

# The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lake County

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## Battles Lost and Won in the Politico Religious Wars Rev. John M. Higgins, Ed. D

I am fortunately to speak to six other Florida congregations regularly. Last year, in particular, I heard many complaints from various congregations that there was too much politics in the services. This means from the comments of members who spoke after the presentation.

Frankly, it is almost impossible to be faithful to the call of religion to ignore politics. Too many issues in our country affect basic ideals of personal liberty and practice. As personal liberty and freedom of the mind are prominent values held by Unitarian Universalists, it seems to me that to be relevant, one must speak out on issues that affect us.

Many other advanced and democratic countries have political parties. In Europe where formal religion seems to be in decline for decades, there are still political parties. In Holland, parties are aligned to religious labels, if not beliefs. Many European countries have Christian Democrat parties -- initially Catholic in outlook but often aligned with welfare policies. In Turkey, there is even an Islamic party. Turkey is the most secular of all majority Muslim countries. Even in India there was a Hindu Nationalist Party in power briefly a few years ago. Simply put, religious values do affect national and even international policies throughout the world.

Our own national history is partly about religion. The European colonies were mostly settled by religious communities. Spanish, French, Dutch all brought their religion to the New World. The English colonies were somewhat different as each colony took on a different religious orientation. The few that allowed religious freedom were often overcome by sectarian interests.

Massachusetts for example, a Puritan colony, mandates Sunday attendance at church as did Virginia and other locations. The reason for prohibition of the federal government in promotion or limiting religion was that the thirteen colonies could not agree that any one colony's religious preference could be nationalized. However, a number of colonies once they became states, did factor religion. Massachusetts actually convicted Abner Kneeland for blasphemy in the 1840 -- decades after the success of the American Revolution. It wasn't until 1844 that blasphemy was abolished as an offense against the state,

Despite the prohibition of religious preferences and assistance, state and local governments favored religious practices. Prayers and bible instruction were common in the early public schools and even today, we find legal suits over prayer and bible study in several states.

There were also the famous "Blue Laws" of Massachusetts which prohibited various activities on Sundays and the use of alcohol at various times. Sunday business closings were often mandated by law and the opening of movie houses were often forbidden on Sundays or before church services ended. We still have such religiously motivated laws in many states and in parts of Florida.

Religious issues have always been part of our American development. In the early days, it was assumed that Christian rules would dominate the week. Some of our national holidays were religious -- Christmas and Easter for example.

Most religious activities supported by public funds have been abolished in recent years although some still continue to draw our attention. The example of a Supreme Court Justice in Alabama

putting a 3½ ton monument of the Ten Commandments in the rotunda of the Court House is fairly recent in our minds.

Most likely, until the end of the Civil War, the dominance of generic Protestantism was accepted. Public schools were still not established in all states and a general religiosity was prevalent.

With the great immigration years of the post Civil War period and the United States becoming the greatest manufacturing country in the world at that time, the religious factor changed. Many immigrants were from Catholic countries and Jews began to leave the anti Semitic areas of Europe. By the end of the Civil War, large immigrant populations were being established in the great cities of the Northeast. The intolerance of the public schools that did exist to Catholics encouraged Catholics to establish a separate school system. At that time, prayers were mostly Protestant and readers contained anti Catholic sentiment. As I said, there was probably a generic Protestantism prevalent in this country with the exception of Mormons who were driven west. However, other religious groups were developing and Catholicism became the largest single denomination.

Other factors were at work too in Western Religion. The notions of Darwin and Higher Biblical Criticism were gaining a foothold in public discourse.

Darwinism as it was called, and still is by Fundamentalist Christians, divided religions as did scholarly disputation of the reliability of the Bible as history. Darwinism became the Science of Evolution with the preponderance of scientific evidence leading to the acceptance that many of today's species evolved from earlier organisms.

Higher Criticism was the discovery of biblical scholars that there were contradictions in scripture and historical inaccuracies as well as narrations for which there was no historical foundation.

In the latter half of the 19th Century we find Judaism dividing into three major divisions -- Reform, Conservative and Orthodox with Reform accepting modern science while Orthodox retained the belief in the historical laws and the inerrancy of the Jewish Bible which Christians call the Old Testament.

Christianity too, divided into Fundamentalists (self labeled) who believe in the inerrancy of the Bible and Modernists who accepted science and looked at the teachings of Jesus as models for human behavior. These basic divisions exist today, and are very prominent in the religion/political debates.

In 1884, Grover Cleveland was nominated by Democrats for the Presidency of the United States. James G. Blaine was his Republican opponent. Cleveland was having some heavy going as he was admittedly the father of a child born out of wedlock with Maria Halpin. (He did "do the right thing": for those days by providing her with sustenance and a home.)

However, during that campaign a Dr. Samuel D. Burchard addressed a meeting of the Religious Bureau of Republican National Committee a week before the election and he said: "We are Republicans and we don't want propose to leave ourselves with the party whose antecedents have been Rum, Romanism and Rebellion. We are loyal to our flag."

What he did was to saddle Democrats with the three most sensitive issues of the time:

**Prohibition** - The Women's Christian Temperance Union (primarily a Methodist group) had heated prohibition into a national frenzy.

**Catholicism** - a feared group thought, at that time, to take orders from Rome, and

**Rebellion** - after twenty years, the country has still not recovered from the bitterness of the Civil War. However, the South had regained statehood status by this time and could cast votes. Candidate Blaine was in the audience and may not have heard these

words and while the speaker had been an officer in the Union army and was a prohibitionist, he was not known for anti-Catholicism. (Some speculate that he succumbed to a preacher's addiction to alliteration and had previously thought "Mormonism" would work as well.) The newspapers ignored this statement for three days but then took it up with vigor - so much so that many of us remember "Rum, Romanism and Rebellion" to this day - even if we can't remember why.

At any rate, the South, Catholics and those who were against prohibition plus normally loyal Democrats were the combination that won the day. Certainly, the largest religious denomination of the day flexed its muscle.

Some forty-four years later, religion played a large part in the presidential election. Alfred E. Smith, a Roman Catholic was nominated by the Democrats to run against Herbert Hoover. Anti Catholicism was rampant at that time -- particularly as the Catholic Church itself, was in a regressive stance -- against modernism. American Catholics were depicted as tools of Rome, loyal to Rome before the United States. Stories circulated about a tunnel being built from Rome to the United States with Papal troops ready to march as soon as Smith was elected. Yes, it was that silly. Nevertheless, nativism won and Smith was defeated badly. Even four states of the Old South voted Republican and the only non southern state to vote for Smith was Massachusetts. However, this was the first time, Democrats showed strength in the big cities. It wasn't until the election of John F. Kennedy that a Catholic could be elected as president in this country.

Our nation still remains one nation divided by religion. For the past thirty years, Evangelical Christians have moved in greater numbers from rural areas to city locations and are more powerful in national politics. We have had numerous figures and organizations developing with the mission of returning the nation to a Christian nation under God.

The names Jerry Falwell, James Dobson, Pat Robertson, Gary Bauer, Phyllis Schlafly, Tony Perkins and Tim Lafaye of the 'End Times' books are all familiar in the news. It is generally agreed-upon by those who watch the Evangelicals that James Dobson is the most powerful of all. Due to his earlier fame as a child psychologist and advisor to parents, he is able to turn out up to a million writers to elected officials to influence legislation and political appointments. As head of Focus on the Family, he was the Dr. Spock of his generation. However, he has now turned his full time to Republican partisanship.

One of the earliest battlers in the political field is Jerry Falwell. He has made a fool of himself numerous times and was once voted the "most hated man in America." He was initially a segregationist but found the light. Today his Liberty University in Virginia enrolls more blacks than whites (according to a former student of mine).

Falwell started many years ago with his radio broadcasts which, when not asking for money called for right wing religious government. He has been in and out of the limelight for many years but is still a well known, if often disgraced, icon of the Far Right.

Pat Robertson is also well known as a radio/television Far Right political evangelical figure. Under his leadership and with the help of Carl Rove, Spiritual War has been declared.

According to The Center for Religion, Ethics and Social Policy of Cornell University, in 1991, Pat Robertson laid out his agenda for taking over the Republican Party. In his book, *The millennialism* he states, "With the apathy that exists today, a well organized minority can influence the selection of candidates to an astonishing degree." He followed up that statement in 1992 with a statement to the Denver Post by saying "We want to see as soon as possible a majority of the Republican Party in the

hands of pro-family Christians."

Robertson hired Ralph Reed to get candidates elected as soon as possible. Together they taught stealth: avoid publicity, stay out of debates and work below the radar screen. Don't call attention to ourselves. And then Christian Coalition campaigned on their behalf exclusively in fundamentalist, Pentecostal and Charismatic churches.

While candidates avoided the limelight, Christian Coalition Family values Voter Guides were distributed to participating churches. Church telephone directories were used to "get out the vote" campaigns.

By 1994 election time, Christian Coalition had delivered 40 million copies of Family Voter Guides to over 100,000 churches nationwide. That was the year that Republicans took control of congress in 40 years. It was also the years Republicans took control of most state legislatures. Thus began the gerrymandering which we know today.

In May, 1999, *Time* magazine called Ralph Reed "The Right Hand of God" and gave credit to the Christian Coalition for giving the Republicans their victory. Out of forty five new members in the House of Representatives and nine in the U.S. Senate, roughly half were Christian Coalition candidates.

In 1996, 45 million Voter Guides went out; in 2000, 75 million were sent to support George W Bush.

In the late 1990's George Bush was sworn in to this second term as Governor of Texas. After the swearing in, there was a meeting with a number of religious leaders. Dr. Richard Land, then resident of the Southern Baptist Convention, is quoted as saying "Among other things he said, was 'I believe that God wants me to be president'". G.W. Bush has been quoted numerous times as saying that he was chosen by God to lead.

PBS producer Raney Anderson did an hour long Frontline program documenting the transformation of a failed businessman and alcoholic to a born-again Christian in the 1980's, after a session with a fundamentalist preacher, Billy Graham.

Many observers tell us that GWB's newfound faith helped his father, an Episcopalian, corner the evangelical vote. Wagner Slater, Austin Bureau Chief of the Dallas Morning News, tells us that GWB was a factor in the election of his father. He wrote "George W. Bush reached out to key evangelical ministers, reassuring them about the values of his father in a way his father, an Episcopalian, never could.

Slater observed Bush in church meetings. "He was a master. He was marvelously successful in talking their language, reinforcing their values and appealing to the kinds of people who would tell their neighbors to vote for him."

The "Jesus Factor" shows Bush's efforts to allow faith based groups to access state funds for social services program -- a priority he advanced once he was in the White House."

Probably, the Evangelical Right reached its highest point after the year 2000. Karl Rove told members of the Family Council in March 2002, that "We need to find ways to win this war." He did not mean the War on Terrorism. He was talking about the War on Secularism.

Did the Evangelical Right capture the Republican Party? Perhaps the extremist party platform at the 2004 GOP state convention in San Antonio, Texas, gives some insight. Some of the highlights are:

## Religious Freedom:

- "The Republican party of the Texas affirms that the United States of America is a Christian nation."
- "Our party pledges to exert its influence to restore the original intent of the First Amendment of the United States Constitution and dispel the myth of separation of Church and State"
- "The 2004 party platform opposes efforts to restrict display of the Ten Commandments and other religious symbols in government buildings and other places maintained by tax dollars."

## Civil/Equal Rights

- The platform supports "covenant marriage" (which endangers battered spouses because it would allow couples to divorce only after a waiting period and counseling, even in cases of domestic abuse) and advocates rescinding no-fault divorce laws
- The platform opposes the adoption of children or foster parenting by gay men and lesbians.
- The platform calls for constitutional protection of a fetus and, until then, strict limits and regulation of abortion and abortion providers.

## Public Education

- The platform supports "child-centered school funding options" that use tax dollars to pay for tuition in private and religious schools (vouchers).
- The party calls for schools to emphasize "Judeo-Christian principles" and for including Bible-based "theories" like "intelligent design" about the origin of humans in science textbooks (which would, in effect water down discussions of evolution).
- Republicans support health education that promotes abstinence from sex "until heterosexual marriage with an uninfected person" and oppose any other instruction on methods of preventing pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

I could go on with literally dozens of reports of the Christian Coalition and the like to control the Republican Party. Needless to say, it has not been fully successful as parties in several states have not been completely dominated by zealots. Fortunately there is no general opinion that "As Texas goes, so goes the nation."

As I mentioned to you several times, before November 11, 2006, not all evangelicals are obsessed with capturing the government to further their purposes - nor do all evangelicals have the same purposes. There are evangelicals who are not obsessed with restricting personal freedom.

Last month's election showed strong voter rejection of Republicans. Evangelicals gave less support to Republicans and many state governments went to Democratic control. Major elections were lost even in Texas. In Florida changes were minor. However, all the national reviews seem to indicate that the apogee of fundamentalist influences in this country has been reached -- for a while.

Gary Andres, in the Washington Post, writes that there is growing evidence that the culture wars" is taking a new turn. The 'Values Veers' are taking a new look. It suggests that

As conservative Christians - particularly among evangelicals -- matures, many are beginning to ask other questions that may have broad political implications. What does it mean to live in a community? Who are my neighbors? These issues posed by Rick Warren, Michael Gerson and others signal a new direction.

I pointed out several months ago that there is a new evangelical movement that is more concerned with poverty and injustice than homosexuality and abortion. They feel that the message of Jesus is not against those who are different in personal behaviors that do not affect others but the issues of human justice are primary. Just a few days ago I heard on radio, then read that the Christian Coalition had lost its president elect. The Christian Coalition is still focused on same sex marriages and abortion. Reports on this are somewhat mixed and not headline news. However, Rev. Joel Hunter, a mega church pastor in Orlando had tentatively accepted the presidency of that organization but made some stipulations about being focused on abortion and gay marriages, the issues of immigration, raising the minimum wage, prescription drugs for the needy and elderly and poverty in America needed attention. The leadership contacted its "base" and felt that Hunter would not be the leader they wanted. They prefer to stick with their rather tiresome two issues.

It has also been reported in most of the weekly journals and other new sources, that the Christian Coalition has splintered and had serious losses in its membership.

Also interesting to note that some of the post election surveys which indicated that significant shifts in votes were occurring. More evangelicals voted Democratic than before -- though not a majority;

Beliefnet surveyed evangelical Christians to find that many were soured on Republicans and the political fray. Many reported that President Bush's' faith had no effect on what kind of president he is. Many in the survey (67.7%) reported that their views about republicans had grown more negative. That is not to say that a majority still voted Republican but the actual percentage had decreased. Much of the dissatisfaction with Republicans was due to corruption and primarily the Iraq fiasco. It may also have some implications for the narrowness of the evangelical political right and its focus on individual behavior pushing the notion that "Same Sex Marriage is a threat to marriage" is a bit hard to sell once a person has time to think about it. They may not approve but "A threat to marriage" in a time of high divorce rates and non married living together is common, seems a bit off center.

It is quite evident that Republicans had a set back. Even the moderates and one congressman who voted against the war were defeated. Possibly the evangelical right has done more harm to Republicans than they can repair. In the past, members of both and even minority parties did not necessarily vote in lock step with the administration. They did not tend to ignore the opposition party in framing policy and law. There was some collegiality.

We are in for several years of recrimination and investigations. There are even calls for impeachment and the threat that there will be grid lock between the President and Congress.

There is good reason to believe that the evangelical right has overplayed its hand and that Americans are looking skeptically at those who would push their religious values onto the vast majority who is concerned with "live and let live" in this very pluralistic society. My own hope is that the real Republicans will recapture their party and repel the religious zealots.

To those who might feel that political talk is not proper on Sundays, please realize that I didn't start it. The religious zealots did. And, of course, religion and politics will probably never be separated until Thomas Jefferson's prediction that the whole country will become Unitarian comes true. Imagine the

arguments we would have then!