. Mary McKinnon Ganz, Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington Archene Turner, ministerial intern, Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington Rev. Louis Schwebius, Mount Vernon Unitarian Church Rev. Leslie Takahashi Morris, Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church, Unitarian Universalist Rev. David Takahashi Morris, Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church, Unitarian Universalist Amy Kulesza DeBeck, Unitarian Universalist Church of Loudoun Cathie Stivers, Unitarian Universalist ministerial candidate Rev. Henry Ticknor, Unitarian Universalist Church of Shenandoah Valley

ATTACHMENT B

[from the October/November, 2006 issue of the newsletter of Interweave Continental, Unitarian Universalists for Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Concerns]

InterweaveWorld

UUs Work To Defeat Virginia “Marriage” Amendment

by Marc DeFrancis

As the summer heat lifts, I find myself tackling a second job with every spare volunteer minute I can find: fighting a marriage-exclusion amendment coming before voters in just two months. This November, Virginia will be one of the half-dozen states where our nuptial options—and our families’ futures—will be weighed in the crude scale of ballot referenda. You wouldn’t know it to judge from the dull roar of karaoke and laughter that billows out of my favorite gay bar in Arlington, Virginia every Friday night. Only 50 days to go before harmless sounding Ballot Question No. 1 will face every voter here, and the last time I bothered the customers at Freddie’s Beach Bar and Restaurant to ask, no more than half of them even knew there was an amendment to think about.

The fog of indifference—sometimes it’s a brick wall of cynicism—is quite understandable. Until very recently our state legislature here in Virginia was only known for its ability to generate homophobic panic legislation any time the words “same” and “sex” were mentioned together. Many otherwise well-informed bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender (BGLT) folks stopped reading the coverage of state politics, if they ever started. And among those who do know a bit about our upcoming “marriage” amendment, quite a few are still staying away from advocacy—and may even stay home from the polls—because they assume the measure is bound to pass. But the good news is that this time that assumption is wrong.

Thanks to groundwork laid in years of work by our statewide BGLT rights group, Equality Virginia, along with our long-established local BGLT organizations in northern Virginia (Arlington and Alexandria especially) as well as increasingly vocal, increasingly visible (I’m talking about highway signs, honey) public advocacy by Unitarian Universalist (UU) churches all over Virginia, this time we are finding all kinds of support for equality from formerly quiet, or formerly waffling, political and business forces. This time, the state’s League of Women Voters, our conservative Democrat governor Tim Kaine, and organizations like the Falls Church Chamber of Commerce have issued public statements of opposition to the homophobic amendment.



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Now mind you, our amendment may be easier to oppose than yours. Ours has been described by legal experts as the most sweeping, most draconian, and most vague of any such amendment ever put up on a state ballot. Indeed, its killer second paragraph is bound to be used to challenge straight unmarried women's right to seek protective orders against violently abusive former boyfriends. Two state courts in Ohio, where a similarly sweeping amendment passed last year, reached exactly that conclusion themselves.

When you think about it, what good law or contract connecting any two people might not be viewed as a "benefit," "quality," or "effect" of marriage? The argument that the amendment would undermine dozens of established laws and clog our courts is quite sound. It is the argument that our own governor, a devout Catholic who told voters during his campaign last year that he opposed both same-sex marriage and civil unions, has made several times, as have two former attorneys general and, just this week, the Washington Post.

In short, our amendment is so terrible that even merchants of the status quo can oppose it. The delicious irony here may be that our right-wing legislators are so right wing, they've cooked up an amendment too toxic to pass.

Where does all this leave us Unitarian Universalists? Many of us, certainly in my congregation at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington, want nothing more than to stand on the rooftop—from which, incidentally, we

have hung four enormous rainbow flags—and shout to the whole state, "Don't you get it? Marriage is a civil right, for God's sake!" But beating a referendum measure requires recruiting the largest number of votes, and that means appealing to all kinds of people and doing coalition politics.

This can be uncomfortable. You're not only sleeping with strange bedfellows (the Libertarian Party of Virginia, for example), you have to make them coffee in the morning. So that's what we're doing.

We are not compromising our principles, either. We always include the full UU message—we believe in full marriage equality—in our public statements on the amendment. But we do not always place that message in front.

One month ago, we wrote up an "Open Letter to the People of Virginia," signed by our ministers, and sent it out to the local media. (A copy is now posted on the UUA website.) The letter begins by spelling out how the amendment could weaken protections for single women and unmarried couples. Then it goes on to spell out the economic argument; in northern Virginia this is especially powerful, because the 250-odd top corporations in the country that offer domestic-partner benefits all have offices here and many of them can relocate across the river where BGLT employment equality is respected or protected.

Only toward the end of our Open Letter do we spell out how we understand

marriage equality to be a fundamental civil rights matter. For every group or subgroup of thinkers and citizens there is a different aspect of this amendment—and perhaps of most such amendments—where we can find common ground to talk about.

And as for the politically de-pressed BGLT community in Virginia, our message right now is simple: Let go of your cynicism, because this time the battle is winnable. A recent poll showed 54 percent of Virginians now opposed or undecided about the amendment once shown its full text. Within our congregation, we have found that once you articulate how political advocacy work will directly translate a UU ethical principle into action and you show your own passion on the subject, people come out of the woodwork.

One woman showed up at a volunteer meeting and explained that she wanted

to do something because her daughter is lesbian. And every time I turn around, I receive yet another email from a senior, some over age 70, not only asking me how they can volunteer in this effort but lately informing me of discussion groups and pamphleteering that they've just gotten up and started on their own, and could I please hurry and get them some more materials?

Maybe that's one of the best things about taking up arms against a heartless new piece of legislation or ballot measure—that it invariably draws us closer to all kinds of people whose gut instinct for justice has been there all along, just waiting to be asked out onto the dance floor. I'm taking all comers.

Marc co-chairs the Vote No! Task Force at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington.

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Interweave's Mission/Vision

Interweave Continental is a membership organization actively working to end oppression based on sexual orientation and gender identity, recognizing that we will not be free until all oppression is a thing of the past. We are an affiliate organization of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, and our work is guided by Unitarian Universalist principles. We value

and affirm the lives and experience of Queerpeopleof faith of all ages, races, ethnicities, income levels, and abilities. By providing and supporting leadership, and working in collaboration with other organizations of similar vision, we strive to connect and nurture all Queer individuals, communities, groups, and their allies.

ATTACHMENT C



[REPRINT]

RESPECT THE WORTH OF EACH AND EVERY INDIVIDUAL **Daily Press - Newport News, Va. [Final Edition]**

By Reverend Preston Moore And Reverend Jennifer Ryu*

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Section: Editorial

Tomorrow, we will walk out of our house of worship and step into the public square, knowing this will pull us into a major political controversy. We will plant a sign on the front edge of our churchyard, as big a sign as the law allows, declaring our opposition to the so-called marriage amendment -- the November ballot proposition in Virginia aimed at declaring gay people unfit for marriage.

We want everyone to know why we are taking such an unusual step.

We are several hundred churchgoers called the Williamsburg Unitarian Universalists, members of a religious movement founded 500 years ago in the Protestant Reformation. Our people are big believers in promises. Our Williamsburg congregation and more than a thousand others like it across the country have exchanged written promises to affirm and promote seven values that Unitarian Universalists hold sacred. The first of these values is "the inherent worth and dignity of every person." Denying a group of people the right to make promises is an attack on that value. By forbidding them to make the promises and commitments that constitute marriage, the proposed marriage amendment disrespects the worth and dignity of gay people.

All promising is important, but a few kinds of promises stand out above the rest. Vows of marriage are among this precious few. They are the deepest, most enduring promises in human relating. When two people exchange promises "to have and to hold from this day forward; for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until death do us part," they enter a blessed state. They create a sacred relationship -- something truly set apart. This relationship brings blessing and holiness not only into their own lives, but also into the life of the entire religious community witnessing their joy. Weddings solemnize and celebrate this blessed state, this spreading spirit of holiness. Denying a group of people the right to marry is denying blessing. The proposed marriage amendment denies blessing to gay people.

When law touches on sacred values, such as vows of marriage, it is much more than a mere instrument of good order. The law cannot bless, but if misused, it can negate blessing by damning. This is the result when governmental authority is exercised to degrade and disrespect a group of people. By declaring them unfit to marry, the proposed marriage amendment damns gay people.

We have not stepped into this controversy simply to uphold abstract values. When we say "we," we mean a church that includes gay people. The straight people and gay people in our church take care of one another -- listening compassionately to stories of pain and loss, helping out when illness or other misfortune strikes, celebrating successes, worshipping together, raising families together, and building a church community together. We are neighbors in the particulars of daily existence. If your neighbors were attacked, would you turn away, or would you stand with them? How could love of your neighbor call for anything less?

In the present controversy, we ask ourselves, "who is our neighbor?" Our faith tradition gives us a clear, resounding answer: all people -- with no one left out, no one belittled, no one cast outside the circle of blessing. We reach out to our gay brothers and sisters throughout Virginia as neighbors who are threatened by a law born of fear and hatred. And we reach out to you as neighbors, asking for your public declaration and your vote on November 7 -- against the marriage amendment and in favor of values we can all embrace as sacred: the power of promising, the holiness of marriage, and the blessings that flow from loving our neighbors. Amen.

*Moore and Ryu are a husband-wife co-ministry team at the Williamsburg Unitarian Universalist church.