

A Free Faith Faces the Future Part 2

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Last February I faced a dilemma. I was up to my eyeballs in the search for a new Assistant Minister and the newsletter deadline was fast approaching. Some of you know that the deadline for the next month's newsletter is the 15th of the month before. So I had to submit my sermon titles for March by February 15. Normally this isn't particularly difficult—I plan services pretty far in advance. But it occurred to me that I had to preach on *something* the Sunday after we announced our new minister before I had even finished interviewing all of the candidates. Since the “Congregations and Beyond” essay was garnering some controversy at the time, I choose that topic for late March. But when the date arrived I knew everyone would be far more interested in the new Assistant Minister than in an obscure essay written by the UUA President on the internet two months earlier. So I talked about Michelle instead.

That is until some folks told me that they in fact had very much wanted to hear about that subject! I even had a retired colleague come

to church that Sunday specifically to hear what I had to say. Well, never wanting to disappoint people, I promised to “re-preach” so to speak the sermon you would have heard on March 18. Hence the “Part 2” of my title this morning.

Last fall we had the honor of having in our pulpit Gini Courter, the Moderator of the UUA. As Moderator, Gini presides not only over the meetings of the UUA Board, but also over the plenary sessions at General Assembly. These are huge meetings; imagine our congregational meeting with four or five thousand people present. Often these are full of reports and presentations of various kinds, but there are also moments, again like a congregational meeting, where a vote is necessary. There are pro and con mics at either end of this vast convention hall and the debate can go on for hours. There are amendments on amendments on amendments. It can grow quite tedious. I find it a struggle to stay engaged with the process when it gets that convoluted. But Gini presides over it all with grace and a little bit of humor. Tense moments are calmed. Boring moments have some life injected into them thanks to her charm. So when she was with our Board I had to ask, “How do you do it? How do you not zone out or get frustrated?”

She replied, “Well I have a screen in front of me, and sometimes my staff put up funny cartoons or snappy saying to keep things lively. The thing about General Assembly is that there are no popes or bishops

or councils that tell us what to do. We practice congregational polity, which means that our congregations are free to govern themselves over matters that they deem important. When we are in that hall when General Assembly is convened, I think that is the most holy time in our life together. It is a sacrament.”

Wow! I thought. That was both inspiring and depressing all at the same time. I know Gini was trying to inspire us, to rouse our blood and make us have some pride in our living tradition, or at least make a deadly boring process feel like it had some life to it. In part I was inspired. But I couldn't help but think too, “Is that all there is? Is General Assembly really the most holy moment of our Association? Because whenever I have experienced the holy, it has been far more life giving and energizing than that.” That is not to say General Assembly isn't a good thing, but let us not fool ourselves into thinking it is something more than it is. At the end of the day, GA is a business meeting for an institution. You can have some fun on the side, but that is its primary purpose.

And so I was particularly interested to read Peter Morales' essay “Congregations and Beyond.” This is heralded as the centerpiece of Peter's vision for the UUA, and I will be hosting a conversation among my colleagues on this essay at GA this year. “Congregations and Beyond” takes a broader view than Gini Courter's response to my question. Morales' point is that Unitarian Universalism needs to be

broader than our congregational life. This is hard for those of us who are committed to congregational life to hear, and it has drawn criticism from many quarters. We need to think of Unitarian Universalism as a cultural force for change in people's lives and in our society as a whole. This does not necessarily preclude the work of congregations, but it can no longer be limited to them. It is so easy for us to conflate Unitarian Universalism with the institutional manifestations of Unitarian Universalism. We think that Unitarian Universalism is the church or worse that it is the UUA. In actuality Unitarian Universalism is not either of those things. Unitarian Universalism is a set of values and principles that we try to live by every single day.

Now of course it is within the friendly confines of our churches where we learn what those values and principles are. We learn them from the pulpit on Sunday mornings. We learn them in religious education classes. But mostly we learn them from each other. It is through our life together as a community committed to ideals like the inherent worth and dignity of every person that we begin to see what it would mean to live according to that belief. Things like ecology and interdependence start to work their way into our consciousness in ways we hadn't considered before. That is the purpose of the church; to provide resources and avenues where all of us can learn these values and apply them. It is an extremely important function. Nothing wrong with any of that. The difficulty comes in assuming that we need to live out

those values only here. That somehow the world out there doesn't need to hear about our faith or reap the benefits of our compassion. As the words to one of my favorite hymns says, "But we make your love too narrow by false limits of our own."

Morales points out that the trends in American religious life are not necessarily on our side. As people like Harvey Cox have noted, the sociological trend in America is away from the Evangelical Moral Majority of ten or fifteen years ago. People are generally more religiously liberal than that. That sounds like a good thing for us UUs, but only partially so. Because while the trend is toward religious liberalism it is distinctly away from participation in religious institutions. Surveys among young people reveal that many of them have beliefs very compatible with Unitarian Universalism. However they consistently mark "none" when asked about religious affiliation. Church is too closely associated with the religious right in their minds. Belonging to an institution like a church doesn't really make a difference—I can do it all on my own—is their assumption.

Certainly those of us committed to the institution of the church can bemoan this trend among the younger generation. I do. However, bemoaning doesn't get us very far. If that is the new reality with which we must come to grips, then let us begin adapting to it. That is what motivated Morales to write "Congregations and Beyond." Congregations are still a vitally important part of our religion—they

always will be. This is sometimes overlooked by Morales' critics. Institutions are important despite what the younger generation, or any generation, may think. Institutions are the locus of power. They are where we pool our collective resources of time, money, energy, ideas, and a group of people begins to all focus on a single goal or mission. By marshalling all of those forces together toward that single goal or mission, the institution is able to affect real change in a way that wouldn't otherwise be possible. The individualist, who opts out of such common endeavors, finds themselves lost and overwhelmed when faced with challenges. Individualists divide and conquer themselves. There will always be a need for institutions to be that locus of power and change.

The cynicism with institutions, such as the church, comes about I think because too often a church become more about itself than it does about its mission in the world. All institutions are means to an end. When they become the end in itself, then they have officially become irrelevant. Churches that only care about themselves or over-focus on maintenance and survival at the expense of doing what it is the church is there to do, risk irrelevance. Morales is trying to save us from that dubious end, by imploring congregations to look beyond their mere survival and to ask again the important question, "Why are we here?" and then be about the business of doing that work.

Believe it or not, this is not the first time that we have been in this circumstance as a religious movement. Way back in the beginning, Faustus Socinus was in a similar boat. Socinus might very well be the first Unitarian in history. Socinus was born in Italy, and was very much a product of the Italian Renaissance. The Renaissance you will recall was a moment in world history that was marked by a new found artistic freedom. It was also humanist with a small “H.” Meaning that artists were emphasizing the human elements of their subjects. Socinus inherited his uncle’s library and began reading not only the Bible but also classical philosophy. He began to incorporate reason into his religious beliefs. Socinus disputed the orthodox Christian belief that Jesus was on par with God. He also disputed Arius’ belief that Jesus was subordinate to God, but still above humanity. Rather Socinus proclaimed that Jesus was simply a man; a spiritually gifted teacher and prophet, but no more and no less a man. Thus Socinus’ Jesus was very close to what the Muslims said about him: a teacher to be revered because his moral teachings were important, but not worshiped as if he were God.

Socinus made his way to Poland and into a town called Racow. There he found a group of liberal Christians who called themselves the Polish Brethren. Socinus was not really a minister but more of a resident theologian. One of this teachings was that since Jesus was a man, it would be inappropriate to address Jesus in prayer, particularly

public prayer. This was in fact a central practice for Socinus. Addressing his prayers to God only, and not to Jesus, set him apart from other Christian teachers and preachers. It was a large part of who he was.

Sadly for the Polish Brethren, the open-mindedness of Poland at the time came to an end, and the Catholic majority forced them to either convert to Catholicism or leave. Some of the Brethren, including Socinus, traveled to Transylvania to live among the Unitarians there. Seemingly that should be the happy ending to the story. Unfortunately for Socinus it wasn't. The Transylvanians were Subordinationists, meaning that while they believed Jesus was not on par with God, he was still a good deal better than humanity. They did not take kindly at all with Socinus' teaching that Jesus was merely a human. And they really didn't like his refusal to address Jesus in prayer. They threw Faustus in jail until he would recant his beliefs. But he never did. He died in jail for his belief that Jesus was a human being. It meant that much to him.

As tragic as Socinus' end is, his legacy would live on. You see before being run out of Poland, some of Socinus' students among the Brethren decided to write down their beliefs in the form of a catechism. They felt that they would be able to pass down their faith to the next generation better and more precisely if they laid it all out in a question and answer format. So they wrote what is known as the Catechism at Racow or the Racovian Catechism. They also happened to have a

printing press, and so they churned out copy after copy of this Catechism. After a while it made its way around Europe and eventually into England. There, people read the Racovian Catechism and it sparked a Unitarian movement. That is what I mean by congregations and beyond! Unitarian Universalism is not just a church, it is not just a belief; it is both together. New ideas need to be embodied in the world through institutions, both the institution in Racow that gave rise to the Catechism, but also the institutions it helped inspire. It gave these new churches a reason for being—a mission. We must never forget that Faustus Socinus did not die in prison for our right to correct parliamentary procedure at General Assembly. That is the institution doing the institution's business. And if that business helps us to be outwardly focused on our mission, then all the better. But when it becomes Unitarian Universalists merely talking to other Unitarian Universalists than it is just navel gazing. It's safe, it's easy, but it's not what we are here to do.

Socinus died for a faith that was free, one that allowed him to profess what his conscious demanded of him. In all likelihood, addressing Christ in prayer isn't an issue that too many Unitarian Universalists worry about these days. But if it isn't that for you, what is? What is that part of your faith that you would let them drag you to prison for because you refused to recant it? If we don't have a faith like that, then we need to get one fast. The purpose of the church is to

transform the lives of people for the better; both inside the church and outside the church. It is a place where we find the resources to develop that kind of rock solid faith that Socinus had—not in its content necessarily, but that our beliefs have that solid a place in our life as his belief in Jesus as a human being had for him. We are on that journey together. We may arrive at different conclusions but our journey there is a collective one, because it is only together that we learn how to grow that kind of strong faith. Sure you can read books about Unitarian Universalism, look it up on the internet all you like, but you cannot live that faith out until you are rubbing up against some other people. That is when you learn what inherent worth and dignity means. What the interdependent web means. When you live it, then it becomes a part of who you are.

So let us be bold in developing that faith, and even bolder in our proclaiming it to the world. I don't mean rapping on people's doors in the neighborhood—I mean letting our light shine for the betterment of everyone, in here and out there. It is not easy, but it is the work we are called to do in this world. Let us be about it with courage and grace. Amen Blessed Be.