

The Occupation of America's Most Liberal Religion

By

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The leadership of the Unitarian Universalist Association reached a new low this week, one that should trouble Unitarian Universalists everywhere. The UUA's Executive Vice President sent a letter to the members of the Unitarian Universalist Seven Principles Fellowship in Austin, Texas ordering them to "cease and desist" using the terms "Unitarian Universalist," "UU," "Naming the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism as your primary source of faith," "Listing the qualifications of your leaders as substantially due to UU experience," "using the domain name uu7pf.org," and using the "chalice logo."

It is preposterous for those occupying our religious headquarters to think they own the rights to all of these terms, including the letter "U" and the number "7," which is probably why their ludicrous "order to cease and desist" came from a UUA employee and not an attorney. But, in my opinion, it is today's leadership of the Unitarian Universalist Association who have no standing to call themselves Unitarian Universalists.

The letter sent to the Unitarian Universalist Seven Principles Fellowship, a name inspired by the Unitarian Universalist Seven Principles, which you can learn more about on their website at www.uu7pf.org, serves as a warning shot to anyone who defies the UUA's new dogma. Any congregation that grows weary of its illiberal behavior and decides to leave the Association will likely receive a similar letter. The UU Seven Principles Fellowship split off from Austin's Wildflower UU Congregation just a couple of years ago, dissatisfied with the illiberal changes they felt were happening there.

We too experienced a split in our congregation over the same matter about the same time. In our case, it was those in favor of the UUA's new illiberal dogma who left to form a new congregation. And they too called themselves a UU congregation, the Inland Northwest Unitarian Universalist Community, to be exact—INUUC. Rather than sending them a threatening letter ordering them to cease and desist, the UUA ignored our Association's bylaws so they could officially recognize this new congregation at breakneck speed. I know of Unitarian Universalist communities, especially those in rural areas, that have struggled for years to receive such recognition. But on April 23rd, 2020, just two years ago, the same year INUUC began, the UUA broke rule 3.3.4 of its bylaws, which states:

- (a) It is ordinarily desirable that a new congregation should have the active support and sponsorship of any member congregation or congregations located in the same geographic area.
- (b) The Association will neither initiate nor recognize such a new congregation until after the Association has consulted by mail or by interview with any member congregation or congregations located in the same geographic area. Such consultation shall include a request for letters from the presiding officer of the congregation's governing board and minister of such congregation(s) stating judgment regarding the establishment and/or recognition of the new congregation.¹

Although we would not have wished to stand in the way of INUUC's formal acceptance into the UUA, we were never asked and are naturally troubled and perplexed by the UUA's violation of its own rules, especially knowing the new congregation was formed during such a contentious time

for both our groups. We also know the UUA had worked secretly with former members of our Board of Trustees, also against their own rules and ours. And now, I am personally disturbed to see the Association bullying another new UU congregation that does not fully embrace its new dogma, which it is attempting to force upon all of us and is unwilling to openly engage or dialogue about. Instead, the leadership of the Association is removing, defaming, and now threatening those who may disagree with them, in an effort to silence any dissent, all while seeming to project their own bad motives and illiberal behavior onto those they persecute.

In recent weeks, a few concerned Unitarian Universalists from another congregation wrote the UUA leadership asking them to please explain their authoritarian behavior. One of those letters, dated December 26, 2021, begins, "I am writing to express my concern about the direction our beloved church is taking. I know that change is inevitable. But this change, which you call 'Sea Change' in the Fall Issue of UU World, I interpret to be a move away from a more democratic institution to a more dogmatic, even repressive one." Another, dated December 24th, begins by expressing concern of the "disturbing trend away" from our Unitarian Universalist Principles. "The first inkling I got of this was at the GA in Spokane," its author says. "Word went round that the UUA had effectively 'banned' a book written by the local Spokane UU Church minister, Rev. Todd Eklof ... I was told that the reason his book was banned was that something in the book 'hurt someone.' But no one has pointed out what words, sentences or phrases in the book were hurtful to anyone or why. In any case, the UUA I once knew was not in the business of banning books." Yet another letter, also sent in December, says, "I am extremely dismayed and disheartened by the current direction of Unitarian Universalism," then goes on state several reasons why, including:

- The hasty condemnation of Todd Eklof's book and his eventual disfellowship, without a shred of evidence and without basic fairness or due process.
- Continued unfair and cruel persecution of Rev. Dr. Eklof by including his name in a list of ministers deemed unfit to serve by the UUA.
- The abandonment of Enlightenment values on the grounds that use of logic, reason, and evidence-based science are characteristics of WSC and white patriarchy.

The responses from the UUA President are unsatisfying, given that they don't address the issues raised in the letters and say more of the same about me: broad claims about the harm my book has caused without citing a single sentence to substantiate them, even though each of these letters asks her to do so. "The essays misrepresented the UUA's anti-racism work and included misleading, untrue, and damaging statements about individual religious educators, the professional association of religious educators (LREDA), the UUA, and its staff," she says. "He behaved unethically with colleagues and refused to engage in dialogue to repair harm."

No doubt, my book was critical of the direction the Unitarian Universalist Association is heading and does name two individuals when quoting what they themselves had previously written and made public, which is standard practice when writing. It's called attribution. One was the President of the Liberal Religious Education Directors Association at the time, who had published an explanation for what she believes was the cause of a disastrous RE Directors conference. The explanation begins, "The LREDA Board and Fall Conference Planning Team brought speakers to Fall Conference that embodied white supremacy and patriarchy." I too find this statement disturbing, this suggestion that white males are the embodiment of white supremacy and patriarchy for no other reason than their gender and color, but I did not write it. I only cited it as an example of my concerns. And, if citing it was misleading, I include the entire document in the

appendices of my book, *The Gadfly Affair*, so readers can judge its content and context for themselves. Unlike the leadership of the UUA, I am willing to validate my claims by citing evidence.

The other individual I name is the UUA President herself, when referring to a public apology she issued for an article in the *UU World* magazine that she claimed was harmful. I disagree with this assertion, as I say in my book, which is the real reason so many in the UUA were upset with by it, because it points out documented examples of their illiberal and Un-UU behavior. This continued claim that I would not “engage” or “dialogue” about my book is also unfounded. I was never asked to dialogue with anyone about the concerns in my book. I was, however, asked to participate in public show trials in which my guilt had already been determined. I did not and will not play that game. If they ever truly want to engage in dialogue about my concerns, which requires openness and an even playing field, I'd welcome the opportunity.

I think I've said enough to make the case that the leaders of the Unitarian Universalist Association have drifted far away from the honest, openminded, tolerant, fair, and liberal religion it is supposed to be. Just this week, one of our own members, a lifelong Unitarian, told me, “The UUA's beliefs and practices are such a departure from the small West Seattle Unitarian Fellowship I grew up in that I don't recognize the UU world anymore.” I won't tell you who said this because I wouldn't want the individual to be accused of racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and classism simply for acknowledging there's something rotten in Boston.

This is why I've come to believe our once liberal religion is now being occupied by some who are not Unitarian Universalists and are working swiftly to completely take it over by squelching dissent and, if they have their way, eventually ridding themselves of any problematic congregations and ministers. In addition to the letter sent to the congregation in Austin, Texas this week, there is a move to redefine our liberal religion as a “covenantal religion,” to eliminate the clause in the UUA bylaws stating, “The primary purpose of the Association is to serve the needs of its member congregations,”² and to, instead, require member congregations to “re-covenant” periodically, perhaps every two years, and to do so by proving how they are meeting the UUA's expectations. But what will happen to those congregations the UUA decides don't satisfy these expectations?

Not that I wish to assign any malevolent motives here. I don't believe anyone sat around conspiring to takeover a religion that wasn't theirs, although this is what has effectively happened. Exactly what has happened is something I hypothesize about in *The Gadfly Papers*. In brief, Unitarianism and Universalism are two different religions that have historically had much in common, along with some big differences. They had flirted with the idea of joining together for nearly a hundred years before finally doing so in 1961. The reason it took so long is because of substantial class and theological differences: big hurdles to surmount. When they finally did come together, it wasn't supposed to be a new religion called Unitarian Universalism, but an Association of Unitarians and Universalists. Instead, we almost immediately began calling ourselves Unitarian Universalists, a religion that had never existed before and had no ideology, history, or prominent figures of its own. This is why sociologists now classify ours as an NRM—a new religious movement.

Both Unitarianism and Universalism have rich histories dating back to the 18th century Enlightenment in the U.S. and farther back to the Renaissance in Eastern Europe. But after the Association was formed in the 1960s, we stopped talking much about our deeper historic and

philosophical roots because, I hypothesize, doing so would also risk exposing unresolved differences between these two separate religions that might lead to conflict. Instead, the UUA got into the habit of periodically conducting surveys asking members who they think we are and what we're about. As time passed, the answers became increasingly nebulous until very few of us knew how to adequately describe our New Religious Movement. Some now consider it the everything-bagel of religions, meaning we are supposed to believe and accept everything.

This made our liberal religion seem like a good choice for those who flipped the ethic to mean that disagreeing with anyone is intolerant, or that saying anything someone else disagrees with makes a person intolerant. Our Enlightenment religion, once committed to the principles of freedom, reason, and tolerance, has been usurped by political correctness, cancel culture, wokeness, identitarianism, or whatever we call it, that has most recently manifested as a dogmatic commitment to CRT—Critical Race Theory. And it is now this questionable approach to racial justice that is considered the heart of our religion by many who forsake all else about it. This is especially so of those who have maneuvered their way into leadership positions, from the Executives at the UUA to the pulpits and Religions Education classrooms in many of our churches.

Not that most of us aren't opened to considering what value there is in CRT or the benefit of sometimes viewing history through the hermeneutic of white supremacy culture, as the 1619 project asks us to do. No, our issue with the UUA leadership is not an ideological difference. UUs have long embraced such differences, until now that is. And this is what we are protesting, the fact that we are no longer allowed to disagree with the powers-that-be at the UUA without being publicly demonized and kicked out of what was once American's most liberal religion.

In her response to some of the letters I mentioned, UUA President Susan Frederick-Gray claims that I made damaging statements about individual religious educators, without ever citing a sentence from my book. She says my statements were misleading and untrue and misrepresented the UUA's antiracism work, again, without citing one example, even though the letter writers requested that she do so. On the other hand, less than a few hours after I gave my book away, I was called racist, homophobic, transphobic, ableist, and classist by name by hundreds of UU ministers, without any of them citing a single sentence from my book. I think it's fair to describe these as damaging, misleading, and untrue statements, which my Inquisitors completely overlook when projecting their bad behavior onto me. I have not misrepresented the UUA's position nor the words of others, I have, rather, publicly disagreed with them. If the UUA is so sure of their ideas, let them rationally defend them, rather than irrationally attack those who use written evidence and reason to disagree.

And this is why I say these individuals are occupying our religion, because their dogmatism, intolerance, and cruelty are the very opposite of what our liberal religion is truly about. This is why troubled Unitarians are writing the UUA President saying this feels like a "move away from a more democratic institution to a more dogmatic, even repressive one," and this is a "disturbing trend away" from our Unitarian Universalist Principles, and "I am extremely dismayed and disheartened by the current direction of Unitarian Universalism," and "I don't recognize the UU world anymore."

They are correct: this behavior does not reflect our liberal religious tradition. Our Association's headquarters in Boston, its institutions, and hundreds of our pulpits are now occupied by people of another kind of religion that is the antithesis of what ours is supposed to stand for. The occupiers of our religion continue to falsely assert that I am a racist because I question their punitive, authoritarian, and ultimately futile approach to racial justice, which they call *antiracism*. They then falsely accuse anyone who criticizes the way they go about it as racist. If they are antiracist then their critics must be racist, they conclude, which should be among the most obvious kinds of logical fallacies.

For I am not critical of their desire for greater racial justice in our nation, a desire I share and have worked toward throughout my career. I am critical, rather, of their intolerant dogmatism, and I am not alone. Columbia University Professor John McWhorter is far more critical than I am in his new bestselling book, *Woke Racism*, in which he calls this illiberal mindset a new fundamentalist religion. "Something must be understood," he says, "I do not mean that these people's ideology is 'like' a religion ... I mean that it actually is a religion. An anthropologist would see no difference in type between Pentecostalism and this new form of antiracism."³

McWhorter, who is a black man, also says:

I write this viscerally driven by the fact that the ideology in question is one under which white people calling themselves our saviors make black people look like the dumbest, weakest, most self-indulgent human beings in the history of our species, and teach black people to revel in that status and cherish it as making us special. I am especially dismayed at the idea of this indoctrination infecting my daughters' sense of self. I can't always be with them, and this anti-humanist ideology may seep into their school curriculum.⁴

Similarly, in a 2021 *Atlantic* article, entitled "The New Puritans," staff writer Anne Applebaum also refers to the new "social codes" being embraced by the extreme left as having all the hallmarks of a rigid and authoritarian religion. "The censorious, the shunning, the ritualized apologies, the public sacrifices—these are typical behaviors in illiberal societies with rigid cultural codes, enforced by heavy peer pressure,"⁵ Applebaum writes. The key point here is that these behaviors must be described as "illiberal," not liberal. As the great 20th century Unitarian theologian, James Luther Adams once said, "Free choice is a principle without which religion, or society, or politics, cannot be liberal."⁶

Our religion's leaders cannot call themselves religious liberals if they do not allow us to be free to question and criticize them, without facing their kneejerk demonization. Accusing anyone who disagrees with their questionable approach to racial justice of being a racist is not an invitation to dialogue, no matter how they spin it. It is they who have proven to be unwilling to entertain any conversation that is contrary to their ideas. And this, too, is a mark of colonization. As British colonialist Edmund Spencer admitted in 1596, "it hath ever been the use of the Conqueror to despise the language of the conquered and to force him by all means to learn his [own]."⁷ Historians call it *linguistic colonialism* or *language imperialism*, defined as "the systematic replacement of an indigenous language with the language of an outside, dominant group, resulting in a permanent language shift and the death of the indigenous language."⁸ Those illiberals who have colonized our headquarters in Boston and many of our pulpits around the nation are forcing us to stop speaking of our liberal religion's indigenous values—freedom, reason, and tolerance—

while claiming their new ideology merely represents a sea change that will naturally be resisted by the heretics and heathens whose institution they are purifying. Like all colonizers they intuitively understand that controlling speech means controlling the free expression of ideas. It means dominating the mindset. It means groupthink.

I know this because I know that Unitarians and Universalists do not ban books or condemn those who criticize them. They do not send threatening legalistic emails to a small group of dissenting Unitarian Universalists while ignoring their own rules in their mad rush to embrace another group of UUs who fully embrace their illiberal ways. Unitarian Universalists are not afraid to openly debate their ideas, rather than dismissing reason as a tool of white supremacy culture. Until now, Unitarians and Universalists, and Unitarian Universalists for that matter, have not succumbed to the same evils as many other religions—dogmatism, authoritarianism, self-righteousness, cruelty, and intolerance. Suddenly, this appears to have changed.

The good news is there are an increasing number of us waking up to what's happening and standing against it, including the good souls at the Unitarian Universalists Seven Principles Fellowship, which you can learn about at www.uu7pf.org.

In *Woke Racism*, John McWhorter says we must not be afraid to stand up to those he calls the Elect, and he gives several examples of some who have and have survived, including yours truly. “The Unitarian reverend Todd Eklof,” he says, “excommunicated for taking issue with Elect ideology, is pushing back, with the support of hundreds of his flock who have stood by him and many others who have left the church in protest. Reverend Eklof will survive.”⁹ I’m sure I will survive. And the Unitarian Universalist Seven Principles Fellowship at www.uu7pf.org will survive. The Unitarian Universalist Church of Spokane will survive. And the enduring perennial values our liberal religion is founded upon—freedom, reason, and tolerance—will survive. In this spirit let us stand and sing our closing song in courageous defiance of the colonization of our free religion. (“I Will Survive” by Gloria Gaynor)

¹ UUA Bylaws and Rules as Amended through December 1, 2020

² UUA Bylaws, Section C.2.2.

³ McWhorter, John. *Woke Racism* (p. 23). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

⁴ Ibid. p. xiv)

⁵ Applebaum, Anne, “The New Puritans,” *Atlantic*, August 31, 2021

⁶ Adams, James Luther, *On Being Human Religiously*, Stackhouse, Max L., ed., Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 1976, p. 15.

⁷ Crowley, Tony, “Colonialism and Language,” *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the Language Sciences*, ed. P. Hogan, Cambridge, 2008.

⁸ Isabelle L’eglise, Bettina Migge, “Language and colonialism. Applied linguistics in the context of creole communities,” Marlis Hellinger & Anne Pauwels. *Language and Communication: Diversity and Change. Handbook of Applied Linguistics*, Mouton de Gruyter, pp. 297-338, 2007.

⁹ McWhorter, *ibid.*, p. 185.