The End of an Era

The Dismantling of Unitarian Universalism by the Illiberal Left

By

Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof

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As most of you know, after giving away less than 200 copies of my book, *The Gadfly Papers,* at the 2019 Unitarian Universalist General Assembly, I was immediately banned from the returning to the Assembly and within 24 hours was publicly condemned in two letters signed by over 300 UU minsters calling me and my book racist, homo- and transphobic, ableist, and classist, without citing a sentence from it. Within a month I was fired as an adjunct professor from Meadville-Lombard Theological School, the Unitarian school where I earned my doctorate, and was publicly censured by the UU Minister's association. A year later I was disfellowshipped by the UU Association's Ministerial Fellowship Committee, and today the Association has me listed on its website as an abusive bully who is ethically unfit for ministry.

Sadly, I am not the first, nor even the most recent, minister to endure such treatment. In 2018, Rev. Richard Trudeau raised similar concerns as mine on social media. "I have reservations about current UU racial-justice ideology," he said, "and would like to find a place to discuss them with colleagues (of all races)." Only a few days later he received a letter of censure insinuating that by merely questioning the UUA's particular approach to racial justice and anti-oppression he had violated their code of ethics.

And just a few weeks ago, Rev. Kate Rohde, a retired UU minister, was formally disfellowshipped in response to personal opinions she's expressed on social media. The UU Association's notice on the matter accused her of "defaming colleagues" without saying how, and of refusing "repeated attempts to call her back into covenant," that she "categorically denied the validity of any and all claims made," and that "the Ministerial Fellowship Committee was unable to find an avenue for reconciliation or meaningful remediation." I take this to mean Rohde refused to confess her sins and recant. She was disfellowshipped, according to their own explanation, for continuing to disagree with her prosecutors.

I begin with these examples, not to incite outrage, but to make the point that in today's Unitarian Universalist Association disagreeing with the authorities is no longer permitted. Those who do will find themselves shamed and silenced at best, and have their reputations destroyed and their livelihoods ruined at worst. Tragically, such suppression and the resulting conflict is also occurring in many of our congregations. Some individuals and small groups want to talk about their concerns, but are being forbidden by their ministers, Boards, and other members from doing so. Many congregations are losing members as a result; members who understandably choose to simply walk away than put up with what has become the antithesis of the free religion they once knew.

This is a sad state, if not end, for liberal religion in North America, which was formalized almost 200 years ago with the establishment of the American Unitarian Association (AUA)

in 1825 but got its unofficial start nearly a century before. It was then Rev. Charles Chauncey, minister of Boston's First Church, began preaching that human beings are born "with the capacity for both sin and righteousness,"[1] an idea that was initially called *Arminianism* but would eventually be called "Unitarianism." A hundred years later, Chauncey's Congregational church officially became Unitarian. Prior to this, King's Chapel, the first Anglican Church in Colonial America, established in Boston in 1686, installed a Unitarian Minister, James Freeman, in 1782, making it the oldest Unitarian Church in the nation. And the oldest pilgrim church in the U.S., founded at Plymouth in 1620, became a Unitarian church in 1802.

Our religion has been here since the founding of this nation, promoting and demonstrating our belief in human goodness and potential and the virtues of freedom, reason, and tolerance. So tolerant are we that, unlike so many other religions that continue to fracture, we formed an association with another religion, Universalism, in 1961, and, until very recently, have been almost defined by our ability to get along exceedingly well despite our many differences. As the renowned Unitarian Universalist minister Jack Mendelsohn wrote in 1964, "In a Unitarian Universalist congregation, an agnostic may sit beside one who believes in a personal God; at the after-service coffee hour a believer in reincarnation may stand chatting with one who affirms 'utter extinction.' Such are our diversities in theological belief."[2]

Yet today, the infectious intolerance and dogmatism that began in Boston is spreading to our congregations and is tearing them apart anywhere there is resistance to the loss of freedom, reason, and tolerance that had defined our liberal religion for nearly 300 years. Again, as Mendelsohn put it, "The most fundamental of all Unitarian Universalist principles, then, is personal freedom of religious belief—the principle of the free mind … No Holy Writ dictates. No creed dictates what must be believed."[3] Today, this is no longer the case, marking the end of an era for religious freedom and liberalism in North America.

Along with the loss of personal freedom in our religion, and the worth and dignity of every person that went with it, is the loss of our collective freedom to express ourselves through legitimate democratic systems. One of the UUA's seven principles, its 5th principles, is "The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large." Yet, for more than a decade, the systems that once kept our congregations democratically engaged with the Association have been eliminated and decision-making power has been consolidated into the hands of a few people at our Boston headquarters. Not long ago the UUA Board of Trustees had dozens of members elected by UUs in districts all over the country. Today there are seven Trustees hand selected by a committee.

As recently as the 2016 General Assembly in Columbus, Ohio, as the UU Association's Moderator announced plans to transform our liberal religion into a covenantal one, he also said, "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." It doesn't get any clearer than that: the new vision is to defer the governance to the UUA.

Today, what many of us would consider democratic elections of leaders is practically nonexistent in the UUA. As in Russia and other authoritarian regimes, we are asked to vote in elections in which the outcomes have already been predetermined by the powers-that-be. The most alarming example of this regards the UUA's Presidential election. Until recently, its Presidential Search Committee was required to present delegates with two or more candidates, while others could choose on their own to run by petition, which required the support of only 25 congregations. There was no restriction on when one could begin gathering these petitions. But this began to change in 2018 when the UUA Campaign Elections Committee issued a report stating:

> **We recommend that the by-law that allows for running for President by petition be eliminated** (9.6a, as it pertains to the office of President). In the absence of the will to eliminate this by-law completely, we believe that the threshold for petition candidates should be raised significantly— to at least 50 congregations, from at least two regions, and certifiable only by the action of duly-called congregational meetings.

Failing to eliminate this option completely, the bylaws were changed in 2019, doubling the number of petitions necessary to 50 petitions from three regions across the U.S., petitions that must be formally approved in a church Board meeting or during a special congregational meeting. This seems an almost insurmountable barrier, but there have never been any restrictions on how early a candidate can begin seeking petitions, at least not until earlier this year when I informed our congregation of my intention to begin seeking petitions to be on the ballot this June. Within just a few days the Election Committee contacted me in a terse email falsely claiming I had violated their rules by campaigning before November 15th, when they would officially announce their chosen candidates. This is patently untrue. The bylaws clearly separate the petitioning process from the campaigning process, and always have.

Meanwhile, the deadline for turning in one's petitions is February 1st, which means petitioners now have only two-and-a-half months to contact and convince 50 congregations from around the country to hold a special meeting to approve a petition to have them placed on the ballot. Given the requirements most congregations have for holding special congregational meetings, petitioning to get on the ballot has become impossible, which is what the Committee expressly wanted to begin with.

Additionally, just last year, the UUA asked delegates to approve a change to the bylaw requiring the Presidential Search Committee to submit "no fewer than two nominations" to state "one or more." By already having effectively eliminated petitioning candidates, this would have allowed them to put forward a single Presidential candidate. This move finally proved to be a bridge too far for the GA delegates who voted it down, meaning the committee is still required to put forward no fewer than two candidates. Nevertheless, on November 15th, just two weeks ago, the UUA announced a single candidate for the position, explaining that one of their nominees "declined the nomination" but, "Once the nominations were made, the committee determined that the only fair and appropriate course of action was to move forward with the nomination," of their chosen candidate, "rather than reopening the application process."

This excuse is nonsense for many reasons and has prompted much concern about the UUA's blatant violation of its own bylaws and disregard for even a pretense of democracy. In a recent campaign statement the Presidential appointee said, "I am currently the only nominee in the election process, though others may run by petition," which, as I've pointed out, has recently been made impossible. In another recent communication, the current UUA President also says, "We do have a petition process and have put out information about how candidates can run by petition." Under the circumstances, these overtures to democracy sound completely hollow and insult our intelligence.

Persecuting those who assert their freedom of speech and actively undermining our commitment to democracy is happening in clear violation of the Seven Principles outlined in Article II of the UUA's Bylaws, which have become problematic for the those involved in this hostile takeover of our liberal religion. This is especially so of the 1st principle, *respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person*, the 4th principle, *a free and responsible search of truth and meaning*, and, as mentioned, the 5th principle, *the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large*. For we cannot censure, silence, and persecute others if we respect them, their freedoms, and their right of self-determination. Nor can we claim to be democratic when we put systems in place that help a handful of individuals determine who will and won't be elected.

So the UUA's Article II Study Commission recently released a proposal to eliminate the Seven Principles altogether and to replace them with seven words, which they refer to as our "shared values." The words include *love* at the center of a diagram surrounded by *pluralism, interdependence, equity, generosity, justice, and evolution*. (Evolution, of course, is not a value but a process.) Words like *freedom, democracy*, and *independence* are not included on the list.

Fortunately, these changes will have to be approved by delegates at a General Assembly and have only been released for prior consideration. Even so, it does not appear genuine feedback about them is truly welcome. An attendee of one such meeting recently reported, "The UUA is conducting feedback sessions in tightly controlled formats that limit the feedback that UUs hear from each other." He further explained that there were no questions allowed nor requests for overall opinions about the changes.

And all of this gets back to my main point: Those of us troubled by what's happening to our religion are not bothered by the beliefs of those responsible, we are simply and gravely disturbed that we have been silenced. Simply wishing to discuss our concerns, immediately gets us condemned as racists, homophonic, transphobic, ableist, classist and any other modern version of the word "heretic" they can throw at us. We can live with our ideological differences. That's the Unitarian way. But we cannot live with being silenced or being part of religion that is regressing into old patterns of religious intolerance, extremism, and authoritarianism. Again, I want everyone to hear me on this—those who agree with me and those who don't—my issue with the Unitarian Universalist Association is not their ideology, as much as I might disagree with some of it. My issue is that they are using their positions and power to silence those they disagree with. It is the UUA that refuses to engage with us

openly and sincerely, in mutual settings, not tribunals. And this is truly unethical, abusive, and bullying behavior.

Yet this is not meant to be a "You've done enough. Have you no sense of decency … at long last? Have you left no sense of decency?" moment, as it was when attorney Joseph Welch spoke these words during the McCarthy hearings long ago. On the contrary, as difficult as it is to hear about what's going on in our beloved and beleaguered religion, as difficult as it is for some of to relive these injustices, this is meant to be an uplifting message, as we are now ready to consider the power we have to adequately meet this challenge.

Our first advantage is that our congregations remain autonomous organizations independent of the Unitarian Universalist Association. I said, "independent," not "interdependent." I know some of you out there are members of congregations that are in conflict over these matters, and I also know how difficult that is to endure, especially when your ministers and your church leaders are suppressing freedom and democracy. But even if your church isn't able to assert its collective independence at this time, you still have yours as individuals, and that is what keeps you free and that is where your great strength lies.

The other great advantage we have is each other. The UUA may have abandoned its liberal members and its liberal heritage, but we have not abandoned each other. Our Association may have become authoritarian, but we remain free. It may not be willing to hear us, but we can continue to speak. So we need no longer concern ourselves with turning the UUA around. It's not necessary. In the past, the UUA was but our service organization, as its bylaws still state. We've funded it so we can collectively support each other with the necessary services we occasionally need. This too is something we can continue doing because all that is required for doing so is our independence and continued connection to each other, which we have. So let's stop wasting time and energy hoping to change the UUA and focus, instead, on what we really need and on our ability to support each other.

- The first thing we need is to regularly be reminded that we are not alone in the world and that we remain part of something meaningful that is larger than us and our local congregations. We need to remain part of a liberal religion with a rich history, deep roots, and essential values.
- We also need an organization wherein we are free to speak and think for ourselves, and are never censured, punished, or ostracized for doing so. We need to be part of a community in which we can be great friends with people who have different ideas and identities than our own.
- We also need liberal ministers, which means a new way identifying and certifying those we call to occupy our pulpits. Finding a UU minister who is truly liberal is the number one concern I hear from congregations in search these days.
- We need information, like newsletters that aren't filled with propaganda and euphemisms, and an independent magazine that includes letters to its editors, including letters expressing dissent and dissatisfaction.

- We need classes and curriculum that remind us of who we are and where we come from, and religious education that exposes our children and youth to our cherished liberal values.
- We need activities that bring us together, including conferences, district meetings, and worship services that make use of technologies enabling us to include members throughout North American and anywhere else.
- We need to reestablish genuine democracy in our dealings with each other by putting a ballot in the inbox of every member and, today, we have the technology to do so.

So today, because we have these needs, and because we have each other, and because we have the freedom to do so, I am excited to announce the formation of the North American Unitarian Association that very shortly will include individuals and congregations throughout the U.S. and Canada as members. Those of us working toward its creation, including two members of our local congregation's Board of Trustees and a member of our Shared Ministry Team, along with others in both countries, have been working swiftly to make this happen. But given the mounting upset regarding recent developments concerning the Seven Principles and the UUA's Presidential election process, we felt it necessary to get ahead of ourselves a little to help alleviate some of the concern and to, hopefully, channel it in a positive direction.

I also want to make it very clear that the NAUA is not meant to replace the UUA. I still believe the UUA will eventually turn around. But this will require new leadership and enough time for them to effect change. According to my estimates, we won't see anything like this happening until 2035 at the earliest. In the meantime, we have immediate and practical needs that must be attended to in order for us to thrive together as religious liberals. So I want to encourage our congregation and other congregations to remain part of the UUA so we can use what little voice we have left to help restore it to the openminded and openhearted religion it is meant to be.

I would be very proud if our Spokane congregation becomes a founding member of the NAUA, but this is not up to me. It will be up to our Board of Trustees in consultation with our members. But for now, we can feel good and hopeful about the future of liberal religion again as, together, we rebuild the relationships and support that have sustained us in North American for more than three centuries, bound by our shared commitment to reason, freedom, and tolerance.

[1] Robinson, David, *The Unitarians and the Universalists*, Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, 1985, p. 11.

[2] Mendelsohn, Jack, *Being Liberal in an Illiberal Age*, Skinner House Books, Boston, MA, 1964, 1995, p. 40.

[3] Ibid., p. 39.