

RELIGIOUS HISTORY YOU CAN UUSE:
The Mother of All (American) Religion

— by Jaco B. ten Hove — Paint Branch UU Church — May 14, 2006 —

Follows Choir singing “Woyaya,” from whence the opening quote is drawn.

INTRODUCTION to READING:

“It will be hard, we know, and the road will be muddy and rough. But we’ll get there, heaven knows how we will get there, but we know we will.”

Walking together along the road of history, as we do, at times can indeed be muddy and rough. Our lives are often a tangled web of past influences, personal and cultural. We exist not in isolation from what has gone before us, and we try to learn the lessons of history, which we then try to project into a hopeful future that is stronger because of our insights.

That will be my endeavor here: to both look backward for some fruitful perspective and, based on that learning, propose a path forward, or at least point in a direction of hope, challenging as it may be.

As those of you who’ve heard me speak on UU history before may know, I prefer to add some contemporary relevance to presentations of our religious past, and today will be no different. I have an overarching theme for this series of occasional sermons, called “Religious History You Can UUse,” and I hope you will again leave here better able to articulate your own connections to what I find is a noble and valuable heritage.

And today, we’ll be delving into the mutual impact of the early Unitarian side of our liberal religious ancestry and the basic American identities of individualism and freedom, which are certainly still a relevant factor in our 21st century culture. My premise is that we UUs today are the too-often neglectful inheritors of the most truly American religious impulses, a lineage I shall diagram shortly.

But first, let me draw on a rich source for today’s material, the esteemed historian Conrad

Wright. I have assembled and edited a passage of his, to lift up a key pivot point that has deeply informed both our American and UU identities, even as it has increasingly become a bone of contention that demands our awareness.

We will hear Part 2 of this reading later, to bookend my sermon; I think his comments are that intriguing. In Part 1 he takes us back to the origins of our culture on this continent and then quickly grabs our contemporary throats...

A two-part READING from
Walking Together: Polity and Participation In Unitarian Universalist Churches
by Conrad Wright, 1979, pg. 159-166

Edited conclusion of the author's final essay, "Individualism in Historical Perspective" (*italics mine*):

PART 1:

...The medieval (European) concept of society was (based) on a relatively stable relationship between population and resources, specifically *land*. When the first settlers came to Massachusetts, they brought with them...social institutions and values that had been functional back home (in that kind of stability). But the presence of a vast untamed wilderness transformed familiar institutions.

(Groups) planted small settlements on the edge of the wilderness; (and) perhaps only some sort of (collective) undertaking could have done (this). But afterwards, only *individual* initiative could conquer that wilderness... As a strand or motif in modern Western culture, individualism is intimately connected with the peopling of the North American continent...

(It) took time for the presence of land in great abundance to alter traditional institutions and patterns of thought. But by the eighteenth century, the concept of the autonomous individual was well established in American social theory, political theory, and church polity...

There is an ominous implication (here, that the) situation that fostered individualism (— i.e., abundant resources—) will be a *temporary* one, and so the philosophy of individualism will sooner or later become dysfunctional if not obsolete...

What I am suggesting is that the value system that liberals have taken for granted... is in need of overhaul along with everything else... (I)ndividualism... becomes dysfunctional as limits to growth come into play. When one moves from an era of abundance to the threat of scarcity, individualism can no longer be the guiding principle in social relationships, or else one ends up in the (classic) war of each against each...

(For instance, as) long as there was plenty of codfish on the Grand Banks, and there were only a few fishing boats exploiting this natural reserve, individual initiative operated to increase the supply of commodities available for human support; the philosophy of individualism was functional under such circumstances.

(However, when) floating fish factories swarmed over the Atlantic fisheries, and each operator sought an increased share of the catch, over-fishing diminished the stock available to all. The pursuit of self-interest by each party resulted in loss, not gain.

A social environment conditioned by the fact of ecological scarcity is not going to appeal very much to those of us (individualists) who have enjoyed the twilight glow of the age of affluence...

The Mother of All (American) Religion — JBtH

Conrad Wright suggested—almost 20 years ago—that despite our formative American grounding, literally, on “the philosophy of individualism,” it can no longer be “the guiding principle in social relationships,” because of the crowded conditions of our current world. “Dysfunctional,” he called it.

Hmmm. This could be a problem, since individual freedom is the cornerstone of both Unitarianism on this continent and the country that came of age with it. So I resist the logic of his position, but it compels me nonetheless to at least look backward and examine this double heritage of ours.

Usually when I say something like “this double heritage of ours,” I’m referring to the strands of Unitarian and Universalist history that merged in 1961 to become what we are today. But in this exploration, Universalism is in the background, and the historical

partnership to which I refer is even more elemental.

These United States were forged, especially in colonial times, from the same philosophical steel that shaped the Unitarian thrust, even though that particular theological name, per se, didn't get much airtime until well after the American Revolution. Nevertheless, I will endeavor to show how the two movements share formative roots.

It may be a stretch to suggest that UUism today holds the franchise as “The Mother of All American Religion”—but maybe not. Certainly there was a strong indigenous religious culture already here when various Europeans came and claimed the land for themselves. But at least as much as “the philosophy of individualism” is ingrained in our national character, one can also argue that the rise and evolution of Unitarianism, which clearly advocates a similar philosophy religiously, is more than a bit player in how this drama unfolded in history.

And perhaps our destinies are thus also linked. One can reasonably view some of the current challenges to our country and our religion through the same lens of an individualism that has overreached its context, as Conrad Wright suggested. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's first journey back to the 17th century to consider a few pertinent angles on our cultural and religious origins.

What the first European settlers did in New England holds a key to what has unfolded since. The Protestant Puritans in *olde* England were active Dissenters against the dominant state religion of Anglicanism (The Church of England), and the Pilgrims were the most fiercely separatist of the Puritans. Thus their courageous emigration, first to Holland for a dozen years, then to the New World across the Atlantic—seeking a place to practice their “purified” version of Christianity unhindered by oppressive majorities.

Settling on these shores, they may not have been a very embraceable group—in fact, Puritans were generally extremely strict, fear-driven and exclusive—but they set in motion an early American revolution that overthrew 400 years of Christian thinking and practice back across the Pond, where government was normally hand-in-glove with a state-sponsored religion, usually called theocracy (“rule by theology”).

And this early American creativity happened almost in spite of their best efforts. The Pilgrims came seeking religious freedom, yes, but they really only cared about it for themselves. And they proceeded to set up their life together the only way they knew how—as a society ruled by religion. However, the unique circumstances of this adventure slowly began to work *against* theocracy, even from the beginning.

There was, of course, the matter of their mere survival, which required an utmost solidarity, so particulars of theology got less attention than the practical aspects of uniting together for mutual support. They were all of one spiritual mind, anyway, so they focused less on what they *believed* and more on *how* they were to be together, to make it through another winter.

This was aided by a fierce articulation of their common commitments, beginning with the formative Mayflower Compact of 1620, which declared

We...doe...covenant and combine our selves together into a civill body politick, for our better ordering and preservation and furtherance of...the generall good of the Colonie, unto which we promise all due submission and obedience...

I can imagine how inspired these pioneers had to be, so far away in an unknown and awesome land. There must have been some pretty dramatic preaching goin' on among them! Early on [1630], John Winthrop's famous lines resounded:

"We must be knit together in this work as one... we must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities; for the supply of others' necessities, we must uphold a familiar Commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality; we must delight in each other, make others' conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our Commission and Community in our work...as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace..."

The Salem Covenant of 1629 contained an evocative phrase that has echoed through the centuries since: "We doe bind our selves...to walke together." The rest of the Covenant included much appeal to the Lord, etc., but it had no statement of belief, per se. Since this first generation of settlers was already quite cohesive religiously, what really mattered for

their endeavor was a unity of practical purpose—that they *behave* as one body, and commit to “walking together.”

This emphasis on the *process* of solidifying how they would live together in their new and fragile religious community, without stressing the theological uniformity they all assumed, is a prime Puritan legacy for the future of American liberty, *although they would not have wanted it so*. This was not their intention, but it happened.

Meanwhile, they set up a new governance system that would also well outlive their name. They had seen enough oppression by Anglican and Catholic hierarchies to want to try something different, so in this new venture they vested authority in the local church alone—with important structures for collaboration *among* the churches, but no power to dictate to any other group.

This effort was formalized in the still influential Cambridge Platform of 1648, which was, in the words of another notable historian [Perry Miller], “a basic document in the American tradition ... the pioneer formulation of the principle that a corporate body is created by the consent of constituent members.” One encyclopedia [Bartleby.com] also added this telling comment about the Cambridge Platform: “It had little to do with matters of doctrine and belief.”

The Puritan churches quickly got too far spread apart on all that expansive land for any external authority to be able to control them anyway. So the emerging system known as Congregational Polity, or Congregationalism, was a fair recognition of both their reactive idealism and the reality of their situation. Institutionally, it is a parallel philosophy to individualism, here declaring that autonomous congregations are their own authority.

Now, to my not unbiased eye, the most authentically American religious experience is the one that unfolded directly from the Puritans’ innovative combination of these two methods: an emphasis on covenantal relationship and organization by local congregational polity, *both without creedal requirements*.

Note again that these first and formative Anglo Americans organized themselves not around *what* they worshiped or believed but *how* they agreed to be together. By not dictating specific beliefs, it allowed room for new ideas to prosper. This was a radically

new and different way to construe western religion, which set the stage for the appearance of our also-radical national value of liberty.

Even though it was resisted mightily and never rose to any real prominence, this formative non-creedal field would, over time, inspire the flowering of greater and greater diversity, primarily because it was not a seedbed made of creedal statements. This was decidedly not what the Puritans had in mind, and no one can be accusing of genius in creating it, but it happened and is nonetheless an important thread of American originality.

And it went this way mostly because of all the land. The Puritans *tried* to maintain uniformity of belief in their Massachusetts Bay Colony and they fiercely expelled those who disagreed with them. With some notable and dire exceptions, such as the hanging of four Quakers and the infamous Witch Trials, the Puritans generally just banished those who couldn't or wouldn't be "knit together" in the work of the Community.

But they also were powerless to prevent those individuals from simply moving away and plying their divergent ideas in a new location, often forming their own communities, as the Baptists did down the road in Rhode Island. Congregational Polity provided no recourse to contain the spread of diversity. And the American pioneering spirit grew—in *religious* directions as well as in geography.

However, as mentioned in the reading, moving outward into this wilderness required an individualistic style, which cultivated that other deep thread of our national personality. Almost immediately, we start to feel the abiding tension between the individual and community that has characterized so much of American (and Unitarian) life every since.

By the year 1700 their natural inclination to enforce religious uniformity was widely frustrated and the Puritan culture began to change under the influence of an emerging diversity. But even as succeeding generations of Puritans naturally wavered from theological purity, and more religious groups began to spring up, there was still the guiding covenant to help them "walk together," despite the steady growth of American individualism. So the Congregational church system was able to stay together, even as Puritanism faded.

And it is from that system that the Unitarians later separated, for all sorts of theological reasons that I haven't even begun to mention here today. That story, and the rich unfolding of 18th century colonial religious history, leading to the really big covenant—the US Constitution—can be told another time.

But we UUs have inherited the two most authentically American strands of that early original religion: connection by covenantal relationship and organization by local congregational polity, *both without creedal requirements*. Here is where we can trace our inheritance as religious liberals (named so because we affirm and uphold religious liberty).

And even though the pious Puritans probably turn over in their graves when they hear me say it, Unitarian Universalism is as close to the Mother of All American Religion as it gets today. Okay, I grant that the Congregationalists, now part of the United Church of Christ (UUC), are still around, certainly, and are some of our friendliest mainstream allies.

Congregationalism does have the historic name and stops just short of a creed, but maintains a primarily Christian stance and does not welcome theological diversity outside the essential teachings of Jesus Christ. So I guess I consider us to be more reflective of the authentic American impulse toward creativity and liberty. But I wouldn't mind sharing the title with them—*not that anyone else is paying any attention to either of us these days*.

Which brings me back 'round to the challenges facing both our tiny religion and our fractious country. Many challenges there are, and not all spring from unbridled individualism, but it is increasingly easy to see the detrimental part played by what used to be a virtue—good ol' rugged individualism, which won the West, etc.—although we might relate more to the version of individualism inspired by Enlightenment reason.

If Conrad Wright is correct about the conditions that gave rise to our vaunted individualism, and those conditions have indeed changed dramatically, are we really ready to release our hold on this most American (and Unitarian) characteristic? Another way to ask this might be: What happens to “the philosophy of individualism” on a crowded planet when there is no more abundance of open land into which new diversity

can move? Is this era now more suited to theocracy than liberty?

Our innovative American system of constitutionally protected religious liberty is still vulnerable to attacks from theocratic quarters that would have us revert back to a religiously-based government. The eminent church historian Sidney Mead put it well, by calling our American project, “The Lively Experiment,” which is the title of his magnificently instructive book. The jury is still out on this national “experiment,” and plenty of loud voices are clamoring for a verdict that I don’t think we will like.

The *country’s* destiny is large. More fitting in our grasp might be this inquiry: Whither Unitarian Universalism in the 21st century? Will we adapt and grow—or shrink and disappear? Will we honor our heritage and find language to articulate a new version of non-creedal religious liberty appropriate to crowded times? Can we effectively model how to flourish amid diversity—with an *evolving* individualism?

Or will the loud, fear-based, exclusivist religious forces on the right carry the day because we can’t get our act together to make a difference, drowning in our individualist anachronisms? Are we stuck in the mode recognized by Ben Franklin when he suggested, “The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results”?

Now, I hate to just leave you with a bunch of nagging questions unanswered, so we’ll return to Conrad Wright and finish off the two-part reading with the very last portion of his book, *Walking Together*, in which he tried to answer his own questions, with provocative, if skeletal challenges. See what you think...

PART 2 of READING [after sermon]:

From *Walking Together: Polity and Participation*
In Unitarian Universalist Churches by Conrad Wright, 1979, pg. 159-166
Edited conclusion of the author’s final essay, “Individualism in Historical Perspective”:

So where does this leave liberal religion, as we have known it? On the verge of irrelevancy? Or still with some chance of adaptation and survival?

...The infinity of the private individual was plausible enough on the shores of Walden Pond, when there was no one closer than Concord Village a mile away; it is hollow

rhetoric on the streets of Calcutta or in the barrios of Caracas...

What is required...is a major paradigm change... The axioms of individualistic liberalism now no longer provide a certain guide to political decision, economic development, or socially responsible behavior.

(So how might) religious liberals...play a significant role in shaping the new age?

... First of all, the heirs of the liberal tradition will have to re-emphasize the religious community as something requiring both commitment and discipline. This...means a rejection of the Jeffersonian concept of religion as a purely private concern; it means no more of the Emersonian declaration that walking along in grove and glen, however pleasant, is an adequate substitute for religious fellowship... (T)here will be...a recognition that to be truly human is not to withdraw inward but to know how to relate to others...

Second, there must be a rediscovery of worship as a (collective) act, one in which the liturgical preferences held individually by the members of the group can never be wholly accommodated. The existence of a group imposes a discipline on its members in the rituals of worship, as in other things.

Finally... liberals will have to (re-)learn how to use the principles of individualism... as a rallying cry against the abuses of power in institutional structures... (but without the expectation that) greater freedom for the individual will necessarily result.

So the fate of religious liberalism rests with us. We may cling to the old paradigm, (by proclaiming absolute) individual freedom of belief...and neglect(ing collective) worship... Then we may dwindle in numbers and influence until we end up a museum piece, like the Shakers, the Schwenkfelders, and the Swedenborgians.

But on the other hand, we may learn how to relate to new social forces, to master a new paradigm. If so, we may not simply assure our own survival as a segment of the Church Universal, but we may even contribute something to the humanizing of what threatens to be a far less comfortable world than the one you and I have known.

* * * * *