

“What’s God Got To Do With It?” Rev. Linda Simmons

Presidential candidate Mary Ann Williamson talks about a politics of love, about love as a revolution, love as the only thing that can cast out the fear and anger so many say that this current administration cultivates and nurtures. I am not advocating for her as our next president. But her words, her call for love as a revolution though perhaps not a sound political strategy, seem a sound moral strategy.

What are morals? Who gets to define them? Are religious liberals moral or are we amoral as so many accuse us of being?

Moral is defined as behaving in accordance with rules of right and wrong. But who decides right and wrong? Well, its roots are deeply embedded in religious traditions.

Still, whose interpretation of the biblical texts carry the most authority or power to persuade and punish, whose approval does one need to be seen as within moral boundaries, whose ideas of right and wrong define the parameters of our lives, communities, neighborhoods, homes?

Jesus walked with the dispossessed. His words, as we know them, come through writers seeking to organize and build communities of Christian peoples. Story placement, additions and deletions, changes in each of the gospels, the focus or interpretation shifts depending on what each community needed to be convinced of to understand and be moved to change by Jesus’ message. Were they gentiles or Greeks or Jews? What were their priorities and what words, used in which way, could move them to change? How could the asked for shift, to be a Christian community, change their lives or help them live more in line with what God wanted, and therefore be blessed here and in the afterlife? How could this all be packaged to affect this outcome?

For instance, the writers of the gospel of Mary Magdalene, written in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century and not published widely until the mid 1950s, were most certainly not women but were writing to win those to Christianity who did not have the considerable authority granted by being one of Jesus’ disciples or descendants, which Mary Magdalene was not counted as being. Though most gospel writers say it was she who saw the empty grave, the rock rolled away, and met the apparition of Jesus there and told the disciples. She was chosen. Powerful message for those who feel unchosen.

This does not mean that the morals Jesus taught were not good. Just that to change moral behavior requires strategy.

It is not my intention today to disrespect any religion. I am however noting that morals carry the weight to determine outcomes when then they are sanctioned, given fluency and applied by those who have power.

So, what are the morals of those who are religious liberals? Most of us do not believe that morals are absolute or come from an other worldly power. Are the morals of religious liberals based on the application of power, acceptance, application and fluency?

Well, sure. And yet, and yet, is there something else that we offer, add, bargain with, and watch as carefully as our limited awareness allows? I would argue, yes. Yes, there is. I believe that we insist that power be analyzed in every moral value we weigh, that who is welcomed inside and who is kept outside is considered as part of the process of weighing our moral integrity.

The morals of most religious liberals, and certainly Unitarian Universalists, are based on being accountable to how their application change lives. We might call this reasoning a principled morality based on this life instead of an absolute morality based on perceived knowledge of god's words.

Principled morality can and must change, respond, become more aware as the world changes, as those with little power are heard, and as those with more power learn to listen.

So why aren't religious liberals the moral majority? Why and how did we as a people lose the respect and ability to influence this country and the moral basis of its policies?

Religious and social conservatism in America is not new. Yankee mill-owners encouraged it for their laborers in the nineteenth century. American religion has often been largely naive and simplistic, especially under frontier conditions.<sup>1</sup>

The rise of the religious right can be traced to 1976 when Baptist minister Jerry Falwell embarked on a series of "I Love America" rallies across the country to raise awareness of social issues important to him. These rallies were an extension of Falwell's decision to go against the traditional Baptist principle of separating religion and politics, a change of heart Falwell says he had when he perceived what he described as the decay of the nation's morality. Within a few years, Falwell launch the Moral Majority.

The impetus for the Moral Majority was the struggle for control of an American conservative Christian voice. During a 1979 meeting, televangelist Jerry Falwell was urged to found the Moral Majority. This was the period when the New Christian Right arose.<sup>2</sup>

It is both a reinvigoration of American religion and religious faith, and at the same time a complex social occurrence. As author John Maurice writes in his article "Christians on the Right: The Moral Majority in Perspective", "(T)he religious right has a meanness of spirit,

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<sup>1</sup> John Maurice, "Christians on the Right: The Moral Majority in Perspective" *Anglican Theological Review*, 65 no 3 Jul, 1983, pp 338-343

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral\\_Majority](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral_Majority)

and intentional disregard of the poor and powerless, (and) the wretched of the earth, (which is) an ironic contradiction of the Biblical witness to justice.”<sup>3</sup>

This witness to justice runs all through the bible with prophets confronting land owners, the abuse of women, the wrong of slavery and with gospels that tell us Jesus built his community among the poor, dispossessed and ostracized. The religious right denies the incarnational principle of Christianity which holds that God came in human form to show us love and that all deserve love equally.<sup>4</sup>

What is new these past 20 years and on the rise is its use of political power to seek to legislate into law what it could never hope to win at the polls to make its brand of Biblicism the rule of the land.

For instance, the Moral Majority would deny federal education money to states that do not allow prayer in public buildings, and forbid federal attempts to change child-abuse laws. It would make all abortion illegal and miscarriages the ground for investigation, bring back school desegregation, divorce or queer-rights cases and require federally-supported clinics to tell parents when their unmarried teen-agers obtain contraceptives.<sup>5</sup>

Author John Maurice argues that the religious right is more serious about politics than it is about religion. One of the problems is that its political objectives undermine the American Constitution and the Bill of Rights where government is said to be established to protect the freedom of speech, press, and religion of all people.

The religious right or so called Moral Majority and Falwell himself, since its formal inception in 1979, has been calling for a “mighty man” to restore Rightist morality. This morality, based on absolute rules plucked from bits of the Hebrew and Christian bibles, is not principle based, does not grow, and cannot change in the face of changing awareness.

The god of this morality is ancient and static. He, and he is He, cannot change or become more aware. This god’s ideas, as written in texts by authors with much different priorities, cultures and circumstances than we live in today, are fixed in time for all time.

I believe, if there is a god, then god is a principled moralist, or one whose morals, built on the principles of love, acceptance, inclusion, hope are mediated through the times we live in. What other kind of god would be worthy of any of us? How could a god be one who thinks women, for instance, are property? Times and the application of morals, and the laws we make to apply them, must change. When I long for a god, I know god knows this.

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<sup>3</sup> John Maurice.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1980/07/25/pro-family-push-political-mine-field/61ba1094-1788-4782-92d5-c2cadf6c9524/>

At the Washington for the March for Life in 2018, one of the nation's largest antiabortion gatherings, which the President attended, House Speaker Paul D. Ryan credited God for this current President's election, saying: "Can we just thank God for giving us a pro-life president back in the White House?"<sup>6</sup> God, the same god who fought for or inspired the rights of the poor, women and the disposed, picked and now anoints this or any other president? What's God got to do with it?

Jerry Falwell Jr., the son of the founder of the Moral Majority movement and president of Liberty University, went so far as to call The President "a dream president."<sup>7</sup>

For many evangelical voters, moving America forward means continuing to support the most antiabortion candidate regardless of his track record on any other moral issue. A recent testament of that came last month, when white evangelical voters in Alabama overwhelmingly backed Senate candidate Roy Moore, despite his facing allegations of sexually assaulting multiple teenage girls while in his 30s.<sup>8</sup>

Is this unprincipled, absolute moralism not part of what Jesus, who never spoke against abortion, gender fluidity or immigrants, being one himself, came to overturn? Is not this moral absolutism based on a God that can also be used to justify war, no matter if Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu or Jewish, the dismissal, murder and degradation of people of who do not have the power to punish and the indefinite detention of immigrants and their children?

What do we need to do, we right here and now, to claim principled morality as a central tenant of our faith and one that can lead us all toward more accountability and love? And when I say love, I am not talking about something easy that can be written in card. I am talking about a revolutionary love that has the power to redefine you and I and our nation too.

We who are Unitarian, who are part of founding the discipline and principle of democracy, we must rise and speak with authority as we say that principled morality based on the principles of love, acceptance, inclusion and hope is the only morality that has the bandwidth, the patience, and the authority to be used to make moral decisions.

This kind of deliberation has gone into the building of our 7 principles printed on the back of your program today. And as we grow, as our ability to hear those without privilege and access, we and they adjust, edit, add. There is now the proposal of an 8<sup>th</sup> principle. Here is its language:

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2018/01/21/evangelicals-continue-to-apply-moral-relativism-in-dealing-with-Trump-but-at-what-cost/>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

“We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote: journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.”

This is what principled morality sounds like.

David Brooks, an opinion writer for the New York Times, in his article called, “We need an Uprising of Decency”<sup>9</sup> writes, “This...is about who we are as a people, our national character. This...is about the moral atmosphere in which we raise our children....(the current administration) is redefining what you can say and how a leader can act...and reasserting an old version of what sort of masculinity deserves to be followed and obeyed. In Freudian terms, (it) is operating on the level of the id. (It) is instigating a degradation of America’s soul.”<sup>10</sup>

Brooks quotes Marianne Williamson, not because he supports her as a presidential candidate but because he sees her as a visionary who wants more than a change in leadership. Williamson wants changes of heart, soul and mind.

She is calling for the use of love as or what I would call a principled morality based on who we are now and who we must become to not only survive in body but in soul too.

Williamson said, “The only thing that will defeat (the degradation of the decency of our society) is if we have a phenomenon of equal force, and that phenomenon is a moral uprising of the American people.”<sup>11</sup>

Brooks, who calls himself a moderate Republican goes on to write, “They are unready for it, but it falls on the Democrats to rebuild the moral infrastructure of our country. (This) means reminding Americans of the values (or what I would call principles) we still share, and the damage done when people are not held accountable for trampling on them.”

This would bring us to what Brooks calls, “An Uprising of Decency” and represent what I would call an uprising of principled morality, one that strives to be woke, and to wake others, that knows it cannot see for all time what is good and best, that considers who its application and the power of those who apply keep at the table and who is left out.

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<sup>9</sup> [https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/01/opinion/debate-marianne-williamson.html?ref=collection%2Fbyline%2Fdavid-brooks&action=click&contentCollection=undefined&region=stream&module=stream\\_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=7&pgtype=collection](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/01/opinion/debate-marianne-williamson.html?ref=collection%2Fbyline%2Fdavid-brooks&action=click&contentCollection=undefined&region=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=7&pgtype=collection)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

It is time to be stand in this time as the morally principled prophets of decency, the MPPD: morally principled prophets of decency. We have the tools, the faith in human beings, the principled morality needed right here and now.

And not because we are right. But because we are willing to wrong, to be accountable and to make amends. Because we are willing to weigh morals against power and ask questions. Because we are all we have. The only way I know to be ready is to prepare the table of readiness together, with places set for all.

May it be so.

Amen.