

Faith in New Mexico

*A Sermon Preached at the First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque, New Mexico
by Christine Robinson May 28, 2016*

There is something special about New Mexico, don't you agree? Something that draws us here to work or retire, something that keeps us here in spite of low pay and low school funding and too many guns. It's something about the blue sky, perhaps, the mild weather, the beauty of mountains and the peacefulness of desert vistas. Perhaps it is the imperfect but workable interaction of three very different cultures here, or the exciting atmosphere for the arts. There is something else that is special about this state; it has a unique religious atmosphere and history; a culture that we UU's can really appreciate; Religion is taken seriously here, and diverse religions live together in relative peace. That could be a definition of Unitarian Universalism: We take religion seriously, and feel enriched by our religious differences. Not all of our values are reflected very well in our culture, so it's nice to notice this resonance in our state and its history.

No one faith dominates the culture. Although the Catholic church is prominent, it is a Catholic church which has several internal variations of its own and therefore does not cast a monolithic shadow. Not only are there the usual variety of Protestants here, but the isolation, beauty, and relatively inexpensive cost of land has brought a rainbow of centers of world religions to our state, requiring New Mexicans to learn tolerance and an appreciation of diversity. The

transplanted artists and others have brought with them or developed a variety of what might be loosely termed “new age” religions, most of which make Unitarian Universalists seem staid, safe, and established by comparison. I have found the interplay of religious insights within an atmosphere of appreciative tolerance to be one of the most delightful aspects of living in New Mexico¹.

So how did New Mexico avoid the twin perils of religious intolerance and religious indifference? My reading suggests that it did so because it has had a strong religious thread throughout its history, but a religious thread that was in most respects a polar opposite from that of the rest of the nation. That dual reality has meant that the New Mexico religious thread has had a more open, modest quality than, say, the thread that runs through the Bible Belt, where the strong religious thread could assume itself to be the whole cloth.

Our nation as a whole has a sort of broad religious history. This is as much myth as reality, and it has a misleadingly broad sweep, forgetting its pockets of Amish and Atheists, its local revivals and its favorite sons, but neither is it entirely inaccurate. Here it is:

¹ For more detail on many of the subjects of this sermon, see *Religion in New Mexico* by UNM professor, Ferenc Szasz. .

America, we think, was settled by several stripes of Protestants who came here with the intention of either duplicating the religious situation of England, where the church was an arm of the state, or with the intention of setting up a theocracy of a purified Christianity. There were various tussles for religious power and position amongst the denominations: the Baptists, in particular, have never forgotten the prejudice they endured at the hands of the Puritans of New England from whom we Unitarians are descended. Some of those tussles suggested to our founding parents that separation of church and state would be the best way to preserve both faith and nation. However, the United States of America entered Nationhood with a sense that this was a Protestant nation which endured a scattering of Catholics, Jews, Quakers and free thinkers, whose presence was tolerated as long as they didn't make too much trouble or ask for much in the way of what we would now call "special protections."

Waves of European immigration changed the proportions of Protestants to Catholics dramatically, but the Protestants maintained their power. Here's just a small matter that most Protestants don't even realize: If you said the Lord's Prayer at the start of the school day, which most people born before 1955 did...did you know that it was the Protestant version of the Lord's prayer that you recited? Did you even know, if you were a Protestant, that the Catholics say a slightly different version of the Lord's prayer and that your Catholic friends were being forced to "go along" with this state of affairs? Likely you had no idea. That was Protestant Privilege.

The continent was settled, and wars shook the nation. But little changed in the religious power dynamics of the nation until growing secularization, the insights and techniques of the Civil Rights movement, and our latest immigration wave forced the nation-at-large to reluctantly admit that our situation was not that of a Protestant Nation with a scattering of Catholics, Free Thinkers, and Jews, or even a Christian Nation with a scattering of others, but a truly religiously pluralistic nation where Protestants will soon not be the majority. This is a very new insight, painful to some.

Well, that's a pretty broad brush, over 400 years, but there you are. If you take that basic structure of religious power and history for granted, it is downright confusing to live in New Mexico, because it has all been different here; a polar opposite, really, from the very beginning.

New Mexico, as you surely know, was inhabited by several groups of Native Americans when the Spaniards arrived 450 years ago. Unlike Protestant, European settlers to the East Coast, the Catholic Spaniards already had significant experience with Native Americans and had a well-developed strategy which allowed some religious accommodation. Furthermore, western Natives did not suffer as catastrophically from European diseases as had eastern Natives had, and therefore retained significant strength to deal with the Spaniards. Spaniard and Native had to deal with one another from the beginning and come to some accommodation about the land that they would share. This is not to say that all

was fair and good, but the situation and relative power was never as drastic as in the American East.

Oñate's instructions from the Spanish government included Christianizing the Native Americans, "Always ordering everything for the glory of God and the increase of the Catholic Faith." The Catholics had already discovered that in dealing with other people's gods and holy places, accommodation works better than force. So the Catholicism of New Mexico Native Americans has a combination of Native and European elements. There are many Native Americans, who, with the blessing of their Church, also practice their native faiths and rituals.

This has not sat well with every Catholic priest over the ages, to be sure. As late as the 1960's, the priest assigned to our neighbor, Isleta Pueblo, prohibited all native elements of worship in the Catholic church. No accommodation could be reached between Catholic hierarchy and Pueblo leadership, so the Isletans simply closed the church. It stayed closed for nine years, until a more accommodating Archbishop came to terms with the Isletans. In spite of oddities like this, in most of the years since 1595, Native American Catholics have glorified God with a brand of Catholicism that is uniquely their own.

This trend was helped along by the fact that New Mexico's Hispanic Catholicism is not quite "mainstream," either. Isolated for many years not only from Europe but from any Catholic authority...the nearest bishop was in Durango, Mexico until 1850...Hispanic Catholicism included not only a variety of non-authorized religious holidays, pageants, and beliefs, but professions and institutions such as *curendaras*, (healers) and the *Penetentes*, a spiritual brotherhood of laymen which had their own organization and ritual distinctive to the new world. Only when the territory became American were American Catholics instrumental in getting a Bishop to Santa Fe. However, that first bishop was not a Spaniard but a Frenchman, (thus his French Romanesque Cathedral in Santa Fe) and he and the French priests and nuns he imported to the state were no more in tune with Hispanic Catholicism than with Native Catholics. The resulting struggle ended up with an actual schism in Northern New Mexico. The Presbyterians moved into the breach and took in many of the old Hispanic families -- thus the powerful but secondary Presbyterian influence in the state to this day. This didn't seem to teach the Catholic hierarchy much: in 1912, the state had but one Hispanic priest. It's better now.

The fact that New Mexico's major faith of Catholicism was made of three strands; Native, Hispanic, and American was of great benefit, in the end. The three strands had to learn to get along together, and the skills they developed were available when other faith traditions began to move in.

In the wider US, a century ago, in the period from about 1890 to 1920, Mainline Protestants were running the religious show in the nation. The Episcopalians, Methodists, Presbyterians, and, in New England, the Unitarians, ran virtually the whole society. Even the public schools, although supposedly free of sectarian instruction, were Protestant institutions in ways invisible to Protestants but painfully obvious to Catholics, Jews, and Free Thinkers, who often sent their children to private schools. Almost everywhere, the discrimination faced by immigrants in those days was often religious and Catholic newcomers were viewed with disdain and their faith with a suspicion that faith in a Pope constituted a threat to democracy. That suspicion left the mainstream when John Kennedy was elected but it is not fully dispelled to this day.

In New Mexico during the same years, things were very different. The Catholic church assumed roughly the same power role here that the Mainline Protestants did for the nation. In 1906 the ratio of Catholics to Protestants in New Mexico was more than 10 to 1. Just as the Protestant establishment of the nation looked with alarm at the great influx of Catholics to America, similarly, the Catholic establishment of New Mexico was not pleased with the influx of Protestants into the state. However, in New Mexico, as in the nation, a basic tolerance prevailed, not only between Catholics and Protestants but with Jews and others.

(Actually there was a Jewish presence in New Mexico from the very beginning of European settlement, as among the first wave of Spaniards to come here were the “crypto-Jews,” families forced to pretend to convert and flee Spain because of their faith, which became a huge family secret which some families are, to this day, coming to understand. The first “regular” Jews arrived in New Mexico in 1840 and were mostly engaged in the businesses that supplied the Santa Fe Trail.)

New Mexico Catholics engaged in social reform in the name of the gospel, as did Eastern Protestants of the era, focusing on solving problems of health care and education. Tuberculosis was in those days the nation’s number one killer, and rest, dry air, and high altitude were the only available cures. In 1920 about 10% of the state’s population was TB patients. Religious people responded by organizing St. Joseph’s and Presbyterian hospitals both of which are now severed from their religious roots.

Education was also a concern. In 1899 the territory had a fledgling public university but no public high schools. A rivalry between the Catholics and the Presbyterians, each of whom feared that public schools would favor their religious rivals, resulted in the development of parallel parochial school systems by those two bodies. Some of the resulting institutions are still with us: The Harwood Arts Center used to be the Methodist High School while the Menaul School still serves its original function as a Presbyterian secondary school, and of course, the Catholic schools are still very much a part of the landscape.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, the Protestants of the nation were divided theologically over issues like whether scripture should be read literally or metaphorically, the place of science in faith, the place of women in family and society. In the southern states, religiously supported bigotry and violence against African Americans mostly, but secondarily against Catholics, Jews and Foreigners was a strain and a stain.

Here in New Mexico, the extremism of the Ku Klux Klan had little influence, indeed, the state provided some refuge for the harassed of Colorado and Texas where the Klan was strong. The issues of Genesis and evolution were not issues here: The Albuquerque Journal carried news of the Scopes trial but dismissed Bryan as a political quack and joked that the whole business was prejudiced against monkeys.

In striking contrast to the situation in the rest of the nation, the Catholics began to win the school war and by mid-century many of the state's children were being educated in Catholic schools and by public schools which were dominated by the Catholic church to such an extent that a court case had to be mounted by the Protestants to force a truly secular public school system. That was in the 1960's.

As the nation matured, the Mid-century world view was that “Protestant, Catholic-and-Jew” could all be equally good citizens of a democratic nation. The solidarity of WW II and the horror of the Holocaust brought a kind of peace to interfaith relationships. The National Council of Churches controlled free air time on TV at mid-century and forced the new “out crowd” – fundamentalist christians -- to purchase media while Catholics, mainline Protestants and Jews got it free, with the ironic result that when free air time evaporated, the Fundamentalists were poised to take over the airwaves. A post-war era of building and expansion in the 50s and 60s put many churches and synagogues including this one, on American streets. “Attend the church or synagogue of your choice” was common advice, and respectable people did just that.

Here in New Mexico, the middle of this century saw New Mexico mainstreamed into American culture. It has not yet forgotten it’s mirror-image roots, and still thinks of itself as “the state different.” It’s religious history of domination by a fragmented and isolated Catholic church which always had power but never quite had privilege, set the stage for the state’s next religious task, which was to assimilate a wave of religious people who were not so comfortably a part of the Judeo-Christian culture. That task faced New Mexico earlier than it faced other parts of the nation, and was accomplished gracefully.

The beginning of the end of Judeo-Christian America was 1960. The mainline Protestant and anglo Catholic churches have steadily, precipitously

declined since then, rocked by an exodus of baby boomers and continual conflict about sexual and social matters like women's rights, abortion and homosexuality, and by financial and sexual impropriety in church leadership. Conservative Protestantism has grown by leaps and bounds, fragmenting Protestant power and privilege. Immigration and Babyboomer fascination with exotica have brought new faiths to America like Islam -- the second largest non-Christian faith in America -- and Buddhism. No longer is it socially necessary to attend the church, synagogue or anything else of your choice to be seen as a good citizen.

New Mexican culture had a leg up on most of America in this regard, both because there has always been a vital Native American faith here, and because both culture and landscape made New Mexico a haven for non-Judeo, non-Christian faiths for 30 years. Dar al-Islam, on the Chama river near Abiquiu is one of the most beautiful Mosques in North America. Interestingly, its prayer door faces north, rather than the traditional east, because the polar route is the shortest way from Abiquiu to Mecca. The Lama Foundation near Taos is an interfaith monastery, best known for workshops and retreats lead by American Hindu Ram Das. There is a large Sikh settlement in Española and both Americanized and traditional Tibbetan Buddhist communities in New Mexico. By and large, these religious communities have developed and maintained good relationships with their neighbors and a "live and let live" atmosphere has prevailed.

The issues of religious freedom and tolerance have been more difficult in the case of Native American claims, because these claims so often include property, a value more sacred to the prevailing American system than any other. However, under the Native American Religious Freedom Act, Blue Lake was returned to the Taos Pueblo and there is at least discussion of the conflict between pueblo worship and west side development here in Albuquerque.

The rest of the nation is rapidly catching up to New Mexico in the need for a much greater diversity of religious neighbors to live together in peace. Perhaps our state can serve as a model that a whole nation can exist in an appreciative tolerance without descending into religious indifference.