

A PREQUEL TO UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM

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I spend a lot of time in committee meetings. There we discuss and discuss some more until we come to a decision by most of the people at the meeting. Sometimes the decision brings about change. Sometimes it doesn't.

Decision making and creating change are the central message for today. But this day is not unique. From the beginning of human communication, as long ago as the story of Adam and Eve in the Hebrew Scriptures, decisions have been made and choices followed to accept or reject the decision, whatever it might be.

The followers of Jesus made a decision to keep his memory and teachings alive long after he was no longer with them. In time they realized that verbal history was not enough and by 70 AD, approximately 30 years after his death, his followers began to write the stories they were being told.

One of the early tasks of the Christian Church was to determine which stories were the official stories and which would be rejected as interesting, but perhaps not true.

In addition to deciding what books would be included in the scriptures, the early church fathers, (and they were all male) took upon themselves the power to decide the interpretation of those writings as the original writers were now long deceased.

One of the most significant decisions was made in 325 CE with the Council at Nicea. Here the leaders of the Christian Church, now known as the Catholic Church, decided that God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit were one and the same. This was the birth of the doctrine known today as the "Doctrine of the Trinity".

It is against the backdrop of this decision that those men who refused to accept this teaching became known as dissenters or Radical Reformers. We claim their voices as part of our origin because they laid the groundwork for some of our Unitarian Universalist teachings teachings that we continue to discuss, accept or disagree with.

Let us move forward in time from the Council of Nicea to 1380 CE... to England. Here we meet John Wycliffe, an Oxford professor, scholar, and theologian. Wycliffe was well known throughout Europe for his opposition to the teaching of the organized Church, which he believed to be contrary to the Bible. He also believed that the scriptures should be available in the language of the people... English, not Latin. At that time, only scholars were able to read the scriptures in the translation known as the Latin Vulgate.

Wycliffe was determined to make a translation for people in English. With the help of his followers and other faithful scribes he translated and manually wrote dozens of English manuscript copies of the scriptures.

Why do we call John Wycliffe a Radical Reformer? What was so radical about his teachings? First of all, he believed that the church had become corrupt and the answers to truth were in the scriptures, not in the doctrines of the Pope.

Secondly, he believed that the Church should be poor, as in the days of the apostles. Some of Wycliffe's followers went out in pairs, barefoot, wearing long dark red robes, and carrying a staff in one hand. Gregory XI called these followers, "Lollards", in derision; but the name stuck and the Lollards continued to grow in number.

Thirdly, Wycliffe thought the Church should be separate from royal government. Europe was full of deals between kings, land owners and the ecclesiastical powers. In his time wars were being waged over land and territory just as strongly as in the earlier days of the Roman Empire.

Twenty four propositions or teachings were attributed to Wycliffe. Ten were declared heretical and fourteen erroneous by church authorities, but Wycliffe refused to stop teaching, preaching, and writing. He kept working until he suffered several strokes and finally died the last day of December in 1384.

The Pope was so infuriated by his teachings and his translation of the Bible into English, that even 44 years after John Wycliffe's death, he ordered Wycliffe's bones to be dug up, crushed and scattered in the river.

But crushed and scattered bones could not stop his teachings.

One of the persons who fully embraced his teachings was also a priest and theologian. Jan Huss, from Bohemia believed in Wycliffe's principle that sinful authority ceases to be an authority. He also believed that the Church had become corrupt in his practices. Huss protested the Pope sending representatives to Prague to sell indulgences to support his war against the King of Naples. Those who bought indulgences for a certain sum were forgiven their sins and thus could buy themselves after-life in Paradise instead of Hell.

Huss was excommunicated for his actions and forced to leave Prague. He went to southern Bohemia and continued to preach, now to the country folk instead of the scholars.

Huss continued to denounce church abuses in his sermons, especially matters of church discipline and practice. One such custom had arisen concerning the serving of communion. The priests began serving the bread to all Christians in good standing who desired to receive it, but kept the chalice of wine only for themselves.

Huss denounced this restriction as contrary to Scripture and to the ancient tradition of the church. He was excommunicated for insubordination. In 1414 he was called before the Council of Constance and ordered to recant. He disagreed with the Council and was found guilty of heresy. Jan Huss was burned at the stake on July 6, 1415.

In 1436, a pact was signed, by which the church in Bohemia was authorized to administer the Chalice wine as well as the Host or bread to all communicants. His followers became known as the Czech Brethren and later founders of the Moravian Church, which is still in existence.

But burning at the stake cannot stop the truth any easier than dumping crushed bones into a river. Move forward in time another hundred years. Enter onto life's stage a Spanish man named Michael Servetus. In Spain unrest had continued in the established church and there was much questioning about the nature of Christianity. Young Servetus was also quite upset by the shedding of Jewish and Muslim blood by Christians in the name of the Trinity during the Spanish Inquisition.

The more Servetus studied the Bible, the more he came to realize that the doctrine of the Trinity was not in the scriptures and the Bible did not always support what was being taught by the Church.

In 1531, he wrote his first book entitled "Concerning the Errors of the Trinity." His book was soundly rejected by Luther and Calvin. He was denounced by the council of Inquisitors and sentenced to death.

What are some of the radical ideas of Michael Servetus as he tried to refute the doctrine that had been established now 1200 years?

Here are some of his writings:

"The philosophers have invented a third separate being truly and really distinct from the other two, which they have called third Person, or the Holy Spirit, and thus they have contrived an imaginary Trinity, three beings in one nature. But in reality three Gods, or one threefold God, are foisted upon us under the pretense, and in the name of Unity..."

For with them it is very easy, taking the words in their strict sense, for three beings to exist, which they say and yet, strictly, simply, and really so different or distinct yet one is born of another, and yet all three of these are shut up in one jar.....

We have become Atheists, man without any God. For as soon as we try to think about God, we are turned aside to three phantoms, so that no kind of unity remains in our conception. What else is being without God but unable to think about God, when there is always present to our understanding a haunting kind of confusion of three beings, by which we are forever deluded into supposing that we are thinking about God...."

Servetus escaped his death sentence by going underground to France. There he took a new name of Villeneuve adapted from the name of the village of his birth.

In Paris he studied medicine and was perhaps the first discoverer of the pulmonary circulation of blood, when he showed that blood was carried from the heart to the lungs where it was aerated and changed color.

He got in trouble with the medical school for lecturing on astrology and again moved to a new community. During this time he continued under his assumed name and worked on another book entitled “The Restoration of Christianity”. In this book he rejected infant baptism. For the second time he was challenged by the court of the Inquisition and received another death sentence.

Throughout Servetus’ life he never stopped trying to correspond with John Calvin in order to persuade him of the truth of his teachings. He was so sure of himself that he even stopped in Geneva at a church where John Calvin was preaching. There he was recognized, arrested, thrown into prison, and found guilty of denying the Trinity, declaring that infant baptism was an invention of the Devil, and attacking the doctrines of the Church of Geneva. He was sentenced to be burned at the stake by a slow fire. In 1553 he died after suffering 3 hours over the flames of green wood.

So, here we are with three radical voices that could provide much conversation for several Sunday mornings in our own group of “Rational Free Thinkers”. They were all voices speaking their truths before the words, Unitarian or Universalist, had come into common usage. Are their concerns of validity some 500 years later?

I believe their lives and words still have significance for us as a religious community and for individuals who try to bring meaning to their own spiritual journey.

One of the leading Unitarian Universalist theologians in our time, James Luther Adams, claimed that our tradition is one that upholds “the priesthood of all believers.” What he meant by the phrase is the *“idea that all believers have direct access to the ultimate sources of religious life and that every believer has the responsibility of achieving an explicit faith for free persons.”* We are each accountable for our own relationship with Life, and for how we live as a result of that relationship.

What James Luther Adams seems to be saying is if we take this liberal faith of ours seriously we are compelled by it into a shared and common ministry—a ministry by and for all souls.

Ask any of the surviving members of the Universalist Church in Hutsonville if the right to participate in a communion ceremony had meaning in the life of their church. They gave us their communion service when their church was officially closed. Although we have not yet availed ourselves of this custom, this set on the table before you is a reminder that we believe the rights of communion are for all. We do believe in a priesthood of all believers. The symbolic elements of the last supper of Jesus with his disciples continue to be a reminder that we are asked to give of ourselves to one another if we claim to be people of faith.

Rev. Charles Ortman, a Unitarian Universalist minister of our times takes the concept of “Priesthood of all Believers” one step farther. He says:

“Sometimes that ministry might mean risking our own exclusive view of reality in order to embrace a larger view, one that may be more inclusive of all humanity and more beneficial to the entire planet, one that may be, in the end, more sustaining.

Always we are called to harness ourselves to a vision of what yet can be—for ourselves and for the world. Always we are called to be strong in our faith, so that it might be as a trusted bridge, leading from what is to the fuller vision of the other side.”

I agree with Charles Ortman. I believe we have a responsibility to learn about the past and how it has shaped our present. I believe we need to name and celebrate those who have walked before us to help create a world in which liberal religion is not only a possibility, but a necessity. I believe we have a story to tell that crisscrosses with other religious communities and it is a story to tell proudly of the choices we have made even though we, or our congregation, or our denomination may be misunderstood.

Prayer lists that pray for this church to be saved; acquaintances who call us godless and atheist, those who are surprised when we share in the rituals of other faith communities and maybe question our right to be doing so... these are a far cry from Inquisitions and burning at the stake. When we tell our story it is not likely we will be arrested for carrying our writings in our backpacks. Nor is it likely that our bones will be exhumed, crushed and thrown into the Wabash River.

We may get a scorching letter in response to editorials written for the local paper, but our letters are printed, not banned or burned. Some folks may never walk through our doors, but others will if we keep on talking and living the faith we have named as Unitarian Universalist. We must continue the heritage of the right to question that was begun so many years ago. We must continue the message proclaiming the worth of every individual. We can and will make a difference in the lives of people around us as well as those who come after us...those generations we will never meet.

Think about it... What are you willing to live for that will continue as truth long after you are gone? How will you continue the radical reformation that our liberal religious faith proclaims?

How will you make a difference? Think about it....