

Emerson and Religious Freedom

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You'd think we'd have religious freedom all worked out by now. It had been such a big problem for old Europe that they fought wars to prevent it. Freedom was a major issue for our nation's founders, who wanted to avoid those old world mistakes, and saw that America was already a religiously diverse society from its very beginning. So they made freedom of religion the First Amendment to the Constitution, assuring that the government would never be involved in limiting the practice of religion. They believed that the persecution of religious difference should be illegal, and it is. But that doesn't necessarily deter the actions of an alienated outsider, like the lone unbalanced individual who invaded the Unitarian Universalist church in Knoxville, Tennessee, two years ago, killing two and wounding six others during a Sunday worship service.

There was a time when this behavior wouldn't have been as shocking as it is to us now. There was a time when persecution was mainstream – people were excommunicated, banished, shunned, tortured, and even burned alive for having religious opinions that differed from the accepted norm. And not just in Europe, either. America has its own part in that history, including the expulsion of Anne Hutchinson from the Massachusetts Bay Colony and the Salem Witch Trials.

Today earth-centered traditions, such as Wiccan, are widely accepted as religious. There are Wiccan chaplains in hospitals and in the military, and as of two years ago, Wiccan symbols are now approved for gravestones in military cemeteries.

But the path to religious freedom isn't always broad or easy, even in liberal religious congregations. Some years ago, I served a Unitarian Universalist congregation that erupted into an uproar when a Wiccan priestess offered a course in pagan symbols and practices. This was in a conservative city, and many in the church felt that they had stuck their necks out just about as far as they could by becoming a welcoming congregation and that letting in a witch was

going too far. “Witches? People will be calling us devil worshippers!” people complained. “We’ll lose all credibility in this community!”

I think they’ve moderated a bit by now, but I’ve also known more than a few folks at Unitarian Universalist congregations who bristled at the very mention of such basic religious concepts as God, spirit, and divinity. I would think that a church dedicated to religious freedom would be proud to affirm and support all the basic concepts and practices of the religious community of which it is a part.

What is religious freedom, after all? How much is too much, or too little? The answer depends on your point of view. In our pluralistic 21st-century society, we often say there can’t be too much religious freedom, but many of us still get uncomfortable when we look at some of the more extreme sects and cults. Where do we draw the line? Generally speaking, we say that our legal system has jurisdiction. If a group is breaking the law, then they’ve gone too far.

But there’ve been a lot of laws throughout history, and religious freedom has been defined in many different ways. Like I said, it depends on your point of view. And there’s often a delicate balance between social consensus and the law. Society changes, and so do laws. Sometimes one part of a society is changing while another part still controls the legal system. What does religious freedom mean then?

We often think of colonial America as a place of religious freedom, but that wasn’t necessarily the case. It’s true that settlers wanted to be free to practice their religion without persecution, but part of that freedom meant having a legal system based on their own particular religious beliefs.

Take Massachusetts, for example. When the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock they wanted to establish what they believed would be a truly just and religious society. Since their idea of justice was based on their religious principles, they saw no conflict between church and state. Enforcement was reasonable, logical: this was religious freedom. If you believed differently from the established church you had to leave. If you were lucky, like Roger Williams, you got help along the way and ended up founding Rhode Island as a community of religious inclusion. If you weren’t lucky you could be banished to the

wilderness like Anne Hutchinson, who didn't do so well in the wild, and ended up murdered along with your children.

Even after the ratification of the US Constitution and the Bill of Rights guaranteeing freedom of religion, the Congregational church was still the tax-funded, state-sponsored official church of Massachusetts. The church was considered to be responsible for the moral education necessary for a civil society. Folks were pretty set in their religious ways, but that didn't protect them from the rising tide of liberty that was sweeping across the new nation.

And religious freedom was changing, too. The enlightened ideals of the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution were not in complete agreement with the religious principles of the Congregational church. This conflict produced Unitarianism. It's hard for us to appreciate the intensity of this controversy because our world is so different today. But what do you do when the congregations of the state-supported religion are torn apart by doctrinal controversy? What happens when the liberals outvote the conservatives and bring in beliefs that many consider immoral if not illegal? The birth of Unitarianism was not a cool, smooth gentle event. It was a revolution.

Unitarianism emerged as a reaction to the rather dim view of human nature held by the Congregational church. Its Christianity was based on three major beliefs. The first of these was original sin, the belief that human nature was inherently depraved; that humans were intrinsically corrupted by an evil they could neither resist nor overcome. Second, the unique life and sacrificial death of Jesus was the only way humans could be saved from the eternal damnation which was the natural consequence of their depraved nature. And, third, that salvation was available only to a limited number of divinely chosen people who would be saved without any particular goodness or merit on their own part.

The Unitarian response was that there was no such thing as original sin: humans possessed an innate capacity for good. People could choose between good or bad actions and thus be the authors of their own character. Since there was no original sin from which they needed to be saved, Unitarians rejected the idea that Jesus had to die to save them from it. They also felt that predestination

made a mockery of free will, which is the idea that people have the capacity to make meaningful moral choices for good or ill.

But the Unitarians didn't reject the Bible; they used it as the basis for their argument. They said that there was no biblical basis for original sin, predestination, or the division of God's nature into a trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They pointed out that, over the centuries, the Bible had often been used to justify newly arising beliefs in a way that seemed to show that they had always been the original intent, while ignoring passages that weakened their case.

The Unitarian position was that the Bible supported the unity of God and the goodness of humankind. But the Bible was also their authority for the life and significance of Jesus. And Unitarians saw the miracles Jesus performed – healings, transformations, revival of the dead and his own resurrection – as proof of his divinity. The miracles were considered sign and seal of the truth of Jesus' gospel.

So the Unitarian religion of Emerson's time was both biblical and Christian. What was radical about it was its reinterpretation of what it meant to be a Christian. This was dangerous because it defied the authority of the conservative state religion. It was feared that the fledgling liberal movement wouldn't survive if it went too far.

This is why early Unitarianism refused to consider Jesus as a mortal human. They thought that a rejection of Jesus' divinity would be going one step too far. The Unitarians had had control of the congregational churches for only a very short time. If their doctrine appeared to be unchristian, then they feared that they would lose this precarious control. So they became highly conservative, fighting hard to insist that Jesus did indeed overturn the laws of nature by performing miracles and anyone who did not agree was neither a Unitarian nor a Christian.

This is where Ralph Waldo Emerson came into the picture. Many of us know Emerson as an icon of American intellectual history: poet, essayist, and public speaker who exerted a powerful influence on his own and every succeeding generation. Most of us have read an essay or two of his in our high school English books where we encountered the kind of antiquated mixture of profundity and

prolixity that threatens to draw the curtains of bemused boredom over the wits of distracted teenagers in every generation. Nowadays, Emerson is considered so mainstream, such a pillar of wisdom, that it's hard for us to appreciate just how radical he was in his day.

But in 1838, the Unitarians had taken their revolution as far as they dared to go. Anyone who challenged the divinity of Jesus was considered a dangerous radical. And Emerson was such a radical, though few realized how dangerous until July 15, 1838, when he delivered his famous "Divinity School Address" to the graduating class of Unitarian ministers at Harvard.

It started innocuously enough: "In this refulgent summer, it has been a luxury to draw the breath of life. The grass grows, the buds burst, the meadow is spotted with fire and gold in the tint of flowers. The air is full of birds, and sweet with the breath of the pine, and the new hay. Night brings no gloom to the heart with its welcome shade. Through the transparent darkness the stars pour their almost spiritual rays. The mystery of nature was never displayed more happily."

He goes on to compare the joys of nature to the joy of virtue, "A more secret, sweet, and overpowering beauty appears when one's heart and mind open to the sentiment of virtue." This is pure Unitarian morality, that good deeds are, in and of themselves, ennobling, and evil ones bring their own punishment in the atrophy of one's character. "The good, by affinity, seek the good; the vile, by affinity, the vile. Thus of their own volition, souls proceed into heaven, into hell." Emerson calls this insight the awakening of the religious sentiment, an experience of being an inlet on the great ocean of what he calls Supreme Wisdom. It is both divine and deifying, showing the foundation of all good to be in oneself, and equally within each person, and not to be sought second-hand from another.

With this rejection of second-hand divinity, Emerson began his assault on his Unitarian audience. He went on to accuse them of religious perversion for relegating divinity to miracles, Jesus and the Bible because that denies the reality of human nature. He said that "Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets. Jesus said he was divine because he saw that God incarnates in each person. He spoke of miracles, for he felt that human life was a miracle. But the word Miracle," Emerson said, "as pronounced by Christian churches, gives a false

impression; it is Monster. It is not one with the blowing clover and the falling rain.”

So Emerson’s first challenge to the church was that it dwelt with noxious exaggeration about the person of Jesus, saying, “The soul knows no persons. It invites everyone to expand to the full circle of the universe, and will have no preferences but those of spontaneous love. That which shows God in me, fortifies me. That which shows God out of me, makes me a meaningless growth, a tumor. There is no longer a necessary reason for my being. To aim to convert a person by miracles is a profanation of the soul. A true conversion, is now, as always, to be made, by the reception of beautiful sentiments.”

Emerson’s second challenge went directly to those to whom he spoke: he called them boring. The consequence of locating revelation exclusively in the past is that all preachers have to offer is a dead message that deprives both them and their audience of what they seek. He recalled a time when, “I once heard a preacher who sorely tempted me to say, I would go to church no more. . . . A snow storm was falling around us. The snow storm was real; the preacher merely spectral; and the eye felt the sad contrast in looking at him, and then out of the window behind him, into the beautiful meteor of the snow. . . . He had no word intimating that he had laughed or wept, was married or in love, had been commended or cheated, or chagrined. If he had ever lived or acted, we were none the wiser for it.” He continued, “The office of the preacher is not discharged. The true preachers can be known by this, that they deal out to people their life – life passed through the fire of thought. The office of a true preacher is to show us that God is, not was; that God speaks, not that God spoke. The true Christianity – a faith like Christ’s in the infinitude of humanity – is lost.”

Emerson challenged the compromise Unitarians had made with the doctrines of the past with two unforgivable assertions: First, that Jesus was a human being. It wasn’t that he was so much better than us, but that our potential was great as his. And, second, that preaching from the dead letter of the past was an abdication of responsibility that produced apathetic conformity rather than uplifting inspiration.

All this might have had a different effect if he'd expressed himself in essay or conversation. But he said it to the gathered assembly of Unitarian notables at its own institutional home: the Harvard Divinity School. It was an affront too great to ignore. The first consequence was that the graduating class lost forever the right to choose its own speaker. But the transcendentalist controversy Emerson ignited that day proved to be a firestorm that took more than a generation to calm down, and is still present in our denomination to this day.

What claim does Emerson's argument have on us today? There's a natural tension between the present and the past, between life lived and tradition received. Unitarian Universalist history seems to be consist of a series of revolutions, rejections of the dead old forms of the past, shrugging off the oppressive weight of history. Sometimes it seems that all we're left with is the elevation of reason, the idealization of the tools we used to deconstruct the past. We've gotten so good at overthrowing the dead forms of the past that we tend to consider ourselves good disciples of Emerson for doing so. But we may be confusing freedom *of* religion with freedom *from* religion. Emerson didn't intend to diminish Jesus by seeing him as a human being; he wanted to lift us all up to the level of divinity which Jesus manifested. Not only are we all merely human, we are all supremely divine. This is the lesson of Emerson's address that we can still take to heart today.

It's important to remember, when we are busy deconstructing religious language, that that language arose to describe something real. As Joseph Campbell said, religious language is like the menu at a restaurant. We read and discuss it, maybe make our decisions on the basis of what it says, but we can't eat the menu. Sometimes when people discover that the menu isn't edible, they say that religion is a fraud, just a bunch of empty words. But the words are meant to point to a reality. Only when we actually eat the food will we really understand what the words on the menu are talking about.

I think that Emerson would challenge us today to remember the meaning of the religious part of that freedom: We are all holy, and that which is called God can be perceived at the very center of every person if only we can get quiet enough to touch it. And it is this experience – what Emerson called the opening

of the heart and mind to the sentiment of virtue – that lives at the core of every genuinely religious tradition. Let's honor Emerson today by taking up his challenge to honor our essential holiness in all its forms, that we may welcome our Christian, humanist, Muslim, Buddhist, Pagan sisters and brothers, including those on any of the myriad religious traditions of our time, so that we may celebrate and worship together in justice, kindness, and love without exclusion and without exception.