

BELIEF UNBOUND

**A sermon given in the 10 -part 'What We Believe' series by
The Rev. Dr. Kelly Murphy Mason at UU Wellesley Hills on
Sunday, November 11th, 2018**

Last week, I travelled to Toronto to attend the 2018 Parliament of the World's Religions, a worldwide event held in a global city that celebrated religious diversity around a common theme: "The Promise of Inclusion, The Power of Love". It involved participants from 80 nations convening for a week to share the wisdom of more than 200 distinct religious traditions with the thousands who gathered there. In a time rife with immense religious, ethnic, and ideological division, it seemed to me both an amazing demonstration of solidarity and an impressive display of liberal spirit. In addition, it was a feast for the eyes, pure sartorial splendor.

During a brief interview, a reporter for our UU World online magazine asked me what differences I noticed between this and other religious gatherings I had attended over the years. "The garb," I replied, almost immediately, "and the vestments." Passing through the grey concrete hallways of an otherwise drab metropolitan convention center, I could spy Sikhs and Swamis, Pagan priestesses and Buddhist monks, Anglican priests and Jain renunciates, Indigenous shamans and Catholic nuns. In our largely secular North American society, it is fairly rare to see that many people so clearly identifiable by their religious commitments.

In his book, Faith Without Certainty: Liberal Theology in the 21st Century, Unitarian Universalist theologian the Rev. Dr. Paul Rasor asks liberal religionists: “How deeply do you identify with the label you use?” Given our individualistic inclinations, we often resist labels. “As a result,” Rasor writes, “liberal religion becomes indistinguishable from liberal politics and liberal social analysis... liberals have often overlooked valuable resources from their own tradition”; some may even have doubted the existence of such a tradition altogether. It can be helpful to be reminded of our heritage.

This 2018 Parliament that just concluded also marked the 125th anniversary of the first such Parliament, held at the World Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. That historic event is credited with initiating interfaith dialogue worldwide, bringing Eastern and Western spiritual traditions into dialogue with each other. In his famous address before that audience, Swami Vivekananda said: “I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We... accept all religions as true.” He went on to lament that “[s]ectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendant, fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful earth. They have filled the earth with violence... destroyed civilizations and sent whole nations to despair.” He decried all the damage done in the name of religious zealotry.

This damage remains conspicuous to us today, as we see the rise of authoritarian, totalitarian, and theocratic regimes internationally. Liberal religion can offer an important corrective to such tyrannical forces. In his 10-point piece, “What Do Unitarian Universalists

Believe?”, the Rev. David O. Rankin declares: “We believe in the authority of reason and conscience. The ultimate arbiter in religion is not a church, a document, or an official, but the personal choice and decision of the individual.” He makes a faith claim that moral reasoning should guide our choices and that our conscience should arbitrate in religious matters.

Yet matters of conscience can raise as many questions as they answer. “Worldviews and other meaning-making frameworks are always given for us, in the first instance at least, by our cultures and our religious traditions,” Rasor notes. “None of us ever starts from scratch.” There are countless schools of moral reasoning, too, and one of the things that an intensive collaboration like the latest Parliaments can do is to make an entire panoply of worldview visible to us in particularly vivid ways.

At the centennial Parliament held in 1993, again in Chicago, a Declaration Toward a Global Ethic was ratified by those gathered. While it was originally drafted by a Catholic priest, its first public signatory was the Dalai Lama. This Declaration posited the “the possibility of a better individual and global order”, and claimed that “the basis for an ethic already exists” among “women and men who have embraced the precepts and practices of the world’s religions”. While the Declaration rejected religious fanaticism as vehemently as Swami Vivekananda had, it celebrated what he called “the liberal sentiment” common to so many wisdom traditions.

This Declaration goes on to “affirm that a common set of core values is found in the teachings of the religions”, that these effectively

comprise “a global ethic”, and that “this truth is already known, but yet to be lived in heart and action” by the peoples of the earth. “All our decisions, actions, and failures to act have consequences,” it contends. “We must consider humankind our family. We must strive to be kind and generous. We must not live for ourselves alone”, but rather, consider “the well-being of the whole” including our precious ecosystem. It concluded with a commitment to uphold “socially beneficial, peace-fostering, and nature-friendly ways of life” and “invited all people, whether religious or not”, to join forces. In essence, it called for humans everywhere to live in accordance with the dictates of conscience.

Any belief in conscience as “ultimate arbiter” seems to presume that certain truths are already known and are somehow in the process of being revealed. Those of us in more liberal religious traditions place more store in this article of faith than perhaps even we recognize. Our insistence on religious freedom assumes that conscience itself will be a reliable guide on the road to progress. Our championing of democratic processes assumes that our consciences can conspire for the right. These days, I understand, many of us are re-examining that belief with a measure of skepticism, especially given the current crisis in our national politics.

All our doubts are allowable. We may not cherish them at this troubling moment in history, but we have to allow them in our lives, and confront the challenges they pose to us. “Doubt is always an inherent part of faith, and... faith without doubt is not stronger; it is simply more ideological,” Rasor contends in Faith Without Certainty.

Often, our faith asks us to become reconciled with uncertainty in ways we would much rather not.

A phrase I learned in Toronto last week was “belief diversity”. Several presenters there were asking attendees to not merely tolerate that, but embrace it. They considered it a key component in the 2018 theme centered on “The Promise of Inclusion, The Power of Love”. What distinguished so-called “belief diversity” from “interfaith understanding” is the broad welcome it extends to people who were formerly characterized as unbelievers: the atheists and agnostic and secular humanists. The 2018 Parliament of World’s Religions wanted to hold a comfortable space for the religiously unaffiliated, those who claimed no religious identity whatsoever, or steadfastly refused to declare any allegiance.

One of the hundreds of programs offered at Parliament was a workshop called “Nuns and Nones”. Let me spell that out here, for the sake of clarity: NUNS & NONES. This initiative yokes progressive orders of Catholic sisters with secular but spiritual Millennials who have a serious concern for social justice. For a couple of years now, they have partnered in places across America, places where their consciences have called them to journey alongside one another.

Some of these women’s orders are now considering what they call “intergenerational stewardship”, which would involve them passing their assets on to younger collectives of the disaffiliated who share their deepest commitments, instead letting those assets default to the church or return to the open marketplace. Together these intentional communities are venturing into a post-sectarian era that previous

generations could never have imagined. “There’s a beyond here,” one sister explained, “that... in that field of hope, in that field of trust.. we can begin to build some possibilities.”

According to Rasor, “Our most important beliefs are always wrapped in emotions... If we are to find meaning in our religious ideas and symbols, it is essential that they not only make sense intellectually but also sit well emotionally.” He cautions that we “fall too easily into the trap of thinking that the rational and the spiritual are opposing poles rather than mutually reinforcing parts of our human condition.” So these sources of our religious authority — reason and conscience — need to be wed. Reason provides us with insight into the choices available to us, but conscience prompts us to make the right decisions in ways that satisfies us morally.

As moral beings, we always understand ourselves in relation to others. A large-scale event such as the Parliament can help heighten moral sensibility simply by bringing people into wider relationships. It underscores the full extent of our interdependence. So its Declaration Toward a Global Ethic is given both a clear context and a fresh urgency. As an underlying unity gets revealed, the boundaries between sacred and secular get blurred for the better.

For several days in a row, I dined with the Sikhs in Toronto. I ate with them and hundreds of others who enjoyed the free lunch they served each afternoon in the convention center. At the Langar, Sikhs prepare a vegetarian meal and serve it to guests, regardless of their religion, class, gender, or ethnicity. Even those with whom they have had historic tensions are welcome to the meal, so long as all heads are

covered. This is an established spiritual practice in Sikh communities worldwide; it is a generous gesture and moving example of radical hospitality.

At the end of each of these midday meals, a man wearing a turban handed me a small cup of chai that tasted identical to kindness. “Why do you go to the forest in search of the Divine? [It] lives in all,” proclaimed Guru Tegh Bahadur, one of the founding figures of Sikhism, and apparently, it can inhabit the basement level of the convention center, too. The Guru declared that “the Divine dwells inside everything; seek therefore in your own heart.”

Religion resides in our hearts and also in our heads and finally finds expression through our hands. “What we long for is a theology that both makes sense and feels right,” Razor states. He asks us all “to recognize that theology involves many dimensions... a realm of feelings and actions as well as ideas.” As artificial as Rankin’s cataloguing what we believe into ten points might appear, his is an attempt to offer us a more systematic theology, one that is credible and coherent, one that connects us to conscience and calls us into religious community.

A page in the 2018 Parliament program made mention of “those with seeker’s heart but a skeptic’s mind”. That seems to me a fair description of many in this congregation. I am conscious that here at UU Wellesley Hills, we inhabit a multifaith context of our own. We are unbound from religious orthodoxy but believers all the same. We honor our doubts. In these pews are assembled a range of individual worldviews, personal theologies, and cultural backgrounds.

We are asked to tolerate some belief diversity of our own and indeed, the democratic method that we use for our congregational governance anticipates that there will be differences of opinion among us. Ours is not a consensus model; it is an inquisitive model, one that asks us to routinely consult within ourselves and with others. Forgoing a degree of certainty requires us to have faith in one another. We must afford each other rights of conscience.

A few weeks before my departure for Toronto, Parliament organizers sent me a reminder to vote absentee in the American election. It was a civic-minded message, but quite duplicative. Several of you had double-checked that I did not miss the voter registration deadline in Massachusetts, and one of you even provided me with a mail-in registration form. Another of you emailed me the date that early voting would open at my town hall. Of course, this entire congregation voted to publicly affirm a Yes vote for Question 3 on the statewide ballot. Although I was gone for Election Day, I never forgot how important this rite of participatory democracy was as an exercise of conscience and a show of conviction.

The 2018 Parliament articulated a vision of a world in which “cultural fears and hatreds are replaced with understanding and respect”, “[p]eople everywhere come... to care for their neighbors”, and “[t]he richness of... religious diversity is woven into the fabric of communal life”. That’s a vision that this particular community shares and works to realize. Without any distinctive dress or ceremonial costume, you have made your various commitments known and felt, and not just through your vast patchwork of yard signs and “I Voted” stickers. You

have ventured a faith without certainty. Today, many others are pursuing a similar path. That, I believe, is the way of the future — so let's see just how far we can go...