

Unity in Theological Diversity

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Reading: from *Engaging Our Theological Diversity*
UUA Commission on Appraisal

Several years ago, then-UUA president John Buehrens talked about the developmental history of the UUA. He suggested that our movement might be ready, as it turned forty, to move from adolescence (which he defined in terms of a tendency toward reactivity, antiauthoritarianism, and lack of self-definition) to greater maturity. Current president William Sinkford has taken up the maturity theme, as evidenced by this quote from his well-publicized “language of reverence” sermon:

I believe that Unitarian Universalism is growing up. Growing out of a cranky and contentious adolescence into a more confident maturity. A maturity in which we can not only claim our Good News, the values we have found in this free faith, but also begin to offer that Good News to the world outside these beautiful sanctuary walls. . .

Today, Unitarian Universalism is predominantly a faith of “come-inners,” those who joined the church as adults, with a minority of “born-inners,” those who were born or grew up as UUs. . . Most of us have in common . . . the experience of being raised in a tradition other than Unitarian Universalism. Stories abound of UU congregants saying, “I was always a Unitarian Universalist, but didn’t know it,” or “I finally found a church community where I could express my beliefs and have them accepted.” . . .

It is about catching the wave – the wave of people hungry for a sense of belonging and meaning, people who want a place where they can safely pursue a spiritual path in the company of people who will support and challenge them; a place that embraces reason, yet transcends the rational and touches the soul.

Sermon:

American writer Gertrude Stein was on her death bed. Her lifelong companion Alice B. Toklas leaned over her dying lover and mentor and asked: “Gertrude! Gertrude! What’s the answer?” Stein, opening her eyes, replied: “What’s the question?” Indeed, the answers we find along our life’s journey depend greatly on the questions we ask.

Unitarian Universalist minister George Kimmich Beach wrote a book about ten years ago called *If Yes Is the Answer, What Is the Question?* The attitude expressed by that title is, I believe, an indicator of the growing maturity of our liberal religious movement. That is, rather than focusing so much on what we reject – what we say “no” to – we are spending more effort on identifying that which we can affirm and embrace, to which we can say “yes.”

That is what I would like to speak about today. What is it that characterizes our liberal religious movement? Some critics, and even some proponents, of liberal religion would say that we answer “yes” to nearly everything – that “anything goes” or “we can believe anything we want to.”

John Buehrens, while he was President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, was interviewed for a local news broadcast in Salt Lake City during the annual General Assembly. He was asked whether, given that we were so liberal, there is *anything* that we would not accept? He replied, and I'm paraphrasing, "Of course there is. We don't accept hatred; we don't accept bigotry; and we don't accept oppression, among other things."

As for believing anything you want to, note that our fourth principle calls for a free and *responsible* search for truth and meaning. It's not that you can believe anything you *want* to, but rather you are free to believe what you *need* to in order to make sense of your experience. And I mean experience here in the widest possible sense. Liberal religion looks to many sources for its revelations, not to *any* single source.

Sometimes the open and pluralistic approach, of liberal religion in general and Unitarian Universalism in particular, leaves confusion about what exactly it is that holds us together. What core beliefs or values do we share in common to form the basis of a shared faith? Well, historian Earl Morse Wilbur, who wrote extensively about the origins and development of Unitarianism, identified a common thread based not on any particular theology, but rather on the basic principles of freedom, reason, and tolerance. I would suggest that those three pillars of our liberal religious heritage offer a framework well-suited to an open and sincere quest for religious growth and understanding.

The principle of religious freedom stirs in me a sense of excitement and exhilaration. The idea of an open-ended myriad of possibilities. The realization that I can follow my quest wherever it takes me. That *everything* is open to question, to challenge, to doubt. The idea that revelation is not sealed; there is always the possibility of new insights from who knows where.

Freedom of religion has been an important part of Unitarianism since its beginnings over four hundred years ago. In 1568 John Sigismund, the Unitarian king of Transylvania, issued the Act of Religious Tolerance and Freedom of Conscience. He declared that "no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone . . . and it is not permitted that anyone should threaten anyone else by imprisonment or removal from his post for his teaching."

That spirit of freedom has continued through the evolution of our movement as evidenced by the ever-widening theological boundaries encompassed by Unitarians and Universalists. There was the universal salvation of the early nineteenth century. There was the Transcendentalist movement of the mid-nineteenth century. Then there was the rise of nontheistic rational humanism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And more recently there has been a resurgence of interest in Earth-centered traditions.

The list of sources contributing to our living tradition reflects our continuing commitment to the principle of religious freedom. That is, we explicitly recognize many sources of religious insight and inspiration. We recognize the validity of many different paths to religious understanding and fulfillment.

If religious freedom generates a feeling of excitement, then the second pillar – reason – tempers that somewhat with the prospect of hard work. The application of reason – of our capacity for rational and critical thought – reins in the seemingly unlimited possibilities furnished by our freedom. Allegiance to reason means a rejection of superstition. We want our faith to be grounded in the natural order and based on common sense. We want our religious expression to be in accord with modern scientific knowledge.

The conscious application of reason to religion also has a long history. In 1695, English philosopher John Locke wrote "The Reasonableness of Christianity," a biblically based essay in which he attempted to distill that religion down to what was compatible with human reason.

Then around 1820, Unitarian Thomas Jefferson compiled the so-called Jefferson Bible. This was a combined version of the four Gospels with all mention of miracles or other supernatural events removed. These efforts were early precursors of more recent trends of biblical interpretation that try to understand the scriptures in the historical contexts within which they arose.

Adherence to reason as a principle of religion does not imply that reason is sufficient to generate the answers to all questions. Reason really acts more as a filter for the many inputs and insights provided by our varied human experience. We take everything we see, hear, smell, taste and feel, and through our powers of reason attempt to construct a vision of reality consistent with, but not necessarily determined by, all those inputs. This is a never-ending process. Our truths are always provisional and subject to revision based on new experience and insight. It is indeed the quest of a whole lifetime.

If freedom is exciting and reason is hard work, what about religious tolerance. I would characterize tolerance as scary. Acknowledging and accepting the presence of religious stances very different from our own is not easy. They may feel like a challenge or a threat to my own faith. In fact, I would put some boundaries on my tolerance of others. That is, I am not prepared to stand by passively and accept the intolerance of others. To me, tolerance means something like “live and let live.” As long as your beliefs and religious practices don’t infringe on mine; as long as they don’t create or reinforce oppression of those outside your faith, then I support free exercise of your religion. And that applies whether you are within or outside the boundaries of Unitarian Universalism.

It is, I believe, possible to make tolerance less scary. I can do that by listening and trying to put myself in the shoes of the other, rather than simply pigeon-holing them as “the other.” It’s my aim to go beyond tolerance to understanding of and respect for another’s religious path. When we share deeply of our faith experience in a two-way dialogue with another, and do so with an open mind and an open heart, we may well learn something, and our faith may grow. We are a theologically diverse movement, but I see that not as a problem, but as an opportunity for all of us to learn from each other as we continue our religious quest.

So the liberal path of Unitarian Universalism, based on the pillars of freedom, reason and tolerance, is an exciting, challenging, and sometimes scary enterprise. I’d like to add one more feature of that path that makes it even more exciting and more challenging. That is, that we do it together in community. When we come to worship, or to discuss, or to debate, we can share the excitement of freedom. We can share the challenge and the accountability of being reasonable. And we can help one another ease the fears of otherness.

If you ask me what Unitarian Universalists believe, I can’t give you a good, simple answer. For it isn’t a particular set of beliefs that defines us. In fact there is a static aspect to beliefs, as such, that can inhibit the progressive development of faith. This is why Unitarian Universalists claim no creed, and espouse no particular doctrines. We create religious community out of people, not ideology. And that community is based on common human needs and values.

Ted Sorenson, who was a special assistant to President John Kennedy, and who was also a Unitarian Universalist lay person, summed up the faith of our church like this:

Its faith is expressed in its purpose and spirit rather than in a creed or set of beliefs, which the individual is free to shape for [him or her]self. Our central purpose may be summed up as follows:

To seek and welcome the truths of life, old and new, since the past must always prove itself anew, and a living religion must change as thought advances and must be free to grow.

To respect in each other, and in all persons, the authority of the individual conscience, and the freedom of the mind, since the human spirit is guided most truly from within.

To discover and advance the world-unifying faith revealed in the deeper insights of all religions, and derived from the wisdom of all cultures.

To utilize for [humanity's] advancing life all available knowledge from every field of human endeavor and exploration into the unknown.

To uphold respect for all persons, and the equal rights of all human beings to share in the benefits of civilized life and to contribute to the common life.

That's a pretty good description of why I'm a Unitarian Universalist. We don't have any one set of scriptures where all the answers are written down in black and white. Certainly I, as your minister, can't give you all the answers. But as we walk together, we can all give each other some of the most important answers. Answers like love, and compassion, and respect, and encouragement. Those answers, and the continuing support of my companions in faith, are enough to give me the courage and strength to carry on my life-long religious quest.

And now, just in case you feel like I've been a little too evasive and vague concerning what Unitarian Universalists actually believe, I'm going to give you an answer now. The answer is printed on a little red wallet card called "What Unitarian Universalists Believe", which I will summarize for you in abbreviated form:

- We believe in the freedom of religious expression
- We believe in the toleration of religious ideas
- We believe in the authority of reason and conscience
- We believe in the never-ending search for Truth
- We believe in the unity of experience
- We believe in the worth and dignity of each human being
- We believe in the ethical application of religion
- We believe in the motive force of love
- We believe in the necessity of the democratic process
- We believe in the importance of a religious community

We don't require a signed oath of loyalty to those beliefs before welcoming you among us. But if most or all of them ring true for you, you may well feel at home here, whatever additional theological propositions you may embrace. And I leave you with these words from long-time Unitarian Universalist minister, the Rev. Jack Mendelsohn:

For those who, like us, cannot accept dogmatism and creedalism as the basis of their religious life, and who yearn for a religious expression stressing reason, freedom, justice, spiritual growth, and the transforming power of love, Unitarian Universalism is an open door to a nurturing community.