

WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT OUR FAITH?

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Reading: "Freedom", excerpts from the writings of John Milton, #671, in Singing the Living Tradition

We cherish this liberal faith of ours. We support it. We believe in it. But sometimes we find it hard to explain, even to ourselves. What is our most distinctive belief as Unitarian Universalists? It's easy to say what we don't believe about such doctrines as God, or Jesus, or Heaven and Hell. But we want to be careful, because we know that what you or I don't happen to believe personally might mean a great deal to another Unitarian Universalist.

There is something radically different and unique about our Unitarian Universalist faith. As far as I know, there is no other religion like ours. We share certain of our values with many other religions – our affirmation of the worth and dignity, the sacredness, of every person; our commitment to compassion and social justice; our vision for world peace; and our respect for interdependence of all being. We may say these in our own words, but we join with many other religions who also affirm these same principles.

I believe that there is something radically unique about our Unitarian Universalist faith which makes it quite different than other religions. What other religion claims as its most essential principle that a person need not believe their religion's own most central claims about Jesus, or the Koran, or the Inner Light, or the doctrine of No-Self, or the Torah, or God and still be a faithful follower of that religion?

In a word, what is unique about our faith is *freedom*. It is our emphatic and uncompromising commitment to the principle of individual freedom - freedom of thought and the right of individual conscience in religious life, and freedom also in political, social, and economic life. This I believe is our most unique and central affirmation. It is our emphatic conviction that individual freedom of mind and conscience is the single most essential requirement for religion if it is to most fully inspire and empower meaningful life. This is an historical commitment going back hundreds of years, and it is one that has been hard won at great cost. In rejecting

conformity, ours is a religion that demands special courage and a vigorous commitment to sustain.

Now, if I take this claim of ours that freedom is the first principle of our faith, if I take this claim seriously, then I must grant each of you this same essential freedom – the freedom to disagree, or to agree, or to argue the point in total freedom as you may feel compelled to do so. I may be speaking from this pulpit, and I have been charged by the congregation to do so. But my task is not to preach anything as authoritative doctrine nor to claim in any way that what I say is final truth. Instead, my task is to lift up the values of our tradition. It is to reflect on our current life situations in light of these values. And, it is to invite and encourage each of you in your own reflections as you consider the decisions which only you can make.

In that famous line in the Gospel of John, Jesus says, “You will know the truth and the truth will make you free.” There is powerful wisdom in these words, especially if you understand by these words that it is by the powers of your own inner discernment, it is in the freedom of your own conscience that truth comes to you. The problem is that so many religions want to define truth for its followers. As Unitarian Universalists, we turn these words around, “We will *seek* the truth in freedom, and in the *seeking*, the truth will become known.”

What is unique about our faith is not a sacrament. It is not a comforting message. It is not any one scripture. It is not a particular code of ethics. It is not any one spiritual practice. It is not a belief in any one particular deity or divine person. What is most unique and radical about our faith is our conviction that freedom, freedom of mind and conscience, is the one most essential thing for religious life, and that all else follows.

Our commitment to freedom has deep historical roots as far back as the mid 1500s during the Protestant Reformation in Europe. Michael Servetus used the freedom of his mind to read the Bible and other texts, and to think for himself. And he concluded, for one thing, that that the long-standing church doctrine of the trinity had no basis in scripture and was contrary to reason. And he dared to publish his thoughts to the world. For this he was burned at the stake in Calvin’s Geneva in 1553. His death provoked other thoughtful reformers to argue for tolerance in religion and helped pave the way for the Unitarians who followed.

In Transylvania, religious leader Francis David, who founded Unitarian religion in that country in the 1560's, argued persuasively for the freedom of mind and conscience in religion. Francis David is famous for saying, "We do not have to *think* alike to *love* alike."

Here in America, our Unitarian and Universalist religions were each born during the period of the American revolution and were inspired by Enlightenment ideas of freedom. Freedom of mind and right of conscience were central values of progressive Congregational clergy. For example, our own minister here, The Rev. Lemuel Briant, who served this church from 1745 to 1753 – this was more than 20 years before independence – Rev. Briant was attacked for his progressive ideas by neighboring Congregational clergy who were more orthodox and also by conservative members of his own congregation.

This congregation held a council, chaired by John Quincy, and to its credit published resolutions defending Rev. Briant. These resolutions proclaimed what they called "the right of private judgment" and commended their minister "for the pains he took to promote a free and impartial examination into all articles of our holy religion, so that all may judge even of themselves what is right." That was in 1753. Because of this event, John Adams many years later in 1815, at the height of the Unitarian controversy in New England, wrote in answer to the attacks by orthodoxy that the ministry of this congregation and many lay people had in fact already been Unitarian for 65 years, since 1750.

Unitarian minister Joseph Priestley, and also a noted chemist, was an original thinker in the spirit of Enlightenment freedom. Because of his progressive religious thinking, he had had to flee mob violence in England and come to America. Priestley was friends with both John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, both of whom read Priestley's books on religion and religious philosophy and corresponded with him.

Benjamin Rush, a noted physician, and a signer of the Declaration of Independence, was also a Universalist, and was also a friend of Adams and Jefferson. In a letter to Benjamin Rush (9/23/1800), Thomas Jefferson wrote his now famous words, "I have sworn, upon the altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man." (These words are inscribed in bold letters around the inside of the base of the dome of the Jefferson National Monument, over the head of Jefferson's statue.)

First among the tyrannies which Jefferson had in mind were the tyrannies of religious doctrine and church authoritarianism.

During the early 1800's the more conservative and orthodox Congregational churches were fearful of the free mind which was being preached from more progressive pulpits. They began to impose examinations of faith and creedal tests in order to exclude free thinkers from membership. These tests of faith helped drive the controversy which led to liberal ministers and congregations founding a new Unitarian religion. The issue was freedom. Abigail Adams, for example, in a letter at this time to her son John Quincy Adams, expressed her sorrow over "a narrow selfish exclusive system gaining ground, instead of that Liberal spirit" which she saw as the true spirit of Christianity. And to her daughter-in-law Louisa Catherine, she wrote, "True religion is from the Heart, between Man and his creator, and not the imposition of Man or Creeds and tests." (Levin, Abigail Adams)

Universalists also defended the essential freedom of mind. As early as 1790, Universalists included in their first denominational declaration of faith the all important liberty clause. This liberty clause guaranteed that "neither this nor any other statement shall be imposed as a creedal test."

It is not coincidental that spiritual freedom and democracy are closely associated. Unitarians and Universalists from the beginning have proclaimed that the right to self-government is a religious conviction - the idea that human beings have the capacity to shape their own destiny, personally and also collectively as a society. This is fundamentally a religious conviction. William Ellery Channing, a founder of American Unitarian religion, preached what he called the primacy of inner spiritual freedom for both religious and civic life. He said that civic and political life would be worth little without a basis within the inner freedom of the spirit.

He warned that the outward forms of liberty - constitutions and social compacts - that these are not the essence of liberty. Without the cultivation of the spiritual freedom within individuals, "even the wisest provisions and most guarded powers," Channing said, "may be made weapons of tyranny." We would do well to remember this in the midst of the strident fear-mongering in our present time of terrorist violence and the passions of a national election campaign now gathering force.

Governments are not the guarantors of liberty. It is our collective inner spiritual freedom that guarantees political liberty. I am concerned that we Americans have become so afraid, that we have become so worried about security, that we have become too willing and too ready to give up our precious liberty to whatever demagogue promises safety and security. Secret prisons and the use of torture do not make us safe!

If Channing is right, and it is our affirmation that he is right, it is by us preserving our inner spiritual freedom that we best preserve our outer civic and political freedom. This is why our churches, this is why our Unitarian Universalist faith is so important.

I submit, then, that it is spiritual freedom, freedom of mind and the right of individual conscience, that is the radical principle of our Unitarian Universalist religion. It is the principle of the free mind and the free moral conscience that most uniquely defines our faith. It is not a love for Jesus, although that could rightly be one's personal devotion. It is not a belief in God, nor a belief in humanism, or in theism, or atheism, although any of these might well be any one person's belief. Nor is it a particular spiritual practice, as important as any of these may be. It is spiritual freedom. This is the unique and defining principle of our faith.

Now, the principle of freedom is by no means easy to live in practice. It requires a strong commitment and a spiritual discipline. The words of John Milton we read this morning speak to the challenge. John Milton was an interesting and inspiring figure. He is perhaps most well-known as the poet who wrote the classic "Paradise Lost." He was also an important Puritan leader during the English revolution in the 1640's. Controversial for his political and religious ideas, he was also radical in his belief in freedom. "Give me liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience above all liberties." But he also said, "Where there is much desire to learn, there of necessity will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions."

In our time, Universalist minister Ken Patton, in proclaiming that our house of worship is a house for freedom, proclaimed that this house is a house for the "free voice, for declaring, both in times of security and danger, *the full and undivided conflict of opinion.*"

The “full and undivided conflict of opinion” - here is our challenge. Our temptation is the temptation of conformity – religious conformity, political conformity, social conformity. Our temptation is to seek the false security of certainty and the apparent peace of agreement and the absence of conflict. (I am sometimes concerned that our votes at meetings of our congregation are so often unanimous. Are we being too timid?) If we are to be true to our most essential conviction, if we are to live the freedom we cherish and proclaim, then we are called to welcome “a full and undivided conflict of opinion.” We are called to a radical inclusiveness, including an inclusiveness of opposing opinions.

We are called not only to welcome the conflict of *religious* opinions. Because religious ideas have their most profound expression in social and political terms, we are also called to welcome the full and undivided conflict of *political* opinion – conservative as well as liberal, socialist as well as free marketers. Some of the most faithful Unitarian Universalists have been or are political conservatives on many issues. Their voices are just as important if we are to be faithful in seeking larger truth.

Our unique and radical spiritual insight as Unitarians and Universalists is just as Milton said it, “And though all the winds of doctrine were let loose to play upon the earth, so truth be in the field, we do injuriously to misdoubt her strength. ... “[Truth] needs no policies, no stratagems, to make her victorious. Let her and falsehood grapple, whoever knew truth put to the worse in a free and open encounter.”

The spiritual practice of freedom calls us not only to cherish and protect the free conflict of opinion. We are also called to exercise a respectful humility, knowing that we each could be wrong in our own opinion, and probably most often are, at least in part. We are called always to grant others the same respect and freedom which we claim for ourselves.

In summary, then, our faith is in liberty. Our faith is in that, so far as mind and conscience are free, larger truth will come to be known. Deeper wisdom will come to be discerned. It is this principle of spiritual freedom, I submit, which is at the heart of true religion. It is for us as religious liberals to cherish and preserve this great gift of freedom as our most important spiritual principle and our practice.

So may it be, Amen.