

# The Rev. Dr. Kharma R. Amos: The spirituality of civic engagement

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The Rev. Dr. Kharma R. Amos, Unitarian Universalist Church of Brunswick

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Despite growing up in a hippy household that “let it all hang out,” I still absorbed the message from the larger culture that it was improper to discuss religion, sex and politics “in polite company.”

As an adult, I realize how much I missed out on not having had open, candid discussions about how my faith and spirituality might both inspire and inform my actions to improve my community. I’m convinced that the practice of compartmentalization, which I inherited and see being reinforced in popular culture, does not serve us. If we try to separate our spirituality from the social or political causes we care about, we deprive ourselves of one of the best resources we have for working together to make the world better.

Right now, ’tis the season for elections, which means there is a lot of political activity afoot — campaigning and voting and stumping for particular issues. People of faith ought to be engaging in conversations about these things with passion and purpose. Our spiritual traditions have a lot to say about the issues of our world; they provide values, principles and wisdom to help us determine how to live well together.

Yes, the separation of church and state is a deeply cherished value in the United States. Yes, the freedom of religion (the rights of persons to determine which, if any, religious traditions and practices they will observe) is a vital human right. Freedom of and freedom from religion are essential cornerstones for democracy. And what is also true is that the values flowing from our spirituality — whether we are Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Wiccan, Christian, Humanist or refused to be labeled and boxed — can and should provide energy and vision for our social justice and political action. We need a more holistic engagement that encourages integration rather than segmenting out the spiritual from the social, sexual or political.

Churches and religious bodies today are sometimes so afraid of losing their charitable tax status that they overcompensate and outlaw political conversations entirely. We individual members of those spiritual communities are often complicit in this. What rubbish!

We should definitely be talking with one another about the things that matter most to us. We should be engaging with civic leaders to determine which values motivate their choices and what ethics guide their behavior. If we could transcend the “don’t talk politics and religion” taboos as well as our own fears, we might be able to tackle the issues we all care about (i.e., the housing crisis, health care, human rights) in a more creative and collaborative fashion.

In my own Unitarian Universalist tradition, as one example, our first principle is to respect “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” Those are not just words. That principle ought to drive me to the polls to vote for the legislators and the legislation that will protect and serve the marginalized and undervalued people of our community. It ought to compel me further to stay at the table where important conversations are being had about how we partner across our differences to meet common challenges with resilience and resourcefulness.

Civic engagement generally refers to the various ways (both political and non-political) that we promote a better quality of life for all in our community. This does not need to be done in a vacuum from our spirituality. In fact, what better application or test of our spirituality than to bring its wisdom and tools to bear on the important challenges we face!

For the love of all that is holy, let your spirit take you to the polls (or sit you down to fill out your absentee ballot) and vote your values.

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