

TOP TEN REASONS THAT LIBERAL RELIGION MATTERS
REV. DON ROLLINS
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PREFACE

As you can see, our annual Smorgasbord celebration is a big undertaking for the good people of Nora Church. Those who welcome and wait on you are some of the most grounded, unpretentious and gentle folk I've come across in my considerable travels as a Unitarian Universalist minister. Together we are doing our darndest to make sure this little country church – the one that *demographically* should have been dead many years ago – remains a voice for liberal religion for the long haul. Most days, we don't wring our hands in anxiety, nor do we get hung up on every new strategy for growth. We keep it simple: to borrow from a recent article on evangelicalism in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, we try to “be” church, not just “do” church.

I'm bragging on the Nora congregation because, well, because nearly every one of them is too busy right now to admonish me for complementing them! Fact is, “Smorg”, as it's referred to here, requires so much work that I literally have a different, if wonderful, congregation on “Smorg Sunday”: you. Thus I beg your indulgence if I go overboard with my praise for the people I serve.

One more time, the very existence of this church is a demographic anomaly; given the shift from family farms to corporate farms, as well as the abandonment of small towns for larger ones, sheer numbers are against us, to say nothing of our political and religious context.

Scary stuff. So even the most enthusiastic among us can be forgiven if, on occasion, she or he wonders about the future of this congregation and its beautiful spiritual home. But this is no time for gloom and doom. As I tell the folks who normally spend their Sunday mornings in this room, we know how much we have to lose if Nora Church should go out of business, *but what about everybody else?* Are we or are we not part of the religious tapestry of our region? Is church ever just about us? (After all, our mission is not to hang on until this place is as empty as Donald Rumsfeld's head, it's to serve the principles that we seek to advance: religious freedom, religious community and religious activism.) In short, my question is less What would we do without Nora Church? and more What would be lost were our voice silenced? Would it matter? For real, *would it matter if liberal religion were silenced in these parts?*

These are the questions to which I'd like to direct your attention this morning. So if you've no idea what Unitarian Universalism is about, I hope these random thoughts might fill in some blanks for you. If you're visiting with us from another Unitarian Universalist congregation, I hope you'll recognize and celebrate something of the faith you experience back home. And, if you're a Nora member, please don't tell the others I was bragging about them!

You know, I like weighty, dense, philosophical conversations. Take for example which late-night talk show is best. I recently discussed with one of our members the merits of Dave Letterman over Jay Leno. He, an otherwise sharp fellow, was unconvinced. He stood by Leno, even when

confronted with that nightly Late Show institution, the Top Ten. With apologies to both my parishioner and Letterman himself, I'm about to list my own Top Ten. In my case, it's the top ten reasons that liberal religion matters. No fancy words, no ubiquitous acronyms; I'd like to talk simply about some of the fundamentals of our way of religion.

Two final reminders. First, by no means am I about to tell you that religious liberals are better, smarter or more loving than everybody else. (You wouldn't believe some of the things I've heard and seen in our congregations.) Second, like everybody else, we religious liberals are not always at our best. (Some days we're on our game, some days we're spiritual train wrecks.) So, strap yourself in, synchronize your watches and let's talk straight up about why liberal religion still matters.

TOP TEN REASONS THAT LIBERAL RELIGION MATTERS

Number Ten: liberal religion matters because it has, and likely always will, change. We do not freeze religion in another age. We exist in contrast to those traditions that confine truth to a "golden age", be it ancient Israel, Jesus' era or the day Muhammad received the Koran. We believe religion evolves. Think about it: In what other field would we settle for Medieval thinking? Government? Education? Medicine? No way.

Religious liberals, Unitarian Universalist or otherwise, hold that religion is an open-ended, dynamic undertaking; religion is *supposed* to change because *truth* is not static. Liberal religion matters because it will not abide old truths that cannot withstand the tests of a new age.

Number Nine: Liberal religion matters because it does not discount reason and science. For us, a mature faith is one that is grounded in one's unique experience, our tradition of religious freedom, and wisdom from a host of sources, "secular" as well as "sacred." But critical as these three wellsprings of truth may be, we also seek to exercise our ability to ask rational questions. What role will reason play in any religious claim? What is, in the parlance of the scientists, educators and psychologists – *observable and measurable* - and what is beyond observing and measuring? What do scholarship and reason tell us about the origins of the Bible? What does science offer as the best *educated* guess about the origins of life? What does research tell us about the potential of stem cell research? In other words, we recognize that many things in life once considered the "Acts of God" have become explainable within the bounds of nature.

Think about it. If Roman Catholicism brings to our quest for truth the element of tradition; if Protestantism brings the elements of wisdom via scripture; and if the Quakers emphasize direct experience, it's liberal religion – Unitarian Universalism and beyond – that insists that reason be part of the religious mix.

Combine reason with experience, tradition, wisdom and what do you get? People who can tell the difference between Intelligent Design and sound science! Every time.

Number Eight: Liberal religion matters because it teaches that sex and sexuality are normal and beautiful. Folks, we can't help the fact that the

first sex educators in white America were those prim and pious Puritans. We can, however, offer a religious alternative that moves the discussion beyond abstinence-only programs and fear and loathing of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons.

Together with the United Church of Christ, our denomination has developed “Our Whole Lives”, an age-appropriate curriculum that helps children and youth understand their own bodies, honor sex as a sacred part of their lives and embrace the fact that sexuality comes in more flavors than the straight missionary position. Oops, sound too graphic for a Sunday sermon? Sexual dysphoria, now *that’s* graphic. Free-floating shame, *that’s* graphic. Unwanted pregnancies, *that’s* graphic, too.

God rue the day when religious liberals surrender sex to the heirs of Puritanism, and God rue the day when we settle for a nation with a second-class citizenship.

Number Seven: Liberal religion matters because it doesn’t suffer idolatry lightly. Treating the Bible as the literal Word of God is to carve an idol from a human book. Treating Jesus as uniquely divine is to carve an idol from a human being. Treating God as a knowable parent-in-the-sky is to carve an idol from a human concept.

To be alive – truly alive and engaged in the enterprise of living – is to be constantly letting go of idols. It’s to resist the temptation to seek permanence and absolute certainty that is apparently part of our very

being. To be a spiritual grownup is to recognize and question our penchant for everything we think will “save” us, even God. But, from the hard core atheist to the flaming fundamentalist, the proverbial jury is still out when it comes things like God and an afterlife. So what’s a body to do? Seek life! Be alive – truly alive and engaged – and live with the questing anxiety that prohibits easy answers to difficult questions.

The ancients relieved their fear and confusion by constructing deities and offering sacrifices, and we do it by constructing an endless number of distractions and offering our sons and daughters to the modern gods of war. Such is our existential dilemma to remain engaged with life.

Liberal religion, at its best, recognizes that uncertainty and anxiety are inherent to human beings. We say that nobody’s perfect, that we all make idols of one thing or another. But we also say the Bible will not save us. The American flag will not save us. And, at the risk of the consternation of my fellow political liberals, neither will the ACLU, the NAACP or the Democratic Party. Folks, if we are to be saved in this life, it is we who must do the saving, uncertainty and anxiety be damned.

Number Six: Liberal religion matters because it does not burden children with the concept of original sin. During the first part of our services here at Nora, our children and youth worship with us. We light our chalice together. We sing together. We light our candles of caring and sharing together. Then I read them a story before they leave for their classes. During that fifteen minutes or so, our words, songs, candles and stories tell our kids that they are unique human beings. We

tell them that they're bright and fun to be around. But we don't tell them that there is within them the "seed of Adam and Eve" that will bear the fruit of sin – sin that can only be assuaged by belief in Jesus' sacrificial death. And we don't tell them they're otherwise bound for hell.

Once downstairs, our kids learn about various religions, including our own. They learn about nature and history. They learn about kindness and civility. They learn that they are acceptable and whole, just as they are. (And lest you think we think they're perfect, I hasten to add that those same children make us want to hit our heads against the nearest wall from time to time!)

The bottom line is this: Our kids will probably face just as many challenges in life as those raised in other traditions; they're likely to make just as many mistakes in life as the children who are, at this very minute, being taught that Jesus died for their sins. But my prayer is that not a single one of our kids leaves this community thinking anything other than she or he is a good human being.

Number Five: Liberal religion matters because diversity of belief and opinion is expected. On any given Sunday you may be sitting next to a Christian, atheist, Pagan, theist, humanist or someone who neither has nor wants a label. The Jesus who graces our altar has presided over a wide array of topics presented by a wide array of thinkers; we like to think that he's blessed them all. Indeed, we're a motley mix!

I'll let two jokes serve as my best illustration of our love of diversity, as well as our love of disagreement.

A visitor to a Unitarian Universalist church sat through the sermon with growing incredulity at the heretical ideas being spouted. After the service one of the church members asked the visitor, "So, what did you think of our minister?"

"I can't believe half the things she said!" sputtered the visitor. "Good! You'll fit right in!"

And yet another bad joke:

A Unitarian Universalist died, and to his utter surprise he discovered that there really was an afterlife. The angel in charge of assigning either heaven or hell told him, "Because you were an unbeliever and a skeptic and a doubter, you will enter hell for all eternity – which, in your case, means a place where there's nobody disagrees with you!"

Friends, religious liberals are not bound by their shared beliefs.

Religious liberals are bound by their shared *values*: freedom, community and justice. In the service of love. Diversity is expected and, at our best, valued.

Number Four: Liberal religion matters because its pulpit is not subject to dogma or creed. Most any given Sunday I say something that would likely get me shot, stuffed and mounted in some congregations!

I am not bound by any given set of scriptures or tradition. Short of telling folks how to vote, I am free to voice my take on most anything. This freedom comes to me as the result of a long line of women and men, serving a long line of congregations, under the rubric that a free religion requires a free pulpit. To be sure, the liberal tradition of a free pulpit also requires responsibility on the part of its ministers. But my responsibility is bound only by the *covenantal relationship* with the precious people of Nora Church, not an external hierarchy, creed or tradition. Sadly, not every minister enjoys that freedom to grow as a person and a professional. I never take that freedom for granted.

Number Three: Liberal religion matters because its heroes were no shrinking violets. God help us, we're sometimes guilty of ancestor worship, so impressive is the list of Unitarians, Universalists, and, since the two denominations merged in 1961, Unitarian Universalists: Susan B. Anthony, Abigail and John Adams, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, John Dewey, Florence Nightingale, Horace Mann, Jane Addams, Samuel Longfellow, Margaret Fuller, Horace Greeley, Julia Ward Howe, Walt Whitman, Fannie Farmer, Charles Dickens, Beatrix Potter, P.T. Barnum, Herman Melville, Margaret Sanger, Rod Serling, May Sarton, Adlai Stevenson, Malvina Reynolds, Ralph Waldo Emerson.

What about Jefferson and Thoreau? Jefferson held a unitarian (small u) theology but was not much for organized religion, even in its most liberal form. Likewise that frumpy conscientious objector, Thoreau. But

their disdain of organized religion doesn't stop us from claiming them from time to time. Close counts.

We're trying to follow in the footprints of some strong folk. Some of our liberal predecessors took on the mantle of the Hebrew prophets, tackling everything from slavery to women's suffrage to poverty. Some pushed the boundaries of their crafts, daring to put their creativity and vision before the critics. Nearly all stood for the principle of a free and responsible search for truth. And they are, in various ways and degrees, our heroes.

So look here, folks, no religion worth its salt should rely on its past heroes for its vitality, but the historical practitioners of liberal religion still function as spiritual guides for many Unitarian Universalists. Kindly indulge us if we trot out our forbears now and then. (And don't hesitate to chide us when we start sounding snooty. Again.)

Number Two: Liberal religion matters because it serves as a counterbalance to those who seek to impose their brand of religion on our courts, classrooms, bedrooms, laboratories, hospitals and politics. Some on the radical religious right seem to believe that their version of God has big plans for the country and the world, few of which allow for the primacy of conscience in personal decisions. It's not that all religious liberals are pro-choice Democrats who support same-sex marriage and rant about the President. (Heck, we're a good deal more diverse than brothers Falwell, Robinson or Dobson imagine! And one need not be a *political* liberal to be a *religious* liberal.) But it is true that

religious liberals generally call for a high wall between religion and government. And it is true that religious liberals tend to favor candidates that share that view, party notwithstanding.

I occasionally come across some interesting letters to the editor of our local newspaper, some of them calling for a theocracy of one kind or another. And I occasionally respond to the most blatant of them. A recent such letter was an attempt to recast the Framers of the Constitution as nothing less than orthodox Christians who meant to create a nation of orthodox Christians. For this fellow, Jefferson was only kidding about that “wall of separation” thing. And John Quincy Adams really wasn’t an active member of a Unitarian church.

Did I set the letter’s author straight? I seriously doubt it. That wasn’t the goal. My point was that, despite the profound and relevant aspects of Christianity, there are those who literalize and proselytize in the service of some very bad theology. Liberal religion, at its best, stands as a witness against theocracy and for true religious freedom.

Number One: Liberal religion matters because it speaks to the heart as well as the mind. We misjudge liberal religion if we focus too much on its emphasis on reason or bent toward social justice. Understood in its simplest form, liberal religion beckons each of us to fashion our own faith - a faith that will sustain us when life up and splinters our hopes and shatters our dreams. In the midst of suffering, illness and loss, liberal religion asserts that life is not a pain-free proposition. At its best, liberal religion bypasses questions about a God who inflicts pain on us

as a test of our faith. Instead, our way of religion holds that life is not without its heartaches and tragedies: bad things really *do* happen to good people. Every day. Everywhere. It's only human to wonder why, but staying stuck in the why is a guarantee that our lives will be on hold; our spirits shrink if we choose to re-experience, again and again, our own pain. Suffering, confusion, disappointment come to us all. There are no free passes: there are only victims and survivors. It is the great tradition of liberal religion to focus on loving one another through life's hard spots, leaving the notion of a punishing God to others.

CONCLUSION

I tell people that liberal religion has changed my life. In this faith I've found wonder. I've come to know absolutely marvelous human beings. I've been introduced to some great ideas and the great women and men who brought them forth. I've laughed until I cried, and I've cried until there was nothing to do but laugh. I've come to know styles of music and poetry and story that have fed me in time of trouble. I've welcomed babies. I've bid farewell to the old and not so old. I've come to believe in the transformative power of community despite difference. I've come to understand how much I may never understand.

Liberal religion is not perfect. It would be a simple thing to develop a sermon on the top ten reasons to avoid our religious communities – easier than some of us may want to believe. And yet, for us, the case for liberal religion is stronger than that against it. We choose the scary, profound responsibility for our own theology. It is our way of religion.

The children in a Unitarian Universalist church school class were drawing pictures. The teacher asked one, "What are you drawing today?"

"I'm drawing a picture of God," came the reply.

"But nobody knows what God looks like," objected the teacher.

Came the immediate response, "They will when I finish this picture!"

Such hubris is a sure sign of one who trusts her experience. We, the inheritors of a stubborn belief in unity in the face of division, and an all-encompassing theology in the face of religious elitism, seek to embody and advance that kind of holy hubris. We say, draw the God that speaks peace to your heart and burns fire in your soul. Have the confidence that for every time you choose life, life will return your embrace. And, to paraphrase one of our ministers when asked for a one-word description of our message, live! And again we say, live!