

# Unitarian Universalism: Now is the Time

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September 25, 2011

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Unitarians Universalists look back on history with great nostalgia. When the very first Episcopalian church to be founded in New England, King's Chapel in Boston, amended its liturgy in the Prayer Book in 1785, deleting all references to the Trinity and revising references to the Son and Holy Spirit it then became the first Unitarian Church in the New World.

And so began Unitarian's leavening role in North American culture. As scholars, radicals, gadflies, and truth-tellers, we have made a significant contribution to the larger religious conversation. It all revolved around liberation of varying kinds. I believe our first important role served to liberate humankind from the brutal orthodoxy of Calvinism. Early on, even before King's Chapel's official declaration as a Unitarian institution, ministers like Charles Chauncey and Jonathan Mayhew contested the doctrines of original sin and eternal punishment. By the time of the American Revolution, many ministers in and around Boston refrained from making any references to cold Calvinist doctrine. Thomas Barnard in Salem, Massachusetts was confronted by parishioners who said to him: "Dr. Barnard, we've never heard you preach a sermon upon the trinity," to which he replied, "And you never will."

It took courage to hold a theological position that corrected the assumptions of a God who had already pre-ordained those to be saved and those to be damned. But liberalism was gaining traction, and by 1805, the oldest endowed chair in America, The Hollis Professorship of Divinity, was awarded to Henry Ware, Sr. a Unitarian, thus allowing the liberals to seize control at Harvard. Shortly thereafter, Samuel Webber, another Unitarian, became president of Harvard College. I sometimes think that with few exceptions, that may have been liberalism's last victory. And so I savor it.

The Orthodox at Harvard (I mean Calvinists, not Jews) took flight when power shifted to the Unitarians, and they began a new college in the town of Andover. The underlying argument among liberals back then, showed that the orthodox position presumed to be derived from the bible, did in fact not stem from scripture but was imposed upon it to create creeds and dogmatic systems to stimulate fear and obedience.

William Ellery Channing led the way to create (in his words) a more reasonable Christianity. He founded the American Unitarian Association in 1825, and the liberals had the beginnings of an identity and platform.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century is truly filled with Unitarian nostalgia, from Emersonian Transcendentalism, Thoreau's civil disobedience, and Theodore Parker's radical abolitionism. In 1838 when Emerson delivered his Divinity School Address putting all the controversial cards on the table, he said: "Jesus spoke of miracles for he felt

that man's life was a miracle. But the very word miracle, as pronounced by the Christian churches, gives a false impression; it is monster. It is not one with the blowing clover and falling rain."

By the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, Mrs. Oliver Wendell Holmes, notorious for her lack of any religious affiliation, declared herself a Unitarian. When reporters asked her why she became a Unitarian she notably remarked: "These days everyone around Boston seems to be something, and the least anyone can be is a Unitarian." I will not ask for a show of hand of those who identify with Mrs. Holmes' statement.

I want us to be reminded that "liberation and the drive towards justice" motivated Unitarians to act: Freedom from the tyranny of an angry God; freedom from the inhumanity of slavery. These constituted our 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century callings, and defined how we approached religion right from the beginning of our institutional formation. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century we had leaders like John Haynes Holmes, minister of the Community Church in New York, who helped found both the ACLU and the NAACP. We had A. Powell Davies, minister at All Soul's in Washington lead the charge against McCarthyism, one of America's darkest times when the rights and freedoms of millions of Americans were severely curtailed.

A generation of ministers slightly older than I, look back on the highlight of their careers as the time they went to Selma to march with Dr. King. The struggle for justice, equality among all people, fueled liberal passions as the ultimate religious goal, preparing for a heaven on earth where the inherent worth and dignity of all people could be realized.

Unitarian Universalism supported the women's movement from the suffragettes to the failed Equal Rights Amendment. Always in the vanguard of supporting women's rights and paving the way for the ordination of women ministers, so too has Unitarian Universalism rallied in support of the queer community, affirming marriage equality at its General Assembly back in 1970.

You would think that a religion that welcomed science in all its nuanced explorations of the universe, a religion that refuted the idea that morality was a deliverance of God, a religion that believed that the future of the world rested in our hands, rather than the intervention of a deity from an undisclosed location, that this religion would be a religion for any time and all times. Predicting the future of Unitarianism, however, has always proven elusive. Back in 1822, Thomas Jefferson in a letter to theologian James Smith, wrote: "I confidently expect that the present generation will see Unitarianism become the general religion in the United States."

In a December 17, 1990 cover story in Newsweek about the return to religion by the baby boom generation, it seemed like everyone from my generation and our children was destined to become Unitarian Universalist because, as Newsweek put it, because of our openness and inclusivity. Like Jefferson, this prognostication never took root either.

Frankly I don't place much emphasis on our numbers; they climb and fall. History shows (by and large) that when America elects a conservative president or society generally swings to the right, liberals freak out and run for cover in Unitarian churches. The McCarthy years in the 50's were one of our strongest gains in membership. We were also helped by Nixon and Reagan.

We need to ask ourselves today, not paying attention to growth or decline in UU membership, just examining as honestly as possible our relevancy to the religious dialogue in 2011 and beyond.

Quite recently, James Wood, staff writer for *The New Yorker*, depicted some of the religious concerns, which might account for why we are sitting in this church today. His piece *Secularism and its Discontent*, led me to ruminate on just how deep the divide between those who have abandoned a belief in God and the zealous religious types who mask their intolerance of cultural issues like gay marriage, abortion, and immigration with a faith that suggests that spiteful rhetoric and neglect of compassion are exactly what God had in mind for America.

But Wood concentrates on the dilemma posed to secular types by beginning his article about an atheist friend who wakes in the middle of the night wondering about the ultimate questions: How can it be that this world is the result of an accidental Big Bang? How could there be no design, no metaphysical purpose? Can it mean that every life, my life included, is cosmically irrelevant? James Wood adds, "atheists are not supposed to have such thoughts...It's confessing a weakness on the order of a registered Democrat wondering if she's really a Republican, or vice versa."

If there were such a thing as an Atheist rulebook, these questions would be considered invalid because they can't be answered. Religion has answers for them and that's the problem. Good secular people want to avoid going there. But even atheists, it seems, experience moments of terror, pointlessness, and anxiety that does not get resolved just because the nonexistence of god has been mathematically and philosophically demonstrated to one's satisfaction.

The German Sociologist of religion, Max Weber, characterized the disappearance of God as a growing disenchantment. I find the use of this word particularly jarring as reference was made in this month's small group ministry to Dag Hammarskjöld's comment: "God does not die on the day we cease to believe in a personal deity. But we die on the day when our lives cease to be illuminated by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of wonder, the source of which is beyond all reason."

I believe that "Wonder" in this sense, leads us to a deeper appreciation of the blowing clover and falling rain. Wonder becomes, in my estimation, a prerequisite to a moral life, filling us with the awe that crystallizes our modest role upon the earth as *Homo sapiens*. After all, who do we think we are as we abuse the earth for our own personal gain, and destroy thousands of life-systems in the process? A person

who is filled with wonder and awe will understand earth's limitations in feeding our hungry appetites for personal gain.

Unitarian Universalism, aims to awaken the wonder and awe among secular souls, because that provides a basis for moral action. It's not about God or about proving or disproving the existence of god. It's about wonder and the realization that creation itself is holy; the earth and all its creatures held in the web of all existence.

Probably many of us might concur with the novelist Julian Barnes who wrote *Nothing to be Frightened Of* when he claims that he does not believe in God but misses him all the same." The blunt denial of God may be more than what the secular crowd is looking for. The old Unitarians who bluntly denied the Calvinist God of predestination, still offered a spiritual foundation so eloquently described by Emerson and the Transcendentalists: "God resides not in formal religion but in nature; not in religious rites but in persons." (God is found in persons). Can you imagine Emerson's response to the execution of Troy Davis as Emerson expresses his faith in the social fabric woven by loved ones, friends, neighbors, and the whole community? The execution of Troy Davis was a moral failure. Emerson may have undermined Christian authority, but his spiritual side was never in doubt.

Charles Taylor, a Catholic theologian, calls secularism an "achievement;" yes, it has dismantled its dependency on a personal god roaming about in the heavens and can gaze upon the world with the enlightened eyes of science. True, but he says that secularism is not only an achievement but also a predicament: as Godless people we inhabit the world in which there is no one to appeal to outside our own mind; thus we are unable to experience the spiritual fullness of our ancestors. In our UU Orientation classes we often hear of religiously rich family traditions, carried on by grandparents and parents, and then when it comes to us to decide, we feel these old traditions, though beautiful, simply no longer fit the contemporary mindset. But does that necessarily place us in a "predicament?"

I am a Unitarian Universalist precisely because it feeds me spiritually although I am primarily a secular being. I whole-heartedly reject the claim that God's grace falls upon the chosen, but I have not rejected grace itself. I believe that the blessings of life are available to everyone, not just to those who play by doctrinal rules. Unitarian Universalism has opened the door for my exploration into wonder...which in today's world speaks to our moral relationship with the earth.

Is our relationship to the earth one of reverence or domination? Is our relationship to the earth one of communion or exploitation? Is our relationship with the earth one of celebration or consumerism?

In our current impasse regarding the collision course between earth's finite and limited resources and our appetite for more, Unitarian Universalism can and must lead our society...reorient our society to understand, appreciate, and celebrate the earth. The time for Unitarian Universalism is now – as it always has been – to

liberate from oppression. Be it the oppression of religious orthodoxy, slavery, and unequal rights. Today we face a different kind of oppression, where climate change threatens to devastate the poor around the globe, and exhaust the earth – our – home – of all its rich beauty and wonder and life systems. Today's clarion call is for eco-justice, a reverence for the earth that demands an entirely different moral relationship to the earth. Unitarian Universalism must frame the extinction of life forms on the planet as the gravest spiritual concerns history has ever encountered. Why spiritual? Because we need to move from a mindset of conquest to one of admiration....from exploitation to wonder.

If that's not a spiritual goal, then I don't know what is. Unitarian Universalism has the singular ability to embrace science as enhancing the threads of wonder. Unitarian Universalism has always focused on the creation rather than the creator. We can argue about the creator for all eternity. (What does that get you?) But the creation is truly in jeopardy and demands our loyalty, our faith and commitment immediately.

The time for wonder, awe, and reverence is now. Without them there is no morality, no justice, and a very different life upon the earth. May we fulfill our role in today's world with the same passion and fervor as our forebears. Liberation from greed. Liberation from consumerism. Liberation from indifference. If we have ever had a call or a reason to share our perspective in dialogue with others, it is now. The time for Unitarian Universalism is now! Amen.