

At Home in the Living Tradition: The Heresies of Unitarian Universalism

by William Cronon

February 19, 2006

A Community Not Just in Space but in Time

As we think about building a new home for this community, it's important to remember that what we do here is not mainly about a building. Far more important than the building in which we worship—even a building as magnificent as this one—is the community we celebrate here. That community exists not just in this room, but in similar rooms all around the world, wherever people embrace the free search for truth and faith and shared humanity. Those values are precious, and never more so than today when they are under assault from so many directions. We gather here to renew our commitment to sustaining them.

Because I stand here before you today not just as a Unitarian, but as a scholar of the past, I want us to remember that the community we affirm spreads out from this room not just in space but in time as well. We gather here as representatives of a long tradition of people who, however much they disagree in the particulars of their beliefs, have shared our search for meaning over many centuries.

When Michael asked me to speak to the congregation this weekend, he said he hoped I would address the heritage that has brought us together in this room. I think Michael believes that the decision we'll be making in the weeks ahead—about whether we can find the means in this small community to take on the very large and expensive burden of building a new physical home for this congregation—is so extraordinary and will require such sacrifice that the only way we can make such a commitment is to recognize that our reason for doing so is larger than ourselves. It is larger than each of us as individuals; larger than this congregation as a community, larger than Unitarian-Universalism as a movement.

To make this kind of sacrifice, we must see ourselves contributing to a great tradition that has survived and flourished because of the vision and sacrifice of those who came before us. It is a way to repay our debts to the past. We therefore build a home not just for ourselves, but to sustain this movement across the years that lie ahead.

What We Don't Believe

I grew up in this church. I attended Sunday School just down the hall in the Loggia. I feel at home here as I do in few other churches. My sense of how a

building, a community, and a set of values can suffuse a room with grace and meaning: I feel these things as strongly here as I do anywhere in the world.

We often say of Unitarian-Universalists that we are non-creedal, that UUs can believe whatever we like about god and morality and truth, that the only constraint on our beliefs is our own conscience. We say this a lot, and I think we truly mean it.

And yet there is a kind of paradox in this, because although in theory UUs can believe whatever we want, we do in fact share some important convictions, and there are certain beliefs from other religions that we are unlikely to embrace in full—indeed, there are religious beliefs we are likely to oppose quite actively. So although we celebrate our open-mindedness and tolerance, in fact there are limits to both.

For instance, although you will certainly be welcome to join and participate in a UU congregation no matter what your beliefs, you are unlikely to *want* be a Unitarian-Universalist if you believe the following:

- There is but one true god, and that god is a jealous god; all other gods are false.
- There is but one source of spiritual authority—a single prophet or priesthood or church or sacred text—that can say what the one true god wants from us.
- Our job is to obey what a religious hierarchy demands of us, deferring to its authority rather than working together to shape our own spiritual vision and religious community.
- Faith is far more important than reason, and reason should fall silent whenever it conflicts with faith.
- Human beings are conceived in sin because of an act of disobedience against God's authority committed in a distant garden long ago, and we are absolutely powerless to redeem ourselves without the intercession of a savior.
- Only those who embrace the one true god can expect salvation.
- Those who do not believe in the one true god are damned and can expect to burn in hellfire for all eternity.

I could go on, but I trust you get my point.

Although a person might hold these convictions and not be actively ostracized in a UU congregation,

it's a little hard to imagine why such individuals would want to join such a congregation, and it would not be at all surprising if both they and the members of such a congregation felt at least a little uncomfortable in each other's company.

This is a way of saying that although we are a non-creedal movement that does not require an act of confession for its followers to declare their commitment to our core principles and beliefs, there clearly are beliefs and principles that Unitarian Universalists do NOT embrace. Despite the way we sometimes joke about ourselves, Unitarian Universalists are not so open-minded that we believe in *everything*, nor are we so tolerant that we treat all religious systems equally.

We are firmer in our convictions and narrower in our beliefs than we sometimes admit to ourselves.

The Oneness of God and the Human Capacity for Good

I originally imagined that my job today would be to give you a whirlwind tour of the history of Unitarian Universalism, sketching the major phases of the movement to help us remember our heritage. There's no time for that, so I want instead just to offer a few observations about the past that have shaped our living tradition.

Perhaps my most important observation is one you've heard before: *we have always been heretics*. Our celebration of individual conscience and our opposition to enforced orthodoxy seem inevitably to draw us into heresy relative to more authoritarian traditions.

Unitarianism and Universalism have embraced so many heresies over the years that we would be here for hours if I catalogued them all. So instead I'll select just four—our main heresies, as it were—that define who we are and what we believe.

Although Unitarianism didn't emerge as a named religious movement until the sixteenth century, and although both it and Universalism didn't begin to resemble their modern forms until the second half of the eighteenth century, one could reasonably say that our core convictions stretch all the way back to late Roman Empire. Our beliefs number among the most ancient and persistent heresies of the Christian church ... which I suppose is a fact in which we can take a rueful sort of pride.

Two of these ancient heresies are worth naming. They can be summarized very simply: we believe in the oneness of god and the human capacity for good.

The first of these heresies is *Arianism*, named for a Libyan Christian named Arius who denied the doctrine of the trinity by arguing that there was only one God, not three. The Council of Nicaea declared Arius a heretic in 325 AD and committed the Christian Church to a belief in the tri-fold nature of God—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—that has been among the defining attributes of most Christian confessions ever since.

Arianism has had other names over the years—most notably *Socinianism* during the Reformation—but its denial of the Christian Trinity has consistently subjected it to fierce persecution. It was for precisely this belief in the unity of God that Michael Servetus—probably our most famous Unitarian martyr—was burned at the stake by John Calvin in 1553.

Our very name, Unitarianism, suggests our roots in this ancient heresy. Our belief in the all-encompassing unity of god has changed and broadened over the years, but it traces back to this dispute about Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

A second ancient heresy to which we can arguably trace our roots is *Pelagianism*, named for a British or Irish Christian named Pelagius who fell afoul of St. Augustine and the early church in the fifth century.

Pelagius essentially denied original sin. He argued that Adam's sin was his alone, and left no taint on subsequent human beings. There was therefore no need for Christ to act as a savior to atone for the original sin of Adam. Children, Pelagius said, are born innocent, so people can choose by their own actions whether or not to become sinners. There is thus no need for baptism. It is possible to live a blameless life without Christ's intervention, and in fact the Mosaic Law of the Hebrew Bible is as sound a guide to good living as the Christian Bible.

Pelagius was condemned as a heretic at the Council of Carthage in 418 AD.

The technical terms of this dispute may seem quaint to those with little interest in the history of the Christian Church, but I hope you can all see the roots of our own convictions in Pelagius's teachings.

My guess is that there are very few people in this room who literally believe that an ancient sin by a man named Adam and a woman named Eve has forever tainted humanity so that only the intercession of a divine savior can expunge that sin and bring us to eternal life. And if we do not believe that all of human history is an atonement for that original sin,

then we are also more inclined to believe that people are responsible for pursuing the good and recognizing wise moral guidance wherever they encounter it, not just in the teachings of a single prophet, no matter how great and good that prophet might be.

These are all recognizably Pelagian beliefs. The heresy has had other names, most notably *Arminianism*, for the Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius who rejected Calvin's belief in predestination by arguing that human beings can achieve grace by their good acts in the world. This is reflected as well in Universalism's belief that a loving god would never condemn people to damnation without regard to their moral conduct.

I won't bore you by elaborating these ancient theological disputes any further. Instead, I'll simply declare that when Christian opponents of Unitarianism and Universalism have branded them as Arian, Pelagian, Socinian, and Arminian heresies, they knew whereof they spoke. We do in fact embrace these heresies, even to this day. We may no longer speak about such matters in terms of the divinity of Christ or the sin of Adam, but we still recognize the deeper truths that underlie this debate:

- The all-encompassing oneness of god, however we understand that word;
- The human capacity for good;
- The possibility of pursuing a shared vision of the good regardless of the religious tradition we follow; and
- Our moral responsibility to serve this vision of the good with our own actions.

All of these are central to our Unitarian Universalist beliefs today. The oneness of god and the human capacity for good remain among the deepest of our core convictions.

Nature, Reason, and Faith

Since time is so short, I'll offer just two other examples of our heretical history, drawn from a much later period. They are:

- faith in the power of human reason; and
- celebration of the wondrous order of nature.

I've already noted that during the Reformation Unitarians got into as much trouble with Protestant Christianity as their ancient predecessors did with the early Church. Their history in North America was less violent, because the modern Unitarian movement emerged in the United States mainly as a schism within New England Congregationalism. The Unitarians wound up controlling many of the

most prominent churches in Boston and its environs—to say nothing of the Harvard Divinity School, which they controlled for much of the nineteenth century.

Although never very numerous, Unitarians constituted the dominant religious movement in significant parts of New England by the early nineteenth century, and included among their number some of the leading American intellectuals of that era. At the same time, Universalism came into being as a more rural, working-class movement that placed less emphasis on the *unity* of god (the core Unitarian belief) than on the goodness of humanity and the loving nature of god.

I will spare you this fascinating but complicated history today.

For now, I want to emphasize the growing influence of the Enlightenment on Unitarian and Universalist thought: the belief that no received wisdom should be immune from critical scrutiny, that one of the best ways to understand the world is to subject it to empirical investigation and reasoned analysis.

In religion, this had several consequences.

Scholars began to study the Bible as a historical document created over many centuries, not as a unified text revealed at a single moment. One result was a growing willingness to understand Jewish and Christian traditions as historical expressions of their time and place, and to explore other religious traditions, especially in Asia. At the same time, there was also a growing sense that religious faith should be pursued by the reasoned inquiry of free individuals following the dictates of their conscience or “inner light.”

Enlightenment thinkers saw the physical universe as an expression of natural laws that could be understood and applied through the use of science. This encouraged a new Deistic sense of the godhead as an all-powerful force ordering the universe but not necessarily intervening in individual human lives as a personal deity. Deism was matched by a romantic impulse to seek out the divine in nature, so that human beings wishing to know divine order and wonder might find these sacred values in the natural world.

Darwin's theory of evolution expressed the nineteenth-century tendency to understand the world historically, with everything in society and nature alike experiencing change over time. Evolutionary thought came easily to Unitarians and Universalists. To the extent that Darwinian evolution seemed to imply the possibility of material and moral progress, it affirmed the essential optimism of Unitarian and

Universalist beliefs. This optimistic faith in the innate goodness of humanity and the possibility of reforming society led many Unitarians and Universalists to become some of the leading social reformers of their day, whether fighting for the abolition of slavery, the rights of women, the well-being of workers, or otherwise working for social justice.

Finally, by the early twentieth century, this long dialogue with Enlightenment thought led many Unitarians and Universalists toward an increasingly secular view of the universe, with science and critical thought seeming to serve as the most reliable guides to social and moral improvement. This secular impulse probably reached its high-water mark with the "Humanist Manifesto" of 1933 that Michael read earlier in the service.

While many more conservative religious traditions had trouble adjusting to these Enlightenment ideas, and even opposed them as heresies, Unitarians and Universalists embraced them with genuine enthusiasm, seeing no necessary conflict between reason and faith. Although it might at times seem difficult to reconcile the competing insights of reason and faith, Unitarian Universalists take it as an article of *our* faith that they can and *must* be reconciled.

Which is just to say that, once again, what other traditions experience as heresy we have long embraced as the best paths to truth.

A Non-Creedal Creed

I've named four great heresies that other traditions have opposed and persecuted, but that we have welcomed as paths to truth:

- The oneness of god;
- The human capacity for goodness;
- The power of reason;
- The wondrous order of nature.

Ours may be a non-creedal creed, but it is still a kind of creed, and these are among its most important tenets.

I know of few more eloquent statements of our non-creedal creed than William Channing Gannett's "Things Commonly Believed Among Us," which you heard me read earlier in the service. It's worth remembering that the purpose of Gannett's 1887 statement was to resolve a conflict between more orthodox Unitarian congregations who feared that the movement was losing touch with its Christian roots, and more liberal Unitarian congregations who opposed Christian orthodoxy.

Our own "Bond of Union," adopted in 1879,

reflects this controversy between conservative and liberal congregations: its reference to First Unitarian Society as "a religious congregation in the spirit of Jesus of Nazareth" may grate on some people in this room who see themselves as non-Christians, but in 1879 the careful avoidance of the word "Christ" at the moment of our founding marked this congregation as liberal and free-thinking.

Listen to Gannett's core principles again and notice how familiar they still feel more than a century later.

"We believe that to love the Good and to live the Good is the supreme thing in religion;

Which is to say, we judge religion by how it encourages its followers to live and act rather than by the words it makes them say. The human struggle to know and serve the good is central to all religious faiths and is a common ground on which people of good will can meet each other despite the differences that divide them.

"We hold reason and conscience to be final authorities in matters of religious belief;

Which is to say, we have more trust in free thought and individual conscience than we do in church hierarchies and imposed orthodoxies. As a corollary, we believe in tolerating those whose beliefs differ from our own, seeking to learn from them as we hope they will seek to learn from us.

"We honor the Bible and all inspiring scripture, old and new;

Which is to say, we honor the profound religious and ethical truths of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, but we do not honor them exclusively; whatever moves us to wonder, inspires our search for the good, and guides us toward right action should be equally honored among us.

"We revere Jesus, and all holy souls that have taught men [and women] truth and righteousness and love, as prophets of religion.

Which is to say, we celebrate the teachings of a great man named Jesus, but we also celebrate all other religious teachers who have also offered guidance toward truth and right action and love.

"We believe in the growing nobility of [humanity];

Which is to say, we do not believe in original sin, and we do not believe that human beings are born innately evil. We DO believe that human beings can improve themselves and achieve religious grace through the force of their convictions and the power of their good acts.

“We trust the unfolding Universe as beautiful, beneficent, unchanging Order; to know this order is truth; to obey it is right and liberty and stronger life....;

Which is to say, we do not draw a sharp distinction between the material world and the spiritual world. We delight in discovering natural laws and religious truths that find expression in the historical drama of humanity and the unfolding universe. Indeed, one might even say that Gannett’s “unfolding Universe” is among our dearest names for God.

“We believe that we ought to join hands and work to make the good things better ..., counting nothing good for self that is not good for all....;

Which is to say, we believe we have an obligation to serve the good, and that by serving the good we can improve the world. Furthermore, we do this together, not alone. Although we cherish freedom of conscience and attach great value to individual human beings, we also honor community and social justice. Individuals who pursue their own self interest without reference to the common good violate one of the deepest values we see shared across so many religious traditions: to love one’s neighbor as oneself.

“We worship One-in-All—that life whence suns and stars derive their orbits and the soul of [humanity] its Ought, that Light which lighteth every man [and woman] that cometh into the world, giving us power to become the sons [and daughters] of God, that Love with which our souls commune.”

Which is to say, we believe that god has many names, though we reveal our Christian heritage when we find ourselves especially drawn to visions of a god whose name is love. Whatever fills the

world with numinous meaning, whatever makes us tremble in awe and wonder at the glory of the universe, whatever makes us sense the unity all of things and the moral imperative to honor that unity: whatever provokes this passion in us is yet another of the ten thousand names we call our god.

Building a New Home for the Living Tradition

For myself, I find this non-creedal creed of William Channing Gannett, these “Things Commonly Believed Among Us,” profoundly moving, for it puts into words some of my own deepest convictions, beliefs that give meaning to my world and motivate my actions as powerfully as any I know.

As I stand before you in this room, I know that one of the reasons each of us gathers here is to remind ourselves that we are not alone in holding such convictions. We are stronger sharing and defending them together than any one of us could ever be defending them alone. We are here to remember that we are part of a great heretical tradition affirming the oneness of god and the human capacity for good, the power of the mind and the wonder of nature, reaching back through the centuries in humanity’s long search for meaning.

As we contemplate the future of our own congregation, and of the physical home that shelters us and sustains the luminous flame of this chalice, we would do well to look to this living tradition as the inspiration for what we choose to do. We build here a home not just for ourselves, but for the ideas and values we cherish, the “Things Commonly Believed Among Us” that we wish to pass on as our gift not just to each other and our children, but to those who will light this chalice when we ourselves are long gone.

Reading 1: Theodore Parker, "The Transient and the Permanent in Christianity," 1841

To turn away from the disputes of the Catholics and the Protestants, of the Unitarian and the Trinitarian, of Old School and New School, and come to the plain words of Jesus of Nazareth, Christianity is a simple thing; very simple.... The only creed it lays down is the great truth which springs up spontaneous in the holy heart—there is a God.... The only form it demands is a divine life; doing the best thing, in the best way, from the highest motives.... Its sanction is the voice of God in your heart; the perpetual presence of Him, who made us and the stars over our head; Christ and the Father abiding within us. All this is very simple; a little child can understand it; very beautiful, the loftiest mind can find nothing so lovely.... Examine the particular duties it enjoins; humility, reverence, sobriety, gentleness, charity, forgiveness, fortitude, resignation, faith, and active love; try the whole extent of Christianity so well summed up in the command, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind—thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself"....

Reading 2: The Humanist Manifesto, 1933

The time has come for widespread recognition of the radical changes in religious beliefs throughout the modern world. The time is past for mere revision of traditional attitudes. Science and economic change have disrupted the old beliefs. Religions the world over are under the necessity of coming to terms with new conditions created by a vastly increased knowledge and experience....

We therefore affirm the following:

Religious humanists regard the universe as self-existing and not created....

Humanism believes that man is a part of nature and that he has emerged as a result of a continuous process....

Humanism asserts that the nature of the universe depicted by modern science makes unacceptable

any supernatural or cosmic guarantees of human values....

We assert that humanism will: (a) affirm life rather than deny it; (b) seek to elicit the possibilities of life, not flee from them; and (c) endeavor to establish the conditions of a satisfactory life for all, not merely for the few....

So stand the theses of religious humanism....

Reading 3: William Channing Gannett, "Things Commonly Believed Among Us," 1887

All names that divide "religion" are to us of little consequence compared with religion itself. Whoever loves Truth and lives the Good is, in a broad sense, of our religious fellowship; whoever loves the one or lives the other better than ourselves is our teacher, whatever church or age he may belong to....

"We believe that to love the Good and to live the Good is the supreme thing in religion;

"We hold reason and conscience to be final authorities in matters of religious belief;

"We honor the Bible and all inspiring scripture, old and new;

"We revere Jesus, and all holy souls that have taught men [and women] truth and righteousness and love, as prophets of religion.

"We believe in the growing nobility of [humanity];

"We trust the unfolding Universe as beautiful, beneficent, unchanging Order; to know this order is truth; to obey it is right and liberty and stronger life....;

"We believe that we ought to join hands and work to make the good things better..., counting nothing good for self that is not good for all....;

"We worship One-in-All—that life whence suns and stars derive their orbits and the soul of [humanity] its Ought, that Light which lighteth every man [and woman] that cometh into the world, giving us power to become the sons [and daughters] of God. that Love with which our souls commune."