

Sunday Service on August 14, 2022 by Bill Baylis - Text version

Extremism and Conspiracy Theories: Threats to Truth, Integrity, and Democracy -

As we struggle to make sense of violence and irrationality in the world today, we must recognize the power of these agents of mobilization while guarding against their inherent dangers.

[Opening Hymn]

Prelude:

Impressive and beautiful images from the 10 billion-dollar James Webb Space Telescope show us stars, galaxies, and black holes as they existed from thousands to billions of years ago, back to a time before humans existed, before there was any life on Earth, even before the Earth and the rest of our solar system existed! See www.nasa.gov/webbfirstimages. The Carina Nebula is a stellar nursery about 8500 lightyears (ly) away in our own Milky Way. On the other hand, the deep-sky galactic cluster SMACS0723 is 6.5 billion years old (and ly distant), so the light we see was emitted about the time our solar system was being formed. Some of the red galaxies in the image are from over 13 billion years ago, less than a billion years after the Big Bang that gave rise to the Universe!

Just 1 week after the James Webb Space Telescope [revealed its first images](#), including the deepest infrared image of the universe (pictured), a team has used the telescope's data to find a candidate for the earliest galaxy ever seen, one that existed 13.5 billion years ago. If correct, the galaxy was shining just 300 million years after the big bang. The previous record was held by a galaxy called GN-z11, seen by the Hubble Space Telescope when the universe was 400 million years old. As [New Scientist reports](#), one of Webb's "early release science" projects has scanned images from Webb's near-infrared camera and found signs of two very distant galaxies, one at a similar distance to GN-z11 and another even farther, dubbed GLASS-z13. The distances were obtained using a relatively crude method involving their brightness at different wavelength bands. They will need to be confirmed by later Webb observations using spectrographs, which can more precisely measure the shift in the galaxies' spectral lines toward the red end of the spectrum by the expansion of the universe—a way of measuring cosmic distances. Having seen such distant galaxies so soon in the mission suggests Webb may be an even better early galaxy hunter than expected, the authors say.

How can these images and our comprehension of them not affect our understanding of our place in the universe and our spiritual beliefs about the meaning and value of life and the possible existence of God or a supreme being?

But will these images also encourage humanity to consider its own longer-term existence and what it must do to ensure a future existence on Earth will be possible? The infrared eye of the space telescope helps it peer through the cosmic dust of stellar

nurseries and compensate for the growing expansion of the universe, allowing us to see far into the distant past, but it won't let us see even a few years into the future.

[Meditation Hymn]

Main Talk: Extremism and Conspiracy Theories: Threats to Truth, Integrity, and Democracy. A. Existential Threats.

From studies of both nature and human society we recognize multiple existential threats, threats to our very existence as individuals, groups, or society.

One major threat is the anthropogenic (human-caused) **climate change and global warming** that scientists have long warned us was coming, and that now the world is experiencing first hand: record high temperatures, severe droughts in some places (SW USA, Italy, France, Spain), followed by devastating floods in others (in Eastern Kentucky > 37 deaths, in Las Vegas a months worth of precipitation in < 2 hours, and others around the world, huge out-of-control fires (McKinney fire in Northern California and all over the globe (Portugal, Spain, Greece—a sign of more to come with increasing warming!)), polar regions heating much faster (2 to 7 times!) than temperate zones and related catastrophes, but we face **other existential threats as well, including pandemics, warfare with nuclear weapons, and cyber and drone attacks using autonomous and robotic technology**. And as though that's not enough, we've seen that extremism, conspiracy theories, lies, and political violence can magnify these threats and their harmful **impacts on democracy, on rationality, and on personal and religious freedoms**.

B. Fear and Hate vs. Hope and Love.

For self-preservation, we naturally fear not only the existential threats themselves, but also unfamiliar and foreign environments that may harbour them. Such fear is a natural, healthy reaction that may protect us. But it can also be irrational, negative, polarizing, and counter-productive, and it contributes to xenophobia, systemic racism, white supremacy, and anti-immigrant behaviour.

As written in the UU Olinda mission statement (and repeated in our chalice lighting and occasionally copied by other UUs in their bylines), "love is a more positive force for good than fear." However, though love is more **positive**, fear can be a more **powerful** as a motivating force, especially when combined with religious fundamentalism and fervor in conspiracy theories and as an excuse for disruption, violence, and destruction, especially in times of existential threat. Politicians have long recognized the power of fear and its often associated partner hate and have often used it to help win elections. Fundamentalists may justify the resulting violence as arising either directly from God's old-testament wrath or indirectly by His subjects trying to curry His blessing.

C. Democracy vs. Authoritarian Rule.

UUs covenant to promote the democratic process, but because of concern that democracy itself can be confrontational and divisive, there are efforts among UUs, Quakers, and others to develop alternative decision-making processes based on consensus building. However, in our fast-paced world, there are many others in too great a hurry, who lack the patience and leisure required for reflective deliberation and seem all-too-willing to sacrifice democracy for the efficiency of authoritarian rule. That should be a mistake, of course, but the fast pace of events together with conspiracy theories may enflame a desperation that makes the adoption of authoritarianism appear attractive.

D. Lies and Conspiracy Theories.

From the hearings of the January-6 Commission in the US House of Representatives, it is clear that we have been living through a critical stage in American history. Here in Canada, we have witnessed the dangerously destructive potential of a sequence of **conspiracy theories**. A “conspiracy theory” is in fact usually not a “theory” at all in any scientific sense. Instead, it is an alternative and usually fanciful explanation that some events and even existential threats have been created by a secret cabal of usually wealthy and powerful conspirators to serve their own evil and selfish purposes. The explanation is often sufficiently nutty that it can be difficult to believe that anyone would take it seriously: Hilary Clinton running a pedophile sex ring of underage girls in the basement of the Comet Ping Pong Pizzeria in Washington, DC? Maybe offering Satanic Ritual Abuse (SRA) including even cannibalism? No one could believe this, could they?

Well, on December 4, 2016, Edgar Maddison Welch, a 28-year-old man from [Salisbury, North Carolina](#), arrived at Comet Ping Pong to rescue the enslaved children. He fired three shots from a [AR-15 style assault weapon](#) that struck the restaurant's walls, a desk, and a door. After office surrounded the restaurant. he surrendered and was arrested without incident. No one was injured, and Welch was sentenced to four years in prison. The experience shows how fear, stoked by conspiracy theories and amplified by advertising techniques developed to promote sales by TV evangelists, can be a powerful motivator. Its followers may feel they have privileged insight into a demonic occurrence with an explanation of why events did not fulfill expectations that had been blown out of proportion by biased news broadcasts.

There are other ways that unpopular decisions come to be made in democratic countries. In the U.S., after decades of sustained restructuring efforts by conservative “Federalist” forces, the Supreme Court of the US (SCOTUS) has made rulings that push America into what surveys and referenda show are generally unpopular post-Roe decisions, effectively restricting both reproductive rights and needed action on climate change. [See discussion and the story “A Dangerous Road” below.] It’s no wonder that many Americans feel isolated and threatened.

There is no creed for UUs to recite, and from the chalice lighting of UU Olinda: “The search for Truth shall make us free.” Yet conspiracy theories and their fanciful lies—

from the 2008 birther conspiracy (that Obama was not born in the US), to pizzagate (human trafficking and a child sex ring) in 2016 to QAnon (including child cannibalism) in 2018 to Trump's Big Lie (that he really won the 2020 election)--not only survive but, according to recent surveys, dominate Republican thinking in the USA by 71% in spite of repeated and indisputable debunking by reliable investigations.

What accounts for the astonishing power of lies and conspiracy theories? They may offer comfort and escape. By joining a group claiming uncommon insight, individuals signal allegiance to an in-group, empowered by co-conspirators in adherence to widely accepted falsehoods or uncommon perspectives that are claimed to provide deep insight. On the other hand, a conspiracy theory may describe a new existential threat, one that could incite more action.

Artificial Intelligence (AI), developed for advertising and applied to politics and social media, really works, and it can be a potent force! Misunderstanding the voting process and its mathematics (e.g., results declared before all the votes are counted) together with biased or wishful reporting can feed false expectations and cause losses that only conspiracy theories seem able to explain.

While positive news is popular and can help sell news programs and products, negative news, such as a loss of voting power by the action of replacement theory (loss of democratic vote by replacement of members by outsiders) can be threatening for future existence. Love is a more positive force for good than fear, but fear—esp. existential fear-- may be better at mobilizing action such as getting out the vote!

E. A Search for Truth and Meaning

How do you search for truth and counter lies and conspiracy theories? Seek out and use a variety of trusted, reliable news outlets. View information critically and encourage discussion and debate. Reduce cynicism by encouraging votes **for society** while condemning those designed solely for partisan goals. Thus, I would condemn those Democrats who supported far right-wing Republican candidates in the primaries because they were thought easier to defeat in the general election.

The story of the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), addressing climate change, prescription drug prices, corporate taxation, technical infrastructure, and more) offers further examples. This was a reduced version of the dem's ambitious "Build Back Better" bill, which failed because of unanimous Republican opposition, the shaky positions of a couple of Democratic Senators, and the filibuster rule that required a super-majority vote. The IRA was widely praised as needed by America and the world for its proposed action on climate change, health care, and corporate taxation, and the strong Republican opposition seemed only explainable as spite, predicated to denying credit to the Democrats for such a major piece of desirable legislation. Republicans vowed to hold up legislation to help veterans suffering from injuries evidently caused by toxic burn-pits. The Dems were trying to pass the bill under a special reconciliation procedure that required full support of all senator Democrats and once that seemed impossible,

the Republicans let the veteran burn-pit bill pass. Shortly thereafter, the democratic Senators announced that, surprise!, they had reached agreement on the reconciliation IRA bill after all!. Its strong support by such varied sources as Nobel economist Paul Krugman (“a major step forward toward saving the planet”) and Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates (“A remarkable moment for Congress and the Country”) amounts to an impressive endorsement, and passage of the IRA can be seen as a win for the world.

F. White Christian Nationalism

We still face existential threats. All too many Americans face threats to their jobs and homes every month. One illness or accident could ruin their lives. One of the most insidious threats is associated with (White) Christian Nationalism. **Christian Nationalism**, like other fundamentalist religions, is not democratic, rational, or scientific. As a revival of an extreme antisemitic, anti-black, Nazi-aligned party from the 1950s, it wants to indoctrinate school children with its fundamentalist religion. Its beliefs are given by scripture or creed and are not generally open to debate or scientific inquiry, but are fundamental to the faith. Nonbelievers and even those who merely question principles of faith are infidels or heretics, and are not welcome in the faith community. Indeed, Christian Nationalists, together with other fundamentalists, have even tried to restrict science teaching as well as social history with critical thinking and analysis, e. g. critical race theory, in schools. Right-wing Georgia Representative Marjorie Taylor Green, who defeated 5 challengers in the primary election at the end of May 2022, advocates that the Republican Party declare itself aligned with Christian Nationalism. [See Dean Obeidallah, MSNBC Opinion July 28, 2022.] She, together with Doug Mastriano, the Republican candidate for governor of Pennsylvania, argue that America was founded as a white, Christian nation, and that we must fight to preserve that distinction.

A review of U.S. history tells a different story (see the Hartman Report): the Founding Fathers of the USA were more Unitarian Deists than Christian, and it is clear that “They vigorously opposed *all* religious leaders from gaining *any* access whatsoever to the levers of political power or intermingling in any way with state business.” The U.S. Treaty with Tripoli, worked out under first president Washington and signed by second president John Adams in 1797, reads “As the government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian Religion...” There is room, to be sure, for differing conclusions depending on one’s chosen source and focus. It reminds me of the debate of whether UUs are Christian, a debate that ministers of our church have navigated in different ways.

UUs at least are not fundamentalists. We welcome questions and challenges as we search for truth and the ultimate meaning of life. As a favorite UU car magnet states:

Our Church in Olinda has a proud history of fighting fundamentalist religious indoctrination in the schools. With the help of Alan Borovoy (longtime general counsel of the



Canadian Civil Liberties Association) and the Ethical Education Association in 1961-67, our church fought such teaching as done by the Bible Club (a Baptist missionary group) (see Louise Foulds book pp 105-7). The Ontario government appointed the MacKay committee to study religious indoctrination in the schools. The Olinda brief was the only one to oppose the indoctrination, but in 1969, the committee report recommended such indoctrination be discontinued. However, only in 1993 did the Ontario Court of Appeal declare such indoctrination unconstitutional.

However, relations of Olinda with the United Church there had largely healed by 1972, thanks to personal friendship of the ministers.

Violent protests seem to be on the rise in Canada as well as elsewhere in the world, as we witnessed in Windsor during the trucker blockade. They often seem triggered by irrational hate. However, even just an implicit threat of violence can be sufficient to change political history, as Michelle Goldberg points out in her NYT Opinion piece. She argues that then FBI Director James Comey's mis-steps to avoid right-wing backlash may have been instrumental in Trump's victory over Clinton in the 2016 election.

A broad understanding of motivations together with a critical analysis of events is needed for a balanced, objective view. Kids do not need to be protected from the truth; they can handle it. They need to hear the full story and recognize and acknowledge that we may occasionally be wrong! Indeed, that is part of the learning process and what makes us human! Only by accepting truth will they develop the integrity that is so critically important in not only in science and engineering, but also in the advancement of human relations.

Studies have reported that Christian Nationalism, along with church attendance generally, is declining in America and even worldwide. However, it is still a powerful force in conservative religions and in right-wing political communities. Its long-planned domination of the Supreme Court of the U.S. (SCOTUS) is especially disturbing (see recent invited guest opinions in the New York Times by Pulitzer-prize winning investigative reporter Linda Greenhouse, who has reported in the Times on Supreme Court issues for 44 years), and it runs counter to demographic trends that will make white conservative Christians a voting minority by 2030. This is a true existential crisis that has led to gerrymandering and voting restrictions, and it is coupled with the implied threat of the "inverse golden rule" under which White Christian Nationalists fear they will be treated by others in the future just as they treated blacks, Muslims, and other minority sects in the past. As Greenhouse recently concluded in addressing the

Justices of the recently reconstituted Supreme Court and the disruption caused by their recent Dobbs ruling overthrowing the half-century constitutional right to abortion: “[J]ustices, your work isn’t done. What you have finished off is the legitimacy of the court on which you are privileged to spend the rest of your lives.”

To conclude, events over the past several years have demonstrated surprising but real threats to our freedoms, democracy, and systems of justice, driven by fear of changing demographics, the explosion and growing influence of social media, and a loss of trust in science and government institutions, all promoted with lies and conspiracy theories.

How do we continue to move forward, advancing the search for truth while eliminating lies and conspiracy theories? UUism offers a valuable path: Don’t hide the truth or ban true stories and histories. It doesn’t protect youthful minds to pretend that racism did not exist or did not present barriers to minority and indigenous groups. Make legislators accountable for their actions and punish those individuals and parties that habitually lie and whose votes are driven by politics rather than by what’s best for society or the world. The recent 1.6 B\$ suit of Fox News by Dominion Voting Systems should serve as a wake-up call! It involves real money!

There is much work to be done and relevant events (such as mishandling critical top-secret government documents and the Mar a Lago “raid” and irresponsibly inflammatory reactions) seem to continue at an increasing pace. Our UU principles can help light the way with love, reason, respect, compassion, and the search for truth. Our commitment to them can spur us on to appropriate action.

[Closing Hymn]

Suggested hymns

Opening Hymn: **Gather the Spirit, Harvest the Power** #347
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6lflAC9bh5k>

Or <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bVbV1Ykf4SA>

Meditation Hymn: **Winds Be Still** #83
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HhYFmG5MsuY>

Closing Hymn: **This Little Light of Mine** #118
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NsbRIq-ebWg>

(Alternative Hymn: Lift every voice and sing #149)

References for further reading:

Thomas B. Edsall, [Why Conspiracy Theories Flourish in Trump’s America, NYT opinion, quest essay. June 22, 2022.](#)

Thomas Hartman: The Hartman Report, the Daily Take. June 29, 2022

_____ July 11, 2022, Where Did the Religious Nuttery Come From?

_____ Aug 2, 2022, Republicans have a Plan to Change the Constitution

Articles and books by **Katharine Stewart: Christian Nationalists Are Excited About What Comes Next**, NYT July 5, 2022 and **The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism (Bloomsbury 2020, pb 2022)**”

Review of Stewart’s **The Power Worshipers** A revelatory investigation of the Religious Right’s rise to political power.

For too long the Religious Right has masqueraded as a social movement preoccupied with a number of cultural issues, such as abortion and same-sex marriage. But in her deeply reported investigation, Katherine Stewart reveals a disturbing truth: America’s Religious Right has evolved into a Christian nationalist movement. It seeks to gain political power and to impose its vision on all of society. It isn’t fighting a culture war, it is waging a political war on the norms and institutions of American democracy.

Stewart shows that the real power of the movement lies in a dense network of think tanks, advocacy groups, and pastoral organizations, embedded in a rapidly expanding community of international alliances with likeminded, anti-democratic religious nationalists around the world, including Russia. She follows the money behind the movement and traces much of it to a group of super-wealthy, ultraconservative donors and family foundations. The Christian nationalist movement is far more organized and better funded than most people realize. It seeks to control all aspects of government and society. Its successes have been stunning, and its influence now extends to every aspect of American life, from the White House to state capitols, from our schools to our hospitals.

The Power Worshipers is a brilliantly reported book of warning and a wake-up call. Stewart’s probing examination demands that Christian nationalism be taken seriously as a significant threat to the American republic and our democratic freedoms.

Linda Greenhouse, **Justice on the Brink: The Death of Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the Rise of Amy Coney Barrett, and Twelve Months That Transformed the Supreme Court**, Random House, 2021.

_____ **Requiem for the Supreme Court**, NYT opinion piece, June 24, 2022.

_____ **Religious Doctrine, Not the Constitution, Drove the Dobbs Decision**, NYT Opinion, July 22, 2022.

Robert S. McElvaine article July 10, 2022: A Coup More Effective than Donald Trump

Paul Krugman NYT Opinion Aug. 1, 2022, Can Inflation Reduction Save the Planet?

_____ NYT Opinion Aug. 8, 2022, _Did Democrats Just Save Civilization?

Philip S. Gorski and Samuel L. Perry: **The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy**, Oxford Univ. Press, April 2022

Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry: Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States, Oxford, 2020.

Michelle Goldberg NYT Opinion, Aug. 11, 2022, _The Absurd Argument Against Making Trump Obey the Law.

Jeremy W. Peters NYT Aug. 14, 2022. Defamation Suit about Election puts Fox on Its Heels.

Louise Foulds, **Universalists in Ontario**, 1980, 2005.

Appendix A: A dangerous road

Driving in a high occupancy vehicle lane meant for at least two people, Brandy Bottone told a police officer who pulled her over in Dallas that her unborn child, due early next month, should count as the second passenger. It didn't work.

"It seems Texas's strict anti-abortion law, which defines an 'unborn child' as 'an individual living member of the homo sapiens species,' only applies when it can be used against women -- not when it can help them get out of a traffic ticket," wrote **Jill Filipovic**.

"It's understandable, given how disheartening the last weeks have been for those of us who believe women have a fundamental right to bodily autonomy, to want to cheer for the moments that clarify just how dystopian anti-abortion laws really are. But as satisfying as this gotcha moment might be, establishing a fertilized egg, embryo or fetus as a separate person imbued with the same rights as you or I is a step down a dangerous path. It is absurd to be sure. But it's also incredibly perilous for women's rights and for a reality-based society more broadly."