

*At the January 8, 2009, Convocation of Meadville Lombard Theological School's Modified Residency Program, the Rev. David E. Bumbaugh, B.D. '64, Professor of Ministry, presented "The Marketing of Liberal Religion." The Rev. Jennifer Crow, M.Div. '04, the Rev. Dr. John H. Weston, M.Div. '88, and the Rev. Dr. Jerome A. Stone, Adjunct Professor, delivered responses to his paper, and Prof. Bumbaugh gave his reply. All of the proceedings are published in this issue of The Journal of Liberal Religion.*

## **The Marketing of Liberal Religion**

**David E. Bumbaugh**

Liberal Religion has roots deep in the American experience. However, its period of greatest influence was probably in the years between the end of the Civil War and the early part of the twentieth century. During those decades, liberal religion sought to structure and promote a faith that embraced the challenges presented by new scholarship in a variety of fields, from Biblical studies to the emerging social sciences. It sought to accommodate rather than dispute the findings of the physical sciences. It offered a confident vision of human progress toward a world consistent with the best moral and ethical teachings of western religious traditions. It offered an enduring critique of the gilded age of untrammelled greed and corruption and imperialist expansion. It concerned itself with the plight of the marginalized and forgotten, and it preached a gospel that insisted that the building of the Kingdom of God is a human task to be engaged in this world, here and now.

Time has not dealt well with the vision and the faith of Liberal Religion. The history of the early twentieth century seemed to make a mockery of the hopes, the expectations, the faith that constituted the Liberal Religious project. Over the past fifty years, Liberal Religion has been under continuous and unremitting attack, not only from more orthodox traditions, but from a radical fringe that has captured the evangelical tradition and transformed it into a nativist, nationalist force in the life of many societies, and from a postmodern critique that dismisses the assumptions and the consequent imperatives of liberal religion as hopelessly culture bound, class bound, and time bound.

From the beginning, Unitarians and Universalists were deeply engaged in the vision that energized liberal religion, but the scope of liberal religion was always far larger than our movement. Even under attack, Liberal Religion continues to be the context in which we exist, but it is neither defined by nor exhausted by our particular history, institutional structures, and visions. In the time we have together, I propose to examine how the Liberal Religious tradition has responded to the challenges it confronts, using Unitarian Universalism as a lens, a perspective. My hope is to explore both the specific situation of Unitarian Universalism and, by implication, the larger context in which we exist.

In May of 1961, in my first year in seminary, I had driven a carload of my fellow Meadville students to Boston to attend the meeting that would inaugurate our newly combined movement. As a delegate to that meeting I was in the hall, waiting for the Moderator to announce the result of the vote that would bring the Unitarian Universalist Association into formal existence—a vote that would end the separate histories of the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America. When the formal announcement came, it was a surprise to no one. The assembly had reaffirmed

the will of the constituent congregations with an overwhelming vote for consolidation. The delegates responded with a standing ovation.

This was a moment I had worked for since I began my ministry to Universalist congregations in April of 1957. As minister, I had preached, as editor of the *Ohio Universalist*, I had written editorials, and as President of the Ohio Universalist Ministers' Association, I had argued in support of the consolidation of the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America. I had been a delegate to the meeting in Syracuse in 1959 that had hammered out the details of the consolidation process. The congregation I was serving had voted for consolidation, even though the members of that small rural Universalist church confessed to feeling profoundly outclassed by and deeply inferior to every Unitarian they had ever met. I should have been among those applauding and cheering. Instead, I found myself standing off to one side of the hall, weeping.

I was overwhelmed by the sense that something profoundly important had just died, that I had just voted away my religious home, that I had just witnessed the end of the Universalist movement, a religious vision that the historian Whitney Cross, in his book *The Burned Over District*, suggested had had an impact

...on reform movements and upon the growth of modern religious attitudes [that] might prove to be greater than that of either the Unitarians or the freethinkers....[A movement whose] warfare upon the forces fettering the American mind might be demonstrated to have equaled the influence of the transcendentalist philosophers.

Over the nearly half century that has passed, I have devoted my life to the movement we brought into being in Boston on that day in May of 1961. In parish ministry, and, for ten years, teaching in this school, my life has been trammelled up in Unitarian Universalism. But, truth be told, I have never felt quite at home in this movement. I have felt like an orphan who has been taken in by a kindly family, but who never has mastered the skills necessary to be fully a part of that family. Somewhere, deep in my soul, there is a sense of profound loss that never quite goes away. In odd moments, I have tried to plumb that deep loss.

Over time, it has occurred to me that the loss, which at first seemed so private and so deeply personal, is, in truth, much more corporate and institutional. Somewhere, over the years following consolidation, we have lost an important insight into the essential nature of religion, and the role it plays in the life of the human community. The process by which that loss occurred is rooted deep in the history of the two movements that came together in May of 1961.

In the first third of the twentieth century, Unitarianism and Universalism, as expressions of Liberal Religion, both were confronting serious losses. The catastrophe of the Great War, that war to end all wars, had made a mockery of the easy optimism that had characterized much of liberal religion. The debacle of the Great Depression had only deepened the sense of pessimism and despair. By the middle of the 1930s the condition of the Unitarian movement was so desperate that a group of young, determined, iconoclastic ministers forced the American Unitarian Association to appoint a Commission of Appraisal.

The central charge given that Commission consisted of a series of questions:

- Has Unitarianism any real function in the modern world?
- How far does Unitarianism in America measure up to the requirements of the new age?
- What must be done to bring it reasonably close to that ideal?
- Is the expenditure of effort necessary to bring about that change justified by the promise of success?

The report of that commission addressed a number of topics, ranging from a sketchy effort to define areas of doctrinal agreement and disagreement to a concern for restructuring religious education and providing more adequate training for leaders. But the elements in the report that received the most attention centered upon restructuring and reorganizing and streamlining the institutional processes of the Association itself. The effect of the report was to give short shrift to questions of faith, and to focus much more attention on questions of structure and process.

The Commission of Appraisal is widely believed to have saved the American Unitarian Association and to have ushered in a period of renewal and growth. In my reading of the history, it did so by simply assuming Unitarianism has a function in the modern world, even if that function is difficult to define, by finessing any serious conversation about theological concerns and by focusing instead on the question of how to reorganize the national Association so it might be more effective. In response to the work of the commission came a series of important initiatives, ranging from the New Beacon Series in Religious Education, to the famous Laymen's League advertising initiatives based on the question, "Are You a Unitarian Without Knowing It?," to the Fellowship Movement, and ultimately, to merger with the Universalists.

During this same period, Universalism was experiencing an even more catastrophic decline in numbers. Once having been described as "the reigning heresy of the day" and credited with being the sixth-largest denomination in the country, Universalism had declined to fewer than 50,000 adherents, was closing one rural or small town church after another all over the country, and was watching as one urban church after another either went out of business or merged with its Unitarian counterpart. Universalism responded to that challenge in quite a different way.

Universalists sought to confront the loss of members and the threat to their continued existence by theological exploration. Under the leadership of men like Robert Cummins and Brainard Gibbons, Universalists began to explore their relationship to the Christian tradition out of which they had come. Among the questions they asked were these: "What is the essential message of Universalism, given the fact that mainline Protestants are no longer proclaiming doctrines of hellfire and damnation?" "Does Universalism have anything distinctive to offer to the larger theological conversation?" "What does Universal Salvation mean in a pluralistic world grown ever more integrated and ever more interconnected?"

Cummins, General Superintendent of the Universalist Church, began to address those questions when he told a Universalist General Assembly:

Universalism cannot be limited either to Protestantism or to Christianity, not without denying its very name. Ours is a world fellowship, not just a Christian sect....A circumscribed Universalism is unthinkable.

Subsequently, Tracy Pullman of Detroit called for a new understanding of Universalism that would be greater than Christianity. Cummins's successor as General Superintendent, Brainard Gibbons, insisted that "Christianity and the larger Universalism are simply incompatible."

These observations led a group of younger ministers to engage the challenge to define a new theological base for the Universalist Church. They advocated what they called a New Universalism—one that sought to define a religion adequate to a global community. They did not seek to create a new world religion, but they dreamed of creating a religion that would be adequate to one world. This led them to engage virtually all the theological categories that had structured their tradition, and seek to determine how to reform or restate that tradition for a new time and a new context. This process continued throughout the years leading up to consolidation.

The point to this excursion into history is to suggest that Unitarians and Universalists brought quite different agendas to the consolidation. Those differences were reflected in much of the debate surrounding the proposal to consolidate. As I remember those years, I am struck by the fact that much of the Universalist opposition to consolidation was theological in nature—traditionalists like Ellsworth Reamon and Seth Brooks and Cornelius Greenway feared that the consolidation of the two denominations would strengthen the hands of those who intended to move Universalism onto an enlarged and non-Christian theological base. On the other hand, much of the Unitarian opposition was institutionally focused—a fear, as A. Powell Davies had suggested very early in the discussions of merger, that consolidation with the Universalists would slow or halt the numerical growth that had allowed Unitarians to claim to be the fastest-growing denomination in America in the 1950s. I have sometimes summarized the two agendas by suggesting that Universalists brought to merger an important, but unfinished theological concern, while Unitarians brought to merger a set of highly questionable marketing plans.

I would suggest to you that in the years after consolidation, the focus on marketing has triumphed. The overriding concerns have centered upon the need to identify our market niche, and to devise programs and strategies to attract and keep clients. Much of our social justice effort can be defined as expressionist politics, less intended to change the world than to serve our own egos, to present a profile to the world and thus attract and expand the client base. Our efforts at self-definition are grounded in no deep confession of faith, no significant meta-narrative. This becomes clear when we consider the all-but-deified purposes and principles. They simply hang there as unanchored assertion—not a covenant, but a temporal agreement—and because that is so, they betray the fact that a primary motivating force in their construction was to embrace every significant opinion, to offend none of our stakeholders, while being so general that likely recruits do not find us too challenging.

Our programmatic focus has been upon growth, both in the size and the number of churches. At all levels, programs are initiated and justified on the basis that they will produce numerical growth. Congregations and individuals who question whether growth

is an adequate mission are regarded as bordering on the heretical. Education programs are designed specifically to counter and inhibit the essential developmental tasks of young people and to bind them effectively to the church. We have toyed with creating mega-churches by offering something called “theology light seeker services.” We have devised advertising programs structured around slogans like “The Uncommon Denomination” and “The Church That Puts Its Faith In You,” slogans that pretend to communicate but that avoid any careful definition. Most recently, the triumph of marketing can be seen in the transformation of the flaming chalice from religious symbol into marketing logo.

Missing in all of this is any coherent theological foundation. Over and over, we hear each other and officials of the Association proclaim the conviction that we have a moral obligation to grow, to spread our word because we possess a vital message, one that is of central importance to the world and to the crises in which the world is entangled. When, however, we are challenged to say what that message is, what our faith consists of, what defines us as a religious people, often we are driven to an embarrassed silence, or we smile smugly and confess that no one can speak for all Unitarian Universalists, or we stutter and stammer and mutter some half-digested truisms about the worth of every person or the importance of embracing each person’s freedom to follow his or her own spiritual path. Those are not wrong affirmations but they provide an incredibly weak foundation for a religious movement and a wholly inadequate program for saving the world. They offer an unexamined piety rather than a solid faith. The unfinished task Universalists brought to consolidation—the effort to redefine the faith tradition in response to contemporary challenges—has been swept away by the fear that if we define ourselves too clearly, someone may be offended.

Nor are we the only example of Liberal Religion trying to survive by fudging uncomfortable self-definitions. In Chicago, and perhaps elsewhere across the country, the United Methodist Church observed Lent, last year, by broadcasting a series of television spots in which people who are lonely, people who are burdened with grief, people who are engulfed by sorrow, are told that they do not have to walk this painful path alone. They will find support and companionship at the United Methodist Church. Except for that last word, “Church,” it is hard to tell that the welcome is from a religious community. It sounds very much like an institution offering therapy rather than faith, comfort rather than challenge, sanctuary rather than adventure.

In his book *American Religious Traditions*, Richard Wentz suggests that religion “is the dialectic of the sacred and profane,” the way in which the sacred and the mundane are held in “dynamic tension.” He claims that religion “provides the ideas and actions that enable us to maintain the significance of the sacred in circumstances that deny it.” This suggests that a movement that is unwilling or unable to define what it holds sacred has surrendered both its claim to religious significance and its ability to respond to the larger world with a meaningful dialectic.

If we are to respond to the needs of the world from a liberal religious basis, it is critical that we be able to address and answer three central questions:

- What do we believe?
- Whom do we serve?
- To whom or what are we responsible?

Several years ago, I was asked to deliver a lecture on the title “Beyond the Seven Principles: The Core of Our Faith.” In that lecture, I suggested that the question of what do we believe cannot be answered adequately until we struggle with the question, “Whom do we serve?” I am increasingly convinced, now, however, that given the makeup of our movement—a movement comprised of people who value education, a movement that reflects a tradition of accommodation to science and embraces concern for creating a tolerant, moral society, a movement that is socially located with access to the levers of power, a movement that is forever tempted to accommodation with the secular culture—it is important that we not delay grappling with the question of what it is we believe, what it is that provides a foundation for, indeed, makes possible a vital religious vision.

That first and foundational question, “What do we believe?” is simple, but profoundly challenging for a postmodern people. It drives us to consider what are the boundaries of our religious community? What is so central to our identity that we must proclaim it, even at the risk of offending someone?

This is the question Universalists were struggling to answer in the years prior to consolidation—the question we have struggled ever since to evade in the interests of more effective marketing. It is in answering that first question that we may sharpen and make more effective our responses to the other two: “Whom do we serve and to whom or what are we responsible?” Ignoring that first question, our institutions are easily seduced by the consumerist imperatives that dominate our times, and our response to the world tends to be shallow-rooted, short-lived, self-serving, and episodic.

Strange as it may seem to us, the fear of defining ourselves has not always dominated Unitarianism or Universalism. There have been moments of clarity in our history. The founding document of American Unitarianism was William Ellery Channing’s 1819 Baltimore Sermon, “Unitarian Christianity,” in which he laid out a clear platform that not only rallied Unitarians, but influenced large numbers of non-Unitarians as well. Later in the same century, when Unitarianism was grappling with the dissent generated by the radicalism of Theodore Parker and his followers, William Channing Gannett offered a statement of “Things Commonly Believed Among Us.” While acknowledging that Unitarians wisely resist creedal statements, Gannett boldly began his statement by affirming “We believe.” That statement of a central faith helped to heal the divisions within Unitarianism. In 1935 the Universalists, struggling to redefine the movement, adopted a statement that, while not a creed, unashamedly began with these words: “We Avow our Faith.”

Let me suggest to you that what the world needs from Liberal Religion, or at least from our version of Liberal Religion, is clarity about who we are and what matters to us; clarity about what vision has called us into being, and what promise we serve. Nor is this such an impossible challenge. While we proudly proclaim the great diversity among us, every study I have seen of Unitarian Universalists suggests that our diversity rests in a powerfully homogeneous core of shared beliefs and attitudes. Indeed, the studies suggest that at the core we are far less diverse than many other religious groups. Let me suggest to you some of the content of that core:

We believe that the universe in which we live and move and have our being is the expression of an inexorable process that began in eons past, ages beyond our comprehension, and has evolved from singularity to multiplicity, from simplicity to complexity, from disorder to order.

We believe that the earth and all who live upon the earth are products of the same process that swirled the galaxies into being, that ignited the stars and orbited the planets through the night sky, that we are expressions of that universal process which has created and formed us out of recycled stardust.

We believe that all living things are members of a single community, all expressions of a planetary process that produced life and sustains it in intricate ways beyond our knowing. We hold the life process itself to be sacred.

We believe that the health of the human venture is inextricably dependent upon the integrity of the rest of the community of living things and upon the integrity of those processes by which life is bodied forth and sustained. Therefore we affirm that we are called to serve the planetary process upon which life depends.

We believe that in this interconnected existence the well-being of one cannot be separated from the well-being of the whole, that ultimately we all spring from the same source and all journey to the same ultimate destiny.

We believe that the universe outside of us and the universe within us is one universe. Because that is so, our efforts, our dreams, our hopes, our ambitions are the dreams, hopes, and ambitions of the universe itself. In us, and perhaps elsewhere, the Universe is reaching toward self-awareness, toward self-consciousness. We believe that our efforts to understand the world and our place within it are an expression of the Universe's deep drive toward meaning. In us, and perhaps elsewhere, the Universe dreams dreams and reaches toward unknown possibilities. We hold as sacred the unquenchable drive to know and to understand.

We believe that the moral impulse that weaves its way through our lives, luring us to practices of justice and mercy and compassion, is threaded through the universe itself and it is this universal longing that finds outlet in our best moments.

We believe that our location within the community of living things places upon us inescapable responsibilities. Life is more than our understanding of it, but the level of our comprehension demands that we act out of conscious concern for the broadest vision of community we can command and that we seek not our welfare alone, but the welfare of the whole. We are commanded to serve life and serve it to the seven times seventieth generation.

We believe that those least like us, those located on the margins have important contributions to make to the rest of the community of life and that in some curious way, we are all located on some margin. We believe that all that functions to divide us from each other and from the

community of living things is to be resisted in the name of that larger vision of a world everywhere alive, everywhere seeking to incarnate a deep, implicit process that called us into being, that sustains us in being, that transforms us as we cannot transform ourselves, that receives us back to itself when life has used us up. Not knowing the end of that process, nonetheless we trust it, we rest in it, and we serve it.

This faith statement is not a creed. (Perhaps we might attach to it the historic Universalist Freedom Clause: Neither this nor any other form of words will be used among us as a creedal test.) Nor can it be easily reduced to an elevator speech—a notion that, in itself, is rooted in a marketing mentality. Nonetheless this faith statement attempts to achieve several things. First of all, it seeks to avoid the morass of hyphenated Unitarian Universalism. Secondly, it seeks to avoid the dreary debate between humanists and theists, between spirituality and rationality, by offering a kind of godless theism—an affirmation that we are not *sui generis*, that we are products of and embedded in a natural process we did not create, cannot command, and do not fully understand, but a process to which we are responsible, a process that is grounded in a vision of a dynamic universe, constantly incarnating emergent possibilities and larger alternatives. It offers a vision that is consistent with our history, our tradition, responsive to the people we serve and to the challenges of our time—a vision grounded in three central Enlightenment commitments, defined by Susan Neiman as reason, reverence, and hope. And, most importantly, it seeks to define a religious position that provides us a distinct location within the spectrum of religious alternatives available to the world.

Perhaps this statement is not fully adequate or even acceptable to most of us, but the times demand some kind of formulation of the basis of our faith if we are to be serious about the world and if we are to be taken seriously by the world. Out of this kind of faith statement, imperatives for action emerge that are deeper than a political program or a class or ethnic loyalty. Such a faith statement reminds us that we are called to serve the largest vision of community we can imagine and that all our lesser loyalties stand under the judgment of that great affirmation. In serving the party, the cause, the national or ethnic identity, am I serving the largest community I can envision? In failing the weak, the lost, the marginalized, have I failed my deepest defining obligations? Such a faith statement allows us to recognize that ultimately we are responsible to the larger, sacred context out of which we have come, in terms of which we live, and to which we ultimately return. It provides a compass by which to steer amidst the uncertainties of a chaotic world.

This particular statement may not capture adequately the imagination of Unitarian Universalists. I am quite certain that some statement of faith is required if our brand of liberal religion is to address the needs of our world. Why we prefer to focus on our disagreements rather than on a core faith that might define us and might offer a religious alternative, I am not certain. Perhaps something deep in our institutional DNA is at work here.

In his two-volume history of Unitarianism, Earl Morse Wilbur argued that for most of our history, Unitarians have resisted any real theological definition. Only when faced with some great threat to the continued existence of the movement could Unitarians be brought to define who they were and what vision they served.



I would suggest to you that we face such a threat at this moment in our history. To be sure, the threat does not seem to take the form of repression, persecution, or proscription. Despite the occasional thrust from religious extremists, we are scarcely important enough to justify the effort that repression and persecution would require. The threat to our existence is more subtle and therefore more dangerous. Liberal Religion faces the possibility that it may be overwhelmed by a kind of ambient spirituality that resists definition or institutional form, but functions to use the human longing for meaning to serve other purposes, an ambient spirituality that has no outward focus but slides easily into the therapeutic mode, offering an endless journey of infinite regression into the self. Look around you and you will see everywhere evidence of the manner in which spiritual longing has been commodified, offered on the open market, used to sell everything from soap, to self improvement, to political platforms. Over and over, and over again, the sacred is stripped of its deepest meanings and dragged in chains behind the chariot of a triumphant consumerism.

By refusing to define itself, Liberal Religion surrenders its ability to stand in judgment on the idolatries of our time. Worse than that, fearing that it will not be taken seriously, Liberal Religion is tempted to try to turn the commercial spirit of the age to its own uses. Os Guinness has remarked that it used to be the case that religion looked for an audience for its message, but more recently, he suggests, religion looks for a message that will hold the audience. There is a world of difference between those two approaches. To the degree that Liberal Religion in general, and Unitarian Universalism in particular, have succumbed to this kind of marketing ploy, we have betrayed our own traditions, we have failed the world, we have become captive to the very processes that threaten to destroy our best hope for the future.

If we are to serve our people, and the world in which we find ourselves, it is critical that we now take up the unfinished project that Universalism brought to the consolidation in 1961, that we have the courage to define ourselves in ways that offer a clear alternative both to the dangerous and divisive orthodoxies that seem to have captured so much of the religious venture, and to the refusal to embrace a clear identity, that threatens to sweep Liberal Religion into commodified, thumb-sucking irrelevance. It is time for Liberal Religion to declare clearly the faith we hold. The world has a right to expect that of us.