

“Liberal Religion?”

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

My last few years in Montreal, I lived in an apartment right overtop of a bar. Most of the time it was pretty drab and dull, and not very lively. But things would change on Friday and Saturday evenings, when they have punk music concerts, and the sidewalk would be filled with people until one or two in the morning, talking, smoking and enjoying each other's company. Having been walking past these gatherings for several years, I have a pretty good eye for the punk esthetic by now: the clothes, the haircuts, the tattoos and piercings.

I don't see much of it in the congregation this morning...but I know many of you are punks at heart, and so perhaps you'll appreciate this anecdote, which a self-identifying punk friend of mine shared with me many years ago: Two friends are walking down the street one evening, and one says to the other: “What does it *mean* to be ‘punk’?” So his friend walks up to a garbage can, kicks it over, and sends it rolling down the street and says, “THAT's punk.” The first friend says to her, “Oh, I get it.” So *he* walks over to *another* garbage can, and kicks it over. It goes rolling down the street... and he asks, “That's punk?” His friend replies, “*No*, that's trendy.”

Being punk, in short, requires being fresh. It means being on the edge, and not doing what you're expected to do. And even in our Sunday best, we Unitarian Universalists like to think there's something punk to how we do things, an edge: a kind of kicking-down-the-garbage can way of being church. We call it “liberal religion.”

And what does this mean? It means reason before ritual, democracy over hierarchy, and individual freedom of belief rather than creeds and dogmas. It's what separates “us” from those people who won't budge in the face of social change, who see greater inclusion and the overturning of established norms as a threat to their identity. In my observation, the term “liberal religion” serves as a shorthand to distinguish ourselves from more traditional religious communities, which many of our members have consciously left before joining UU congregations. Unitarian Universalism is almost synonymous with liberal religion. There's a Wikipedia page dedicated to the topic, but we're the only religion mentioned. For many UUs, individually and collectively, the l-word is an indispensable part of our self-definition.

And so the message that I'd like to share with you this morning may seem a little heretical, but I think it needs to be said: being liberal is not punk anymore. It's become trendy.

Of course, maybe this isn't news to many of you. Like a lot of the social and cultural change that's on the wind these days, it seems that we are aware of it on some level, even as we continue to live our lives more or less on the same model that we have become accustomed to. A while back, I set myself the challenge to try to explain Unitarianism without using the word “liberal” – as a ministerial student, I am put on the spot to explain fairly often – and so far I have been failing miserably. Once I

was asked by some co-workers when I worked in a bookstore, and I stalled and said we were a “progressive” religion. A brave attempt, but more of a sloppy synonym than a really substantial re-envisioning. I'm so afraid of being stereotyped as one of those uptight and intolerant church people that I make sure to immediately stick myself with the liberal label, just to make it clear that I'm capable of being a reasonable member of our secular society.

It's not that I think there's necessarily anything wrong with the notion of liberal religion. And rest assured I'm not proposing that we become – Goddess forbid – a *conservative* religion. But if the liberal moniker once served to set us apart, I think it now does us a disservice, especially when we use it out of habit, assuming that its meaning is obvious and unchanging.

James Luther Adams, a Unitarian theologian – kind of a high priest of liberal religion – wrote several decades ago that “Religious liberalism depends first on the principle that “revelation” is continuous...Nothing is complete, and thus nothing is exempt from criticism. Liberalism itself...is patient of this limitation. At best, our symbols of communication are only referents, and do not capsule reality...They point always beyond themselves.” Of course, he wasn't advocating ditching the term, but I think his reasoning hints at that eventuality.

This doesn't mean letting go of everything we identify with being liberal: a broad welcome, an enquiring mind, and a commitment to social justice. Rather, as philosopher Ken Wilber suggests, the goal can be to “transcend and include” our current worldviews into something richer, deeper and more complex.

And this may not be as bad as we think.

First of all, when I say that liberal religion has become trendy, I don't mean that as an entirely negative thing. For our Universalist ancestors, preaching the Gospel of universal salvation – that no one was damned, or condemned to eternal hell and torment – was a really radical thing! As unfortunate as it is that some people still do hold to such narrow ideas the fact is that if you talk to mainstream Protestant Christians, you'll find that they don't really believe in those things either. Ditto for many groups from Jewish, Muslim and other faith backgrounds, who have found ways to reconcile their traditions with secular society, and evolving notions of justice and human rights. And that, from where I stand, is good news.

So where do we go from here? I've heard a few Unitarians lament that we're no longer the leader among religious groups on social justice. I've heard it said that we just need to pick an issue, like affordable housing, that we could champion and become relevant again. Do something bold to stand out from the pack. And I hope we do become braver and bolder, and willing to carve out new ground as we act with faith in the world according to our principles.

But I think we would be missing a fantastic opportunity if we thought our relevance depended on finding a way of setting ourselves apart from our kindred in other faith traditions. It's been dawning on me that, despite my often reflexive impulse to make it clear that I'm not like “most religious people,” most religious people are actually not what I imagine them to be much of the time. Spending three years studying at the Montreal School of Theology – composed of colleges of the United Church of Canada, Anglican and Presbyterian churches – has proven beyond a doubt that there are deep currents of understanding and shared aspirations which cut across the sometimes significant differences in theology, church culture, worship styles and institutional structures. I think of my friend Geoff. Although he's studying to be a minister with the United Church of Canada, he's known for his love of

high Anglican liturgical and musical stylings, and we joke about him being a closet Unitarian when it comes to theology and spiritual beliefs.

Now, I'm not trying to make religion soup here, or flatten out many of the very real and obvious differences which exist among ourselves and other faith groups. My point is that there is more overlap than we would like to admit: a network of remarkable connections which get overlooked when we overuse terms like liberal and conservative, and imagine ourselves on opposite ends of a spectrum which looms like an unbridgeable chasm.

The real trend which seems to be emerging is not necessarily that so-called conservative churches are becoming more liberal, or that we're moving to something more conservative, but that the liberal/conservative or progressive/traditional dichotomy is breaking down. It's being revealed as the historical construct that it is, and being replaced with new understandings. Author and activist Shane Claiborne, in his book *The Irresistible Revolution*, writes of his background as an evangelical Christian, preoccupied with "moral issues" such as homosexuality and abortion. He describes how, years later, he's still an evangelical Christian, but more committed to *living* the Gospel, and has moved on to what he now understands to be the true tasks of our time: *Capital M*- Moral Issues like poverty and war. He looks, talks and acts like a very radical kind of activist, just that he's more likely to quote Jesus than Karl Marx. "My activist friends call me conservative, and my religious friends call me liberal," he writes, saying that like a growing number of people, he just doesn't fit into those old categories.

Reverend Jonipher Kpono Kwong, minister of the First Unitarian Church of Honolulu, suggests that the emerging paradigm is not about being liberal or conservative, but about constructive or destructive. Are we building relationships, trust and understanding, or are we sowing division, discord and conflict? This is what I wonder when I hear UUs and others referring to themselves as members of the religious left. It's effective as a reminder that not all religious people share the same views as those on what is popularly called the religious right, but I'm skeptical as to whether this kind of polarization can actually promote the kind of positive change which we might hope.

Or think of the organization, KAIROS, a partnership among a number of Christian groups in Canada, grounded in the injunction of the Hebrew prophet Micah, to "do justly and love mercy, and walk humbly with God". I'm not an expert on their work, but I know it's quite extensive, with concrete initiatives to address climate change – including the innovative concept of a carbon sabbath – and a wide range of tangible initiatives in Canada and abroad, working for economic justice, indigenous rights, and corporate accountability. It's impressive stuff, and nothing short of radical. Their member churches include the Anglican Church of Canada, The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, the United Church, Presbyterians, the Mennonite Central Committee, and the Society of Friends, or Quakers.

A few of those groups might fit under a broad liberal umbrella, but many of them probably would not come to mind if we were asked to list what we considered to be progressive churches. Yet that doesn't have to matter as much as we think it does. Many of the identifying differences among contemporary religious groups are largely superficial: like if they have clergy, what those clergy wear, how their institutional structures are organized, and the style of their worship practices. Even more significant differences in some social values can arguably be subverted to joining together to confront issues like climate change and runaway economic inequality, crises which affect every area of our lives, and threaten our very ability to exist as religious communities at all.

Our 7th principle is “respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part.” I think this is much broader than being just the “environmental principle” which we sometimes assume it to be. It calls us to a constant awareness of the relationships which exist among the multitude of biological and social ecosystems with which we share this resilient yet fragile planet.

We have a long and proud history as Unitarians and Universalists. Heretics, humanists, priests and Puritans have all taken their steps in the relay which has brought us to this moment in time, and to the choices and opportunities we face together. I had hoped to come up with a word or a term, something which might fit neatly into the blank space which cries out to be filled with that l-word which I've used often enough this morning. But I have to admit, I don't have a clear idea for a successor. And maybe that's ok. Considering that some UUs would rather dispense with the notion of being a religion all together, perhaps trying to find the right adjective to precede it is not worth the trouble. And at any rate, the point is not to free us from one limited and limiting category only to drop us into another one.

I don't think we need to totally stop using the word liberal, if we know why we're using it and what it means in a given situation. But what I would love is to see us thinking more creatively and holistically about ourselves as a spiritual and human community, about everything we are and could possibly be. Trying too hard to be at the leading edge of religious and human progress may have the consequence of leaving us standing at the sidelines. The new leading edge, I suggest, is right in the middle of it all, walking arm in arm with our brothers and sisters and siblings, breathing the same air and calling with one voice for justice, for balance, and for a future we can all call our own. We can continue to debate and disagree, but perhaps we can walk and talk at the same time.

So how will we describe ourselves? As one of our hymns says, “We are a justice-seeking people...” What else is there to say? We are a freedom-loving people. We honour the intellect, but do not make it our idol. We believe in continually widening the circle of our understanding, until no one stands outside. We believe we have something to offer, and so much to learn. We should be less afraid of being lumped in. We are strong enough and good enough to hold our own and do our part.

David Robinson writes, “As rebels against established ways of thinking, *Unitarians and Universalists have always had a distinctly antihistorical temperament*. Yet their very activism, intellectual and social, has been the source of a rich history. Liberals can safely look back without risking their prospective vision.” We can look back, we can look forward, and we can look all around us and see the many ways our living tradition is unfolding, and inviting us into the dance of change.