

Can Unitarians do Theology Anymore?

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So let's take that dark, acidic piece of lyrics and music that we've just heard and use them as an entrée today into some reflections about the task of theology-making in contemporary Unitarian communities. When writing a song, Newman frequently takes on a particular persona, and then imaginatively writes through the eyes of that character. Often, they are loners, marginal types, broken on the wheel of life. They're frequently a very unsympathetic bunch of people, repellant even; they express through lyrics a view of the world, of current events, and of personal relationships from the far side, the dark side of the human condition.

In this song, the main character is god overheard in conversation with the human family. And there's a problem here; there is a fundamental disconnect between what humans believe about life and their relation with the divine, and what, in fact, appears to be the case. Instead of peace, health, and longevity in this world, there is violence, disease, and untimely death. Instead of a privileged relationship with the divine based on personal likeness, empathy, and love; humans appear essentially to be no different in kind and status from other living things; and we share their anonymous and violent fate. (cf. Psalm 103: 15)

Newman's song seems to ask: Has the whole thing been a set-up? Are we victims of a scenario written by a malevolent deity (if one truly exists), or was the whole thing sketched out by human ancestors blinded by an utterly mistaken sense of privilege and self-regard. Heart-sick and perplexed by the incoherence of it all, "our greatest priests" from both East and West, Newman writes, call out to the heavens: if you, god, won't "take care of us," just leave us alone; to which this enigmatic deity, who has looked into the dark heart of human nature and history replies: you're "crazy to put your faith in me" and yet, in the final analysis, "You really need me," and "that's why I love you." It's a pretty messed up relationship, if you ask me. But then that's vintage Randy Newman: picking at festering scabs, pulling the curtain aside and inviting us to look at what's broken and incoherent in the human heart and mind; and in this case, what may be fundamentally broken and incoherent in the way we have painted a picture of reality and of human life.

That work: providing a large-scale picture of reality, both cosmic and human, and then showing how we fit meaningfully within that grand and intimate canvass is the essential task of religion. Religions try to explain how and why things came to be; why the heavens and the earth are the way they are; and then they set out to help us discern and achieve ways of living that promote essential human flourishing within that "landscape."

There have been and will continue to be many religions, diverse renditions of "reality," prescriptions for meaningful lives, sources of truth, and paths to enlightenment and salvation. As long as we need solace, security, and affective community; as long as we need and seek to live meaningfully; as long as we creatively respond to these needs with stories about how things began, stories about exemplary humans and how they achieved enlightened, meaningful lives; and as long as we respond to these fundamental human needs with music, symbol, moral action, thought and ritual life, with institutions, architecture, and effective patterns for relating and encouraging one another in community there will be religion.

Religious ideas, practices and symbols have and will emerge as long as human beings work out their need for meaning. And a religion will continue to be compelling as long as it is sufficiently convincing, as long as it truly provides a sense of purpose, coherence and value in our life.

What happens when it doesn't? What happens when the picture begins to crack, when large gaps appear in the canvass, when we can no longer figure out even how to hang it on the wall because we can't see

what's up and down; and if it's a group portrait, what happens if we can't find ourselves within the frame?

What happens? Theology.

Now theology comes in many shapes and sizes. We may find it in a Randy Newman lyric and in a multi-volume academic publication. Theology may occur when we grope to explain to a child why a beloved pet died. "Why did it have to suffer?" she asks. "Is that really the end of its life?" How do you respond? And what sources do you draw from in order to frame a coherent and compelling answer to the sincere questions of a child in distress? And are not these questions and our answers a kind of dress rehearsal for our own: "why do I and those I love have to suffer?" "And is death really the end of my life and theirs?"

Or consider some other examples. Theology arises when we doubt that ministry belongs only to men; when we ask, "Who says that only men may hold and exercise this office? What's lost, what's distorted when half of us are categorically excluded from expressing the arts of ministry?"

And theology may happen when we can no longer coherently claim that the sun revolves around the earth, or that the earth was created in six days. If not, then how did the heavens and the earth come into existence; and for what, if any purpose? Who or what are we if, instead of being the beloved special creation of god, struck like a coin in the divine image, and privileged to own a direct interpersonal relationship with a transcendent being, who are we if, instead of that, we see ourselves as merely the product of blind evolutionary forces of nature, differing little essentially from other living things, and sharing their fate? What happens to our ideas and hopes about progress, redemption, and meaning? If the sacred narratives, if the pictures of reality painted by scriptures and their priestly interpreters no longer fit with the world as described by modern science or our own lived experience, what are we to do with them if they claim otherwise? Toss them into trash as so many lies? Turn and walk away? But where then do we walk, and with what stories and sources of knowledge, and with whom?

If religion attempts to provide for us an encompassing picture, or map, of reality that gives life a fundamental orientation and meaning; then theology takes a look at the picture, that map, when it cracks, when it fails in some way or another to provide us with meaningful, with useful bearings and directions in order for us to navigate the terrain of our lives. Theology looks intentionally, honestly, and critically. "Does the picture make sense? Does the map work? If not, why; what's wrong with the picture, and to what sources do we turn in order to fix it, and make it coherent and useful again?"

In one sense, the question in the title of this sermon is rhetorical; because Unitarians have done and will continue to do theology. We're the kind of people who turn again and again to examine our ideas, beliefs, institutions and behaviour in order to make them credible, coherent and functional as means for achieving full, meaningful, and flourishing lives. In this we are no different from most other thoughtful members of religious and spiritual communities and traditions.

What sets it apart? What might make our way of doing theology distinctively our own; a way of intentionally, honestly and critically examining religious map-making that can encourage us to be willing and excited to participate in this endeavour?

Today, I want to suggest three angles of seeing things in a Unitarian way that ignites my imagination and thought, gets my juices flowing, and enables me to be willing to set out on the journey of doing the work of theology in this setting. The first is our own and distinctive 450 year old story and tradition of doing theology; what's striking about it, is the vanguard role Unitarian thinkers and doers have played in the religious life of Western Europe and North America. Firmly convinced that they were well grounded in the authoritative sources of scripture, tradition, reason and experience, they battered down one obstacle after another that stood in the way of providing a compelling and coherent account of reality and of a religiously

meaningful life.

In the 16 th and 17 th centuries, at great risk to their own personal and collective safety, Unitarians affirmed the unity of God, the humanity of Jesus, and the critical role of unfettered reason in critically examining the claims of religion and faith. By affirming the unity of the divine, these pioneering characters laid the early foundations for inter-religious dialogue between faith traditions based on the grounds of mutual openness and respect. By asserting the humanity of Jesus and our likeness to him, they claimed our essential worth and goodness, our moral and ethical responsibility, and thus told us that each and all can and should accomplish our own redemption and achieve the good life. And then by resolutely promoting the role and autonomy of conscience and reason in religious exploration, they turned tolerance of religious diversity and views from a wicked vice into a moral virtue.

In the 17 and 1800s, Unitarians continued this vanguard theological role in two ways. First, they challenged the formidable, near-monopoly of Calvinist theology and culture in North America, when they, along with Universalists, offered a viable, compelling alternative to the psychological terrorism that consigned most people to eternal damnation. They did it by preaching hope not hell. They asserted that humans are capable of achieving the good, that the chief attributes of God are love and compassion; and that we can experience the presence of the divine not just in church and scripture, but immediately and intuitively through direct experience of nature. As well, Unitarians went on from this to accept and explain the consequences for religious map making brought on by the scientific discoveries of people like Charles Lyell and Charles Darwin, in geology and biology.

Finally in the 20 th century, Unitarians contributed in profound and significant ways to the theological and religious landscape by building on the pioneering work of their ancestors: on the one hand by experiencing and acting on the insight that all of nature is dynamic and interrelated, thus helping to propel the environmental movement on to the world stage; and, then, in their advocacy of the full rights and participation of women and of gays, lesbians and others to leadership and professional ministry in our denomination. By violating this late, great taboo, Unitarians empowered many other religious denominations to follow their lead to inclusiveness and acceptance of all from the margins into the centre of religious and communal life

I cannot emphasise strongly enough, how important Unitarians, across a wide array of theologizing, how important their role has been as a vanguard community of scholars, cultural leaders, and community builders. We live in a different moral and religious landscape as a consequence. What was once marginal in religion: dialogue, tolerance, humanism, respect for nature, democratic practices, naturalist metaphysics, the death of hell, the benevolence of God, gender and sexual diversity at the center of religious life, not its margins, all these and more, are central to our Unitarian theological legacy. We should know it, use it, and be proud of it.

But this is not merely a “just-so story.” Across more than four centuries, these our ancestors asserted, claimed, preached, taught and lived what they did, only because they had thought and felt their way intentionally, critically and honestly through the whole landscape of human learning and imagination. This is the second distinctive aspect about Unitarian theology. Look at the sources of our living tradition! Not one of them, no source of mystical and rational insight and experience, no sacred narrative, no human example of justice and mercy, no finding of science and reason, nor the deep wisdom of the rhythms of nature are alien or forbidden to us as we seek to find our place in the heavens and the earth and in order to make meaning in our lives. Indeed we must learn them and experience them in order that we, in our turn, will add our distinctive touch and contribution to this vanguard theology and religious tradition of ours.

Again, this is not merely a “just-so story” because there is no guarantee that we will go deep into these sources and find our own way of religious map making and theological exploration. We could rest on the

laurels of others. We could fail to claim our own heritage. We could be swallowed up by tides of indifference, shoddy thought, clueless spirituality, and despair over human violence and our disregard for the earth; swallowed up and be lost to ourselves and to the religious and ethical tradition we have inherited as our own. I am troubled by how difficult it seems to be for us to convey our knowledge and commitment to this religion with infectious passion both amongst ourselves and to our youth. I am troubled by the lack of commitment by our institutions and leaders to support historical scholarship and well-informed, innovative theological exploration.

It is almost spooky to compare the 19th century optimism and assurance of Longfellow's lyrics and the music in our opening hymn to the tentative, modest affirmations, the doubts, and sense of plotless erring we find in the words of the hymn that we will sing at the close of this service. But we know what lies between Longfellow's age and our own: the fiery furnace of the 20th century through which Unitarians in Europe and North America perilously passed; world wars, epic struggles over ideology, mounting environmental catastrophes. And now we must contend with the corrosive acids of consumerism, economic uncertainty, mental and emotional distress, growing disparities in wealth and health, energy wars and global warming.

Never before has the third, distinctive Unitarian way of looking at things been so desperately needed. We begin with an affirmation of the worth and dignity of each person, not the attributes and majesty of God; and then we move from that modest but unshakeable place of human solidarity to a modest, reverent but firm affirmation of our place within the web of nature, of all that is, knowing that it is our responsibility to be a blessing not a curse to the heavens and the earth and to all that in them dwell.

May we reengage with and claim our vanguard theological heritage; Unitarians have done some real, meaningful theology in their day. Let us explore the sources of our living tradition; let's claim them as our own because I'm telling you: disciplined study of the world and the past, intuitive exploration within and beyond, and ethical action in this world can ignite mystery and wonder in our minds and hearts and illuminate our path through these uncertain times.

Can Unitarians do theology anymore? Of course we can, and we must; because so much is at stake.