

*The Present Moment:
The Crisis in the Political Theology
Of Liberal Religion*

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Something quite fundamental is going on in Unitarian Universalism, something quite dangerous to our future as a religious movement in the United States. The situation of the world, and of the United States, is changing dramatically, and this religious movement is NOT responding to the changing situation out of the depths of its core religious insights, but out of the shallows of our recent fads, fashions and enthusiasms.

Liberal Religion is becoming less and less Liberal in its core understandings of humanity, the social order, and the role of faith. The core political and social values of liberal religion became compromised by conceptions, ideas, theories, tropes, memes that were parts of the apologetic apparatus of totalitarianism. From 1961 on, apologists for leftwing totalitarianism acquired a great influence among political progressives. Since we have always had a fuzzy boundary between our religion and our politics, ways of thinking that serve totalitarianism entered our religious thinking. I say that this is a **crisis** because in the present moment a global contest between liberalism and totalitarianism is shaping, and will define the decades to come. We face the third 20th century form of totalitarianism: Islamic fundamentalism, which is the successor to Fascism and Stalinism. The crisis is that, given the way that the world is going, and given the way that we are going, it is possible that Unitarian Universalism, the most straight-forward religious expression of the liberal imagination, the religious fruit of classical liberalism, will end up being an apologist for Islamic totalitarianism.

That Unitarian Universalism might unwittingly become apologists for totalitarianism seems a shocking assertion. It seems so unlikely, so far from our true opinions that it

must be impossible. We need to think more deeply about the foundations of our participation in political and social controversy. Much to the dismay and regret of ministers, religious movements tend to be followers and not leaders in the area of politics. In following the political movements we have followed, we have drifted into following some ideas that contradict our basic values. We have followed our inclinations and passing interests, but failed to check them against our deeper commitments.

The backdrop, the enabling condition, that makes this drifting possible also comes from our best intentions: our tolerance, and unwillingness to condemn new and different ideas out of the box. We also value our pragmatism; we prefer new understandings, especially when derived from concrete situations, over old teachings.

Here are some examples of where and how we have gone wrong: I call this section "Four dangerous memes and how they grew. A meme is a thought fragment that attaches itself to other thinking and analysis, which can spread like a virus throughout social dialogue. If it seems like it is generally true, if it seems like it applies to numerous situations, and if it will fit on bumper sticker, it is a meme. A classic meme is "no pain, no gain!" It is more than a specific thought. It is paradigmatic, seeming to have an applicability across many situations, from physical fitness, to personal finances, to personal growth, to church dynamics.

Meme #1: No justice, no peace!

The "No Justice, No Peace" started out as the grim summation of bad situation. If there was a situation in which injustice ruled, it was pretty much inevitable that violence and conflict would result. It don't believe that is was offered at first as a justification of violence; it was a statement of fact about cause and effect. But it mutated into a moral and tactical justification. It was taken to mean that Violence could be justified to oppose Injustice. It can even take on the feel of a threat: "Until you give me Justice, we will make war."

The “No Justice, No Peace” meme entered our thinking with the urban uprisings of the 1960’s. Liberal Religion saw itself in solidarity with the Southern Civil Rights Movement, and with black people. And the Southern Civil Rights movement was a classically liberal movement; it was aimed at extending rights, bringing excluded people into full participation in the constitutional democracy, it was non-violent, because it respected the moral agency of its opponents. It attempted moral persuasion rather than force. It was radical, in that it proposed a radical and dramatic change in the United States. And while it did not confine itself to only legal methods, it respected the law, respected it enough to call for it to live up to its own ideals.

The riots, on the other hand, were a moral disaster. They exulted in criminality, and lawlessness. Stores and businesses were burned and looted, imposing a popular justice that worked without due process of law. The mob punishes the people it can find for the oppressive actions of others, of the same group, whom it cannot find. It was a nightmare situation for religious liberals. They had no liberal understandings of society and the individual with which to defend the looting of small businesses and arson, yet they wished to stay in solidarity with African Americans.

But for those who were not liberals, the riots were a liberation from the limits of liberalism. A younger version of the Left, both black and white, had emerged, and they had, as the fruits of Marxist tradition, plenty of theoretical justifications for violence. But also, there was the long-awaited whiff of revolution in the air, the break with history and ordinary life, the chance to bring all of life fragments into a single, cohesive, meaningful, or to die trying.

In response to the riots, we liberals began to adopt the language and thinking of Marxists, not quite realizing that we were adopting also the theories of totalitarians. We began the careful process of making moral distinctions between the actions of “the oppressed” and the actions of their “oppressors.” Burning a store was no longer just burning a store. The moral value of it depends on whose store it is, where it is located,

and who is burning it. This, of course, is a complete reversal of the principle of the moral equality of all human beings. And it is an abandonment of the notion of individual moral responsibility as opposed to collective innocence and guilt. The white store owner is presumed to be bearing the moral responsibility for all white people's crimes against blacks. The crowd, which is really a collection of individuals, is seen as acting on behalf of all blacks.

When religious liberals declared themselves as in solidarity with the turn that the black liberation movement made in the middle and late 1960's, the slogans of black power, and "the urban uprisings", they began to tacitly adopt the moral principles of revolutionary violence, which underlies all of the ethics of totalitarianism.

The past cannot be changed, but we must examine the consequences of accepting the morality of revolutionary violence, the meme of "no justice, no peace".

a. The first consequence is that our politics became the defense of things that we, ourselves, would not do. Unless one is ready to pick up the gun oneself, you find yourself in the position between "the oppressed" and "the oppressor." Our work became explaining that violence and urging the government to not repress it. You are in the middle and those in the middle become the apologists for violence. This creates its own moral crisis. If the oppressive conditions warrant violence for the oppressed, then why not for you? Either you are a hypocrite, unwilling to walk the walk despite talking the talk, or you must think yourself to be morally superior to those with whom you are in solidarity. One of the reasons why we love our Selma story is that came at the end of the era when we acted in solidarity with others on behalf of our own ideals, rather than just in solidarity with others. We all wanted to live in a country in which all citizens could vote, even in Alabama. On the other hand, despite all of our solidarity with Vietnam, very few of us actually wanted to live in a Vietnam that was governed by the Vietnamese Worker's Party.

b. A second consequence comes from the general fact that revolutionary violence is not supported by the general population. Therefore, we have to dissociate from them. White people in the 60's, even whites who were sympathetic to the Southern Civil Rights movements, would not defend the riots and that uncomfortable fact had to be explained. Two overlapping explanations developed. One was that the general public were racists themselves, or, if the particular evidence of that was actually small, then, the beneficiaries of unearned privilege. The second is that they are dupes, being whipped up into a frenzy by manipulative politicians.

A simpler, and more elegant explanation, of course, was possible. The riots and the talk of revolution simply violated most people's understanding of morally responsible behavior.

c. The morality of revolutionary violence has epistemological consequences. It leads inevitably to the sociology of knowledge, which starts from the fact that people in different "social locations" view reality differently, from there to the conjecture that those who are in oppressed social locations see reality more clearly, and concludes those who see reality most clearly must have power. Vanguardism becomes a logical necessity. Political discourse becomes ideological, and hence, without content. After all, if one's opinion about any subject is merely the result of social location, then what is there left to talk about, except to compare resumes? The social process of liberalism has a unequalled capacity to produce knowledge, because it incorporates into every discussion some of the aspects of the scientific worldview. Propositions and ideas are subject to social scrutiny; it is the social process of scrutiny, debate, discussion and questioning that validates an idea, or concept, not the authority of the person who advanced it.

d. Eventually, the presence of violence is evidence of oppressive conditions, in and of itself. Paul Berman, in his excellent book "Terror and Liberalism" says that this is because we assume that the world is rational, and so, therefore, there is a ra-

tional explanation for everything that happens. For example, conditions somewhere must be very terrible that they would motivate someone to hijack a passenger jet and fly it into an office building. Our job must be to figure out what those reasons must be; we not only repeat justifications for revolutionary violence, we develop additional ones when the ones given are not persuasive.

Meme #2: There is no difference!

Religious liberals backed into position that the US was a totalitarian system because we had already accepted the morality of revolutionary violence. Any justification of revolutionary violence must be based on the premise the US political system is closed, unable to respond to the popular and expressed needs of the people, that we are governed without our consent. Moreover, whatever crimes and atrocities committed by others in the world, have been also done by the United States, which negates any argument in defense of the liberal order.

But think about it. Does the United States have a functioning democracy? If we don't, does anyone in the world? The totalitarian Left had an answer to this question, which flowed from their tradition. Systems like that of the US, was what they called "bourgeois democracy", which was actually the dictatorship of one class over another. . For much of this century, significant portions of the Left in the United States defended Marxist-Leninist regimes abroad, as being merely a different type of democracy, People's Democracy. And during the latter 60's and into the 70's, the Marxist left was relentless in promoting the viewpoint that the US did not have a functioning democracy. This followed from their institutional interests. They were desperate to consolidate all of the activists of the New Left into their organizations, afraid that they would become activists in the Democratic party.

Liberals did not conclude, after careful analysis, that electoral politics did not work, and that therefore extra-parliamentary tactics were called for, and violence justi-

fied. The reverse was true; we were already doing what we were doing, and adopted those political memes that would justify it.

A variety of circumstances have led us to assume, for political purposes, that democracy is an empty promise. The implications for our public theology have been enormous.

We have not pursued a public ministry of promoting participation in the democratic process. Where we have spoken to the public democratic process, it has been to repeat critiques that justify a strategy of abstaining from electoral politics. Our repeated resolutions against corruption and campaign financing, it could be argued, proclaim that democracy does not work. We pass resolutions about campaign finances, but have not urged congregations to register voters, or lobby to urge legislators to change the rules to make it easier to vote. Most of our churches do not participate in the election season with forums on issues, or invitations to candidates to speak.

Meme #3: The Individualism is an illusion!

Liberalism, as has been pointed out numerous times, is based on a model of the individual human being, who freely chooses the modalities of his/her social connections, based on his/her understanding of own interests and desires. Liberalism is based in the model of the autonomous self. Individual liberty and free conscience all are based on this concept.

It does not take much understanding of human anthropology to grasp that the autonomous self, the individual, is a philosophical fiction. No such person ever existed. Human beings are social animals, it appears, in nature; actually kind of pack or herd animals.

This elementary anthropological insight has been taken to have all sorts of relevance to the current problems of Unitarian Universalism.

As one might expect of a church culture that is rooted in liberalism, UU churches often struggle with issues of behavior, boundaries and the rights of members. Especially

newer churches and congregations which do not have long standing traditions have been beset by disruptive, rude, cantankerous people who abuse the tolerance of the group, and who claim that their rights are being violated when they are confronted. Since this has never happened in the congregations represented here, let me just report that it can be a difficult problem.

In such situations, the reminder that individualism has limits was good news to many UU's. The rights of the individual, all those assertions that are based on the sacred first principle: the inherent worth and dignity of every person, had been finally balanced by a counter-principle. My belief is that in the mid and latter 90's, this re-assertion of the inherent right of groups and organizations to define their own boundaries and practices for their self-preservation was an important step forward.

The meme was presented in its most conceptual form in the speech by Robert Bellah at General Assembly in Rochester in which he chided us for appearing to believe that the person is ontologically individual when everyone knew that the person was ontologically social.

UU's have gone to town with this meme. Not only does it provide a justification for telling that church member to stop wandering around the sanctuary with his coffee cup during the service, it also names rampant and runaway individualism as the over-arching social problem, the hidden personal cause behind every social ill, and the obstacle to every social reform.

Of course, individual authority, autonomy, personal liberty, and self-expression are relatively new ideas, no more than a few centuries old. For most of human existence, such notions of personal independence were unthinkable. Human life was defined by its anthropology, and the individual was always at the mercy of the pack, the herd, the clan and the tribe. While the notion of the autonomous self is a philosophical fiction, it is a useful and necessary fiction. One could argue that the concept of a God who transcends all human institutions, who is the "King of Kings", and who has a direct relationship with

each individual is also a fiction. It cannot be proven. But that belief is the basis of human liberty and the free church tradition.

Has anyone noticed that the primacy of the social, the meme that the individual is an illusion, is the hallmark of the totalitarian worldview. It's called totalitarianism precisely because it wishes to erase the distinction between the personal and public and place the totality of life under the influence of the group.

It goes without saying that neither individual autonomy and social cohesion are absolute values, but exist in uncomfortable tension with each other. The individual who acts out in a church needs to be curbed by the power of the group. And on what authority does the group act? Is it because the leadership is the democratically chosen and legitimate authority of the group? That is the liberal conception of authority. Liberal society has looks to democracy as the way to mediate those opposing tendencies. In a democratic process, the coercive power of the group is exercised with the consent of the governed.

On the other hand, the totalitarian justifies the coercive power of the group to discipline errant individuals on the grounds that the group is more primary and the individual secondary. *Unitarian Universalism has, as it has confronted the problem of the excesses of individuals in some situations, has turned to the memes of totalitarianism (the primacy of the group), rather than solutions of liberal society.*

Meme # 4: Constructed, not created!

The radical liberal vision of the individual at liberty has had an ambiguous relationship with the concept of human nature. Religious liberalism has followed the prophetic of argument always present in the Jewish and Christian traditions that the social order was not ordained by God, and therefore, one's role in the social order was secondary.

Against this liberating vision, conservatives have argued that the social order does reflect something fundamental about God's intentions for human beings, that the social

order reflects our human nature. Especially, it turns out, in the areas of sex, gender and sexuality. That identification with the social order, human nature and God's intention has all come crashing down during the short history of Unitarian Universalism.

It was a liberating idea that we were not ordained by human nature into the sexual roles that society had marked out for us. It was a liberating idea that what we had thought was just natural was, in fact, a product of culture, politics, and power. But that liberating ideas could be understood from both liberal and totalitarian frames. Liberals would argue that human society was finally catching up with God's intentions, which was to honor each human soul, and hope for its fulfillment. Surprise, surprise; women, and gays, and even transgender folks have autonomous selves as well.

On the other hand, Totalitarians argued that there was no such thing as human nature, that humans are not created, but constructed. Such an argument is very powerful, because it lays open to critical review, every single aspect of human life. Everything is culture, which means that it political, which means that it can be changed, if sufficient power can be brought to bear. This is a crucial argument for that Totalitarian Left because it de-legitimizes the inherent worth and dignity of the individual. Predictably, the notion of the individual is the first to be deconstructed, since it is the biggest obstacle to the emergence of the new order.

Here again, as we follow our impulse toward solidarity with women, with gays, with the transgender people, we have failed to distinguish between rationales which are consistent with the liberal tradition, and those rationales which are derived from, and lead to, totalitarian ideologies.

The great irony is that Unitarianism which has always distinguished itself by its particular views of human nature, is now beginning to sound like it does not believe in human nature at all.

Summing Up.

To sum up, the historical trajectory that our social theology has taken: Merger ended serious theological reflection as a guidance to our political stands. Religious Liberals had no other source than the theorizing that was going on in the movements of political liberalism. But the radicalism of the sixties brought many of the intellectual habits of Marxism into the progressive movements. In many ways, these habits of analysis, these memes, seemed to be effective tools. We did not notice that were in deep contradiction to the ways of thinking that were foundational to liberal religion. These ideas were not discredited and corrected after the fall of Communism in 1989, which should have brought about a reappraisal of our basic social theology at that point.

Today we live in a world also in which the confrontation between liberalism and totalitarianism has become acute. I believe that Paul Berman has outlined the features of the present moment with great clarity; that Islamic fundamentalism is the third wave of a continuing totalitarian revolt against liberalism. Who will defend the values of the liberal society?

But what of the value of tolerance? Isn't the world big enough for religious ideologies that are exclusive to coexist with liberal religion? Yes, but in a world in which the tolerant and the intolerant are to co-exist, the tolerant must have power.