

Religion Is a Team Sport

Given 8/11/2013 by Robin Mitchell

Suburbia is some strange stuff...

I grew up in Orange County, and my part of it in the late 60's – early 70's was very homogenous – mostly middle-class, mostly Republican, almost entirely white; no real difference from one neighborhood to the next. This was also right in the middle of the Baby Boom, so there were lots of schools – I went to Adams Elementary School, and just four blocks away was Mesa Verde Elementary. Same neighborhood, built at the same time, the same architecture, even; two peas in a pod.

But I remember one day we had a track meet with them, and we all sat in the bleachers to cheer our schoolmates on. At first we did the old "Lean to the left, lean to the right, stand up, sit down, fight, fight, fight!" but that got banned when we got a little too enthusiastic about acting out the "fight, fight, fight" part. So then we switched to a home-grown cheer: "Messy, messy, Mesa Verde, we are clean but they are dirty!" Ah, the rapier wit of sixth-graders...

And then in high school things really got weird. We had pep rallies – they took us out of classes where we were learning useful things like math and English to spend an hour cheering the Estancia High School Eagles against some other high school a few miles away. We'd end the rallies with our school song, which we were basically singing to a bunch of jocks on the football team: "All hail to thee the Eagles, all hail to thee the proud; with honor, love, and spirit, our heads to thee are bowed."

Looking back on all this; these completely artificial rivalries and the arbitrary pride of going to one school instead of another, all I can say is, "what was that all about?" How did we end up having so much rivalry, to the point of overwrought school songs and silly insults against people just like us from the same neighborhoods as us? How could this have meant so much to us and to the adults who were in charge of it all?

Some people will say that it was a deliberate part of our educational system; that they consciously teach us to divide ourselves and compete against each other to make us useful tools of the capitalist-militarist system, and I actually have some sympathy for that view. But I don't think that's the whole story; we just took to it too naturally and too enthusiastically to say that it was all imposed on us. Certainly a lot of us went on to become Dodgers or Angels fans with a lot more enthusiasm than we showed for anything else the adults tried to teach us in school, so I think there has to be more to it than that.

Another explanation comes from the author Jonathan Haidt, in his book *The Righteous Mind* that I talked about a few sermons ago. He says that we are all born with a set of inherent moral impulses like fairness, freedom, not harming innocents, and something he calls "in-group loyalty" – banding together as a team against outside threats or competing groups. These aren't just random traits; they are what has allowed us to come together in the large, stable societies that are the basis for human culture and are such a big part of what has made us the dominant species on the planet. So they're very basic to our behavior, and we express them in many

ways – in-group loyalty can range from the trivial fun of being a Chargers fan to the deadly seriousness of war and nationalism.

And one of the places where we've all seen this impulse towards tribalism is in religion. In fact, he has a chapter called "Religion Is a Team Sport" where he says that of all the institutions in our culture, religions do the best job of binding people together into stable, cohesive groups. Being a sociologist, he isn't even interested in what the religions teach – he agrees that people who are active in their religious communities tend to be more ethical, generous and compassionate than people who aren't, but he says it's a result of their being deeply bonded in a community of trust and shared values rather than anything their specific religion might teach them about ethics or generosity or compassion.

Now when I first read this I thought he was massively missing the point. His talking about religion while ignoring its teachings seemed to me like a tone-deaf person saying that people go to concerts for an evening of shared ritual with like-minded people without ever mentioning music. Myself, I go to concerts for the music and I go to religion for its transcendent vision of the kind of life we're made for.

But the news coming out of Myanmar in the last year or so has made me think that he may have a point after all. Armed Buddhist mobs, led by monks, have been slaughtering their Muslim neighbors and burning down their homes, leaving whole villages destroyed and over 150,000 people homeless. Now when Christians or Muslims or Hindus do this kind of thing, we tend to blame it on the specific nature of their religion – all of them have passages in their scriptures that can be taken to say "kill all the infidels", so we're not surprised when some of them end up doing just that. But I've been practicing and studying Buddhism for over ten years now, including reading a lot of the classical texts, and I've never heard anything that can be taken as a command to go kill your neighbor. The monk who seems to be doing the most to incite the violence isn't quoting the Buddha; he's saying things like "You can be full of kindness and love, but you cannot sleep next to a mad dog", which sounds more like he's trying to evade the Buddha's teachings than to invoke them.

You can't even apply the more general atheist critique of religions here – that any supernatural beliefs are dangerous because sooner or later your imaginary friend will start telling you to kill people – because these people are from the Theravadan school of Buddhism, which is perhaps the least supernatural religion in the world. (Except for us of course; we *always* win first prize there...) They don't believe in any gods or deities, and they see things like reincarnation and karma as impersonal laws like gravity or thermodynamics.

So it's very hard to see the violence in Myanmar as really being based in religion. When you look at what's behind it, it looks much more like Jonathan Haidt's vision of religion as a team sport. The Buddhists there are feeling pressured by a growing Muslim population that they see as a threat to their cultural and economic dominance, and they are responding by treating Buddhism as their team identity rather than as a religion with specific teachings and practices.

And I think we've seen this same thing happening in other conflicts that have been called religious. The Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland weren't kneecapping each other over whether the body and blood of Christ are literally present in the sacrament of Communion; they were acting like warring tribes with a long history of political and economic conflict. The Sunnis and the Shia in Iraq aren't

setting off suicide bombs in each other's mosques to settle who was the legitimate successor to the Prophet Mohammed; their civil war is about the violence their tribes have inflicted on each other in the past and the roles they will have in the future of Iraq.

This has happened in our country in the form of the Religious Right, which has become a team based as much on conservative cultural and political values as it is on religious values. Years ago I read an article about a conservative Christian pastor who went to some massive religious rally where they showed a video of three crosses on a hill, superimposed on an American flag with F-15 fighters screaming overhead. And he said he felt almost literally sickened to see that he had become part of a team that glorified nationalism and militarism as much as his beloved Gospel of grace and redemption, and so he pulled back from the organized Religious Right without changing his own conservative Christian beliefs.

And I've seen it happen in the other direction – I have a friend who has no interest at all in religion, not even enough to call himself an atheist or an agnostic. But he's also a very conservative Republican who loves his Fox News and thinks Bill O'Reilly is a great social prophet, and so he was absolutely furious a few years ago when the atheists and the ACLU were trying to get the Mt. Soledad cross taken down. That cross had no religious meaning for him at all – it didn't stand for hope or salvation – but it was a symbol of his team, and by God he was going to defend it!

So I've come to think that Mr. Haidt has a point after all: a lot of the bad behavior we see in other religions – and, I have to admit, perhaps some of the good behavior as well – really has nothing to do with the essence of their beliefs. It's just what happens when people come together in teams.

And yet for all the ways that I think he's right about religion, I still think he misses the jewel at its heart. Of all the causes that bring us together in tribes, religion is the only one that has at its core the transcendence of tribalism. Most of our other civic “-ism's” like nationalism are all about our own group – no matter how large the tent may be, only the people inside it matter. My favorite patriotic song ends with the words “America, America, God shed his grace on thee. And crown thy good with brotherhood, from sea to shining sea.” I love how this reminds us that we will not achieve goodness until we achieve the brotherhood (and sisterhood) of everyone in our nation. And yet the brotherhood stops at the shoreline – beyond the shining seas, drone strikes and extraordinary renditions are just fine.

But religion at its best offers us a greater vision. Compare the ideal of patriotism to Jesus' teachings about how to treat rivals:

You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'
But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. ... If you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others?

Or our own Seven Principles: The inherent worth and dignity of every person, regardless of whether they're UUs, or Americans, or well-off white suburbanites. The use of the democratic process in our own congregations and in society, even if some of the people who want to participate aren't liberal Democrats. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence, giving other species the same concern we give our own.

All of these, the UU principles and those of other religions, cut directly across the grain of in-group loyalty, of wanting what's best for our team without regard for those on the outside. And therein lies a paradox. This impulse towards tribalism is so deep in us – Mr. Haidt says that it's in our DNA – that most of us need the support of a community to overcome it. We need each other for inspiration, for encouragement, for role models, sometimes for accountability. The Buddhists say there are three jewels that make Enlightenment possible for us: the Buddha, the enlightened teacher; the Dharma, the spiritual teachings; and the Sangha, the community of practitioners. The community is as important as the teacher or the teachings! And those of us here this morning know that; we come together as a community to effect the awakening in ourselves and our society that we know we can't do alone.

And yet the act of coming together in community, if we're not careful, encourages the very tribalism we're joining together to overcome. It's very easy to become partisan members of Team Christianity, or Team Islam, or even Team Buddhism, and have the partisanship become more important than the principles. Or of Team UU-ism – we may not go around burning down other people's villages, but in some other ways I think we're actually the most tribal of all the religious communities that I personally belong to.

We certainly think we're special – a few years ago, we were calling ourselves “The Uncommon Denomination.” That's a clever play on words, but as a veiled insult to every other faith it's really not a lot better than “messy messy Mesa Verde.” And even our current “Standing on the Side of Love” slogan can be taken to say that there are sides to be chosen – teams to be joined – and that if we're standing on the side of love, then everyone who disagrees with us about marriage or immigration policy must be standing on the side of ... yeah.

And we sometimes do this in more subtle ways. The Christian author C.S. Lewis, writing during World War Two, asked us to think about how we react when we hear a story about our enemy committing some terrible atrocity – are we secretly pleased? Are we disappointed if we later hear that it wasn't true? If so, he says, then our souls are in danger, because we are wishing for more evil and hatred in the world rather than less, and over time we tend to become what we cheer for.

So how do we feel when we hear that a conservative Christian church has banned interracial couples or Obama voters? How do we feel when we hear about the Catholic Church covering up the sexual abuse of children? Are we secretly gratified to see the “other team” behaving badly?

If so, I would say our UU souls are in danger. We are cheering for a world less in harmony with our Seven Principles, a world in which victims suffer and victimizers move themselves further from wholeness, just so we can feel better about ourselves by scoring points against the other team. We are undermining in our hearts all the best reasons we claim to come together, and making a secular sport of our sacred faith.

At our best, we're so much better than that. I really believe that what draws us here is not just Mr. Haidt's vision of being in a team of like-minded people, but the prophetic call in our Principles and our Sources to bring about a world in which all

people are cherished, all people are safe, all people have enough, and to ourselves be transformed into people who would be at home in such a world.

And to do that we must become, to paraphrase Carl Jung, a community whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere, a community with beloved members but with no outsiders. May we join with all people of good faith to help lead the world beyond tribes, and may we invite everyone along for the journey.

May that be so.