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Moral Communities in a Pluralistic Nation
Unitarian Universalist Church of Bowling Green, KY
September 21, 2008
By Eric Bain-Selbo

I was delighted to be asked to give another talk for you all. As you might imagine, I'm rarely asked to come back to groups to whom I've spoken, so I'm particularly appreciative of the Sunday services committee's faith and generosity. Somewhat bewildered, but appreciative.

Of course, I perhaps should have thought twice about agreeing to do this after finding out that the topic was to be about, roughly, moral relativism. What a terrible task to be given? And to someone who recently became a member? If this is the way we treat our own . . .

I daresay that there are few philosophical problems that have been more intractable and that have been given more reflection than moral relativism. And it's not just professional philosophers who give it some thought. There are few people who live out their days without at some point wondering if their beliefs about right and wrong, good and evil, are true. Are those beliefs justified rationally? Can they be grounded in some natural laws? Are our beliefs true for us at this particular time, but perhaps not true for people from other cultures or from other times? Take the example of pre-marital sex. Is it morally wrong or just morally wrong for people in certain groups or communities? Was a morally wrong in the past, but now morally acceptable? In short, almost everyone at some point in their lives (and, for some of us, at many points in our lives) struggles with the issue of moral relativism.

And, I think it is fair to say that today we are more conscious of the problem of moral relativism than ever before. At least since the European Enlightenment we have been urged to question

authority and not to blindly follow tradition. But if we can't rely on authority or tradition to tell us what's right and wrong, what *can* we rely upon? Our reason? Perhaps. But moral philosophers, those paragons of reason, often are in disagreement about what is morally correct. And even when some of them agree about what is morally correct in a given situation, they'll disagree about *why* it is morally correct. Of course, this is what they do—it's part of their job description.

Maybe then we can rely upon our intuition or our sense of what is right and wrong—what we might call our conscience. Perhaps. But then how can we explain that people of apparently “good conscience” can end up in moral disagreements. This gets even more complicated when we start thinking outside our “social box.” Thinking globally suggests that there could be multiple valid moral codes or belief systems, yet we wouldn't want to say that people around the world have *different* intuitions or senses. Then we're back to moral relativism.

Maybe we must return to our traditions then to justify our morality. And, of course, the traditions that most people turn to are our religious traditions. But doesn't this also lead us back to moral relativism—all of us stuck in our discrete, separate traditions? Baptists with their morality, Hindus with theirs, and Unitarians, well, you see what I mean. We end up with moral communities rather than an American moral community. The problem here becomes even more complicated when thinking of the relationship of religious/moral communities to the state. The rise of the modern nation-state has led to the sequestering of religion out of the public sphere—pulling the rug out from under many moral beliefs. Indeed, perhaps no development has been more critical to the rise of moral relativism than the marginalization of religion by the nation-

state. If one's religious tradition was the basis of one's moral beliefs, what did it mean for the nation-state to separate itself from any and all religious traditions? For all the clamouring from religious fundamentalists about our *Christian* nation, we long since have been a secular nation—a nation of religious believers and non-believers who abide by a Constitutional agreement to make decisions and laws without any primary reliance or justification upon religious traditions. This is part of what makes religious pluralism possible. But religious pluralism suggests moral relativism (the plurality of moral communities). If we have all these religious traditions, don't we have a bunch of moral traditions as well? So can we even talk about an American moral community (in the singular) in a pluralistic nation? This is the question I'd like to pursue today. To do so, I want to describe two critical and important options, one by theologian Stanley Hauerwas (a "traditionalist") and one by philosopher Richard Rorty (a "liberal").

Theologian Stanley Hauerwas argues that tradition and community are necessary conditions for the cultivation of virtues and moral character. Taking the previously mentioned example, one becomes a responsible sexual being within a particular tradition or community. For Hauerwas, defending tradition and community (in his case, Christianity and the Church) in the modern world is critical in the effort to preserve the very existence of Christians today and in the future. He vehemently opposes the language of individualism and freedom that he identifies with liberal democracy—liberal democracy being that political state that is fundamentally founded on individual civil rights and representative government. For Hauerwas, liberal democracy is formed on the basis of self-interest and thus produces citizens that are only self-interested (Hauerwas 1981, 79, 79). Liberal democracy poses my self-interest against yours, turning us into strangers rather than friends (Hauerwas 1981, 81). The distrust intrinsic to this political order

never can form community, let alone be the fertile ground from which virtues and character arise. Hauerwas' assessment of our current situation is that we have turned freedom or liberty into an absolute ideal, so the greatest good is the preservation or promotion of *my* freedom. Liberal democracy has promoted this view or, at a minimum, this has been its unintended consequence. That said, religious traditions should be wary of entering the public sphere for fear that its pernicious individualism and anti-traditionalism will destroy them. Religious traditions should support the state, the government, but only to the extent that the state or government will protect and preserve the religious traditions. Outside of that, the religious traditions should form isolated enclaves from which they may offer criticism of the state or government, but contrary to the strategies of some Christian voices in America, religious traditions should *not* get themselves mixed up in the public or political sphere. Participation in the public or political sphere would only lead these traditions and their leaders to make political compromises with their faith. For example, don't Christians have to make compromises with their faith in order to support the dropping of bombs on innocent civilians? It is best, then, for religious groups to remain free of government so that they can be places in which virtues can be cultivated and character formed consistently with their faith traditions. In short, Hauerwas opts for moral communities rather than a moral community.

Philosopher Richard Rorty also is wary of having religious traditions actively involved in public discourse. But this is not because he wants to preserve the religious traditions. He wants to preserve the public discourse.

For Rorty, religious traditions may be fine for one's private life, but they need to be rejected in the larger public conversation. Why? If the justification that you give for an action or public policy to which I am opposed is based on a religious language that I reject, then the only way that I can be made to accept that action or public policy is through coercion or force. For example, I believe that homosexuals should have all the rights and privileges of marriage (including the use of that legal term) that heterosexuals have. But what if the government passes a law that prohibits gay marriage so that the "sanctity" (a deeply religious and often used word in regard to this topic) of heterosexual marriage can be preserved? And what if legislators use the Bible as part of their justification for enacting such a law? In this case, I will be forced to accept a public law that is very much grounded in a type of language (religious or Biblical) that I do not use or even accept as morally relevant in this case.

Rorty's point is that there is a public sphere in which the language of liberty, equality, and reason should reign supreme. Then there is the private sphere where languages particular to my religion may be relevant and important, but such languages can pose problems when used in the public sphere. In the case of gay marriage, it certainly is fine if religious/moral communities want to debate whether or not God demands that only heterosexuals can marry or even if God condemns homosexuality at all. But these are not legitimate questions for public discourse, because many people in the public sphere do not believe in God or the use of such religious language. The only question that can legitimately be raised and discussed is whether or not the *legal* institution of marriage and its rights and privileges can be reserved only for that portion of the population that is heterosexual. In other words, is such discrimination in the law and by our governmental institutions justified in light of our commitment to liberty and equality?

This is why Rorty argues for “light-mindedness” in the public sphere (Rorty 1993, 268). The idea here is that as *public* citizens we must come to take less seriously some of the problems or issues that might trouble us—like whether or not God cares if I make love to a man or a woman or whether or not abortion is moral. As *private* citizens we can mull over or even obsess over these problems or issues all we like, using whatever religious language we like. But attempting to use such a vocabulary in public discourse ultimately will fail. Either it will end the discussion (How can we talk if we are using different languages?) or it will set up a situation in which the person using the religious language will have to use coercion or force – ranging from legal coercion (e.g., prohibition of homosexual marriages) to actual physical violence (e.g., the destruction of abortion clinics or even the killing of abortion doctors). Either way, the outcome runs counter to what a liberal, democratic society is all about – in which all the citizens are committed or should be committed to liberty, equality, and rational conversation. We cannot predict what the outcome of that conversation might be, but for it to be a real conversation it must be non-coercive. Other than that, Rorty provides relatively little guidance. He does advise that we should avoid cruelty and try to prevent it when we can. While important, this doesn’t get us very far. As we know, one person’s cruelty can be another’s “advanced interrogation techniques.”

Though Hauerwas and Rorty come at religious/moral pluralism from different perspectives, they end up fairly close together. Rorty is less concerned than Hauerwas with the flourishing of religious traditions, but his position nevertheless allows for them. Hauerwas is less a fan of liberal democracy than Rorty, but he allows for the necessity of it. Both fear the intrusion of

religious traditions into the public or political sphere—Rorty because it would be destructive of liberal democracy and Hauerwas because it would be destructive of religious traditions. Both accept religious pluralism and imagine a society of diverse and multiple moral communities. So, is this what we finally must accept—a richly pluralistic religious and moral society in which there is no moral community (singular) but many moral communities (plural) that agree not to kill one another? In short, unless we are going to accept the violence of the imposition of one religious, moral worldview on all of us, must we accept moral relativism?

I don't think this is the best we can imagine for ourselves, and I think there is some interesting work being done in moral and social theory that tries to move beyond the kind of impasse represented by Hauerwas and Rorty. I recommend the work of philosopher Jeffrey Stout as one good example.

Stout agrees with Rorty to a certain extent. Stout argues that relying on religious languages generally is “imprudent” and that “in a setting as religiously divided as ours is, one is unlikely to win support for one’s political proposals on most issues simply by appealing to religious considerations” (Stout 2004, 86). Yet he also is critical of Rorty on this issue. Where Rorty sees the use of religious language as a moral conversation-stopper (because not everyone is committed to the beliefs represented by those religions), Stout sees Rorty’s own banishment of religious language as a conversation-stopper. Just because a religious language might not be held in common by everyone in a moral and public discussion does not mean that it should be excluded. For example, Martin Luther King, Jr. may have used rhetoric that expressed ideals that we all hold in common (freedom, equality, justice), but his success in furthering the public

conversation and in achieving his moral and political objectives undoubtedly was tied as well to his powerful use of religious concepts and ideas. In short, Stout recognizes and even advocates for a secular public discourse. But whereas Rorty would interpret secular to mean the exclusion of all religious talk, Stout interprets secular to mean a particular attitude or approach to religious language. He writes:

What makes a form of discourse secularized . . . is not the tendency of the people participating in it to relinquish their religious beliefs or to refrain from employing them as reasons. The mark of secularization . . . is rather the fact that participants in a given discursive practice are not in a position to take for granted that their interlocutors are making the same religious assumptions they are. This is the sense in which public discourse in modern democracies tends to be secularized. (Stout 2004, 97)

But if the public discourse is being constituted by a cacophony of voices that often do not share the same religious/moral assumptions that are bound to the distinct languages being used, then what will be the basis upon which the public can determine the validity of its decisions? Can it reach decisions? More particularly, how can moral judgments be made if we do not share a common language and common ideals? Everyone's talking out of their own religious/moral tradition, but we don't know which one is true. We could vote. But do we really want to say that whatever the majority *says* is morally correct is *actually* morally correct? That means that what is moral can change from one day to the next depending on the most recent opinion polls. This simply leaves us again with moral relativism.

Here is where Stout makes an interesting move. If everyone lives within his or her insulated religious/moral communities or enclaves, and the boundaries between these are impermeable, then there *cannot* be genuine disagreement. Any disagreement would be similar to arguing about whether an apple is a better fruit than an orange. Genuine disagreement must begin with some commonalities, some level of agreement about beliefs or principles that can be the means by which to arbitrate the disagreement. Stout uses the example of Nazi morality to explain his point.

Nazis and I differ in many respects. We belong to different groups, each with its own way of thinking and talking about moral topics. I also differ with Nazis in another respect, for I reject various moral commitments they accept, including their view of what constitutes just treatment of Jews. The fact that we have different moralities should not be allowed to obscure the equally important fact that we disagree about the moral truth. If I am right about justice, then the Nazis are wrong. (Stout 2004, 239)

The moral relativist perspective would dissolve the conflict because it simply affirms that what is moral in the Nazi context may not be moral in Stout's context. There is no basis for comparison. However, justice is a concept that is shared in both contexts, and Stout's disagreement with the Nazis about the nature of justice is the source of genuine disagreement. In the end, it is the source of disagreement about *what is true*.

This is very different from the tack that Rorty takes. Truth, for Rorty, is the product that arises out of the conversation of competing languages. Liberal society (as Rorty understands and supports it) "*is content to call 'true' whatever the upshot of such encounters turns out to be*"

(Rorty 1989, 52). This leaves us in a precarious position. What if some neo-Nazis were to win the day in the United States? It would be at this point that the enemies of the neo-Nazis would want to argue that the neo-Nazi language and worldview fail because they are *not true*, and that truth demands that the neo-Nazis be overthrown. The enemies of the neo-Nazis *should not* accept such a state of affairs (a neo-Nazi society) just because the neo-Nazis have won the support of the majority in our public conversation. Even if neo-Nazis are given power through a democratic process, I still can claim (and quite legitimately) that their views are false, that they are in opposition to the truth. When making such an argument about what is true, I am *not* being a moral relativist. I am acknowledging genuine moral disagreement and claiming that there is *one* truth that resolves the disagreement. In other words, I am acting in a way quite unlike that supported by Rorty. I am *not* being “light-minded” as he would say.

Of course, Hauerwas would argue that truth is found within one’s own religious tradition, not in the public arena. For him, as for all committed believers, truth is related to an ultimate reality or power that grounds or justifies that truth. The various religious/moral traditions may provide many resources to critique the neo-Nazis, but Hauerwas separated those traditions from the moral conversation of the society at-large. Hauerwas certainly doesn’t support neo-Nazis and would find plenty in his own religious tradition to criticize them. But when we have only minimal expectations of the state (to protect the religious traditions), we don’t have much of a basis upon which to seek the overthrow of otherwise misguided governments—neo-Nazi or any others. Again, I’m stuck with moral relativism.

Stout's approach is to return to tradition as the basis of moral judgment, but not a religious tradition. His approach returns us to the American democratic tradition. He argues, and I agree, that it is a tradition like any other. It has its fundamental moral principles—equality, fairness, freedom, and many more. It has its specific practices that both come out of these principles and continually affirm them—voting, community organizing, citizen debate, and many more. It even has its own virtues and we can talk about the kind of character that people must have to be a democratic citizens. In my own work, I write of the dialogical virtues of humility, charity, and courage—and I think these all fit Stout's vision of moral character in a democracy. Democratic citizens must practice humility; they must be willing to put into question their own beliefs and practices in order to join the moral conversation of a democracy. Democratic citizens must be charitable; they must be willing to grant that their fellow citizens might be right about a few things. Without humility and charity, it's hard to imagine any constructive moral conversation even beginning. Finally, democratic citizens must be courageous. It is an act of courage to be both humble and charitable when dealing with one's most precious beliefs and practices. At the same time, any moral conversation requires that we be willing to take a stand in regard to our most precious beliefs and practices—otherwise we simply go whatever way the winds of public opinion are blowing. It is in standing up for their beliefs and practices that democratic citizens very likely will draw from a wide variety of traditions that inform their lives—be those religious, political, philosophical, or whatever. In sum, democratic citizens must possess the character and wisdom to balance the dialogical virtues of humility, charity, and courage in their interactions with one another.

Democracy then is not a cold, legalistic framework in which our religious/moral communities exist—all separated from one another with nothing in common. Democracy *is* our tradition. It *is* our moral community—shaped by legal principles, but also shaped by a long and rich history, by millions of sacrifices in its name, and even by the rich diversity of religious/moral traditions that constitute the tapestry of American society. It *is* that place where we can practice moral virtues and develop moral character. It *is* the foundation upon which we can stand to speak the truth.

Neither Stout nor I have a final or complete answer on these matters. But I do think that work along these lines will take us a long way toward a workable conception of moral communities in our pluralistic society. We end up with a recognition and celebration of our moral diversity, but confidence that we can talk about ourselves—Americans—as a moral community.

Thank you.

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