

The Good News of Liberal Religion

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In some ways Unitarian Universalists are like other religious people. Like Jews, we value learning, education and study. Like Hindus, we have no creed, no doctrine, and no dogma, to which all are required to agree. Like Buddhists, we do not require people to have a belief in God to be a member of our community. Like Roman Catholics, we trace our history back to the early church. Like Muslims, we believe that Jesus was a great prophet but not God. Like other Protestants, we gather Sunday morning to sing hymns, and to listen to a sermon.

These similarities grow out of our history. As an organized religion Unitarian Universalists began in Europe during the protestant reformation. We started as a movement of Christians who believed in the humanity of Jesus. We rejected the trinity, which divided God in three parts, the father the son and the holy spirit. In the 19th century Christian Unitarian Universalists learned about world religions and began to incorporate into their worship the elements of Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. Today our hymnal includes readings by Buddhists, Jews, Hindus, Moslems and Christians, looking for wisdom in all the great world religions.

Still, one characteristic of healthy churches is that they have a clearly stated identity. When members of a religious community cannot simply and passionately describe what they believe to visitors, maintaining a religious community is difficult. No successful religious community can be all things to all people. We can experiment with prayer, readings and candles, but we will never match the liturgy of an Episcopalian service. We can experiment with creating a closer community, but we will never match the closeness of an American Amish congregation. We can experiment with helping others, but we will never match the work of the Salvation Army. We can experiment with contemporary music and video screens, but we will never match the show put on by the Assemblies of God. We can experiment with new approaches to fund-raising, but we will never match the tithe of the Mormons. Of course we can improve in all these areas, but these are not our particular strengths.

So what is the special strength of a Unitarian Universalists church? What unique wisdom do we offer the world? What is the Good News of Liberal Religion?

I think *our use of reason* is the Good News of liberal religion. Of course other religions also use reason, but at some point they leave reason behind and say that there are core parts of their religion that people simply must accept on faith. In contrast in our church we do not ask you to suspend your reason or your common sense. Instead we encourage you to trust your own mind, to trust your own experience to trust your own common sense. We encourage you to think, understand, and form judgements about religious issues logically. The use of reason to analyze religious questions is our major contribution to the world.

In a letter to a young nephew, the American Thomas Jefferson wrote:

“Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of a God; because, if there be one, he must more approve the homage of reason than of

blindfolded fear.” (Jefferson's Works, Vol. ii., p. 217)

Other religions ask their members to suspend reason and accept on faith the teaching of their leaders or the writing of scripture. Unitarian Universalists do not.

Our use of reason dates from the first debate about the identity of Jesus. In the year 325 at the Council of Nicaea a priest named Arius argued that Jesus was a human being and not God. He used reason as his method. Arius pointed out that saying Jesus is both God and the son of God is not logical. Arius was not successful in convincing the bishops. Instead they created a confusing theology that came to be called the trinity.

In the year 1531 Michael Servetus pointed out that the original accounts of Jesus' life do not mention the Trinity. Servetus argued that our reason showed that Jesus was human and not God.

In the year 1838 Ralph Waldo Emerson argued that the miracles of Jesus as reported in the Bible were not true and not evidence of the existence of God. Emerson said we could find evidence of God by walking in the woods and looking at the trees and the animals in the sky.

For hundreds of years liberal religious people have been committed to using reason in exploring religious questions. The scientific method is our basic tool. We ask: What are the facts? Where is the evidence? How is it tested? Is the conclusion warranted?

Today in the United States there are about 600,000 adults who say when they are asked, that they are Unitarians. Of these about 150,000 adults have actually signed the membership book in one of our churches. These are not a large numbers compared to other Christian denominations or compared to the Hindus, the Muslims and the Buddhists.

Because of our small numbers, most people have never heard of the Unitarian Universalists Church. Consequently, when they find out that we are Unitarian Universalists, people ask us to explain who we are. Personally, when others ask me to describe Unitarian Universalists in a few words, three possible answers come to my mind.

If the questioner is a *traditional Christian*, I talk about the origin of the word Unitarian. I explain that Unitarian refers to the unity of God as opposed to Trinitarian belief. I say that Unitarians believe Jesus was a human being, while Trinitarians believe that Jesus was God. Christians who have struggled to understand the theology of the trinity can quickly understand Unitarian are different.

With traditional Christians I also talk about the origin of the word Universalist. I explain that Universalists refers to a belief in universal salvation, a belief that there is no hell and that when we die all of us will go to heaven. This the least developed in America over 200 years ago as a reaction to Calvinists to preached that before we are born God decides whether we will go to heaven or hell when we die. Some people thought this was a crazy idea and decided that God loves us and that God forgives us for our sins and accepts us and to heaven when we die. This is where the word Universalist came from and are named Unitarian Universalist. Today about 20% of us still believe that we go to heaven when we die, about 40% of us when we are assayed that we don't really believe there is anything after death, and about 40% of us say that we don't know what happens when we die.

If the questioner seems disillusioned with all religion, I talk about our emphasis on *tolerance and respect*. Unitarian Universalists, I explain, believe that people should be encouraged to talk freely about their religious ideas without fear. I tell people about a sign in the kitchen of the seminary I attended. It said "Unitarian Universalists are responsible for their own theology and their own dishes." We affirm and promote the worth and dignity of every person. People who have left organized religion behind because of closed-minded clergy, like the way we honor the dignity of every person.

If the questioner thinks that the word Unitarian Universalists refers to a flaky new-age-religion. I list famous persons who have been Unitarian Universalists. For example, I explain that the inventor of the World Wide Web, Sir Tim Berners-Lee is a Unitarian Universalist. To make the case that we are a religion that others should take seriously, I will shamelessly name drop.

Each of these answers, the origins of the words Unitarian and Universalist, the importance of tolerance and respect, and the names of famous Unitarian Universalists, are rooted in another, more basic definition. In trying to explain who we are, I often say that the use of reason is the unique quality of Unitarian Universalism. When others invite us to take something on faith, we want to know, is it rational? Is it logical? Is the faith statement consistent with what we know about the world? Is it probable, based on our own experience?

The good news of liberal religion is that here we encourage each other to be practical, rational, and grounded. Here Instead of healing ceremonies we look for the best new discoveries in medical science. Instead of babbling in tongues, we try to speak slowly and clearly. Instead of hysterically shaking we offer classes in the yoga, tai chi, and ballroom dancing. Instead of exercising demons we have a course in "drumming as a spiritual exercise." Instead of snake handling we have a class called "choosing the right dog for you." A practical people, we do not sell prayer cloths or plastic Christ's, although there are some interesting books for sale in the lounge after the service.

I say that our use reason as a tool to understand claims of religious faith is what makes Unitarian Universalists different from other religious groups. However, what makes us different is not the same thing as our goal as a religion.

I tell people that *our goal*, the primary mission of Unitarian Universalism, is to learn how to love each other and how to love the earth. We gather in church to learn to love each other, to learn to love others in community and to learn to love the earth and all its creatures. What makes us unique as a church is the way we use reason as a tool in helping us learn to love each other.

Now some critics have complained to me that our use of reason means that Unitarian Universalists are unable to express emotion, that we are cold, that we are boring intellectuals. In response I say we that we have in our congregations many passionate, emotionally expressive people. We have in our churches passionate musicians, painters and poets. Reason does not eliminate our feelings or our creativity. Logic and emotion can exist together in people. People can express passion and still be rational.

Still, I do feel no need to apologize for the fact that we attract scientists to our religion. Michael Servetus not only questioned the trinity, he also was a medical doctor and was the first person to describe the circulatory system. As we heard last week, Joseph Priestly was not only an important English Unitarian minister. He also discovered oxygen and laughing gas. Linus Pauling not only won the Nobel Prize twice once for chemistry, and once for peace, but he was also a committed member of the first Unitarian Church in Los Angeles. I am proud of our scientists.

Today, in the United States many of our largest Unitarian Universalists congregations are located near Universities. And as a group we do well on tests. On average, Unitarian Universalists score the highest on IQ tests of any religious group. On average Unitarian Universalists teenagers get the highest SAT scores of any religious group. This is because these exams test our ability to use reason. Jews are the second highest scoring religious group after Unitarian Universalists.

This is our major contribution to the world, the good news of liberal religion. Our beliefs do not stop with habits and customs. We are open to new experiences that teach us new truths. Our church is not led by an infallible minister or a manipulative Guru. We trust in the wisdom of open discussions and voting. Our religion is not based on one sacred book. We learn from studying all the great religions of the world and from the discoveries of science.

Reason is only a tool. Like many religions, love is our goal. This is also the good news of liberal religion. We ask: How do we love each other when some of us are young and some of us are old, when some of us are extroverts and some of us are introverts, when some of us are gay and some of us are straight? How do we love each other when our ancestors come from Europe and Asia and South America and Africa and the Middle East? How do we love each other when some of us like traditional music and some of us like to experiment with new musical styles? These are the questions with which we struggle. What makes Unitarian Universalists unique among religions is that reason is our authority as we work to realize the goal of love.