

## “THE ANSWER TO BAD RELIGION”

— Rev. Jaco B. ten Hove, *co-minister* — Cedars Unitarian Universalist Church  
— Bainbridge Island and N. Kitsap County, WA — August 26, 2012

### **READING INTRO:**

The author of our reading this morning, Jim Wallis, calls himself a “public theologian” and has been known to speak at upwards of 200 events a year, addressing “the crossroads of religion and politics in America.” He is a progressive evangelical Christian, founder of [Sojourners](#), a nationwide network of similarly optimistic religious folks “working for justice and peace.” One of his more recent books gives evidence to his approach. It’s perhaps wishfully titled: “The Great Awakening: Reviving Faith & Politics in a **Post-Religious Right** America.” (Would that we *were* in a “Post-Religious Right America”!)

But Wallis’s earlier book, *God’s Politics*, which was mentioned in the lead article of one of our *UU World* magazines (“[The Religious Left](#)”) and is the initial focus of my talk this morning, also has a catchy subtitle: “Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It.” It’s a rambling treatise that nonetheless contributes a lot to this public discussion, especially as an important qualifier to the Religious Right.

Wallis’s Christian credentials are impeccable, so his voice has impact. At least I hope it does, even if I disagree with him in significant ways. Here’s a taste of his perspective, which will set-up my sermon to follow:

**READING** from *God’s Politics*, by Jim Wallis (Harper, SanFran., 2005, pp. 346-47)

(T)he big struggle of our times, is the fundamental choice between cynicism and hope. The prophets always begin in judgment, in a social critique of the status quo, but they end in hope—that these realities can and will be changed. The choice between cynicism and hope is ultimately a spiritual choice, one that has enormous political consequences...

(And) let's be fair to the cynics. Cynicism is the place of retreat for the smart, critical, dissenting, and formerly idealistic people who are now trying to protect themselves. They are not naive. They tend to see things as they are, they know what is wrong, and they are generally opposed to what they see...

They know what is going on, and at one point, they might even have tried for a time to change it. But they didn't succeed; things got worse, and they got weary. Their activism, and the commitments and hopes that implied, made them feel vulnerable. So they retreated to cynicism as the refuge from commitment....

If things are not really going to change, why try so hard to make a difference? ...And if you have middle-class economic security (as many cynics do), things don't have to change for you to remain secure. That is not intended to sound harsh, just realistic. Cynics are finally free just to look after themselves....

(Cynicism can feed) what I call “secular fundamentalism” among too many of our liberal elites who seem to have an allergy to spirituality and a disdain for anything religious. In particular, they have such a visceral reaction to the formulations of the Religious Right that they make the mistake, over and over again, of throwing all people of faith into the category of right-wing conservative religion. That mistaken practice has further polarized the debate over religion and public life in America and has even deepened the impression among many Christians that the real battle is indeed between belief and secularism.

(However), the answer to bad and even dangerous religion is not secularism, but better religion...

### **SERMON “*The Answer to Bad Religion*” by Jaco ten Hove**

“The answer to bad religion,” according to Jim Wallis, is, as I understand it, essentially this: Jesus, Jesus and more Jesus, mixed in with a leavening dose of the ancient Prophets. And, to his credit, I think, Wallis calls Christians to follow the religious, social and economic *revolutionary* Jesus—not the one who was later co-opted by authoritarians, materialists and literalists, most of whom see only one way—theirs.

Such near-sighted extremism is partly what has inspired “bad” theology; whereas *Jesus* was preaching and modeling *good* theology, according to Wallis, who urges a return to that anti-materialist orientation, especially with an “option for the poor.” That’s what “better religion” looks like to him, and I applaud his clarity and courage.

Jim Wallis is a refreshing voice, evangelical but not fundamentalist—which is an important distinction to hold, because those two postures are not at all necessarily the same. If you are a Christian willing to release the materialism of our culture and honor the poor like Jesus did, Jim Wallis is your guy. He may be swimming upstream, even within Christianity, but he’s relentlessly, ethically, effectively on message.

And I agree with him that the way to counter bad religion is not with *less*, but *better* religion.

However, I am not a Christian, never have been. I was raised Unitarian and then Unitarian Universalist, with a large platform of possible religious paths before me, only one of which was Christian. But that call wasn’t loud enough and I forged my own way that includes some of the best of Christianity, I hope, but stops short of being Christian, per se.

So I have a different take on what “better” religion looks like, and I will be exploring this avenue here a bit; it’s kind of what I do. But meanwhile, I want as many followers of Jesus as possible to ally with Jim Wallis, because I think he’s got a grip on the authentic Jesus, more so than many other eager Christian mouthpieces, most of whom I think actually position themselves at quite a distance from that religious, social and economic revolutionary.

But I think Wallis also falls prey to a very seductive trap that has most Americans, religious or otherwise, in its thrall as well. And I propose that getting us out from under this spell will be part of crafting a “better” religion for the post-modern 21<sup>st</sup> century. My endeavor from here on will be twofold: to name that trap and then begin to point in a positive direction.

The seductive trap that continues to enthrall most if not all of us moderns has a boring name that you've probably heard before: **dualism**, which itself is not inherently evil; we're just overly dependent on its use, hooked on the easy rush it can provide. Dualism is now a trap because we get stuck in it. It has so pervaded our thinking that extremists get away with their narrow, self-serving agendas because we can't seem to counter their dualistic appeal.

But even Jim Wallis uses a dualistic approach by posing [in the earlier reading] hope *versus* cynicism, as if it were a switch one could throw, on or off, either/or. Another important religious leader, Rabbi Michael Lerner, who's actively trying to convene a *progressively* religious political movement, is likewise also relying on a very familiar and accepted dichotomy. The title of his very provocative *and* helpful book, *The LEFT Hand of God*, completes the polarity with its subtitle: "Taking Back Our Country from the Religious RIGHT" [my uppercase for emphasis].

Lerner first provides a compelling analysis of "America's Spiritual Crisis," articulating why changing our current momentum matters. He does an insightful and thorough critique of how conservative ideologues and religious fundamentalists have been able to successfully commandeer so much political apparatus.

Then he goes further than most commentators and offers a stirring vision of what will unite the rest of us under a big, avowedly liberal religious tent. It is juicy reading, to be sure, laced with important—and original—challenges to our thinking and acting...but it still relies on a fundamental dichotomy, Left *versus* Right.

Dualism is bred into our psyches by a long established philosophical *and* practical orientation that understands the world through pairs of opposites: this *opposed to* that. Such perspective may be a natural inclination, since much of the planet does seem to be generally organized in twosomes: night and day, hot and cold, up and down, male and female, etc.

But in the still emerging new paradigm of our evolving culture, many explorers at the cutting edge are finding that we just cannot automatically resolve—or even fully understand—many of the tensions of our time by positioning them on a flat line, either at or somewhere between two opposing poles. Such a linear continuum, while a useful tool and a very ingrained orientation, is becoming less and less helpful—or *accurate*, even, when we try to grasp the complexities of 21<sup>st</sup> century existence.

Some couplings that have often been presented as opposites but now resist location on a linear continuum include: mind and body, science and the humanities, spirit and matter, secular and sacred, conscious and unconscious, even male and female. These and many more pairs of apparent or assumed opposites are proving to be very elusive if we try to fit their roundness into the square hole of a linear mindset.

Nonetheless, Wallis, Lerner and most other leaders still speak in dualisms—*either this or that*—because it's still a persuasive technique; *and it still hooks us*. We respond to it because we're taught to think this way. Listen for dualism and you'll hear it everywhere.

But also found in the natural world is another organizing principle that has been largely overshadowed by the glare of Enlightenment logic, but may be rising in our collective awareness nonetheless. It's the *circle*, embodied by repeating cycles that help us understand how things move in complexity and continuity.

Many of us are aware intuitively that circles are holistic and natural. However, they tend to minimize tensions, which can mean that they don't get noticed and don't have power that can be applied for gain, especially in a world where tension is what makes news. Circles have always been with us, they are comforting and creative, but *not* very political. Nonetheless, they hold an immense bounty of value, patiently awaiting and cooperating with our explorations, when we do decide to notice them and their influence.

Recall the ancient and circular Medicine Wheel with its multi-layered attributes; or the six spherical directions; or the four cyclical seasons—these are all obvious embodiments of this round wisdom, decidedly *not* dualistic. The planetary directions and seasons point to an even larger realm: the cosmos. There may be lots of intrinsic pairings on the Earth, but when you venture beyond our atmosphere, the dominant pattern out there is circular, elliptical, orbital—*round*, more or less, with little reliance on dualism as a guiding, let alone dominating motif. In the cosmos, for instance, up and down lose all significance.

To me, this suggests that while pairs of opposites do abound and are very real, they are only a narrow representation of the universal whole, and not always our best tool for understanding how the universe manifests in our lives and culture. Dualism pivots on the word “versus”; whereas circles have a center point. Which model seems like it would be more coherent with a positive future of peace and prosperity?

But over the past few centuries our Western rational conditioning has installed—hardwired—in us a strong bias toward automatically going to linear and dichotomous explanations for almost all inquiries. Heaven and earth, black and white, good and evil, active and passive—the list goes on and on and quickly the case is closed. We draw conclusion based on dualities.

Now, pairs of opposites are not bad, per se, of course. We are just out of balance by relying on them to explain everything. As the saying goes, “If all you've got is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.”

I'm talking about our basic worldview, which I consider infected with a dualistic virus. The disease model is apt. Our bodies are full of bacteria that most of the time actually help us function in good health, but which can sometimes get disastrously out of whack and begin to take over, which we usually name as unhealthy. Likewise with dualism: it's a natural part of life in this world, but our over-reliance on it is now way out of whack, causing viral stress on an increasingly crowded planet.

For instance, an *either-or* attitude can easily create very seductive *us-and-them* scenarios, which in turn can be extremely effective in motivating support for self-aggrandizing and/or militaristic proposals. When this perspective is sanctioned as sacred, with overt religious justification, it can be doubly persuasive to a population that is *only* versed in dualistic thinking. And out comes the

hammer, as in the Crusades, to use an enduring example that still has some tentacles around us today.

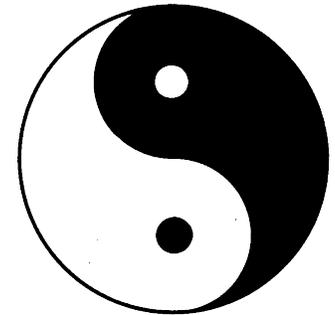
A better religion for the 21<sup>st</sup> century will figure out how to transcend simplistic and often stultifying choices between two poles. A better religion will guide us away from knee-jerk responses that urge us to just look for more enemies, and will instead provide healthy underpinning for new models of unity within diversity, which is clearly a large challenge before us now. A better religion will give us options beyond paired opposites.

Watch yourself as *you* explain elements of your world, especially ones with some tension attached to them. I predict you will likely resort to using and justifying dualistic language, often without realizing it. I know I do. Or add this perspective to your personal meditations, reflecting deeply on your own dance with dualism and see what emerges for you.

I certainly don't pretend to be cured of this conditioning. It's what we've all been taught, here in the West, at least. It's the water we swim in, usually unquestioningly. I expect to spend the rest of my life unlearning my reliance on this insidious thought pattern.

It's interesting and instructive that Eastern philosophies are not nearly so beholden to linear models and approach the natural coupling of elements from a different angle. I note, for instance, the way the ancient Yin/Yang symbol is depicted.

Yes, it acknowledges two fundamental and opposite energies, but they are in direct relationship, in contact, even—*not* separate or opposed, but connected in a dance. And in fact they contain elements of each in both, held together in the shape of a circle. I find this to be a beautiful and powerful antidote image.



*Separation* is the key issue. Unlike the circular Yin/Yang symbol, linear models are not holistic, by design. Linear analysis lines things up sequentially as separate items that can be broken down into discrete parts, spread out and distanced from each other. As conditioned as we are in this dominant mode, we have been taught to understand reality as a series of individual elements, with everything composed of independent building blocks. So when we *use* that dominant lens to perceive our world—what'd'ya know, we see separated elements.

But I am convinced that things are just not as discontinuous as they may appear. There is indeed some separation between things, especially at least as perceived in the visible light spectrum. But our scientists, at least, are telling us that before we leap to conclusions, we might want to try on more than one kind of lens, because there are interconnections we can't necessarily see unless we go looking for them, using different angles.

For instance, in our generation NASA's developments in imaging celestial bodies offer fascinating new perspectives. The visible light band has produced some spectacular photographs, for sure, especially thanks to the Hubble Space telescope. But once NASA put *x-ray* and *infrared* telescopes in orbit beyond our hazy atmosphere, we were able to "see" just how much more was actually out there that would never show up in the relatively narrow visible light spectrum.

In a parallel way, if all we look through is a dualistic prism that breaks everything into two poles, we will just see flat continuums and likely miss a big chunk of the grandeur of the natural and human ecology all around us, much of which is not at all flat, but spectacularly interconnected, even if not in linear or visible ways.

But if we don't intentionally develop lenses to open up that realm of reality, we'll keep on perceiving everything as separate from everything else...and out comes the hammer. Part of my spiritual discipline now is to find, build, create and use such lenses as much as I can—sometimes critically, sometimes in pure wonder and inquiry. I hope to intentionally cultivate circles amid the flatland, optimism amid the cynicism of our time. Hopefully, we're learning, ever so slowly, that life is indeed fundamentally connected and *interdependent* in magnificent, if mysterious ways.

Our Unitarian Universalist Principles document first declared as much over 25 years ago, by including the 7th Principle and the First Source in our UU values statement. We affirm and promote “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part” [the 7<sup>th</sup> Principle], which leads us to honor “Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and openness to the forces which create and uphold life” [the 1st Source].

I believe this grounding affirmation of interconnection is a better path for religion to follow deeper into the 21<sup>st</sup> century than reliance on our dualistic and dichotomous training that has helped explain the world to us so far. There's a whole lot of mystery and wonder to respect and explore.

Our postmodern mantra could be Albert Einstein's famous and wise observation that “We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking that created them.”

I think we're ready to wear new lenses that perceive the universe differently, more wisely. In fact, if our species doesn't get wiser a little faster, even, it may not be much of an enjoyable future. There's a lot at stake, as we evolve rapidly in technological power but slowly in consciousness.

I think Unitarian Universalists like you and me can help lead our kind into “better religion” because we at least *affirm* interdependence, even if we've yet to truly *internalize* it. We are thoroughly embedded in a dualistic culture, so I think we've got some more work to do to loosen up our own thinking and change our behavior in progressive ways, especially to the degree that we might decline toward cynicism. But I have great faith that we can contribute a lot, in our everyday lives, to a brighter future.

Progress, to my mind, is no longer about “onward and upward forever.” That inspires a rather linear image of basically one direction. I think it's now more like “progress—inward and outward together,” which means moving in all directions at once, with each person holding a piece of the truth, rather than just falling into line on a single path with one destination.

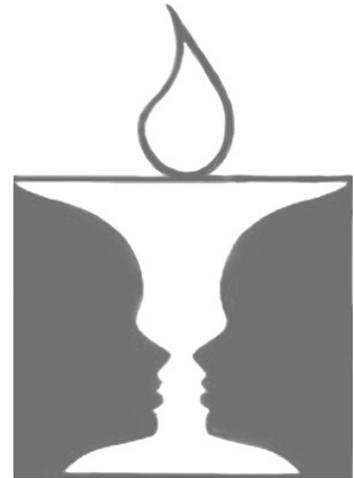
So one answer to “bad religion” can be to honor the emergence of a new kind of lens that *first* helps us identify where and how the limiting worldview of dualistic separation is in play; and *then*, without necessarily rejecting that, urges us to step beyond it, through it, into an articulation of

what's possible if we *also* see things in relationship, connected, cyclical, balanced together in a bigger picture, rather than *only* pitted against each other on a linear continuum.

Yes, there is separation on one level, but that's not *all* there is. Come, let's explore a bigger universe that connects us in ways we are just discovering. It won't be easy, but what's dominating right now ain't so easy to take, either. A "better religion," to my mind, is one of invitation, openness, inclusion, radical hospitality and many options, able to embrace "that transcending mystery and wonder" with loving patience & a center point of healthy balance.

In closing I draw your attention to the classic box image of a vase flanked by two facial profiles; maybe you've seen this before. It's called the Rubin Illusion, and I added a flame on top, to give it even more imagery as a Flaming Chalice.

Within the box, however, you can really only look at one shape at a time: *either* the outlined vase *or* the dark faces on each side, but they are *all* there, together, interdependent. We *choose* the perspective that allows us to see one or the other, but we know they *both* co-exist. To the extent that we *can* see both at once, we are able to expand our vision. This is a grand metaphor, I think.



I increased its dimension as a Flaming Chalice because I think we've got a darn good answer to bad religion here in Unitarian Universalism, and I'm eagerly looking for ways to deepen our grounding and express our faith in interconnectedness. I encourage you to do the same. This expanded graphic reminds me that we can be powerfully, progressively centered amid multiple perspectives and avoid the seductive crutch of undue dualism.

I think a "better religion" will persistently, faithfully *resist* settling for "either-or" explanations and instead build new muscles for exploring less obvious but ultimately more satisfying paths toward what I like to call "both-andian" goals.

Such movement will take counter-culture courage and purposeful intention toward a religious, social and economic *revolution*, one that pivots on the knowledge that *Our World is One World*, which is the title of our inspiring Hymn #134...

## **CLOSING WORDS**

The future beckons us and our hearts to hear a different call, inward and outward together, to harvest the power kindled in one hopeful flame. Let us be intentional toward a more peaceful and creative worldview that employs exciting new lenses to truly see and experience our holistic interconnections, whereby unity within diversity becomes our shared mantra.

Go in peace, my friends, BE peace. Return in *both-andian* love.

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