

Letters to the Editor

The Journal of Liberal Religion welcomes letters from all readers.

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RE: "Why Anti-Racism Will Fail"

What a powerful article! The version of it that I read before (UU World?) seemed so unconvincing, whereas this grabs me and makes sense. I am going to recommend that other leaders of my congregation read this in its entirety.

By the way, I think a UU journal devoted to theological and denominational issues at a greater depth than is usually found in the UU World is an excellent idea, and one that we desperately need if we are to thrive as a movement. Why shouldn't we have our own Thomas Aquinas's or Augustine's (mutatis mutandis)?

Dr. Jan Garrett
V.P.
UU Church of Bowling Green KY

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Thank you for the new journal. We are a very small, unaffiliated UU congregation in West Texas, often hard-pressed to find articles and topics that seem helpful and relevant to our lives. Your journal may prove to be a fine resource for our weekly discussions.

Deanna Bowling
Congregational Representative
Alpine UU Fellowship

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To the Editor:

Congratulations on producing a fine first issue of the reborn, online Journal of Liberal Religion! I want here to comment on Paul Razor's essay in this issue, "The Self in Contemporary Liberal Religion: A Constructive Critique." I was interested in his development of the concept of "intersubjectivity" in the thought of Gadamer and G. H. Mead, a term I first learned from Bernard Lonergan. Lonergan's luminous illustration of the phenomenon of intersubjectivity was the way one person's smile communicates an inward, unspoken feeling to another person, and perhaps an answering smile.

Rasor's essay is a perceptive and erudite contribution to the ongoing reconstruction of "liberal religion." I want to comment on points at which the essay seemed underdeveloped. First, in his section on "Liberal Religious Self-Understanding" he cites John Haynes Holmes, Clarence Russell Skinner, James Luther Adams, and Henry Nelson Wieman, all of whom long ago challenged the individualistic tradition of liberal thought, and concludes: "Yet despite these theological developments, the individualistic understanding of the self that emerged with the Enlightenment has proved remarkably persistent within the liberal religious tradition." The question that cries out to be asked, even if not fully answered, goes unasked: Why, despite the labors of a lifetime from all these presumptive intellectual leaders, has the intellectual landscape remained frozen? When I read what Jim Adams was writing in the 1930s and 40s about "the liberalism that is dead" I wonder that we seemed condemned to eternal repetition.

Let me suggest the beginning of an answer. Analysis of intellectual thought in abstraction from the sociological phenomenon of "liberal religion," such as Rasor offers, cannot resolve the mystery. Rather, one needs to look at the "market niche" that Unitarian Universalism has carved out for itself: the spiritually alienated (and to an extent, the socially marginalized). Thus, for all our theoretical talk about "the social self," the doctrine of "individual freedom of belief" has become sacrosanct. (See Section C-2.4 of the UUA Constitution.) Why? Because it serves the social and psychic needs of the segment of the middle classes of late 20th century North Americans to which we increasingly appeal. "Individualism" is an ideology, in the Marxist sense of a doctrine that fits a social class need.

The "identity crisis" of liberal religion that Rasor discusses is closely related. Unitarian Universalists have fostered a negative sense of identity by defining themselves by "what we are not" and appealing to those who share the dominant mood of alienation. This "don't tread on me" attitude constitutes an inherently "individualistic" stance. For all our talk about "diversity," we thrive by the self-stereotyping quest to attract "our kind of people." Thus we are caught in a double bind of our own making: The "ontological individualism" which enfeebles us, in Rasor's analysis, we have made the cornerstone of our shared identity.

Second, Rasor comments: ". . . [W]e tend to think of our individual self as both logically and morally prior to the community. . . . This idea is deeply rooted in the congregational polity that has long governed our church structures, for example." Again, the point is well-taken. But Rasor ignores a major institutional document that is directly relevant to his theme, namely, the report of the UUA Commission on Appraisal, *Interdependence: Renewing Congregational Polity* (1997). Had he taken this work into account he might not have been so cautious about advocating change in the theory and practice of congregational polity, as when he says, "Without advocating a change in our basic polity, I want to suggest that

the same ontological individualism that lies behind it also contributes to the problem of religious identity."

As Interdependence makes amply clear, "congregational polity" is not a frozen dogma, but an idea that has taken various institutional forms among various religious bodies. Just so, the COA has proposed a fundamental shift in the understanding of "congregational polity" among Unitarian Universalists, in the direction fully consistent with Razor's essay: congregational polity as the community constituted by the mutual commitment of self-determining congregations, just as congregations are constituted by the mutual commitment of self-determining persons. While the relationality of congregations is not his primary concern in this essay, it is intimately related to the relationality of "the self." We see this in the social dynamics of congregations; thus, individuals wield much greater power (often in the form of "veto power") vis-a-vis "outside influences" within a small, isolated community than they can a large, diverse, community of communities.

A final comment. Razor's constructive suggestions would carry us much further, I think, if they were explicitly theological. For instance, in the section titled "Toward a Conception of the Self for Liberal Theology" he deals with questions of "the self understood in fundamentally naturalistic and organic terms," "the self as social," and "the centrality of language" in the formation of the self. Excellent psychological analysis, but where is the promised theological discussion? Two theological questions pertinent to Razor's theme come to mind: (1) Does the social nature of the self imply the necessity of a doctrine of the church in a liberal theology, and if so, how would it modify our understanding of the nature of religious community? (2) Does a doctrine of God (or perhaps of God as creator) entail a principle of creative freedom for the individual person vis-a-vis his/her community, such that a person can be not only "embedded in" a community but also a critic and transformer of it? (Thus the individual has immense positive significance within a relational perspective.)

I hope to see further discussion of such issues as these from Paul Razor and others in forthcoming issues. Thanks for the first!

Sincerely yours,

George Kimmich Beach

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I was pleased to learn and then go through your first issue. This journal is certainly timely and I hope it will expand beyond Christianity in today's world of diversity in religion. All religions of the world are going through similar transformation as your faith. All of us have to put our heads together to unite in

diversity.

Harbans Lal, Ph.D., D.Litt. (Hon.)

President

Academy of Guru Granth Studies

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Many thanks for the new journal! It's something that's been missing in the Unitarian Universalist movement. I have often wondered why it was that a movement that engendered such intellectual ferment, if only among the few, would not have a journal of theology. Perhaps it was because we couldn't even agree to get started. But, the quality of the articles was excellent. I found the frequent allusions to Universalism hopeful (meaning we still acknowledge we are both Unitarians and Universalists). And I am indebted to Thandeka for her piece on anti-racism, for helping me to sort out some other issues--such as why there may be a place where Americans of all colors can at least connect--our shared economic situation. I have contended that at the point of economic suffering and its impact on the human spirit, we may find common ground. It may be true that I am a recipient of "white privilege," as the anti-racism training of the UUA suggests (and I won't argue that point), but once said, the changes I need to make are attitudinal--again, the Unitarian bias that by changing attitudes, one changes behavior. Most of us are getting the short end of the economic pie. If we could meet on that ground, we might see ourselves more like brothers and sisters, and less like people at coffee hour talking past one another. Our behavior would then change, because we would have crossed the racial gulf that still seems to divide us. But, thanks for the publication! It's a great start.

John Morgan

Northumberland, Pa.

P.S. Perhaps it is synchronicity, but you might be interested in learning that the Quakers also have a new journal and it is online as well. <http://www.quaker.org/quest>. It makes for an interesting evening reading the two new journals on theology. As someone who feels comfortable in both movements, it is wonderful to see the heart of Friends and the mind of UU?s in one evening.