

**What Does It Mean to be a Religious Liberal?
Presented by Kathy Burek, February 24, 2008
At the UU Church of Minnetonka**

My reading this morning is from UU Religious Educator Sophia Lyons Fahs, "It Matters What We Believe". It's # 657 if you would like to follow along.

My topic today was inspired by observing two beliefs that many UUs hold about religious liberalism. The first is that religious liberalism and political liberalism go hand in hand. The second is that if one is a humanist, atheist or agnostic, one is automatically a religious liberal and cannot be a fundamentalist. We frequently criticize religious fundamentalists for their lack of tolerance of other religious views, and for equating "True Christianity" with a set of political stands we strongly disagree with. We chuckle to ourselves or shake our heads about how misguided and benighted these political conservatives and fundamentalists are, and we miss the irony that we are too often just their mirror image. For me, religious liberalism is not just the opposite of religious conservatism or religious fundamentalism, but an altogether different approach to religion.

If religious liberalism is not about a certain kind of politics, is it about a certain kind of religious belief? Does liberal religion mean non-theistic philosophies, or unconventional world views? Again, the answer is no. While humanism is often associated with liberal religion, one need not be a humanist to be a religious liberal. Conversely, one can be a humanist and not be a religious liberal, at least not the way I define religious liberal.

What then, does it mean to be a religious liberal? There are three aspects of religious thought that we need to explore. First, there is the aspect of content. In this area, we ask the question, "Is there a particular content to religious belief that makes one a religious liberal?"

Second, there is the aspect of process. Here, we ask, “How are religious beliefs formed and held?” Third is the aspect of behavior. The question here is, “How does the religious belief lead the adherent to behave toward others?” To summarize, the three questions are 1) what do we believe, 2) how do we believe it and 3) how does our behavior reflect our belief, or so what?

First, how does the content of religious liberalism differ from religious fundamentalism? One key difference traces back to the very origins of Unitarianism and Universalism. In contrast to Calvinist views of human nature as inherently sinful and depraved, our Unitarian forebears asserted that human beings were born innately good. Evil was the product of poor upbringing or environment. Calvinists also believed that because God was all-knowing, you were already saved or not. The Universalist contribution to our theological heritage was the belief that a just and loving God would not be so cruel or capricious as to send his creatures to eternal damnation—especially when he created us with the capacity for error. While many modern UUs no longer believe in the God of our ancestors, our modern faith carries forward the belief that human beings are born with inherent worth and dignity.

Even when people engage in behavior that causes others emotional and physical pain, our saving message is to respond in a way that affirms human dignity. We understand that inherent goodness does not mean that people are perfect, nor are we blind to the fact that some people treat others as means to their ends, and still others have no regard whatsoever for the well-being of others. However, when people do intentionally make choices which cause emotional or physical harm to others, we as religious liberals are called on to respond in ways that limit the harm and heal the harm. We are called to refrain from adding to the damage by

repaying harm with harm, by uncivil words or deeds, or by applying the term “evil” when we really just strongly dislike a person’s actions or points of view.

In contrast, the religious fundamentalist still sees human nature as basically sinful and flawed. Starting from this assumption, people must be controlled by strict laws and rules and threats of eternal punishment. Absent these controls, people will choose the easy, painless, self-indulgent course of action rather than exercise self-discipline, sacrifice for the right, or take into account the broader consequences of their actions. One interesting implication of the fundamentalist view is that doing the right thing is not seen as rewarding enough to be chosen on its own merits, and doing wrong is always appealing and fun. This seems to me a rather strange way to look at right and wrong.

While a belief in the inherent worth and dignity of each person is an important component of religious liberalism, I do not think that religious liberalism needs to imply political liberalism. How one sees the role of government, taxes, and particular policies is the result of weighing a number of factors. Each of us can agree that peace, liberty and justice are good things. Where we don’t agree is what these look like or how to get there. There is no “politically correct” way to be a UU, although we often make it seem so by the disdain we show for political conservatives.

It is certainly true that liberal Democrats vastly outnumber Republicans in our movement. The stands on social issues taken at General Assembly, the kinds of social action projects congregations choose all reflect a politically liberal bias. However, as some of you might know, in the 90’s, the only two UUs in the Minnesota Legislature were both Republican, and both women. There is a group called the Conservative UU Forum. As we see in this month’s *UU*

World, there are ministers in our movement who serve as chaplains in our armed forces. They choose this service because there are UU men and women serving in those same armed forces. Rev. Bill Sinkford, our UUA President, speaks out clearly and eloquently for peace. Yet even when he does so, he recognizes that we have diverse views on war and peace in among our members. He criticizes government policy, but does not condemn individual UUs for their political views or for acting consistently with those views. Sinkford, I think, practices religious liberalism when he articulates his positions without “excommunicating” people who don’t agree. Sadly, that is not true of many religious traditions.

I’d like to turn now to the second aspect of religious liberalism—how we believe what we believe. For me, this is one of the key differences between religious liberalism as practiced by Unitarian Universalists and other religious liberal traditions. There are in my view four other aspects of liberal religion that are even more important. These are: freedom of conscience, reason, open-mindedness and respect. To elaborate,

- Religious liberals place our emphasis on individual conscience rather than external authority
- Religious liberals are open to new ideas and new learnings
- Religious liberals rely on reason and critical thinking, and are always testing and refining their beliefs
- Religious liberals don’t just “tolerate” diversity, but value it and respect differences in belief

Without these elements as part of our belief process, we are at risk of being just as rigid and narrow-minded in our beliefs as the fundamentalist of whom we are so often critical. I'll examine these in turn.

One, religious liberals place our emphasis on individual conscience rather than external authority. We do not acknowledge any person, institution, or set of scriptures as having custody of our consciences. This rejection of authority is in marked contrast to many religions. Traditionally, Roman Catholics have accepted the authority of the church and the Pope to establish doctrine that must then be followed. Fundamentalist Protestants assert that the Bible is divinely inspired and is literally true. Muslims believe that the Koran was dictated to the Prophet Mohammed by the Archangel Gabriel. Orthodox Jews believe that God made a covenant with the Jews that requires strict adherence to dietary and other laws governing religious observance. For the followers of these religions, the authority of Pope, Bible, Koran or Covenant is beyond question.

As religious liberals, we reserve the right to think for ourselves, and come to our own conclusions. The reading from Channing is an eloquent celebration of our commitment to freedom of thought. Channing calls us to resist the bondage of habit, to protect our minds against the usurpations of society, and to jealously guard our intellectual rights. Our free and responsible search for truth and meaning is a cornerstone of our faith tradition; it distinguishes us from religious traditions who might share many other aspects of our Principles.

This commitment to freedom of conscience is reinforced in our organizational structure. The Unitarian Universalist Association is organized on the principle of congregational polity. There is no hierarchy. The UUA President is elected by delegates from the member

congregations, and while he can speak as a Unitarian Universalist, he cannot speak for Unitarian Universalists in the sense that the Pope speaks for the Catholic Church. The General Assembly can adopt resolutions on political and social issues but these are not binding on member congregations or on individual UUs. Our very organizational form reflects and supports our rejection of outside authority in matters of conscience.

Even more important than the freedom congregations to organize as they please is the absence of any creed or statement of belief that is required of Unitarian Universalists. Our seven principles and six purposes were adopted to govern how our congregations covenant to associate with one another. They were not intended to be a set of belief statements for individual UUs. Further, each UU is free to interpret these as he or she chooses or to reject them altogether. Some UUs reject the notion of a set of principles altogether, as seeming too much like a creed, even if it is not a required testament of faith. Since there is no creed, there is no excommunication process in UU churches. William Ellery Channing stated nearly two centuries ago that no one could excommunicate himself from liberal religion except by the death of goodness in his breast.

Does this mean, then that we are free to believe whatever we wish? Yes and no. While there is no creed or fixed theology, our principles do encourage us to pursue a responsible as well as a free, search for truth and meaning. The freedom from creeds and authorities we enjoy as religious liberals imposes on us the obligation to choose our beliefs carefully. Beliefs guide actions, and beliefs which are narrow, rigid, or hateful will ultimately lead to actions which are harmful to those around us. Unitarian Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson cautioned that, "everyone worships something...the gods we workshop we wear on our faces. By this Emerson

meant that we could discern our real (not just our professed) beliefs by watching what people do, not only what they say.

Two, religious liberals are open to new ideas and new learnings. We do not limit ourselves to only one theology or philosophy, one set of teachings, one institution in our quest for truth and meaning. When I was a child, Catholics were not allowed to attend Protestant church services for fear they would be exposed to the heresy preached there and led away from the “True Faith”. Many fundamentalist religions today refuse to interact with those of different religious beliefs, fearing that their own teachings will be undermined. When the Taliban ruled Afghanistan, they destroyed centuries-old statues of the Buddha and threatened to execute aid workers they claimed were promoting Christianity, in an effort to maintain their vision of a pure Islamic state.

Unitarian Universalists believe in what English Unitarian John Stuart Mill called, “the free marketplace of ideas”. Only by allowing arguments to freely contend, said Mill, can we find out the truth. Mill believed that the truth would always win out if people could freely and openly discuss all ideas. We honor this free marketplace of ideas in our discussion periods following the sermon.

As religious liberals, we believe that freedom of thought is not only for adults, but for our children as well. William Ellery Channing wrote, “The great end in religious instruction is not to stamp our minds upon the young, but to stir up their own”. Hence, in our religious education programs, we do not indoctrinate our children, but encourage them to think for themselves. Unitarian Universalists willingly teach our children about other faith traditions in addition to our

own. We believe that in a multi-cultural world, our children should respect others' religious beliefs, and that respect begins with knowledge.

Three, religious liberals rely on reason and critical thinking, and are always testing and refining their beliefs. Reason means that we are willing to subject every idea to careful analysis. We will question the assumptions underlying views presented to us, question facts, and challenge others and ourselves if we try to gloss over inconsistencies. Among the living traditions that underlie our principles is the caution against the idolatries of the mind and spirit. These idolatries are any set of beliefs which we hold without question, and which we resist changing. As you sit in these seats over this next year, if you feel yourself becoming irritated with a speaker, stop and reflect. There's a growth opportunity right in front of you.

Rev. Bruce Marshall suggests that we need to be self-critical, especially when we are most certain we are right. Marshall writes, "When we are absolutely sure we are doing good, we then must be especially careful to consider that maybe we are not. Yes, there is inherent human worth and dignity, but it does not follow that everything we do is inherently worthy and dignified. We have not intended evil, and so when it happens, we are shocked and cry out, "How could this have happened?" Thus, self-awareness is another trait of the religious liberal. We avoid the sin of hubris, of misplaced pride, by questioning our own motives. We strive to be certain that we have not fallen into the trap of assuming that we are doing good because we say we are.

Testing and refining our beliefs requires us to be open-minded. By open-mindedness, I mean that we are open to re-examining our beliefs when we encounter new ideas or new information. Open-mindedness also means that we understand that our views are not absolute,

eternal truths. It means that we understand that we are human, not gods. We do not possess the truth for all people and for all time. Rather we have found belief system that works for us, for now. That belief system may change over time as we gain new experiences and new insights. Kathleen Montgomery: "In one sense, 'religious liberalism' describes the willingness to examine our history and ourselves. We do this with the understanding that religious questions are ultimately human questions and that the questions themselves, the search itself, enriches us and helps us become more fully human."

Open-mindedness also means that we do not limit ourselves to listening to and talking with only those who agree with us. Instead as religious liberals, we should regard interacting with those of differing views as an opportunity to learn and grow. If we limit ourselves only to like-minded people, we will stagnate. Our beliefs will become rigid and stale through lack of challenge and debate.

A healthy open-mindedness presupposes some method of sorting out good beliefs from bad ones. Our capacity for reason, for examining evidence for and the implications of, new beliefs keeps us from being intellectual dilettantes or faddists. As one wit put it, "If you're open to anything, you'll fall for everything". Religious liberalism is not simply the "flavor of the month" in religious practice. It is instead a disciplined search for truth and meaning. It is a search for beliefs that will make us better people, and the world a better place.

If religious liberalism consists of open-mindedness, critical thinking, and respect, fundamentalism consists of the opposite: closed-mindedness, unquestioning belief, and rejection of the different. By this definition, there can be fundamentalist atheists, pagans and humanists, just as there can be fundamentalist Christian and Muslims. Whenever, we think we

know it all, or that our beliefs are superior to those of others, we are at risk of being fundamentalists. We UUs are at risk for this kind of fundamentalism when we put down Christians, political conservatives, when we reject the spiritual in favor of a strictly secular humanism or when we reject humanism without really understanding its complexity and diversity. As UU historian Conrad Wright said, "...diversity need not mean surrender to those who insist that tolerance means that others must tolerate them, no matter how rigid and dogmatic they may be".

Four, religious liberals don't just "tolerate" diversity, but value it and respect differences in belief. We cannot claim to be open-minded if we do not respect people whose beliefs differ from ours. If we are not gods, if we do not know it all, then we must be willing to afford others the right to hold views different from our and to express those views without recrimination. We often use the word "tolerance" in this context. However, I find the word "tolerance" problematic. It often suggests a kind of patronizing indulgence that does not take the other seriously. If, however, we commit ourselves to accepting others who might hold different opinions and respecting them despite those opinions, we listen to those views and affirm the right not the other person to come to different conclusions than our own.

The Rev. Bruce T. Marshall has this to say about respect: "Respect for people means listening to another, given our time and attention to the person who shares his or her ideas and concerns...Respecting human worth and dignity means acknowledging our connection with others, even people different from ourselves. It means recognizing that we of the human family are bound together, that our fate rests upon our learning to share the earth. Respect for people means affirming that each has something of the divine within, that each has

something to contribute...My own vision is expanded as I respect the ideas and perceptions of others.”

Respect means that as a religious community, we provide a safe place to speak the truth as each of us sees it. We must take care not to put down points of view different than our own, assuming that we all see things alike. Offhand comments can have the effect of silencing those whose thoughts differ from ours. Some of us are confident, and speak out regardless of what others think and we relish a vigorous debate. Others are shy, perhaps fearful of rejection. Our liberal religious community needs to support them in the spiritual and intellectual growth by affirming their right to think differently than we do, and encouraging them to speak out. Those of us who tend to be outspoken and emphatic on our beliefs might need to temper our speech. We can certainly disagree, but must conduct our disagreements in a respectful and caring manner. If we fail to do so, our community is the poorer. As the Unitarian theologian Francis David said, “We need not think alike to love alike”. Loving alike, despite thinking differently is the heart of a liberal religious community.

Adlai Stevenson summed up the importance of valuing differences this way. “I think that one of our most important tasks is to convince ourselves and others that there is nothing to fear in difference; that difference, in fact, is one of the healthiest and most invigorating of human characteristics without which life would become meaningless. Here lies the power of the liberal way: not in making the whole world Unitarian, but in helping ourselves and others to see some of the possibilities inherent in viewpoints other than ones own; in encouraging the free interchange of ideas, in welcoming fresh approaches to the problems of life; in urging the fullest, most vigorous use of critical self-examination.”

Open-mindedness, critical thinking, acceptance, and absence of external authorities and creeds, beliefs informed and challenged by diverse theological, philosophical and political views—the religious experience—at least for me—doesn't get any better than this. Ultimately, the religious liberal is on a journey. The truth is something we always seek, but never find, at least not forever and for always. What saves this from being a lonely and confusing journey is that we know we have the company of others who are also open-minded, critical thinkers, who accept us, challenge us and support us.

Finally, I would like to address the third aspect of religious liberalism—what difference does it make? I chose the Sophia Lyons Fahs reading because she so eloquently states this aspect of religious liberalism. You will recall that nowhere does she prescribe any particular set of beliefs. Instead, she calls on us to look at the impact any set of beliefs has on the person holding them. If the belief promotes growth, self-worth, and a sense of a common humanity, the beliefs are good beliefs.

We have a long tradition of judging beliefs by the behavior of the person holding them. At MSUS, the home page of our website quotes Thomas Jefferson, “For it is in our lives, and not from our words, that our religion must be judged” Former UUA President John Buehrens puts it this way, “All that matters is whether we are willing to live up to the promise and the power of our own faith. Morality not proved in deeds is always betrayed by words, however right-minded, lofty and sage. I call this sin.”

In our content, our process and in our results, I believe the religious liberalism of Unitarian Universalism has a saving message—that there is no division between the “saved” and the “unsaved”. We proclaim that there is no heavenly pecking order in which God loves

some people more than others. Our emphasis on the inherent worth and dignity of every person affirms that we are all members of one human family, and no one lies outside the circle.

I believe the religious liberalism of Unitarian Universalism has a saving message—that the individual is capable of judging religious truth and falsehood, and such judgments cannot be abdicated to any external authority, book, or passively accepted historical practice. We do not require people to fit their conscience into a predetermined shape. We celebrate spiritual and intellectual growth, and expect that we will refine our beliefs as we go through life. We also know that in community, we can come closer to the truth than any one of us can alone.

I believe that the religious liberalism of Unitarian Universalism has a saving message—that it is more important to do the good we can than it is to be theologically correct. We strive to live what we believe and not merely talk about it. We practice respect and tolerance in our congregations; we support each other in living our values. We have conviction enough to act courageously, and humility enough to know that we might be wrong.

With this as our message, we can indeed save the world.

Now, in the spirit of religious liberalism, I invite your questions, comments and disagreements.

Closing Words are from John Murray: Go out into the highways and by-ways. Give the people something of your new vision. You may possess a small light, but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the ears and minds of men and women. Give them not hell, but hope and courage. Preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.