

“A History and Theology of Unitarian Universalism”

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Preface

What I'll be presenting today is not *the* history and theology of Unitarian Universalism, but *a* history and theology of Unitarian Universalism. There are many versions available to suit many needs. My primary resource is the late Earl Morse Wilbur, a leading authority on Unitarian history.

My goal is to give you a general sense of the history and theology of Unitarian Universalism. I will do this primarily by telling a series of stories.

In 1961, the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America merged to form the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. I will first tell you a history and theology of the Unitarians.

“A History and Theology of Unitarianism”

Unitarianism was a concept long before it was a movement. At the heart of Unitarianism is the notion of oneness, specifically, the oneness of God.

One of the most powerful influences on Unitarianism was Jewish monotheism. “Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.”

An early Christian influence was Origen, one of the Church Fathers. In the year 230, in a document titled, “Of Principles,” Origen advocated, among other things, the oneness of God.

Another powerful influence on Unitarianism was the Greek concept of Logos. Logos has traditionally been translated as ‘word’ or ‘reason’ or ‘wisdom.’ The Greeks understood logos as a kind of world soul and the intermediary between God and people.

A critical step for the Christian Church occurred when Jesus became identified with the Greek logos. According to the Gospel of John, “In the beginning was the Logos.... and the Logos became flesh and dwelt among us.” After Jesus became identified as the Logos, the problem for later theologians was to explain how Jesus was related to both God and Humanity. This was the subject of a major theological controversy in the 4th Century.

The controversy took place at the Council of Nicea in the year 325. There were three major players at the Council of Nicea. First was Constantine, Emperor of a divided Roman Empire. Constantine had either converted to Christianity or, as a political move, he chose Christianity as a means for unifying his empire. If his motive was political, he made a bad choice; because Christianity, from its very beginning, was diverse, if not divided, in belief and practice. The second major player was Athanasius, who represented the orthodox position that Jesus was God. The key phrase for his position was that Jesus was eternally divine. The third major player was Arius, who represented the liberal view that Jesus was divine, but not eternally divine. Arius said that Jesus was not divine in the same way as God the Father. In the end, Constantine threw his support to Athanasius and Arius was defeated. The result was the Nicene Creed which affirmed the orthodox position that Jesus was God, eternally divine. Those who opposed this view were declared theological heretics and enemies of the state. Our theological forbearers were the losers of this controversy, and they were first known as Arians. Later our spiritual forbearers would be known as Socinians, then as Liberals, and eventually as Unitarians. The original Arians were Christians and had a very high regard for Jesus. They understood Jesus to be the Christ, that is, the special or anointed servant of God. They looked to Jesus as their Lord and Saviour, but they did not see Jesus as God. The point not to be missed is that our spiritual forbearers at the Council of Nicea in 325 sincerely believed that to equate Jesus with God was an act of idolatry, a sin, and an insult to God. They believed that to equate Jesus with God violated the oneness of God. But because the penalty for being a theological heretic or an enemy of the state could be torture or death, those who disagreed with the orthodox position generally kept their convictions to themselves.

At this point, I'm going to jump ahead several hundred years to the 1500's to the point where the concept of the oneness of God is almost becoming a movement. Earl Morse Wilbur, one of the foremost authorities on Unitarianism, said that Unitarianism has been characterized by "freedom, reason, and tolerance." Unitarianism, as an organized religious movement, started in the 1500's, and much of its early history was a struggle not only for institutional survival, but for the personal survival of its adherents.

Early Unitarians often practiced their religion under the threat of fines, confiscation of property, prison, torture, and death. When early Unitarians spoke of religious toleration, they were speaking about the desire to practice their religion free from persecution. More specifically, the religious toleration they sought was legal recognition of their right to exist. The religious toleration that our spiritual forebears sought was in no way a request that others agree with their beliefs, and they certainly were not asking for personal affirmation. They simply wanted the right to practice their religion in peace, nothing more.

To illustrate the nature of the struggle for religious toleration by our Unitarian forebears, I will briefly tell a few stories:

The first is that of Michael Servetus who was burned at the stake in Geneva Switzerland in 1553. Servetus, who was a Trinitarian, had written a book titled, “On the Errors of the Trinity”, and he had gotten into a theological conflict with John Calvin, the Reformation theologian. Eventually, Servetus was charged and found guilty of “spreading heresy.” He was sentenced to die by “slow fire.” Servetus asked to be killed by the sword, lest the great suffering cause him to retract what he believed to be true. But, his request was denied. He was led away crying, “Oh God, save my soul; Oh Jesus, Son of the Eternal God, have mercy on me.” He was led to a pile of wood made up of small sticks and bundles of green oak with leaves still attached. He was seated on a log with his feet touching the ground, his body was chained to a stake, and his neck bound to it by a course rope. His head was covered with straw and leaves, sprinkled with sulfur. His book was tied to his thigh. The fire, which was controlled to burn slowly, took about half an hour to kill Michael Servetus.

The death of Michael Servetus brought about three things. First, Servetus was removed from the world stage and could not longer spread his message. Second, Servetus became a martyr and the concept of the oneness of God now became a movement that would eventually evolve into Unitarianism. The third thing that the death of Michael Servetus did was to raise the broader issue of religious toleration.

Up to this point in history, there was not much thought about, or concern for, religious toleration. The primary reason for this was that almost everybody believed that one’s eternal salvation was dependent upon having the right knowledge of God and Christ. During that time almost all Christians believed that it was absolutely essential that one’s knowledge of God be correct – for if one’s knowledge was not correct, or not truly held, one’s eternal salvation was in jeopardy. This is why heresy and the spreading of heresy were considered to be crimes worthy of death. If there were a school teacher, a minister, or anyone in the community passing on to children or adults an incorrect knowledge of God, this could cause the misled person to burn in hell for eternity. And, the reason they often killed heretics slowly was to give them time to repent before they died. They thought it was better for them to suffer a few minutes and repent of their errors, than to burn in hell for eternity. I know this sounds strange to our ears, but if you want to understand why heresy and the spreading of heresy were considered worthy of death, you have to understand, in that world, right theology was absolutely essential for salvation.

This understanding also sets the stage for my second story about the Unitarian struggle for Religious toleration. The setting for the second story is Poland. The historical beginning of organized Unitarianism was June 10, 1565, at the Synod of Brzeziny. This was the first assembly in which anti- trinitarian congregations met as a separate body to consult for their common ends. The issue that brought them together was baptism of infants. The synod concluded that each congregation should follow the leading of the Holy Spirit and be tolerant of those who adopted different practices.

Without doubt, the most outstanding leader of the Unitarian movement in Poland was Faustus Socinus. He lived from 1539 until 1604. Socinus questioned the doctrine of the Trinity and expressed his personal theology in some letters to another Protestant minister. These were circulated in Poland and in other parts of Europe and eventually published by a nobleman under the title, "Servant of Jesus Christ." In essence, Socinus says that Jesus is our Saviour not because he suffered the penalty that was due us, thus appeasing the wrath of an offended God. Rather Jesus is our Saviour because he made known to us the way of salvation which we may attain by imitating him. This position was a rejection of what theologians call Substitutionary Atonement. But the thing that most distinguished Faustus Socinus was his claim that Jesus was not divine, but simply human. This was a major leap in Unitarian history. Up until this point, the dominant liberal position had been that which Arius had articulated over 1200 years before, that Jesus was divine, but not eternally divine, that Jesus was not divine in the same way as God the Father. Now Socinus says, 'No,' Jesus is not divine at all. He is simply human. At this point, those who would become our spiritual forbearers became known as Socinians.

The reaction to this radical theology by both Catholics and other Protestants was brutal. I'll give two examples: On December 16, 1611, in the great market place in Warsaw, Iwan Tyszkowicz, an accused heretic. (p.446 Wilbur) was executed in the following manner: His tongue was cut out, one hand was cut off, one foot was cut off, he was beheaded, and finally his body was burned. Second example, on July 10, 1660, all Socinians (those who would later be known as Unitarians) had to either recant and declare their allegiance to the Catholic Church or leave Poland. Many, especially the poor who could not afford to relocate recanted and declared their allegiance to Catholicism. But many left Poland. This is the story of one wagon train of 200 wagons. Before the caravan reached safety in Transylvania a roving band of Imperial soldiers fell upon them, robbed them of their money, plundered the few goods they had been able to take from their homes, seized their provisions, and stripped them of the very clothes they wore. This is the kind of religious intolerance that many of our spiritual forebears faced.

The setting for the next story is Transylvania in the mid 1500's. Prior to the Protestant Reformation, Catholicism was the religion of Transylvania. When the Protestant Reformation challenged Catholicism, most of the people became Lutherans. Later most of the population converted to the Reformed Church and were commonly called Calvinist. Prior to Unitarianism becoming popular, there were three "Received Religions," or three legal Religions, in Transylvania: The Catholics, the Lutherans, and the Calvinists.

Transylvania was indeed a more tolerant place than most, and much of this is due to the influence of their young King, John Sigismund and his mother. She had significantly influenced him and nurtured in him an attitude of religious toleration. In a time when most people believed that having the right knowledge of God was essential for salvation, this young King encourage theological debate and religious tolerance. He did this with the help of Giorgio Biandrata, his physician, and Francis David, his Court Preacher. These three became great friends, and together they fostered an atmosphere of religious tolerance. King John Sigismund's last public act before his death at age 31 was to sign a law declaring the Unitarians to be one of the "Received (legal) Religions." This law insured that the Unitarians would enjoy equally with Catholics, Lutherans, and Calvinists, the Constitutional rights of freedom of public worship and equal access to public office and honors.

However, after the death of King John Sigismund, a new King came to power who enacted a law prohibiting any innovations in religion. In essence, the new King said, 'you can keep all the changes that have been made to this point, but no more innovations. Francis David violated that law by teaching that Christ should not be 'adorned or invoked.' He believed that only God should be adorned or invoked. David argued that this was an old teaching and not an innovation, but to no avail. David's good friend, Giorgio Biandrata, came down on the other side of the issue and pleaded with David to stop teaching this new doctrine. Biandrata even arranged for Faustus Socinus from Poland to come to Transylvania to convince David to moderate his position, but to no avail. It is not clear if Biandrata actually disagreed theologically with David or whether Biandrata was just more politically astute. But it is clear that Biandrata was afraid that David was going to cost the entire Unitarian movement their recently won status as a "Received Religion." Eventually David and Biandrata became enemies, with Biandrata serving as the prosecutor at David's trial. However, before David was arrested, he preached his last sermon declaring, "God is One." This statement can still be seen over the doors of many churches in Transylvania. David was found guilty and sentenced to life in prison. He died there about 5 months later.

The next story takes place in England. In 1534, King Henry VIII, through the Act of Supremacy seized control of the Catholic Church in England and set himself up as the head of what would become the Church of England. During the Protestant Reformation, some groups tried to purify the Church of England. These were the Puritans. Other groups gave up on the Church of England and left it. These were the Separatists.

Among the Separatist was John Biddle, the Father of English Unitarianism. He lived from 1615 until 1662. However, the most influential person in English Unitarianism was Dr. Joseph Priestly. He was very intellectual and deeply interested in religion. He is credited with the discovery of oxygen, and he was a good friend of Benjamin Franklin. His theology, which was increasingly liberal, was articulated in two books. One titled, *Corruptions of Christianity*, claimed that primitive Christianity was Unitarian. This led to a major controversy and eventually to violence against all dissenters.

On July 14, 1793, which was the anniversary of the fall of the Bastille, which marked the beginning of the French Revolution, a dinner was held in Birmingham, England to celebrate the revolution. On this evening, the High Church party employed a mob to silence dissenters. The mob burned Dr. Priestly's church and wrecked other churches. They burned Dr. Priestly's home and laboratory, but just moments before, he and his family had escaped. The result of this terror was that the dissenters were crushed. Denying the Trinity was still a crime, and this whole plot was set up to appear that the dissenters had been enemies of both the church and state. In 1794, Dr. Joseph Priestly left England to avoid further persecution and probably death. His ship was bound for New York. Dr. Joseph Priestly will later make his mark on American Unitarianism.

Let's now shift our attention to New England in the early 1600's. Whether called Puritans, Separatists, or Pilgrims, about 20,000 persons sailed from England to New England between 1620 and 1640. By whatever brand they might be called, these pilgrims held to a simple religious belief, a simple manner of worship, and a simple manner of church governance. They did not believe that the church should be under the control of the Pope. Neither did they believe the church should be under the control of the King. Rather, they believed that the members of the congregation should make the decisions about church matters. This was the concept that gave rise to New England Congregationalism. It should be noted that Congregationalism, at that point, was not about theology. It was about how the church was run.

In terms of theology, these New England Puritans embraced a strict form of Calvinism that their fathers had adopted in England. This was so taken for granted that it was over a century before a formal creed was required. This left the door open for diversity, or heresy, depending on one's view.

Unitarianism in America evolved out of New England Congregationalism, and the evocative issue was not the Trinity, but the Nature of Man, or as we would say, the Nature of Humanity. The theology of John Calvin, the Reformation theologian of the 1500's, emphasized 'original sin' and the depravity of all humans; and that salvation was available only through the substitutionary atoning death of Jesus. It was a later follower of Calvin that would emphasize the Doctrine of Election, that only a certain few, the elect, would be saved. According to the Calvinist theology held by most New England Congregationalist, all humans were depraved but some were predestined to be saved and others predestined for hell. The liberal movement in America was a reaction to this fundamentalism regarding the Nature of Man.

In the 1600's in America, the term Unitarian had not yet come into usage. Those Congregationalists who disagreed with the orthodoxy of Calvinism were generally referred to as Liberals. In the 1700's and 1800's, a few were referred to as Arians and a few as Socinians, but most were known as liberal Congregationalist. Only gradually did the term Unitarian come into usage. In America, prior to 1819, it was an insult to call someone a Unitarian.

The story of American Unitarianism is too elaborate to tell in one session, but I will offer this overview. American Unitarianism evolved out of New England Congregationalism in response to four events. As already mentioned, the first was Calvinist theology, especially as it related to the Nature of Man.

The second event was the Baltimore Sermon delivered by William Ellery Channing at the ordination of Jared Sparks in Baltimore, Maryland in 1819. This was a national event, covered by the media from all over America. In this sermon, Channing took up the main doctrines on which Unitarians departed from the Orthodox and held them up, one by one, for searching examination before the bar of popular reason and conscience. It was the first elaborate statement and defense of the liberal position. It furnished the Unitarians a platform to which they could rally, and it laid down a system for their defense. The Baltimore Sermon transformed a vague liberalism into the Unitarian movement. It defined American Unitarianism.

The third event was a legal decision handed down by the Supreme Court of Massachusetts in 1820 regarding church property. This decision determined which group was entitled to church property in the event of a split in the congregation.

After the Baltimore Sermon and the Property Rights Decision, church divisions took place one by one. When a Minister would leave a congregation, that congregation would decide, by its choice of a new Minister, whether it would remain a Congregational Church or become a Unitarian Church. This was a slow painful process for all involved. Finally, on May 25, 1825, the American Unitarian Association was formed. Its constitution said that its purpose was “to diffuse the knowledge and promote the interest of pure Christianity.”

Among the most notable American Unitarians was Ralph Waldo Emerson, leader of the Transcendentalist movement. His Harvard “Divinity School Address” given in 1838 was a defining moment for American Unitarians. In that sermon, he criticized historical Christianity, called into question the supernatural origins of Christianity, and casually dismissed the miracles. At that point in history, both the Orthodox and the Unitarians considered the miracles to be proof that Jesus and Christianity were from God. Older Ministers regarded this address as undermining the very foundations of Christianity. Their fears were to be realized.

Through the 1800’s, the overwhelming majority of Unitarians were liberal Christians; but gradually Humanism became a significant influence and a significant point of controversy. The Humanist Manifest published in 1932 was drafted by a Unitarian Minister, Roy Wood Sellers, and most of the original signers were Unitarians. From about 1920 until about 1945, the Unitarian movement went through an identity crisis. We didn’t know if we would remain liberal Christians or if we would become Humanists. By 1945, we knew. American Unitarianism, as a whole, had become Humanist. Within the larger movement, there were individuals who continued to self identify as Christian, local congregations, such as ours, that continued to identify as Christian, and for the most part, New England Unitarianism continued to stay closer than other regions to its Christian roots; but the movement as a whole had become Humanist. By the end of World War II, persons were joining Unitarian congregations because we were not Christian. As a movement, we had, for all practical purposes, cut our selves off from our religion of origin, and there developed a stronger negative response to Christianity than to any other religion. Humanism was the dominant theological motif in our movement from about 1945 until about 1980. Since about 1980, we have been a religion without a dominant theological motif.

Though I am not ready to begin telling the story of Universalism, I need to point out that it was during this period when the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America merged. The merger took place in 1961. Therefore the remaining part of Unitarian history and theology includes Universalism.

In the late 1970's and early 80's, Feminism started to have an increasingly powerful influence in our movement. Basically, the women rejected the brand of Humanism that had characterized our churches. The kind of Humanism in most Unitarian Universalist churches was a cold, intellectual, elitist, male dominated Humanism that spoke only to the head and not to the heart.

Feminist spirituality affirmed a religion that spoke both to the head and the heart. It affirmed not only intellect but intuition. It affirmed not only reason but faith. It affirmed not only mind but body. And it reestablished the importance and the living presence of the Sacred Feminine. In reclaiming the Sacred Feminine, Unitarian Universalist women found wisdom and spiritual practice in the ancient Earth-Centered, Pagan traditions. These traditions included many gods and goddesses from which one might draw wisdom, strength, and inspiration.

Unitarianism, in its original form, had affirmed that there is one God and that God is one. But by 1980, we were welcoming the many gods and goddesses of the Pagan religions. Where would it all end?

By the 1990's, many Unitarian Universalist Christians were feeling marginalized. There was a sense that every other religion seemed to be welcome in our churches - except Christianity. With Feminist Spirituality having introduced many gods and goddesses into our churches, it no longer made sense to discriminate against the God of Christians. The result was a revival of liberal Unitarian Universalist Christianity. The full significance of this revival is yet to be seen.

In many of our congregations, and in our movement as a whole, there is at present, a renewed interest in spirituality. As a result, we now have many Humanist feeling marginalized. Where will it all end?

Let's now turn our attention to the Universalist.

“A History and Theology of Universalism”

Like Unitarianism, Universalism was a concept long before it was a movement. In its original meaning, Universalism is the belief that all persons will be saved.

Origen, the 3rd Century Church Father who advocated the Oneness of God also affirmed a benevolent God, denied the existence of a literal hell, and argued that God would offer salvation to all people. Another Church Father, Clement of Alexandria, also believed in universal salvation. In fact, it was acceptable to believe in universal salvation until the Fifth General Council in 553. Only then did belief in universal salvation become a heresy.

Universalism did not become a movement until the mid to late 1700's. It arose in response to the emotional preaching of Calvinistic theology, that emphasized original sin, the depravity of man, and predestination.

In 1750, James Rely organized a church in London England based on salvation for all people. He was a very sincere Christian Minister with a deep commitment to the Bible. Through his life, his preaching, and his writings, he would influence many; but of all he influenced, none would have a greater impact on Universalism than John Murry.

John Murry would leave England and come to America. In 1779, Murry organized the first official Universalist Church in America, the “Independent Christian Church of Gloucester, Massachusetts.” Murry would later become known as the Father of American Universalism. Where Calvinist theology contended that only some are elect, that is, that only some will be saved, the message of Murry was that all are elect, that all will be saved. Both John Calvin and John Murry believed that salvation came through the substitutionary atoning death of Jesus. Murry also believed that salvation would come after some suffering in the afterlife. He believed that the soul had to go through some period of purification. But his basic message was that all will eventually be saved.

The response to Murray and to Universalism was strong. He was hated and persecuted. He was considered immoral and subversive. There were attempts to keep Universalists from testifying in court and from serving on juries. The rationale for this was that if one did not fear going to hell, one might say or do anything. Their word and judgment could not be trusted! In addition, there was great pressure put

on the children of Universalists because school teachers would often urge these children to turn against their parents. Because Universalism was not one of the “Established Religions,” Universalist Ministers could not perform weddings and the Universalist churches did not receive any tax support like the “Established” churches. Remember, this was before separation of church and State, and all established religions were supported by taxes collected by the government. The Universalists had to pay taxes to support the other churches and they had to provide all financial support for their church. Another interesting story involves John Murray when he was a chaplain in the Revolutionary Army. None of the men would listen to him, and they were often disrespectful. In response to that, General George Washington issued an order saying, in effect, “Respect this man”.

Though Murry was the Father of American Universalism, the Giant of Universalism in America was Hosea Ballou. Ballou’s message was very different from the message of Murry. Ballou rejected the whole notion of Calvinistic atonement. For Ballou, Man is not depraved and God does not require an infinite sacrifice. According to Ballou, sin is limited or finite and it does not require an infinite sacrifice. Ballou was also a rigid Determinist. That is, he did not believe that Man was free to reject salvation. He also believed that salvation was granted immediately upon death. Hosea Ballou is remembered for the phrase, “Give them hope, not hell.” In essence, Ballou believed that the grace of God was greater than human sin.

It should also be noted that the Universalists were the first denomination in America to ordain a woman. Olympia Brown was ordained by the Universalists in 1863.

It should also be noted that the kind of Humanism that influenced the Universalists was the humanism of Jesus, a warm caring humanism that operated within the context of religious faith. Universalists were often in the forefront of improving prisons, hospitals, schools, and mental institutions. They were also leaders in the abolition of slavery and advocates for women’s suffrage. Universalists also tended to stay closer to their biblical roots, and they were frugal.

Compared to Unitarians, Universalist congregations, as a group, were less educated, poorer, and more rural. However, the First Universalist Church of Lynn, the mother church of our congregation, was an exception. The First Universalist Church of Lynn was well educated, relatively wealthy, and urban. In the late 1800’s and early 1900’s, the First Universalist Church of Lynn, was the largest Universalist church in the world, with a “reported membership” in 1936 of over 1,600.

By 1888, the Universalists were the sixth largest denomination in America, boasting a membership of 800,000. It should be noted, however, that this number was probably inflated. By the time of merger with the Unitarians in 1961, Universalists numbered less than 50,000, and it may have been as low as 11,000. Now let's look at the merger, our six theological sources, and our seven Principles.

The Merger of the Unitarians and the Universalists, Our Six Sources and Seven Principles

The merger of the Unitarians and the Universalists in 1961 was an expression of religious diversity and of religious toleration. For example, many Unitarians did not believe in universal salvation. On the other hand, many Universalists were Trinitarians. So, from the very beginning, we had some members of our churches that held Unitarian theology while others held Trinitarian theology. We had some members who strongly believed in Universal Salvation and some who did not.

What this meant was that we had either already passed the point where a common theology could identify us, or we were going to reach that point very quickly. Regardless of when it happened, we, as a religious movement, are far beyond the point where Unitarian Universalists can be identified by a common belief systems. Our theological diversity is reflected in the six general sources from which we draw wisdom and inspiration. Here are our six general sources:

Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;

Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;

Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;

Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;

Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;

Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

With this diversity of sources, there is no way that we can have a common belief system. The closest thing we have to a common theology is our Seven Principles, and even these are not binding on

individuals. This is not to say that an individual can't use the Principles as a primary guide; but the Principles are part of the covenant entered into by Member Congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association.

All congregations that want to be a part of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations must commit to affirming and promoting the following Seven Principles:

The inherent worth and dignity of every person;

Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations;

Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;

A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;

The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;

The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;

Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Individuals who join our congregations may affirm and promote the Seven Principles, but they are not required to. To require belief in, ascend to, or support of, would devolve the Principles into a Creed. That we would never do. What we offer is a non-creedal religious community, rooted in these seven principles, that encourages persons to develop their beliefs according to their own reason and conscience.

We are not the only religion that encourages its adherents to use their reason and conscience. However, what distinguishes us from most other religions is the extent to which we do this. In most other religions, there is some external authority that supersedes one's own reason and conscience. In some religions, it may be a designated leader like the Pope, Imam, Bishop, or a local pastor. In other religions, the external authority may be a Creed, or it may be a sacred text like the Bible. But, as a Unitarian Universalist, when it comes to personal beliefs, you are the ultimate authority. Within the scope of your private life, your reason and conscience prevails over everything else.

But, let it be known to all that this radical elevation of reason and conscience to the place of ultimate authority places the individual on a dangerous slippery slope. Some of the most abhorrent atrocities ever committed in the history of the world have been done by people following their reason and conscience.

Reason and conscience can be wrong. Because reason and conscience can be misguided, we have set for ourselves two safeguards when it comes to giving expression to our beliefs. The first is a personal commitment that we will do no harm. For example, if I am being led by my reason and conscience to do violence to another person or to the environment, I would not do that. I would know (at least in theory) that my reason and conscience was misguided. So the first safeguard to expressing our reason and conscience is the commitment that we will do no harm.

The second safeguard has to do with our life within the congregation. In expressing our reason and conscience within the congregation, our commitment is to live within the limits of the democratic process. That is, we will act in accordance with the collective wisdom of the majority. For instance, if I am being led by my reason and conscience to declare our church a political sanctuary for illegal immigrants, I would not do that on my own. I would know (at least theoretically) that my reason and conscience first needed to be tested by the collective wisdom and democratic process of the congregation.

Simply put, the expression of our reason and conscience needs to be limited by a personal commitment to do no harm, and we need to live our lives within the context of a religious community that can both support and challenge us.

My Personal Perspective on Religious Diversity and Religious Toleration

It is my sense that one of the most attractive things about Unitarian Universalism is the freedom we offer persons to develop their beliefs according to their own reason and conscience. Such freedom of thought always yields diversity of beliefs. And diversity of beliefs always produces tension. This tension is not necessarily bad. It can lead to meaningful dialogue, broader understanding, and spiritual richness.

But the danger and fear is that our diversity will divide us. All too often, this is what happens. Today, and every day, people in many parts of the world are literally killing one another because of their religious differences.

I am convinced that the best gift that Unitarian Universalism has to offer the world is a model of how to be a global community locally. Our commitment to freedom and tolerance allows us to be that model.

But, being part of a diverse religious community is not easy, and it's always costly. The price of admission into a Unitarian Universalist congregation is quite high. First you must value diversity. Second, you have to respect all persons. Third, you have to be tolerant of beliefs and practices that are contrary to your own. Fourth, you must be willing to regularly sacrifice your personal preferences and spiritual comfort. Fifth, you must learn how to be in *creative reconciling dialogue*. Being part of a diverse religious community is a wonderful thing, if you can stand it - and if you can pay the personal cost. The question then is this: how much is it worth to be part of an experimental religious community that is imperfectly attempting to model for the world how to be a global community locally?

Perhaps Unitarian Universalism has always been an experiment in religious freedom, but since about 1980, our experiment has become more radical. No other religion in the world tries to do what we do every Sunday. That is, we come together for spoken worship - singing, praying, preaching- spoken worship - with no common religious myth and no common religious language. To my knowledge, this has never before been done. Somewhere in the last 100 years, we, as a religious movement, separated ourselves from the Christian myth that had given birth to both Unitarianism and Universalism. Today, in theory, we have access to the myths and languages of all religions, but when we come together for worship we are not united around a common myth using a common religious language. Whether any religion can long do this is yet to be seen. This truly is an experiment, and my guess is that most UU's don't understand or appreciate what a risky radical experiment in freedom, diversity, and tolerance this is!

Our fourth Principle refers to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. But what do we do when someone's free and responsible search leads them to truth that is for us contrary to truth, and to meaning that is for us senseless. In the midst of diversity that is uncomfortable, how do we be appropriately tolerant and maintain our personal integrity? I don't have a full answer, but I will offer a starting point.

We need to distinguish religious toleration from intellectual agreement and personal affirmation. If you are in intellectual agreement with another person's beliefs you may certainly say so. If you want to affirm another's personal or theological journey, you may certainly do so. But, if you are not in intellectual agreement with another's beliefs, or if you are uncomfortable with another's personal or theological journey, you certainly don't have to imply that you are; but neither are you obligated to immediately voice your difference. However, you are obligated to be respectful of the person.

When and if you choose to enter into dialogue with others about beliefs and practices that conflict with your own, do so at an appropriate time and place, and do so respectfully, speaking in ways that are simple, honest, and caring. Creative respectful dialogue is the lifeblood of this religious community.

If we ever come to the place where every idea must be considered of equal value, where we must agree with every lifestyle choice, or where we must affirm every path as equally helpful, we will have eliminated the need for critical thinking and individual choice. Religious toleration does not require intellectual agreement or personal affirmation. But religious toleration does demand respect for every person, regardless of their beliefs and practices, and a willingness to let others hold ideas that are contrary to our own - as long as they do no harm. But even the commitment to do no harm is very subjective. Remember, many of us have family or friends that are convinced that our way of life and religious convictions are harmful, not only to ourselves, but to society. Nonetheless, as Unitarian Universalists, we choose to follow our reason and conscience.

As I continue to work with the issue of religious diversity and toleration, it is my goal to be non-attached to my own perspective of truth and meaning, confident only that I do not know. Likewise, I would surrender all expectation that another's free and responsible search would lead them to my sense of truth and meaning.

In conclusion, let me give my most general description of our congregation. From what I've observed, the Unitarian Universalist Church of Greater Lynn has three characteristics that I would want to be aware of if I were looking for a congregation.

Theologically, we are Christian, and we are Other Than Christian.

Socially, we are increasingly inclusive. We are a Welcoming Congregation.

And Politically, we are quite liberal.

If this tradition and congregation appeals to you, come and check us out. We would be honored to walk with you in the next phase of your spiritual journey.

Namaste,

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