



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Are individuality and religion oil and water?

Clay Nelson © 6 December 2020

I've struggled for a long time with how to build a Beloved Community with a bunch of strong individualists. I shared UU minister Cheryl Walker's story a few years back to exemplify the problem:

"Sunday morning. My family and I are on our way to worship services. We walk the streets of Harlem, my brother and father in dark suits with bow ties; my sisters, my mother, and I dressed in white. The sea of people parts to let us pass; we are strong and confident, invulnerable. It is the early sixties and we are on our way to Muhammad's Mosque No. 7. We will meet others like us and greet each other with the familiar hand grasp, kiss, and blessings of "as-salaam-alaikum" (peace be unto you). We are powerful.

"Our power comes from our collectiveness. Because we act as one we are able to build schools, publish newspapers, and start businesses. We have an unshakeable sense of who we are, proud black women and men, which shields us from the racism that is pervasive in all other parts of our lives. We are not inculcated with a sense of inferiority; just the opposite, we have an unwavering sense of innate superiority. Our difference feels like a badge of honour, not one of shame.

Yet a shadow side exists. We are strong only if we are willing to conform. The rules are strict and there is no tolerance for breaking them. The price to pay for the power of this type of community is the loss of individuality. For some, me included, the price became too high, and so in my teenage years I made the choice to separate from the community; not from the faith but from the community, for I still loved many things about the faith of my childhood.

"I kept my faith but lost *my religion*."

She went on to tell her story of finding Unitarianism. After years of wandering in a religious wilderness, a friend invited her to a Unitarian church where there was a black woman in the pulpit and banners with the symbols of the world's faiths hanging on the sanctuary walls, including one with a star and crescent. It was love at first sight. In her words, "I fell in love with being an *individual* in a faith community. I was like a kid in a candy store. Me, me, me. My faith, my journey, my religion. It's all about me. This religion was created with me in mind, just waiting for the day that I would show up and make it complete."

However, with time she discovered the shadow side of being a Unitarian, “There was no discipline of faith. It required little of me. All I had to do was sign a book and give some money and, *voilà!*—I was a Unitarian Universalist. This group of people had no cohesion beyond a single congregation, and even within congregations there was little or no cohesion. Everyone had come thinking this religion was made just for them, even those people who had grown up in this faith. Therefore everyone thought everything should be for them. This wasn’t individuality, it was individualism, worship of the individual.”

Individualism is a core value of Unitarian Universalism, especially so in America. Church historian Conrad Wright credits both Thomas Jefferson and Ralph Waldo Emerson as exemplars of “the extreme individualism that has been a hallmark of liberal religion,” and as “privatised” so that their views “can yield no rationale for religious fellowship in general or the Church in particular.”

In a 1993 sermon on individualism, the Reverend John Papandrew suggests that as an ethic, individualism ultimately fails us, with worrisome theological implications: “There is a vast underworld of people who have lived with the fantasy of the Lone Ranger and found it to be Hell. For Hell is the absence of relationship -- the ultimate disconnection.”

This is ironic that the roots of the word “religion” imply the ligaments that connect tissue in the body. The word conveys re-connection and binding. In the case of most religions, religion connects or binds humanity to the supernatural, transcendent of spiritual spheres. In spite of our need for connection religion has failed to evolve to meet the needs of many for connection. There is little interest in this boomer and many Gen Xers and Millennials, and none at all in Gen Zs, to be connected to a God in heaven. For them such a divine being is non-existent in a place that is not there. That does not mean they are oblivious to the very human need for a different kind of religion.

French palaeontologist and Catholic thinker, Teilhard de Chardin suggested as long ago as 1931 that the problem lies with religion’s failure to accept evolution. In his mind there is a human hesitation and resistance to open our hearts to the call of the world within us, to feel a sense of the earth. Part of this hesitation is the ambiguity of the world itself. Is the world worth our attention? Is it a place of temporality and sin or a place of infinite goodness? Christianity in particular has done a tremendous disservice to the nobility of the earth by holding to a doctrine of original sin that is incompatible with evolution, creating an illusion of a “fallen” universe.

In response, Teilhard de Chardin expresses deep concern for building the earth and for developing the spirit of one earth, that is, with seeing the

whole world and all peoples within it as one. Teilhard was also aware that a unified earth will not arise if religion does not undergo a radical transformation of ideas, acquire new metaphors, and tell a new story that can harness the spirit of the earth.

In his view religion belongs to evolution in the same way that consciousness belongs to matter; they cannot be separated. The integral relationship between religion and evolution reflects Teilhard's positive view of science as being closely aligned with religion. Teilhard saw a religious character in the work of science. Science not only does not oppose religion, but in some sense it is a necessary preparation for religion because it explores the hidden depths of reality. In this respect neither science nor religion can develop normally without the other, or, as Teilhard writes, "science cannot go to its limits without becoming tinged of mysticism and charged with faith."

The kind of religion we seek today, Teilhard believes, cannot be found in the religious traditions of the past, linked to static categories. What is needed is a new religion that can utilise all the "free energy" of the earth to build humankind into greater unity. He thought that religion was too focused on the individual and an otherworldly heaven. This is insufficient, he states; people are looking for a religion of humanity and of the earth that can give meaning to human achievements, a religion that will enkindle cosmic and human evolution and a deep sense of commitment to the earth. God has become too small to energise us for new life. Science tells us that the universe is constantly evolving and this fact alone "must lead to the profound modification of the whole structure not only of our thought but of our beliefs."

Teilhard's new definition of religion is a religion of the earth that can build the earth into a greater unity.

Unitarian Universalism is particularly well-positioned, because of its history, to lead the way into Teilhard's vision of what religion could be, but we will need to first adopt a new core value where community trumps individualism. Fortunately, Millennials and Generation Z have already adopted the importance of community and, as I mentioned last week, Seventh Generation thinking. My hope is they can lead the rest of us to Promised Land. This conversation is to be continued as we examine how that is already happening. Stay tuned.

[N.B: Much the material about Chardin I gleaned from Ilia Delio's book Re-Enchanting the Earth: Why AI Needs Religion. Delio is a Franciscan Sister, scientist, theologian, author and teacher.]