

The Future of Faith

Delivered to the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington Delaware

September 25, 2011

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Like all good college stories, this one starts with a girl. In between my junior and senior year of college I had a little crush on the girl down the hall in my apartment building. Her name was Mary. Like most crushes, it was based mostly on my fantasies about who I hoped she was, rather than who she actually was. A fact I should have realized at the time when Mary invited me to the Friday night meeting of her Campus Crusade for Christ chapter. Of course I accepted. Never mind the fact that I was already a UU and practicing Zen Buddhism at the time. I was an Anthropology major, so I was going as a participant observer to better understand conservative Christianity, I told myself. I will leave it up to you to buy that or not as a rationalization.

It was the summer so this was a rather small worship service that took place in the living room of the pastor's house. I remember browsing through some of the brochures before the service began. I found one that argued against evolution and claimed that Satan had placed dinosaur bones in the ground so as to lead astray true believers.

That was the first time I had ever encountered that particular theory. The service was lively with lots of singing. The sermon though was merely adequate. However one part of it grabbed my attention. He started to criticize other churches and was disgusted that there was a church that was doing a service on poetry and not focused on the gospel. Of course I knew that he was talking about the Unitarian Universalist church, although he didn't name it, because that was the service the next Sunday. Actually he was pretty critical of a lot of things. Sexuality was chief among them, and one might guess that having a worship service for college kids on a Friday night was intention in this regard. It kept us on the straight and narrow. In fact this minister was against pretty much everything and everyone who was not his particular flavor of Christianity. He concluded his sermon with the warning that when we die God will ask us two questions, "Are we saved and how many people did we convert to salvation?"

This minister's message illustrates quite effectively what Harvey Cox calls "The Age of Belief." Harvey Cox is a name perhaps familiar to you. In the sixties he wrote a bestseller called "The Secular City" which predicted that religion in America was on the decline and eventually disappear altogether. While that may have been welcomed news to some at the time, Cox made this prediction with a sense of foreboding. He is after all a liberal Christian theologian teaching at Harvard Divinity School. Religion is his bread and butter.

Well as they say in Vegas, don't buy a lottery ticket Mr. Cox! His prediction, we now know, turns out to have been utterly wrong. As he now admits, American public life is now more religious rather than less. Throughout the seventies and eighties we saw the rise of New Age and eastern religions on the left and the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition on the right. He should have made his forecast about Europe instead, which has more thoroughly embraced secular humanism as a way of life.

In his latest book, "The Future of Faith" Harvey Cox once again returns to the somewhat dubious pastime of trying to predict how American religious life will turn out. Cox believes that we are on the cusp between two epochs, what he calls "Ages" in the evolution of faith and religion. The old paradigm he dubs the "Age of Belief" because it is characterized by writing creedal statements of belief as a way of both identifying yourself as a religious person, and more importantly separating yourself from others who deviate from your creed. Thus religion is cast almost exclusively in the language of belief. "What do you believe?" is the question most often posed. How do you tell the difference between a Methodist and a Presbyterian or a Catholic and a Unitarian Universalist? Well you find out what they *believe*. We understand religions only when we can make some meaningful distinctions among their beliefs. This is why Cox calls it "The Age of Belief." Thankfully, it is the age he predicts that is passing away.

In its place is emerging the “Age of the Spirit.” Creeds are intended to divide people based on what they believe. The Age of the Spirit is a time when people of diverse religious beliefs begin to overcome their historical division and start to come together. Beliefs are still there, they are still different, but they no longer pose the overwhelming hurdle to unity that they once did. Instead in this Age of the Spirit people are looking for a religious faith that is more experiential, that moves the heart as well as the head. In that sense it is a kind of neo-Transcendentalism that does not exclude reason, but attempts to encompass a more holistic approach to faith. The Age of the Spirit is more democratic and less hierarchical. Religious truth is available to everyone, and living out that faith becomes everyone’s spiritual practice.

Cox concludes “The Future of Faith” with this summary:

“I began this book by suggesting that a fundamental change in the nature of religiousness is occurring. The change assumes different shapes but some of them overlap. With globalization, religions are becoming less regional. Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, and Hindus now live on every continent. Religions are also becoming less hierarchical. Lay leadership and initiative flourish in all of them, as the Muslim Brotherhood, Soka Gakkai, and the Latin American base communities demonstrate. In addition many are becoming less dogmatic and more practical. Religious people today are more interested in ethical guidelines and

spiritual disciplines than in doctrines. They are also becoming less patriarchal, as women assume leadership positions in religions that have barred them for centuries, sometimes for millennia.”

Certainly this was true for the Waldensians. I remember hearing about their heresy way back in my history of the church class, but I had no idea until I read Cox that they had survived history. Whatever else one may think of John Paul II and his legacy, it is undeniable that his papacy had a track record of reaching out to other faiths that was pretty remarkable. He entertained reunions with both the Eastern Orthodox church and the Anglicans at various times. A friend of mine who was training to be a priest once told me that other than refusing to ordain women, the modern Catholic Church has basically changed to the point that Martin Luther would probably still be Catholic today! I am not enough of a Luther scholar to confirm or deny that claim, but it does seem to indicate that at least in John Paul’s day the historical creedal boundaries between the Catholic Church and its siblings were starting to weaken.

Hopefully the Age of the Spirit is being ushered in. Part of what has done this is the greater contact between world religions, especially in America. Cox notes that, “representatives of Buddhism and Hinduism are often hard put to set forth a list of their ‘beliefs.’ More than one course on comparative religion in the West has foundered on this reef, as students, and sometimes professors, search in vain for the Hindu

equivalent of the Nicene Creed.” As we heard in our Ancient Reading today, from the most ancient religious scriptures in the world, God is not some all-knowing philosopher. Varuna as God was a presence for the ancient Hindus. But he looks upon the universe as dice to a player. He is present but not in control. A spirit, but not confined by the exactness of the Greek’s cookie cutter philosophy. Granted it is a faith that is hard to explain rationally to someone else. Hinduism is a hard religion to understand and with the exception of the Hare Krishnas, who are really a fundamentalist movement that prove the point, Hinduism isn’t a religion that seeks converts. It has practices, it is a way of life, it has a set of values to living, but it is not a definitive creed.

I for one am hoping that Cox’s predictive powers are more accurate this time around. The Age of the Spirit feels like it is moving people toward a religion much more in keeping with Unitarian Universalism now than ever before. Perhaps we just rode this wave of history a bit earlier than some others. Let us hope. In Unitarian Universalism we are united by a covenant rather than a creed. Our religious forebears were ones who were put out of the church as a result of the orthodox creeds, and when they formed their own churches did not want to exclude free thought in that way. And so they turned to the Old Testament for inspiration. A covenant is a series of promises people make to each other. They form the foundation of an ongoing relationship; a partnership to walk together regardless of what either

party may believe. It is a relationship that tolerates ambiguity and difference. Indeed, it makes room for all of us to make mistakes and at the same time calls us to strive for our highest ideals. The model and aspiration for these churches came to be called “The Beloved Community.”

Recently a colleague of mine asked me about policy governance. She wanted to know how First Unitarian Church had implemented policy governance so well! I had to chuckle at that one. Those of you who have been around a while know that that process over the past years has been no picnic. I said, “Well a lot of the hard work was done before I arrived so I can only speak to my own experience with it. The first thing to do is to fail at doing policy governance in front of your Board. Then have them fail at doing policy governance right in front of you. Once you have completely messed it up, and each party has disappointed the other, then you are ready for step two. In my early days working with the Board, I would present my monitoring reports to them and the reports would completely miss the mark. But do you know what the Board would do in response? They forgave me for it. They knew I was trying my best, I didn’t quite give them what they wanted or needed, and I was forgiven. And when they messed up, occasionally getting into the day to day operations of the Executive Team and they would recognize it, I would forgive them. At that point we were ready for step three: we would go about trying to learn from our respective mistakes. This

entailed speaking honestly and with love to each other. It also meant listening without getting defensive, knowing that both the Board and I are in relationship, we are on the same team, and want to see the other succeed. Did we disagree at times—of course. If we were a creedal congregation, then that would have been it. We would have differed on belief and therefore would have had to separate. But because we are a covenanted community, that relationship is what is primary, not our differing beliefs. Thus because we valued our relationship more than we did being right, it provided the opportunity to hear and learn from the other.

Since we were able to be in such honest relationship with each other, the Board and the Executive Team could then take some chances. When we reached step four we could try some new things with how we did policy governance based on our learning. We got creative with it, and pretty soon all that boring stuff came to be symbolic of our covenant, our promises to walk together in relationship. That is when we reached the ultimate stage of policy governance: we failed again! We are not perfect beings, any of us. We are always making mistakes particularly if we are taking risks and trying to do things in a new way. Mistakes and failure are a part of the process. But you know I will never forget the wry observation of Phil Dowd, then a Board member, who observed, “Yes but we are making such better and more sophisticated mistakes now!” They were higher order mistakes! This comment would

inevitably get a chuckle at a Board meeting and the covenant would be preserved yet again.

Actually these five steps have nothing to do with policy governance in and of itself, and everything to do with how the Beloved Community acts. Failure, forgiveness, learning, innovation, and failure again that repeats the cycle at a higher level, characterize how we live together in community. It makes room for the fact that we are all human, we cannot and should not please everyone, and yet there is improvement. The practices of the beloved community dispel this myth that we are all individually perfect and that somehow our church should be perfect. It, and we, should always be striving to get better. For as the saying goes, if you ever find the perfect church don't join it. You can only mess it up!

I think the Age of the Spirit that Cox describes will be one marked not by creeds of the past but by the covenant of the Beloved Community. If that is the case, then the future for our religious tradition is a bright one. As Rev. Rob Eller-Isaacs says, we are a covenant making, a covenant breaking, and a covenant remaking, people. It is the values of love, forgiveness, learning, and creativity that form the foundation of that covenant. These values may lead each of us to different rational conclusions, to different theologies, but our commitment to that relationship to walk together and to pick each other

up when we inevitably fall is what makes the Unitarian Universalist church a unique one.

I also think that it our commitment to these values that makes our faith more easily exported and externally focused. If you have a creed and you proclaim it out in the world to a stranger, then you are trying to convert them, as that Campus Crusade pastor taught. But if your religion is based on a set of values which you live out through the course of your shared life together as a community, then when you proclaim those values out in the world you build bridges. Lots of different theologies affirm love and forgiveness as important spiritual tasks. These are things we can agree upon whether we are Buddhist, Christian, or atheist. Values create connections while creeds strengthen barriers. And if Cox is to be believed this time, they are historically anachronistic creedal barriers whose time may be at hand.

Mary and I were never able to overcome our creedal barriers. I suppose that is a good thing, otherwise I might have become a very different kind of minister and preacher than the one I am today. We remained friends but nothing more. However I am very glad I went to her church. Her church called her to proclaim their beliefs. My church called me to listen. It's a big difference.

May we never grow complacent in our quest to live out our liberal religious values. May we always practice the spirit of love and trust

among us. And if we do fail, let us forgive each other, learn to do better, and walk together into the future. Amen Blessed Be.