



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK

Can You Be Both a Religious Liberal and a Political Conservative?

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

2 November 2014

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Frederick, Maryland

frederickuu.org

Spoken Meditation

At the 2012 Unitarian Universalist General Assembly (GA), Paul Roche, Rev. Nancy McDonald-Ladd, Rev. Scott Sammler-Michael and Rev. Anya Sammler-Michael presented a workshop inviting UUs to consider the partisan bias that exists in our congregations. The workshop drew a crowd of more than 75 people.

This summer at our most recent GA, the same team of leaders offered a follow-up workshop to a crowd of nearly 200 people. Three key themes were (1) individuals across the political spectrum can join to do viable and meaningful social justice work, (2) partisan labels prevent us from experiencing one another's full humanity, and (3) our congregations lose their power to transform the world when we limit ourselves through bias and discrimination. The following are three brief excerpts of testimonies that were shared this summer at GA about bridging the partisan divide in our congregations.

The Rev. Anya Sammler-Michael: When I aged into the youth group in my home Unitarian Universalist congregation, my parents lessened then ceased their participation. My parents politically associate as Republicans. They loved our Unitarian Universalist home congregation. They grew wise in the embrace of the members and ministers, but overtime, began to feel more and more estranged and uncomfortable. I learned, long after they ceased participating, that they no longer felt welcome, that they could no longer bring their full selves to the altar of worship or the circle of fellowship....

The Rev. Nancy McDonald Ladd: [Unitarian Universalist congregations] can be an actual home for the spirit not in spite of, but because of, our diversity. [UU congregations] exist so that we might make promises to one another, and one of those promises is that I will get myself out of the way long enough to make some room here for you as well. In spite of all of our incompleteness, our fraying goodwill, we are made whole by the wide-open welcome to which we all are called and by the promises we must continually make. The purpose of [a Unitarian Universalist congregation] is to make and live out a promise which says that those unlike me, politically or otherwise, are fully as human and as worthy of respect as I am. That's the kind of

community we are called to create, one in which we may not only tolerate, but indeed grow to deeply love those we might otherwise never have chosen as friends.

Paul Roche: I am one of the founders of Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Sterling, Virginia. I grew up an Irish-Catholic in Boston. When I stumbled across Emerson's writings I was shocked to find how they resonated in me and then sought out a UU church. The concept of a free and responsible search for truth and meaning was wonderful and the fact that I could join others in a [congregational] setting to do so I found nothing short of amazing. I saw enough that I settled in as a UU. I am a believer, supporter, and fighter for human rights.... I have held signs and engaged in conversations at my neighborhood polling places trying to prevent the Virginia anti-gay constitutional amendment. For these things, my non-church friends and neighbors around the Washington D.C. beltway think I am a crazy liberal. But I also believe that the greatest issue facing the U.S. is the impending collapse of our economy – and that the way to fix it is primarily through lowering spending. For the latter and other positions on issues seen as “conservative” I am deemed a crazy conservative by my UU friends. The difference is: at church it hurts.

Sermon

Unitarian Universalism is sometimes called “The *Living* Tradition.” We are open to growing, changing, and evolving based on new evidence, insights, and experiences. A more formal way of describing our progressive nature is that we are a *theologically liberal* religious tradition.

In contrast, a theologically conservative religions tend to resist changing, growing, and evolving even when new facts come to light. Conservatives tend to preserve traditions, current social structures, and long-standing community ties that can be undermined if innovation comes too rapidly.

As *religious* liberals, we UUs are the heirs of two heretical religious movements: Unitarianism and Universalism. Our ancestors boldly questioned religious traditions that had come to seem obsolete or contrary to human reason and human experience.

But we UUs are also a “big tent.” We seek to be inclusive, and to draw the circle wide of who is welcome in our congregations. We are clear that a wide diversity of religious liberals are welcome here: UU Buddhists, UU Christians, UU Humanists, UU Pagans, and more!

That being said, on this Sunday, two days before Election Day, I would like to invite us to reflect on the ways that — despite our wide *theological* diversity — we are not always welcoming as we could be to a diversity of *political* views. Said differently, can you be a

religious liberal and a *political* conservative? Or more provocatively, can you be a UU and a Republican? As you heard during the Spoken Meditation, our lack of intentionality around such questions has resulted in long-time, loyal members of our congregations feeling alienated.

However, it has not always been the case that theological liberalism (the questioning of traditional religious dogma) was seen to necessitate political liberalism. Consider these words from UU historian Mark Morrison-Reed's book The Selma Awakening:

During the first half of the twentieth century, prior to the rise of McCarthyism, Unitarianism had included outspoken Socialists like John Haynes Holmes on the one hand, and on the other a strong contingent of Republicans, including President William Howard Taft and Senator Leverett Saltonstall. On the Universalist side, Clarence Skinner represented the progressive wing, while several congressmen who attended [Universalist] National Memorial [Church] in Washington, D.C., were Dixiecrats. (197)

So as early as the first half of the twentieth-century, it was commonly possible to be a religious liberal and a political conservative. What changed was the 1960s and 70s. Morrison-Reed writes that, "Civil rights was the first in a series of issues that grew to include Vietnam War resistance, Black Power, women's liberation, [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender] rights, environmental concerns, and, most recently, immigration reform. These movements reshaped, and polarized, the American political landscape" (197).

Now, I should pause at this point and clarify that by no means am I suggesting that we Unitarian Universalists should be less bold in "standing on the side of love" for social, economic, and environmental justice. Rather, we should be proud and emboldened by the work for peace and justice that UUs have done historically and are continuing today. Indeed, the current UUA Common Read (a book selected annually for all UUs to read, discuss, and act on) is Paul Rasor's 2012 book Reclaiming Prophetic Witness: Liberal Religion in the Public Square. That book laments the ways that too often all religion has come to be stereotyped as theologically conservative religion. And Rasor's book outlines how our liberal theological heritage can empower and ground our work for peace and justice. If you are interested, I encourage you to read Reclaiming Prophetic Witness: Liberal Religion in the Public Square. (It's short at barely

more than 100 pages.) I will plan to schedule a sermon and Congregational Conversation about the book for early in 2015.

At the same time, I want to take seriously that historically the *theologically* liberal traditions of Unitarianism and Universalism have included major figures who were both *politically* liberal and *politically* conservative. And I also want to take seriously the reflections you heard earlier from the General Assembly workshop that our big tent of Unitarian Universalism is large enough to reach across the partisan divide that grown increasingly wide since the 1960s. In so doing, we may be able to build relationships of mutual trust and respect with the actual, complex human beings behind those far too simple labels of “Democrat” and “Republican.”

And to better understand the roots of the partisanship that began to grow deeper in this country in the 1960s, I would like to turn back the clock farther to a time of even greater social change: the late eighteenth century, the time of the American Revolution and French Revolution. As our guide, I would like to look at a helpful and accessible new book that I recommend to you by Yuval Levin titled The Great Debate: Edmund Burke, Thomas Paine, and the Birth of Right and Left. I first started studying these figures, who are at the roots of the modern day political movements we call “The Left” and “The Right,” in college in a philosophy class on Liberalism and Conservatism. (For those with a good memory, I also invite you to also keep in mind everything I said in my Election Sermon two years ago about Jonathan Haidt’s important book The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion. I’ll also include a link to that sermon in the manuscript version of this sermon if you want to look back at some of the highlights.).

Many of you have heard me say before that the Latin root of the word Liberalism is *liber*, meaning “free” — and giving us a range of words from liberal to libertarian and a range of connotations *from* the positive example of the Statue of Liberty on the New York shoreline welcoming new immigrants to a land of freedom *to* the negative example of the irresponsible libertine, who abuses freedom. And although Liberalism is sometimes seen as a “dirty word” (as if all liberals were libertines) when we talk about Unitarian Universalism as a *liberal* religious

tradition, we mean liberal in the best sense of the word: open to new ideas, generous, openhanded, open-hearted, and open-minded.

And the *Liberal Turn in Religion* is precisely that demand of *freedom from* religious beliefs and authorities, whose only justification is tradition. Liberal Religion says that, “we have always done it that way” is not sufficient justification to keep doing or believing something. The Liberal Turn in Religion is, likewise, about *freedom for* exploring wherever human reason and experience leads us.¹ It’s what we UUs call our 4th Principle: “A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”

But what about those individuals whose free and responsible search for truth and meaning leads them to politically conservative positions? And what insights might Paine and Burke, those 18th-century luminaries, have for us twenty-first century religious liberals, who want to build a tent big enough to cover the partisan divide?

To begin with Thomas Paine, it is most fitting that his most famous publication is a 50-page pamphlet titled “Common Sense” — because classic Liberalism (and the Enlightenment in general) is about the turn *from* history, tradition, and alleged one-time divine revelation in the past *to* universal truths that are apparent and verifiable in all times and places through human reason and experience. And another word for such universally provable truths is *common sense*.

One major target of Thomas Paine’s pen was the hereditary British monarchy, which he saw as opposed to common sense (Levin 16-17). For Paine, if you took one step back from the accepted conventions, it became self-evident that any one particular allegedly-noble family had come to power through some sort of historically-contingent circumstances that were usually manipulative, selfish, and violent (51-52). He saw nothing natural about the so-called “divine right of kings.” Why, he asked, would you want to give perpetual authority to the heirs of someone who lied, cheated, or killed their way to power? Or even if one generation is good, noble, and came to power for legitimate reasons, why would one assume that future generations of that same royal line would also be the best possible rulers?

¹ Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Crisis, Irony, and Postmodernity, 1950-2005*, 1.

Instead, Paine argues in his 1791 book *The Rights of Man* that, “all men are born equal, and with equal natural right” (46). You can hear echoes of the same Liberal, Enlightenment view that inspired Thomas Jefferson and other founders of this nation to throw off the yoke of the hereditary British monarchy and demand that government be based on the “consent of the governed.”

To bring Edmund Burke into the equation, it’s fascinating to note that he agrees with Paine about the corrupt origins of most monarchies. They even both agree about the historically-contingent and often corrupt origins of religion (74-5, 154). But Burke cautions that we are often unwise to ask those sorts of questions (Levin 53, 164). We should, in other words, not pull back the curtain and expose that the “Wonderful Wizard of Oz” is actually a mere, imperfect mortal. For Burke, we need such illusions, built up over time, to keep a stable society.

Moreover, Burke warns that theorists such as Thomas Paine are *naïve* to put so much trust in human reason. For Burke, it is ‘common sense’ that humans are ruled much more by their *emotions* than by reason. Jonathan Haidt’s image for this truth is “The Elephant and the Rider”: our reason is like a human riding on top of an elephant. The elephant is our emotions. His point is that we have far less control over our emotions than we like to think.

Furthermore, Burke thinks that Paine and other liberals are often foolish in their failure to see that “human rights” are as equally historically contingent as the idea of hereditary monarchies. Burke is right that human rights are *not* self-evident, but rather are historically-contingent conventions developed over time in *humane* societies — so we should be careful about undermining those societies (55-59). Whereas Paine is always in a rush to allow each new generation to tear down past social, political, and religious arrangements and rebuild them based on reason and the needs of the present, Burke is concerned that by tearing down traditions and conventions one is more likely to result not in reason, compassion, peace, and justice but rather in anarchy, violence, and “might makes right” (158, 163, 213).

Burke is for social progress. But he is for *gradual evolution* whereas Paine is for *immediate revolution* (67). Keep in mind that Burke and Paine are writing for the world stage in response to the intense upheaval and violence of the French Revolution in which the king, queen, and other nobility were beheaded by guillotine in the streets. (The equivalent today would

perhaps be if the Occupy Movement was seeking to remedy our growing wealth inequality not by nonviolent protest, but by decapitating the “Wolves of Wall Street.”)

At the same time, when I hear people in power telling marginalized groups to be patient, I can't help hearing in response, Dr. King's challenge in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail to the white moderate, who is more devoted to “order” than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: “I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action”; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another [human being's] freedom....

Burke was nothing if not paternalistic. And it's is much easier for Burke to say “slow down and wait” for freedom, equality, and justice from his privileged seat in the British House of Commons.

Overall, my experience of reading Burke and Paine — and of reading Levin's book The Great Debate — is of feeling a pendulum swinging back and forth within me. The paradigms represented by the “left” and “right” are not problems that can be solved; rather they are a *polarity* that can only be managed. We need prophets like Thomas Paine calling for liberty and equality *now* — through revolution if necessary. But we also need voices likes Burke reminding us that we are not merely a collection of rational individuals. Human nature is much more complex than reason alone and we are much more driven by *selfishness* and *emotions* than we usually admit. There are also important values to be found in history and traditions — and important obligations that we owe to the common good — beyond what is merely in one individual's best interest (102-103).

Just as we intend Unitarian Universalism to be a liberal religious tradition in the best sense of the word *liberal* — open to new ideas, generous, openhanded, open-hearted, and open-minded — there has been room historically and there is room today within the big tent of our liberal religious tradition for those who are *conservative* in the best sense of the word: caring about conservation of nature, upholding the beauty of traditions and rituals that accrued deep meaning through the test of time, reminding us of the importance not only of individual rights and equality, but also of community, authority, sanctity, and loyalty. This dynamic is one reason

that many UUs resonate deeply with contemporary prophets such as Wendell Berry, who are conservative in the best sense of the word. We desperately need such voices within our movement.

We Unitarian Universalists like to say that we are “Standing on the Side of Love.” And, wherever you find yourself on the political spectrum, this coming Election Day, as we practice our 5th Principle of “the democratic process,” may you discern within your own conscience what it means to vote on the side of love.

For Further Reflection

Carl Gregg, “The Righteous Mind” and the Democratic Process, available at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2012/11/the-righteous-mind-and-the-democratic-process/>