

LIBERAL RELIGION

By Rev. Arlin Roy (3/23/25)

Liberal religion and liberal theology prioritize modern knowledge, science and ethics over the traditional doctrine of any sect. They emphasize the importance of personal reason and experience; liberal religion is based on the wisdom of all believers in a democratic community.

The definition of Liberal is wrapped up in freedom--from tradition, from rote obedience, and from received assumptions. Liberal religion—from that which binds us together—takes its meanings from liberal theology that is based on a critical, historical and linguistic reading of sacred scriptures. Liberal theology is not necessarily **political** liberalism, an economic viewpoint that sometimes corresponds to liberal religion--and sometimes not. Political liberalism supports giving aid to poor people domestically and poor countries, greater access to education and resources for the economically disadvantaged, and acceptance for immigrants and LGBTQIA+ people. Liberal theology provides the freedom to hold such views, but you can also get to liberal politics from liberation Protestant theology, socialism, or devout Catholicism. Some people have. Also, there are constitutional conservatives and economic conservatives who arrive at conservative politics but hold liberal theological views.

On the other hand, aggressive Christian conservatives, known to the Pew Research Institute as “Faith and Flag Conservatives,” vehemently disagree with Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Faith and Flag Conservatives want America to be explicitly a Christian nation that allows public school teachers to lead students in Christian prayer, despises LGBTQIA+, would abolish gay marriage, ban abortion, restrict government action to support fairness socially, and throws us headlong into climate disaster. By contrast, political conservatism believes in individualism, traditionalism, states’ rights, and limited federal government. Faith and Flag Conservatives actually favor selective expansion of federal control over individual rights when they oppose all abortion and same-sex marriage, favor Christian prayer in public schools, and channel government funding into private religious schools.

Liberal Protestantism and Catholicism developed as a reaction to the needs of people who have knowledge of science and reason. They struggled to reconcile a Biblical faith holding archaic views of ethics, human relationships, and the nature of humankind with more recent understandings. You might find a vague parallel development in Buddhism, which has thousands of scriptures written by diverse authors, but no recognized canon of accepted books. There has to be an ancient collection of various works located in one spot, like the Koran or the Bible in order for disputes about what is meant to arise. Liberal Protestants and Catholics tried to make common human experience the yardstick by which to measure Christian

faith, so that the Bible was no longer authoritative and infallible but was subject to historical and textual criticism. Liberal Christians turned away from traditional doctrines such as the creation story and disdain for same-sex relationships to focus on Jesus's ethical teachings and science's findings. This opened up a freedom for individuals to make their own decisions and be free to know where they stand in the world through direct experience and a broad search for truth.

Hypocrisy, or at least squishy, selective inconsistency with religious dogma in our elders, has motivated many of us in our youth to seek out Unitarian Universalism. There was freedom in hypocrisy, but not a principled freedom to become more truthful and more loving. I was raised American Baptist, which is officially full of missionary zeal for the downtrodden and oppressed, and has an unambiguous official declaration supporting conscientious objection to war. But I noticed, at sixteen years old, that the American Baptist denomination and my childhood pastor did not condemn the Vietnam War. I thought it sadly ironic that the racist and misogynist Southern Baptists were the first major Protestant denomination—in 1968—to officially oppose the war. How was I to reconcile this lack of principled consistency with how my peers were subject to the draft and therefore to the war? Many of you have reported that during your childhoods your parents selectively adhered to their faith's dietary or behavioral restraints. When parents keep kosher, but only within the home and not at Chinese or Italian

restaurants, it is hard for children to accept that as faithful. Parental nastiness and physical violence are also hard to square with voicing support for an officially loving faith. One of our previous ministers told me that she had left her childhood fundamentalist church over an abstract doctrine so obscure as to be beyond her or my comprehension. When the elders of our lives and our religions seem to not notice that they are living a lie, it is offensive. On the other hand, there is nothing more self-righteous than a sixteen-year old whose recent brain development means they have recently acquired the ability to distinguish right from wrong. Everyone needs a little mercy. What everyone does not need is hypocrisy for unprincipled comfort and convenience that does not further humans' welfare.

A lot of these conversions take place in late adolescence, when two factors are at stake—a new-found development in adolescent brains that enables a child to be very sure of their ability to know what's right and a new-found ability to commit oneself to a changed perspective. One young adult described how, one day in his second year of college, he found real meaning in Satan worship, and then later in fundamentalist Christianity, but by lunch he was free from both of them. I will give some grace to elders in this case, elders who have reached a flexible sense of what feels right and how to honor their traditions and commitments without making all of life about those traditions and commitments. At least, we

acknowledge we can be contradictory, mistaken, and misled—a lot of this involves the messy co-ordination of the inner life with outer social signals.

Liberal politicians support LGBTQIA+ for a variety of reasons—constitutional equality, ethical fairness, and scientific understanding. Unitarian Universalism comes at the support of LGBTQIA+ from a more spiritual basis. Given our support for “the inherent worth and dignity of every person,” we are going to be pretty careful about shaming someone. The third principle, “Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations,” leans hard toward considering people to be whole and entire as they are, however that might be. The fourth principle, “A free and responsible search for truth and meaning” leans heavily into reason as well as emotion. Finally, one of the living traditions we draw from is,” Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science . . .”

So, let’s consider some real-life examples. LGBTQIA+ includes a lot of letters because, over time, additional categories (transgendered, queer, Intersex, Asexual, and many more) were added as people understood that orientations and genders exist in great variety, that they are not discrete entities. Although the Christian fundamentalists claim that God created two sexes, actual genetic knowledge says that there are four sexes and that gender has multiple expressions

on a continuum, as does sexual attraction and orientation. I give you the experience of J. Ben Morton, (and I quote):

As I involuntarily learned at 32 years old, sex and gender are continuums with many variations. Saying otherwise jeopardizes not only intersex and transgender people, but all Americans, by increasing government overreach and a loss of privacy, reinforcing rigid gender roles, and complicating legal and medical processes. (I Learned I Was Intersex At 32. Here's What I Want You to Know" Huffpost, 3-12-2025, pg1)

Morton, who considered himself male, had submitted a biological sample to an ancestry tracing company that discovered that he had female genetic markers and was therefore intersex. This was a profoundly confusing, dismaying, and painful realization for this guy. Despite those female genetic markers, he has decided on male gender affirming therapies, certainly his right, any way he wished to be recognized. But however people realize they are intersex; the incidence is roughly the same incidence for naturally having red hair—2%. That means roughly seven million Americans are intersex to some degree or other. That is a lot of people for Faith and Flag Christians to try to “erase” by claiming that there are only two sexes. In any case, I do not mean to imply that sexual orientation, preference, and gender must have a genetic basis. We do not know what causes heterosexuality and opposite-sex orientations, so let's give everybody the same breaks.

Which brings us to choice: Transgender people have always been their gender; they simply have not been allowed to occupy it. They are just affirming it through language and other methods of transition. “Affirming” is the key word here, because while orientation, and gender are not a choice, choices must be made about expression. What any one person chooses as their socially recognized symbols to use in affirmation of their truth varies considerably. I will use the most minor and visible symbols to represent far deeper, more profound issues. You see me here in a suit jacket, shirt and tie. The Rev. David Bryce spent years resisting wearing a tie, and then did, because that had significance to him. Out West, it might be a bolo tie and cowboy boots, and in California--no tie, a casual shirt and jeans or even shorts. I won't show up to preach in a skirt, but perhaps a kilt to honor my Scottish ancestors? What if I showed up to preach in Bermuda shorts and sandals? I am not diminishing the importance of gender expressions, so much as symbolizing with minor manifestations what deeper co-ordinations of gender expression with inner feelings are like. There are medical issues when someone's body feels wrong and their voice sounds wrong--to them--that must be respected. There are legal name and sex designations to be corrected, and doctor's offices need to adapt. The census bureau reported, and I quote: “data show that sexual and gender minorities have different access to health and mental health care, as well as different economic and educational experiences. ...Mental health struggles are

more prevalent among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender adults than non-LGBT adults in all age groups.” (Robert Santos, “Hidden No Longer: Expanding Our Knowledge on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity,” Census Bureau website, 6-26-2024, pg.2) Although some would prefer to say that is an expression of illness for the individuals, I think it is an expression of **social** illness manifested in prejudice, narrow imaginations, and hate.

I think I know how gender expression and sexual orientation became such big issues for the Flag and Faith Conservatives—once people have broken through some cultural assumptions they may simply, casually break through others to affirm their orientation, gender, or simply Love. A U.S. Census Bureau report said, last year, that about 31% of same sex couples were interracial in 2022, more than half as common as the 19% of married opposite-sex couples that were interracial. If truth like this is allowed to be recognized it means that we are not living in MAGA land, Mayberry, or Little House on the Prairie. Declaring a governmental policy that there are only two genders does not make it so, nor does discriminating against diversity, equity and inclusion erase the truth that people are different on many dimensions.

My other example today, chosen out of so many possible examples, is about immigration. Calling someone illegal depersonalizes and dehumanizes them. Almost all of you know that I support immigrant rights and have ever since the

first Trump government. The reason is very straightforward—these are people who have been badly mistreated in their home countries, by their families or by their governments. (Like every other immigrant group, a few organized crime groups have snuck in. But over-all, the Central and South American immigrants have a lower crime rate than birthright Americans generally.) The significance of this is simple—the United States has intervened in many Central American and South American countries directly and indirectly for many decades. When a democratically elected president would take office in Central or South America, having promised to redistribute land from large corporations to poor people, their days were numbered. President Clinton, in 1992, visited Guatemala and while there apologized for America's role in propping up a brutal dictatorship during their civil war. If it was not the CIA bribing their army to stage a coup it was our Marines landing on their shores. In Central America, Costa Rica is the only country with an independent judiciary. American corporations own so much of the land that they feel a need to own the government as well. In Costa Rica, I saw the palm nuts for palm oil being trucked from Mobil Oil plantations to Mobil Oil palm oil processing plants that spewed thick white and black smoke into the otherwise pristine air. What if those tens of thousands of acres for raising palms were farmed by Costa Ricans? Oppressed people often take out their frustrations on family members—or escape North. When Sarita and I took in Blanca eight years ago, we

did not understand the backstory of her Guatemalan starvation and abuse, but we do now and it is tragic. As the richest country in the world, the United States is keeping the peasantry down in order to keep them in their place as poorly paid workers. As the country that is most influential in many other countries, our constant meddling in their affairs means we are a major factor in their poor economic conditions.

That is why “the inherent worth and dignity of every person” is a spiritual principle that cannot be isolated to America, or Germany, or India, but considers that every person deserves respect, however they wish to peacefully affirm their worth. “A free and responsible search for truth and meaning” means that the truth of gender or immigration or a thousand other subjects is essential for our own spiritual wholeness. And, finally, “The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all” calls us to look beyond national borders, to look beyond our previous assumptions of sex, orientation, and gender, to affirm freedom for everyone.