

# **Correction: Ours is a Liberal Religion, Not a “Covenantal” One**

**By**

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**October 17, 2021**

The word “covenant” originates from a Latin word meaning “to come together,” or, more simply, “to agree.” It occurs when two parties agree to do or not do something for mutual benefit. A covenantal religion would be a religion that is defined and bound by such an agreement between its devotees and their god. The only religion I know of defined by such a covenant is Judaism, and, more loosely, the other two so-called Abrahamic religions borrowing from it, Christianity and Islam. According to the Hebrew scriptures, which are central to all three of these religions, the first such covenant occurred when Abram was visited by the Lord:

I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers ... As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations ... I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.<sup>1</sup>

The Lord then changed Abram’s name to Abraham and told him, in addition to remaining faithful and blameless, that he and all the males among his people must be circumcised as proof of their agreement. “My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant,” the Lord said. “Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”<sup>2</sup>

A similar promise is made to the Israelites when Moses first presents them with the Ten Commandments, “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.”<sup>3</sup> Naturally, there will also be many benefits that flow from being the Almighty’s chosen people, but hell to pay should they disobey his commands. This was one of those offers they couldn’t refuse.

There’s also the covenant the Almighty makes after having destroyed most the world and killed millions of people in a global flood. “I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.”<sup>4</sup> Of course, these assurances don’t guarantee there won’t be other localized floods, or that life won’t be destroyed by another kind of catastrophe, like fire and brimstone or Global Warming, but at least there won’t be anymore global floods. As proof of his part, God then places his mark in the sky. “I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth ... Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth.”<sup>5</sup>

I won’t go deep into the theological implications of these covenants except to ask if you consider any of these stories to be central to our religion? Are these ancient agreements, none of which could possibly have occurred as they are told, or any covenants like them, central to our liberal religion? Is it our purpose to remain blameless in Yahweh’s eyes so we might dominate the world, or to obey his commands so we can enjoy the benefits of being his favorite people, or simply to avoid destruction? I know of no such covenants that can be ascribed to Unitarians or Universalists at any time in our histories.

So imagine my bewilderment when two years ago, in response to my book, *The Gadfly Papers*, the leadership of the Unitarian Universalist Association and the UU Ministers Association began reminding me that “ours is a covenantal religion,” and regularly accusing me of being “out of covenant.” Of course, they have never cited nor quoted any covenants I am supposed to have broken since there is no covenant in which I have agreed not to say or write things they might disagree with. In fact, my promise to you, as a liberal minister, is that I never have and never will make such an agreement.

I began hearing accusations of being “out of covenant” almost immediately after giving away my book at the UU Association’s General Assembly in 2019. Shortly after having been banned from returning to the Assembly, I received an email from one of its moderators stating, “you are welcome to participate in General Assembly events after you enter into an agreement with us about how you will uphold the covenantal commitments of our community at GA.” Firstly, like everyone else, I registered online to attend the Assembly during which I was not asked to agree to any covenants. Secondly, the agreement they wanted me to make under these auspices was to stop giving away my book. A month later, I was publicly censured by the UU Ministers Association in a letter stating:

As the continental leadership of the UUMA, our responsibility is to uphold our values and our covenant. We believe you have broken covenant. We write this letter to ask you to seek understanding of the harm that has been done and to work toward restoration. We would welcome the opportunity to help guide and support a public process of restoration, which we expect would foster widespread learning about what it means to be a covenantal faith.

When an attorney wrote the UUMA Board asking why they hadn’t notified me of any formal grievances before taking such an action, as their rules require of them, they eventually responded, “The Board is not attempting to resolve a formal grievance, but rather inviting Rev. Dr. Eklof into a religious process of covenantal repair.” When my Good Officer, Rev. Richard Davis made a similar inquiry, as well as asking for the specific language of the covenant I am accused of violating, they only replied:

We are a covenantal faith. As such, we, the Board of Trustees of the UUMA, are first and foremost responsible to the covenant of our organization. That covenant was voted on by the membership in 2009 and is available in the “Covenant” section of our UUMA Guidelines for the Conduct of Ministry. Each Board of Trustees carries the responsibility of interpreting the covenant to the best of their collective wisdom, and hopefully does so with integrity and faithfulness.

So, rather than citing the actual covenant or explaining how, by distributing a book of dissenting viewpoints, I had violated it, they simply let us know that it’s up to them to interpret it however they wish.

Other ministers have similarly been censured and defrocked under the guise of having broken covenant. In March of 2018, after having also publicly expressed concerns about the Unitarian Universalist Association’s counterproductive and illiberal approach to addressing racism, Rev. Richard Trudeau also received a letter of censure stating, “the UUMA Board of Trustees voted to issue a letter of censure against you for conduct that violates our Covenant and Code of Conduct.” After Rev. Richard Davis gave a sermon expressing similar concerns, he too received a letter from the UU Minister’s Association asking for meeting and explaining, in part, “we believe we share the

same goal, though- learning, discernment, and a repair of relationship and restoration of covenant.” After he rejected their illiberal attempts to control his free pulpit, he was dismissed from the Good Officer program, cut off for not mutilating himself, figuratively speaking. Earlier this year, the Rev. Kate Rohde, a long time and respected activist UU minister, says she too was contacted by the Ministers Association and told she was “out of covenant” for comments she made on social media, and told she could get back “in covenant” if she agreed not to talk about certain issues or with certain persons. She declined to cooperate and, like me, was soon stripped of her credentials.

It is not only UU ministers they are using this “out of covenant” silencing tactic on. Last year, Unitarian Universalists Frank Casper and Jay Kiskel were prevented from having a booth at the General Assembly representing their Fifth Principle Project after coauthoring a book about the erosion of democratic processes within the Unitarian Universalist Association. In a March 2020 communication to Casper, a UUA official cited several emails the organization had received asking it to forbid them from exhibiting, including one email saying, “The idea that someone can get an exhibitor booth to promote said book seems very out of covenant to me. If their booth is approved, it would make me very uncomfortable and many other people as well.” Apparently, not wishing to make people uncomfortable by exposing them to books they disagree with, the UUA rejected the Fifth Principle Project’s application. Additionally, after the publication of their well written and substantiated book, *Used to be UU*, over a hundred ministers signed an open letter accusing its authors of being out of covenant. In fact, the one-page April 2021 letter used the term “covenant” six times, including defending the UUA’s punitive behavior toward me in its obvious attempt to discredit and silence me. “While imperfect,” the letter says, “this process reflects our best understanding of how, after a behavioral breach in covenant, we can return to right relationship as colleagues in covenant and as members of the UUMA.” Spoken like a true Medieval Inquisition.

The Fifth Principle, affirmed by the UUA and its member congregations, including our own congregation, is “The Right of Conscience and the Use of the Democratic Process Within Our Congregations and in Society at Large.” There are seven principles in all, and it is our commitment to affirm and promote them that is the only covenant the UUA’s member organizations have agreed to, and even this is a covenant between organizations, not between individual church members or ministers. Article 2.1 of its bylaws states, “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote...” a statement followed by the list of seven principle and six sources of inspiration that we agree with.

But this does not make ours a “covenantal religion.” For it is not the word “covenant” that’s important here, but the principles themselves. These principles help define ours not as a covenantal religion but as a liberal religion, a free faith, precisely because they reflect the liberal ideas of freedom, reason, tolerance, and human welfare we most value. In his extensive two-volume work, *A History of Unitarianism*, written in 1945, sixteen years before there was a UUA, the respected Unitarian minister and scholar, Rev. Earl Wilbur Morse wrote that our religion is defined by the “fundamental *principles* of freedom, reason and tolerance.”<sup>6</sup> Likewise, the great liberal 20<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian minister, A. Powell Davies, who once called Democracy our nation’s true spirituality, said those who founded our religion wanted to “form a church which was definitely based on freedom.”<sup>7</sup>

And yet, in recent years, the UUA leadership has been describing our liberal religion as a covenantal religion instead. Last May, in an online statement entitled, “Conversation on Covenant,” current UUA President, Susan Frederick Gray began by saying, “Covenant lies at the heart of our faith: a shared agreement on how we should be together. Our religion is made from an ongoing, interlocking, and organically growing series of promises we make with our communities, congregations, and the world.” I ask you, whether you have been part of Unitarian Universalism for many years or discovered it more recently, if you are here because of any promises you have made or that have been made to you? Or are you here because of our mutual commitment to a free faith, a free mind, a free tongue, and a free society?

And if we are truly a “covenantal faith,” as is now being routinely blasted across the UUA’s many propagandistic communications to us, why was it only in 2015, just six years ago, that the UUA Board of Trustees first approved the formation of a Task Force on Re-Covenanting, 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>8</sup> You see, the UUA Bylaws currently state, “The primary purpose of the Association is to serve the needs of its member congregations.”<sup>9</sup> It is but a service organization to its membership of autonomously run independent congregations. To truly become the kind of authoritarian religion it wishes, empowering it to hold our congregations accountable to its interpretation of a “covenant,” which can only be seen as a euphemism for *dogma*, will require a vote from congregational delegates.

As sheepish and acquiescent and General Assembly delegates tend to be, even this seems a bridge too far. In fact, during what is apparently its last published report, in 2017, the Task Force on Re-Covenanting explicitly stated, “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.” This recommendation never came. But if such a change should ever pass, it would mean our congregations would have to “re-covenant” with the UUA every two years and satisfactorily prove how they are upholding the said covenant.

I believe, fearing such an outlandish departure from the liberal principles our free religion is founded on would never pass, the UUA leadership has decided that rather than going through a transparent democratic process, including open discussions about this matter, they have decided to just start claiming ours is a covenantal religion until we hear it often enough that we all believe it must be true.

In fairness, it is true that the UUA bylaws use the word covenant in reference to our principles and has been encouraging congregations to adopt what it calls “covenants of right relations,” for many years, and there are a few covenants listed in the back of our common hymnal. We even have the word used a few times in our own church bylaws, but this doesn’t define ours as a “covenantal religion” anymore than having Buddhist readings, or Christian readings, or Jewish readings, and so on, means we are a Buddhist, Christian, or Jewish religion. We are inspired by these traditions and use their words to reflect upon, just as we do with the ancient Hebrew notion of covenant. But we are able to do so precisely because ours is fundamentally a liberal religion, which makes us open to finding wisdom in many traditions and many metaphors.

It is unfortunate that by taking this term literally, the UUA, like all literalists, is becoming fundamentalist, dogmatic, self-righteous, punitive, and authoritarian. In their rigidity, they have poisoned the term "covenant," which is why those in the process of considering our own church bylaws are likely to recommend removing the term and replacing it with the phrase, "liberal religion," or something like it.

Social psychologist Erich Fromm once said, "the history of man can be characterized as a process of growing individuation and growing freedom."<sup>10</sup> Compare this to the UUA's stated position that "individualism" is among our religion's "Trinity of errors," along with "exceptionalism" and our "allergy to authority," the "antidote" for which they say is "covenant." It was also Erich Fromm who considered covenantal religion but a primitive stage of theological development. "In the beginning of this development," he said, "we find a despotic, jealous God, who considers [humankind], whom he created, as his property, and is entitled to do with him whatever he pleases."<sup>11</sup> But the next stage, only slightly better, is what he called the *covenantal stage*, in which even God is bound by the promises he makes, so long as neither party breaks the agreement. It's an advance over the idea of a despotic god people can only hope and pray doesn't get angry. If they can predict and control god's wrath by obeying him, sacrificing to him, or otherwise pleasing him, then they don't have to worry about being punished. Still, at this stage, the covenant remains an authoritarian relationship in which God promised to treat us well so long as we obey him.

But in the third and final stage of theological development, God is transformed from both a despot and a loving or punitive father figure into a nonentity, "into the symbol of his principles," Fromm says, "those of justice, truth, and love. God *is* truth, God *is* justice."<sup>12</sup> Instead of being viewed as a person, God becomes the principles our religions, when at their best, say we are supposed to uphold, like freedom, justice, truth, mercy, love, and so on. "In this development," he says, "God ceases to be a person, a man, a father; he becomes the symbol of the principle behind the manifoldness of phenomena."<sup>13</sup>

So, this undemocratic attempt to stealthily redefine our liberal religion, which, until now, has not only been committed to the seven principles articulated in our Associational bylaws, but also to the older and more fundamental Enlightenment principles of freedom, reason, and tolerance, is a downgrade of our religion, not an advancement. And like those covenants outlined in the ancient Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, in which God promises to help one people rule the world if they promise to continue pleasing him, even if it means mutilating themselves and cutting off those who don't, or promises never destroy most the world again so long as he is obeyed, the downgrade the UUA leadership is pushing for is also a move toward authoritarianism, as proven by the many examples I've given of its punitive behavior toward those who challenge the organization's new dogma.

A few months after I'd been censured by the UU Minister's Association, a group of over sixty longtime Unitarian Universalist ministers wrote them a letter, not only in my defense, but in defense of our religion, stating, "Those who initiated this letter find no violation of our covenant in Todd's book." More importantly, the letter stated:

We hope you would remind colleagues that open conversations lead toward truth. Instead you chose one side of a debate among people of good will and used your position to censure a colleague

you disagree with. You have increased anger and distrust and have even engendered despair among many of our colleagues. Your practice of bullying and silencing has severely damaged the collegial climate that once sustained us through difficult times. We trusted you to be our bulwark against the noxious national climate. This time of national turmoil is exactly the wrong time to back away from our collegial principles.

And that’s precisely the issue. The current UUA and UUMA leadership uses “covenant” as a euphemism for its dogmatism and authoritarianism, which are the opposite of liberalism, and in so doing are ignoring the very principles—including the worth and dignity of every person, the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, and the Right of Conscience and the Use of the Democratic Process Within Our Congregations and in Society at Large. Their primitive covenantal religious regression cannot recognize the universal principles that truly define what our liberal religion is all about.

I recently saw a post in which another UU minister accused me, in his words, of “being out of covenant with the mainstream UU ministers.” I can assure everyone that I’ve never covenanted or been asked to covenant with the mainstream. But this is precisely what the word now means in the UUA, that if you don’t go along with the mainstream, you are out of covenant and must be cut off. Today I am in the fight of my life, and I’ve taken a lot of hard blows in the process. But I’m quite sure this is my job and my duty as your minister and as a human being, to preserve and promote our liberal religion and our commitment to the advance of freedom, reason, and tolerance everywhere.

<sup>1</sup> Genesis 17: 2-4

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 17:14

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 19:15

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 9:11

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 9:12-17

<sup>6</sup> Morse, Earl Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 1945, p. 208.

<sup>7</sup> Davies, A. Powell, *America’s Real Religion*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 1947, p. 27.

<sup>8</sup> Report of the UUA Task Force on Covenanting to the UUA Board, January 2016

<sup>9</sup> UUA Bylaws, Section C.2.2.

<sup>10</sup> Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, Henry Hill & Company, New York, NY, 1941, 1969, p. 47.

<sup>11</sup> Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, *ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57f.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.