

Well, once again, I ended up in a different place than when I began to write. This talk should be titled, “Can Unitarian Universalism survive the authoritarian left?”

The answer to that question is not clear, and may not be resolved for some time, if ever.

Let’s begin with liberalism.

Liberalism – not to be confused with the political label of liberal – is the Enlightenment philosophy whose foundational assertion is that all human beings – each and every individual - has equal moral worth. From that assertion comes the idea of equal rights for all, as well as the fundamental liberal ideals of free markets, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religion and the separation of church and state, right to due process and equality under the law.

On that foundation rises modern social liberalism – and liberal religion – that works for public spending on programs such as education, health care and welfare, and where the common good is considered compatible with or superior to the freedom of the individual. It attempts to address issues like economic inequality, voting rights for minorities, affirmative action, reproductive and other women's rights, support for LGBTQ rights, and immigration reform. It also believes markets need tight regulation or they endanger democracy.

Sound familiar? That’s UU... or maybe not.

The past couple of decades have seen our faith – and many other spheres – dominated by critical theory. Our ‘leadership’ has seen fit to buy into critical theory without much conversation or debate at the congregational level. Most recently, our congregations have been described as bastions of white supremacy culture, to the dismay of many who have fought for years against racism, sexism, gender bias, inequality and so much more.

There isn’t any doubt that liberalism has failed to live up to many of its promises. Whether one can lay the blame for that at the feet of liberalism is another matter. There are many social forces at play, many of whom are violently opposed to liberal principles and processes.

There also isn't any doubt that critical theory has valuable things to say about racism and sexism and gender bias and other conditions in America.

What has not been open for discussion in our faith is whether these two systems of thought – liberalism and critical theory – are compatible, or can even coexist.

There are some deep and probably irreconcilable differences.

Critical theory subordinates the individual into group identities, making the claim that this is necessary to end oppression. One's race, sex, gender, social location, etc. are said to define their values and their positions on a host of political, economic, and social issues. You think what you think because of what you are, not because you are capable of freely arriving at your beliefs and opinions.

This contradicts our first principle: The inherent worth and dignity of every person.

Another critical theory belief is that only power can force out entrenched interests. This idea has never been more blatantly on display than in recent developments at the UUMA and UUA. As in all groups of humans, entrenched interests are always present. Changing one set of them for another does little to solve these kinds of problems.

Liberalism relies on evidence, argument, and the rule of law to overcome injustice, not the use of power. Liberalism is no longer seen as our way forward, but has become the enemy.

Critical theory is being used to justify a new authoritarianism on the left. We are seeing how badly that power is being wielded, and it only reinforces why we should be suspicious of authority.

Our Fifth Principle - The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large - has been discarded in favor of what can only be described as religious fundamentalism.

This fundamentalism conflates critical theory with theology.

Some characteristics of fundamentalism include – in no particular order of importance:

- Strict adherence to a text or dogma that cannot be questioned
- The existence of an Elect to which the truth is given
- The division of people into those who “get it” and those who don’t (woke/unwoke, saved/damned, enlightened/unenlightened, etc.. pick your poison.)
- The suppression and excommunication of dissenting voices
- The use of fear, guilt, shaming, scapegoating, gaslighting, etc. as a means of conversion and maintaining power over, rather than power with
- The demonization of some entity, group, or invoking of some abstract force as the reason for the world’s evils. (examples: The Devil, the Serbs, the Jews, capitalism, communism, immigrants, white supremacy, liberalism, and so on ad nauseum. )

There are more, but I think that covers the basics.

I am reminded of a Bene Gesserit aphorism from the novel *Dune*: *When religion and politics ride the same cart, they think nothing can stand in their way.*

This fundamentalism has rejected our Unitarian heritage, and badly damaged our Universalist heritage as well. It is elitist, highly partisan, and political, not religious. It mirrors the ancient alliance of church and state, of politics and religion.

This fundamentalism makes the same mistake progressives have accused the religious right of making. It also partakes heavily of ideas from the Counter-Enlightenment - against reason, universalism, and empiricism, which are commonly associated with the Enlightenment. It uses the goals and tactics of the Counter-Reformation that the Catholic Church used against the Protestant movement.

This fundamentalism is reactionary because it seeks a return to the days when our religious ancestors demanded – and got – strict adherence from their members, and governance was

hierarchical, by the Elect. It seeks to impose an ideological viewpoint on our congregations and the larger culture, and shut down discussion and debate.

It is not Unitarian Universalism as we have known it, nor is it an “evolution” of our faith. It represents an old and recurring problem – the misuse of power and authority in the name of doing good.

All this has taken place without a wider discussion in our congregations, and is being presented as a done deal. The fundamentalists have taken over the reins of power –such as they are – and are behaving worse than those they claim to be replacing. Cronyism and favoritism are even more open and blatant than before. Ideological purity is the new order of the day.

But of course, it’s different this time. The four most dangerous words in the English language.

Power. The temptations of power are almost irresistible. Power is at the heart of pretty much all our issues these days. Who’s got it? Who doesn’t? What kind of power do they have or don’t have? Who has the right to power? Who has too much, and who has too little? Who shouldn’t have any?

We know the answer to that last question, right? The other guys.

We squirm a little at that one, because there’s a lot of uncomfortable truth in it for us. Unitarian Universalists have always had an uneasy relationship with power and authority. I think that’s mostly been a good thing, but it’s also left us reluctant to wield it when necessary, and vulnerable to its misuse and abuse from within and without.

And now liberalism has become the other guys. Ouch.

When everything is framed as power relations, everything becomes a struggle for power.

And that might be useful in war and politics, but religion? I like to think we are called to something better.

I still think liberal religion provides us the way to do that. I still think liberalism – in the original Enlightenment sense – provides us the way to do that as a society.

Is it imperfect? Of course. It constantly needs refinement and correction through debate and the free exchange of ideas.

If we abandon that process, we are simply left with the naked struggle for power. At which point we have failed as a religion.

Can Unitarian Universalism survive the authoritarian left?

The answer is up to the people in the pews. To you. This is where the power ultimately lies in a liberal, democratic religion. With the people, not some Elect.

I invite you to consider pushing back, to reclaim liberalism and liberal religion, by becoming part of the Fifth Principle Project, an organic grassroots initiative to gather into community those Unitarian Universalists who want to reinvigorate the right of conscience and renew the democratic process in the governing of our denomination.

You can find them at [www.fifthprincipleproject.org](http://www.fifthprincipleproject.org)

In closing, let me say that Unitarian Universalism has always fought against authoritarianism and hierarchy from the right, from the patriarchy, from traditional religion, and other reactionary forces. It's damn shame that we now have to do that from within our own denomination.