

OUR FOUR LIBERAL LINEAGES

Sermon, Unitarian Universalist Church, Ellsworth, Maine
Sunday, © July 20, 2014 by Rev. Peter Tufts Richardson.

If you ask the typical UU what is unique about their religion they will look perplexed for a moment and then mention, “Well, we are liberal: we insist the individual is responsible for their own beliefs so we have freedom; some of us wear yellow T shirts with the word, “Love” on them, so I guess we are ‘the Love People;’ and we believe all religion around the world has something important to say so we are world citizens religiously. Oh yes, and we have the U U A principles and traditions statement. You can google it!” So what IS uniquely Unitarian Universalist?

If you interview a Buddhist priest very soon you will hear about his or her teacher and then a whole lineage of teachers. So I have set out to find our Unitarian Universalist lineages. What in all the detail of our history stands out as unique among religious teachings, a weaving of ideas that Unitarians and Universalists originated themselves and advocated? Martin Luther advocated the “priesthood of all believers,” the Buddha advocated the Eightfold Path, Moses gave us the Ten Commandments of Monotheism. What have we created? I came up with four unique variations of religious philosophy I am calling our Four Liberal Lineages. They are: (1) Classic Liberal Christian Unitarian, (2) Liberal and Radical Free Religion, (3) Classic Universalist Heresy, and (4) One World Humanist Naturalist. You will find lots of other ideas floating around among us but these four began with us.

Hancock County is the only one of Maine’s 16 counties to have had more Unitarian than Universalist activity. All but two of the 12 Unitarian societies were summer chapels, organized by wealthy summer residents from Boston. Three of the 8 Universalist societies occupied meeting houses but have not survived. In these 20 societies both the Classic Unitarian and Universalist lineages were predominant. I suspect the second Unitarian lineage came in about the time summer people began to spend Sunday mornings on their yachts rather than in the chapels their parents built. So now we have viable and strong congregations in Castine and Ellsworth. This church was founded by three women, a school teacher, a shop keeper and Fanny Otis, of the Boston Unitarian Otis’s, holding court in the town of Otis, named for her family which once owned the town. Lets call these three founders, exhibit A for lineage 1, Classic Liberal Christian Unitarian.

There will be a quiz at coffee hour to name the four lineages. Basically they are the two original Christian heresies, the Unitarian and the Universalist, plus a unique strand of religious philosophy that underpins what we call American individualism, plus a unique approach to the global religious scene based in humanist naturalist religion. The story of how this little religion of ours came up with four distinct inventions of religious philosophy is rather remarkable. I'll try to flesh it out as best I can.

I.

The first Unitarian sermon in America, so far as I can tell, was in the West Church in Boston in 1755. Jonathan Mayhew also preached on the right of revolution in the same period. It is fair to claim that the same impulse to freedom in religion was also working politically in New England. Politically it was in opposition to the arbitrary rule of the King and an overseas government, "taxation without representation." In religion it was in reaction against the arbitrary theology of Puritan Calvinism with its insistence on the depravity of human nature and the exclusion of all but a tiny elect from the benefits of an after-life. This double opposition to authoritarianism produced the Unitarian emphasis on the adequacy of human nature and reason for what we face on this planet, our ability to govern ourselves and to solve the issues of life. There was a confidence in the air, a positive estimation of human capacities! Ministers and congregations which preached this new optimism became known as "Liberal Christian" vs. those who stayed in the old Puritan attitudes, known as "Orthodox." To simplify a complex story, in the next generation the labels were changed to "Unitarian" vs. "Trinitarian." By 1805 the Unitarians had gained control of Harvard College, where ministers were trained, and we were off to the races!

Thus our first Liberal Lineage, "*Classic Liberal Christian Unitarian*," was formed consisting in about 150 of the old formerly Puritan parishes, east of Worcester and stretched along the coast from Eastport, Maine, to Newport, Rhode Island. However, very early this fortuitous development was to be shaken by a divergent philosophy within its own ranks.

II.

What was to come might be symbolized by the immigration of Joseph Priestley from England to Philadelphia in 1794. He was a Unitarian minister in England and an early pioneering scientist, working alone as scientists did in the early years. Priestley is credited with discovering oxygen. The Birmingham riots stirred up by Anglican clergy and conservatives burned Priestley's house and all his scientific instruments. He came to the United

States for its religious and political freedom and his own personal safety. But he would preach a series of sermons in Philadelphia in 1796 to the core of the founders of the United States, including President, John Adams. He dedicated his printed sermons to Adams. Then a few years later he dedicated another book to his friend, Thomas Jefferson. Here we see a contrast still with us today. Adams was a member of a congregation, the First Church in Quincy, MA. Jefferson preferred to be “a Unitarian alone.”

Soon after this contrast was drawn, in 1832, Ralph Waldo Emerson resigned as minister of the Second or Old North Church in Boston. Why? He couldn't get them to end serving communion. But more basically he was uncomfortable with a church culture in religion. He then attended church in Concord and preached around including two interim ministries here in Maine but he was always wary of organized religion. His religious philosophy had shifted too. Rather than an external religious authority, vested in an over arching monotheistic God, Emerson placed religious authority within each person, a divine spark within. If you seek for truth look first to your own experience. This was a dramatic departure among early Unitarians and crystallized the second Liberal Lineage. By the middle of the century the new sciences, Geology, Priestley's chemistry, Darwin's biological evolution, were challenging religious theology. Where is authority? Look to your own inner judgment for authority.

Thus was born the second Liberal Lineage, “*Liberal and Radical Free Religion.*” When asked why they joined a church, those in this second lineage typically say, for the fellowship of “like minds,” or “these are my kind of people” When asked why they haven't attended for awhile they might say, “well, the sermons aren't as stimulating,” or “I have found religion in my garden,” or “things have gotten too conservative lately,” or any number of like rationalizations. You come and go with organized religion according to your interests. The organic, corporate, mutual care and covenantal aspects of religion seem lesser values. Emerson's influence is seen as the philosophical basis for what is called “American individualism.” It is not hard to see how his inner authority resulted by the 1920s in religious humanism. His “divine spark within” had vanished in the winds of scientific thought. Religion comes to be rooted in our human nature, our human dignity and worth, our authority in a religion of the free mind.

III.

Meanwhile in the late 1700s our third liberal lineage, “*Classic Universalist Heresy,*” was percolating. The first Universalist sermon in America, as far

as I can tell, was preached by the French Huguenot, George de Benneville, in 1741 in rural Pennsylvania. Later an English immigrant, John Murray, landed in New Jersey in 1770 and preached Universalism along the Atlantic seaboard until he founded a church in Gloucester, Massachusetts, in 1779. Earlier a number of Universalist preachers and congregations were springing up, home grown, in western Massachusetts and southern New Hampshire and Vermont. There was even a charismatic preacher, Caleb Rich, who saw visions of Jesus approving the Universalist message of divine love.

The classic Universalist message was simple. God is love. Therefore all are saved. Universal Salvation! How could a loving God do otherwise? The Calvinists in the Trinitarian churches, the Congregationalists, Baptists, or Methodists of the day, were incensed. They said human depravity would destroy the world without the threat of divine punishment! The Universalists were radical egalitarians, we are all equal in the sight of God. Deal with it! "Love thy neighbor as thyself!"

In rural New England and soon across the country Universalism was seen as a liberating message, spreading like wildfire among subsistence farmers, village shopkeepers, workers in mills beside streams powering textile and shoemaking machines. Every village crossroad, it seems, was sprouting a tiny Universalist church. Local free thinkers, self-made mystics, flat footed commonsense idealists gathered, with circuit rider preachers of "universal salvation." To form these free spirits, laity and ministers alike, into institutional churches was like herding cats. But they compensated with enthusiasm. In Maine alone classic Universalism gave birth to 329 congregations.

Universalist ministers often challenged neighboring ministers of other religions to a debate. Universalist preachers were skilled at out proof-texting Bible verses and a flurry of books were published showing that the Bible from Genesis through Revelation was God's attempt to bring the world to Universalism. Within several generations most Protestants came to agree. For example, when was the last time you heard a Protestant minister mention at a funeral the possibility that the deceased might NOT be destined to land in heaven?

IV.

My great-great grandfather was a Baptist minister in Rockland, Maine, who declined to affirm the Universalist egalitarian message because he believed

it would lead to humanism, an overconfidence in human nature. It seems the Universalists were afraid of the consequences of their belief as well! Universalists did draw the contrast between Universalism and what they called “Partialism,” namely everyone else. Partialism was exclusive. Universalism embraced the world! Here again Universalists were timid over the logical extension of their name, “Universalism.” To embrace the world would mean to move beyond Christianity, to look for guidance, insight, wisdom, our basic human spirituality, in the many religious traditions of the world. Universalism nearly expired before ministers and congregations at last took the leap to embrace an affirmation of Universalism as “a religion for one world.”

Thus in the mid twentieth century was born our fourth Liberal Lineage, “*One World Humanist Naturalist.*” The Massachusetts Universalist Convention had watched all 23 of its Boston churches dwindle and die. They bought an old church building in Boston’s West End in 1949 and determined that they could found a congregation on a new model, taking the principles of Universalism to their widest meaning, humanist in content, globally centered in extent. The new congregation called a humanist naturalist minister, Kenneth Patton, to its pulpit and the congregation set about creating a temple for a world religion inside. Our nearest galaxy, the Andromeda Galaxy was painted on one wall in fluorescent paint. A model of the atom was placed opposite, for an axis of the micro and macro universe. A map of planet earth was placed in the center, with the pews arranged in a circle and centers for celebrating the religious art of the world’s religious traditions surrounding the congregation. You could stand in the center of the map and find the religious cultures of that continent beyond. While half the religions of the world worship a god or gods and goddesses, they all project human qualities. To learn from our full religious inheritance is to gain enriched insight and understanding ever more widely and deeply into our own humanity.

The image and memory of this vision of a universal compass for liberal religion has stayed with us. There is a widespread willingness among us now to reach into many traditions for inspiration and to incorporate practices and insights into our ongoing congregational life. In time perhaps another congregation will make the attempt to create a full temple for one humanity.

So does this cover our uniqueness, these four lineages? We have an added challenge of being a liberal religion open to new ideas. In a democratic

society every generation finds one or more ideas, excitements, waves of insight which sweep through the culture. Very often UUs have been among the pioneers and given leadership to them. In the years leading up to the civil war, for example, we were embroiled in the abolition movement to end slavery. Later women's suffrage came along with both Universalist and Unitarian leaders. In our lifetimes the neo-pagan movement swept through many of our congregations and the Covenant of UU Pagans was organized. Feminism received such a push among UUs that a majority of our ministers are now women. We were the first to change our vocabulary and to purge sexist language from our hymnals. Gay rights and marriage equality received leadership and energy from UU congregations and ministers. Many congregations have Buddhist meditation groups and Yoga practice circles. We have African drumming and "new-age" reading groups. There are process theologians and new atheists sitting side by side in our worship rooms.

We began asking the question, What is a Unitarian Universalist? And we scramble to come up with a succinct response. Unitarian Universalist religion begins by affirming a heritage of freedom in community. Our Liberal Lineages often are advocated side by side in the same congregations. You may hear a classic Christian orientation, Unitarian or Universalist, you will find a radical individualism, gathering with others of "like mind in the search for truth." Or you can experience a centering in a global spiritual emergence of human religion, creating in community a model for what we require of ourselves and the world.

It seems to me, whatever the present excitement, that we deepen our faith when we associate new ideas with one or more of the liberal lineages. It gives a powerful historic connection, a continuity with the best poetry and thought of the human presence on the planet. We become capable of embracing the sweep of time in an organic story, a unique and liberal way we can take hold of our collective human destiny.

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