

Individualism and Unitarian Universalism Remaining Independent in a Climate of Conformity

By

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A few weeks ago, I spoke of an ethical practice attributed the 20th century philosopher Stephen Toulmin, who told his students, “To earn the right to criticize someone, you must first understand their argument well enough to present it in a way they would accept as informed and fair.” Beginning today, I intend to give a series of three sermons critical of an essay Rev. Fredric Muir presented to his ministerial colleagues just prior to the Unitarian Universalist Association’s 2012 General Assembly in Phoenix, Arizona, during the annual Berry Street Essay, a prestigious tradition dating back 200 years. I consider his essay the root of an ideology that has since transformed Unitarian Universalism into something unrecognizable, which is why, as the Unitarian Universalist minister of a Unitarian Universalist church, I believe it is my responsibility to discuss it with you. To begin, however, I want to model Toulmin’s principle by fairly explaining at length and without commentary or judgment, what I understand to be the point of Rev. Muir’s essay.

His essay, entitled, “From iChurch to Beloved Community: Ecclesiology and Justice,” about the future of Unitarian Universalism, begins by pointing out our stagnant membership numbers: “in spite of being a justice-seeking faith, in spite of the ministries to which we are committed, in spite of the marketing we have done,” he says, “we have not grown.” Rather, our religion is at a “tipping point,” he says, and if we don’t recognize it and respond accordingly, we will not be a “religion of the future.”

Additionally, Muir says there is a confluence of other factors that have led to a “perfect storm” that we have failed to recognize. Chief among them is the U.S. Census Bureau’s prediction that by 2042 “members of racial and ethnic minorities will make up a majority of the country’s population.” From this he concludes that if Unitarian Universalism continues to maintain its “North Atlantic look—as reflected in our demographics, theology, and epistemology—[it] will grow more cut off from the U.S. population, unless we start reflecting our society’s true diversity.” He further points out that according to much research, the “Nones,” those who indicate they have no religion, are the fastest growing religious identity group in the U.S. From this data he concludes that if our religion is going to grow, it will only be by appealing to these growing demographics. “Ministry to and with ‘minorities’ (that is, those who make little-to-no claim on a North Atlantic heritage), along with a ministry to the ‘Nones’ could be a ministry of growth or justice making.”

But, again, it isn’t just our “North Atlantic like” look we much be willing to change to make this happen, but also our North Atlantic theology and epistemology. “Fundamental to our future,” he says is recognizing that our way of faith, from its ministry to its members, has been supported and nurtured by a trinity of errors, leading not only to ineffectiveness but to an inability to share our liberating message.”

The trinity of which I speak is:

- First, we are being held back and stymied by a persistent, pervasive, disturbing, and disruptive commitment to individualism that misguides our ability to engage the changing times;
- Second, we cling to a Unitarian Universalist exceptionalism that is often insulting to others and undermines our good news;
- Third, we refuse to acknowledge and treat our allergy to authority and power, though all the symptoms compromise a healthy future.

“These three organizing and corrupting narratives have shaped our story,” a story he recommends we radically transform before we can successfully move “From iChurch to Beloved Community:”

In this process, we will create something that has eluded Unitarian Universalism: a doctrine of church, an ecclesiology that is grounded in congregational justice making, a doctrine of church that will guide and sustain us as we become the religion we (and others) know we can be.

In discussing the first of these errors, *individualism*, Muir begins by explaining how transformative and central Emersonian Transcendentalism had been in his own life and ministry but that he eventually recognized as the origin of a troubling nationwide story. “That story,” he says, “is about American uniqueness and individualism and has been expressed in a myriad of ways.” After further discussing his creative use of the term “iChurch” by use of cultural phenomena like Apple’s iPhone and iconic nonconformists like Jack Kerouac, Muir makes the case that, “Individualism not only shaped American culture writ large but shaped Unitarian Universalism: We comprise the church of Emersonian individualism; we are the iChurch.”

Muir distinguishes between “individuality” and “individualism,” in his critique of the latter, explaining, “I have read enough of Emerson to feel certain that he celebrated the gifts of individuality, the beauty of nature’s differences and diversity, of which humans are a part,” but, “When used as an expression of individualism rather than an expression of the joy and celebration of individuality, the Principles come dangerously close to sounding like an ideology or creed turned theology and spirituality.” Yet this is precisely what he believes has transpired in Unitarian Universalism, which, “took the blessing and joy of individuality and made it an ideology, made it a theology, and did a very bad job of making it polity,” resulting in what he calls a group of “atomic and unrelated individuals.” As such, he says, “There is little to nothing about the ideology and theology of individualism that encourages people to work and live together, to create and support institutions that serve common aspirations and beloved principles.”

His proposed solution to individualism is “covenant,” which he considers a “promise” between Unitarian Universalists guaranteeing “mutual trust and support.” This is so, he believes, because “We cannot do both covenant and individualism,” the two cannot coexist, one must cancel out the other. *Individualism* is the worst of the three errors he discusses because he considers the other two—*exceptionalism* and *our allergy to authority and power*—as outgrowths of it.

He explains his meaning of *exceptionalism* as the belief that “Unitarian Universalism is a faith shaped by ‘perceptions, ideas, intuitions, and ambitions which posits, among other things, that [our way of religion] is uniquely virtuous, uniquely powerful, uniquely destined to accomplish

great things, and thus uniquely authorized to act in ways to which [Unitarian Universalists] would object if done by other [ways of faith].” He further suggests that others often experience this pervasive attitude as off-putting and insulting:

Whether as a source of pride, personal and community truth, embellishment, anger, clarification, or, strangely enough, welcoming—we hear the inflection of Unitarian Universalist exceptionalism from the pulpit, from newcomer’s classes, from Sunday greeters, from those who are earnestly trying to explain our way of religion to the uninformed. As unique as our experience with Unitarian Universalism may be, it is not the only way. We must stay conscious of how we explain, defend, or share lest we come across as elitist, insulting, degrading, isolating, even humiliating of others.

When discussing what he means by *our allergy to authority and power*, Muir acknowledges that there are “many reasons to be suspicious of hierarchical structures,” especially for the many who found Unitarian Universalism after leaving other “faith communities where no room was made for different views or disagreements.” After admitting having once been lured into Emersonian nonconformity himself, by “Conflating the narrow path of individualism with the promise of institutional health,” Muir now argues, “Unitarian Universalism’s allergy and misuse of power and authority is a factor in our inability or unwillingness to welcome and listen to a diversity of interests and passions.” What he calls the “antidote” for this allergy is, again, a covenant “promising our mutual trust and support.” In congregations where such a promise has occurred, he says, “there is a clear and deep understanding that addresses the potential of abuse and misuse of authority and power, those ministries are among our most vibrant, growing, and electric.”

From here, Muir imagines what might happen if this antidote became widespread: “If individualism led us to the iChurch, then covenant can shape the beloved community.” This phrase was popularized by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who said, “I understand the term Beloved Community to mean an inclusive, interrelated society based on love, compassion, responsibility, shared power, and a respect for all people, places, and things—a society that radically transforms individuals and restructures institutions.” Such institutional change will begin, Muir posits, by creating a new story about who “we will be, who we are becoming,” that speaks “not only [of] our historical commitment to social justice outreach but with congregational justice inreach,” and “it begins with the congregation you serve or attend.” He thinks overemphasizing outreach can be used as an excuse to avoid doing the hard work of dismantling our trinity of errors: “And how convenient to want to reform the world because the work of shaping and modeling our congregations as beloved communities, not as the iChurch, means addressing the challenges of individualism, exceptionalism, and authority.”

This does not mean completely abandoning, what he calls, “our historical journey of justice making in the world,” but narrowing it down to multiculturalism and antiracism, environmental justice, sexual and family values, and right relationships, which he says should become the “four pillars of our justice-seeking and justice-making ecclesiology [and] the foundation on which every Unitarian Universalist beloved community is built.” He then concludes by proposing Unitarian Universalism must become “religious and spiritual.” Although he doesn’t go into detail about what this means,

he does indicate it refers to something that was lost when Unitarians took a “humanistic, arguably post-Christian turn in the late nineteenth century that arrested its theological creativity.” Admitting the reform he’s outlined won’t be easy, he concludes by emphasizing it cannot happen without dedicated Unitarian Universalists ministers who are willing to carry it out in their own congregations:

An ecclesiology of beloved community that is built on the promise of mutual trust and support; Unitarian Universalism’s letting go of iChurch; addressing the obstacles of exceptionalism, power, and authority; becoming congregations that are religious and spiritual—these will not happen without the bold and prophetic leadership of you, dear colleagues, you who our congregations and programs have called and hired to preach, teach, model, and lead the way.

Having now done my best to fairly explain his position, I should add that I don’t recall ever having had the privilege of meeting Rev. Fredric Muir, although I admire his courage in presenting such a challenging view of Unitarian Universalism to his colleagues, an activity that is increasingly frowned upon these days. I would also point out that I am in agreement with Muir regarding his view that *exceptionalism* and *antiauthoritarianism* are outgrowths of *individualism*. A society that does not believe in individual freedom and expression, which, as a belief, is an *ism*—an *individualism*—will allow few to stand out as exceptional and must suppress any signs of antiauthoritarian behavior.

Beyond this, there is much I disagree with, including a few logical fallacies, *non sequiturs*, and unsupported conclusions we need not delve into. I will focus, rather, on what I consider to be my most pertinent areas of disagreement. Firstly, I disagree that the growth of its membership should be the most crucial concern of the Unitarian Universalist Association, especially if growing requires us to fundamentally change who we are. I have no issue with it becoming less “North Atlantic” looking, as Muir puts it, which I believe it has been doing quite naturally on its own. As I mention in *The Gadfly Papers*, the same surveys Muir cites about religion in America inform us the number of white members in the UUA decreased from 90 percent to 75 percent between 1990 and 2008, as the number of nonwhite members increased 11 to 25 percent. That’s a 14 percent increase compared to an 11 percent increase in the U.S. overall.¹ Today, according a Pew Research 2015 study, membership among “Unitarians and other liberal faiths,” is now 78 percent white, which is on par with the makeup of the U.S. population in general.²

But the suggestion we must also change our theology and epistemology must not be overlooked, because it would require us to become something utterly different than what we are. If this is what it takes, then it wouldn’t really be Unitarian Universalism that’s growing but the different thing it has become. Theologically, Unitarian Universalism is a nontheistic religion. This doesn’t mean its individual members don’t believe in a god, many of them do. It means, rather, we are not bound together by a particular and common belief about God. We are not defined by one theological idea. Epistemologically, we are Enlightenment thinkers, meaning that having the freedom to think and speak for ourselves is our categorical imperative. If this were to change, there would be little reason for many of us to remain Unitarian Universalists.

This would especially be true if, as Muir suggests, we become what it takes to entice the “Nones” to join our ranks. According to numerous independent religious identity surveys, those indicating they have no religious affiliation are not only the fastest growing group in America but now represent its fourth largest religious identity group, representing over 33-million people. Conversely, the stagnation or decline of membership is indicative of all Religions in the U.S., not just Unitarian Universalism, including those that already have the alternate “religious and spiritual” theologies and epistemologies Muir is advocating we take on. He is right in pointing out the majority of the Nones describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious,” the meaning of which is not defined in the surveys. What we do know about the SBNR’s, is that the majority of them, including 65 percent of those between ages 18 and 30, consider themselves Christians, though, behaviorally, they rarely if ever go to church.³ In short, what they mean by “spiritual but not religious,” is “Christian but not churchgoing.”

This would imply that in order to accommodate the Nones, Unitarian Universalism must first become more Christian in its theology and then must find a way to overcome their reluctance to attend church. It should also be noted, according to the 2012 Pew Research cited in Muir’s essay, 13 million of the 33 million Nones, representing 6 percent of the U.S. population, describe themselves as atheists and agnostics.⁴ Of course, these surveys are now eight years old, and, given the trends, their numbers are likely to have increased considerably since then. So, even if Unitarian Universalism were to become theologically Christian to accommodate most the Nones, which most religions in the U.S. already are, repelling a huge portion of the atheists and agnostics among them in the process, there remains no reason to believe doing so would be enough to entice any of them to begin coming to church.

In addition to disagreeing with this faulty growth strategy, and the implication our growth and future should supersede all else, even if it means abandoning those principles that make us who we are, our nontheistic theology and Enlightenment epistemology, which, by the ways, are not exclusively North Atlantic, I fundamentally disagree that individualism, exceptionalism, and our aversion to authority and power are errors. Rather, I consider them our strengths. Individualism, especially, is an outgrowth of our Enlightenment heritage, though not what Muir describes as a group of “atomic and unrelated individuals” who have no reason to cooperate. The individualism I’m talking about refers to a group or communities bound by a shared commitment to secure and support the freedoms of all individuals. This, I believe, is the common belief—the *ism*—that has traditionally held our communities together; and, in my experience, it has fostered meaningful relationships between our members, not resulted in those that Muir says give us no reason to “work and live together” or “to create and support institutions that serve common aspirations and beloved principles.” For me, we don’t need to become “religious and spiritual,” because our commitment to the freedom and flourishing of every individual is our religion and our spirituality.

I’ll have more to say about this principle and Muir’s critique of *exceptionalism* and *our allergy to authority* in my subsequent sermons, but I want to wrap up by explaining why I find it so

important to discuss an essay that most Unitarian Universalists have probably never heard or even heard of. I do so, because, whether or not it is being interpreted or administered as Rev. Muir intended, it has been explicitly referred to by today's top leadership of the Unitarian Universalist Association to explain the direction it is taking. In a 2019 *UU World* article entitled "The Power of We," our Association's current President cited Muir's trinity of errors—individualism, exceptionalism, and our allergy to authority—repeated his call to move from "iChurch to beloved community," and his claim that covenant is an "antidote to individualism."⁵ The following October, a Pacific Northwest UU Region newsletter also contained an article further using Muir's language by promoting what it called our congregational shift from "I" to "We." Did you know we were making this shift? Was this part of any promise you gave?

Regardless of how well-intended Muir is, and I have no doubt he is, I can tell you firsthand that his solution to individualism—*covenant*—is being used to suppress individuality and its expression. After a year of nebulously being accused of being "out of covenant" for having written a book some dislike, I know what I'm talking about. "Covenant" has become a euphemism for suppressing free thought, free speech, and dissent in our religion, which is the real violation of our promise to each other. It is a violation of the epistemological basis of our shared worldview, whatever our varied theologies. For it is our commitment to individual freedom and flourishing that holds us together, bonds our community, and gives us the joy of being together and a reason to work and struggle together. As a Unitarian Universalist minister, and your friend, I will do my utmost to uphold this principle so long as I am with you.

¹ Eklof, *The Gadfly Papers*, Self-Published, 2018, p. 98.

² Ibid.

³ http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/religion/2010-04-27-1Amillfaith27_ST_N.htm

⁴ "Nones" on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation, Pew Research Center, The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, Released October 9, 2012.

⁵ Frederick-Gray, Susan, "The Power of We," *UU World*, Spring 2019.