

Liberal Religion in America

What I think about Unitarian Universalism's Past, Present, and Future

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Unitarian Universalism, which formally began only 61 years ago, in 1961, is rooted in a unique and rare liberal religious tradition, which it has since been steadily severing itself from, becoming the antithesis of its namesakes in the process. I say liberal religion is rare because, to my way of thinking, liberalism is a pro-human ideology devoted to the principles of freedom, reason, and tolerance. There are other religions that demonstrate interest in one or two of these principles but not all of them. The only religions I know of that do are Unitarianism, which originated in Eastern Europe during the 16th century at the start of the Renaissance, and its cousin, American Unitarianism, which emerged independently during the Enlightenment period.

Universalism, as an ideology, began in the second Century CE, as a disbelief in eternal Hell. It didn't begin as a disbelief in Hell altogether, only that a loving God would not punish anyone there forever. Perhaps sinners would spend some time in Hell, purifying their souls, but eventually all will be released from its torments because of Christ's sacrifice—hence the term, *Universalism*—everyone gets saved. Over the centuries, this initial idea of Universalism as a disbelief in eternal Hell, evolved into a disbelief in Hell altogether, then came to emphasize the unconditional love of God and the inclusion of all souls, which is where it was when it became an official religion with the formation of Universalist Church of America in 1793.

With its emphasis on Universal love, Universalism was obviously a tolerant religion. It was also an oppressed religion because denying the existence of Hell was considered heresy by the rest of the Christian world. As such, Universalists also believed in religious freedom, that they should be free, that is, to practice their religion without being abused by others. Universalism was not, however, overtly committed to the use of reason, and, thus, cannot be considered a liberal religion.

Liberalism itself is rooted in the Renaissance thinking that began in the early 14th century and became widespread during the Enlightenment period of the 17th and 18th centuries, also known as the Age of Reason. *Renaissance*, which means “renewal,” refers to the 14th century renewed interest taken in the thinking of the early Greek philosophers of the 7th century BCE, 2,600 years ago. That was the first time in human history that some began attempting to explain the world in natural rather than supernatural terms. Historically speaking, philosopher Bertrand Russell says, it “is one of the most spectacular events in history. Nothing like it has ever occurred before or since.”¹

This is so because in order to seek natural explanations for our reality, explanations that don't involve deities, myths, and fates, we need to trust in human agency and reason. In this sense, the birth of Greek civilization only 2,600 years ago, represents the beginning of humanistic thinking—which has a positive view of humanity and a belief in human potential. It only follows that humans should be free to think and decide for themselves, and that what they think and decide should be based upon human reason rather than divine commands and authoritarian decrees, and, in order to consider the many possibilities, society at large must be or become tolerant of different beliefs.

This kind of openness and curiosity was squelched by the Church during the Dark Age but reemerged during the Renaissance. And Unitarians were among the very first to attempt fashioning a society based upon reason, freedom, and tolerance with the Edict of Torda, issued by Hungarian King John Sigismund Zapolya in 1568. Transylvania was the part of Hungary situated between the Ottoman Empire to the southeast and the Austrian Empire to the west. Because of this, it had far more diversity than most societies at the time could have been expected to peaceably withstand. It had three main native ethnic groups, the Szeklers, Magyars, and Saxons. Its economic diversity included nobles, serfs, and peasants. And its religious diversity including Muslims, Jews, and Christians, both Catholic and Protestant.

So, King Sigismund held a conference to hear what its various religious leaders had to say. (There's the use of reason: being open to hearing different ideas.) Inspired most by the Unitarian who spoke, Ferenc Dávid, the King wisely decided to make his a Unitarian kingdom because it allowed him to remain inclusive of all the others. He and his new Unitarian Bishop almost immediately issued the Edict of Torda, the first religious freedom law in human history, commanding that, "in our dominions, there will be freedom of conscience"² and "no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone ... and it is not permitted that anyone should threaten anyone else by imprisonment or by removal from his post for his teaching." As retired professor of Unitarian history, David Bumbaugh says, "When [King Sigismund] identified himself as a Unitarian, and found the majority of the nation supporting him, he only demanded of those who disagreed that they live in peace with those with whom they differed."³

So reason, freedom, and tolerance are the foundation and heart of Unitarianism—and don't let anyone tell you otherwise, especially those who now claim, with no historical evidence, that "ours is a covenantal religion." Ours is a liberal religion based especially on freedom, which is what the root of the word liberal means and why ours is correctly referred to as a liberal religion. The respected 20th century Unitarian minister, A. Powel Davies says the founders of our religion wanted to "form a church which was definitely based on freedom."⁴ And in his 1945 book, *A History of Unitarianism*, Rev. Earl Wilbur Morse writes that our religion is defined by the "fundamental *principles* of freedom, reason and tolerance."⁵

American Unitarianism developed separately from Eastern European Unitarianism but shared the latter's commitment to these three principles. Eastern European Unitarianism emerged during the Renaissance. American Unitarianism was born during the Enlightenment, when the ideas forged during the Renaissance were flourishing throughout western society. In the U.S., it was initially called Arminianism, based on the idea that human beings have the capacity for both good and evil. It was a rejection of the belief in original sin and innate human depravity. Believing, instead, in human potential and agency, like the early Greek philosophers, meant each person has inherent worth and dignity and everyone should, therefore, be free to speak and think for themselves and have a voice in how they are governed. This is why many of the Enlightenment founders of American democracy were also Unitarians.

The Universalists had also made their way to the Americas during the Enlightenment where, as noted, they established the Universalist Church of America. They had much in common with Unitarians, along with a couple of major differences—theology and class—which is why the two denominations only flirted with the idea of joining together for more than a century before they finally did so in 1961. Although it has been a slow, almost imperceptible train wreck, this merger marked the inevitable end of Liberal Religion in America.

Fearful of conflict erupting over the two religions' major unresolved differences, we stopped talking much about our rich pasts, wherein both our differences and our values lie. Thus, instead of being an Association of Unitarians and Universalist, we suddenly began calling ourselves Unitarian Universalists, with no clear idea what a UU was. In his 2004 sermon, *Why Unitarian Universalism is Dying*, Rev. Davidson Loehr called "Unitarian Universalism,' a religion that had never before existed anywhere, and to which no one of any note in history had ever belonged."⁶ Although Unitarians and Universalists had been around for hundreds of years before 1961, there had never before been any such thing as a Unitarian Universalist. This is why religious identity surveys now refer to ours as an NRM (a New Religious Movement), even though its namesakes are hundreds of years old.

Instead of looking to our past to recall what we are about, the new UU Association conducted a survey in 1967 aimed at profiling the "typical Unitarian Universalist."⁷ Of the 12,000 members surveyed from 800 congregations, less than 3 percent claimed to believe in a "supernatural being," 28 percent considered God "an irrelevant concept," 57 percent did not consider theirs a "Christian" religion, and 52 percent preferred "a distinctive humanistic religion."⁸ It should be kept in mind that at the time of the consolidation, almost 83 percent of those merged were Unitarians, not Universalists, which explains why, at the time, almost none of us believed in a deity and why a majority of us were humanists. Back then we still knew what we were about.

Yet over the decades since, UUs, as we are now called, have become sore-pressed to explain our religion to ourselves, let alone anyone else. Instead of drawing upon our lengthier and larger history, rooted in Enlightenment liberalism and the humanistic ethic, to remember we are about freedom, reason, and tolerance, we now attempt to augment the nebulous meaning of Unitarian Universalism by adding still other adjectives before it, calling ourselves Christian UUs, Pagan UUs, Humanist UUs, and so on. As I say in *The Gadfly Papers*, "Such descriptions would have been both unnecessary and inconceivable prior to the merger, at least not any less than it would be today to call oneself a 'Buddhist Pentecostal,' or a 'Pagan Baptist.'"

To prove the point, in 2005, there was another UUA survey, which asked its members, "What holds us together?" One participant said, "It's the support network."⁹ Another saw "the UU movement as an interreligious dialogue."¹⁰ Another said UU congregations are comprised of "people who didn't fit in"¹¹ anywhere else. Still others actually complained about us not having a common belief. "This is where the UUA falls down," they said, "and why you have CUUPS and the Buddhists and the Christians and all these little subgroups—because we offer the hope of a spiritual journey, and we offer no tools to do it with."¹²

Oddly, the commissioned report concludes that, “Despite consensus within the church that the liberal message of Unitarian Universalism is important in this troubled world, we find it difficult to articulate that message clearly.”¹³ Perhaps this is so because, having avoided our past, we have developed an identity crisis. As Unitarian Walter Herz, editor of *Redeeming Time*, wrote in 1999, “We too frequently behave as though Unitarian Universalism was born without historical or theological antecedents. We will continue to ignore our past only at the peril of losing our identity as a religious people.”¹⁴

And this, I believe, is where our once liberal religion is today, suffering the consequences of having lost our identity as a religious people. This has created a void that is now being filled by a fringe group of fanatics who are working steadily to redefine Unitarian Universalism into its very antithesis. Listening to them, we can only conclude they hate the very religion they have chosen to lead. They refer to our venerable tradition as a white supremacist organization, even though from its very beginnings it was firmly on the side women’s suffrage and the abolition of slavery. They further claim UUism is founded upon a trinity of errors, individualism, exceptionalism, and antiauthoritarianism, the very qualities many think are what make us great and are, by definition, what make us liberal.

The illiberalism of the UUA leadership further manifests at complete intolerance for dissenting voices and an eagerness to punish heretics by destroying their reputations and livelihoods with no shred of evidence or decency. If anyone disagrees, instead of shouting “witch” or “heretic,” there are immediate, panicked, kneejerk accusations of racist, homophobe, transphobe, ableist, and so forth. Today, because I wrote a book outlining all of this, for which I was condemned, censured, and excommunicated, I am listed on the UUA’s website as having been defrocked and ethically unfit for ministry because I am a “bully,” all with never a single citation from my banned book. I am only one among other UU ministers who have been made an example of, leaving many others too timid to speak out against the religious fanatics who have overtaken our once liberal religion.

Meanwhile, the UUA leadership continues to redefine Unitarian Universalism as a “covenantal religion,” which seems to be a euphemism for “church doctrine.” As Rev. Fredric Muir, the intellectual architect of this plan has said, “We cannot do both covenant and individualism.” If we can’t do both, and if we are a covenantal religion, then the individual voice has no place among us anymore. I take this to mean that by turning the UUA into a covenantal religion, individual congregations and individual members will be held “accountable” for upholding that which Muir has also called, “something that has eluded Unitarian Universalism: a doctrine of church.” Yes, our noncreedal religion just got a creed that ministers are already being held accountable to and, soon, so will our congregations.

To ensure this plan is not interrupted, in recent years the UUA leadership has established changes making our democratic processes a farce by assuring no one can make a serious run for any leadership positions other than those few candidates they have hand selected.

All of this leads me to conclude that there is nothing those of us concerned can do make the UUA immediately change its course. I do believe the illiberal mindset that has overtaken Unitarian

Universalism, and has overtaken many other liberal organizations too, is beginning to wane. But it will be well into the next decade before its failure is recognized by the UUA leadership and that new leaders might emerge to restore us to sanity. By then, however, too much damage may have been done to our already tiny religion, and there may be too few of us left for Unitarian Universalism to survive.

This is why I have said liberal religion is now dead in America, because Unitarian Universalism is the only Liberal Religion in America. I don't mean to suggest there aren't some UU churches, like ours, that remain liberal, but currently there is not a liberal religious organization connecting us to those outside our own church communities. We are not part of something larger than ourselves, at least not in an organized and formal way.

If I'm correct, then we now have only two choices, to wait it out and see what happens, during which we are likely to only witness the further erosion of what has become our unrecognizable religion, or the religious liberals among us must leave the UUA to create a new organization rooted in our liberal history and values. Although I am willing to help with such an endeavor, I am not willing to lead the charge. But if liberal religion is to be revived in America and in our world, then I believe we must admit it's time to move on, that the UUA has become a lost cause and what matters most is our historic commitment to living out those perennial values we call reason, freedom, and tolerance. They are perennial because they keep coming around and cannot be destroyed. For these values are what make us liberal, they what make ours a free church, they are never diminished when we share them with others, and nobody can take them away.

¹ Russell, Bertrand, *The Wisdom of the West*, Crescent Books, Inc., Rathbone Books Limited, London, 1959, p. 10.

² Bumbaugh, David E., *Unitarian Universalism: A Narrative History*, Meadville-Lombard Press, Chicago, IL, 2000, p. 50.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁴ Davies, A. Powell, *America's Real Religion*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 1947, p. 27.

⁵ Morse, Earl Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 1945, p. 208.

⁶ <http://austinuu.org/wp2011/why-unitarian-universalism-is-dying/>

⁷ Robinson, David, *The Unitarians and the Universalists*, Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, 1985, p. 176.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

⁹ UUA Commission on Appraisal, *Engaging our Theological Diversity*, UUA, Boston, MA, May 2005, p. 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁴ Herz, Walter P., ed., *Redeeming Time: Endowing Your Church with the Power of Covenant*, Skinner House Press, Boston, MA, 1999, p. ix.