

God, Anxiety and Unitarian Universalism

Today's theme is that Unitarian Universalism moved from defining God distinctly within Christianity to rejecting God and Christianity, to now selectively accepting God, Christianity, and other sources of inspiration. This history has formed our identity.

The Unitarian Universalist Pocket Guide contains many stories of people feeling dissatisfied, rejected, or otherwise alienated from their religion of birth, or the spiritual emptiness of no religion. For example, this classic quote from Aneesa Shaikh:

I discovered Unitarian Universalism at around age thirteen, after a long and unsatisfying search for a spiritual community that matched what I felt I needed. I was newly separated from the faith I was born into and had never been more confused about what I believed.

(She continues) My parents met in college . . . my mom a first-generation college student from a very poor Missouri family and my dad a first-generation immigrant after growing up in India. (Unitarian Universalist Pocket Guide, pg. 14)

The details vary, but often a crisis or painful event sets off confusion and disaffection that leads someone to a sampling of various faiths. Then they step into a sanctuary where they are welcomed gladly and feel accepted, as 90% of UUs have. For me, it began at eighteen in the Montreal Unitarian Church. I was visiting Montreal on a Saturday and saw an inspirational quote from Einstein on the front sign board. Einstein? In church? I was intrigued. The next morning, I trudged through knee-high snow to hear an intellectual sermon drawing on Dante's inferno that challenged me to think more deeply. I talked with some friendly parishioners afterward and a nice lady signed me up for monthly sermons by mail. My journey began.

These journeys of faith find root in the paradox of Unitarian Universalism, whereby a stable congregational structure is open to new perspectives. A little history: Over many centuries, the natures of God and man have been foundational for theologians. Everything in their theology followed from a basic

decision about who God and man are. Is God angry and punitive, or loving and tolerant? Is humanity basically sinful or created as good? Over the centuries, a lot of anxiety attended these questions. If you think you were damned at birth and you are going to hell if you don't repent, and give your money to your saving church, that will cause a lot of anxiety. It is also a very good business model; as a contemporary teacher of Christian missionaries once instructed, "You gotta get them lost before you can save them." As a great Christian revival wore on in the early 1800's, Christian preachers were vehemently speaking of man's inherently sinful nature and God's sending people to hell. Anybody could get pretty nervous about that. Other Christians noticed that while the Father, Jesus, and Holy Spirit were named in various books of the Bible, the Trinity was not explicitly identified, and man's "sinful nature" contradicts God having formed humanity in His image. So it was that Unitarians and Universalists moved from taking over already established churches from within--by rejecting theologies of a punitive, three-person God--to forming distinct denominations in the early 1840's. If jokes have a germ of truth, then there's some truth that Unitarians believed they were too good to be damned and Universalists believed God was too good to damn them. History shows that the Unitarians and Universalists of past ages often overlapped each other, and were theologically in both camps.

The anxiety that drove many of us to affiliate here was one of social exclusion. Either we couldn't be comfortable someplace, or someplace wasn't comfortable with us, and so we looked for more openness. Our UU sources of inspiration that are listed with our principles—direct experience, prophets, the world religions, Jewish, Christian humanist, and spiritual teachings—encourage openness when subjected to conscience. There is no one source, and tradition is not mentioned, as feeding our spirits. Unitarian Universalism is a this-world faith, as opposed to heaven and hell after death, and has typically contrasted itself with Catholicism's top-down administration and moral authority; UU authority is located in the individual conscience, not the church of God's representative on earth. Unitarian Universalism has a history of first contending with God within Christianity to then rejecting God and Christianity, and now to selectively accepting God, Christianity, and more. This aspect of our history is very important

to recognize. As Greenwood and Harris write in An Introduction to the Unitarian and Universalist Traditions:

Religious experience for Unitarian Universalists happens in nature. It can be scientific or mysterious, concrete or abstract, shared or interpersonal. But it is a faith based on love for this world, and an understanding that love makes us responsible. Care for this world is demanded, as is openness to being changed by relationships to nature. There is one living system; people grow, adapt, blossom, and die in accordance with the laws of nature and their own actions, and luck. (Greenwood and Harris, UU TRADITIONS, pg. 241)

According to a book review from last week's New York Times, and I quote:

It's probably the old working-class Catholic foundation in me that asks what a church actually is if anything goes, including believing in God in the first place. This whole organization feels not unlike a high-brow book club, or a group exercise class where the participants are hugely devoted to their instructor and how much she inspires and motivates them." (Mary Beth Keane, 'In Squad We Trust,' THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW, pg. 45)

But that superficial understanding ignores our central principles, such as numbers one through four:

1. The inherent worth and dignity of every person.
2. Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.
3. Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.
4. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

Our history has led to those principles, because principled men and women pursued "truth and meaning" over the centuries to understand first a Unitarian God, and then Nature, and then other religions . . .and finally how faith is not defined by words one person imposes on another. As I stated before, we have a UU history of progressively struggling with, then rejecting, and finally relativizing God and Christianity as one choice among others. Akin to Twelve Step groups, our Higher Power is our choice, our definition. Our Universalist ancestors' struggle to

uphold a positive view of humanity is summarized by “inherent worth and dignity,” “justice,” and “acceptance.” Those values lead us to publicly stand with democracy as our governing principle—which is why we will have a congregational meeting after the sermon to make important decisions--and the “priesthood of all believers,” meaning that everyone may speak from the pulpit freely.

We have matured enough that although traumas from childhoods and young adulthoods spent with Mormons, Southern Baptists, a cult, etc. still emotionally spark an internal pang of distrust, we can engage peacefully. We collaborate with other faiths in social action. Through our focus on service we collaborate with Christians, Buddhists, and others, despite differing sources for inspiration. Many of us have gladly worked alongside South Church members for the poor and houseless.

The logical extension of the principle of the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process is the “priesthood of all believers.” Unitarians and Universalists through the ages have chosen their beliefs carefully, reasonably. They have accepted the personal responsibility to figure out what they will stand for individually even if it brings them into divergence from others. That is why there can be lay-led services and program groups. It is a very strong part of our tradition that we are part of an association of congregations, not directed from a central authority. Your thinking may differ, but I must respect your reasoning, as that enables all of us to grow through engagement.

This is not without complications and missteps. Our search for truth and meaning inevitably encounters problems. The Rev. Gail Geisenhainer persevered despite her anxieties about her congregation perhaps being homophobic, and after witnessing congregants working through a thorny issue, to say:

When we covenant to journey together through all that life brings, it means that when things get ugly, we don't just leave. Oh, how we may want to vanish! But our covenants call us to abide and work things through. . . .This congregation would not get stuck in conflict, mired in name-calling, or diverted from its gentle, steady trek toward building the Beloved Community.

This is terrific stuff, but we struggle with the decline of all religions, across the board, in America. They are all losing members. Geographical mobility means that people move for jobs or retirement and seldom re-connect with a local congregation of their faith. Also, only ten percent of those raised in a faith stay with it. The way all these religious groups have dealt with this crisis is to double down, i.e., do what they always did, just try to do more. But the pandemic has given us the opportunity to reach across geography and time via the internet. Worship services and seminars online are not as good as personally interacting but much better than nothing. We are lucky to have Matthew Clowney as our tech guru for Zoom and hybrid services, or we would be in worse shape.

Finally, despite sincere and vigorous efforts at increasing our diversity, which would tap into a greater number of potential members, we aren't doing it. Garrison Keillor of "Prairie Home Companion" fame had a point when he said that diversity in UU congregations is different colored Subarus in the parking lot. Almost half of UUs have graduate degrees, average household income is higher than any other American denomination, and "the dominant tone in the denomination is that of the educated professional class." (John Buehrens, *Universalists and Unitarians in America*, pg. 210) We are a very special acquired taste culturally, but our tone should be refocused more broadly in order to serve our principles.

Since I have acquired a taste for thoughtful, open dialogue, I will persevere and do everything I can for our principles. I will work for world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all. I will practice justice, equity, and compassion imperfectly but sincerely in my daily life. I will humbly respect the interdependent web or all existence, knowing I am a part of it and may mistake my part for the whole. I will fail to fully meet and solve these crises, but I will intend to move in direction of truth and meaning, self-correcting as I go. Join me as you can. Join each other, knowing limits and stretching them.