

## Render To Caesar

### Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona

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#### Readings

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World salvation through faith or world destruction through fear is the spiritual issue of our time. And the close student of history must recognize that temporarily at least the forces of fear have conquered the forces of faith...

It may be [said] that we must not expect the impossible from the churches. They are human and must partake of the frailties of all other human institutions. True. We do not expect the impossible. It is just this attitude that faith is impossible, that world justice is a delusion, that the cooperative commonwealth is an impossibility, which calls forth the indictment against the present ecclesiastical order. If the churches had tried and gloriously failed, there would be universal sympathy for them. The churches did not try. They have surrendered to expediency. They have not given faith to the world because they themselves had lost faith and shared the world's disillusion...

The church of the future must convince the world that...every step away from the application of ideals is a step in the direction of moral and social disintegration...

How impotent for this great task is...the crass spirit of commercial acquisitiveness. What will bring the new order will be a spiritual renaissance, touching into flame the smoldering faith of [men and women] in the impossible, an awakening of great imaginations, a touch of mysticism in politics, a glory round the edge of business, a disturbance, a breath of idealism, an unloosening, a peril...Eager hands dripping music, eyes of [men and women] full of the kingdom of God, voices of poets chanting poems as big and flowing as the sea, prophets thundering great and awful judgments, creative men and women, sculptors of the future, molding the unreal into flesh. Of such is the Kingdom of Tomorrow!

--Clarence R. Skinner, *Worship and a Well Ordered Life*, 1955  
(Universalist minister and former dean of Tufts University)

There's a story that's told about Jesus in three of the four Gospels included in the New Testament and in this story Jesus is asked what God has to say about paying taxes to Caesar. Jesus, in turn, asks one of the questioners to give him a coin and then he says, "Whose picture is that on this coin?" The obvious reply is given: "Caesar's", and Jesus says, "There you go, then. You give to Caesar what is Caesar's and you give to God what is God's." (A slightly different version appears in the Gospel of Thomas, where, after Jesus says to give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's, he adds, "And give me what is mine." Some say this refers to tax *cuts*...I don't know if that's the case or not...)

But the phrase as we most commonly hear it from the King James version: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." (Mark 12:13-17), is considered a very wise saying--General Wesley Clark, for example, answering a question put to him by the [Interfaith Alliance](#) recently, refers to this story as the starting point of the "absolutely fundamental principle" of the separation of church and state...

*On the other hand*, Jesus' response here may be considered a very clever way of avoiding a tough question. *Very clever. Worthy of a seasoned politician.*

And that second interpretation is even more reasonable when you consider a little more of the context of the story. The people who were asking him this, according to the Gospels, were people who were inextricably tied in with the establishment, (*collaborators* with Caesar, if you will), who were trying to trick Jesus into saying something so radical that he could get into trouble with the authorities and maybe lose stature in the eyes of his followers. Jesus managed to outfox them, however. It is said that his questioners "were amazed" by his answer, (*were defeated* might be a better description) and I imagine a few chuckles and jeers from Jesus' followers as the Pharisees and Herod's buddies slink away in rhetorical defeat.

So, yes, it's a good story, but really, from my perspective, it offers very little help with the issue at hand. It may be wise in the sense that Zen koans are wise, (it reflects the question back to the questioner), but it is not wise in the sense of offering profound advice or guidance... the question remains: How do we separate what belongs to Caesar from what belongs to God? How do we define our civic duty as distinct from our religious convictions? Where does one stop and the other begin, and what takes priority when they come into conflict, (after all there's not always a clean separation, is there)?

On the Bill Moyers show, NOW, on [January 18, 2002](#), four months after the events of 9/11, they asked the question in another way. As congregants came from worshipping at the Bethesda Christian church in Fort Worth, Texas, they asked them to respond to the question, "Which one's first in your life, religion or country?" Most folks said they were Christian first and an American second. They then asked a follow-up question (remember, this is January 18, 2002, and the tragedies of September 11, 2001 are still fresh in the memory)—they asked, "What if Muslim Americans gave the very same answer?" Well, needless to say, there was some hesitation and discomfort about that, mostly centered around some foggy notions of the nature of Jihad or Holy War and what exactly the Koran taught, but most people eventually saw

their way to accepting that Muslims would feel about their religion just as these Christians did.

"Which one's first in your life, religion or country?" What do you say? A Unitarian Universalist first and an American second? Or Unitarian Universalist may more accurately describe your community, while Buddhist or Humanist or Pagan or any of a number of other religious perspectives may be closer to defining your own religious beliefs.

Certainly, if we accept the idea that religion holds our deepest convictions; frames our values; shapes our interaction with the world, calls us to recognize our interdependent connections with the whole of life, *how could we not say* "religion first, national allegiance second"? And yet, like those Christians coming out of the church in Fort Worth when asked about Muslims, we may squirm a little when we hear John Ashcroft answer as we did, right?

Some of us may choose *not* to answer that our religion comes first...and what would that mean? Well, I think it might have to do with how we value what Wesley Clark called the "absolutely fundamental principle" of the separation of church and state. We may not be saying that our national allegiance takes precedence over our religious convictions, but we may be pointing out how important it is to keep the lines between them from blurring.

I, too, believe strongly in the separation of church and state. I am troubled by Federal funding of "faith-based initiatives," as such a plan is ripe for devolving into Government preference for one religious group over another, not to mention the opportunities for "conversion coercion" inflicted on people in need. I oppose the stubbornly persistent attacks on the teaching of evolution in public schools. I am uncomfortable with the new language from the current administration that seems to imply that "Christian, Jew, and Muslim" is decidedly inclusive, encompassing the entire range of religious expression. It scares me to hear [John Ashcroft say](#) "because we have understood that our source is eternal, America has been different. We have no king but Jesus." It frightens me to imagine that President Bush believes that he is carrying out a mission from God, [as it was reported he said to the Prime Minister of Canada recently](#).

But I also wonder, sometimes, if, in our passion to uphold the separation of church and state, we undercut our own ability to act explicitly from our deepest convictions. I wonder if we mistakenly believe that we must work to keep church and state separate not only in our society, but also in our very selves.

Listen to this excerpt from [the John Kerry interview](#) on the Interfaith Alliance web site:

***How do you as President, if you are elected, Senator Kerry, maintain that separation between church and state, between religion and politics?***

*Well, the way we have for 228 years. I mean, I don't find it very difficult... We certainly go back to the Founding Fathers, and there was an understanding of how we were founded and what their belief*

*system was. But we separated in terms of the establishment of religion. And that is the constitutional clause that I think is so critical...Affairs of state are affairs of state, and they ought to be based on the discussion we have day to day about how we fund education or how big the military ought to be. And affairs of faith are affairs of faith. And they're separated.*

To which I respectfully reply...**what?!?!** Does anyone else detect a decided discomfort with discussing this issue? Does it feel like he's stumbling through what he hopes are appropriate responses while trying his best not to offend?

*Affairs of state are affairs of state, and they ought to be based on the discussion we have day to day about how we fund education or how big the military ought to be.*

Affairs of state should be based on the discussions we've had about affairs of state...which I presume were based on the discussions we've had previously about affairs of state and...well, you know.

*And affairs of faith are affairs of faith. And they're separated.*

Well, that's clear enough, right?. Faith is faith, state is state, two different things, clean break, here is Caesar, there is God, line down the middle here...and it makes me want to scream, "**Get real!**"

"Affairs of faith," of conscience, of belief, of ethics, at their best, grab at our very lives and won't let go. I use the word "religion" in a very inclusive way to mean: *that which holds our ultimate concern*. It doesn't have to be belief in God or historical revelation or any particular doctrine or practice, but it's what holds our lives together; it's how we make sense of our experience; it is the container of our gratitude; it is the expression of what we cherish and it includes the tools we use to accept what is sometimes painful and it draws the lines that mark what we *will not tolerate*; it's what inspires our respect for all life and nourishes our concern for each other ...But, because it is *religion*, sometimes we fool ourselves into believing that to be good citizens we need to keep it private, personal ...it is *separate*.

Now I know it seems like I'm picking on John Kerry here, but I use Kerry only as an example of a muddy notion of the separation of church and state that pervades a good share of public discussion, a notion that can drain our arguments for peace and justice of their passion, that saps our social action of its source of energy, that depletes our critiques of domestic and foreign policy of their *moral bite*. If the best that we can do is to base affairs of state on discussions of affairs of state, I fear that we are lost... that we, as Clarence Skinner said in 1955, have no choice but to give ourselves over to the world's disillusion; that we have conceded that our ideals are impractical; that we have lost faith.

I once got into an online discussion with someone on the chat site of the Minneapolis Star & Tribune newspaper. It was right after the World Trade Organization protests in Seattle, and he was speaking vehemently against the protestors. Somehow, it had come up in our earlier discussion that he was Christian, so I pointed out that the protestors were concerned about the effect of WTO policies on the poorest people, the most vulnerable and those with the least power. "After all," I said, "wasn't it Jesus

who said, 'I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me drink...if you did it unto *the least of them*, you did it unto me'?"

His answer was concise and dismissive: "That's religion; this is economics."

I thought about this incident later and looked up the passage I had referred to in Matthew and found that, for me at least, it was *most clearly* linked to economics. First of all, it says "the nations" gathered before the King, not individuals with their charitable donation tax receipts. And the judgment that the King passes down is all about allocation of resources. Where are your priorities? Would the parable sound much different today? I was hungry and you fed me; I was homeless, and you made sure I found a home; I was without a job, and you found me work with enough pay to survive; I was sick, and you made sure I had health care; ...and certainly we can understand Jesus' identification with the least fortunate. It is echoed again and again by prophets of various stripes throughout history--Eugene Debs saying, "While there is a lower class, I'm in it; while there is a criminal element, I am of it; while there is a soul in prison, I am not free."—John Steinbeck's character, Tom Joad, from *The Grapes of Wrath*, saying, "Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever they's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there." In the language of our principles, it's about the worth and dignity of every person, and the *connections* between us in this web of life, and those connections *extend* from our personal religious understanding and experience to our communities to politics to economics to foreign policy to... ***everywhere! They must!***

But no, wait a minute, I'm getting carried away here. *That's* religion; *this* is economics. *That's* your personal faith; *this* is your public face. *Those* are affairs of faith; *these* are affairs of state. I think sometimes that we have unintentionally rewarded just this kind of attitude because we are so frightened of the religious right. Because of improper commingling of religion and government, we respect those who pledge to be religion-free, regardless of their "personal" convictions. We worry so much about the "true believers," that we discount the just-as-real danger of hypocrisy. What does it say if a person can state without missing a beat that their religion will not affect their politics? Is that what we want? How can we believe that such a clear compartmentalization is possible? How can we say along with Theodore Parker in our hymnal, "Be ours a religion which, like sunshine, goes everywhere," and then expect that we can contain it at will?

Remember Lieutenant General William Boykin, who was in the news recently for saying, among other things, that "his God" was bigger than the God of the Muslims; "his God" was the real thing, while the Muslim God was an idol, and saying that God put George Bush in the White House? While many were shocked by these remarks, I have to admit to being somewhat shocked by the shock. I was puzzled by the sort of jaw-dropping horror that people expressed at these sentiments. It seemed grandly naïve from my point of view to consider those sorts of views "extreme." I know *many* people who believe similarly, *many* in my family.

Boykin, in his defense, as reported in a [Boston Globe editorial](#) by James Carroll, said, "I am neither a zealot nor an extremist, only a soldier who has an abiding faith." And Carroll (and I) concur that indeed

the General's statements do not put him into any extreme category of Christian whatsoever. There is a large contingent of Christians who believe that Jesus Christ is the *only* way to salvation and that other Gods are, by definition, idols, false, insufficient. "The general's offense was to speak aloud the implication of a still broadly held theology," writes Carroll. General Boykin was being honest, and the initial reaction is to try and shut him up...

Now let me state clearly that I see the problems inherent in what he said. I see the problems with that sort of theology, and that's one of the reasons I'm here with you today, in a Unitarian Universalist community that explicitly rejects an absolutist position on spiritual matters, that explicitly promotes freedom of religion and a free exchange of ideas across differing belief systems. So *I* wish this incident, rather than simply causing the General to shut up, had *opened up* a discussion about how theology is influencing our public policy. I wish that we could put questions to President Bush and Attorney General John Ashcroft (and have them answer!) regarding what *they* believe about the exclusivity of religious truth, and how their beliefs might influence their decisions in office. I think we have a right to know if President Bush believes that he is carrying out a mission from God. What does that mission entail and what parts do unbelievers play? I think we deserve to know how, since his favorite political philosopher is Jesus by his own admission, *how* the teachings of Jesus are reflected in his policies thus far. I think we have a right to ask John Kerry how he can so effectively separate his faith from his politics, and what that means for the sincerity of either side of that equation. I think that further silence around these issues, while it may provide an illusion of that all-important separation of church and state, actually works against it.

There is a definite need for us to go on fighting any attempt by the government to sanction any particular religious expression, but we can't go on naively believing that the public square can be completely cleansed of religious influences. The compartmentalization implied by Jesus' phrase: "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's," cannot, finally, hold water...it can't even sustain itself through the pages of the Bible, as it is clear that even the coins like the one that Jesus held went both to Caesar *and* to the Temple.

We must understand that the separation of church and state does not keep individuals from bringing their own theologies, philosophies, and values to bear on public matters. (After all, we Unitarian Universalists must come to grips with the fact that our fervent support of the separation of church and state could be convincingly said to *stem from our own* religious convictions). *But*, we can insist in this society that those values must be in dialogue with the values of others. If we continue to believe in the dream world of complete separation, the truths that are the wellspring of our actions go underground. Better far to have those values out in the open, to be able speak about and act on our religious convictions freely, to be able to stand on what is strongest in our lives, knowing that our convictions will be open to scrutiny, to respectful challenge, to hard-fought compromise in a democratic society.

I believe that we, Unitarian Universalists, are perfectly poised to launch this discussion, to bust this silence wide open. James Carroll writes, "A respectful religious pluralism is no longer just a liberal hope but an urgent precondition of justice and peace." A respectful religious pluralism...we've got a little experience there, right? Enough to get the ball rolling. Enough to open our doors to the conversation. I

think the spiritual renaissance that Clarence Skinner called for might begin when we free ourselves to act on the truth inside our selves while keeping our ears open to those around us; when part of the mission of our church is to "convince the world that...every step away from the application of ideals is a step in the direction of moral and social disintegration;" when we loosen our tongues from the words of separation and take up the language of connectedness; and when we free our best selves, our whole selves, to engage in remaking the world. I do believe, like Clarence Skinner, that the work begins here...

Where else?