

**Salvation by Character:
How UU's can Find the Religious Center
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When the Tao is lost, there is goodness.

When goodness is lost, there is morality.

When morality is lost, there is ritual.

Ritual is the husk of true faith,

the beginning of chaos.

— Lao-tzu

When I look at UU congregations today, and hear the stories others are telling of their internal struggles, I see the signs of chaos.

Our tiny, hard-to-find churches are filled (if "filled" isn't too presumptuous) with well-intentioned people who gather under one roof but who lack a common religious language. We house many enclaves—theists, humanists, Wiccans, liberal political activists—but they are variations without a shared theme, at least a shared *religious* theme.

We have a lot of company. Across the religious spectrum, churches are splitting through the narcissism of small differences. I recently heard that a new denomination is formed *each week*.

Mainline and liberal churches, including ours, continue to attract a smaller and smaller percentage of the population. Here, I'm only interested in the *theological* reason, which may initially strike UUs as strange, even irrelevant: *we have not adequately filled the hole left by the death of God*. Neither have other mainline and liberal churches, but I'm most interested in our churches here.

The theological problem of Western religion can be put another way: During the last few centuries, *God ceased to be a being, and became a concept*. The "being" God needed a place to *be*, and that vanished when people stopped believing there could be anything "up there." Since then, "God" has "dwelled" in the minds and hearts of believers, as a concept, an idea, or a feeling. While the language has stayed the same, this "category change" for the word "God" has changed the game of theology almost completely.

In Western religion, this change of referent for the word "God" from a being to a concept creates a vacuum which can be put very simply: *concepts don't have*

attributes. Philosophers describe this problem as the confusion of essence with existence, the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, or the concept of reification. More simply, the "Guy-in-the-sky" could perform the whole array of anthropomorphic activities. He saw, heard, spoke, walked in the garden, created, planned, thought and loved us. But God-as-a-concept can't "do" a thing. The *idea* of "God" (or "Goddess") can't see, hear, plan, or—most distressingly—love anybody. This robs religious beliefs of integrity and relevance, a strain felt throughout our culture.

Religion and Salvation

Most dictionaries define "religion" as involving a belief in a god, and nearly everyone still takes that to mean a supernatural Being who lives somewhere "up there." And "salvation," religion's other key concept, is widely understood as getting to go "up there" after you die, so you can live forever.

I suggest instead a "radical" definition of these words, getting down to their *root* meanings.

- *Religion* comes from the Latin *religare*, and means *reconnection*. ("Re-" means "to do again"; "-lig" is the root found in words like "ligament" and "ligature," and refers to a connective.)

- *Salvation* comes from the same Latin root as the word *salve*; it refers to a healthy kind of wholeness.

Putting them together (I think they must go together): *Religion is the search for a feeling of reconnection to a healthy kind of wholeness.*

The Liberal Bias: Intellectual Integrity

Not all religious paths require intellectual integrity. In fact, *most* don't. When I was in graduate school, I had a classmate who was a brilliant student, took his Ph.D. with honors—and was a Moonie. My cognitive dissonance finally got so loud I asked him over lunch one day how he could possibly keep the things he learned in his Ph.D. program in the same head with the things the Moonies taught him without splitting in half. "Oh, *that*," he replied without missing a beat. "That's easy. You just have to keep what you *know* and what you *believe* separated." As I gagged on my calamari, he added "There's a lot of that going on, you know."

There is indeed. That's a key difference between the broader conservative religious paths and the narrower liberal paths. The kind of "peace" religious liberals seek may *surpass* understanding, but it can't *bypass* it. By keeping what he knew and what he believed separated, my classmate lost any possibility for achieving the kind of integrity that is a non-negotiable component of liberal

religion. If we're going to check our brains at the church door, almost *any* faith will do. Ours is, and has always been, a much harder and more demanding route. The quality of integrity it offers can lead us to a personal authenticity forever beyond the reach of those who keep what they know and what they believe separated.

Today, we need to unload, reexamine and rethink the religious symbols we use to express our deepest hopes and yearnings—especially the symbol "God." This task falls, by definition and tradition, to religious liberals. It is one of the most sacred responsibilities we owe to ourselves and to the future of religion.

Once "God"—the quotation marks have been necessary since at least the Enlightenment—is merely a *concept*, new questions arise:¹

- Why, for example, should we frame our religious questions in God-language *at all*? More politely we might ask: "To what extent, and within what limits, is god-language (or goddess-language) really helpful any longer? Aren't there clearer ways of framing our important questions and provisional answers?"

- And if we decide to use the symbols and metaphors of god-talk, why should we talk in terms of *monotheism*? As some Jungians have made clear, in real life we have *competing* demands on us, not a single booming voice. Our task is not *obedience* (as in the Abraham and Isaac story in Genesis 22), but *discernment*. We must balance equally valid demands of parenting, career, personal fulfillment, adventure, lust, responsibility, and a dozen more.² Even if we're to use the symbols of deities to express the seriousness of our desired allegiances, real life seems clearly to be polyvalent, not monotheistic.

- Why remain within the biases of Western religions? The most we can hope for through most Western salvation stories is a *relationship* with "God," mediated through "correct" beliefs, rituals or behaviors. In Eastern religions, the goal is to realize our *identity* with the sacred powers of life. Isn't this a preferable and more advanced level of spiritual aspiration?

Goethe said the person who doesn't know *two* languages doesn't truly know even *one*, meaning that when we can only say things *one* way, we will confuse *our* way of thinking with "the way things really are." If we have *no* religious language, we're left mute. If we know only *one* religious language, we will confuse the map with the territory, and defend that one map long after it has gone out of date. This is the area within which our problem lies. And the problem itself, I believe, points toward its resolution. See if you agree.

Three Religious Options That Fail

I want to look at just three religious styles that are prominent in our churches today, and suggest that they are examples of the *chaos*, not the Way. The three are:

Scientism

Politics as a Religion

Theological Double-talk

1. Scientism

This is a thought style that could be called rationalism or logical positivism. It is the style of thinking widely associated in our congregations with “secular humanists,” but I want to consider the thought style, rather than the various people who sometimes use it.

What I'm calling scientism is a particular form of thinking with a very specific origin and history. This kind of reasoning exalts Science (and usually capitalizes it), and criticizes most “spirituality” as a fuzzy *mélange* of feelings lacking necessary definitions.

Scientism operates within the theory of knowledge that guides the scientific method and most of our more rigorous sciences, focusing on objective facts with empirical verification, rather than subjective feelings or intuitions that can't be put to this kind of a test.

The origin of this way of thinking explains its strengths and limitations, whether in the 17th century or in our own. This is the theory of knowledge defined by Descartes in the early 1600s, and perhaps best known as Rationalism. At its time, it was a heroic invention by a young genius trying to save Western civilization from more of the bloody religious wars he had known throughout his life.

Descartes' genius was to separate knowledge into two categories. Rationalism, later the basis of the scientific culture, was to explore objective and impersonal knowledge, which could not, he thought, conflict with the *other* kind of knowledge. That other, older, knowledge included all the questions about meaning and purpose in life, about moral and ethical values, how we should live, what made life fulfilling. These questions, in this subjective kind of knowledge, he excluded from his new rationalism, to protect the new thinkers from the bloody wrath of the Church (Descartes was a devout Catholic). He also assumed, without ever seeming to question it, that the Church would be able to satisfy the yearnings of believers, with a field of knowledge cut off from any easy possibility of rational (later scientific) verification.

To this day, our scientific cultures, and the scientific thought style within our churches, disdain sloppy forays into symbolic, metaphorical, or subjective areas. Their rationalism and empiricism, true to Descartes' intent, is rigorously confined to matters that can be quantified. And this, again as Descartes intended, puts almost all religious or "spiritual" questions out of bounds—as tens of thousands of UU theists, Christians, Wiccans or "spiritualists" can attest.³

Our modern scientific culture has accomplished much by restricting thought to that which can be quantified, that which is objective rather than subjective. We want our cars, planes and bridges built on this foundation of cold hard facts, not on what might "feel right" to a particular engineer.

But these concerns, as valid as they are within their narrow range of usefulness, have very little to do with the spiritual (by which I mean emotional, ritual or psychological) hungers and searches for meaning and purpose which bring most people into our churches.

And so this scientific style of thinking is today a reaction against religious language, but cannot, because of its limited scope, hope to be an adequate heir to religious thinking. It seeks to clarify thinking, but operates within a severely restricted theory of knowledge that cannot, by definition and design, address the personal and subjective hungers that, for the majority of us, *constitute* the religious search. So, while the intent is good, scientism adds to the chaos in our congregations.

2. Politics as a Religion

For a complex of reasons that deserve their own essay, liberal politics has been substituted for liberal religion in our society during the past thirty or forty years, as it also has in many UU churches—and, I believe, at the UUA. It is taken for granted that most of those who join UU churches are Democrats, pro-choice, friends of NOW and the ACLU, for Jesse Jackson but against Clarence Thomas, for Gloria Steinem but against Camille Paglia, and more for "individual rights" than for individual responsibilities.

We are presumed to hate sexism, racism, and all forms of discrimination against sexual orientations. We endorse phrases like "the Black point of view," "the gay/lesbian point of view," "the women's point of view," and most still have strong sympathies with the aims of "political correctness" (though with growing qualms). Our social and political sentiments are presumed to align with those of liberal political and social policies in general; and, in general, they do. Social conservatives, Republicans, pro-lifers and those who speak out for conservative political or social agendas generally feel far less comfortable in our churches, *regardless of their religious beliefs.*

To be sure, conservative churches have their comparable campaigns for pro-life marches, Republican candidates and conservative letter-writing campaigns. The political captivity of the churches is a sign of our times.

Within our movement, there are many religions, each with its own distinctive origin and history. We have Unitarians, Universalists, Christians, theists, Wiccans, humanists, Buddhists, a variety of mystics, and others. But the official group identity known as “Unitarian Universalism” is best understood as representing the social and political ideology shared by most of our members, *regardless* of their religious beliefs. The “UU Principles” grew out of discussion groups designed to produce a description of the things those few people happened to believe. In effect, we were taking a “poll” of the generic values that characterize the kind of cultural liberals who are drawn to our churches (and to discussion groups). The core “principles” of the new religion called “Unitarian Universalism” were primarily descriptions of social and political ideologies, not religious beliefs. We weren't asking what we *should* believe, or what was *worth* believing. We were just asking what the people like us who were at these discussion groups *happened* to believe.

"Unitarian Universalism" is primarily a political identity that accepts a wide variety of individual religious beliefs, precisely because the religious beliefs are *peripheral* and the politics are *central* to the identity and goals of the UUA. As long as members are pro-choice (for just one example) they can be Christian, Jewish, atheist, Wiccan or Other, because their *religious* beliefs are irrelevant as long as their social and political identity is in order. But if they are very vocal about being pro-life, they will not be likely to feel very welcome—again, regardless of their religious beliefs. This is the description of a political ideology, not a religion.

A few more observations must be noted in passing. First, politics, even good politics, makes lousy religion. Its vision is too restricted by topical issues and class biases, and it tends to view those holding opposing political ideologies as enemies. Worse, political ideologies tend to treat people as pawns or "tokens" in the larger political games, rather than as individuals in their own right.

One story on point is worth sharing. It happened at the Community Church of Boston, founded in 1920 by Clarence Skinner, the notable Universalist minister whose name is deeply linked with social responsibility in our Association (the Skinner Sermon Awards, Skinner House Books, etc.). Skinner was particularly eager for his church to be a community brought together out of disparate kinds of people, and indeed the minutes of one board of directors' meeting of the Boston church indicate that much time was taken up "in attempting to find a more representative Negro than the one they had."⁴ Here is a human being turned into a token—and in one of the most socially conscious, committed churches of its time. When an organization accepts a *political* identity, people become markers, used to show the world that we are "politically correct." In my experience, this

tendency to transform our favored minorities into such pawns remains strong within "Unitarian Universalism" today.

Second, the positions taken by cultural liberals (including many of us) are neither as enlightened nor as noble as we lead ourselves to believe. We are, we insist, against all the bad "-isms": certainly against racism and sexism. But the *essence* of racism is the presumption that by knowing someone's race, we can infer *anything* else about them. The essence of sexism is the assumption that we can infer someone's character or opinions through knowing only their sex. Phrases like "the Black point of view" and "the women's point of view" are *profoundly* racist and sexist. Let's be blunt: *There is no such thing as "the Black point of view," or "the women's point of view."* Claiming this reduces human beings in these categories to mere tokens in an ideological game that cannot do justice to our calling as religious liberals.

Who would *speak* for "the Blacks"? Jesse Jackson or Clarence Thomas? Al Sharpton or Shelby Steele? Our political ideology dictates what we have decided "proper" Black people should represent.

Who would speak for "women"? Gloria Steinem, Camille Paglia, Katherine McKinnon, or Phyllis Schlafly? And how would you frame your argument? Again, choosing one of these women to be "more representative" of "women" than others merely identifies the political ideology which has captured us. Blacks, Hispanics, women, men, gays, lesbians, and every other category of humans cover the whole spectrum of opinions on all issues. To grant them less is to diminish their humanity. We desperately *need* religious perspectives on these issues and many more, instead of the disturbingly narrow ideologies that turn people into soldiers in our unending wars between political half-truths, adding to the chaos of a movement without an adequate religious center.

3. Theological Double-talk

By this, I mean "God-talk" used as a nostalgic, ornamental addition to ordinary language. This is the most popular style of using God-talk today. We frame our ultimate concerns, our fears and yearnings and our understanding of the human condition in ordinary language—or in the vocabularies of "scientific" disciplines (psychology, anthropology, sociology, etc.) rather than in religious jargon. Then we add a few "religious" words or phrases—a prayer, benediction, or gratuitous references to "God," as ecclesiastical flourishes or ritual signs of our intent to keep that older language somehow involved. Three examples might help clarify the way this double-talk looks and works.

A. Dissembling: This is the tack that Rabbi Harold Kushner took in his influential book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. He excuses God from any responsibility for bad things that happen: they just happen. They're part of the crapshoot of life. (Or, as the Epicureans said a couple millennia ago,

the bottom line is Chance, not Providence.) For Kushner, "God" is what helps us get through all the stuff we have to endure. But this is a "God" without power to change things, more like a warm word or an old friendly sound we can invoke when we're frightened. We hope this old deity—who can't *do* anything—loves us, even if it's a pretty anemic kind of "love." But this argument let Rabbi Kushner save face for the symbol "God." He remained, nominally, within his tradition of god-talk, ancient Hebrew myths, and modern reflections on those stories (and remained a rabbi). Those myths and reflections contain wisdom that he and others don't want to lose (as well as containing many useless and some harmful teachings).

B. Latitudinarianism: Another way to understand theological double-talk is through recalling the Latitudinarian movement and its parallels today.

This was the effort of 18th Century Anglican clerics to stay within a tradition by taking greater "latitude" with its teachings. It was a kind of intellectual "two-step." First, to preserve their sense of integrity, they announced they didn't really *believe* the literalisms of their religious tradition. God wasn't an active agent in the world, except in our imaginations and devotional habits—there was no Guy In The Sky. Then, with personal integrity and intellectual honesty restored, they returned to their devotions, again to repeat all the creeds and formulae they no longer believed, in order to "remain within the tradition." From the outside, it's easy to ridicule this two-step as sheer hypocrisy. From the inside, it must have felt like preserving the best of both the intellectual and devotional realms, keeping what they *knew* and what they *believed* separate.

Episcopal Bishop Shelby Spong has made his reputation as a modern proponent of this Latitudinarianism, and he is a popular author among many people in our own churches. But the real cutting-edge Latitudinarianism today comes from the work of the Christian scholars of the Jesus Seminar. These scholars have been quite candid in denouncing all of the religion's supernaturalism. Jesus' body didn't "ascend to heaven"; it decomposed (or was eaten by the dogs and birds around Golgotha, as Catholic scholar Dominic Crossan has it). The virgin birth was Christian mythmaking, and the miracles were hagiographic literary devices common at the time. The Jesus Seminar Fellows, like the 18th century Anglican clerics, show honest and admirable candor. Then, intellectual integrity restored, Seminar Fellows (all but a few of us are Christians) return to their churches and participate in the creeds and traditional confessions: virgin birth, resurrection, Savior, Redeemer, and God.

With this move, we are pulling the wool over our own eyes, by using two different words, both spelled "G-o-d," but with fundamentally different *meanings*. One (God) means a being existing somewhere "up there," in time and space. The other ("God") means a concept, a feeling, an idea.

C. Bargaining: In Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's versatile model, this is Bargaining. The Bargain is: We'll relinquish all supernaturalism, all the miracles, all notions of this man Jesus as an other-worldly savior figure. In return we'll keep using all the terms we've just debunked, and still call ourselves Christians. But it will be a Christianity without a Christ, a resurrection without an afterlife and a God without an existence—except in the determined imaginations of believers.

It's like wanting the Smile, without the Cat: imagining essence without existence.

The same two-step occurs in synagogues, mosques, or the Mormon Tabernacle, of course—or in Wiccan groups in our own churches, when anthropomorphic attributes are projected onto The Goddess. But the stubborn fact remains: concepts don't have attributes, and playing this game compromises our integrity and our religion. It is another example of keeping what we know and what we believe separated, the move I don't believe can be allowed within the tradition of liberal religion.

These Three Won't Do

Like Santa, the old God-as-a-being is gone. Those who've dressed up in his clothes have tried to sell us visions of science, politics, and theological self-deceptions. All three of these currently popular religious paths are inadequate:

1. *Scientism* is inadequate because of its intentionally restricted theory of knowledge, excluding precisely those psychological, ritual and emotional hungers that constitute what most people in all times have identified as the religious search.
2. *Politics as a Religion* is inadequate because of its intentionally restricted, partisan, and class-bound vision. Liberal politics is a dangerous and dehumanizing substitute for liberal religion.
3. *Theological Double-talk* is inadequate because it has committed the cardinal sin of liberal religion, by separating what we believe from what we know.

These three paths are about *feeling* good or right rather than *being* good or right. Any trustworthy notion of *being* good— notions of the Good Life, the noble person, or the wise path—must be measured against standards that *transcend* the ideology of our own group. Otherwise, they are impossible to distinguish from narcissism and its sister, solipsism.

One final vision of the self-deception I'm trying to unmask comes from the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein:

Imagine this game—I call it "tennis without a ball": The players move around on a tennis court just as in tennis, and they even have rackets, but no ball. Each one reacts to his partner's stroke as if, or more or less

*as if, a ball had caused his reaction. (Maneuvers.) The umpire, who must have an "eye" for the game, decides in questionable cases whether a ball has gone into the net, etc., etc. This game is obviously quite similar to tennis and yet, on the other hand, it is fundamentally different*⁵

Theology without a "theos" (god) is a lot like tennis without a ball. The talk is similar, the ecclesiastical moves are similar, there are still enough conflicting certainties to go to war over, and the costumes stay the same. And yet, on the other hand, it is a *fundamentally* different game! When gods die, we need a healthy suspicion of the people dressing up in their clothes; it's kind of like the difference between Elvis and Elvis impersonators, but without the music.

Finding the Center

Religion is the search for a feeling of reconnection to a healthy kind of wholeness. And the most enduring form of that health and wholeness is *character*, reconnecting individuals with their greater possibilities, and more responsible and vivid roles in their families, societies, and in history. The legitimate heir to dissipated deities is a religion of salvation by character, grounded in the noblest parts of our common humanity. We need to begin articulating a *religious*—as opposed to merely a liberal *political*—vision. Our "social action" outside the churches should be on behalf of this more inclusive vision, rather than the partisan marches for which we too easily settle.

Without getting diverted into yet another area that deserves its own essay, I'll hope one example of a religious rather than political vision will suffice here. On the issue of abortion, we have generally rubber-stamped the pro-choice agenda, as religious conservatives march behind a narrowly conceived pro-life agenda. Without more distinctions, *neither* is a religious vision. The religious center on this issue would have to begin from the acknowledgment that we must regard human life, at all stages of development, as sacred, and must be able to make convincing and contextual moral arguments to support the termination of any life, including the life of a developing baby. Once that basic premise has been granted, we can move toward *making* the necessary distinctions that can help us understand when and where abortion is, in fact, the most moral and responsible decision. If this sounds too idealistic, it describes the middle way that has, in fact, been found in other industrial, "advanced," societies.⁶ Public discussions operating from this central position could bring a much more nearly *religious* perspective into the currently political and narrowly ideological deadlock on this issue. To put it in theological poetry, a religious perspective must aspire to getting a "God's-eye view"—by which I mean the most inclusive view possible—of complex situations, rather than just a righteous partisan slant.

A Universalist Approach

The search for a religious center doesn't have to start from scratch. Even a cursory study of the world's great traditions shows us that religion *does* have an enduring and empirical subject matter. Its insights measure the quality of our lives and our worlds, for better and worse, whether we "believe in them" or not. Most of these truths do not seem to have changed much in recorded history. They seem to be species-specific traits and norms that most peoples of most times have recognized as inviolable, and which we also recognize as inviolable—though we seldom articulate these facts:

- The Way we seek is older than the gods, as Lao-tzu said.
- We want to learn how to relish the transient pleasures of life without becoming limited and defined by them, and how to nurture our life-giving circles of friends—as the Epicureans taught.
- We know that neither we nor any supernatural agencies can control what life brings our way, so we should learn how to control our *responses* to life—as the Stoics taught.
- Most of us believe in “salvation through understanding,” as the Buddhists have taught.
- All of us need to be reminded—in the Roman Seneca’s magnificent phrase—that we are all limbs on the body of humanity, and we must learn to act accordingly.
- We know, but want to be reminded, that if only we could treat all others as our equals, our brothers and sisters, as “children of God,” that we could transform this world into a paradise—as Jesus taught in his concept of the “kingdom of God.”

This is the kind of “universalism” we need to be about today. These are the enduring truths that have always guided spiritual searches for that healthier kind of wholeness.

Character Traits

The qualities of character that we admire in ourselves and others aren't a secret. We all know them. If you doubt it, think back on all the memorial services you have seen or done, and remember what we say in our eulogies, when we look for good and true things to say about someone who has died. We know *exactly* what has and does not have lasting worth. When we are trying to speak well of our dead, we don't speak of their power, sexual prowess, popularity, political correctness or wealth.

When we speak about character, we value the same things humans in all times and places have cared about: honesty, integrity, responsibility, authenticity, moral courage. We love good wit, spurn malicious intellects. We admire generosity, hate greed. We praise selfless caring, recoil from co-dependence. Selfishness and narcissism may be acknowledged in a eulogy because we know we must not

lie, but they are acknowledged as faults, not gifts. We never approve of those who side with the stronger against the weaker, or who use others as "things" to serve their own personal hungers or ideological agendas. We don't regard anyone very highly who has no sense of owing something back to life or to those who loved or needed them.

And all of these traits point back to the one kind of salvation that noble people in all times and places have admired and eulogized: salvation by character. Not "self-esteem" or empty pride, but developing the kind of character of which we rightly *can* be proud. Not "feeling good" but the far harder and longer task of *being* good people.

Questions of character aren't fancy. They're very ordinary sorts of questions that extend our horizons beyond the biases of our little in-groups to reconnect us, through our common humanity, with all people in all times and places. They include questions like these:

- How am I becoming a better partner, parent, neighbor, citizen, and world citizen?
- How have I built bridges toward those whose religious or political beliefs will always differ from mine, yet who are, as I am, limbs on the body of humanity?
- How is my life a blessing to a world not made in my image?

The Queen of Religious Idioms

Since we are defined by a myriad of spiritual paths within our congregations, we have both a need and a responsibility to learn how to communicate *between* them. This is easy. There is only one language that is shared and understood by everyone in our churches: *ordinary language*. This means that all jargon— theological, psychological, mystical, whatever—must be expressible in ordinary language, or else it is merely a language-game serving an in-group *identity*, rather than a path toward healthy wholeness or the establishment of a true *community*. At a minimum, every adult in our UU congregations should be expected to learn two idioms fluently: the idiom of their own religious search, and the ability to translate their searches and findings into ordinary language so that we might not merely "tolerate" each other's differing spiritual journeys, but actually *understand* them.

As medieval Churchmen once defined theology as "the Queen of the sciences," ordinary language is, in our pluralistic movement, the queen of religious idioms. It is the only language that can let us communicate honestly, deeply and clearly between the many different spiritual paths on which we find ourselves.

Furthermore, this insistence that religion be expressed in ordinary language is, I would argue, the essence of the liberal religious spirit. The 15th century Catholic priest Jan Hus preached in Czech rather than the Latin of the priests, and taught that the chalice was to be shared with all, because religion must be expressed in ordinary language and put in the hands and lives of ordinary people. Our UU chalice represents this chalice of Hus's, as our flame stands for the fire in which he was burned at the stake for expressing this liberal spirit.

Likewise, Martin Luther taught that religion must be expressed in the ordinary language of the people rather than the jargon of the priests, preaching in and translating the Bible into German. And when Friedrich Schleiermacher, who is known as "the father of liberal theology," wrote his *Speeches to the Cultured Despisers of Religion* in 1799, he knew even then that the audience he most needed to reach were those who had already sloughed off theism because they despised its bogus supernaturalism and theological mind-games. Schleiermacher created liberal theology by transposing the traditional teachings of Christianity into concepts akin to existential psychology. This was also the path of Søren Kierkegaard two generations later: translating religion into the language that could speak more directly and powerfully to the depths of ordinary life. Paul Tillich learned from Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard, and recast theology as depth psychology fifty years ago, as many Jungians and existential psychologists have also done.

Each of these people saw that religion must be translated out of jargon, out of the specialized language of the priests, and into talk-as straightforward as they could make it-aimed directly at ordinary people. Ordinary language is also the best way to communicate with people *outside* the church who have those spiritual hungers that would make them want to be *inside* the church, if only the church would bother speaking to them instead of to itself.

It's a harder challenge in a pluralistic society than it is anywhere else in the world. It is hardest of all in the liberal churches with the widest freedom-ours. It's a challenge worthy of us.

We have never looked back with pride on religious liberals who didn't go forward into new and uncharted territory during a crisis of religious expression. We admire Channing, Parker and Emerson because they took new paths. We don't remember the names of the vast majority of Unitarians or Universalists who stuck with "the old ways," or got lost in their era's religious fads.

It's easy to duck these responsibilities, to play down toward easy comfort. Many people in many churches, including ours, even seem to prefer it. We've each grown comfortable within our idiosyncratic religious languages, whether theistic, Wiccan, scientific, mystical, Buddhist or Other. We withdraw into our own enclave of like-minded people, making congregations full of variations without a shared religious theme. The narcissism of our times endorses this search for

small identities that feel no need for a common vision or language beyond the political and social identity of "UUism." I want us to be embarrassed by such limited aspirations.

Both the history and the spirit of liberal religion have bequeathed to us, and demanded from us, a more profound vision and more courage to take liberal religion to the next level for the new millennium. Each Sunday, we reach over to that chalice symbolizing an early martyr's determination that the messages and gifts of religion be offered in a language and a currency open to all who come. Then we light that flame, reminding us of the terribly high price our religious predecessors paid to pass this sacred liberal baton on to us.

Now it's our turn. As religious liberals enter the twenty-first century, we need to spend less time *worshiping* history and more time *making* it.⁷

1 The quotation marks are necessary around both "God" and all *attributes*, once "God" has become a concept rather than an existing being. God—meaning the Fellow who lived above the dome of the sky—could see, hear, plan, intervene, and love. But as a *concept*, "God" can, at best, "see," "hear," "meddle," and "love." The quotation marks are needed to remind us that here the old symbols and metaphors are fundamentally misleading, and are steering us away from the real phenomena, which are of a different nature and lie in a different direction.

2 I'm thinking especially of Jean Shinoda Bolen's work in this area, through her influential books *Goddesses in Everywoman* and *Gods in Everyman*.

3 For a fascinating book on how and why Descartes developed his restricted theory of knowledge, see Stephen Toulmin's *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*.

4 I got this from a paper Kendyl Gibbons presented at Prairie Group several years ago. She got the quote from Charles Gaines's *Clarence R. Skinner: Image of a Movement*, (Boston: Tufts University, 1961), chapter 6.

5 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology*, vol. I, p. 110 ("the philosophy of psychology" is what Wittgenstein renamed what was once called epistemology.)

6 For an informative comparison of over twenty industrialized nations and their policies, see Mary Ann Glendon's 1986 *Abortion and Divorce in Western Law: American Failures, European Challenges*.

7 I thank my colleague Peter Raible for this closing sentiment.