

The Unitarian Universalist Church of the Restoration
The Future of Faith and Restoration The Reverend Kathryn Ellis
May 22, 2011

This month is the 50th anniversary of the merger of the Universalist Church in America and the American Unitarian Association to become the Unitarian Universalist Association. When I sent this title to the newsletter, I did not realize that many of you would be receiving the Summer issue of *UU World* this week. This new issue has several articles about the future of Unitarian Universalism, a religion that is different than either Universalism or Unitarianism in 1961. In one of these articles, Dr. Diana Eck is quoted.

Dr. Eck is Professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Studies and Frederic Wertham Professor of Law and Psychiatry in Society at Harvard. Her academic work has a dual focus—India and America—and in both cases she is interested in the challenges of religious pluralism in a multi-religious society.ⁱ In October 2007, Dr. Eck spoke at the installation of Rev. Dr. Galen Guengerich as senior minister of the Unitarian Church of All Souls in Manhattan. She has since been quoted many times by Unitarian Universalist ministers.

You are, in my estimation, the church of the new millennium. In this era, Unitarian Universalism is not the lowest common denominator, but the highest calling . . . In a world divided by race and by religion and ideology, the very presence of a church like this, committed to the oneness of God, the love of God, the love of neighbor and service to humanity, is a beacon.

The Unitarian Universalist theology, and yes, you have one, does not reduce the mystery of the divine, the transcendent, but amplifies it, broadens it to include the investigation of the many, many ways in which the divine is known and yet unknown. . . . The world is in need of your theology.ⁱⁱ

When I read Harvey Cox's most recent book, *The Future of Faith*,ⁱⁱⁱ I thought that the future faith he described is Unitarian Universalism - or could be! I believe that our wider community needs the Unitarian Universalist community of the Restoration. Cox is a Christian theologian who taught at Harvard Divinity School. Cox wrote of three ages in Christianity:

The first might be called the “Age of Faith.” It began with Jesus and his immediate disciples when a buoyant faith propelled the movement he initiated. . . . “(F)aiith” meant hope and assurance in the dawning of a new era of freedom, healing, and compassion that Jesus had demonstrated. To be a Christian meant to live in his Spirit, embrace his hope, and to follow him in the work that he had begun.

The earliest Christians were about resisting empire and bringing hope, peace and love to their lives. The kingdom of God is at hand, is within you. Paradise is here on earth. Doctrines, dogmas and creeds did not yet exist. Christianity was a way of life.

The second period in Christian history can be called the “Age of Belief.” The empire became “Christian,” and Christianity became imperial. . . . Heresy became treason and treason became heresy.^{iv}

This was the age of creeds and it lasted about 1500 hundred years. Cox says of creeds and beliefs:

Creeds are clusters of beliefs. But the history of Christianity is not a history of creeds. It is the story of a people of faith who sometimes cobbled together creeds out of beliefs. It is also the history of equally faithful people who questioned, altered, and discarded those same creeds.^v

That’s us and our ancestors; we were the ones who questioned, changed and threw out some of what we were told to believe. We discarded that which did not fit with our experience, our sense of reality. Cox goes on:

Beliefs come and go, change, fade, and mature. The pattern of beliefs one holds at ten are not identical with the ones one holds at fifty or seventy-five. To focus the Christian life on belief rather than on faith is simply a mistake. We have been misled for many centuries by the theologians who taught that “faith” consisted in dutifully believing the articles listed in one of the countless creeds they have spun out. But it does not.^{vi}

One of the most devastating blunders made by the church . . . was to insist that the Spirit is present only in believers. . . . “Outside the Church there is no salvation.”^{vii}

But what made me think Cox was describing Unitarian Universalism was when he talks about the third age, dawning now, a “post-Constantinian era.” Cox calls this the “Age of the Spirit.”^{viii}

At the beginning of the new millennium three qualities mark the world’s spiritual profile . . . The first is the unanticipated resurgence of religion . . . The second is that fundamentalism, the bane of the twentieth century , is dying. But the third and most important . . . is the profound change in the elemental nature of religiousness. . . . the rediscovery of the sacred, the spiritual in our everyday world . . . People turn to religion more for support in their efforts to live in this world and make it better, and less to prepare for the next . . . pragmatic and experiential elements of faith as a way of life . . . The experience of the divine is replacing theories about it.^{ix}

Cox concludes, noting that the changes he sees are not just within Christianity:

With globalization, religions are becoming less regional. Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, and Hindus now live on every continent. Religions are also becoming less hierarchical. Lay leadership and initiative flourish in all of them . . . many are becoming less dogmatic and more practical. Religious people today are more interested in ethical guidelines and spiritual disciplines than in doctrines. They are also becoming less patriarchal, as women assume leadership positions in religions that have barred them. . . . The wind of the Spirit is blowing. . . . Faith, rather than beliefs, is once again becoming (Christianity’s) defining quality, and this reclaims what faith meant during its earliest years. All the signs suggest we are poised to enter a new Age of the Spirit and that the future will be a future of faith.^x

Cox describes the future of faith as about a way of life –valuing the gift of life, living ethically, working to make this world better, practicing spiritual disciplines, experiencing the sacred and the divine in everyday life, inclusive and sharing ministry and leadership. Sounds like us, doesn’t it? Eck, who is not a Unitarian Universalist, sees us as “committed to the oneness of God, the love of God, the love of neighbor and service to humanity.”

Yet, on the whole, Unitarian Universalism and many of our congregations have not grown much. What’s that about? Rev. David Bumbaugh says we have, “An Unfulfilled Dream.” I heard Rev. Bumbaugh speak passionately about this at Meadville Lombard Theological School in January 2009. Now you can find his work in the

Summer 2011 UU World. Bumbaugh says, “We have neglected the Universalist challenge of restating our core convictions in contemporary terms.” He challenges us:

If we are to be the religious movement some of us dreamed about fifty years ago, if we are to respond to the world from a liberal religious basis, it is critical that we be able to address and answer three central questions: What do we believe? Whom do we serve? To whom or to what are we responsible? What is so central to our identity that we must proclaim it, even at the risk of offending someone? . . . Universalism was centered on an abiding conviction that we are all children of the same great love, that we are all fated to a common destiny, that nothing any of us might do will serve to sever us from that great community and, therefore, there can be no division of the human race into sheep and goats.

Is Rev. Bumbaugh asking us for a creed? I don't think so. I think rather he is asking us to proclaim our message, our identity. I have no doubt that our message, our purpose, a core identity exists. We need to have enough clarity and conviction of our identity to share it, to invite others to join us.

In an unpublished, Rev. Robert Latham asks, “DOES UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM HAVE A FUTURE?” He, too, calls us to answer several questions and to be clear about our identity, our mission, and our purpose. His questions:

Who Am I?
How Do I Know What I Know?
Who Or What Is In Charge?
What Is My Purpose?
What Does My Death Mean?

Latham says:

A religious community is a group sharing a common view of reality built around unprovable answers to life's compelling questions of mystery. It is this view of reality that transcends differences and bonds the community in mutual allegiance. It is from these answers that a religious community extracts its message to the world. This message proclaims that if either individuals or society lives accordingly, they will be transformed. The religious community shows the transformative power of its beliefs by modeling them in its relationships.

We will show our intention to model our beliefs in our relationships when we affirm the covenant that this congregation has created. Latham notes that “It is not the law but the heart that motivates behavior” and that “religious missions focus on changing

hearts.” Latham writes that we many of us have used the phrase “unity in diversity,” but he suggests that that is backwards. The power to create change, fulfill missions and to change hearts comes from acknowledging the common elements of our identities. “The key to a powerful religious liberalism is in the focus of diversity in unity.”

Diversity in Unity. I think that is a good descriptor for us, right here at Restoration.

Rev. Latham, who I think is now retired, wrote that his years of religious leadership led him to these affirmations:

The most profound form of human community is bonded by common allegiance to transcendent purpose. The most successful form of social action is intended to fulfill a larger noble purpose. The most effective form of organizational structure is designed to achieve clear institutional purpose. The most inducing form of financial abundance is the captivation of compelling purpose. The most creative form of cultural dialogue comes from those for whom language is a tool of transforming purpose. The most powerful form of advertising is the light thrown off by those consumed with burning purpose. The most lasting form of congregational growth is a consequence of committed purpose.

I think that we do have answers to these challenges, but that we have hesitated to articulate them, to share them. Here at Restoration, I think our answers include what Bumbaugh said of Universalists:

Universalism was centered on an abiding conviction that we are all children of the same great love, that we are all fated to a common destiny, that nothing any of us might do will serve to sever us from that great community and, therefore, there can be no division of the human race into sheep and goats.

And we fit Eck’s description, we are “committed to the oneness of God, the love of God, the love of neighbor and service to humanity.” We do not “ reduce the mystery of the divine, the transcendent, but broaden it.”

Right now, a group has been meeting to create an initial long range plan from all the goals that you have expressed over the past 20 years in workshops and committees. You will hear more about that later.

Next year, I plan to lead the congregation in a yearlong process of listening and discerning, listening to each other, to the wider community, to the still small voice within and to the sacred. Through this process we gain clarity and confidence. The clarity to articulate Restoration's identity and purpose in the 21st century. And the confidence to proclaim our vision and mission. All of this so that we may joyfully be the faith of our own future.

Amen and may you live in blessing.

ⁱ <http://scholar.harvard.edu/dianaeck/biocv>

ⁱⁱ Quoted in Dan Cryer, "A Nation of Religious Changelings" in *UU World, Summer 2011*, p. 51.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cox, Harvey. *The Future of Faith*. Harper Collins e books, 2009.

^{iv} Cox, Harvey. *The Future of Faith*. Harper Collins e books, 2009, pp. 4-7.

^v Cox, Harvey. *The Future of Faith*. Harper Collins e books, 2009, pp. 4-7.

^{vi} Cox, Harvey. *The Future of Faith*. Harper Collins e books, 2009, p. 17.

^{vii} Cox, Harvey. *The Future of Faith*. Harper Collins e books, 2009, p. 53.

^{viii} Cox, Harvey. *The Future of Faith*. Harper Collins e books, 2009, p. 10.

^{ix} Cox, Harvey. *The Future of Faith*. Harper Collins e books, 2009, p. 19.

^x Cox, Harvey. *The Future of Faith*. Harper Collins e books, 2009, p. 223.