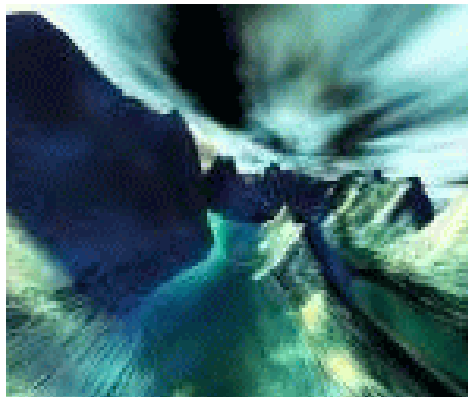




A Common Language of Reverence?

It All Depends on What We Are

David E. McClean



For those in our wonderful Unitarian Universalist fellowship who
struggle to grasp the meaning of religious faith in a paradoxical age of
irony and religious certainty

A Common Language of Reverence? It All Depends on What We Are

by David E. McClean

I have been reading through the book *A Language of Reverence*, which is by now well known in Unitarian Universalist circles. The book features contributions by William Sinkford, David Bumbaugh, Thandeka and other UU thought leaders. I have also been following and participating in discussions with fellow UUs concerning how, whether or when we might actually come-up with that to which the title of the book refers – a common “language of reverence” which might allow UUs to engage, more easily, in less strained and self-censored dialogue concerning religious matters, despite the many diverse theological and philosophical positions that individual UUs hold. (I will take the expression “language of reverence” to mean “religious vocabulary,” since the very idea of “reverence” is suspect for some UUs who think that less theology-laden words such as “awe” and “sublimity” will do.) But the book and the discussions seem to magnify rather than settle the philosophical and theological differences that we have among ourselves as UUs – differences that it would at least *seem* necessary to resolve if a *common* language of reverence is to emerge. For we are likely mistaken to think that any but the most mealy vocabulary, in which words and phrases have generously varied meanings, can arise where philosophical and theological premises and conclusions remain wildly disparate. Without a shared set of substantial religious ideas and commitments, ideas and commitments that go beyond collections of ethical principles and more or less shared sensibilities (and which I will, for that reason, hereafter describe as metaphysically “thick” or “meaty”), one certainly has warrant to conclude that those seeking a common language of reverence will fail to achieve it.

But there are those UUs who worry less about vocabularies and more about actions; less about theology and more about community. They think we are doing just fine, and they worry that debates about words and the meaning of words are likely to do more harm than good. They may have a point. On the other hand, to borrow a phrase from several contemporary philosophers, “language goes all the way down.” The reality in which we exist is linguistically constructed, and not “out there” somewhere, separate and apart from us. Words matter, as do identities, as does who one represents oneself to be to the world, as does conceptual clarity, as do the questions that those who are not UUs put to us when they are trying to

figure us out. As for actions and community, on what are they based? On what sets of propositions? On what beliefs? How secure is the foundation on which they rest? The debate regarding a language of reverence drags to the surface a much more fundamental question. That question is this: What, after all, is contemporary Unitarian Universalism? While it may seem that there is enough literature that purports to answer this question, the very existence of a debate about a shared religious vocabulary suggests that the answers given are in some ways insufficient, or perhaps better put, are no longer sufficient.

Suppose we take this question seriously. Suppose the “problem” of a common religious vocabulary attends a false or problematic notion of ourselves, i.e. the notion that Unitarian Universalism remains a religion in any sense that resonates with the *popular expectations* of what a religion *consists in*. The inability to meet those expectations appears to be, in part, the reason that we seem to have such a difficult time building our numbers. Boiling-down religion to an essential watery essence, as we do at times when we retreat to etymology (*religare*, etc.) as though by doing so we have explained the natures and psychologies of lived religious sentiment and commitment, shows just how disconnected we may actually be from those we would attract and for whom we claim to have something to offer. By hanging our hats on something like a “thin” etymological least common denominator, as opposed to the “thick” and constitutive elements that attend a true leap of faith, it may be that we fail a basic communitarian (and so, ironically, religious) test, and so fail to resonate with more people who search for a religious community with a clearer and more resolute set of answers to ultimate questions, rather than answers awash in nuance or abstractions. A religious community that is steeped in irony and contingency regarding its basic commitments, that is often perceived to make no faith claims that are distinguishable from claims promulgated by scientific methods and a narrow rationalism, is likely to remain an unappealing alternative for many people, even people who have grave misgivings about the religions of their youth, the ones with creeds and strict ceremonies and rigid rules. A religious community whose metaphysical commitments rest heavily on irony,¹ contingency and scientific

¹ I am using the word “irony” here in the sense used by Richard Rorty in his *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. An ironist is someone who has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, does not think that the arguments phrased in her present vocabulary – whether that vocabulary is that of science, religion or the market, can either underwrite or dissolve these doubts, and who does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself. Rorty’s concerns about those who are not ironists in this sense have to do with our culture’s need to get rid of certain bad habits, such as branding people in other cultures as barbarians, as irrational and further away from something called the “Truth.” I have a great deal of sympathy with these aims and walk a thin line between my own concerns for such things and my belief

rationalism, albeit with an affective twist, makes those who prefer to get their irony, contingency, rational discourses and emotion from novels, poetry reviews, philosophy books and scientific journals wonder just what is the point of joining-up.

One way that Unitarian Universalism gets described is as something like a collection of people or fellowship, rather than a *community*, of free, autonomous seekers each having his or her own personal religious vocabulary that both demands recognition and overlaps sufficiently with the religious vocabularies of others so as to make a good deal of communication and understanding possible – to permit *some kind* of coherent conversation to exist regarding matters of faith. These autonomous seekers all assent to such propositions as those that undergird our seven principles, and are not asked to assent to thicker religious propositions, since there aren't any that are organizationally sanctioned. A collection of autonomous seekers, held together within elastic boundaries by a set of mostly ethical principles but whose members cannot agree on a set of core and thick metaphysical ideas, is fine – but it is unlikely to ever generate enough “strong force” to quicken the blood of many of its members or to move them to confidently *proclaim* a common faith that can be responsive to the basic emotional and intellectual hunger for *profound meaning*, as William Sinkford has suggested. Further, it seems clear that a “*chosen* faith” is not the same thing as a “*common* faith.” A common faith requires a different type of assent, and a different type of *ascent*.

It is true that not all UUs see the need for such a thick metaphysics (and by “metaphysics” I mean only a view about what is really real, whether God, Spirit, rocks or trees). But some UUs feel that the lack of such a shared metaphysics indicates that there is something about their movement that does not quite make sense. Many visitors to UU congregations often sense this lacuna as well, and express it in various ways which may be collapsed into one: “There is no there there.” Or, perhaps, there are so many “theres” that no particular “there” may be discerned. Many of us have heard this refrain before, and there is something to it that it would be a mistake to simply wave off as beside the point.

that a deep faith commitment is still possible. For it does not follow that believing that one is in touch with a “power beyond oneself,” for example, must necessarily lead to the odious state of affairs, including cruelty and humiliation, that Rorty wishes to avoid.

Liberalism, Legitimacy, Tradition and Truth

There are many reasons for this inability to formulate a “there” that is common and central. The befuddlement experienced by many people who inquire into the meaning and mission of contemporary Unitarian Universalism likely has something to do with, among other things, some mistaken uses or understanding of words like “liberal,” “legitimate,” “traditional” and “truth” as we UUs appropriate them. To tackle this set of possible reasons may be starting at the deep end of the pool, but I think the deep end of the pool is where the action is.

We sometimes appropriate some of our religious notions and language from the political philosophies of free and democratic societies, and often transport the virtue of procedural democratic practices in affairs of government and political discourse into the religious life, making for a broad egalitarian sensibility. This transportation, however, begins to produce unintended consequences, such as a lack of a clear self-definition (or, if one prefers, clarity of mission or coherent sense of identity) and an inability to articulate just what it is we actually believe as a matter of “faith.” I have heard many “elevator speeches” – the summary versions of Unitarian Universalism that some think we should be prepared to deliver on a brief elevator ride – but very few that have quickened my blood or the blood of friends who hail from different faiths or are even ardent and happily isolated humanists. A religious communion may be procedurally democratic in its governance, as we UUs try to be, but a religious communion is not a state or principality seeking a decision procedure. Procedural political liberalism may work well in the regulation of diverse interests among the constituents of a *political* community, allowing them to pursue their notions of *The Good* in relative peace and freedom (which is what political liberalism is all about), but the popular expectation of a religion is that *it itself undertakes to explicate and champion a constitutive notion of The Good*, and to actually answer, rather than ruminate over or bracket, such basic but thick questions as “How shall we live?” and “What is the purpose of life?” and “What may I hope?” Also, when members of what we call “traditional” religions refer to those religions as *faiths*, they do so because they know that the answers to those questions do not and need not pass tests for “legitimacy” as determined by the rationalist methods of modernity, but rather are leaps, as Kierkegaard tried to tell us. “Humans are essentially good and may be made holy”; “The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice”; “We were created with the power to transform the world into a Beloved Community”; “The universe is governed by a Divine purpose that we can only see with the eyes of the Spirit.” All of these are leaps, with little scientific justification. A certain kind of narrow rationalism might even call them mere velleities or desiderata, and tell us that people who actually believe such things are

living in a fantasy, or are just plain stupid. (It is interesting to note that some of our own principles, which we think are rather intuitive and persuasive, are themselves leaps of faith – something often forgotten when we assert what seem to be such obvious conclusions as that there is an “interdependent web” and that such web suggests a certain equally obvious moral and political course; or that there is an “inherent worth” possessed by all human beings. As for these two examples, neither is obvious and both are open to serious critique and wildly different interpretations.)

The person of faith, as commonly understood, roots his or her life plan in such “stupid” notions and sheds most of his or her irony or tentativeness in doing so. It strikes me that these leaps have more to do with forming a holistic view of existence than about buying-in to fantasies. As long as these claims or leaps don’t start to become wholly unreflective, as long as they don’t start to become socially catastrophic (leading to the denial of rights, the suppression of thought, or worse), those who offer them up and who are prepared to live with their benefits as well as their consequences need not worry about their “legitimacy” any more than Muscovites need to worry about the “legitimacy” of Faberge eggs or African-Americans need to worry about the “legitimacy” of jazz.

In many ways Unitarian Universalism’s religious egalitarianism is a great achievement. But such religious egalitarianism comes at a price. Unitarians and Universalists once had a more or less coherent common language of reverence or religious vocabulary, anchored in liberal Christianity. That common language of reverence was necessarily proscribed when the anchor was pulled-up, when numerous other interesting and stimulating religious ideas were, rightly, considered worthy fonts of insight and wisdom, worthy spiritual way-points toward which to sail. The result is that, over time, Unitarian Universalism determined to offer no *proprietary, thick* answers to theological or metaphysical questions. It sought, instead, a theological and metaphysical least common denominator, one that seemed to scratch the religious itch of its diverse members by not having an itch of its own. However, its openness to a multitude of religious and philosophical propositions often played-out as tentativeness with respect to each, as each proposition is held as a viable alternative to be considered, embraced, rejected or ignored. Since then, Unitarian Universalists have been swimming in a kind of religious irony or skepticism, not concerning any particular faith claims, *but concerning all of them*, while at the same time celebrating faith and the religious life. This type of critical approach is great for philosophers, laboratory scientists and intellectuals, but such irony or skepticism, when pushed too far, misses the point regarding the nature of religious faith commitments. Religious faith has less to do with epistemology and scientific truth than with a *Decision* to

see the world/cosmos from a certain bold Perspective, a Perspective that cannot wait for a scientific theory of everything that, even when achieved, is likely to leave us cold to the same extent that it is likely to leave us amazed (and most of us scratching our heads). Having such a Perspective is like staking a grand Claim. Claims about divine plans or moral arcs are not epistemological; they are the bases for our existential orientation and the shaping of our very life plans. They are the prerequisites for seeing the world as “enchanted” *in se* rather than as barren, as the/a nexus of Cosmic Concern, rather than as utterly irrelevant or expendable. UU ministers and theologians, for the most part quite sophisticated people, know this; but much of what they write and utter from the pulpit does not seem sufficiently in touch with it.

That the religious life is not about knowledge, not about “knowing” in a scientific sense provides sufficient warrant, for many in contemporary culture, to condemn all religion and religious sentiment. So the concerns of many people who self-identify as humanists (whether or not they are UUs), i.e. that religious propositions must be checked for “legitimacy” by the methods of science (or logic), are often off the mark save for where such religious propositions attempt to make predictions about the specific behaviors of the natural world. Today, none but the most literalist religions seek to involve themselves in predicting and manipulating such behaviors. The Enlightenment and its aftermath have established a more appropriate division of labor between religion and science, and between their respective vocabularies. Religion has learned time and again that whenever it sticks its nose into the affairs of physics or biology or chemistry it is likely to have it nipped and bloodied.² Still, many such humanists often bristle at the thought that religious propositions should not be subjected to scientific methods of verification or falsification. They think that such a common decision procedure should determine meaning, truth and legitimacy in *all* spheres of life. This notion bears a family resemblance to the positivism of the Vienna Circle, the stunning implosion of which was brought about by the force of its own logic. (Its members could not verify their basic claims by the methods of science, and so were undermined by an internal contradiction.) Positivism failed to peel apart, neatly, statements that have meaning and statements that don’t, statements that are “rational” and statements that are “irrational” (the worst insult, it believed, you can pay to any statement is to call it “irrational”). But the urge to try new ways to do

² Some self-described humanists find the same is true when they try to make the vocabulary of science commensurable with the vocabularies of religious faith. They may not pull back bloody noses, but they tend to leave frustrated by the attempt. David Bumbaugh seems to be lamenting this in his contribution to *A Language of Reverence*, even while calling for a humanist vocabulary of reverence.

so, to purge the “meaningless” and the “irrational” from human culture, is still an almost irresistible urge among many who call themselves humanists. They prefer to reduce all vocabularies to the vocabularies of science or logic because the latter vocabularies satisfy their criteria for “legitimacy,” and thus for meaning. While many enlightened humanists know about positivism’s errors, there are many who still suffer from its fallacies. We have people from both camps in Unitarian Universalism.

It seems odd to have to say this, but we Unitarian Universalists want to be careful not to be lured in the direction of such positivist fixations when we engage the religious and spiritual commitments of our brother and sister UUs. Different vocabularies do different kinds of work. The work of religious vocabularies is different than those of science, *or poetry*, or journalism, or sport. It would serve us all well to remember this point, as there is a certain kind of scientific rationalism that many Unitarian Universalists seem to embrace and that has little to do with big Perspective religious Claims. Such humanists, as well as all other critical thinkers, are right to worry about the use of religiously-derived propositions that presume to speak to such issues as how we deliver health services, or how we design our cities, or what stem cell lines we may use in medical research. That certain religious people run amok from time-to-time and jump vocabularies, entering others in which they have no competence, cannot be gainsaid. It is and is likely to remain a problem for some time to come. When they do run amok, they tend to sound foolish and do more harm than good. Yet, scientists have their own versions of running amok, such as when they fail to see the social, moral and spiritual dimensions of their work; when they fall prey to a version of the Naturalistic Fallacy and hold that “can implies ought” – as in, because we *can* split atoms or raze rainforests, we *ought* to. There are those who are not themselves scientists, but who hold to a similar instrumentalist view, such as many modern business leaders and managers. Their knowledge claims may hold, *but their wisdom is unutterably deficient*. The productions of science (or the market) do not themselves always guide us toward new heights of morality, decency and Truth as is so often proclaimed, although issuing from those who arrogate to themselves the mantle of “rationality.” Scientific method (and when we talk about science we are primarily talking about method) has given us both our Jonas Salks and our J. Robert Oppenheimers. We might be better off with more Salks and fewer Oppenheimers, as we might be better off with more Thomas Mertons and fewer Jimmy Swaggarts. Geniuses can be found everywhere, and so can the unwise.

The ultimate answers to our ultimate questions come, in large part, from the depths of human experience, not from its surface spaces. They derive from

decisions to cast down one's ethical, metaphysical, theological and epistemological "buckets" where one is and thereby try to fashion life plans around (and even stake one's life on) those decisions. The ultimate answers which so derive, because they address ultimate things, provide something that Unitarian Universalism, as an ironic "religion," seems unable to offer either the broad public or, for that matter, many of its own members who hunger and thirst for the emotional richness, the bold position and Perspective, and the sense of joy and purpose that only a true leap of faith can bring – even where the attendant dogma and rigid orthodoxy are utterly odious. For reasons that I will give shortly, this is not necessarily fatal to our movement. But what is at least pathogenic to our movement is the idea of an ironic, tentative "faith." Some of us UUs conflate meliorism with irony, valorizing the latter when the former is what should be preferred. There is a world of difference between meliorism and irony. To consider a view revisable and improvable is to suggest that we must be prepared to adjust it to accommodate new insights and experiences. To consider a view ironic means that we think that the whole thing is up for grabs, and therefore is nothing to take too seriously.

Many UUs and visitors to UU congregations hunger for a less ironic and less tentative leap of faith, but worry that the price is flirtation with the "utterly odious" things from which they have fled. This worry runs through the debate regarding a common language of reverence. The worry could be quieted if we were to stop thinking that casting down our buckets as just suggested is akin to believing that the world was made in six days, or is flat, or that thick commitments mean venturing out onto a slippery slope of religious intolerance. UUs are very good at pointing out the dangers of leaps of faith, but not always so good at embracing their benefits. We need to keep doing the former, but get much better at doing the latter. We ought not teach our membership to revel in logical fallacies. Not every rule need be thought of as ushering in tyranny, and not every creed need be thought of as the first step toward religious despotism. A creed may simply be a statement of a Decision to see the world in a certain way, as just sketched, rather than a claim to a special and timeless knowledge of the world.

That aside, for as long as we fail to provide a real and clear choice rather than a religious department store of take-it-or-leave-it religious observations (humanism in aisle 1, Jewish festivals in aisle 7, *Aum* in aisle 9), the excitement of newcomers may continue to wane within months (or moments) of their introduction to our congregations – as did mine when I first attended a UU congregation in the 1980s. While many such newcomers are happy to have escaped their metaphorical Egypts, they often find that they are not so happy that they have in fact escaped to a mere marketplace of religious ideas rather than a

new city that can provide the needs that were not provided in the old land. (I admit that the use of “mere” here might be harsh -- Unitarian Universalism is certainly more than a religious marketplace – but stark judgements determine both who will return to one of our congregations and who will look elsewhere; and people who market or sell know how a first or second impression can form a judgement that can last forever.) This presents no problem for those of us who do well in such marketplaces. But given that we want to attract more people to Unitarian Universalism we do have to ask ourselves if it is tenable to simply “shake the dust from our feet” at newcomers’ expressions of a taste for more meaty metaphysical faith commitments. (We may even need to ask ourselves, ultimately, if we really even *care* about attracting large numbers of new people, especially if the reform we might need to make in order to keep them is just toward such a meaty, organizational metaphysics or theology.)

Just as we need to be more careful with what we do with words like “liberal” and “legitimate,” we also need to be careful with what we do with “traditional.” One sense can be pejorative, at worst suggestive of more or less backward or “irrational” modes of life, and at best suggestive of folkways, cultural habits, pre-reflective and customary modes of engagement with the world, which could even be charming. In either case, the “traditional” when used as pejorative, suggests a cultural stance against modernity, the manner of thought that emerged from the Enlightenment and that ushered in “the age of reason.” This is an important point, because it is often the case that when we Unitarian Universalists put on our rationalist, free-thinker hats and describe ourselves as “untraditional” in our approach to religion, as we often do, we seem to be taking sides with modernity and subjecting our religious propositions to an acid bath of critical scrutiny, as is typical for a modern sensibility – propositions which, in fact, should not be able to withstand such scrutiny because they were not made for modernity’s tests for legitimacy. But there is another sense of “traditional” that should be considered, and in this sense Unitarian Universalism still has the option to view itself as indeed “traditional.” It may look at itself as doing what religions actually do, “traditionally,” i.e. engage in a protracted series of *conversations, discourses* about how we may orient the mind, the heart and our actions in a grand constitutive, thick *Experiment* – how we may put forward a set of bold claims about the really real *as we see it*, about the place of humankind in the cosmos *as we see it*, about that which underwrites our existence *as we see it, and as we live it*. This is “traditionally” what religions do, and this is the sense of “traditional” that we have warrant to embrace notwithstanding the current view of modernity, i.e. a post-“traditional” era with largely post-“traditional” sensibilities, where “traditional” takes on the pejorative flavor just discussed. When we understand ourselves as untraditional we generally aim to reject this pejorative sense of the

word. But without recognizing the other non-pejorative sense just outlined we remove ourselves from the possibility of thick, shared commitments and put ourselves outside of what is commonly, and I think correctly, viewed as the religious sphere, outside of the sphere of religious vocabulary, and outside of the sphere in which a common language of reverence is a real possibility. We have a choice to reclaim a notion of ourselves as a traditional religion, just as we have the choice to adopt a thick metaphysics or theology. Whether or not we do either will determine where we go from here. We may, in fact, choose to do neither. But if we do neither, it seems to me that we must ask ourselves what we have become.

What We Have Become

Unitarian Universalism has a *history*. The problem is that it has lost its *narrative voice*, its *Story*, and so has no *axis mundi* other than the “weak force” of its principles, some of which can be reduced to sets of ethical dos and don’ts. That Story was derailed, for better or worse. Because Unitarian Universalism no longer has a coherent Story, a coherent narrative that provides basic answers to fundamental questions, it may well remain a federation or collection of seekers who, at times, hold their noses in the presence of one another when words like “God” or “prayer” or “humanism” or “blessings” start to get thrown around from the pulpit. In practice, we at times cannot even agree on what we mean by “religion,” and many of us can’t articulate the more than trivial reasons why we are UUs rather than simply NGO workers or activists. I do not think I overstate this, since this is precisely how I have heard it put to me in adult RE classes that I teach. The old joke about Unitarian Universalism having a theology similar to that of PBS may very well suggest a crisis rather than an occasion for chuckles. A religion that cannot figure out for itself what “religion” means, or whose essence is articulated in the language of a thin etymological gruel *is either in trouble or is in fact something other than what it recognizes itself to be (or both)*; and a religion in which not all even agree that it makes sense to keep in the lexicon a word like “reverence” (as opposed to “awe” or “sublimity”) is unlikely to spin-out a common language of reverence that won’t give many of its members heartburn, unless it is ready to move toward schism.

That said, few of us see a return to the Christian roots of Universalism and Unitarianism, nor do we think such is necessary (although those roots resonate with many). We are unlikely to ever reclaim the old narrative thread. We might never even convene to formulate some new set of “thick” metaphysical and theological views that might form a new and revisable creed. *But we might still be none the worse for that*. Outside of maintaining the status quo, another option is available. We can still move away from who we think we are and look squarely

at what we in fact are, and open our eyes to what we have created in contemporary Unitarian Universalism. What we have created seems like something that the world can use. While Unitarian Universalism maintains many of the indicia and furniture of what people think of as religion, it really has the look and feel of a *meta-religion*, the members of which are those who pledge to be influenced and conditioned (or guided) in their own religious reflections and practices by its principles and forms of thought concerning the religious life, while remaining committed to their own thick vocabularies and resonating narratives. By “meta-religion” I mean a communion or institution whose job it is to regulate, critique, celebrate and support religious sensibilities and the religious life, rather than provide any particular, thick religious or theological answers. If Unitarian Universalism cannot reclaim its old Christian narrative thread (and it is pretty clear that it cannot and, even more strongly put, *ought* not), if it never decides to come up with a new set of meaty religious propositions to which it expects its members to give assent (and it likely will not), it may yet serve as a useful organ for open-ended and informed religious discussion and engagement – discussion and engagement that pulls into its arena of concerns all of the productions and plans of human culture, including ethics, art, science, and politics. That is, after all, what we actually are and what we actually do.

But as a meta-religion, Unitarian Universalism, itself, can offer little of the leap of faith that many people believe they need to take in order to construct lives of meaning. It can only support its members in their decisions to go and do just that very thing, within the limits it establishes (reasonableness, charity, reverence for the biosphere, etc.). As a meta-religion it may approach, with warrant, a liberalism that comes close to the political version. The constitutive and deep faith of many Unitarian Universalists (Wiccans, Christians, Jews, Pagans, Buddhists, Humanists) may then, as is already the case for many of us, remain outside of it, as does my own, and remain outside of it with no need to reconcile itself with a common Unitarian Universalist language of reverence, because none would be needed.

I, for one, am committed to a notion of Deity and that there is a *telos* behind the cosmos that even figures into my own life plans – a view roundly rejected by many of my brother and sister UUs. When I think of myself as solely a Unitarian Universalist, I find that this rejection stings. For as long as I think of Unitarian Universalism as *my religion*, I seek approval rather than rebuff or polite dismissal regarding my deepest commitments, as do many other UUs. Absent that, I find that I, as well as other UUs, engage in a demure self-censorship. But such rejection becomes acceptable the moment I view my membership in Unitarian Universalism as a wonderful, regulative, important add-on, and not the whole

shebang. As Unitarian Universalism cannot sanction my views on Deity or teleology as central to its mission (nor contrary views, for that matter), I need to go elsewhere at times to find those who share it and can help me sustain it, modify it, and employ it in ways that might be of benefit or of interest to me. (Or I might seek out support in Covenant Groups within Unitarian Universalism, or supposedly “within” it.) My attraction to the idea of God (call it, alternatively, what you will) and to the notion of a universal teleology are both “unscientific” *and* central to my lived experience and life plans. For me, as Emerson put it, Jove indeed nods to Jove as we humans meet on the highway, in the market, in the bedroom, across a fence that divides two backyards. If I were to stop taking that seriously, if I were to stop viewing the world in this way, I think I would go insane. I do not think that this makes me “irrational” or suggests that I suffer from a failure of existential nerve; as far as I am concerned such a view as mine is, to the contrary, the result of a long, hard spiritual slog concerning the value of such a grand thought Experiment, and concerns the different kinds of Perspectives that are made possible thereby. It is where I cast down *my* bucket. I am a UU and assent to Unitarian Universalist principles because I think they keep me grounded, humble, and open to the new insights that are available only through active listening to others. And if that is what Unitarian Universalism has to offer – a deep commitment to promoting the religious life and to keeping us from going off the rails into religious intolerance, dogma, absolutism, self-righteousness and cruelty – then it offers something quite valuable indeed, even without a thick metaphysics of its own and even when other faiths try to do the same thing.

Viewing Unitarian Universalism as a meta-religion constituted by a membership of religious and spiritual seekers does away with the “problem” of having no common language of reverence – a problem that remains only when Unitarian Universalism thinks of itself as a religion like others. For the reasons I have stated, there can be no common language of reverence, or of faith, or of Divinity, or of humanism, nor should we want one insofar as forcing one upon the membership would do more harm than good, and completely disregard what the movement has, in fact, become. It would be like putting the train back on the wrong narrative tracks. It will do more harm than good because our religious movement is not about proffering a particular set of religious ideas, which is what religions traditionally do, but rather a framework for the pursuit of those ideas. While we make space for “worship,” sing “hymns,” ordain “clergy” and have “services” and “liturgies,” these are done more to make room for expressions of *overlapping religious sentiments and practices* than as an attempt to suggest that words like “worship,” “hymn,” “clergy,” “service” and “liturgy” must mean what they mean elsewhere. *Making-room-for* is at the heart of who and what we are as UUs. If that is the case, and if Unitarian Universalism is seen as a meta-religion rather than as a religion, then none of us should object to having an *expanding* rather than *contracting* lexicon used to express our wonder, despair, joy,

dependence, awe and *reverence* in the contemplation of our existence in a universe that is still unexplained and filled with mysteries. Only when we think that the thing we share is a religion or more than a space to engage one another in a spirit of reasonable exploration do we get to thinking that we need a common set of words or phrases to make our gatherings coherent. Give up the idea that we are a religion-just-like-other-religions rather than a new creature in the world, and the “problem” of the need for a common language of reverence melts away.

I might be wrong about all of this, but if I am right, if we have indeed jumped the Christian tracks (and any thick metaphysical or theological tracks) and are now on the road to creating a completely new narrative, this new understanding of ourselves presents, to be sure, interesting challenges and occasions for philosophical and theological reflection, as well as organizational change – always heady and disconcerting stuff. Perhaps with a new understanding of ourselves as a meta-religion, we need to also rethink the Christian-rooted moniker that we hang on ourselves. We may also need to rethink the strategy and intentions of our efforts to increase our numbers, whether our membership should now include *institutions* as well as individuals, and begin to sketch new reasons why both might want to join our ranks. That might become easier once we get our Story straight, once we know just what it is we are offering. Perhaps, organizationally, we will ultimately just come to think of ourselves as the “universalists” that we have in fact become – open to all religious and spiritual notions that do not violate our governing, regulative principles. Perhaps, we might be better off just calling ourselves “Universalists” after all, in the more general sense of the word. Finally, while the idea of meta-religion raises a good number of questions (including those concerning the unloveliness of such a self-description), I say let us be about answering them, but let us not deny who and what we are as a communion in the modern world. We UUs, always on the cutting edge of religious thought, may have a new and special mission before us that we are now asked to figure out, and then execute. That mission, if there is one, would not have begun to suggest itself without the raising of questions concerning a common language of reverence, and without the boldness of those who insisted that we take a closer look at who and what we are.

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