

A Call to Create a Theology of Covenant

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Liberal religion in general and Unitarian Universalism in particular have lost religious faith.

Liberals have not lost faith in political liberalism as it is now, although the general public may not have any more confidence in it than in today's political conservatism. People on the political left hold their positions and policies with as much religious fervor as they do on the political right. Both divide. But, holding to something "religiously" doesn't make it the proper object for ultimate devotion and allegiance. Those who prize freedom, broadmindedness, a generosity of the Spirit, have lost what that means in terms of religion. They've lost the spiritual origin and nature of freedom. When it comes to speaking to the modern existential situation in this way, liberal religion is silent. The main challenge to the liberal religionist today concerns breaking that theological silence, and laying claim to a spiritual identity rooted in an understanding of freedom as the yield of certain kinds of relationships which themselves can be called spiritual.

Liberals have lost the conviction that there is a force and direction to existence that is generous, benevolent, and liberating. Liberals have lost the prospect that human beings are partners in the creative workings of that force and direction, in terms of both our shared effort and destiny. Liberals do not hold a faith in a God of history. They are deeply ambivalent as to whether there is a spirit alive in the world over which death has no dominion, a light in the world that no darkness can extinguish.

This agnosticism about the force and direction of history, that is, God, and their intellectual and critical views of Scripture, rightly inherited from the history of liberal religion, have distanced liberals from the spiritual life well lived. The mind deconstructs that for which the heart yearns: a unity and freedom of the Spirit that widens affection for creation and the human family. As a consequence of this loss liberals have become religious about their political liberalism, but walked away from being liberal in living and experiencing faith.

And by our own admission we who are Unitarian Universalists have lost our sense of what is religious. The president of the Unitarian Universalist Association declared we lack a "language of reverence," a way of speaking about the *religious* quality of human experience. And a professor at one of our seminaries says we are theologically illiterate. We cannot reflect upon human experience to represent its religious content, measure its religious yield, or pronounce its religious effect. We can't use the language of theology and religion with conviction to convict the world of its most virulent idolatries. We are just the most extreme instance of the spiritual vacuity in liberal religion today; the way it has become a theological deconstructionist movement, and taken on the role of philosophy as the content of its theology. It is possible, and maybe likely, that we are either where liberal religion is tending, or where it has already arrived unbeknownst to itself. I hold it is the latter.

Neither liberal religionists in general nor Unitarian Universalists in particular can say with the deepest of all confidence, with conviction and faith, that life contains the possibility of fulfillment or how it is or can be redemptive. Liberal religion's historic critique of the idolatry of power in state and church has decayed into a tentativeness

about faith and theology. Political judgments are declared. But nowhere is there pronounced a judgment of the God of history, which will surely judge us all. Only a devotion to political ideology remains to fill the void.

This is, I think, a loss of ability not capacity. The loss of faith and theology has been occasioned by disuse and neglect, like a muscle that has atrophied. The liberal religionist has abandoned the language of religion and theology as a way to understand experience, or has so watered it down as to pertain to no particular and compelling revelation.

The liberal religionist has yielded to the political critique of the litmus tests of various parties; to the psychological critique of the anxious and divided self in need of reunification; to the philosophical critique of language's, as in "*What do you mean by the word 'God'?*" and "*How do you define the Holy?*" Political critiques, psychological analyses, and philosophical questions are, of course, necessary and fruitful to understand the complexities of modern life. But, none is theological. And, ironically, the liberal *religious* way to read existence is the very thing that our time most needs right now.

But, what is a liberal religious way to read existence? Here are the roots of one.

When individuals gather in religious communities they define the identity of their community primarily in two ways; by belief and by the organization of social power. Often one of these ways is prominent over the other, as for example, when a community sees itself as bearing correct belief (orthodoxy and creed) or as a group bound together by a bond of affection (covenant). In congregations where creeds are recited and theological doctrine emphasized, the identity of the "people" assumes a more explicit form. Members point to shared convictions—"I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord"—as the central bond that holds and guides fellowship. It is the measurement of who is and isn't a part of the community's fellowship. But the explicit profession of faith also hides the deeper reasons individuals seek out the companionship of others. Although they may be held as secondary, these reasons are still important. In fact, the organization of social power might actually hold sway where individuals claim it is creed and doctrine. I remember one church in the vicinity of my divinity school which recited the Apostles Creed on Sunday morning, and included in its fellowship practicing Jews, self-identified atheists, and professing Muslims. Clearly there was an implicit bond distinct from what was recited, and which "defined" the implicit form of communal fellowship.

Congregations in a non-creedal tradition like my own Unitarian Universalism, form congregations primarily through an organization of social power, rather than an explicit profession of theological belief as the boundaries of community. Sometimes the organizing purpose and aim are explicit, as in congregations which recite covenants on Sunday morning or use covenantal language to describe who they are. Other times considerable effort is necessary to figure out what purpose and aim are implicit to its organization of social power. Sometimes the bonds that are publicly recited are betrayed by the implicit ways power is exercised and delegated. Whichever is the case, these spiritual communities claim to hold themselves together by an organizing of social power that has its origin in an agreement.

And spiritual communities formed by agreement, that is, covenant, whatever may be their faith tradition, and whose spiritual identity is primarily carried through the

generations by the way power is organized and distributed within that agreement, contain implicit theological proclamations and revelations. If God—the object of study in theology—can in any way be understood as a word pointing to “Ultimate Power,” or the way power moves in existence to bring about creativity and fulfillment, and human meaning into a redemptive history, then covenantally formed spiritual community is a kind of “scripture.” It is a witness to the tie between God and human being played out over time.

But, by abandoning theology and faith, those who practice this form of fellowship, and see the aim of that fellowship to be involved in some way with freedom—that is, liberal religionists—are incapable of self-critique and correction. And without theology, there is no way to speak of God—the Ultimate form of power in existence—as a force and direction to existence that is generous, benevolent, and liberating. There is no way to see ourselves as spiritual partners with that power in the way we form communities. There is no way to see history as redemptive and align ourselves, as best as finite creatures can, with that redemptive power and against what thwarts it.

It must become part of the liberal ministry in the twenty-first century to lift up the theological dimensions of congregations held together primarily by the organization of social power, over against those whose primary bond of fellowship is stated belief through creed and theological doctrine. There is a theology buried inside of spiritual community whose glue is a bond of affection, consented to and aimed towards freedom. There is a pressing need to coax that theology out of these kinds of congregations, under the assumption that the spiritual organization of social power tells us something important about both God and human being, and the bond that ties us together in a shared destiny.

The historical journey that brought liberal religion to this place of loss need not be recalled in detail. However, there is a need to lift up two significant historical markers along the way. They have shaped the existential situation faced by the modern liberal religionist who has, in response to that situation, abandoned the life of faith.

The “father” of liberal theology, Friedrich Schleiermacher, changed the direction of theology from its roots in the aims of orthodoxy—to establish and defend “correct” belief, a metaphysical aim—towards establishing it as a creative response to human existence. He did this by declaring it the yield of human experience rather than as an analysis of the hidden structures of existence that precede human experience. In this way theology, as a reflection upon human experience, is initiated not with the question of the nature of God, the Meta-physic, but the question of human nature; the question pertaining to the “experiencer.” “*What is Man, that thou art mindful of him?*” is not only the Psalmist’s question, but initiates the liberal religionist’s faith life and theological reflection upon it.

But that also means that the distortion of the life of faith has its origin here, too. Firstly, a theology that is derived from experience is vulnerable to the way human beings disregard the complexity of existence and lose Ultimacy within the narrow scope of self-interest. The individual necessarily “narrows” existence to understand his or her limited experience of it. And secondly, the life of faith is vulnerable because in considering the enormity of human variation in terms both of experience and understanding, the individual might lose the particular moorings of his or her particular

place. In contemplating and being open to the spiritual path of others one might forsake one's own distinctive experience.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century philosopher William James gave an analysis that explains in part the first distortion; and when extrapolated, how the liberal religionist, in interpreting experience and beginning the theological task, came implicitly to abandon the life of faith. James cautioned individuals about how cognition feeds the idolatry of self-interest through what he called "vicious intellectualism." In using the powers of the intellect to critique and understand experience the individual can easily become distant from the vast complexity and depth of existence itself. In analyzing what we experience and seeking to understand it by reason and critique, we must isolate facets of our own experience, lifting up only certain ones as constitutive and ultimate. Paul Tillich called this mistaking the finite for the infinite. This becomes what a certain experience means *to me*. I isolate the qualities I have experienced and elevate them to infinite status. It's unavoidable. In this the authority of individual experience is confirmed, but the complexity of existence is dismissed. When liberal religion, rooted in the Enlightenment view of Reason as an equal partner with Revelation, began to elevate Reason above Revelation, it began to wipe away a capacity of the individual to experience life in a broader way. Revelation gradually became synonymous solely and completely with supernaturalism, and the revelation of symbol and metaphor and myth became first confusing, and then inaccessible. Or, it became the province of "Nature," which has no discernible redemptive direction, nor one that we can co-create with "Nature's God." Language "shrank" into fewer words, especially as traditional Western "religious" language, denuded of everything but its supernatural or natural features, was discarded on the trash heap of history. The foundation for a "secular" Tower of Babel was laid.

It became a descent into the idolatry of self-interest from which theology, as considering questions of Ultimacy, cannot ever survive. Eventually the individual separates the self from others and from the vast and wondrous complexity of connection that forms existence. This "narrowing" became the self's idol, and in its wake, the liberal lost religious faith.

James also identified what was to him the central quandary of philosophy, the problem of the one and the many; the second manner in which the life of faith as rooted in experience can become distorted. Succinctly stated it is this: Individuals experience uniquely, and not universally. There are "overlaps" between your experience and mine. We might be present at the same sunset, and mistake that we have experienced—or, more rightly, interpreted—the exact same sunset. Yet, upon sharing the bond of conversation, the overlaps simply reinforce how different we are in what we experience and how we make meaning from this shared event. You and I are various, and taken together humanity forms a "many" sided view derived from a many-sided experience of existence, within a universe that can accommodate such various experiences and meanings. It is as though we exist in a "many-verse." Yet, this is certain: We live in a "one" that is existence, a uni-verse. We contest with one another over what constitutes this "one" universe and what our experience of it is, sometimes breaking out in violence over the difference. This is the reality of the early twenty-first century.

Appreciation and sympathy are means for the liberal religionist to understand how existence is experienced differently by others. The witness of others expands my

understanding and, thus, my capacity to experience “more” of the “one.” Yet, the problem of the one and many lures me towards another distortion. In expanding my sympathy with more and more of the variety of human experience, I broaden my understanding, true; but there is the implicit and unseen threat of forsaking my particularity. I so love the one that is the aggregate of the many, that I may lose my distinct identity as a particular, finite, and unique “experiencer” of the many. The liberal religionist easily sees the effect of this problem in conservative religious circles that have produced a fundamentalism, both political and religious, that sacrifices the many for a presumed absolute one. The liberal religionist rightly criticizes the absolute claims of the religious conservative as being only one particular perspective in a sea of the “many.” Yet, the liberal religionist may have so relinquished the particularity of his perspective as not to see the same about himself. It is no less potent a distortion when the liberal religionist loses the ability to experience in a way that authenticates his particular identity *while* confirming difference. Often in seeking connections with others the liberal religionist has abandoned a connection with the particularities of her own faith tradition that shapes her way of fashioning meaning from her particular experiences. The liberal religionist loves the traditions and customs and practices of the “other” without admitting or living inside of his or her own particular spiritual identity. This became the idolizing of the “other,” and in its wake, the liberal lost religious faith.

The path towards a spiritual identity for the liberal religionist in the twenty-first century will be forged through developing a particular understanding and seeking to live through that understanding. One theological path towards that particular understanding is by way of a “theology of covenant”; that it is in the experience of relatedness, mutuality, and agreements and relationships formed by consent and aimed towards spiritual freedom, whereby liberals can carve out a liberal view of religion and the life of faith.

Humanity can strive for a common life that deepens mutuality while liberating individuality. Human beings can fashion their common existence within a Spirit that transforms them towards a greater creative individuality *and* integrative mutuality, which will move creation towards the fulfillment it was fashioned for. The liberal religionist can give witness to this truth consecrated through the ages by the service and sacrifice of individuals and communities: There abides a unity and freedom of the Spirit expressed through a Love for all souls. Humanity grows in its likeness to the Divine, the image in which all have been created, as the mind is freed to think creatively and the heart opened up to broader mutuality. Or, as our twentieth-century Unitarian forebear Napoleon Lovely wrote, “The bonds of love keep open the gates of freedom.”

As a minister in covenant with a local congregation I have seen time and time again the liberating power of the Spirit moving through human relationships and connections. I have seen and experienced how affection can be multiplied and broadened when human beings consent to “walk together” throughout life’s vicissitudes and constancies. I have seen problems solved when the mind is liberated to its latent creativity. I’ve seen it in one-on-one pastoral settings, and in the interaction amongst groups. I have seen God work through human beings in mysterious and explicit ways, and I have seen the possible directions of history thwarted by hubris and petty aims that end with the self. There are qualities to human connectedness that are noble as well as

ignoble. And seen from a covenantal view, it is the role and responsibility of humanity to deepen the noble and weaken the ignoble.

But we cannot dismiss the central problem of liberal religion in our time. Those faith traditions who are liberal in their religious view—that is, those who hold that whatever is Ultimate in existence, in power and influence and origin, is best understood as involving freedom, generosity, broadmindedness, *liberalis*, from the Latin meaning “free”—cannot avoid the chief religious problem plaguing them. To say it theologically, liberal religionists seek God as freedom. But, liberal religion in general and Unitarian Universalism in particular has lost religious faith. Therefore, we who are liberal religionists cannot understand the meaning of the charge which the spiritual life entails: to seek God as freedom. And thus, we struggle mightily to conceive of how to live a life of faith formed from it and shaped by it.