

# Exceptionalism and Unitarian Universalism

## Standing Out in a Crowd in a Climate of Sameness

By

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Last week I began responding to Rev. Frederic Muir's 2012 essay, "From iChurch to Beloved Community," which has been fundamentally changing our religion ever since. Having thoroughly and fairly explained its arguments then, I will only summarize them again now. In short, the essay argues Unitarian Universalism has long been hindered by a "trinity of errors," which he calls *individualism*, *exceptionalism*, and *our allergy to authority and power*. His "antidote" for these errors is "covenant," which he defines rather loosely, if not euphemistically, as a "promise" we make to each other guaranteeing our "mutual trust and support." Muir believes covenant is the cure for individualism in particular because, as he says, "We cannot do both covenant and individualism." Individualism, that is, cannot exist where people are bound by a covenant. Since he considers the other two errors, *exceptionalism* and *antiauthoritarianism*, outgrowths of the first (*individualism*), covenant is the cure for all three.

I happen to agree with this last point, that a belief in individual freedom and expression leads to exceptional individuals and their resistance to authorities that are dependent upon control by groupthink, but I do not consider any of these qualities to be errors. On the contrary, I believe individualism, exceptionalism, and antiauthoritarianism are Unitarian Universalism's Trinity of Truths. Last week I argued why I believe this is so about *individualism*. This week I'm going to focus more on *exceptionalism*. And I'll finish this series by discussing my thoughts about our liberal religion's attitude toward authority.

But first I want to go a little more deeply into why I consider it important enough to give not just one, but three sermons on this matter, drawing unnecessary attention to an essay I disagree with and that you are unlikely to have otherwise ever heard of. Firstly, we shouldn't be afraid of people being exposed to ideas we disagree with. Just because I disagree with Rev. Muir, doesn't mean I think ill of him, nor that I don't believe he's begun a valuable dialogue for all of us. On the contrary, I am grateful for the provocative essay he's gifted us with because it has helped my better clarify my own thinking about our religion and to more clearly grasp what's currently happening to Unitarian Universalism. Ideas should not be feared or stifled but discussed with courage and gratitude. Although, if you have gratitude, you don't really need the courage.

Contrast this with the response to *The Gadfly Papers* at the 2019 UUA General Assembly: After I was banned, a box of books I'd unthinkingly left at our church booth in the exhibit hall was confiscated, and some of our members were verbally assaulted by other Unitarian Universalists for placing them on our table. One UU minister in attendance later bragged to his congregation that he took a stack of them off our table and discarded them in the nearest trash can. If this is what the new covenantal promise to each other is to look like, I want no part of it. Like biblical Noah, who so fears and hates the old world that he bases his

utopian hopes on its complete destruction, I believe characterizing Unitarian Universalism's defining strengths as a trinity of errors is a misguided effort to do the same. Yet, be forewarned, as with Noah, anyone who isn't on board with this new vision for Unitarian Universalism may find themselves left out in the rain.

Those who are on board with the destruction of our religion, the soft book burners, the confiscators of ideas, the assaulters of reason, should heed the story of Noah and his ark. For after the world is utterly destroyed and its flood waters finally recede, Noah is overwhelmed by his vision for the promising new world, purified of its former evils and imperfections. "I have set my rainbow in the clouds," Yahweh assures him, "and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth... Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life."<sup>1</sup> Interesting that this word "covenant" appears in what becomes a cautionary tale of utopian delusions.

For, in the very next verse, the one immediately following the rainbow promise, we find Noah drunk, passed out, and bear-naked inside his tent, a dramatic cut from an idyllic scene to its complete opposite in the next. After his son Shem attempts to get his brothers to deal with their father's alcoholism, they try to cover it up, and Shem gets kicked out of the family, and his descendants are to be enslaved and exploited for the rest of eternity. So much for Utopia: especially one that has been constructed on hate and fear and the ruin of other lives.

The second reason it is important to spend a good amount of time considering the contents of Muir's essay is because it has had a profound influence on what has since transpired in the Unitarian Universalist Association. Last week I said that in 2019, just prior to the General Assembly, it was mentioned in an article entitled, "The Power of We," written by the UUA President. The article repeated Muir's trinity of errors, that "covenant" is their antidote, and our need to move from being an iChurch to beloved community. But the connection between Muir's essay and what's been happening to Unitarian Universalism goes deeper than just the repetition of his ideas in a single article seven years later.

Five years ago, in October of 2015, the UUA Board of Trustees approved the formation of a Task Force on Re-Covenanting (also called "Renew the Covenant Task Force" and "Task Force on Re-Imagining Covenant") charging it with "imagining a future for our association in which congregations were not merely members of an organization, but related to the whole dynamically and organically: through covenants, that could be renewed periodically."<sup>2</sup> The Task Force's first report the following January calls the traditional membership model, in which congregations remain autonomous, an "atomistic model [that] reifies the independence rather than interdependence of the congregations." It also recommends "that eventually, the covenanting relationship replace membership." This is so even though, as the report itself acknowledges, its current bylaws state "The primary purpose of the Association is to serve the needs of its member congregations,"<sup>3</sup> which it

would have to convince General Assembly delegates to eliminate in order to officially carry out a change that already appears underway.

A few months later, at the 2016 General Assembly in Columbus, Ohio, the UUA Moderator began his annual report by holding up and recommending everyone read a 2016 book edited by Rev. Fredric Muir entitled, *Turning Point: Essays on a New Unitarian Universalism*, while discussing proposed changes to the Association's governance structure. "Muir challenges us to correct and acknowledge our trinity of errors," the Moderator said. "He writes":

... Fundamental to our future is recognizing our way of faith, from its leadership, to its Sunday service, to justice making partnerships, have been supported and nurtured by this trinity of errors leading not only to ineffectiveness but also to an inability to share our liberating message.

After then describing Muir's trinity of errors in detail and going on to say more about his ideas for changing Unitarian Universalism, including the need for "imagination," the Moderator notes that "District leaders are imagining other ways of shaping governance. Three districts in the Midwest consolidated into one region two years ago. And eight districts in the south and central Northeast have voted to dissolve and defer governance to the UUA." He then mentions the Task Force on Re-Covenanting and his vision that "rather than signing the book, people were welcomed into covenant that would be renewed periodically. Imagine if congregations and communities entered into, were welcomed into mutual covenant with the larger Association that would be renewed periodically."

In October of 2017, the Task Force on Re-Convening reported, "We have also addressed ways in which congregations and covenanted communities enter into covenant with the UUA, and with each other. We offered the example of periodic, affirmative, renewal of covenant rather than our current system of membership." In its recommendations to the UUA Board of Trustees later that same year (April 2017), it similarly stated, "The Task Force was charged with changing the culture of the UUA from one of a member services administration to one of mutual covenanting," going on to explicitly say, "The Task Force will bring to the 2018 General Assembly recommended bylaw changes that would require member congregations and covenanting communities to renew their connection to the UUA biennially, with a vote of intention to join, and a statement of how they understand their community to be fulfilling Unitarian Universalist purpose." To my knowledge, this recommendation has yet to be fulfilled, but such talk continues at the highest administrative level, including in the aforementioned 2019 *UU World* article, "The Power of We," by the Association's current President.

For many, these euphemisms may sound benign enough to go unnoticed: *we, beloved community, promise, mutual covenant, renewed periodically, imagine such a future*. But I need not imagine such a future because I have already witnessed where it has led, and it is not the kind of future I want for our religion. It has, in fact, already resulted in increased authority and power being "deferred to the UUA," in which dissent and disagreement is

unforgivingly and immediately shut down in the name of “covenant,” and a “beloved community” in which “we” are all made afraid to talk to each other. It has led to an environment in which the opposite of Rev. Muir’s vision has occurred, in which many now really do act as if their way is the only way, and are willing to immediately condemn and make an example of anyone considered an ideological threat to their extremist views. So much for Utopia.

And not to be overlooked is the recommendation the official covenant, whatever it becomes, should be “periodically renewed” with a biennial vote from each congregation, along with a statement explaining how they are fulfilling “the Unitarian Universalist purpose.” So, while we using our imaginations, let’s imagine what might happen if a congregation doesn’t fully agree with the renewed “covenant” that it’s being asked to accept. Or what might happen if its explanation of how it has been cooperating isn’t considered acceptable. Or if it continues to support a minister who has been officially excommunicated after being branded racist, homophobic, transphobic, ableist, and classist. What happens after the UUA’s transformation from a membership organization into a covenantal institution, which has successfully consolidated its power for the purpose of assuring better “cooperation and accountability,” becomes complete?

Frederic Muir believes Unitarian Universalist exceptionalism is one of our fundamental problems and we must rid ourselves of its burden if we are to fulfill his more perfect vision of our future. As far as I’m concerned, however, we are being asked to rid ourselves of the very qualities that do make us exceptional, the qualities that make us Unitarian Universalists. The alternative to individualism, exceptionalism, and antiauthoritarianism, as we are seeing played out, is feeling ashamed of ourselves, believing there’s nothing exceptional about us, and that we better get with the program or else be exiled and cursed like Shem in the Bible and Todd Eklof in real life.

My thirty years of experience as both a Unitarian Universalist and a Unitarian Universalist minister seems to have been quite different than Muir’s. Having visited and worked with many congregations over the years, I have not witnessed any of their members who have claimed ours is “the only way,” as he has. On the contrary, I would describe this as the very opposite of my experience and the antithesis of our liberal religion. Yet I would also argue that our religion is unique for this very reason: because such behavior is contrary to what is often true of religions in general. At least until now, ours has been nondogmatic, noncreedal, nontheistic, and open to the influences of reason, science, dissent, and the wisdom of other faith traditions, which I consider exceptional.

Just because we believe ours is a legitimate way is not the same as considering it the only way. So why shouldn’t its ministers not preach about its exceptions, or its members not speak of them when explaining their unique religion to others? If any religion were not considered exceptional, even in small ways, why would anyone choose to be part of it? In

practice, however, as I argue in *The Gadfly Papers*, the opposite is more often true: most Unitarian Universalists cannot easily explain their religion due to its decades-long identity crisis:

Our common quest for the elusive “elevator speech” to explain what Unitarian Universalism means is but one symptom of our own organization’s identity crisis. After more than five decades since the merger, many Unitarian Universalists still don’t know how to adequately describe their religion to themselves, let alone to others. Some find it with so little meaning of its own that they feel compelled to add other traditions to the mix, describing themselves as Buddhist UUs, Christian UUs, Pagan UUs, Humanist UUs, etc., etc.<sup>4</sup>

I also note in *Gadfly* that a 2005 UUA Commission on Appraisal report, entitled, *Engaging our Theological Diversity*, sought to help resolve the identity question by asking, “What holds us together?” After receiving widely varying responses, the report concludes, “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.”<sup>5</sup> This data would indicate few Unitarian Universalists feel secure enough to describe their religion to others with the insulting degree of certitude Muir describes.

I would also make the case that a purely negative understanding of exceptionalism is rooted in an even more pervasive misunderstanding of *equality*. As Erich Fromm once complained, “Equality today means ‘sameness,’ rather than oneness.”<sup>6</sup> This subtle, though, prevalent misunderstanding has led to all manner of oppression and injustice because of its misguided belief that fairness means everyone must be treated exactly the same, have the same, earn the same, do the same, think the same, and, above all, say the same as everyone else. In such a society, anyone who stands out, who is an exception to the rules, becomes suspect and, often, is made to disappear in one way or another.

Last February, My Good Officer and friend, Rev. Richard Davis and I were walking about Silver Falls State Park in aptly named, Sublimity, Oregon, when, by chance, we passed a young boy standing over a smaller boy shaking his fist. “You’re making me mad,” he said. “There are no losers. Everyone is a winner.” As strange as it was to see such a young child angrily dominating another in the name fairness, I immediately recognized it as a familiar ethic in today’s society. In the name of equality and justice, everybody is a winner, no exceptions. I wondered if he was one of the many unfortunate kids these days who has engaged in contests and competitions after which everyone gets a prize. I even wondered if he may have learned his fist-shaking ethic of no exceptions in a Unitarian Universalist Religious Education program.

The same confusion also applies to some definitions of *equity*. Its meaning has been depicted by a familiar image of a group of children standing on different sized boxes so they are all the same height when looking over a tall fence. It is an appropriate image for depicting what must occur for every individual to have fair access to society’s benefits and

opportunities (although true equity might be better achieved by tearing down the fence that's in everybody's way). When it comes to providing basic human needs, like healthy food, clean water, fresh air, adequate housing, affordable healthcare, quality education, meaningful employment, and safe neighborhoods, as well as essential human rights like freedom of speech, ease of voting, fair taxation, and equal protections and treatment under the law, then everyone should be treated the same by a system of justice that is blind to individual exceptions.

But take the same vertical line created by those different sized boxes, lay it horizontal on the ground, and make it the starting line for a hundred-meter dash. What would be the point of the race if its starting line, or finish line for that matter, were adjusted to make certain every runner finishes at once? So that "there are no losers; everyone is a winner?" Why play any sort of game, a professional game of basketball or a friendly game of scrabble, if the point isn't to do our best to win? And what would any enterprise or effort be without those who make exceptional contributions and accomplishments? What would any society, discipline, or vocation be without its innovators, outliers, rebels, misfits, and superstars who stand out as exceptional? What would our world be if cleansed of its Einsteins, Mozarts, and Mother Teresas? Or without the ability to stand upon the shoulders of giants? Or without those able to make giant leaps for the rest of us?

Life would be meaningless if, as individuals, we were not allowed to excel and stand out among others for our excellence, nor recognized for our exceptional achievements, nor allowed the pleasure and pride of an occasional win. None of this is to argue that Unitarian Universalism, although exceptional in many ways, is the best and only way. But those of us who choose it, after considering and experiencing other options, have found it the best way for us and may very well think it the best there is. Should we settle for what we consider the second, or third, or fourth, or even the last best option? Are all religions, and by extension, all beliefs and ideas, equally sound? Determining one's religion to be the best doesn't necessarily mean we want to force it on others, nor result in belittling those who have chosen a different path. The quality of embracing and supporting those of other faiths is itself an example of Unitarian Universalism's exceptional approach to religion, and I wouldn't want to change that for the world.

<sup>1</sup> *Genesis* 9:13-15

<sup>2</sup> Report of the UUA Task Force on Covenanting to the UUA Board, January 2016

<sup>3</sup> UUA Bylaws, Section C.2.2.

<sup>4</sup> Eklof, *ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70f.

<sup>6</sup> Fromm, Erich, *The Art of Loving*, A Bantam Book, Harper & Row, New York, NY, 1956, 1963, p. 12.