

"Where are UU Going" or "The Next Big Thing"

A sermon for Unitarian Universalist Congregations by Martin Bryant

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Earlier this year, this religious community took an important step towards its destiny — it formally joined the national Unitarian Universalist movement. This is so important - I congratulate and welcome you all. However, now that we are irrevocably on board, maybe it's time we took a hard look at our movement.

In this new millennia - our Western world finds its primary spiritual vehicle in crises: scandals and more scandals, a hemorrhage of declining numbers, and a vacuum of real spiritual leadership. The leading Christian sect, Catholicism finds itself in opposition to American policy on almost every issue you can name, liberal or conservative — the death penalty, abortion, the war in Iraq, land mines, and nuclear weapons. A bestselling novel depicts a church employing assassination to maintain millennia old secrets which lie at the core of their doctrine. The most prominent Christian today is not a Mother Theresa or a Martin Luther King, Jr. or even a Billy Graham, but a military leader. One has to wonder if there is another millennia left in Christianity.

Does this mean that the world is just becoming a secular place; that there is no role for religion in modern society? Hardly; America has never been more diverse in its faith - and maybe never more truly concerned about spirituality than it is now - and maybe it has never been more confused (healthy confusion, maybe) Increasingly, Americans answer polls by calling themselves "spiritual, not religious".

A few spiritual visionaries, like Neale Donald Walsch, and futurists, like Anthony Zolli, look for the "next big thing" in religion.

So could our UU movement be this next big thing? The American culture still seems to grow in influence and the pluralistic, culturally creative UU movement, so "American" in its approach would seem to be a natural fit. Harvard enviro-futurist E.G. Wilson believes it may take a religious movement that is aware of the challenges the environment faces to save our planet - we could do that. "The next big thing" would need to pitch a tent big enough to include true tolerance for Christians, Muslims, and Jews. Sounds like us.

Early in the 19th century, Thomas Jefferson wrote that he believed Unitarianism so consistent with American ideals that he predicted it would become the defacto national religion. Universalism was the third largest Protestant denomination in the United States at the turn of the 20th century. Six United States Presidents have been Unitarians or Universalists. But by the time of the merger in 1961 - in spite of efforts just after World War II to expand the Unitarian movement - both movements had dwindled in numbers and perhaps in significance.

And we are getting smaller. We have about 1050 congregations, around 250,000 congregants and about a half million claimants or friends. In the hardest view of these statistics - the movement has lost over 10,000 adult members in real numbers - and compared to the U.S. population we are about half the size we were almost fifty years ago in 1961.

Last year, Davidson Loehr - of Austin's most prominent UU pulpit, wrote: "UUism is dead".

During the last year, I participated in a thread of discussion on this topic on the UU debate board on the international spiritual/religious electronic community - belief.net. I'd like to summarize many of the reasons various posters cited for this situation. I do not agree with all of these views - I present them to give you a broad view and show just how complex this issue may be.

The first view purports that our movement is mired in a struggle between rationalist / humanist / intellectual "head" UUs and abstractly spiritual "heart" UUs. For the rational UUs the search for truth means trying to make sense of it all and they are restrained only by their devotion to tolerance from calling half of what goes in their churches as foolishness. At its extreme this aspect of our movement is an ethical/scientific / philosophic discussion group.

While the spiritual UUs celebrate an almost charismatic worship style including both "new age" and "age old" expressions of spirituality. The idea that true inspiration could be rationally quantified and logically proven is as alien to them as much of what they do is to the rationalists. The spiritual UU s seems to say "anything inspired goes" in a "flavor of the week" religion.

The rationalist are certainly not heartless, and the spiritualists are hardly inane - and most of us explore this experience somewhere in between - but the two approaches are so different - they represent two different theologies. Although I see them as poetically balanced, incomplete expressions of a true faith that lies somewhere in the inexpressible "between", some feel that as long as we have this polarization- we present a very confused image to others and we will not grow as we might, because we seem to be two churches undecided about which to be.

The UU clergy, led by President Sinkford - seems to want to try to rally the faithful around a more spiritual, less rationalist flag. Whether this is heresy - or a necessary step to resolution - I can't say.

Another view is that our movement still hasn't "gotten over" it's breakup with Christianity and still isn't dealing with Christians or Jesus very well. This puts us more at odds with our culture than we might be. The very large, multifaceted Christian movement has not, in all of its manifestations treated everyone well, and the UU movement has become a

church home for some of the alienated. Here, they join with iconoclasts that enjoy their intellectual independence -even rebellion from the cultural religious norm.

One could say that the UU movement was developed at the vanguard of an intellectual movement led by Darwin, Emerson, Freud, and Einstein who changed our world view and seriously challenged traditional Christian theology. In this view, UUs who have bravely abandoned Unitarian Christianity and Universalist Christianity have left Christendom without a strong liberal voice and may have failed to offer a coherent alternative for its faithful in the way of a liberal spiritual path.

For some, even my rather harsh objective view of the Christian infrastructure which started this talk - in a church setting - is somewhat shocking. However, I am personally in awe of the poetic, powerful presentation of the core spiritual message that Jesus brings to us across the millennia. I believe we celebrate Jesus' message and cultural relevance too little in our congregations. It may be that until cultural Christians feel that Jesus is truly welcome here - we will not be able grow, because many feel if the gentle, egalitarian shepherd is not welcome here they must not be either.

Many UU churches are starting or nurturing their UU Christian groups. The Christian message can be a powerful force for spiritual development and for good in our culture. If we will not embrace the powerful myth and message of Jesus - we leave it to those who would abuse it. And in embracing these spiritual paths - we embrace our cultural roots and liberal Christian brothers and sisters.

There is a view that without any expected behavioral modifications on the part of our members -we are not a religion and have no identity. We offer very limited and completely optional ritual and we expect no religious "practice" other than showing up every once in awhile and behaving with polity and tolerance. Some think that maybe we could "get away" with having no creed if we at least had ritual or practice. Without a ritual

or practice we are about beliefs and ideas that we have already agreed to disagree somewhat on so we never feel truly, satisfyingly whole or united.

How do you know you are UU? We do not really have a ritual you do not change your routine or diet. Within the UUA - there has long been concern that we do not retain our youth well. Often young people raised in UU churches do not stay in or come back to the church through the late high school and college years and become unchurched. Their UU experience does not leave them feeling either like UU is a part of them or they are necessarily a part of the movement.

Coming of age programs are one way some UU churches are trying to "mark the lives" of young UUs. These programs can address significant American cultural problems as well. Although UU holidays -- like IllUmination may seem goofy - this may be another way to take our faith beyond this Sunday morning setting to our home-life - and maybe even that part of our lives which is more visible to the wider community.

There is another view, that our movement has become a liberal culture and social action club. That we turned away from being a religious movement in the 19th century and have become a social reform movement. For all of our talk about spirituality and inclusiveness, this view states that we are a mere manifestation of the "Boston" liberal psyche - "Help them, become indignant for them, because we can, and by the way, if you are one of them, get over there and be them so we can help you ... "

Cornell West, the American theologian and civil rights activist writes that one difference between white churches and black churches in America - is that black churches see every person they help as a potential new member - and white churches see people they are helping as vehicles to exercise their charity obligation or impulse.

Following this idea - UU churches - should not be painting houses in East Austin or raising money for widows in India - but working with joblessness and after-school programs and drug dependency problems in suburbia. People whose lives are changed by

outreach can become very loyal members. But that would mean admitting we have these problems and facing them in our congregations. Out reach could include sponsoring training and assistance for couples in crises, people with addiction, those struggling with joblessness, bereavement support groups - for those in our community and congregations. Perhaps social action and pastoral care are two sides of the same coin.

Although forgetting your own needs and helping others can be a blessing - some feel our approach to this alienates us from those we help and from each other. Perhaps we should reach out in a way that reveals our own vulnerabilities - not from the position of the powerful "haves" - but from the position of another seeker with problems, a community of seekers who realize that by helping each other we can both get stronger.

Another view reminds us that America is never more divided by race, ethnicity, and income than on Sunday mornings. Going to church people want to go "home" to a culturally significant religion. In this view - our decline - it is just numbers. The largely white, well-educated, upper middle class segment of the American population that is the UU base - is declining. The Birkenstocked boomers have done boomed and there are fewer of them in their church-seeking years. All religious groups have trouble getting out of their ethnic/economic/ cultural bases and UUism is no different. We are trapped in a declining market.

Racial and cultural diversity in our congregations is hard. First we must always be who we are - we must be honest to ourselves then we can reach out. Spirituality must begin with sincerity. Perhaps if we had a way to affirm that our interest in inclusiveness is motivated by a real theological demand for unity and wholeness - and not because we want to assuage our guilt or because we need diversity for survival - we could communicate this in a way that would have integrity. But this might require us to agree on that much theology in a way we can communicate.

I have a friend who studied sociology in Princeton. He asserts that historically -every major religious movement is developed by a charismatic leader. Successful religions begin with an catalytic exemplar. And yet, the UU movement seems suspicious of leaders, particularly charismatic ones. We may be the only faith that not only elects our leader, but has term limits. Even at the congregational level, we are a little suspicious of churches that become too much dependent on a minister or on congregational leaders who become too influential or stay in office too long. To the extent that this caution concerning leaders is real, we may guarantee that our movement stays small, because there may be no other proven way for religious movements to grow.

Of course there is also this regularly promoted viewpoint: There is nothing wrong with UU! It is whole and terrific just the way it is... It is just too big a secret. It is just our marketing that is awful. If we could let the millions know that are already UU know that we are here - through really creative wonderful messages - we could not handle what would happen!

I like the optimism of this view, but I'm not sure it is entirely correct. Still the UUA is trying new methods of getting the word out - new ways of marketing. From the Pathways Church UU experiment in the Dallas Fort Worth area - to the "Uncommon Denomination" targeted advertising campaigns, this idea is being tested.

Another perspective asserts that we are a religious movement that celebrates individuality above all else. When you think about it the only dogma or religious "document" we have - our bible if you will - are the seven principles, and they do not start with "God" or "love" - but with "The inherent dignity and worth of each individual..." Further down - there is some one-worlder stuff and somewhat later there was controversy over the abstract "web of life" language which was added, but the idea of underlying "unity" clearly takes a back seat to the assertion of individuality.

Considering this, to the extent UUs have a theology - it may be a problematic one.

Americans in particular are already waayyy too self-absorbed, self-centered, and self-concerned. We are so much more concerned with justice and fairness than we are with compassion and nurture. We live in huge communities and yet feel isolated within our existentialist, narcissist lives. The "Matrix" seems a little too real for many. Individuality is the disease in America - not the cure. If we celebrate individuality above an else, maybe it is good for us to stay small. Perhaps intuitively seekers see the problem reflected in our message and not the solution.

And maybe it is a bit odd to tell people that the individual is everything and then be surprised when they don't want to congregate. If you are so all knowing and self-enlightened; if you, alone, are worthy of so much dignity and you don't need anything from anyone for your religion. Well then what do you need us for?

Ironically, though we may say we celebrate individuality above all - the church experiences that make UU what it is - are about community. We are not a religion of personal enlightenment - we are - as I have defined us in my elevator speech - "an intentional community of caring seekers". In my view, we are first - a community. And most of you may agree that - even for a faith without ritual or practice - it is what we do - together - that makes us UUs - not some belief we hold or faith we have.

And "community" brings us to our conclusion. I'm sure there is someone here wondering what this "whining" is accomplishing. Even if there are real ideas here that represent a real sampling of thinking - what good does it do to present it here? Shouldn't these issues be considered by authorities somewhere who can do something about it?

Well, yes, and that's exactly what I'm doing. Our UU movement is an expression of the liberal paean "think globally, act locally" Boston is no Rome. Our religious expression evolves - is crafted each week, day and hour by our membership. It happens here. There is no higher or better authority to consider the fate of our movement than I address now.

So, can UUism be the next big thing?

As for big, Austin Texas must certainly be a UU hot spot. In the last five years Austin UUs not only have produced a great new congregation, but just short of a 50% increase in UU members. If UU wants to get bigger, it could do worse than bottling what's going on in this room and shipping it to 1000 other congregations. Wildflower's growth may not seem world-changing, but from such seeds....

As for the next thing - well, I see we have a covenant group meeting Tuesday night and choir practice on Wednesday - and the speaker next week is...

The next big thing? - it's right here