

How many communities are you a part of? If you're like me, you belong to several, to a greater or lesser degree.

I've belonged to a world-wide community of vision quest guides for over 20 years. There's the community of the place I live, Chimayo, that my wife and I are learning to be a part of it. I'm a member of the Unitarian Universalist community, specifically the congregations of Santa Fe and Taos, which are part of the larger community of Unitarian Universalist congregations.

Perhaps you are part of a knitting circle, or a gardening club, or are involved with a political party, or an environmental group. You are certainly part of the community where you live, hopefully in an active way.

We belong to communities within communities, circles nested within circles. Some are communities of place, some are communities of interest. Some of these communities overlap. Some have no knowledge of each other. We live in a world where such things are possible, where we can choose where to live and who to associate with. That's pretty amazing.

And they all have their own cultures, their own rules and traditions and expectations. Even those that share common roots have their own individual flavor. For example, UU Taos and UU Santa Fe are distinct and beautiful expressions of our liberal religious values.

What does it mean to be a liberal religion?

A lot of folks think it has to do with progressive, left politics and social concerns, in contrast to the religious right. There's some truth in that, but that's not it.

Liberal comes from the Latin "liber" – free. Liberal religion is free religion. Free from creeds and unquestioned belief in scriptures or ideologies, free from orthodoxy, free from fundamentalist thinking, free from authoritarian priesthods and clerics.

Freedom to seek the truth as individuals. Freedom to live and work by our own choices. Freedom to associate with those we choose to associate with. Freedom to love who we please.

That freedom was born of the Enlightenment, and the social and political order that arose from it. That order we now call classical liberalism - the political and moral philosophy based on the rights of the individual, liberty, consent of the governed and equality before the law.

In general, we liberals support private property, market economies, individual rights (including civil rights and human rights), democracy, secularism, rule of law, economic and political freedom, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of religion.

These ideas are the foundation of humanism – the idea the human rather than divine or supernatural matters should guide our affairs. We believe in the value

and goodness of human beings, we emphasize common human needs, and we seek reasonable and inclusive ways of solving human problems.

As I've pointed out before, believing in humans takes a lot more faith than believing in unseen deities!

Those are our roots, and they are deep ones. Our religious and political ancestors had had enough of hereditary privilege, state religions, and the divine right of kings, among other things. They sought freedom of belief and association in a time when those things were forbidden and brutally suppressed.

Their struggle for those freedoms took generations, and there were many setbacks. Access to those freedoms and the rights and responsibilities that go with them has slowly expanded over the generations, and continues to expand. Liberalism isn't perfect. It has its failings and weaknesses. It can be abused, like all systems. But it has taken us far, and I believe it can take us even farther.

But why liberal RELIGION? Even if we could agree on a definition of what constitutes a religion, why incorporate liberalism into it?

We must look to history for answers.

The Protestant Reformation was a reaction to what Joseph Loconte calls the sins of Christendom. The denigration of individual conscience. The criminalization of dissent. The corrosive and compromised relationship of church and state. The

hedonism of clerical leadership, and the deeply rooted anti-Semitism. Most important of all, the Catholic Church and the monarchies had failed to uphold the freedom and the dignity of every human soul. The Protestant project was essentially the creation of a more just society based on the life and teachings of Jesus.

Our faith is grounded in that heritage and the pursuit of those ideals: The ideal of human equality and human freedom based on the proposition that every person bears the image of God. The ideal that the rights of conscience are sacred and can't be coerced by church or state. The ideal that impartial justice, the golden rule, must be the cornerstone of any democratic society.

We still seek the full implementation of these ideals, even if we no longer necessarily hold to the original beliefs that gave rise to them.

Separated from the state, religious freedom ignites the spark of new movements for social and political freedom, for freedom of philosophical inquiry, and the Enlightenment follows close on the heels of the Reformation.

The profound effect of this liberation can be hard to imagine today, when we take these things for granted. It was, and still is, a paradigm shift that transformed European civilization, one whose effects are still playing out.

In 1936, philosophy professor and Disciples of Christ minister Edward Scribner Ames wrote in his article "Liberalism in Religion":

*The term "liberalism" seems to be developing a religious usage which gives it growing significance. It is more sharply contrasted with fundamentalism, and signifies a far deeper meaning than modernism. Fundamentalism describes a relatively uncritical attitude. In its custom, traditionalism, and authoritarianism are dominant. There is no doubt that the loss of the traditional faith has left many people confused and rudderless, and they are finding that there is no adequate satisfaction in mere excitement or in flight from their finer ideals. They crave a sense of deeper meaning and direction for their life. Religious liberalism, not as a cult but as an attitude and method, turns to the living realities in the actual tasks of building more significant individual and collective human life.*

The key words here are "attitude and method."

We have an attitude towards - and methods for - how we express our liberal values. These are expressed in our 7 principles, our commitment to the worth and dignity of every person, our commitment to the democratic process, and our insistence that whatever we do, we seek truth grounded in living reality, not creed or ideology or some authority. We understand that - in the words of James Luther Adams - that revelation and truth are not closed, but are constantly being revealed as our knowledge and understanding grow.

You know, even if we have trouble defining exactly what a religion is, we have a pretty good idea of what religion provides us:

Religion gives us a sense of identity, of community, and of belonging. It provides a moral and ethical framework for our lives, and gives us purpose in the world. It also provides a sense of transcendence, of seeking something beyond the mundane world, and perhaps of immanence, that something larger is present in the mundane.

Now, other ways of being together can provide many of those things, but what distinguishes us from the knitting club and the political party are two things: First, the moral obligation to manifest good in the world. And second, that transcendence and immanence lead us to a sacred sense of universality, the feeling that something bigger than we are holds all of us in its embrace, no matter who we are or where we come from or what we think. You can call that whatever you want, but many of us call that Love.

What makes us a religious community is that moral obligation and our shared goal of making the world more just and loving. And we do that by liberal means.

And make no mistake, this is not easy. Freedom comes with responsibilities. Democracy is difficult and time consuming and frequently boring. Being inclusive demands we keep opening our hearts and widening the circle. Our faith in humanity will be tested over and over again. Truth-seeking is a constant and never-ending pursuit that challenges us to question ourselves and each other, and to test our ideas against reality.

As Kenneth Patton writes in our opening words – this house offers a platform for the free voice, for declaring, both in times of security and danger, the full and undivided conflict of opinion.

That means we might get our feelings hurt. That we might have to change our minds. It means we may need to overcome our fear and speak what we truly think aloud. It means we don't hurry to judgment when someone speaks their truth. It means we generously make room for differences of opinion and the possibility that many things can be true at the same time.

Community is hard. And we will fail at it, probably with some regularity.

And when we stumble, we are called to be compassionate with ourselves and others, for we are only human. And we are here to help each other be better human beings, for we can't do this alone.

Who belongs in this house? I think that is anyone who wants to make the world a better place for all. The more the merrier. We will disagree on what a better world looks like, and how to get there, but finding the way together is how we get to that world.

Our covenants can only ever show us how to travel. They are not signposts that tell us where to go. For the terrain we traverse is not some fixed road, some four lane highway to Utopia, but the wild country of spirit and love and reality. We

travel the pathless path, the path that creates itself under our feet as we walk together.

So welcome... to the messy, sometimes difficult, sometimes wonderful, rarely boring, world of liberal religious community.

I for one am glad that I am here, that you are here, that we are here together. It is good to be together. It makes all the difference in the world.