

## **The Free Church: Revolution and Experiment**

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#### **I: The Roots and Qualities of the Free Church**

The year was 1781. In what could never had been expected or foreseen, a ragamuffin group of revolutionaries had concluded a struggle of biblical proportions and found they had gained the freedom of the other side of their own "Red Sea." But, the body of water was the Chesapeake Bay, the place was Yorktown, and instead of Moses facing down Ramses, it was George Washington and General Cornwallis, who was standing in for King George.

Individuals fight wars for as many different reasons as there are individuals, and it is a heady assumption to say that all of these rebels were fighting for the same thing; especially in that blacks and women could not have registered resistance to British political rule with the same expectation of outcome as did white men. Yet, what would be an equivalent misreading would be to deny or ignore the intimate relationship between the idea of personal liberty, and the initiative and outcome of this remarkable revolution. The band that day at Yorktown piped and drummed the tune, "The World Turned Upside Down," and indeed it had!

The modern world had never seen a political experiment where the church and the governing state were separated; where inalienable rights propelled citizens towards self-government instead of submission to the divine rights of kings; where individual liberty and the independence of the free spirit were so prized that civil authority would be created to protect and eventually extend it; and, where the public square and the private sphere would be progressively revolutionized down to our own day. Philosopher Hannah Arendt noted how radical and historically unique the American Revolution was. It was a revolution over civil rights, she noted, and every revolution since, beginning with the French Revolution, has concerned itself with social well being or economic rights. And every one after has failed! She wrote before the revolutions in the former Soviet bloc, some of which concern civil rights and may eventually succeed. The world had turned upside down in the late 1700's because of an experiment in transforming the idea of freedom into a political reality.

But the experiment in transforming the idea of freedom into a reality had its roots in the generations before. We, in the tradition of the Free Church, are more than just heirs of this revolutionary experiment. The religious tradition we have chosen is one of its chief originators and protectors. It was no coincidence that a political revolution concerning liberty would occur on this continent. In many ways it was prefigured every time one of the numerous independent churches of New England gathered for worship. "Congregationalism, by its very nature, grants sovereign power to no one," Yale historian Harry Stout pointed out in citing congregational polity as the cornerstone of the revolution, "So we find people in New England in these churches playing democratic politics from the start, without

ever calling it that. As a matter of fact, I think if you were to stop the average New Englander in the early 18th century and mention the word politics, they would know that word, but would think instinctively of church politics. ("Colonial Sermons Laid Groundwork for the Revolution," Robert Marguand, *Christian Science Monitor*)

The demand for political self-government was most certainly foreshadowed every time one of these independent congregations met to elect a new minister. The first use of the written ballot on these shores was in the Salem, Massachusetts congregation, on July 20, 1629, a congregation which five years later would call Roger Williams to be their pastor. When this Puritan group voted on its ministers, an ocean away from the English Establishment and the set and staid ways of the Church of England, there began a series of revolutionary actions which would create a New World:

The persons thought on (who had been ministers in England) were demanded concerning their callings; they acknowledged there was a twofold calling, the one an inward calling, when ye Lord moved ye harte of a man to take yt calling upon him, and fitted him with giftes for ye same; the second was an outward calling, which was from ye people, when a company of beleeveres are joyned together in covenante, to walke together in all ye the ways of God, and every member (being men) are to have a free voyce in ye choyce of their officers, &c... So these 2. servants of God, clearing all things by their answers, (and being thus fitted,) we saw noe reason but we might freely give our voyces for this election, after the triall. [Their choice was after this manner: every fit member wrote, in a note, his name whom the Lord moved him to think was fit for a pastor, and so likewise, whom they would have for teacher; so as the most voice was for Mr. Skelton to be Pastor, and Mr. Higginson to be Teacher.] (*The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, Williston Walker, pp 103-104.)

It takes no stretch of the imagination to see in this single act the seeds of revolution concerning the divine rights of kings. Why should citizens not elect those who would govern them if as congregants they also elected "Christ's representative on earth," as clergy were then known? It takes even less imagination to see the seeds of reforming a Calvinist orthodoxy with little regard for the human prospect in its inherent sinfulness and depravity. If an individual possessed the capacity to discern the good, so as to recognize and thus elect "Christ's representative on earth," then how can that same individual be considered essentially sinful and depraved with no inherent capacity to discern, act, and bring about the good? Thus, you can see how theologically revolutionary and distinctive is the election and installation of a minister.

In his work on the nature and structure of the Free Church, American church historian Conrad Wright has identified two characteristics that mark the free

church and set it off from its orthodox counterparts. First, that each congregation calls its own ministers. Religious leadership is not a matter for ecclesiastical higher-ups, nor is it the province of civil authorities. Secondly, that each congregation determines its own criteria for membership. There are no necessary doctrinal or creedal boundaries that are common to free churches. It is the act of self-determination of membership that characterizes them.

Why is it imperative to lift out these two characteristics? They both concern relationships. And what is it that these relationships serve? In other words, what is the purpose of a church gathered in such a way that it institutionalizes these characteristics, using these relationships as a pathway to authentic religious fellowship? Or, as Conrad Wright asked in his essay, *A Doctrine of the Church for Liberals*, "What is the difference between a collection of religiously-concerned individuals and a church?"

### *The Purpose of Religious Association*

The "organizing principles" that lie at the heart of the Free Church arose from the Protestant Reformation. The form of church governance called congregational polity "is a legitimate outcome of a consistent application to church polity of the principles of the Reformation." (Walker, p 1) Simply put, the Reformation represented human salvation as the province not of the absolute claims of Christian Orthodoxy's doctrine or the Church itself, but of an individual's direct encounter with the Word of God and one's own faith. In other words, the Reformation attacked the ways that organizations, in this case the Church, foster their own absolute and all-encompassing claims, thereby distorting reality and justifying those distortions at the same time. No organization, no official position of that organization, and no official representative of that organization stood as a "mediator" between the individual and the most sacred demands and domains of existence. In many ways, the Reformation signaled the beginning of the idea of the individual. From the time of the establishment of Christian doctrinal orthodoxy - when the 4th century Church Councils of Constantine muzzled what we now know to be the diverse forms of religious fellowship emerging from Jesus' death up unto that time - the church had been the repository of salvation, and coercively so. Conformity to church doctrine was essential to the fate of a man's or woman's soul. Deviation or dissent were deemed heresy and punished accordingly. The Reformation, though, posited a new thing, which would inevitably be expressed in organizational form: the primacy of individual conscience in discerning matters of faith. In an individual's direct encounter with Scripture - unmediated by priest or church doctrine, king or civil law - God's Will could be discerned. It was symbolized by the drive among the Reformationists to translate Scripture and the words of the Mass into indigenous tongues. This was a revolution in the deepest and most creatively unstable sense of the word.

Of course, initially this was an "anti-institutional" stance, simply because there were no church institutions that could hold such a radical reforming of a

individual's relationship with others, with the church, and with God. Many Protestant leaders of the 1500's even came to compromise it themselves when trying to give it organizational form. But, one man showed no such inclination, perhaps because he was a genius, or a madman, or both.

... the first Englishman to proclaim Congregational principles in writing was Robert Browne... [who] after he had been silenced by the bishop... formed with others whom he gathered about him the first Congregational Church of the long series which has continued since that day... The model for their organization Browne found in the New Testament. The believers should be united to God and one to another by a covenant, entered into, not by compulsion, but willingly... There are officers of divine appointment, some of temporary use... and others designated as the abiding officers of individual churches, the pastor, teacher, elders, deacons, and widows, who "haue their seuerall charge in one Churche onely." Yet these officers do not stand between Christ and the ordinary believer, they "haue the grace & office of teaching and guiding;" but "euerie one of the church is made a Kinge, a Priest, and a Prophet, vnder Christ, to vpholde and further the kingdom of God"... Browne saw that not only individuals within a local church, but the local churches as separate bodies had duties one to another. (Walker, pp 9,10, 13)

How many of us have responded to coercion similarly to Browne by seeking some other form of religious association than what suppresses the spirit? I remember from my seminary days the first time I understood the different purposes for religious association. I was in an interfaith preaching class, and met and befriended an Episcopal priest who was taking the class for continuing education credits. One Monday morning he told me he had a woman come up to him following Sunday worship confessing, "Father, I can no longer say the creed because I no longer believe it." "What did you tell her?" I asked. He replied: "I said, 'Madam, you don't have to believe it. You simply have to say it.'" It was then that I realized the genuine difference in the purpose of religious association! I also began to believe why Robert Browne was so firm in his conviction: "Yet these officers do not stand between Christ and the ordinary believer, they 'haue the grace & office of teaching and guiding;' but 'euerie one of the church is made a Kinge, a Priest, and a Prophet, vnder Christ, to vpholde and further the kingdom of God'..."

The purpose of religious association in churches and fellowships that claim a lineage to the spirit and principles of the Reformation is to institutionalize religious freedom. The mission of churches and fellowships in this tradition is to liberate and cultivate the human spirit; to help each and every person become a fully functioning, free individual. They are communities for the free spirit. The paradox of fulfilling a purpose and mission that yields individual religious liberty, is that it must be done in community. An individual by himself may know who he

is; but he is not free. He is simply alone. Freedom is a currency spent by individuals, but minted in a community. It is relational. And, associations that concern freedom become religious when their creation and maintenance are seen as tasks mirroring the deepest, most profound orders of existence. "God's work" say some. The "highest of human aspiration" say others. It is a tricky balance, associating with others in religious fellowship through relationships meant to maintain and strengthen the free individual. Everywhere and always an individual will use his or her own theological language to interpret the religious foundation of this association. And the tendency of all human groups is towards a conforming identity. To the extent that the purpose and mission of associating religiously with one another is well maintained, the church or fellowship, as well as the tradition itself, will resist these temptations and tendencies, and the free spirit will flourish.

### *The Visible Symbol of Free Religious Association*

In an excellent article entitled, "The Doctrine of the Liberal Church from a Historical Standpoint", Charles Howe identified both the problem of enumerating a doctrine of the church, and the implications:

By "doctrine of the church" is meant the understanding by its adherents of what a church should be, however imperfectly realized. Such an understanding inevitably changes with time; thus any doctrine of the church is necessarily an evolving one. (UUMA Essays, 1994, p39)

At selected times in history the authority to which groups referred in affirming their free religious associations has varied. For example, Puritan and Pilgrim congregations used Scripture to justify how their communities were organized. By the middle of the 19th century, it was a combination of Scripture, and the organizational tradition of independent congregations established by the Cambridge Platform (an ecclesiastical council of congregational representatives which gathered in 1648 and produced a fairly detailed "organizational chart," including specific roles and responsibilities for various offices within the congregation) and honed through practical experience. By the latter 20th century, the authority to which groups referred in affirming their free religious associations was a combination of tradition, practical experience, and expediency. Yet, throughout the centuries the common thread throughout different congregations was the idea of congregational polity; that is, that "the church" in its essence is made up of a single, independent congregation in relationship with other independent congregations. This thread exists in the 20th century as surely as it did in the 17th, as enumerated in 1645 in Thomas Hooker's *Summary of Congregational Principles*:

Each Congregation compleatly constituted of all Officers, hath sufficient power in her self... (Walker, 144)

Where the Reformation had declared the primacy of the individual in matters of religious concern, the evolving institutional expression had come to be the single, independent church, in association with other independent churches. In their evolution over centuries these congregations have gathered to institutionalize religious freedom and help each and every person become a fully functioning, free individual. Yet, throughout the centuries, the common symbol, the needle for that common thread, has been the covenant.

Looking at covenants of early Puritan congregations one can see, beneath the theological homogeneity of a time different from our own, the words that would eventually direct those communities towards serving the free spirit:

*The Charlestown-Boston Covenant, 1630*

In the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ, & in Obedience to His holy will & Divine Ordinance.

Wee whose names are herevnder written, being by His most wise, & good Providence brought together into this part of America in the Bay of Massachusetts, & desirous to vnite our selves into one Congregation, or Church, vnder the Lord Jesus Christ our Head, in such sort as becometh all those whom he hath Redeemed, & Sanctified to Himselfe, do hereby solemnly, and religiously (as in His most holy Proesence) Promise, & bind o'selves, to walke in all our wayes according to the Rule of the Gospell, & in all sincere Conformity to His holy Ordinance, & in mutuall love, & respect each to other, so neere as God shall give vs grace. (Walker, 131)

*The Salem Covenant, 1629*

We Covenant with the Lord and one with an other; and doe bynd our selves in the presence of God, to walke together in all his waies, according as he is pleased to reveale himself unto us in his Blessed word of truth. (Walker, 116)

When the transient - the religious language and symbols relative to a particular time in history - is removed, and the lasting, enduring, "permanent" is left to stand alone, what emerges is the agreement by a group of individuals, relative to their historical time, which allows the possibility of institutionalizing the principles of the Reformation. The phrase, "and doe bynd our selves in the presence of God, to walke together in all his waies," or "& bind o'selves, to walke in all our wayes" became a commonly used formulation to indicate that the center of the community was and is a covenant, an agreement, entered into voluntarily and in good faith, preserved by a particular community's customs and practices, in order that an individual might discern the "waies" of God and walk rightly with others.

Our words today may be different, but the spirit is similar. It is a religiously held, social agreement which is the symbol that our aim as a community is towards what will make us free.

### *A Revolution and an Experiment*

Until recently, the radical nature of the American Revolution was largely muted. In the over 200 years since the colonists became Americans, history has witnessed catastrophic revolutions more deadly, more chaotic, and even deeply tragic. And because the American Revolution was waged largely in confined locations, and fueled by aristocratic concerns, we do not now associate it much with the radical social change it occasioned. But, historian Gordon Wood, in his book *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, noted that if radicalism means "the amount of social change that actually took place," it was "as radical and as revolutionary as any in history" in that it transformed "the relationships that bound people to each other."

It is characteristic of freedom that it intimately involves relationships, because it is impossible without them. Its revolutionary power consists in its awesome effect on the lives of individuals. And if we consider the church to be an organization whose central purpose includes the maintenance and strengthening of freedom, then we must always seek a knowledge of what kind of relationships fulfill that purpose. That is our central task together as a gathered free church proclaiming liberality in religion and thereby pledging our lives and honor to the sacred relationship between an individual and God. We will next examine some of the core customs we practice arising from the central question demanded by our "gospel": What kind of relationship forms a community that keeps the individual and the free spirit in possession of itself?

When Henry Whitney Bellows orchestrated the National Conference of Unitarian Churches in the late 1800's he aimed the free church towards answering the question, "How are we going to be in the world, as it is?" with a remarkable sermon, "The Suspense of Faith." The answer for them, as it was for most Protestant groups, was the concentrated power of a national organization. In 1913 the Congregationalists likewise created the concentrated power of a national organization in response to three things: the rising power of state conventions, conversations of denominational mergers, and the perceived need amongst Congregationalists to coordinate and control social justice agencies operating under the banner of the denomination. A century later, to use Bellows' sermon image, the religious scene in this country is "suspended" once again. Both the century-long age of ecumenism and the age of strong national religious organizations are past. Independent congregations of all stripes are now "where the action is," yet few if any see, understand, or are willing to claim the theological ramifications of congregational polity and independence. But, this can be a time of immense opportunity for free congregations if we understand and claim both the revolutionary nature of our heritage, and the creative experiment

called the Free Church.

In 1882, in the attempt to resurrect the remnant of a south side Chicago congregation, Rev. Jenkin Lloyd Jones, uncle of Frank Lloyd Wright and the chief organizer of the World Parliament of Religions, the first worldwide gathering of the leaders of the world's great faiths, called forth a stirring image of the free church that captured the larger purposes of free religious association:

[The Ideal Church is] a free congress of independent souls... It is the thinker's home... Over its portals no dogmatic test is to be written to ward off an honest thinker or an earnest seeker... [It would welcome all] on the basis of a common Humanity, a common Moral Law, Conscience and Duty... Given the freest thought, the widest outlook and the most wholesome desire to help one's kind but wanting that sensitiveness to things divine, the soul is till deficient in character... [Therefore, this Ideal Church] will be founded on Reverence. (*Freedom Moves West*, Charles Lyttle, p 158-59)

I like that. The Ideal Church is "a free congress of independent souls." What a radical revolution free churches are! And what a noble experiment free churches will continue to be, in the course of human events and the ceaseless unfolding of the divine.

## **II: The Customs and Practices of the Free Church**

The belief that natural behavior is beautiful, and that civilization's restrictions spoil the essential goodness inherent in all of us noble savages, is, of course, the Jean Jacques Rousseau School of Etiquette. He began his career as a footman, and does not seem to have cared for it.

Rousseau's philosophy continues to survive in the pop-psychology and "human potential" movements of today, and in the do-nothing school of child rearing, which have given us so many little-savages. In point of fact, we are all born rude. No infant has ever appeared yet with the grace to understand how inconsiderate it is to disturb others in the middle of the night.

The concept that civilization is inherently corrupt, but Nature inevitably benign, is particularly popular in earthquake and flood ridden California. The natural approach to human relations presumes that to know any person well enough is to love him, and that, therefore, the only human problem is a communication problem. It refuses to admit the possibility that people might be separated by basic, deeply held, genuinely irreconcilable differences - philosophical, political, or religious. Thus, the effort to trivialize etiquette as being a barrier to the happy mingling of



souls, actually trivializes intellectual, emotional, and spiritual convictions by characterizing any difference between one person's and another's as no more than a simple misunderstanding, easily solved by frank exchanges or orchestrated "encounters."

Many forms of etiquette are employed exactly to disguise those antipathies that arise from irreconcilable differences, in order to prevent mayhem.

-*"In the Quest for Equality, Civilization Itself Is Maligned,"* Judith Martin, 1985

It is part of the role of the Free Church to practice and to teach manners. It is the presence of manners -- customs and practices handed down through the generations which maintain delineated roles -- that allows for the possibility that two people can hold differing religious convictions and still maintain the connection of religious fellowship. In other words manners make possible freedom within the context of a community. Manners are the means by which speaking the truth in love is even possible in reality. In the public world manners are called the protocol of diplomacy. It kept Begin and Sadat from killing each other before they could reach an agreement.

The Free Church tradition described above is not a denomination as such, for it is a tradition that characterizes as religious certain characteristics of human association. This tradition is central to the ongoing political and social revolution called the democratic experiment because it represents as central to religious life the Reformation idea of the primacy of individual conscience in discerning matters of morals and faith. An individual is endowed with the capacity to discern directly the ultimate dimensions of reality in the same way that the individual is endowed by the Creator with certain unalienable rights. The church's role is not to confer conviction any more than it is the role of government to confer rights.

The free church in its own understanding and development is relational. It becomes religious when people gather in a community for the free spirit as an endeavor that expresses the ultimate order of existence. This is how life works! But it works because there are implicit or explicit roles and responsibilities in the community and behaviors associated with those roles and responsibilities. And there are customs and practices indigenous only to particular communities, too. As conviction differs from individual to individual, so also do customs and practices differ from free church to free church. For example, it was the custom of the first church I served in Milwaukee to have a member decorate a "worship table" each Sunday for worship, a custom that this church carried from its rental quarters to its first church building when we occupied that in 1987. Another example from my former church in Tulsa was the custom of having the President of the Board elected for two consecutive one-year terms.

But there are roles and responsibilities characteristic of all Free Churches, and it is to these that we need turn our attention.

### *The Relationships that Make Religious Freedom Possible*

In 1648 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, representatives of independent local congregations gathered to see if they could identify some normative understandings of how Christian congregations with no ecclesiastical hierarchy should be governed. In the Cambridge Platform of 1648 there were listed in some detail the congregational "offices" or roles and responsibilities that arose out of the covenant, the central commonality amongst these groups. Questions like, "Who has the responsibility for what?" and, "Who has the authority to do what?" will inevitably arise in religious communities which have a covenant at the center. Common theological belief does not necessarily bind persons together in free religious communities, but an agreement on how we seek to treat one another does ("to walke together in all his waies, according as he is pleased to reveale himself unto us" or "dwell together in peace, seek the truth in love, and help one another"). And this requires knowledge and division of roles and responsibilities. These do not arise haphazardly, but deliberately and in consultation, as the means to fulfill the purpose of association. In other words, as freedom is the aim of the religious community, and freedom is by its nature relational, and the covenant is the symbol for what holds the community together, what are the various "covenants" or relationships in the church that make freedom possible. The theological tradition from the Reformation holds that one's faith, one's deepest convictions concerning the nature and structure of existence and its demands upon us, dwells in the region of individual conscience. But, in order for that principle to be made real it needs to be embodied in a community devoted to protecting and strengthening it. The organization of a community so designed has to be sophisticated and explicit, arising out of relationships that make a community possible and free.

The foundation of the Free Church is the relationship between an individual and the congregation. In terms of the organization of a free religious community, individuals do not covenant with other individuals. Individuals pledge themselves to the purpose of the community upon joining. The most visible symbol of the purpose of free religious association, in terms of the covenant between an individual and the church, is the free pew. The Free Church, as it has come to be organized in our day, does not impose a doctrinal test for membership. The symbol for this characteristic is the free pew. Each lay member is responsible for protecting the free pew as one of the roles of laity. It is the primary way the religious community protects the principles of the Reformation out of which it came.

The free pew doesn't mean that "you can believe anything you want" and be, for example, a member of a Fountain Street Church, our congregation in Grand Rapids, Michigan. That is a distortion of the covenant between an individual and

the congregation. Freedom is a virtue, but license is making this virtue absolute and, thus, a vice. The free pew means there are no theological constraints on belief. When someone identifies all members of Fountain Street Church as of one political party, or that they all believe a particular point of theology, it is the free pew that is being threatened. But, there are many, many beliefs that have nothing primarily to do with theology, which you cannot hold and be a member of a Free Church. You cannot believe that free speech means you can say anything you want at any time, rise in the middle of Sunday worship, and shout "fire." If you have been "shushed" during a worship service that is more than just an aesthetic reminder. It is a point of etiquette that protects the free pew.

While the free pew does not itself have "theological substance," it does allow for each individual to unfold unto selfhood, when nurtured and protected by members. The free pew makes possible a religious life of contemplation, possibility, excitement, and invigoration not unlike that envisioned by Ralph Waldo Emerson, who himself had to leave the church to find this:

Let me remind the reader that I am only an experimenter. Do not set the least value on what I do, or the least credit on what I do not, as if I pretended to settle any thing as true or false. I unsettle all things. No facts are to me sacred; none are profane; I simply experiment, an endless seeker, with no Past at my back. ("Circles," Ralph Waldo Emerson)

The free pew is the sanctuary in miniature, where the depths of conscience or the glory of God can be met first hand, can be weighed by the rigors of reason, any conviction can be doubted, and the heart and the hand can be stirred to vigorous and voluntary action. No member should allow the encroachment of culture or the preference or neediness of individuals, to desecrate it. The free pew is the field where all things can be unsettled, an individual planted, and selfhood harvested.

The covenant between a minister and a congregation arises from the foundational covenant between individual and congregation, because historically ministers were called out of the congregation and out of one covenant and into another. The roles and responsibilities of a minister are different than a lay person. Laity are concerned primarily with the maintenance and strengthening of the free pew; literally, as in the practical and financial proceedings of the church, and figuratively, in keeping the pews a sanctuary in miniature during worship. But, the covenant between minister and a congregation is different, and its symbol is the free pulpit. The free pulpit is the responsibility primarily of the clergy.

The free pulpit is the compliment to the free pew. Jeopardize either, and the other is in peril! As there cannot be any theological constraints in the pew, there can be none on the minister in the pulpit. He or she must be free to speak from the depths of conscience, the truth as it is seen, in love. Not because it is

assumed the hearers will adopt what is said. But, because an individual wrestling with the dictates of conscience, with the exigencies of culture and historical time, with personal anxiety, and hope, despair, and grace, will of itself invigorate each individual in the pew to do likewise. Freedom is a necessary condition for truth, fulfilled through personality. For the pulpit to be free it must be a place where such spiritual searching is supported by the pew. The pulpit is not a debating forum, where the minister presents one view one week, and someone else presents a counter view the next. The free pulpit does not mean free access to the pulpit by anyone. The free pulpit is not a place where theologies foreign to the preacher are presented, nor is it a place where gender, ideology, political partisanship, or a whole host of other facets of our lives need be represented. In fact the free pulpit has value of itself and not because within it any particular viewpoint is represented. The free pulpit is loaned indefinitely by the congregation to the minister with the expectation that the minister will honor that pulpit (and its relationship to the pew) and treat it with the dignity worthy of the loan! It is the most sacred public relationship in our society. Where in this world can an individual disclose the greatest, most tragic, most profound moments of life? A preacher can unsettle all preconceived notions of right and wrong, good and evil, only through this most authentic and honest of public relationships. And, thereby, inspire the pew to do likewise. Life is a journey. We do walk together in relationship, though our roles and responsibilities differ. But, life certainly is not a debate where we try to "one-up" each other every week.

The third relationship that makes freedom possible is the covenant amongst ministers. This is a tricky one to negotiate today because of "professionalization." The relationship amongst ministers is increasingly going the way of the other two traditional professions. The commonality among doctors, lawyers, and clergy, as the traditional professions, was that each had its origin and its authority from a relationship: doctor to patient, lawyer to client, pastor to layperson and God. Doctors have given this up to organized medicine and the insurance companies. Lawyers have given this up to consumerism now that the law is a "good place to make some money" and you can advertise for services. Only ministry remains rooted in relationship, although this, too, is threatened. In the Free Church tradition one is a minister because one is related to a congregation. If I am not the minister of Fountain Street Church, then I am not a minister. I may feel I am called by God. But, the only way to discern whether it is God calling or simply indigestion is to be called by a congregation and be in an ongoing relationship with that congregation.

The responsibilities that attend the covenant between ministers concern our reminding one another of who we are, what we are responsible for, and to whom. In other words, it is the responsibility of minister to minister to keep focused on the refreshing destiny of the free spirit, and the relationships that preserve and strengthen it:

Let me remind the reader that [we are] only experimenters... [We do not] pretend to settle any thing as true or false. [We] unsettle all things... [We] simply experiment, [are] endless seekers, with no Past at [our] back.

There are certain manners concerning the covenant between minister and minister. The chief among these is to recognize the sacred relationship between congregation and called minister. Thus, I am not in contact with members of my former church because that would impinge upon their relationship with their new minister. And I have to be careful about any communication that occurs between us so as not to compromise the sacred relationship they are creating with another.

Finally, the relationship of congregation to congregation makes religious freedom possible. Covenants amongst autonomous congregations are one of the two ingredients of congregational polity; the other is locating the focus of power within the individual congregation. But, in our time, the chief means of congregational association is through denominations; literally, congregations which hold common religious values as central to their relationship. I think this is dangerous. It leads to the isolation of religious institutions from one another and the maintenance and strengthening of a theological polarity that keeps a divided world divided. It indicates that the "lateral relationships" between congregations are weak or non-existent, as are knowledge of the history and the nature of congregational polity. Eventually that will weaken individual congregations. The Free Church is the chief religious institution whose role it is to break down the divisiveness between congregations with different theologies. In our own institution we are the ones who practice and seek to embody the manners necessary to make such a relationship possible.

All four relationships form a balance. Freedom is so fragile that when one relationship falters, they all can serve tyranny! A layperson that takes on the role and responsibilities of a minister without being called by the congregation threatens freedom. A minister who gives away the role and responsibilities of a minister threatens freedom. A minister who desires to be liked by other ministers above fulfilling his responsibilities as a colleague in covenant with other colleagues ruptures a relationship allied to freedom. And when relationships amongst congregations of different theological flavor are not created, supported, and sustained, there is much more at stake than isolation. It is all a delicate balance designed to keep our spirits free.

### *What's at Stake?*

Let me close this section with an excerpt from an article in the *Christian Century*, "The Etiquette of Democracy," by educator and cultural observer Stephen Carter:

When I was a child, attending grade school in Washington, D.C., we took classroom time to study manners. Not only the magic words, "please" and

"thank you," but more complicated etiquette questions, such as how to answer the telephone ("Carter residence, Stephen speaking") and how to set the table (we were quizzed on whether knife blades should point in or out) . . . And somehow nobody - no children, no parents - objected to what nowadays would surely be viewed as indoctrination . . .

When *US News & World Report* ran a story in 1996 about the decline of civility, it opened with what it must have considered the man-bites-dog vignette - an account of a classroom where young people were taught to be polite . . . Deportment classes are long gone. Now and then the schools reach some norms of conduct, but almost always about sex. Respect for rules of conduct has been lost in the deafening and essentially empty rights-talk of our age. Following a rule of good manners may mean doing something you do not want to do, and the weird rhetoric of our self-indulgent age resists the idea that we have such things as obligations to others. We suffer from the elevation of self-expression over self-control.

Remember: there was a reason utensils were placed on the tabletop. With all weapons in plain view, two people could get down to the challenge of establishing a relationship, which maintained their individual viewpoints!

### **III: How We Connect With Others**

Religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.

-*The Interpretation of Cultures*, Clifford Geertz

A religion is not about a place but a picture of a place. The place is reality as human beings experience it. The picture, as Geertz alludes to, is so compelling as to lead the "believer" to conclude that the place and the place the picture depicts are the same thing. Yet, as American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson would remind us, "human beings see an arc, and assume the circle." In this case the circle is reality, and the arc represents the portion of reality that a particular individual living in a particular time and place might see.

What is the relationship of a free faith to other religions and religious traditions within Christianity? We might begin such a quest by asking what the parameters are of a particular religious perspective? What role, for example, does culture play in religion, in the creation of pictures that carry such an "aura of factuality" about them that human beings are certain they are "true"? Do all religions possess a particularity such that there is an underlying, basic, unbridgeable difference between them?

## *The Roots of Liberal Theology*

At the Divinity School of the University of Chicago one of the first courses incoming students take is entitled, "Methods for the Study of Religion." The focus of the course is the intentional development of a critical understanding of how human beings study and practice religion. A "definition" of religion is derived from various perspectives: psychological, sociological, anthropological, historical, literary, etc. The definition offered as the frontispiece to this lecture was used when I took the "Methods" course as representative of anthropology. The underlying presupposition of the course, and the perspective on religion that it represents, is that there is not a singular way to interpret religion and religious phenomena. But, there are general, structural ways to understand humanity's practice of religion.

I would argue that, first and foremost, the Free Church tradition approaches the phenomenon of religion as an anthropological phenomenon. Jack Hayward, former professor at Meadville Lombard Theological School, the Divinity School of the University of Chicago and at Southern Illinois University, once told me that to religious liberals, theology begins with anthropology; that is, with the question, "What is a human being?" The Psalmist's question then, "What is man, O God, that thou art mindful of him?" is the central liberal religious question.

This is not the case with religious orthodoxy. In the orthodox understanding of religion theology "begins" with a consideration of God's nature: "What is God, O Man, that God should elicit our praise and our ultimate concern?" While in both liberal and orthodox settings theology literally includes "the study of theos or God," where such a study begins sets the stage for what is found and, especially, how religion and religious practice is shaped by theology. There are structural characteristics that can be used for a comparison. Orthodoxy, literally "right belief," concerns itself in practice with creeds. The most important question is "What is right belief?" When someone asks, "What does your church believe?" they are asking a question from an orthodox view. It looks back to a time when truth was revealed. Its emphasis is on conforming to a consistent, communal understanding of religion (God, Jesus, morality, etc.), and communal norms regarding faith. In reaching for one encompassing understanding -- the "truth that is God" as it were -- orthodoxy always flirts with ignoring humanity's temporal and historical finitude. It will insist on making ultimate claims for temporal and historical truths. That is its idolatry.

In the liberal religious understanding that informs the Free Church, the idea of covenant is central to the religious life, being the sacred dimension of a "relational" understanding of reality. Theology begins with the question of human nature, not the nature of the divine, since God could not and cannot be known separate from human relationship. The most important question is, "How do I treat others?" When someone asks, "What does your church do for the world?" they are asking a question from a liberal religious view. We actually expect, and I

would even argue measure, the religious life based upon its effect on the world. It looks ahead to a future when truth will unfold. Its emphasis is on personal integrity and on an individual's understanding of religion within the context of a community devoted to that. In reaching for an encompassing understanding -- discover a common thread within the diversity of the human family -- liberal religionists always flirt with ignoring humanity's temporal and historical finitude, and make inclusive claims that ignore or smooth over real difference. That is one form of our idolatry; making the inclusive claim, for example, that all religions are variations of one, or that all religions teach the Golden Rule. In searching for what is common to human nature we smooth over difference, individuality. Weary of our overactive understanding of human finitude, we are sometimes eager to rush to make the genuine difference of human history and culture superfluous.

One of my previous churches was once hosting an interfaith dialogue amongst Christian, Jewish, and Muslim leaders. I opened the evening with a brief characterization of the Free Church, its philosophical roots in the Reformation, and its historic roots in this country through the Pilgrims and Puritans and their quest for the freedom to worship God as they saw fit. After the presentations a Muslim man, who had accompanied the Muslim presenter, came up to me and said, "I have read many things about Unitarianism. And it seems to me that it is very much like Islam. In fact, I think we are related. Unitarianism could even be considered another form of Islam." I said that I had done a lot of reading, too, about Islam. And what had occurred to me in my study was the enormous difference between the two perspectives. I was reintroduced to the oppression of a universalism that swallows up genuine difference.

Whether he was a religious liberal or not, this Muslim man exemplified what I have since termed liberal idolatry: the eagerness to uncover a universal, continuous element in *Homo religiosus*. No two religions, or even religious traditions within the same religion, ever speak to human experience and the human condition the same way. Our own theological perspective, beginning with the consideration of human nature, teaches us this. Finitude is a central quality of human nature; that is, that each of us is a creature bounded by time and place. Theologian Paul Tillich called it the condition of existence, something which human nature neither adds to nor takes away. Finitude is a condition and it is shot through existence. Even within the same culture and relative time space, each of us has different experiences, and even when experiencing the same phenomena we do not "take it in" the same way. It's a miracle we can even come close to communicating! For the first two years I was in Tulsa I found it nearly unbelievable that, as one Tulsan remembered, "there was a time when we had only one high school." Tulsa identifies itself as a southern city and it seemed odd to me that this southern city would be so much like my Indiana hometown, where one high school served all in that small city. Because of my misunderstanding, it took me two years to figure out she meant one *white* high school!

When considering religion through the human desire to find commonality,



religious liberals forget the meaning of philosopher George Santayana's observations:

Any attempt to speak without speaking any particular language is not more hopeless than the attempt to have a religion that shall be no religion in particular . . . Thus every living and healthy religion has a marked idiosyncrasy. Its power consists in its special and surprising message and in the bias which that revelation gives to life. The vistas it opens and the mysterious it propounds are another world to live in; and another world to live in -- whether we expect ever to pass wholly over into it or no -- is what we mean by having a religion. (George Santayana, *Reason in Religion*)

### *The Function of Religious Connection*

In my first church I was asked what the role of the preacher was and I responded that in part it is to speak the truth in love. The hearer responded, "Your truth, of course." This simple and common exchange portends the difficulty of genuine religious connection in our time. Truth is often cited as the goal of religious yearnings. Yet, every "truth" we might discover or uncover is contaminated with our finitude. So, it must be declared one person's truth. It is indicative of our time that we cannot conceive of truth without considering it as either objectively absolute or absolutely relative. There is no in-between in the pictures we paint of reality. Yet, we exist in between the canvass and the easel. Writes the poet:

Between the idea  
And the reality  
Between the motion  
And the act  
Falls the shadow.  
-*The Hollow Men*, T.S. Eliot

That is where we exist: in the shadow. Religious connection between two people of different faiths begins, I think, when we try to bring light to our own individual shadow. This is why I would suggest that we couldn't know another faith or religion without some understanding of our own. Being originally from Indiana I can declare there is no such person as a "Hoosier Buddhist" who isn't more Hoosier than Buddhist. It is why I am so focussed on articulating a free faith in general, and my beliefs in particular. It is not because they are absolute. They will change I'm sure. But it is not because my beliefs are absolutely relative, either. Some of what I believe connects me with others. But, illuminating the individual's "shadow" is the starting point of human connection because our understanding of religion -- our "method" as it were of seeing, hearing, and interpreting it -- will shape our willingness to hear the "strangeness" of another's picture of reality. Religions are shaped by history and culture, and do not possess an essence that escapes that shaping. But planting a Buddhist monastery in the center of my home state of Indiana -- as was done in the mid

1980's by the Dalai Lama's brother - while it will create all kinds of profound misunderstandings by orthodoxy and religious liberals, can also be a spark of hope that human beings can connect despite the divisions that mark the conditions of our existence.

Because of our finitude, connecting with those of other faiths, and even those within differing Christian traditions, will not occur when we run to far-off gods. Our abilities to connect with others will be related to our willingness to be enlightened about the presence of God in our own locale. That is why I read from the Bible on Sunday morning, even though I was not trained in the Hebrew or Christian Scriptures, but rather in theology, philosophy, and cross-cultural religious studies. Unless we seek some kind of liberation from the oppressive interpretations of our Judeo-Christian culture, we cannot ever hope to connect with any depth with those whose religion and culture is different. When I was serving a church in Milwaukee I would be interviewed regularly by students at the local Wisconsin Synod Lutheran college for their "Life in Christ" class. I invited every individual to read beforehand Mircea Eliade's "The Myth of the Eternal Return," a classic in the cross-cultural, cross-historical study of religion developed at the University of Chicago. One student commented to me of his incredulity that "Hindus worship cows." I said I thought it was probably no more remarkable to us than that to Hindus, Christians worship lambs. He looked puzzled. I reminded him that to many, Jesus is the Lamb of God. I do not think he could ever come close to understanding anything of Hinduism until he begins the journey of liberation from the oppressive interpretations of his own culture.

We are not marked off by a denominational name brand, but we go by the moniker of liberal religion or the Free Church tradition. A particular congregation, with a particular history and tradition, offers a perspective, a way to look at faith unlike others. Individuals who come through its portals are invited to grow religiously and spiritually in certain ways, towards freedom. But it is an ongoing experiment in how human beings can associate with one another while each's individuality unfolds. Those who find their journey within this covenant - marked off by characteristic ways we treat each other so as to strengthen the liberation and cultivation of the human spirit -- will grow in certain directions and not in others. But to the extent we can understand who we are through our engagement with the world (remember, we represent freedom as being relational) we will learn, too, how to exist in a universe created by God to exhibit an abundance and bounty of difference. We will revolutionize our world. And we will learn, too, to navigate through our temptations in order to preserve individuality which is, when all is said and done, what we of a free faith are placed on this planet to do.