



**Meadville Lombard**  
Theological School

## **RESPONSE TO “THE MARKETING OF LIBERAL RELIGION”**

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David, you have given us two valuable gifts this evening. One is your stimulating historical and critical illumination of the theologically impoverished, even religiously impoverished wilderness in which you see us as having wandered and wandering still. The other is the Pisgah sight of Palestine that you afford us as the time nears when you lay down like a staff the professorship of ministry at this institution that we love and whose importance to the future of liberal religion cannot be overstated. May there be Joshuas here this evening preparing to lead liberal religion into that goodly hill country beyond the river.

I want to further unwrap your gifts by posing two questions. First, is Unitarian Universalist theology today as unfounded as you suggest? Or is there not, apart from the foundation you propose, another mode of theologically rich work going on that both challenges and sustains us? Congregational self-reports that I have collected with your help suggest that important yeasting is indeed going on, and the issue may be more about what constitutes theology. And the second question: how true is the what I would characterize as romantic theological foundation you propose to a different, more theological understanding that I would claim is not uncommon among us? Here I will have to speak personally. But with regard to both sets of questions—How theologically unfounded is Unitarian Universalism these days? and How comprehensive is the theological foundation that you propose?—it's worth noting, with William Faulkner, that “The past is not dead. In fact, it's not even past.” Your Universalism and my Western Conference Unitarian Humanism are as alive and active now as they were during the negotiations that resulted in the consolidation.

So, to the first question. How barren of theology is Unitarian Universalism these days? Most especially, how barren is it in our congregations? That issue I can actually best get to with David's help. Congregations are never more theological than when they describe themselves to prospective ministerial candidates as part of the ministerial search process. A couple of years ago, recognizing the inadequacy of the tools for self-description that we provided, I asked David for assistance. David designed a survey instrument featuring so cogent an array of theological I-statements that many congregations put more energy into describing their theological situations than they did criticizing the instrument.

What are the most controversial theological issues in our congregations today? According to responses to David's survey instrument, by far and away the most controversial issues today are the same issues that were most controversial twenty and forty and probably sixty years ago. One, as phrased in David's instrument, is the centrality of the life, teachings, and death of Jesus of Nazareth to one's understanding of God, the Universe, and the human condition. Such centrality is dismissed by 68 percent of

respondents. The other is the importance of a personal relationship with God as a vital part of one's spiritual life and a necessary part of one's worship experience. The importance of such a relationship is dismissed by 59 percent. OK, one might say, that's pretty decisive. But here's the interesting thing. While 68 percent of respondents deny the centrality of Jesus, 14 percent affirm it and another 18 percent are on the fence, for a total of 32 percent. Sixty-eight percent no, 32 percent yes or maybe. And in the case of a relationship with God, while 59 percent deny it, 23 percent affirm it and 17 percent are on the fence. Fifty-nine against, 40 percent yes or maybe.

David, I think you are right that there is a lot of theologizing that has been suppressed, primarily because attempts to undertake it are feared to be incendiary. For example, recently an internship committee in a Mid-Atlantic congregation admonished the intern minister thus:

We [suggest] that, in view of the variety of religious beliefs in a congregation such as ours, expressed beliefs may alienate someone with even slightly differing beliefs. . . . We feel that a minister's position is so imbued with authority that expressions of personal faith, or even perceived expressions of personal faith, may interfere with the successful unification of people with disparate beliefs.

I am pleased to say that the courageous intern worked hard to open up the theological doors and windows in that congregation. Thank goodness that such efforts are usually not confined to interns. Here's this from a California congregation: "One of our challenges is to help all members, especially those who do not primarily identify as agnostic/atheist/ humanist, to feel welcome to share their theologies." And from time to time, as in this from a border state congregation, theological pluralism is received as a gift: "We are not an 'anti-' church," they say; "we do not, by and large, arrive here wounded, we arrive here alive and looking for a spiritual home. This diversity is celebrated and all are equally welcomed."

Years ago in a class at the Div School David Tracy said that some of the best theologizing in the Middle Ages was done not in words but in art. I want to suggest that some of the best theologizing in Unitarian Universalism right now is done in what might be called congregation-based theological ethics. I'd like to think that the hard, dedicated, and by no means always successful work done in so many of our congregations in the past thirty or so years is theologically rich work, as a result of which—although not in that Mid-Atlantic congregation where the intern served—people are increasingly enfranchised to have whatever religious understanding they have, and to speak about it aloud, and to be full participants in congregational life nevertheless. I think it's really quite amazing that that has happened when the divisions are as high as 60-40 or 70-30. It's splits like that in the political world that often lead to Balkanization and bloodshed.

Every time I read about a congregation's efforts to become a beloved community, to take theological pluralism seriously and to craft behavioral covenants in order to marginalize toxic behavior such as intimidation, financial ultimatums, or more serious acting out—I feel an impulse to bow in their direction. Pretty much gone are the days when a dominating member could say of a potential new member, "I don't think he's tough enough to belong here."

I want to turn now to the constructive dimension of David's argument, in which he proposes to identify the "powerfully homogenous core of shared beliefs and attitudes" upon which our diversity rests. Several of the beliefs and attitudes he proposed in his paper this evening are echoed in additional theological I-statements that David composed for the survey. I find it remarkable that only two of those statements elicit more powerful affirmative responses among the congregations studied than the negative responses elicited by the statements about Jesus and God. Here are those two statements:

- Goodness and "meaning" are human constructs created as a result of the human encounter with each other and with the world. (This one received 72 percent yes, 10 percent no, and 17 on the fence.)
- My spiritual life is grounded in a sense of the fullness and connectedness of all things. (This one received 84 percent yes, 5 percent no, and 11 on the fence.)

I conclude that on the basis of the congregations studied, the dominant strain among us is to ground ourselves in the fullness and connectedness of all things rather than in a relationship to God, and to look to our own experience rather than to Jesus of Nazareth or any other spiritual authority for what is good and what is meaningful. Each yes is informed by a no. And yet in practice we recognize too that there are in our congregations people who see things differently, who for example ground themselves in a relationship to God rather than in connectedness, and who look to Jesus for what is good rather than to their own authorities. We know that people who see things differently from us have gifts to give us, even if receiving those gifts is not always an unmixed pleasure, and we want those people with us. Here to, every yes is informed by a no.

And on that note, the note of the interdependent yes and no, I wish to end. It will take me a couple of minutes to sound that note as I believe it needs to be sounded if it is to carry. By way of a prefatory reading for my brief remaining remarks, hear these words from neo-Freudian Ernest Becker, from his 1975 book *Escape from Evil*:

Existence, for all orgasmic life, is a constant struggle to feed—a struggle to incorporate whatever other organisms they can fit into their mouths and press down their gullets without choking. Seen in these stark terms, life on this planet is a gory spectacle, a science fiction nightmare in which digestive tracts fitted with teeth at one end are tearing away at whatever flesh they can reach, and at the other end are piling up the fuming waste excrement as they move along in search of more flesh. . . . Life cannot go on without the mutual devouring of organisms. If at the end of each person's life he were to be presented with the living spectacle of all that he had organismically incorporated in order to stay alive, he might feel horrified by the living energy he had ingested. The horizon of a gourmet, or even the average person, would be taken up with hundreds of chickens, flocks of lambs and sheep, a small herd of steers, sties full of pigs, and rivers of fish. The din would be deafening. . . . [E]ach organism raises its head over a field or corpses, smiles into the sun, and declares life good. (pp. 1-2)

The most illuminating description of religion that came my way during my years at Meadville Lombard and the Divinity School was from the anthropologist Clifford Geertz. Geertz said—I'm paraphrasing here—that any religion worth its salt provides its adherents with two things: a world view and an ethos.

Your worldview is what goes on in the world according to you. Jesus said that God's eye is on the sparrow. Unitarian Theodore Parker said that the moral arc of the universe bends toward justice. The preacher in the Book of Ecclesiastes said he had seen all the works that are done under the sun, and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit.

Your ethos, on the other hand, is what you're supposed to do in the world. Benjamin Franklin said:

Be temperate in wine, in eating, girls, & sloth;  
Or the Gout will seize you and plague you both.

To that pinch-minded platitude D.H. Lawrence responded: "Carouse and drink wine with Bacchus or eat dry bread with Jesus but don't sit down without one of the gods." Each of these is an ethos.

Geertz also said that only if a religion's worldview and its ethos cohere, only if they somehow entail each other, does it really have the right to call itself a religion. Religion is the integration of worldview and ethos. It doesn't make a lot of sense to carouse and drink wine with Bacchus while the universe is busily bending toward justice. On the other hand, if all is vanity and vexation of spirit, what a waste of effort is temperance.

David, you have articulated for us an ethos that if included as an I-statement in the congregational survey as I plan to do would I believe reveal itself to be widely affirmed: to "act out of conscious concern for the broadest vision of community we can command and [to] seek not our welfare alone, but the welfare of the whole." But I would hazard that the worldview you offer, which earlier I described as romantic, would be found to speak to and on behalf of a notably smaller majority. In the spirit of Chicago empiricism I can't believe that I am the only Unitarian Universalist who simply cannot, in looking about him, see persuasive evidence of a world threaded through with a moral impulse. The struggle toward feeding seems to me far more powerful than the drive toward meaning.

I believe that the ethos you enunciate does not require the worldview you espouse. It can just as easily be adopted over against a universe with no innate friendliness toward meaning. In such perspective is rooted a theology of tragedy.

For the past fifteen or so years or so we in Unitarian Universalism have heard voices assuring us that if only we embrace a theology of abundance, all will be well. Such a theology seems to me a boomer theology, promulgated by those for whom an economic downturn was not a serious possibility. But in the words of philosopher and trader Nassim Nicholas Taleb, unending profits are "simply cash borrowed from destiny with some random payback time." What we need now and in fact have needed for some time is a theology of contraction, a theology of entropy, a theology of the massive randomness and unpredictability and riskiness of things.

So let me end by saying, David, the ethos you propose is never more needed than now, at this time of economic disaster, when the temptation of nations and peoples will be to cry "every man for himself" and head for the boats as the *Titanic* backs off the iceberg. But we need a worldview that better appreciates the riskiness of the voyage, and the temperature of the water, and the need for watertight compartments.