

WHAT IN THE WORLD IS LIBERAL RELIGION?

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INTRODUCTION:

You know we use a lot of words, phrases, and terms rather casually around here. One word that we use rather casually is "liberal" and another is "religion". In our mission statement we say that one of our goals is to become a beacon and a voice of liberal religion in our community. I think that is a very worthy goal. I also believe that it is important for us to be able to define and use our language clearly and correctly. What do we mean by "liberal religion"? Recently I was asked by a prospective member, "If I join the Unitarian Universalists Church, will I be joining the Democratic party?" This was a serious question. I told him no, absolutely not. But later I realized that sometimes it must seem that way and that it shows our own confusion about the difference between liberal politics and liberal religion. I think that today would be a good time to talk about the meaning and importance of "liberal religion."

The word "liberal" is related to and derived from the same root as words like liberate, liberation, and liberty. All these words come from the original Latin word "Iiber". Liber was the Roman god of Growth. Liberare in the Latin meant "to set free" or "to deliver something freely" i.e. without obligation. Liberate means "to be set free, no longer a slave nor an indentured servant, but a freedman." Our current word "liberty" of course meant freedom, freedom from the King, freedom from the Roman Church, and freedom from slavery. Remember all these words and terms come from the same basic root of "Iiberare", to be set free. Liberal means to be set free, to not be a slave, to have freedom.

Religion is a word we have discussed before. To refresh our memories, religion comes originally from the word "ligament" meaning to "tie one part to another" to attach, just like ligaments in the body. Religion means to re- connect, to re-unite. Religion also implies a "strong connection" or "to bind together strongly." Liberal Religion means "to freely choose to connect and to freely attach to one's own faith and one's own philosophy." Liberal religion is a freely chosen faith, not one chosen for you by a King, not one chosen for you by the culture in which you live, not one dictated by a priest or a church, not one imposed by parents or teachers. A liberal religion is one freely chosen by one's own conscience and mind. This is one reason it is difficult to state to

others "what Unitarian Universalists believe", because each of us chooses for our self what we believe.

Well now, does all that freedom mean that liberally religious people have nothing in common? Not at all, although our own confusion, fuzziness, and fussiness sometimes makes it seem so. We do have a common history of liberal religious thinking. The struggle for religious freedom goes back at least to the beginnings of the Christian church. Great arguments and debates occurred around many important religious ideas. One of the great debates was the argument over the divinity of Jesus and the concept of the Trinity. The basic debate was whether the orthodox position would become the belief that Jesus was "the son of God" and was "one with God the Father", or whether he was "a son of God" and one of the significant prophets. Some church leaders said "The Son of God" and some said "a son of God." The Trinitarians outvoted the Unitarians and their position became Christian orthodoxy. The Unitarians, the liberals, became the minority, and as the Roman church became stronger, the religious liberals were no longer just the minority, they were considered heretics. Another major debate was about who could participate in salvation. The liberal universalists said that everyone would be saved and the conservatives said that only those who "believe in Jesus as the one and only savior would be saved." The conservative's won the debate by a large majority of the votes and the universalists became the minority and slowly were also considered unorthodox heretics. Both the unitarians, who believed that there was one God by many names, and the universalists, who believed that all people are connected and all are loved by the creator, were cast out of Christianity, persecuted, and sometimes killed. This is part of our common liberal religious heritage as Unitarian Universalists, a heritage of commitment to free thought, freedom of belief, and freedom of worship.

There are certain clear distinctions in the worship service in a UU church and a main line Christian denomination. Many of our churches have varying styles of worship, but one thing is common, we are a non-creedal religion. What does that mean? When I grew up as a Methodist we said an orthodox creed every Sunday, which was also repeated in almost all most all mainline Protestant churches. As children we memorized the "Apostles Creed." "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth: and in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; the third day he rose from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, from thence he will come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the

forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen." In order to join most orthodox churches, you must swear this creed or a similar creed stating that you agree with these orthodox positions. Let me read it again slowly so that you can feel what I mean by a creedal religion. Unitarian Universalists as a liberal religion set us free from having to swear that we believe these things. You may if you wish but you do not have to, you can even pick and choose, as a member of our Fellowship you may believe all these doctrines, none of them, or those that you freely choose. When you join you are not required to swear that you believe any orthodox theological position dictated by the religious council of the Unitarian Universalist denomination. You are expected to use your own mind and follow your own conscience. Believe me, in this culture of Glynn County, Georgia, USA that is a liberal religious position.

Another facet of liberal religion that is common to us all is freedom and equality for all people. We have a long history of actively fighting for freedom of thought, freedom of speech, freedom of movement, and freedom of worship. Liberal religious leaders came to this country seeking freedom from domination by both the Roman Church and the Church of England. Liberal religious thinkers and activists campaigned for and fought for the abolition of slavery (and still do!). From the 1860's to the 1960's liberating religious people became enlightened to the "social gospel." This liberal religious movement was based on the belief that religion is not just about one's personal relationship to God or loyalty to a church. Liberals believe that religion should be involved in making the lives of people better in this life, not in the life here-after. The Social Gospel led to social action. Religious liberals of all faiths have supported religious activities to abolish slavery, to build hospitals for all people, to provide quality housing for all people, to do away with segregation, to get rid of child labor, to allow women to vote, and to change all laws that support prejudice of any kind. Religious conservatism has focused predominantly on the individual's spiritual relationship to God, the individual's loyalty to orthodox beliefs, and loyalty to an organized church. Religious conservatism focuses on the inner life of the individual and the life to come after death. Liberal religious clergy and laity have proudly led in the effort to make religion relevant to the every day lives of all people. Remember, liberal religion means to set people free, free to think, believe and worship as they choose. This includes supporting voting rights for all people, equal education for all, and equality before the law for every person.

Here are some of the basic concepts that religious liberals of many faith groups hold dear. They are not required, they are not unanimously agreed to, but they are central concepts of liberal religious thinking.

1. Respect for the interconnectedness of the entire world, our own galaxy, and indeed the universe. We have a reverence and respect for all of nature, for all life, and for the mystery of the entire universe.
2. An open-mindedness to the future of scientific discovery. From our commitment to the use of reason and research, we have supported the discovery of surgery, of autopsy, abortion, and stem cell research. These positions grow out of our liberal religious position of the importance of reason and open-mindedness. We believe in the constant search for new knowledge, new solutions, new connections, and new truths wherever they may lead us.
3. We expect tough, complex decision-making, based on mature ethical thinking and responsible, kind choices. Here is a story about people who think life is just about trusting in the Lord. (A man was trapped on his roof in a flood. Three times as the water rose to his door, then his windows and finally his ceiling, a boat came by with rescuers asking him to get in the boat. Each time he said he would "just trust in the Lord". He finally drowned and went to heaven where he angrily asked to speak to God. When he got an audience he asked the Lord why he didn't save him when he prayed so hard and had such a strong faith. God said, "I sent a boat for you three times but you would not get in the boat." That man had a simple, dependent, very orthodox solution to life's problems: just trust in God. Liberals think life is more complex than that. Some people may think that liberal religion is easy and simple. To quote one of my former psychiatric colleagues who grew up Roman Catholic, "Following the dictates and beliefs of the church is 'candy-assed' compared to trying to learn to think for yourself." I sometimes long for the days when I believed that reading the Bible or offering a prayer would answer my questions or solve my problems. Liberal religion is not for sissies, there are no simple answers, there is no magical solution, and no one, not even god, is going to step in and fix it for you. You have to use your brain, your emotions, your experience and your intuition -- and sometimes that is not enough.
4. Liberal religion is focused on the present. We respect the past and want to learn from it. We look to the future with hope for new discoveries in science, sociology, psychology, and biology. But we do not worship the past. I am not particularly interested in the virginity of Mother Mary, but I care a lot about equality for women and respect for their own decision-making. I am not as interested in the miracles of Jesus as I am the message of Jesus that we should love one another. The future to me is not about a life hereafter, it is about the quality of life of my progeny and the future of all people on the earth. I care passionately about the kind of world we will leave to them. Will the water be fit to drink? Will the air be fit to breathe? Will the food be edible? Liberal religious thinking is focused on the present, the here and now, not a romanticized past and not some magical future. That is why I titled

this sermon, "What in the World is liberal religion?" I believe it is in the real world, with real people, struggling with difficult questions and complex issues, that religious activity occurs. Religious activity is feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, visiting the sick and imprisoned, clothing the naked, educating the uneducated, and housing the homeless. As Jesus, a true liberal prophet said, "If you do it to anyone of these in need you do it to me, for we are all one." Amen. (Now let us discuss liberal religion together. Then we will have coffee and refreshments).

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