

Imagine a Religion: Reflections on Unitarian Universalism

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preaching

Martin Luther King Sunday, January 15, 2023

Hymns: #1024 When the Spirit Says Do, #1008 When Our Heart Is in a Holy Place, #121 We'll Build a Land (refrain adapted thus: "build a land where *all of our kindred...*")

Readings: "The Unitarian Universalism that Does Not Yet Exist" by Dr. Natalie Fenimore and the Sources of our Living Tradition (UUA Bylaws, Article II). Printed after the sermon.

Chalice Lighting: Adapted from the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Printed after sermon.

Instrumental Music: "Homage to William Levi Dawson," by Zenobia Powell Perry, "Precious Lord, Take My Hand," by Thomas A. Dorsey, "Imagine," by John Lennon and Yoko Ono

Prayer (excerpts)

On this day of what would have been the 94th birthday of the late Dr. Martin Luther King Junior, we remember his leadership and courage in the movement to achieve civil rights for Black Americans, dignity for poor people, and peace for all people. Through his words of eloquence, strategic brilliance, inclusive Christian faith, and a commitment to the principles of nonviolent resistance, he made the United States a better country.

Knowing of the resistance he faced, and the violence he suffered, let us honor his memory by hearing the voices of current leaders for racial and economic justice, and responding to them. Let us heed their calls toward greater freedom, equity, and safety for all people. May they lead us to build a land of people so bold, where justice shall roll down like waters and peace like an ever-flowing stream.

Now please join me in centering ourselves in an awareness of our breathing...

Let us pray. O Breath of Life, Spirit of Love, draw near to us. Bring us peace when we need it. Lead us to extend and share peace when we can. Remind us of the power of kindness and patience. When we are sad, hurting, mournful and in need, bless us with comfort. When we feel uncertain in our lives, steady us.

When we worry about our community, this country, and the planet, remind us that we are not alone in our concerns and our hoping. Urge us to reach out. When we know of the need for more justice, more dignity, more freedom, give us the courage to bear witness to our values. Give us the humility not to have all the answers.

O Breath of Life, Spirit of Love, be with us now and in the days to come. Bring us peace when we need it. Lead us to extend and share peace when we can. So may it be. Amen.

Sermon

As the highest-selling song of John Lennon's solo career, "Imagine" has touched so many people, including many Unitarian Universalists. (In fact, I assumed universal knowledge of it and didn't think to have it sung at the service, for which I apologize.)

The song's vision of a world of peace, without materialism, without borders, and without religion is idealistic and inspiring. And frankly, it's unrealistic. As a clergy person, someone who makes a living as a minister in a religious tradition, I have no worries that the dreamer's vision of "no religion, too" will put me out of work anytime soon.

To be sure, when some people hear about Unitarian Universalism, they ask: "Is it really a religion?" Indeed, many Unitarian Universalists don't even want to claim that word, *religion*.

Given how much evil has been done by religious organizations, religious people, and religious ideologies, that is understandable. Fair enough. So long as you show up and participate, I don't mind if you call UUSS your religious home or call it your community recreation center. But consider this: the Internal Revenue Service says we are entitled to tax-deductible contributions because the State considers us a religion organization. Please don't talk them out of that.

And consider this question. If we're not a religion, when did we stop being one? Universalism and Unitarianism each began as a profession of belief *by* religious people. Their faith was unusual, of course; it was heretical for its time.

The Universalists argued there is no hell and God is Love. Unlike the song, they did imagine a heaven, but everybody would be there. The Unitarians argued that every person is blessed with dignity and worth, as Jesus of Nazareth demonstrated by his ministry and his life—his very human life. This may be heretical, but it's *religious* heresy.

In the 1830s and 1840s, many of the Transcendentalist thinkers in New England were Unitarians, or they'd been brought up as Unitarians. But they broke away and expressed their own heresies. One of them wrote that you don't need Bibles or churches to be religious (R.W. Emerson). Another said *in public* that the values taught by Jesus of Nazareth would have been just as true, just as pure, if anybody else had taught them (Theodore Parker). Condemnations of this came from within Unitarianism and from outside it. False religion, it was called. Now it's part of our heritage.

Also happening in the middle of the 1800s, Unitarian radicals moved to the Great Plains and Midwest, and they started churches. This movement included a few dozen women ministers who served in Iowa, Nebraska, Michigan, and other places where the winter wind was biting. These liberal ministers didn't talk much about the nature of God; they emphasized religion as the practice of living ethically and participating in a community.

If you are a Humanist, you may be thinking that we stopped being religious when Humanism took hold in this movement. How could we have so many skeptics, agnostics and committed atheists among us—and still be religious? Well, it's important to remember that the Unitarian ministers of a century ago who, along with others, wrote and published the Humanist Manifesto were proclaiming Religious Humanism. Their words. They said that religions are a human creation, thus religion should serve human communities and meet the goal of human flourishing. Belief in a supernatural deity isn't necessary to practice this kind of religion, they said. These Unitarian ancestors claimed the name of *religious* humanism.

No, I don't want to hide from the word *religion*. For one reason, I wish to honor those in our tradition who lived out the courage of their convictions. In 1529, in the Kingdom of Poland, a person by the name of Katherine Weigel was accused of blasphemy. She was 70 years old. They said she was a heretic for not accepting that Christ was the son of God. That belief in the full humanity of Jesus would later be called Unitarian. When she recanted—or denied this belief—the charges against her were dropped. Ten years later she was accused again. This time Katherine Weigel didn't deny her Unitarian belief. In the center of Krakow, she was burned at the stake, at the age of 80.¹

Her death happened three decades before there was an organized unitarian movement known as the Polish Brethren. These people were pacifists; they didn't take oaths or serve in the military. The Polish Brethren held property in common, as they understood the early followers of

Jesus to have done (as told in the Acts of the Apostles). The Polish Brethren were a few centuries ahead of John Lennon's words: "Imagine no possessions/ I wonder if you can/ No need for greed or hunger/ A brotherhood of man."

In the last 50 years, the UU movement has embraced a variety of spiritual perspectives. This includes Buddhist insights and practices, and earth-based rituals. It includes the celebration of Jewish holiday traditions by Unitarian Universalists with Jewish backgrounds. It includes a new look at the New Testament's narratives about Jesus of Nazareth.

Furthermore, in recent years a number of practicing Hindus and Muslims have joined UU churches. Some have become our ministers. In this pulpit at UUSS, we've heard guest sermons from one Unitarian Universalist minister who is a lifelong Hindu, and from another UU minister who joined the Sikh faith as a young adult.

Imagine a religion... which could welcome all kinds of traditions and all kinds of people. Imagine a religion which respects our differences while celebrating shared values.

Earlier in a reading, we heard the current list of the Sources of Our Living Tradition. It includes a variety of inspirations. When you hear it, this list can seem straightforward, even obvious. Yet behind each line in the list of Sources was a lot of arguing. Before the voting took place (at General Assembly), some UUs expressed fears that adding this or that Source would confuse who we are. It would make us look incoherent or inconsistent. Well, the last addition was 27 years ago, and we seem to be holding together fine.

Back in the 1500s, the Polish Brethren didn't always see eye to eye. But when they had religious disagreements, they used dialogue instead of resorting to violence. It's easy to imagine a religion like that, but it calls for effort, patience, and love to make it real. In the early 1800s, American Universalist preacher Hosea Ballou said: "If we agree in love, there is no disagreement that can do us any injury, but if we do not, no other agreement can do us any good."

As Unitarian Universalists, we can't be everything to all people, and we won't appeal to everyone. However, our tradition has been a spiritual home for countless people of goodwill. It has been a launching pad for people to work toward a world that is more just and fair. I have one more story to recount for you.

In March of 1965, in Selma, Alabama, African Americans demonstrating for voting rights attempted three times over a number of weeks to march from Selma to the State Capitol in Montgomery. In the first march, Alabama State Troopers assaulted people with clubs and police dogs (known as Bloody Sunday). After that, Martin Luther King Jr. called on white clergy to come to Selma. Three UU ministers who did come were attacked at night by a white mob of men. The Reverend James Reeb died from his injuries. Following that, dozens of UU ministers and laypeople arrived in Selma, as did allies from other religious affiliations.

The marchers made it to Montgomery on the third attempt. After the protest rally ended, the Black demonstrators had to get back to Selma before dark in order to be safe. Among the white volunteers who took carloads of marchers back home was a young mother from Detroit, Michigan. Her name was Viola Liuzzo. As she and a friend drove back to Montgomery to pick up another carload, a car pulled up beside hers and a man shot and killed her. Formerly a Roman Catholic, Viola Liuzzo had been a member of the First Unitarian Church of Detroit for only a year. And she had been taking her children to church there. I can imagine that in the early 1960s, making a switch between religions like that was a gutsy thing to do. Moreover, Viola's

husband was still Catholic. He didn't approve of her UU involvement *or* her driving to Alabama. After Viola's murder, he had a Catholic funeral mass held in Detroit. It was attended by the Governor of Michigan, the head of the autoworkers' union, Martin Luther King Jr., and 750 other people, including Unitarians. Two UU ministers called on her husband at home at two different times, but he turned them away.

It was not only Viola's husband who thought she had no business helping out in Selma. A few months later, a poll in the *Ladies' Home Journal* revealed that only 26 percent of American women approved of her actions, while 55 percent disapproved. She was one of the few white women able to go, who chose to go. Imagine a religion which motivates people of conscience to put themselves in harm's way to support other people in demanding dignity, safety, and equal rights. As a mother with children at home, this must have been a venture which Viola could not have seen herself making, earlier. Perhaps, however, something in the Unitarian Church inspired her to accept the invitation to go to Alabama.ⁱⁱ

I don't want to imply that UUism is a better kind of religion than all the others. We have our appeal and our strengths, and we have our flaws and weaknesses. Of course, this is the best religion for me; it is my home. It is a source of guidance and accountability for me. And I assume it's the right place for you as well, unless you are just being a good sport this morning. Maybe you wanted to get out of the rain and are staying for the coffee.

But even if we love this place and this tradition, we dare not imagine ourselves to be superior. UU minister Mark Belletini has written that "our work as liberal religious people is not to be competitive with others, and to find ways to supersede others, but rather to find ways to supersede *ourselves*, to grow beyond our limitations and our constrictive boundaries, each and every one of us."

Unitarian Universalism emerged from within the dominant culture of this country. The United States was founded and settled within a culture in which whiteness or white identity was at the center. It is a culture of white supremacy, in other words. Our UU tradition has reflected this culture by centering white identities. This has begun to change in recent years, thanks to brave and bold UU leaders of color—young leaders drawn to the promise of this faith, plus resilient UU leaders who've been here for decades. In a reading earlier, Dr. Natalie Fenimore, a UU minister of color, said that she is in love with a Unitarian Universalism that doesn't yet exist. But while she loves that vision, she says she must love the reality of the faith now as well.

I said earlier that the dreamer's visions in the song "Imagine" are idealistic but also unrealistic. Yet in many religious and social movements, idealism for something that has not yet been attained is a strong source of energy. Deep values can motivate us all. Inspired visions and faithful commitments can unify, connect, and sustain communities through setbacks and hardships. You could say that Martin Luther King Junior loved an America which was not here yet. In the struggle against racism, poverty, and militarism, he gave us a vision of that America. In quoting the prophets of the Hebrew scriptures, Dr. King imagined a time in the future, when justice will roll down like waters and peace like a mighty stream. His controversial, challenging, and courageous leadership did bring us closer to sharing the America of which he dreamed and which he loved—as a possibility calling to us.

Imagine a religion where people feel grateful and excited enough to invite others to share in it and where we can be humble enough to know that it won't meet everyone's needs. Unitarian

Universalism is not perfect or ideal. We have wide gaps to cross to reach the visions and goals toward which our values call us.

But we can imagine a religion in which the awareness of our mistakes and flaws as a faith tradition don't make us give up or give in or go away, but they fuel our commitment and keep us dreaming. We can dream, together. We can imagine.

We can struggle and celebrate, listen and learn, reach out and offer help, and we can ask for help. Imagine, we are not alone. Imagine, we are connected, and we are together. Let our imagination, our connections, and our values call us forward and sustain us, each one of us, and all of us, together. Amen.

Reading:

This reading is entitled "The Unitarian Universalism that Does Not Yet Exist." It's from a series of conversations with ministers in our UU movement who are Black, Indigenous, or People of Color. It was published by our denomination in a book entitled *Centering: Navigating Race, Authenticity, and Power in Ministry*. The speaker is the Rev. Dr. Natalie Fenimore, Minister of Religious Education at the UU Congregation at Shelter Rock, on Long Island. She says:

[In 1972, U.S. Representative] Shirley Chisholm was asked why *she*, a Black woman, was running for [nomination to the presidency]: "You don't have a chance! Why are you doing that?" And she said, "Because I am in love with the America that does not yet exist," and that's how Unitarian Universalism is also. I'm in love with the Unitarian Universalism that does not yet exist. But I have to hold *both* the love for that thing and the love for the [current] reality. It does not yet exist. It will probably not exist in my lifetime. I don't think it will in that of my children, but I can't deny my love for it. You know, [I want to be there in that struggle.]

Antiphonal Reading: Sources of Our Living Traditionⁱⁱⁱ

1-This reading is based on part of the Bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Association, of which this church is a member. These are the six sources of our faith tradition, but this reading is in a different order from the official one. The sources of UUism are not a creed, but part of the covenant of connection among over 1,000 congregations in the UUA. We will alternate reading these to you and you can see them on the screen.

2-Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.

1-The living tradition which we share draws from many sources:

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- Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.
- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;

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- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;

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- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
- Words and deeds of prophetic human beings, which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love.

ⁱ From Charles Howe, *For Faith and Freedom: A Short History of Unitarianism in Europe* (UUA: Boston, 1997). [books.google.com/books/about/For Faith and Freedom.html?id=442fLk4sbYC](https://books.google.com/books/about/For_Faith_and_Freedom.html?id=442fLk4sbYC)

ⁱⁱ From Mark D. Morrison-Reed, *The Selma Awakening* (Skinner House: Boston, 2014). www.uuabookstore.org/The-Selma-Awakening-P17456.aspx

ⁱⁱⁱ UUA Bylaws, Article II. <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/sources>