

As I craft this response my heart is filled with thoughts of those who were “worthy of Prairie Group” but who have gone before us into a world of light. I sit with the death this year of Rev. Dr. John Wolf. I am also in deep consideration as I write, of the intentions of the initial founders of our own study group, considering *their* purpose and *their* context. In light of the current state of America, Unitarian Universalism and the ministry, I wonder whether or not we will meet¹ or surpass what was imagined of us? We were planted in the soil of the Midwest and Southwest by a group of predominantly white educated male ministers looking to connect and study across the vastness of the mission field. Our context was significantly influenced by James Luther Adams who famously argued that our religious belief is expressed (both personally and institutionally) in our actions and associations. The questions that haunt me: Can we even act outside of the empire(s) within which we exist? Does resistance actually perpetuate the empire(s) of which we are a part? My head spinning with the readings, I am most curious about how we may have unconsciously contributed to the creation of the American empire both individually and collectively.²

Matthew³ began his essay and our evening with with the Greeks, more specifically Pericles⁴. Pericles not only emphasizes the irritating origins of ignoring the deceased in a memorial service⁵ but also beautifully frames our work this week in the rhetoric of the Empire. The individuals’ exceptionalism is buried in the context of the exceptionalism of the city (or the nation or the culture). An individual has value because they have defended Athens, have sacrificed for Athens, and are therefore worthy of being called an Athenian. Why wouldn’t everyone want to be a part of such an advanced example of a collection of the human race?⁶ *We* are better than *they* are, let us free them from themselves. Matthew’s task to identify what makes empire attractive, what it demands and costs and how faith and empire challenge, weaken and strengthen each other over time, was no simple one.

Matthew’s first thesis is that “the participants in empire almost entirely with sincerity, believe themselves fit for the responsibility to be lord and owner over the whole world.” Overvaluing our own

¹ Or have already?

² UGHH

³ I struggled here with how to refer to my colleague. We all share Reverend yet it is indeed a religious hierarchical pyramid. I want to honor his specialized study and say Dr. yet that is yet another term describing educational rank. Mr. Johnson seemed too formal and maybe the reading has tainted my ears but even a bit to patriarchal. So I will just stick with Matthew and ask to be forgiven for the lack of formality in the face of such sensitivity to power that will inevitably follow us on our journey this week. (This is meant to be humorous and yet isn’t it the fool that so often exposes the painful truth?)

⁴ Where we even begin this story matters. What if we had started 17 years earlier with the Han Dynasty? How do we manage the fact that America didn’t make the list? (could our exceptionalist myth extend well beyond our borders?)
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_largest_empires

⁵ Meant to be humorous please laugh boisterously.

⁶ This is not far from our own Ralph Waldo Emerson’s stance in his essays on the Anglo Saxon Race where he declares that: it is in fact America who is the legitimate son, the inevitable receiver of the instruments of power.

culture is in fact the definition of Defense. Empires function from an inherently monocultural perspective. Their worldview can only be seen through their own lenses and their own values. Either in denial, defense, or minimization⁷, they view the world with an extremely limited perspective of their own complexity or the complexity of others. “Our state of denial” regarding America’s imperialist history and present is woven into the DNA of our country and its origin myth. When we expose this oversimplified historical narrative as myth, introducing these more complex ideas and motives, those in Denial move to Defense.⁸ There becomes an *us* and a *them*. We overvalue the *us* and devalue the *them*. We *civilized* a nation. Barbarians only resist because they are perceived as inferior. Minimization only arrives on the scene when we become skilled at finding the things we have in common with “those Barbarians” from our VERY limited and stereotypical perspective.⁹ The *creation* of the empire requires Polarization Defense. The *maintenance* of empire seems to flourish in minimization where those in power believe to unconsciously solve the community’s problems from their limited perspective.¹⁰

Matthew later argues that minimization *from an elitist place in the pyramid scheme* is in our DNA as Unitarian Universalists. Of the nearly 200 UU IDI’s that I have administered the bulk of those have returned in Minimization with a trailing orientation in Defense. This means that there are certain times, topics, and experiences that pull us back into Defense. I would argue that Matthew’s description of *our elitist place in the pyramid* is one of those topics that pull us back into Defense (especially regarding wealth and intellect). It is Defense (and not Minimization) because it overvalues *us*. Interestingly, the data we have regarding cultural competence in over 30 countries (and in 17 languages) shows a bell curve in which the majority of people are in minimization (even UU’s). However all of the countries tested were not in civil unrest, were not at war, and were experiencing an already minimized version of their country’s culture (where violence is likely less explicit and oppression is couched in systems).

Using America as my primary example, I would argue that we don’t explicitly have to believe ourselves to be (or desire to be) “the lord and owner over the world” to wield our power *like* an Empire (or an out of control garden hose). Well intended people with *legitimate* concern from their limited perspective can create (or perpetuate) an empire. The empire need not even have a awareness of the complexity of American exceptionalism or consider themselves to be superior to have a significantly negative impact. It appears that we have managed to replicate our British Empire DNA with one particular genetic adaptation: the center of power lies not with a single individual and that individual’s directive to colonize. We have no defined emperor per se. We are instead a Republic (not a democracy), functioning with 3 branches of government and a constitution (that claims to have been designed to protect the minority from a founding father’s limited white, male, landowner perspective.) Further, in our increased diversification and specialization, we have given our power

⁷ Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity Bennett, Milton, Hammer Mitch

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ This would be the time when many might say they have a Barbarian friend (minimizing heir definition of friend and discount power dynamics) a Barbarian who works for me, works in the cubicle next to me, who goes to my church.

¹⁰ Temporary dismantling of an empire might occur if we are thrown back into Polarization and demonize the empire itself. This is how we simply perpetuate the empire building process replacing one for another.

away to groups of systems (made up of individuals who perpetuate those systems of which they are a part, ironically in the name of self preservation, not necessarily in the conscious name of the Empire). Most of us cannot survive without participation in these systems.¹¹ We cannot completely remove ourselves from these systems without utter isolation.¹²

America seems to be a collection of empires all under the same roof. And regardless of their intention at their origin, all of these empires directly connect to an individual's basic needs: food, healing, peace, education (who has access to what resources, who defines our narrative, how research is funded), city structures (from plumbing to sewage, roads, to trash pickup). Who is responsible for the values of these empires? For their impact? No one seems to be and we all are. The asleep are as guilty as the awake. The dominant consideration of the empire seems only to be its survival. We are a product of the systems of which we are a part, including the many empires which make up this country, that minimize the problems and the solutions to the detriment of the complexity of the people involved (even as they "help people" with their problems or work to meet their needs.)¹³

Matthew's second claim is that "in the seeds of the logic of empire are also the plant whose oxygen might give us life." Matthew reminds us that empire takes on a quality of divinity and describes it as "a sacrament, a visible manifestation of the holy in the world." I would argue that empire is not a sacrament but a man made and ever insufficient idol masquerading as God. This is why its logic will always become its downfall. It is this idolatry that we are warned of so often in Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. The holy does encompass freedom and peace but the holy can not be the state, or the nation, or the empire. We create constructs of right and wrong to serve our purposes. God does not choose sides. Someone will always come to "present a more living vision of the empire's expression of divinity" because it will eternally be insufficient. And to continue with my cultural competence frame, the empire requires assimilation and not adaptation. In adaptation, we see value in difference. The needs of the other are not merely defined by us and considered by us. People come together and seek to understand, frame-shift and modify behavior. There is an appreciation of and addressing of power imbalances. Empires require assimilation not adaptation. We lose voice and soul. What matters to us has no place for expression or acknowledgement. Empires will forever be exposed not only because of their poor logic "we must destroy the village to save it" but also because the God with whom the empire aligns will always be too small.

Does the allergy to Christian language in many of our members and sometimes us serve our desire to dismantle the empire? I would argue that acts of social justice that continue to minimize certain groups actually perpetuate the very thing we are trying to eliminate. Christians minimize the gospel. UU's minimize Christianity. As a Christian Universalist I am trying to hold the complexity of both Christianity and Universalism by examining the complexity of my understanding of the gospel and therefore adding another voice to the conversation. How do we move those in polarization along the continuum? Help them to see what they have in common with their polar opposites. UU's are

¹¹ I.e. the economy broadly, Health Care, the Justice System, Education, The Oil Industry, Industrialized Food, Electricity, even the Credit Bureau. Glving up Amazon, gas powered cars, recycling and putting in Solar panels will not save us.

¹² It may not even be possible.

¹³ And those problems are mostly perpetuated by the empire itself.

great at this, it's in our DNA. Where we keep missing the mark is that we deny the complexity of our heritage (that includes unitarianism and universalism) and overestimate our own cultural competence. So, we seek to understand others before we fully understand ourselves and our own identity. Who are we? How did we come to be who we are with the values we hold today? What are *our* uses and abuses of power? What is our culture of resistance/conflict? Of forgiveness? Of Mercy? Of Change? If we do indeed lack a theology of surrender to God, how does this impact our perceptions of human power? What is our capacity for our own complexity? How quick do we jump to resist and minimize the conflicts and paradoxes? If the complexity is overwhelming (and maybe even paralyzing) then we have likely moved into Acceptance. In the lens of cultural competence this is in fact a good thing. (even though it is frustrating). In order to know our next steps, we must become clear of our goals and their connections to our values. If our congregations are in minimization (which likely the bulk of them are) the work is self examination (How was their allergy of Christianity shaped and formed?) before they will ever fully understand our heritage and the paradox of Christianity both as a weapon of the empire and a valuable tool for empire's demise.¹⁴

I look forward to the conversation ahead and humbly submit my response.

¹⁴ Here we can insert a deep argument of who and how we define the gospel, atonement theory, who can claim themselves a Christian and the relationship between Christianity and Judaism... but I will submit to the allotted time I have been given and have faith that as our week unfolds with all of the topics divided we will be further enlightened.