

Religious Liberalism

The Rev. Christine Robinson August 6, 2023

Reading: "Revelation" by Clinton Lee Scott, from the 1976 Meditation Manual of the UUA.

Good morning! It's great to be back in the pulpit with my beloved colleague, and seeing you all...old faces and new ones. My cup overflows!

We are having a very rich sermonic summer at First Unitarian, focused on a variety of religious traditions...Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, with more to come. So interesting! This week we're going to focus on ourselves and who we are and how we fit in with the rest of the world's religious people. When we have to explain that, to ourselves to others, we often call ourselves a "liberal religion." And....what's that?

Let me start by telling you what it's not.

First, Religious liberalism is not political liberalism, though there is considerable overlap of people and values. They come from completely different branches of human thought; political liberalism from the enlightenment emphasis on the sovereignty of the individual and religious liberalism from the religious reformation's left-most wing which emphasized the ability of ordinary humans to find their own relationship to God, or later, to truth, and...this is important...to test their faith within a community. There are lots of places for overlap, however, most political liberals are not religious, and more than a few are anti-religious. Furthermore, some religious liberals are politically conservative and some religious conservatives are politically liberal. That's another sermon.

For now, think of Religious liberalism and political liberalism as like two trees of different species, planted so closely together that their branches intermingle...but that intermingling is of distinctively shaped leaves which can be traced back to their origins on different trunks.

Secondly, religious liberalism is not exclusive to Unitarian Universalists. There is a strain of liberalism and conservatism in every faith group, every denomination, and even, almost every congregation. Judaism, for instance, ranges from the very conservative Hasidic congregations who wear the clothing, speak the language, and continue most of the social practices of the European Jewish communities of 2 centuries ago, while the Reform Jews have been willing to change and adapt their faith and lifestyle to accord with scientific and social progress. They are just much religious liberals as we are. There are religiously liberal Southern Baptists as well as the more famous religiously conservative ones. You might have noted in the news earlier this Summer that the Conservative Baptists kicked out a bunch of Liberal Southern Baptists over the issue of women in ministry. Shocking practice....unheard of in Jesus' day! There is a whole pack

of proudly liberal Southern Baptists... who note the Jesus respected women and insisted on including them among his followers and therefore they should not be excluded from ministry. They lost a round...butThey'll be back!

We are a denomination of predominately religious liberals, and our congregations, as a whole, pledge themselves to promote religious liberalism, but we don't enforce any set of beliefs or values on our members, and I've met...and tangled with... a few religiously conservative UU's in my life, and more than a few religious liberals who had one or two very conservative ideas...like..only classical music can be worshipful, or that language shouldn't change even when when results on one group oppressing another.

So... Unitarian Universalism is a religiously liberal denomination, but we are not the only religious liberals in the world, and all of use have our little conservative nooks and crannies.

So.....what.....exactly.....is religious liberalism?

Now we have a problem. Usually, when people..especially people from the Christian tradition ask about a religion, they want to know what those people BELIEVE. And, I hope you know, that we UU's decided from the get go that what you believe is between you and God...or later, between you and your own mind and heart. We don't have sets of beliefs that everyone subscribes to.

Most religious people who are not Christians...Buddhists, Hindus, and so on, are also non-creedal, and they describe their faith by their practices rather than their beliefs. Muslims pray at certain times each day, fast during Ramadan, dress modestly, and try to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca, and so on.

Religious Liberalism is just as short on universal religious practices as we are on required beliefs. Just notice....nobody tells you have to pray, or tithe, or adhere to a dress code, or even come to church. Religious practices may be suggested and explored, but they are not required.

So...how do we explain to ourselves and others, what liberal religion is and how it is different from conservative religion?

Here's one way...easy to remember, and that is to focus on the words, Liberal and Conservative themselves.

The word Conservative means someone who conserves.., and to conserve is to save...with overtones of saving something of great value. So... may save our pennies but we conserve species and historic buildings. Conservative religion looks primarily to save the insights, beliefs, governing structures, and rules of past. Conservative religions looks to old revelations, venerable scriptures, inspired prophets of a long time ago, and very often, the social mores and forms in place during those days which are presumably more holy than now. There seems

to be something about focusing on the past that molds thinking towards certainty about what is right and wrong, and a certain lack of intermediate places between good and evil, but that always seems to come along with conservative faiths. There is a conservative strain in every religious faith, but Orthodox Judaism, Pennsylvania Dutch communities, Later Day Saints, large swaths of Catholicism and Protestantism are conservative religions. We westerners tend to label conservative Islam as “radical,” and “extremist,” out of our fears and ignorance, but there certainly is both liberal and conservative Islam which is no more dangerous than conservative Christianity and Judaism.

There is a lot of comfort and authority in doing things as they have always been done and thinking things that have always been thought. It makes changing conditions like Global warming or changing knowledge like scientific developments very challenging, but...it works for them. To be conservative is to look to the past.

The word, “liberal”, on the other hand, descends from the name of a Roman God, Liber, better known in his Greek incarnation as Dionysus. Liber/Dionysus was the god of the vine, of fertility, wine, of generosity. To worship Liber is to, of necessity, notice that nothing is all good or all bad. Wine, after all, brings both pleasant freedom from care and the ravages of drunkenness. And..if the farmer wants a good crop of grapes next year, they must severely prune their vines...down to a single dead-looking branch, in faith that come Spring, that branch will experience an almost miraculous exuberance of growth. Those who looked to Liber for inspiration noticed that life often brings suffering which turns, in the end, to growth and new life.

In Liber’s incarnation as Dionysus, he was the god, not only of fertility, growth, and wine, for good and for ill, but the god of artistic creation and mental inspiration. The Greek tragedies we think of as one jewel in the crown of human creativity were written to Dionysus and the great theaters built to him.

Even today, there are uses of the word, “liberal” which mean generous, free spirited, accepting of change and ambiguity. We religious liberals embrace these meanings of the word. And when we ask ourselves where to find Truth, we think forward, not back, trusting human creativity and inspiration and honoring the growth of the present more than the icons of the past. In other words, we trust you, you amazing human being, to have a big enough heart to love, a keen enough curiosity to wonder, and a open enough mind to take in the new.

Another attempt to define religious liberalism and to help UU congregations to center their work is going on at the national denominational level: the re-writing of Article 2 of the UUA bylaws.

Article 2 of almost all bylaws consists of the basic purpose of the organization...usually a few carefully crafted lines. Ours is about the length of a Greek Tragedy and almost as hard to change. The years long process of proposing this change is coming up on its last year and, if

voted in by the delegates of the General Assembly in June, 2024 is going to be wordier than its predecessor. At its center, however, is a set of values that congregations will agree to promote and live by. Not individual UU's, notice. That would be too much like a creed...but the UUA and the congregations, like ours, which belong to it.

These are the 7 words in the flower on the cover of your order of service. You've been wondering about that ever since you walked in, I bet!

This image has a chalice at the center, with the word "love" superimposed on the flame. Surrounding the chalice of love, in a circle, enclosed in swirls like petals of a flower, are the words, Justice, Generosity, Pluralism, Equity, Interdependence, and Transcendence.

The commission that proposed this change believes that the six values in the petals are co-equal and equally necessary...and that they all flow out of love. These values complement, inform, limit, and strengthen each other. They are purposely not in order of importance!

I was quite taken with these words, as a way to define religious liberalism. They give us an answer when people ask, "What do you believe?" If this passes it's last test, a new answer will be, "We believe many different things, but here are some of the things we value and work for in our lives, our congregations, and our world: Justice, pluralism, equity, generosity, love, interdependence, and transcendence."

Why did I put them in that order? It's because I remember this new list of words with the aid of the phrase, "Justice, Peglit!"... that is, justice, pluralism, equity, generosity, love, interdependence, and transcendence. Hopefully a better way to remember this words will emerge, but that's the best I've heard so far. I'm going to talk a bit about each of these values; as I do, I invite you to ask yourself if these are YOUR values, and how they live in your life.

There are lots of definitions of the word **Justice**; The one I like best comes from the African American social philosopher Cornell West. "Justice," he says, "is what Love looks like in public." That is to say, the structures of justice help us create in society what love helps us to create in our personal relationships: a place where everyone has a chance to thrive, is treated fairly, and can share the fruits of human society.

Everybody will tell you that they value justice...but they define the word differently. The conservative brand of Justice is measured by adherence to the structures and laws and mores of the past. Liberal justice is measured by fairness, opportunity and equity in the present. Liberal Religious Justice is the spiritual value which works to extend love out into the world.

Pluralism:

The P in Peglit stands for pluralism, which is the positive value we place on all kinds of human diversity. We honor this value by the habits we create which help us to encounter human differences with love and curiosity, with the expectation that we learn by encountering people

who are different than we are. Specifically for religious communities, we find ways to worship together, teach our children, and form communities without the expectation that we will all believe the same things...even about these values! Our valuing of diverse beliefs is one of the things that distinguishes us from most western faith communities.

Embracing pluralism is hard work. It requires paying attention to the needs and desires of people who are different from us:

New pronouns!

Different holidays and holy days!

Different styles of music!

Moving aside to make a place for a newcomer!

Yikes!

Pluralism is a costly value. It requires the generosity, openness, and valuing of growth that comes to us in our liberal heritage.

E is for

Equity; the social condition in which all people can thrive...not just property owners, or the men, or the rich, or the white or the adults or the thin or the people canny enough to work the economic system....but.... but everybody. Wanting everybody to thrive, not just people like me, is a spiritual value that flows out of love.

Generosity comes from the spiritual qualities of gratitude and hopefulness and bids us to share our time, our talent, and our resources with and for others in our interdependent web. Since we are fundamentally bound together in the web of life and relationship, we share.

Love is at the center of the circle. It is the power that holds us together in community and keeps us accountable to these shared values.

Interdependence means that we are not alone but are part of intersecting webs, as large as the earth's ecosystem, and as small as our individual relationships. Valuing interdependence means that we see ourselves and others, not fundamentally individuals, but fundamentally in terms of our relationships. "Our world is one world," our hymn goes, "What touches one affects us all."

Transformation: Valuing transformation, that is to say, being open to change and willing to adapt our faith and actions to new wisdom comes out of the liberal hunch that the TRUTH is a growing body, not a static book, tradition, or hierarchy, as conservatives believe. This relates back to our understanding of truth...how it "comes to earth in small installments, how it is the product of long, laborious, and often spurned discovery," as the author of the reading said. Conservative religion is suspicious of change and new insights, for they by necessity challenge the belief that the truth about everything was written down a long time ago. Liberal religion values the ways we can change as we live our lives.

I hope as I went through these values, they resonated with you. They are anything but new, of course, we religious liberals, children of the Reformation, have been trying to live them for 400 years. And oh, the things we have learned and the skills we have gained in plying these values into our lives and congregations!

We've learned that we can be firm in our beliefs and passionate about living them without forcing those around us to believe as we do.

We've discovered that the lone dissenter must be permitted, lest new truth be buried in complacency or old inequities perpetuated.

We have discovered that discussion in community can bring new insight and spiritual growth, and the freer participants are to bring their whole selves to the table, the better we all are.

We have discovered that our society is systematically unjust to some groups of people, that that systematic oppression must be actively resisted so all can thrive.

We have enjoyed the blessings of knowing ourselves to be a part of many intersecting circles: ecosystems, families, interest groups, congregations.

We have learned to change as times and knowledge and needs change, and to grow in that change.

And that makes our enterprise important, not only because it enriches our lives, but because we stand as a living model of how people with differing visions and beliefs can cope with pluralism and work together to see that more people thrive among us.. Our society needs us, , needs our vision, our history, the tools we have forged and the lessons we have learned in 400 years of being together in freedom. May we go forth into our next decades remembering this, enjoying it, and being strong not only for ourselves, but for our changing world.

Religious liberalism trusts you...trusts you to have a big enough heart to love, a keen enough curiosity to wonder, a generous enough spirit to share the good in your lives with others, and a mind open enough mind to take in all that is new. Go home and practice this grand faith...and bo in peace.