

Freedom of Pulpit and Pew

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John Haynes Holmes was one of the great Unitarian ministers of the last century. In fact, later this month, The Community Church of New York will be celebrating the centennial of his installation as their minister. In March of 1907, at the age of 27, Holmes began a ministry that would have a profound effect on that congregation and on Unitarianism across the land.

Holmes preached the Social Gospel and socialism to some of New York's great capitalists. In 1909, he helped found the NAACP and the ACLU. During World War I, he preached pacifism, and denominational leaders like former U.S. President William Howard Taft practically excommunicated him. In his own church, the members of the Board of Trustees expressed their near unanimous disagreement with their minister. But even as they embraced their freedom of the pew, they also honored freedom of the pulpit and would not seek his resignation.

Histories of our religious movement lift up that moment as a shining example of how freedom of pulpit and pew serve us well, as Holmes went on to a long and productive ministry. And over time, the Community Church adopted an expansive vision that led to important work in areas of civil rights, peace-making, civil liberties, women's rights, and economic justice, with leadership coming from both pulpit and pew.

While John Haynes Holmes's ministry provides a fine example of freedom of the pulpit in action, the history of the concept goes back even further. Unitarian minister John Turner Sargent, at the dedication of the Suffolk Street Chapel in Boston in 1840, promised "its pulpit is free – show us but the man duly authorized to speak, whose heart is filled with a religious sympathy – whose mind is active or alive with a desire to do good, and here, in the name of truth, he may stand forth and have his utterances, even though he may not translate the word precisely as we do."

Not everyone was so supportive of free speech in the pulpit in those days. Rev. Abner Kneeland was convicted in 1838 of blasphemy and was actually jailed for his crime. John Turner Sargent, along with William Ellery Channing and others, signed a petition calling for Kneeland's pardon and stating that "freedom of speech and the press is the chief instrument of truth and of social improvements, and is never to be restrained by legislation."

In 1841, Sargent's friend, Theodore Parker, preached his famous "Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity." That sermon was so controversial that virtually all of Parker's ministerial colleagues refused any further pulpit exchanges with him. Pulpit exchanges were big in Boston in those days, and this move severely restricted Parker's ability to be heard.

John Turner Sargent refused to abandon his friend, and continued to exchange pulpits with him. The Benevolent Fraternity, which was apparently Boston's version of a Ministerium, urged all ministers to exclude Parker from their pulpits, and hand-delivered a private letter to Sargent rebuking him for ignoring the prohibition. Unwilling to promise he wouldn't exchange again, Sargent resigned his ministry, but continued for years to defend vigorously the concept of freedom of the pulpit.

So that is some of the historical background of the concept of freedom of the pulpit, and its complement, freedom of the pew. Let me take some time now to try and flesh out what all might be entailed by these concepts, and then to speak a bit about why they are so integral to our

identity as religious liberals. And just as a heads up, after I've had my say, in the interests of freedom of the pew, I will open the floor to comments and responses from you.

I'd like to share from a couple of documents that formalize the concept of freedom of the pulpit. First there's the "Guidelines for the Unitarian Universalist Ministry" formulated by the Unitarian Universalist Ministers' Association. These guidelines state:

1. Freedom of the pulpit is fundamental to the commitment of Unitarian Universalist congregations to the disciplines of persuasion in the presence of truth.
2. Freedom of the pulpit is delegated by the membership to the minister. The minister is accorded the freedom to speak the truth as she or he understands it when in the pulpit or when expressing views through other channels such as the parish newsletter or the newspaper.
3. The minister does not, however, necessarily speak for either the society or its members. It is the minister's responsibility to do everything possible to make clear when she or he is speaking as an individual.
4. It should also be understood that the minister's interest in the pulpit extends to invitations to guest speakers. The minister and the committee charged with filling the pulpit in the minister's absence should share the decision making.

At the local level, my Letter of Agreement – my contract – with you the congregation states the following:

The minister has freedom of expression from our pulpit and through other means such as Fellowship and District newsletters, letters to local newspapers, published articles and books and personal witness. The minister is free to conduct all aspects of the ministry including counseling and workshops according to his/her experience and insights and express values, views and commitments without fear.

Next I'd like to quote from a couple of my UU ministerial colleagues on this topic. The Rev. Daniell O'Connell, in a sermon a couple of years ago, said:

- Freedom of the pulpit means religious reflections passed through the fire of thought. The minister is to preach the truth as the minister sees it.
- Freedom of the pew means the right of individual conscience in the pew.

Without such freedom, it would mean the preacher must preach the ordained dogma and the pew must accept this as Truth. This is creeds, this is orthodoxy. The essence of the free church is the right of individual conscience, and the right to live out one's conscience. In our fourth principle we say: the free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

The Rev. Christine Robinson recently addressed the topic of "Freedom of the Pulpit" in her blog on the web. She writes:

Freedom of the pulpit, in this minister's belief, is the freedom from advance censorship. It is extended to a minister because the minister and congregation have covenanted together; the minister to speak the truth in love and to mind the best interests of the church and the traditions of our free faith, and the congregation has agreed to hear that truth, love, and responsibility with an open mind.

The responsibility, as Robinson understands it, is to live out that freedom within the context of the mutual covenant between minister and congregation. As she points out, "It's really not true . . . to say that 'freedom of the pulpit means that the minister can say anything s/he wants to.'"

So based on all of those sources, and on the history I've recounted, I would say that the core values inherent in the twin concepts of freedom of the pulpit and freedom of the pew are: freedom of conscience, freedom of expression, and the responsibility to exercise those freedoms with integrity and respect.

The details of how those freedoms are protected and exercised may vary. For instance, freedom of the pew can play out at a number of different levels. At the very least, there is the freedom of congregation members to think or believe as they wish, regardless of what comes from the pulpit. Beyond that there is the possibility of expressing those thoughts and beliefs, either among yourselves during coffee hour, or during a structured post-service gathering like our PQRSTs, or even during the service as part of a scheduled "Congregational Response" as we will have today. Finally, the "voice of the pew" is periodically given center stage when congregation members and friends conduct lay-led services approximately monthly, and through the summer.

Similarly, the scope of freedom of the pulpit may vary from place to place and from time to time. For some, the understanding is that the minister is given full control over what comes from the pulpit, and who speaks from it. For others, a more collaborative approach is embraced. For instance, here at UUFCC, the Sunday Services Committee develops topics and suggests guest speakers for many services, and they do consult me about them. But only in extreme cases would I ever urge them to change their plans. To me, what is important about freedom of the pulpit is that I feel as comfortable as possible about expressing my thoughts, beliefs, and deepest convictions. I don't feel a need to fully control the pulpit or to have my voice be the only one that comes from it.

You know, it's not just about freedom and responsibility. It's also about trust. That's what's at the core of whatever explicit or implicit covenants there are between me and you. Based on your assessment of my character, my thoughtfulness, and my consideration and respect for differing views, you have entrusted to me the privilege of access to this pulpit, to speak the truth as I understand it. I deserve that trust only so long as I respond with integrity and respect. Conversely, I trust that you will hear me with an open mind, either agree or disagree, but again, always with integrity and respect.

Those core values - freedom of conscience, freedom of expression, trust, and responsibility - are important and valuable in their own right. But they also serve a higher theological purpose. The free church is based on the premise that religious truth is not absolute and unchanging, independent of historical and social context. One way we sometimes express that is by saying that "revelation is not sealed."

The free church is also based on the premise that religious truth does not come to us from any one source, either divine or human. That leads to the concept, mentioned by Eric Johnson in our reading this morning of “democratic religion.” But let me hasten to say that democratic religion does not mean that we simply take a vote and accept the voice of the majority as to what is good and right and true.

As David Rankin said in the meditational words I shared with you this morning, “Every truth is born out of painful criticism.” And Eric Johnson, again, talks about the “religious boxing ring,” where debate and dialogue, learning and mutual respect, can “duke it out.” That language is not an accident, because the process is often not pretty.

As I was thinking about this, I was reminded of a service I did here about four years ago, called “Dialogue as Creative Event.” In that service, I quoted the Rev. Jack Taylor, who wrote, in part:

The goal of conflict is winning; the goal of argument is persuasion; the goal of conversation is entertainment; the goal of dialogue is creation. . .

And we create when ideas are exchanged and conditions are ripe. At times as these, new ideas are born, fresh insights develop, and that which did not exist, exists. . .

This is Dialogue. It is the human process through which ideas and ideals are conceived, opinions are revised, insights are garnered and problems are solved. . .

[The environment in which authentic dialogue can occur requires]: careful and adequate preparation by the participants, a commitment to one’s opinion even to the point of table-pounding, door-slamming arguments, and a willingness to abandon one’s cherished opinion when the greater insight has become evident.

Dialogue. Authentic dialogue. That is what freedom of the pulpit and freedom of the pew are really about as far as I’m concerned. They help to create the conditions most conducive to authentic dialogue. Honest expression. Thoughtful listening. Respectful response. And don’t forget Jack Taylor’s assertion that dialogue is not about winning. The only way authentic dialogue can occur is if all parties are open to being changed. Sometimes one party may be persuaded by another. But at its best, dialogue leads to something new; a new idea, or a new synthesis, through which all parties reach a new and higher level of understanding.

I invite you to join me in ongoing dialogue as we all try to find our way as best we can through a complex and difficult world. I thank you all for your part in this important religious work. And thank you for the trust you have placed in me as steward of this pulpit.