

The Moral Revival: Finding Common Ground

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I recently received in my mailbox an invitation from the UUA to join in a Moral Revival. Led by the Rev. William Barber, who spoke at General Assembly in June, the movement calls people to rally for a new justice movement based on a Higher Moral Ground Declaration, where UU ministers took their place early on.

The UU Ministers Association reported in July that, "UUA President Rev. Peter Morales ... joined with Rev. Barber, Rev. James Forbes, Rev. Traci Blackmon--UCC Justice Ministries Directors and others to raise a moral voice of courage and to center the testimonials from people most impacted by poverty, racism, and oppression. The Declaration will be delivered to all the candidates running for President, Senate, and Governors, " and called on UU ministers nationwide to get involved .

Aimed at redefining morality in American politics, the *"Higher Ground Moral Declaration"* calls on our political system to rise above hatred, fear, and left or right politics, to reach our highest values of love and justice.

If you pause when you hear the words "morality" and "politics" together, you're not alone.

But debates on the place of morality in politics, or lack thereof, have been around since there have been political systems. In the 16th century, Machiavelli suggested a consequentialist morality where actions are judged according to the good consequences they promote for the general good of society. In the 18th century, economist Adam Smith, the author of *Wealth of Nations*, explored the moral good of prosperity and human progress.

What is the political sphere, after all, but a place to debate common good and who is best qualified to serve it through policy and law?

In a piece by the [Catholic Church](#) earlier this year, Ireland's bishop of Elphin, Dr Kevin Doran suggested that , *"There is an essential relationship between ethics and politics, but this is not always recognized these days because of the widely divergent views that people hold about what ethics actually is,"*

"It all begins with the experience of morality," he added. Most people, he noted, experience the desire to be good and to do good. Ethics, he continued, shows us how to move from the desire to be good and do good, to carrying out the actions to implement that desire.

"The fundamental ethical question of course, is the question asked by the Rich Young Man in the Gospel in Matthew 19, and that question, he said, is "What must I do?"

Ethics and conscience are relevant to politics, says Bishop Doran, because *"politics is the science of morality for the city or the state, and its purpose is to move us from the desire for a good society, to the kind of actions and decisions that will lead to the common good, which is the good of all and of each individual."*

That's an interesting definition of politics: The science of morality.

Edward Teller – better, though unhappily, known as the father of the hydrogen bomb - proposed a variant of that idea, that politics decides what is right, whereas science decides what is true. Those words: Right and True. What are we to make of them?

If we follow Bishop Doran's reasoning, all seems well and good until he moves onto the shaky ground of his contention that the interaction of ethics and politics has become confused due to the encouragement of individual freedom at the expense of truth, causing people, he said, *"to confuse what is possible and convenient with what is good and true."*

Some of the issues he pinpointed are respect for human life; the family and education; healthcare; housing; refugees; religious freedom; climate change – the exact same things Rev. Barber is talking about - and the Bishop also emphasized first and foremost the importance of protecting life, which he

contends, “Within the Christian tradition, as in Judaism and in Islam, human life is regarded as a gift from God and not simply the product of a biological process.”

It is the task of Catholics, he advised, *“to convince our politicians of the importance of supporting and promoting a culture of life that recognizes the unique value of every human person, and we need to actively support those who do.”*

What the Catholic church means when it says “promoting a culture of life that recognizes the unique value of every human person,” can be quite different than what we, as Unitarian Universalists mean when we talk about the “inherent worth and dignity of every person.” And while the Bishop would probably agree with Rev. Barber about rising above hatred, fear, and left or right politics, to reach our highest values of love and justice, what the Bishop considers the highest values of love and justice will theologically vary from what Rev. Barber means.

So before we go any further on our Moral Revival tour with Rev. Barber and our UU compatriots, maybe we should define our terms and see if that helps.

The word “Moral” says Merriam Webster is defined as “concerning or relating to what is right and wrong in human behavior.” That’s pretty straightforward. Then there’s this additional definition: “... considered right and good by most people : agreeing with a standard of right behavior.” And there’s the sticky wickets – “most people” and “standard of right behavior.”

In a 2008 article New York Times article, [The Moral Instinct](#), writer Steven Pinker observed:

“Moralization is a psychological state that can be turned on and off like a switch, and when it is on, a distinctive mind-set commandeers our thinking. This is the mind-set that makes us deem actions immoral (“killing is wrong”), rather than merely disagreeable (“I hate brussels sprouts”), unfashionable (“bell-bottoms are out”) or imprudent (“don’t scratch mosquito bites”).

“The first hallmark of moralization,” he writes, “ is that the rules it invokes are felt to be universal. Prohibitions of rape and murder, for example, are felt not to be

matters of local custom but to be universally and objectively warranted. One can easily say, "I don't like brussels sprouts, but I don't care if you eat them," but no one would say, "I don't like killing, but I don't care if you murder someone.""

Another hallmark of moralization, he says, is that people often feel that those who commit immoral acts deserve punishment, *"inviting divine retribution or the power of the state to harm other people they deem immoral."*

Bertrand Russell wrote, "The infliction of cruelty with a good conscience is a delight to moralists — that is why they invented hell."

Pinker observes, *"... the culture wars between liberals and conservatives, consists of the moralization or amoralization of particular kinds of behavior. Even when people agree that an outcome is desirable, they may disagree on whether it should be treated as a matter of preference and prudence or as a matter of sin and virtue."*

Over time our views of both can change. Smoking, for example, has gone from a socially accepted and expected part of American life, to a moralized issue where smoking is discouraged. Divorce, being a working mother, homosexuality, and illegitimacy are examples of situations or ways of being that have been amoralized, switched from sin to accepted human condition.

People don't generally engage in moral reasoning, psychologist Jonathan Haidt argues, but *moral rationalization*: they begin with the conclusion, usually based on emotion, and then work backward to a plausible justification.

"People given diagnoses of "antisocial personality disorder" or "psychopathy" show signs of morality blindness from the time they are children. They bully younger children, torture animals, habitually lie and seem incapable of empathy or remorse, often despite normal family backgrounds." Some of these children grow up to be people who bilk elderly people out of their savings, rape or commit armed robbery.

The Times article noted that there are a few general moral themes that pop up everywhere around the world. Most people, the research shows, *"think it's bad*

to harm others and good to help them. They have a sense of fairness: that one should reciprocate favors, reward benefactors and punish cheaters. They value loyalty to a group, sharing and solidarity among its members and conformity to its norms. They believe that it is right to defer to legitimate authorities and to respect people with high status. And they exalt purity, cleanliness and sanctity while loathing defilement, contamination and carnality.”

Psychologist Jonathan Haidt counts five of what he calls “moral spheres” concerned with:

- Harm,
- Fairness
- Community (or group loyalty)
- Authority and
- Purity

which he describes as the “ primary colors of our moral sense “ as human beings.

“The ranking and placement of moral spheres also divides the cultures of liberals and conservatives in the United States,” wrote Pinker in the NY Times article. “ Many bones of contention, like homosexuality, atheism and one-parent families from the right, or racial imbalances, sweatshops and executive pay from the left, reflect different weightings of the spheres. In a large Web survey, Haidt found that liberals put a lopsided moral weight on harm and fairness while playing down group loyalty, authority and purity. Conservatives instead place a moderately high weight on all five. It’s not surprising that each side thinks it is driven by lofty ethical values and that the other side is base and unprincipled.”

Reassigning an activity to a different sphere, or taking it out of the moral spheres altogether, isn’t easy. People think that a behavior belongs in its sphere as a matter of sacred necessity and that the very act of questioning an assignment can provoke moral outrage.

Rev Barber is attempting to move things out of their spheres to , as one of his followers Bob Zellner, a long time civil rights organizer says, “ *take back the*

evangelical community, we're going to take back the moral high ground, we're going to take back the flag, and we're going to bring it back to real American forces that believed in brotherhood and sisterhood, not division."

In a Christian Science Monitor article from July about the Moral Revival, Rev. Barber said, " *We should be concerned ... when politics is more a struggle over money and manipulation than a struggle over ideas. Politicians want us to be slaves to their decisions without citizens having the ability to register their discontent at the ballot box.*"

Rev. Barber is not without his critics, who cite his often-caustic tone that can turn off moderates who otherwise might be attracted to his message. He famously said of Tim Scott, the first black senator elected in the South since Reconstruction and a Republican: "A ventriloquist can always find a good dummy."

At the heart of his effort however, is this: "*What we're saying is we need a moral movement that said, 'Here's this policy, is it morally defensible?' "*

The Moral Revival website is pretty text heavy, and it's hard to tell just where the actual Declaration begins or ends, since the link to "read the Declaration" seems to take you to the same text on a different page, with a lot of commentary mixed in.

But in describing why he believes such a revival is necessary, Rev. Barber writes,

"In reference to the Vietnam War in his 1967 sermon, Dr. King told the nation that 'silence was betrayal. If silence was betrayal in the 1960s, revival is a necessity in 2016. Way too much of our national discourse has been poisoned by hateful language and policies. The extremists see nothing wrong with insulting the poor, the sick, our children, immigrants, communities of color, voting rights, women, LGBTQ people, the environment and religious minorities with their language and their policies. True faith and true evangelicalism place love, justice, and compassion at the center of our public life."

Rev. Dr. James Forbes, also a founder of the Moral Revival, explains in an article on the site that the multistate tour underway right now, " *is focused on a*

revolution of moral values. By morality, we mean governing for the good of the whole, not for the good of a destructive few. In the tradition of the great prophets, a revival is about stirring up the faithful; restoring believers to a place of maximum impact. Our tour is about preparing leaders of faith to go to the public square and provide a strong moral voice and witness against the extremists' rhetoric and policies."

"Following moral traditions rooted in our faith and the Constitution, we are called to stand up for justice and tell the truth. We challenge the position that the preeminent moral issues today are about prayer in public schools, abortion, and homosexuality. Instead, we declare the deepest public concerns of our faith traditions are how our society treats the poor, those on the margins, the least of these, women, children, workers, immigrants and the sick; equality and representation under the law; and the desire for peace, love and harmony within and among nations. "

According to the Moral Revival website, the Higher Ground Moral Declaration *"provides a moral agenda for our nation on issues including: democracy and voting rights; poverty and economic justice; workers' rights; education; health-care; environmental justice; immigrant rights and challenging xenophobia; criminal justice; LGBTQ rights; and war-mongering and the military.*

"For each issue area, an individual moral and constitutional foundation is established. The positions are neither left nor right, nor conservative or liberal. Rather, they are morally defensible, constitutionally consistent, and economically sound. Most importantly, they represent, as Dr. King urged, a revolution in values."

It would be hard to find someone who would argue against these issues as being central to our American dialog, but to declare that the issues as posited in the Declaration are "neither left nor right, nor conservative or liberal" and to state categorically that they are "morally defensible" – however much we as a liberal faith community may support many of them as presented - is a stretch.

If that were really the case, there would be no need for a Moral Revival.

“Together, we lift up and defend the most sacred moral principles of our faith and constitutional values,” states the Declaration and proceeds to outline five issues as moral principles:

1. Pro-labor, anti-poverty, anti-racist policies that build up economic democracy through employment, living wages, the alleviation of disparate unemployment, a just transition away from fossil fuels, labor rights, affordable housing, direct cash transfers and other support for all families struggling to get by, and fair policies for immigrants; and by critiquing policies around warmongering that undermine our moral standing and ability to address domestic issues;
2. Equality in education by ensuring every child receives a high quality, well-funded, constitutionally diverse public education, as well as access to community colleges and universities and by securing equitable funding for minority colleges and universities;
3. Healthcare for all by expanding Medicaid in every state, ensuring access to Medicare and Social Security, moving decisively towards a universal, transparent, and equitable healthcare system, and by providing environmental protection and protecting women’s health;
4. Fairness in the criminal justice system by addressing the continuing inequalities in the system for black, brown and poor white people and fighting the proliferation of guns;
5. Voting rights, women’s rights, LGBT rights, labor rights, religious freedom rights, immigrant rights and the fundamental principle of equal protection under the law.

“We believe our moral traditions have a firm foundation upon which to stand against the divide-and-conquer strategies of extremists. We believe in a moral agenda that stands against systemic racism, classism, poverty, xenophobia, and any attempt to promote hate towards any members of the human family. We claim a higher ground in partisan debate by returning public discourse to our deepest moral and constitutional values.”

To me, that sounds a lot like conservative voices calling for a return to the moral underpinnings of the Constitution as they perceive it.

The document takes the five moral principles and expands them into ten political issues:

1. Democracy and voting rights
2. Poverty and Economic Justice
3. Workers' Rights
4. Education
5. Healthcare
6. Environmental Justice
7. Immigrants' rights and xenophobia
8. Criminal Justice
9. LGBTQ Rights
10. War mongering and the military

for which Constitutional or scriptural support is given, along with related questions for candidates – much as conservative evangelicals approach these same issues.

For instance, the Higher Ground Moral Declaration section for voting rights cites article 4 of the Constitution and Amendment 14 and then suggests asking candidates about their positions on the Voting Rights Act, Citizens United and voter ID laws.

In the section on Workers' Rights, supporting evidence for the moral grounds of political diligence include references to James 5:4 All the workers you've exploited and cheated cry out for judgment. The groans of the workers you used and abused are a roar in the ears of God;

Amendment 14 of the Constitution, section 1, protecting the rights of all citizens to due process and equal protection under the law, and a quote from Dr. Martin Luther King: "If a man doesn't have a job or an income, he has neither life nor liberty nor the possibility for the pursuit of happiness. He merely exists." Then

there are questions for candidates regarding the Fight for 15 to raise the minimum wage, fair trade policies and collective bargaining.

At the end of each of the key issues section, is a question for legislators that frames each issue as a moral issues, as in “We believe worker’s rights is a moral issue.” And then asks , “ Do you? If not, please explain why.”

I think I hoped to be more inspired when I looked deeper into the Declaration, thinking, when I saw UUA support, that the Declaration was an interfaith effort that would unite faith communities through a moral renaissance that was nonpartisan, ecumenical, more inclusive and collaborative.

I’m going to use the freedom of the pulpit here to say that I didn’t find that inspiration, or any real galvanizing movement, although it certainly wouldn’t hurt if it caught on. While the Moral Revival declares its positions to be neither left nor right, it’s pretty clearly a leftist faith movement, and specifically an evangelical one.

These are all important ideas of course, but we come back to the issue of moralization, and also rationalization. Too much of the Declaration reads like diatribe – and leftist diatribe is still diatribe - and quoting only Christian scripture to support the moral basis of the identified issues doesn’t seem to do much to encourage interfaith dialog. I’m glad it’s liberal evangelicalism, but it’s still evangelicalism and as such, subject to the whims of the reigning evangelical figure driving the movement of the moment, which would be Rev. Barber, whose face and social media accounts are where all links and articles lead.

When Rev. Barber says “we’re going to take back the evangelical community, we’re going to take back the moral high ground, we’re going to take back the flag” I become concerned. That doesn’t sound like my fight, even though there are elements of shared values within that fight. But once we start talking about “moral high ground” we’re back to playing king of the hill, and that’s a never ending battle.

It seems a stretch to apply Biblical rhetoric to workers’ rights, or to tie scripture in with the Constitution, because that’s a game too easy to play by conservative

evangelicals as well. The Moral Revival simply seems to trade one set of moral absolutisms for another, albeit, a more socially just one, at the outset, but also in a vehicle that that may be off-putting to a lot of people.

And that brings us to the homestretch here.

In the Venn diagram of social justice, Rev. Barber's evangelical moralism and my secular moralism have some overlap. And therein lays the common ground, and the lesson. He's trying to motivate and mobilize by using the language of evangelicalism to appeal to conservative evangelicals, largely, on the basis of the shared vocabulary of the Bible and the Constitution.

This is important because in order to have any real discussion that move us forward as a society and as a nation, and truly addresses the vital social, environmental and economic issues we're facing today, we need to find a way to see and understand what we're all talking about, from one another's perspectives.

Actor Will Smith made headlines in 2007 and ticked off the Anti Defamation League at the same time, with his observation that Adolph Hitler *"didn't wake up going, 'let me do the most evil thing I can do today.' I think he woke up in the morning and using a twisted, backwards logic, he set out to do what he thought was good."*

He wasn't saying Hitler *was* good, only that in his mind, Hitler probably felt that what he was doing was right.

Smith isn't the first to make this observation. TS Eliot opined long before Will Smith, that *"Most of the evil in this world is done by people with good intentions."*

In the [Geography of Bliss](#), by Eric Weiner, one of our Keystone Book Club reads a couple of years ago, Weiner observed something that happiness researchers have noted before: the happiest places on earth are not those that are the most diverse, but more monocultural societies like Bhutan, Iceland, Norway and Thailand, places with a big solid core of shared history, language, religion (or lack thereof), humor, music, and art. The more diverse a community, and the bigger,

the more complex the society, as we try to live together in a cultural amalgamation that might be rich and interesting, but where the elements don't always blend.

Weiner concludes with Henry Miller's observation that *"One's destination is never a place, but a new way of seeing things."*

That NY Times piece on morality, concurs, noting that, *"At the very least, the science tells us that even when our adversaries' agenda is most baffling, they may not be amoral psychopaths but in the throes of a moral mind-set that appears to them to be every bit as mandatory and universal as ours does to us. "*

The Times piece also noted that *"some adversaries really are psychopaths, and others are so poisoned by a punitive moralization that they are beyond the pale of reason."* Just putting that in the record...

But more to our purposes here, the central point is that *"in any conflict in which a meeting of the minds is not completely hopeless, a recognition that the other guy is acting from moral rather than venal reasons can be a first patch of common ground. One side can acknowledge the other's concern for community or stability or fairness or dignity, even while arguing that some other value should trump it in that instance."* (use of the word "trump" in its English definition!)

Some of you may have seen the little Peanuts cartoon making the rounds recently, with Charlie Brown following Violet around demanding, "Change your Mind!" After three or four panels of repeating his demand – "Change your mind!" - he stalks off along muttering, "It's almost impossible to get people to change their minds these days."

That cartoon was made in 1956. But obviously people have changed their minds about a lot of things since then.

In the end, I think the best way to find some common moral ground from which to speak and reason with one other and address the serious issues of our age, is not by shouting at one another to change our minds, nor in scorn or derision, or in

the quoting of scripture, but in simply acknowledging the basis for the other person's view, of their own moral standing.

For example, said Pinker in the NY Times article, *"With affirmative action... the opponents can be seen as arguing from a sense of fairness, not racism, and the defenders can be seen as acting from a concern with community, not bureaucratic power. Liberals can ratify conservatives' concern with families while noting that gay marriage is perfectly consistent with that concern."*

Our moral sense, wrote Pickner, is *"as vulnerable to illusions as the other senses. It is apt to confuse morality per se with purity, status and conformity. It tends to reframe practical problems as moral crusades and thus see their solution in punitive aggression. It imposes taboos that make certain ideas indiscussible. And it has the nasty habit of always putting the self on the side of the angels."*

I'm still not personally convinced that all the social issues that demand serious consideration of policy and governance are the stuff of the moral crusade of the Moral Revival. We cannot have the necessary discussions from a place of defense.

While I agree with Rev. Barber that we need to create equitable, compassionate, caring and just practices in labor, education, healthcare, criminal justice and voting rights, I don't know that I want to hop aboard the UUA caboose in the conviction that the right way to approach these issues is through an evangelical Moral Revival. Dogmatism on the religious left is no better than dogmatism on the religious right.

I submit that what we may really need more than a Moral Revival, is a Revival of Civility, which starts with recognizing the moral basis for others' views, even and especially when different from our own, and going from there.

That happens to be another distinguishing feature of Bhutan by the way - *"If I had to name the biggest difference between Bhutan and the rest of the world,"* observed Linda Leaming, in her book, *Married to Bhutan*. *"I could do it in one word, civility."*

We can't have a Moral Revival without being able to speak with one another and, more importantly, being able to hear and understand one another. Our own first Principle calls on us to recognize the inherent worth and dignity of every person. That doesn't mean just the downtrodden, disenfranchised and marginalized.

That also means the inherent worth and dignity of people who are difficult to love or understand, and with whom we may vehemently disagree about how they feel is the best way to address the issues of the downtrodden, disenfranchised and marginalized.

Imagine – and this may be tough for some of us I know, but try the thought experiment with me: Imagine that instead of the kneejerk reaction many of us have to many of things Donald Trump says, we were instead able to reframe the discussion by acknowledging that he is touching on keystone issues for a part of our society for whom he is articulating real frustrations and concerns.

While his own moral basis might be slim to none and largely driven by a zero sum game of self-interest, the feelings that those who follow him may be experiencing are worth hearing and understanding, and trying to respond to in ways other than name calling and derision.

Making the effort to understand the moral basis for views and positions with which we may not agree, however narrow that ledge of belief may seem to us, can be the first step to finding that important common ground on which we can stand, and from which we can build a more equitable and compassionate society together.

We need to put down the gloves, evangelical or otherwise, and simply listen. This is our challenge, and this is our charge: To follow our conscience and to understand that most people are simply trying to follow theirs, and then to act, speak and listen from that common ground of understanding to have a better chance of finding a way forward together.

Good luck!