

In the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Old Testament, the Israelites are admonished again and again not to practice idolatry, the worship of false gods. "They served their idols, which became a snare to them," says the Psalmist in Chapter 106.36. In the context of the Hebrew Bible, we think of that as an admonishment not to worship the pagan gods, but only to worship Yahweh. That seems pretty irrelevant, I'm guessing, to most UU's. But is it? What if we take a more expansive look at what might come under the heading "false gods."

Twenty-five hundred years later Emerson told us we will worship something. "That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and character," he says.

Under our more expansive definition, and with the help of Emerson, we can look around us and find plenty more instances of worship of false gods besides those already mentioned. Might those false gods include money? Power? Youth? Good looks? Consumerism? Capitalism? Who has one to add? Just shout them out.

I'd like to include in this category of false gods ideology. Blogger Elliot, who publishes "All is Grist," discussed the book *Political Visions and Illusion*. The author, David Koyzis, examines five popular political ideologies and how they rise to idolatry. Koyzis looks at liberalism, conservatism, nationalism, democracy, and socialism.<sup>i</sup>

Ideologies "begin with a fundamental problem and present a solution to that problem. They argue that if their solution is accepted and pursued on a broad scale in the way they endorse, it will lead to an ideal future," says Elliot. Ideologies make their own rules says another blogger on the site Biblical Brethren Fellowship.<sup>ii</sup>

Those of us who came of age during the Viet Nam war can certainly see how democracy came to be a false god in the pursuit of victory in that war. Lies to the American people, massive bombing of innocent people and monumental environmental damage, all to save the Vietnamese people from communism, to save them for democracy. This war has been revisited recently with the Ken Burns documentary "The Vietnam War," so it is fresh for some of us. One needn't look too hard to see how the other ideologies listed by Koyzis, conservatism, nationalism, socialism and liberalism, have risen to the level of worship of false

gods. Yes, even our precious liberalism falls under the category of ideology, depending on how it is practiced.

It's easy for us to recognize the faults of ideology in the current Republican Party, where the Tea Party agenda and the NRA agenda have cut off dialogue among Republicans and between Republicans and Democrats. But something similar is taking place in Democratic circles, and it angers me. I first noticed it when, about a year ago, I started to fill out a survey from the Democratic National Committee. I wasn't very far into it when I noticed that every question was asked in a leading way so that the DNC would get the answer they wanted. There was no effort to actually learn where party members might want the party to lead. "Begin with a fundamental problem and present a solution to that problem. Argue that if the solution is accepted and pursued on a broad scale, it will lead to an ideal future." Many of our current crop of Democratic as well as Republican leaders practice this.

We have seen this phenomenon recently in the pillorying of Senator Diane Feinstein, and others who are looking for bipartisan solutions, for not being liberal enough. She must be replaced, say the true believers, by someone who represents their ideological brand of liberalism.

Might humility offer a way out of this impasse. Humility, whose Latin root, *humilitas*, means "grounded." Humility, sharing the root with words such as human, humane, humanitarian, and humus. Humus--rich earth. The ground. Unfortunately, humility also shares the root with humiliation, which means "reduced to dirt." Being grounded and being reduced to dirt are two very different experiences, although in our modern culture, practicing humility is equated with humiliation. For many, practicing humility is seen as weakness, although, in reality, one practices humility from a place of strength. The humble recognize that we are human, that we all have inherent worth and dignity. Further, we are all subject to making mistakes; none of us is perfect. Humiliation states that "you are a mistake," something very different.<sup>iii</sup>

In the 13th century, St. Francis of Assisi built an entire order around the concept of humility. Pope Francis, the first pope to take on the name of St. Francis, has made humility a keystone of his papacy. "Who am I to judge?" he famously

said of gay Catholic priests. And boy, has he received plenty of criticism for that remark.

This, despite the fact that Jesus' ministry was one of humility. He kept company with the impure of Jewish society, the tax collectors, the lepers, the unmarried, unaccompanied women. In his parable of the wedding banquet in Luke, chapter 14, he recommends that one sit at the lowliest place at the banquet table.

President Obama, too, was criticized for his practice of cultural sensitivity and humility when he bowed from the waist upon meeting Japanese Emperor Akihito in 2009. "His cultural sensitivity was seen as a display of spinelessness and equated with "groveling" by many pundits and columnists," says Raymond Lam, in writing for the website Buddhistdoor Global.<sup>iv</sup> He goes on, "All the higher religions – in particular Buddhism – have ancient rituals of expressing humility, the most basic of which is bowing. Without a sense of humility and acknowledgement of our own fallibility, we gradually begin to feel justified in everything we think, say, and do, even when it hurts others, because we do not observe our own actions as reproachable."

There is a story told about the Dalai Lama by Matthieu Ricard.<sup>v</sup> The Dalai Lama had just been in meetings with Francois Mitterand, who at the time, was President of France. They were at the Palace Elysee. President Mitterand had accompanied the Dalai Lama to the front steps of the palace, where the Dalai Lama's car was waiting. Before getting into his car, the Dalai Lama went over to shake the hand of one of the palace guards. Mitterand looked on, astonished that one of such high stature would acknowledge someone like the guard.

For a man like Mitterand, and perhaps most people in power, such an action would be felt to be humiliating, beneath their status. For a great religious leader like the Dalai Lama, he was merely practicing one of the precepts of his faith-- humility.

For many Westerners, Buddhism, mindfulness and humility go hand-in-hand from our exposure to the writing of Thich Nhat Hanh. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, in his 1967 letter nominating Nhat Hanh for the Nobel Peace Prize, referred to the Buddhist monk as "a holy man, for he is humble and devout." Some of us

here may have been privileged in our lives to see Thich Nhat Hanh. Unfortunately, I have not.

Buddhism and Christianity are not alone in considering humility a virtue to be cultivated. Surah Al-Furqan, the 25th book of the Qur'an says in verse 63 "The servants of the Most Merciful are those who walk upon the earth in humility, and when the ignorant address them, they say words of peace." In the Sahih Al-Furqan, a highly regarded collection of sayings by the Prophet Muhammad, the Prophet says this: "Verily, Allah has revealed to me that you must be humble towards one another, so that no one wrongs another or boasts to another."

Hinduism also teaches humility. Fifteen year old Gautama Mehta had this to say about his religion in the online Huffington Post column Kidspirit: "Hindus are taught to have humility. Ancient Hindu artists were never supposed to sign their names on their work, and temple artists, when creating statues of gods, are always supposed to leave a deliberate imperfection to show that they cannot really represent God."<sup>vi</sup>

I return to an earlier quote: "Without a sense of humility and acknowledgement of our own fallibility, we gradually begin to feel justified in everything we think, say, and do, even when it hurts others, because we do not observe our own actions as reproachable." Isn't this a source of great evil in our society today? It is readily apparent at all levels of governance. It is evident in our "civil" discourse, and I use that word fully recognizing that our discourse in the public sphere is generally anything but civil.

What are we to do? It would be nice if there might be some grand outbreak of humility from our nation's capitol that would then flow down through society. I'm not holding my breath on that one.

The alternative? The alternative that is within our reach? It is incumbent upon us to practice humility in our daily interactions with one another, including those with whom we disagree. Our Universalist faith calls us to Love. Our first principle calls us to recognize the inherent worth and dignity in every person. Great religions and religious leaders call us to be humble. They are not calling for us to give up our agency, our power. They are not calling for the disenfranchised among us to roll over and accept inequity. But they are calling us to not worship

false gods. They are calling us to recognize that none of us are perfect; that none of us has all the answers. They are calling us to practice the wisdom of the ages throughout the world. They are calling us to humility.

---

<sup>i</sup> <https://elliotritzema.com/2012/06/16/the-idolatry-of-ideology>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://biblicalbrethrenfellowship.wordpress.com/2016/01/20/ideology-is-idolatry/>

<sup>iii</sup> Kirk Loadman-Copeland. "Introduction to the Theme." Touchstones Journal, March 2018.

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.buddhistdoor.net/features/being-humble-is-itself-a-spiritual-practice>

<sup>v</sup> Accessed 3/2/18. <https://buddhism-controversy-blog.com/2014/09/30/the-virtues-of-humility-by-matthieu-ricard/>

<sup>vi</sup> Accessed 3/2/18. [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/kidspirit/humility-in-hinduism\\_b\\_1364035.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/kidspirit/humility-in-hinduism_b_1364035.html)