

We Unitarian Universalists don't tend to spend much time with our history. Maybe, without knowing it, we've inherited the tendency to distance ourselves from the more traditional thoughts that led to the moment of our time. Perhaps we've unknowingly inherited the tendency to place a great deal of emphasis on our own thought processes, believing them to be superior, more rational, better informed, more aligned with current reality, than the positions held by those who have come before.

I want to remind us however, no man, no person, is an island. None of us sprung up out of nowhere as isolated individuals. We all have histories. We all came from somewhere and have been heavily influenced by that place, influenced by those with whom we grew up. We've all been influenced by the times in which we find ourselves. This is true whether we think positively or negatively about those circumstances.

We all come to this place, here today, from varying circumstances, with varying belief systems. Because we are here together, we can assume our beliefs have more in common than they diverge. That said, we do have our differences...believe me, I know, I'm confronted with those differences on a regular basis.

Commonness and differences are the hallmark of our religious history. Universalism and Unitarianism have always had a good deal in common, yet, with very real differences. Both grew up during the same timeframe. Both stretched accepted Christianity by insisting upon applying reason to religious interpretations. They largely shared views on God, Christ, reason and scripture.

Unitarianism grew out of the well established Congregational churches in New England, whose membership was literate, cultured and financially well positioned. Universalists on the other hand grew out of various denominations, with a large percentage coming out of the Baptist Churches. Their membership was largely less educated and lower class.

In short, class was the greatest line of demarcation between the two developing belief systems during the 1700's and well into the 1800s. Unitarians with relative privilege were more open to seeking inspiration from outside the bible; they were more comfortable with scientific and developing philosophical thought. Universalists saw the Holy Spirit operating within its ranks, without the need for intellectualization. They held more tightly to biblical interpretation.

The greatest difference in beliefs centered around the issue of salvation. Culturally and financially well-situated Unitarians placed great weight on the notion that man was able to earn salvation with their own efforts. While fundamentally optimistic in their outlook, Universalist placed greater focus on God's loving concern for his creatures and a belief that all could be reconciled with God.

By use of free will, the Unitarians could accept that man might choose not to be reconciled with God. Universalist couldn't countenance the thought. It's been said that the Universalist believed God to be too good to damn his people, while the Unitarians thought themselves too good to be damned.

Universalism was seeded in America, in large measure, by John Murray, who landed at Good Luck, N.J. in 1770, where his ship from England had run aground. He was seeking to start a new life after the death of his wife and son, excommunication from the Methodist church and a stint in debtor's prison. It so happened that a man by the name of Thomas Potter had built a church, waiting for a preacher to arrive.

He invited Murray to preach once he learned he had done some preaching in England. Murray refused but eventually agreed on the condition that the ship not get free first. Murray had reservations because he had given up on church after being kicked out of the church for preaching universalists ideas.

Murray preached on universal Grace. He impressed not only his audience, but set himself on a career of preaching. Shortly after the service, the ship came free and Murray sailed off to New York and taking his message of Universalism up and down the eastern seaboard. He established the first Universalist church in Gloucester MA.

While Murray may have seeded Universalism in America, Hosea Ballou became its leading proponent. Ballou had a 35 year ministry in Boston and published the seminal work, A Treatise on Atonement. Ballou grew up in the poor household of his father, a Baptist farmer and preacher. He had little formal education but was a creative and original thinker.

As a young man he pondered the question of how a good God could condemn humankind, made in his own image, to damnation? Over time, he reasoned his way to Universalism. He concluded God was love, a benevolent God that loved mankind and sent Jesus as a model of love. Ballou fundamentally turned the concept of atonement around.

Instead of mankind atoning for their sins in order to reconcile with God, he argued God's love, ultimately, would redeem all people from sin.

It's been said that Ballou "believed that more damage was done to the religion of Jesus by the Christians' propensity for anathematizing their opponents" than by applying reason to Christian theology.

I dare say, what Ballou believed in the nineteenth century remains true today. Christians do themselves great damage by demonizing those who have a different worldview than they. I'd go even further and say the way some Christians practice their faith does a great disservice to the Jesus story and concept of a loving God.

Our nation seems to be in great disarray. There is great fear and anguish out there. There is anger and retribution. There is what can objectively be described as ugly, mean-spiritedness. Perhaps these are understandable reactions to a paralyzed political climate, terrorism, gun violence, a shrinking middle class and off the charts disparity in the distribution of wealth and its corollary, distribution of poverty.

Many of those who've been elected or appointed to govern us call themselves Christians. Some are born again, evangelical Christians, who are committed to the "good news" of the gospels and Jesus as Savior. They believe in the bible as the highest authority and their obligation to demonstrate the gospel in their every day lives and deeds. And mainline religions groups are in rapid decline.

I certainly do not want to place our societal ills at the feet of Christianity. Yet, we so often hear religious language and beliefs in conjunction with actions and reactions to our country's ills, I can not avoid seeing a very real correlation.

The Christian right, has argued the sanctity of marriage between one man and one woman based on biblical doctrine. They have used that construction as substantiation for denying human beings the right to buy a cake for a wedding that has been deemed legal by our judiciary.

The Christian right are among those who actively support gun ownership, concealed carry laws and the right to stand your ground, meaning you can shoot to kill based on your feelings more than someone else's behavior.

Conservative Christians are visible among those who believe God has given mankind dominion over the earth and we can do as we choose with it. They are visible among those who believe the earth is about six thousand years old and that the climate has been changing all that time. Therefore, there is no need for concern about the hoax of global warming caused by fossil fuels.

I do not claim Christians or evangelicals or the Christian right as the sole source of such beliefs and behavior. I simply hold up they are active participants. They are among those who passed a law in Indiana, I believe, that requires the remains of fetal tissue from abortions be handled the same way one's grandparent is handled upon death...tagged and sent to a funeral home for burial or cremation. I've read such fetal tissue can be the size of a pea or pea pod.

The evangelical vote has been in high demand, especially by the Republicans during this election cycle. The two candidates receiving the greatest number of votes have adopted positions that unabashedly seek to deny fundamental human dignity to a selected swath of humanity.

At least one has argued for the need to keep Muslims out of this country for at least an unspecified amount of time. Both have argued for the deportation of millions of people, some born here and others who have established lives here, who work and pay taxes but without proper documentation.

There is a crassness that has grown up in our civil discourse that is simply appalling. I don't hear the voices of Christians calling out to dampen such behavior. I don't hear the cry for us to treat each other with decency but rather an inclination to mistrust, assume the worst about each other; to see, or at least fear predators behind every bathroom door; to assume someone speaking what might sound like an Arabic language is therefore a terrorist.

Friends, our country is in steep decline; not necessarily monetarily, because we are still a very wealthy nation. Our decline is a moral decline. Our moral decline is not because of gay and transgendered people, it is not because abortion is legal, it is not because we have people who loot and murder.

The source of our moral decline is the absence of living Christian values. Whether or not you define yourself as a Christian, Christian values are the mainstay of a healthy democracy. A healthy democracy is one in which people treat each other with respect...in other words, do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

A healthy democracy is one in which we express concern in policy and programs for the least of us. Some would call it a safety net, others might call it healing the sick and feeding the hungry.

Hosea Ballou told us God is love and that all can ultimately be redeemed by God. While employing creative, rational, reasoned thought, Ballou also believed in the scriptures. I suspect he'd have no difficulty with the words of St Paul in 1st Corinthians.

"If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have....but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.....So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love."

Universalism is built on the notion and power of God's love. Our nation, the world even, is in great need of the tangible manifestations of love, as demonstrated by Jesus, the biblical exemplar of that love. Let us, as Universalist, not do damage to Christianity by demonizing those who disagree with us. Instead let us be vessels of God's manifestation of love here on earth.

May it be so. Amen