

The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lake County

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When is Political Correctness not Correct?

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I am not sure that I have the right title for what I want to express to you today. What I want to express is how popular beliefs - or popular liberal beliefs - may not necessarily be as cut and dry as they seem. I wish to explore several situations which many of us accept without further concern. I must confess to doing this myself. I want to explore three very diverse possible popular misconceptions - or at least, partial misunderstandings. I anticipate that some of you will have serious objections to my observations.

As Unitarian Universalists, we are often reminded that one of our primary duties is "the honest search for truth." As our conclusions to that "truth" we may cut corners and not go beyond our own prejudices. Of course, this is easy to do especially when we hear that human beings are being exploited. Let's look at some of the stories carried by the many progressive journals and magazines.

Over the past many years we have heard stories of the practices and outlook of Wal-Mart that point to avariciousness, exploitation of foreign workers, mistreatment of domestic help and lowering the quality of what we purchase. I don't want to speculate that Wal-Mart being a heavy contributor to Republican causes has special influence here.

I think that it would be no exaggeration to say that I come across at least one article a week that reports on Wal-Mart misdeeds.

The accusations against Wal-Mart start at the beginning - the supply sources from which they obtain the goods they sell.

Wal-Mart has been accused over and over again of profiting from exploitation of defenseless workers overseas. It has been accused of buying from Chinese factories owned by generals in that country's armies. I have read that employees are treated badly, often supervised by Koreans who have no compunction about punishing the employees by slapping and other physical abuse. They also work in unsafe and health endangering situations. The products that are made are done by some of the lowest paid employees in the world who are often held in a kind of slavery. Hundreds of factories make products for Wal-Mart from Wal-Mart specifications.

For American suppliers, Wal-Mart continually seeks to reduce costs of products. One writer once wrote that Levy Strauss, the Innovator and historical manufacturer of jeans had its costs cut to the point that this historic and Internationally known trade mark was not used on the products it had to produce for Wal-Mart.

Once the goods arrive in American hands, Wal-Mart uses underpaid help to store, distribute and sell the goods. Wal-Mart is the largest retailer in the world and employs hundreds of thousands of persons. Reports are that they are underpaid, that they some are forced to work overtime without pay, they receive few benefits and those who need health care, it is too costly under Wal-Mart coverage. It has been reported that 40% of Wal-Mart employees must get financial assistance from state and federal sources for health care and sustenance.

This company resists union organizing and there are many complaints against it from union sources. Just a few weeks ago there were reports that a Canadian store was closed when the employees voted to join a union.

There are also legal actions in process from employees who have claimed gender discriminations in promotional practices. In short, many of us are convinced that Wal-Mart, this enormously powerful company, is a revival of the old Robber Barons who exploited labor and made huge profits on its draconian practices. There is even a video about the evils associated with this company.

Wal-Mart is not only opposed by those who decry its labor policies but by small business that complain that they use unfair marketing practices. The first congregation I served was in an affluent suburb of Buffalo, NY. The suburb is known for its charming and (of course historical) downtown with unusual stores and a toy factory. (It would be hard to find any truly poor people in this town.) It has an art festival every year and excellent schools. It also has no slums. It is a charming suburb and the locals are very pleased with life there. There are, of course two very large supermarkets there. (Only slum dwellers use local convenience stores for their family shopping because chain stores won't locate there.)

There was great opposition when Wal-Mart announced that they were coming to town. Petition drives were launched. The opposition claimed that local businesses would be destroyed, that the traffic patterns would be disturbed and public services would be disrupted. The town did stop Wal-Mart. but what was the cost to residents? The "quaint shops" including a famous drug store, women's shops still kept open and charging much more than one would find the same items elsewhere. Also employees of small shops didn't get large wages nor did they have health benefits.

In the circles I travel, most people consider Wal-Mart to be evil. I never thought about it much because I stay away from Wal-Mart and I just assumed that, like most of my acquaintances, Wal-Mart is evil,

I had to start rethinking the total depravity of this organization one day while driving in the Port St. Lucy area. A radio news program reported that Wal-Mart was opening a distribution center in that county. Wages were to range from seven dollars an hour to fifteen dollars. Local merchants were complaining that they could not compete with the salaries that Wal-Mart was paying. Apparently, they wanted Wal-Mart to stay away because the labor glut would become a shortage and they would lose their supply of close to minimum wage employees.

I then began to notice what Wal-Mart does. We have a widowed relative in mid seventies who has a modest retirement income but barely enough to buy more than necessities. She works at a Wal-Mart part time and finds that the extra money makes her life more comfortable. Not only that, but she makes friends of other employees and is, in short, quite happy with her experience in this "house of horrors."

In the January 16, issue of US News and World Report, Michael Barone wrote that businesses like Wal-Mart are what has kept the economic situation of the country well off. Unlike auto manufacturers with well paid workers and benefits, Wal-Mart is able to change products, services rapidly to accommodate customer needs while manufacturers of large equipment must wait years to change models.

One writer recently wrote that Wal-Mart caters to lower income people with family incomes of \$30,000 and contributes to their welfare by reducing the costs of their food and other supplies at considerably less than other organizations that aim for customers with higher average incomes. That writer

maintained that without Wal-Mart, welfare and other public assistance would be inadequate. As a result, one hundred million plus customers shop weekly at Wal Mart.

The two pictures of Wal-Mart are not compatible or maybe they are. It is true that Wal-Mart sells for substantially lower prices than its competitors; it makes some items affordable to those who otherwise might not afford them. It is also true that in small towns, Wal-Mart provides jobs for people who otherwise might not earn the money that makes the difference between barely adequate funds to sufficient to raise the quality of life.

The two sides of the story are probably both mostly true. The problem is how does one find a way whereby lower costs can be given to consumers and workers still paid a fair wage with adequate benefits?

In another vein, many of us have been concerned with the Muslim population in America. A few weeks ago, we saw young Muslims in France burnings hundreds of cars, There were general riots throughout France and other European countries are having difficulties integrating this population.

The riots were not about international Muslim concerns or support for fundamentalist ideals. They were about housing, and jobs. Muslims born in France were concerned about being treated like other citizens but believe that they have not been given the same opportunities as other French citizens.

The British too, were surprised last summer, to find out that British born and educated citizens took part in terrorist activities there. There are also continued racial tensions and occasional race riots in northern England that are troubling.

Some Americans think that we should have similar worries. Yet, the situation of American Muslims is quite different. For the most part, American Muslims are not from the same countries that emigrated to Britain, France, Holland, Denmark and Germany. Many American Moslems are highly educated and do not live in segregated communities. For the most part they did not emigrate from former colonies nor are they segregated as occurs in Europe.

I have also been surprised with the first American generation of Muslims I have met. They are having the usual difficulties with parents from the "old country" but the parents seem to be adjusting quite well. As children from professional classes, they have the advantage of higher education and mixing with other American children and students in public institutions

I have met a number of this first American generation several times in the past three years. It is true that some of them have become atheists and find that Islam does not meet their intellectual needs. However, there are many who can rationalize their religion with American life. Some have difficulties with the older generations but they stand up for their beliefs. The recent issue of Mother Jones carries a brief story about Asra Nomani who is challenging men in her Morgantown mosque where she insists on praying with the men. (Let me point out that Morgantown is the home of West Virginia University.)

Asra is the daughter of Indian immigrants and was a reporter for the Wall Street Journal. When she was on assignment in Pakistan she saw "the worst of how Islam is experienced in the world." She left the Journal to return to the USA to fight for women's rights. She demonstrated, wrote letters to the newspapers and published articles denouncing the degradation of women at the mosque. Needless to say, the men of the mosque were not overly happy. However, they changed the rules to allow women to pray with men but so far, she is the only woman to show up to do so.

Mother Jones reports that segregation is not uncommon among Muslim groups and about two thirds of US mosques place women behind partitions or in separate rooms for services. Almost one third ban women from serving on governing boards. At this place in time, two thirds that do have women on governing boards and one third that have removed barriers that separate the sexes seems to me to be an incredible step forward when most of the younger people are first generation Americans. One of the most encouraging developments in this country has been the appearance of feminists among U.S. Muslims. This seems to follow the pattern of past immigration where the children are the first to adapt to the new circumstances. Of course, it has to be pointed out that the parents had to make the first adaptations when they sent their children to schools that are not segregated by gender.

Last March in New York, Amina Wadud, an Islamic Studies scholar, raised eyebrows (and blood pressures too) when she acted as an imam and led a mixed group of men and women in prayer. Although she was denounced in intellectually challenged countries, the Progressive Muslim Union has a web site that promotes women's rights in general.

Last November, I had a young professional woman address my class in World Religions. We asked her about marriage. She reported that she met her future husband on line rather than deal with an arranged marriage. When asked how young Muslims meet prospective partners, she said that most of her acquaintances met their partners at college or university. They didn't date but met in the homes of their parents and in groups but they did attend mixed gender classes and were not recognizable as anything other than typical American students. I might also point out that the parents in these cases have been doctors, dentists and scientists who have not left their faith but are willing to maintain their relationships with their American born children.

There was one case I remember of young Muslims whose parents immigrated from Yemen, one of the more undeveloped countries on the Arabian Peninsula. They were indoctrinated in a radical mosque near Buffalo, NY and went to Afghanistan for a Muslim education after high school. They were picked up right after 9/11. However, they did not represent the vast majority of Muslims in this country as they had come from a traditional country and live in a segregated area. Their parents are, for the most part, convenience store operators in the Buffalo metropolitan areas.

It should also be noted that a number of well known colleges and universities have Muslim women professors teaching in the area of religion. They promote new interpretations of the Qur'an. They believe that the time has come for feminist versions.

From what I have discovered from readings and talks with young Muslims, they are forming a new Islam in this country and Canada. They are demanding to be treated like any other American women and, from my observations, many are highly successful.

The Muslim terrorists do not have fertile recruiting fields in the country with a few exceptions. They have reached a safe haven where the national government is neutral in matters of religion.

There is another area where popular understanding may be skewed. That is the area of Christian rightist political activities. Like continuing stories about Wal-Mart, the magazines and journals I receive have frequent articles about the activities and dangers of the Christian zealots. If anything, there may be more stories about Christian zealots than about Wal-Mart. The November issue of The American Prospect exposes the activities of Ron Parsley, who is called "a rising star of the religious right," and subject of lawsuits over his church governance and secretive fund-raising practices. He and a black leader, Bishop Harry Jackson, share a theology and political views. They have both campaigned for anti gay marriage propositions across Ohio and forcefully campaigned for George Bush in the last presidential election. In fact, they claim that Bush would not have won had it not

been for their activities. (You may recall that the vote in Ohio was very close and had it gone another way, we would have a different president today.)

Parsley is highly popular with white and African Americans of the fundamentalist persuasion. He predicts an apocalyptic showdown between good and evil. He also preaches that "...our country cannot truly fulfill its divine purpose until we understand our historical conflict with Islam." His high political profile and his anti homosexuality bring many of the zealots into this fold. He is against Aid to Dependent Children, Social Security and unemployment compensation. He is a supporter of most of those issues which deny separation of church and state and allied with at Robertson, James Dobson and Jerry Falwell. He has organized hundreds of likeminded pastors into an organization that supports far right candidates for office.

Mother Jones recently published a special issue on the plans of the Christian zealots to "return this country to its Christian Roots" The issue shows a chart of the many Christian zealot organization major broadcasting empires, numerous universities and colleges, writing establishments, law offices and schools, literally dozens of well funded groups determined to change this country.

There is, however, a growing concern among other Christians that the emphasis on anti abortion, anti homosexual rights and the traditional targets of the zealots is a digression from true Christian values. The Christian Progressives are deeply concerned with the hatred and distortions of the zealots. One such organization is Sojourners which "...is a Christian ministry whose mission is to proclaim and practice the biblical call to integrate spiritual renewal and social justice." At the web site you will also find groups with names like the Religious Left and Religious Progressives. These are coalitions of many Christian groups that seek to integrate their efforts in contacting those concerned about social justice issues. The February 2, issue of Sojourner reported on the budget passed by Congress. It says "Passage of the budget will result in cuts to health care, child support and educational assistance for lower-income families. At the same time, Congress is planning to provide more tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans. In fact, also in February 1, the Senate began another debate of the tax reconciliation bill that may eventually include provisions to extend capital Gains on dividends provisions enacted in 2003."

One group, called Turn Left, sells bumper stickers with revealing messages - "Proud Members of the Religious Left," "God Bless Everyone - No Exceptions", "When Jesus Said 'Love Your Enemies', he didn't mean Kill Them", "Support the Separation of Church and Hate".

There are Christian groups that are concerned with social justice, help for the poor, help for those who cannot afford higher education, health care and other issues. It is good to know that Christian groups are appalled at the excesses of the zealots. We are not alone in our concern for the whole country, religious liberty and social progress. My own belief is that there are more Christians who wish to practice the teachings of Jesus than there are those who prefer hate and intimidation.