

WHERE DOES OUR RELIGIOUS LIBERALISM COME FROM?

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This past week I attended the annual gathering of the Berkshire Group. This is a study group of about 18 of my Unitarian Universalist colleagues, which I helped to co-found ten years ago. We meet each year in October – in the Berkshires. Each year we select a topic, develop a reading list, and assign ourselves papers to write and present for discussion. This year our topic was religious liberalism and democracy. My assignment was to present a paper on the historical sources of liberalism. I came to some surprising conclusions, a few of which I want to share with you this morning.

As we know, the spirit of liberalism is under assault on many fronts. In recent years, liberal religion has been on the defensive, and our institutions of democracy are being threatened by powerful forces that would weaken the essential values of democracy. Unitarian Universalist minister Jack Mendelsohn has written about the challenge and importance of “being liberal in an illiberal age.”

To know where who we are and where we are going, it is always important to know where we have come from. We need to know our roots. As James Luther Adams so often said, “By their roots you shall know them.” We sing “Roots hold me close, wings set me free.” We need to know our roots. We are like the leaves of a tree, living in the here and now. But leaves derive their sustenance from the root system of the tree which draws minerals and water from the soil. At the same time, roots receive life energy and nutriment from the products of photosynthesis that take place in the leaves. It is our roots which sustain us. We also need constantly to renew

our roots by the dynamic, spirit filled living of our faith today. There are forces in the land that would demean the spirit of liberalism. It is for us to be sure of our roots and to proclaim the truth that sets the human spirit free.

By liberalism I don't mean one political party or the other. By liberalism I mean the essential values that are at the heart of our liberal religion and our modern institutions of democracy. Thursday, while driving back from the Berkshires, I happened to tune into an interview with Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer on the program "Fresh Air." He was talking about a new book he has written on democracy, with the title "Active Democracy." Justice Breyer identifies four essential values as being at the heart of modern liberal democracy. These are: freedom, equality, the division of power so that power is not concentrated in a single place but is widely dispersed, and fourth, the rule of law. Again, four essential values which Justice Breyer said are at the heart of modern democracy are: freedom, equality, division of power, and the rule of law.

This is a good list. These four values are key markers of modern liberal democracy. I agree with the list. I had said much the same in my paper. But where do these values come from? How do they relate to the values of our *religious* liberalism? I argue that these values of democracy – freedom, equality, division of power, and the rule of law – are first of all *religious* values. Indeed, I argue that modern liberal democracy has received decisive inspiration from the same sources as religious liberalism.

The roots of religious liberalism go deep in history. This is a large topic. But I will sketch it briefly in very broad outline. The so-called seven principles of our Unitarian Universalist faith did not spring suddenly from nothing. They have roots deep in religious history going back thousands of years in Biblical tradition. They have more recent roots in the humanism of

the Italian Renaissance of the 15th and 16th century, and in the Protestant Reformation of the 16th and 17th century both the reformation of John Calvin's Geneva, and especially from the radical wing of the Reformation of which the European Unitarians were part. Another important root is that of American Congregationalism here in New England with its independent self-governing churches, including this congregation, and town meetings. It is within these Calvinist Congregational churches here in colonial New England that American Unitarianism has its most direct roots. The Enlightenment philosophy of the 18th and 19th centuries then added an especially important branch to the root system of liberal religion.

The American revolutionary experience of establishing a new social and political order founded on republican and democratic ideals is another important root, especially for democracy. The one thing that the American colonists shared in all thirteen colonies, regardless of their different religions, was the long tradition of English constitutional history. This English history goes back through the Puritan revolution in the 17th century, through numerous civil wars, to the Magna Carta in 1215, and all the way back to William the Conqueror in the 11th century, who laid the foundations of English law. This English history is the story of the gradually increasing political and civil liberties of the people and of the steadily decreasing power of the monarch. The importance of this legacy for our American democracy cannot be underestimated.

Altogether, these several sources represent a complex root system for modern liberalism, both for religious liberalism and for democracy, which I argue to be intimately related. So often we think of religious liberalism as having its source most directly in the Age of Enlightenment. And it's true. American religion, and our Unitarian Universalist tradition in particular,

received important insights from the Enlightenment that opened up and liberalized the rigid Calvinism of the earlier colonial era. Individual freedom of thought; the use of reason to examine critically all claims to truth; individual human rights; religious pluralism; political liberty and social contract – these values all have their roots in the Enlightenment.

What I want to say now may come as a bit of surprise to many of you. I claim that the central tap root of both religious liberalism and democracy is deep within the Biblical tradition, both within the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. I know this may seem surprising in light of the patriarchy and the narratives of violence in these scriptures of which Margie spoke last Sunday. Certainly, we must acknowledge that these are there within the Biblical tradition, especially within the more ancient Hebrew scriptures. We must acknowledge that particular Biblical texts, texts which in part reflect the social conditions of the time, have been exploited over the centuries for self-serving agendas to dominate and control others. We cannot deny this. It is evidence of our human brokenness.

But in spite of this sad legacy, let us keep in mind the central, overarching themes of the Biblical narrative. The key values that are lifted up over and over again in the Biblical story are those of liberation from bondage, the sacred worth and radical equality of the individual who is made in the image of God, and the idea of covenant as the foundation of social order. Freedom, individual worth, and covenant - these are told over and over from Genesis One all the way through into the Christian New Testament. The central narrative is that of a transcendent power working in history to bring about a social order based on freedom, justice and the rule of law.

The main story, of course, is that of the Exodus. This is the story of liberation from bondage and the covenant at Sinai. In this story, liberation depends on a voluntary covenant relationship between the community and God, who calls community into being and sustains the community. A community bound by a voluntary covenant is a society governed by the rule of law rather than by the arbitrary rule of tyrants. It is a society where power is divided among the people and not concentrated in a single place. This rule of law and division of power is more than a simply a practical agreement. It is grounded in an understanding of a transcendent moral reality that is beyond any political system.

This Exodus theme of liberation and voluntary covenant is repeated over and over again in the Hebrew scriptures. The God of Israel is the God who brought them “out of the land Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” This is the first of the Ten Commandments, and it is invoked and echoed throughout the scripture texts. The prophet Isaiah famously proclaims, “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners (Is.61:1-4). In Luke’s Gospel, it is this same prophecy – “liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners” - which Jesus reads from the scroll that is handed him in the synagogue and sets the theme for his ministry (Lk.4:17-19).

While Isaiah has in mind the anticipated liberation of Israel from the bondage of foreign domination, Jesus proclaims liberation of individuals from the bondage of sin and the imminent arrival of a new spiritual order of being. While his proclaimed “Kingdom of God” is not explicitly a political order, it holds latent within itself radical implications for the social order, as the rulers of his day in Jerusalem were quick to perceive and to fear. The Apostle Paul, too, speaks of the radical freedom and equality that comes

from what he called new life in Christ. The early Christian churches were radically egalitarian and self-governing. They experienced vitality in a spiritual freedom that was unbound by dogma. Again, central themes are freedom and equality, proclaimed in spiritual terms to be sure, but with radical implications for history, and centuries later, for liberal democracy.

History had to wait for the Reformation for these values to break out at last into widespread political and social form. Another surprise is that our modern democracy owes a great deal to John Calvin and his experiment with democracy in the city-state of Geneva in the early 1500's. Several key ideas come from Calvin – that rulers are to be elected by the people, that rulers are accountable to a higher moral law, that the people hold the right to resist government when government abuses its power, and that church and state are to be kept separate from each other although they are to work in cooperation together. Our modern democracy owes a lot more to John Calvin than we may realize. The democratic governance of our own Unitarian Universalist churches comes straight from Calvin and his version of The Reformation.

But it is churches of the Radical Reformation – the Anabaptists, the Spiritualists, and the Evangelical Rationalists, among whom were the European Unitarians – it is these radical churches which represent an especially important source of religious liberalism. Long before the Enlightenment, it was these churches, inspired by the Holy Spirit, which were emphasizing most strongly the values of spiritual freedom, radical equality, rights of individual conscience, and the authority of personal religious experience. Here in America, the Universalists gave powerful expression to these same values.

Of course, I have greatly oversimplified a rich and complex history in this quick survey. But my main point is that each of these several roots – the Biblical tradition, the Renaissance and Reformation, the Enlightenment – these work together to form the complex root system of modern religious liberalism and democracy. Today, contemporary post-modern experience, liberation theologies, and religious pluralism are providing new soils for additional roots to reach into. Our Unitarian Universalist tradition draws all these roots together in a unique and original way. Each root in the total system brings vitally important nutrients.

Ours is *a dynamic faith*, which finds its best life in spiritual freedom in covenant community together. Ours is *a Biblically grounded faith*, which relies upon a transcendent creative power that works in history and is not of our own making. Ours is *a covenantal faith*, which affirms the essential worth of each person, and which affirms that all human relations are best conducted by voluntary, mutual consent and not by coercion. Ours is a tradition that affirms the right of conscience of minorities and seeks to protect their voices. Ours is *a deliberately open-minded faith*, which understands that no human truth can ever be final, that no claim to truth is exempt from critical examination. Ours is *a moral faith* that calls us to establish democratic community which is founded on the religiously inspired values of freedom, equality, covenant relationship and the division of power. And most of all, ours is *a hopeful faith* that draws on resources both human and divine to build a more just and compassionate world. In the words of James Luther Adams, ours “is a pilgrim church, a servant church, on an adventure of the spirit.”