

A couple of months ago I talked about the difference between liberal social justice and critical social justice. Today I want to dive into liberalism as a political project and what makes it not only special in history, but makes it special to Unitarian Universalists.

Classical liberalism is the great Western political and economic tradition that includes Adam Smith and also J. S. Mill; Thomas Paine and also Edmund Burke; Alexander Hamilton and also Thomas Jefferson; Friedrich Hayek and also John Maynard Keynes; John Rawls and also Robert Nozick. But within this diverse group of thinkers, there is a shared vision of government as secular, limited, representative, and constitutional, and a vision of citizens as free and equal.

Within modern liberalism are what we've come to call the left and right wings of that tradition. These days, small-c conservatives tend to be the ones defending classical liberalism, which is a shame, since liberals should be doing that as well. Conservatives see empowering individuals to solve problems as the key to a better society. Liberals tend to think that governmental action the key to a better society, and that the state is needed to achieve equal opportunity and equality for all, and that it is the duty of the government to address social issues and to protect civil liberties and individual and human rights. Both have positives and negatives, and neither should be allowed to dominate.

It's this tension between these two paths to a better society that marks America as a political project. And until recently, both sides were more-or-less in agreement about the ground rules – which is to say, classical liberal institutions and norms.

Which I think boiled down to a few basic concepts: live and let live, persuasion not coercion, authority is always accountable, and you win some, you lose some. And that at the end of the day, we can all sit down to dinner together, because we all share a common belief in the American project, even if we disagree on how to implement it. Compromise and a willingness to change our minds are pretty key to making that all work.

That agreement is breaking down. The extreme right and the extreme left have become increasingly illiberal and authoritarian, and see the other side as the enemy, not the loyal

opposition. They've come to dominate our political discourse, and have an outsized influence on the two main political parties.

We have become more polarized as a result, and the guiding principle of our discourse these days seems to be: If you ain't with us, you're against us. Compromise is off the table. It's all about power, and screw actually finding and applying solutions to our many pressing problems.

So I think it's worth taking a look at the roots of liberalism and how it led European culture out of many years of war and conflict that came about due to the Reformation.

The Reformation pitted Catholics against Protestants. It's hard to imagine these days just how committed people were to their beliefs concerning God and the Bible. Heresy was the capital crime on either side. You could be tortured in an effort to get you to recant your beliefs, and what is remarkable is the number of people on either side who went to their painful and agonizing deaths without renouncing those beliefs.

This didn't end there. The Protestants split into sects, and those sects accused the others of blasphemy and heresy over things like child baptism and predestination. But both Catholics and Protestants saw Unitarianism as heresy. Michael Servetus, one of our Unitarian forebears, was burned at the stake in Geneva in 1553 by edict of the City Council. They were Calvinists, but the Catholics would have happily done it had they gotten to him first.

The religious wars in Europe spanned most of the 15 and 16 hundreds. Warfare intensified after the Catholic Church began the Counter-Reformation in 1545. The conflicts culminated in the Thirty Years' War, which devastated Germany and killed one third of its population, a mortality rate twice that of World War I. The Peace of Westphalia broadly resolved the conflicts by recognizing three separate Christian traditions within the boundaries of the old Holy Roman Empire: Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Calvinism.

Unitarians were there from the beginning. From the early anti-Trinitarian movements in Poland and Transylvania to the Dissenting Tradition in England, Unitarianism and the associated

political and social reform movements help shape the philosophical and theological foundations for many of the ideas that would come to inform classical liberalism.

Those foundations have deep roots in Christian theology.

Prior to the Reformation, it was understood that the ancient family, the basic unit of the city-state, was itself a kind of church. The paterfamilias was originally both the family's magistrate and high priest, with his wife, daughters and younger sons having a radically inferior status. Inequality remained the hallmark of the ancient patriarchal family. Society was understood as an association of families and tribes rather than of individuals.

Christianity upended this understanding. The belief of the equality of souls in the eyes of God – the discovery of human freedom and its potential – created a point of view that would transform society. This began to undercut traditional inequalities of status. It was nothing short of a moral revolution, and it laid the foundation for the social revolution that followed. The individual gradually displaced the family, tribe or caste as the basic unit of society.

I cannot emphasize enough how radical this change is. Kings no longer stand higher than serfs. Clergy no longer stand higher than the lowest sinner. Men no longer stand higher than women. One race is no longer better than another. All are equal in the eyes of the Creator.

This is where our first principle comes from.

Implementing this was centuries-long process that is still in play. By the 12th and 13th centuries the Papacy sponsored the creation of a legal system for the Church, based on that idea of moral equality. Canon law defined the fundamental unit of the legal system as the individual (or "soul"). Working from that assumption, canonists transformed the ancient doctrine of natural law ("everything in its place" – like the existing social order) into a theory of natural rights – the forerunner of modern liberal rights theory. By the 15th century these intellectual developments contributed to a reform movement calling for something like representative government in the Church.

The failure of that reform movement was the cause of the Reformation, which led to religious wars and growing pressure across Europe for the separation of Church and state. By the 18th century such pressure had become a rabid anticlericalism, which selectively rewrote western history.

It is this selective memory of our past that lies behind our failure to see that it was moral intuitions generated by Christianity that were turned against the coercive claims of the Church – intuitions founded on belief in free will, which led to the conclusion that enforced belief is a contradiction in terms. So it is no accident that the West generated a rights-based culture of principles rather than of rules. It is our enormous strength, reflected in the liberation of women and slaves and the extension of those rights to all, and the refusal to accept that heresy is a crime.

Long story short, a new political arrangement arises between the churches, the states and their citizens, and the rising mercantile powers. It's based on Christian ethical traditions and the insights of the Enlightenment. Every one of our principles is grounded there.

This arrangement becomes what we now know as classical liberalism, the political tradition that advocates free market and laissez-faire economics; and civil liberties under the rule of law, with special emphasis on the separation of church and state, individual autonomy, limited government, economic freedom, political and religious freedom, and freedom of speech.

This reaches its fullest expression in the American experiment. Many historians and thinkers see this experiment as not just unique, but as something precious.

It is a vision of a country founded on the core Revolutionary ideals of equality and liberty. Equality amounts not to sameness in skills, talents, or ability but to equal moral worth. Equality is thus required for liberty, insofar as liberty amounts to non-domination.

The fact that "liberty was precarious" was the lived experience of the colonies over the course of a century and a half of dealings with Britain. The Revolution was motivated by the colonists' acquired mistrust of "privilege, ascribed to some and denied to others mainly at birth," which

was corrosive of equality, as well as by their fear of the arbitrary “misuse of power,” which was destructive of liberty.

In this light, we see the full force of the Declaration of Independence’s denouncement of tyranny, the arbitrary domination of one group by another. Yes, the circle of equality and liberty was small at first, but it has expanded over the years to include more and more citizens, and it continues to expand.

It’s become very uncool on the Left to be patriotic.

The accusation is that America is hypocritical and does not live up to its ideals, speaking loftily while acting basely. This view of America is that of a country built on genocide and slavery and oppression. There’s truth in that assertion, and we shouldn’t turn a blind eye toward that history. But we are not unique in that regard.

But the other side of the story is that from the beginning, there were also the forces of abolition at work. There were the voices that opposed the taking of Native lands. There were those who sought the implementation of the vision that all people were free and equal, including slaves and women and the indigenous peoples. And they were on both sides of the political aisle.

What undermines our ideals is what has always undermined them: selfishness, greed, and the will to power. That was what liberalism was conceived to hold in check. But we have to defend it against corruption and bad faith actors. There is no system of governance that is immune to the forces of greed and self-interest, immune to the desires of some to have power over others.

The struggle to keep these forces in check is an evolving one, and liberalism is a pretty new means for that in the scheme of things. But is more effective than some other things we’ve tried.

When we look back on human history, we’ve tried many different kinds of social organization. There is no system that cannot be corrupted and abused for power and to oppress.

Autocracies, monarchies, democracies, socialisms. Some of them we've tried over and over. Many of them involved hierarchies where power and wealth is held in the hands of a few. That seems to be a strong pull for humans, and we tend to always end up there if we don't constantly fight that pull.

Liberal institutions meet that structural need for vigilance, and it needs upholding and defending. There are those who seek to return us to the days when all that mattered was our tribe or caste or race or place in some hierarchy, not our unique complexity as individuals.

Whatever we do, we must not tear down and discard this rare and precious thing that – despite its flaws – has given us a way to live together and find our way together with far less violence and oppression than under the old tyrannies of church and state. Without liberalism, the danger is that of devolving into the old cycle of tit-for-tat, of the oppressed overthrowing their oppressors and becoming oppressors in their turn.

Liberalism needs defending by liberal religion, so that we don't forget its roots in Protestant Christianity, and that we don't forget either our complex and sometimes difficult history or the struggles of our ancestors to achieve freedom and equality for all, no matter their station in life.

It's a valuable heritage we should be proud to defend.

May it be so.