

Resources for Communities of Ongoing Religious Exploration

V. 1 Unit 9

Unitarianism: Five Smooth Stones

Suggested Chalice Lighting

We are not a religious tradition with a creed, but a religious movement that has always wedded social justice work to theology. ~James Luther Adams

I. Introduction

James Luther Adams (1901-1994), was the dominant voice of Unitarianism in the 20th century. Reared in a fundamentalist Christian family, he embraced liberal religion as a young adult. He insisted on a faith that had both moral and intellectual integrity; having rejected unquestioning literalism, he was disappointed by the vague optimism of liberal Christianity that seemed irrelevant and useless as Hitler rose to power.

He addressed topics often avoided by UUs, e.g., conversion, confession, discipline, sin, tragedy. In glossing over weighty topics, he believed, liberal faith becomes complacent, lazily following social trends that corrupt and dilute its values. He called the liberal church to be "the prophethood of all believers"—an institution whose people, rooted in the biblical and liberal traditions, learn to judge and correct their society. He articulated an understanding of religion that is not separate from, and cannot be separated from, sociopolitical issues and events in the world.

For Adams, a belief was not simply a private attitude, idea or a personal guide for behavior. It is also a guide for the behavior of institutions, behavior that reveals the practical content of a belief. He insisted that talking about beliefs requires attention to the institutional structures, strictures, and behavior prompted by these beliefs. Furthermore, he saw the free church as valuable institution only to the extent that it meets two other criteria. Only if it includes people of all ages and social strata, many occupations, levels of education, ability, wealth, etc., can it touch a meaningful range of human concerns and be significant in human society.

His work toward a coherent liberal theology, capturing both the common principles and the diversity of the free church, culminates in what he called the "Five Smooth Stones of Liberalism" (an allusion to the biblical story of David and Goliath, in which the young warrior chooses five smooth stones to bring down the giant). What follows is excerpts from the opening paragraph of each section.

II. CONNECT: Readings

(1) Religious liberalism depends first on the principle that "revelation" is continuous. Meaning has not been finally captured. Nothing is complete, and thus nothing is exempt from criticism. Liberalism itself, as an actuality, is patient of this limitation. At best, our symbols of communication are only referents. Events of word, deed, and nature are not

sealed. They point always beyond themselves.

(2) The second is that all relations between persons ought ideally to rest on mutual, free consent and not on coercion. Obviously, this principle cannot be advocated in any strict or absolute sense. Education, for example, may be compulsory within the liberal state, if not in the liberal church. All responsible liberals recognize the necessity for certain restrictions on individual freedom. They also recognize that “persuasion” can be perverted into a camouflage for duress. Nevertheless, free choice is a principle without which religion, or society, or politics cannot be liberal.

(3) Third, religious liberalism affirms the moral obligation to direct one’s effort toward the establishment of a just and loving community. A faith that is not the sister of justice is bound to bring us to grief. It thwarts creation, a divinely given possibility; it robs us of our birthright of freedom in an open universe; it robs the community of the spiritual riches latent in its members, it reduces us to beasts of burden in slavish subservience to a state, a church or a party – to a selfmade God.

(4) [T]he fourth element of liberalism: we deny the immaculate conception of virtue and affirm the necessity of social incarnation. There is no such thing as goodness as such; except in a limited sense, there is no such thing as a good person as such. There is the good husband, the good wife, the good worker, the good employer, the good layperson, the good citizen. The decisive forms of goodness in society are institutional forms... The faith of the liberal must express itself in societal forms, in the forms of education, in economic and social organization, in political organization.

(5) Finally, liberalism holds that the resources (divine and human) that are available for the achievement of meaningful change justify an attitude of ultimate optimism. This view does not necessarily involve immediate optimism. In our century we have seen the rebarbarization of the masses, we have witnessed a widespread dissolution of values, and we have seen the appearance of great collective demonries. Progress is now seen not to take place through inheritance; each generation must anew win insight into the ambiguous nature of human existence and must give new relevance to moral and spiritual values.

~ From “Guiding Principles for a Free Faith,” included in *On Being Human Religiously: Selected Essays In Religion and Society* (1976), Beacon Press, Boston, MA.

III. GROW: Questions for consideration and discussion

1. Note that he encloses “revelation” in quotation marks. Still, when talking about the gradual unfolding of mystery, the use of that word places agency on the mysterious (what he might call *God*) rather than the seeker. Is *revelation* a useful concept, as we consider the free and responsible search? Do you think there is such a thing as *revelation* (as enlightenment, or inspiration)?

2. The ideal of completely non-coercive relationship: for some, this simply means, *If you don't like how we do things, you can leave*; our association is entirely voluntary. Others point to Adams' insistence on diversity as essential for an institution to have real value; a *love it or leave it* attitude is inherently coercive to people who do not share established mores.
Where do we find the boundary between individual freedom and cooperative society, in which we sometimes demand compliance with communally established rules? And how do we work out our different approaches to this underlying question?
3. Adams saw liberal religion and necessarily, inexorably linked with active engagement towards a more just world; social justice work is not a counterpoint to spirituality, but an aspect of authentic spiritual life.
Does this understanding hold meaning for you? Is it possible to do authentic, meaningful religious expression without addressing emergent issues, e.g., mass deportation, mass incarceration, reduction of indigent aid, cuts to education funding, abandonment of civil rights enforcement, etc.?
4. There is no virtue or goodness *per se*, outside of the context of society: is that true? Is the goodness of a person only manifest in relationship with another person, or with another living thing?
5. The Seven Principles were ratified by the association as points of agreement, and form the covenant into which all congregations join as members of the UUA. The Five Smooth Stones, on the other hand, are one man's opinion of what defines liberal religion.
What areas of agreement or confluence do you see? Are there areas of Adams' treatise with which you disagree?

IV. SERVE: Taking it home

Take notice the social institutions that you encounter in the coming weeks. Commercial media, retail enterprises, governmental bodies, service agencies, neighborhood or community groups, etc. have their own profiles. Notice how actions of individuals who are part of the institutions, and policies and systems that regulate and guide institutional behavior, reflect or contradict the core values and mission of each institution. As much as you can, notice the organizational structures and systems (rigid or loose, hierarchical or egalitarian, preset or spontaneous, mechanical or organic, etc.).

Reflect on the ways in which a body's purpose and mission might be expressed in, or undermined by, its structure. Consider how the organizational structures of Unitarian

Universalist congregations can express or undermine the ideals and aims of the free church.

V. Conclusion

This text covered several theological ideas, with many facets and possible areas of exploration. Did this setting provide opportunity for discussion and consideration of diverse viewpoints? Was the discussion interesting? Or did it belabor questions that are of minor importance in your spiritual journey?

Were there moments in which you felt uncomfortable? Confused? Anxious? Affirmed? Eager? Hopeful? Surprised? What other feelings did you encounter?

If people in the group would like, allow them to share these things, without interrogation or challenge.

Suggested closing words:

I call that church free which enters into the covenant with the ultimate source of existence. It binds together families and generations, protecting against the idolatry of any human claim to absolute truth or authority. ~ James Luther Adams