

The Road to 2073

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Several months ago, at our annual services auction, I offered for sale the opportunity to designate a topic for a sermon which would be preached sometime in the next year. Mike Shand was the dubious winner of the ensuing contest. After a decent interval, we met for lunch, and Mike outlined the topic he had in mind. He began by recognizing that no matter what title he offered, undoubtedly it would undergo a surprising metamorphosis as it made its way through my peculiar thought processes. However, Mike said that recently he had been struck by two different but related experiences. The first of these had to do with the sermon series Beverly and I offered in the fall, outlining the history of our movement and the process by which Unitarian Universalism was transformed from a modest Christian heresy into our contemporary formulation, a movement which many observers regard as outside the Christian fold. Mike indicated that while the sermons were interesting, he had not really been caught up by them in the way some others had been, perhaps because he had never been within the Christian fold.

The second experience had to do with his occasional return to services in the context of Reform Judaism and recognizing that, in many ways, the distinction between contemporary Unitarian Universalism and Reform Judaism seems to be slight and to be narrowing. This led him to wonder whether the two movements are on a trajectory. If I were writing the history seventy-five years from now, he wondered, would I record the emergence of "Reform Unitarian Universalism"? In any case, that was my assignment -- to write that history. This morning, knowing that there is nothing so fraught with hazard as attempting to read the future, I shall try to acquit my assignment.

As the twentieth century drew to a close, Unitarian Universalism seemed to be in a healthy state. In a climate in which mainline religious bodies in the United States had been declining for decades, Unitarian Universalism had recorded a small but significant increase in numbers, in congregations, and in financial support for the national body. In a climate in which many religious groups were reporting an alarming shortage of students for the ministry, Unitarian Universalists were experiencing a steadily increasing number of ministerial candidates. While other bodies were engaged in divisive struggles over the role of women and of gays and lesbians, Unitarian Universalists, by and large, had welcomed women and gays and lesbians into positions of leadership. Unitarian Universalists seemed to have weathered the turmoil of the twentieth century better than many similar groups.

However, as the century turned, there was a growing sense of unease among Unitarian Universalists -- a sense that despite all the indications of success, all was not well with

the movement. Increasingly there was a sense that the vision, the purpose, the direction of the movement had grown less distinct, less clear with the passage of time, that the message at the center of Unitarian Universalism had grown fuzzy and indistinct, that random activity had replaced clear direction. Increasingly, the movement struggled to define a gospel which would address the times in which it found itself.

At the turn of the century, Unitarian Universalists became convinced that they lived in a world which was becoming increasingly diverse, a world in which ethnic traditions, multiple languages, religious faiths, cultural assumptions encountered each other directly and struggled for recognition in the public square. At the same time, Unitarian Universalists were painfully aware that little of that diversity seemed to be reflected in their own congregations. In many ways, Unitarian Universalism seemed to be the ethnic church of those shaped by the rationalism of the European Enlightenment.

In response, Unitarian Universalists in this period set about to invite and accommodate the diversity they believed characterized the world. They sought to soften the religious and theological distinctions which had defined them as a separate people so that others from different backgrounds would feel welcome. This was the era in which many churches renamed themselves congregations, the era which saw efforts to translate materials into Spanish, and witnessed experiments with gospel music, extemporaneous preaching, return to traditional religious language and sources, services of healing, candle-lighting rituals introduced into the life of congregations. This was the era which talked about "giving away the ministry of the church to lay people." The result was often confusion about the nature of the movement, and an influx of new people and an exodus of long-time members. The movement seemed torn between the conflicting needs to offer a distinctive message, and to create a climate in which all would feel welcome.

This blurring of theological distinctions occurred in the context of a world in which the understanding of the nature of religion was undergoing a sea change. Religious identity had lost its power to bind people permanently to a faith community, even as a need for a richer, deeper dimension to life was felt. The demand was for a kind of religion in general rather than for a specific faith. This exhibited itself in large numbers of "inter-faith" marriages, in which Jews and Christians, Catholics and Protestants, believers and agnostics, Easterners and Westerners sought some common ground where they could rear their children and expose them to the various value systems present in the parents' heritage.

At the same time, large numbers of people were turning to the church as an escape from the spiritually corrosive impact of a pervasive secularism. But many of them came with no previous experience of religious community. Both groups came looking for a vague "something more" that the secular world could not offer, but could not say precisely what that something more might be. And the assumptions they brought with them were borrowed from the entertainment industry. Religion should move and touch and excite and stir. It should offer, in the idiom of the day, "a quality show." And, like the entertainment industry, it should demand little more of people than that they show up and pay the admission.

The result was that often religious services began to resemble folk festivals. Those congregations which could afford to hire quality performers flourished, almost without regard to the message presented; while those saddled with less than stellar musicians and preachers languished. And few people noticed that performance values -- the very secular values which so many were fleeing -- had become the standards of religious institutions, as people who talked of owning and sharing the ministry of the church were more and more comfortable in the role of spectator, in the role of audience.

The irony, of course, is that while Unitarian Universalists were busy embracing diversity, the world at large, unlike the world of their suburbs, was not becoming more diverse. Unitarian Universalists were swimming in a sea of developments and trends over which they had little control and which they often misread. This was the era when not only were species dying off in catastrophic numbers, but so were human cultures. As the century turned, it was possible to fly from New York to Budapest and find on the television sets in the airport reruns of American situation comedies -- "The Golden Girls" dubbed in Hungarian. One could walk the streets of that ancient city and see theaters advertising the latest Hollywood epic. Restaurant menus were printed in Hungarian and English. In remote Transylvanian villages, families gathered around the television set to watch reruns of American soap operas. And everywhere, the uniform of the young -- blue jeans and T-shirts emblazoned with the logo of the Hard Rock Cafe. One could find Santa Claus standing over the Christmas manger in Japan. And from London to Budapest to Tokyo, MacDonald's, Burger King, Kentucky Fried Chicken were driving ethnic foods onto elite and exclusive reservations. English had become the language of commerce, the language of the Internet, virtually everyone's first or second language.

Religion was playing at diversity while forces which had little patience with or commitment to religious values were reshaping the world into a unified culture -- one which responded to the ethics of the main chance and the imperatives of the immediate moment, one which was engaged in a vast global transfer of wealth and power from the poor to the rich. Noticing the consequences of this emerging "MacWorld," religion chose to respond by treating the consequences rather than the causes. Despite the efforts of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee to develop programs which would confront underlying, structural problems, most Unitarian Universalists, shaped by the entertainment culture, wanted hands-on activities which would make them feel involved, would help them develop their own spirituality. They housed the homeless and built homes for the poor, rarely noticing that the numbers of the homeless seemed never to decline, and people lost their homes faster than Habitat for Humanity could erect houses. They ran soup kitchens and feeding programs and seemed oblivious to the fact that the dominant global paradigms seemed to generate hunger and need faster than anyone could respond. As one critic commented, often they seemed determined blindly to use the misery of others for their own spiritual enrichment. And the prophetic mission of the church -- to stand in judgment on powers and principalities, to speak aloud for those who have no voice -- was honored primarily in the breach.

Other developments were also to affect the shape and focus of religion in the early

decades of the twenty-first century. As the effects of global warming -- another consequence of the short-sighted imperatives shaping the world culture -- began to make themselves felt around the globe, the unexamined nature mysticism which had, for so many Unitarian Universalists, replaced the God-centered religion of previous generations, found itself challenged in profound ways. Whether the climate change was the consequence of human activity, or of inconceivably long natural cycles, or more likely of both, the world, even for the wealthy and prosperous, no longer seemed quite so welcoming and nurturing. The romantic visions of the late twentieth century were swept away by cataclysmic storms and rogue weather, by the vision of wretched villages and magnificent villas swept into raging seas or swallowed by mud-slides, or torn apart by cyclonic winds. The same influences undermined the gentle theism that characterized so much of religion as entertainment. The planet and its God seemed to be caught up in a thunderous rage which inflicted untold pain and suffering upon the human community. And yet, human population did not decline. Indeed, as if in response to the challenge, population continued to increase, placing further demands on a stressed global ecosystem. And still, the rich grew richer and the poor grew poorer and injustice compounded. Circumstances cried for a new theological formulation, a response to a world swinging out of control. Clearly, the effete formulations of religion as folk festival, of religion as rock festival, of religion as entertainment were no longer adequate to the human experience.

It was in response to this growing dissonance between the human experience and the religious expression that a new reformation began to emerge. In the West this reformation took on superficial similarities to an ancient theological debate. Early in the history of Christianity, Augustine and Pelagius had debated whether human beings had any role to play in their salvation, or whether salvation was a matter of grace alone. Augustine insisted that salvation was God's exclusive prerogative; Pelagius insisted that human beings were not just pawns in a cosmic game, but were called upon to be participants in their own salvation. In the mid part of the twenty-first century, this ancient debate took on new significance which cut across all kinds of denominational lines.

Ranged on the one side were the neo-Augustinians, those who, in the face of unremitting catastrophes, despaired of human ability and intelligence and called for a return to abject faith in an absolute God, seeking ways to assuage his just and righteous wrath. This position included not only evangelical Christians, but Orthodox Jews, conservative Muslims, and the more radical elements in the ecology movement. On the other side of the religious divide, the neo-Pelagians included those who, though chastened by the ecological disasters abetted if not caused by humanity's overweening pride, were convinced that it was too late for the human community to decline its election. This second group sought to reformulate the conviction that human beings are part of the natural world, embedded in its processes, and that human reason and creativity are natural resources to be used in the effort to sustain life on the planet and help secure it as a home for the human community. Ranged on this side of the religious divide were the Unitarian Universalists, Reform Judaism, the neo-pagan groups, religious humanists and large numbers of unaffiliated people. Main-line denominations tended to split between these two religious options.

This was not the kind of division which resulted in the formulation of new denominations, or the merger of older groups into new and larger bodies. Rather it was more a matter of identifying with one of the religious perspectives, and building networks of cooperation and collaboration between people of different original traditions. Inevitably, perspectives, resources, attitudes began to coalesce around some shared convictions and values. And so, as the eighth decade of the twenty-first century arrived, it was common to see liturgical resources shared back and forth between various denominations and religious traditions. This was particularly true of Unitarian Universalism and Reform Judaism. Readings and hymns from Unitarian Universalist ministers were often included in revised prayer books; Unitarian Universalist ministers frequently quoted Reform rabbis and used their liturgical materials. However, in a time when human culture is highly homogenized, people cling to ethnic and cultural identifiers with great tenacity -- and nowhere more so than in the realm of religion. So, in 2073, it remains unclear whether, given so many similarities, diverse groups will unite into a single reformed community, or continue the pattern of growing cooperation and collaboration while clinging stubbornly to their distinctive names and forms of organization. History would suggest that the latter pattern is more likely to prevail.

It is interesting to note that while the convictions of what we have called the reformed wing of Western religion are significantly chastened by the economic, demographic, ecological catastrophes which have characterized the first half of this century, they reflect the underlying optimism which was typical of an earlier day. Unitarian Universalism has learned that the living system which is our planet home is complex beyond our imagining, that we must live with care and humility as children of the Earth, that our actions must seek to encompass the widest range of responsibility, including all our sisters and brothers on the planet, the welfare of the ecosystem of which we are a part, and must occur in reference to a time frame that exceeds our brief lives. Nonetheless, Unitarian Universalism affirms that human beings have a responsibility to use their reason and initiative to assist in the shaping of a world in which life, in all its richness and diversity, may be sustained.

It is curious, but in many ways, the Unitarian Universalism of the mid-2070s seems to reflect an affirmation by an obscure Unitarian Universalist minister who, at the end of the twentieth century, wrote:

Many who have worked at the interface of ecology and theology have been devoted to an ethic of preservation, defining the sacred in terms of the world as given. This, of course, flies in the face of reality. In a universe always and everywhere in process, the challenge is to embrace the changingness of things, without the cynicism which insists that all things are ultimately of equal worth, or the despair which suggests that ultimately nothing matters. The challenge is to understand ourselves as agents of choice in a universe in which the sacred is manifested in change, affirming our responsibility not only to ourselves, but to the sacred, emergent possibility, responding to that possibility with a concern for the seventh generation, for the seventy-times-seventh generation.

The heart of my faith is rooted in the seventh principle in our statement of purposes and

principles. Hidden in this apparently uncomplicated, innocuous statement is a radical theological position. The seventh principle calls us to reverence before the world, not some future world, but this miraculous, awesome world of our everyday experience. It challenges us to understand the world as reflexive and relational rather than hierarchical. It bespeaks a world in which neither God nor humanity is at the center; in which the center is the void, the ever-fecund matrix out of which being spirals. It bespeaks a world in which, because all things impinge on all other things, everything matters. It challenges us to accept personal responsibility for the whole and for all parts of the whole, since in an interactive network, every decision, every relationship has significance for every other decision and every other relationship. It calls us to trust the process, the creative, evolving, renewing, redeeming process which brings us into being, which sustains us in being, and which transforms us as we cannot transform ourselves. It offers a vision of a world in which the holy, the sacred is incarnated in every moment, in every aspect of being, a world in which God is always fully present, and in which God is always fully at risk.

This faith calls us to complete the theological renewal our times demand, to define the *religious* and *spiritual* dimensions of the ecological crisis confronting the world and to preach the gospel of a world in which each is part of all, in which every place and every one is sacred, and every place is holy ground, in which all are children of the same great love, all embarked on the same journey, all destined for the same end. Nothing short of this will offer a religion which is adequate to the twenty-first century.