I’ve come a long way from the religion I grew up in. Yet it shaped my understanding of religion’s purpose. A few years ago, I attended the funeral of Gordon Torgersen, who was the minister at the Baptist church where I grew up. My cousin Natalie, a member of that church, presented me with a book of Rev. Torgersen’s sermons. As I read these sermons, I saw much in them that was authentic, much that still rings true today.

One of the sermons was a response to the U.S. invasion of Cambodia in 1970. Even as the U.S. government was pulling troops out of Vietnam, it was making what it called “incursions” into Cambodia. Rev. Torgersen asked how the youth of America could have any hope for the future, how they could be expected to carry forward our institutions, when the government lied to the American public, when it treated war as a matter of economics or party politics. After reflecting on the human costs and the ethical bankruptcy of this system, Rev. Torgersen went on to say:

> When I talk this way, I know what some of you are thinking. You violently disagree with what I say and the conclusion to which I have come. Some of you have made it known that you are ashamed of me … There are those of you who say: ‘This is politics! This is the President’s business!’ I respond: if ethics are of no consequence … if integrity is to be ignored, if human life has no value, then there is no place for such a [discussion] in church.¹

Rev. Torgersen’s words struck a familiar chord. They resonate with a larger tradition that connects spirituality with social reform. One day I would learn that this tradition has a name – the Social Gospel. This Social Gospel tradition cuts across denominations. In this country, it flourished in Unitarian, Universalist and mainstream Christian churches, starting after the Civil War and continuing well into the 20th century.

As a kid, I assumed that all religion was like this. But the Social Gospel offers a distinctive message. It says: we don’t locate salvation in some distant, celestial world.

Our work is to bring about salvation here, by resisting injustice, healing broken lives, and tending to the physical and economic needs of the poor. There should be no distinction between what happens within these church walls, and what we do outside. It’s legitimate to raise political questions in here, and to bring our religion out there. Religion has an important place in the public square.

The Social Gospel tradition continues. As a people of faith we bring something important to the public debate: our most deeply held religious values and convictions. Drawing from the deep well of tradition, we bring forth words of judgment and words of hope, the incandescent language of the prophet. Without us, the public discourse would be shallow and incomplete.

There is a common misperception that public religious speech threatens the separation of church and state. Because the institutions of religion and politics must be kept separate, some people conclude that the ideas of religion and politics must be separate. But religious teachings have strong political implications, and political issues have a moral dimension.

There are good reasons for the separation of church and state. We are right to be concerned when one group’s religious agenda is pushed as public policy, or when government officials justify their actions on religious grounds. We’ve seen these dynamics in the close relationship between the political right and religious right. As a faith community we can do more good by engaging the political institutions even as we remain independent of them. The true purpose of church-state separation is to prevent the government from using the churches to accomplish political goals, and to prevent the churches from manipulating the government to accomplish religious ends.

Some people are concerned about the tax code. They fear that if we get too involved in public life we might lose our tax exempt status, and no longer be eligible to receive tax-deductible contributions. But as it turns out, we can do an awful lot without breaking any rules. The UUA Washington Office for Advocacy has published a guidebook titled “The Real Rules” (see http://www.uua.org/action/reallrules/) which can answer most questions.
The IRS rules that concern us cover three areas: *Issue Advocacy* includes educating and mobilizing the public about political and social issues. *Lobbying* includes promoting changes in the law, advocating for or against a specific piece of legislation. *Political Campaign Intervention* includes all partisan activities, such as advocating for or against specific candidates for public office.

The IRS puts very few restrictions on *Issue Advocacy*. They put no limit on the time, effort and expense that a congregation can devote to this area. The IRS does put restrictions on *Lobbying* activities, which must not represent a “substantial” portion of the church’s overall activities. In practice, this means five percent of the congregation’s budget, staff and volunteer hours. Most congregations can lobby to their heart’s content, and never bump up against this limit.

The IRS puts a total restriction on *Political Campaign Intervention*. This includes fundraising, promoting or providing meeting space for candidates. It may also include *Lobbying or Issue Advocacy*, if the issue has a clear connection to the candidate. In such cases, timing is very important. If we raise the issue close to election time, the IRS might take notice. But if we’ve been delivering a consistent message all along, there should be no problem.

So far, my remarks could apply to any religion – to any group of people that might define itself as a religious organization. What about us Unitarian Universalists? As a liberal religious group, we face specific challenges.

I’d like to use the term “liberal religion” to remind us that we are part of a larger movement that includes the Social Gospel tradition. There is a liberal strand in many religious groups; and while our theologies may differ, we share common ground. For example, several Christian denominations have a program very similar to our own “Welcoming Congregation” program. And the leaders of the UUA and the UCC (the United Church of Christ) often agree on social causes, even marching together in Washington, D.C. During our General Assembly in Phoenix, Arizona, the Rev. Geoffrey Black, president of the UCC, took part in our public witness event outside the Durango Street Jail, also known as Tent City.
How shall I describe liberal religion? There are several common themes: We tend to engage with the prevailing culture, rather than turning our backs on it. We want to keep our religion intellectually credible, and so we follow new developments in the physical and social sciences. We look to reason and direct experience as sources of religious authority. We reject the idea that the truth was revealed once and for all in the distant past. As the UCC folks like to say, “God is still speaking”. Our liberal religious roots are intertwined with the roots of democracy: values of pluralism, freedom and equality; fair and open legal and political processes. We are also rooted in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets who spoke truth to power, and who called the people back to their highest commitments. This is an important aspect of our calling as religious liberals: we are called to be a prophetic voice in the public square.

It’s a paradox that some of the liberal traits that define our faith, as Unitarian Universalists, also undermine our ability to live it out. One obvious trait is a reluctance to use religious language. When we speak out on a social issue, we tend to frame our opinions in secular terms. This can happen for several reasons:

First, much of the public religious speech we hear nowadays is coming from the religious right. Much of it amounts to theological bullying. We are appalled by the rhetoric; we don’t want to risk being associated with it.

Second, we Unitarian Universalists are an eclectic bunch. As individuals we explore different religious ideas and from time to time, we change our minds. Without a long-standing commitment to specific beliefs and the rich symbolism that goes with them, we don’t have a big religious vocabulary to draw on.

Or we may just want to avoid offending people. Keenly aware of the diversity within our fellowship, and in the general public, we try to avoid language that could alienate or exclude people. We don’t want to be seen as holding up one religious perspective or judging others as inferior. As a result, we tend to state our opinions in secular language that’s been stripped of its power and disconnected from the “inward explosions” that first motivated it.

As the theologian Paul Rasor describes: if you read through the resolutions that have been adopted at General Assembly, you will see that many of them “read like
political policy platforms rather than statements of religious conviction.” Not many of them refer directly to our Seven Principles, “and then only in passing among the introductory ‘whereas’ clauses.”2 Which raises the question, why should a religious body issue such a statement? What can it add to the public discussion, that hasn’t already been said by secular groups?

Perhaps we’re doing better today. In 2006, William Sinkford, then our president, spoke to a group of Congressional staffers. Voicing his opposition to a proposed Federal Marriage Amendment that would have prohibited same-sex marriage, Bill Sinkford said to them:

Within Unitarian Universalism, we know from our own experience the many blessings that gay and lesbian people bring to our congregations and communities. We know from our lived experience in religious community that differences of faith, of race and of sexual orientation need not divide us, that diversity within the human family can be a blessing and not a curse. Unitarian Universalists affirm that it is the presence of love and commitment that we value. For Unitarian Universalists, it is homophobia that is the sin, not homosexuality. Unitarian Universalists Stand on the Side of Love.

Sinkford then linked this deep religious conviction to public policy arguments about discrimination and personal freedom …3

These arguments could be made, and had already been made, by others; but Sinkford framed them in a religious context. In this way he added something useful to the debate. By showing the people something of our vision, he helped change minds and hearts.

Another trait that undermines our prophetic voice, a trait which is also one of our strengths, is that we are more than willing to respond to the prevailing culture and embrace change. This openness is a good thing when it’s linked to an enduring sense of

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religious identity, and specific religious convictions. It’s not so good when we are behaving like a wind sock, simply turning whichever way the wind blows.

The calling of the prophet demands critical distance, as well as cultural engagement. At bottom, our religion is counter-cultural. Even where our religious values overlap with the cultural norms *du jour*, we need to maintain a sense of independence.

It follows that we need to distinguish between *liberal religion* and *liberal politics*: they are not one in the same. There are political conservatives within our fellowships, as well as political liberals. We cannot assume that all of us here champion the same causes or vote for the same people. We affirm religious pluralism among us. Shall we make at least some room for political pluralism as well?

Conservatism and liberalism are not merely the political positions people take; they are ways of seeing the world. The conservative impulse is to preserve what is good, and to retain what works. The conservative is not against change as such, but would favor incremental change over radical change. These attitudes are not foreign to Unitarian Universalism. They represent one end of a healthy polarity.

As the early Unitarian, Francis David, once said: we need not think alike to love alike. Beyond our differences, we share much common ground: a healthy skepticism, the affirmation of human dignity, and a commitment to the basic ideals on which our country was founded. From where we stand, together, we shall make meaning of the world around us – sometimes to affirm, sometimes to judge, and sometimes to shape this world according to our positive vision of the future.

So may it be.