

## **The Limits of Freedom, Reason, and Tolerance**

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

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So, did I pick a sermon title, or a Ph.D. thesis topic? Actually, I have wanted to talk about this subject for some time now, as it ties in with many of the other sermons I have given in the last year. I'll try to point out some of those connections as we go along this morning.

The Unitarian “trinity” of freedom, reason and tolerance was coined in 1934 by historian and minister Earl Morse Wilbur. He came to the conclusion, from his research and his experience, that at the core of Unitarianism were three principles: freedom, reason, and tolerance.

Wilbur's use of the word freedom referred to the relatively new ability, even in this country, to think so-called heretical thoughts, as in skepticism about or disbelief in the Christian trinity, without being thrown in prison or burned at the stake. The early 1900s was truly an exciting new time in which freedom of religious thought, rather than bondage to creeds or confession, had become possible.

Secondly, Unitarians proclaimed that we had evolved with the ability to reason and therefore we should use it. Reason was an essential element for analyzing biblical revelation and religious authority. Again, it had not been all that very long ago that the scientific perspective, biblical criticism, and rejection of the supernatural had even been possible. It had only been one year earlier, 1933, that a group of professors and Unitarian ministers from the mid-west wrote the original Humanist Manifesto. To be rational, to use our intellect, to demand proof through the scientific method was the fashionable “way to be” in the liberal religious and the secular world of the 1930s.

And thirdly, as theologies diversified within Unitarian congregations under the influence of Humanism and Transcendentalism and increasing exposure to all the world's religions, tolerance was the watchword Earl Morse Wilbur chose to describe something crucial to the survival of this relatively new tradition, Unitarianism, that prided itself in freedom of belief.

These are the original meanings of the words Wilbur used to form a new Unitarian trinity: “freedom (freedom of thought rather than bondage to creeds or confession), reason (use of reason in relation to revelation, external authorities, and tradition), and tolerance (understanding and acceptance of others within the congregation rather than requiring uniformity).” (Mark Harris, Historical Dictionary of Unitarian Universalism, p. 519) It was a heady time, and by that I mean Unitarians were very much in their heads. Fellowships and societies were popping up all over the country, rituals and hymns were falling out of the orders of service, and our own hand-holding closing circle might have been considered much too irrational or emotional for many. I have mentioned all this

because I think it is important to understand the context in which Wilbur's three words were chosen, and why they might have seemed like the right ones at the time but may not seem as appropriate today.

Did you notice that there is very little in the original Unitarian context of freedom, reason and tolerance that spoke to relationships beyond the walls of their churches and meetinghouses? These were very insular concepts – born out of the great enthusiasm for the individual and individuality of that era. Since then our congregations, and I think the country in general, has become much more focused on the relational aspects of our lives – inside and outside our buildings and our theologies. For many, at least in the liberal traditions, how we live our lives has become more important than the specifics, or even the diversity, of our beliefs.

What are some of the new, and hopefully improved, ways we can look at the words freedom, reason, and tolerance? Or might other words be more useful?

In 2001, a UUA Commission on Appraisal finalized its report on a study called Fulfilling the Promise. They wanted to know how Unitarian Universalism has progressed since the merger of the two separate entities in 1961. The Commission wrote “The old Unitarian emphasis on “freedom, reason, and tolerance” has not been lost, but has shifted in interpretation. Freedom has become not just my freedom, but a concern for the liberation of all from oppression. Intellectual reason has been combined with the emotional intelligence that true compassion requires. Tolerance has come to be seen as a minimal achievement for civil society, with mutual respect and cooperation being far more desirable.”

In a sermon at General Assembly in Cleveland, also in 2001, The Rev. Dr. Sarah Oelberg held up the contributions of the Universalists to our then 40 year old merger into UUism. She joins others who think it is the Universalist side of our UU pairing that is saving us from the stark impersonal trinity of freedom, reason and tolerance. I have to preface reading her remarks by admitting I do not necessarily agree with everything she said, in particular that Unitarianism only became more relational/emotional because of the Universalists. Here is what Sarah Oelberg preached that day in Cleveland: (I was there.)

“The Unitarians had for many years stood on a foundation of freedom, reason and tolerance. But their freedom at times became unbridled radicalism, and at other times did not extend to people who did not agree with them. This freedom also contributed to individualism and threatened to destroy the ideal of institutional loyalty. The Unitarians were more organized, top-down, but the Universalists had more congregational liberty and denominational loyalty. The mix has been good.

Reason had become such a strong foundation on which to base ideas that there was little room for intuition, or grace, or faith. Humanism reigned supreme in most Unitarian churches, and belief in the supernatural, as well as such things as ritual, liturgy, and prayer had largely been excised from them. The Universalists embraced a kind of wisdom which used reason, but also acknowledged and accepted other ways of knowing

and being, and they had not strayed quite so far from their Jewish and Christian roots. They brought God back into the conversation, much to the relief of UU Christians and others who find solace in spirituality. [I do not agree that one must believe in God to be a spiritual person. But she rightly concludes,] The two together have given us a much broader and deeper approach to finding meaning.

Tolerance was the third Unitarian tenet, [I continue from Sarah Oelberg's sermon] but it sometimes meant only putting up with someone or something; not embracing people and ideas that were different. The Universalists showed us that tolerance becomes genuine when it is guided by love, and infused with understanding."

We started this sermon with Wilbur's usage of the words freedom, reason and tolerance, then expanded them a bit to liberation (freedom for all), compassion (where even a rational approach will take us every time if we look hard enough at the suffering around us), and cooperation (definitely a step in the right direction from mere tolerance). I'd like to present an additional complication, that involves all three of freedom, reason and tolerance, no matter how you define them.

What do we do when another person's beliefs lead them to do things we know, in both our heads and our hearts, are wrong? I'm being polite with my question. The French Enlightenment philosopher and writer, Voltaire, was more direct in his indictment of total freedom of religion. He said "If you believe in absurdities, you wind up committing atrocities." This is what we are seeing so much of in today's world. Extremists of all varieties are condoning and committing acts of violence, murder, injustice, and outrage, all in the name of their particular brand of religion. Yet it is very, very politically incorrect to criticize the beliefs that are behind these outrageous behaviors. Last year's sermon on *When Religion Becomes Evil*, based on the book of the same name by Charles Kimball, listed some of the warning signs to look for as religious zeal goes awry.

On a related subject, Sam Harris, in his own controversial book *The End of Faith*, writes "What is worst in us (outright delusion) has been elevated beyond the reach of criticism, while what is best (reason and intellectual honesty) must remain hidden for fear of giving offense." Religion is seemingly held to a different standard than other forms of belief. "When was the last time that someone was criticized for not 'respecting' another person's unfounded beliefs about physics or history?" Harris asks. "The same rules should apply to ethical, spiritual, and religious beliefs as well."

Speaking directly to Unitarian Universalists in a recent article in the *UU World*, Sam Harris tells us "Insofar as you're reluctant to criticize irrationality and sectarianism, you're not offering what wisdom and rationality you could offer. No one is winning any points for holding their tongue, and to the extent that you are reluctant to offer a religious counterpoint, you are conceding the field to the dogmatists. Your position [our position] is that all religious traditions can be seen in a Universalist light, that we should emphasize the common virtues of peace and justice and fair play. But there is a limit to that kind of discourse because there are beliefs that lead people to blow themselves up in public and those that don't, and that distinction is becoming extraordinarily relevant..... When your

enemy has no scruples, your own scruples become another weapon in his hand.” Right on, Sam Harris.

By the way, he also said in this article “If I could wave a magic wand and make everyone a Unitarian Universalist, I’d be tempted to do so, because I doubt that people would then fly planes into buildings, blow up children at street corners, or bend U.S. foreign policy to conform with biblical prophecy.” He really does not pull any punches.

What does our UU faith ask us to do? Or rather, what does your UU faith ask you to do? Do we tolerate and cooperate? Do we keep our voice moderate so that at least it stays in the playing field, as UUA president, Bill Sinkford, advocates. In that same UU World article about Sam Harris, Sinkford says “To do anything other than respect the beliefs of others, even those who challenge ours, even those who challenge our right to exist, would violate our religious principles so deeply that it’s simply not an option.”

I think I agree with Bill Sinkford as long as we are talking about beliefs. But I agree with Sam Harris when it comes to inhumane actions that result from those beliefs. Here are the limits I personally place on the Unitarian trinity of freedom, reason, and tolerance. Freedom, whether of religious belief or in society, requires responsibility. Victor Frankl, in Man’s Search for Meaning, wrote that any country with an east coast of freedom better have a west coast of responsibility. When a religious belief leads to violations of human rights or degradation of the earth, to me that belief is an irresponsible belief. I wrote something to this effect in my ministerial profile when I was in the search process for this position, and was chastised by the UUA Settlement Office and advised to delete it. They didn’t want me to even suggest that I thought some religious beliefs might be irresponsible.

I think you know by now that I believe rational thinking is the only kind of thinking there is. But I also believe that thinking is not the only path to knowing. Our emotions, our feelings, our hearts are essential to a balanced understanding of both ourselves and our world. In my recent sermon on homelessness, I talked about the powerful motivation to make a difference in the world that comes through our hearts as opposed to simply through our heads.

Tolerance, to me, implies condescension. I wish there was another word to use in its place. I believe that good interfaith work requires understanding (through knowledge), respect and an admiration for diversity that goes beyond tolerance. But I must add one additional caveat. Tolerance, respect, and admiration for diversity must have their limits. When irresponsible beliefs lead to what in my mind and heart are unconscionable actions, when they cross the limits of my conscience, then I am called to speak. We have talked often about the importance of the liberal religious voice in our world, and perhaps more to the immediate point, in our country. I’ve mentioned connections to past sermons this morning, because the reality is that everything we talk about in these services, week after week, year after year, is in fact part of the same sermon!

There are so many wonderful things about Unitarian Universalism. I am a big fan, to say the least. But as an association we are a work in progress, just as each of us is a work in progress. The words freedom, reason and tolerance are not used so frequently these days in UUism. We speak more often of justice, equity and compassion. These are very relational terms, that themselves, have limits, too.

What are the limits of freedom, reason, and tolerance?

Freedom implies responsibility.

Reason must be balanced with sensitivity and an emotional wisdom that leads one to compassionate action.

Tolerance requires knowledge, respect, and in the end, sensibility.

And finally, where, in all our covenants and principles since our Unitarian Universalist merger in 1961, might I ask, is the word love?

Blessed Be.