

"Can We Defend Our Civilization's Universal Values in Today's Global Environment?"

June 27, 2010 by Nani Ranken

My past talks from this pulpit (5 or 6 of them) were motivated by my need to explain to myself the meaning of my religious identity as a UU. This was not easy, since I grew up in a secular home and didn't quite know what religion was or could be. But by the time of the last talk, just three years ago, I felt I had answered most of my questions. Today I am turning to another troubling question of my identity. If I ask myself where my basic outlook on the world, and my values, come from, I can answer without hesitation: I identify as a child of European culture and more broadly of Western Civilization. I would like to assume for today that we here are all children of Western Civilization -- albeit in many variants, so that the question that has been troubling me for some years is one that will be of interest to us all.

Here is the question: Do we have **universal values** on which to ground our civic and political life, both nationally and globally? (This is very different from asking about the values that we rely on in our **private** lives, as we make choices Is it OK to lie to my friend for her own good? Do I owe my co-worker an apology? etc.) Our question today concerns another sphere of ethics: the values that ground civic and political life. What is our vision of a just society? It turns out that this big question is by far the easier one, and here is a simple answer.

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act toward one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.

All are equal before the law and are entitled **without any discrimination** to equal protection of the law.”

These are three of the 30 articles of a document that expresses the values of our liberal western civilization. The UDHR (acronym of ?) William Schultz describes this as the **only** document or scripture that has universal status. It is not revealed, (if it were, it couldn't be universal . . .) contains no religious language, nor is it a truth derived from science. Rather it is a

covenant, **a universal declaration of what is a good and just human community.** It served as the foundation of the constitutions of new democracies or republics established since '48 and the background of all the new Covenants voted by the U.N., such as Right of the Child, etc. Importantly, the Declaration contains not only the kinds of guarantees to freedom and equality that I quoted, but a long list of rights to welfare: social security, right to work, rest and leisure, adequate living standard and education and more. This corresponds to the humanitarian moral injunction first expressed in secular language two centuries earlier, and shouted from the ramparts during the French Revolution: *Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite.*) (Explain . . . commitment of social body to its members . . . humanitarian moral injunction that underpins the rights to welfare in the UDHR that I just read.) This document was adopted **unanimously** in New York, under the leadership of a great woman who was herself a child of western civilization - Eleanor Roosevelt. This is our document, reflecting our liberal western values, our over-arching commitment to absolute equality of rights and freedoms. All right, this is the end of the rah-rah-aren't-we-great part!

I have wondered in recent years how many of those 1948 delegates kept their fingers crossed behind their backs as they voted for approval. (“We know that women are not ‘equal’”). And since then many new countries have been added from outside the Western cultural sphere. And here we are, sixty years later, and we may wonder: This document is a Universal Declaration, but can we still pretend that it has universal standing? On paper, yes; but does it express universally held values? New voices are being heard, forcing us to recognize sharp cultural conflicts in our increasingly globalized world; and we even see conflicts with sub-groups coming to the surface within the western world, even within our own country. (Teaching Creationism?) Can we hold on to our belief in the absolute value of freedom, equality, and humanitarianism, and if so, **on what grounds**? The question of grounds for our commitment to UDHR did not arise as long as we believed that it was what it claimed to be -- a universal covenant. But now, it certainly arises for me! And yet, I want to say that slavery is absolutely, objectively, wrong, no matter what others think, have thought, or will think! And I want to say that the honor-killing of girls who have been raped is absolutely wrong even though this practice is required by the values of some contemporary cultures. Samuel Huntington put it bluntly: “The liberal project to unite the world through universal values was destined to be stillborn.” If anything, the attempt to establish

liberal democracies on alien soil creates resentment and a sharpening of the clash of values. His dramatic name for this is “clash of civilizations.”

So, what to do? We are rightly proud of being tolerant and openminded; we are committed to respecting freedom of conscience; but we may have to abandon that uncritical tolerance and take up the task of separating right from wrong. (Of course we have been doing this all along, for example, we don't allow a child with appendicitis to be kept from the hospital by parents who have conscientious objections to medical care.) But once we start deliberately separating right from wrong, **where will it end?** Our own culture, our own commitment to free choice revolts at the thought of universal policing! Therefore the answer must be that we have to make reasoned, defensible distinctions, and decide when and how to limit the rights and freedoms of Article #18 which I am about to read. This is the article which deals with the issue at the heart of my dilemma (please pay close attention to details, which will be important for our talk-back.)

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes freedom to change one's religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or **in community with others, and in public or private, to manifest one's religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance.** (Note that what makes this article different from the other “freedom” articles” in the document, is that it turns our attention from individual to communal rights, and that is not an easy thing for our culture to absorb. The religious **community** is given freedom to practice. I have an example for a discussion of this during our talk-back.)

So, our liberal tradition seems to face a dilemma. (Explain “di-lemma” . . . horns, if we don't like either choice we are impaled etc.) 1) We can give up on the claim of universality and accept freedom of conscience. We would then take a relativist position (“these values of equality and non-discrimination are right for us but may not be right for your culture.” Period.) Or 2) We can insist on universality, and give up freedom of conscience. On this choice, we say: “Here we stand, and if you proclaim something else you are simply wrong.” I don't like either of these choices -- which is why I see this as a dilemma. Now I have to make good on my claim that both choices are bad.

The first choice -- acceptance of moral relativism (in the sphere of values that ground civic and political life) -- brings to mind the poet Yeats' lines in “The Second Coming” . . . “the falcon cannot hear the falconer” . . . here the

falconer stands for the vision of justice given to us by Xianity . . . loss of vision, is followed by anarchy and chaos “ the center cannot hold” “the best lack all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity!” The poem ends on a vision of a future with another power rising to take the place of the old vision. (“what rough beast . . .”) Relativism does push us into a trap: If we accept a culture-relative standing for our central moral commitments, then we must accept moral legitimacy even for honor-killings, for example. The best lack all conviction . . . ? I don't want to be impaled on that horn of the dilemma!

So, what is wrong with the second choice -- grasping the horn of universal values? Well, there are two things wrong with it: first, we would be rejecting freedom of conscience, and taking an illiberal position (**we** know the truth and will enforce it). Second, we don't know how to do it! We can proclaim from the rooftops that these are universal truths! We can stamp our feet and shout “we are absolutely convinced!” but that won't do! What is needed is proof! To grasp that horn securely, we need reasoned arguments to show that these values are the true ones (capital T!) A very big order! Too big! (That's the trouble with dilemmas -- they insist on being dilemmas!)

Yes, at the level of theory we are stuck with the dilemma. But in real life we are obviously not helpless. We make distinctions. We must of course be honest and willing to accept a more modest, limited goal, not the proof we crave. Please follow me on a little digression to the very roots of Western Civilization . . . we are, of course, going to Athens! ☺ Those ancient Greeks had an insatiable curiosity about the world around them; their need to understand, to explain, to communicate how things work led them to ask questions; and rather than waiting for the gods to answer they engaged in what came to known as philosophy. We are heir to this curiosity, which is why we have continued to develop philosophy, logic, the sciences. All of them are based on the central use of, and trust in human reason, experience and observation **and the discipline** required in their effective use. Philosophy, as Bertrand Russell once said, is “an unusually persistent attempt to think things through.” We have accepted this discipline, which is why we can't just settle down with any result or belief or revelation that we like. (Our own fourth principle calls for “free **and responsible** search . . .) Out of this discipline came our scientific world view and, beginning in the 17th century, the careful development of moral theories **independent of any religious framework**. They depend only on an understanding of our common humanity, the fact that each person, each self has needs, feelings,

goals, connections to others, and a will to choose and act, which gives it dignity and responsibility. We think of this as a gift of the Enlightenment, bringing us the three fundamental commitments for a just social order – the need for individual freedom, the ground for equality in our very natures, and humanitarianism.

So, how does this story of our heritage help? Remember, it was article #18 that brought our problem into the open: “ . . . **freedom, either alone or in community with others, and in public or private, to manifest one’s religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance.** So, a group of fringe Nazi activists chooses to express their beliefs by marching in parade with their swastikas through a Jewish neighborhood in Skokie, Illinois. A small conservative Christian community decides to incorporate prayers into all public events, including schools. Gay couples insist on the freedom to marry and are actively opposed by religious communities. And we haven’t even touched on challenges to freedom and equality in the values of diverse non-western cultures. **How do we separate right, from wrong exercises of freedom of belief and religion?** (a freedom given to us in #18) Well, we can do what we have been practicing and refining over 25 centuries: **We can search for principles of governance that lead to human well-being and social harmony.** This is an empirical question -- though a very complex one indeed! But at least we do not need to defend our values by appeal to special sources, such as scriptures. We defend them by disciplined empirical study, using tools available to everybody and grounded on values that everyone (or almost everyone) could endorse: human well-being and social harmony.

It is time now to get down to real life, where in practice, we don’t have to face the dilemma. In our country, for example, governmental bodies, including the Supreme Court, make decisions that limit the freedom of religion, and give reasons for them, and that’s OK provided that it is understood that we have moved away from absolutist claims. The dilemma remains – we haven’t embraced relativism and we haven’t produced a proof of absolute truth. We have merely cut the Gordian Knot -- which leaves us with jagged strands, rough edges, piecemeal and culture-dependent arguments. That’s “real life!” Let us look at some cases.

(To open the discussion.)

Even here in the west where we share the broader culture, we may infringe on the freedom of sub-groups! (Example of Warren Court . . .) So we see that our liberal culture with its supremely high valuation of individual freedom of choice can undermine the free choice of groups as they attempt to live out their communitarian values in the public sphere.