

Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church – Unitarian Universalist

“The Use and Abuse of Political Labels”

Rev. Tony Perrino

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There are many ways of lying. Some are **blatantly** bad; others are more subtle and, therefore, worse—because they are less recognizable.

An example of a more sinister kind of prevarication is evident in these words written by **George Orwell** years ago: “Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, their cattle machine-gunned, their houses set on fire, and this is called pacification.” (which is precisely the term used by our government during the Vietnam war!)

When a pleasant word is used to describe a not-so-nice reality, it’s called a “**euphemism**,” which is simply another way of lying--like describing torture as “**enhanced interrogation!**”

But this morning I want to focus on a different form of “mendacity” (a word which is, of course, another euphemism for lying,) the mendacious practice of **labeling people and ideas**.

In addressing this matter, I am ignoring the old saying that “We speak of the sins for which we have no mind and avoid the ones toward which we are inclined.” But the fact is that we’re **all** guilty of this sin of labeling. I certainly am. So I may have to conclude these remarks the way the comedian **Mort Sahl** closed his monologues: “**Is there anyone here I haven’t offended?**”

My thesis can be stated in two sentences; every label tends to be a lie: at best an imprecise tool of language, at worst an insidiously irresponsible weapon of attack. **But**, since they seem to be an unavoidable form of communication, we ought to define our labels clearly before we use them.

Let us begin by recognizing that the need for labels, as a kind of linguistic short-hand, stems from our inability to cope with the complex issues of life more precisely. I once saw a **cartoon** depicting two cows grazing in a field when a modern milk truck rolled by. The sign on the truck boasted, “Our milk is pasteurized, homogenized, standardized and enriched with vitamin D.” One cow is quoted, saying to the other, “**It makes you feel kind of inadequate, doesn’t it?**”

Well, that’s how most of us feel about the large, complicated issues of modern life: inadequate. So, we generate labels to simplify and make these issues more manageable. We pigeon-hole people and ideas with this linguistic shorthand. **But the first test** of the usefulness of a word is whether it means the same thing to the listener and the speaker. And **labels seldom do**.

For example, the term “liberal” (which we UU’s proudly claim) could be describing an attitude toward change: **open-minded and flexible**, as opposed to dogmatic and rigid. **Or** it could be referring to a particular position on an issue: a liberal view. **But**, if that liberal view were held with doctrinaire rigidity, of course, it would represent the exact opposite of the first definition.

In the political realm, we tend to use these labels in a relative sense: describing someone as “liberal” or “conservative” in the context of prevailing thought. For example, ideas that were considered “liberal” (if not radical) when first proposed by **Norman Thomas** in the 1920’s (like Social Security) are now supported in both party platforms. So, to maintain those views today is a “conservative” stance. The difficulty in keeping up with these changes is seen in the fact that “**The Pledge of Allegiance**, which seems to have become the conservatives’ test of patriotism, **was written by Francis Bellamy, ---a socialist!**”

We also tend to judge someone else’s views in relation to where **we** stand on the issue. That’s why the John Birch Society saw President Eisenhower as very liberal, (“soft on Communism”) while left-wing “radicals” thought President John Kennedy was too conservative.

If we return to the first definition of “liberal,” as flexible toward change, most of us have to admit that we are liberal on some issues and conservative on others. For example, the typical “liberal” attitude toward public aid to parochial schools—is really conservative: it does not want to change the historic provision of separation of church and state by letting the government fund parochial schools ---**even when they are doing a better job of educating inner city children.**

Labels are, at best, inaccurate and imprecise. They purchase simplicity at the price of clarity.

The second fact which must be recognized is that **when labels are used as weapons** to attack and discredit a person or idea, they are **insidiously irresponsible!** They exploit base emotions and encourage a mindlessness which buries reason along with its victims

Most of you are old enough to remember “**McCarthyism,**” admittedly itself a label coined to describe the Wisconsin Senator’s practice of destroying someone’s credibility by fastening the label “Communist” upon them. A variation of this “red-baiting” tactic, which McCarthy practiced with great skill, was that of “**guilt by association**” i.e. if someone takes the same position on an issue that a Communist takes, he must be “one of them.”(a “fellow traveler”) Or, as was exhibited during the Presidential primary, the fact that candidate Obama had served on the same Chicago school Board as a man named Ayers, who had, 30 years earlier, been involved in illegal, anti-war activity, was used to raise questions regarding the candidate’s patriotism.

There is a story which illustrates the irresponsibility of the “guilt by association” practice. It tells of a man who had been **the village drunk..** and reformed. For six weeks he had gone without a drink. Then one Saturday morning, at the town store, the crowd started chiding him for “falling off the wagon.” He said it was a lie, but they insisted that word was out and pointed to the village gossip, standing across the room, as their source. Angrily, he went over to the woman and accused her of spreading lies about him. But she asserted that they were **not** lies: she had “**incontestable evidence**” which **proved** that he had started drinking again: the fact that **his wheelbarrow had stood in front of the saloon all Friday night.** The man answered with actions.. rather than words. That afternoon he took his wheelbarrow, parked it in front of the gossip’s home, and left it **there** all Saturday night! So much for the tactic of guilt by association.

As I said at the outset, in spite of their obvious limitations, we are probably going to have to live with labels. So, our task is to define them more precisely. This morning I would focus on doing so with the political labels “liberal” and “conservative.”

The first thing I would suggest is that we **rid ourselves of the right-to-left conception of those positions,** abandoning the notion (spawned in the French Parliament many years ago) that to the left of center (wherever that is?) we have liberals, then socialists, then communists. And to right, conservatives, then reactionaries, then fascists.

Among the many things wrong with that political spectrum is the suggestion that the extremes are opposites—when, in fact, **they are more alike than different:** neither the “far right” nor the “far left” would grant freedom of expression to those who do not share their views; both tend toward conspiracy theories and would use **any means** to achieve their ends, including lies, violence and torture. They are also both characteristically lacking in a sense of humor.

The right to left spectrum also implies that a step toward liberalism is a step toward Communism and a step toward conservatism—is a step toward fascism. Neither is true: the nations which are most susceptible to the appeals of Communism are **not** those with a liberal or even a socialist history (like Sweden) but those accustomed to authoritarianism. Similarly, a genuine conservative, who places a high value on the individual liberty, is hardly a candidate for fascism. **The first step in clarifying political labels is to rid ourselves of the right-to-left analogy.**

Having done that, **how do we meaningfully define “liberal” and “conservative”.. politically?**

Ambrose Bierce, in a book he called “**The Devil’s Dictionary**” suggests that, “A conservative is one who is enamored of existing evils, as distinguished from a liberal—who wishes to replace them with others.” I sometimes wonder, noting how the terms are popularly misused, whether that distinction may be as valid as any.

How then do we define political labels meaningfully? We can begin by rejecting the popular misconceptions. For example, some contend that conservatives are on the side of property rights as opposed to human rights, and liberals are favor big government at the expense of individual freedom. Both exemplify irresponsible labeling. Placing property rights above human rights is **not** genuine conservatism; **it’s greed!** (I almost said “pure and simple,” but it’s not: it’s impure and complicated... and it is what was responsible for the recent collapse of our nation’s economy!) And no intelligent liberal wants unnecessarily to expand the federal bureaucracy; only the power-hungry of both parties seek that, as is evident when they complain about “big government” and high taxes and then vote for “earmarks” and an increase in the military budget.

It should be obvious to any thoughtful observer that the unrestricted exercise of property rights will eventually be destructive of individual freedoms. And the proper role of government is that of protecting citizens from exploitation by the powerful greedy! Some may call that “socialism” but the fact is that, when some say, “Get the government off my back,” they often really mean, “**Leave me alone to grab all I can.**” The fact is that we cannot return to the limited government of the 18th century and deal effectively with the complexities of modern life. “**The government which governs best**” is **not that which governs least—but that which governs most effectively.** Both genuine “liberals” and “conservatives” know that.

So, I propose a new way to think about political labels. It’s not orthodox, but it’s more interesting because it’s original! My view is based on a belief that every important issue involves tension between **two valid concerns:** a regard for the welfare of persons and a commitment to the preservation of principles. Neither the liberal nor conservative would disregard the other consideration, but each emphasizes the one it considers more important.

A liberal would argue that principles only exist to serve persons, and if, in a given situation, they do **not** serve the cause of human need, they may be altered or abandoned. **A conservative** would insist that the long-range interests of persons are always best served by maintaining time-tested principles, and, therefore, would tend to resist altering or abandoning them. And that is why I regard the **American Civil Liberties Union** (which I support) as a “conservative” organization. **Its very purpose is to preserve the principles set forth in The Bill of Rights.**

I suggest that both points of view are valid perspectives, which thoughtful persons might hold: attitudes which may be 100% half right, so responsible liberals and conservatives are needed to balance each other in a free society.. and (dare I say it?) in a healthy religious community!

When I told my wife that I was going to address this topic, she asked, “How are you going to make it a religious matter?” (wives do things like that.. to keep us on our toes.) My answer is that **labeling persons is dehumanizing, a way of turning a human being into an “it” and that is a sin!** In the extreme, it is the kind of demonizing which is threatening to tear our world apart. And I am **so proud and grateful** that we have a President who is committed to reaching across boundaries, bridging the gap between liberals and conservative, the left and right, and striving to establish the sense of our common humanity that would enable the world to live in peace.

I must also add that **labeling is a sin** because the effort to be intellectually honest and precisely truthful—is a **holy calling**, one particularly pursued by our religious movement.

So, if you catch yourself using labels indiscriminately, remember, “**You are in my thoughts.**” which is a UU minister’s way of saying, “**I’m praying for you.**”

Is there anyone out there I haven’t offended?