

Some churches, even at least one Unitarian Universalist church that I know, display the American flag in their sanctuaries. This has never made sense to me. At first glance, this seems like a jarring interjection of that most secular of sentiments, patriotism, into a sacred space where we seek to transcend self-interest and to expand our understanding of what it means to be human. Surely, a more fitting symbol for a religious space, a space designed for worship, would be the image of the planet earth photographed from an orbiting spaceship – the familiar blue and white sphere in which continents are visible undivided by national boundaries – the image that reminds us that such divisions are man-made and, as such, are transient and, in the long run, trivial.

I abhor the mixing of religion and politics – the claim that this is a Christian nation frightens me, along with the ever present threat of theocracy, in which national policies are decided according to a limited and unimaginative understanding of Scripture – one religious view imposed upon the rest of us. I cringe at the conversation about what candidate does or not wear a flag lapel pin, and what church he attends, and the ostentatious consultation of religious leaders by politicians. Shallow patriotism and shallow religion, combined, make for a deadly combination.

So, on this weekend of barbecues, fireworks and parades, I wonder what it is we celebrate, what it means to say that we love our country – that we are patriotic -- and whether there is anything religious about any of it. In particular, how can we – or **can** we – reconcile the ideals of our faith with the sentiment of patriotism? For I, like most of you, perhaps, am certainly not immune to patriotic feelings. If you’ve ever been out of the country for any length of time, you may have felt the rush of affection for home as the familiar skyline of New York came into view through your airplane window. Maybe you, as I am, are moved by those words about purple mountain majesties and crowning our good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea. And maybe you share a certain uneasiness with the goose bumps that rise along your skin at such moments.

After all, don’t we UUs embrace in our principles “the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all?” A world of cooperation and equality? And doesn’t “the interdependent web of all existence of which we are part” suggest that we are all related, regardless of nationality? Surely, we affirm “Justice, equity and compassion” not just for our fellow-Americans, but in all our human relations. And most troubling, if all humans are endowed with inherent worth and dignity, surely it is sacrilege to seek to dominate or even destroy any of those fellow-humans. Shouldn’t we, as Unitarian Universalists, pledge allegiance, not to the United States of America, but to a larger reality – to that image of the earth from space – the fragile and precious globe we share with all peoples?

We can, perhaps a little smugly, insist that a narrow fundamentalist understanding of religion has no place in a modern democracy. But what about our own religious faith? Is it possible to be both a Unitarian Universalist and a patriot – or is patriotism, as George Bernard Shaw insisted, merely a “conviction that this country is superior to all other

countries because we were born in it” – a conviction irreconcilable with the religious ideals we embrace – merely “the virtue of the vicious”, “the last refuge of the scoundrel?”

If patriotism means, “My country, right or wrong,” then no, it is not possible to be both a UU and a patriot. If it means the unquestioning obedience to government, then no, it is not possible. After all, the founders who signed the Declaration of Independence, some of whom, including its main author, Thomas Jefferson, were Unitarian in fact if not in name, affirmed the right of the people to reject, even to overthrow, an unjust government. These patriots held themselves to a different vision of patriotic duty, and so must we. Their first allegiance was not to a flag, but to principle, as must be ours.

So what of those principles that I mentioned earlier? The principles of one world, respect for the interdependent web, justice, equity and compassion, and the inherent worth and dignity of all people. And what of that other one of our UU principles, one that we tend to overlook – the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process? If not “my country right or wrong,” what kind of patriotism is consistent with our particular religious convictions?

Patriotism is a tricky thing to pin down. Its meaning is most often a byproduct of history. Even within a culture – say, within the US – its meaning changes according to the needs of the day – especially according to the uses to which it can be put to motivate a people. Love of country can be, and reliably is, an emotion that can be manipulated to achieve the ends of governments. Patriotic feeling is stirred up to convince citizens to fight wars, to explain wars that cannot otherwise be justified and to convince us that it is noble to die in such wars. Patriotism, throughout history, has been used to rationalize suppression of civil rights in the name of national security, from the Japanese internment camps to Guantanamo Bay. It has been used to justify empire building in the name of freedom. It is used to rationalize economic policies that make the rich richer. It is used to create fear and even hatred of those different from ourselves.

In our own history, patriotism has taken the form of American exceptionalism, the idea that America is uniquely morally qualified to lead the world, to act with impunity on the international stage, singled out by God to fulfill a special destiny. This idea of patriotic destiny has excused the eradication of native peoples as well as stirred us to fight oppressive governments around the world in the name of democracy, from Iraq to Nazi Germany..

Patriotism, as it has most often been employed by nations throughout history, is at bottom, the reason given us for killing and being killed. Patriotism is, at its inflamed heart, a kind of tribalism. We are easily convinced to defend “our own,” whatever we understand that to mean. Our most primitive impulse is to defend ourselves, our family, our tribe, our clan, our religious group, our nation. This impulse may be primitive but it can also inspire acts of self-sacrifice... acts of love. It is too glib to condemn this emotion, this impulse, as merely banal or ignoble. We are, after all, social animals and, as such, we have all the instincts, for better or worse, to protect the family, the tribe. But

we need not be driven by these impulses into unthinking obedience to tribal custom or tribal hegemony.

In this world that is growing forever smaller, a world in which it is impossible to live isolated from the effects of events on the other side of the world, the boundaries of the tribe simply have to expand. Our tribe is no longer our family, our ethnic group or our country. Our tribe has become the human race. Our human tribe, if it is to survive global warming and nuclear destruction, population explosion and pandemics, must learn a larger allegiance and embrace larger loyalties.

This kind of love – for it is love as well as self-interest that will save us – requires us to reconsider patriotism as devotion, not to nation, but to principle – to ideals. For there **is** another kind of patriotism – the kind that can raise those goose bumps on the arms of even the jaded, or, at the other end of the spectrum, even the most globally-minded and idealistic.

The principles on which this country was founded are indeed worthy of this kind of devotion. As are the ideals professed by this Unitarian Universalist faith. There is no need to blush or apologize for these principles – the principles expressed in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution. And there is no contradiction here with our religious beliefs, for these statements of principle express *religious* values – values of equality, the right to self-determination and the corollary responsibility to create more justice by challenging our leadership when it goes astray.

We can be justly proud of a constitution and a system of government that protects the rights of the minority. We can be, and should be, proud of a system of government that recognizes the inherent worth and rights of gay and lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons. And this kind of pride – this patriotism, if you will – requires us to be vigilant and tireless. This kind of patriotism demands that we fight, not to ensure national dominance over other countries, but that we fight to protect principles. The principles of freedom and equality, the principle that the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are inalienable to humankind because humankind has inherent dignity and worth.

I love my country because it is mine, yes... I take pride in what it has done in its finer moments. But my better nature loves it because of what its founders dreamed it would be and for what it may yet become.

I am ashamed of its failures. I am ashamed that people of color do not enjoy the same privileges as I and that prejudice still determines the lives of so many. I'm ashamed that so many of us struggle in poverty and that so many of us live without the basic necessities of wholesome food, a home and medical care. I'm ashamed that the poor, the black and the brown languish in our brutal prisons and on death row, while the wealthy are held to a different standard. I'm ashamed that my government condones torture and that it allows corporations to dictate national policy.

I would not be ashamed of these failures if I lived in a dictatorship, for they would not be my responsibility. It is because I enjoy so many of the freedoms promised me in our founding documents that I have a duty, a patriotic duty, to make this country better – to call it to live up to its principles. I love its ideals. I love the vision of what our country might be, and of what the world might be if we truly meant it when we claimed to be the land of the free and the home of the brave. If we truly meant it when we claimed that these truths are self-evident; that we are endowed with certain inalienable rights. That among these are the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness – not just for some, the wealthy and the white – not just for Americans, but for all people.

I love the vision of an earth made fair and all her people one. Not one people in likeness, but one in cooperation and fairness – justice, equity and compassion. One tribe, one human race. One world in which every human being is accorded his or her dignity and worth. But I cannot make this be so. I can, however, work to make this country act so as to further this vision. I can call our government and our cultural norms to account for their failures to live up to our principles. I can try to practice this kind of patriotism.

And I can do so in the comfort of knowing that this kind of patriotism is fully consistent with my religion. My beloved religion of fairness, tolerance, self-determination, fearless questioning, challenge and change. My faith that calls me to live up to a higher standard of justice, equity and compassion than I now do. My faith that is never finished and that is never finished with me. My faith tells me that my country is not finished. Nor am I finished with it. This is what I celebrate this Fourth of July.
Amen