

Enlighten Up!
A History of Reason, Freedom, and Tolerance
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Assuming human psychology has remained fundamentally the same throughout our existence, then we can assume our most ancient ancestors were motivated by the same unconscious needs, fears, and desires still motivating us. Developmental psychologist Robert Kegan says, “The two greatest yearnings of human life ... may be the yearning for inclusion (to be welcomed in, next to, held, connected with, a part of) and the yearning for distinctness (to be autonomous, independent, to experience my own agency, the self chosenness of my purposes).”¹ If he’s right, the greatest source of human anxiety is the conflict between our opposing need for both freedom and belonging, which presents itself as conflict between society and the individual. Freud said, “every individual is virtually an enemy of civilization,” and, “...civilization has to be defended against the individual, and its regulations, institutions, and commands are directed to that task.”²

Hence, throughout human history, whether part of a handful of ancient humans living in a small troop led by a dominant male, or a modern human living in a global society, Freud says, “A great part of the struggles of mankind centers round the single task of finding some expedient (i.e., satisfying) solution between these individual claims and those of the civilized community.”³ As a student of psychology, I’d say it is the, so called, “civilized community” that usually wins out. This is not only because societies are collectively more powerful than the individuals who make them up, but also because the need to belong is greater in us than the need to be free. We can survive without much freedom, even if our lives are not optimal, but we cannot survive long without others, whom we depend upon for our survival. As social psychologist Erich Fromm says, “This identity with nature, clan, religion gives the individual security,”⁴ but can “block [one’s] development as a free, self-determining, productive individual.” But at least, he says, one “does not suffer from the worst of all pains—complete aloneness and doubt.”⁵

Again, as Kegan puts it, “Our survival and development depend on our capacity to recruit the invested attention of others to us ... There is no sadder or more thought provoking material in the research on infancy than the documentation that babies fail to thrive and even die without an attachment to a consistently present caretaking person.”⁶ As newborns, we are entirely helpless and dependent upon our bond with our mother or surrogate mother and, to a lesser extent, the rest of our family, with no initial thought or desire of becoming independent from them. We begin life by identifying so closely with others, especially our primary caregivers, that we have almost no independent sense of ourselves. And many of us continue this pattern of psychological codependence with others throughout the rest of our lives, with no desire to leave or lose the sense of belonging, acceptance, and security of our families and the other significant people and groups we become enmeshed with. For these, true freedom and independence can be terrifying.

But if we cannot overcome our fear of freedom, we are likely to get stuck at an immature stage of development, at a conventional stage in which we consider our worth based upon how well we satisfy the expectations of others, not upon our own expectations of ourselves, and our morality

remains an authoritarian devotion to law, order, and convention rather than to our own authentic values and principles. If we get stuck at such a stage, we cannot fully unfold as individuals, we cannot self-actualize or achieve our full potential. For “Those in whom [this] has taken place,” Freud says, “are turned from being opponents of civilization into being its vehicles.”⁷

When individuals are fixated, or stuck, at an immature stage of development, rather than striving to fully mature, they work in the interest of the collective to thwart individuation and development in others, too. They literally become lost in the crowd. As developmental psychologist, Jean Piaget, says, “Mass movements create a social unit at the expense of individuals, who lose their critical sense, their personality, and even their moral sense.”⁸ Or, as Carl Jung put it, “Man in the crowd is unconsciously lowered to an inferior moral and intellectual level, to that level which is always there, below the threshold of consciousness, ready to break forth as soon as it is stimulated through the formation of a crowd.”⁹

It's important to point out that such thinking on the part of psychologists, sociologists, and philosophers is modern thinking. The idea that people should be free and relatively unrestrained by society has only become a moral expectation during the past few hundred years. Prior to this, it was taken for granted that most people were meant to be ruled over by a dominant patriarch, a monarch, high priest, or religious authority. Such was considered the natural order of things as determined by the fates, the gods, one's class or cast at birth, and the like. The worth and dignity of every person would have been so unthinkable then that the mere suggestion of it would have likely sounded like the punchline of a joke.

As for the few in the ruling classes of human society, they too were convinced they were divinely chosen to govern everyone else because they were born inherently better, and that those they were elected to rule over were inherently worse. Most human beings were considered inferior by the very few who ruled over them, and those they ruled considered themselves inferior beings who were deserving of their inevitable circumstances. This resulted in a negative view of humanity and human nature in general. In western religion this has expressed itself in Christianity's doctrine of Original Sin, the belief that every person is born flawed and fallen. Today, even those who may not subscribe to this doctrine hold a negative view of human nature. Freud said, “The doctrines of religion are not a subject one can quibble about ... Our civilization is built upon them, and the maintenance of human society is based upon a majority of men believing in the truth of those doctrines.”¹⁰ Be they church doctrines, social laws, or cultural norms and mores, they are rooted in the idea that it is society's task to keep our base instincts in check, not to establish systems that allow us to make our own choices about what is good and what is good for us.

But roughly 2,600 years ago, one of “the most spectacular events in history” occurred, something so extraordinary that philosopher Bertrand Russel once said, “Nothing like it has ever occurred before or since.”¹¹ I'm talking about the birth of Western philosophy in the Greek city of Miletus. That's where, for the first time, as far as we know, some thinkers attempted to explain the world in natural rather than supernatural terms. As important as this giant intellectual step forward was, just as important is its implication that to achieve such understanding requires a positive belief

and confidence in human reason and agency. As basic as this might now seem, it was a historic gamechanger. For the first time, there was a positive belief about the potential of every human being, and that meant there was something good that all people shared in common, rulers and the ruled, kings and subjects, rich and poor, Christians and non-Christians, blacks and whites, males and females, gays and straights, citizens and foreigners, and so on. Of course, we're still trying to achieve the implications of this great awakening, but the seeds of humanity's highest aspirations, seeds that would bloom into dreams of equality, and justice, and democracy, and freedom, and tolerance, and reason, and self-actualization, and individual worth and dignity, were all born during this extraordinary magic moment on that tiny Greek island nearly three millennia ago.

Alas, we all know what happened only a few hundred years later: The Holy Roman Empire emerged, Greek philosophy was considered contrary to the teaching of Christianity, ninety percent of its writings were destroyed, it was condemned as paganism, and it became illegal to teach or talk about. Historians call the lengthy period that followed the Dark Ages, but it may just as easily be considered a return to the kind of primitive thinking that had existed prior to the miracle in Miletus, the kind of thinking that viewed all of humanity in a negative and cynical light as an untrustworthy and malicious creature that needed to be under the constant control of authorities who had been magically granted divine insights and divine rights to rule over them.

It wasn't until the Papal authority began weakening in the 14th century and some thinkers dared to question Church doctrine, that things slowly began getting better again, including the reemergence of a more positive view of humanity. Among them was Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch), who was born in 1304 and became known as the "Father of Humanism." Petrarch studied what was left of the early philosophers' writings and teachings and other forbidden works of Antiquity, and emphasized the importance of *studia humanitatis*, studying all the works of humanity. Again, today this may seem obvious, but at the time, after centuries of having a single truth forced upon all of society, under the cynical presumption that people are too sinful and dangerous to think for themselves, the idea that human beings everywhere, including those outside the Christian world and those from the long ago past, had something significant to say, was unthinkable.

The Period to follow this major paradigm shift, this *studia humanitatis* and its positive view of humanity, has become known as the Renaissance. *Renaissance* means "renewal," and was named such because of this renewed interest in the whole of humanity's forbidden works, especially those of the early philosophers who first began seeking the answers to life's biggest questions by examining empirical evidence through the use of human agency and reason. Whatever else they were to discover, whatever other values they would develop, I cannot emphasize enough that the very beginning of these intellectual revolutions, both in Miletus and during the Renaissance, started with a positive view of human nature and human potential.

Once we accept this, that all humans share a good and common nature, no matter where they are from, what language they speak, what beliefs they hold, or how otherwise different they might be, then a common humanity ethic must follow, the idea that all people are equal and deserving of the same basic rights. If a peasant is as worthy of respect as a king, for example, we must begin to ask

what is the purpose of a king to begin with? If we are to have a king, or any kind of government, their purpose ought to be to serve the welfare of their citizens, not the other way around. Better still, why not get rid of the king and give everyone an equal voice, an idea that led to the establishment of Democracy.

Once this positive view of humanity emerged, so did the ideas that people should be free to think and speak and decide for themselves; and that what people believe and expect others to believe should be based on empirical evidence and sound reason; and that, in order to guarantee these rights for everyone, societies must be tolerant of the many differences within them. It was, in fact, the Unitarians, who had emerged during the Renaissance, that put this latter principle to the test by establishing the first religious toleration law in Western history, the Edict of Torda, established in Transylvania in 1568. "In our dominions, there will be freedom of conscience"¹² the edict declared, 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."

These Renaissance principles—freedom, reason, and tolerance—flourished during the Enlightenment period that was to follow, between the 17th and 19th centuries, and are the basis upon which Western society is founded. More honestly, they are the principles toward which Western society aspires or, at least, claims to aspire and ought to aspire toward. They are the principles upon which the United States is founded and the principles upon which its most liberal religion, our religion, Unitarianism is founded, both of which claim the common humanity ethic, that "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

In recent years, in 1985 to be precise, American Unitarians rearticulated this ethic in its first of seven principles, "Respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person." Yet it is a much older principle that was first articulated by theologian Martin Luther, who believed humans should be free because God had given them a dignity unlike any other creature. Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant echoed this sentiment with his categorical imperative insisting that no person should be treated as an end to someone else's means, but should be considered an end within themselves. They should be able to choose, that is, their own purposes and sources of meaning. As Francis Fukuyama says in his book, *Identity*, "The desire for the state to recognize one's basic dignity has been at the core of democratic movements since the French Revolution,"¹³ which occurred during the Enlightenment period.

Fukuyama also reminds us the principle of human dignity has been "embedded in a significant number of modern democratic constitutions, including those in Germany, Italy, Ireland, Japan, Israel and South Africa. For example, article 1, section 1, of the German Basic Law of 1949 states, 'The dignity of man is inviolable. To respect and protect it shall be the duty of all public authority.' Similarly, section 10 of the South African constitution states, 'Everyone has inherent dignity and the right to have their dignity respected and protected.' The South African Constitutional Court has noted, 'A right to dignity is an acknowledgement of the intrinsic worth of human beings.'"¹⁴

By now you are probably asking, if this is a foundational principle of so many societies, including our own, why is there so much indignity in the world? Despite the highest of aspirations articulated in our own Constitution, we have tolerated long periods of slavery and Jim Crow laws, gender inequality, racist internment camps, debtors prisons, disproportionate imprisonment and punishment of minorities, and all manner of other inequalities and indignities. This is why I refer to these principles as aspirations, because we are still striving to perfect them within our societies even as we struggle against other authoritarian instincts that seek constantly to turn back the clock. Our devotion to human worth and dignity, and to the principles of freedom, reason, and tolerance that must follow, is imperfect and not fully shared by all of us. “Authoritarian governments,” as Fukuyama says, “fail to recognize the equal dignity of their citizens.”¹⁵ But there are also many citizens with an authoritarian attitude, a wish to control the narrative, who don’t recognize the equal dignity of their fellow citizens.

Even as we still strive to fully achieve these highest of human aspirations, there remain primitive instincts and forces seeking to eliminate them and return to the old model of human society in which a great and mighty silverback of sorts dominates us all. Even today, the Unitarian Universalist Association, the headquarters of what was once the world’s most liberal religion, has utterly abandoned its democratic principles and is now proposing to eliminate its seven principles altogether, including its first principle, the inherent worth and dignity of every person. For it has embraced authoritarianism and now seeks to eliminate any devotion to individuality and personal freedom altogether. If it can happen to ours, it can happen to any organization.

Fortunately, these enduring values, no matter how imperfectly observed, are perennial and not dependent upon the continuation of the Unitarian Universalist Association, or any other organization for that matter. So long as there are human beings on this Earth, these principles will persist. This is so, because they exist in the heart of every person, this yearning to be free, but are at odds with that other yearning to be included. When the latter is dominant, people fear, hate, and disrespect those who are different. But when the yearning to be free is primary, the worth and dignity of every person becomes paramount. And this is so for all of us, whether we are liberal or conservative. It is by appealing to this instinct, this basic need, that we can come together, not merely as a society, but as a species, no matter who we are or where we are from.

Currently, there are many circumstances in the world that understandably make us afraid— afraid of the future and afraid of each other—and our instinct is to retreat into group identity, nationalism, prejudice, and to feel hostile toward those who hold different ideas than us. We want to take control of the narrative, of the way others look at the world, by becoming authoritarian and intolerant.

And this is the reason Unitarian Universalism exists, or is supposed to exist, an entire religion based upon the principle that every person, every individual, has inherent worth and dignity, and therefore should be free and equal. Fortunately, our congregations remain independent from the illiberal organization the UUA has become, which means we can continue to do our job by not only living out our highest aspirations among ourselves, but by reminding everyone of these powerful

longings that dwell with the heart of every soul. In the U.S., Unitarianism was initially called, Arminianism, defined by a belief that every person is born with the potential to do good. It is this positive view of humanity that lies at the foundation of our faith, in the highest aspirations of our society, and in the only hope there is for a better, more just, and loving future. Our liberal faith is rooted in our yearning to be free and in our desire to fashion a society in which all people are free to fully unfold.

¹ Kegan, Robert, *The Evolving Self*, (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1982), p. 142.

² Freud, Sigmund, *The Future of an Illusion*, (W.W. Norton & Company, New York, NY, 1961, 1989) p. 7.

³ Freud, Sigmund, *Civilization and its Discontents*, (Dover Publications, Inc., New York, NY, 1930, 1994), p. 27.

⁴ Fromm, Erich, *Escape from Freedom*, Avon Books, Heart Corporation, New York, NY, 1941, 1965, p. 51.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Kegan, *ibid.*, p. 17.

⁷ Freud, *ibid.*, p. 14.

⁸ Piaget. Jean, *The Essential Piaget*, eds., (Gruber, Howard E. and Voneche, J. Jacques, Jason Aronson, Inc., Northvale, NJ, 1995), p. 49.

⁹ Jung, Carl, *Psychology & Religion*, (Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 1938, 1966) p. 15f.

¹⁰ Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, *ibid.*, p. 44.

¹¹ Russell, Bertrand, *The Wisdom of the West*, Crescent Books, Inc., Rathbone Books Limited, London, 1959, p. 10.

¹² Bumbaugh, David E., *Unitarian Universalism: A Narrative History*, Meadville-Lombard Press, Chicago, IL, 2000, p. 50.

¹³ Fukuyama, Francis, *Identity*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, NY, 2018, p.49.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 49.